
BETWEEN FOUR WALLS AND BEYOND: EXPLORING UNCLAIMED CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN EMMA DONOGHUE'S ROOM

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Abstract

Room (2010) by Emma Donoghue provides a powerful portrayal of trauma using the exclusive voice of a captive child narrator, Jack. Grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this research explores how the novel captures the psychological consequences of long-term captivity, the fragmentation of self, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma within the confines of physical entrapment. The structure of the narrative refracted through Jack's limited understanding presents the tension between experience and its representation as a foundational problem in trauma studies. This article argues that Room reconfigures trauma as an embodied, relational, and spatial process rather than a single catastrophic event. It also examines the healing function of storytelling and narrative reconstruction as a therapeutic process. Donoghue's novel is transformed into a space where not only trauma is represented but also re-lived as well, enabling readers to partake in an empathetic response to the characters' rehabilitation process. The study contributes to debates on representing child trauma, feminist ethics of care, and the politics of witnessing in twenty-first-century fiction. **Keywords:** child narrator, Cathy Caruth, trauma theory, fragmented self, rehabilitation, narrative healing.

INTRODUCTION:

Emma Donoghue's Room is a story of horror, innocence, captivity, trauma, escape and resilience. The novel emphasizes linguistic creativity, maternal resilience and the possibility of narrative control as a form of psychological liberation. The story was narrated by five-year-old Jack who has lived his entire life in a single locked room with his mother whom he calls Ma. The novel offers an unsettling yet poignant look into the mental, emotional and developmental consequences of prolonged captivity.

The story is told exclusively through the consciousness of Jack whose understanding of the world is shaped entirely by the four walls of Room and the interceded explanations given by his mother. This child-centered narrative strategy not only deepens the emotional impact of the novel but also problematizes the representation of trauma, identity and the nature of reality.

The tension between visibility and invisibility is rooted in how Jack's mother uses storytelling to construct a protective version of reality. In a cramped and soundproofed garden shed Jack's mother has been held captive by a man called Old Nick for seven years during which time she gave birth to Jack. His mother teaches him that Room is the entire world and that everything else is a TV-world, a distant fictional universe, to shield him from the grim reality. Jack born in captivity finds wonder in ordinary things like a single skylight, a wardrobe and even a sink. That small oppressive shed becomes his universe where identity is formed, relationship is nurtured and meaning is produced. This circumstances reshapes physical confinement into psychological expansiveness. As Jack turns five his mother realizes they must escape and carefully devises a plan convincing Old Nick that Jack is seriously ill. Upon their escape Jack and his mother faces the trauma of adjusting to the outside world

overwhelmed by sensory overload, unfamiliar environments and complex social interactions. Jack struggles to accept freedom, clinging to the safety and familiarity of Room. Meanwhile, Mother wrestles with depression and the psychological aftermath of years of abuse. The story culminates with a poignant visit back to Room where Jack says his final goodbyes to the confined space that shaped his early life.

The novel's intimate narrative approach gives readers access to trauma's visceral and cognitive aftermath. Trauma studies especially the work of Cathy Caruth provides a crucial framework to comprehend how Room articulates trauma beyond immediate physical survival as a lingering psychological wound that shapes identity and memory.

Latency and Unclaimed Experience:

Cathy Caruth, a foundational figure in trauma theory conceptualizes trauma not merely as an event but as the experience of an event that remains unassimilated and unassimilable to consciousness at the moment it occurs, manifesting instead through delayed and repetitive haunting. In her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth argues trauma manifests through a delayed, repetitive haunting, rather than direct recall,

Trauma seems to be 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. 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 4)

This approach shifts the understanding of trauma from the event itself to its recursive impact on memory and identity.

According to Cathy Caruth trauma is an event that is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). It is defined by its latency, indirectness and the difficulty of the survivor in integrating the experience into conscious life. Jack's childhood trauma is profoundly latent. He cannot interpret the events in Room as traumatic because they constitute his only reality. His worldview is constructed of routines, personified objects and the careful storytelling of mother. He does not possess the language or conceptual framework to name his suffering. This aligns with Caruth's assertion that trauma is not fully assimilated as it occurs but returns later through symptoms and compulsion. Jack's perception is fragmented and discontinuous, reflecting trauma's hallmark of interruption and confusion. Only after his escape trauma begins to impose itself again as Jack is overwhelmed by sensory overload, separation anxiety and difficulty espousing into society.

