



MISTY'S TRAUMA IN ASHLEY BLOOM'S EVERY BONE A PRAYER

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Abstract, This study aims to discuss the issue of trauma in the novel *Every Bone a Prayer* by Ashley Blooms. The main focus of this study is to find the causes, effects, and types of trauma experienced by the main character in the story. This study uses the theory of literary psychology approach by applying Judith Herman's theory to analyze the trauma experienced by Misty. The research method used in this study is qualitative with a literary psychology approach. From the analysis results, there are three causes of Misty's experience. The first is sexual and physical abuse by her neighbour named Big Billy, the second is emotional neglect by her family, and the last is a dangerous situation. The impact of the trauma experienced by Misty is emotional and psychological. This can be seen from the guilt and shame for what has happened to her. Therefore, it can be concluded that the trauma experienced by Misty is complex trauma. Complex trauma refers to a type of trauma that occurs repeatedly and cumulatively, often over a long period of time and usually in interpersonal relationships. This trauma is more severe because it usually involves violence, often starting from childhood.

Keywords: Trauma, Cause Of Trauma, Effect of Trauma, Type of Trauma

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is often understood as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that can leave lasting emotional and psychological wounds. It does not merely stem from physical harm but is frequently embedded in social, familial, or personal contexts that strip individuals of safety, identity, and trust. Trauma may result from a singular life-threatening experience or a long series of distressing events that challenge one's ability to cope and process reality. Judith Herman defines trauma as a response to overwhelming events that exceed an individual's capacity to manage, often resulting in lasting damage to emotional and psychological stability (Herman, 1992: 33).

Trauma can take different forms depending on the source and context in which it occurs. These include acute trauma, chronic trauma, and complex trauma. Each form holds unique implications for how individuals perceive themselves and their

environment. Herman (1997: 34) emphasizes that trauma not only disrupts one's internal world but also deteriorates interpersonal connections and emotional regulation. The inability to express or even understand what has happened can lead survivors to internalize guilt, shame, and isolation. Such emotional patterns are particularly common in victims who experience trauma during childhood or in situations involving betrayal from trusted individuals.

In Ashley Bloom's *Every Bone a Prayer*, trauma becomes the central theme through the character of Misty, a ten-year-old girl living in a rural Appalachian village. Misty's life takes a painful turn after she experiences sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of someone close to her. The trauma she suffers is not limited to one event but is compounded by neglect, environmental threats, and the absence of emotional support from her family. Misty's journey throughout the novel reveals the multifaceted nature of trauma and how deeply it can affect one's sense of identity, safety, and reality. Her symptoms—including fear, dissociation, silence, and hypervigilance—reflect Herman's framework of trauma responses, which include hyperarousal, intrusion, and disconnection.

The writer is drawn to explore Misty's trauma because her story provides a vivid literary representation of the complex layers of psychological suffering. Misty's experience, though fictional, mirrors the reality faced by many trauma survivors who live with invisible wounds. The novel allows readers to empathize with those who endure pain in silence and seek meaning in brokenness. Therefore, this study aims to explore the causes, types, and impacts of trauma experienced by Misty in *Every Bone a Prayer*, using Judith Herman's trauma theory as the primary framework for analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection between literature and psychology offers a rich framework for analyzing fictional characters through the lens of human behavior. Literature serves not only as an artistic expression but also as a reflection of psychological realities, while psychology provides tools for understanding the complexities of those realities. According to Wellek and Warren (1977), literary psychology can be approached through four main perspectives: the psychological analysis of the author, the creative process, the psychological structure within the literary work itself, and the effect of literature on readers. This study emphasizes the third perspective, examining the psychological dimension of a literary character.

The psychological approach in literature uses established psychological theories to interpret character behavior, mental processes, and emotional experiences. As Pratiwi and Pramesti (2022) argue, literature often captures internal conflicts—such as trauma, anxiety, and repression—through narrative structure, character development, and symbolic motifs. Thus, this approach helps readers to not only empathize with fictional characters but also to comprehend broader psychological concepts through literary expression.

