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**Speaking the Unspeakable: The Construction and Presentation of Narratives in  
Literary and Popular Trauma Novels**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

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## Abstract

### **Speaking the Unspeakable: The Construction and Presentation of Narratives in Literary and Popular Trauma Novels**

Focusing on *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Housekeeping* (1980) by Marilynne Robinson, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) by Sue Monk Kidd and *Cat's Eye* (1988) by Margaret Atwood, my thesis considers a range of contemporary portrayals of trauma within novels featuring girls or women as autodiegetic narrators. These texts are examined in dialogue with theories of representations of trauma in literature from contemporary trauma critics Roger Luckhurst and Michelle Balaev, theories of memory taken from Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, and readings of clinical psychiatrists Judith Herman Lewis and Lenore Terr. The 1972 work *Survival* by Margaret Atwood is critical in my interpretations of the protagonists as they attempt to heal from their trauma and become accommodated into society.

I commence the thesis with an overview of the history of the medical study of trauma and the complementary study of representations of trauma in literature. Through a study of prominent critic Cathy Caruth's investigations into Freud, I establish the signs of symptoms of trauma, and their typical presentation in a novel. In the work of contemporary theorists I establish the typical features of a trauma novel; however, I aim to establish that a wider range of techniques is utilized, examining the concepts of narrative closure, psychic integration, temporal disruption, and the reconciliation with flawed maternal and paternal figures.

The thesis is structured in four chapters, each examining within a novel the relationship between the types of trauma suffered, the presentation of the traumatic symptoms, and the healing process of the protagonists. Each chapter is structured around a significant relationship, their titles reflective of the faults of the perpetrator of the trauma, for example *The Sins of the Father*, where analysis of the effects of these flawed relationships takes place. Kambili's narration in *Purple Hibiscus* shows the effects of colonisation on the formation of identity; *Housekeeping* demonstrates the continuing

effects of abandonment; *The Secret Life of Bees* demonstrates the necessity of truth to overcome repressed traumatic memories; and *Cat's Eye* demonstrates the ongoing effects of repressed memory on the formation of character. Together these novels form a coherent argument that representations of trauma have become an organising concept for female identity in the late twentieth century.

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# Speaking the Unspeakable: The Construction and Presentation of Narratives in Literary and Popular Trauma Novels

## Introduction: Reading Trauma Narratives

In my job as a teacher of English at a secondary girls' school, with a Decile 7 rating and an enrolment of around 1350 girls, I facilitate students' choice of reading material for reading logs, theme studies and the study of authors and directors. Year after year, material chosen reflects a diverse set of interests; however, choices which deal with traumatic events remain perennially popular amongst this age group (13-18). Novels such as Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002) remain popular with girls as young as thirteen who find it engrossing and moving, despite the traumatic subject matter dealing with rape, murder and unresolved mourning. Likewise, Somali model Waris Dirie's memoir *Desert Flower* (1998) is often passed from student to student as they read about the genital mutilation she underwent as a child, her forced marriage at age thirteen to a much older man, and her subsequent flight from her home to London. The students' engagement leads to discussions about the nature of power within relationships, and what we can learn from the characters. These popular trauma narratives demonstrate that the accessibility of trauma narratives privileges them over other forms of portrayal, especially to a youthful audience, in contrast to other forms such as documentaries, photography, and the news media. Literature appeals to the intellectual side of people, and it serves as a source of entertainment. The introduction to *Extremities*, a book exploring representations of trauma in literature, claims: "In a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or even the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of the limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion" (Miller and Tougaw 2). Perhaps there is little more than a borrowed thrill for some readers; still, there is more on offer than just entertaining

stories. In *Stop What You're Doing and Read This!* (2011), a series of essays on the effect, importance, and impact of reading, Tim Parks states: "The fact is ... novels engage with the way we construct our identities" (Parks 71). My students, and the wider society, can see aspects of their own lives within trauma narratives, which have a broad humanistic appeal, and reading how those dealing with trauma have formed their characters helps readers in turn to form their characters. Literary trauma narratives are often not easy to digest due partly to their content, partly to the tendency to not always reach a resolution, and partly due to their complex form, where structures and chronologies seek to replicate the experience of the traumatised narrators. In this thesis I argue that a female-centred sub-genre of the trauma narrative has emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and I analyse influential examples of the genre.

The novels I have chosen are all first person auto-diegetic novels and are based on a *Bildungsroman* pattern. *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) by Sue Monk Kidd, *Housekeeping* (1980) by Marilynne Robinson and *Cat's Eye* (1988) by Margaret Atwood, are contemporary novels addressing issues felt by the wider audience of which my students are a part. They depict characters disconnected with themselves and society due to traumatic experiences. These are novels of personal trauma, not widespread "cultural trauma" (Alexander xiii) or "historical trauma" (Silverman qtd. in Kaplan 73), common in contemporary society, helping the reader to understand themselves and the world around them. They address domestic issues, contrasting with the interests common in the literary trauma novel, such as surviving the Holocaust, slavery and wars. Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* grows up in a physically abusive household; *Housekeeping's* Ruth is traumatised by the suicide of her mother; Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees* accidentally shot and killed her mother; and Elaine in *Cat's Eye* was the victim of relentless bullying by her supposed friends. The introduction to *Stop What You're Doing and Read This!* claims: "We need literature --novels, poetry -- because we need to make sense of our lives, test our depths, understand our joys and discover what humans are capable of" (Callil, Carr and Davis). This is true of trauma novels, which can help us make sense of sudden, painful and traumatic events, and the

resolutions offered in popular trauma novels feed into this orthodox understanding of subjectivity, giving a sense of agency to their characters.

A second characteristic the novels share is that they present victims of trauma overcoming their experiences. Margaret Atwood wrote *Survival* in 1972, a theoretical work on Canadian Literature, describing the stages of victimization she saw portrayed. The four positions of the victim are:

1. To deny you are a victim: this is common by those who see themselves as better off than others who they see as victims, and if there is any anger, it is directed at others who see themselves as victims.
2. To acknowledge you are a victim, but that it is the fault of Fate, Biology, or some other force. This means there is no point in fighting the oppression since it is from so large a force, and the denial of any other source that is making them a victim.
3. To accept they are a victim but were not fated to be this way, and can see that with effort they can change the situation.
4. To be a creative non-victim. This position is for those who are no longer victims as well as those who have never been victims, and it allows that creative energy is no longer wasted on anger or effort to become free of victimisation.

The changing positions Atwood defines are evident in the changes in the characters throughout the texts in this study and allow the reader accessible illustrations that demonstrate how to take control and become a 'non-victim', a survivor. Michelle Balaev's article "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" (2008) notes: "The trick of trauma fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined" (155). The novels in my study present narrators who are survivors of trauma and represent women and girls such as my students --their stories are unique yet representative of the stories of so many young women -- therefore engaging them further in their tales of overcoming



traumatic events. Each narrative provides opportunity to explore memories, process traumatic events, and form new identities or new understandings of themselves and their motivations as they review their past, helping them to develop and maintain their female identity. Tim Parks' statement that novels "engage with the way we construct our identities", turned on its head, would explain why such novels are so appealing: if an author successfully demonstrates how characters construct their identities after a traumatic past, it shows young women a way forward, a way to emerge from victimisation as survivors. Michelle Balaev argues: "The trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an 'everyperson' figure" (Balaev 155). Readers learn to view the protagonist as 'everywoman', creating a picture of women as strong, capable and victorious as they take control of their situations and healing.

I am also interested in the interplay of the trauma with the maturation of the character in each text, as each of the novels can be seen as at least partially conforming to the *Bildungsroman* pattern. *Bildungsroman* is a German term that translates to a "novel of growth", or a "novel of formation" (Kastan) and sometimes translated as a 'coming of age' novel. In her 1996 article, Suzanne Hader quotes and condenses Marianne Hirsch's ideas from her article "The Novel of Formation as Genre" (1979), listing these characteristics:

1. A single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life", and a "search for meaningful existence within society."
2. To spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting.
3. The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgements enforced by an unbending social order.

4. Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society. The novel ends with the assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in society. (Hader)

In each chapter I will look at how the character's development is affected by their traumatic experiences and examine how their victim position changes as they mature: when they reach maturity they are survivors, but do not necessarily find a place in society typical of the *bildung* of the nineteenth century. The novels link narrative progression and psychosocial progression as a *bildung* would: the maturation of the protagonists is intimately connected with the shifts in victim position and reactions to the trauma they had suffered, and they find their place within a new or renewed family by novel's end.

The novels in this study all feature female narrators who bear testimony to on-going trauma at the hands of various tyrants: fathers, school-yard bullies, and forms of social exclusions or self-exclusion. Some have suffered a single traumatic event; others have to deal with "the more complicated effects of prolonged and repeated abuse" (Herman 3). All are based around the domestic sphere and affect only a small group of people. Each novel is narrated in the first person by the girl or woman at the centre of the text, as they bear testimony to the traumatic event they suffered and reveal its consequences. I want to look at the ways trauma is presented within popular trauma novels as they relate traumatic experiences to their readers. "Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality ... She [the child] must compensate for the failures of adult care and protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defences" (Herman 96). The testimony of the characters, presented as first person narration allows a study of these compensations and protections in a selection of narrators, both youthful and mature, which is investigated in these chapters.

The narrative structure and development of character in popular fiction can be differentiated from literary fiction through the more muted use of figurative language, predominantly chronological representation of time, the strong and consistent identification of the reader with the protagonist, and the narrative closure offered through the drive towards personal integration or 'healing'. Ken Gelder argues that "Literature draws on the language of the art world when it ties its authors innately to notions of creativity ... popular fiction, as a form of literary production, occupies a different position altogether in the literary field" (Gelder 14). He defines popular fiction as "a kind of industrial practice" divorced from "discourses of creativity and originality" (Gelder 19). Essentially Gelder views authors of literature as artists, and authors of popular fiction as craftsmen. The primary difference between *Cat's Eye* and *Housekeeping*, primarily literary texts, compared to *The Secret Life of Bees*, and even *Purple Hibiscus*, then, is the position of their authors: artist or craftsman. Gelder argues:

Literature is intimately connected to life, while popular fiction gives itself over to fantasy.

Literature is cerebral, but popular fiction is sensuous: caught up with 'danger' and 'intrigue.

Literature is restrained and discrete, popular fiction is excessive, exaggerated. Literature

doesn't need a story or a plot, but popular fiction wouldn't function without one. Literature

is dull, while popular fiction is exciting. (Gelder 19)

Gelder's work focuses on popular fiction. So while he identifies literature as dull and plotless, compared to the plot-driven thrillers and romances in his study, the depth of character, embrace of ambiguities, and rejection of easy resolutions can be dismissed as difficult. Conversely, popular trauma narratives might promote a fantasy of agency for the protagonist that may exaggerate effects of trauma or provide unrealistic views of healing from traumas. Literary trauma texts aim to transmit trauma to the reader –performing rather than describing traumatic affect -- while the popular trauma texts soften this hard edge. Gelder identifies the main difference between the texts: "Students of Literature are in fact asked to become readers -- whereas those who read popular

fiction are rendered, ideologically, as (merely) consumers” (Gelder 35). The same is true of the texts in my study -- *The Secret Life of Bees* is undemanding, and hit the New York Times paperback bestseller list with around 4.2 million copies sold by 2006 (M. Rich), and Adichie’s novels have now been translated into at least thirty languages -- while the more demanding texts can expect sales only in the thousands while in hardback. Readers of popular fiction are ‘consumers’ in that their desire to read is inexhaustible, each book compelling the reader to search out another text. In comparison, literature demands engagement and often bears re-reading, such as Booker Prize nominated author Paul Bailey’s devotion to *Housekeeping*: “I love and have lived with this book, which I have read a dozen times with renewed admiration for its subtlety” (Bailey).

### **Historical and Theoretical Framework**

The trauma affecting young women has been central to the history of psychoanalysis, yet their issues have been marginalised by a male-dominated field where women were viewed as prone to fantasy and hence lying about their traumatic experiences. Published in 1895, *Studies on Hysteria* by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud included the case of ‘Anna O’. Her physical hysteria symptoms were traced back to her feelings about her father’s illness and death. The ‘talking cure’, a discussion looking for causes of their hysteria in past events through free association -- where patients speak for themselves rather than repeating a therapist’s ideas -- forms the basis of psychoanalysis. In “The Aetiology of Hysteria” (1896), Freud hypothesised that repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse were a prerequisite for hysteria, which he called the Seduction Theory. Initially viewing the traumatic stressor as real, by 1899 his Screen Memory theory concluded that women’s histories of abuse represented fantasies and desires rather than experiences, claiming their “value as a memory [is] not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed” (S. Freud, Screen Memories 319). A former psychoanalyst, Jeffrey Masson, claims: “We were taught that if a female patient described a memory of incest, we were to regard this as anything but a true memory” (Masson i). Masson was deeply unhappy with the Freudian

explanations that psychoanalysts were trained to search for -- a false memory, wish fulfilment, delusion or self-deception -- which led him to question these explanations and research the reasons behind them. These explanations represent the patriarchal mind-set that feminists have fought against, as illustrated by Adrienne Rich's essay, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (1975): "Women have been driven mad ... for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience" (A. Rich). Masson's book *An Assault on Truth*, states: "There are many other areas in which Freud is unsurpassed ... But when it comes to one major human experience, sexual trauma, Freud was right only briefly, and then forevermore wrong" (Masson ii). Masson and psychodynamic therapists such as Judith Herman, who works within the feminist context, acknowledge Freud's earliest work and largely reject his post-1896 theories as giving too much weight to the role of fantasy. The tendency to privilege male experience became entrenched in the institutional codification of post-traumatic stress disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, the essential guide for psychiatrists and other mental health practitioners.

The DSM defined PTSD as a reaction to "an event outside the range of human experience" (250), failing to recognise "routine" domestic abuse in favour of "men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" (101). Laura Brown notes secrecy surrounding such sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence and marital abuse.:

For girls and women, most traumas do occur in secret. They happen in bed, where our fathers and stepfathers and uncles and older brothers molest us in the dead of night; behind the closed doors of marital relationships where men beat and sometimes rape their wives and lovers; in the back seats of cars, where women are forced into sex by their boyfriends ... in the offices or physicians and therapists who sexually exploit patients, knowing that their status is likely to protect them. These experiences are not unusual, statistically; they are

well within the “range of human experience.” ... They are private events, sometimes known only to the victim and perpetrator. (L. S. Brown 101)

These experiences rely on a power dynamic heavily in favour of male perpetrators. Their regularity and frequency means they fall well within the range of “normal human experience”. And not only are male perpetrators at fault, but increasingly women and girls are responsible -- through bullying, abandonments and abusive actions -- for victimising others. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman argues that there is no difference in terms of psychological harm and the impact of victimisation between “rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between survivors of concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes” (Herman 3). She was influential in DSM revisions, which, as of 2013, include expanded criteria for triggering events allowed for the diagnosis of children, including “actual or threatened sexual violation” (American Psychiatric Association). This comes much closer to reflecting the picture of trauma seen in the novels in my study. Each of the texts in this study focuses on vulnerable individuals and the impact of these everyday experiences on the narrators. The privacy of these events is also a factor: some occur in the homes, and all involve the parents as either perpetrators of abuse or seeming to condone it through keeping the abuse secret. The first person narrative endeavours to interpret the effect of this knowledge, guilt, and secrecy as the characters formulate a conception of themselves as survivors.

The field of contemporary trauma studies responds closely to the medical study, with key theorists drawing heavily upon the studies of Freud, Pierre Janet and Lacan. Cathy Caruth, Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub originated the field: Caruth’s introduction to the series of essays in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in 1995 was followed by her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* the following year. In “The Wound and the Voice”, Caruth’s introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, she explains Freud’s use of a literary example in “Beyond the Pleasure

Principle" (1920), Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata*, to explain the effect of trauma, and writes: "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing" (3). Caruth explains "trauma" comes from the Greek word for a physical wound, but is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3), the result of a traumatic event that fails to be properly assimilated. The mind prevents the wound from being fully realised, and many symptoms occur that "reflect our inability to allocate meaning to the event" (Edkins 39). Long term, a compulsion to repeat this "unclaimed experience" causes the event to be perpetually re-experienced. Caruth states: "The response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). While Caruth, Felman, Laub and other psychoanalytic critics pose valuable questions about trauma and the creation and interpretation of characters, their focus comes from analysing Freud's later work, primarily *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), centring on repetition compulsion. They focus on trauma narratives that transmit rather than describe traumatic affect, something that is not evident in the popular trauma novel. The perspective of Judith Herman, based on Pierre Janet and Freud's early hysteria work, is ideal for my study of literary and popular trauma novels that focus on abuse of women and girls, not only because of her embrace of the domestic scope of trauma but also because it enables a study of the broader scope of traumatic affect.

Temporal chronology is significant to both trauma theory and literary Modernism as reflected in the trauma novel, which increasingly focused on the individual consciousness, relying on "'time in the mind' rather than 'time on the clock'" (Stevenson 318), a concern that has now become integrated into more popular fiction. In 1926, Thomas Hardy remarked of literary Modernism: "They've changed everything now ... we used to think there was a beginning and middle and an end" (Stevenson 317). By allowing narrators to abandon narrative conventions, chronologies were reshaped to emphasise memory and moments of significance. Anachronicity is common in trauma novels, an attempt to recreate this response to re-experiencing of traumatic reactions which links to Freud's view of the mind as a 'Mystic Writing Pad', a wax drawing pad which, even when erased, will

always bear the imprints of past drawings. This wax pad he compares to the unconscious, always bearing the marks of the past even if the drawing surface, like the conscious, shows no marks, past events will always leave a mark. “(T)he history of past impressions is present in the gaps ... all the fantastic things that happen in the unconscious also riddle my understanding of who ‘I’ am” (4-5), explains Ian Parker. The way in which time is presented therefore mediates the narrator’s perceptions of events and the world through their idiosyncratic outlook, never able to escape their history which always leaves a mark.

My approach to the texts in this thesis is framed by the historical reading of trauma and the insistence of psychoanalytic critics that “speechless fright that divides or destroys identity” (Balaev 149) is at the heart of literary portrayals of trauma. This thesis is as much about the limitations of these readings as it is about the texts. Theories of trauma that do not take into account female subjectivity and the building of character beyond their traumatic experience take little account of what it is to live beyond the experiences. Theories of memory described by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek complement the analysis of these texts. Antze and Lambek reject the concept of memory as a metaphoric container or storehouse. They acknowledge: “The past does not correspond to the real in any direct, unmediated way ... memories, like dreams, are highly condensed symbols of hidden preoccupations” (Antze xii). They challenge psychoanalytic ideas of memory as a Western construct that shaped the ideas of Freud and others. They state:

In forging links of continuity between past and present, between who we are and who we think we are, memory operates most frequently by means of the threads of narrative. Life itself is a creative construction, and there is a point at which a person’s life and the stories she tells about it begin to merge. However, stories require interlocutors ... Our memories are shaped in part by the narrative forms and conventions of our time, place and position ... traumas offer a way of inserting a radical, often transformative break in the flow of a life narrative. (Antze xvii)



They see a narrative as a story that must have a beginning and an end: shaped by events, always informed by an event's meanings. Memory is never unmediated; the significance attached to memory is always framed by the context of remembering and the demands of the present moment. The life narrative, recalled through an act of memory, must be constructed by the narrators of my chosen texts. The role of the interlocutor, to whom the narrator unburdens themselves, is critical, as is assessing what inspired the retelling of their story. "People emerge from and as the products of their stories about themselves as much as their stories emerge from their lives. Through acts of memory they strive to render their lives in meaningful terms" (Antze xviii). I believe this to be as true for those telling stories of trauma as those relating tales of adventure and heroism: the author creates through the autodiegetic narrator a picture, shaping our knowledge through narrative, through narrative choices, the chronologies they craft, the gaps in the narrative, and the revelation of aporia within the mind.

Contemporary trauma studies include a range of theorists influenced by the model of literary trauma theory developed by Felman and Caruth and critics who provide additional readings of trauma in literature. I find Michelle Balaev's 2008 article "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" useful as it looks at alternative ways to approach literary representations of trauma. Balaev urges acknowledgement of aspects beyond the pathologic paradigm emphasised by Caruth et al, looking at cultural values and ideologies. Balaev states: "The novel demonstrates the ways that an experience disrupts the individual conceptualisation of self and the connections to family and community, but the values attributed to the traumatic experience are largely shaped by cultural forces created in the world of the novel" (156). She encourages looking at the cultural forces at play in a novel rather than analysing only pathological behaviour. This approach allows for a greater range of strategies to represent trauma than those typically noted by psychoanalytic critics of literary trauma. Criticism from trauma theorists, such as Anne Whitehead, Laurie Vickroy, Kali Tal and Robert Eaglestone, agree that there should be some form of temporal disruption within the texts. Eaglestone, who focuses on the Holocaust, believes the difficulties caused by temporal disruptions contribute

towards the sense of the “impossibility of comprehending the Holocaust” (Luckhurst 89).

Whitehead argues that “it requires a narrative form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (Whitehead 6), and Vickroy says they must “incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structure of these works” (Vickroy xiv). Tal emphasises the danger of “reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives” (Tal 6). Roger Luckhurst argues that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is “paradigmatic”, creating a framework for an “implicit aesthetic for the trauma novel” (87), with three key elements: “its disarticulation of linear narrative, its figuration of trauma in the ghost, and its closing reflections on the transgenerational transmission and the complex accommodations communities need to make with such traumatic history” (91). Luckhurst sees the aesthetic implicit in *Beloved* extend through “Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988), Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-5), Anne Michael’s *Fugitive Pieces* (1996)” (Luckhurst 87) to contemporary authors such as Jonathan Safran Foer. Luckhurst identifies a paradox evident if a specific or “prescriptive” trauma aesthetic is created within literary Modernism that prizes innovation:

[T]he aesthetic means to convey the singularity of a traumatic aporia has now become highly conventionalised, the narratives and tropes of traumatic fiction easily identified. This contradiction can be avoided by making two shifts. First, rather than privileging narrative rupture as the only proper mark of trauma aesthetic, if the focus is moved to consider narrative *possibility*, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative, this opens up the different kinds of cultural work that trauma narratives undertake. (89)

Luckhurst is concerned with the ways that the “traumatic aporia” -- the gap or “black hole” (Leys 231) -- is presented, which links to Caruth’s work, exploring how characters “stubbornly [persist] in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” (Caruth 5). His suggestion of looking beyond “a narrow canon of works” to “a mass of narratives that have exploded across high, middle and low-brow

fiction since the late 1980s" (Luckhurst 89-90) is where popular trauma novels fit into this genre: texts that depart from the trauma paradigm, finding new ways to present a trauma narrative. Luckhurst specifically identifies Stephen King's gothic sensibility in texts such as his novella "The Body" and novels *The Shining* and *Gerald's Game*, as well as fictional memoirs by Phillip Roth and Sara Paretsky's detective novel *Total Recall* as examples of the range of texts relating to trauma.

