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The All-Knowing Narrator’s Mental Sanctuary

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Abstract

In the year 1946, German author Anna Seghers wrote her semi-autobiographical novella The Outing of the Dead Schoolgirls during her exile in Mexico (during 1941 to 1947). She had suffered from both physical and emotional traumas, having met with a car accident and having lost her mother while still in exile. This essay explores how Seghers’ use of childhood memory as a trope to work through trauma allows the protagonist a mental space that acts as a sanctuary to recover from trauma. The essay argues that Seghers attempts to reunite the protagonist with her mother but the plot disallows this anticipated trajectory. The protagonist’s failure to meet her mother demonstrates that a survivor (like Seghers) is unable to obtain closure, therefore causing them to repeatedly revisit the traumatic memory. The essay utilises the explanation of Dominick LaCapra, a trauma theorist and Holocaust historian, that the desire for a connection with the “dead intimates” causes trauma survivors to “invest” in the trauma memory by reliving and prolonging the experience as a “necessary commemoration or memorial” that the dead did not receive (23). These survivors are often provoked by their experiences of the war leaving the individual with recurring reminders of the dead and their memories of them. The desire to return to these memories and to commune with the dead complicates the process of working through the trauma that would enable victims to recover from their emotional and mental scars.

Keywords: Trauma, Sanctuary, All-Knowing Narrator, Childhood, Memory
I. Introduction

German author Anna Seghers wrote her semi-autobiographical novella *The Outing of the Dead Schoolgirls* during her exile in Mexico from 1941 to 1947. She had suffered from both physical and emotional traumas after she met with a car accident and lost her mother. Critics have noted that these experiences may have shaped Seghers’ work by triggering traumatic memories and provoking the desire to commune with her loved ones. Seghers names the protagonist, Netty, after her own nickname and gives her the powers of an all-knowing narrator. Netty desires to return to Germany after being exiled to Mexico, and she eventually slips into a dreamscape of her childhood in Mainz, Germany. In this fantasy, she bridges the distance between Mexico and Germany and joins her best friends, Leni and Marianne, her peers and teachers on an outing, anticipating to eventually meet her mother. Given the protagonist-narrator’s ability to foretell the future, we learn that all these characters die prematurely. The fate of her mother evades even the all-knowing narrator, where ultimately, Netty fails to reconnect with her mother. Seghers’ use of childhood memory as a trope to work through trauma allows the protagonist a mental space that acts as a sanctuary to recover from trauma. However, despite Seghers’ attempts to reunite the protagonist with her mother, the plot disallows this anticipated trajectory. The protagonist’s failure to meet her mother demonstrates that a survivor (like Seghers) is unable to obtain closure, therefore causing them to repeatedly revisit the traumatic memory.

The trauma theorist and Holocaust historian, Dominick LaCapra, explains that the desire for a connection with the “dead intimates” causes trauma survivors to “invest” in the trauma memory by reliving and prolonging the experience as a “necessary commemoration or memorial” that the dead did not receive (23). These survivors are often provoked by their experiences of the war, leaving the individual with recurring reminders of the dead and their memories of them. The desire to return to these memories and to commune with the dead complicates the process of working through the trauma that would enable victims to recover from their emotional and mental scars. Therefore, LaCapra’s argument explains Seghers’ protagonist’s motivation for wanting to revisit the memory of her mother and school friends. The unsuccessful reunion allows the protagonist to continue “investing” in this trauma to commemorate the death of her loved ones.
II. Creating the Perfect Sanctuary

The story begins in a place that is foreign to Netty, where she describes Mexico’s physical environment to be dull and monotonous that lacks life and fervour. Netty also describes her desire to return home to Germany, which reveals how the dreamscape is a coping mechanism for her to deal with her trauma.

She eventually experiences a transition from her physical state in Mexico to a mental state of reliving her time in Germany. This transition proves that Netty is unstable as she is unable to identify the state she is in whether she is physically in Mexico or mentally in Germany. The repetitive words utilised in the introductory paragraphs such as “motionless”, “weakness”, “exhaustion” and “fatigue” evoke negative emotions that hint towards a dreadful physical environment and mental state, which causes her to be mentally unstable. The emphasis on the state of instability and lethargy reveals Netty’s physical and mental state as weak and almost paralysed due to the heat and exhaustion from her unfamiliar environment because of the distance she is away from home in Germany. She is not physically and mentally strong and able to carry on in here journey to whichever destination she is headed towards. The protagonist’s instability and vulnerability makes her liable to slip into a hallucination to possibly relive her trauma.

