

Clash of Conscious and Unconscious: A Psychoanalytical Study of Seamus Heaney's Poetry and Past Events

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Abstract

In this article, the researchers investigate the personality of Seamus Heaney by the textual analysis of his poetry, and the application of psychoanalytic theory that is given by Cathy Caruth. Caruth's theory deals with the idea of interaction elements of memory in the mind that she calls "dead or alive". The research focuses on the conscious part of the mind (instead of the unconscious) because it greatly impacts our actions. The focus here is on the past events and desires that the poet experiences. Moreover, Caruth's theory negates the concept of trauma (a shock that only affects the victim when it happens) given by Sigmund Freud provides a new door to think of trauma as a shock that repeats itself. This repetition occurs in the form of a re-enactment of events. The research aims to negate the concept of Wordsworth (poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings) and argues that it is not an emotional process but a rational one. Researchers conclude that memory is not only an emotional but also a social factor that is vital for the development of personality. The study finds a new paradigm that the articulation of traumatic memory acts as a healer rather than merely a wound.

Keywords: Traumatic memory, Conscious mind, Unconscious mind, Narration, Trauma as Healer

Introduction

Seamus Heaney is a poet of repressed memories and past events. His poetry delves into the recalling of childhood, the pleasures of adulthood, the harsh realities, and the old age longings to return to the past. Seamus Heaney is a poet with too much ambivalence towards the political violence he witnessed in Ireland since childhood. Deaths in Heaney's family, events of violence in Ireland and troubles of colonialism influenced his poetry (Brandes, 1997). His poems show the role of these memories in shaping his poetry. For instance, he retrieves the images (submerged in his psyche) to articulate his childhood memories of the funeral (Stefanović, 2001) by using the phrase "the black glacier" in his poem "Funeral Rights". The glacier symbolizes a dead body that is cold and covered in a black coffin. In addition to this, the memories of his father's funeral in his poem "Seeing Things", place him between the external world and the memories (Abd-Aun, 2012). Heaney remembers the time, of watching his father from a window digging in a flowerbed in his poem "Digging". The poems of Heaney characteristically demonstrate the act of memorizing past events (MacKichan, 2012). Whatever the message he intends to deliver, Heaney relates it with any of his past traumatic experiences to create some analogous dimensions that mark his poetry with recalling, retrieving, and remembering. In this paper, researchers examine the act of retrieving his poetry concerning the psychoanalytic theory. It also shows the psychological processes behind recalling.

Witnessing death at a great scale leaves a traumatic effect on Heaney's psyche that (Freud, 1961) called "traumatic neurosis" happens only on the spot due to the "factor of freight" or shock. For Freud, it remains dead, as the effect of trauma remains alive only during the time of the traumatic event and only that time is frightful. However, Cathy (1996) sees it differently and coins the memory of trauma or freight with the wound that seems "dead" but "alive" and remains "at work" in the unconscious. For instance, Heaney's poem "Digging" is about the memories of his father. Whenever the poet visits his hometown and looks at the fields and his house, these things remind him of his father's death. Similarly in

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his poem *"The Skunk"*, he looks at the skunk from his window while being exiled, and it reminds him of his wife. There is a re-enactment of the present moment of the poet with the past one. For Caruth, the freight is always a result of the re-enactment of events from the past that evoke emotions and suppression of the unconscious. Being suppressed in the unconscious it is dead or inactive, but when there is a re-enactment of events it becomes alive or active in the conscious. However, for Freud, there is only a traumatic flashback that occurs in the unconscious mind as dreams or hallucinations. Furthermore, Caruth in her work *"Unclaimed Experience"*, views the idea as, the act of remembering a traumatic event is what causes distress, not the event itself (Caruth, 1996). According to her, there is always a delay between an occurrence and the first time one experiences the event, a moment of latency in which forgetting is a defining feature. In her reflective process, she makes connections between the past and the present via imaginative representations, much as the poet Seamus Heaney does in his poems. In such psychological accounts, it is not surprising to see Heaney with a distorted identity. As (Dominick, 2001) argues, when one is occupied by the past and has a tendency to repeat it obsessively as if it were completely present, "particular subject-positions may seem dominant or even overpowering" (p.12). The concept of remembrance leads toward memory. Given that the human capacity for remembering is often thought of as something that occurs "within the minds" of individuals.

