Bonsai boy : the traumatised child in Emma Donoghue' s room

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**Bonsai Boy: The Traumatized Child in Emma
Donoghue's *Room***

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Summary

Much of existing theorisation of literary trauma privileges the adult perspective over the child perspective, with critics such as Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead focusing their research on narratives that revolve around adult victims—or sufferers—of trauma. This paper seeks to expand upon the existing assumption that the sufferer of trauma is synonymous with the adult perspective by putting forward a study of the traumatised child—the individual who exists outside of conventional tenets of traumatic experience when it comes to how they are represented in fiction. In this study of the traumatised child, I endeavour to draw attention to how present trauma discourse falls short of comprehensively taking into account the full spectrum of traumatic experience, and should be expanded to encapsulate also the ways in which the experience of the traumatised child is represented differently in fiction as compared to the traumatised adult.

The text which will be used to bolster this paper's stand is Emma Donoghue's *Room*, a novel which acutely illustrates the unique perspective of the traumatised child and how its narrativisation subverts our present understanding of trauma and its representation in fiction. I seek to conclusively prove that Donoghue, in her writing of the traumatised child, creates a need for a change in our existing homogenised understanding of trauma fiction as put forward by writers like Whitehead and Caruth. Donoghue proffers an alternative means of approaching trauma fiction's key tenets of the renegotiation of spatial boundaries, the dissociative effect created through the deconstruction of language and linearity, the writing of the body in trauma, and the role of the reader in witnessing and testimony.

This paper endeavours to achieve a study of the traumatised child that illustrates why and how present trauma discourse should be expanded to include a spectrum of physical and psychological responses to and manifestations of trauma that, until this point, has been insufficiently encapsulated in trauma discourse.

Bonsai Boy:

The Traumatized Child in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

Introduction

To write about expressions of trauma in fiction is to take on a principle paradox: “if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?” (Whitehead 3). This paradox hinges on a definition of trauma that warrants unpacking as it forms the starting point for the theoretical discourses which will be explored in this paper. Anne Whitehead, whose volume *Trauma Fiction* presents the opening paradox, views trauma as a response which necessarily disrupts normal physical, emotional, or cognitive function, so much so that the individual is rendered unable to express themselves or be represented. To study these notions of expression and representation is to examine how authors writing within the trauma fiction genre use certain stylistic or thematic elements to narrativise the effects of trauma. Whitehead posits that “[n]ovelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection” (3). This relationship of mimesis between the realities of trauma and its fictive counterpart, as established by Whitehead, is built upon Cathy Caruth’s research on the inability of the pathology of trauma to be “defined [either] by the [traumatic] event itself . . . [or] in terms of a *distortion* of the event” (Caruth, “Explorations in Memory” 4). For Caruth, “[t]he pathology [of trauma] consists . . . solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4). The narrative strategies which function as a form of mimesis, as put forward by Whitehead, can then be read as an interpretation of Caruth’s stand on the belatedness of trauma in terms of its resurfacing—what Whitehead identifies as “the collapse of understanding which is situated at the heart of trauma” (Whitehead 5). Whitehead writes, expanding upon Caruth’s

above-mentioned perspective, that “[t]rauma emerges as that which, at the very moment of its reception, registers as a non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to falter” (Whitehead 5). This recognition of trauma as a response that eludes articulation and understanding on the part of the individual is one which will be explored in this paper through selected texts that challenge the relationship between traumatic experience and its representation as identified by Whitehead and Caruth in their study of the “collapse of understanding” (5).

Taking into account Whitehead and Caruth’s examination of trauma and its representation, there seems to be an assumption made by both authors about the relationship between the traumatic event and the individual’s response to it, where the effect the traumatic encounter has on the individual is positioned to be homogenous across the entire spectrum of traumatic experience. This homogenous response is that of the adult sufferer of trauma—the primary figure whom Whitehead and Caruth focus on in their examinations of the traumatic event and its psychological and physical impact on the individual. The link drawn between adulthood and Whitehead and Caruth’s discourses is one that will be justified and expounded upon in the chapters to follow. The aforementioned individual will henceforth be referred to as the traumatised adult—the individual whose experience of trauma is wholly represented by the limited scope of stylistic and thematic elements that Whitehead and Caruth have outlined. This paper seeks to expand upon the existing assumption that the sufferer of trauma is synonymous with the adult perspective by putting forward a study of the traumatised child—the individual who exists outside of Whitehead and Caruth’s tenets of traumatic experience when it comes to how they are represented in fiction. In this study of the traumatised child, I endeavour to draw attention to how present trauma discourse—including, but not limited to, Whitehead and Caruth’s—falls short of comprehensively taking into account the full spectrum of traumatic experience, and should be expanded to encapsulate also the ways in which the experience of the traumatised child is represented differently in fiction as compared to the traumatised adult.

Whitehead and Caruth are two among many contributors to the field of trauma theory whose works have reconfigured the way expressions of trauma are approached in both historical and fictional texts. Much of existing theorisation of literary trauma privileges the adult perspective over the child perspective, and a survey of Whitehead and Caruth's work will demonstrate their focus on narratives which revolve around adult victims—or sufferers—of trauma. Whitehead, in her volume, surveys a series of novels that are all written on and about the traumatised adult, an example being the essay "The Past as Revenant: Trauma and Haunting in Pat Barker's *Another World*." In her *Regeneration* trilogy, Pat Barker "draws on and revises the literary genre of the ghost story, so that the spectres that haunt the soldiers represent a form of psychological possession" (Whitehead 15). The first novel of the trilogy, *The Ghost Road*, follows Siegfried Sassoon in his struggle with "his guilt at not fighting in the war and his grief for the men he has lost" (Whitehead 15). In her essay, Whitehead attempts to read the selected works of Barker through the lens of Caruth's notion of belatedness and establish an interpretation of them as "narrative[s] of traumatic haunting," all the while following the central characters across Barker's novels which are all adults (Whitehead 15). Similarly, Caruth's volumes *Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* are both focused on texts that are centred on narratives woven by and about adults. The former, with the essay "Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow-Up," offers a study of the testimonies of Holocaust survivors decades after their experiences. The latter, with the essay "Traumatic Awakenings (Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory)," examines a "psychological dimension of suffering" that focuses on a case study of psychoanalysis conducted by Freud on the dreams of a father who has lost his child (Caruth 91). Keeping Whitehead and Caruth's privileging of the adult perspective in mind, our current understanding of how individuals respond to traumatic events begins to fall apart once we take into consideration the perspective of the traumatised child. The question of how trauma experienced by an adult differs from that experienced by a child is one which forms the foundation of the chapters to come. These chapters will endeavour to demonstrate

how child sufferers of trauma, as represented in fiction, present different emotional, psychological, and intellectual baselines for what is considered typical. The presently homogenised expressions of trauma, as Whitehead and Caruth have put forward in their dissections of the “collapse of understanding,” will be juxtaposed against a reading of traumatic experience from the perspective of children as presented in selected fictional texts so as to demonstrate that the child understands and responds to trauma in a unique manner that adds to current trauma scholarship which is focused on the adult perspective (Whitehead 5). What will become immediately arresting in this comparison is the fact that our present understanding of trauma theory and its role in fiction has to be re-examined the moment we take into account the nuances of the child perspective. This essay will set out to prove that novelists express traumatic experiences of children in a manner which forces us to reconfigure the way we presently read trauma fiction and its representation in fiction in that it challenges Whitehead and Caruth’s notion of the “collapse of understanding” when it comes to the theorisation of literary trauma (Whitehead 5). This reconfiguration stems from how the child differently understands and responds to trauma, and a study of how traumatic experiences of children are narrativised differently from their adult counterparts reveals how certain symbolic and technical devices presently understood to be the foundation of the genre are based off the relatively narrow perspective of adults. The mimetic effect of narrative devices such as temporal and chronological fragmentation or narrative indirection are renegotiated through fictive representations of the traumatised child, where narrative structures and inter-character relationships are subverted in order to better encapsulate the nuanced effect trauma has on children as compared to adults.

It must be acknowledged at this juncture that Whitehead and Caruth are two of a considerable range of voices contributing to trauma theory, which in turn may limit the scope of this paper. The choice of Whitehead and Caruth as the principle lenses through which trauma theory will be examined has been made on account of their interests in fictional rather than historical or non-fictional representations of trauma. The upcoming chapter will offer a more in-depth look at a

number of other trauma fiction critics whose works have contributed significantly to the field and offer contrasting ways for us to look at how trauma is narrativised in fiction.

Drawing back to Whitehead's identification of the "collapse of understanding" when it comes to representations of trauma, there exists a conflation of the varied responses to trauma which fall short of identifying the nuanced ways in which individuals of differing genders, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, or age are represented differently when it comes to how they are represented in fiction (Whitehead 5). Whitehead and Caruth apply a potentially limiting lens on trauma fiction for their methodology relies on the assumption of there being a singular response to an experience which—given how it is represented across the novels which will be examined in this paper—is too varied and nuanced to be allowed that narrow a definition. In order to fully encapsulate the implications of traumatic experience across all perspectives and demonstrate with clarity its fictive representation, it will be helpful to apply an interpretive research methodology which encompasses literary, historical, and psychoanalytical analysis. Such analyses will have to necessarily compare and contrast the unique expressions of trauma across unique individuals. These key threads of analysis will form the core methodological approach of this paper, and in the process shed light on the tenets of trauma fiction which, as presented currently by Whitehead and Caruth, homogenise representations of traumatic experience.

Over the course of this paper, the many discursive threads of trauma will be studied with specific attention paid to how they are expressed in fiction on both a symbolic and technical level, the former referring to the themes and metaphorical images unique to the genre, and the latter referring to structural or linguistic devices which are employed by novelists to express trauma in fiction. The notion of trauma itself will be thoroughly examined with the intention to provide as clear a conceptual framework as possible. The word "trauma" is rooted in the 17th century Greek word *trauma* which directly translates to "wound" (Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience" 3). Present usage of the word has extended the notion of physical injury sustained by the body to include that

sustained by the mind as well. The relationship between traumas of the body and traumas of the mind has long been studied by psychoanalysts and literary theorists alike, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that the binary may not be as distinct as it first appears. This paper will unpack the many binaries of traumatic experience—that between the mind and body, and across the different genders, backgrounds, and ages of individuals—and attempt to arrive at a reading of trauma fiction which takes into account the multiplicity of unique perspectives offered through the writing of traumatised individuals in selected fictional texts.

In order to demonstrate how the writing of the traumatised child necessitates an expansion unto our current understanding of the “collapse of understanding” that takes place with respect to trauma and its representation in fiction, a study of a range of contemporary fictional texts will have to be conducted with a focus on how they renegotiate the theoretical discourses raised above (Whitehead 5). The text which will be used to bolster this paper’s stand is Emma Donoghue’s *Room*, a novel which acutely illustrates the unique perspective of the traumatised child and how its narrativisation subverts our present understanding of trauma and its representation in fiction. The Irish-Canadian author’s narrative provides an ideal setting for a juxtaposition between the writing of trauma through the perspective of adults as compared to children. It is exceedingly clear throughout the novel that the central characters—an abused woman and her son, both of whom begin the narrative held in captivity—each have a vastly different experience of trauma compared to one another. In her novel, Donoghue creates a narrative setting within which the different stylistic and symbolic expressions of trauma can be directly juxtaposed. The abused woman and her son Jack spend years locked in a garden shed they learn to make their entire universe, and we are afforded a glimpse into what early childhood is like for someone who has never seen anything beyond the small confine of four soundproof walls. The writing of the two characters within the same physical and psychological site of trauma—the prison-room they are confined within—allows for a comparison of how their experiences of traumas are expressed differently by the author. As the

novel is written from the perspective of Jack, the reader is afforded intimate access to the narrative modes through which the young boy's psychological and physical processing of his surrounding traumas are expressed. These narrative modes are revealed to be unique to Jack, Donoghue choosing to employ contrasting thematic and stylistic devices when it comes to expressing the traumas of the abused woman—or Ma, as she is referred to by Jack. The chapters to follow will offer a close-reading of these different narrative modes and seek to prove how our present understanding of trauma theory and its application in fiction is limited due to its homogenisation of the child and adult experience of trauma. The survey of trauma theory and close-reading of the thematic and formal aspects of selected texts within the trauma fiction genre will set out to demonstrate how the traumatised child is used as a narrative strategy to provoke existing tenets of trauma discourse and offer a new way of interpreting literary representations of it.

This paper will also offer a reading of trauma fiction beyond the use of stylistic and thematic devices as a means of representing trauma—it will consider how the effect of witnessing and testimony created in trauma fiction allows us to approach novels such as *Room* through the lens of reader-response criticism, in doing so making clearer the distinction between how the perspective of the traumatised child is different as compared to that of the traumatised adult. Through the first-person narrative in Donoghue's novel, the reader is led through attempts made by Ma and Jack to work through and live with their traumatic experiences, the latter character never fully conscious of what it means to be in trauma and recover from it. The reader closely follows Ma and Jack along their reconstructions of their traumatic pasts and becomes privy to their dissociative and disorienting behaviours and coping mechanisms. Through this shared, emphatic experience, it becomes clear that Ma and Jack react to their own traumas in categorically different ways, and this is signalled to the reader through the different modes of storytelling applied by Donoghue in her writing of Ma and Jack. These modes of storytelling, given their close relationship to the process of witnessing and testimony as a means of getting to a personal truth, can be read as being reflective of

how trauma fiction requires the reader to take on an active role, where the act of reading and listening is paralleled to that of bearing witness to a traumatic experience (Caruth 6). For the purposes of this paper, the psychoanalytical or psychological discourses examined will form the foundation upon which trauma theory will be read within the context of selected contemporary fictional texts. The distinction between fictional and non-fictional texts, especially when it comes to the examination of how the narrative strategies employed by Donoghue can be paralleled to the process of witnessing and testimony, bears repeating. This paper will be concerned primarily with fictive representations of witnessing and testimony rather than the actual psychological process itself—much of the present research conducted on the remembering and recording of traumatic experience as a function of survival is based on historical trauma narratives, whereas this study will focus primarily on fictional texts and examine how these psychological processes are paralleled through narrative strategies employed by novelists. With this key distinction in mind, this paper will set out to demonstrate how Donoghue's traumatised child is used by the author to further our understanding of the function of trauma narratives, which is, as presently established, to "lure readers into uncomfortable or alien material, sharing victims' pain with readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed, or appealing to readers through popular forms of writing" (Vickroy 3-4). Donoghue, in her narrativisation of the traumatised adult differently in comparison to the traumatised adult, engages the reader with an experiential representation of trauma which highlights the devastating and long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological effects of trauma.

This paper will be segmented into five chapters beginning with one which identifies the key methodological approaches of this study and examines the different theoretical frameworks which will be consulted throughout the rest of the paper. This chapter will also offer clear justifications for the choices of Caruth, Whitehead, and a few other critics as the authoritative voices on trauma theory and its application to fiction. The stand this paper takes on the homogenisation of traumatic

experience as represented in fiction will be further elaborated upon and substantiated through the reading of selected essays from Caruth and Whitehead's volumes which demonstrate the limitations of regarding the adult perspective of traumatic experience as universal. The psychoanalytical and psychological discourses raised in the earlier paragraphs will also be examined to form a theoretical framework upon which the subsequent chapters will be based. Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's writings—selected chapters from the former's *Studies on Hysteria*, jointly-published with Josef Breuer, and the Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience"—will be read for their bolstering of present trauma theory in terms of how they inform certain narrative strategies which authors like Donoghue employ in their representation of trauma in fiction. A reading of Lacan's schema of the real, symbolic, and imaginary as established in "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" will also be conducted with a focus on the presentation of the real as an object—or source—or anxiety that can be associated with the physical and psychological manifestations of trauma. This first chapter will demonstrate how the writing of the traumatised child complicates our present understanding of trauma fiction and necessitates a renegotiation—achieved by Donoghue through her use of the traumatised child as narrative strategy—of what it means to represent trauma in fiction.

The second chapter will examine how Donoghue uses the writing of symbolic space to evoke a sense of dissociation in the reader by challenging the ways in which places and environments are remembered or imagined under the effect of trauma. Dreamscapes, fantastical spaces and recurring images are integral components which make up sites of trauma, and the sense of dissociation which is created is enhanced through her use of the child narrator. Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* will be read comparatively with Donoghue's *Room* with a focus on how both novels express trauma through spaces both remembered and imagined. The layered narrative structure offered in Gaiman's novel—where the protagonist is looking back at his childhood and reflecting upon a series of events which seem more fantasy than reality—allows for a

clear reading of how remembered and imagined spaces are altered through the lens of traumatic experience. Both the adult and child perspectives of Gaiman's protagonist co-exist simultaneously within the same site of memory, offering a clear means of comparing between the perspective of the traumatised child to its adult counterpart. Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart's essay "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" will be examined alongside Donoghue and Gaiman's novels for its in-depth look at dissociative disorders which manifest during instances when "intensely emotionally arousing experiences" are not properly assimilated into the right "memory systems" (163). These dissociative disorders will be read within their possible application in Donoghue's *Room* as influences to narrative strategies through which the traumatic experience of Jack and Ma are written, with the comparison between the child and adult perspective being at the forefront of discussion. Other essays which will also be consulted for their critical insight on how spatial boundaries are negotiated as a means of representing trauma are Freud's volume *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Jayana Jain Punamiya's essay "Thinking Borderlessness: Alternative Forms of Embodiment and Reconfiguration of Spatial Realities in Emma Donoghue's *Room*." This chapter endeavours to demonstrate how the symbolic spaces created through traumatic memory are expressed differently for child characters as compared to adult characters, taking *Room* as its primary example.

Chapter three will explore how Donoghue reconstructs temporal linearity and language as a means of characterising trauma in *Room*, the contrasting manner in which Jack and Ma's perception of time and communication are written challenging our current homogenised understanding of how trauma is represented in fiction. This chapter will demonstrate how the two technical devices are used to create a sense of dissociation and approximate the effects of trauma within the reader. Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* will be juxtaposed against Donoghue's novel to provide more depth to this chapter's analysis of time and its passage—Barnes' novel examines the fallibility of memory through the writing of its protagonist's fragmented recollections of his past, where the unreliable

and deceptive nature of the protagonist's account reflects an inherent inexpressibility of traumatic experience. Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* will be read to support this chapter's exploration of how communication verbal and nonverbal alike is reconfigured in *Room*, the novel being written in stream-of-consciousness sentence fragments as a reflection of the protagonist's expression of traumatic memory. The narrative strategies studied in Donoghue, Barnes and McBride's novels will be applied to the discourses of trauma theory examined in the previous chapter, in the process proffering an alternative reading of trauma fiction which takes into account how the traumatised child challenges our current understanding of trauma theory and its application to fiction. One of the key essays that will be studied in this chapter is Kinga Földaváry's "In Search of a Lost Future: The Posthuman Child," which puts forward the claim that the child figures as written in novels like *Room* can be interpreted "as posthuman in that they embody contemporary society's fears and anxieties about the future," a stand that can be read within the context of trauma fiction as one of the ways in which the traumatised child is—for Donoghue—a narrative strategy through which the tenets of traumatic experience can be challenged (207). This chapter sets out to illustrate how our present reading of technical devices employed to express trauma in fiction need to be examined differently when the perspective of the traumatised child is taken into consideration.