This thesis analyses four texts that form part of this wide range of narratives, from authors across the spectrum, from critically acclaimed Margaret Atwood to popular author Sue Monk Kidd. My analysis of the texts reveals that Luckhurst list of features is useful but not exhaustive, merely revealing some of the tools used by authors to portray trauma and its "endless impact on a life" (Caruth 7). Disarticulation of the narrative demonstrates to the audience the fractured knowledge characters have of their own history and circumstances; use of a 'ghost' figure is less common in popular trauma novels, and while trans-generational transmission of trauma is evident in some texts, it is linked to overt behaviour: Eugene's violent dictatorship of his family in *Purple Hibiscus*, T-Ray's detached parenting style in *The Secret Life of Bees*, Helen's suicide in the lake in *Housekeeping*, causally linked to the traumatic affect in the narrators. I aim, through a close analysis of the novels, to investigate additional techniques used to detail the traumatic affect of the characters, and to look beyond them to how memory shapes the wider narrative, the fictions' use of interlocutors, and what prompts narrators to tell their stories.

## **Chapter Outline**

This thesis will explore four novels within a framework shaped by ideas about sin in the Catholic Church, an institution relevant to a number of the texts, either through portrayal of the church or links to the Virgin. The division of chapters in this thesis each looks at a different 'sin'. In the catechism, sin is described as "an offence against God ... it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become 'like gods' (Genesis 3:5), knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus 'love of oneself even to the contempt of God'" (Vatican 1850). Sin is "committed by a free

personal act of the individual will” (O'Neil): that is, actions you freely take. Sin is divided into sins of commission and sins of omission.

Actual sin is committed by a free personal act of the individual will. It is divided into sins of commission and omission. A sin of commission is a positive act contrary to some prohibitory precept; a sin of omission is a failure to do what is commanded. A sin of omission, however, requires a positive act whereby one wills to omit the fulfilling of a precept, or at least wills something incompatible with its fulfilment. (O'Neil)

A sin of commission is doing something that you should not, inflicting pain; a sin of omission is a deliberate failure to do what you should, leaving an absence, or disregarding another's pain. The paternal function and intergenerational elements of the transmission of trauma along with the differing actions that lead to the traumatic events suffered by the first person autodiegetic narrators is therefore examined in this manner, as reflected in the chapter titles.

“The Sins of the Father: The Ongoing Effects of Colonised Masculinity on the Role of the Father” looks at *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, set in Nigeria amidst the tensions of post-colonial life. Kambili narrates how things started to fall apart in their home when her brother began to challenge the authority of their autocratic father, structuring her narrative around key events. A *Bildungsroman* that focuses on Kambili as she negotiates the road to maturity in a family dominated by a man determined to discipline his wife and children, it shows the trauma suffered by all of the family before Eugene's dominance is challenged in a way that has long term effects. This novel explores the pervasive terror within the family. The psychological effects on Kambili and her family, seen in everyday behaviour and in Kambili's feelings for her father, are presented in relation to the post-colonial environment in Nigeria and as a microcosm of the world, concluding with Kambili's empowerment, breaking her silence. There is a clear focus within my analysis on the dictatorial Eugene, shaped by his own experiences with the Catholic colonisers, and his effect on Kambili and his family.

The chapter titled “The Sins of the Mother: Maternal Abandonment in *Housekeeping*” focuses on the effect of an absent mother who through her absence has greatly affected her family. The protagonist Ruth is now grown; however, the events of her youth are the central focus on the novel. Growing up in the small lakeside town of Fingerbone in her grandmother’s house, Ruth narrates how she and her sister were abandoned by her mother’s suicide -- in the lake that claimed her grandfather’s life -- and then by the series of women who care for them: her previously estranged grandmother, her spinster great aunts. The attachment Ruth feels for her formerly transient Aunt Sylvie after her mother’s sudden suicide and her previous abandonments is demonstrated throughout the later part of the novel, contrasted to Lucille’s determination to embrace society. The two sisters’ reactions are a study in contrast as one clings to ‘normality’ and the other shuns it. The twin focuses of this chapter are the issues caused by Helen’s abandonment of the children and her suicide, leading to attachment issues in the children, and the portrayal of memory within the text which is critical to each sister’s life choices. Ruth’s fear of abandonment means her relationship with Sylvie is far more important to her than housekeeping as she embraces the environment as her home. The focus on memory throughout the novel is also critical to developing an understanding of the effects on relationships and sense of self, when abandonment can lead to abandonment of society, through the contrasting choices of Lucille, who accepts society, and Ruth who is empowered to explore new possibilities outside of the bounds of convention.

The chapter “The Sins of Omission: Secrets, Truths and Lies in *The Secret Life of Bees*” explores the story of fourteen year old Lily, who has grown up with the knowledge that she killed her mother at the age of four. Lily’s narrative seemingly incorporates a melodramatic sensibility and is shaped around a classic quest story as she searches for the truth about what happened the day her mother died. *The Secret Life of Bees* looks at the ways in which Lily is left to try to reconstruct fragments of memory. The manner in which Lily finds closure and healing is the focus of this text, as she follows her heart in trying to find out the truth, thus showing the importance of acknowledging the truth in order to find healing from traumatic events. The conjunction between race and religion is also

explored in this novel, where revision of institutional Catholicism sees the celebration of the sacred feminine developed. Within this environment, Lily finds acceptance and healing.

The final chapter is “The Sins of Commission: Artistic Mediation of Childhood Experience in *Cat’s Eye*”. Like *Housekeeping*, it is narrated by a middle aged narrator looking back on events of her youth. A visit to her home town forces narrator Elaine to confront her memories about her own role as a bully towards Cordelia. The confronting of a traumatic event from her formative years is similar to what happens in the other texts; by using an older narrator looking back we are able to investigate a childhood trauma from a different viewpoint. The novel’s structure and action are based around a retrospective of Elaine’s significant art works, where each painting reveals her traumatic heritage and causes the recollection of events that informed its contents. The structural links between the content of her paintings and the events that inspired them is explored in this chapter. The importance of place is also explored; Elaine’s return to Toronto is critical in her becoming aware of the bullying that she experienced as a child. It links to trauma theory, which emphasises that “place, more than anything else, remains attached to highly emotional episodic memory” (Terr 73). The access that is gained to her episodic memory is crucial to her understanding and reconciling herself to the events of her past. Religion plays a role in this novel too, as the Virgin Mary is seen by Elaine when she is hallucinating after her most traumatic bullying episode; it is a symbol of her empowerment, which she inserts into her paintings.

All trauma fiction invites us to look both at the individual who undergoes a traumatic event -- designed to seem like a uniquely personal traumatic event that enhances reader’s identification with them -- and to view the after effects, to see how the protagonist becomes free of victimisation. I am interested to investigate how childhood trauma affects the protagonists as they grow up, and the ways in which interlocutors help to facilitate healing by providing a safe place for memory to surface and for allowing aggressive or ambivalent feelings to be expressed without judgement. As Felman and Laub argue, “For the testimonial process to take place there needs to be a bonding, the intimate

and total presence of an other -- in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for a long time" (Felman and Laub 71). There is a range of interlocutors within the texts: from a priest in *Purple Hibiscus* to mothers and mother-figures in *Cat's Eye*, *The Secret Life of Bees* and *Housekeeping*, and the ways in which the interlocutors draw the narrators out of themselves is critical to the reader gaining more knowledge of the protagonists. Their intervention allows the narrators new understanding of themselves, their reactions to events, and allows them to see a way out of their situations. These narrators allow us a viewpoint into the world of traumatised young girls growing up in a violent and uncaring society.

By focusing on small, personal traumas, these novels allow readers to strongly connect with the characters. More than a hundred years ago, Clayton Hamilton wrote: "Fiction has survived, and flourishes today, because it is a means of telling truth" (21). While the world has changed in the intervening century, this is still true of contemporary fiction. I aim to identify which aspects of the construction of trauma narratives make them compelling. The following chapters investigate methods and conventions of fiction: narrative, structure, symbolism and other techniques used to shape the trauma narrative and analyse how successfully the writers portray trauma -- the interplay of "knowing and not knowing" (Caruth 3), and its effects on the narrators. In his conclusion to *The Trauma Question*, Luckhurst comments: "Some of the most interesting cultural work to emerge from the trauma question has involved an attempt to find a model of trauma that acknowledges yet seeks to *work through* the traumatic past, premising communality not on preserving trauma but on transforming its legacy" (213). Each of the authors in this study seeks to show us how their characters work through their traumatic past, uncovering the truth about their experiences, facing it, and creating a life beyond that of a victim, by being empowered to become a survivor. Each text and author adds to the cultural portrayal of trauma in literature, so appealing to the reading public, including my teenage students.

## The Sins of the Father:

### The Ongoing Effects of Colonised Masculinity on the Role of the Father in *Purple Hibiscus*

Papa ... was different, special.

*Purple Hibiscus*-(77)

*Purple Hibiscus* (2003), shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2005, takes on challenging material, exploring life from the perspective of fifteen year old Kambili who is the child of an abusive and overbearing father. This is the source of the trauma that Kambili experiences as she and her family suffer his draconian rule. His role of caregiver, to protect his growing children from harm and to educate and empower them so that they can be a productive part of society, fails. Many households have an atmosphere of fear: *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates one such household dominated by the totalitarian control of the father. The profound disruption of the normal relationships is evident throughout the text as the effects of on-going abuse and trauma are seen on the entire family. Within this chapter I will look at how the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* are adhered to and adapted, the role of Eugene as father and abuser, especially looking at his characterisation as a self-loathing post-colonial product, and how the Eurocentric Roman Catholic church and the post-colonial Nigerian society all contribute to the formation and development of both his and Kambili's character. Each of these aspects is critical to Kambili's role as narrator and protagonist as it helps the reader to "situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the [traumatic] event and the reconfiguration of the self" (Balaev 149). Within the context of trauma in literature, I will also investigate the reasons why this challenging material is 'popular trauma fiction' rather than fully within the trauma paradigm. This will focus on the silence and its associated imagery, Kambili's lack of repression of events and her failure to interpret her father's actions as abusive.



## In the Beginning ...

*Purple Hibiscus* begins *in medias res*. The opening section, titled “Breaking Gods”, occurs on Palm Sunday. Adichie begins by referencing Nigerian author Chinua Achebe’s influential novel on colonial Nigeria, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). *Purple Hibiscus* is a contemporary take on Achebe’s themes, investigating the effect of colonisation and Christian missionaries efforts on the Igbo people, explored by focusing on one Igbo man. Kambili begins: “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère” (3). This conscious reference to Achebe reveals that Kambili’s ordered existence has ceased as Jaja’s challenge causes things to “fall apart”. Adichie references the Catholic church both in Jaja’s defiance by not taking communion, and Papa’s use of the missal as a weapon. The étagère and the figurines, “beige, finger-sized figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures” (7), whose symbolic significance is later developed, are mentioned. The text’s ending is foreshadowed with Kambili’s mother Beatrice’s reassurance that their destruction does not matter. This event has induced Kambili to record the events with its importance reinforced by its placement at the beginning of the novel.

Eugene is “the emblematic colonised masculine subject” (Stobie 424), a “big man” (Adichie 4), a financially successful factory owner, and as the publisher of a newspaper which condemns political injustice, he is influential and much respected. Eugene enjoys the trappings of financial success, owning large compounds in both Enugu and his home town of Abba. He is the father of two teenage children both educated at prestigious Catholic schools. Beatrice, his wife, praises him for not leaving her for a more fertile woman. He is respected by Father Benedict the white parish priest whose sermons are peppered with references to Eugene; he “usually referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus – in that order” (4). The introduction develops a portrait of Eugene as a man zealous in his devotion to the Catholic Church’s rituals. Kambili describes his slow-moving line at mass on Ash Wednesday as he “pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross ... and slowly, meaningfully

enunciated every word of 'dust and unto dust you shall return'" (3). The solemnity and fervour with which he performs this obligation is clear: "Papa always sat in the front pew for Mass ... He was first to receive communion ... His eyes would shut so hard ... and then he would stick his tongue out as far as it could go" (4). The parish priest, Father Benedict, uses him as an example before the church in his sermons and listens to his reports on who has missed participating in communion. Kambili explains he feels that "nothing but mortal sin would keep a person away from communion two Sundays in a row" (6). Kambili understands Eugene's opinions, and the family attempts to reach his expectations. Jaja's defiance breaks with family tradition. His claims, "The wafer gives me bad breath" and "the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me" (6), seem childish. Kambili is shocked and wonders how the family can "act so normal ... as if they did not know what had just happened" (8). At the close of the section, Kambili comments, "Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom ... a freedom to be, to do" (16). His defiance, aimed at producing freedom from Eugene's expectations, is understood by Kambili only with hindsight.

Kambili's fearfulness about the ramification of Jaja's actions reveals the fear and tension within the household. She fears "the compound walls would crumble ... The sky would cave in" (14). She develops a physical reaction to her fear: "My tongue felt like paper" (12). "I developed a cough, and my cheeks burned the back of my hand. Inside my head, thousands of monsters played a painful game of catch" (14). This fearful reaction reflects a home dominated by fear and retribution for actions that break the established order. Eugene's behaviour in this extract reveals two inter-related triggers. The first is Jaja's challenge. Teenagers often challenge their parents: they begin to assert themselves and make their own decisions. Jaja's choice of challenge is significant as challenging the authority of the church triggers Eugene's abusive behaviour most strongly. The choice of the missal as the weapon is symbolically significant. Before Eugene threw the missal, he is described as looking choosing the missal deliberately, delaying his response. Also it becomes clear that Beatrice is subjected to physical violence by Eugene and her routine of polishing the figurines after a beating is

explained by Kambili. "Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something banged against the door"(10). This confirms on-going abuse, and that Beatrice is accepting of her fate. The polishing of the ballerina figurines allows her something she can control, and by treating beautiful, precious things with loving care and kindness, she can still her mind and soul. It seems that both physical and sexual violence is inflicted on Beatrice, whose struggle to maintain a pregnancy is a sign of her suffering. By his acts Eugene is defeating himself as a father, causing his unborn babies' deaths as he enforces his narrow conception of what it is to be a father.

Conversely, Eugene's fatherly tenderness is also revealed in the opening section when he visits Kambili's sick bed when she is sick with worry over what will happen to her in the wake of Jaja's challenge. She says, "We sat silently, our hands clasped for a long time" (15). Beatrice also comes to visit, and in contrast to Eugene's silence, Kambili questions her mother about Jaja and whether she will replace the figurines. She reflects, "Maybe Mama had realised that she would not need the figurines anymore; that when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything. I was only now realizing it, only just letting myself think it" (15). The idea that "everything" came "tumbling down" has less negativity associated with it than the earlier idea of things "falling apart", which embraces the idea of rebuilding. Against this background, the novel presents the trauma of living in an environment of constant fear of abuse and fear, teamed with Kambili's desire to understand the complexity of her abusive father. Antze and Lambek's idea of memory as a "creative construction" in this context is relevant -- Kambili establishes early her victimhood. The image of love being painful is established as Kambili recalls the "love sip" her father offers her of his hot tea: "I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me" (8). Although she does not acknowledge her victimhood, Papa's love causing pain is implicit in this section, and other methods of causing pain are developed as the text continues. Kambili's passive acceptance of the tea, and the pain that comes with her father's love, demonstrates Kambili's construction of herself as a passive victim. Adichie uses this section to

establish characters strongly, and their actions and Kambili's descriptions are keys to founding the setting and atmosphere of the text.

### **The Father**

*Purple Hibiscus* chronicles the downfall of Kambili's father, Eugene Achike. The Achike family protect the terrible secret that their lives are dominated by Eugene's rules, schedules, and religious observances, and that they endure violent beatings when his expectations are not met. Many of Eugene's abusive actions spring from his desire to have them do the best for themselves and the family. In her chapter on captivity in *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman provides an understanding of a perpetrator's relationship to their victims. She says that to society he appears normal, although "authoritarian, secretive, sometimes grandiose, and even paranoid [while at the same time] exquisitely sensitive to the realities of power and to social norms" (75). Psychological control is a key weapon, and as a result he does not often have to resort to violence to achieve dominance, and through his control, the simple kind gestures captors offer are more appreciated, such as "the hope of a meal, a bath, a kind word, or some other ordinary creature comfort" (78). All of these characteristics apply to Eugene, and Kambili finds herself torn between love and hatred for him. Evidence that she is fully in his thrall comes as he records the way he talks with her, clearly showing adoration for him and commenting how she hates to hear him criticised, claiming "he was different, special" (77) when she hears her aunty passing judgement on him. At the same time she is afraid of him, demonstrated in her mute obedience to his demands.

Eugene's duality -- on one hand a respected businessman and recipient of a humanitarian award and on the other a controlling, obsessive and dictatorial family man -- makes him a fascinating character, and it is a symptom of the deeper issues he is dealing with. Eugene favours European influence over his Igbo racial heritage which he derides. He favours English over Igbo, and as revolutionary anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon, commenting on the psychopathology of colonialism,

wrote, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon, *BSWM* 29). Eugene has abandoned his own culture to take on that of his colonisers. Fanon stated:

The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. (Fanon, *WOTE* 32)

Eugene's self-loathing is a symptom of his colonisation. The "native" in Fanon's analysis is "corrosive", "evil", and this is evident in Adichie's Eugene as he represses his Igbo instincts, thoroughly colonised by the Europeans and the Catholic Church. The novel illustrates Eugene's fear of his own father, Papa Nnukwu, having an influence on his children; he considers Papa-Nnukwu 'evil', the enemy of the values he has instilled.

The novel demonstrates the pervasive influence of the European colonisers in Nigeria through Eugene. Cheryl Stobie's "Dethroning the Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" (2010) states: "this particular family is presented as a microcosm of a nation and church that is in need of reform" (423). There is a growing body of critical work on *Purple Hibiscus*, much of which, like Stobie's, concentrates on elements of the patriarchy, and the post-colonial viewpoint and politics of the novel. Stobie argues that the issues facing wider Nigeria, with a dictatorial government allowing the little freedom to the individual, are echoed in the issues facing Kambili's family. While the novelist supported this in her address "The Danger of a Single Story" at the TED conference in 2009, Adichie also spoke of a desire to avoid stereotypes, stating: "I don't want to have types or symbols in my writing. I want to have living, breathing, flawed people" (Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story"). Through Eugene's tensions and dualities Adichie creates a compelling antagonist; he is a product of his environment shaped by

issues typical of post-colonialism, consistent with Stobie's assertions. Domestic violence is widespread in Nigeria; up to 81% of married women acknowledge they have suffered from verbal or physical violence, also widespread among other post-colonial societies (United Nations Population Fund). Many aspects of Eugene's character reflect elements of internalised colonialism, as Fanon theorised. His appearance -- obsessed with the trappings of European-style living, with Persian carpets, custom-made bed, red silk pyjamas, and annually redecorated cream bedroom -- is symptomatic of an inferiority complex: "The wearing of European clothes ... using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking ... all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements" (Fanon, *TWOTE* 19). Social recognition, acknowledgement at church for his generosity, the success of his business, and recognition of his humanitarian efforts make him feel like a 'big man' in comparison to the European, not just the 'big man' in his community.

The Catholic Church informs Eugene's religious expectations, and the morals that he attempts to instil are drawn from the church; however he seems to consider that he "bears the responsibility of monitoring the purity and obedience of his wife and children" (Stobie 426). Adichie sees religion as "a huge force, so easily corruptible and yet so capable of doing incredible good. The streak of intolerance I see masquerading itself as faith and the way we create an image of God that suits us, are things I am interested in questioning" (Adichie, qtd. in Stobie 422). As a boy Eugene was sent to the missionary school, and he has allowed the values of the Catholic Church to overrule traditional Igbo values. He is intolerant of traditional practices seeing them as evil. He has rejected his own father, who comments: "My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries" (83). His sister Ifeoma was also educated by the missionaries but maintains a respect for her father and his traditional values. She points out that "it was not the missionaries" (83) who were alone responsible for Eugene's character. This symptom of internalised racism demonstrates that he has

taken to heart the coloniser's mission. "The total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness" (Fanon, *BSWM* 169). Eugene and his family are Igbo, the dominant tribal group in South-East Nigeria, traditionally religious people. Papa-Nnukwu follows the native religion: he acknowledges *Chineke*, creator of the universe, and believes strongly in the spiritual realm. Eugene keeps the children away from all traditional influence, preventing them from attending 'pagan' festivals. When Kambili spends time with Papa-Nnukwu she comes to understand he is a "traditionalist and not a heathen" (166-7), as she observes his prayer ritual. She is surprised at the earnestness of his prayers and at the fact that "He was still smiling" when he was done: she notes "I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did" (169). Fanon comments on the church, saying: "The church of the colonies is the white people's Church. She does not call the native to God's way but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor" (Fanon, *BSWM* 32). Eugene's control of the children and fear of the Igbo heritage is never clearer than in Kambili's reaction to this encounter. Her faith is not threatened and is in no danger from an 'enemy of values'; she sees the beauty and purity of the prayer ceremony and spiritual relationship.

Eugene places himself at the centre of the household, creating a climate in which he is "like God", "knowing and determining good and evil" (Catholic Pages), dishing out punishments as if he is God. His rejection of his Igbo culture and his acceptance of the European ways confirms that he cannot accept positive aspects of his traditional religion, and because of this he lacks balance. Frantz Fanon criticises those who, like Eugene, reject their racial history, saying: "The black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites" (Fanon, *BSWM* 8). Instead of finding God, Eugene has lost himself. Eugene's combination of the power assigned by patriarchal inheritance together with the powers of God he ascribes to himself allows us to see the damage that is possible when authority lies in such a place.

## Silence as Communication

The largely chronological temporal structure of the novel, apart from the *in medias res* opening beginning with a description of key events, is important to the portrayal of trauma. My choice of young female first person narrators for this study was deliberate as I wanted to look at the trauma from their perspective. Adichie utilises a first-person autodiegetic narrator who is aware of her situation. Unlike Elaine in *Cat's Eye* and Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees*, she has not dissociated or repressed the abuse she suffers: in the opening section Kambili acknowledges previous and on-going abuse in her observations about the figurines' purpose and in her fear of punishment. Judith Herman discusses the prevalence of dissociation in her study, saying: "She [the traumatised child] will go to any lengths to construct an explanation for her fate that absolves her parents of all blame and responsibility .... Unable to escape or alter the unbearable reality in fact, the child alters it in her mind ... she tries to keep the abuse a secret from herself" (Herman 101-2). This novel, however, presents a situation where the entire family was subject to abuse every day that influenced every aspect of their lives. Michelle Balaev's assertion is that the "self is conceived as both a product of culture and individual idiosyncratic tendencies and behaviours ... the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society" (155). Kambili has been sheltered from the community; her heritage and extended family and her view of herself are shaped by her interactions at home, thus providing no conception of herself as a victim of trauma. She has viewed her father as both loving parent and dictatorial punisher, without the judgement provided by outside perspective. Kambili's lack of repression of events makes her narrative accessible. Reviewer Emily Witchurch notes: "[s]he doesn't labour to attach complicated meanings and judgements, avoiding overtly reflective passages, and the novel shines the brighter for this" (Witchurch). Her growing understanding of what has happened, made evident through the novel's structure, guides the reader's interpretation of events. The novel, therefore, has more in common with the popular



trauma narratives: it provides a simple understanding of events and Kambili's view of them.

