

CHAPTER III

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the discussion centered on Joe Goldberg, the main character and narrator of *You* (2014), whose childhood trauma has shaped the psychological patterns examined throughout this study. This chapter examines the childhood experiences that contribute to Joe Goldberg's trauma, the belated return of this trauma in his adult life, and the repetition compulsion that emerges as a result of his unresolved childhood trauma.

3.1 Intrinsic Elements

3.1.1 Character and Characterization

3.1.1.1 Joe Goldberg

Joe Goldberg is a bookstore manager whose appearance does not stand out, yet he claimed that he is a physically attractive man, saying, "You make me think; maybe you're searching for that hot guy in the bookstore, maybe." (Kepnes, 2014, p. 17). His character is complex and requires a thorough understanding through his actions and thoughts. Joe needs no explicit explanation and often comes as a surprise with convincing twists. Joe Goldberg is charming, while at the same time violent, and he killed someone for the price of love. Admittedly, he said, "I killed for you. I deserve you" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 306). Joe Goldberg killed Benji, Beck's boyfriend, because he believed Benji was an obstacle to him and Beck. His contradictory traits make him a round character.

Although Joe is a psychologically complex character, he remains static, as his obsession and violent tendencies persist throughout the novel. At the beginning,

Joe shows an early obsessive pattern, collecting Beck's personal belongings during his stalking and storing them in his own box, called 'Beck's box'. It contains her stolen phone and personal belongings, including Beck's underwear and a used tampon that he hides in a box. Up until near the climax of the story, Beck found the 'Beck's box' and was terrified. Instead of admitting his wrongdoing, Joe claims that Beck is the one invading his privacy, positioning himself as the victim and criticizing her for judging his obsessive and intrusive behavior. He even says: "You are afraid of the Box of Beck. You are judgmental, nasty." (Kepnes, 2014, p. 278). Rather than reflecting on his actions after witnessing Beck's fearful reaction, Joe continues to justify his behavior.

The refusal to be introspective, he persists throughout the story, that what he does is not wrong. He has shown no moral change or significant character development. These traits make him a static character. Joe Goldberg is characterized indirectly because the novel is written from a first-person perspective. His personality is revealed through his thoughts, as the story is largely composed of his obsessive narration and internal monologue.

3.1.1.2 Beck

Beck is Joe's charming love interest. Her character in this book is described by Joe Goldberg, the narrator. At their first encounter, Joe says, "You smile, embarrassed to be a nice girl, and your nails are bare and your V-neck sweater is beige" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 1). Her appearance is described as clean and simple, as Joe provides detailed observations of her appearance: "You are classic and compact, my own little Natalie Portman circa the end of the movie Closer, when

she's fresh-faced and done with the bad British guys and going home to America" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 1). He compares her to an actress in an admiring way. She is portrayed as an ambitious writer, but also insecure and sometimes irresponsible. She pities her sister for not having her ambition: "You pity her. How come she has no ambition?" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 14). No matter how ambitious, her friends criticize her for not focusing on writing, but on her identity as a writer. These complex and contradictory traits make her a round character.

On the other hand, her character develops throughout the story, which classifies her as a dynamic character. At first, she was naive, particularly in her relationships with others. She overlooks flaws and believes the good in people: "You're a sweetheart. You see the best in people. You complement me" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 14). This trait makes her easily trust people, particularly Joe, who she thought was attentive and supportive. Over time, she becomes conflicted and self-aware once she realizes Joe's true nature. When she discovered Beck's box, she firmly fought back when Joe tried to manipulate her. She has recognized that Joe's love is toxic.

Her character is mostly written directly. Beck is self-centered, as Chana, one of her friends, describes: "Beck is full of herself" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 27). Chana describes Beck as conceited because she thinks Beck keeps pretending to be a writer rather than acting like one. Therefore, Beck is portrayed as an ambitious yet insecure character. Although she is initially naive in her romantic relationships, she eventually becomes more aware of Joe's true nature.

3.1.1.3 Mr. Mooney

Mr. Mooney is the owner of Mooney's bookstore, where Joe Goldberg has worked since the age of fifteen. Mr. Mooney is old and retired. Joe looks up to him and perceives Mr. Mooney as a replacement for a father figure, as shown in the statement, "Mr. Mooney was the boss now, the dad I wanted to do right by" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). This suggests that Joe lacked a proper father figure and sought validation from Mr. Mooney. He is intense about books and even initiated, ordered, and placed the cage to keep valuable old books. However, he is contradictory as an authority figure to Joe.

Mr. Mooney carries contradiction as he is harsh and nurturing, which makes him a round character. For instance, he does not want Joe to listen to vulgarity: "Don't swear in front of the boy" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 40). He is also abusive. He locked Joe inside the cage as a punishment, but Joe perceives that "Mr. Mooney cared enough about me to teach me a lesson. I learned" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). He is not always mentioned in the book, but shows consistency in terms of relationships and values from when Joe was fifteen through his retirement. He remains the same man, exacting and rigid, a static character. He is characterized almost entirely through indirect characterization, as his dialogue and actions reveal his personality.