Chapter four will examine how the writing of the body affords us an alternative way of reading trauma theory and understanding how traumatic experience is represented fiction, focusing on how Donoghue, through her narrativisation of physical bodies and the social structures which surround them, express the traumas faced by Jack and Ma in *Room*. The body plays in an important role in *Room* in that it reflects certain physical manifestations of extreme stress, Donoghue illustrating the fundamental relationship trauma has with bodily pain and suffering in her writing of her characters' physical trauma. In this chapter, the traumatised child and traumatised adult will be juxtaposed within the scope of how their bodies are used to narrativise trauma, drawing focus on Donoghue's writing of bodily wounds and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Beyond the

physical body, this chapter will also take on the challenge of dissecting the social structures portrayed in *Room* in attempt to illustrate how Donoghue expresses trauma through her representation of the fractured relationships between her characters. Jayana Jain Punamiya's essay "Thinking Borderlessness: Alternative Forms of Embodiment and Reconfiguration of Spatial Realities in Emma Donoghue's *Room*" will be read alongside *Room* for its study of how the novel's depiction of "a variety of cross-border assemblages that contain the flow of corporeal, bio-political, and affective borders within traumatic and larger social spaces" challenges our existing perceptions of spatial and temporal borders that, when read through the lens of trauma theory, complicates the presently homogenised set of assumptions and expectations that are asserted onto texts belonging in within the trauma fiction genre. In order to offer more depth to the reading of the body and inter-character relationships in trauma fiction, Laurie Vickroy's "Subjugation, Nurturance, and Legacies of Trauma" will be examined for its exploration of how "situations of subjugation manifest similarities in the structures, workings, and effects of domination as well as in the psychological effects on the individuals involved" (36). This chapter aims to prove how Donoghue's writing of the body and relationships of the traumatised child in *Room* differ from of her representations of those facets when it comes to the traumatised adult, in doing so revealing a limitation in our present understanding of trauma theory and how it relates to fiction and demonstrating how the traumatised child functions as a narrative strategy through which those very sentiments are provoked.

The fifth and final chapter will apply the lens of reader-response criticism to this study of trauma fiction and consider how the tenets of witnessing and testimony can bolster this paper's examination of the traumatised child as represented in *Room*. In her application of different modes of storytelling when it comes to expressing the traumas of Jack and Ma in her novel, Donoghue creates emphatic responses in the reader unique to the child or adult character in question. The study of the relationship between survival and storytelling necessitates a study of the role of the listener, and this chapter will examine just what that relationship signals within the scope of trauma

theory and its representation in fiction. The first half of *Room* functions as an eye-witness account of Jack's trauma under captivity which creates the effect of testimony, the narrative mode "draw[ing] readers into the more complex and painful social and personal implications of trauma" (Vickroy 7). *Room* is not the only work of Donoghue which actively engages the tenets of witnessing and testimony as a means of narrativising trauma. Set in a small Irish town during the post-Crimean War years, Donoghue's 2016 novel *The Wonder* details the methodical witnessing of a young girl under great physical and psychological stress brought about by fasting. *The Wonder* and *Room* will be approached with reader-response criticism in mind, the role of the reader studied for how it alters our present understanding of trauma theory with respect to the child survivor of trauma. Wolfgang Iser's "Interaction Between Text and Reader"—with its interpretation of the "dynamic interaction of text and reader" that serves to demonstrate how our understanding of any given literary text is constantly being revised through a feedback loop of communication—will form the theoretical foundation for this chapter's applications of reader-response theory. Selected essays from Shosana Felman and Dori Laub's volume *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing, Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* will be analysed for their exploration of how "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event," where "through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (Laub 57). In its application of reader-response discourse to *Room*, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how Donoghue's traumatised child creates an emphatic response in the reader that is unique to the child figure, as such challenging the ways in which readers communicate with and relate to trauma fiction texts.

Ultimately, I endeavour to demonstrate how the traumatised child of Donoghue's novel, *Room*, can be read as a narrative strategy that challenges present trauma discourse and the representation of trauma in fiction, drawing special attention to her application of different symbolic and technical devices, her writing of social structures and inter-character relationships, and her engagement of the reader as an active witness of accounts of traumatic experience. I seek to

conclusively prove that Donoghue, in her writing of the traumatised child, creates a need for a change in our existing homogenised understanding of trauma fiction as put forward by writers like Whitehead and Caruth. Donoghue—through her situating of Jack and Ma within the same site of trauma while offering different representations of their experiences as a result of their dissimilar age—proffers an alternative means of approaching trauma fiction’s key tenets of the renegotiation of spatial boundaries, the dissociative effect created through the deconstruction of language and linearity, the writing of the body in trauma, and the role of the reader in witnessing and testimony. By the end of this paper, I wish to arrive at a study of the traumatised child that illustrates why and how present trauma discourse should be expanded beyond the “collapse of understanding” to include a spectrum of physical and psychological responses to and manifestations of trauma that, until this point, has been insufficiently encapsulated in the trauma discourse of writers such as Whitehead and Caruth (Whitehead 5).

1. Research Methodology and Theoretical Context

It is perhaps most fitting to begin a study of trauma fiction and the traumatised child by attempting to answer the question of why we need these discourses in the first place. Trauma literature, by virtue of it being fictional, neither offers a direct documentation of traumatic experience nor functions as a diagnostic tool for individuals who have lived with or are living through trauma. What it does, instead, is mimic the effects of traumatic experience through narrative forms and structures which are employed by authors writing from within the genre (Whitehead 3). Why, then, do we turn to it as a possible means through which we can better understand trauma and its impact on the individual? Caruth, in her volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, puts forward a link between the classification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as an official diagnosis and the rise of dissociative disorders being positioned under the umbrella of trauma (3). The emergence of trauma as an official psychological and psychoanalytical concept has informed our present

discourses on the pathology of traumatic experience in that we are now able to locate its relationship to “a fundamental disruption in our received modes of understanding and of cure” (3). However, this classification of trauma as a psychological and psychoanalytical concept leads to a complication in terms of determining how trauma can best be documented or represented:

[T]he more we satisfactorily locate and classify the symptoms of PTSD, the more we seem to have dislocated the boundaries of our modes of understanding—so that psychoanalysis and medically oriented psychiatry, sociology, history, and even literature all seem to be called upon to explain, to cure, or to show why it is that we can no longer simply explain or simply cure. (3-4)

This brings to mind the paradox raised in the introduction of this paper, where the very thing trauma fiction seeks to express is that which eludes expression, simply or otherwise (Whitehead 3). The inexpressibility of trauma points to the inherently multi-faceted nature of traumatic experience in that it often cannot fully be encapsulated by a singular mode of expression. Trauma, it seems, requires a more nuanced approach which considers more than the psychoanalytical, psychological, sociological, and historical implications of any given representation of traumatic experience. This paper’s focus on literary representations of trauma as opposed to the other identified domains of psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology and history is a result of Caruth’s primary concerns regarding the impact trauma has on literature and psychoanalytical practice and theory (“Explorations in Memory” 4). As this study engages actively with Caruth’s discourses on trauma fiction, much of the research conducted will be within the scope of trauma literature. This is not to say, however, that this study will overlook the other discourses raised—it will become apparent over the course of this paper that much of trauma fiction is built upon a foundation of the different fields of theoretical and practical study raised. The writers chosen in this paper draw heavily upon real accounts of traumatic experience, and it will be limiting to neglect those domains of representation. This chapter will demonstrate the supportive role psychoanalytical, psychological,

sociological, and historical discourses play when it comes to the narrative strategies employed by the authors examined, at the same time expounding primarily on the threads of literary representation raised by Caruth.

While Caruth is but one of the many voices of trauma fiction criticism, her contributions to the field have been identified as seminal by a number of other critics. Her undeniable influence is the primary reason why this study is governed by her conceptualisations of trauma and its representation in fiction, the traumatised child being read in relation to narrative strategies informed by Caruth's discourses. Whitehead acknowledges that "Cathy Caruth's edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* appeared as a landmark publication in 1995," the first chapter of Whitehead's volume "[exploring] the implications of Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma for narrative fiction" (5). Vickroy, in the opening chapter of her work *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, identifies Caruth as one of the writers whose "theorizing of trauma and its representation [has] directed [her] conceptions of literary trauma and the power of literature to suggest what is inaccessible, unbelievable, and elusive about traumatic experience" (8). Whitehead and Vickroy's volumes expound in part upon the discourses put forward by Caruth, signalling the latter's position as a voice of authority in trauma fiction. As such, this paper regards Caruth's work as the defining literature of trauma theory and its application in fiction, and places its reading of the traumatised child in conversation with her discourses.

Another critic whose work heavily informs this paper's approach to trauma fiction and the traumatised child is Whitehead, her volume being segmented into two halves which deal with the thematic and stylistic implications of trauma theory in fiction. The first half of *Trauma Fiction* offers a broad reading of the ways in which trauma is "conceptualised and understood and how this has . . . been reflected in contemporary fiction" (3). The second half of Whitehead's volume offers a "structural approach to trauma fiction which emphasises recurring literary techniques and devices" (84). This categorisation of trauma fiction by theme and style is paralleled in this study of

the traumatised child, where the different narrative strategies employed by Donoghue and other comparative authors are read for their symbolic and technical expressions of trauma as experienced by child protagonists. As a result, this study's reading of the traumatised child is segmented as such in order to actively engage with Whitehead's discourses of trauma fiction as categorised by its thematic and stylistic implications.

While this paper approaches the study of the traumatised child primarily with a consideration of how the two critics Caruth and Whitehead in particular conceptualise trauma within the scope of fiction, other works will also be explored for the contrasts they offer. Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* is one such work. Its strength as a supporting resource to this study lies in its explorations of how certain social or political structures create and perpetuate trauma (2). She draws close reference to literary texts which demonstrate, by way of bringing the reader "into the visceral experience of traumatizing events and their aftermath," the "potential value of fiction in conveying experiences of historical and social value that have either been suppressed, forgotten, or overlooked by traditional historical scholarship" (11). Vickroy's examination of social and political relationships within contemporary trauma fiction includes a component on how the reader functions as an emphatic witness to the traumas which are represented in fiction: "Trauma narrativists endeavor to expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warn us that trauma produces itself if left unattended" (3). This exploration of the emphatic relationship which is formed between the reader and a work of trauma literature is highly relevant to this paper's analysis of Donoghue's use of traumatised child as a narrative strategy when it comes to the reading of her techniques through the lens of reader-response criticism. Another critic whose work offers a notable glimpse into how the reader—functioning as a witness—engages personally with trauma literature is Dori Laub, whose essay "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle" reflects upon the

“relation of witnessing to truth” with specific reference to “the historical experience of the Holocaust” (“Explorations in Memory” 61). However, the rooting of Laub’s study in historical scholarship renders his discourses only tangentially relevant to this paper’s discourses.

Nevertheless, Laub’s voice remains relevant in the contrasting role it is able to play in this study of the traumatised child in fiction and its implications when it comes to reader-response criticism.

Taking into account the above reviews of critics whose works have been chosen to govern this study’s approach towards trauma narratives for the reasons stated, a common thread emerges when it comes to the function of trauma literature. It becomes exceedingly clear that—for Caruth, Whitehead, and Vickroy—trauma literature serves to express what other modes of expression simply cannot. It serves to represent, by way of narrative strategy, what trauma means both in terms of how it is inwardly perceived in the individual and how it is outwardly portrayed to its witnesses. Of the many means through which we can approach trauma and its representation, the one which is inadequately considered is that of the traumatised child. Caruth does expound on the notion of the traumatised child in the introduction to her volume where she first writes about the “crisis of truth” which occurs when a recurring dream or hallucination possesses an inherent “literality” that paradoxically functions to produce a “deep uncertainty to its very truth” (“Explorations in Memory” 6). To illustrate her point, she brings up an example taken from Florabel Kinsler’s paper “The Dynamics of Brief Group Therapy in Homogenous Populations: Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” where a young survivor of the Holocaust experiences recurring flashbacks of trains which continually torment her (6). This young survivor later finds out the trains she was having hallucinations about were psychological manifestations of literal trains from a memory she had no prior awareness of. It is revealed that the young survivor used to be held in a cell at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where it was possible for her to look through the bars of the children’s barracks and watch trains pass by (6). The young survivor’s inability to remember where her flashbacks of trains originated from is neither a result of amnesia nor an implication of

repression (6). It is, instead, a “crisis of truth [that] extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access” (6). As such, in order for trauma literature to adequately express the inexpressible, it has to capture this belatedness of traumatic experience and offer a way of understanding how “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it”—the paradox that has always driven, and continues to drive, trauma discourses (6).

Before we examine how the traumatised child, through its use as a narrative strategy in Donoghue’s *Room* and the other comparative texts in this study, renegotiates our present understanding of the belatedness of traumatic experience and its relation to trauma literature, it is necessary to first establish the theoretical context within which these discourses emerge. For Caruth, much of the traumatised individual’s “crisis of truth” can be located within a framework of psychoanalysis (“Explorations in Memory” 6). Caruth takes on Laub’s exploration of the “collapse of witnessing” in his essay “No One Bears Witness to the Witness,” the former dissecting the latter’s writing of the “inexplicable traumatic void” which is the result of “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the *event* fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself” (Caruth 7). Caruth draws a link between Laub’s study of the “inexplicable traumatic void” and Freud’s application of trauma structures to Jewish history in his work *Moses and Monotheism* and attempts to demonstrate how the belatedness of traumatic experience is closely tied to the “latency” of Freudian psychoanalysis (7). It will thus be useful, at this juncture, to first unpack the Freudian notion of “latency” and conduct a closer analysis of how Caruth applies it to her study of trauma fiction (7). What is arresting for Caruth about “latency,” a term which signals the “period during which the effects of the [traumatic] experience are not apparent,” is the fact that it occurs without the individual being fully conscious of the event as they are experiencing it (7). Its significance goes beyond the interval of repressed consciousness, demonstrating that the

inexpressibility of trauma occurs not because the event can no longer be remembered by the individual, but because the event itself is not experienced in a conscious manner. This latency in experience will become all the more relevant in the study of the traumatised child as narrative strategy—the traumatised individual’s lack of awareness of the event as it occurs becomes increasingly complex when taking into account how the prepubescent mind is narrativised in *Room* and the other selected texts. Caruth’s reading of Freudian latency in traumatic experience will be challenged when compared alongside a reading of the narrative strategies employed in works with child protagonists.

A closer examination of Freudian latency as identified by Caruth deepens this study’s explorations of repression and the displacement of traumatic experience. Freud’s examination of latency can be found in *Studies on Hysteria*, a work jointly-published with Josef Breuer that contains essays rooted in Freud’s “conversion theory” (Freud 173). In his case studies, Freud seeks to demonstrate with analogies and psychoanalytical readings of illnesses that “conversion can result equally from fresh symptoms and from recollected ones” (174). Freud’s essays endeavour to prove that mental traumas are not found to be a manifestation of somatic pain, but rather an occurrence which is “merely used, increased and maintained by it” (174). The link between physical traumas and psychosomatic traumas drawn by Freud informs this study’s approach to the belatedness of traumatic experience in that it allows for a more in-depth reading of Caruth’s examinations of latency and its application to trauma theory and her selected literature. Freud posits that much of the pain which is associated with hysteria has roots in a “genuine, organically-founded pain at the start” that undergoes an interval of dormancy and manifests later as a pain which is not immediately identifiable with its root cause (174). The dissonance between the sensation of pain and its source can be paralleled to the kind of belatedness that is associated with traumatic experience and its later resurfacing symptoms. Even though Freud’s study is focused on hysteria and thus cannot directly be compared with traumatic experience, the similar manner in which pain undergoes latency before

manifesting in the case of both hysteria and trauma reinforces the notion that trauma, despite its root association with physical wounds, can be studied very much as a psychosomatic condition.

The distinction between mental and bodily traumas is not as clear as it may first seem, as established by Caruth in her study of PTSD and the Theresienstadt concentration camp survivor. Despite their similarities in symptoms, the most striking difference between the latency that occurs as a result of hysteria as compared to trauma lies in how the latter involves a dissociation on the part of the individual as the traumatic event itself is occurring. The latency of hysteria is believed by Freud to be a period whereby somatic pains morph into psychosomatic ones, though this study is concerned not so much with the reason for this phenomenon but more with the mechanics behind it. The latter may allow us to understand the traumatised individual's repression of their memory of physical trauma and how it resurfaces after an interval of dormancy. The psychosomatic pain that Freud's hysteria patients observe tend to bear great similarities to their physical pains, leading Freud to the notion that this psychosomatic pain bears an associative connection to somatic pain (*Studies on Hysteria* 174). However, in the case of traumatic experience and its belated manifestation, the moment in which the traumatic event occurs creates an opposite effect in the individual, where the individual's consciousness is numb to the event and does not actively remember it (Caruth, "Explorations in Memory" 7). Trauma manifests itself not as a psychosomatic pain which can be associated with its physical root cause, but as a hallucination of the traumatic experience which is often literal and recurring. Taking into account Caruth and—by extension—Freud's studies of latency and the return of past traumas both physical and nonphysical, it becomes clear that much of the belatedness of trauma is rooted in a lack of awareness on the part of the individual when it comes to the traumatic event. This lack of awareness becomes all the more complex when we consider the child experience of trauma—it may be limited to align the inability of the traumatised child to process the traumatic event as it occurs with the numbing effect trauma creates, for the child perspective as written in literature often relies on a limited worldview by virtue

of the subject's age and thus inability to fully process their surroundings the same way their adult counterparts can.

In Donoghue's *Room*, Jack and Ma both experience the belatedness of traumatic experience which Caruth speaks of. The contrasting ways in which the two characters are represented demonstrate how the traumatised child, Jack, is used by Donoghue to flesh out tenets of traumatic experience through literary symbolism and formal technique that are limited when it comes to the expression of similar experiences of the traumatised adult, Ma. While the later chapters will offer more in-depth detail as to the specific mechanics behind Donoghue's narrative strategies, it would be useful at this stage to first consider the psychoanalytical and psychological context within which the text is written. *Room* is inspired by the Fritzl case of 2008, where Elisabeth Fritzl had emerged from twenty-four years of captivity under her abuser and father Josef Fritzl (Aiman, *The Guardian*). Donoghue's novel is written from the perspective of five-year-old Jack who has spent his entire life confined within a small room along with his mother. For Jack, the small room in the garden shed is all he knows of the world—his mother has chosen to raise him with the understanding that there is nothing else outside the four reinforced walls within which they reside. It is later revealed that Jack is fathered by his mother's captor, Old Nick, who had abducted her seven years ago and has since then held her captive in the room. As the novel progresses, we learn, through the eyes of Jack, that his mother is routinely raped by Old Nick, the unemployed middle-aged man—whose background is only implied through tangential detail—entering the dead-bolted room several nights of the week to sexually abuse Jack's mother. The turning point of the novel occurs around the halfway mark, where Jack and his mother eventually make their great escape out of the room and find themselves in what Jack knows only as "Outer Space"—a world entirely alien to Jack (8). Due to the distinct two halves of the novel, the first taking place in the soundproof room and the second taking place outside it, *Room* depicts the traumatised individual in two distinct psychological states—one in the process of the traumatic experience, and one after it. Donoghue's work is chosen for this study

precisely because of this narrative structure which allows for a direct examination of the belatedness of trauma as represented in fiction.

