USC UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

"Overcoming Trauma: Nature, Sorority and Self-discovery in Holly Ringland's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*"

Autora: Sofía Molares Bonome

Titora: Laura María Lojo Rodríguez

CURSO 2023–2024

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"Overcoming Trauma: Nature, Sorority and Self-discovery in Holly Ringland's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*"

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart is a novel written by the Australian writer Holly Ringland and published in 2018. The novel deals with the coming-of-age of Alice Hart, a young girl who faces a tragedy and is taken by her grandmother to her flower farm, a community of women who suffered male abuse and are there learning to heal. In her teenage years, Alice will set out on a journey to the Outback with the purpose of finding herself, but love will put her in danger again.

This dissertation will focus on the causes and consequences of trauma, especially the ones resulting from male-perpetuated violence and from women's subordinate position in a patriarchal society. My main intention is to show how the author and the characters of the novel deal with and overcome pain and guilt. To serve this purpose, I will tackle the regenerating and relieving powers of writing in Rigland's work, whose own traumatic experience inspired the novel. Nonetheless, I will also focus on the characters' alternative ways to heal and free themselves from the painful memories of the past. In this sense, this dissertation will also examine sorority, intergenerational relationships and feminism, as evident in the novel in the flower farm, a community of women established to resist male abuse whilst also having as central these women's contact with nature as therapy in the native Australian context. In consequence, this dissertation will also critically examine the language of flowers and flower imagery as an alternative mode of expressing fear and trauma, as well as the importance of self-discovery in the process of maturation.

In order to do so, this dissertation will be informed from a methodological perspective by trauma studies, paying special attention to seminal works such as Cathy Caruth's *The Unclaimed History: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) as well as by the concept of "Dangerous Writing" (Tom Spanbauer, 2016), which consists in using fiction to write about unresolved past traumas. Finally, I will also refer to works related to gender studies and feminism, among others.

Santiago de Compostela, 21 de novembro de 2023.

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“Overcoming Trauma: Nature, Sorority and Self-discovery in Holly Ringland’s *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*”

“Superando el Trauma: Naturaleza, Sororidad y Autodescubrimiento en *Las Flores Perdidas de Alice Hart*, de Holly Ringland”

“Superando o trauma: Natureza, Sororidade e Auto Descubrimento en *As Flores Perdidas de Alice Hart*, de Holly Ringland”

SUMMARY

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Key words: trauma, nature, sorority, self-discovery, writing

DECLARACIÓN DE ORIXINALIDADE DO TRABALLO

Dona Sofía Molares Bonome, con NIF 32723060V declara que o presente Traballo de Fin de Grao é integramente orixinal, non tendo sido empregada ninguna fonte sen ser referenciada, sendo consciente do delito de plaxio que constitúe o contrario.

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this dissertation is the study of the causes and effects of trauma, especially those resulting from women's subordinated position in our patriarchal society, with an emphasis on the difficult healing process that leads to recovery. To accomplish this task, I carried out a personal analysis of the novel *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, written by Australian writer Holly Ringland, a book that exemplifies this struggle to overcome past traumatic experiences as well as the need to get lost to finally find oneself.

My main motivation at the moment of choosing this topic was my interest in psychology and my love for literature, two fields that deeply intertwine in this novel and that appeared to me as the perfect opportunity to investigate and widen my knowledge and the relationship between the two of them. Initially, I came across the adaptation of *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, an Amazon Prime series based on Ringland's novel, and it had such an impact on me that I decided to read its original source on paper and turn it into my object of study. I found in this book a story of inspiration and courage which proves how literature, stories and imagination can be of great help when dealing with painful experiences. Even though I fortunately have not faced any traumatic event like the protagonist and the author, I have always considered literature my safe place, a relief in moments of distress and sadness, a way to escape the physical world, with all its dangers and threats, and enter into a fantastic dimension in which pain disappears and everything is possible. Therefore, I was able to empathise both with Alice, the protagonist, and Holly Ringland, the author, regarding the feelings and comfort that reading and writing evoked in them.