3.1.1.4 Benji

Benji is Beck's boyfriend, whom Joe heavily resented. He is physically polished in a privileged way as he is wealthy. He also has distinctive hair and carries a drug purse: "there's his drug purse, packets of heroin or coke or Ritalin or whatever the kids are doing these days" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 55). His physical

appearance explains enough that he has a substance use disorder. He is a rich hypocrite who consistently cheats on Beck. As Joe states, “he cheats on you, Beck. A lot. Compulsively. He is in intense pursuit of a performance artist who fucks with his head the way he fucks with yours” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 50).

From the beginning to his imprisonment in Joe’s cage, he does not change or develop, which makes him a static character. Others’ perspectives of him also remain the same. Even under pressure and in a suspenseful situation, he persists in his sense of entitlement: “Let me out,” he snaps. “Now” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 57). Benji is characterized indirectly through his behavior, his appearance, and even his own business. He does not carry out his role as Beck’s boyfriend properly and is almost always absent from her important events.

3.1.2 Setting

3.1.2.1 Geographical Setting

3.1.2.1.1 Mooney’s Bookstore

One of the central settings in the novel is Mooney’s bookstore, where Joe Goldberg works and first meets Beck. “You walk into the bookstore and you keep your hand on the door to make sure it doesn’t slam” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 6). Joe comes to work daily and commutes to the shop on the Lower East Side. In the basement of Mooney's bookstore, there is a glass cage that was initially used to keep old and priceless books: “Our cage was only for books and Mr. Mooney wasn’t kidding. We did have a lot of work to do.” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 41). It is a crucial setting to the story, a silent witness where Mr. Mooney first locked Joe, “Mr. Mooney ordered

me to go into the cage and close my eyes. I was scared. When I heard him lock the door I knew I was locked inside” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). The incident causes Joe to replicate his childhood trauma of being locked in a cage, and he starts imprisoning others in that cage, and Benji becomes his first victim. “Here he goes, down the stairs. He doesn’t wake up while I drag him into the cage and I lock him in there and smile. Excellent.” (Kepnes 2014, p. 55).

3.1.2.1.2 Beck’s Apartment

In his early stalking, Joe obsessively seeks more information about Beck and eventually gets her address from the internet. He begins watching her from across the street and, at one point, calls the gas company to report a leak in her apartment, even though he knows she is outside. After successfully infiltrating her apartment, he admits, “he leaves, and the first thing I do is take your computer and sit on your couch and smell your green pillow and drink water out of your brown mug” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 22). He then observes her room to learn more about her, including her computer, bathroom, and bed, as shown when he says, “Pitch Perfect has ended and I go to your bedroom and I am on your bed, unmade” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 24). From that point on, he frequently enters Beck’s apartment whenever she is not at home. Beck’s apartment not only functions as her space but also as a site of Joe’s surveillance, a product of his obsession.

3.1.2.1.3 Joe’s Apartment

Several key scenes take place in Joe’s apartment. It is where Beck occasionally stays overnight, where they spend time together as a couple, where Joe

hides the ‘Beck box’ full of her personal and private belongings in his wall, and where Beck eventually discovers it herself. The big fight scene between Joe and Beck happened here. At first, Joe was sure Beck would never find the box.

“The walls in the building are terrible (surprise, surprise) and the plaster is cracking and the hole is bigger and I keep meaning to tell the super but I don’t want to tell the super because I want your things in my hole. I’m being a lunatic. You’d have to climb into the wall to get at the box and no girl in the world would do that” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 268)

Although Beck had slept over many times, she was unaware of the box that Joe had hidden in his apartment. Eventually, she discovered it, and it was in this apartment that Beck found the box in fear. Despite being caught, Joe shifts the blame onto Beck for invading his privacy in his apartment, “YOU’RE the one who snooped in my wall yet you’re acting like I’m the only one in this apartment with problems” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 278). Beck was both terrified and manipulated during this conflict. Joe’s apartment is where his obsession is concealed and revealed.

3.1.2.2 Time Setting

3.1.2.2.1 The Early 2010s Digital Era

The novel *You* by Caroline Kepnes is set in the digital era, as it was written in the early 2010s. During this era, technology was a crucial instrument for Joe’s stalking of Beck. Smartphones, social media, e-mail, and real-time location were Joe’s tools in tracking Beck in the novel. Within a few days after their meeting in the bookstore, Joe searched for her online to gather information about her: “the first thing I had to find was your home and the Internet was designed with love in mind. It gave me so much of you, Beck, your Twitter profile” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 13). In the digital era, it only takes a short time to find someone, without requiring physical

effort, and that is what Joe Goldberg took advantage of in technology. To someone with abandonment trauma like Joe and his need to control people he loves, digital infrastructure provides him with facilities that no previous historical era could have offered. The internet did him a favor by making it easy for him to do his presumptuous stalking.

Aside from stalking her online, Joe also hijacked her emails to monitor what she has been doing: “I have been reading your e-mails. I have taken pictures of the passwords you keep in your password folder. This way, when you change your password, if you change your password, I’ll know the possibilities” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). Joe’s childhood trauma terrrors him with the possibility that his loved ones may leave in unpredictable times. Therefore, by monitoring Beck in real time, he attempts to construct a temporary sense of relief from the terror of abandonment. Furthermore, the novel’s digital setting contributes to Beck's active online presence for digital branding. She tweets, blogs, and uses Instagram very actively, which allows Joe to read her character without a hardship. Joe claims to Beck: “You tweet more often than you write” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 18). Joe then studied her public performance to continue his staged allurements.