The psychoanalytical context within which *Room*'s representations of trauma are read is important to establish in this study for it allows for a broader reading of the dissociative traits of traumatic experience. One of the recurring themes of Donoghue's novel is the notion of self-identity and how perspectives applied by the individual to their experiences can alter the way the individual is affected psychologically and even physically. This thematic concern of *Room* is relevant to this chapter's psychoanalytical examinations for it can be paralleled to key psychoanalytical concepts such as Jacques Lacan's notion of the mirror stage in infant development and its relation to self-recognition and self-identity. Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" takes on the concept of the real, authentic self being inherently displaced from the image which is created by the individual of themselves during key stages of their development in childhood:

[T]he total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it. (76)

While Donoghue's text does not overtly engage with Lacan's psychoanalytical discourses on the mirror stage and childhood development, adopting it as a way of reading how Jack is represented in *Room* allows for a deeper understanding of Jack's evolving self-perception as the narrative transitions between the contained, controlled space of the room and the uncontrolled vastness beyond it. Donoghue's characters spend much of the narrative wrestling with their spatial boundaries, trying to expand it while they are in the room, at the same time entering a state of heightened anxiety outside it, as demonstrated by Jack's difficulties in assimilating to the newfound world outside of the prison room which had remained his entire universe until he successfully

escaped from it. While this thematic notion will be covered in greater depth in the following chapter with a close reading of how exactly Donoghue employs the use of space to express certain traumas her characters face, it is helpful for us to establish at this point the Lacanian psychoanalytical context within which these spaces can be examined.

What is also worth noting is that Lacan's mirror stage analysis is focused on the imaginary stage of his schema which also includes the real and the symbolic. The imaginary realm, given how it is not able to function independently from Lacan's Borromean knot which consists also of the real and the symbolic, should be read as an interrelated realm that also comprises of the real and the symbolic. Where then can the phenomena of trauma, when read against Lacan's Borromean knot, be situated? In "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" Lacan tackles the subject of Freudian psychoanalysis and posits that "it is in the experience inaugurated by psychoanalysis that we can grasp by what oblique imaginary means the *symbolic* takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism" (11). Where the imaginary is the realm that originates directly from sensorial perception, as with what the child observes of his reflected image in the mirror, the symbolic can be thought of as being interrelated to the imaginary in a similar manner to the signifier-signified relationship, the signifier belonging in the symbolic order, and the signified belonging in the imaginary order. The imaginary realm of the traumatised child, then, only exists in relation to its interrelated symbolic and real realms, and this interrelation sheds light on how exactly we ought to read the traumatised child in fiction. For every phenomena which enters the field of perception by means of a signifier, a component of it has to remain unsymbolised, where the unsymbolised can be regarded as the real. For Lacan, "the real does not wait [*attend*], especially not for the subject, since it expects [*attend*] nothing from speech. But it is there, identical to his existence, a noise in which one can hear anything and everything, ready to submerge with its roar what the 'reality principle' constructs there that goes by the name of the 'outside world'" ("Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary on Freud's 'Verneinung'" 389). When applied to *Room* with respect to the relationship

Jack forms with his site of trauma, the prison room, it seems plausible that Jack remains unable to access the realm of the real when it comes to the phenomena of trauma—he is unable to see Room as a traumatic space, and instead seeks solace in it.

What is striking about the two spaces which are created in *Room*—the confined one within the prison room, and the unconfined one outside it—is that the former appears to be more complete to Jack than the latter. Inside the room, Jack has no understanding of the traumas that surround him and his mother and is shown to be well adjusted to the room, as small and limited in resources as it is. Donoghue maintains that the child perspective she adopts for *Room* allows her to drive home the notion that Jack is oblivious to the traumas he undergoes, him being shielded from it by virtue of the perfect illusion Ma creates in her hiding of Old Nick’s abuse and her choosing to tell her son that the four eleven-foot walls are all there is to be known of their universe (Crown, *The Guardian*). This perfect illusion is shattered when Jack slowly learns there is a bigger world outside of the space he has made his home for the past five years, and, in the process of escaping and abandoning it with Ma, begins to depart from his well-adjusted self and evolve intellectually and psychologically. This chapter is interested in the psychological impact of Jack’s departure from the room, for it signals a major shift in how his traumatic experience—and, by extension, his mother’s—is written. Jack’s psychological evolution can be paralleled to Lacan’s writings on the mirror stage evolution that occurs during early infancy and marks the moment of self-awareness on the part of the individual (Lacan 75-7). Lacan draws a distinction between the pre- and post-mirror stage consciousness, the split between the two being likened to the Freudian duality of the id and the ego, where the individual, prior to developing a sense of the self through a recognition of themselves in a reflection, maintains an understanding of themselves as a unified whole—a “coherent organization of mental processes”—that is reconfigured after the mirror stage (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 5). This distinction between the two stages of self-perception marks the alignment of the pre-mirror stage consciousness to an imagined, unknowable self that creates a mere illusion of a

whole, tangible self and remains inaccessible and thus inexpressible. The mirror stage for Lacan occurs at early infancy, and it is only after the infant is able to perceive themselves through a reflection of a mirror—either real or figurative—that they begin to attempt to make sense of the world they reside within and try to understanding its many social and linguistic constructs (77). While the analyses of infant self-perception as conducted by Lacan cannot directly be compared to Donoghue's writing of the traumatised child as the latter takes place within the realm of fiction and not reality, Lacan's identification of how the post-mirror stage self departs from its prior indefinable, illusory self by way of the individual assimilating language and other such symbolic constructs around them allows us to contextualise within a psychoanalytical framework Donoghue's narrative strategies when it comes to representing the traumatised child in *Room*.

The narrative structure of *Room* allows for an active comparison of Jack and Ma's psyches—as portrayed by Donoghue—to the two distinct states of Lacanian pre- and post-mirror stage consciousness. The room prior to Jack and Ma's escape is a closed space within which an entire universe is created by Ma for Jack in order for her to preserve a semblance of normalcy for her son, and as such can be thought of as a constructed illusion behind which the real traumas of the situation reside. Jack is only able to access the reality of his traumatic experience when he leaves the room during his escape and encounters, for the first time, a world other than the one he intimately knows, a seemingly infinite space with its own social structures and linguistic systems. What becomes apparent as the narrative moves forward in depiction of life beyond the small room is that Jack begins to develop an acute awareness of his own traumas, a state of self-perception he does not have access to until he leaves his prison. Yet, this deepened sense of self-awareness is contrasted to the limited nature of how he is perceived by others who come into contact with him in the post-prison world. Like a reflection in the mirror, the Jack that is presented to people who exist only outside of the room is far more one-dimensional than the Jack the reader has access to. Donoghue creates a society beyond the room that recognises Jack's innocuous perspective of

wonder and intense curiosity, but at the same time contextualises his behaviour within the context of traumatised experience:

He is “Miracle Jack” to the staff at the exclusive Cumberland Clinic who have already lost their hearts to the pint-sized hero who awakened Saturday night to a brave new world. The haunting, long-haired Little Prince is the product of his beautiful young mother’s serial abuse at the hands of the Garden-shed Orgre[.] . . . Jack says everything is “nice” and adores Easter eggs but still goes up and down stairs on all fours like a monkey. (215-6)

Donoghue offers here a stark contrast between the way in which Jack is seen by his mother as compared to the rest of the world, the former choosing to remove the context of trauma from their environment, and the latter reinforcing it. The world outside the room is one that likens his movement to that of a feral creature and creates a sensationalised narrative out of his trauma, one that chooses to do the reverse of what his mother does—acknowledge his traumas. It is in this space which constantly recognises and reiterates the traumatic context of his upbringing that Jack slowly becomes more aware of the fact that he is, and has been, in trauma. Expanding upon this parallel between the two distinct physical spaces of *Room* and Jack’s increasing awareness of himself as a traumatised individual, it seems possible to draw a link between the world outside the room and the post-mirror stage consciousness as presented by Lacan, where the heightened complexities of “Outer Space” force onto Jack an awareness of his own traumatic experience (Donoghue 8). Even outside the room, the diagnostic physical and psychological tests that are conducted on Jack fail to identify the nuanced symptoms of trauma expressed by Jack that are not apparent in the traumatised adult. It is in these nuanced symptoms as written by Donoghue that we begin to understand how the approaches to trauma literature we have taken are fundamentally homogenised in their failing to encapsulate the more nuanced, unique perspectives of the traumatised child. The application of Lacan and Freud’s psychoanalytical studies on consciousness and self-perception allow us to see how Jack’s morphing sense of self-awareness can be read as being reflective not only of his own

transition from pre- to post-mirror stage individual, but of a certain psychological state that is symptomatic of traumatic experience. Through the parallel drawn between Lacanian self-consciousness and Donoghue's writing of Jack's psychological growth throughout the novel, this study puts forward a possible reading of Donoghue's *Room* that encompasses the Lacanian notion of how difficult it is for anyone outside of ourselves ever being able to understand the deeper, darker inner workings of our psyches, and it is through her writing of traumatic experience and its manifestation in Jack that she illustrates this.

The third chapter, "After," marks the beginning of what can be identified as Jack's awakening when it comes to recognising his own trauma, and applying the lens of Lacanian self-consciousness as established in his infant mirror stage study offers us a means of better understanding how the psychological shift that occurs in Jack is expressed by Donoghue (Donoghue 157). The chapter opens with Jack fresh after his grand escape out of the room, sitting in a police car with Ma and Officer Oh. In this scene, Donoghue creates a sharp contrast between the way Officer Oh views Jack and the way Jack views himself, Officer Oh treating Jack very much as a traumatised individual even when Jack does not see himself that way at all. The scene is marked by the police car being surrounded by what is implied to be a group of opportunistic photojournalists who try to take photographs of Jack, and all the while, the young survivor seems oblivious to what is happening: "I don't see any vultures, I only see person faces with machines flashing and black fat sticks. They're shouting but I can't understand. Officer Oh tries to put the blanket over my head, I push it off" (159). It is in this world outside the room that Jack begins to see himself as part of a greater whole and becomes exposed to the idea that the room he had called his entire universe before is only a single fragment of a larger space. In this outside world, Jack is immediately defamiliarised to the things he had once known so intimately well: "The floor's all shiny hard not like Floor, the walls are blue and more of them, it's too loud" (159). The familiar objects around Jack in the outside world function as mirrors to his own self-perception, and it is in this space that

Jack not only becomes aware of his own traumatic experience, but begins to exhibit behaviour symptomatic of PTSD as established by Caruth.

Donoghue manifests Jack's symptoms of PTSD in the form of physical ticks and recurring visual images that Jack neither recognises nor explicitly addresses as trauma, and it becomes clear that Jack's bodily reactions cannot be directly compared to that of a traumatised adult. He is jumpy around people other than his Ma, involuntarily recoiling the moment someone walks past an open door at the police station, and copes with this by immediately wishing for the door to be closed and for him to be able to nurse (161). While exhibiting physical ticks consistent with PTSD is not something unique to the traumatised child, Jack's reaction to this particular situation is closely tied to his being a child. He seeks immediate comfort from Ma in the form of breastfeeding, a motif that complicates our present understanding of trauma and how it is represented in fiction. At surface level, it seems possible to read Jack's breastfeeding through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis and denote it an oral fixation which reflects his neuroses triggered by the anxieties that arise in his traumatic encounters, but to do so will be to draw an assumptive conclusion based on a singular characterisation by Donoghue (Freud, "Volume VII" 232-5). It will be useful, however, to consider the differences between the symptoms of PTSD as presented in the writing of the traumatised child as compared to its adult counterpart. In this case, Jack's inability to be weaned off breastfeeding despite being much older than the conventional norm points towards a possible oral fixation that can be tied to a form of neurotic adaptation that has occurred as a result of his trauma (Freud, "Volume VII" 232-5). Whether or not this neurotic adaptation can be read as a manifestation of how the traumatised child is uniquely represented in fiction still bears questioning—the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to Jack's association of nursing to comfort, while seemingly sound, still takes on the assumption that fictive characters can be examined as real patients. It may be more fair to suggest at this juncture, given the psychoanalytical framework that has been put in place, that Donoghue's writing of Jack's involuntary reactions to traumatic experience builds upon the existing

theories of psychological neuroses put forward by Freud and Lacan and uses them as a starting point from which the specific stylistic and thematic elements of trauma fiction are derived.

Ultimately, this chapter suggests not a direct relationship between Lacan and Freud's psychoanalytical works and Donoghue's writing of the traumatic experiences of fictional characters, but instead a way of reading the characterisation of traumatised individuals in *Room* that may offer insight as to how elements of trauma such as its belatedness, literality and inexpressibility comes together to provide access to the inherently elusive and inaccessible truth of trauma (Caruth 6). The following chapter will expound upon the psychoanalytical groundwork presented in this chapter and offer a close-reading of Donoghue's writing of symbolic spaces and the hallucinations that occur within them. It will demonstrate how these symbolic and formal techniques that are specific to the traumatised child allow Donoghue to offer an alternative to our present interpretations of trauma theory and its application in fiction.

2. Haunted Sites of Trauma: Recurring Images, Hallucinations, and Dreamscapes

The way in which trauma manifests itself in the individual has been likened by Caruth to a haunting: "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" ("Explorations in Memory" 4-5). The key symptoms associated with this process of haunting take the form of "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience" (4). These facets of traumatic response are rooted in Freudian latency which informs the "crisis of truth" that emerges upon consideration of how trauma seems to be a symptom more of historical experience than of unconscious repression (6). This chapter will primarily be concerned with the relationship trauma has with memory and the spaces they inhabit. The study of these sites of trauma from the perspective of both the traumatised child and their adult counterpart reveals how traumatic experience is uniquely moulded based on the perspective of the individual. In the case of *Room*,

Donoghue's sites of trauma reveal stark differences in the way Jack and Ma interact with the physical and fantastical spaces they inhabit, a juxtaposition that reveals how the traumatised child functions to offer an alternative means through which traumatic experience is represented in fiction, keeping in mind how our understanding of traumatic experience thus far is rooted in how adults specifically process trauma and manifest its symptoms. Caruth observes that traumatic events are not assimilated and processed as they occur, rather through an indirect resurfacing that occurs at a different time and place in the future, and this study is concerned with the forms these returning images take in terms of how they are used by Donoghue to express trauma.

In her volume *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead offers an interpretation Caruth's research on the belated return of traumatic memory and examines its role in fiction in terms of how the narrative past is remembered and reconstructed. For Whitehead, "trauma fiction relies on the intensification of conventional narrative modes and methods" (84). In Donoghue's narrative, one of the ways in which the traumas of Jack and Ma are represented is through the author's writing of spaces that are haunted by traumatic memory and fantastical projection. These sites of trauma can be read as reflections of Jack and—to a lesser extent—Ma's traumatised psyches, each filled with recurring images and fantastical elements that signal the forcible return of traumatic memory that they are not fully conscious of. Whitehead identifies repetition as one of the key means through which the effects of trauma are mimicked, drawing upon Freud's work on the "uncanny" and putting forward the notion that the narrative strategies of "repetition or correspondence" can imbue the simplest events with "a symbolic aura," the seemingly banal and everyday objects and spaces becoming charged with "an atmosphere of trauma" (Whitehead 86). What is unique about Donoghue's narrative is that the space in which the primary traumas of the narrative take place is the very space that the traumatised child, Jack, longs to return to. The space within which Jack's trauma-induced hallucinations and projections take place is not that in which his traumatic experiences take place, but that which ironically is supposed to grant him respite from his horrific past experience. This is,

in part, due to Ma's insistence on bringing Jack up sheltered from the harsh realities of Old Nick's abuse, but bears hints at how the child inherently processes trauma differently as compared to the adult. Donoghue applies unique narrative strategies to express how Jack's relationship with spatial boundaries differ from that of Ma, one of them being the rich dreamscapes which are layered on top of Jack's world.

The key turning point of *Room* takes place the moment Jack leaves the prison room and enters the world outside it for the first time in his life, and it is in this transition that Donoghue fleshes out the psychological anxiety Jack feels upon leaving his perceived safety of his prison and entering a world completely alien to him. The former space is one that, at surface level, represents Jack and Ma's primary site of trauma—it is the one in which Jack is malnourished and deprived of social contact with anyone other than his mother, and the one in which Ma is subject to systematic sexual abuse. The space beyond the walls of the room, on the other hand, is the one in which both mother and child are kept distanced from their source of trauma, Old Nick, the one in which they are watched over by healthcare professionals and given the physical and psychiatric attention they need post-trauma. Given this initial reading, it seems plausible to identify the space outside the room as being outside trauma and thus the safer of the two for both Jack and Ma. Yet, a reversal occurs in Donoghue's writing of these two spaces. Jack views the outside world not as a safe space, but one that is seemingly more hostile than his prison. In one particular instance taking place in the outside world, Jack has a nightmare of "vampire germs floating around with masks so we can't see their faces and an empty coffin that turns into a large toilet and flushes the whole world away" (217). When Jack shares this dream with Dr. Clay, one of the medical professionals overseeing Jack's recovery, Jack is told that he is in safe hands, Dr. Clay telling Jack that his nightmares are just his brain "gathering up all those scary thoughts [Jack does not] need anymore, and throwing them out as bad dreams" (218). Jack, however, believes otherwise: "[Dr. Clay's] got it backwards. In Room I was safe and Outside is the scary" (219). Jayana Jain Punamiya writes, in

her essay “Thinking Borderlessness: Alternative Forms of Embodiment and Reconfiguration of Spatial Realities in Emma Donoghue’s *Room*,” that the realities of the outside world imprint onto Jack its “disciplinary mechanisms [that], far from making Jack feel protected, contribute to his uneasiness with the structures of control that surround him in the new world he inhabits” (5). These constructs of institutional control are addressed within the context of Louis Althusser’s “ideological and repressive apparatuses that prescribe norms, customs and habits with the ultimate goal of suppressing any deviant behaviour,” an expansion upon the Marxist notion of how dominant classes in society assert power by inculcating a fear of exhibiting behaviour outside of the social norm (5). These fears result from Jack’s introduction to a space that asserts institutional control over him, and are uniquely applicable to him in that they force him into a domain that forces him to become acutely aware of his own difference and his own traumas. The prison room, for Jack, represents a space of “traumatic ruin,” Jain Punamiya asserting that “[a]n environment of ruins discharges an affect of melancholy” that, when read within the context of institutional control and the role it plays as a narrative strategy through which trauma is expressed in *Room*, signals the close relationship that is drawn between traumatic experience and the site within which it occurs (3).

Examining the forces of institutional control that are asserted onto Jack in the outside world through the lens of trauma fiction reveal just how Donoghue uses the renegotiation of space—as illustrated through the perspective of Jack—as a narrative strategy through which our present understanding of trauma theory and its modes of fictive representation is challenged. Jain Punamiya views the technologies of the outside world as forces which introduce anxieties in Jack that are absent in the prison room—or in *Room*, as he plainly refers to it without any identification of its function of captivity. For Jack, Outside represents a space that is overwhelming in its assertion of seemingly arbitrary rules and forcibly imposed social norms. *Room*, on the other hand, represents its opposite—complete protection and harmony, the contrast proffered between the two adding further complexity to how we currently read sites of trauma and the roles they play in supporting

themes of belatedness and dissociation in traumatised individuals. Every piece of technology in Outside scares Jack in some way, its noises, lights and textures shocking him at times to tears. He likens to flush of an automatic toilet to an “awful roaring” and cries upon hearing it (162). The apparatuses and garments that are meant to provide him comfort, sanitation, and safety fail to do so. Jack longs to return to the space he believes to be safe, and the first dream he has in Outside reflects this sentiment:

First it's warm, then it gets cold. The warm was nice but the cold is a wet cold. Ma and me are in Bed but it's shrunk and it's getting chilly, the sheet under us and the sheet on us too and the Duvet's lost her white, she's all blue—

This isn't Room. (170)

Freud, in his volume *The Interpretation of Dreams*, draws a link between dreams and unconscious desire, suggesting that dreams function as a form of wish-fulfilment, the form the dreams take and the images contained within it being reflective of objects or situations that the dreamer subconsciously long for (550-1). Freud points out that the “undistorted wishful dreams [feature] principally in children; though *short*, frankly wishful dreams *seemed* . . . to occur in adults as well” (551). This relationship between dream and desire that Freud posits is particularly uncensored in children is a function of the “peculiar propensity of dreams to recast their ideational content into sensory images” (548). In Jack's dream, the manifest content takes the form of his return to Room, possible reflecting his unconscious anxieties about being in Outside. While this connection is not explicitly addressed by Donoghue, the motif of dreams in *Room* draws attention to its function as a narrative strategy through which the traumas of Jack are represented. It may be limiting here to attempt an psychoanalytic reading of Jack given the fictive nature of Donoghue's narrative, but the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis can still be applied—it possibly informs Donoghue's writing of Jack's latent dream thoughts that manifest in his dream desires to retreat from Outside and seek comfort in Room.

