

A Haunting Without Resolution: Trauma as Unclaimed Experience in Picnic at Hanging Rock

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ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi trauma dalam novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) karya Joan Lindsay, khususnya hilangnya Miranda, Marion, Irma, dan Miss McCraw secara misterius saat piknik sekolah. Meskipun novel ini kerap dibahas sebagai kisah misteri yang dibangun oleh ambiguitas, kajian tentang bagaimana hilangnya para tokoh yang tidak pernah terpecahkan itu merepresentasikan trauma sebagai pengalaman yang tidak dapat dipahami sepenuhnya atau diintegrasikan ke dalam narasi yang utuh masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana novel tersebut menghadirkan kehilangan sebagai pengalaman yang tak terklaim (*unclaimed experience*) melalui kesunyian, ketiadaan, pengulangan, ketidakpastian, dan celah naratif. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain analisis tekstual kualitatif dengan novel sebagai data primer, dengan menelaah adegan-adegan penting, respons tokoh, pola naratif, dan deskripsi tentang peristiwa hilangnya para tokoh. Analisis menerapkan konsep-konsep trauma, khususnya *unclaimed experience*, *belatedness*, *acting out*, dan *working through*, untuk menafsirkan representasi kehilangan dalam novel. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa peristiwa tersebut menimbulkan ketidakpastian yang berkepanjangan, spekulasi yang berulang, gangguan emosional, dan ketidakstabilan institusional, sementara ketiadaan penjelasan yang pasti membuat para tokoh dan komunitas tidak dapat memproses peristiwa itu sepenuhnya. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penolakan Lindsay untuk memberikan penutupan naratif berfungsi sebagai representasi yang disengaja atas trauma yang tidak terselesaikan, sekaligus menunjukkan bagaimana kehilangan dapat terus memengaruhi individu dan komunitas ketika suatu pengalaman tidak dapat sepenuhnya dipahami, diartikulasikan, atau diklaim.

KATA KUNCI: *acting out; ambiguitas naratif; belatedness; kesaksian; penutupan naratif*

ABSTRACT: This study examines the representation of trauma in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), particularly the unexplained disappearance of Miranda, Marion, Irma, and Miss McCraw during a school picnic. Although the novel has often been discussed as a mystery shaped by ambiguity, less attention is given to how its unresolved disappearance can represent trauma as an experience that cannot be fully understood or integrated into a coherent narrative. This study aims to analyze how the novel presents loss as an unclaimed experience through silence, absence, repetition, uncertainty, and narrative gaps. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis design, using the novel as its primary data and examining significant scenes, character responses, narrative patterns, and descriptions of the disappearance. The analysis applies concepts of trauma, particularly *unclaimed experience*, *belatedness*, *acting out*, and *working through*, to interpret the novel's representation of loss. The findings show that the disappearance produces persistent uncertainty, repeated speculation, emotional disruption, and institutional instability, while the absence of definitive explanation prevents the characters and community from fully processing the event. The study concludes that Lindsay's refusal to provide narrative closure functions as a deliberate representation of unresolved trauma, demonstrating how loss can continue to affect individuals and communities when an experience cannot be fully understood, articulated, or claimed.

KEYWORDS: *acting out; belatedness; narrative ambiguity; narrative closure; testimony*

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INTRODUCTION

This study will analyze Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. The novel tells the story of a girls' boarding school in Victorian-era Australia. Its central conflict revolves around the disappearance of several students and a teacher during a Valentine's Day picnic at Hanging Rock, a mysterious rocky formation. Experiences of loss have often become one of the most frequently explored themes in literary works because of their close relationship to human experience, both as events themselves and as wounds embedded within narratives. In this novel, however, the nature of loss is different. The disappearance of the students and the teacher points toward something that remains unspoken. Loss does not always take the form of separation through death; rather, it can emerge through absence or through an event that cannot be fully explained. In some literary texts, such forms of loss do not move toward resolution or recovery but instead remain suspended, repeatedly returning as a disturbance that continues to affect the characters.