However, the power of reading was not the only aspect that called my attention. In *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, nature takes a central role in the lives of the different characters. From the seaside for Alice and her mother in the beginning, passing through the flower farm, Thornfield, which had been born as a refuge for women in situations of domestic violence and gender abuse, and which became Alice's home during her teenage years, to Alice's retreat to the Australian desert, the Outback, before her return to the coast, the contact with nature appears to transmit an energetic force that increases the characters' inner-peace and tranquillity.

In writing this dissertation, I was also triggered by my own curiosity and attraction towards Australia, which is also an English-speaking country but often forgotten in the English literature courses taught at University. I chose to lead my dissertation towards a continent which often remains hidden behind the prominence of United Kingdom and the United States, because I am amazed by the authenticity and uniqueness of its wild landscapes, ranging from paradisiac bays and coasts to green blooming forests or empty brownish red deserts. Furthermore, I have a deep interest in the aboriginal culture and ancient myths, which advocate the importance of taking care of nature and respecting the environment in order to be in harmony with our surroundings, a mind-set that is represented by the protagonist's experience in the desert as guardian of the natural park and the native traditions, and which is inspired by Holly Ringland's own adventure in the Outback. This proves how by connecting with nature, it is easier to connect with our inner selves and others.

Consequently, throughout this dissertation I will be critically dealing with the origin of the protagonist's trauma and her progressive process of recovery and amelioration, accompanying her in a chronological journey from childhood to adulthood in her quest for self-discovery. My starting point was the hypothesis of the restorative power of writing for both the protagonist and the author. Since this novel is largely to be understood as a fictionalization of the writer's real experiences, my aim concerned the critical examination of the novel's narrative strategies to show how Ringland used herself the process of writing fiction as a curative tool, projecting similar traumatic experiences onto her protagonist, and explaining how the latter carried out the same method of writing to relieve pain in moments of sorrow. Ringland was also inspired by her life in Australia and her love for nature in the creation of the setting, as well as by the implications of being a woman in a male-dominated society, aiming to unearth the violence and submission to which some women are subjected. In this sense, gender violence and submission are two elements that figure prominently in my critical analysis of Ringland's novel. Therefore, the dissertation's main aim is to critically examine the different strategies that helped the main character of the novel, Alice, to recover from trauma by means of contact with nature, the influence of literature and the urge of finding sorority among women, especially with those who are going through the same situation.

To serve this purpose, this dissertation is informed by the methodology of trauma studies by focusing on the research conducted by some of the most prominent scholars in this field, such as Cathy Caruth, with her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) or Dominick LaCapra, with works such as *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994) and *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). The observance of classical trauma theory is here complemented with more recent approaches specifically dealing with fiction and childhood, such as those carried out by Christa Schönfelder or Tom Spanbauer's concept of "dangerous writing", which consists in using fiction to write about unresolved past traumas, Ringland's major fictional strategy in the creation of the novel. Throughout my analysis, I also refer to different studies on the benefits of nature and gardening for the improvement of mental health and general well-being, as well as to works on the position of women in the patriarchal society and the existing male-perpetrated violence and domestic abuse.

This dissertation is divided into five separate sections. The first one is devoted to the contextualization of the author of the novel, Holly Ringland, a contemporary young writer who is now emerging in the international literary scene. The section focuses on interviews given by Ringland herself and on the information that can be found on her official website, highlighting her inspirations and influences, her career, her background and the autobiographical references included in her novel, with a particular emphasis on her own process of writing fiction as a therapy to heal trauma.

The second chapter of my dissertation has a more theoretical nature and deals with the methodology used in my analysis, which corresponds to trauma studies. I here compare the different approaches of influential scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra pertaining to the possibility of representing trauma. Then, I move on to the realm of fiction, reflecting on the capacity of literary imagination to symbolise and fictionalize traumatic events that seem difficult to understand or put into words, with a special focus on childhood trauma. To conclude, I justify the therapeutic character or writing and its benefits for traumatized victims.