3.1.2.2.2 Post-9/11 2001

A national disaster that happened on September 11, 2001, has also shadowed the novel's settings. It was a horrific tragedy where four commercial airplanes were hijacked and crashed into New York's World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Pennsylvania, which were later named after the date, 9/11. The

writer, Kepnes, directly connects this to Joe's biographical timeline. Joe mentioned that: “He let me out of the cage on September 14, 2001, three days after September 11. The whole world was different then, and Mr. Mooney said my father had never called; he probably thought I was dead” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). He talked about how he was released from confinement as punishment by Mooney, and Mooney also said that his father never called. The fact that his dad “doesn’t care when his son doesn’t come home during a national disaster” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43) explains that he is an absent father. It was a moment of incomprehensible national loss, but all Joe had was a neglectful father. Unlike others who seek their family around the city, Joe was different.

“I kept hunting for the Franny and Zooey thief and right after 9/11, I wasn’t alone. Everyone was like me, searching the streets. People wanted to find their families; I wanted to find the thief. There were flyers for missing people all over the city. I thought about learning to draw and plastering the city with drawings of the thief. I could pretend she was my mother” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43)

This passage from Joe serves as an explicit revelation of his grief. He is hunting for the woman who stole from the bookshop, who caused Mooney to imprison him in the cage for days. At this moment, he confesses that he could pretend she was his mother. The tragedy of mass loss becomes the occasion for Joe to unmask a wound he has never been able to articulate before.

3.1.2.2.3 Cultural Milieu of Early 2010s New York

The specific cultural environment shown in the novel proves that it is set in early 2010s New York, as proven by its mentions of MFA programs, the Kindle, independent bookstores, and Brooklyn bar culture. This milieu takes part in forming

Joe's expression of trauma. At his first encounter with Beck, he delivers a sarcastic critique: "Fuck books. Get a Kindle. You know why Kindles are so successful?" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 8), before proceeding to argue that the Kindle "takes all the integrity out of reading" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 8). Although the Kindle was launched in 2007, it reached mass cultural popularity in the early 2010s, hence making Joe's contemptuous reference to it a chronological marker of the time setting. His opposition towards technological advances in literacy is deeply rooted in the value system Mooney instilled in him, which holds that books are sacred objects that must be handled with care and reverence. This further reinforced when Joe declares that "the interaction between seller and buyer, is the most important two-way street we got" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 9). He positions the physical bookstore as a moral institution in a cultural collapse.

Joe also dismisses his colleague Curtis, whom he thinks is a cultural collapse, as "part of Generation Benji, all busy with his fake life in his fucking tinderokcupidinstagramtwitterfacebookvinebullshitnarcissism" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 65). The platforms he mentioned: Tinder, OkCupid, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Vine, are products that were popular in the early 2010s. The writer, Kepnes, timestamps this through Joe's contempt. Contemporary literary New York is not only serves as a backdrop for Joe's psychology, but the lessons Mooney taught Joe about books, standards, and human worth become apparently legitimate, which become apparent as a cultural criticism.

3.1.2.3 Atmosphere Setting

3.1.2.3.1 Romantic

A romantic setting is one of the atmospheres shown in *You*. Despite being in contrast with Joe's obsession with Beck, the romantic build-up of their relationship developed throughout the story. Joe's first-person narration often speaks affectionately of Beck. The romantic tension appears at the very start of the novel, when Beck enters Mooney's bookstore, and Joe instantly falls in love. It was initially one-sided, but over time, they shared flirty messages and texts until it became mutual. "You care what I think and you're nervous and I'm nervous and at 8:52 I take my first step toward you and I can hear my heart in my throat, I can't believe it's happening, us, together" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 69). Joe and Beck planned their first date and it is visible how nervous Joe was anticipating.

Joe's romantic fantasy slowly turned into reality, as Beck shows romantic reciprocation during the date. "You can't stop smiling and I let you wait the right amount of time where you think I'm cool, not rude, and you take a deep breath and look up and then down" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 69). Beck smiles, blushes, and teases Joe in between their conversations. The peak of their romantic tension occurs when they begin engaging in physical intimacy, before the true nature of Joe Goldberg is revealed. At this stage, the relationship begins to appear mutually desired. Beck kissed Joe for the first time, and Joe states, "Your lips were made for mine, Beck. You are the reason I have a mouth, a heart. You kiss me when people can still see us, when we can still hear Bobby Short—I'm in love again, and I love, love, love it" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 95). It reveals how in love Joe feels how Beck reciprocates.

3.1.2.3.2 Suspenseful

One setting that stands out the most in this novel is suspense, where Joe often makes the reader feel tense and anxious about his actions. For several days, Joe watches Beck from across the street from her apartment. He calls the gas company to report a leak when he knows she is not at home, as it is part of his plan to enter. He admits, "I had to get into your place, Beck. And I knew what to do" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 22). Joe successfully enters her room and begins to wander around and observe her things as soon as the gas worker leaves: "He leaves, and the first thing I do is take your computer and sit on your couch and smell your green pillow and drink water out of your Brown mug" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 22).

At this moment, Beck was unaware of his presence, which creates a suspenseful atmosphere. There was a possibility that Joe might be caught. The tension escalates as Joe hears her coming, "I go to your bedroom, and I am on your bed, unmade, and I hear the sound of a key entering a keyhole and turning... I hear you put a key into your keyhole and the door opens and the apartment is small and you are inside of it" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 24). Joe had a very limited chance to escape.