The structures of control that exist in *Outside*, far from providing a framework through which post-trauma healing can take place, create a hostile environment instead for the traumatised individuals of *Room*, one in which their symptoms become more pronounced the more they are identified and scrutinised by members of the public. Jack and Ma's appearances are sensationalised by the local news and described in a manner that acutely highlights their traumatic origins: "[Jack and Ma] have an eerie pallor and appear to be in a borderline catatonic state after the long nightmare of their incarceration" (165). Moments after the television is switched off, Jack goes straight to Ma and attempts to nurse, but she denies him access: "I'm pulling at her dress but there's no way in. . . . She kisses me instead on the side of the eye but it's not a kiss I want" (166). This reactionary gesture of nursing, followed by his change in mood after its denial, signals his reliance on it as a means through which he copes with his anxieties. The act of nursing has already been established in the prior chapter as a possible means through which Donoghue reflects Jack's nervous ticks in light of his traumatic experiences, and in this scene, it is made all the more complex when taking into account the link Jain Punamiya draws between the structures of control in *Outside* and Jack's surfacing anxieties. This recurring pattern is also reflective of what Whitehead identifies as one of the key narrative strategies employed by novelists to mimic the effect trauma has on the individual (3). Jack listens to the words as they play out on the television, and hears for the first time a description of himself from the perspective of someone other than his mother: "The malnourished boy, unable to walk, is seen here lashing out convulsively at one of his rescuers" (165). Jack does not explicitly demonstrate any anxieties immediately upon hearing this news. In fact, he does not even seem to be aware of what it is actually saying about him. He is far more interested in looking at himself in the television, almost as if fascinated by this digital reflection of his own image. This moment of self-recognition parallels the earlier reading of the two spaces in Donoghue's novel—*Room* and *Outside*—as symbolic representations of Lacan's pre- and post-mirror stage consciousness, the television in the latter being the mirror through which Jack

becomes fully aware of his subjectivity in the world. While Jack is far older than the usual age of around six months when infants are discovered—according to Lacan in his study of the work of James Mark Baldwin—to first identify themselves in the mirror, his lacking motor skills and continued nursing align him to the phase of infancy associated with Lacan’s mirror stage (75-7). Jack’s impaired motor skills are a result not of his tender age, but as a result of the constricted space within which he is forced to grow up. Dr. Clay likens Jack to a newborn who has not quite learned how to navigate his way around the world both physically and socially, stating that “there are likely to be challenges [for Jack] in the areas of . . . social adjustment, . . . sensory modulation—filtering and sorting out all the stimuli barraging him—plus difficulties with spatial perception” (182). Both Jack’s traits of impaired motor skills and nursing are symptoms of trauma that are unique to his being a child, and Donoghue remains fully conscious of this difference between the traumatised child and the traumatised adult, reminding the reader across multiple scenes in *Room* that Jack continues to struggle with even the most basic of human interactions with the physical world and the social structures contained within it. It is through these differences in Jack and Ma’s reactions to their shared site of trauma that Donoghue expands upon existing discourses of trauma theory that fail to take into account the anxieties of the traumatised child—anxieties that are absent in the traumatised adult despite the fact that both go through a shared experience of trauma within a shared physical and social space.

A closer examination of Jack’s physical and social impairments reveals that the relationship between traumatic experience and its somatic and psychosomatic symptoms are more complex when taking into account the traumatised child—much of what, at first glance, appears to be manifestations of trauma for Jack share similarities to impairments that are a result of his being a child confined within the restrictive boundary of Room. To the members of Outside, Jack is unable to become assimilated into regular society largely because of his physically constrictive environment growing up: “[Jack] was sealed up for all of his five years in a rotting cork-lined

dungeon, and experts cannot yet say what kind of degree of long-term developmental retardation—” (216). Ma removes the newspaper out of Jack’s hand before he is able to finish the sentence, but we can gather from the excerpt, and from the expressed opinions of the medical professionals in charge of Jack, that the young boy’s time in Room had long-lasting impacts on his mental development due to the young age during which his traumas had occurred. What is unique about this treatment of Jack’s traumas is that so much attention is placed on his tender age rather than on the scope of trauma that he has been forced to experience. The attention that is paid to him regarding his mental and social wellbeing is not afforded to Ma despite the fact that she was held in the same horrific, confined space as her son. The focus on Jack’s unique manifestations of trauma in Outside—albeit conflated with speculations as to the part his age plays—reveal that the traumatised child is expressed differently as compared to the traumatised adult. Caruth addresses the effect of numbing that occurs to the traumatised individual that occurs during their experience, suggesting that it only surfaces later in the individual’s life, at times after a long interval of dormancy during which they do not seem to be aware of the fact that they have been traumatised at all (6). In *Room*, the traumas that are experienced by Jack and Ma do not undergo a period where they are repressed and buried deep within their psyches, only to surface later in their lives. The switch seems to occur as they move from their primary site of trauma, Room, to their secondary one, Outside. In Jack, there seems to be no numbing of the sort that Caruth identifies. The repressions that Caruth observes as being one of the means through which traumatic experience is processed is not directly reflected in the way Donoghue expresses Jack’s symptoms after he leaves Room, and it seems limiting to associate his lack of self-awareness when it comes to his traumas with the kind of belatedness that is conventionally applicable to traumatised individuals in fiction. The fears and anxieties that manifest in Jack while he is in Outside can be identified not as a resurfacing of repressed traumatic memory, but as an inherent inability to process the subjectivity of a domain that asserts an otherwise absent structure of control. Taking into account this juxtaposition between the numbing effect on the

traumatised individual derived from the repression of traumatic memory and the inability of the traumatised child to be actively aware of his traumas partially due to social and physical limitations stemming from their age, it stands to reason that we ought to adopt a similar binary when it comes to the application of trauma theory to fictional characters. In this regard, what we currently understand of trauma, as established by Caruth and Whitehead, bears changing for it homogenises traumatic experience and fails to offer a satisfactory distinction between how traumatic experience for the child is written—or has to be written—differently as compared to the adult, a distinction that Donoghue has employed as a means of illustrating her distinct take on trauma and its representation in fiction.

Drawing back upon Caruth's likening of the key expressions of trauma—recurring images, fantastical hallucinations, and dreamscapes—to a haunting, Jack's traumas are manifested not only through his physical and social ticks, but also through dreams which bear a semblance of the literality that Caruth identifies as being indicative of the enigmatic pathology of trauma, a fundamental aspect of it being "the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event" ("Explorations in Memory" 5). For Caruth, the literality of the recurring image when it comes to trauma and its belated return in the individual informs narrative strategies that are commonly found in trauma literature. Returning to Kinsler's example of the Theresienstadt concentration camp child survivor having recurring flashbacks of trains that are later revealed to be a memory of trains passing by her barracks, the traumatised individual does not, within their hallucinatory space, understand the significance of what they see until much later. In *Room*, however, Jack spends the entire narrative never reaching that level of self-awareness as to the symbolic meaning of his dreams. Donoghue creates dreamscapes for Jack that are immediately identifiable by the readers as possessing the literality that signals the return of Jack's traumas, yet never allows her young protagonist to fully understand it. This narrative strategy of creating a

traumatised character unaware of their own traumas—not entirely because of their repression of the event, but because of their fundamental inability to consciously understand the reality of the event due to their young age—is one that signals how the traumatised child is used as a means of offering a different take on traumatic experience and its representation in fiction. We cannot be sure at any point during Jack’s time in *Outside* that he is conscious of the resurfacing of his traumas, even as the event is fully articulated to him by Ma and the professionals that take care of him. As Jack listens to the local news that provide reports on his escape and detail what they have read as the physical, social, and mental effects of trauma, Jack remains oblivious to it all, asking Ma why he is described as “haunting” when “that’s what ghosts do,” a statement that becomes almost self-reflexive when taking into consideration the slew of dreams and recurring physical ticks that plague Jack while he is in *Outside* (216). The first dream Jack has in *Outside* details every aspect of his bed, and he wakes up with the sudden realisation that the bed he is currently on is not the same one as that in *Room* (170). In his dream, the bed alternates between being warm and cold (170). He later finds out that he has wet his actual bed, a possible explanation as to the temperature shifts he had experienced in his dream-bed. While this does not signal a literality that is the result of trauma-induced Freudian latency, it does hint at the connection Jack’s dreamscapes have with their physical spatial counterparts in *Outside*, most of his dreams taking place in a version of *Room* that almost functions as a mirror to his life in *Outside*—albeit one that bears more hints of his anxieties, just like the wetting of his bed, which may be read as a sign of distress given the attention Donoghue pays to it while Jack is in *Outside* as compared to in *Room*.

Another text which encapsulates the relationship between traumatic memory and dreamscapes within the context of the traumatised child is Neil Gaiman’s *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Studying this text comparatively with *Room* will reveal the similarities in the narrative strategies employed by novelists when it comes to the expression of trauma through child protagonists, and will bolster the arguments made in this paper with regards to how our present

understanding of trauma fiction is too narrow in scope and ought to, instead, encompass a broader viewpoint that takes into consideration the child perspective and experience of trauma. While *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (henceforth referred to as *Ocean*) is but one of an ever-growing number of books detailing elaborate dreamscapes intertwined with childhood memories and the repression and later resurfacing of childhood trauma, Gaiman's novel is unique in that the protagonist is an adult narrating from the perspective of his childhood self. The voice that is adopted is thus one that both reflects the precocious wonder of his younger self as well as his more reflective, sombre, and introspective older self. The contrast between these two perspectives existing within the same character offers a clear way for the dreamscapes of *Ocean* to be read while keeping in mind how the child and adult perspective each offers a distinct representation of traumatic experience. It is this difference in representation of perspective that signals the necessity for an expansion of existing discourses of trauma fiction to include the different mechanisms that are at play when the traumatic individual is not an adult but a child. Beyond the voice of the unnamed narrator, the dreamscapes of *Ocean* can be possibly interpreted as manifestations of the protagonist's repressed childhood traumas, and in that regard can be read comparatively to *Room* for a deeper understanding of the role dreamscapes play in allowing novelists to express traumatic experience through the use of the child perspective as a narrative strategy. *Ocean* opens with its narrator leaving a sombre event that is never directly identified, but can be inferred to be the funeral of someone close to him, possibly his father. The narrator takes a drive through the country, making seemingly random turns until he reaches a farmhouse and encounters a familiar face that sparks the return of his previously forgotten childhood memories. The bulk of the narrative that follows takes place within the space of the narrator's memory, him sitting on a bench by a pond recollecting his childhood. His adolescent years are filled with loneliness and books. After witnessing a particularly traumatising event one day, which he does not process quite as such, the narrator chances upon a mysterious girl, Lettie Hemstock, who takes him to a farmhouse by a duckpond in which a series of

magical events occur. The narrator, in this farmhouse beside a duckpond he later believes to be an ocean, is accompanied by the triumvirate of Hemstock women who play the part of mythical guardians that protect him from the terror that is Ursula Monkton, a monster living in his house that possesses a dual, interchangeable appearance of great beauty and grotesqueness. We slowly learn, through the eyes of the child narrator, that the terrors and otherworldly forces that plague him are manifestations of traumatic encounters from his childhood. The novel ends with the narrator returning to his adult self sitting by the pond, later revisiting the Hemstock household and promptly forgetting everything he has recollected. It is then revealed that the narrator has returned to the same farmhouse multiple times over the course of his life, each time remembering and immediately forgetting his time with the Hemstocks and their fight against the darkness.

The world of dream and fantasy, for Gaiman's narrator in *Ocean*, is a repository of once-forgotten childhood memories that have always existed on the edge of recognition and understanding: "Childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like childhood toys forgotten at the bottom of a crammed adult closet, but they are never lost for good" (6-7). Gaiman imbues his narrator's childhood with elements of myth and magic that are conjured around him in a manner reminiscent of a haunting, a strategy that can be read through the lens of Freudian uncanniness as a reflection of how traumatic memory can create strong symbolic correspondence in the most banal, everyday spaces and objects (Whitehead 86). What makes Gaiman's dreamscape so powerful in its reflection of his narrator's traumas is its poignant literality to the actual traumatic memory that resurfaces during the act of remembering. While there are multiple occurrences in *Ocean* that can be construed as source of trauma, one of the most powerful magical figures in the novel, Ursula Monkton, is constructed to reflect the morphing feelings the young narrator has upon seeing this beautiful woman seduce his father and turn him away from his mother, an act that turns Ursula into a literal monster. Gaiman's narrator maintains a high level of self-awareness when it comes to his expression of the literality of his traumatic

memory: “My mother was in there with a woman I had never seen before. When I saw her, my heart hurt. I mean that literally, not metaphorically: there was a momentary twinge in my chest, just a flash, then it was gone” (70). The young narrator describes Ursula as first being “very pretty,” having “shortish honey-blond hair, huge grey-blue eyes, and pale lipstick” (70). Despite his initial impression of Ursula as beautiful, her image conjures in him a general feeling of dread he cannot accurately articulate except through imagery which often bears a strong literality, just like the physical pain he feels in his heart when he watches Ursula talk to his mother (70). Throughout *Ocean*, the narrator describes Ursula using a series of recurring, interconnected metaphors, the most distinctive of them being the trinity of the wind, the ocean, and the sky, all of which are culminated in one instance where he depicts her dress as “flapping like the mainsail of a ship, on a lonely ocean, under an orange sky” (71). These associations of Ursula with wind, the ocean, and the sky are peppered all over the narrative, evolving in intensity as the narrator slowly learns of Ursula’s intimate relationship with his father, which frightens him even though he is not fully conscious of what is happening between them. Ursula’s appearance, as well, starts to morph in line with the narrator’s process of discovering more of his father’s affair, Ursula’s ugliness and the narrator’s understanding of their tryst deepening in tandem. Tainted by the knowledge of her wrongdoings, which are manifested in the young narrator’s mind as a kind of spell cast upon his father, Ursula’s eyes begin to bear a resemblance to “holes rotted in canvas,” her once-beautiful features taking on increasingly grotesque qualities the more the narrator learns of her and her affection for his father (75). Beyond Ursula’s morphing physical features, Gaiman’s dreamscape slowly becomes more sinister as the narrative progresses, the narrator starting to suffer from hallucinations involving great violence, including one in which his father attempts to drown him in his bathtub, seemingly bewitched by Ursula (95). It is never made clear whether or not the narrator’s father actually attempts to kill the narrator—the adult narrator, looking back at his own childhood, uncovers little more in reflection than what is revealed through his younger eyes. In Gaiman’s dreamscape,

memory is intricately intertwined with the shroud of traumatic fantasy. What is worth noting is that the narrator of *Ocean* is the only human who sees the otherworldly, grotesque properties of Ursula, and is the only one who's able to experience the protective magic of the Hempstocks. As Gaiman's narrator travels deeper into his memory and learns more about his traumas in childhood, the hallucinatory and magical elements of his dreamscape intensify. The dreamscape of *Ocean* can be read as a site of trauma that serves to bring to the surface previously repressed memories. What the fantastical sites of trauma in *Ocean* and *Room* share is a notion of literality that, when taking into account the perspective of the child, can be interpreted both as a reflection of latent traumatic memory, as well as an inability of the individual to fully process the events that unfold before them as a result of their young age.

The dreamscapes of *Ocean* and *Room* allow us to explore the difference between two distinct psychological spaces: that of traumatic memory, and that of narrative memory. In Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart's essay "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," the different paradigms of traumatic and narrative memory are explored through case studies that provide much insight as to how we may approach Donoghue and Gaiman's texts as fictive reflections of storytelling modes unique to traumatic experience and the traumatised child. The essay takes on the mechanics behind memory-making and seeks to understand the "effects of traumatic memories on consciousness" through the study of early psychopathological work spearheaded by key figures in the field, one of whom is French psychologist and psychoanalyst Pierre Janet ("Explorations in Memory" 159). One of the principle observations that van der Kolk and van der Hart make is how both psychoanalysis and psychiatry "[ignores] the fact that actual memories may form the nucleus of psychopathology and continue to exert their influence on current experience by means of the process of dissociation" (159). This notion of dissociation, when read within the context of trauma and its representation in fiction, creates that distinction that van der Kolk and van der Hart draw between traumatic and narrative

memory, one that they attempt to unpack in their study of Janet's early psychopathological work. Traumatic memory is not consciously made, but "evoked under particular conditions," where it "[occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation]" (163). In *Room*, the dreams of Jack that bear a strong literality to his existing physical surroundings, such as the one involving Bed and Duvet that reflect his displacement from Room and his discomfort in Outside, can be read as a form of traumatic memory triggered by the inhibition of a space resembling a site of trauma which, in this case, is the bed in the hospital ward (170). For Gaiman's narrator, the trigger for traumatic memory is not as clear cut as it is for Jack, for it is implied that what drives his recollection of his childhood—with its fantastical imagery and conjured monsters that reflect the source of his trauma—is in part the physical location of the duckpond, and in part the act of remembering itself. Gaiman's narrator contemplates the duckpond that his childhood self sees as an ocean, and in doing so, remembers Lettie, his mythical guardian who mysteriously disappears after the death of Ursula. As he recounts the mystical events of his childhood that revolve around Lettie and the Hemstock household, he launches the reader into the deepest, darkest facets of his traumatic memory:

Where did she go? America? No, *Australia*. That was it. Somewhere a long way away. And it wasn't the sea.

It was the ocean.

Lettie Hemstock's ocean.

I remembered that, and, remembering that, I remembered everything. (10)

The literality of traumatic memory, for Gaiman's narrator, is intricately linked to his memory of the ocean, though it differs from Jack's memory of Room triggered by the hospital ward in that it includes a layer of self-awareness that is absent in the child narrator of *Room*. It seems possible to attribute this level of self-awareness in Gaiman's narrator to the fact that he is recollecting his childhood as an adult, adding a second layer of remembering that further distances the narrator from

his traumatic experience. What can perhaps be derived from this comparison is a possible difference between the act of remembering for the traumatised child and for the traumatised adult as presented by both novelists, where Gaiman's narrator remains acutely aware of his own act of remembering and Donoghue's does not. Despite the two narrators' degrees of self-awareness, or lack thereof, what remains is a literality that can—given its heavy use in both *Ocean* and *Room*—be seen as a narrative strategy employed in both the writing of the traumatised adult and the traumatised child. The difference between the two, then, lies in the individual's ability to remain conscious of their act of remembering.