The third, fourth and fifth parts of this dissertation focus on my critical analysis of Ringland's novel, with particular attention to the process maturation and recovery of the protagonist, Alice Hart. The chapter explores the origin of the trauma suffered by Alice when she was just a little girl, and which supposed a turning point in her life. I

also align the protagonist's trauma with her mother's, both victims of the domestic abuse inflicted by her father and husband, respectively, including physical and psychological violence. Trauma is also enhanced by the death of Alice's parents in a fire, which left her orphan and forced her to move with her grandmother, a woman she had never seen before. The following chapter of the dissertation tackles the consequences of trauma for Alice's childhood and her adolescence in Thornfield, with an emphasis on the healing character of nature and the community of women created there to overcome male violence and abuse. Finally, the last section of my analysis examines the character of Alice as a young adult and her experience in the Australian desert in a process of self-discovery. This section also analyses the importance of mother earth for the aboriginal communities, the repetition of Alice's past traumas through a toxic relationship and the final revelation of the metafictional character of the novel.

2. Contextualization

The novel with which I will be dealing in this dissertation is titled *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* (2018), the inaugural publication of Holly Ringland (1980-), a gifted Australian writer and television presenter.

Ringland's most renowned novel, *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* was published in 2018 and became an international bestseller, being published in 30 countries. It has its own series adaptation on the streaming platform Amazon Prime, starring Sigourney Weaver and it won *The Australian Book Industry Award General Fiction Book of the Year* in May 2019. Nevertheless, Holly Ringland has never stopped writing and her second novel *The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding*, published in 2022 also became an instant success in Australia and New Zealand. Her last book is titled *The House that Joy Built*, and it appeared in 2023 (Ringland, 2024).

Moreover, Ringland also acted as television presenter by participating in a stunning documentary throughout 2020 called *Back To Nature*, that she co-hosted with Aaron Pedersen (Ringland, 2024). The importance of the Australian landscape is a constant motive in her creations, and it also appears in this series, where "Holly and Aaron take the audience on a journey into the deep interconnectedness between human beings and the landscape, sharing stories on geology, history, natural science, mystery, spirituality, and First Nations' knowledge" in order to reconnect with themselves (Ringland, 2024).

Ringland grew up by the Broadwater, a shallow estuary of the Pacific Ocean in the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia (Kembrey, 2018). Her childhood was spent outdoors, in the subtropical, blooming garden of her mother and in her grandmother's home, surrounded by the smell of salt in the air and cane fields that ran to the sea (Ringland, 2018).

Ringland was mostly raised by a single mother who transmitted her the love for books and stories, especially fairytales. She learnt to read when she was three years old and from that early age, she always knew that all she wanted to do was to be a storyteller (Ringland, 2018). Ringland's relation with her mother was very special, as she said: "She gave me the gift of teaching me to read by the time I was three; my earliest memories are of us being together, sitting, reading, and dreaming. Looking back now, I don't think I was the only one between us who found hope and possibility in

stories of other worlds and their magical charms. From that early age one thing I have always known is that all I wanted to be was a writer of stories" (Ringland, 2018). Her favourite ones were those that reflected the landscapes in which she lived: May Gibbs' *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*, and Pixie O'Harris's *Marmaduke the Possum*. Both tales included the Australian flora and fauna. Inspired by these stories, Ringland started writing tales about gumtree kingdoms, paperbark queens, soldier crab warriors and wattle witches. The addition of Indigenous Australian books to her library, such as Dick Roughsey's *The Rainbow Serpent* and *The Quinkins*, contributed to her increasing fascination with the relationship between stories and landscapes (Ringland, 2018).

The Australian landscape and these experiences as a child were the starting point of Holly Ringland's career as a writer, as she says in an interview for the magazine *Folklore Thursday*, in 2018: "Fairy tales taught me that stories have the power to save us. They had the power to save me. Stories gave me permission to dream and hope for more. Writing a modern Australian fairy tale as my first novel was my humble attempt at offering something to the magic of the folktales I absorbed as a child" (Ringland, 2018).