3.1.2.3.3 Dark and Disturbing

Another dominating atmosphere in *You* is dark and disturbing. There are many scenes that involve the violence done by Joe Goldberg. This setting is evident in one of its most prominent scenes, where Joe imprisons Benji. He was one of Joe's victims who was first locked in his cage and treated horribly, mentally and physically. The way Benji was imprisoned was Joe's way of controlling things to

fit his narrative. He humiliates Benji as he states, “I kick him into the corner like the dog that he is, pick up his leftover drugs off the floor, and flush them down the toilet. I thank him for the crap in his locker and he cries and I feel better already” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 101).

Joe’s distorted moral compass suggests a lack of sympathy. The disturbing atmosphere intensifies as his act of torture ultimately leads to murder. Joe poisons Benji by exploiting his peanut allergy, gambling on whether Benji is telling the truth about the allergy, and treating the outcome as a matter of chance. He describes the act casually as he says, “I pour a healthy tablespoon of peanut oil into the soy latte. Benji lies about everything. He’s probably lying about his peanut allergy but who knows? Maybe I’ll get lucky” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 117). The situation becomes even more disturbing after Benji’s death, and Joe decides to burn his body. He narrates the process with unsettling detachment, stating, “Cremation takes time. You have to keep that fire going for ages and it’s not a perfect job. Benji’s ashes are definitely bony so you wouldn’t want to go pouring them into a colander!” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 119). This atmosphere stands out as it reveals Joe’s violence.

3.1.3 Conflict

3.1.3.1 Joe’s Internal Conflict

Joe was almost constantly consumed by internal conflict throughout the story. Joe sees himself as a thoughtful and emotionally intelligent man, even claiming to be “a multitasking businessman at heart. I am a poet” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 53). This self-description seems to be in contrast with his own actions of stalking,

manipulating, and imprisoning. He even thinks of his imprisonment of people as a heroic movement of justice. Not only does he experience conflicts between image and reality, but he also experiences conflicts between abandonment and love.

Being abandoned as a child led him to believe he might be abandoned again: “my mom left when I was in second grade so I grew up knowing that it was possible to leave people, especially my dad” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). This fear Joe carries eventually turns into control and possession of Beck. He is conflicted between his need for love and the fear of losing it. Another primary conflict that always haunts him is his past with Mr. Mooney. When Joe was a teenager and helped Mr. Mooney set up the book cage, Mr. Mooney always told Joe to be gentle. Though he has grown as an adult, Joe still hears his voice at unexpected moments: “gently, Joseph, one by one” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 77). This proves that he never moved on from his past, and his trauma remains unresolved.

3.1.3.2 Joe’s External Conflict with Benji, Beck, and Peach

Joe Goldberg has a major conflict with Benji that involves physical imprisonment. Benji was one of Joe’s victims who was imprisoned in a cage because Joe views him as a threat to Beck and him. He sent a fake email pretending to be a food critic interested in Benji’s club soda company. Joe baited Benji through email and set up a meeting. When they met, he drugged Benji with xanax, punched him, and locked him in the book cage.

Despite his love for Beck, he also experienced conflict with her. One of their biggest conflicts was when Beck found out that Joe had been collecting and hiding her personal belongings, she was terrified. When Beck was confronting him, instead

of admitting and apologizing, he says: “You are afraid of the Box of Beck. You are judgmental, nasty.” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 278). He also feels like a victim because Beck keeps screaming at him while he tries to calm down. He claims: “You’re screaming again and do I scream at you? Never” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 280). Another external conflict Joe endured was with Peach Salinger, with a similar engine of jealousy, and eventually also murdered by Joe.

3.2 Contributing Experiences to Joe Goldberg’s Trauma

Trauma does not always arise from a single disaster. Rather, it is also shaped collectively by unpleasant experiences that happened repeatedly. Caruth stated 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” (1996, p. 4). During childhood, children are most vulnerable to trauma as they are very dependent on caregivers for safety. When a child is neglected without the right attention and care, they may be forced to endure traumatic experiences that may lead to long-term effects. In *You*, Joe Goldberg’s experiences as a child growing up abandoned by his own mother heavily shaped the trauma that turned him into an obsessive and controlling person. His childhood experiences have become unassimilated memories as he lacked emotional security in his childhood. Therefore, his trauma was primarily rooted in parental abandonment.

Furthermore, aside from parental absence, another contributing factor to his trauma is an unstable childhood environment and the complex mentorship of

Mooney as his father's replacement. Kolk argues that "children have no choice but to organize themselves to survive within the families they have" (2014, p. 150), but in this case, Joe only had absent biological parents and only had Mooney as a father figure. Mr. Mooney has exposed Joe to the feeling of abuse and isolation at such a young age. Unconsciously, these childhood experiences collectively shaped his view of love, relationships, and morality.

3.2.1 Parental Abandonment

Joe Goldberg is an abandoned child, whose "biological parents no longer fulfil their responsibility to care for and to provide, thereby ignoring their basic developmental needs" (Marici, et al., 2023, p. 1). It takes all the way to the moment when Joe was abandoned by his mother to acknowledge his fundamental source of trauma. When Joe was in second grade, his mom abandoned him. He claimed himself: "My mom left when I was in second grade so I grew up knowing that it was possible to leave people, especially my dad. I don't feel sorry for myself, Beck" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). Joe was too young to understand that being left by his own mother left a wound on his psychological state, as Caruth argues, "the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (1996, p. 6). But it was, in fact, a traumatic experience for a child.