Throughout the novel Kambili masks Eugene's brutality through her sympathetic descriptions. Daria Tunca's analysis of Kambili's narration in "An Ambiguous Freedom Song: Mind-Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" (2009) notes:

[S]yntactic arrangements inside clauses seem to shift the blame away from Eugene and onto his weapon, while those above the level of the clause appear to minimise the impact of the aggression .... Since Kambili almost systematically avoids assigning her father the function of Actor in her description of the beating, she portrays him as a passive victim instead of an aggressor ... she appears to excuse his behaviour by attributing it to "something [that] weighed him down, something he could not throw off" (102). ... At the same time, Papa is presented as not needing to make any direct intervention to endow his belt with an amount of kinetic energy so forceful that the object seems to come to life. Paradoxically, he thereby comes across as a god-like figure in control of the physical elements around him. (Tunca 10)

Tunca's close reading of Kambili's narration demonstrates the techniques Adichie uses to subtly influence the reader through her narrator's syntactical choices, creating less judgement from the reader accordingly. Tunca views language as "a prism through which one's understanding of reality is conveyed" (Tunca 3). For Kambili this reality is the constant balance she attempts to create which "highlight[s] the intricacy of the character's negotiation of freedom and love" (Tunca 15). Her obfuscating language demonstrates the ways Kambili, despite her intelligence, has been blinded to her father's true nature, portraying him as both "a god-like judge and ... victim of his feelings" (Tunca 11) without deeply examining his motivations.

The second section of the novel, "Speaking with our Spirits", is set further back in time, tracing the months "Before Palm Sunday" (17) when their lives began to unravel. The section's title refers to

the ways in which Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili have communicated without words. Speech and silence are utilised extensively throughout the text with three major types of speech: silent communication of the spirit, oral communication, and suppression of speech. Communication of the spirit demonstrates closeness between individuals such as Jaja and Kambili's mutual understanding which springs from their mutual support. Later the close relationship between Kambili's cousin Amaka and grandfather Papa-Nnukwu is evident to Kambili when she notes, "They understood each other, using the sparest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have" (163). Their communication comes from a close knowledge of a person and their feelings and behaviour; the distance between Kambili and Papa-Nnukwu reveals to her what she has been deprived of. Kambili also is able to understand her father without words, as reading his body language enables her to avoid the worst of his wrath at times. The second major type of speech in the novel is oral communication, shown to be easily disrupted. Kambili's difficulty communicating with others at the start of the novel and her journey to articulation demonstrates the impact her father's abuse has had on her spirit. Amaka and Aunt Ifeoma contrast with Kambili: their family is open and honest, and Ifeoma's desire for free speech at her university puts her in danger of punishment and loss of her job. Closely linked to this is the suppression of speech illustrated by the avoidance of speaking about the abuse. Later in the novel when the children are away from home, it becomes clear that Jaja has told his aunt about how his finger became deformed -- a punishment from his father for missing two questions in his catechism test. Kambili muses: "Had Jaja forgotten that we never told, that there was so much that we never told?" (154). Kambili cannot understand why Jaja would 'tell' when suppressing this information is their habit.

The Achike household is usually dominated by silence: each knows about the others' mistreatment, but it is a taboo subject. At times the abuse is implied and understood; for example when the children discuss their mother's pregnancy Jaja says: " 'We will take care of the baby; we will protect him'. I knew that Jaja meant from Papa" (23). By protecting the baby "from Papa" they are meaning from Papa's abusive behaviours. Judith Herman explains: "Children in an abusive

environment develop extraordinary abilities to scan for warning signs of attack. They become minutely attuned to their abusers' inner states. They learn to recognise subtle changes in facial expression, voice, and body language as signals of danger ... This nonverbal communication becomes highly automatic and occurs for the most part outside of conscious awareness" (Herman 99). Evidence that Kambili is aware of her father's movements is often present in the novel. For example, from his uncomfortable behaviour in church when the priest speaks of his generosity she can tell that "Papa wished the priest would talk about something else" (90). Adichie develops the motif of non-verbal communication to show that abuse victims can communicate without attracting attention. She uses a language of the spirit, communicated through characters' eyes, which Kambili calls "asusu anya" or the "language of the eyes" (305). Everyday things are communicated through their eyes, as when Jaja organises to see Kambili in his room when on holiday. She relates, "With his eyes he said, *We can spend time together then*" (59). Later when Kambili wants to check what he has admitted to in confession, she asks him "with my eyes" (105). Their communication preserves their privacy, highlights their intimate connection, and reveals that they avoid speaking of their plans to their father. This silent communication allows them to remain close despite the regime they live under, and at times it also prevents them from suffering further abuse.

Silence and difficulty with speaking are characteristic of children who have experienced trauma. Their reluctance to open up to others indicates social awkwardness, and it is not understood by people they come into contact with. Abused children are often kept isolated, and Herman explains: "Survivors describe a characteristic pattern of totalitarian control, enforced by means of violence. ... [They describe] destruction of all competing relationships through isolation, secrecy and betrayal" (98). Jaja and Kambili are unused to forming relationships outside their immediate family and are socially awkward. When the editor of their father's paper Ade Coker visits, he asks if they enjoy visiting Abba and if they have friends there; the two teenagers' answers are monosyllabic. The differing reactions of Ade and their father show how difficult it is to interpret their behaviour. "They are always quiet ... so quiet ... Imagine what *The Standard* would be if we were all so quiet," Ade

comments. (58) In contrast, Eugene is proud of them. “They are not like those loud children people are raising these days, with no home training and no fear of God” (58). While Ade Coker saw this as a joke, Papa and his children did not: they were trained to behave just as Eugene wished, as fear of their earthly father made them behave, rather than a fear of God. This fear lies at the heart of this father’s ‘sins’. His self-appointment as moral guardian means that they have never developed a conscience or a feeling that they have sinned against God: sins against their father are far more problematic. Adichie compares their silence to the silencing of Eugene’s newspaper *The Standard* which had become “the voice of the people” known for its “vitriolic attack on the government” (Okuyade 251), but was subject to persecution, with the newspaper driven underground and Ade Coker eventually killed. While Eugene fights for the right for his country’s voice, his own family have no voice against the persecution.

The relationship between Kambili and her cousin Amaka, who is also 15, is also affected by Kambili’s remoteness and silence. Kambili finds it hard to speak when spoken to by Amaka, commenting that she needed to force “a cough out of my throat; I hoped I would not stutter” (79). She could speak clearly and found it hard to tell her the truth about her life. Amaka was amazed at the satellite dishes on their houses and the many luxuries they possessed, but Kambili and her brother “did not watch TV. Papa did not pencil in TV time on our schedules” (79). A lifetime of difference stands between the girls. Where Kambili has material wealth, Amaka is raised in relative poverty; where Kambili is raised in oppressive silence, Amaka is raised in an open, loving home. Neither cousin can understand the other. Amaka is jealous of the trappings of wealth at Abba, but fails to realise the children cannot access these. She accuses them of being “bored with” them (92), and Kambili cannot articulate the truth. Adichie presents Kambili’s difficulty in speaking as a symptom of the abuse that she suffers. It is not until later in the novel that she is able to begin to openly communicate with others. Traumatic events are considered “unspeakable” and Herman discusses the “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma ... .The psychological distress symptoms of

traumatised people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it" (1). While Kambili struggles to articulate anything, she is used to non-verbal communication and to repressing her feelings about the oppressive atmosphere in which she is raised. It is not until she finds someone to listen to her non-judgementally that Kambili begins to find her voice. Because the whole family suffers alongside Kambili, she has not needed to articulate her feelings or explain her experiences before.

### **The Schedule as a Method of Control and The Sins of the Father**

Eugene provides a schedule for his children as a way to enforce control over them. "Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep" (23-4). Judith Herman discusses the nature of the household where abuse happens and notes: "While most survivors of childhood abuse emphasise the chaotic and unpredictable enforcement of rules, some describe a highly organised pattern of punishment and coercion" (Herman 99). Adichie describes a household dominated by the schedule where any departure from it would be punished: the characters depend on the schedule, which both organises and controls the children, ensuring religious observance. Automatic acquiescence to the rules of the Catholic Church, which Eugene enforces, is embedded in the household. Despite this, Kambili loves and respects her father, commenting: "Most of what Papa said was important ... sometimes I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his voice ... it was the same way I felt when he smiled" (25). When she makes a statement which he approves of and holds her hand, she feels "as though my mouth were full of melting sugar" (26). The tension between love and control is clearly laid out in these dual ideas of the schedule and the approval that Kambili so craves from her father. She does not understand his need to control over every aspect of his life and the lives of his family. That his self-esteem is tied up with his obsessive religious observance does not diminish her love for him. The idea of duality is common in the study of trauma. Most commonly it looks at a

duality within the victim: a side that knows about the trauma and another side which denies it.

Adichie's innovation is that Kambili displays a different sort of duality: the love and fear of her father, never sure whether he will offer love or terrible judgement.

In this context, the idea of "The Sins of The Father" that I have raised in the title of this chapter is evident as Eugene has made himself like God in the household, punishing the misdemeanours of his family. Labelling Eugene's actions sinful implies wilfully disobeying God's laws. The Catholic Catechism describes sin as freely committed. The Bible describes how sin came into being, when the first woman and man ate from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17), seeking to make themselves "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3.5). Eugene should know the difference between good and bad, and his rule of the household and his schedule establishes forward planning: he enforces this schedule and punishes any failure to observe it. In addition, failure to observe religious obligations triggers physical violence. When Beatrice feels ill and cannot stay to visit the priest, he first prays, asking God to "forgive those who had tried to thwart His will, who had put selfish desires first and not wanted to visit His Servant after Mass" (32). He then beats her, and later demands the children say "sixteen different novenas. For Mama's forgiveness" (35). Throughout, Eugene refuses to accept nausea as a plausible reason for not wanting to visit the priest. A further example is when Kambili breaks the Eucharist fast in order to take food and medicine together for her stomach cramps. Papa's reaction is to beat her: he "unbuckled his belt slowly" (102), lashing out at Jaja, Mama and Kambili in turn. They stood and took his punishment: "We did not move more than two steps away from the leather belt that swished through the air" (102). He questions them: "'Why do you walk into sin?' he asked. 'Why do you like sin?' " (102). The duality of his role as enforcer and carer is clear as he asks, "Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?" (102). His fierce hug -- Kambili says that he "crushed Jaja and me to his body" (102) -- demonstrates his inability to tell the difference between violence and a truly loving touch. Eugene appears torn between being the protector of their souls and a compassionate father: he does not allow them to develop independent consciences, seeing them as extensions of himself. Cheryl Stobie notes:

“While Eugene’s tears function manipulatively to provoke reassurances from his victims, they also reveal a realisation of his culpability” (427). Stobie’s reading of Eugene charitably explains self-serving tears, ensuring the family’s continued compliance. Like the victims of child abuse that Herman discusses, the family does all that they can to minimise the abuse, but it also reflects the typical patterns of the abuser who first lashes out and then apologises for their actions. Eugene’s failure to see his triggers and to change his behaviour indicates his lack of self-awareness as the product of colonial Nigeria and the far-reaching influence of the Catholic Church’s missionary zeal. The ways these create his self-loathing and masterful control over his family all contribute to the specificity of place in this novel. The ideas of silence and sin are effective reminders of the trauma suffered by Kambili, and the combination of post-colonial issues with traumatic subject matter is an effective reminder of the influence church and state have on individuals’ lives.

### **Catalyst for Change and the Role of the Interlocutor**

The children’s visit to Eugene’s sister Ifeoma is the catalyst for change, altering how Jaja and Kambili relate to others and allowing them to realise the extent of their abuse. They had never been away from Papa and for Kambili it was a frightening prospect. She says: “I could not find the words in our eye language to tell him [Jaja] how my throat tightened at the thought of five days without Papa’s voice, without his footsteps on the stairs” (109). The motif of silence and speech is continued in this new setting as Kambili describes “bubbles of air” in her throat “keeping the words back” (154), and when she does speak it is so quietly that it attracts notice. Cousin Amaka questions, “Why do you lower your voice ....You talk in whispers” (117). Kambili is overwhelmed by the noise, commenting, “Laughter floated over my head. Words spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting any response. We always spoke with a purpose back home ... but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak” (120). The contrast of silence with speech demonstrates the measured existence they have lived and Kambili’s embrace of silence. As Kambili becomes accustomed to the new environment, she begins to find her voice. When Amaka is rude to Kambili

about her inability to make the *orah* soup, Aunt Ifeoma urges her to speak up: “[H]ave you no mouth? Talk back to her!” (170). Freedom and encouragement to speak are new to Kambili, and her calm reply takes her by surprise and reveals personal growth in this place of freedom.

The chaplain at Auntie Ifeoma’s hometown of Nsukka, Father Amadi, develops an interest in Kambili and functions as interlocutor, allowing Kambili to bear testimony to the trauma she has been through. Father Amadi recognises Kambili’s need for space and encouragement to testify about her experiences. By initiating casual conversations, treating her kindly, and including her in activities, he makes her relax. While she had not understood Jaja’s increasing openness about their abuse, judging him for breaking their silent pact, she finds herself opening up to Father Amadi despite struggling with a growing attraction to him. Her first teenage crush makes her self-conscious but allows her to explore this side of herself away from Eugene’s stifling judgement. She enjoys the company of a man who “made me forget who was nearby, where I was sitting, what colour my skirt was” (173), someone who can lift her spirit while addressing the issues that surround her. “I had smiled, run, laughed. My chest was filled with something like bath foam. Light” (180). Father Amadi is kind, thoughtful, and generous to Kambili, but never promises her a relationship as he is committed to the church. Father Amadi is interlocutor and confessor, acting as Judith Herman advises, “to affirm a position of moral solidarity with the survivor” (178). This is valuable to Kambili as she prizes the Catholic Church despite its role in her father’s abusive behaviours. Father Amadi’s commitment to the priesthood, which he saw as central to answering his “many questions growing up” (180), never falters, and his life of service puts this love into action. This positive reading of the church counterbalances Eugene’s portrayal and establishes its positive influence. St Peter’s is described as lacking “the huge candles or the ornate marble altar of St Agnes” (240), but Father Amadi and the congregation share a sincere belief in God. Father Amadi is described as being “somewhere else only he and God knew about” (241) during communion, and the liturgy is adapted to include Igbo phrases showing an ability to adapt to the needs of contemporary Nigeria. This



experience meets Kambili's needs when she is most vulnerable, demonstrating the continuing value of the church.

Kambili's new self-confidence gained in Nsukka is challenged by Eugene's abusive actions on her return, which primarily spring from his reactions to the children having extended contact with Papa-Nnukwu. First, Eugene pours boiling water on the children's feet on the night of their return, punishment for failing to inform him of Papa-Nnukwu's presence in Nsukka. "So you saw the sin clearly and walked right into it?" (194), Kambili was asked. The slow, deliberate pouring of the boiling water on her feet was accompanied by a lecture: "This is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (194). Afterwards he insisted: "Everything I do for you, I do for your own good" (196). He recalls how he was dealt a similar punishment by a priest when growing up: he had his hands soaked in boiling water after being caught masturbating. "I never sinned against my own body again. The good father did that for my own good" (196). His experience of humiliation and punishment by the priests as a boy is revealed as the catalyst for the cycle of guilt and penance. His constant awareness of sin and the need to atone for it, and his desire to avoid sin while never judging himself for the punishments he inflicts on those he loves, reflect the lessons he learnt. His legalistic view of Christianity is based on Catholic teaching rather than accepting the grace of God to forgive sin and to lead followers on a righteous path. Ian Hacking's article "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse" (1991) looks at the changing face of what we consider 'abuse' and states: "The abuser's own sense of what they are doing, how they do it, and even what they do is just not the same now as it was thirty years ago" (Hacking 254). He continues, saying there are a "litany of the bad things that can be done to children, all of which will be placed in the category 'child abuse', some of those things were not even counted as especially bad three decades ago" (Hacking 257). Hacking's interest in the social construction of child abuse helps us to see the priests' actions fits in with a contemporary description of mistreatment of children. Roger Luckhurst acknowledges the role of "second-wave feminists in forcing the acknowledgement of incest and familial sexual abuse, in the face of professional and general cultural denial" (Luckhurst 74), and the

role of a proposal for Battered Child Syndrome in 1962, in acknowledging inappropriate violence within the family. Eugene is depicted as inflicting unnecessarily abusive punishments instead of gentle correction. While the oft-quoted Biblical proverb advises, "Spare the rod and spoil the child" (Proverbs 13:24), a more contemporary interpretation, the New International Version, states, "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them." Eugene oversteps the boundaries of acceptable discipline, which is contrasted to Ifeoma's management of her children: Amaka describes physical punishment -- a stick on their palm for Amaka, or buttocks for Obiora, or a slap-- being followed by a prolonged explanation. "Afterward she would talk about it for hours. I hated that. Just give me the lashes and let me out. But no, she explained why you had been flogged, what she expected you to do not to get flogged again" (245). Eugene sees himself as a loving father. However when Kambili is punished for keeping a painting of Papa-Nnukwu, Eugene is ruthless: "Kicking. Kicking. Kicking" (211). He beats her so badly she is hospitalised. His speech is described as "nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English" (210). This second beating reveals the ferocity of his feelings about his 'heathen' father and demonstrates his savagery. His usual planned, measured action is abandoned to his rage as demonstrated by his use of Igbo, a language he considers undignified.

Beatrice's actions and reactions do not seem to appreciate the seriousness of the abuse after Kambili is beaten. Ifeoma encourages Beatrice to leave Eugene, who insists, "It has never happened like this before" (214). Kambili goes to Nsukka -- her place of refuge --when she leaves hospital, and is honest about her injuries when Amaka asks, "It was Uncle Eugene who did that you to, *okwia?*" (220). She is allowed to recover in an open atmosphere, and receives support from Father Amadi. This trip and the one that follows show the increasing break that Jaja and Kambili are making with their father, experiencing life outside of the abusive atmosphere. They return to Nsukka stronger and more determined with Jaja's refusal to participate in communion being an attempt to seize control of his life. The novel's structure helps to inform the audience about events and motivations of characters, establishing the psychological and physical abuse of Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili. It

illustrates that their actions and reactions in the penultimate section of the novel are because of this on-going climate of fear. This section of the novel softens and moderates Adichie's message about colonialism, as the empowering of Jaja and Kambili, along with sympathetic portraits of Father Amadi and Ifeoma, show that the integration of the traditional and contemporary views can be successfully accomplished.

### ***Purple Hibiscus as Bildungsroman***

*Purple Hibiscus* focuses on Kambili's growth as she moves from her sheltered childhood, where she does not realise the effect of her abusive upbringing, through a series of events which prompt her, Jaja and Beatrice, to challenge Eugene's control. Their quest is to live without oppression, to make their own choices about how they will live, study and observe religion. For Kambili it also is a quest to maintain her views on life: how to find the will to study without a father imposing his expectations on her, to worship a God of her own free will, and to balance her love of her father with an increasing knowledge of his abuse. Kambili faces loss and discontent as she begins to acknowledge that her father is responsible for her fear. There are markers here that this is not a classic *bildung*. The journey from the family home in Enugu to Nsukka opens her eyes to the true atmosphere of her home. This journey enables her to begin to see the world differently away from her father. While Kambili is under Eugene's influence she cannot grow up, remaining passively obedient attempting to meet Eugene's unreasonable expectations. In Nsukka she discovers life can be different, maturing as she learns to speak about living in fear, the physical punishments that she and her brother have suffered, and learning to accept that others judge her father's actions far more harshly than she had ever dared.

Kambili finds her voice as a narrator in a way that she has never voiced her thoughts previously. Her character grows in maturity as she shapes the story of the traumatic events of her life, beginning with events on Palm Sunday that are a turning point, revealing her changing understanding of family dynamics. While Kambili ends the novel with a much higher degree of maturity, the ending is not

redemptive. Aspects of the *bildung* framework are evident in the text in the links between events that cause the psychological growth and Kambili's need to deal with the trauma in her life. The events that cause her pain also prompt the growth of her maturity and strength of spirit, and her readiness for adult relationships signals social integration has begun.

### **The Long Term Effects of Abuse**

The ending of the novel provides resolution to suffering, as Eugene is killed by Beatrice who had seemed so stoic in her suffering. She finally loses patience with Eugene when he causes yet another miscarriage, breaking "that small table where we kept the family bible" (248) on her belly. With Ifeoma leaving Nsukka for America due to political unrest at the University, the family will no longer have her support. The children visit one final time and are there when they learn that Eugene has been found dead, they will learn later that he had been poisoned by Beatrice. She had begun poisoning him with a substance obtained from a witchdoctor. This reveals her utter desperation and reveals that their servant Sisi, whose witchdoctor uncle provided the poison, was aware of the suffering the family endured and was willing to risk herself to help them. In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst states: "The plots of trauma narratives can belatedly and magically reconfigure entire life stories" (88). This is because they aim to replicate the trauma, which is often repressed that even the sufferer is unaware of what they have undergone until late in the narrative. Knowledge of Beatrice's actions does not "magically reconfigure" her life story; however it raises questions and invites us to reassess her. What finally made her give up on Eugene? Which of his actions was the one that caused her to lose ultimate faith in him? This revelation invites reassessment of her character. Before her actions are revealed, Jaja berates himself, saying "I should have taken care of Mama" (289). Having noted the attempt of Ifeoma's son Obiora to care for his mother, Jaja wishes he took better care of his own family. He also displays anger towards God: "Look at what he did to his faithful servant Job, even to His own son .... Why didn't he just go ahead and save us?" (289). The allusion to Job from Old Testament of *The Bible* refers to a righteous

man whom God allowed Satan to test, and Jaja compares their testing to this: unnecessary suffering that God has subjected them to. He questions God's power, which Kambili has not done, although she has struggled with her faith. Jaja claims responsibility for his father's poisoning -- taking the punishment for his mother as a scapegoat in a Christ-like action -- and the novel ends with him about to be released from prison after awaiting trial for thirty-one months. He became hardened by this experience, causing distance to grow between himself and Kambili: "His eyes are too full of guilt to really see me, to see his reflection in my eyes, the reflection of my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could" (305). Like Kambili, Jaja belatedly discovered the toxicity of the family atmosphere but blames himself for allowing this to continue. After Eugene's death Kambili continues to be affected by nightmares and unresolved feelings: "I have nightmares ... [of] the silence of when Papa was alive. In my nightmares, it mixes with shame and grief ... until I wake up screaming and sweating" (305). The nightmares are symptomatic of the trauma she has suffered but her simple narration of them does not transmit the trauma to the reader. Instead she narrates how she now offers Mass for her father, using her religion to manage her feelings for him, and showing her ultimate forgiveness for him. The opportunity to impress the traumatic impact on the audience is again softened by the narrative style.