Previous studies of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* have examined the novel through various perspectives, including ambiguity (Gibson, 2019), memory and neo-Victorianism (Valls Oyarzun, 2021), Gothic and ecoGothic representation (Craven, 2021; Miller, 2017; Rassier & Costa, 2017), silence and setting (Hulbert, 2016; Mayr, 2017), and colonial and institutional contexts (Crofts & van Rijswijk, 2020). These studies demonstrate that the novel's refusal to provide a definitive explanation is central to its narrative construction (Gibson, 2019). However, the unresolved disappearance can be examined further in terms of how its resistance to explanation functions as a representation of traumatic experience. Rather than approaching the disappearance primarily as a mystery that awaits resolution, this study focuses on the relationship between unresolved loss, narrative silence, and the continuing return of an experience that cannot be fully assimilated into knowledge.

Based on this gap, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How is the experience of loss in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* represented as a trauma that cannot be fully experienced or understood at the moment of its occurrence, but continues to be present through silence, absence, and narrative repetition? (2) Why does the traumatic experience in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* remain resistant to stable meaning or resolution, and how does this failure of articulation demonstrate trauma as an unclaimed experience that continues to haunt the subjects and community in the novel? This study aims to demonstrate that the novel's ambiguity and refusal of closure function not merely as narrative strategies for sustaining mystery but also as formal representations of traumatic experience.

This study examines trauma through Cathy Caruth's (2016) concept of unclaimed experience. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth explains trauma as an experience that cannot be fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence and that may return belatedly through its effects. Trauma therefore disrupts the relationship between experience, memory, and understanding. Rather than being fully contained within the past, the traumatic event continues to affect the subject through repetition and delayed recognition. Caruth's concept of belatedness remains an established reference point in literary trauma studies (Balaev, 2008; Richards, 2021) and continues to be applied to fiction (Ahmad et al., 2023). It is particularly relevant to *Picnic at Hanging Rock* because the significance of the disappearance emerges through its continuing effects rather than through an immediate or complete understanding of the event. Caruth's framework also draws attention to the difficulty of narrating traumatic experience. Attempts to represent trauma may remain incomplete because the event

exceeds the subject's capacity for immediate comprehension and articulation. Testimony consequently becomes significant as an attempt to approach an experience that cannot be completely possessed through language. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, however, the disappearance does not develop into a complete testimony. Instead, the event is surrounded by silence, narrative gaps, speculation, and uncertainty. These features allow the novel's formal structure to participate in the representation of an experience that remains unclaimed. To further develop this framework, this study incorporates LaCapra's (2014) concepts of acting out and working through. LaCapra distinguishes acting out, in which the traumatic past continues to be repeated or relived in the present, from working through, which involves developing a degree of critical distance and reflective engagement with the past. Working through does not imply complete closure or the erasure of trauma; rather, it allows a subject to develop greater agency in relation to a traumatic experience. These concepts have been applied to literary and cultural texts (Fernández Santiago, 2019; He et al., 2024; Ullah, 2020) and to wider questions of trauma and security (Schick, 2011). They are useful for examining how the disappearance continues to disturb the characters and the wider community in Lindsay's novel. The collective dimension of the disappearance is particularly significant because its consequences extend beyond the missing individuals. The students, teachers, families, and surrounding community are confronted with an absence that cannot be transformed into a stable and shared explanation. Their continued speculation, anxiety, and attempts to restore order demonstrate how the event remains active within the present. The novel therefore allows trauma to be considered not only as an individual experience but also as a disturbance that operates within institutional and communal relationships. The combination of Caruth and LaCapra provides a framework for understanding the novel's ambiguity as more than a technique for sustaining mystery. Caruth explains how the disappearance can function as an unclaimed experience whose meaning remains inaccessible and whose effects emerge belatedly. LaCapra, meanwhile, provides a way to examine the continuing return of the event through acting out and the incomplete possibility of working through. Together, these perspectives allow this study to examine how silence, absence, repetition, and the refusal of closure contribute to the representation of trauma.

This study therefore approaches the ambiguity of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as a significant representational strategy rather than a narrative flaw. By examining the disappearance through trauma theory, the study shifts attention from the question of what happened at Hanging Rock to the question of how the inability to know what happened continues to shape memory, narrative, and communal experience. Ultimately, this study aims to demonstrate how Lindsay's novel represents trauma as an unfinished experience that remains present precisely because it resists complete articulation and resolution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework applied in this study is primarily based on Cathy Caruth's concept of Unclaimed Experience (2016). This theory is selected because it is considered relevant to the object of this study, Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. According to Caruth (2016), trauma is an experience that cannot be fully understood or represented; rather, it functions like a wound that operates through absence, repetition, and the failure of understanding. Caruth (2016) further views trauma as an experience that is not fully conscious at the moment it occurs. Consequently, trauma emerges belatedly

and continues to return in the form of disturbances that have no definite ending or final and complete meaning.

