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TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE IN NOVEL ABSOLUTE DARLING (2017) BY GABRIEL TALLENT

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Abstract

This study focuses on the exploration of trauma in the novel *My Absolute Darling* (2017) by Gabriel Tallent, specifically examining how traumatic events affect characters and their development. The research aims to analyze the portrayal and effects of trauma as depicted in the narrative, utilizing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (1995) as a theoretical framework to understand the psychological implications of traumatic experiences. Employing a qualitative research method, the analysis is presented in a written format, emphasizing the intricate details of the characters' experiences. The findings reveal that trauma stems from various forms of violent behavior, including physical, sexual, and verbal abuse. Additionally, the effects of trauma manifest as intrusive thoughts, anxiety, arousal, avoidance, cognitive and negative feelings. In conclusion, the study provides a deeper understanding of how trauma shapes narratives and influences character interactions..

Keywords: *psychological trauma, traumatic experience, violence.*

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Introduction

Trauma is a painful experience that affects individuals physically, emotionally, and psychologically. It does not discriminate based on age or gender, impacting children, adults, and the elderly alike. Trauma can lead to significant changes in victims, such as depression, excessive anxiety, and behavioral alterations (Caruth, 1996). Traumatized individuals often display anxiety, despair, and



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feelings of helplessness, which complicate their ability to trust others and socialize normally. Ullman (2002) highlights that negative social reactions to trauma disclosures can further hinder recovery, making it essential for victims to have supportive environments.

Emotional changes caused by trauma often result in persistent sadness and loss of interest in once-enjoyed activities, making daily life challenging (Spytska, 2023). Excessive anxiety can manifest as constant worry, leaving individuals feeling tense and isolated. Those who have experienced trauma may withdraw from friends and family, preferring isolation over social interaction. Difficulties in trusting others can hinder relationships and foster feelings of loneliness (Spytska, 2023). Additionally, negative reactions from others when sharing trauma can complicate the healing process, making supportive communication crucial for recovery.

Trauma is common and arises from various sources, including physical or psychological abuse, loss of loved ones, natural disasters, and unexpected events. A notable example is Reynhard Sinaga, an Indonesian man convicted of serial rape against 48 men in the UK, whose case highlights the severe trauma faced by survivors, some of whom have attempted suicide. Another poignant example is Evi, a 36-year-old woman from the Czech Republic, who suffered trauma after a serious car accident in 2015. Her story, published by the Blizzard Institute (2015), details her experience of losing dignity and becoming dependent on others, illustrating the long-term psychological impacts of trauma.

In literature, Gabriel Tallent's novel *My Absolute Darling* explores similar themes of trauma through the character Julia Alveston, a 14-year-old girl who endures physical and sexual abuse from her father, Martin. Despite her survival skills, Julia is profoundly affected by her experiences. This study focuses on *My Absolute Darling* due to its vivid portrayal of trauma and its effects, including intrusive thoughts, anxiety, avoidance, arousal, and negative feelings.

While existing analyses have explored trauma in literature, significant gaps remain in understanding how characters depict traumatic experiences and their psychological impacts. Many studies focus on trauma mechanisms but do not delve deeply into the nuanced emotional responses of characters like Julia. This research aims to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive examination of trauma as depicted in *My Absolute Darling*, enhancing our understanding of trauma's complexities and its representation in literature.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory serves as a foundational framework for this analysis, positing that traumatic experiences often lead to delayed responses, manifested through intrusive thoughts, anxiety, and avoidance behaviors. Key references in trauma literature, including the works of

Herman (1992) and Van der Kolk (2014), provide additional context for understanding the psychological ramifications of trauma. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) How is the traumatic experience reflected in the main character in the *My Absolute Darling* (2017)? (2) What are the effects of traumatic experience on the main character in *My Absolute Darling* (2017)?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the broader discourse on trauma in literature, emphasizing the significance of understanding trauma's complexities in shaping character development and narrative structure.

Research Methods

Design

The design of this research study employed a qualitative approach, focusing on an in-depth exploration of traumatic experiences depicted in *My Absolute Darling* by Gabriel Tallent. This design was particularly suited for understanding complex social and human issues, as it allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the text. Qualitative research provided insights into the meanings that individuals assigned to their experiences, which was essential for analyzing trauma as presented in literature. The study relied on narrative analysis to explore themes and character development, providing a rich context for understanding trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth.

Participants

The participants in this study were the primary characters in *My Absolute Darling*, particularly Julia Alveston, whose experiences of trauma served as the focal point of the analysis. The novel itself acted as a participant, providing a narrative that revealed the inner workings of trauma through Julia's perspective. This qualitative analysis did not involve human participants in the traditional sense but instead drew on literary analysis to interpret character experiences.