This final section of the novel is titled "A Different Silence", set in 'the present', almost three years later, and looks at the ideas of redemption and forgiveness, and new silence within the family between mother and daughter. Firstly silent about the possibility of Jaja being freed, they "went about carrying, but not sharing, the same new peace, the same hope, concrete for the first time" (297). Also left unspoken are bribes to judges and police, uncovering Papa's secret generosity to orphans and veterans, and bigger issues: "There is still so much that we do not say with our voices, that we do not turn into words" (297), which demonstrates their difficult road to redemption. In reference to Jaja, Kambili says, "There is so much that is still silent between Jaja and me. Perhaps we will talk more with time, or perhaps we will never be able to say it all, to clothe things in words, things that have long been naked" (305). The narration of silence allows the audience to understand

that Eugene's death has not brought freedom: the guilt has been transmitted to the family as they negotiate life knowing that they hide the truth of Eugene's death, and that they need forgive themselves and each other in order to enjoy redemption.

By the end of the novel, it is clear that Kambili has grown enormously: without leaving home and experiencing the challenges she does, she would never have experienced the personal growth that allows her to go from a scared young girl to an articulate narrator. Using Margaret Atwood's victim positions from *Survival* (1972) as a framework allows us to analyse this growth. Kambili and Jaja are initially aware they are victims but seem unable to fight, whereas Beatrice actively defends Eugene, viewing herself as lucky to have him. Kambili and Jaja show awareness at times, such as being determined to protect a new sibling. The attitude of Kambili as things begin to "fall apart" (3) shows her acceptance of the changes. Beatrice moves most quickly through the stages of victimhood. Although her changing opinion is not outwardly expressed after Kambili's severe beating, this and her miscarriage are catalyst for transformation. Jaja and Kambili take positive action too, challenging Eugene's hold on them to return to Nsukka where they feel safe. Jaja's claim of responsibility for Eugene's death makes him a victim of Nigeria's justice system, corrupt and slow-moving, which leaves him hopeless. Beatrice becomes closed off from even Kambili. Jaja's release from prison offers hope, with the trio going home to plant a new garden. The novel's end, which claims "The new rains will come down soon" (307), symbolises their readiness for a new season in their lives. Atwood describes as position four the readiness to be creative non-victims. The garden, with its purple hibiscus, which Kambili had earlier described as "fragrant with the undertones of freedom" (16), is symbolic of freedom; thus, the gift of the hibiscus from Auntie Ifeoma for them to grow echoes her gift of knowledge about how others live. The novel has a hopeful ending with a redemptive feeling. Empowering Kambili with a sense of agency provides resolution; the final section where Jaja and Beatrice lose ground is countered with the hopeful ending, demonstrating that victims do not need to continue to be oppressed but can enjoy the fragrance of freedom. This redemptive ending caters to the popular audience by providing the elements of wish fulfilment that

come with a happy ending. This ending, along with the accessible portrayal of trauma, helps to place the novel at the popular end of the continuum of trauma novels. In addition, Adichie's personalisation of the issues of colonisation through Eugene's character effectively shuts down far-reaching criticisms of colonialism, because Ifeoma is more moderate and accepting despite similar upbringings. He represents only one possible outcome, and the experiences of his family show his influence can be overcome given time.

## The Sins of the Mother:

### Maternal Abandonment in *Housekeeping*

Memory is the sense of loss; and loss pulls us after it.

*Housekeeping* (194)

*Housekeeping* (1980), Pulitzer Prize winner Marilynne Robinson's PEN/Hemingway award-winning first novel, backgrounds the trauma suffered by sisters Ruth and Lucille after their mother Helen abandons them, eventually leading to Lucille's embrace of society and Ruth's transience. The title of this chapter, "The Sins of the Mother," refers to Helen's suicide. The chapter's title is not meant to imply suicide is a sin, rather that abandoning her children, the suddenness of her death, and the planning that was involved implies rule breaking in the same way that Eugene's systematic control and abuse of his family was 'sinful' in *Purple Hibiscus*. The chapter examines technical innovations such as the precise, poetic language of the narrator; the setting, distinct both in its portrayal of small-town America and the eerie mood of Fingerbone; symbolism relating to nature and female subjectivity; and structural devices. This is a distinctly American novel with a focus on families and society, as the traumatic legacy Helen inherits on her father's death is in turn gifted to her children. The contrast of autodiegetic narrator Ruth with her younger sister Lucille is also critical in showing the effects of sudden, traumatic loss on children and the decisions they make in either embracing or rejecting the norms of patriarchal society. I argue that the issues Ruth and Lucille face relate to Attachment Disorder following their mother's suicide, and their differing choices reflect their reactions to this pivotal event. A young child is utterly dependent, and mothers are considered to be nurturing, expected to subjugate their own needs. Even from a feminist viewpoint, the needs of dependent children are still vital. *Housekeeping* is an evocative novel about the feel of life in small town America, and features sisters changed by their mother's suicide and abandonment to the care of their grandmother



Sylvia. This chapter looks at how Helen's death, the girls' resulting trauma, and the lack of an attachment figure combine to cause their different lifestyle choices. Her death and their abandonment cause on-going effects on the girls in both their relationships and attitudes. *Housekeeping* illustrates this as the girls navigate through their childhood and teenage years whilst dealing with the trauma of abandonment, showing disconnection and problems with attachment.

*Housekeeping* is about growing up in America -- the feel of life at a time when structures of society are being challenged -- and investigates ideas about what we value in life: the home, or the feeling of being at home, no matter where that might be. *Housekeeping* has a different tone and feel to the other novels I have chosen. Robinson uses striking, poetic language, "so precise, so distilled, so beautiful that one doesn't want to miss any pleasure it might yield up to patience" (Schrieber). Robinson's concentration on elements of the landscape is at the heart of her metaphors: "Miss Robinson works with light, dark, water, heat, cold, textures, sounds and smells. She is like the Impressionists, taking apart the landscape to remind us that we are surrounded by elements, that we are separated from one another, and from our past and future, by such influences" (Broyard). The interplay of landscape with home, housekeeping with transience, and light with darkness is at the metaphoric heart of the novel, and each element influences Ruth as she grows up in Fingerbone unable to escape the influence of the ever-present lake.

### **In the Beginning -- Setting, Chronology and Narrative Point of View**

Akin to the first chapter of *Purple Hibiscus*, the first chapter of *Housekeeping* establishes the background of the trauma seen through the physical setting of Fingerbone and Ruth's family dynamics. In *Purple Hibiscus* there is no back story provided, though the importance of the past is established through Eugene's insistent preference of the Catholic colonial traditions over Igbo. The readers must determine the importance of this preference as Kambili herself establishes an understanding of Eugene's colonised patriarchy and his internalised racism. Robinson structures

the novel around intergenerational trauma and abandonment, with the town of Fingerbone central to this concept -- its icy lake is the symbolic heart of the issues of abandonment and loss. Fictional Fingerbone, partly based on Robinson's hometown of Sandpoint, Idaho, has a gothic feeling with its isolation, set in a mountainous area built on the flat of a former lake. The town floods annually in spring: "The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips" (5). It is isolated, cut off by the lake, accessible only by the railroad bridge that crosses the lake. The sisters are abandoned in this strange town at their grandmother's home.

Ruth, a largely silent character within the narrative, narrates the historical events that occurred before her birth that shape the family's present. Ruth is similar to Kambili because of her tendency to silence, a characteristic of those who have experienced the unspeakable. As Christine Caver notes, in "Nothing Left to Lose, *Housekeeping's* Stranger Freedoms": "Although her imaginative landscape is dominated by these haunting, repetitive images of her absent/present mother, only the reader has access to them. To those around her within the novel she barely speaks at all. In contrast to her emotionally rich interior monologues, Ruth's clipped speech reveals neither emotion nor imagination" (Caver 119). Ruth describes her grandfather's determination to live by mountains, and his eventual death in a "spectacular derailment" (5) of the train as it crossed the bridge over the dark icy lake. Her grandmother, Sylvia, continued living there with her three daughters, not bitter about what she viewed as "a kind of defection" (10) by her husband. Her daughters, aged sixteen to thirteen, became clingy, needing their mother's reassurance. She maintained regular rhythms including eating together, but perceived "them leaning toward her, looking at her face and her hands" (11). She noted, "Never since they were children had they clustered about her so .... It filled her with a strange elation, the same pleasure she had felt when any one of them, as a suckling child, had fastened her eyes on face and reached for her breast, her hair, her lips, hungry to touch, eager to be filled for a while and sleep" (11). The strong attachment within the family is shown in her feeling that her daughters were nurtured by her presence, like helpless infants. As a family unit, they became dependent and inseparable: "The years between her husband's death and her eldest

daughter's leaving home were, in fact, years of almost perfect serenity" (13). Ruth observes that this "lulled my grandmother into forgetting what she should never have forgotten" (13). Routines allowed them to forget the loss of their husband and father: "[the loss] had fallen out of sight ... and the calm that followed it was not greater than the calm that came before it" (15). While adapting to the loss they had not addressed it or its traumatic impact. The family's continued presence in Fingerbone after the sudden death of their father demonstrates some people's reluctance to escape from the site of their memories, even traumatic memories. The image of the family sitting together, ignoring their loss, displays them accepting it without understanding the loss. The loss haunts them later, analogous to Ruth's haunting following her mother's abandonment and death. Their interdependence was shattered as the sisters all left home within a year of each other. Failure to address their losses impacted each sister, and their traumatic inheritance of unspoken trauma is demonstrated by their failures in relationships and difficulty being accommodated in society. The eldest sister, Molly, became a missionary in China while the younger sisters moved to Seattle, drifting into unsuitable relationships. Helen, the middle child, eloped with the girls' "putative father" (14), returning to Fingerbone to placate Sylvia with a second wedding. Sylvia is able to maintain possession of the house but not her children: the house remains her spiritual centre, providing security despite her losses, and it allows the development of a place where there is an "absence of men as rule-givers and overseers of hearth and home" (Chandler 292). The shattering of the family reflects the concern of wider America that a type of familial diaspora was occurring, breaking families apart as they sought their own version of the American dream -- "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable ... regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (Adams 215) -- away from home and hearth.

Helen's suicide in the lake demonstrates the intense impact of her father's death and the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Despite "a total of seven and half years ... between Helen's leaving Fingerbone and her returning" (19), she returns only to commit suicide. She came

when “she knew her mother would not be home, and she stayed only long enough to settle Lucille and me on the bench in the screened porch, with a box of graham crackers to prevent conflict and restlessness” (20). While the girls quietly waited, “she went back to the car and drove north almost to Tyler, where she sailed in Bernice’s Ford from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake” (22). Ruth’s description leaves us in no doubt that the death was deliberate. She learned that when the car got stuck, Helen got help to get it out and then “roared swerving and sliding across the meadow until she sailed off the edge of the cliff” (23). Helen chooses the lake for her death, associating her death with her father’s death in the minds of the children. When Ruth describes the lake she says: “One is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the depths of the lake” (9). The lake is central to the town, but also to Helen’s thoughts: even away from Fingerbone she feels its call. Ruth’s description of the lake creates metaphoric layers, and critic Angela Wei describes its four levels:

1. The first level of the lake: the deepest level, the old lake where the dead are.
2. The second level of the lake: Fingerbone itself, the lake of human life and memory, the town can be a lake, the town is a lake and part of the lake. When there is a flood, the town is immersed in the lake.
3. The third level of the lake: it also touches life because the plants and grass absorb water from the soil.
4. The last level which is on the surface of the lake: the dampness in the air, water suspended in sunlight, the lake can rise and turn into air. (Wei para 2.)

The town and the lake are linked by name, but their boundaries are blurred: by frequent flooding it creeps into houses and floods the basement of the family house. Wei argues that the town represents life and the lake is symbolic of death; therefore the lack of boundary between the town and lake means there is “no boundary between absence (the dead) and presence” (Wei para 3.). It

therefore allows the ghostly presence of the lake's dead to penetrate the home. Roger Luckhurst argues: "Trauma persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time" (81). The ghostly presence, here seen in the lake filled with the souls of the family's departed, is the central symbol in the novel. It dominates both the novel's beginning and ending. Robinson's decision to frame Ruth's narrative with the family's history illustrates her deep sense of connection to Fingerbone where "through all these generations of elders we lived in one house" (3). Ruth's awareness of her traumatic inheritance is acknowledged by the structural importance of this opening chapter prioritising family history and its legacy. Like the lake, an inescapable haunting presence, the traumatic wounds of the previous generation are passed on to the new generation. While Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* inflicts punishment on his family as he was punished by the priests, these threads of trauma run deeper: the traumatic affect is the legacy transmitted through the very house and town itself. In her chapter "*Housekeeping and Beloved: When Women Come Home*", Marilyn R. Chandler compares the house in Fingerbone with 124 in *Beloved*. Chandler notes that both Sethe and Sylvie, in inheriting the houses, "experience a different set of challenges as a result of ambiguous privilege" (292). The traumatic legacies are inescapable in both novels, as each woman tries to find "freedom from the burden of a grisly past that is now part of a family mythology in which they are implicated as heirs" (292). Doreen D'Cruz interprets the house as "symbolizing the attempt to establish the Father's order" (D'Cruz 223). Certainly the house in *Purple Hibiscus* was under the father's control. In *Housekeeping* the house results from Edmund Foster's desire to establish a home in the mountains; however, his death leaves the house to his wife and daughters. The house remains a symbol of the patriarchal order, yet as the generations establish their lives within it, the house -- like the patriarchal order -- is increasingly unable to provide shelter. D'Cruz notes the eventual self-exile of Sylvie and Ruth and argues that "the lighted house ... functions as a place that keeps alive the illusions of shelter and knowledge, while blunting one's finer senses" (D'Cruz 224). Like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* when she journeys to Nsukka,

leaving the house enables functioning outside of the patriarchal order. The finality of Ruth and Sylvie's departure shows their total rejection of this order.

The frame created by Robinson in the introductory chapter is critical to understanding the traumatic events and Ruth's attitudes to them, just as Adichie's structural framework for *Purple Hibiscus* is created by her opening section. Chronological differences between the two texts show different interests developed: for Adichie the opening events fall part-way through the action of the text, whereas Robinson discloses immediately the history of traumatic events that her protagonist's family have undergone. Both present events that are re-examined throughout the text. Their importance is evident as it allows insight into workings of the narrators' minds as they constantly revise history and their memories, searching for meaning in former occurrences. Both events prove to be central to the trauma suffered, and the continual returns could mirror the concept of repetition compulsion as described by Freud and Janet: "Restitution requires the restoration of a sense of efficacy and power" (Herman 41). By re-examining key events each narrator attempts to take control, perhaps aiming for a satisfactory solution to their traumatic experience.

### **Suicide, Absence, and the Sins of the Mother**

Starting the novel with family history indicates Robinson's desire to establish how these events define and shape Ruth's life, and Ruth's narrative persistently returns to her mother, endeavouring to contextualise her suicide. Ruth cannot escape knowledge of her mother's suicide; it preoccupies her again and again, and this continual return to the traumatic loss presents Ruth trying to revise and understand her mother's death, representing a disarticulation in the narrative which initially appears to be chronological. With each return to the topic more information is revealed about Helen, supporting Ruth's initial assertions that her actions were a deliberately planned suicide. Disarticulated narratives became common in trauma novels, as Laurie Vickroy notes: "Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and

structures of these works" (Vickroy xiv). The return to and revision of the facts exemplifies Ruth's reworking of such certainties and uncertainties. This pattern of revisions is common in trauma novels. Robinson's innovation comes from an interest "in the figural quality of thought, its affinity to myth and dream, first of all in its emotional density and its indifference to time" (Brookes). This "figural quality" of thought can be linked with Caruth's perception that traumatic experiences recur in an attempt to reclaim the experience lost to trauma.

Helen's death is a suicide and therefore an unwelcome subject in her mother's household. Sylvia's obituary refrained from mentioning "essential information", perhaps because "they wouldn't want to mention Helen" (40). Sylvia is a "religious woman" (9) who believed "life as a road down which one travelled ... and that one's destination was there from the very beginning" (9). This description aligns her with Robinson's own Calvinist beliefs, a group whose founder saw suicide as "an appalling and abominable crime before God" (Bilkes). Later, the Great Aunts also avoid mention of Helen because of her suicide, experiencing "sharp embarrassment" at the mention of her name (51). The suppression of conversation about their mother magnifies the consequences of her death to their girls: to themselves they question "How could their mother have left them like that?" (31), but with others they suppress conversation on account of their uncomfortable reactions. Helen's decision to end her life in the lake reinforces the correlation to her father's death and reveals the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Helen's parenting choices expose her struggles, as she possesses neither the skills nor support to raise her children. Her choices include leaving them with an aging, sleeping neighbour while she worked, providing them with no knowledge of their father, and at times putting "lengths of clothesline through our belts and fasten[ing] them to the doorknob" (21). While her trip to Fingerbone was at neighbour Bernice's insistence, the implication in the calm actions preceding her suicide establish her as resolved and determined in her approach.

Helen's abandonment of the children, without any introduction to their grandmother or staying to place them in her care, is not an act we expect of a mother. Ruth recalls she "put our suitcases in

the screened porch ... and told us to wait quietly" (22), and drove off. There are no scenes of farewell or parting. As a society we harshly judge mothers who abandon their children. The term 'abandonment' implies voluntary withdrawal from the relationship, a desertion of the children and responsibility for them, and clearly Helen has neglected to make arrangements for their care, 'dumping' them on her mother's porch when "she knew her mother would not be home" (20). It is easy to judge Helen for such a deed: Ruth certainly does. However, Lucille views her actions differently. Depression or an inability to cope with the children may have prompted Bernice to push for the visit, supplying her own car for the journey. Ruth can only narrate what she knows, limiting the reader's knowledge. Contrasting her memories of Helen with Lucille's, she states:

Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow ... who was killed in an accident. My mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it would not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have like to have been even more alone -- she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned. (109)

Ruth sees Lucille's view as a comforting fiction that creates a gap between the sisters -- they quarrel about their mother's nature, which adds to the growing gap between them. Ruth sees Lucille as protecting herself, no longer was she abandoned, but left by someone with no alternative. Ruth is the older sister; the reader relies on her status to provide reliable testimony, she deals with harsher ideas, presenting them as reality, determined not to protect herself from the "Sins of the Mother", and she shapes her life around this abandonment. Antze and Lambek's rejection of memory as a storehouse is relevant to *Housekeeping* when considering the difficulty of accessing memories from long ago: "The past does not correspond to the real in any direct, unmediated way ... memories, like dreams, are highly condensed symbols of hidden preoccupations" (Antze xii). Each sister's memory of their mother is mediated by their view of her. Ruth sees abandonment through her pain; Lucille's acceptance of her mother presents no judgement. Neither is capable of unmediated memory.



The children mourn the loss of their mother, and search more information about her. Searching is a common feature of mourning. Other features of mourning “include anger, directed at third parties, the self, and sometimes at the person lost [and] disbelief that the loss has occurred (misleadingly termed denial)” (Bowlby 32). Sylvia’s reticence makes it difficult to find out more about their mother. “Our grandmother never spoke of any of her daughters, and when they were mentioned to her, she winced with irritation” (50-51). This typifies Sylvia’s failure to help the girls absorb their loss, a failure continued by the mother figures that follow. When Helen’s sister Sylvie becomes their caregiver, the sisters view her as a link to information about mothers’ past. She, too, is reticent, providing little insight: “She was nice ... . She was pretty ... . She was good in school ... . She was very quiet ... . She played the piano ... .She collected stamps” (51). These vague snippets deny them a fuller portrait. Scant information is also offered about their father: “He travelled. I think he sold some sort of farming equipment” (52). The girls are left hungry for knowledge of their parents and with unresolved grief. While Sylvie’s makes truthful comments, their brevity stymies the girls’ attempt to mourn their mother. “I do not think Sylvie was merely reticent. It is, as she said, difficult to describe someone, since memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated and arbitrary” (53). The girls are left chasing at shadows of memories, left to create fictions that soothe or intensify fears because of Sylvie’s nebulous response. Ruth shows sympathy to Sylvie that she does not deserve; her positive attitude springs from her attachment to Sylvie rather than from genuine understanding. A convincing picture of Helen could have been created from these arbitrary memories to help soothe the girls.

The physical similarities between Helen and Sylvie provide a daily reminder of their loss and Sylvie’s behaviour exacerbates their loss. Ruth speculates whether they also think alike, recalling her mother’s preparation for their trip to Fingerbone and contemplates her thoughts. “How do we know what Helen’s thoughts were? It might not have been until she was on her way to Fingerbone that she decided what she would do, though it was in Seattle that she bought the graham crackers that were to help us wait” (131). Sylvie is a prompt, a ‘ghost’ of the trauma that connects to their

traumatic loss. The twinning of Sylvie and Helen echoes other hauntings in trauma novels, and one example is seen as they watch Sylvie brush her hair in the mirror.

Appearance paints itself on bright and sliding surfaces, for example, memory and dream.

Sylvie's head falls to the side and we see the blades of my mother's shoulders and the round bones at the top of her spine. Helen is the woman in the mirror, the woman in the dream, the woman remembered, the woman in the water, and her nerves guide the blind fingers that touch into place all the falling strands of Sylvie's hair. (131-2)

Ruth becomes anxious that Sylvie is planning an escape and is left to reassure herself it is just coincidence. Robinson's comment that appearance is attached to memory and dreams show Sylvie's appearance is the trigger for their memory. "There was such similarity ... in the structure of the cheek and chin, and the texture of hair, that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to replace it" (53). Ruth's conflation of the two women emphasises memory as a construct easily influenced and not to be trusted and demonstrates how prominent thoughts of Helen are in the girls' minds despite each of their mother figures discouraging discussion about her.

### **Attachment and Disconnection**

Attachment Theory describes how children develop attachments to their parents and the effects of disrupted attachment. John Bowlby states: "Successful parenting is a principal key to the mental health of the next generation" (Bowlby 1). In *Housekeeping*, grief, disruption to attachments, detached behaviour, and adverse effects are evident. Adverse effects making sufferers vulnerable for more effects later are "likely to be the consequences of his or her own actions, actions that spring from those disturbances of personality to which the earlier experiences have given rise" (Bowlby 37). This is manifest in *Housekeeping* where the seemingly quiet and uneventful years following Edmund's death shape the personality of Helen and her sisters: Helen's inability to handle stress and grief are key factors in her suicide. Her isolation in Seattle, impulsive marriage, and her difficulty raising the girls highlight her difficulty in making connections with others and maintaining

relationships. Through her suicide Helen perpetuates the cycle of loss, leaving her own children vulnerable to adverse experiences themselves. Judith Herman states that “damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma .... Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (51). Helen’s failure to maintain a relationship with the girls’ father, a proper friendship with Bernice, or to maintain contact with her mother all exemplify failures in her relational life. This first model of motherhood in the novels is shown to be flawed as she remains disconnected from the children, as Ruth describes: “My mother was happy that day, we did not know why. And if she was sad the next, we did not know why. And if she was gone the next, we did not know why. It was as if she righted herself continually against some current that never ceased to pull” (213). That her moods are not connected to her behaviour, and that at times she was “gone” illustrates this withdrawal. Helen’s moods are easier to interpret than their motivations: her moods are a metaphorical “current”, linking to the water motif developed through the lake, tides which ebb and flow, at times invading beyond accepted boundaries.