In this study, trauma in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* will not primarily be examined through memories of the past. Instead, the study focuses on the wound within understanding itself, namely a narrative that cannot be fully claimed by the subject. This inability to claim or comprehend the experience allows trauma to persist through repetition. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, trauma is represented through a narrative structure characterized by an atmosphere of silence and the absence of a definitive explanation. Joan Lindsay deliberately creates ambiguity in the novel and refuses to provide a clear resolution, thereby leaving readers to consider the possible meanings of the ending themselves. The sense of emptiness that remains after reading the novel further reinforces the atmosphere of trauma, corresponding to Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience.

In line with Caruth's perspective, LaCapra (2014) argues that acting out refers to a condition in which a subject becomes trapped in traumatic repetition, where the past is not positioned as something that has already passed but continues to intrude upon and dominate the present experience. Such a condition can be identified in the novel as a form of acting out, since the trauma is not confronted as a completed past event but is instead repeatedly re-experienced through the narrative. However, LaCapra also emphasizes that working through does not promise complete resolution, because trauma is persistent and always leaves a residue. If trauma could be completely healed simply through writing and reading, the question would arise as to why psychotherapy and psychiatric treatment are necessary, and why individuals who undergo treatment over extended periods may still continue to struggle with the effects of trauma. Therefore, in this study, the failure of working through to produce complete resolution is understood as another representation of trauma.

By combining these two theoretical perspectives, trauma in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is understood as an unresolved experience represented through repetition, uncertainty of meaning, and the rejection of final resolution. Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience enables this study to read the ambiguity and absence of meaning in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* not merely as characteristics of mystery or narrative uncertainty, but as representations of trauma itself. At the same time, LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through provide a framework for understanding how unresolved trauma continues to circulate through repetition and the inability to achieve complete closure. This combined theoretical approach further emphasizes that trauma should not be understood solely as an intrapsychic phenomenon, but also in relation to the ways in which memory, narrative, and community interact in confronting an experience of loss that can never be fully understood.

Recent scholarship on trauma in literary studies has increasingly moved beyond the understanding of trauma as a representation of a single catastrophic event. Instead, trauma has been examined through its relationship with temporality, memory, repetition, and the difficulty of establishing coherent meaning. Richards (2021) observes that trauma theory has become so established within literary studies that it is difficult to imagine the field without it, and she emphasizes the significance of belatedness in understanding meaning. In this framework, an event may not be fully comprehended at the moment it occurs, while its significance emerges retrospectively through its later return. Such an approach is particularly relevant to literary narratives in which an event remains incompletely understood and continues to affect the present.

This understanding of trauma is closely related to Cathy Caruth's foundational concept of unclaimed experience. Although Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* was originally published in 1996 and therefore falls outside the ten-year publication range, her concept remains the theoretical foundation of the present study. Recent scholarship continues to employ Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that resists complete assimilation and becomes accessible through belated forms of memory and narration. Ahmad et al. (2023), for instance, apply Caruth's theory to Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* and examine the reenactment of known and unknown war trauma as a double wound. Thus, Caruth is employed here not as a recent source but as the foundational theoretical framework through which recent scholarship on literary trauma can be interpreted.

The question of repetition and unresolved experience can further be developed through Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through. Like Caruth, LaCapra's foundational work predates the ten-year period stipulated for the present literature review. Nevertheless, subsequent studies continue to apply these concepts. Fernández Santiago (2019), for example, applies LaCapra's distinction to Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* and examines how post-traumatic reactions operate at both personal and public levels. The study demonstrates that acting out and working through can be used not only to describe psychological responses but also to examine how literary form represents the relationship between traumatic pasts and the present. Similarly, He et al. (2024) draw on LaCapra's acting out and working through, alongside Butler, to examine how the protagonist's earlier traumas are reactivated in Ian McEwan's *The Children Act*. Ullah (2020), drawing on Caruth and LaCapra, examines war memory and literary witnessing in Afghan cultural production and shows how traumatic memories can remain active within cultural narratives rather than functioning simply as representations of completed past events.