Returning to Whitehead's principle observation that trauma fiction seeks to recreate the symptoms of traumatic memory in the reader through the use of recurring visual motifs, the fragmentation of time and chronology, and indirection, there seems to be a link that can be drawn between the dreamscape and the mimetic aim of Donoghue and Gaiman's texts (Whitehead 3). The fragmentations of memory that are manifested as dreamscapes and distorted imagery can be likened to the dissociative effects that are brought to the surface through traumatic memory. Donoghue's traumatised child Jack enters his dreamscapes not with an awareness that he is accessing his traumatic memory, as with the above comparison with Gaiman's narrator, but subconsciously as a result of an experience he has not fully processed but still resurfaces against his will anyway, a process that has been established in this study as being a hallmark of traumatic memory and its insistent return (Caruth, "Explorations in Memory" 5). This narrative strategy employed by both Donoghue and Gaiman hinges on an effect of dissociation that van der Kolk and van der Hart, in their examination of Janet and Freud's case studies, tie to the "[l]ack of proper integration of intensely emotionally arousing experiences into the memory system," a phenomenon that results in traumatic memory returning as "physical sensations, horrific images or nightmares, behavioural reenactments, or a combination of these" (van der Kolk and van der Hart, "Explorations in Memory" 163-4). While the dreams of Jack are not immediately recognisable as particularly

terrifying in and of themselves, they do imply a darker reality that is brought to the surface, the dreams functioning as mirrors that, while being reflective of his present surroundings in their literality, also project an undertone of dread. The objects and spaces in Jack's dreams lure him towards a comfort that is only possible when experienced by a child who does not understand the reality of his present trauma. This study is interested in how the notion of traumatic memory, as put forward by van der Kolk and van der Hart, and the notion of belatedness and Freudian latency, as addressed by Caruth, can be compared to one another and examined as a possible unified reality of traumatic experience. Donoghue's dreamscapes do not seem to be triggered by any specific object or space, though it can be said that Jack's dreams generally take place while he is in a state of trauma in *Outside*. For Gaiman's narrator, on the other hand, we are led to believe he enters his dreamscape in his adulthood, and that what prompts his entire journey is the event which he leaves at the beginning of the novel. Like Jack, Gaiman's narrator does not enter his dreamscapes after a specific trigger. Both Donoghue and Gaiman's use of the dreamscape as a means of expressing trauma point towards their understanding of traumatic experience being far more complex than possibly viewed through the lens of belatedness or traumatic memory. The traumatised child, in *Room* and *Ocean*, seeks comfort in the fantastical elements of their dreamscapes, Jack longing for and dreaming of Room, and Gaiman's narrator hiding behind the protective magic of the Hemstock family in the face of the perpetrator of his trauma Ursula. What this means, then, is that the traumatised child—as expressed in the above study of the sites of trauma found in *Room* and *Ocean*, in particular the dreamscape—occupies a different space within the field of trauma fiction, one that signals the application of a narrative strategy differing from that of the traumatised adult.

We can see from this chapter's examination of the sites of trauma in *Room* and *Ocean* is that spaces, both physical and fantastical, function as devices through which the effects of traumatic experience can be mimicked. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the imbuing of the once-ordinary with a strong symbolic aura, where the everyday objects or spaces such as a bed

or a room can become sites of trauma, as can be seen in Jack when he is in Outside (Whitehead 86). This symbolic aura extends beyond geographical boundaries, taking place also within the corporeal realm, where Jain Punamiya draws a link between the anxieties that arise in Jack and the technologies of Outside that trigger them (5). While these anxieties are not limited to Jack, they are unique in that they are not consciously acknowledged by the young survivor. Donoghue's traumatised child longs to return to Room, the source of his trauma, and begins to react to Outside as if it is his primary source of trauma, a reversal of the resurfacing of traumatic experience that prompts a necessary reassessment of our current understanding of trauma and its representation in fiction. Gaiman, too, recreates the dreamscape by presenting it as a conflation of traumatic memory and the dissociative effect that is conjured against the will of his narrator. Vickroy posits that the social environment inhibited by the traumatised individual, whether during or after the event, "forms the circumstances out of which trauma is created, but it can also provide, or decline, needed supports for healing" (13). The spaces that surround the traumatised child uniquely challenges them in that they create social and even physical obstacles that are not present in the traumatised adult, such as how Jack longs to return to his primary site of trauma and how he is unable to get used to the dimensions of a world far larger than Room, continually bumping into walls and objects and being unable to focus on anything farther in distance than the tight confines of the padded room he had called his home for most of his life (182). What the sites of trauma in *Room* and *Ocean* offer us is a deeper understanding of how the traumatised child is used as an alternative means through which the resurfacing of past traumatic experience is represented in fiction, this resurfacing signalling the traumatised child's inability to properly process the trauma not only due to the effect of belatedness, but also due to their inherent inability to comprehend these effects by virtue of their age.

3. The Language of Trauma: Reconfiguring Tongue and Time

Caruth, in her volume *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, studies the language of trauma and demonstrates how it is used to speak of a truth that is otherwise inexpressible (4). She draws upon Freud's interpretation of trauma as an experience that cannot fully be assimilated as it occurs, and examines how the crisis of truth that is born out of traumatic experience necessitates a unique form of expression that can be thought of as literary: "a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (5). Jack speaks with a language that only he uses, turning nouns into proper nouns by way of omitting definite and indefinite articles when referring to some of the objects in *Room*. The inanimate objects in *Room* are also assigned personalities and are invigorated with an emotional energy that speaks to the attachment he forms with them: "Ma leans out of Bed to switch on Lamp, he makes everything light up *whoosh*" (3). This chapter will offer a close reading of the technical mechanics behind Jack's speech and attempt to identify a language of trauma that can be read through the lens of what Caruth likens to a manifestation of the "wound of the mind—a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (4). Beyond the speech of Jack, the intrusive memories that plague Ma and Jack in *Room* are indicative of how Donoghue uses stylistic device of rhythmic uncertainty to create a sense of dissociation and approximate the effects of trauma within the reader reminiscent of the mimetic function of trauma fiction that Whitehead identifies (3). What follows is an examination of how the fracturing of time in novels such as *Room* function as narrative strategies through which trauma is expressed, with special attention placed on the traumatised child's conceptions of time and its passage.

At first glance, it seems Jack's unique mode of communication, with his sentence fragments and personification of inanimate objects, stems from his traumatic experience, given how it is the most glaring circumstance that differentiates his childhood from what could be constituted as typical. Yet, Ma does not demonstrate a use of a language of trauma similar to that of Jack—her traumas are not manifested through a reconfiguration of her speech. The mechanics behind Jack's

unique language bears unpacking for it reveals how Donoghue uses the traumatised child as a means through which our present homogenised understanding of traumatic experience is expanded. In Kinga Földaváry's essay "In Search of a Lost Future: The Posthuman Child," Jack's unique mode of communication is described as being indicative of him being a posthuman child—a figure who "is not simply a victim of society's inhumanity but whose plight appears to be symptomatic of a world that can no longer look forward to a future without apprehension" (208). Földaváry sees Jack's naming of the objects in *Room* as "an act of creation of concepts unique to *Room* itself," where "Jack's sense of uniqueness, both of himself and of the phenomena of the universe, is shattered in the moment of contact with the outside world" (217). The link between Jack's language and the manner in which he perceives the world is revealed through the application of a posthumanist lens onto *Room*—Jack is presented by Donoghue as hybrid figure, perceived by the public as both a boy and a girl due to the length of his hair and his narrow frame, and as both an isolated "Bonsai Boy" as well as wild feral creature (Donoghue 216, Földaváry 217). For Földaváry, the posthuman child is characterised by their deviation from what is considered normal, where they are either delayed in development or otherwise distinctly different from their peers (209). Jack's language being unique to him signals this difference that, when read through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's "The Dark Continent of Childhood," pushes them towards a state of "desocialization" that is intricately linked with the anxieties brought forward by a future imbued with technologies that function to manipulate our sensibilities and challenge our ethical and moral standings (Földaváry 210). While posthumanist discourse cannot directly be examined in parallel with trauma theory, the role of the child in Földaváry's research on posthuman subjects raises questions of socialisation and self-identity that bear much resemblance to that Whitehead's study of the inexpressibility of traumatic experience and how it necessitates own unique modes of expression that are multi-faceted and call for a broader approach (Whitehead 3). It must be acknowledged that the link that has been drawn between Jack's unique language and his traumatic

experience can be challenged when taking into account the fact that Jack's limited exposure of the right social and educational infrastructures during his time in Room has a part to play as well. It becomes difficult to tell for sure if Jack's unconventional language is a result of his young age, or of the harrowing realities of Room:

[Jack's] unusual narrative voice encourages us to revisit our concepts of what is normal, ordinary or human, and what is not. The reader is constantly forced to contemplate whether Jack's narrative . . . is characteristic of an average five-year-old's linguistic skills, or whether it shows the consequences of Jack's confinement in Room all his life, in an unnaturally extended gestation period, which may have caused irretrievable damage to his mental and psychological development. (Földaváry 218)

The mechanics behind Jack's different mode of expression become all the more accessible when taking into context the developmental stage of early childhood and how it is easily affected by social environment. Vickroy contends that "[c]hildren are particularly vulnerable to abuse because it effects the way they develop, as well as their life coping skills and their future relationships" (14). She goes on to identify a connection between the resemblance—or lack thereof—between the symptoms of the traumatised child and the traumatised adult: "Unlike adults, [children] can suffer regression, misperceptions of time, pessimism about the future, disrupted attachments, and impaired social skills and cognitive development" (14). Donoghue seems fully aware of this social dimension of traumatic experience, and addresses it in her writing of Jack's limited ability to attain the level of social and mental development that the medical professionals in Outside expect someone of his age to. Dr. Clay tells Ma that Jack is "like a newborn in many ways," adding that it will be likely that Jack experiences "immune issues" as well as "challenges in the areas of . . . social adjustment, . . . sensory modulation—filtering and sorting all the stimuli barraging him—plus difficulties with spatial perception" (182). These social obstacles induced by traumatic experience are exacerbated by Jack's being a child, and it is in the study of these obstacles that we can better understand the

mechanics behind Jack's expressions of trauma, and how Donoghue, in her writing of the traumatised child, brings these tenets to light. The spatial constrictions of *Room* are made all the more obvious when we are able to see its direct impact in Jack. In *Room*, the symptoms of trauma that plague both Ma and Jack are unveiled through Donoghue's writing of Jack's difficulties in *Outside*. The inability of the survivor to express themselves in the wake of trauma, for instance, is expressed through Jack's inability to communicate using the language of *Outside* (Vickroy 6). The traumatised child in fiction, then, can be seen as a means through which novelists are able to directly engage with what has previously been inaccessible, where they are able to, like Donoghue does with Jack, employ a narrative device that parallels a symptomatic trait of traumatic experience.

The narrative strategy of deconstructing and reconfiguring language to express tenets of traumatic experience is not unique to Donoghue's novel—Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is written with a unique language consisting of sentence fragments, realigned grammatical syntax, and invented words that function as its protagonists primary mode of expression. A comparison of McBride's use of language in her novel with Donoghue's in *Room* will reveal how this mode of expression is used to represent the traumatised individual in fiction. This study seeks to reveal how Donoghue's writing of Jack's unique speech differentiates him as the traumatised child, taking into consideration the key contrasts in language in *Room* and *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (henceforth referred to as *Girl*). McBride's novel revolves around its unnamed narrator, a young woman learning how to cope with the traumas of her life—her brother's illness, a brain tumour, and the host of abuses she experiences as an adolescent and early teenager. The Irish author's writing style is described by Gina Wisker—in her essay “‘I Am Not That Girl’: Disturbance, Creativity, Play, Echoes, Liminality Self-Reflection and Stream of Consciousness in Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*”—as conveying an experience of liminality, where the reader is led by the author “into the gap between what is felt and begins to form in the mind of the narrator, the girl, and her actions in the shared world” (58). It is striking in its rhythm

and grammatical syntax, each sentence fragment reading like an outpouring of the innermost workings of a deeply-troubled mind: “For you. You’ll soon. You’ll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she’ll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I’d say. I’d say that’s what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day” (3). Through this language in which articles and conjunctions fall by the wayside, and verbs and proper nouns take on interchangeable roles, McBride bridges the gap between reader and character by way of reinventing communication. *Girl*’s half-rhymes and intricate wordplay create a musicality that alters the way its sentences are read, a narrative strategy employed by McBride that allows her to bring as close as possible to the surface the unfettered thoughts of her traumatised narrator that mimic her stream of consciousness, one that challenges the conventions of novelistic writing and “emphasises how very managed fiction usually is, and how the structure of fiction conveys a sense of control over identity and sense-making as well as individual narrative” (Wisker 58). Wisker identifies this technique as a means through which McBride expresses her narrator’s attempts to escape the social, cultural, and gender boundaries that are placed upon her, her breaking down of language being reflective of her breaking down of her identity within those boundaries and her own defiance of selfhood (59).

McBride’s language of trauma is very much centred around the deconstruction of self-identity and a visceral expression of buried grief and trauma, and in that regard differs from Donoghue’s reconfiguration of Jack’s speech, the latter being focused on how the formation of language is strongly dependent on one’s mental development and social environment. Jack’s unique language is intricately linked to his survival, his personification of the inanimate objects around him and his imbuing of them with emotional auras possibly reflecting how necessary it is for him to create a social environment in Room that extends beyond Ma. In this regard, Jack’s language bears similarities to that of McBride’s narrator, the latter expressing herself within a “liminal space between half-formed thoughts and expressions, a half-formed sense of self, and action” (Wisker 63). Referring to the work of Deborah Madsen on the notion of the “cultural scripting” that takes

place in the writing of trauma narratives as a result of its inexpressibility, Wisker posits that “[t]he expression of the narrative and of the girl’s unstructured flow of thoughts emphasises how stuck she is in the immediacy of traumatic experience” (65). This concept of the individual being stuck in the moment of trauma seems to reflect a tenet of traumatic experience not yet directly investigated by Caruth, Whitehead, or any of the other voices of trauma fiction examined in this study. Yet, it does bear slight similarities to the language of trauma that occurs with Jack in *Room* in that it encompasses a new grammatical syntax and reflects a core facet of the traumatised individual’s experience. In the case of Jack the traumatised child, this language of trauma reflects his strongest needs during his early stages of mental development that had taken place in *Room*, one that differs from that which is used by McBride’s traumatised adult narrator, whose unique language takes on a more mimetic role in that it more directly reflects the stream of consciousness triggered by the traumatic episodes of her life. Taking this comparison into account, we are able to see how Donoghue’s writing of the traumatised child—specific to her illustration of Jack’s language of trauma—signals the different approach she adopts when it comes to her representation of traumatic experience in fiction.

Jack’s language of trauma goes beyond his unique speech—it is reflected also in the way he expresses himself by way of gesturing, where the attachments he forms with his mother and the inanimate objects of *Room* reveal the mechanics behind the communicative manifestations of his traumatic experience. This study extends Jack’s language of trauma to include physical gesturing for it forms a core part of how Jack expresses himself in *Room*, where he relies on these modes of communication far more than his adult counterpart Ma. Whether or not this is wholly due to his being a child is up for contention, but it must be acknowledged that the traumatised child needs to be read differently from the traumatised adult, for the former has been proved to demonstrate symptoms differing to that of the latter (Vickroy 14). Vickroy posits that “[t]he social environment, the severity of the event, and the individual’s characteristics and experience all determine how

someone will cope with trauma,” and this study supports the notion that Jack’s fractured forms of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, are key to understanding how his traumas are written in *Room* (14). Jack’s unique language can be said to be formed out of his being a “Bonsai Boy,” a term given to him by journalists in *Outside* to describe his severely constricted childhood environment of *Room* (216). The notion of the “Bonsai Boy” forms Donoghue’s core approach towards her writing of Jack’s traumas, and this is particularly striking when examining the mechanics behind Jack’s collapse of communication. In *Outside*, his behaviours are seen as other-worldly, and his unique speech, while at times interpreted as endearing, more often than not is seen as reflection of his stymied mental development (215-6). This stymied mental growth can be read as symbolically represented by the stunted physical growth of the Bonsai plant from which Jack’s namesake is derived, the traditionally Chinese or Japanese art form characterised by miniature species of plants whose growth is limited by the restrictions of their glass enclosures. Much like the Bonsai that is admired for its physical aesthetic, Jack’s stymied mental growth takes on the quality of spectacle, where it receives ample media attention and is looked at with medical curiosity (216). Determining the source of Jack’s stunted mental growth as established in *Outside* can be difficult as Jack’s traumas themselves are challenging to pinpoint specifically. Beyond the constricted social environment of *Room*, where he spends his childhood interacting with only one other person, Jack is also exposed to Old Nick’s repeated sexual abuse of his mother, a circumstance that without a doubt creates a lasting impact on his psyche, a notion that Vickroy supports with her writing of the social and cultural dimensions of trauma (13).

What makes the pinpointing of Jack’s traumas all the more murky is the fact that in *Outside*, the focus is placed on his constrictive environment and young age rather than the fact that he has been exposed to repeated encounters of his mother’s sexual abuse. For Ma, the focus is reversed, where much of the attention is placed on the violence that has been inflicted upon her body, where there is comparatively less concern expressed for the cognitive and psychological effects long-term

spatial confinement has on her. This is, of course, reflective of the magnitude of the different traumas that have been inflicted upon the two individuals who had lived in Room together, Jack and Ma having experiences that differ in their scope and impact both physically and psychologically. The medical professionals in Outside are immediately concerned about the bodily damage sustained by Ma while in Room, and they are quick to tend to her wrist injury and run checks on her physical health (166). For Jack, however, Ma denies any form of initial treatment for him, choosing for her child sleep and rest over any other sort of medical attention: “Jack doesn’t need *treatment*, he needs some sleep. . . . He’s never been out of my sight and nothing happened to him, nothing like what you’re insinuating” (167). Donoghue’s writing of Outside’s narrow medical and psychological approach towards the understanding the nuanced traumas of Jack and Ma—where they have both been exposed to an event that necessitates a wide berth when it comes to the classification of its type of trauma—highlights the difficulty in trying to approach the language of trauma using a specific tenet of existing psychoanalytical or psychological theory. In her essay “Subjugation, Nurturance, and Legacies of Trauma,” Vickroy examines the “psychology of oppression” that emerges from traumatic contexts which foster conditions of subjection and colonisation (36). Drawing upon Geraldine Moane’s work *Gender and Colonialism: A Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation*, Vickroy posits that mothers are at risk of developing self-knowledge issues for they “embrace the identity of satisfying others’ needs over their own and are forbidden to express their anger of individuality,” a phenomenon that becomes all the more pronounced in the context of trauma fiction (Moane 60, Vickroy 49). The stubbornness that Ma demonstrates in reaction to the implication that Jack may be hurt is indicative of how her social interest as his mother has been threatened, a symptom of the “psychology of oppression” that comes out of “dehumanizing and conflicted situations, wherein a process of internalizing oppression brings out social and psychic manifestations of trauma, such as emotional restriction, fragmented or split identity, dissociation and problems with self-knowledge” (Vickroy 36). While much of Vickroy’s

essay is centred on oppression within the context of colonialism and racial struggles, there exists an examination of domestic space and its colonisation, where the power of the mother lies in her social realm, which consists of home, her children, and herself (37). In the face of the medical professionals in *Outside*, Ma knows only that she must never let Jack out of her sight, even if it means denying her child immediate treatment (167). While Ma's language of trauma is not as explicitly addressed as Jack's, with Donoghue peppering psychological and cognitive analyses for Jack throughout the narrative, Ma still bears a unique communicative footprint which take the form of behaviours and states of mind symptomatic of sustained traumatic experience.