Although the book did not say much about Joe's father, Mr. Mooney once mentioned him. Joe explained, "Mr. Mooney said my father had never called; he probably thought I was dead" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). The prior situation in this line is post-9/11. Noticing how his father never called when parents normally would want to know if their children are alive explains that he is neglectful. The statement

from Joe Goldberg carries no emotional weight. In fact, he said it casually like a mere fact rather than a psychological trauma.

Joe was only about seven years old, a crucial age for developing trust under a nurturing parental environment. The absence of his mother has not only left a wound but also taught him a wrong lesson that he may not be worthy of love. As Joe stated to Beck, he had learned that it was possible to leave people, that the person he needed could just walk away. Joe does not even pity himself for experiencing such an experience at a young age. As Joe grows into adulthood, he still carries this belief and projects it onto the one he loves. The outcomes of this belief have turned into surveillance and control.

This unacknowledged grief also surfaces in the novel when Joe is released from the cage. He was punished by Mr. Mooney for letting a woman steal a book from the bookstore. He was released after the 9/11 tragedy, and unlike the others who find their families, he plastered the city with his drawings of the thief, devastatingly saying, "I could pretend she was my mother" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). He unconsciously understands that he is mother-deprived, despite denying the trauma, and rather interprets this as a mere fact he has to accept.

3.2.3 Mooney's Complex Mentorship

The relationship between Joe Goldberg and Mr. Mooney is quite complex and, hence, a major source of his trauma that led to a distorted character development as an adult. He is the owner of Mooney's bookstore, whom Joe directly describes as the father figure he wanted. Joe firmly says, "It doesn't take a fucking village to raise a child. Mr. Mooney was the boss now, the dad I wanted to

do right by” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). As Joe’s both boss and mentor, Mooney has a complex mentorship. Although he provided Joe with what his biological parents could not: attention and care, his idea of mentorship is abusive. When Joe was a teenager, Mooney locked him in the book cage to teach him a lesson, particularly the value of books. This situation, he describes: “Mr. Mooney ordered me to go into the cage and close my eyes. I was scared. When I heard him lock the door I knew I was locked inside” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). Joe acknowledges his fear of Mooney’s punishment, but he had no power but to be obedient.

“I had no phone, no sunlight, no darkness. All I had was my brain and the buzz of the AC unit and the daily slice of pizza (cold because steam is no good for old books), and coffee (lukewarm in a cup from the Greek diner), both of which Mr. Mooney slipped to me through the drawer. The days and nights got lost” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42).

Joe was only a teenager, yet he had to experience isolation from the authority figure he looked up to. A mentorship that is psychologically distressing and leaves a wound. This extreme discipline of Mooney has taught Joe to imprison people in the cage, the same way Mooney imprisoned him. Nevertheless, Joe reframes it as Mooney’s form of care. He claims, “Mr. Mooney cared enough about me to teach me a lesson. I learned” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). Joe misinterprets Mooney’s abuse as education, and this is because “trauma is not experienced as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment” (Caruth, 1995, p. 10). Joe could not process this immediately and proceeded to accept the treatment that was given.

Joe is dependent on Mooney emotionally. If, at this moment, Joe acknowledges this as harm rather than a form of care, he would no longer have

someone to rely on. Mooney is the only person around Joe who was least expected to hurt him, but he did. Joe's trauma stems from misbelieving Mooney as a protector rather than a perpetrator. Furthermore, Mooney also verbally abused Joe, saying, "That's because your father is a pig, Joseph," he said. "Are you a pig?" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). Mooney's pressure on teenage Joe is distressing. By asking whether Joe wants to be like his absent father, Mooney is also attacking his identity for being his father's son. To call Joe's father 'a pig' and associate that with Joe is a degrading and inappropriate thing to say to a teenager.

The transition from childhood to adulthood was very difficult for Joe Goldberg. Mooney not only left emotional scars on Joe but also taught philosophies that were wrong and dangerous to interpret. Mooney once brought Russian dolls to Joe to teach him something. Then, Joe "popped one doll in half and got another doll and popped that doll in half and got another doll and so on until the final doll that could not be popped in half, the only whole doll in the bunch" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 41). This is Mooney's way of teaching Joe that, in his own words, "everything valuable must be hidden" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 41). While childhood is a vulnerable period for learning, adolescence is no less susceptible to indoctrination. Joe was sixteen when he learned that anything valuable must be hidden; later, in adulthood, he applied this belief to Beck by imprisoning her. This is major evidence that proves Mooney's mentorship contributes to Joe Goldberg's trauma.

Mooney, without awareness, raised Joe to be abusive just like he is. There is this command that Mooney repeatedly said to Joe when he was a teenager, "gently, Joseph" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 41), which haunts Joe even as an adult. An

internalized fear of being supervised. Initially, Mooney said this to ensure Joe handles the rare books carefully. However, this command appears in many situations, even in those unrelated to books at all. It is a horrific voice within that he carries and cannot escape from.