After the loss of their mother, their sole attachment figure, the girls began life again with their grandmother; however, she was withdrawn and emotionally unavailable. Initially she “spent a number of days in her bedroom” (23), mourning her daughter’s death, then she got on with the job of raising her grandchildren. “For five years my grandmother cared for us very well, she cared for us like someone reliving a long day in a dream” (24). Ruth noted they were tended “with scrupulous care and little confidence, as if her offerings of dimes and chocolate chip cookies might keep us, our spirits, here in her kitchen, though she knew they might not” (25). The grandmother emotionally distances herself from children, having already been abandoned by her husband and children. Ruth comments: “She whited shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back bedclothes, and then suddenly feared and remembered that the children had somehow disappeared, every one” (24-25). “Disappeared” suggests rapidity and a lack of preparation for the parting. Ruth and Lucille were not older than five and six years old, and while Sylvia provided routine, financial and physical

security, it took the place of the warm and loving environment which the girls needed. She met the girls' physical needs without providing emotional security. This second model of motherhood shows that Sylvia provides mechanical nurturing: she fulfils the maternal function without connection. Sylvia's detachment denies the sisters a new attachment figure, her caregiving filled with empty actions that remind her of the past and her losses. The impact on the children is injurious. Adrienne Rich has theorised that "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (236). *Housekeeping* pairs girls who have lost their mother with a mother who has lost her daughter. Helen's loss is a tragedy for the girls. Despite their youth they are resourceful, having had their neighbour, Bernice, responsible for them while Helen worked. She did this by "trying to sleep lightly enough to be awakened by the first sounds of fist fights, of the destruction of furniture, of the throes of household poisoning" (22). Nevertheless the loss of the only parent they have known is devastating. Herman states, "Basic trust is acquired in earliest life in the relationship with the first caretaker ... . This sense of trust sustains a person throughout the lifecycle" (Herman 91). Where this trust is not established, or when it is broken, alienation occurs that "pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion .... The traumatised person loses her basic sense of self" (52). Robinson demonstrates, through the novel's initial chapter, abandonment affecting the girls, their mother, and grandmother. The lake, dominating the landscape, symbolically dominates the family as a constant reminder of their losses. The sisters' traumatic past is like the lake: always present, always ominous, always threatening. Positioning these facts and loss at the beginning of the novel casts a shadow over the rest of the text, informing all the other events with these traumatic events just as in real life, and it makes the reader constantly aware of these traumatic losses. Because Ruth and Lucille refer constantly to these events in their own minds they shape the girls' personalities, decisions and actions throughout the text. This sense of alienation is the driving force of both the girls throughout the text as they try to find a place in life.

The grandmother's house is offered as a point for secure attachment. Built by her husband, it was owned "outright" and she urged the girls, "keep the house. So long as you look after your own health, and own the roof above your head, you're as safe as anyone can be" (27). This concept of housekeeping reflects the security the house offered Sylvia after her husband's passing, but more is needed. The house is incapable of supporting the girls when Sylvie arrives: she cannot keep the house clean, tidy and in order. The girls need far more in their lives than just a house. Judith Herman explains: "Having once experienced the sense of total isolation, the survivor is intensely aware of the fragility of all human connections .... She needs clear and explicit assurances that she will not be abandoned once again" (Herman 61-2). The reassurance necessary for Ruth and Lucille is not evident. After the death of the grandmother the girls were supposed to be raised by their grandfather's sisters, Lily and Nona. Maiden aunts unsuited to the role of caregivers, they seem maternal but had "brusque, unpractised pats and kisses" (29) and brought a present of cough drops. They were unused to nurturing and unprepared for the role. The first night they sent the girls to bed three hours early as they didn't know what to do with them. While "Lily and Nona ... enjoyed nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day in the next" (33). They were not able to recognise the girls' need for reassurance through the formulation of routines that incorporated and acknowledged them. Additionally, they were unused to housekeeping, having lived in a residential hotel, and are unsuited to the challenges of family life. Their solution is to seek Sylvie to replace them, despite her reputation as "itinerant ... drifting ... [with] a preference for the single life" (42). This swift change of caregivers leaves both girls vulnerable and renews their anxieties and fear of abandonment. As Herman states, there is a need for reassurance, which the girls did not receive, instead being abandoned at a vulnerable time. While the aunts were not well suited to caregiving, their management of the situation increased the girls' vulnerability.

The introduction of Sylvie as their caregiver raised new issues: her transient history and unusual behaviours, added to the girls' fear of abandonment, exacerbates their anxiety. Like Helen, she has a failed marriage behind her and a tendency to drift that makes her unsuited to raising children. She

is known for “riding around in freight cars” (42), and she does not settle easily into domestic life. Her unusual habits, such as leaving her coat on indoors, eating “with her fingers” (87), preferring cold food and eating out of small packets, and her inclination for keeping the lights off, make the girls doubt that she will choose to remain with them. They reason, “She resembled our mother, and besides that, she seldom removed her coat and every story she told had to do with a train or bus station” (68). They doubt her transience is over, and find her physical resemblance to their mother a sign she resembles their mother emotionally.

Domestic virtues do not come naturally to Sylvie, who “talked a great deal about housekeeping. She soaked all the tea towels for a number of weeks in a tub of water and bleach. She emptied several cupboards and left them open to air, and once she washed half the kitchen ceiling and a door” (85). The routine tasks of housekeeping are beyond Sylvie, revealing her deeper unsuitability for the role. The girls are ill-prepared for the freedom they experience under her care: “Sylvie liked to eat supper in the dark. This meant that in summer we were seldom sent to bed before ten or eleven o’clock, a freedom to which we never became accustomed” (86). Her lack of awareness of the girls’ movements allows on-going truancy, and she fails to realise the significance of this when she knows they are absent. The sudden, traumatic loss of her father adversely affected Sylvie, and her vulnerability plays a role in the choices she and Ruth make about their future at the end of the text. The third model of motherhood offered in the novel, Sylvie also fails to satisfy society’s expectations of the nurturing, subjugated mother, and leads to the intervention of the power of the state to remove children from the care of mothers who do not measure up to expectations. Sylvie’s experience with trauma should allow her to empathise with the girls. As Ruth comments, “In all our trancies, perhaps we never came to a place where she had not been before us. So she needed no explanation for the things we could not explain” (11). This understanding partially accounts for Ruth’s sustained attachment to Sylvie. Robinson’s sensitive demonstration that children need secure attachment and careful parenting is carefully revealed through the characters, their actions

and interactions throughout the text. Yet Lucille makes very different choices, judging Sylvie for her inability to assimilate into society.

### ***Housekeeping as Bildungsroman***

The pathways of Ruth and Lucille bear resemblance to the *Bildungsroman*. However, the novel challenges the values of society, as Ruth ultimately rejects society's values. The novel traces Ruth's psychological and moral growth and follows Lucille as she makes markedly different decisions about her future. Ruth rejects schooling and social mores, clinging to the homestead in Fingerbone until she feels forced to leave, threatened by the sheriff, representing patriarchal society, who threatens to take her from Sylvie. The house she was instructed to 'keep' by her grandmother is part of society, and while initially it provided a refuge from society, attempts to adapt it to suit Sylvie's preferences makes it clear that transition to a new order is not possible, leading to their eventual rejection of society. A gothic sensibility around the house links it further to *Beloved's* 124. Both provide enclosures but the house feels impermanent. Throughout Sylvie's attempts to let light in, and the incursions of animals, the house seems alive, like 124, which Morrison describes as "spiteful". When Sylvie and Ruth attempt to appease society, the cluttered, unliveable homestead is cleaned and tidied. Initially described as having "crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic" (99), it is transformed: "In the morning the kitchen table was cleared and scrubbed" (189). Despite this, Ruth rejects the spirit of the social order when she discovers Sylvie's commitment to her, commenting, "I was surprised ... that she would go to such lengths for my sake. It had always seemed to me that Sylvie and I were there together purely as a matter of accident" (189-90). At the end of the novel she explains: "We are drifters. And once you have set your foot in that path it is hard to imagine another one" (213). Ruth's failure to integrate into society, which the final aspect of the *Bildungsroman* formulae would have her accept, reflects her earlier trauma and her embrace of the wider landscape which offers her freedom to create her own future. Georg Lukacs theorised:

[C]ommunity is not the result of people being naïvely and naturally rooted in a specific social structure, not of any natural solidarity of kinship (as in the ancient epics), nor is it a mystical experience of community.... [I]t is achieved by personalities, previously lonely and confined within their own selves, adapting and accustoming themselves to one another; it is the fruit of a rich and enriching resignation, the crowning of a process of education, a maturity attained by struggle and effort. (Lukacs 133)

As Lukacs theorised, community is possible without being rooted in specific social structures. The formation of a new community for Ruth and Sylvie outside of the auspices of society is achieved by their embrace of transience.

Ruth's choices are contrasted to Lucille's, who embraces traditional society. Initially behaving similarly to Ruth, she initiates a series of absences from school after being accused of cheating. It was embarrassment caused by Sylvie's note, saying "She always seemed quite well by 9.30 or 10.00 in the morning" (77) that led them both to skip school, and "We spent the whole of that week at the lake" (79). Their repeated truancy leads them to miss half a year of school. Despite this, Ruth perceives change in Lucille, noting, "Lucille had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore" (92). Lucille rejects the fanciful clothing Sylvie purchased for them; she "wanted worsted mittens, brown oxfords, red rubber boots" (93), preferring stability and reliability over Sylvie's whimsical purchases, which Ruth considers "little elegances" and "treasures" (94). Ruth notes that "Lucille's loyalties were with the other world ... [and she] began her tense and passionate campaign to naturalise herself to it" (95). Lucille begins to challenge aspects of Sylvie's housekeeping such as her sleeping on top of covers and keeping her belongings in a cardboard box instead of in drawers. She fully embraces a return to school, promising to do extra homework. To Ruth, "It was now obvious that Lucille would soon be gone. She was intent upon it" (134). Lucille accomplishes this swiftly, moving in with her home economics teacher, having been "invited in and the two of them talked that night about Lucille's troubles at home" (140). Formerly a solitary



woman, “Miss Royce gave [Lucille] the spare room. In effect, she adopted her, and I had no sister after that night” (140). Lucille’s rejection of her past is total, taking nothing with her, “Not even her hairbrush” (142).

### **The Importance of Journeys**

Journeys are significant within this novel, principally as they represent journeys away from home - they are meant to be “housekeeping”, keeping the house in order -- not journeying away from it. Marilyn Chandler argues that for Sylvie and the aunts “the house is an inherited burden; the privilege of ownership, an unwelcome obligation” (Chandler). Those not used to owning a house do not see its value, and Ruth comes to view the house similarly. In the first of the journeys, Ruth and Lucille spend the night in the woods after travelling too far and staying out too late. Ruth wakes in total darkness and embraces the experience.

Lucille would tell this story differently. She would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become co-extensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones .... Darkness is the only solvent. While it was dark ... it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent. (116)

Ruth’s desire for this permanent darkness reflects her desire to escape her past and memory.

Journeying away from the house clarifies this desire. Her embrace of the environment, becoming ‘co-extensive’ with it, demonstrates her changing nature. Lucille, in contrast, wakes early and heads for home: “She did not speak to me, or look back” (117). Later that day she leads Ruth on an expedition into town, and insists that “We have to *improve* ourselves!” (123), improvements she envisages finding in conformity. Ruth muses, “It seemed to me that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there” in that “other world”, the world of mainstream society (123-4). This visit appears to be Ruth’s catalyst for embracing what Sylvie offers her, and the catalyst for Lucille to embrace society and its conventions.

Another significant journey is the morning after Lucille leaves the household, when Sylvie takes Ruth across the lake to visit an abandoned house. As they walk Ruth muses, “We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child” (145). Her conflation of Sylvie and Helen establishes Ruth’s vision of herself metaphorically reborn as Sylvie’s child, and imagery in the novel depicting her entry into the boat from between Sylvie’s legs reinforces this concept. She follows Sylvie, visiting the derelict house. While Sylvie is charmed by “the mystery of its past and its seclusion” (Chandler 301), Ruth fails to find deeper meaning in it. Sylvie leaves Ruth alone, causing loneliness and anxiety. Again she remembers her mother, saying she imagined seeing her mother, especially her hair: “She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind” (160). This associative perceptual return, caused by feelings of abandonment, is similar to the idea of ‘afterwardness’ as initially described by Freud and termed *Nachträglich*, meaning delayed or deferred. *Nachträglich* suggests “ordinary causality can be thrown into reverse by traumatic impact, whose affect is only registered long after the first shock and which can retrospectively rewrite life narrative” (Nicholls 56). Nicholls suggests that the disarticulation of linear narrative is typically used to show *Nachträglich* at work. Robinson employs ghostly synchronism brought on by Ruth’s apparent abandonment by Sylvie, showing a further symptom of Ruth’s traumatised behaviour. This perceptual return occurs on their journey away from the home; Ruth’s alliance with Sylvie is strengthened by this event as she experiences the trauma of re-abandonment at the house in the valley.

At the end of this journey, Sylvie rows them to the far side of the lake; where, under the railway bridge they can watch the train go past. Still on the lake at nightfall, they become lost and in the morning they hop aboard the freight train back to town. It is here, in a state of “dishevelment” (173) that they are noticed by the town’s busybodies, who are worried that Sylvie is influencing Ruth towards vagrancy. The contrast between Ruth and Lucille emphasises their escalated difference. “[W]e passed Lucille and her friends .... Lucille was dressed like all the others” (173). Lucille, who did not undertake this journey, is suited to the town, whereas Ruth is ill-equipped to assimilate. Lucille’s

abandonment of the pair, choosing a new life within the confines of society, reinforces this observation. This journey has separated Ruth from society, and what follows prompts their flight from Fingerbone. One last attempt to keep their house in order proves impossible, and they choose to torch the house and leave under cover of darkness. Ruth says, "I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now we were truly cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping" (209). They escape via the railway bridge leaving no trace, presumed drowned in the lake. They leave for a life of transience -- as Ruth says, "cast out to wander" (209). Their final journey begins a lifetime of journeys. The "end to housekeeping" means they no longer have a secure roof over their heads; burning the house constitutes an irrevocable decision. Ruth closes the novel with a comment that Sylvie keeps an article reporting on their deaths pinned to her lapel: a "clipping with the heading LAKE CLAIMS TWO" (213). There is no return possible for them. These final 'deaths' completes the circle first begun in the novel's opening pages when the lake claimed the life of Helen and Sylvie's father.

In the final chapter, Ruth ponders, "When did I become so unlike other people?" (214). She has various theories: when they crossed the bridge, when left at Fingerbone, or at conception. "I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally" (215). This final crossing of the bridge indicates that she has transformed, and she deems this changed her. I would argue that what changed her was her abandonment in Fingerbone. The act of abandonment by her mother changes everything for Ruth, and for Lucille, as I have examined in this chapter. The moment she is abandoned the bonds that had linked her to her mother, her home, and all that she had known -- apart from her sister -- were broken. The lack of attachment to her grandmother and great aunts, even her sister, instigated her attachment to Sylvie. It created in her a desire for a stable relationship, for which she is prepared to forsake society's conventions.

Lucille rejects Sylvie as her caregiver, showing a drive for independence in place of attachment, contrasting with Ruth's rejection of society and desire to stay with Sylvie. Before she leaves the family, Lucille says to Ruth: "I know you can't help the way you are." Ruth's reply is "I know that you

can't help the way you are either" (129). Both are incapable of acting differently. Lucille's replacement mother is a domestic figure, able to provide a home and order: she is experienced at keeping house and keeping society's rules. By contrast, Ruth clings to Sylvie, despite the cost, and ends the text discussing how they never contacted Lucille, calling this failure "the worst of it" (213). She visualises their old home with Lucille, "fiercely neat, stalemating the forces of ruin" (216). She imagines Lucille's reaction to their supposed death. While Ruth acknowledges that "It is a terrible thing to break up a family. If you understand that, you will understand everything that follows" (190), she leaves to construct a new community outside of the bounds of society and patriarchy. Divesting themselves of a house incongruous to their lifestyle was far less painful than enduring further separation. In this way the novel strays from the *Bildungsroman* formulae, demonstrating the effects of the loss of Helen on her children. Like Lily from *The Secret Life of Bees*, Ruth leaves her home, to be part of a marginal world outside of the bounds of the patriarchal system; for Ruth, the wider landscape becomes her home.

*Housekeeping* reveals that connections to the past cannot be found in place alone but also in relationships, and that association makes Ruth's transient life bearable. Relating these ideas back to Atwood's victim positions shows that journeying away from Fingerbone stopped Ruth and Sylvie being re-victimised by a society which would separate them. Their 'creative solution' consists of founding unconventional new lives. Seizing control of their fate, this lifestyle allows them to embrace family connections which they deem important and to reject persecution. *Housekeeping* adds texture and enrichment to the trauma paradigm, placing trauma in the wider context of American life, trauma as a contemporary phenomenon that is part of the tragedy of the everyday, played out daily in homes across America as families are torn apart.

## The Sins of Omission:

### Secrets, Truths and Lies in *The Secret Life of Bees*

Knowing can be a curse on a person's life. I'd traded in a pack of lies for a pack of truth, and I didn't know which was heavier. Which one took the most strength to carry around?

*The Secret Life of Bees* (317)

As children we are told that what you don't know can't possibly hurt you, yet *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) demonstrates that ignorance of the truth adds to the problems characters face, and it leads us to question whether reticence is a good idea. This is the 'Sin of Omission' in this chapter's title: her father's decision not to tell fourteen year old Lily the truth about the circumstances around her mother Deborah's death interrupts her social and emotional development and the course of her life. The novel follows Lily's journey from her position of ignorance -- longing to know the truth -- to an understanding of events, as she learns that knowledge is as painful as ignorance. The layering of the secrets and trauma into the coming of age story helps to create a level of difficulty that satisfies many readers but leaves others wanting. It is 'Trauma Fiction lite'. In her review "Honey Child" (2002), Rosellen Brown concludes:

[T]here are those ... who will also find its loving kindness like honey, nourishing but a touch cloying .... [U]nless a book is meant for the very young we resist comfort that comes too readily. A consoling balm, *The Secret Life of Bees* has less sting in the end than its swarm of griefs would seem to promise. (R. Brown 12)

While there are traumatic events, the use of humour is prominent. This novel typifies the "mass of narratives that have exploded across high, middle and low-brow fiction since the late 1980s" (89-90) that Roger Luckhurst identified in *The Trauma Question* (2008), and is influenced by literary melodrama. Although the ideas of pain and trauma are portrayed, as Rosellen Brown notes, "There are no rough edges, no threat of unresolvable pain, though many atrocious things happen, or

threaten to happen, along the way” (R. Brown 12). We never fear for Lily as we do for Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, though they are both vulnerable and of a similar age during the principal action of the narrative. Lily’s greatest threat comes from within: the repressed knowledge of having accidentally killed her mother is locked inside in her mind, unable to pierce her psyche’s protection, whereas Kambili’s major threat was external -- her father’s violent actions, which she managed to endure through habitual silence and isolation from others. It is not unusual to dissociate oneself from painful truths, but Lily’s search for the truth is hampered by her father’s silence about the past. “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness,” says Judith Herman. “When the truth is finally recognised survivors can begin their recovery. Often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom” (Herman i). Lily is unlike Kambili, Ruth or Lucille, who all have some memory of their traumas; Lily must search for truth. This narrative is uncomplicated in its presentation of trauma, revealing early on Lily’s repression and the secrecy that surrounds it.

### **In The Beginning: Repression and its effects**

Lily Owens opens her narrative with three major points: the loss of her mother, her feelings about this loss, and her inaccessible father. She relates that since the age of four she has been raised by her father, T. Ray Owens, and black housekeeper Rosaleen, in small town Sylvan, South Carolina. On the third page Lily commences telling the story of her mother’s death: the central issue in her life but a topic that everyone avoids. “My mother died when I was four years old. It was a fact of life, but if I brought it up, people would suddenly get interested in their hangnails and cuticles ... and seem not to hear me” (3). Because her father was not willing to discuss the death at all, his opinion was shared by the community. However, it never leaves Lily’s thoughts. She explains: “Once in a while ... some caring soul would say, “Just put it out of your head, Lily. It was an accident. You didn’t mean to do it” (3). The centrality of this event is confirmed by allusions to it early in the text. This is similar to *Purple Hibiscus* where an abusive event is revealed in the opening and to *Housekeeping’s*

recitation of traumatic history in the first chapter. The chronology of *The Secret Life of Bees* is simple: beginning with this history, Lily relates events as they unfold: the novel questions the keeping of secrets rather than reinforcing them through its structure. The simple temporality demonstrates lack of innovation and illustrates that Kidd is not aiming to represent psychological cause and effect. Kidd's use of realist temporality makes reading easier, appealing to consumers of popular fiction.

Lily's traumatic childhood and early death of her mother is complicated by her lack of memory of her mother. "My first and only memory of my mother was the day she died" (6), Lily claims. She tries hard to remember ordinary activities "like tucking me into bed" (6) or reading her books, but her sole memory remains of the day of her death. This contrasts with Ruth in *Housekeeping*, who was able to remember minutiae of her mother's life, as does Lily's determination to create a picture of her mother in her mind: a kind, compassionate, selfless mother who is utterly perfect and loving. She imagines a reunion where "she would kiss my skin till it grew chapped and tell me I was not to blame" (Kidd 3). While Ruth refuses to create soothing fictions for herself, Lily is more like Lucille, maintaining a positive view of her mother. That this day is the only memory of her mother is worthy of note. Children's reactions to traumatic events have been researched by psychiatrist Lenore Terr. Her book *Unchained Memories* (1995) interweaves case studies with theories on children's reactions to trauma. Terr establishes the link between certain behaviours -- signs and symptoms -- and childhood trauma. Evident when sufferers are unaware of past trauma in an attempt to protect themselves from psychological damage, Terr identifies techniques including repression, displacement, dissociation, and splitting. She notes: "A whole life can be shaped by an old trauma, remembered or not" (xiii). Terr divides sufferers of childhood trauma into two categories: "The first comprising the results of an unanticipated, sudden event and the second involving the results of a long-standing or repeated series of events" (Terr 194). Lily has experienced a single significant trauma, her mother's loss, of which she remembers only part. Her father withholds vital information about the traumatic incident, hoping perhaps to spare her any further trauma, or perhaps

concealing important knowledge about the event. Lily struggles with his reticence throughout the text and it fuels her determination to find out the truth. In this way, Kidd has incorporated accepted behaviour of a trauma sufferer into her novel: Lily acts much as a trauma victim would within the trauma paradigm. Lily's narration of her thoughts and emotions as she remembers her mother and later finds out the truth contrasts with Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, who remains aware of the abuse she suffered. Both texts contrast with *Beloved*, where Sethe seemingly circles the truth when directly asked about her trauma, unable to articulate her experiences: more complex texts use accounts of trauma to dramatic effect to replicate the effect of trauma as "the turbulence that affects every level of narrative. Linear temporal sequence is shipwrecked against the jagged fixity of this atemporal traumatic scene" (Luckhurst 91). Kidd's intention in revealing Lily's traumatic secret early in the text, paired with Lily's repression of events, does not allow for the turbulent effects when the secret is finally unfolded because the audience is already aware of the key issue. In this way, Kidd's temporal narrative fails to replicate the effects of trauma in the reader: the text becomes easier to read but the reward is far less.