There are three different senses in which the word "memory" may be used: the ability to recall past experiences, access previously stored knowledge, and execute mental routines learnt in the past (Young 1995). However, Freud discussed repressed events of the unconscious as four aspects: condensation of ideas, displacement, revival, and consideration of representation in his work *Delusion and Dream* (Freud, 1905). It shows that memory of an event remains dead and dwells in the unconscious of the person but from time to time it comes back to the conscious mind as a living event. In (Ahmad et al., 2023) words it is a re-enactment of events, that develops anxiety about depressing memories. Moreover, Freud also developed another complicated structural model that depicts the controlling forces of the mind. These forces control the desires, memories and other mental operations. These forces include the id, ego, and superego.

The 'id' encompasses primary wishes, 'the superego manifests socially acceptable norms and 'the ego' conciliates among the desires of the id and justification of the superego (Breuer and Freud, 1955). This model simply shows how the mind processes memories and how there is always a conflict between desires, realities present and the past. For Caruth, the conflict is between the dead and alive aspects of the events. Caruth focuses on how dead memory becomes alive after re-enactment as in the case of Seamus Heaney. Donald L. Carveth (1984) links Marx's conflict theory of society with Freud's conflict theory/model of the mind. People are not only suffering from the conflicts of society and its competition but also their wills (Marx and Friedrich Engels, 2012). This conflict is caused by several forces in the mind. This is similar to Freud's idea of conflicting forces of id, ego and super-ego. Hence, it is arguable that there is always some reason behind this conflict, which is often a recurring memory of a painful event.

In line with psychoanalytical theory, Memory is often seen as a component of self- or character development in theories of identity formation and socialization. The process of identity creation focuses on the individual, to explicate the motivations behind social behaviors. In these types of narratives, the past is brought into the present via the actions and emotions of real people going about their everyday lives. In this way, memory helps account for human behaviours by moulding the language of literature and the dead or alive aspect of memory. Similarly, the representation of memories in Heaney's poetry helps to examine

various aspects of his identity. The poet's use of language in his works communicates a lot about his personality and identity.

Sometimes the revelation of the traumatic memory becomes a source of relief for the victim because of sharing the pain and showing the marks left by it. It provides a way to elaborate on the pain and marks to release. However, this articulation also requires a particular context and situation where the victim feels comfortable speaking about the memories that (Caruth, 1996) calls (dead/alive) and is "a voice that is paradoxically released through the wounds" (Caruth, 1996). Hence, the poet feels a sense of relief after writing his pains in words. As Heaney in his poem "Digging" hears the voice of the shovel in flashback, it takes him back to his childhood and enables him to re-experience the pleasures of the past and feel relieved.

When it comes to analysing literary works, the narrative of tragic experiences presents two sides of terrible situations. To begin, texts demonstrate what is recognized (known trauma). This happens at the first encounter with a horrific occurrence. It can be a real incident that occurred in the victim's life, which (Laub and Podell, 1995) call "witness to oneself" (75). Second, via debate and narrative, texts demonstrate that the missing piece is "not known" and "not locatable". When asked why flashbacks of traumatized people require Freud's attention, Caruth elaborated on her theory of narration as, "because they provide testimony for survival that beyond the very claims and knowledge of the one who undergoes it" (Caruth, 1996). Moreover, literary texts (like psychological analysis) are for learning the "not knowing" realities. Literature communicates a lot about the personality of its creator. Caruth uses literature to express agonizing situations. Hence, like other modes of literature, poetry becomes a safe place to articulate such scars of the psyche. Therefore, with the help of Caruth's narrative of knowing the unknown, we can bring to knowledge various unknown aspects of Heaney's personality and various events of his past that cannot be known without analysing his poetry.