3.3 The Belated Return of Joe Goldberg's Trauma in Adult Life

Cathy Caruth's theory addresses trauma as an experience that is not immediately recognized at the moment it occurs. According to Caruth, trauma is characterized by its belatedness. She states that, "the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (1996, p. 4). This theory defines Joe Goldberg's trauma of childhood and adolescence. Joe suffered parental abandonment, complex mentorship, and an unstable home environment, while not fully acknowledging these patterns as trauma. He was never able to process these consciously, in fact, he misinterpreted them as something a normal child can experience. They were never claimed and later returned belatedly in his adult life. Ironically, this trauma comes and shapes his mind and character entirely. Caruth addresses this as inherent latency.

3.3.1 Obsession and Stalking as the Belated Return of Abandonment Trauma

As a child, Joe was abandoned, who was "intentionally left behind, openly or secretly, by a parent who has no intention of returning" (Marici et al., 2023, p. 2). Unfortunately, it comes back not only as an obsession fixation, but also as compulsive stalking, both of which are inseparable manifestations. His pattern has shown that "parental abandonment or rejection creates anxious, avoidant, and

insecure attachments into adulthood” (Bertelsen, 2023, p. 3). This insecurity then manifests in Joe’s need to monitor Beck compulsively and obsessively to guarantee that she will not vanish the way his mother did. Caruth argues that “trauma does not deny or eliminate the possibility of reference but insists, precisely, on the inescapability of its belated impact” (1996, p. 7). This explains how Joe’s trauma has brought a belated impact.

The obsession Joe has with Guinevere Beck is the fundamental form of his belated return of childhood trauma. At their first encounter, when Beck walked into the bookstore, Joe was immediately infatuated with her and wanted to learn more about her. He was obsessed and intensely captivated by Beck’s physical appearance, even down to her smallest gestures. His obsessive narration about Beck marked this. “I’m shaking and I’d pop an Ativan but they’re downstairs and I don’t want to pop an Ativan. I don’t want to come down. I want to be here, fully, watching you bite your unpainted nails and turn your head to the left.” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 6). Joe’s physical reaction suggests that this is not an ordinary attraction, but an explosive feeling because he feels that something he has been looking for has finally come to him.

His detailed and excessive observation about someone whom he just met is pathological in its intensity, as if the unprocessed wound of his childhood were suddenly a belated return of trauma when his mother left him: “My mom left when I was in second grade” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). In this situation, the abandonment trauma Joe has never fully comprehended imposes exactly as Caruth describes, that trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is

therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). This imposition suggests that Joe did not consciously choose to become obsessed, rather, it happened subconsciously.

Aside from obsessive fixation, Joe’s trauma also returns as compulsive stalking. Within a few days, Joe had already utilized the internet to stalk Beck and gather all available information about her. All Joe needed was her name, and he succeeded. He explains it himself that her name was the beginning of his further action: “Your name was a glorious place to start. Lucky for us, there aren’t a lot of Guinevere Becks in the world—just the one. The first thing I had to find was your home and the Internet was designed with love in mind. It gave me so much of you, Beck” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 13). Joe did not stop there, in fact, he started coming to her apartment to watch her. “I come in the day, in the night, and whenever I am here, your windows are always open. It’s like you’ve never seen the nightly news or a horror movie and I sit on the steps of the brownstone across the tiny, clean street that faces your building” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 16).

This compulsive action of stalking surfaces from his fear of being abandoned again, just like he experienced in his childhood. Joe wanted to make sure that he knew enough about Beck to know that her existence may never vanish from his sight. Joe once mentioned, “I grew up knowing that it was possible to leave people, especially my dad. I don’t feel sorry for myself, Beck” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43), which aligns well with Caruth’s statement about how trauma is “not known in the first stance” (1996, p. 4). This fear was, as Caruth explains, never grasped, but it managed to haunt Joe because he thought abandonment could occur anytime. His

fear of being abandoned is connected with his obsession with Beck and his intense stalking of her.

3.3.2 Idealization as the Belated Return of Emotional Deprivation

As a child, Joe was never valued or seen. He was forced to grow up without a proper parental figure to provide him with attention and care, leaving him with a deep sense of unworthiness. Doyle and Cicchetti (2017) explain that "caregivers who are unavailable, low in sensitivity, or inconsistently or inappropriately responsive to a child's needs promote an insecure attachment relationship" (p. 3). This is the environment Joe was raised in, a mother who abandoned him in second grade and a father who was too indifferent to even call. As a result, Joe belongs to the category of children who, as Doyle and Cicchetti (2017) further explain, "children who experience maltreatment are exposed to social-emotional deprivation and/or abuse" (p. 4). However, Joe never grasped that this experience was an emotional deprivation, as he once said to Beck:

"I don't feel sorry for myself, Beck. Lots of people have shitty parents and roaches in the cabinets and stale, raw Pop-Tarts for dinner and a TV that barely works and a dad who doesn't care when his son doesn't come home during a national disaster" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43)

He perceives what he experienced as something that many children experience. Furthermore, he was referring to himself when he talked about how his father did not care when Joe did not come home during the 9/11 incident. Joe did not talk about his father often, but this one detail proves his profound neglect. This sentence from Joe has explained enough how he lacked attention and emotional care throughout his childhood. Rather than acknowledging this as emotional

deprivation, he normalizes it. This normalization proves Caruth's identification of unclaimed experience that "the wound was precisely not known in the first instance" (1996, p. 4), and therefore could not be mourned.