Not only was Ringland influenced by fairytales, but she also took inspiration from authors she loved as a teenager, such as the Brontë Sisters, and especially her favourite book *Jane Eyre* (1847), written by Charlotte Brontë. For instance, the house in which the orphaned Jane Eyre works as a teacher for Rochester's daughter is also named Thornfield Hall, such as the flower farm in Alice's story, Thornfield. This novel also inspired her when she was thinking on how to narrate the story, as Holly Ringland said: "I thought about one of the most powerful narrative structures I knew of from when I was a teenager, and it was following Jane Eyre from when she was a child, right through to why it's so powerful at the end when she says, "And reader, I married him" […] That way, the simplicity of the narrative structure helped me to tell the complexity and the depths of what was going on inside of Alice, and outside of her, and map those two worlds together". She also introduced other allusions such as the crater in the desert where Alice goes, whose name in English is Earnshaw, making reference to Catherine Earnshaw from the novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847), by Emily Brontë. As she confessed: "I just dropped things in there for me to pay homage to the Brontë sisters" (Etzel and Freedman, 2021).

When Ringland was nine, her family moved from Australia to North America. They settled their base in Vancouver, while travelling in a campervan from national park to national park throughout Canada and the US. She had many jobs before her full-time occupation as a writer and in her early 20s she moved inland to live and work in Australia's astonishingly beautiful Western Desert, learning and sharing culture and stories with her Anangu colleagues, the Aboriginal inhabitants of this area, as she explains: "For the first time I noticed a sense of Australian people, weather, bodies of water, flowers, and bushland creeping onto my page" (Ringland, 2018). This native landscape serves as an inspiration for the setting and atmosphere of her stories.

The Australian landscape became an essential element of Ringland's first novel, *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*. However, even if she was influenced by the environment where she grew up, the setting of her stories is fictional because she wanted to add the aboriginal reality without appropriating a story that was not hers to avoid a possible whitewashed perspective, as had been the case of the stories she used to listen to as a child. The Kililpitjara, or Earnshaw Crater where Alice worked, as well as its name and story, were made up by the author. The Wolfe Creek Crater and the Gosse Bluff were the geological places she took as sources of inspiration. She used the Pitjantjatjara, the language of the Anangu, the aboriginal tribes, to create the name, meaning "belonging to stars" (Ringland, 2023, 376).

As she explained in an interview for *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2018, "until I wrote Lost Flowers, I had thought that to escape trauma I needed to separate myself from everything that reminded me of it. But it turns out home is deeper than pain, deeper than love. Those roots go deeper. The landscapes, flora and fauna that raised me will never be any further from me than the microsecond between my heart's beat or the unseeable dark in the blink of my eye. Those places are always there. Here. Home" (Ringland, 2018). That is the reason behind her choice to set the novel in her mother land.

One of the main elements of the landscape is the presence of native flowers, which was influenced by the fact that she was raised by gardeners. Both her mother and grandmother showed an unconditional love for plants and flowers because of their use for healing. In addition, Ringland investigated the language of flowers characteristic of Victorian times, in which each flower carried a meaning and symbolism, not only to

express love and friendship but also disdain and hatred. She decided to apply this tradition to the Australian reality, by giving a fictitious signification to the different native flowers and using each of them as a title for every chapter of her first novel (Etzel and Freedman, 2021). She also introduced this motive in the flower farm, where bouquets were designed and sold to send messages and express emotions when words could not, as well as including the importance of the care and respect for nature in the aboriginal tradition.

Even if Ringland enjoyed very much the contact with nature and the Australian desert, she walked away from her job as senior media officer of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and from living in an Aboriginal community at the base of Uluru because of an abusive relationship, something she had been hiding from everyone (Chenery, 2022).

The traumatic experiences prevented Ringland from feeling at ease in Australia, which reminded her too much of her experienced pain and fear. After quitting her job in the desert, Ringland spent her life savings to travel to Europe in 2009, enrolling in a master's course in creative writing at Manchester University. Once she finished, Ringland embarked on a PhD via correspondence where she first started researching the link between creative writing and trauma (Kembrey, 2018), a theme which is backbone of *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*.

Ringland wrote the first lines of her novel by hand in her office in Manchester, in 2014. After a brief pause due to family reasons, she continued writing her novel from August to October in 2015. The first chapter received a Griffith Review writing award that year, and she was offered a residency at the writers' retreat, Varuna, in the Blue Mountains (Kembrey, 2018).