Caruth's theory addresses not only the individual but also the relational effects of trauma. In Room, Mother's own trauma reverberates through her interactions with Jack. Her efforts to protect him ironically contributes to the latency and unclaimed nature of his trauma. "It's called mind over matter. If we don't mind, it doesn't matter." (Donoghue 06). The repeated reassurances of the mother acts as a defense against her own pain, showing how trauma disrupts the conventional parent-child dynamics and transmits uncertainty along with coping strategies, and unspoken fears across generations.

Jack's personal and latent trauma, Mother's intergenerational transmission of suffering and the frustration of narrative unity exemplifies Caruth's notion that trauma is defined by what remains unclaimed and unresolved within consciousness. This structuring of trauma as a recursive, relational and latent force are foundational to understanding Room's unique narrative power.

Trauma Narration in Room

Jack's status as a child narrator is crucial in depicting trauma from a fragmented and delayed perspective shaped by years of confinement. His narrative provides insight into trauma's impact on cognition and time. Jack does not initially comprehend the full horror of his captivity, his trauma is implicit and emergent. This aligns with Caruth's assertion that trauma escapes immediate recognition but is relived in memory over time. Jack's understanding of the world is pieced together from sensory impressions, routines and limited explanations provided by his mother resulting in a narrative that mirrors the psychological fragmentation characteristic of trauma. Jack describes everyday events like "the world is always changing brightness and hotness and soundness, I never know how it's going to be the next minute" (Donoghue 230), in ways that show bewilderment and discontinuity represent trauma's hallmark of interrupted consciousness.

Jack cannot explicitly recognize or narrate the trauma of captivity as he lacks both the conceptual language and external connections. This inability echoes Caruth's assertion that "trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" (Caruth 2). The narration of Jack is full of gaps, silences and moments of dissociation. Only after leaving Room do the overwhelming symptoms of trauma start to take shape, showing up as sensory overload, disorientation and anxiety. He reports actions and sensations without always being able to describe them. The audience is positioned as co-witnesses of unclaimed childhood trauma as a result of these narrative gaps, which force readers to piece together the scope of Jack's suffering.

Jack's struggles with understanding freedom outside the room, his fear and confusion highlights trauma's persistence beyond physical rescue. He insists, "In Room I was safe and Outside is a scary" (Donoghue 188). This reflects how trauma reshapes the child's sense of safety and alters perceptions of reality in his post-traumatic state. His narrative is thus an example of how trauma is often rendered through fragmented narratives and subtle signals

rather than clear confession, which is a central insight in trauma theory. The child's perspective in its limitations and peculiar constructions becomes the perfect lens to demonstrate trauma's delayed imprint and the fractured self that emerges from unprocessed horrific experience. The room becomes not just a physical site but a psychic centre of trauma.

The Mother's Trauma and Survival:

The mother carries wounds that go far beyond what Jack can see. Behind her calm strength lies years of denial, painful memories and the sheer will to survive. Even though her story is explained through Jack's innocent voice, it expounds the sense of her deep long-term trauma, emotional struggles after giving birth in captivity and by the constant fear for her son's wellbeing. She also carries the heavy echo of trauma passed down through generations on her own and forced upon her by the cruelty of confinement.

Caruth's theory underscores trauma survivors' repeated confrontation with their wounds, even when attempting to repress them. Mother's oscillation between hope and despair mirrors the delayed recall and Caruth identifies that trauma survivors are haunted by memories that repeatedly evade but are captured in words and actions.

Trauma, Witnessing, and Ethical Implications:

Caruth emphasizes trauma's ethical dimension as "listening to the voice and to the speech delivered by the other's wound" (Caruth 8) and the necessity of witnessing the survivor's testimony. In *Room*, this dynamic is enacted through Jack's naïve childlike behaviour and fragmented narration. Jack's story is more than just a retelling of what happened to him. It becomes his way of showing that he carries deep wounds he cannot fully express or even understand. The novel does not neatly tie up his pain or offer easy answers. Instead, it allows readers to sense the things Jack leaves unsaid like the pauses, the repeated details and the confusion. These small gaps reveal the lingering trauma he has not yet been able to face. Through this, readers are invited to feel his struggle and to recognize the quiet, ongoing pain beneath his words. Jack's narration is itself a form of testimony, a vital act of witness that reflects Caruth's notion of trauma as an experience that "confronts historical events, that we may need to rethink the possibility of history, as well as our ethical and political relation to it." (Caruth 12). In *Room*, the retelling of traumatic experiences through Jack's consciousness foregrounds the limits of language and linear narrative showing that testimony is not simply factual reporting but an invitation for outsiders to witness the survivor's ongoing struggle. His innocent account of horror and recovery becomes a lens not just for his own pain but for broader ethical questions about empathy, reception and the moral obligations of readers as witnesses to trauma.