These recent applications are important for the present research because they indicate that trauma can be examined not only through what characters explicitly remember but also through the persistence of unresolved events within narrative structures and collective environments. Consequently, acting out becomes useful for examining situations in which the past continues to intrude upon the present, while working through provides a contrasting framework for identifying attempts to establish a reflective relationship with that past. The distinction is particularly useful for a novel in which no definitive explanation is provided for the central disappearance.

Within scholarship specifically concerned with Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, recent studies have focused on ambiguity, memory, silence, setting, Gothic aesthetics, and historical or cultural representation. Gibson (2019) examines the novel's relationship with Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and argues that Lindsay's novel deliberately embraces ambiguity. Her study is particularly significant because it identifies the novel's lack of a satisfying ending as an important aspect of its narrative construction rather than simply an unresolved mystery requiring a solution. Gibson also argues that Lindsay pushes Jamesian obscurity further by moving the drama beyond the social realm.

Another important contribution is Valls Oyarzun's (2021) study of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as a neo-Victorian text. Valls Oyarzun examines the novel through the relationship between memory, history, nostalgia, and the re-enactment of the past. His argument suggests that the novel does not merely reproduce Victorian culture but continually negotiates with the past through processes of representation and

remembrance. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because it establishes memory and the re-enactment of the past as significant dimensions of Lindsay's novel. However, Valls Oyarzun's primary concern is the novel's neo-Victorian engagement with history and memory rather than the traumatic structure of the unresolved disappearance itself.

Other studies have approached the novel through place, silence, and institutional space. Hulbert (2016) draws attention to the novel's sonic figures and to two kinds of silence, offering a reading of the characters' precarious fates. Mayr (2017) examines Appleyard College as a sentient house, and Miller (2017) reads the novel through phenomenology and the Australian ecoGothic, focusing on the white colonial lost child and the bush as a haunted locale. Rassier and Costa (2017) approach the novel through displacement and identity in the Australian Gothic, while Crofts and van Rijswijk (2020) discuss the Gothic colonial institution and the experience of girlhood in relation to the 2018 television series.

Recent scholarship has also considered *Picnic at Hanging Rock* through the framework of Australian Gothic. Craven (2021), in her analysis of the 2018 television adaptation alongside *Storm Boy* (2019), situates *Picnic at Hanging Rock* within the Australian Gothic tradition and focuses particularly on the figure of the lost child. Her study demonstrates that later adaptations revisit and modify the Gothic discourse surrounding disappearance, loss, and the child. Significantly, Craven observes that the later adaptation provides forms of resolution that distinguish it from the earlier cultural representations of the story. This distinction reinforces the importance of examining the original novel's resistance to closure rather than assuming that disappearance necessarily requires narrative resolution.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that ambiguity and unresolved meaning constitute significant characteristics of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Gibson (2019) emphasizes ambiguity as a deliberate narrative strategy, while Valls Oyarzun (2021) highlights the novel's continuous negotiation with memory and the past. Hulbert (2016), Mayr (2017), and Miller (2017) foreground silence, space, and landscape, and Craven (2021) shows how later adaptation can alter the treatment of disappearance and closure. These studies establish that the novel's disappearance has already been examined as a problem of ambiguity, memory, silence, Gothic representation, and cultural history. However, the relationship between this persistent ambiguity and the structure of trauma remains comparatively underexplored in the recent scholarship identified above.

This gap provides the point of departure for the present study. Rather than treating the disappearance primarily as a mystery that requires interpretation or resolution, this study approaches it as an event whose very resistance to explanation can constitute a representation of trauma. The study therefore brings recent scholarship on ambiguity and memory into dialogue with the foundational concepts of Caruth and LaCapra. Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience is employed to examine the belated and incomplete comprehension of the disappearance, while LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through is used to examine how the unresolved event continues to structure the responses of the characters and their surrounding community.