Netty had spotted “something green” and made her way towards it, and she heard a “creaking” sound that came from the garden (615). Before she knew it, she enters a green garden as compared to the vast contrast of her original physical state in Mexico, which was dry and hot. Netty’s physical movement towards the garden represents the metaphorical movement towards her childhood memory. The movement is due to the longing and desire for a journey back home, where the survivor finds comfort and familiarity of loved ones. Netty’s “longing for bizarre, eccentric adventures” creates a disturbance and restlessness within her, which makes her realise that “there was only one more venture which could spur [her] on: the journey home” (Seghers 615). The desire has become the sole mission for Netty to strive towards, thus creating the opportunity for a portal for her to enter the past through the “open gateway”.

Netty is unable to identify whether she is hallucinating her childhood in Germany amidst her physical present state in Mexico. The garden becomes a liminal space for Netty between Mexico and
Germany. LaCapra argues that whilst in a liminal state, the individual experiences the blurring of distinctions and certainties such as the confusion of past and present, the self and other, which are processes of recovering from trauma (21). The confusion of the temporal space of past and present affects the individual’s ability to navigate her unstable state, where the protagonist would be susceptible to the changing nature of her spatial state. The protagonist explains that she was led to a residential area and she “walked through the open gateway” where she saw a garden (Seghers 615). This “open gateway” is a symbolic representation of Netty walking into the garden which is a space containing her past. LaCapra points out that the trauma survivor’s unstable mental state causes him or her to be unable to distinguish between the past and the present. Therefore, their unstable mental state allows them to enter the memory of trauma without difficulty and hindrance.

Due to the unstable physical and mental spaces, there is no prediction or certainty of when the trauma memory would be triggered in the victim. Cathy Caruth, building on Sigmund Freud’s concept of trauma, demonstrates that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Since trauma is beyond understanding, it allows the survivor the freedom to explore the reliving of the memory that enables them to work through the trauma. Netty’s mind relapses into her childhood memory in Mainz, which becomes a sanctuary for her process of working through the trauma. Netty provides full disclosure of her experience in the garden, where she “could smell the garden’s greenness, all the time growing fresher and more luxuriant” (Seghers 616). The description of the garden mirrors the likeness of the Garden of Eden, which is a paradise with the fresh greenery that surrounds her. This garden is a safe space for Netty to rehabilitate from the trauma she has been exposed to, thus eradicating the lethargy she previously experienced before entering the garden. However, despite its Eden-like qualities of purity and naivety, it is insufficient for Netty to recuperate from her trauma. In Christian mythology, after man sinned, he was cast out of the paradise of Eden. Segher’s decision to use a garden, likens the trauma victim to the fallen man because both have been evicted from a once safe and sacred place. However, the trauma victim is unable to heal from his or her trauma in the garden like Eden.
Therefore, the garden in this novella functions as a sanctuary rather than a paradise of Eden, as it is a sacred place solely for the victim to work through his or her trauma.

A sanctuary is described as a sacred place that is protected from harm, it is for individuals who are afraid and without shelter. For Netty, she feels a sense of familiarity in her childhood memory that allows her to seek refuge and relive the moments of joy and happiness while working through the trauma. From the perspective of trauma survivors, LaCapra notes that the “excess of trauma” can become “an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy” (23). The overwhelming experience of trauma that taunts the individual may potentially lead them to seek refuge in the trauma itself as a coping mechanism. Thus, Netty’s use of childhood memory as a familiar and “uncanny source” is justified as it brings her joy and happiness. Her childhood memory is transformed into a sanctuary that provides her the same security. Instead of the physical sanctuary, Netty constructs a mental refuge as she undertakes “the journeys home” through the recreation of her childhood. It becomes a bubble of protection that gives her comfort and security amidst the harsh reality in her present physical location, Mexico. She enters the sanctuary on her own accord through the “open gateway”, without force and intrusion in the sacred space.