Instrument

The primary instrument used for data collection in this study was the novel *My Absolute Darling* (2017). The text served as both the subject and tool for analysis, allowing for direct engagement with the narrative and dialogues that illustrated traumatic experiences. The analysis also incorporated theoretical frameworks from trauma studies, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, to guide the interpretation of Julia's experiences and responses to trauma.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved thorough readings of *My Absolute Darling*, with multiple readings conducted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the text. Key traumatic issues were identified, and relevant quotations were extracted to support the analysis. Each quotation was carefully marked for easy reference, and the dominant themes were organized according to Caruth's trauma theory. This systematic approach facilitated a focused analysis of the text, ensuring that the findings accurately represented the narrative's portrayal of trauma.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this study involved inspecting, cleansing, transforming, and modeling the collected quotations to uncover meaningful insights related to trauma. The analysis was structured around the narrative and dialogue from the novel, followed by thorough interpretations based on the theoretical framework provided by Caruth. This included defining and classifying trauma based on Julia's responses and examining the setting, plot, and conflict to understand the broader implications of her experiences.

Results and Discussion

Results

The portrayal of trauma in Julia Alveston from *My Absolute Darling* is both detailed and deeply moving. From a young age, she endures severe emotional and physical abuse from her father, whose survivalist mentality fosters an environment of fear and control. This dynamic shapes Julia's self-perception, making her feel unworthy of kindness and affection. The constant threat of violence scars her psychologically, leading to difficulties in trusting others and seeking help.

Julia's trauma is compounded by her isolation in the wilderness, far from societal support systems. While she finds solace in nature, her emotional struggles persist. The novel illustrates how her traumatic experiences manifest in anxiety, self-doubt, and challenges in forming healthy relationships. Her mental state reflects the chaos of her home life, creating internal battles as intense as the external ones.

Moreover, Julia's trauma affects her interactions with others. Although new friendships offer a glimpse of hope, her past experiences hinder her ability to connect. The narrative captures her instinct to push people away to shield herself from further hurt, highlighting the complexities of emotional scars and the challenges of forming genuine connections amidst a painful history.

The traumatic experience reflected in the main character in the My Absolute Darling (2017)

Julia's experiences of trauma are vividly portrayed through her interactions with her father, Martin, and the psychological impact of his abusive behavior. Key forms of violence include:

1. Experience of Sexual Violence

"He runs his hand up her leg and cups her butt in his hand and he says, "God-damn, goddamn, and he walks his lips up the knobs of her spine, kissing each, waiting on each, his breathing choked with emotion, saying. "Goddamn," her legs parted to show a gap admitting to the black of her guts and he takes this for her truth, she knows. He lifts her hair in handfuls and lays it over the pillow to expose the nape of her neck and he says, "Goddamn," his voice a rasp, teasing the small stray hairs with his fingers." (Tallent, 2017, p. 21)

This part from Tallent's *My Absolute Darling* (2017) is a disturbing yet deeply revealing depiction of sexual violence, capturing the violation not only of the body but also of the sense of self. The narrator's detailed description of the man's physical actions and his repeated utterance of "Goddamn" highlight the imbalance of power and objectification inherent in the scene. The sensory language—touch, movement, breath, and voice—renders the violence intimate and invasive, emphasizing how the perpetrator interprets the victim's physical vulnerability as "truth," a false justification for his domination. This moment encapsulates how sexual violence distorts intimacy and agency, turning a private, sacred experience into an assertion of control. The victim's internal awareness ("she knows") adds psychological depth, showing her painful consciousness of being reduced to an object within the aggressor's gaze. Through such prose, Tallent exposes the emotional and existential trauma of sexual abuse, using visceral imagery to make readers confront the horror and complexity of power, violation, and coerced intimacy.