This study employs Judith Herman's trauma theory to explore the trauma experienced by the protagonist, Misty, in *Every Bone a Prayer* by Ashley Blooms. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Herman outlines the psychological impact of trauma, categorizing it into acute, chronic, and complex trauma. She also introduces a three-phase model of trauma recovery: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring connection with others. These concepts are highly relevant to the portrayal of Misty, a child who faces prolonged abuse, emotional neglect, and psychological fragmentation. Herman (1997) emphasizes that trauma disrupts a person's sense of self, security, and interpersonal trust. Especially in cases of childhood trauma, victims may develop dissociation, hyperarousal, and emotional numbness. In literary texts, such psychological responses often appear in the form of character silence, withdrawal, or symbolic imagery. Through Herman's framework, Misty's narrative is analyzed not only as a story of personal suffering, but also as a literary representation of broader psychological truths.

By integrating literary and psychological analysis, this study demonstrates how trauma literature can articulate experiences that are otherwise unspeakable, and how characters like Misty embody the lasting psychological consequences of trauma. The literary psychological approach, therefore, serves as a vital method for understanding both the inner world of fictional characters and the real-life conditions they mirror.

METHOD

This study used an extrinsic approach in the analysis of literary works, which considers factors outside the text itself, such as the social context, culture, and historical period in which the work was created. According to Wellek and Warren, the extrinsic approach involves factors outside the work itself, such as sociology, psychology, history, and others (1949: 65-66). In this study, the author discusses Misty's trauma in Ashley Bloom's *Every Bone a Prayer* using a psychological approach. This psychological approach examines behavior and thought and can be used to study human life, mental functioning, and individual and social behavior.

Vanderstoep & Johnston (2009: 7-8) state that qualitative research generates narrative or textual descriptions of the studied phenomena, enabling researchers to offer a thorough understanding of the population. Then, Bogdan & Biklen (1992: 5) added that qualitative research is inherently descriptive, with data gathered in the form of words or images instead of numerical values. The data collected are in the form of quotes from the novel *Every Bone a Prayer* that describe the character of Misty and her trauma. The primary source used is Ashley Bloom's novel *Every Bone a Prayer*, which was published in 2020. Supporting sources encompass theories on trauma and references drawn from libraries and global media.

The research instrument involves the author immersing themselves in the subject matter, comprehending and integrating the referenced materials to bolster this study. Data collection steps include reading the novel, identifying data, and selecting relevant

data. Data analysis involves collecting data, analyzing data, interpreting data according to theory, and drawing conclusions based on the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Misty's Trauma in Ashley Blooms' *Every Bone a Prayer*

Misty is the central character in Ashley Blooms' *Every Bone a Prayer*, a young girl whose life is shaped by deep emotional wounds and silent suffering. At just ten years old, she lives in a rural Appalachian community with her emotionally distant parents. Misty possesses a unique and painful ability—she can feel the emotions and physical sensations of others, which becomes both a burden and a form of silent knowledge. Her world is one of discomfort, fear, and isolation, as she navigates trauma largely in silence, often misunderstood by those around her.

The trauma Misty experiences is central to the novel and is portrayed through her responses to abuse and emotional abandonment. She does not have the language to explain what she feels, and this inability isolates her further. Instead of expressing her trauma openly, she internalizes it, which affects her behaviors, thoughts, and sense of self. She seeks meaning in the natural world, in animals, and in her deep connection with physical sensations, but these are not enough to protect her from the harm done by those closest to her. This is evident in the following quotation:

“Misty was always careful. She knew how to be quiet, how to make herself smaller. She knew how to watch and wait. But no matter how small she became, the pain still found her. It moved through her like smoke, filling up the spaces inside her that she couldn’t name.”
(Blooms, 2020: 15)

The quotation captures the essence of Misty's trauma—not just the event of abuse, but the lingering emotional smoke that stays with her, suffocating yet invisible. Her trauma shapes her sense of self and becomes part of how she navigates the world around her.