The conceptual contribution of this study lies, therefore, in shifting the critical question from what happened at Hanging Rock to what the inability to know what happened does within the narrative. The disappearance is not approached as an empirical puzzle but as an unresolved experience whose effects persist through silence, repetition,

anxiety, absence, and the continued search for meaning. By combining the Caruthian concept of unclaimed experience with LaCapra's account of acting out and working through, this study argues that the novel's refusal of closure can be read not merely as an aesthetic strategy of ambiguity but as a representation of trauma that remains open and unfinished.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using textual analysis. This approach is appropriate for the research objectives, as the study aims to examine how trauma is represented through narrative ambiguity, textual gaps, repetition, and the absence of definitive meaning in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Rather than seeking to establish a single, objective interpretation, textual analysis enables the researcher to explore how meaning is constructed through the novel's narrative elements and literary techniques. This approach is consistent with recent studies that read narrative form through trauma theory, such as Hafeez and Akhter (2025), who examine fractured narrative, repetition, and temporal disjunctions in Emma Healey's *Elizabeth Is Missing* through Caruth's belatedness, and Naha (2025), who reads silence and memory gaps in Claire Fuller's *The Memory of Animals* through Caruth and LaCapra.

The primary data source is Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Since this study does not involve human participants, participant sampling is not applicable. Instead, textual passages are selected purposively based on their relevance to the research questions and theoretical framework. These passages include narrative descriptions, dialogues, character responses, instances of silence and repetition, and moments of uncertainty surrounding the disappearance at Hanging Rock. The selection focuses particularly on textual evidence that reflects the concepts of unclaimed experience, acting out, and working through.

Data collection was conducted through repeated close readings of the novel. During this process, relevant passages were identified, recorded, and categorized according to their narrative and thematic significance. Particular attention was given to passages that demonstrate the inability of characters or the narrative to fully comprehend or explain the disappearance, as well as instances in which unresolved experiences continue to emerge through repetition and ambiguity.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative textual analysis, drawing on Belsey's (2005, 2013) understanding of textual meaning as open to multiple interpretations. The analysis involved three stages. First, significant passages were identified based on their relevance to the representation of trauma. Second, these passages were examined in terms of their narrative functions, particularly how silence, repetition, ambiguity, and narrative gaps contribute to the construction of unresolved experience. Third, the findings were interpreted through Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience and LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through to explain how trauma operates within the novel's narrative structure.

To maintain the trustworthiness of the analysis, interpretations were developed through repeated close readings and cross-checking between textual evidence, the theoretical framework, and the research questions. Each interpretation was grounded in specific passages from the novel rather than relying solely on subjective impressions. Since this study uses a published literary work as its sole primary data source and does not

involve human participants or personal data, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

The textual analysis identifies three interconnected findings concerning the representation of trauma in Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*: the disappearance as an unclaimed experience, the persistence of trauma through belatedness and repetition, and the dominance of acting out accompanied by the failure of working through. These findings emerge from the novel's recurring use of narrative gaps, silence, uncertainty, temporal disruption, and the refusal to provide a definitive explanation for the disappearance of Miranda, Marion, Irma, and Miss McCraw.

The first finding concerns the representation of the disappearance as an experience that cannot be fully explained or claimed. From the beginning of the novel, the narrative acknowledges that something has occurred without providing a complete account of what that event actually was. The statement

"something had happened" (Lindsay, 1967)

establishes the occurrence of an event while simultaneously withholding its meaning. The same pattern is reinforced through expressions of uncertainty such as

"no one could say what" (Lindsay, 1967).

The disappearance is therefore presented not through a complete sequence of identifiable actions but through fragments of perception, incomplete testimony, and unanswered questions. The narrative does not establish a clear cause, perpetrator, or mechanism behind the disappearance. Instead, Miranda, Marion, Irma, and Miss McCraw disappear during the picnic without leaving a conclusive explanation.

The second finding concerns the persistence of the event beyond the day of the picnic. The disappearance does not remain an isolated narrative incident but continues to affect the characters, the school, and the surrounding community. The statement

"The picnic was over" (Lindsay, 1967)

marks the end of the immediate event, yet the consequences of the disappearance continue afterward. Speculation, anxiety, changes in interpersonal relationships, and the deterioration of Appleyard College demonstrate that the event remains active within the narrative. This persistence is accompanied by a disruption of ordinary temporality, captured in the statement

"Time seemed to stand still" (Lindsay, 1967).

The narrative consequently presents the event as something that belongs to the past chronologically but continues to affect the present.