The researchers are going to study Seamus Heaney's following poems: "Follower, Man and Boy, Digging, Mid-Term Break, Seeing Things, Summer Home, The Underground, The Skunk, Funeral Rights, and Blackberry Picking" by applying Caruth's psychoanalytic theory. These poems are about the memories of his father and his death, the time spent with his beloved and her memories, and the longing to go back to the past. The researchers argue that the pain associated with these events resides in the mind and has a great impact on the psyche. Heaney's poetry shows his remembering and re-enactment, and poetry is done consciously. Hence it supports Caruth's idea of re-enactment in the conscious mind, and recalling as making the dead memory alive. So, poetry becomes a product or property of the mind that does not take the form of words spontaneously but rationally with experience. The study takes evidence from the existing research in the field and provides a new aspect of memory as a resident of the conscious mind. Along with this, the research shows poetry is conscious and not spontaneous as proclaimed by Wordsworth.

Literature Review

Heaney's poems grabbed the attention of many researchers. Different researchers have explored the poetry of Seamus Heaney from various angles, themes and concepts. These concepts include love, death, sexuality, nature, and landscape with human psychology (Brandes, 1997; Gonzalez et al., 1997; Sell, 2004; Cuda, 2005; Candelier et al., 2010; Clifton, 2011; Regan, 2014; Zirra, 2017; Abdulateef, 2021). Parker M discusses memories of war in the sense of pictures in his poetry (Parker and Parker, 1993). Likewise, Karkovski, (2007) discusses the past using poetic language but he like other researchers missed a chance to explore the subject of conscious and unconscious (dead or alive memory) through the lens of psychology. Gulpinar Ozoran, (2019) talks about the painful memories in Heaney's poetry

but does not talk about the flashbacks of memory. Similarly, Abd-Aun, (2012) also discusses only the childhood memories in Heaney's poetry. However, Clifton, (2011) talks about only the physical sensations in his poetry and Chopan S talks about the cultural roots in Heaney's poetry (Chopan, 2015). The existing research only gives knowledge about Heaney's past but leaves a gap in how to analyze his recalling of the past. To fill this gap, the study explored the poetry of Seamus Heaney through the theory of psychoanalysis. The study deals with the conscious and unconscious methods of recalling the past. As per the literature reviewed, no researcher has touched on this aspect. Another perspective to approach Heaney's way of recollection is the idea of how a particular event raises emotions and reminds of past experiences.

Research Methodology

The study's methodology is based on the concept of traumatic memories as "active" rather than dead. The study draws its methodology from the contrast between Freud's and Caruth's views on such memories. The study focuses on Heaney's poetry as a source of illustration of this concept. In contrast to Sigmund Freud's ideas, Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic viewpoint is that traumatic memories are not dead but active. Freud conceptualized the structure of the mind as a "topographical model" (Milton et al., 2011; Modell, 2018) where there are three main layers or levels of the mind. These levels include; conscious, unconscious and the superconscious. When a traumatic incident occurs, it disrupts a person's state of mind in the conscious. This disruption is just temporary and it fades away. Conscious memory becomes so much active at that time that the traumatic memories are prevented from entering the unconscious. The topographical model suggests that the experience prevents entry to the unconscious since the memory is overloaded with stimuli. Hence the effect of trauma occurs temporarily only at the time of happening of traumatic event.

Caruth, (1996) disagrees with Freud's concept. For her, traumatic events cannot be comprehended at the time of happening. Since there is always an "incubation" phase during which the memory lies dormant, it must travel far into the victim's unconscious. Caruth introduces the term "latency or re-enactment" to show how painful memories become active or alive afterwards. In addition, Caruth argues that traumatic memories might resurface in the mind (via re-enactment) in the shape of a new act that is similar but distinct from the original. Similarly, to Caruth's theory, psychoanalytic critic Greg Forster calls these reoccurring traumas "punctual traumas," and he argues that the uniqueness, magnitude, and horror of each re-enactment both shapes and are shaped by the individual's recollections of the original trauma (Forster, 2007). Heaney's poetry shows that the poet experiences the flashbacks of past when he visits his childhood places or sees relevant objects. There occurs a re-enactment between what is present physically and what resides in the memory. By seeing new experiences and associating them with those that are in the unconscious memory, the conscious mind gives fresh life to a painful memory that had previously been dormant in the unconscious. For Freud, this repetition takes place in the form of dreams or hallucinations which are the unconscious mental processes (Freud, 1961) but it occurs consciously and actively as Heaney's poetry shows the flashbacks of his past. He remembers and writes these memories while being awake, active and conscious rather than being in a dream.