2. The Causes of Misty's Trauma in Ashley Blooms' *Every Bone a Prayer*

Trauma does not occur in a vacuum—it is shaped by both internal and external forces. In Misty's case, her trauma is the result of a deeply sensitive inner world colliding with a harsh and abusive external environment. This discussion explores the origins of her trauma through internal factors (such as her emotional sensitivity and psychological predisposition) and external factors (such as sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and environmental insecurity).

a. Internal Causes of Misty's Trauma

Trauma is not always caused solely by external events or actions; in some cases, it is also deeply influenced by internal factors such as an individual's emotional disposition, psychological makeup, and unique sensitivities. In the case of Misty, her trauma is not only a result of the abuse she endures, but also a consequence of her extraordinary internal world. Misty possesses an intense emotional sensitivity and an unusual empathetic ability that allows her to feel the emotions and physical sensations of others sometimes even those of animals or

inanimate objects. This heightened sense of empathy places a heavy emotional burden on her, making her far more vulnerable than most children her age.

From a young age, Misty perceives herself as different. She experiences emotional pain not only from her own circumstances but also from the feelings of people around her. This is not simply empathy in the ordinary sense; it is a deep, physical connection to others' emotional states. When someone around her is angry or sad, Misty feels that emotion as though it were her own. This constant flood of emotional input often overwhelms her and becomes a major internal source of her trauma. This can be seen in the quotation below:

“She could feel her mama’s sadness before she saw it. It was thick and heavy in the room, like fog. Sometimes it clung to Misty even when she tried to brush it away. She didn’t want to feel it, but she didn’t know how to stop it either.” (Blooms, 2020: 18)

This passage reveals how Misty’s inner experience is not defined solely by her own feelings but by the emotional weight of others that becomes absorbed into her body and mind. The sadness of her mother is described as fog—dense and suffocating—indicating that Misty cannot escape it, even when she tries. This kind of emotional entanglement makes Misty highly susceptible to trauma, as she is unable to emotionally detach or protect herself from the distress around her.

a.1 Misty’s Sensitivity and Empathic Ability

Misty is not a typical child; she has an unusual gift, or perhaps a curse—she can feel the emotions and sometimes even the physical sensations of people, animals, and the natural world around her. This makes her extremely attuned to the emotional pain of others, which she absorbs deeply and often silently. This can be seen in the quotation below:

“She could feel her mama’s sadness before she saw it. It was thick and heavy in the room, like fog. Sometimes it clung to Misty even when she tried to brush it away. She didn’t want to feel it, but she didn’t know how to stop it either.” (Blooms, 2020: 18)

This passage shows how Misty’s internal wiring makes her unusually vulnerable. Her heightened empathy blurs the lines between herself and others. This constant emotional bombardment leaves her exhausted and confused, contributing to her trauma from within.

b. External Causes of Misty’s Trauma

Misty’s trauma is not merely the result of her internal psychological landscape, but largely shaped by external forces that impose pain, fear, and emotional isolation upon her. These external causes are rooted in Misty’s social environment, the people around her, and the places she inhabits. Specifically, her trauma stems from three primary external sources: the sexual abuse committed by Big Billy, emotional neglect by her parents, and a hostile, unsafe physical environment. These factors work in tandem to create the deeply embedded trauma that defines Misty’s daily reality.

b.1 Sexual Abuse by Big Billy

One of the most severe and defining causes of Misty's trauma is the sexual abuse she experiences at the hands of Big Billy. The betrayal, fear, and shame that come with this abuse leave lasting psychological damage. This is evident in the following quotation:

"She waited until she heard the door click closed behind her. She didn't cry, didn't scream. There was no point. The pain had already settled in her chest, hot and sharp. She curled in on herself, willing the world to disappear." (Blooms, 2020: 33)

This quotation presents not only the event of abuse but Misty's muted response to it. The absence of crying or screaming indicates how deeply conditioned she is to silence perhaps from past experiences or from knowing no one would come to help.

b.2 Emotional Neglect from Her Parents

While Misty lives with both of her parents, the emotional distance between them is vast. Her mother is cold and controlling, and her father is distant and passive. Instead of offering safety, her home becomes another source of fear and isolation. This can be seen in the quotation below:

"Her mama looked at her like she was broken. Like she had done something wrong just by feeling things. Her daddy didn't say much, just nodded and walked away. Sometimes Misty thought maybe they didn't really see her at all." (Blooms, 2020: 21)

This quote reflects how emotional neglect feeds Misty's sense of invisibility and unworthiness. Her parents' failure to acknowledge or comfort her compounds the trauma she endures elsewhere.

b.3 Unsafe and Threatening Environment

Even the physical environment around Misty is unsafe. The barn, the woods, even her own home are places where fear hides in corners. The physical world offers no sanctuary from emotional or physical harm.