The third finding concerns the recurrence of uncertainty and the absence of narrative closure. The novel repeatedly returns to the disappearance through speculation and attempts to reconstruct what happened, but these attempts do not produce a stable explanation. The statement

"nothing was certain" (Lindsay, 1967)

demonstrates the instability of testimony and interpretation, while

"the mystery remained" (Lindsay, 1967)

maintains the absence of resolution toward the end of the narrative. The Rock itself also participates in this pattern of silence, as expressed in the statement

"The Rock remained silent" (Lindsay, 1967).

The combination of silence, uncertainty, repetition, and unresolved disappearance establishes a narrative structure in which the central event remains present without becoming fully knowable.

4.2 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the trauma represented in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* does not primarily operate through the explicit narration of a traumatic memory. Instead, trauma is constructed through the inability of the narrative and its characters to establish a complete account of what happened. This finding directly addresses the aim of the study, which is to examine how trauma is represented as an experience that cannot be fully understood or claimed. The disappearance therefore functions not simply as a mysterious plot event but as the central wound around which the narrative continues to organize itself.

This finding can be interpreted through Caruth's (2016) concept of unclaimed experience. For Caruth, trauma involves an experience that cannot be fully assimilated into consciousness at the moment of its occurrence. Its significance emerges belatedly and returns through forms that resist complete understanding. The disappearance in Lindsay's novel demonstrates a similar structure. The event is recognized as having occurred, yet neither the characters nor the readers are given sufficient knowledge to transform it into a complete and coherent narrative. The repeated acknowledgement that something has happened is therefore accompanied by an inability to explain what has happened. The absence of meaning becomes part of the representation itself.

The silence of *Hanging Rock* reinforces this interpretation. The statement
"The Rock remained silent" (Lindsay, 1967)

can be read not merely as a description of the setting but as a representation of the limits of language. The Rock does not become a witness capable of revealing the truth of the disappearance. Instead, it functions as the material embodiment of what remains inaccessible to explanation. Questions, speculation, and attempts at reconstruction repeatedly encounter the same silence. In this sense, the setting participates in the novel's representation of trauma because the environment itself refuses to provide the missing narrative.

The finding concerning the persistence of the event can further be understood through Caruth's concept of belatedness. The disappearance is not immediately transformed into a comprehensible traumatic narrative. Instead, its consequences emerge through changes in behavior, relationships, social tensions, and the deterioration of Appleyard College. The event therefore acquires its traumatic significance through its subsequent effects. The disruption of temporality suggested by

"Time seemed to stand still" (Lindsay, 1967)

is particularly significant because it challenges a linear understanding of the past as something that can simply be left behind. The past event continues to shape the present, while the future of the community becomes increasingly uncertain.

The repeated speculation surrounding the disappearance also demonstrates the persistence of an experience that has not been integrated into a coherent understanding. Each attempt to explain the event produces another possibility rather than a final answer. From a Caruthian perspective, this repetition is significant because the traumatic event cannot simply be incorporated into an established narrative of experience. The event continues to return precisely because it has not been fully understood. Thus, repetition in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* does not move the narrative closer to resolution; instead, it repeatedly reopens the same absence of meaning.

LaCapra's (2014) concepts of acting out and working through provide a complementary framework for understanding this persistence. The community surrounding Hanging Rock repeatedly returns to the disappearance through discussion, speculation, memory, and attempts at explanation. The past consequently remains active within the present rather than becoming a completed historical event. This condition corresponds to acting out, in which the subject remains caught within the repetition of a traumatic experience rather than establishing sufficient reflective distance from it.

Mrs. Appleyard provides a particularly significant example of this condition. Rather than processing the disappearance through reflection, she increasingly attempts to maintain order, discipline, and the reputation of Appleyard College. Her obsession with institutional control can be interpreted as a defensive response to a situation that she cannot adequately comprehend or control. The disappearance threatens the stability and authority upon which her identity and the institution depend. Her increasingly destructive response suggests an inability to establish the reflective distance necessary for working through. The eventual destruction surrounding her therefore reinforces the novel's representation of trauma as something that remains unresolved rather than something that is successfully overcome.