2. Experience of Physical Violence

"You are mine," he says, and swings the fire poker around and strikes her on the arm and she pitches onto her stomach in the mud, her left arm numb, her shoulder broken-feeling, and she tries to rise, gets one hand under herself and heaves up and he plants his boot on the small of her back and drives her to the ground. He raises the poker into the air, and she thinks, get away, get away, Julia, for your life get away, but she is pinned in place by his boot and she thinks, you have to you have to, but she cannot

move, and he brings the fire poker down onto the back of her thighs, and she bucks, spasms.” (Tallent, 2017, p. 140)

This vividly depicts the brutal experience of physical violence intertwined with sexual domination and control. The abuser’s statement, “You are mine,” reflects the assertion of ownership and power that often accompanies acts of sexual and physical abuse, reducing the victim to an object of possession rather than a person with agency. The violent imagery—the fire poker, the physical restraint, the victim’s immobilization—illustrates both physical harm and psychological terror, capturing the sense of helplessness and entrapment that victims endure. The repetition of internal commands like “get away” underscores the victim’s desperate struggle for survival and autonomy, even as her body betrays her under the weight of trauma and pain. Through this scene, Tallent (2017) exposes the devastating intersection of physical assault and emotional subjugation, revealing how violence serves not only to inflict injury but also to assert control and destroy the victim’s sense of self and safety.

3. Experience of Verbal Violence

“Julia sits with her hands flat on the table looking at the gun. He says, “Don’t be a little bitch, Kibble.” He stands perfectly still. “You’re being a little bitch. Are you trying to be a little bitch, Kibble?” (Tallent, 2017, p. 5)

The excerpt reflects the psychological and emotional impact of verbal violence, showing how language can be weaponized to intimidate, belittle, and control. In this scene, the repeated use of derogatory and demeaning language—particularly the insult “little bitch”—functions as a form of verbal aggression intended to humiliate Julia and assert dominance over her. The speaker’s tone, combined with the presence of a gun, intensifies the threat, making the violence both psychological and emotional rather than purely physical. This kind of abuse damages the victim’s sense of self-worth, instills fear, and reinforces power imbalance. Through the use of harsh, dehumanizing language, the perpetrator strips the victim of dignity and autonomy, illustrating how verbal violence can be as destructive and traumatizing as physical assault.

The effects of traumatic experience on the main character in My Absolute Darling (2017)

Julia's trauma manifests in various psychological effects, including:

1. Intrusive Thought Effect

“Slowly, the boys drop off to sleep, and Julia lies opposite them. She thinks, I love him, I love him so goddamn much, but, but let me stay out. Let him

come after me. We will see what he does, won't we? Here is a game we play, and I think he knows we play it; I hate him for something, something he does, he goes too far, and I hate him, but I am un-sure in my hatred, guilty and self-doubting and hating myself almost too much to hold it against him; that is me, a goddamn slut; and so I trespass again to see if he will again do something so bad: it is a way to see if I am right to hate him: I want to know" (Tallent, 2017, p. 80)

The excerpt illustrates the intrusive thought effect through Julia's conflicted inner dialogue, revealing her struggle between love, guilt, and self-hatred. Her thoughts are repetitive, obsessive, and self-punishing, showing how trauma and emotional manipulation distort her reasoning. Julia's intrusive thoughts blur the line between affection and resentment, creating a mental cycle of confusion and self-blame. She rationalizes her abuser's behavior and questions her own emotions, indicating a deep internalization of abuse. This psychological turmoil exemplifies how intrusive thoughts trap victims in patterns of emotional dependence and guilt, preventing them from clearly distinguishing love from harm.

2. Anxiety Effect

"Julia wakes in the predawn dark thinking about that. Thinking about what he'd said. She cannot get back to sleep. She sits at the bay window and looks out at the ocean, the rose thorns itching at the panes. What had he meant, there is something broken in that man? Outside, it is clear. She thinks, you will be better and more than I am, reproducing his expression in her mind, trying to get at what he meant" (Tallent, 2017, p. 50)

The passage reflects Julia's experience of anxiety through her restless thoughts and inability to return to sleep. Her mind becomes trapped in a cycle of rumination, replaying the man's words and searching for hidden meanings. The imagery of the "rose thorns itching at the panes" mirrors her inner unease, suggesting that her thoughts, like the thorns, continually prick at her peace. The quiet predawn setting emphasizes her isolation and emotional vulnerability, as she struggles to make sense of his statement, "there is something broken in that man." Julia's attempt to "reproduce his expression" shows how anxiety consumes her cognitive space, compelling her to overanalyze and self-reflect obsessively. This moment captures the psychological toll of anxiety—where uncertainty, fear, and mental fixation disturb one's sense of safety and rest.

3. Avoidance Effect

"Then she thinks, but if I go back up the stairs, there will be a whole tract of myself I will have to keep half lit by remembering, and I will never come to peace with it, but if I go in there now and I do just the best I can, that is a story I can tell myself, however it ends" (Tallent, 2017, p. 147)

The passage reflects the psychological impact of avoidance as a coping mechanism in trauma recovery. Julia's internal conflict between confronting her past ("go back up the stairs") and avoiding it ("keep half lit by remembering") symbolizes the emotional burden of facing painful memories. Her fear of reliving trauma prevents her from achieving peace, yet she also recognizes that avoidance only prolongs her suffering. The act of "doing the best I can" signifies her attempt to regain agency by choosing action over paralysis. This illustrates how avoidance, while initially serving as emotional protection, ultimately traps her in a cycle of partial healing and unresolved pain.