Seghers constructs the narrator’s burdens based on her personal life where she had suffered from both physical and emotional traumas. Seghers uses this space to empower her protagonist, which allows her to regain her strength. Netty expresses that the sanctuary has brought her closer to recovery from the hurts and burdens she carried from outside the garden. The burden that Netty bore was from the loss of her friends and her family during WWII and her displacement from her home as she currently resides in a foreign place, Mexico. She comes to a realisation that the weight of her lethargy and emotions has been lifted upon entering the garden:

As I continued to look around me I found I could breathe more freely and my heart filled with a wave of happiness. The heavy burden of depression that had weighed on every breath I drew had vanished without my noticing it. As a seed draws life from the earth in which it is planted, so too the gentle curves of this countryside filled my very being with joy and gladness. (Seghers 619-20)
Netty’s exclamation about her experience reveals that this sanctuary aided in alleviating her “depression” that weighed her down. She feels a sense of relief and comfort after spending time with her best friends, Leni and Marianne, who are sources of familiarity. The elation she experiences in her “being” is due to the spatial presence that encompasses the serenity and the natural environment. The imagery of the seed taking life from the earth represents how Netty is assimilated into the purity of her childhood and receives energy from the pure earth. This analogy reveals how the earth has healing elements and acts as a sanctuary for the trauma victim.

Although Seghers does not describe much of Netty’s present physical presence in Mexico, she reveals the emotional burdens that Netty carries despite living faraway from her family and friends, who were in Germany. After suffering from the physical trauma of the car accident and the emotional trauma of the passing of her mother, these traumas added the emotional burden unto Seghers, which led her to write this novella that allowed her to work through her traumas.

III. The Childhood Sanctuary

Seghers uses the mode of a childhood memory of a school outing to work through the trauma. The use of childhood represents a mental sanctuary for the narrator who is physically present in Mexico. Critic of representations of childhood, Debbie Pinfold asserts, “like all Romantic depictions of childhood, it does not spring from a purely regressive impulse. Rather, like Romantic writers, Seghers turns to childhood in an attempt to imagine an alternative, better future” (24). Even as Pinfold argues that childhood enables the narrator to “imagine an alternative” and “better future”, it is also crucial to note that the all-knowing narrator foretells the future of the children in the novella. Children typically represent joy and hope of the future rather than despair, yet Netty witnesses the unfortunate fate of her friends whom she mourns for. Therefore, Seghers’ decision to use childhood as a genre draws attention to the purity of these girls who are devastatingly transformed by the horrors of wartime. This purity refers to the state of being innocent and clean with no blemishes, which the mode of the childhood allows for.

Seghers places the emphasis on the purity of the children as observed through Netty’s interaction with her friends. Similar to Leni’s features, she describes Marianne to have “nothing but serenity and grace showed in her face; her features were as noble and well-proportioned... She was as
free as a flower from any sign of selfishness, guilt, or indifference. I immediately forgot everything I knew about her and rejoiced to see her” (617). In the story, Marianne eventually betrays her friendship with Leni and refuses to help her during the WWII. The narrator’s focus on the childlike features of “serenity and grace” speaks of the purity of a girl. She provides great detail of what Marianne lacks such as “selfishness, guilt, or indifference” even when she had betrayed a friendship which is an issue undeserving of forgiveness. Unable to believe whom Marianne has transformed into, Netty turns her attention to the optimism and glow that a child exuberates that causes her to forget the horrors of Marianne’s actions and of the war. The amplification of the childlike purity enables Netty to feel comforted and safe in this sanctuary to relive her memory with her friends. Pinfold suggests that “for Seghers, childhood is a source of positive potential, both morally and politically, the inner core of human values” (26). The childhood memory serves to provide a positive interpretation of the text so as to alleviate the horrific tragedy of WWII.