The pattern also operates at the collective level. The community does not arrive at a shared understanding of the disappearance. Instead, uncertainty generates rumors, suspicion, and competing explanations. Trauma consequently has a double function: it creates a shared point of anxiety while simultaneously producing division within the community. The absence of a definitive narrative prevents the loss from being incorporated into a stable collective understanding. Rather than transforming the event into a completed past, the community continually reproduces it through speculation.

This finding corresponds with Gibson's (2019) argument that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* deliberately embraces ambiguity and resists definitive closure. Gibson demonstrates that the novel's refusal to provide a satisfying explanation is an important aspect of its narrative construction. The present study extends this observation by interpreting that ambiguity through Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience. Whereas ambiguity can be understood primarily as a narrative strategy, the findings of this study suggest that ambiguity also functions as a representation of trauma. The lack of resolution does not merely make the novel mysterious; it reproduces the structural difficulty of comprehending an experience that cannot be fully claimed.

The findings also intersect with Oyarzun's (2021) discussion of memory, trauma, and neo-Victorian remembrance in Lindsay's novel. Oyarzun demonstrates that the novel engages with the reconstruction and reshaping of the Victorian past. The present study, however, focuses more specifically on the structural inability to produce a complete account of the disappearance. While Oyarzun emphasizes the relationship between memory, history, and trauma, this study emphasizes the formal and narrative dimensions through which trauma is represented: silence, gaps, repetition, uncertainty, and the refusal of closure. The two perspectives are therefore complementary rather than contradictory.

The absence of working through is particularly important to this study because the novel never provides the kind of resolution through which the traumatic event could be incorporated into a stable narrative. The ending does not transform the disappearance into a solved mystery. Instead, the uncertainty remains. The statement

"the mystery remained" (Lindsay, 1967)

reinforces this structural refusal of closure. From a LaCaprian perspective, the absence of resolution can be interpreted as evidence of the persistence of acting out. At the same time, the novel's refusal to resolve the event prevents trauma from being reduced to a simple puzzle with a discoverable answer.

This does not mean that the novel presents trauma as an experience that can never be approached or interpreted. Rather, the narrative demonstrates that interpretation itself has limits. The characters continue to speak about the disappearance, and readers continue to search for possible explanations, but neither process produces complete knowledge. The novel therefore places the reader in a position similar to that of the characters: both are confronted with an event whose existence is certain but whose meaning remains inaccessible. This narrative position strengthens the representation of trauma as an unclaimed experience.

The findings consequently contribute to existing scholarship by shifting attention from the question of what actually happened at Hanging Rock toward the question of what the inability to know what happened does within the narrative. The disappearance becomes traumatic not simply because characters are lost, but because the loss cannot be transformed into a complete and stable account. Through the combination of Caruth's unclaimed experience and LaCapra's acting out and working through, the study demonstrates how trauma operates simultaneously at the level of individual experience, collective response, and narrative form.

4.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the analysis is limited to Lindsay's original novel and therefore does not examine how trauma and ambiguity may be represented differently in its film and television adaptations. Second, the study relies on textual interpretation rather than empirical evidence from readers, which means that its conclusions concern the possibilities of meaning produced by the novel rather than the psychological effects of the text on actual readers. Third, the analysis focuses primarily on Caruth and LaCapra; consequently, other approaches to trauma, memory, Gothic literature, or spatial theory may produce different interpretations of the same narrative features. These limitations do not invalidate the findings but indicate that the study's contribution is specifically situated within a literary-textual and trauma-theoretical reading of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* through Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as unclaimed experience, complemented by Dominick LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through. The analysis demonstrates that the novel's central disappearance should not be understood merely as a mystery awaiting a solution. Rather, the disappearance functions as an unresolved traumatic event whose significance lies precisely in the impossibility of complete explanation. The disappearance of Miranda, Marion, Irma, and Miss McCraw produces a fundamental crisis of knowledge. Something has happened, but neither the characters nor the reader are granted sufficient access to determine exactly what happened. The event therefore exists between knowledge and ignorance. It is acknowledged but not fully understood, remembered but not integrated, discussed but never conclusively narrated. This condition corresponds to Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience. Trauma, in Caruth's framework, disrupts the ordinary relationship between experience, memory, and