Beyond the collapse of communication seen in Jack and Ma in the wake of their traumatic experience, Donoghue also employs the use of nonlinear chronology to express trauma and mimic its symptoms. Temporal chronology in Donoghue's novel is reconfigured through Jack's unique manner of remembering and narrating his harrowing experience in *Room*, where his past traumas return to him in a nonlinear fashion. This technique of breaking temporal chronology is differentiated from the belated return of repressed traumatic experience as in the case of trauma fiction centred on adult survivors through the centring of Jack's memories on symbolic imagery framed by an innocuous childhood perspective. It is this added dimension to the technique of temporal nonlinearity in trauma fiction that reveals how the traumatised child, for Donoghue, allows her to expand upon existing characterisations of traumatic experience in fiction and offer an alternative form of literary expression. Donoghue's reconfiguration of linear chronology in *Room* forms part of the language of trauma that attempts to mimic the effects of trauma in the individual. For the traumatised child, the nonlinearity of their perception of time is not directly achieved through the writing of non-sequential timelines but through the intrusion of strong symbolic imagery and dreamscapes. This draws to the previous examination of how the dreamscape is used in fiction to bring out a facet of the traumatised child that is otherwise absent in the traumatised adult, that of the traumatised child's inability to separate what is real and what is fantastical. Part of how

Donoghue breaks up the linear chronology of *Room* is through the insertion of Jack's dreams, which have rhythms of their own and which take a past memory or fantasy and superimpose them unto a present space:

In the night Tooth is coming for me, bouncing on the street *crash crash crash*, ten feet tall all moldy and jaggedy bits falling off, he smashes at the walls. Then I'm floating in a boat that's nailed shut and *the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out*—

A hiss in the dark that I don't know it then it's Grandma. "Jack. It's O.K."

"No."

"Go back to sleep."

I don't think I do. (263)

The tooth that comes alive is the symbol of Ma, Tooth, a literal part of her that he keeps in his mouth all the time. His nightmare involves images of this sentimental object crashes through Outside, playing to the tune of a song that Ma used to sing to him (35). What makes the "worm" song so particularly arresting is the fact that it was sung to Jack moments before Old Nick enters Room in one instance (35). The language that Jack uses to express his traumas is at once strikingly literal and deeply symbolic, his sucking on his mother's actual tooth signalling an unshakable physical and emotional bond he has with his mother—a trait that Vickroy, drawing upon the work of Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, posits is suggestive of the crucial attachment that forms the core of the mother-child relationship and the bedrock upon which the mother's loss of self-knowledge in the face of trauma is built (Greenberg and Mitchell 221, Vickroy 46). The dream intrusions that Jack experiences have strong parallels to his circumstances in Outside, and an examination of other novels within the canon of trauma fiction reveal how this narrative strategy of chronological interruptions is used as a means of expressing traumatic experience.

The narrative strategy of nonlinear chronology employed in trauma fiction is not limited to the child perspective in works such as *Room*—an examination of other similar methods used by

novelists writing within the canon of trauma fiction but departing from the child perspective reveals just how the traumatised child is expressed differently in comparison to the traumatised adult when it comes to the narrativisation of trauma. Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending* is a novel told from the perspective of an aged Tony Webster looking back at his younger days and contemplating the inexplicability of time in terms of its passage, where certain events seem to renegotiate the temporal boundaries of one's memory. In Barnes' novel, Tony attempts to articulate a particularly traumatic event from his teenage years—later revealed to be the suicide of his close friend Adrian Finn—but finds it almost impossible to do so due to his memory slipping, resulting in him losing his sense of time. Throughout it all, Tony remains highly aware of this phenomenon: “[I]t takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing—until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return” (3). This notion of time going missing seems to echo trauma fiction's concerns with the belatedness of traumatic experience, where the traumatised individual experiences a period of latency, only to have the traumatic memory return in an often indirect manner (Caruth, “Explorations in Memory” 6). It has to be acknowledged, however, that it is potentially reductive to equate the rather nuanced childhood trauma explored in *The Sense of an Ending*, which encapsulates the amnesia and belated resurfacing in later life of traumatic experience, with that expressed by Donoghue in *Room*, which takes on the rather different phenomenon of Jack the traumatised child being unable to wholly recognise Room as his primary site of trauma. Yet, Barnes' explorations of how traumatic experience necessarily changes memory and forces the survivor of trauma to question the authenticity of their own past experience somewhat echoes what Donoghue attempts to express with the traumatised child in *Room*—the notion that trauma reconfigures the core manner in which past experience is remembered, even altering it altogether and rendering a site of trauma benign. Throughout *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony speaks repeatedly of his time with Adrian, but the details surrounding his death change with

each recollection. Tony is never able to express with lucidity his authentic memory of Adrian, the narrative darting back and forth between the events that transpired throughout his younger days, pointing to a state of indirection that can be read as being indicative of trauma fiction's mimetic mode of expression. The difference between the reconfiguration of temporal chronology in *The Sense of an Ending* and in *Room* lies in their protagonists' awareness of the fact. Barnes' traumatised adult Tony repeatedly questions the nature of his fallible memory, while Donoghue's traumatised child Jack lives in a world that conflates dream, memory, and the present within the same space.

The tenet of nonlinear chronology that is used as a narrative strategy to express trauma in fiction has strong links to the memory and its unreliability, where the recollection of a traumatic past is often distorted through the act of remembering, a phenomenon that Barnes' protagonist is lucidly aware of: "'the history that happens underneath our noses ought to be the clearest, and yet it's the most deliquescent'" (80). Tony's observation parallels Caruth's notion of the inexpressibility of trauma and how it often resurfaces in an elusive and indirect way (Caruth, "Explorations in Memory" 6). In a manner similar to Jack's remembering of his time in *Room* while in *Outside* through intrusive dream sequences, Tony struggles to hold on to a memory of his friend Adrian that remains always out of his grasp. In his essay "Divided Narratives, Unreliable Narrators, and *The Sense of an Ending*: Julian Barnes, Frank Kermode, and Ford Madox Ford," Frederick M. Holmes examines Tony's insight within the context of the narrativisation of memory, suggesting that "[s]tatements such as these are pervasive enough in the novel that they constitute a kind of metadiscourse on the limitations of perception, memory, and representation" (34). The limits of memory can be studied within the scope of trauma fiction and be thusly understood as a core mechanic used by novelists to create an effect of mimesis when it comes to the behaviours expressed in the individual that are symptomatic of traumatic experience (Whitehead 3). It must be acknowledged, though, that Holmes' essay is focused on a comparative analysis of Barnes' *The*

Sense of an Ending and Frank Kermode's collection of the same name, the critic examining how both authors challenge existing notions of memory and its linearity and reconfigure our present understanding of it in a manner that allows us to make sense of our place in the temporal plane (27). As such, Holmes' essay cannot be used to directly inform this study of the role that memory plays in trauma fiction. It can, however, provide a tangential glimpse as to how similar mechanics of memory across different texts can deepen our understanding of trauma fiction in that it allows us to draw links between the act of remembering and the rhythmic uncertainties created in the recollection of a traumatic past as we can see both with Jack and his intrusive dreams, and Tony with his inability to articulate with lucidity his time with Adrian. In her essay "Traumatic Awakenings (Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory)" Caruth posits that the study of traumatic experience brings to the surface the paradox of the individual being unable to process and understand the traumatic event even if they have direct access to it during the moment of its occurrence ("Unclaimed Experience" 91-92). Tony knows Adrian but, in the wake of the latter's death, describes their relationship differently each time he is forced to revisit it. What makes Jack's perspective in *Room* unique is the fact that, unlike with *The Sense of an Ending*, where the reader is only given access to an aged Tony looking back at his youth and its series of traumatic events, what the reader gets with Donoghue's novel is a direct expression of the key traumatic event that takes place told through the voice of their child narrator. With *Room*, the reader is able to see the mechanics of traumatic memory at work—we are led by Donoghue through the mind of Jack as he experiences intrusive dreams, and we are prompted to locate parallels between his dreams, his past years in *Room*, and his present time in *Outside*. It is in this comparison that we are able to see how Donoghue uniquely expresses the symptoms of the traumatised child, choosing to articulate the belatedness of his traumas through the disruption of temporal linearity by way of intrusive dreams. This narrative strategy is similar to what Gaiman uses in *Ocean* to interrupt the chronology of his narrator's recollection of his time with the Hemstock family, and its stark contrast to the keen self-

awareness Barnes chooses to imbue Tony with signals a principle difference between the writing of the traumatised child as compared to the traumatised adult.

Upon taking into account the above examinations of the linguistic mechanics behind Jack's unique speech and the temporal reconfiguration that takes place in *Room* by way of Donoghue's use of intrusive dreamscapes, it seems clear that the language of trauma has, at its core, a function of disruption, where social and cultural conventions when it comes to language are broken down and where chronology itself is realigned. This disruptiveness when it comes to language and time is not something that is completely unique in the traumatised child, although there are some differences that have been found between them and their adult counterpart when it comes to the modes that are used by novelists to express their language of trauma. While both *Room* and *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* demonstrate the use of a unique, fragmented mode of speech, they are written from two different perspectives—the former being that of a child and the latter being that of an adult—that each bring to their table their own specific linguistic patterns. The narration in McBride's novel is heavily stylised, deliberately written so as to create a mimetic effect of trauma when read aloud, paralleling the state of mind of an individual undergoing an intense resurfacing of traumatic experience. For Jack, what is real and made up are often the same, the symbolic taking on a literality that distinguishes it from the adult voice and uniquely marks it as an expression of the traumatised child. The rhythmic uncertainties of *Room*, where dreams frequently interrupt the chronology of Jack's life in Outside, are also different from novels written from the perspective of traumatised adults. We see that Tony has an acute sense of self-awareness of his unreliable memory that is absent in Jack, and it is that level of self-awareness that sets the traumatised adult of *The Sense of an Ending* apart from the traumatised child of *Room*. We can ultimately see, in this study of the language of trauma and the reconfiguration of temporal chronology in *Room* as compared to the novels *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* and *The Sense of an Ending*, that the traumatised child

plays a unique role as compared to their adult counterpart when it comes to how they are expressed in fiction, in turn challenging our present understanding how trauma is narrativised in fiction.

4. Morphing Dimensions: The Body and Beyond

The body in *Room* occupies an academic territory that overlaps with earlier examinations of spatial boundaries and the language of trauma. This chapter will take on Donoghue's writing of the body and demonstrate how she uses it as a means through which trauma—in particular that occurring within the child domain—is expressed, paying particular attention to Jack's physical symptoms of traumatic experience as well as the relationships he has with other characters such as Ma and the people of Outside. In *Room*, Donoghue extends the body beyond its corporeal limitations, using it as a means of expressing psychological, social and linguistic landscapes. Returning to Jain Punamiya's essay "Thinking Borderlessness: Alternative Forms of Embodiment and Reconfiguration of Spatial Realities in Emma Donoghue's *Room*," one of the key points put forward in the examination of borders and boundaries in *Room* is that of the body itself being read as a space that can be examined alongside the psychological, sociological, and linguistic domains of Donoghue's novel: "[*Room*] depicts a variety of cross-border assemblages that contain the flow of corporeal, bio-political, and affective borders in novel ways" (2). For Jain Punamiya, the bodies of Jack and Ma each reveal tenets of trauma which have been inflicted upon them, Ma's body being "terrorized through sexual violence and imprisonment," and Jack's "[occupying] a liminal space that challenges traditional concepts of home and belonging" (2). Jain Punamiya examines the bodies of Ma and Jack through the lens of abjection and the latter's subsequent othering of his mother: "For Kristeva, abjection is an othering process through which the individual attempts to maintain and protect one's psychical integrity" (Jain Punamiya 4). She draws focus to the role of the mother in abjection, where an identity is constructed through an abjection of the object that has created the individual—the mother (4). In *Room*, Jain Punamiya posits that abjection is expressed through the

writing of Ma's body, which demonstrates a strong connection to bodily parts and fluids expelled—from leaking orifices to severed fragments—in a manner reminiscent of the body purging parts of itself (4). Jack's body is intimately connected to these bodily excretions of his mother, him suckling on a tooth that has fallen out of Ma's mouth, and him constantly seeking her breast and nursing as a means of both satiating his hunger and calming his nervous energy, repetitive behaviour that the earlier chapters have examined in greater depth and revealed to be intricately linked to traumatic experience and its representation by novelists such as Donoghue.

Jain Punamiya draws particular attention to one specific scene in *Room* that can be studied within the scope of trauma fiction and the traumatised child—Jack's great escape from Room, which Jain Punamiya posits can be read as a moment in which Lacan's mirror stage in Jack is ruptured, where the child, as she establishes with reference to Kristeva, realises they are not "continuous with [their] mother's body, but separate from it" (Jain Punamiya 4). In the escape scene that marks the shift between the two distinct halves of the novel, Jack undergoes a visceral experience of Outside after a lifetime confined in Room. He enters this limitless space for the first time and has his senses overwhelmed with stimuli he has not yet been exposed to prior to his escape: "The air's different. Still the dustiness of Rug but when I lift my nose a tiny bit I get this air that's ... Outside" (Donoghue 137-138, Jain Punamiya 4). Jain Punamiya posits that "Jack's experience coming out into the Outside involves multiple levels of abjection, in Kristevan fashion, having to deal with corporeal fluids, fear, fantasies of dismemberment, and violence" (Jain Punamiya 4). What this study is interested in, is how this notion of abjection can be linked to the traumatised child as expressed in *Room* by Donoghue. Jack's first moment in Outside is earmarked by a host of physical sensations that he narrates in close detail as he tries to remember the series of steps he has to take in order to break free from the clutches of Old Nick:

Oh, I have to *Wriggle Out*, I was forgetting. I start to do like a snake, but Rug's got tighter I don't know how, I'm stuck I'm stuck. . . . Old Nick's going to take me to a place and bury

me[.] . . . I'm crying again, my nose is running, my arms are knotted under my chest, I'm fighting Rug because she's not my friend anymore, I'm kicking like Karate but she's got me, she's the shroud for the corpses to fall into the sea . . . (138)

In this passage, Donoghue creates a tapestry of bodily sensation that clearly signal intense distress, from the excretion of bodily fluids to the desperate flailing of limbs. What is arresting about this passage is that Jack—in his most vulnerable moment where he is in the most susceptible to violent danger—foresees his own death, him creating a lyrical image of his corpse falling into the sea. This is all happening while his body excretes tears and nasal mucus that Jain Punamiya links to Kristevan abjection. In her seminal work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva writes of bodily excretions being representative of the body extricating itself from the border of being alive: “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver” (3). Kristeva likens this border between life and death to an object, with the corpse being “the utmost of abjection[,] . . . something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (4). Applied to this scene in *Room*, the image that Jack creates of himself as a corpse can be read as being representative of his growing awareness of his abjection, a state of being that—when taking into account Lacan’s mirror stage and its association with the individual’s confrontation of the self in a moment of acute self-awareness—signals a key shift in Jack, one in which he progresses from being impervious to the traumas in Room, to becoming completely overwhelmed by it all at once. Jain Punamiya notes that Jack has never bled prior to leaving Room, and the fact that blood has never come out of his body until his great escape—until he leaves the space that is familiar and safe to him and enters Outside—is significant when read within the context of Kristeva’s abjection, him having to “deal with corporeal fluids, fear, fantasies of dismemberment, and violence” (Jain Punamiya 4). Building upon this observation, Jain Punamiya points out that Jack seeks comfort in keeping his mother’s tooth close to him—he tucks it away in his sock during

his great escape, and he later keeps it packed away in his mouth, chewing and suckling on it as he spends his days in Outside (Donoghue 134). For Jain Punamiya, this physical bond that is formed between Jack and Ma is indicative of him retaining a state of continuity between his body and his mother's despite him becoming increasingly aware of the world around him (4). Donoghue expresses this notion overtly through Jack's rumination, as observed by Jain Punamiya: "It's weird to have something that's mine-not-Ma's. Everything else is both of ours. I guess my body is mine and the ideas that happen in my head. But my cells are made out of her cells so I'm kind of Ma" (Jain Punamiya 4, Donoghue 142). The link that is drawn between Jack's escape from Room and his growing awareness of his own physical existence and place within the larger space of Outside demonstrates how Donoghue uses the body and the environment which surrounds it to manifest the effects of traumatic experience. In this particular scene, the physical sensations experienced by Jack are unique to the child perspective as they can only be written through the eyes of a character whose narrative occupies two distinct halves of pre- and post-consciousness existence, one that cannot be achieved through the adult perspective due to the young age at which this shift in psychological self-awareness is said to occur, as identified by Lacan.

Jain Punamiya's essay on the spatial borders of *Room* and the abject body of Jack, the traumatised child, reveals similarities to tenets of trauma fiction as explored by the key voices of the field studied in this paper, most notably Caruth and Whitehead. Jack's othering of his mother through his liminal state of selfhood, as asserted by the earlier consideration of Jain Punamiya's essay, can be read as a means through which Donoghue represents the traumatic experience of Jack. Quoting Kristeva, Jain Punamiya writes that the boundary of the abject is one that "protects and challenges physical integrity at one and the same time" (Jain Punamiya 4). The link between this notion of Kristevan abjection of the body and traumatic experience is made all the more clear when read within the lens of what Vickroy identifies as a "diminished, even shattered sense of self [that] is common in cases of severe trauma," where she adds also that this fractured perspective of the self

seems “particularly prevalent in accounts of domestic tragedies and sexual abuse” (Vickroy 23). It remains a matter of contention whether or not Jain Punamiya’s observation of Kristevan abjection as manifested in the bodies of Jack and Ma by Donoghue can be read as a direct narrative strategy through which trauma is expressed in fiction, but it seems undeniable that Jack’s great escape from Room is transformative for him both physically and psychologically. It is during this pivotal scene that he becomes acutely aware of his physical body and the space it occupies in the world—he begins to see himself as an othered corporeal entity in a sphere almost infinitely larger than the one he is used to. The small prison room from which he emerges during his great escape is one in which his physical and psychological environment is very much intertwined—he interacts with inanimate objects much like he would a human being, as explored at-length in earlier chapters of this study. The growing awareness Jack has of his body and its relationship to the world can be applied to tenets of trauma fiction when read within the context of abjection and the phenomenon of othering, which can in turn be associated with established tenets of trauma fiction. Vickroy takes on object relations in her essay in a manner that can be read meaningfully alongside what Jain Punamiya writes of Kristevan abjection, where Vickroy references D. W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality* and identifies how positive relationships that are forged between the child and the people around them creates a form of ego strength that “promotes learning processes that help make us subjects within culture” (Vickroy 24). Winnicott’s work focuses on the dynamic relationship that is formed between mother and child, where he posits that the “safety and independent recognition of the child” allow for the creation of “symbolically meaningful internal and external objects that eventually help the child to affect and respond to the environment and discover him- or herself within a cultural framework (Winnicott 95-103; Vickroy 24). Jack’s relationship with his mother’s and his own body—when read within the context of Kristevan abjection and Vickroy’s study of object relations—allows us to understand more clearly how trauma is expressed through the writing of the body. Vickroy puts forward the observation that “[t]he traumatization of mothers and missing recognition

diminishes intersubjective nurturance and can create destructive generational legacies” (25). The focus that is placed on the mother-child relationship signals its uniqueness when it comes to how we ought to approach social relationships expressed within the field of trauma fiction, especially when it involves the child, whose mental and cognitive development is greatly influenced by their social circumstances and attachments formed during their crucial early years (Vickroy 24). These explorations of Kristevan abjection and object relations as established by Vickroy, when applied to *Room* and Donoghue’s writing of Jack’s growing awareness of his corporeal reality, can be seen as a means through which the traumatised child is uniquely represented in fiction. The link between Kristevan discourse and psychoanalytical tenets like Lacan’s mirror stage—as posited by Jain Punamiya—are only applicable to individuals who are in the midst of, or are at least closely departed from, an early stage of mental development. In the case of *Room*, the perspective of the traumatised child, Jack, by virtue of his age and social environment that necessitates his dependence on Ma, can be read as a means through which Donoghue explores a facet of trauma that typically eludes adult fictional characters—that which involves a transition from Lacanian pre-consciousness to post-consciousness, where the traumatised individual becomes more aware of their abjected body that is closely associated with the fractured self of self that Vickroy identifies as being indicative of traumatic experience (23).