Through the descriptions of her friends, Netty’s juxtaposes their youthful and pure description with the violence that took place later in their life, which points to the fatal determinism of the text. She wonders “why no sign of the violent events that had ruined her life could be seen in Leni’s face. It was clear and smooth like a peach and showed not the slightest mark, not the slightest scar, from the blows dealt by the Gestapo when they arrested her…” (Seghers 616-7). Leni’s characterisation illustrates the juxtaposition of child innocence and violence of war that could potentially leave scars on the individual. The absence of visible scars speaks of the innocence and purity of childhood, where not even the “slightest” intrusion of violence in this sanctuary is permissible. The rejection of violence reinforces the purpose of the sanctuary offered to Netty as a space of tranquil and purity that protects her from external harm. However, Netty’s ability to predict the future allows her to see the “violent events” that occurred in Leni’s life, which causes the childhood and violent memories to conflate with one another. This conflation enables the historical telling of the impact that the Gestapo’s forceful tactics has left on the civilians.

The childhood space is met with the conflict and withstands the tensions from the horrors of war that threatens the serenity of the sanctuary because of the foretelling of the fates and actions of the girls. Pinfold points out that “at this stage the girls are still free to follow their own positive
inclinations and while some continue to do so into adulthood, only to fall victim to the Nazi era, in the case of Marianne and Nora, Nazi ideology prevails” (24-5). While Seghers utilises childhood to provide hope and optimism to look toward a life of bountiful opportunities, it also presents a distortion of childhood purity that leads to a bleak future of adulthood. The Nazi regime has transformed many individuals to behave savagely and turn their backs on friends, like Marianne and Leni, just for survival.

IV. The All-Knowing Narrator

The function of the all-knowing narrator reveals the helplessness of humanity when confronted by the mortality during the bloodshed of WWII. Netty is privileged with the foreknowledge of what would occur to her peers and teachers. After describing the behaviours of her classmates and teacher, she provides the details of their future, how they live their adulthood and how they died. The first instance is when Netty discovers the fate of her best friends and what they had done to one another. She is puzzled at Marianne’s betrayal in the future, when presently she treats Leni with kindness and gentleness. As Marianne helps her friend off the seesaw, she “couldn’t possibly have refused coldly and bluntly to help Leni later. She couldn’t possibly have made the reply that she took no notice of the girl who once happened to have been her form mate at school” (618). The foreshadowing that the narrator is granted reveals the irony of their friendship that would end up in betrayal. The repeated phrase “couldn’t possibly have” speaks of her refusal to acknowledge how the future of the friendship would turn out between the two girls. Her disbelief attests to how the ability to be omniscient leaves her helpless and desolate.

In another example, Netty’s observes a close student-teacher relationship and foresees it turning sour due to the political climate during the WWII. During the Third Reich, the ethnic paranoia towards the German Jewish sparked friction in existing relationships. Seghers herself was a Jewish, she would have experienced similar backlashes from her friends who may have possibly treated her the same way. Thus, she explores the hypocrisy of the young girls who were innocent and once friendly towards their Jewish friends. Fraulein Sichel is described as the students’ “favourite teacher” (621) whom Nora pours coffee for. However, the turn of events occurs due of the teacher’s Jewish ethnicity. The narrator provides the brief biography of Nora’s life as an adult:
“she joined the Nazi Women’s Organisation of our town. … During the first World War, in a section of the Women’s Volunteer Service which provided food and water to soldiers on the march, she would still be pleased to have the same hours on duty as Fraulein Sichel. But later she would rudely chase the same teacher, now old and shaky, off the bench by the Rhine because it was one prohibited to Jews” (621).

The twist of events between Nora and Fraulein Sichel reveals the contradiction in the student-teacher relationship. Nora’s allegiance to the Nazis supersedes her relationship with her “favourite teacher”, causing her to renounce it. Through the use of her foreknowledge, the narrator mentions that Nora “would still be pleased” to work with her teacher. However, in the following sentence the narrator states, “she would rudely chase” her teacher. This contradictory action sheds light on Nora’s inconsistency as a friend and how she is no longer the naïve child but a shrewd adult. The stark contrast in action is the result of the narrator’s foreknowledge, which Seghers uses as a technique to highlight the savagery during wartimes. For the sake of one’s survival during war, personal relationships, as seen in the cases of Marianne and Leni, and Nora and Fraulein Sichel, are betrayed.