Because Joe never claimed this deprivation, it resurfaces in his adult life as idealization. He feels the need to idealize Beck as someone perfect who can provide him with what he never received as a child. This unconscious manifestation reflects Caruth's argument about how trauma appears through behavior. As Caruth explains, "This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

When he met Beck for the first time, he was already consumed with the perfect idealization of Beck: "You're so clean that you're dirty.. You are classic and compact, my own little Natalie Portman" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 6). As someone with a hunger to be seen and loved, Joe finds it easy to make Beck fill the void he has carried since childhood. Joe's way of perceiving Beck is beyond ordinary and excessive. Beck becomes the mother-figure, the unconditional lover, the one who will not leave, who Joe plants inside his head. Joe romanticizes this, "you are Guinevere, a love story waiting for the one, and I bet you capitalize The One when you dream of him. Of me" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 13).

3.3.3 Mooney's Internalized Voice as the Belated Return of Past Trauma

During Joe's crucial period of growing up, Joe depended on Mooney because he was the only person he had, as his biological parents were absent. He acknowledges this, saying, "It doesn't take a fucking village to raise a child. Mr.

Mooney was the boss now, the dad I wanted to do right by” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). However, Joe’s relationship with him was not nurturing in any sense, instead, it was controlling and conditional. Teenage Joe had experienced many complex lessons from Mr. Mooney, one of which was how Mooney would always tell Joe to take care of things gently.

Mooney's way of mentorship is all about psychological control. He repeated the word “gently” to Joe like a command as they worked together to set up the cage in the basement. “I assisted Mr. Mooney as he wrapped dust jackets in custom-fit acrylic cases (gently, Joseph), before placing the jacketed books into acrylic boxes with air holes (gently, Joseph)” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 41). This moment was more than a command from Mooney, but his training to make Joe meet his standards and submit to his control. Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2010) argue that controlling socialization “pressure individuals to think, behave, or feel in particular ways” (p. 78). This defines Mooney’s control over Joe. In Joe’s adulthood, Mr. Mooney’s voice resurfaces unexpectedly to govern Joe’s behavior. Regardless of Mooney's retirement and his later absence from the novel, his voice haunts Joe as both a judgment and a command.

This is not a mere memory, but what Caruth describes as “a voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know” (1996, p. 3). Joe has not yet recognized this as a wound, but it appears uninvited as a trauma. An instance of its return is marked when Joe makes a mistake. He left a signed copy of *The Western Coast* on the sidewalk while distracted, thinking of Beck. He said, “Mr. Mooney was right. I will never be fully

capable of running the bookstore” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 53). He did not say he thinks he is a failure, but he highlights that Mooney was right that he was incapable. This trauma manifests as what Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2010) describe: “these messages would also trigger children’s introjects such that, across time, children will gradually apply the internally controlling messages of their parents to themselves and pressure themselves from within” (pp. 81–82).

This introjection was the product of Mooney’s conditioning. His voice comes back to Joe in his adulthood in the same phrasing and demand: “gently, Joseph.” When Joe locked Benji in the cage, this voice haunts him again: “I pull the drawer open and lift the cups off the tray and into the drawer, gently, Joseph, one by one” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 77). Mooney is not in the room, but his voice is. This aligns with what Caruth calls the experience being “not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (1996, p. 4). It imposes itself again as an involuntary intrusion.

The evidence of this being a belated return of trauma is how Mooney’s internalized voice is no longer experienced as an interference as Joe grows up. Rather, Joe consciously repeats his voice to hold himself to Mooney’s own standard of excellence. As an adult, Joe carries Mooney’s standards and logic. Because Joe never claimed this as a wound, it becomes a voice he believed and absorbed entirely.

3.4 Joe Goldberg’s Demonstration of Repetition Compulsion

According to Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a person tends to repeat a traumatic experience to become the master of the situation. This action was

carried out as a form of revenge for the unpleasant experience he had as a victim. Given that, “as the child passes over from the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game, he hands on the disagreeable experience to one of his playmates and in this way revenges himself on a substitute” (Freud, 1920/1961, p. 11). As a child, Joe was emotionally abused by Mooney, who was the authority figure he had. Therefore, Joe becomes the perpetrator of abuse in his adult life. This likely happened because Joe attempts to re-enact his trauma, perhaps while not realizing that he is repeating it. Early trauma of neglect has affected Joe’s ability to connect emotionally with others.

3.4.1 Confinement as the Repetition of Punishment Trauma

An exact repetition that Joe experienced is the confinement of Benji in the same book cage in which Mooney once confined Joe as a teenager. When a rare book was stolen, teenage Joe was punished. “Mr. Mooney ordered me to go into the cage and close my eyes. I was scared. When I heard him lock the door I knew I was locked inside” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). The isolation done by Mr. Mooney was heavy and long, as Joe described, “days and nights got lost” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). Joe was forced to spend days inside the cage with no sunlight, only AC. Unfortunately, at this moment, he was not aware that it was an abusive action that no kid deserves.