understanding. A traumatic event may not be fully comprehended when it occurs and may instead return through its consequences, repetitions, and delayed effects. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the disappearance functions in precisely this way. Its meaning is not contained within the moment of disappearance. Instead, it continues to affect the characters, the school, and the surrounding community. The concept of belatedness is particularly important because the traumatic force of the disappearance emerges through its aftermath. The picnic ends, but its consequences continue. The school's stability is disrupted, relationships change, speculation spreads, and the missing girls remain psychologically present through their physical absence. The past therefore does not remain safely in the past. It continues to shape the present. The novel's use of silence and absence further strengthens this representation. *Hanging Rock* becomes a symbolic structure of silence because it witnesses the disappearance without explaining it. The landscape remains physically present while withholding the knowledge necessary to reconstruct the event. This transforms the setting into an embodiment of the limits of language. The novel's narrative form reinforces the same condition. By withholding information and refusing definitive closure, Lindsay prevents the disappearance from becoming a conventional mystery with a final solution. The reader is forced to experience uncertainty alongside the characters. The narrative therefore does not merely represent an unresolved trauma; it formally reproduces the condition of unresolved knowledge. LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through provide an additional explanation for the novel's continuing sense of disturbance. The community repeatedly returns to the disappearance through memory, speculation, rumor, and anxiety. This repetition can be understood as acting out because the past remains active within the present rather than becoming an object of fully reflective understanding. LaCapra distinguishes this condition from working through, which involves developing some critical distance and differentiated understanding of the traumatic past. Working through does not promise complete closure, but it makes possible a limited capacity for reflection and agency.

In *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, however, such a process remains incomplete. The characters act, speak, speculate, and attempt to respond to the disappearance, but these responses do not produce a stable narrative. The community remains trapped within the uncertainty generated by the event. Mrs. Appleyard's increasing attachment to institutional control illustrates this condition at the individual and institutional levels. Her attempt to preserve order can be read as a response to an event that has fundamentally demonstrated the limits of control. The novel consequently presents trauma as a persistent condition rather than a problem that can be solved through information alone. The inability to explain the disappearance does not make the event insignificant. On the contrary, its unexplained status becomes the source of its continuing power. The analysis also demonstrates that trauma in the novel operates collectively. The disappearance affects not only the missing individuals but also the school, its students, teachers, families, and surrounding community. The event creates a shared absence, but the community cannot transform that absence into a shared meaning. Collective experience therefore does not necessarily produce collective understanding. Ultimately, the two defining characteristics of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are ambiguity and unresolved uncertainty. Yet these qualities should not be interpreted as weaknesses in Lindsay's narrative. They constitute the novel's central representational strategy. The refusal to provide a definitive explanation allows the novel to preserve the traumatic event as an experience that cannot be completely possessed by language.

The novel therefore suggests that some experiences remain meaningful precisely because they resist complete interpretation. The disappearance does not become less powerful because it remains unexplained. Instead, its lack of explanation allows it to continue haunting the narrative and its characters. The absence of closure consequently becomes the form through which trauma is represented. Rather than moving toward recovery, reconciliation, or definitive knowledge, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* leaves its characters and readers within the space of uncertainty. The missing girls remain absent, Hanging Rock remains silent, and the mystery remains unresolved. The novel refuses to convert absence into a simple answer. Through Caruth, this refusal can be understood as the representation of an unclaimed experience: an event that occurred but cannot be fully possessed as knowledge. Through LaCapra, the continuing return of the event can be understood through acting out and the incomplete possibility of working through. Together, these theories reveal that the novel's haunting quality does not depend solely on the supernatural possibilities surrounding Hanging Rock. Its deepest source of horror is epistemological: the recognition that something has happened and that its meaning may never become fully available.

Thus, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* represents trauma not as a wound that necessarily moves toward closure but as a persistent disturbance in memory, narrative, community, and understanding. The novel does not ask its readers to solve the disappearance. Instead, it asks them to remain with the absence. In this sense, the novel's greatest achievement is its ability to make uncertainty itself meaningful. The unanswered question becomes the traumatic object. The silence becomes testimony. The absence becomes presence. The repetition becomes the sign of an experience that cannot be fully integrated. And the refusal of resolution becomes the literary form of a trauma that remains unclaimed.

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Author Contributions

Author 1: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, and writing. Author 2: review and editing

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data underlying this study are derived from Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. No separate dataset was generated or analyzed. The textual material is available through the published novel and is subject to copyright restrictions.

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