Netty is aware of her omniscient role in the text, which complicates her reliability as an all-knowing narrator in the text. Before she describes the details of her teacher’s hair she says, “it suddenly flashed through my mind, as though I were guilty of a sin of omission, that it was my bounden duty to notice and record the smallest details” (621). The details that “flashed through” her mind points to how the analeptic memory of teacher’s appearance intervenes with the proleptic telling of the teacher’s future. Analeptic narration is the “‘flash back’ to relate to an event which happened in the past” and proleptic narration is a ‘flash forward’ that anticipates the future event (Barry 235). The analeptic and proleptic elements of memory collide with one another, as the narrator simultaneously foretells the fate of the teacher and reflects on the past (which is the current physical and present state of Netty). She admits that she is possibly “guilty” of omitting certain information, yet she acknowledges that as a narrator it is her “duty to notice and record” the details of her memory. Her self-reflexivity underlines the importance as a narrator not to omit details as she recounts the stories and fates of her friends. However, readers need to question if her recollections of the past are accurate even to the minute detail.
The narrator’s interiority grants readers access to Netty’s thoughts and feelings about the fate of her friends. Readers are encouraged to relate to her helplessness in being unable to warn her friends about their fates. Critic, Birgit Maier-Katkin, whose work explores literary representations of memory and identity, opines that Netty’s observation of the characters “allows her to move between the behaviors of groups and individuals, to examine morality, complicity, and political behaviour not only in the public but also in the private sphere” (370). The omniscient function gives her leeway to piece the trauma together to tell the fates of her friends. The information she narrates is disruptive to the plot and it reinforces the impending doom of human mortality that they cannot escape from. The fate of the characters is death – thus it justifies her decision to articulate their lives and give voice to the voiceless of the war. This knowledge permits Netty to navigate through the complicated friendships and the ironic shift in relationships in order for survival in a tense political environment of WWII. The omniscient narrator serves as a social commentary about the lives of the Germans during WWII, allowing readers to see how the war disrupts the peace and harmony of friendships.

V. No Closure: A Reason to Revisit

At the end of the novella, Netty approaches her flat and attempts to climb the stairs to the second level where her mother is waiting for her at home. As she climbs up the stairs she is filled with exhaustion and the “stairs were swimming in a haze”, preventing her from completing her “journey home” (Seghers 638; 615). Netty anticipates her own journey coming to an end, “Again I felt a tinge of fear as I turned into my own street, as though I would have a foreboding that it was destroyed” (637). She is filled with fear with the expectation that her street would be destroyed. However, she brushes it off and continues her journey home. The foreshadowing destruction happening within her memory is a sign that the sanctuary is falling apart because it is the first occurrence where Netty describes her present state.

As Netty walks up the stairs, the adjectives used to describe her journey up are the same as when she was in Mexico before entering the garden. She felt “far too tired” and the “haze of exhaustion” had “enveloped” everything”, which caused the staircase to look “endless and inaccessible” where she “felt a similar dread that some disaster could stop [her] from seeing her [mother] again” (638). The repeated adjectives signal the coming to an end of this remembrance of
her loved ones, where she is returning to the same state as when she first entered. The state of confusion destabilises her mental state again, which threatens to remove her from her sanctuary and push her back to her physical reality in Mexico.

Eventually, Netty fails to meet her mother and cries out:

What a pity! – I would so love to have been hugged by my mother. But I am too tired to climb the stairs, whenever shall I find my strength to reach the village higher up in the mountains where I started from and where I am expected at nightfall. (Seghers 638-9)

She expresses her deepest desire to have been embraced by her mother but she fails due to her exhaustion. Netty ponders about the next time she is able to gather her strength to reach the mountains, the peak where it is her final destination of reuniting with her mother. The serene imagery of the mountains provides a similar description of a sanctuary-like environment that hints towards a possibility of another space to work through her trauma. With the tranquillity of the mountain, it is a vast space that is associated with the desirable German mountains rather than the dry and hot Mexico. Therefore, there is a failure to achieve closure and the sanctuary has failed to successfully provide a safe environment for the victim work through the trauma because of the disruption of the exhaustion she experienced that transported her back to her physical reality in Mexico.

