

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter discusses the intrinsic elements relevant to The Main Character's Childhood Trauma in *You* (2014) by Caroline Kepnes, focusing on character and characterization, setting, and conflict. The theoretical framework guiding this research consists of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Sigmund Freud's concept of repetition compulsion. These intrinsic elements are essential for examining the childhood trauma of Joe Goldberg, the main character of the novel.

2.1 Intrinsic Elements

2.1.1 Character and Characterization

Kenney suggests that “we have to know more about the kinds of characters that appear in fiction and about the means by which character is portrayed” (1966, p. 28). Kenney emphasizes the importance of examining not only who a character is but also how the character is constructed within the narrative. He also adds that “with regard to the kinds of characters portrayed, it may be helpful to follow the practice of many critics and divide fictional characters into two general categories. Our names for these categories will be simple characters and complex characters” (Kenney, 1966, p. 28). His classification of simple and complex characters is adapted from E. M. Forster's distinction between flat and round characters.

Flat characters, which Kenney called the simple character, is “less the representation of a human personality than the embodiment of a single attitude or obsession in a character” (Kenney, 1966, p. 28). They are predictable and can be quickly understood by readers through their actions or traits, without detailed

descriptions. He also adds, “at the other end of the spectrum is the complex character, called round by Forster because we see all sides of him. The complex character is obviously more lifelike than the simple, because in life people are not simply embodiments of single attitudes” (Kenney, 1966, p. 29). Round characters are multi-dimensional. They must be understood through their actions, thoughts, and dialogue. The author does not need to explain them explicitly, and they are capable of surprising the audience.

A thorough understanding of a character requires attention to characterization. Kenney treats characterization functionally as the method where “the author must choose not only what kind of characters he will present, but also by what methods he will present them” (1966, p. 34). In literature, we can comprehend a character thoroughly through characterization. It plays a vital role in storytelling, where the author controls characterization.

Characterization is divided into direct and indirect. According to Kenney, direct characterization is when the author “simply tells us about his characters. He enumerates their qualities and may even express approval or disapproval of them. The advantages of this method are simplicity and economy.” (Kenney, 1966, p. 34). It means that a direct characterization is when the author explicitly describes a character’s appearance to reveal aspects of their personality or morality. Whereas indirect character, on the other hand, is when the author “allows his characters to reveal themselves to us through their own words and actions” (Kenney, 1966, p. 35). Indirect characterization lets the reader infer a character’s traits on their own, without the author directly explaining them.

2.1.2 Setting

In a dramatic work or narrative, setting greatly influences the plot and characters. Kenney explains how “everything that happens, happens somewhere at some time; that element of fiction which reveals to us the where and when of events we call setting. In other words, the term ‘setting’ refers to the point in time and space at which the events of the plot occur” (1966, p. 38). This suggests that a setting is not only a place, but also includes time, dynamic, and social environment. Dynamic, as described by Kenney, is how “setting may thrust itself dynamically into the action, affecting events and being in turn affected by them, until setting seems to assume the role of a major character” (Kenney, 1966, p. 40). According to this view, setting is not merely a background where events take place. Instead, a dynamic setting actively contributes to the progression of the story by influencing characters’ behaviors and interactions.

2.1.3 Conflict

According to Kenney, “the conflicts with which fiction concerns itself are of many kinds” (1966, p. 18). Conflict arises when two or more parties have opposing interests. For example, if two individuals aim for the same goal, one might feel that the other is obstructing their path and limiting their chances. Two types of conflict may occur in a story, known as internal conflict and external conflict.

Kenney states that “a story may deal with a conflict within a single man (e.g., desire vs. duty)” (2006, p. 19). Internal conflict occurs within oneself. For instance, a character may conflict with his own thoughts, desires, and emotions. On

the other hand, external conflict is “a conflict between men, a conflict between man and society, between man and nature, and so on” (Kenney, 2006, p. 19). It refers to a struggle between a character and an external force that challenges the character’s goals, beliefs, or actions.

2.2 Trauma

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is an unclaimed experience, one that is too sudden or too painful to comprehend at the time it occurs fully. Because it is not absorbed by consciousness, the trauma returns in the form of repetition, flashbacks, and compulsive behavior. As Caruth states, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996, p. 11). This shows that trauma is rooted in a past misfortune, with its effects surfacing belatedly. Caruth also adds 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). Because the event was not consciously known at the time, it resurfaces as memories or emotional distress. The survivor continues to be disturbed by these flashbacks, even long after the catastrophic event.