T. Ray creates a climate of fear within the household that adds to Lily's initial trauma. As Rosellen Brown points out, "He mocks her, he beats her; his generally cruel behaviour accounts for her envy of the freedom of honey bees" (R. Brown 12). Judith Lofflin takes up this theme in her doctoral thesis *American Freedom Story: A Journey from Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to The Secret Life of Bees* (2009), recalling the time Lily spends "recounting some of the sadistic punishments he had devised for her, like telling her that her pet rabbit had died when it had not. Physical punishment was expected, but the emotional punishment proves more than she can withstand" (248). Lily lacks emotional security, and, like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, the person who should be protecting her is the one who inflicts the most damage, and in this way Lily is shown to suffer additional trauma.

The only memories Lily recalls of her mother relate to the day of her death. She recalls them spending time together as her mother hurriedly packed a suitcase and playing in the closet when her



father came up the stairs. "I don't remember what they said, only the fury of their words, how the air turned raw and full of welts" (8). She tried to escape into the closet, to forget what was being said, but was dragged out and sent to her room. She was shouted at by her father and shoved. "I landed against the wall, then fell forward onto my hands and knees" (8). She remembers her mother trying to stop him from hurting her: "I saw him take her by the shoulders and shake her, her head bouncing back and forth .... She lunged away from him into the closet, away from his grabbing hands" (9). She grabbed a gun, but he snatched it from her, and Lily only remembers "bending to pick it up. The noise exploding around us" (9). She does not recall the shooting of her mother or the aftermath -- her mind has somehow repressed this knowledge. Lily says: "This is what I know about myself. She was all I wanted. And I took her away" (9). The tone is bitter, regretful, judgemental, and sad although she was young and incapable of comprehending what happened. Her inability to remember the moment the gun fired, or who fired it, indicates repression has taken place. T. Ray has told her she is responsible and she does not want to believe this: while a child may not associate pulling a trigger with killing someone, she has repressed all the bloody aftermath of the killing too. Lenore Terr explains: "Conflict is the key to repression. Freud believed that the conflict was between the patient's instinctual drives and the patient's fears ..... You may experience a conflict between the utter helplessness you feel during a terrible event and the way you wish to see yourself -- as human and competent" (15). Lily has to search out the truth to find a level of peace with the past. Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's article "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" (1995) explains repression: "Repression reflects a vertically layered model of mind: what is repressed is pushed downward, into the unconscious. The subject no longer has access to it. Only symbolic, indirect indications would point to its assumed existence" (168). Lily is aware that the memory exists because of its consequences but she is unable to retrieve the memory, instead relying on T. Ray, who is reluctant to discuss the event.

There is only one occasion that Lily recalls T. Ray being willing to discuss Deborah's death, but he does not relieve her of feelings of responsibility. When Lily is about to start school, T-Ray initiates a

conversation about her mother's death, saying, "there are things you need to know. About your mother" (22). She tells him, "I remember" (22), and recounts her parents yelling at each other, which invokes his fury. "Goddamn it, you were four years old!" he shouted. "You don't know what you remember" (22). As the subject was previously taboo, he is shocked she remembers, and her memory of this yelling is threatening to him. His harsh judgement belittles her memories. He offers generalised reassurances: "It was just one of those terrible things. You didn't mean to do it" (24). This interaction illustrates their difficult relationship. The yelling, shouting and cursing typify his attitude. And his underestimation of her ability to remember -- or partially remember -- the incident demonstrates their disconnection. Judith Lofflin is interested in this idea of guilt, stating:

These different details suggest some possibility that Lily may not have been responsible; his next statements further this speculation: "The police asked lots of questions, but it was just one of those terrible things. You didn't mean to do it .... But if anyone wants to know, that's what happened" (Kidd 19). His surprise at her memory of the day and his need to implicate her raise some questions about the truth. Lily will never be able to find the truth; she asks him once more at the end of the novel, and he answers by saying he knows she wants him to say she did not do it but he refuses to continue. (Lofflin 246)

T. Ray's refusal to make any reversal in his long stated view that Lily killed her mother is in character for him. His lack of emotional connection with Lily means there is no benefit for him to claim responsibility. The later parts of the novel make it clear that he feels guilt about his behaviour towards Deborah, and that he was deeply in love with her despite their argument. His words of reassurance to Lily -- "You didn't mean to do it" -- acknowledge her role in the tragedy, which she must learn to accept. Where Antze and Lambek argue that "memory operates most frequently by means of the threads of narrative" (Antze xv11), it is evident that Lily cannot weave her life story without this key thread; therefore it is imperative that she finds out the truth. This relates strongly to elements of literary melodrama, which often features protagonists unable "to take action to

resolve their problems ... [so] as a consequence of this passivity and inaction we see emotions and tensions building up that cannot be turned into action" (Mercer and Shingler 22). This melodramatic sensibility pervades the text; however, Lily's youth frees her to take action: the juvenile act of running away from home.

### **The Symbolism of Bees**

Kidd includes bees in a central symbolic role and in the novel's action to add shape to the narrative. This begins with reference to the bees: "At night I would lie in bed and watch the show, how bees squeezed through the cracks of my bedroom wall and flew circles around the room" (1). Lily finds the bees a comforting but challenging presence, whose freedom created a sense of "longing build[ing] in my chest" (1). "The bees came the summer of 1964, the summer I turned fourteen and my life went spinning off into a whole new orbit .... Looking back on it now, I want to say the bees were sent to me" (2). An older Lily feels positive about the bees because of later events. "Despite everything that happened that summer, I remain tender toward the bees" (2). It is "that summer" rather than "this summer," showing that Lily has aged since the events of the novel. With age and distance comes perspective, which Lily uses to consider that the bees were "sent" -- the journey she undertakes to the Boatwright's honey business makes the bees central to her life and the circularity of her journey is embraced by her claim the bees were "sent to me". When Lily tries to show her father the bedroom full of bees, they have disappeared. Although she can catch one, she cannot show them to her father. This symbolises Lily's search for the truth and her desire to be heard: the truth cannot be established either. His reaction to the bees is typical of his behaviour in the novel, threatening Lily: "You wake me up again Lily, and I'll get out the Martha Whites" (4). The "Martha Whites" are "a form of punishment only T. Ray could have dreamed up. I shut my mouth instantly" (4). Lily's fear of her father and of the punishment that he has promised her prompts instant acquiescence. This incident reveals the culture of fear that T. Ray establishes and how he controls Lily's behaviour with threats and physical punishment, linking to Kambili who

obeys her father unquestioningly. Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004) considers how "family secrets that are unspoken or unresolved are communicated to the next generation and lie buried within them" (Whitehead 28). While Kidd's symbolic intention for the bees is clear, a reading of them as a ghostly figure -- evident only to Lily and only at night -- is possible. The house is the site of Deborah's death, and those left behind are unable to escape their grief as they cannot escape the bee's hum, "like a radio tuned to static in the next room"(1), the white noise of unspoken secrets. Lily pictures honey "seeping out for me to taste" (2), ever hopeful that something sweet can be salvaged from the pain. Both T. Ray and Lily were present when Deborah died, which makes transgenerational haunting possible; however T Ray is unable to see or hear the bees, illustrating the gap between Lily and T Ray, and his inaccessibility to Lily.

Each chapter contains an epigraph on the nature of bees or beekeeping chosen to add symbolic weight to the chapter's contents and illuminate Kidd's aims in each. Chapter One begins with extract from L H Newman's *Man and Insects*: "The queen, for her part, is the unifying force of the community; if she is removed from the hive, the workers very quickly sense her absence. After a few hours, or even less, they show unmistakable signs of queenlessness" (1). Lily's recollections of what was like to be motherless are central to this chapter; we can see the author has chosen this epigraph to symbolically represent similarities between motherlessness and queenlessness. Mothers and queen bees are the unifying forces in a household and their absence causes behavioural change. Other epigraphs work in a similar manner, such as Chapter Fourteen which states a remedy to queenlessness: "Introduce a new queen and the most extravagant change takes place" (343). Likewise in the novel, the void Lily feels is filled with a new female role model, August Boatwright, who becomes the 'queen bee'. Although Lily had Rosaleen in her life, she never fulfilled this maternal role. Brown's review states that the epigraphs operate as "[g]losses for what's to come" (R. Brown 11). She argues "Though the quotations are undeniably intriguing, their smooth fit with the story is a touch too perfect, as if to point out conveniently snug connections we must not be allowed to miss. Kidd must have found them irresistible" (R. Brown 11). These summaries and clues

add backbone but not substance. They illuminate the writer's aims, but as Brown argues, their transparency detracts from the overall effect. The neat links between the bee community and the issues that Lily faces are essential to the planned and organised nature of the novel's structure, making it highly accessible to the average reader yet departing from the literary trauma novel's disfiguration of narrative coherence. They act as a heuristic device aiding the reader's interpretation. Of the other novels in this study, only Atwood's *Cat's Eye* utilises epigraphs. *Cat's Eyes'* two epigraphs are placed before the contents page, and while they relate to key themes of victimisation and a mental journey across time, their complexity means they can only be understood in the context of the novel, rather than guiding the reader's understanding of the author's aims. Atwood juxtaposes her epigraphs, their context belatedly evident, whereas Kidd's heuristic device aids cognition.

### **The Sin of Omission and Parental Abuse**

Lily's attempt to recollect memories of Deborah is a thread that weaves through the early section of the novel: T. Ray's failure to realise the importance of knowledge for Lily leaves her constantly wondering. Early in the narrative, Kidd establishes the everyday effect of Lily's loss by describing childhood events, such as missing out on charm school because she had no female relative to present her with a rose at the graduation. Her longing for Deborah's special smell is another aspect of her search. Lily recalls: "The moment she lifted me, I was wrapped in her smell" (7). Lily relates how she tried to identify this scent in expensive perfumes, finally learning years later it was Ponds Cold Cream. Lily secretes a cache of Deborah's possessions which she treasures: a photograph she examines for similarities, a pair of white cotton gloves which she sometimes slips her own hands into, and a mysterious picture: a black Madonna. She buries the items in the orchard, treating them as a talisman. "First it was just a spot to hide from T. Ray and his meanness or from the memory of that afternoon when the gun went off, but later I would slip out there ... just to lie under the trees and be peaceful" (17). Lofflin comments: "For a young girl, these sensual artefacts provide her with

psychological escape from the loneliness of her life and the pain of remembering loss and abandonment” (242-3). Lily seeks isolation and distance from the house, escaping her father to a parallel world where her mother still exists and she is loved. Lily’s positive view of her mother is evident in her attitude to her possessions and smell, and illustrates how she seeks to recreate the missing strands of memory.

T. Ray’s reaction when he catches her in the orchard late at night reveals a second common thread through these early chapters: physical punishment. Lily is made to kneel on grits, the “Martha Whites” she was earlier threatened with. Her reaction indicates that she has become accustomed to this treatment, as Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* has become accustomed to physical abuse. “My knees had been tortured like this enough times in my life that I’d stopped thinking of it as out of the ordinary; it was just something you had to put up with from time to time, like the common cold” (31). Her complacency reveals that the punishment is commonplace. Only Rosaleen’s reaction makes her realise that it was unacceptable: “The look on Rosaleen’s face cut through all that. Look what he’s done to you” (31). Like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, Lily is usually able to read her father’s moods and tries to minimise his anger. Early in the text she recalls how her father had referred to Shakespeare as “Julius Shakespeare” and commented “if you think I should have corrected him, you are ignorant in the art of survival” (20). She had learnt the importance of picking her battles with him. Where Kambili struggled to balance love with fear, Lily has created an entirely negative view of her father, longing for her lost mother in place of the father whom she despises.

T. Ray lost a wife when Lily lost a mother, and he provides an illustration of an embittered and withdrawn sufferer, someone who had been unable to cope with her departure which had subjugated his masculinity. Initially, Deborah had “loved the fact that he was decorated in the war. He was so brave” (307). T. Ray had “treated her like a princess” (307), and she got “carried away with romance” (310). An unplanned pregnancy led her to accept the proposal. Deborah’s

depression after Lily's birth led to her leaving both husband and daughter to live in Tiburon, at the house of her former nanny, August. At the novel's conclusion T. Ray finally learns where Deborah had gone, admitting, "I looked for her everywhere I could think" (307). August explains, "People can start out one way, and by the time life gets through with them they end up completely different" (307). T. Ray's hurt and bitterness are evident, but the text does not explain the trauma he went through by suddenly losing a wife he had adored. Lily eventually tries to understand him, but it is not until the end of the text. She explains how the lack of a mother had created a hole inside her, "always aching for something, but never once did I think what he'd lost or how it might've changed him" (363). She is freed to see T. Ray in a different light. "Seeing him now, I knew he'd loved Deborah Fontanel, and when she'd left him, he'd sunk into bitterness" (363). Lily comments, "I had seen into the dark doorway that he kept hidden inside, the terrible place he would seal up now and never return to if he could help it" (367). The seal he uses seems ineffectual though, as the pain and bitterness leach out into every aspect of his life, distancing him from the community and preventing him from loving his daughter.

While T. Ray has lived the knowledge of Deborah's defection and death, Lily has to come to terms with the truth in order to make sense of her death. "Knowing can be a curse on a person's life. I'd traded in a pack of lies for a pack of truth, and I didn't know which was heavier. Which one took the most strength to carry around? ... Once you know the truth, you can't ever go back and pick up your suitcase of lies. Heavier or not, the truth is yours now" (317). By omitting to tell Lily about the circumstances of Deborah's death, T-Ray deeply affected her development -- this is the Sin of Omission in the chapter's title. The effect of not knowing the truth is balanced with knowing. Initially, Lily fights the truth, disbelieving because she misunderstands the complexities of adult relationships and mental health issues. She expresses her anger by throwing jars of honey all around her room; but she discovers she cannot run away from the truth, saying: "There was nothing left to do. No place to go. Just here, right now, where the truth was" (321). She has to make herself vulnerable to be ready to start her new life. When she says: "Knowing can be a curse on a person's

life" (319), "can" is the critical word -- the curse is neither definite nor settled. The metaphor of baggage is used to describe the truth: "Once you know the truth, you can't ever go back and pick up your suitcase of lies" (317). Both a "pack of lies" and a "pack of truth" are burdens. Lily has no way of divesting herself of these burdens, no compensatory protection employed to shield her from this knowledge. She has to come to accept August's reassurance that "There is nothing perfect ... there is only life" (317) and get on with living.

The narrative concludes with T. Ray finding Lily and coming to reclaim her, staking a paternal claim at odds with his feelings. Lily's reaction to him illustrates growing maturity as she stands her ground, refusing to leave with him. T. Ray's intimidating manner jars against the gentle femininity of the Boatwrights' parlour. He sits in a chair carving at it with his knife; seemingly wielding a tool of power -- a stand-in phallus -- otherwise powerless in the female-dominated household. Lily observes: "He seemed crazy with anguish, reliving a pain he'd kept locked up all this time, and now that it was loose, it had overwhelmed him" (365). Lily's empathy establishes that she has reached the end of her journey of maturity and self-acceptance. She identifies her decision to stay as being "[l]ike pearls I'd been fashioning down inside my belly for weeks" (367). The pearl metaphor establishes her ability to make something beautiful and valuable out of something bad, like an oyster: it signals a maturity that leads to her freedom. Lily's similarity to Deborah has always operated as a painful reminder of his loss. In coming for Lily; he really was trying to reclaim his wife. Although he lets Lily go, he cannot let go on his bitterness about Deborah's loss. Within the melodramatic genre, the "plot turns on an initial, deliberately engineered misrecognition of the innocence of a central protagonist ... [the] narrative is then progressed through a struggle for clear moral identification of where guilt and innocence really lie" (Mercer and Shingler 94). That Lily, not T Ray, was ultimately responsible for Deborah's death goes against this general formula, which takes Lily by surprise. There is, however, a distinction between innocence and responsibility -- while Lily did cause her mother's death by pulling the trigger, it was without knowledge of the consequences. Lily must learn to embrace her innocence in a moral sense and acknowledge the accidental nature of



her actions. She learns that the love and acceptance of August, June and Rosaleen are not dependent on her innocence. Lily is able to move on in a family she has chosen for herself, where honesty and acceptance rather than lies and omissions form the basis of relationships.

### **Journeys and Quests**

*The Secret Life of Bees* is at its heart a quest story, where, in order to find truth, Lily undergoes a journey. Like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is a journey that takes her away from a violent father. Lily takes an enormous risk in leaving without her father's permission or support, risking his wrath in running away. Like Ruth in *Housekeeping*, she leaves home for the unknown. Both Ruth and Lily see that there is much to be gained in leaving a home that no longer provides a safe haven. For Ruth, the fear of legal removal prompted her journey, whereas Lily runs away in an attempt to find the truth about her mother and her death, attempting to make sense of the fragments of memory and scraps of information she has been given. Judith Herman states: "Survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events" (J Herman 3). The novel follows Lily's journey as she does exactly this -- following a trail of clues to try and reconnect the fragments of her memory and to find out the truth of the events surrounding her mother's death.

Lofflin defines the journey that Lily undertakes as a 'freedom journey': "the story of an individual -- ... a misfit character -- who leaves his or her home community to journey toward a fulfilment of a quest. This personal freedom becomes possible through a community formed with a fellow freedom traveller; the community and the freedom prove transient, dissolve, and leave the hero diminished in each story" (3). This story breaks with one element of this tradition, the dissolution of the community. "Lily ... continues her healing journey as a part of the household" (Lofflin 275), after staving off T. Ray's patriarchal attempt to reclaim what he has lost. Lily's motherlessness has always made her feel like a misfit, and her father's attitude emphasises her difference as he refuses to allow Lily to conform to society: "He didn't believe in slumber parties or sock hops, which wasn't a big

concern as I never got invited to them anyway, but he refused to drive me to town for football games, pep rallies .... He did not care that I wore clothes I made for myself in Home Economics class .... I might as well have worn a sign on my back: I AM NOT POPULAR AND NEVER WILL BE" (10). Lily's companion on her journey, the 'Jim' to her 'Huck', is Rosaleen, the black maid who had raised her. Their relationship has sustained Lily through a difficult childhood: despite Rosaleen's "sharp ways" (13) her love became clear to Lily. Together they run away from Sylvan at a time of intense racial unrest, their racial difference a genuine problem in this climate, Lily having broken Rosaleen out of hospital. Rosaleen was under police guard in hospital following her arrest and a racially motivated beating. Rosellen Brown notes that they are both on a quest, making "a break for freedom and dignity. Like bees that seem to fly randomly, they will turn out to know exactly what they need and what will feed them" (R. Brown 11). This journey allows both Rosaleen and Lily to journey from a painful past to a promising future.

Their journey is prompted by discontent with T. Ray and by his venomous accusations that Deborah hadn't loved Lily, having run away and left her behind, coming back only to get her things when she died. This links again to the excess of melodramatic sensibility presented in the novel. T Ray announces, "You can hate me all you want, but she's the one who left you" (48). Lily had pictured her mother as a kind of guardian angel and had reassured herself all through her childhood with the idea that her mother had loved her. Lofflin comments: "Physical punishment was expected, but the emotional punishment proves more than she can withstand" (248). The emotional abuse wounds Lily and puts in place the events and discontent that cause her to run away. In what Lily interprets as a religious moment, she hears a voice say, "Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open" (52). This metaphorically relates to the bees she had caught in a jar. When she opened the lid they remained, "as if the world had shrunk to that jar" (34). Before this point, Lily did not see a comparison between the bees in the jar and her life. Now she understands she has been trapped in an unloving home, and she realises that freedom is hers for the taking. The belief that her jar has opened gives her the courage to begin her journey.

Lily's youth and immaturity are obvious as she begins her journey with Rosaleen, with little idea of where to go. Only a small picture of the Virgin Mary in Deborah's belongings with "Tiburon S.C." gives her direction. Earlier Lily had revealed a desire to go there simply out of curiosity, stating, "I wanted to go every place she had ever been" (18). This small clue alone leads her to Tiburon, where she finds a sign in the shop for honey with the same Black Madonna picture on the jars. This easy discovery is a convenient plot device, easing a potentially challenging journey for the pair. Instead of repeated clashes with the social order, Lily is directed to the pink Boatwright house, which arouses a visceral reaction for her. She feels "a traveling current that moved up my spine, down my arms, pulsing out from my fingertips .... The body knows things a long time before the mind catches up to them. I was wondering what my body knew that I didn't" (79). Kidd allows mystical elements to intrude upon the realistic details: although Lily has no idea, they have been led right to the house of August Boatwright, Deborah's former nanny, to whom Deborah had run when she had fled Sylvan. The journey must be followed by the maturation process, which allows the protagonist to become accommodated into society. In the same way, the arrival at the Boatwright family is only the first step in Lily's search for the truth about her mother. Lily must fight for acceptance by June Boatwright, and against the untruths she has told about her identity, having provided the sisters with a false surname and lies about being recently orphaned, and her reasons for being there.

### **The Role of the Interlocutor and the Painful Journey to Self-awareness**

Lily and Rosaleen's hosts in Tiburon are the 'Calendar Sisters', May, June and August Boatwright, African American women who "embod[y] every form of maternal nurturance and emotional education Lily needs" (R. Brown). August apparently accepts Lily's lies and employs her to work with the bees. August coaches Lily how to act around bees: "Above all, send the bees love. Every little thing wants to be loved" (114). Kidd uses August as a foil for T-Ray, with August's mentoring showing the true role of a parent, displaying endless patience and forgiveness.

When Lily considers herself ready for the truth she approaches August, only to find out how transparent her lies were: August knew she was Deborah's daughter all along. The first person narrative is utilised effectively in this section of the novel to show Lily's maturation process as she comes to terms with the truth about her mother's life. August approaches her role as interlocutor with the wisdom of a maternal figure and the detachment of an observer, answering even painful questions. Initially immature reactions, such as finding out she was the result of an unplanned pregnancy, make Lily reconsider her readiness for the truth, commenting: "You think you want to know something, and then once you do, all you can think about it erasing it from your mind. From now on when people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I planned to say amnesiac" (308-9). This typifies the humour of the text, softening the impact of her new awareness. She finds the idea of amnesia attractive although she has been fighting against her lack of memory her entire life and immediately allows herself to sink back into her illusion about her mother, saying: "I'd lived inside [my mother's love] the way a goldfish lives in its bowl, as if that was the only world there was. Leaving it would be the death of me" (309). Both ideas demonstrate Lily's immaturity, and show that Lily's repression has been comforting. Throughout the novel she has fought for knowledge, but now her mind fights back, determined to protect itself.