By the end of the novella, there is a lack of closure for Netty as she does not fulfil her personal desire to return home to her mother. LaCapra suggests that this lack of closure for the victim to return to their loved ones is attributed to the constant desire to revisit their deceased loved ones:

Part of this feeling may be the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One’s bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound (LaCapra 22).

LaCapra makes the point that the survivor’s refusal to work through the trauma means to forsake the victims who died in the traumatic events such as WWII. The survivor’s life after the traumatic event is dedicated to relive the experiences with his or her deceased loved ones. Similarly, Netty’s desire to embark on the “journey home” is the same scenario where this lack of closure of
meeting her mother provides her the gateway to continue remembering this event in her life. Although she does not outwardly reject the notion of forsaking her loved ones, the memory begins to falter and fail her the moment she reaches the stairs to her home – suggesting that there is a resistance towards a closure to meet her mother. Being unable to meet her mother, it creates uncertainty as to whether Netty’s mother is alive or dead. Drawing the parallel to Seghers’ personal life where her mother had died, it is assumed that Netty’s mother has died even before she could embrace her. Hence Netty’s refusal to come to terms with the truth traps her in a cyclical motion of re-enacting and reliving the hurt of losing her mother. Without articulating the fate of her mother, unlike the details of her friends’ deaths, the narrator is unable to work through her trauma and receive closure because she unable to come to terms with the reality of the fate of her mother.

Netty returns to reality as she is transported from the tranquil garden of Mainz to the blistering heat of Mexico. Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst whose research explores trauma victims’ bearing testimony as a means to recover from trauma, asserts:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, … continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its re-enactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. (Laub, 69)

Laub points out that trauma survivors like Netty are not living in the memories of the past but they are dealing with an event they are unable to fully attain closure for. Netty continues living in her present state in Mexico, yet she maintains a distance with the “traumatic reality” instead of being fully immersed in it. She mentions that she feels exhausted again, as she “was too tired to take another step” (639). Hinting towards the return of her lethargy, she is unable to continue her journey in the mental childhood sanctuary. This signifies the end of her recollection and lack of closure due to her exhaustion.

In the last few lines of the story, Netty slips into another relapse of her childhood memory as she suddenly “remembered the task that [her] teacher had set [her] – to write a detailed account of the school outing” (639). This refers to how the protagonist is trapped in both her reality and the re-
enactment of her past and she is still unable to differentiate between her traumatic reality and physical present reality. Netty’s recollection of her teacher’s task continues to live in her memory. She tells herself that she will “do this right away, tomorrow or tonight even, when [she] no longer felt so tired” (639). This statement suggests that when the exhaustion subsides, she will regain the strength and energy to return to her memory of writing her account about the school outing, which is the protagonist’s written form of working through the trauma. Being physically in Mexico yet feeling “entrapped” by the traumatic event, she is in a liminal state that creates a space for herself to revisit her childhood memory where her loved ones exist. She oscillates between living in her reality and revisiting her past freely when she chooses to.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have analysed Seghers’ attempts to present a failure of working through the trauma from WWII through her personal experiences. Trauma experts comment that trauma victims experience trauma repeatedly through re-enactments and attempt to work through their trauma but in different ways. Seghers employs the childhood memory as Netty’s sanctuary to work through the trauma of war through meeting her friends and mother. Using that space as a means to revisit the memories of her friends and teachers, she is able to come to terms with the horrors of the war that had transformed her friends into distressed individuals who eventually experience a devastating fate.

Through the use of an all-knowing narrator, Netty’s foresight of the bleak future of her loved ones creates tension between herself and her close friends, posing a problematic reading as readers question her credibility as a narrator. At the end of the novella, she fails to reunite with her mother because she does not detail what happened to her mother and is immediately transported back to her current state in Mexico. Thus, this failure exists as a means for Netty to return to visit the traumatic memory again. Although Seghers continues telling about Netty’s life after that dreamscape incident, readers can assume that the protagonist will continue to revisit and relive the same childhood sanctuary to meet her loved ones in order to preserve this memory of them. This would be a representation of how the lack of closure for trauma victims prevent them from successfully working through their trauma.
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