4. Arousal Effect

"Turtle's whole body prickles. She listens. He walks into the living room and stands at the foot of her stairs and she waits, thinking, come on up, you bastard. You might hurt me but you can never break me, so come on up the stairs, motherfucker, and let's see what you have. Turtle's scalp prickles. It feels like the skin is tightening. The fear grows on her." (Tallent, 2017, p. 356)

The passage demonstrates the arousal effect through Turtle's intense physiological and emotional response to fear and confrontation. Her body reacts viscerally — her skin prickles, her scalp tightens — signaling a heightened state of arousal that prepares her for potential danger. This bodily tension reflects the activation of her fight-or-flight response, where fear and adrenaline intermingle, creating both vulnerability and defiance. Psychologically, the arousal effect manifests in Turtle's internal dialogue; though she recognizes the threat, her thoughts reveal an empowered defiance, showing that fear fuels her readiness to resist rather than surrender. The scene powerfully captures how arousal amplifies both physical sensations and mental determination, illustrating Turtle's complex mix of terror and resilience in the face of violence.

5. Cognition and Negative Feelings Effect

She thinks, I killed him. The thought comes so quickly, so painfully, that it makes her shiver in disgust, grinding her teeth, and she thinks again, I killed him. Her own insignificance is oppressive to her-that she should be the one who finally kills Grandpa, when so much else had failed, and it

seems to her that her own relationship to Grandpa is shallow compared to his relationship with Martin, and if Grandpa's relationship with her had been less troubled, it was only because it had less depth" (Tallent, 2017, p. 175)

The passage reflects the Cognition and Negative Feelings Effect through Julia's internalized guilt, self-blame, and sense of emotional inadequacy. Her repetitive thought—"I killed him"—reveals an intrusive and obsessive cognitive response driven by trauma and moral confusion. The intensity of her disgust and physical reaction, such as shivering and grinding her teeth, illustrates how negative cognition manifests somatically. This moment demonstrates Julia's internal conflict between her rational understanding and emotional turmoil; she attributes disproportionate responsibility to herself, showing how trauma distorts self-perception. Additionally, her belief that her relationship with Grandpa was "less deep" than his with Martin heightens her feelings of worthlessness, reinforcing a cognitive pattern of self-devaluation that reflects both psychological damage and the lingering power dynamics of abuse.

Discussion

The findings from *My Absolute Darling* reveal a rich tapestry of trauma that profoundly shapes Julia Alveston's character and her interactions with others. The interplay of sexual, physical, and verbal violence creates a complex web of emotional responses that resonate deeply with the literature on trauma. Drawing upon Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this discussion will analyze how Julia's experiences reflect broader themes in trauma literature and highlight the implications for understanding the psychological ramifications of such abuse.

Julia's experiences underscore the multi-dimensional nature of trauma. Each form of violence she endures contributes to her psychological landscape, complicating her emotional responses and interactions. Caruth (1995) posits that trauma is not merely an event but a series of delayed and intrusive responses that manifest in various ways. Julia's sexual abuse, for instance, leads to a distortion of her understanding of love, as she internalizes her father's manipulation as affection. This aligns with the findings of Herman (1992), who emphasizes that victims of sexual violence often grapple with feelings of confusion and self-blame.

Moreover, Julia's physical abuse serves as a constant reminder of her vulnerability, reinforcing the trauma's grip on her psyche. The visceral nature of her experiences, as illustrated in the quote about the fire poker, highlights the brutality of her father's control. This brutality echoes the findings of Van der Kolk (2014), who notes that physical violence can leave lasting scars that

affect an individual's sense of safety and self-worth. Julia's inability to escape the cycle of violence illustrates the pervasive nature of trauma, wherein the victim feels trapped in a web of fear and manipulation.

The psychological effects of Julia's trauma are profound and multifaceted. Her intrusive thoughts reveal the depths of her internal conflict, where love and hatred coexist, leading to a fractured sense of self. This complexity resonates with Caruth's assertion that trauma often disrupts the victim's ability to form coherent narratives about their experiences. Julia's struggle to reconcile her feelings toward her father reflects the broader theme of identity crisis common among trauma survivors.