Caruth in her book *Explorations in Memory* (Caruth, 1996) also posits that a traumatic event is not simply a memory of the past, but a complete recollection of experiences and such experience remains part of memory (Ahmad et al., 2022). As a result, the survivor's memories take on a strange quality, with which they keep reappearing and animating the old wounds. In this case, it's the recollection of the loss of the "libidinal" item that has caused its return. It means longing to be with the beloved one. Seamus Heaney represents this item in

his poetry while showing his desire to be with his wife in the poem "The Skunk". Similarly, he shows it in his poem "Blackberry-Picking" while yearning to be young again with his beloved one. At the same time, he is consciously awake while expressing these ideas. The inexplicable character of traumatic flashbacks manifests as "willed memories" or persistent "aware" thoughts about the painful experience itself. Memory re-enactments of traumatic events are accurate representations of such events as they occurred in real life. Traumatic re-enactment in the memory depicts the truth of the real traumatic event in real-time. In line with Caruth, Imbasciati, (2020) refers to memory as actions performed so consciously that the mind remains aware of it. Just as Seamus Heaney performs the act of writing his memories while being mentally active. The poet's mind remains aware of what he is writing and how he is writing. This concept establishes a new domain where a traumatic event is accepted by the memory and leads to a state of "narrative memory" because the incomprehensibility of the event does not specifically mean that the truth of the event cannot be spoken. It means that the event is understood by the memory, and it can now be narrated.

For narration of traumatic memory, Caruth, (1996) uses the term "speaking wound" in her book *Unclaimed Experience*. According to her, the narration of traumatic memory is a voice with peremptory addressed powerfully and this address comes from the conscious awareness of that event. Hence, the narration of memory is consciously done with the voice in a wounded language. This transformation of memory into narration or speaking awakens others as well. In this way, Caruth's idea of speaking about wounds clarifies the study's main objective of healing with narration. It means when the wound in the memory gets narrated by the poet, it heals the scars. In literature, the artist, according to Freud uses the slip of the pen, to articulate the powerful impact of a traumatic event which can be a death, a loss, or a catastrophe. For Freud, it is the slip of the pen that occurs unconsciously but for Caruth, it is the conscious narration. Supporting Freud's ideas, Imbasciati writes that memory comprises such emotions that have no language, ineffable as in etymology (Imbasciati, 2020). On the contrary, in Caruth's words, the combination of the language of theory and the language of literature composes an enthralling response to a memory.

Caruth fuses the language of literature, to illustrate the idea of psychological trauma that pertains to the connections between dead and living of memory. Reading traumatic ideas and the language they are written in goes hand in hand. Trauma is preserved via the power of language and reading. For example, Seamus Heaney in his poem "North" has not only the traumatic events but the whole history of the Irish War. Similarly, he has preserved his whole past in the form of flashbacks in his poetry. To bring attention to what Freud calls "bear witness" (60) experiences of trauma and loss (which means those who have personally witnessed trauma and loss), literary fiction is used as a kind of narrative. For instance, witnesses to the Holocaust, may revisit and feel suppressed trauma during their testimony. However, the magnitude of their experiences may prevent them from providing an accurate and coherent account. D. Laub makes the important point that the survivors of the war needed to communicate their narrative to keep themselves alive (Laub and Podell, 1995). Hence, articulation provides catharsis for victims (such as Seamus Heney) by revealing sentiments and describing scars and harm that are not achievable in other ways, but the victim loses the opportunity to correctly describe the trauma. Trauma requires a time and precise frame to respond and to explain the genuine experience of the traumatized individual, which may be done consciously later. This confusing event might cause psychological issues not just for a person but also for the whole community.

Poetry gives voice to recollections and is the literary style most suited to conveying a broad and nuanced message with great precision. Therefore, poetry is not the unconscious and spontaneous release of intense emotions or traumatic flashbacks. Rather it is the result of

the poet's conscious and rational deliberation. As Heaney's poetry is the representation of his past, it is not the unconscious remembering. It is the conscious narration of his memories. This implies that the best course of action is to discard the trauma's agony via the power of speech whenever a dormant or repressed memory of it surfaces in the conscious. In line with this idea, Eddy Zemach stated that the unconscious processes are only the analogous arguments of philosophy. Whereas, consciousness gives awareness about a person's state of mind, the dimension of thinking. It also tells how or in what dimension other people think as their thinking is reflected in their utterances and actions (Zemach, 1986).