“while the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli

recalling the event” (1995, p. 4)

Caruth argues that when an event is overwhelming, there is a possibility that its response may be delayed and return in several forms, for instance, thoughts and behaviors derived from the event itself. Drawing on Freud’s writing on trauma, Caruth also adds that trauma is “much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (1996, p. 4). This means that trauma is not simply a personal illness or even a sign of psychological weakness, but a persistent feeling that continues to push to convey truths that the person themselves may not even be aware of.

Caruth’s theory of trauma builds directly on Freud’s work in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud emphasizes trauma as an active psychic mechanism, and traumatic repetition is fundamentally a labor of mastery where the mind “endeavors to master the stimulus retrospectively” (Freud, quoted in Caruth, 1996, p. 32), whereas Caruth relocates the source of trauma toward passivity and delay. She argues that traumatic shock is not the mind actively works upon, but “precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known” (Caruth, 1996, p. 62). However, Caruth’s theory of trauma is not simply opposed to Freud’s, but develops a distinction Freud himself identifies without fully pursuing.

Freud observes that the traumatic dream “cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event” (Caruth, 1996, p. 59). Caruth simply follows this Freudian distinction to its full conclusion. She argues that if traumatic repetition has no meaning to

master, then what returns is not the mind's labor but the event's own unfinished lateness. This is her concept of inherent latency, in which trauma does not return after being processed or forgotten, but "is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (Caruth, 1996, p. 17).

2.3 Belated Return of Trauma

Trauma is characterized by its belatedness as it has not been grasped as soon as it occurs. According to Caruth, "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (1995, p. 9). She views that trauma comes belatedly in the survivor's life rather than being acknowledged or appearing immediately after the event. This is because trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Eventually, the wound will impose itself repeatedly.

Caruth speaks of trauma as something that has not been grasped: "what returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (1996, p. 6). Trauma that was not fully understood will haunt the survivor later in life. Events that are too shocking can prevent the mind from processing them immediately, then resurface later to force their way back into one's life. The event leaves no trace of memory, because it did not enter the survivor's consciousness. Because of that, there is a latency period of not knowing. She explains that "the inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal

structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (Caruth, 1995, p. 8). The phrase another place and another time here implies that the belated return of trauma brings the past to the present.

The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all (Caruth, 1995, p. 7-8)

Caruth’s view focuses on how belated trauma is not about the period of forgetting, but the fact it never comes to the survivor’s mind as an accident, or registered as a wound that occurred. She writes in *Unclaimed Experience* that “the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality — the escape from a death, or from its referential force — rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (1996, p. 7). The belated return of trauma is not merely incidental but constitutive, as it continues to shape an individual’s thoughts, emotions, and actions over time.

2.4 Repetition Compulsion

Trauma does not always return as a mere memory. In many cases, it returns through repetition of actions that mirror past experiences. An individual tends to reenact a traumatic event to understand and gain mastery of the situation. According to Sigmund Freud, this pattern is known as repetition compulsion, in which individuals unconsciously reenact traumatic events. Freud proposes that “it is clear that in their play children repeat everything that has made a great impression on

them in real life, and that in doing so they abreact the strength of the impression and, as one might put it, make themselves master of the situation” (1920, p. 11). Furthermore, in this context, children tend to repeat merely the unpleasant experiences. As Freud argues, “children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively” (1920, p. 29). Freud proposes that children feel empowered to revisit unpleasant scenes by being with the perpetrator rather than simply experiencing them. However, the actions of repetition were carried out without pleasure.

Freud observed that people in relationships, friendships, and love affairs follow the same unhappy conclusion. He argues that “if we take into account observations such as these, based upon behavior in the transference and upon the life-histories of men and women, we shall find courage to assume that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (Freud, 1920, p. 16). This explains how repetition compulsion is a force that overpowers one’s drive away from pain. It is not a psychological condition, but an inevitable behavior. He explains further that “the manifestations of a compulsion to repeat exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, give the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work” (Freud, 1920, p. 29). An individual does not possess repetitions, but is possessed by them. The past returns not as a memory to be reflected upon, but as an experience to be relived through action.