This is evident in the following quotation:

"The barn was full of shadows and sharp edges. It smelled like dust and old sweat. Misty walked slowly, each step louder than the last, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath. This was where things happened. Bad things. And she could feel it in the air." (Blooms, 2020: 31)

The setting becomes an extension of Misty's trauma. She is constantly surrounded by spaces that trigger fear and memory, preventing her from ever feeling truly safe or relaxed.

3. The Effects of Misty's Trauma in Ashley Blooms' *Every Bone a Prayer*

Every traumatic experience leaves a lasting impact on a person, especially when it happens repeatedly at a young age. In *Every Bone a Prayer*, Misty experiences trauma that affects her entire being—mentally, emotionally, and physically. The effects of this trauma are shown through her behavior, her perception of herself and others, and the way she interacts with the world. Trauma manifests in both visible and invisible ways.

Some of its effects may be expressed in hyperawareness and emotional detachment, while others appear as internalized fear, dissociation, or loss of control.

Although trauma often brings suffering, it may also lead to transformation, strength, or the development of empathy. In Misty's case, however, the negative effects are far more pronounced. She experiences psychological symptoms that reflect the depth of her pain, including withdrawal, loss of trust, confusion, and a fractured sense of identity. These effects can be categorized into both positive (in rare glimpses of emotional insight or strength) and negative impacts, particularly in three major areas: hyperarousal, intrusion, and dissociation.

a. The Positive Effects of Misty's Trauma

Despite the immense suffering Misty endures, her trauma shapes her into a deeply empathetic individual. She develops a heightened sensitivity to the emotions and inner lives of others. Misty's ability to "hear" the feelings of people, animals, and even trees around her, while painful, allows her to form connections that others cannot. This emotional sensitivity can be viewed as a strength born out of trauma. Misty does not become numb; instead, she remains emotionally open, which helps her understand pain—both her own and that of others.

This is evident when Misty reflects on the idea of pain as a bridge between people. Her trauma gives her insight into human suffering, making her more perceptive and compassionate toward those around her. Though this emotional awareness is overwhelming for a child, it reveals her strength in surviving while still feeling deeply.

b. The Negative Effects of Misty's Trauma

While there are rare moments of emotional insight, the overwhelming effects of trauma on Misty are negative. The abuse she experiences creates long-term psychological harm, which can be seen through her body language, behavior, and inner thoughts. These negative effects fall under three major symptoms of trauma: hyperarousal, intrusion, and dissociation.

b.1 Hyperarousal

Hyperarousal refers to the state of constant alertness, fear, and anxiety that trauma survivors often experience. For Misty, the world never feels safe again after her assault. She remains in a heightened state of vigilance, afraid of being hurt or caught off guard. This is especially evident when she walks through familiar spaces but no longer feels secure in them.

This is evident in the following quotation:

"She stepped off the porch and walked toward the barn. She walked like she always did, her eyes on the ground, watching for snakes, but her shoulders were high and tight like a rope around her neck. Her hands were clenched so tightly the nails bit into her palms. Every time the wind moved through the leaves she flinched, and every time she heard a creak in the wood she paused. Even her breathing was careful." (Blooms, 2020: 45)

The quotation above shows how Misty's entire body is responding to the fear she carries within her. Her breathing, her posture, her awareness of sound—all reflect a state of hyperarousal. She is constantly preparing for danger, which indicates how her trauma has conditioned her body to remain in survival mode.

b.2 Intrusion

Intrusion refers to unwanted and uncontrollable memories, flashbacks, or emotional responses that are triggered by trauma. Misty experiences intrusion when she finds herself overwhelmed by memories or feelings that she cannot escape. These moments are not chosen or wanted; they enter her mind suddenly and disturb her present experience.