When she is more ready for the truth, she learns more, and while initially her narrative shows an immature reaction, she gains in understanding. August reveals that Deborah was deeply depressed when she came to Tiburon, feeling she was "kind of falling apart" (311). Lily judges her for this, saying: "I'd spent my life imagining all the ways she'd loved me, what a perfect specimen of a mother she was. And all of it was lies. I had completely made her up" (312). She learns that "depressed people do things they wouldn't ordinarily do" (313) and is finally able to see hear the truth. She is ready to ask questions and hear the answers. The structure of this section mixes a recount of the conversation with Lily's reactions, which Kidd uses to guide to our understanding. She comments, "I couldn't make heads or tails of my heart. One minute I hated my mother, the next I felt sorry for her" (314). When Lily begins to put herself into her mother's position, August reveals

that Deborah had gone home to get her and take her back with her to Tiburon. “She’d come back for me too. She’d wanted to bring me back her, to Tiburon, to August’s. If only we’d made it” (315). Lily then tells August what had happened that day, details August had been deprived of: “I’ve had to live with not knowing. All these years.” (316) August’s lack of knowledge parallel’s Lily’s own: she too understands the pain of ignorance.

August’s love and acceptance are critical to Lily as she learns the truth, accepting Lily’s pain without judgement. August invites her to cry: “It hurts, I know it does. Let it out. Just let it out” (295). As an interlocutor who listens and a character who speaks the truth, August absorbs Lily’s pain: “It seemed like I drew up my whole lifeload of pain and hurled in into her breast, heaved it with the force of my mouth, and she didn’t flinch .... She was like a sponge, absorbing what I couldn’t hold any more” (295). August is trusted with Lily’s deepest fear, that she is unlovable:

Probably one or two moments in your whole life you will hear a dark whispering spirit, a voice coming from the centre of things. It will have blades for lips and will not stop until it speaks the one secret thing at the heart of it all. Kneeling on the floor, unable to stop shuddering, I heard it plainly. It said *You are unlovable Lily Owens. Unlovable. Who could love you? Who in this world could ever love you?* (299)

The imagery used here is noteworthy: the “whispering spirit” is deep in the “centre of things”, a voice from inside Lily, yet she is disconnected from it and unable to control it. The blades show that she is afraid of the truth which deeply wounds. The hurtful words reveal her innermost fear: being unlovable. Her secrets are “like a garbage truck had backed up and dumped its sorry contents across the floor for her to sort through” (298). Finally having a safe place to share her fears means Lily is free to face her fears. This demonstrates the types of compensations Lily had put in place to help her cope with the trauma. Her worst fear, that she had been unloved by her mother, appeared to be coming true: learning she was unplanned and initially ‘abandoned’ destroys the myths that

sustained her through her childhood. The new maturity that Lily develops with August's help allows her to abandon the soothing illusions of motherhood and to accept the truth.

### **The Role of Religion and the Black Madonna**

The Black Madonna is another feature used to illustrate Lily's journey of maturation. The Boatwright's honey business took its name from the carved figurehead, Our Lady of Chains, on which they base their religious community, The Daughters of Mary. The first time Lily sees the figure, she describes "her face [as] a map of all the storms and journeys she'd been through .... Even though she wasn't dressed up like Mary and didn't resemble the picture on the honey jar, I knew that's who she was. She had a faded red heart painted on her breast ... what I felt was magnetic and so big it ached like the moon had entered my chest and filled it up" (70). Lily's reaction is immediate, and she feels that she hears its voice: "Lily Owens, I know you down to the core" (71). Her reaction is analysed by Joni Mayfield in her Master's thesis *Race-ing the Goddess* (2005):

The black Mary assuages Lily's spiritual yearnings, symbolizing for the maturing girl a divinity in female form, providing her with an unfaltering and maternal assurance that she possesses value, worth, and lovability despite her hatred for T. Ray and despite the possibility that she effected her mother's death .... The black Mary, therefore, opens up to Lily the possibility of her potential and the realness of her deficiencies. She is the spiritual guidepost that Lily so desperately needs and desires. (Mayfield 68)

The Madonna figure that knows Lily to her "core" does not reject her which Mayfield interprets as making Lily open to the possibility of change. The acceptance that she feels from this religious figurehead is also given to her by the Boatwright sisters. The process the Black Madonna began, the sisters continued. While the Daughters of Mary do not represent the established church, parallels can be drawn between them and the youthful chaplain Father Amadi in *Purple Hibiscus*. His worship is sincere, such as when he "burst into song in the middle of his sermon" (136). Within

*Purple Hibiscus* we are invited to compare this to Papa-Nnukwu's prayer to his god or ancestor Chineke that left him smiling, while Kambili "never smiled after we said the rosary back home" (*Purple Hibiscus* 169). Just as these two churches contrast to Kambili's experiences at St Agnes in Enugu and show her love, acceptance and an alternative way to acknowledge and worship God, so the Daughters of Mary open up a new possibility to Lily. She learns "[o]ur Lady ... is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlour. She's something inside of you" (288). The Virgin acts as a transitional mother figure, promising Lily the acceptance that she never found from the patriarchal God of Sylvan's Baptist church. Acceptance from the Virgin allows Lily to begin to know and accept herself, a process Ruth undergoes in *Housekeeping* when she journeys away from home with Sylvie, finding acceptance within her self, not the church. The Virgin is also significant in *Cat's Eye*, where Elaine has a vision of the Virgin at the ravine when she is her moment of deepest crisis, which begins a series of images related to the Virgin in the text and in Elaine's paintings. In her article "Placing the Spiritual Metaphors of Contemporary Women Writers" (2007), Carissa Turner Smith comments that "she [Lily] experiences a spiritual rebirth. However, the result of this rebirth is to render place (and the literal mother) unnecessary ... find[ing] "home" within" (Turner Smith 6). Elaine's Virgin is the Virgin of 'lost things', the Boatwrights' Virgin is Our Lady of Chains, named so "not because she wore chains ... because she broke them" (137). Both are supportive figures, and Lily's belief in her self is regained through her connection with the Virgin. The novel demonstrates how Lily accepts that she is worthy of being loved, and it links to the idea of the journey she undertakes in the novel: she needs to end up in the right place with herself, no matter where she ends up literally.

The inducement to convey her narrative for Lily is the successful outcome of the maturation process. Judith Lofflin notes that Lily "refers to the end of her journey as she begins the telling; the telling becomes again the successful end of the quest" (Lofflin 249). While unable to retrieve the knowledge lost to her about her mother's death, Lily pieces together the story of her life, in the process creating a new life for herself. Far from finding that she is unlovable, Lily chooses a better

life for herself. Her movement through the victim positions, described in Atwood's *Survival*, is complete by the novel's end. While Lily never had the luxury of denying she was a victim (position one), she needed an incentive to move on. T. Ray unknowingly provides this motivation, and in her journey to Tiburon, Lily begins to change, finally maturing when she confronts the truth about her mother and herself. While T. Ray maintains that Lily was responsible for Deborah's death, Lily is now secure enough to no longer judge herself. While her lost memory is never recovered, and the false images of her mother are shattered, Lily finds the strength to build a new life for herself. Kidd creates a satisfying yet simplistic ending for the reader, demonstrating that it is possible to triumph over the adversities trauma brings. It is an uplifting ending, demonstrating the capacity for overcoming trauma and reconciling oneself to a new life. This sense of resolution echoes the positivity and hope evident in the ending of *Purple Hibiscus*, where there is the promise of 'new rain' -- a new season in Kambili's life. Lily's experience demonstrates the same tendency of the popular trauma novel to create a cultural fantasy of reconciliation. The acceptance into society of the *Bildungsroman* plays a small part in this, but the idea of overcoming adversity also features in this myth, which I, like Rosellen Brown, find unsatisfying. While, like Ruth in *Housekeeping*, Lily does not triumph over society directly, the peace she feels with her choices creates the idea that being at peace with oneself is enough for happiness.



## Sins of Commission:

### Artistic mediation of childhood experience in *Cat's Eye*

I'm surprised how much pleasure this gives me, to know she's so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her.... energy has passed between us. I am stronger."

*Cat's Eye* (233)

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) is an early example of trauma fiction, which Roger Luckhurst places near the beginning of the 'cluster' of trauma fiction novels behind Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published one year earlier (86). It features the non-linear narrative, the figuration of the trauma in a ghost, and musings on the transmissions of trauma onto the next generation that Luckhurst identifies as key features of trauma fiction. Atwood's innovative portrayal of the narrator and central character, Elaine Risley, an artist returning to her childhood hometown of Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her works, utilises a range of techniques to portray the trauma that Elaine had experienced and later repressed. The synthesis of the various elements, and Atwood's presentation from the perspective of an artist figure, allows her to comment on the role of the artist in contemporary society, transforming trauma into art, mirroring the creation of a novel by the author. Atwood's academic background and previous experience as a novelist -- *Cat's Eye* is her seventh novel -- sets her apart from the other authors examined, each of whom have had their first novel examined in this study. Atwood's theoretical study of victimisation in *Survival* (1972) shows readers that her intentions are very clear: in exploring a character who was both victim and perpetrator of bullying, she demonstrates a maturity of vision missing in novels best categorised as popular fiction. Her awareness of the difficulty trauma victims face when dealing with relationships in the real world is delicately handled, using techniques to replicate the effect of trauma for the reader. Utilising an older narrator, she looks beyond the dramas -- and melodramas -- of teenage life illustrated in *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Life of Bees* to investigate the long-term effects of childhood trauma.

Elaine Risley, an artist who lived in Toronto from eight until she moved away as an adult, returns for a retrospective exhibition of her oeuvre, prompting her to review the past, much of which she has repressed. Throughout the novel she explores her traumatic bullying at the hands of her childhood friends, including ringleader Cordelia, and her reaction when she had the chance to turn the tables when she was a teenager. This bullying is what I have labelled her 'Sins of Commission', established in the introduction to this thesis as a wilfully chosen, deliberate act. As a bullying victim Elaine should have known better than to manipulate Cordelia, but Atwood explores how repression of this earlier trauma means she does not understand her ambivalence towards Cordelia or recall her treatment at her hands. Instead, she allows her negativity towards Cordelia to control her actions as she learns to enjoy manipulating her. As an adult Elaine has to deal with her guilt over her treatment of Cordelia, accompanied by a feeling that she has abandoned her to her fate, all while being unsure why she has treated her this way. The use of coping techniques, including repression, is looked at as I seek to analyse the techniques that make this novel stand apart from those in my study best considered as popular trauma novels. Atwood illustrates the effects of a return of Elaine's memory as she returns to her childhood home and finally remembers the terrible events from her childhood, enabling her to decode the metaphors contained in her artworks. I will argue that the complexity of Elaine's artworks reveals the damage Elaine has suffered, revealing the endless impact of Elaine's childhood trauma.

### **Time and Memory as Structural Concepts**

The theme of time as a dimension, introduced on the first page, runs through the book and is mirrored beautifully in a number of metaphorical ways. The twinning of time and place is important as Elaine has lost much of her memories of her childhood to repression. Structural elements of *Cat's Eye* allow readers to identify with the gradual return of Elaine's memory as she returns to Toronto. Atwood utilises time as a structural tool useful for ordering events -- demonstrating how visits to significant sites prompts Elaine's repression to lift -- rather than chronological temporality, which mirrors the classic trauma narrative that performs rather than describes traumatic affect. She

introduces the concept of time, stating: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space ... like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing" (3). Atwood demonstrates how truth, knowledge, and memory rise to the surface of Elaine's mind throughout the novel.

The novel is structured into fifteen parts, each named after one of Elaine's paintings, with each revealing more of the history of her journey through childhood and into the artist she became. Each of the sections begins in the present during Elaine's return to Toronto, that is, chronologically, after these paintings were created. She comes ready to remember the depths of what happened to her: to revisit the sites of her trauma, having lived in Vancouver since the break-up of her first marriage, raising her two daughters with second husband Ben. Atwood brings into focus memories long-forgotten because of passing time, and of having been long-repressed on account of their traumatic impact, in the chapters that follow each section's introduction. Elaine's walks through the once-familiar landscapes are the catalyst for remembering her childhood spent in those very streets. She comments: "I could see it's still the same. Underneath the flourish and ostentation is the old city" (14). She associates the buildings themselves with the issues that she had as a child in the city. They, symbolically, become her childhood tormentors; they are "malicious, grudging, vindictive, implacable" (14). She comments that in Toronto she feels as though she is "shedding matter, losing molecules, calcium from my bones, cells from my blood; as if I'm shrinking, as if I'm filling with cold air, or gently falling snow" (13). In this place she is less herself; she is unable to compose herself as the mature, successful, artist and again becomes a product of her traumatic childhood. This structural pattern links journeys through past neighbourhoods with returning memories, clearly fitting with Luckhurst's view of trauma texts following a non-temporal pattern. Atwood uses this structure to advance our knowledge of both the adult Elaine and Elaine as an artist as she clearly links her formative years with her artistic inspiration.

## Writing Trauma: Atwood's Innovations and Techniques

While *Cat's Eye* has been described as her most "personal novel", Atwood asserts that its admittedly "semiautobiographical elements" are primarily restricted to period and place. The shared elements of Elaine and Atwood's formative years -- both growing up in "rather isolated circumstances, spending most of my early life in a forest with no electricity, no running water, without any radio or movies, and before television" (Atwood interview) -- do not mean Atwood and Elaine should be confused. In an interview in September 2000, she laments that the use of a first person narrative technique creates a "habit of identifying the author with the narrator" in a text. "Readers tend to assume that Atwood must have had some terrible pain in her life, to convey it so well in her work. This infuriates her" (Viner para 19.). The transformation of pain into art is evident in Elaine's artworks, but the role of the artist and writer within society is not to present their own pain, but to write in an evocative way. As Atwood explains to Viner, "There's a difference between describing and evoking something. You can describe something and be quite clinical about it. To evoke it, you call it up in the reader" (Viner para 18.). This evocation is effective because she works within the realms of reality, as she explains: "The darkness is really out there .... It's in my work because it's in the world" (Viner para 24.). The artistry Atwood displays in transforming a story about such pain into a believable, accessible story that mimics the trauma suffered by girls and women is a reason for her continuing success as an author.

Elaine's move to Toronto as an eight year old was prompted by her father's job, and she is thrown into a society she was unprepared for. Previously the family had lived an itinerant lifestyle as her father, an entomologist, travelled around Canada counting bugs. Elaine finds it difficult to leave this nomadic lifestyle and is unsuited to domestic life. Instead of a picture perfect home with picket fence, she finds the house "surrounded by raw mud... [with] an enormous hole in the ground" (33). This does not fit with Elaine's view of a home, and Atwood uses it to symbolise the way that Elaine, too, does not fit in the suburban environment. Like Ruth in *Housekeeping*, she is to be raised in an

unfamiliar environment; however, she is unprepared for the challenge, and with her mother equally unsuited for the task of suburban living she cannot help her adjust or prepare her for the challenges she faces at school. Thrown together out of geographical proximity and being of a similar age, Elaine had little else in common with the other girls: "I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I don't know what to say" (47). Initially friends with Grace and Carol, she attempts to learn their games and quickly learns rules: "Because we want to play with her more than she wants to play with us, she gets her way in everything" (52). They colour in, dress up cut-out dolls, play schools, and make scrapbooks featuring women and domestic goods from Eaton's Catalogues: "cookware, furniture, dining suites, beds, stacks of towels" (54). The following year Cordelia is included and replaces Grace as lynchpin, and Elaine's inexperience in female friendships makes her vulnerable to the subtle bullying Cordelia initiates while her isolation means she knows no way to stop the attacks. As Sonia Gernes notes, "She invents arbitrary rules and punishments, devising games that intrigue the other girls but also terrorizes them" (Gernes 145).

Elaine is unsure how to manage Cordelia's behaviour so she withdraws into herself, using self-punishment techniques to cope rather than to break away from the group. While other characters in this study display coping strategies, they are conscious decisions like Kambili's family silence and her persistence in running to meet her father's driver Kevin after school to escape punishment for slowness, then denying this to her fellow students. Ruth and Lucille's coping strategies include truancy from school, and Lily copes by creating a collection of her mother's belongings which she treats as relics. Elaine begins with conscious management of her behaviour. Initially she peels skin off her feet, then she begins to vomit -- not privately like a bulimic, but first in front of her friends and then with her mother's knowledge -- as a way to escape the girls' company. Then she begins to faint, at first accidentally, but soon Elaine realises she "can do it almost whenever I want to" (172). Here begins an interesting conflation of voluntary and involuntary symptomatic behaviour. She is able to "spend time outside my body without falling over. At these times I feel blurred, as if there are two of me, one superimposed on the other, but imperfectly .... I can see what's happening, I can

hear what's being said to me, but I don't have to pay any attention. My eyes are open but I'm not there. I'm off to the side" (173). A reflection of the victim positions that Atwood proposed in *Survival* is evident through these actions. Elaine initially viewed herself as a victim of the girls (position one), but by developing a method that helps her to escape emotionally from the situation, there is an effort to reduce its impact on her (position two). This compares to the other novels, where coping behaviours indicate resignation to their fate and an attempt to minimise the impact. It is her unconscious withdrawal that sets Elaine apart from other characters, and as psychiatrist Lenore Terr discusses dissociation in *Unchained Memories*, self-hypnosis techniques are almost automatic ways for some children to escape the traumatic situation they are experiencing. The separation of selves that Elaine notes seems to fit in with this diagnosis.

The central episode of bullying that leads to Elaine's repression of her experiences occurs when the young Elaine is abandoned by her friends in the snowy ravine while she retrieves her hat that Cordelia has thrown over the railing. It is most traumatic incident in the novel, and it links to the "field of snow" (407) portrayed in the "Cat's Eye" painting. This incident is the turning point for Elaine: after this incident she deliberately and automatically represses all the previous bullying and even the reason for her dislike of Cordelia. Elaine's earlier coping techniques of fainting and active dissociation have trained her in self-preservation. This single event is the most significant for Elaine, however, in part because the ravine has been previously established as a traumatic site. Elaine comments, "She wants me to go down into the ravine where the bad men are, where we're never supposed to go" (187). The ravine was seen as dangerous, with men lurking there: "not ordinary men but the other kind, the shadowy, nameless kind who do things to you" (48). It is thick with weeds in summer, including "deadly nightshade", and "Cordelia says because the stream flows right out of the cemetery it's made up of dissolved dead people" (74). The local lore makes it a terrifying place for Elaine to have to retrieve her hat. However, she realises that "If I go home without it, I'll have to explain, I'll have to tell" (187). Of the options, the idea of facing up to her mother and admitting her friends' bullying is too much for her. She says of this moment: "Maybe she's gone too

far, hit, finally, some core of resistance in me. If I refuse to do what she says this time, who knows where my defiance will end?" (187). This possibility of defiance seems a position for Elaine, Atwood's fourth victim position in *Survival*, the creative non-victim. However, she hasn't the resolve to carry it through. The threat that Elaine may challenge Cordelia's bullying is real as she recognises their manipulation and threatens to stand up to them; therefore they issue the ultimate challenge, which she reluctantly accepts. Elaine becomes unwell after retrieving her hat from waist-deep icy cold water, having delayed her return home for a count of one hundred as the girls had instructed her. What had been promised as an act of forgiveness was in fact their chance to get away, leaving Elaine soaking and delirious. Elaine deliberately distances herself from them after this: the insincere apologies of the trio followed by a threat of further punishment drives the final wedge between them: "I turn and walk away from her. It's like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does .... Nothing binds me to them. I am free" (193). Elaine comments, "They need me for this, and I no longer need them" (193). She finally reaches the fourth victim position: her foray into friendships has taught her that if she is unwilling to be manipulated, they can no longer manipulate her. "Grace and Cordelia and Carol hang around the edges of my life, enticing, jeering, growing paler and paler every day, less and less substantial. I hardly hear them anymore because I hardly listen" (194). The terrible situations that the trio put Elaine in has taught her not to make herself vulnerable to others, something she remembers long after she has repressed the traumatic incident at the ravine.

Long-term memory retrieval is benefitted by a return to the place where it is experienced. As Terr states, "Place, more than anything else, remains attached to highly emotional episodic memory" (Terr 73). Atwood closely links Elaine's memory retrieval to her return to specific places throughout the text. Return of memory is also linked to association with objects in this novel, most notably the cat's eye marble. This marble was her favourite as a child and she had invested it with significance, representing an "impartial gaze" (166), and its presence made her feel stronger around her 'friends'. As Nathalie Cook explains, "Elaine understands that the cat's eye marble ... can empower her .... It

models a way for Elaine to see her situation differently” (111). The marble cannot hear the torments of the girls, and if Elaine can model herself around it, then she too can be impervious to their bullying. When she rediscovers the marble as an adult, it acts as the trigger for the recovery of her lost memories. When she finds it, she says: “This one was mine. I look into it and see my life entire” (398). Before this she was unable to recollect her traumatic childhood, despite the fact that much of her art presented themes and figures from her traumatic past. These dramatizations of dissociation, illustrating the ways in which sufferers of trauma carry on with their lives in wounding circumstances, enable readers to experience the return of memory to Elaine.

### **Our Lady: Necessity, Imagery and Iconography**

A recurring motif in the novel is the Virgin Mary, whom Elaine calls “Our Lady of Perpetual Help”, and throughout the novel Mary’s influence is evident in her paintings. The inclusion of the Virgin links to strong religious themes in *Purple Hibiscus* and to Lily’s experiences with the Black Mary in *The Secret Life of Bees*. In the primary bullying event described earlier, while Elaine lies beside the creek she sees someone who “is just like her vision of Mary when praying: I feel her around me, not like arms but like a small wind of warmer air” (189). She returns home, certain it was the Virgin Mary. “I know who it is that I’ve seen. It’s the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt” (190). Later she becomes less certain: “I’m now sure, now, that it really was the Virgin Mary, I believe it but I no longer know it” (192). These visions and uncertainties link, in part, to her disorientation and feverishness in the wake of her unseasonable dip in the creek, but more strongly to the theme of memory and how easily it is lost and altered. While Elaine’s repression of the incident occurs, the Virgin figure stays in her mind, an un-repressed remnant of her experience.