Consequently, articulation becomes a conscious source of catharsis for sufferers. Latency is the essential idea in this cathartic philosophy; it is not simply that the traumatic event is powerful because it is remembered after the fact, but also because it is experienced for the first time because of this very forgetting. The term "latency" refers to the lag time between when an event occurs and when it is processed and stored in memory. Heaney's poetry shows the occurrence of events in his past time, but he remembers them in his present which is years ahead of his past. It means these events reside in the poet's unconscious mind for a long period and become alive in the conscious after latency. Redundancy, the second key element linked to Caruth's theory of trauma, damage, and memory, is similarly attributable to the lateness of experience. The rise of optimism in tales of catastrophe is the insight hypothesis. Trauma not only causes the issue of destruction, but it also serves as a healer, restoring the sufferer to normal life (Caruth, 1995). Heaney's poetry represents catharsis and redundancy together in his poetry. For example, in his poem *Blackberry-picking*, at the end, he accepts the reality that he cannot go back to the past. What is gone is gone and he has to live only in his present.

Regarding traumatic memory, Michel Foucault emphasizes that "power is everywhere" (Culler, 2000). It means the language is also powerful. As a result, factually accurate descriptions of the past relied heavily on the portrayal of memory via the medium of powerful narrative. So, the primary reason for selecting Seamus Heaney is that this study seeks to highlight the effects of war by heavily relying on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The study uses this theoretical framework to show how and where traumatic memories reside in the mind. The study also shows with the help of Heaney's poetry how these memories are revised and recalled in the mind.

Discussion

The study focuses on some selective poems of Seamus Heaney to illustrate the concepts of memory and flashbacks. The study discusses these poems in the order of his childhood, youth and finally old age longings and flashbacks. For instance, the poems "*Mid-term Break*", "*Digging*", "*Follower*", and "*Man and Boy*" mark the childhood memories with Heaney's late brother and father. His poems "*The Summer-home*" "*The Skunk*" and "*The Underground*" contain the memories of his wife. His poem "*Blackberry-Picking*" represents a combination of his past and present, including childhood, youth and old age. Our analysis shows that Seamus Heaney is a poet with so many repressed memories of his past who continues to retrieve the images of the past in his poetry using several literary techniques, which Caruth attributes to a latent or incubation system. As Caruth suggests, the encounter of an event is more important than the event itself. It means how one reacts to that event and how that event is memorized and then it would be narrated. An important concept in this regard is the simultaneous severing and binding of past and present events. This severing and the act of binding can be seen in Heaney's poetry. There is a complete re-enactment in his memory. This is not purely the re-enactment of images, but also that of

sounds and textures, as he hears a shovel in his memory and feels the pebbly earth. He writes in the poem "Digging": "outside my window, I hear the clear sound of a shovel,

Working the pebbly earth. It's my father (Heaney, 2009a).

Heaney's tone is also nostalgic in the poems "Follower" and "Man and Boy". Here he remembers the fishing experience "catch the old one first". He remembers the voice of his father's laughter as he writes:

*"would make a splash like the salmon he said,
back through its unheard concentric soundwaves"* (Heaney, 2009a).

He shows the desire of how Heaney wants to be like his father in his youth. Here the idea of Caruth's "speaking wound" highlights the fact that Heaney's wound of his father's death seems to achieve a voice for its narration. Irish politics and the sufferings of Heaney's exile also play an important role in the repressed content of his memory. During the time of his exile, he is lost in the memories of his beloved wife and longs to be with her. His poems "The Summer-home" "The Skunk" and "The Underground" demonstrate the memories of his wife and his young age.

Conscious and unconscious knowledge has a significant impact on the life of every person. For Freud, the most prominent role is performed by the unconscious because the controlling force behind our conscious thinking is the unconscious knowledge. However, Caruth sees it differently and for her, there is a significant relationship between the body of the present being perceived by the conscious mind and the body of the past that stands for the memories. There is a re-enactment between the two bodies. The same relation is manifested by Heaney in the poem "The Skunk" when he says,

*"and there she was,
intent and glamorous,
ordinary mysterious skunk,
for the black colour plunge-line nightdress"* (Heaney, 2009a).