Beyond the growing self-awareness Jack has of his body and the role it plays in relation to the objects around him and the environment it exists within, Donoghue uses Jack’s unique perspective of the key characters of *Room* as a means through which corporeal boundaries are renegotiated, in doing so expressing how Jack uniquely experiences the traumas that are inflicted upon him in *Room*. The earlier study of Jack’s relationship with his mother and her body has demonstrated how the notion of Kristevan abjection plays into the “shattered sense of self” that emerges across experiences of traumas that entail a strong domestic and maternal component (Vickroy 23). Jack’s ability to survive the traumas in *Room* can be said to be a result of Ma’s

consistently nurturing presence and her creation of an environment that, despite its horrific realities, appears ordinary and seemingly free from trauma. Lucia Lorenzi, in her essay “‘Am I not OK?’: Negotiating and Re-Defining Traumatic Experience in Emma Donoghue’s *Room*,” views Ma’s sheltering of Jack from the realities of their circumstances as a mechanism that “calls attention to the ways in which traumatic experiences are shaped by and in conversation with the very definition of trauma that we have constructed” (20). In this manner, Donoghue uses the social environment unique to the traumatised child—where they are, ironically, oblivious to the dangers that surround them—as a means of representing another facet of traumatic experience that eludes literature written about or from the perspective of adults. Building upon this notion of the body and the environment it exists within functioning as a language of trauma, Donoghue’s writing of Jack’s dependence and overall close relationship with his mother’s body—as seen in his suckling on her tooth throughout the latter half of *Room* as a means of coping with the distressing realities of life in Outside—is unique in comparison to other character relationships in the novel, and unpacking their differences will allow us to obtain a deeper understanding of how the traumatised child is used by Donoghue to express trauma in fiction. On the other end of the spectrum of character relationships, where Ma can be considered the individual closest to Jack, lies Old Nick, who exists almost as an apparition in Jack’s eyes, a mere fragment of a human being. A juxtaposition of these two relationships against each other reveals how Donoghue reconfigures the manner in which trauma is written in literature through social relationships that are unique to the traumatised child. Ma prevents Jack from ever getting to know Old Nick as anything beyond the strange figure that enters the room at night sometimes and makes the bed creak, and Jack, in the early scenes of the novel, is only able to look at Old Nick through the slits of Wardrobe. Even Old Nick’s name is not real—Ma refers to him merely as “*him*,” and Jack refers to him as Old Nick only because of his association to a character from a cartoon series that Jack watches at night (12). Lorenzi identifies a key difference between the child narrator and their adult counterpart when it comes to their role in trauma fiction,

using Donoghue's writing of Jack's relationship with Ma and Old Nick as a point of reference:

"Because Jack is a child, his witnessing of the violence between Old Nick and Ma . . . does not necessarily project the same kinds of interpretive framework onto these experiences as those that might be conveyed by an adult narrator . . . or by a child narrator who was not always already in Room" (22). While Lorenzi does take into account the fact that Jack's relationship is as unique as it is not entirely because of the fact that he is a child, but also because of his sheltered upbringing under the close care of Ma, it is clear that Jack's inability to understand the traumas of Room are intricately linked to his being a child, as much as it is linked to his mother's sheltered raising of him.

The notion of Old Nick existing to Jack as a mere fragmentary apparition akin to a cartoon character behind a television screen—remaining forever inaccessible—hints at how Donoghue uses the contrast between the types of social relationships among characters in *Room* to express tenets of trauma, specifically that belonging to the child which cannot otherwise be easily expressed with an adult character. Lorenzi observes that Jack's inability to distinguish between people in the television from characters like Old Nick is indicative of a form of "partial perspective"—a notion derived from Donna Haraway's essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective"—that demonstrates how a study of the child perspective in fiction may validate Haraway's rejection of "singular modes of objective knowledge-formation" (Lorenzi 23). Lorenzi points to a key scene in *Room* that illuminates Jack's limited perspective on social relationships, one in which the young narrator tries to explain the difference between what exists in the real world and what exists only behind a television screen:

Mountains are too big to be real, I saw on in TV that has a woman hanging on it by ropes. . . . Men aren't real except Old Nick, and I'm not actually sure if he's real for real. Maybe half? He brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he's not

human like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. . . . I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer. (18)

What is clear in this scene is that Jack is unable to understand the reality of Old Nick's existence in his life as a result of Ma's shielding him from ever knowing in full detail the atrocities that are inflicted upon her when Old Nick comes in during the night. Prior to his great escape, Jack is only able to see the body of Old Nick in fragments, mostly when he is peeking through the slats of Wardrobe, which Ma forces Jack to hide in every time Old Nick enters the room. Through the slats that quite literally fragment Jack's experience of Old Nick, Jack creates a narrative of Old Nick based on what limited ways he can see and hear and smell from within Wardrobe—he listens to the conversations that take place between Ma and Old Nick without ever fully understanding the social contexts within which they take place and savours the “yum” of outside air that rushes into Room when the bolted door is open, piecing these sensory pieces together to form an impression of Old Nick that is limited at best, always falling short of fully understanding Old Nick's relationship with Ma and his role in Room (35). Lorenzi observes that even though Jack senses an air of malevolence about Old Nick, he does not attribute this to any of Old Nick's actions or speech—Jack is unable to articulate what he feels about Old Nick, only that Old Nick is not a human like Ma is, as evident from his association of him with a cartoon character from a television program (23). What Jack's unique perspective allows Donoghue to achieve is a reconfiguration of the reader's expectations when it comes to how trauma is expressed in fiction. Taking Old Nick's rape of Ma as a point of examination, Lorenzi notes that Jack's description of the event—with his inability to fully comprehend the violent nature of the act of sexual assault—forces the reader to actively engage in interpretive work in order to make the connection between what Jack is describing and what is actually happening, a process that takes what is typically a passive consumption of a trauma narrative and turns it into an active one that requires the reader's participation. What is created is an effect of empathy that is as poignant and powerful as it is only because it is told through this limited

perspective of Jack, and in that manner reinforces this study's argument that the traumatised child plays a key role in allowing Donoghue to express tenets of trauma that she otherwise will not be able to express with an adult narrator.

Room is not the only work of Donoghue's that explores how the body and the social relationships formed between characters are used as a means through which trauma is expressed, where the writing of the traumatised child—with how susceptible they are in the early stages of their life to be strongly influenced by their social and environmental realities—is used by novelists to represent tenets of trauma that are otherwise inexpressible through conventional narrative strategies. Donoghue's 2016 novel *The Wonder* takes on the body as a language of trauma as well, revealing how the physical effects of a traumatic experience are handled differently when manifested through a child character. The body in question belongs to Anna O'Donnell, an eleven year-old girl who is believed to have subsisted for months without eating a single morsel of food. She is kept under the watchful eye of nurse Lib Wright, an English nurse who spends the narrative keeping track of Anna's every movement, the young fasting girl seemingly defying everything the world knows of the body and its functions by thriving despite consuming nothing other than biblical scripture and heavenly song. What unfolds is a detailed study of the body under the effect of a supposed miracle—Lib spends day and night observing Anna's every move, noting her every symptom and trying her best to unravel the truth behind the young girl's logic-defying ability to sustain herself without food. The turning point of the narrative occurs when Anna begins to show physical signs of starvation, almost as if the act of scrutiny is rendering the miracle of her body's preservation through the fast ineffectual. Anna's body begins to waste away before Lib's eyes, and the narrative eventually plunges towards the revelation that the young girl had embarked on her fast with the belief that it could heal the wound of losing her brother and give him the redemption she thought he deserved. Throughout *The Wonder*, the body functions as a means through which the traumas of Anna are expressed, the deep psychological effect of losing her brother and subsequently

growing up in a highly-religious environment manifesting itself in her destruction of her own body. What makes this characterisation unique is the fact that it takes place through a young character, whose age renders her more susceptible to social and environmental influence, as established by Vickroy in her study of objection relations when it pertains to the child and the relationships that they form (24). Donoghue uses this circumstance of the young child's highly malleable mental and cognitive function to her advantage when it comes to her writing of Anna's traumas, whose self-destructive fast has strong ties to her religious upbringing. The traumatised child in *The Wonder* functions to express tenets of trauma that are otherwise inexpressible through the use of the traumatised adult, and the context of Lib being placed in an environment where she constantly and failingly tries to access the young mind of Anna makes this abundantly clear, as will the scenes that will be studied hereafter in closer detail.

The corporeal is referenced extensively in Donoghue's characterisation of people and description of spaces in *The Wonder*, giving rise to a narrative that very much draws attention to how the body itself functions as a language through which cultural, political and personal discourses can be expressed. In the opening scene, Lib looks out the window of a taxi passing through Athlone and paints a dreary picture of the town: "The few people on the macadamised road out of Athlone seemed wan, which Lib attributed to the infamous diet of potatoes and little else. Perhaps that was responsible for the driver's missing teeth too" (5). Immediately we are centred on an atmosphere of famine, the image of the body wasting away extended to Lib's description of the landscape as well, where she passes through the bogland and remarks that it is known to harbour disease (6). The first pages of the novel set the tone for the narrative to follow, a narrative peppered with imagery of a small Irish town in the midst of a "hungry season" where food is scarce and the people are growing thinner and more impoverished (7). Vickroy observes that trauma fiction novelists use the writing of physical manifestations of abuse and suffering to make the harrowing experiences of characters more accessible and real: "Trauma writers make the suffering body the

small, focused universe of the tormented and a vehicle for rendering unimaginable experience tangible to readers” (33). The body as a trauma narrative relies on the emphatic relationship that is created between character and reader, where the wounds—physical or otherwise—that are inflicted upon the former are felt by the latter through the writing of tangible corporeal torment. When Lib first hears of Anna’s inability, or unwillingness to eat, she goes through a list of possible ailments that may explain her circumstance, one of which is melancholia (13). This is immediately dismissed under the pretext that Anna is a “quiet, pious girl,” after which Lib’s immediate thought is that “religious enthusiasm” may be behind her fast (13). The truth behind Anna’s rejection of food remains unresolved, almost as if she refuses—or is simply unable—to express what it is that prevents, or compels her to fast. Much like how the reader of *Room* has to play an active role in piecing together Jack’s traumatic experience through his coping mechanisms that involve his mother’s body—her decayed tooth and her lactating breast—and his inability to see Old Nick as a whole, functional human like Ma is, the reader of *The Wonder* has to interpret Anna’s silence and self-inflicted starvation to understand the psychological burden that has resulted from her traumatic past, a psychological burden to hold herself responsible for her brother’s untimely death and to punish herself for his redemption. To build on Whitehead’s claim that trauma fiction exists to express that which eludes expression via conventional narrative modes, Donoghue’s writing of the body in *Room* and *The Wonder* reveal how the traumatised child plays a key role in her representation of a tenet of trauma that otherwise is inexpressible through adult characters, narratives of *Room* and *The Wonder* revolving around specific social circumstances that cannot exist with anyone other than a young central character.

What Donoghue’s writing of the body in *Room* and *The Wonder* also allows us to do is better understand the role the reader plays when it comes to the representation of trauma fiction, where the emphatic responses that are triggered by Donoghue’s narrativising of Jack and Anna’s traumas are as poignant and powerful as they are specifically because they evoke the mother-child relationship

that is unique to that social dynamic. The strength of the mother-child relationship in *Room* is what intensifies the traumas that are inflicted on both Jack and Ma during their time both in Room and in Outside, Ma's shielding of Jack against the harsh realities of Room and her subsequent protection of him from the prying eyes of the medical staff and journalists in Outside resulting in Jack being distanced from the full extent of the traumas that surround him. This mother-child relationship is not as evident in *The Wonder*—Lib neither is Anna's mother nor shares a deep-seated history with the young girl, the two having met only during the beginning of Lib's medical watch. Yet, what is undeniable as the novel progresses is the intimate relationship that blossoms between Lib and Anna, the Irish nurse transitioning from a cold observational stance, where she sees Anna as nothing more than a medical subject, to a more empathic and emotionally connected state, where Anna's deteriorating physical health begins to cloud Lib's ability to continue her role as distanced observer. When the two first meet and Anna addresses Lib as "missus," Lib instructs the young girl to address her as "[n]urse, . . . or Mrs. Wright, or ma'am" instead, Lib making sure even their acknowledgement of each other does not encroach their non-personal relationship (34). Lib ignores Anna's requests to know her "Christian name," and approaches her miracle with great skepticism, convinced that Anna has been maintaining her charade by secretly eating when no one is looking (35). Lib slowly begins to grow into her role as mother when she finds out that not only has Anna been truthful in her fasting, but also that her body is slowly wasting away as the days pass, a process that seems to have been triggered by Lib's watch. Much like Jack of *Room*, Anna is not conscious of the traumas she is going through, even as Lib fights eventually with the authorities for the watch to end and for Anna to be force-fed even if it means halting all progress on her medical mission and placing her own livelihood—and later on, life—in jeopardy. What this study is interested in is how Anna's deepening relationship with Lib can be aligned with what Vickroy, in her study of Winnicott's psychoanalytical works, writes of the mother having a key role to play in helping the child adapt to "less care, greater interaction, and independence with available support,"

one that allows us to better understand the mechanics behind the use of the traumatised child as a narrative strategy through which novelists represent a tenet of trauma they otherwise cannot with adult characters (47).

As Anna spends more time with Lib in that observation room, she begins to open up to Lib, eventually sharing the details of her traumatic family history—the link between Anna’s growing intimacy with Lib and the proportionate resurfacing of her previously inaccessible traumatic experiences signals the key role the mother-child relationship plays in this mode of trauma fiction. The clearest moment of this shift in Lib from nurse to mother occurs when she finds out that the heavenly “manna” that Anna claims her mother Rosaleen has been feeding her is not a figure of speech, but an actual “dose of mush” delivered to Anna through a daily kiss from her mother (221). It is in this moment that Lib becomes acutely aware of the fact that Anna’s mother is behind the “rain of abuse,” and that it was no longer safe to leave Anna in Rosaleen’s hands (222). Lib finds herself burdened with the responsibility of nursing Anna back to health, a process that proves exceedingly difficult because she is the only one who knows the secret behind Anna’s miraculous body—it is this responsibility that shifts her relationship with Anna from nurse-patient to mother-child. By the novel’s conclusion, Lib will have become Anna’s mother in all senses of the word barring a biological connection, Lib escaping the medical facility with Anna in her embrace, with the two implied to have left Athlone to start their life anew as child and adoptive mother. Vickroy sees the mother-child relationship in trauma fiction as a means through the dynamics of oppression and subjugation can be examined, her essay “The Traumatized Child as Outcast in Duras and Morisson” demonstrating how Marguerite Duras and Toni Morrison “have given voice to those silenced and marginalized by oppression and probe how individuals manifest the effects of living under subjugation in the way they carry their personal and collective histories within them” (80). While Vickroy’s essay is centred on racial subjugation and colonialist discourse, her exploration of the mother-child relationship within the scope of traumatic memory and its shaping of self-identity

and personal history remain relevant in this discussion of Donoghue's traumatised child in *The Wonder*. In her study of Morrison and Duras' works that "portray adults as preying on children and destroying their innocence," Vickroy posits that "[t]he child victims created by Morrison and Duras are the embodiment of traumatic knowledge that, once understood and articulated, would reveal fearful truths about the other characters' lives" (87). This traumatic knowledge and the fears which are associated with it take the form of a lack of understanding on the part of adult characters when it comes to the traumas of children which they can neither empathise with nor offer support for in light of their own personal concerns (88). While Lib of *The Wonder* undergoes a scope of traumatic knowledge that differs categorically from the scope of domestic violence and sexual abuse that pervades Morrison and Duras' works, she still feels the "leaden cape" of responsibility that comes from her being "the only one in the world who knew for sure that this child is meant to die," a conclusion she draws after realising that Anna's mother had done nothing even after knowing that her daughter had refused to consume even the food mush she had been feeding her (234). What Donoghue achieves here is traumatic experience in the making—apart from Anna, Lib herself finds herself stricken with the "feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis" that Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, as quoted in Vickroy's essay, put forward as being "fundamental to making an experience traumatic," where "the person [is] unable to take any action that [can] affect the outcome of events" (Vickroy 89). It is this shared struggle between Lib and Anna to articulate the silenced traumas of the latter that make their bond as powerful as it is, and the mother-child dynamic which is born out of this process only serves to make it stronger. It is no coincidence that Anna is able to verbally express the details of her traumatic past only once Lib has achieved a certain level of intimacy—an intimacy that, given the analysis above, can be described as maternal. This study posits that it is precisely this maternal bond that Lib creates with Anna that empowers Anna to articulate her traumas. Vickroy writes that the traumatised child's "recognition of [their] own assertions in a supportive social context" is what gives them the support they need to express

themselves, where “[a] child achieves differentiation in relation to the mother’s own autonomy within a particular sociocultural context,” which in this case the shared knowledge of Anna’s past in combination with their shared proximity to Anna’s traumatised body, Anna suffering directly through it, and Lib keeping it under a close watchful eye over the time the two spend together (Vickroy 47). Donoghue uses the mother-child relationship to express the role maternity plays in the articulation of trauma when it comes to child victims, and this is made evident in the above study of Lib’s evolution from nurse to surrogate mother of Anna.

This chapter has demonstrated how Donoghue uses the body as a language of trauma—she manifests the resurfacing anxieties and other such psychological symptoms of traumatic experience through the physicality of her characters, with her characterisation of Jack’s behavioural ticks and spatial awareness challenging our current homogenised understanding of how trauma is expressed in fiction. In *Room*, we are made privy to the terrorisation of Ma’s body, which is written in tandem with Jack’s growing awareness of the abjection of his body, a process that Jain Punamiya has linked to his shift from pre- to post-mirror stage consciousness (Jain Punamiya 4). For Jack, the body is a source of both comfort and anxiety—the former when he keeps a part of his mother always close to him by suckling on her tooth, and the latter when he feels an inexpressible air of dread that overcomes him as he observes Old Nick’s interactions with Ma, his body existing only as fragments from behind the slats of Wardrobe. Donoghue makes use of this unique relationship between Jack and the bodies that inhibit his world to articulate what he is unable to do so with words—his bodily reactions are the clearest way through which his experience of trauma as a young, developing child can be interpreted. Donoghue extends this narrative strategy to *The Wonder* as well, where she pushes the malleability of the developing mind to the extreme in her writing of Anna’s belief that she can save her dead brother through a never-ending fast. Anna, like Jack, slowly gains autonomy over her faculties and slowly becomes more aware of her own traumas. Through her writing of Lib and Anna’s deepening relationship, Donoghue demonstrates the role the mother-child relationship

has to play in the representation of the traumatised child, where Lib's maternal instinct is what allows Anna to articulate the traumatic past that she otherwise silences, much like how Ma has a undeniably important part to play in Jack's growing awareness of the realities of his traumas. As such, we can see, in this chapter's study of the body and social relationships in *Room* and *The Wonder*, how Donoghue uses the traumatised child as a means of challenging our existing understanding of how trauma is represented in fiction, drawing focus on how fundamental differences in cognitive function between an adult and a young, developing child allow for the unique use of the body as a language of trauma.