As she was writing from Manchester, Ringland needed to find a way to access the landscape and environment where she wanted to set her story. To do so, she applied to senses. In an interview for the magazine *The Planthunter* in 2018, now called *Wonderground,* she explained her method: "I would burn eucalyptus and sandalwood oil in my burner; and I chose the room in my house that I write in because it has a window view and Manchester is red brick city, and when the light hits the red bricks a certain way, they are made of iron ore sandstone, so they throw the same colours as the desert" (Latona, 2018).

Although Ringland used her own experience of violence to write her first novel, *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart,* it is essential to bear in mind that it is not autobiographical. As she says in an interview for the *Sydney Morning Herald "*I have lived with [male-perpetrated violence] a lot in my life, in different parts of my life, in different relationships," Ringland says. "In terms of the personal genesis of the novel, it was the hardest thing I had ever done because I looked at things and reflected on things that I've never taken the time to look at, and sit in, and remember and reflect on. I had to learn how to reflect rather than relive, so that I wasn't spiralling into reliving memories that are in the past" (Kembrey, 2018).

In an interview for the blog *Absolutely Anything*, Ringland explained that a conversation with the American novelist and friend Kate Gray opened a new way for her. She had not written *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* yet, but they were talking about their stories and Kate suggested her to take a close look at the theory of Tom Spanbauer about fiction and truth. It was a turning point for Holly Ringland, as she argues: "Tom Spanbauer talks about dangerous writing, which is the act of the writer going into the sore place that we have inside all of us, and drawing fiction from there because fiction that comes from the sore place is fiction that's alive […] Dangerous writing is the act of using fiction as the lie, to tell the truth, truest" (Etzel and Freedman, 2021).

For Spanbauer, "what makes writing dangerous is something much more personal. To write dangerous is to go to parts of ourselves that we know exist but try to ignore-parts that are sad, sore; parts that are silent, and heavy. Taboo. Things that won't leave us alone […] To be human is to be engaged in an enormous battle within yourself. There is no one who is human who is not in battle. So, since there's a battle going on inside all of us, why not acknowledge that this battle is what defines us as humans and start writing about how it feels to be in this perpetual battle? We can write to the larger question of human suffering by writing of the struggle that exists in our own hearts" (Spanbauer, 2016, 37).

That is exactly what Holly Ringland started to do: she used fiction to talk about her past experiences through the protagonist of her first novel, Alice. Applying the concept of "dangerous writing" of Spanbauer, she made up a new fictional world inspired by the real events that she had to face, turning trauma, fear, and painful

memories into beautiful stories that helped her heal and recover, proving the usefulness of writing as a fantastic therapy to overcome difficulties and traumatic events.

Ringland's first novel features the coming-of-age story of the protagonist, Alice Hart, a girl who faces terrible traumatic experiences as a child, losing her parents in a fire and being exposed to a violent father. She is sent to Thornfield, a flower farm ruled by her grandmother, a place where every woman in a situation of abuse is welcomed to heal and bloom. Flowers become powerful tools to send messages and talk about truths that are too hard to say aloud in conventional language. However, while Alice is able to recover the voice that she had lost due to the trauma she suffered, some deeper secrets kept by her family make her withdraw from the coast to the desert. She decides to work in contact with nature and protect the aboriginal culture and communities of the Australian Outback. Throughout the novel, the reader can follow Alice's development as a woman as well as the cycle of male abuse, which is both physical and psychological, and which does not seem to have an end, coming again from a toxic love relationship. Alice eventually returns to the place where she grew up to heal, to publish her story in her own voice and, ultimately, to speak her truth that had been so long silenced.

There are many similarities between the author and the protagonist of her first novel, Alice, such as a traumatic experience, the abusive relationships and the male-perpetrated violence, the difficulty of overcoming trauma and the use of writing to express themselves and heal from the pain caused upon them. As Alice did, Ringland learns how to find her own voice by writing this story.