It was a torture that he was only served “daily slice of pizza (cold because steam is no good for old books), and coffee (lukewarm in a cup from the Greek diner), both of which Mr. Mooney slipped to me through the drawer” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42) to keep him alive, no matter how torturous. Yet, Joe still rationalized this confinement as love and care. He thought, “Mr. Mooney cared enough about

me to teach me a lesson. I learned” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). Decades later, Benji was tortured the way Joe was tortured. After realizing how Benji mistreated Beck and how he also stands in the way of his romantic pursuit of Beck, he decided to punish him: “He doesn’t wake up while I drag him into the cage and I lock him in there and smile” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 55). Joe faked his identity to lure Benji into his basement, drugged him, and dragged him into the cage to repeat the confinement that Mooney did to him.

There is a single sentence from Joe that serves as the most explicit evidence of repetition compulsion. He says, “Benji can scream all he wants and nobody’s gonna hear him, just like nobody heard me” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 61). Freud explains that a child who had been the passive subject in an unpleasant experience later shifted positions to understand what it feels like to be the active subject. “At the outset he was in a passive situation — he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part” (Freud, 1920/1961, p. 10). Joe’s compulsion to repeat does not come from his conscious desire, but from the unconscious drive to master an experience that was originally passive or overwhelming.

By repeating this confinement and taking Mooney’s part rather than teenage Joe’s, the reversal gives him power. Joe was once a helpless child locked inside by Mooney, but now, he is the perpetrator. Not only did Joe repeat the confinement, but Mooney’s rationalization was done the second time: “When he gets outta here, he’s gonna be pissed about being locked up but he’s also gonna thank me for making him into a man” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 63). As a kid, he misinterpreted Mooney’s

punishment as care. As an adult, he rationalized his own action to Benji as an act of goodwill. Freud described that such repetitions are “repeated, under pressure of a compulsion” (1920/1961, p. 14). The reason behind Joe’s repetition is not recognition, but the possession by the logic of his own past. His actions were carried out with no intention of pleasure, yet encouraged by the compulsion itself.

3.4.2 Controlling Relationships as the Repetition of Mooney’s Authority

Joe’s controlling relationship with Beck is rooted in Mooney’s authority over Joe’s childhood. As Mooney is, in Joe’s own words, “the dad I wanted to do right by” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43), he has shown an authoritarian fatherhood. His love is conditional on obedience, and he often corrects Joe’s behavior sharply. Mooney was demanding and wanted Joe to meet his standards, so when Joe did not act as Mooney expected, he would call Joe a failure. “You failed, Joseph. You failed me and you failed the books” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). However, Joe learned that love and care always come with control: “Mooney cared enough about me to teach me a lesson. I learned” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). Now, he positioned himself in Mooney’s previous role, the person in control.

This pattern was later absorbed by Joe, who repeated it to Beck. He idealized Beck and became disappointed when she did not do as he wished and did not meet his standards. Learning this model of relationship model led Joe to repeat it in his relationship with Beck. At their first encounter, he already claimed Beck. He says: “You give me your e-mail address. You’re mine now” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 38). He frames his attraction not as emotional feelings, but instant ownership. This tendency to assert ownership is Joe’s way of expressing the love Mooney taught him.

Joe also explicitly demands that Beck do what he asks due to his ownership over her, claiming, “You're mine now and you'll do as I say” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 74), which is an exact repetition of Mooney’s set of standards towards him. This is, as Freud argues, evidence that Joe is “obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past” (Freud, 1920, p. 12). Joe does not consciously repeat Mooney's authoritarian model of love, but he lives it out as if it were an original feeling that comes from within himself.

Mooney did not negotiate and ordered teenage Joe what to do when he punished him: “Mr. Mooney ordered me to go into the cage and close my eyes. I was scared. When I heard him lock the door I knew I was locked inside” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 42). This sentence itself proves how Mooney’s mentorship was harsh and full of orders rather than warmth. Furthermore, after releasing Joe from the cage, Mooney still carries an authoritarian manner: “You are free, Joseph. Be wise” (Kepnes, 2014, p. 43). Joe’s freedom was a reward from Mooney, who could take it away at any time, not a right that he held.

Joe not only showed verbal possession, but the way he controlled Beck by monitoring everything she did was a relentless surveillance. Tracking Beck’s phone and location, stalking and following her around, were a form of compulsive repetition. He constantly breaks into her apartment, confessing internally: “I have been reading your e-mails. I have taken pictures of the passwords you keep in your password folder” (Kepnes, 2014). This trespassing is a form of Joe's self-declared ownership.

However, when Beck finds out the truth about Joe, she fights back physically. Unfortunately, Joe's bigger physical size overpowers her as he narrates: "Your Portman-sized body is no match for mine, Beck. I count to three. I give you the chance to shut up... You are going to be so sorry too when you calm down and realize what you made me do" (Kepnes, 2014, p. 284). Joe's logic of how she should be sorry instead of him, and blaming her for what he did, indicates that he never acknowledges his actions as violations. This is Joe's way of re-enacting Mooney's controlling behavior and justification at once.

This repetition aligns with what Freud observes, how they tend to "repeat all of these unwanted situations and painful emotions in the transference and revive them with the greatest ingenuity" (Freud, 1920, p. 15). In this case, Beck was Joe's object of transference. He unconsciously re-enacts what Mooney did to him. As a child who was loved conditionally, Joe becomes someone who cannot offer unconditional love. Control is essential in Mooney's mentorship, and hence Joe applies it later on his relationship with Beck.