Trauma and Repetition:

Caruth highlights the repetitive nature of traumatic memory as survivors unconsciously relive aspects of the initial traumatic event. In *Room*, this is illustrated through Jack's compulsive counting and rituals which function as coping mechanisms rooted deeply in trauma. Jack describes, "I count to one hundred . . . I do to five hundred" (Donoghue 131) and this shows how Jack's counting and rituals are examples of repetition compulsion, a coping mechanism rooted in trauma. Even after their escape from captivity, Jack clings to the rituals and objects of *Room*, attempting to manage anxiety and make sense of the overwhelming new world. This persistent adherence to familiar routines represents trauma's cyclical persistence that was once a source of protection becomes both a shield and a prison, mirroring the psychological patterns Caruth associates with trauma survivors.

Caruth further proposes that trauma constitutes a crisis of witnessing. Its truth is often indirect and mediated described as, "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" (Caruth 4). The narration of *Room* is a cry for witness as Jack's innocent account invites the reader to perceive the profound suffering that he himself struggles to claim. "I don't know what to say" (Donoghue 91). Jack's silence is more than just the absence of speech. It reflects the kind of pain that is too deep and confusing for a child to express. His quietness becomes a way of showing how trauma often hides itself in the spaces between words. Readers are gently pushed to look beyond what Jack says and pay attention to what he cannot say like the emotional wound he carries even when he does not fully understand it himself.

Through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, *Room* becomes not just a story of captivity and escape but a powerful study in the latency, repetition, transmission, narrative silences and witness of trauma. The novel's structure filtered through Jack's unclaimed experience embodies and demands the ethical response Caruth envisions through a way of listening attuned to the complexity, the interruptions and the silences that define childhood trauma.

From Horror to Healing:

Emma Donoghue's *Room* provides layered narration and strategic use of innocence and traditional trauma narratives by shifting the focal point from horror to healing and from silence to speech. This layered experimentation is most vividly realized in the novel's strategic use of innocence as Donoghue foregrounds a child's retelling of horror not through graphic depiction and spectacle but through the gentle child-centered perspective that enables a delicate articulation of healing, survival, agency and the reclamation of selfhood.

Rather than dwelling on graphic depictions of violence, Donoghue chooses to portray trauma through Jack's innocence and fragmented understanding illustrating how healing unfolds in small often imperceptible ways. "Jack doesn't need treatment, he needs some sleep" (Donoghue 141). This narrative strategy aligns with Cathy Caruth's trauma theory which posits that, "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (Caruth 58). Jack's storytelling becomes a reclaiming of language, experience and survival transforming silence and suffering into a form of expression and control.

The novel thus highlights storytelling as a therapeutic act. As Jack slowly negotiates freedom beyond Room, his fluctuating perceptions show the ongoing tension between trauma's grip and the potential for recovery. Room challenges trauma fiction's typical preoccupation with victimhood by insisting on a narrative of resilience and rearticulation, where healing is neither linear nor total but a complex lived process. Through Jack's voice the novel offers a powerful testimony to the embodied and relational nature of trauma and recovery. The story reminds that when someone is finally able to speak and when another person truly listens with compassion, broken pieces of the self can slowly come back together. In this gentle exchange of telling and witnessing the journey moves from fear and confusion toward trust, wholeness and healing.

CONCLUSION:

Emma Donoghue's *Room* intricately embodies that trauma does not simply fade. It returns in cycles and often hides beneath the surface just as theorized by Cathy Caruth. The story reveals how pain can linger quietly inside people by shaping their feelings and fears even when they try to move forward. Through Jack's tender way of seeing the world and through his mother's quiet strength, the novel shows trauma as a wound that never fully settles or becomes easy to understand. It stays fresh, complicated and unfinished that they carry with them even when they try to move forward. The novel offers profound insight into how trauma shapes memory, identity and relational dynamics beyond immediate survival, emphasizing the persistent psychological aftermath of captivity and abuse. It even underscores the vital ethical role of witnessing trauma. By allowing to see the world through Jack's confused, innocent and often fragmented understanding, *Room* turns readers into quiet witnesses. They don't observe trauma from a safe distance, they feel its everyday weight, its interruptions and its unspoken fears as they unfold in real time. The novel seeks to respond not with judgement but with empathy, attention and moral care.

Donoghue's storytelling adds something vital to trauma literature. Rather than presenting trauma only through suffering or victimhood, she shows how it lives in the body, in relationships, in memory and in the stories people struggle to tell. In doing so, *Room* echoes Cathy Caruth's ideas revealing how trauma is not simply remembered but it is carried, lived and slowly understood.

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