Holly Ringland sustains that "to me writing *Lost Flowers*, just purely personally was a reckoning of telling the truth of my experiences, through Alice Hart's story of what it's like to have a big imagination and emotions that feel like they're going to swallow you whole and what it's like to live with unspoken trauma, casting this long shadow on your life, and how beautiful life can be when we ask for help, when we allow people to love us, and that we can be more than what people have done to us. So those are the emotional truths that I discovered" (Etzel and Freedman, 2021).

3. Methodology: Trauma Studies

Nowadays, the study of trauma has become very relevant in literary and cultural studies, emerging as a new domain within the humanities, even if it was originally located in the field of medicine and psychology. This is due to the fact that it has proved a common and recurrent trope in life writing and fiction (Schönfelder 2013, 28).

One of the most influential scholars when dealing with trauma studies is Cathy Caruth (1955-). Her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) represents a benchmark in contemporary trauma theory, and it has had a great impact on almost all fields of knowledge, especially the humanities and social sciences (Brochard and Tam, 49, 2019).

In *Unclaimed History*, Caruth explores the ways in which texts of a certain period that belong to the fields of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory speak about and through the experience of trauma. Instead of directly describing case studies of trauma survivors or trying to explain in a straightforward manner the psychiatry of trauma, she is focused on the complex ways in which knowing and not knowing are tangled up in the language of trauma and the stories related to it (Caruth 1966, 4): "Literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (Caruth 1996, 3).

The authors that she explored are Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Paul de Man, Heinrich von Kleist, Emmanuel Kant, Marguerite Duras and Jacques Lacan and the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) by Alain Resnais. Her main purpose was to underline the recurring figures or words in all these stories. As Caruth pointed out: "The key figures my analysis uncovers and highlights—the figures of "departure," "falling," "burning," or "awakening"—in their insistence, here engender stories that in fact emerge out of the rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of these figures, a literary dimension that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes, and that, beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound" (Caruth 1996, 5).

The original meaning of trauma in Greek is "wound," referring to an injury inflicted on the body. Afterwards, it became to be used particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and mostly by Freud as a wound inflicted upon the mind instead of upon the physical body. Sigmund Freud was one of the most influential intellectual figures in the twentieth century, recognized as the founder of the theory of psychoanalysis (Caruth 1996, 3).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud sustains that the wound of the mind is different from the wound of the body because the latter corresponds to a simple and healable event which is experienced too soon and too unexpectedly to be completely known and processed by the mind. This implies that it is not available to consciousness until it reappears, repeatedly, in the nightmares of the survivor or victim. Therefore, trauma cannot be located in the simple violent or original event in the past of an individual. Instead, as it is not assimilated by the mind in the first instance, it returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 1996, 3-4). In *Unclaimed Experience,* Caruth explains that "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 1996, 4).

Recently, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology have reiterated that external violence have immediate effects in psychic disorders. The result is the increasing study of the *post-traumatic stress disorder*, or PTSD, which describes "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 1996, 57-58).

In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the mysterious and inexplicable way in which painful events seem to reappear and repeat themselves in the mind of those who have passed through them, such as battlefield survivors, who constantly suffer from frightening nightmares. In some cases, Freud points out, "these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem

to be entirely outside their wish or control" (Caruth 1996, 1-2). However, it is not only the violence of the event what returns to haunt the victim, but also the reality of the fact that this violence has not yet been fully known or processed by the mind of the survivor (Caruth 1996, 6).

The awareness of the threat to life is caused by what Freud calls "fright", which consists in the lack of readiness to assimilate a stimulus that comes too fast and too unexpectedly. As Caruth explains, "the shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known." This explains the nightmares and repetitions in the lives of those who suffered a traumatic experience, that are not a sign of the direct event but, rather, of the attempt to grasp what was not assimilated in the actual moment of the accident, forcing the survivor to confront it repeatedly (Caruth 1996, 62).

In addition, what Freud finds in the traumatic neurosis is not only the reaction to a terrifying experience but also the unexpected and peculiar experience of survival. The dreams and flashbacks caught his attention because they are witness of a survival that cannot be understood by the consciousness of those who experienced them (Caruth 1996, 60).