5. The Reader of Trauma Fiction: Witnessing and Testimony

Whitehead's paradox of trauma being at once inexpressible and yet defined by its multi-faceted mode of expression can perhaps be better understood under the context of reader-response discourse, which questions the role the reader of trauma literature has to play in shaping the way trauma is written (Whitehead 3). At the heart of reader-response theory, is the notion that literature exists to communicate not only ideas from author to reader, but also to express an experience that comes alive when imbued with the perspective of a reader who, presumably, brings to the narrative an interpretive response that allows it to be cast in a different light. Wolfgang Iser, a key figure in the field of reader-response theory, identifies, in his essay "Interaction Between Text and Reader," the two poles of literary work, the artistic and the aesthetic, where "the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (1524). The notion of the author's writing being only one half of the two-way communication that takes place between the reader and the text is one that allows us to approach the interpretive elements of trauma as a key means through which traumatic experience is not only shaped, but shared by the reader. Iser posits that "[a]s the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates to the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in

motion, too” (1524). Taking into context what this study has established thus far of trauma fiction being defined in part by its function of creating a shared experience between the reader and the text by way of the narrative modes explored in the earlier chapters, the application of reader-response theory to Donoghue’s *Room* sheds light onto the mechanics through which this effect is achieved (Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience” 6). Of Iser’s essay, what is particularly relevant is the notion that “[s]ocial communication . . . arises out of the fact that people cannot experience how others experience them, and not out of the common situation or out of the conventions that join both partners together” (1526). Here, Iser is speaking of the empathic response in readers that can be paralleled to similar ideas raised by trauma fiction critics such as Caruth and Whitehead in their study of the literary mechanics that bring out these responses. Iser identifies a gap that is created in the author’s writing of a text that requires interpretation, him stating that “the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader [is what gives] rise to communication in the reading process” (1526). For Iser, “communication in literature . . . is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment” (1527). What is evident here is the idea that there exists within the text concealed narratives that are only uncovered when the reader imprints their own history and perspective onto that presented by the narrative that is being read. To apply this to trauma fiction is to establish the fundamental driving force behind the empathic response of the reader as the gap in understanding that exists between what is written and what is being read, where what is concealed—or, in the case of trauma fiction, belated—is precisely what defines it.

Building upon Iser’s notion of literary work existing in the communicative gap formed between the text and reader, this study offers an application of reader-response theory to the expression of traumatic experience in fiction and seeks to demonstrate how Donoghue, in her writing of *Room*, remains always aware of the power of the reader of trauma fiction—of the witness to traumatic experience, particularly when it relates to the traumatised child. In her exploration of

the relationship between psychoanalysis and narrative expressions of traumatic experience, Caruth writes that “it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (“Unclaimed Experience” 3). For Caruth, this intersection is representative of an “experiential truth” that allows for the expression of a story that otherwise remains unarticulated or inexpressible (3). The “crisis of truth” that drives Caruth’s work is, in part, indicative of the fact that “trauma is not experienced as a mere repression of defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment,” where trauma is seen as not only the “repeated suffering of the event,” but also the “continual leaving of its site” (“Explorations in Memory” 10). This re-experiencing of trauma is closely tied to the act of testimony that is unique to traumatic expression, where the act of telling a story that resists articulation becomes in itself a form of communication worth examining as a narrative mode. The notion of the traumatic narrative being a form of witnessing and testimony is indicative of the shared space occupied by fiction and history, where literary discourse is used in tandem with social, cultural, and clinical discourses in a manner that is unique to the trauma cannon. Shosana Felman and Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing, Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, take on the notion of “literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing—of accessing reality,” their essays being primarily concerned with the “preservation . . . both of uniqueness of experience in the face of its theorization, and of the shock of the intelligible in the face of the attempt at its interpretation; with the preservation . . . of reality itself in the midst of our own efforts at interpreting it and through the necessary process of its textualization” (xx).

While Felman and Laub’s findings cover a broad spectrum of narrative mediums beyond the literary including psychoanalysis, contemporary history and the visual arts, their work remains relevant to this study’s examination of how the reader of Donoghue’s *Room* plays the role of the witness who enables the survival of traumatised individuals such as Jack, where traumatic experience—which is thought of as “an event without a witness”—is made accessible through the interpretation of the

reader or listener (xvii). The performative aspect of reading a work like *Room*—the act of piecing together what little is revealed in cryptic expressions of traumatic experience—will be taken on in this chapter, with Felman and Laub’s volume forming the theoretical foundation upon which the mechanics of witnessing and testimony in Donoghue’s novel will be built. What follows is an examination of the relationship between the reader and the traumatic narrative within the context of Donoghue’s traumatised child. This chapter endeavours to demonstrate how the narrative voice of Jack affords us insight into shared spaces “between narrative and history, between art and memory, [and] between speech and survival” (Felman and Laub xiii). Jack’s mode of expression, as examined earlier in this study, is unique beyond his use of unconventional grammatical syntax in speech—it involves his perspective of the social and cultural norms that surround him both in *Room* and *Outside*, one that reveals how his traumatic experience has shaped the way he sees the world and communicates with the people in it. As the witness to Jack’s traumatic experiences both in *Room* and in *Outside*, the reader of *Room* is subject to a process of interpretation that demands contextualisation beyond the text in addition to a textual articulation of context, where “the very *tension between textualization and contextualization* . . . might yield new avenues of insight, both into the texts at stake and into their context—the political, historical, and biographical realities with which the texts are dynamically involved and within which their particular creative possibilities are themselves inscribed” (Felman and Laub xv).

Donoghue’s writing of *Room* using the first-person narrative allows her to take on the unique perspective that Jack offers on trauma and its representation, where Jack is unable to experience trauma the same way his mother does as a result of the latter’s shielding of the former from the truth of their harrowing circumstance, and where the reader is then engaged to play an active interpretive role to give credence to the harrowing experience of the traumatised child of *Room*. Returning to Lorenzi, whose essay “‘Am I Not OK?’: Negotiating and Re-Defining Traumatic Experience in Emme Donoghue’s *Room*” has been studied in the earlier chapter for its

exploration of what the multiple perspectives of a shared traumatic experience in *Room* can achieve in terms of revealing the mechanics behind which trauma is expressed by novelists, it is clear that Donoghue's choice of narrative perspective in *Room* is specific to the effect it achieves when it comes to creating an air of ambivalence as to whether or not Jack understands the trauma he is undergoing, which in turn expresses the multiplicity that forms the core of trauma theory and its application in fiction: "As with first-person narratives of trauma such as those found in works of life-writing, voicing stories from the perspective of the victim risks inciting a form of affective appropriation of a particular subject position, causing the reader to either over-identify or misidentify with a character's experience of violence" (21). In the case of *Room*, Donoghue's writing of the narrative from Jack's perspective results in the reader having to piece together the harrowing events that unfold in *Room* based on his innocuous observations, where he never explicitly narrates Old Nick's sexual abuse of his mother because he lacks the vocabulary to articulate it. It is never clear if Jack truly understands the nature of the trauma that surrounds him, but it is clear that he senses the danger that accompanies Old Nick: "When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don't know what would happen if I didn't count, because I always do" (37). He is drawn to the traumatic event even though he does not know why, keeping himself awake and making sure to listen to the entire ordeal even though Old Nick's voice makes his "chest start to go *dung dung dung*" and every slightest change, like the sudden switching off of Lamp, makes him jump even though he is not one to typically mind the dark (36). A powerful connection is created here between the text and the reader, with the latter having to interpret the details of the traumatic event through the lens of a character whose limited perspective results in a reality that can be far more harrowing than what is let on. Vickroy puts forward the observation that trauma narratives seek to "expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalised, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterises

traumatic memory and warns us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended” (3). This suggests trauma narratives have a strong sociological component which aids in the expressing of that which is inherently inexpressible, the act of telling a story becoming the means through which the experience of trauma becomes tangible and relatable. In the case of *Room*, both the emphatic reaction created in the reader and the gap that is formed between the text and the reader’s understanding of it is accentuated with the child narrator. The limited perspective of Jack—in part due to his young age and in part due to Ma’s choice to shelter him from the harsher realities of Room—is used by Donoghue to accentuate the “mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit” that Isler posits forms the foundation upon which communication between text and reader is built (Isler 1527). The reader, in their filling in of the details of the traumatic events in Room using their imagination based on what little is offered by Jack, takes on a performative role that brings them as almost close to the narrative as a character within in. This is made all the more powerful with Donoghue’s use of the traumatised child, whose very innocuous and sheltered nature necessitates a more active participatory position on the part of the reader.

Beyond the role of the reader as interpreter of the implicit in text, the act of narrating a traumatic experience, when examined within the discourse of testimony, reveals how trauma literature can potentially serve a healing function that evokes active participation on the part of the reader—or, in this case, listener. Texts such as Donoghue’s *Room*, in their being written from the perspective of the traumatised child, provide insight onto the process of testimony and post-trauma recovery that may not be as apparent with typical accounts of traumatic testimony for they do not involve the period of latency that often accompanies trauma literature written from the perspective of adult survivors. Dori Laub, in his essay ““Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,”” draws an explicit link between the act of listening to a traumatic account and the creation of an empathic response that is unique to the speaker-listener dynamic:

[T]he listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (“Testimony” 57-58)

The traumatised child, with their limited vocabulary and perspective of the world that differs vastly from their adult counterparts, can be seen as a narrative mode that serves to express tenets of traumatic expression that are otherwise elusive to the traumatised adult. The link drawn between this narrative mode of self-expression in fiction and the act of listening to an account of a survivor of real traumatic experience is of course built upon a key assumption that the literary and the historical can necessarily be examined alongside each other to reflect a singular mode of traumatic expression. This study remains acutely aware of the fact that Laub’s examination of the act of bearing witness is situated upon the traumas of the Holocaust and can thus never be used as a direct means of interpreting fictive narrations of traumatic experience. However, what remains relevant to this study is the process of healing that accompanies this act of bearing witness, a process that calls upon alternative modes of representation, one of them being the literary narrative, which has been established earlier in this study as one of the means through which the symptoms of PTSD, as identified by Caruth, can be narrated (Caruth, “Explorations in Memory” 3-4). In Donoghue’s *Room*, Jack’s narration does not read like a conventional historical account of traumatic experience. It is written in present tense, and much of the focus is placed on the everyday experiences of childhood—the reader is slowly made aware of the horrific realities of his circumstance through this innocuous narration. In this manner, the text calls upon the reader to play the duplicitous role of interpreter and listener, where they have to at once try to understand the implicit in the narrative and offer engage in an emphatic relationship with Jack. What complicates this process is the reader’s inability to identify the nature of Jack’s testimony in that they have to guess at whether or not Jack

has full understanding of his traumatic experience. Jack, with his peculiar perspective on object and spatial relations, creates a testimony that seems lacking in the belatedness or latency that is typically associated with adult accounts of trauma. In the closing scene of *Room*, Jack returns to his site of trauma and notices all that has changed:

We step through Door and it's all wrong. Smaller than Room and emptier and it smells weird. . . . Bed's here but there's no sheets or Duvet on her. Rocker's here and Table and Sink and Bath and Cabinet but no plates and cutlery on top, and Dresser and TV and Bunny with the purple bow on him, and Shelf but nothing on her, and our chairs folded up but they're all different. Nothing says anything to me. (319)

Jack narrates his experience in a manner that seems primed to evoke great empathy in the reader, especially when taking into account the reader's knowledge of all that had transpired in *Room*—Jack, the boy who treats the inanimate objects of *Room* as his friends, finds himself in a space where they have been silenced and have been made different. Jack, upon his return to *Room*, finds it defamiliarised, an phenomenon that Lorenzi writes is not suggestive of Jack's belatedness to his traumatic experience, but to Jack's inability to recognise the events of *Room* as traumatic (19-20). Taking into account the emphatic response that is created in the reader in their interpreting of the traumatic events of the novel through Jack's eyes and the subsequent shared emotional responses to the experience of trauma as identified by Laub, it seems that the reader is able to access the traumas of *Room* better than Jack himself is able to. Lorenzi approaches this rift in traumatic experience by suggesting that the "*external framing* of Jack's experiences in *Room*" are more traumatic for him than "his experiences in and of themselves," referring to how Jack is unable to understanding the episodes of trauma in *Room* as they occur, but yet seems able to develop an acute response to the perpetrators of trauma—Old Nick, in particular—and is able to recognise them as dangerous, as established in the previous chapter (20). In this study's application of reader-response discourse to *Room* and how it ties in with Donoghue's use of the traumatised child as a narrative strategy

through which trauma is expressed, the gap that is created between Jack's experience in *Room* and his limited understanding of it can be bridged with the role of the reader, who plays the part of the interpreter of the events and who takes on the burden of experiencing the emotional effects of traumatic experience that are otherwise left unarticulated in Donoghue's central character. The reader, with this relationship with the text and thus with Jack, takes on the role of witness to this narration of traumatic experience, and, with their shared empathic responses to the text, undergoes a process that mirrors that of healing through testimony, where the child speaker—in this case, Jack—is used by Donoghue to express a tenet of trauma fiction that otherwise remains inaccessible with adult characters.

It is in the closing scene of *Room* that we can most clearly see how Donoghue's traumatised child has complicated the divide between the everyday and the traumatic—Jack, in his narration of his post-trauma life, offers an alternative way for us to approach the healing process of trauma and how we access traumatic memory, where the reader of *Room* plays a larger role in articulating the traumas that are expressed in comparison to the reader of a text narrated from the perspective of an adult. Laub identifies the process of testimony as one that is fundamentally of “facing loss—of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing—which entails yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss” (91). Applying this lens to the testimony of Jack—focusing on the final scene of the novel in which he revisits his site of trauma—reveals how the traumatised child is used by Donoghue to reconfigure our current understanding of trauma and how it is represented in fiction. Jack's goodbye to the room is surprisingly devoid of any hint of the pathological symptoms of traumatic experience or even of healing, where he simply says: “I look back one more time. It's like a crater, a hole where something happened. Then we go out the door” (321). Jack sees Room not as a site of trauma, but an everyday space in which everyday events have transpired—it is through this representation of Jack's perspective on the harrowing events of *Room* that the reader is forced to consider what truly constitutes trauma for the

young survivor. In Donoghue's writing of *Outside* being far more traumatising for Jack than *Room*, as put forward in the earlier chapters, what is made clear is the notion that Jack's experiences are not inherently traumatic—they are framed as traumatic through the external social circumstances that surround his childhood. Jack's mother makes the conscious choice to prevent Jack from truly accessing the realities of his surroundings—in “protecting Jack from pathologization, . . . *Room* calls attention to the ways in which traumatic experiences are shaped by and in conversation with the very definitions of trauma that we have constructed,” definitions which take into account the role of the reader as interpreter and witness (20). Lorenzi posits that “*Room* demonstrates that trauma is not only steeped in complexity . . . but that it is also part of a series of organizing principles that need to be fundamentally interrogated for the various mythologies and assumptions that they bring to and sometimes impose upon individual experiences of violence” (32). In line with this approach towards representations of trauma in fiction, this study puts forward the claim that Donoghue is able to achieve this very complexity in her literary expression of trauma because she is able to assimilate apply the unique perspective and modes of communication of the traumatised child to our current understanding of trauma, thereby challenging it and forcing us to reconsider an alternative reading of how it should be represented.

Conclusion

How is our understanding of trauma theory and its application in fiction complicated by the child protagonist? How do authors such as Donoghue make use of those very complications as part of their narrative strategy and offer an alternative approach to existing trauma discourse that—in its present state—fails to satisfactorily account for the unique ways in which trauma is processed by, and manifested in, the child? I have endeavoured to seek answers to these very questions through a study of a variety of texts that are centred on, or are written from the perspective of, young characters. The underlying premise that has driven this paper's approach is Whitehead's principle

paradox of trauma fiction being a narrativisation of an experience that inherently resists representation and offers an alternative take on what constitutes trauma fiction, a paradox that has been formed out of her study of Caruth's trauma discourse and the "collapse of understanding" that problematises the relationship between the traumatic event and its representation in fiction (Whitehead 5). Chapter one has established the theoretical foundation upon which the paper rests, beginning with an analysis of Caruth's "crisis of truth" and later delving into Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and has set out to demonstrate how the treatment of traumatic experience in fiction has been homogenised to exclude the nuanced perspectives that the child character offers (Caruth, "Explorations in Memory" 6).

The narrative strategies that have emerged to form the core of trauma fiction can be read as attempts at articulating an experience that resists representation. Much of present trauma discourse revolves a singular interpretation of the relationship between the traumatic event and the effect it has on the individual, where the predominant voices of the field—such as Caruth, Whitehead and Vickroy—have established a scope of stylistic and thematic properties which are unique to trauma fiction. Trauma fiction, for Whitehead, seeks to mimic the "forms and symptoms" of traumatic experience "so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (3). These narrative strategies that have been established as being unique to the representation of traumatic experience in fiction have been challenged by this study's examination of the traumatised child. This paper has approached the representation of trauma in fiction through a series of stylistic and technical lenses that have been applied primarily to Donoghue's *Room*, with a selected range of related texts being examined comparatively. Chapter two demonstrates how sites of trauma, both physical and fantastical, are differently used by Donoghue has a narrative strategy to renegotiate our present understanding of trauma fiction. The following chapter takes on the language of trauma and examines how the unique speech of Jack complicates what we know of how trauma is rendered through language. The distinct voice that the

traumatised child brings to the realm of trauma fiction is made all the more clear when read alongside McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, a novel that seeks to manifest the forms and symptoms of trauma through the use of grammatical syntax and vocabulary that is unique to its protagonist.

While trauma has been established as a wound of the mind, much of its representation in fiction is still anchored on the writing of the body. Chapter four takes on Donoghue's use of the corporeal as a means of expressing trauma specific to the child. It demonstrates how Donoghue's other novel, *The Wonder*, offers a unique point of comparison to *Room* when it comes to examining how the physical is intricately linked to the psychological and emotional when it comes to the manifestation of the symptoms. Beyond the body, trauma fiction is also unique in that it hinges on the emphatic response that is created in the reader. The final chapter offers a reading of Donoghue's *Room* through the lens of witnessing and testimony, and applies reader-response discourse to trauma fiction as a means of better understanding the mechanics behind the emphatic response that is created in the reader of trauma fiction.

In bringing together present trauma discourse and the new approaches to the field proffered by Donoghue through her use of the traumatised child, I have sought to articulate a need for us to reexamine some of the key assumptions that are being made of trauma theory and its representation in fiction. Donoghue's traumatised child has allowed her to complicate existing narrative strategies that have been employed by novelists to mirror the forms and symptoms of trauma. In her writing of Jack in *Room*, Donoghue has taken the narrative strategies conventionally associated with trauma fiction and reconfigured them through her use of the traumatised child, who necessitates an expansion of those very stylistic and thematic narrative traits that have been applied to fiction due to the traumatised child's occupying of a physical, psychological, and emotional space that is inherently different from that of the traumatised adult.

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