The inclusion of religious experiences for all of the protagonists across the texts in this study is significant as they provide evidence of the search for healing, acceptance and order in a fragmented world, although there is an ironic tone to its inclusion in *Cat’s Eye*. Kambili’s personal experience of the Virgin at Aokpe adds to her previously positive view of God. Cheryl Stobie describes her vision as



“one of all-embracing joy and loving-kindness, traditionally associated with femininity” (Stobie 431). Kambili senses “the Blessed Virgin: an image in the pale sun, a red flow on the back of my hand, a smile on the face of the rosary-bedecked man whose arm rubbed against mine. She was everywhere” (*Purple Hibiscus* 275). Her sense that God is all around is new, and that she alone of her group witnesses the apparition indicates Kambili’s deep psychological need for healing and freedom. Similarly, Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees* experiences healing and forgiveness through her interactions with the Black Mary, Our Lady of Chains to whom the Boatwrights’ religious community, the Daughters of Mary, pray. Mary’s statue is visited daily by Lily who comes to love the icon’s crevices and ugliness more and more. She is taught to embrace the Virgin as a part of herself. Lily comes to understand the importance of having faith in something larger than herself, without finding this in traditional religion like Kambili. A more extreme example of looking outwardly for an object of faith is the experience of Ruth in *Housekeeping*, whose journey across the lake with Sylvie causes a rebirth of her spirit as Sylvie’s child -- an experience that Robinson describes as being “transfigured” (*Housekeeping* 199) . Ruth becomes a child of nature and the open air, rather than finding spiritual existence within the traditional church and society. In *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine had attended Sunday School with the Smeath family but does not see their church as providing an answer for her, and instead she prays to the Virgin: “I decide to do something dangerous, rebellious, perhaps even blasphemous. I can no longer pray to God so I will pray to the Virgin Mary instead .... I close my eyes and think about the Virgin Mary. I want her to help me or at least show me that she can hear me, but I don’t know what to say. I haven’t the words for her” (183). The mention of this prayer occurs just prior to the retelling of the incident at the ravine and it shows Elaine’s increasing desperation. Her mother has failed to prevent the bullying, therefore her prayer is a cry for help, a desperate plea that goes unanswered: “Nothing happens” (183). When the Virgin appears to her by the ravine, it is not “Our Lady of Perpetual Help”, but a different vision, and later as she undertakes a search for statues of the Virgin that match her vision. What she finds are disappointing representations: “insipid ... pious and lifeless” (197). Later, however, an unconventional depiction of the Virgin Mary found in Mexico resonates

with her. Dressed in black, “She didn’t have a crown. Her head was bowed, her face in shadow, her hands held out open at the sides ... she was a Virgin of lost things, one who restored what was lost” (198). This humble Virgin resonates with Elaine; however, she still finds herself unable to pray properly, claiming: “I didn’t know what to pray for. What was lost” (198). Sonia Gernes investigates possible readings of the Virgin’s appearance to Elaine, citing psychological, mythological and scientific reasons. Her reading of scientific reasons is based on the Unified Field Theory that Elaine’s brother Stephen worked on, and her psychological reasons are plausible, explaining that Elaine conjures the Virgin in her time of need, which links her to Kambili’s experience at Aokpe. However the ideas surrounding the mythologizing of Mary resonates most strongly with my reading of the text. Gernes acknowledges Elaine’s tendency to mythologise important figures in her paintings, and views her return to Toronto as a process to demythologise her past, especially that relating to Cordelia.

The recurrence of Virgin imagery is related to two paintings Elaine produces. The first is “Our Lady of Perpetual Help”, in some ways a traditional Mary, “With the usual white veil, but with the head of a lioness. Christ lies in her lap in the form of a cub” (345). The lion imagery reflects Mary’s strength and ferocity as she sits with a bone at her feet. She is also portrayed in “a winter coat over her blue robe, and has a purse slung over her shoulder. She’s carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries” (345). This every-day Mary is like Elaine, a busy mother suffering the same chores and challenges. In the picture “she looks tired” (345), showing even she is not invincible and reflecting Elaine’s experience of motherhood. Secondly, in the painting “Unified Field Theory”, the Virgin of lost things appears. She is holding “a glass object: an oversized cat’s eye marble, with a blue centre” (408) and depicted above the bridge in the ravine. This is the final painting described in the book, the last of five new works for the retrospective. Each work reflects on an important relationship or aspect of Elaine’s past that she has had to work through: the self-portrait “Cat’s Eye”, paintings for her parents, brother Stephen, and for her “*Three Muses*” -- Mrs Finestein, Mr Banerji and Miss Steward - who had helped to shape her character and interests in her early years. This final painting takes its name from Einstein’s theory which her scientist brother was interested in. She attempted to portray her whole self by

incorporating central motifs, the Virgin and cat's eye marble, which had played an influential role in the development of Elaine's self (409). Elaine now uses her art to order and make sense of her entire life: parents, brother, influential teacher, the three bullying friends, her hatred for Grace's mother Mrs Smeath: all are depicted in this series of paintings. By the novel's end she can remember them, although she comments, "I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have came out of me. I'm what's left over" (409). By transforming her memory and history into art, she is transforming their hold over her, and thus giving herself space for her to grow and move on from her traumas. Therefore the retrospective exhibition features paintings from all periods of her adult life, and the inclusion of these final five paintings, through which she reorganises her memories, represents the healing process she has undergone in the time surrounding their creation. Like other characters in this study, Elaine finds healing and recovery gradually. Having attempted to find answers in prayer, in an apparent hope that God is bigger than the traumas she was undergoing, she finds in her paintings a way to create her own healing and resolution.

### ***Cat's Eye* as *Künstlerroman***

In the novel, Elaine's art progresses from its commercial roots to a multi-layered commentary of the issues of her life. The narrative develops in the same way, revealing its multiple-layers, eventually bringing many strands together to reveal the themes, symbols and motifs evident in Elaine's artworks. The novel follows Elaine from childhood to adulthood and beyond. Atwood has called it "a coming-of-age novel -- middle age" (Random House.com). The difference between this and *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Life of Bees* is that, like Ruth in *Housekeeping*, the first person autodiegetic narrator is an adult looking back on her formative years, as opposed to a young narrator speaking of her formative experiences. Readers can see how events shaped Elaine's personality and actions and influence her growth as an artist. *Cat's Eye* is also distinctive in focusing on "the protagonist's journey to creativity" (Blue 9) as is typical of the *Künstlerroman*, a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*. Where the *Bildungsroman* is a novel of personal identity formation, the

*Künstlerroman* is concerned with the formation of the artist. Atwood uses her knowledge of the genre to create characters who “contribute something radically new to the *Künstlerroman* tradition, particularly in the way that the artist emerges as deeply involved in day-to-day living but is also capable of creating self-protecting personae that jostle for position within the text” (McWilliams 13).

Elaine’s art works also play a role in her redemption and create layers of metaphorical symbolism within the novel. As Elaine describes the pieces in her retrospective, the readers are able to assimilate their knowledge of her life with the images portrayed in her pictures, imagery such as the cat’s eye marble and Virgin as described above, and figures of those she has known. The titular painting, “Cat’s Eye”, is an excellent example:

[I]t’s a self-portrait, of sorts. My head is in the right foreground, though it’s shown only from the middle of the nose up; just the upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outwards, the forehead and the topping of hair .... Behind my half-head, in the centre of the picture, in the empty sky, a pier-glass is hanging, convex and encircled by an ornate frame. In it, a section of the back of my head is visible; but the hair is different, younger. At a distance, and condensed by the curved space of the mirror, there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow. (407-8)

The self-portrait of Elaine is as an adult; seen from the front she is showing her age with wrinkles and greying hair: she is mature, insightful. The image of the pier glass is borrowed from the novel’s imagery, where earlier Elaine had narrated her interest in Jan Van Eyck’s experiments with reflection in his 1434 painting *Arnolfini Marriage*. A convex mirror shows the backs of the couple in Van Eyck’s painting, and the young Elaine is also interested in the fact that it showed two other figures not visible in the painting itself. She explains, “This round mirror is like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking” (343). This independence of vision sets her apart as a young artist. Her desire to look beyond the surface appearance should be linked to repressed memories and her

feeling that there was more that needed to be explored in life, if only one were to look in a different way. Atwood uses this painting, and Elaine's fascination with the idea there is always more to see, as a symbol of her repressed past, her desire to see beyond the surface appearance in a search for truth.

The "three small figures" in this painting are those of her childhood friends and tormentors, Cordelia, Grace and Carol. That Elaine has painted the three girls only in the pier glass shows that they are both absent and present in her life: both their presence and absence have made her the artist and the person she is today. This painting represents the terrible events that Elaine was party to, and the ways in which they are still with her. Elaine's portrayal of herself as an adult in the picture shows that she could never get away from these events of her youth; the girls in the pier glass are still youthful, which shows that the events can never be forgiven. In this painting we can see her entire journey from childhood to artist represented, and it is through this we see the aims of the *Künstlerroman* most fully accomplished.

Like the characters in the previous novels, Elaine has journeyed in her maturation process -- and she has become a mother herself and the effect of her experiences on her mothering is evident throughout. Elaine had felt abandoned by her own mother, later reflecting, "What would I have done if I had been my mother? She must have realized what was happening to me, or that something was" (150). While she avoids laying the blame on her mother, she later learns her mother was aware of the bullying, and realises, "What she wants from me is forgiveness" for failing to act (395). Elaine herself finds that "Most mothers worry when their daughters reach adolescence, but I was the opposite. I relaxed, I sighed with relief. Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized" (118). It takes Elaine's growth and maturation to reach this level of understanding about her mother and her attitudes towards her children, as she grows to a new understanding of the past through the imagery displayed in her art.

## Turning the Tables: Sins of Commission

Through her art, Elaine has been able to transform her past into something new, but her artworks also reveal her suffering. Many of Elaine's paintings unflatteringly portray Mrs Smeath, the mother of childhood friend Grace. The Smeaths had taken Elaine to Sunday School and shared Sunday dinners with her yet also judged her for her unconventional family, earning Elaine's hatred. Shown at her first exhibition were a series of works: "Mrs Smeath in metamorphosis, from frame to frame, naked, exposed, and desecrated, along with the maroon velvet chesterfield, the sacred rubber plant, the angels of God" (352). While she had created this series of paintings unconsciously, standing back she thinks: "I have gone way too far" (352). At her retrospective, she comments: "I put a lot of work into that imagined body .... I laboured on it, with, I now see, considerable malice. But these pictures are not only mockery, not only desecration. I put light into them too" (404). Not privy to her repressed memories, Elaine had been puzzled by Mrs Smeath's appearance in her paintings: on the first occasion she "floats up without warning, like a dead fish, materializing on the sofa I am drawing" (338). The domestic scene she was painting is invaded by Mrs Smeath. At the time Elaine had been transitioning from commercial art to paintings of domestic objects. The painting "Rubber Plant: The Ascension" marked a turning point in which Mrs Smeath "multiplies on the walls like bacteria, standing sitting flying, with clothes, without clothes" (338). The connotations of the simile imply the Mrs Smeath paintings are as undesirable as bacteria, and Elaine was powerless to stop these portrayals. At the first exhibition where these works were shown, a woman Elaine first thinks is Grace expresses her horror at the works, throwing ink across one. Elaine muses, "I will be looked at, now, with respect: paintings that can get bottles of ink thrown at them, that can inspire such outraged violence, such uproar and display, must have an odd revolutionary power. I will seem audacious, and brave. Some dimension of heroism has been added to me" (354). Elaine has turned the tables on one of her tormentors, a person who she felt had misunderstood her and judged her harshly, and now feels powerful instead of powerless.

When Elaine has regained her memory about the traumatic events of her childhood, she is able to read her own paintings in a new way. She looks at her portrayal of Mrs Smeath and says, "I used to think these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. The eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man" (405). Through her journey to adulthood and memory, Elaine is now able to see her paintings as a form of "vengeance" rather than "justice, or rather mercy" (405). She comments: "An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness" (405). This alludes to the Jewish concept (see Matthew 5.38) of vengeance for wrongs done, and to one of her paintings of Mrs Smeath at the sink, peeler in hand, "*AN.EYE.FOR.AN.EYE.*" Now Elaine realises she sought vengeance for Mrs Smeath's judgment on her in her unflattering portrayals -- Mrs Smeath with a "potato face", Mr Smeath stuck to her back "like an asparagus beetle" (225), her body naked and flaccid, or as a potato. She was merely regaining control of her self-image, wresting Mrs Smeath's judgements away and reasserting her strength and self-image. These paintings represent one of Elaine's 'Sins of Commission' -- her vengeance, claiming her "eye for an eye" rather than practising the New Testament way of dealing with issues, "turning the other cheek" (Matthew 5.39). Elaine comments: "Whatever has happened to me is my own fault .... Mrs Smeath knows what it is. She isn't telling" (338). Atwood illustrates how inexact memory does not affect Elaine's overall feelings of judgement towards Mrs Smeath.

The negative judgement Elaine retains of her tormentor Cordelia influences their relationship when Cordelia re-enters Elaine's life at high school. Elaine, a year younger than Cordelia, looks "like a kid dressed up" as a teenager (200), yet the troubled Cordelia now depends on her. They are unlikely companions, and Elaine comments, "It must be hard for the teachers, looking, to figure out why we are friends, what we're doing together" (229). Their shared history keeps them together, as Elaine watches bemused at Cordelia's antics and observes her recklessness as she shoplifts and drifts through school, never focusing on her studies. During summer she gets letters, and she observes, "her bubbly style does not ring true. I have seen her, sometimes, when she thinks I'm not looking:

her face goes still, remote, unreflecting. It's as if she's not inside it" (221). Elaine recognises a complexity within Cordelia but cannot understand it, and their friendship does not permit her to delve more deeply into her friend's thoughts. The following year the balance of power changes between the pair when Cordelia speaks about the Smeath family. "Cordelia remembers all kinds of things: the greying underwear dripping on the clothesline in the cellar, the kitchen paring knife that was worn right down ... [and] winter coats from the Eaton's catalogue" (230). Together they lampoon the family, calling them the "Lump Lumps": the family clearly made an impact on Cordelia as well as Elaine, who cannot understand why Cordelia insists on prolonging the game. Elaine finds the game "deeply satisfying" and participates with "savagery" and enjoyment (231). She moves on from the game, demonstrating the shifting power within their relationship. Unenchanted by the cemetery of their childhood, now not frightening but "too pragmatic, too ugly, too neat" (232), she scares Cordelia with a vampire story. She enjoys the power: "I'm surprised how much pleasure this gives me, to know she's so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her.... energy has passed between us. I am stronger" (233), Elaine notes the malevolence of this strength, which has not been attained from loyalty or companionship, but by a triumph at Cordelia's expense. Her awareness of this power shift is also significant, demonstrating a self-awareness that allows me to categorise her on-going harassment of Cordelia as a 'sin'.

As time passes Elaine grows into her new persona noted by her peers for her "mean mouth", and is surrounded by an "aura of potential verbal danger" (234), which helps her gain allies who try to stay on her good side. These mean comments are apparently often reactionary, something which apparently disappoints her, as shown in her comment, "It disturbs me to learn I have hurt someone unintentionally. I want all my hurts to be intentional"(235). Elaine has become stronger, someone who knows how to manipulate others, but, importantly, someone who *wants* to manipulate them too. She victimises Cordelia, claiming: "I use her as target practice" (235). The tables have been completely turned, with Elaine the tormentor and Cordelia her victim. She is never sure of her motivation until she recovers her memories of bullying. Her repression leaves open the door for



Elaine to take revenge without any knowledge of her motivation. The paintings of Mrs Smeath are excellent examples of her obsession with the past, even while she lacks any understanding of her motivations, and this same obsession is evident in this relationship with Cordelia.

Only one of Elaine's paintings features Cordelia, an image called "Half a Face". She describes it, saying "Cordelia's entire face is visible. But behind her, hanging on the wall ... is another face, covered with a white cloth. The effect is of a theatrical mask. Perhaps" (227). Elaine also describes her difficulty in painting the picture: "It was hard for me to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age. I wanted her about thirteen, looking out with that defiant, almost belligerent stare of hers. So? But the eyes sabotaged me. They weren't strong eyes; the look they give the face is tentative, hesitant, reproachful. Frightened. Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia" (227). The web of emotions Elaine feels about Cordelia is evident in this picture and her reactions to it. Her memory of Cordelia as a teen with a belligerent stare" speaks of confidence, a challenge to the world. Yet Elaine has trouble capturing the image of Cordelia that she wishes to paint. She sees herself as somehow not in control of the paint, that the image somehow takes control. She observes that the eyes are "not strong ... the face is tentative" (227). The difficulty she has in representing Cordelia links with the difficulty she has in remembering her and in choosing which 'version' of her to recall, as she states in the opening section: "But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up ... or the one before, or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone" (6). Elaine's memories of Cordelia are multi-layered and tainted with the repressed memories from her childhood. Her theory here of there being multiple versions of a self is striking as if she sees past experiences not helping to create and shape a person, but to have been discarded and moved past, a separate self. Repression of childhood experiences has meant that she has shed this earlier self. However, her attitude towards Cordelia shows you can never move past this completely untouched.

The painting's title "Half a Face" links to imagery that is pervasive throughout the novel and the section Half a Face closes with a memory of Cordelia reading Elaine a comic book story about a pair

of sisters: one beautiful, one disfigured by a burn over half her face. After the disfigured sister's suicide, her spirit inhabits the mirror where the beautiful sister now sees a disfigured reflection, and the disfigured sister's spirit inhabits her sister's body. The story ends with the mirror broken and the beautiful sister's spirit returned to her body. This motif is discussed in Jessie Givner's article "Names, Faces and Signatures in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*". Givner suggests that the process of division and doubling is replicated in Elaine's painting. "[H]er painting presents Cordelia's face as both a whole face and a half-face, a divided face and a doubled face" (67). Givner's reading is of the masked face in the background belonging to Cordelia. In fact the novel offers us no clues as to the identity of the masked face: it could be Cordelia, or even Elaine herself, which was my initial reading, supported by Nathalie Cook's analysis (108). In light of Elaine's concerns that she and Cordelia may have changed faces, this reading makes the most sense: "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when" (227). Throughout the novel, these two characters are paired, and Elaine's concern that she may have become Cordelia reflects her role as tormentor and her guilt over it, that she became the sinner, rather than sinned against. "We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (411). This feeling of being half of a whole, of dependence upon Cordelia, could link back to the painting and also her repression of childhood memories, and her desire to understand why Cordelia allowed herself to become victim to the teenage Elaine, to understand the transference of power between the pair. The "half a key" symbolises her need to unlock the past. Elaine has a desire for understanding, saying: "There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why" (411). Despite her age, maturity and artistic success, Elaine is being held back by this lack of perception, and even though she has now regained her memory, she needs more than this, she requires understanding.

"I am not the centre of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is

part of herself I could give back to her” (411). The novel *Cat’s Eye* represents the journey one character makes through her traumatic past, as she grows in knowledge of her self, the inspiration behind her art, and a growing acknowledgement that it is impossible to look at yourself in the same way as others look at you. Elaine wishes she could meet up with Cordelia again in order to hear her version of the ‘story’, unlikely because of Cordelia’s poor mental health, revealed late in the narrative. The novel is unsympathetic towards Elaine at times, demonstrating the on-going effects of a traumatic incident in a child’s past as influencing all areas of her life -- her first failed marriage, her hesitant motherhood, and her art practice.

*Cat’s Eye* predates many novels presenting trauma in literature and represents an innovative portrayal of the on-going effects of a childhood trauma. Like the other novels in this study, use is made of an autodiegetic narrator to present an intimate look at the inner workings of a character’s mind. The labelling of Atwood as the ‘high priestess of pain’ demonstrates the success of her portrayal. The artistic interpretation of memory through the character of Elaine Risley illustrates how we can be haunted by shadows of memories throughout our lives. It also illustrates how we can be as wounded by our own actions as by those around us. Atwood’s novel is a fitting conclusion to the four in this study as it demonstrates trauma’s effects throughout our lives, influencing every aspect of our lives, even if it remains an unrecovered memory.

## Conclusion

In the chapter “Afterwards”, the conclusion of *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst comments: “Some of the most interesting cultural work to emerge from the trauma question has involved an attempt to find a model of trauma that acknowledges yet seeks to *work though* the traumatic past, premising communality not on preserving trauma but on transforming its legacy. This is perhaps why Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* remains such an important text: the melancholic ghost continues to haunt, but the other daughter, Denver, is allowed to start to refashion some other kind of community afterwards” (213). This insight prompted me to contemplate why authors write ostensibly terrible stories, often exposing the worst of humanity. It is not from a desire to entertain us with traumatic details, but rather to show the potential for survival of the worst that humanity can cause for each other. To transform the legacy of trauma into something more positive -- a community where our actions are intentional, a community where we learn from trauma, as Denver does in *Beloved* -- a trauma not caused by her actions, but those of her mother. Denver must learn to live with trauma’s legacy, much as we in society must continue to live with trauma’s legacy.

The four novels studied in my thesis represent a spectrum of trauma novels, from the literary trauma novel through to the popular trauma novel. Each demonstrates we all have the potential to hurt others -- from the childlike bullying in *Cat’s Eye*, through to damage done by parents to their children as seen in *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Life of Bees*. Hurts unintentionally caused, for example to the abandoned children in *Housekeeping*, or to Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees* through her own accidental actions, have a lifelong impact on those affected. They also illustrate the array of techniques authors use to convey and replicate trauma. I have argued that at one extreme *Cat’s Eye* effectively portrays the repression, while at the other *The Secret Life of Bees* illustrates repression. Humour, melodrama and accessibility are characteristic of Kidd’s novel, whereas dense imagery and anachronicity are characteristic of Atwood’s. Between these two poles lie *Purple Hibiscus*, effectively illustrating the effects of post-colonialism on the individual but less effective in transmitting trauma, and *Housekeeping*, a beautiful picture of dysfunctional small-town America

demonstrating two varying reactions to trauma. Each of the novels adds to the portrayal of the impact of trauma on girls and women, demonstrating ongoing negative effects. The novelists in this study have all shown the significant impact that these hurts have on our psyche. They have each demonstrated through their narrative and the first-person voices of their characters, the costs and consequences of being a survivor of trauma. The stories illustrate the effects of our actions, urging us to take care of each other, to consciously weigh our actions, not to fall into inadvertent 'sins'.

Margaret Atwood's book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002) explores the reasons behind her own, and others', writing. She writes about the balance of artistic satisfaction, the need to financially support your craft, and being socially relevant. Atwood says, "Let us suppose that the words the writer writes do not exist in some walled garden called 'literature' but actually get out there into the world, and have effects and consequences" (97). Atwood acknowledges that writers cannot write entirely for themselves; they write for an audience. Their work is never without consequences, and Atwood argues that with social relevance comes a measure of social responsibility. "[I]f he doesn't engage himself with the social world at all, he risks being simply irrelevant" (117). However, "a socially conscious writer can quite easily be charged with exploiting the misery and misfortune of the downtrodden for his own gain" (119). In *Cat's Eye* Atwood's intention was to respond to her observations of how society works. This socio-political purpose, raising the audience's consciousness regarding issues of bullying, trauma, and its long-lasting impact, is echoed in the works by the other novelists. Contemporary authors like Chimamanda Adichie have continued this tradition, combining an authentic post-colonial voice with consciousness-raising intention. Popular culture too, has embraced the socio-political ideas of trauma fiction, as seen in the success of Sue Monk Kidd's novel. Each novelist focussed on individuals affected by traumas, exploring how varied causes can cause startlingly similar effects through conventions including narrative closure, psychic integration, temporal disruption, and the reconciliation with flawed maternal and paternal figures that have emerged in the representation of trauma. While each author in my study approaches her task differently, the ultimate effect is the same: engaging an

audience with stories, ultimately providing us with a vision of how representations of trauma have become an organising concept for female identity in the late twentieth century. The author's tools help them to influence their audience. From the literary trauma novel, exemplified by *Cat's Eye* which strives to transmit the traumatic experience, to the popular trauma novel represented by *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Life of Bees* which aim to create sympathy for their characters, different tools emerge. But all impact the audience, engaging them in the contemporary dialogue of trauma and recognising its impact on girls and women.

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