The trauma of the nightmare is also the experience of waking from it. Therefore, trauma appears not only as a consequence of having confronted death but also of having survived without knowing it. In this sense, "what one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's own survival" (Caruth 1996, 64).

Consequently, one of the main questions with which Caruth deals is the following one: "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" The consequence would be both a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: the story of the painful event as well as the story of its survival (Caruth 1996, 7).

Despite the influential character of Cathy Caruth's work, she has also been criticised by some authors who said that her theory reduce trauma to an event that defies

representation. The debates about the possibility of representing traumatic experiences are in vogue among scholars dealing with this subject. Those who disagree with Caruth argue that if trauma cannot be represented, it is impossible to get beyond. On the other hand, the fact that traumatised subjects may verbalize traumatic events proves that trauma can indeed be represented. To answer to this criticism Caruth returns to Freud, from whose reading she drew her own study on trauma (Brochard and Tam, 50, 2019).

In an interview in recognition of the twentieth anniversary of her most popular book *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth explained that the problem is the confusion between representation and repetition. To support her theory, Caruth uses Freud's example of the traumatic nightmare, which seems like a representation of trauma, because it reflects images like flashbacks that haunt the victim in his or her sleep, but Freud does not refer to it as a representation but as a repetition because it happens again and again because of the impossibility of responding in a correct way to it. As Caruth argues, "trauma, as an experience, as a missed experience, causes you to ask, precisely, why it is that all the frameworks you have previously used, all the models, aren't adequate to describe this experience. So, even a survivor saying, "I have no words for this," doesn't necessarily mean "I can't represent this." The type of reflection that goes on after traumatic events is often something like: "all the frameworks, including the frameworks of representation, are no longer adequate to this." Which by no means suggests that I can't find some mode of testifying; it just means that my framework for living and thinking from now on will no longer be the framework in which I lived before, whether it's an existential issue about the meaning of life, or an issue of how I communicate my experience" (Caruth 2019, 51).

All of this goes back to the fact that repetition is not as much about representation as about history. Freud supports that there are always two scenes to a trauma. In *The Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), Freud talks about the experience of a little girl who goes twice to a shop and the shopkeeper touches her genitals through her clothing. At this moment, nothing happens for her. But after puberty, every time that she goes into a clothing store and sees that shopkeepers are laughing, she is forced to escape frightened. Laplanche, another important French psychoanalyst, declares that trauma is actually the result of both scenes together. In the first scene the little girl was molested but she wasn't traumatized yet, while later she is

not directly molested but she is already traumatized. Therefore, trauma appears as a consequence of the relation between both scenes (Brochard and Tam 2019, 60-61).

One of the scholars who opposed to Caruth's perspective is Dominick LaCapra (1939-). He declares in one of his major works of literature titled *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* that psychoanalysis must be understood as "an inherently historicized mode of thought intimately bound up with social, political, and ethical concerns" instead of just a psychology of the individual (LaCapra 1994, 11-12).

LaCapra fears that Cathy Caruth's way of writing on trauma consists in "writing trauma" instead of writing about trauma, alleging that she is still traumatized or still repeating or acting-out instead of "working through" (LaCapra 1994, 58). J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* define acting-out, according to Freud, as an "action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and phantasies, relives these in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character" and working-through as a "process by means of which analysis implants an interpretation and overcomes the resistances to which it has given rise. Working-through is taken to be a sort of psychical work which allows the subject to accept certain repressed elements and to free himself from the grip of mechanisms of repetition" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974, 488).

Sometimes, in cases of extreme trauma, acting-out is unavoidable and necessary and working-through entails the recognition that some scars are not going to disappear, and some wounds will always remain (LaCapra 1994, 66). In addition, victims of trauma may experience at the same time guilt about having survived and intense anxiety and fear of reconstructing their life and start again. The most common feeling is that beginning a new life implies a betrayal of those loved ones who died or were not able to move on and are still stuck in the past. LaCapra says that "this feeling of betrayal must, I think, itself be explicitly recognized in the attempt to work through it, notably in processes of mourning" (LaCapra 1994, 200).