Anxiety emerges as a prominent theme in Julia's narrative, particularly in her interactions with Martin. Her heightened state of alertness illustrates the lasting impact of trauma on her mental state, aligning with Caruth's notion of hyperarousal. Julia's anxiety manifests not only as a response to her father's presence but also as a pervasive sense of dread that permeates her daily life. This aligns with the findings of Ullman (2002), who emphasizes that trauma survivors often experience heightened anxiety in situations reminiscent of their traumatic experiences.

Julia's attempts to avoid reminders of her trauma further complicate her emotional landscape. Her reluctance to confront painful memories illustrates the struggle many trauma survivors face in navigating their past. Caruth (1995) suggests that avoidance is a common coping mechanism for trauma victims, yet it often hinders the healing process by preventing individuals from fully engaging with their emotions. Julia's internal conflict between the desire to escape her trauma and the necessity of confronting it underscores the complexities of trauma recovery.

The portrayal of trauma in *My Absolute Darling* highlights the critical need for understanding and support for survivors. Julia's experiences reveal the profound isolation often faced by individuals dealing with trauma, as she grapples with feelings of worthlessness and shame. The absence of a supportive environment exacerbates her struggles, illustrating Ullman's (2002) findings that negative social reactions to trauma disclosures can hinder recovery.

Moreover, the complexities of Julia's relationships underscore the importance of empathy and understanding in supporting trauma survivors. Her interactions with friends like Brett and Jacob offer glimpses of hope, yet her past experiences often lead her to push them away out of fear of further hurt. This dynamic emphasizes the need for supportive relationships that foster healing and resilience, echoing Herman's (1992) assertion that social support is crucial for recovery from trauma.

In conclusion, the exploration of trauma in *My Absolute Darling* reveals the intricate ways in which abuse shapes identity and interpersonal relationships. Julia's experiences of sexual, physical, and verbal violence serve as a poignant reminder of the complexities inherent in trauma. By situating Julia's narrative within the broader context of trauma theory, this study underscores the importance of understanding the psychological ramifications of abuse. The findings advocate for increased awareness and support for trauma survivors, emphasizing the critical role of empathy and understanding in fostering healing and resilience. Ultimately, this discussion contributes to the ongoing discourse on trauma in literature, highlighting the need for continued exploration of its representation and implications in both literary and real-world contexts.

Conclusion

After conducting a deep analysis and interpretation of Gabriel Tallent's novel *My Absolute Darling*, this study has illuminated the complexities of trauma portrayed through the main character, Julia Alveston. The findings contribute significantly to the field of literary trauma studies by detailing how various forms of abuse—sexual, physical, and verbal—interact to create profound psychological effects.

The research highlights that Julia's traumatic experiences stem from the continuous violence inflicted by her father, Martin. This repeated abuse manifests in multiple ways, leaving Julia with deep emotional scars. The sexual violence she endures leaves her feeling powerless and unable to resist, as her father exerts significant control over her. Acts of physical violence not only cause visible injuries but also reinforce her feelings of vulnerability. Additionally, the verbal abuse she faces contributes to her sense of worthlessness and despair. Each of these forms of abuse plays a crucial role in shaping Julia's identity and psychological state.

Furthermore, the study identifies five key effects of trauma that Julia experiences: intrusive thoughts, anxiety, avoidance, arousal, and negative self-perceptions. These effects are consistent with existing literature on trauma, reinforcing the importance of understanding how trauma can permeate various aspects of a survivor's life. Julia's intrusive thoughts reflect the struggle many survivors face in reconciling their traumatic experiences with their sense of self. Her anxiety illustrates the pervasive nature of trauma, while her avoidance behaviors highlight the challenges of confronting painful memories. The findings suggest that the psychological repercussions of trauma can hinder recovery, emphasizing the need for supportive environments that foster healing.

The implications of this study extend beyond literary analysis; they highlight the urgent need for improved support systems for trauma survivors. Understanding the complexities of trauma as depicted in literature can inform educational applications, particularly in developing curricula that address mental health awareness. Additionally, the findings call for further research into trauma representation in literature, particularly how different contexts and genres approach the subject.

Future research could explore the relationships between trauma and coping mechanisms in various literary works, potentially integrating psychological, sociological, and cultural perspectives. By examining these intersections, scholars can gain a more comprehensive understanding of trauma's impact on individuals and communities.

In conclusion, Julia's experience in *My Absolute Darling* serves as a powerful reminder of the profound effects of trauma on mental health. This study underscores the importance of understanding trauma in literature, not only as a narrative device but also as a reflection of real-world experiences that necessitate empathy, support, and effective intervention for survivors.

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