The beauty of the skunk reminds him of the beauty of his wife, its black and white body shows the white body of his wife in a black nightdress and then, the taste of wine stands for her sweet breath as he writes, "the aftermath of a mouthful wine, like inhaling you off a cold pillow". Moreover, the re-enactment of images "the loosened flowers between us" in the poem *The Summer-home*, (Heaney, 2009), sound in the poem "Our Love Calls Tiny as a Tuning Fork" as well as *The Underground*, (Heaney, 2009) consciously qualify the idea of Caruth.

Heaney's poem "Blackberry Picking", written in 1966 is the most dynamic of all where all three phases of life are demonstrated, the memories of childhood and youth, a desire to go back to a young age and the miseries of old age (Heaney, 2009). He writes in the poem,

*You ate the first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for picking* (Heaney, 2009: 17).

Here the idea of transience and wisdom is condensed with the natural images of fruits and their appearances, colours, and textures. Similarly, there is the displacement of the emotion of his youth and sexual instincts, the desire for more, and the depression of his dying age with the colours of berries, their taste, and lust for picking and decaying berries respectively. The memories of his childhood exist in his mind as "green berries" in the field, those of adulthood as "red" and the most significant of his young age as a "glossy purple clot" that bursts and leaves a stain on his memory. The speaker of *Blackberry-Picking*, (Heaney, 2009: p. 17) is recalling the time spent with his beloved in the following lines,

*"You ate that first one and its taste was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it*

*Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. The red ones inked up and that hunger”*

He is referring to the time when he was with his beloved one for the first time. The moment was sweet as wine, and he was drowsy in the sweetness. These lines exemplify how past time is returning into his mind which Freud called “libido”: the rising desire for sexual instincts in the unconscious. He recalls his memory of lovemaking with his wife, which is represented as libido. Libido is controlled by the ‘id’ but during writing and narrating those desires, it becomes a part of the conscious mind as to Caruth’s idea. As Caruth posits, the voice of a memory (death in Heaney’s case) is an imperative force that arises from the consciousness and is transmitted in a powerful address of that conscious thought.

Throughout the discussion, and in line with Caruth’s ideas, the researchers find out that the processes of memory are truly conscious, its perception, influence and narration are conscious. Trauma at the time of happening cannot be understood. After the period of incubation and latency, and with a re-enactment of events, traumatic events can be experienced. It is with the re-enactment that the traumatic pain in the unconscious becomes alive in the conscious and is felt again. The poet narrates all the memories consciously and rationally. Hence, the researchers by using the lens of psychoanalytical theory negate Wordsworth’s doctrine that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and rather suggest that it is the representation of a poet’s conscious thoughts, rationality, and sense of reasoning. Consequently, poetry is understood as rational deliberate articulation.

Conclusion

The study shows that it is the conscious and not solely the unconscious that plays a very important role in the memorization process. Things are experienced in the conscious, stored in the unconscious and again recalled as active in the conscious. Whenever a person encounters a traumatic event, the pain of it becomes a part of the memory and narrating that pain heals the memory and, in this way, the narration becomes an “optimistic” way to relief from repressed pains. For example, after the Holocaust, there was an awkward silence among the victims. This is called traumatic silence but with the narration of the incident, victims were able to recover from the trauma. Hence, memory plays a very important role in psychological development and the overall development of individuality. The study can be useful to analyze the personality of people suffering from “distorted identity”, as the study finds, there is a distorted memory (traumatic) behind the distorted identity. For example, the character Popova from Chekov’s play *The Bear* suffers from identity crisis, loneliness and being anti-social due to the painful memories of her husband’s death. When at the end she narrates the pain, she can recover. The study suggests that memory can also be analyzed from a social perspective, which means memory is not simply an emotional but also a “social process” which means memory is formulated from the society’s events and happenings. The memories of traumatic happenings in the society influence the sufferer’s role in the society. For example, the death of Popova’s husband affects her role in society. Likely, the study’s findings can be helpful in the field of psychology. These findings will help in the therapy of traumatized people and people with distorted memory.

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