This can be seen in the quotation below:

“The memory came all at once, like a splash of cold water. She didn’t want to remember, didn’t want to think about the barn or what had happened there, but it was already there. The way the sun had looked on the wood. The way her legs had trembled. The sound of the barn door closing. Her stomach flipped and she felt like throwing up. She wanted to scream but her mouth stayed closed.” (Blooms, 2020: 62)

The scene above captures the moment when Misty is overwhelmed by intrusive memories. She tries to suppress the pain, but her mind forces the past back into her consciousness. Her physical reaction nausea, desire to scream, silence demonstrates how the memory still lives in her body.

b.3 Dissociation

Dissociation is one of the most severe psychological effects of trauma, where a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, or even their body. Misty often disconnects from reality when the pain becomes unbearable. She feels as though she is floating or that time slows down. This is her mind's way of protecting itself by creating distance from the painful experience.

This is evident in the following quotation:

“It was like her body wasn’t hers anymore. Like she was floating somewhere above herself, watching everything from far away. The barn looked smaller from up there. The voices sounded like they were underwater. She didn’t feel her hands anymore, didn’t feel the pain, just the heaviness, the silence. It was better not to feel. It was better to be gone.” (Blooms, 2020: 33)

The quote describes a classic dissociative episode. Misty detaches from her physical presence in order to survive the pain. She distances herself mentally from what’s happening to her. This moment illustrates how dissociation becomes a psychological shield for her, albeit a temporary and fragile one.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion in the previous chapters, Misty is portrayed as a young girl who endures severe psychological trauma throughout the novel *Every Bone a Prayer* by Ashley Bloom. Living in a small Appalachian town, Misty's life is shaped by a series of distressing events that influence her perception of herself and her surrounding environment. Her trauma stems from multiple sources: sexual and physical abuse by her neighbor Big Billy, emotional neglect by her own family, and the constant presence of dangerous and unstable situations.

The causes of Misty's trauma are both personal and environmental. Internally, Misty experiences deep emotional suffering due to the betrayal and violence inflicted by someone she initially trusts. Externally, her emotional needs are consistently overlooked by her parents, especially her mother, who is often mentally distant. These factors combine to create a world in which Misty feels invisible, unworthy of affection, and emotionally abandoned. The trauma is further intensified by the environment she inhabits — a setting filled with decay, isolation, and unspoken pain.

Misty's trauma manifests in three distinct but interconnected forms: acute, chronic, and complex trauma. Acute trauma is seen through her intense reactions to specific events, such as the abuse and her encounter with an injured deer. Over time, these experiences become chronic, as Misty repeatedly faces neglect and rejection within her family. Eventually, her trauma evolves into complex trauma, deeply embedded in her identity and expressed through dissociation, silence, and emotional detachment. Her responses reflect Judith Herman's theory of trauma, where survival mechanisms such as hyperarousal, intrusion, and dissociation dominate the victim's life.

The impacts of Misty's trauma are both psychological and behavioral. On one hand, she becomes withdrawn, constantly afraid, and unable to find safety even in familiar places. On the other, she displays an extraordinary sensitivity to the pain of others, revealing how trauma has shaped not only her suffering but also her capacity for empathy. Misty's coping mechanisms including silence, avoidance, and fantasy — reveal her desperate need to escape a reality that continues to wound her.

In conclusion, Misty's trauma is not rooted in a single event, but rather a combination of abuse, neglect, and environmental danger that accumulates over time. These traumatic experiences shape every aspect of her life, influencing her thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. The novel presents Misty's story not merely as a personal struggle but as a powerful exploration of how trauma, when left unacknowledged and unsupported, can consume a young life. Yet through her pain, Misty also embodies resilience — her silent endurance reflects the complex reality of many trauma survivors who continue to seek safety, identity, and meaning in a world that has failed to protect them.

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