LaCapra focuses on the *Shoah*, the Hebrew term for Holocaust, the genocide of the Jew population in Europe carried out by the Nazis in Germany because it was a reality that exceeded the limits of both imagination and conceptualization, and victims themselves were unable to believe what they had gone through or beheld. This created

problems in terms of representation when it occurred, and it continues to do so nowadays. This traumatic series of events are related in a complex way to the question of silence due to its complex representation. The Holocaust needs a response that, in LaCapra's words, "does not deny its traumatic nature or cover it over through a 'fetishist' or redemptive narrative that makes believe it did not occur or compensates too readily for it" (LaCapra 1994, 220). It is necessary a discourse which understands the traumatic events and empathizes with the victims (LaCapra 1994, 221).

LaCapra proposes a theoretical as well as historical approach to trauma that would celebrate the particularity of historical wounds, without forgetting to recognize the fact that the traumatic past still has an influence in today's society. But he also sustains that the trauma of the past must undergo a process of working-through in order to move on, to release us from a cycle of repeated traumatization and allow us to look for new political and ethical projects focusing on the future instead of the wounds of the past (Debarati 2002, 301).

These important publications by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra from the 1990s have been followed by many other studies dealing with trauma in fiction, non-fiction, film, and culture (Schönfelder 2013, 28).

Fictional writings related to trauma have multiplied because the literary imagination has the power to explore from different points of view those experiences that seem to defy understanding and verbalization, most specifically traumatic and threatening events, thanks to its amazing capacity to fictionalize and symbolize. As it is explained by Christa Schönfelder, "literary approaches to trauma, then, have the potential to engage readers' powers of emotional identification and sympathy on the one hand and critical reflection on the other. These texts also serve important socio-cultural and political functions" (Schönfelder 2013, 29). Similarly, and as Laurie Vickroy stresses, this allows us to understand and make more accessible those frightening and traumatic events as well as providing a witness for the history of those that have been historically marginalized and forgotten. In this sense, novels which deal with life writing and self-representation in cases of traumatic events "allow authors to experiment with self-reflexivity in ways that non-fictional trauma writing may not permit, thus enabling writers to explore different perspectives on writing trauma and writing the self" (Schönfelder 2013, 29-30).

In this sense, literary trauma texts reflect the contradiction between the attempt to communicate and the nature of those events as resistant to common ways of remembering, narrating, representation and understanding. In Schönfelder words, "trauma narratives raise important questions about the possibility of verbalizing the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable, and making sense of the incomprehensible" (Schönfelder 2013, 30).

As I have already mentioned, Caruth's perspective in this debate is one marked by scepticism towards narration: "Caruth allows for the possibility of trauma being transformed into a narrative that tries to make sense of the incomprehensible but claims that such a narrative is likely to distort the truth of trauma and weaken its impact" (Schönfelder 2013, 31).

Those theories that focus on the impossibility of narrating trauma are usually critical of the possibility of understanding and recovering from it. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth gives much importance to repetition as an essential feature of trauma writing, that emphasizes the sense of being locked up in cycle of never-ending suffering. The trauma narratives that she comments as well as her own theoretical vision oppose to any perspective of recovery and healing (Schönfelder 2013, 32).

However, this focus on the preservation of the truth is problematic because it means ignoring the victim's needs to talk and relieve themselves through narration to achieve integration and complete recovery. A great number of literary trauma texts deal with the desire of those who passed through a terrifying event to verbalize trauma and the difficulty to find a language to express themselves (Schönfelder 2013, 33). LaCapra, as the main opponent of Caruth's idea, suggests that there is a "tendency to avoid an explicit encounter with normative problems and to restrict historical discourse to seemingly empirical and analytic uses of language." This avoidance of talking about it "aggravate trauma in a largely symptomatic fashion" (LaCapra 1994, 193). However, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) LaCapra criticizes trauma narratives for "prematurely (re)turning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios" (LaCapra 2001, 78). Therefore, it is necessary to find a midpoint between these two, a trauma narrative that is able to understand the tensions between the

impossibility and possibility of narration and between acting out and working through (Schönfelder 2013, 33).

Even if wars, genocides, and other historical events used to be the main focus of classic trauma studies, recently, individual and domestic traumas such as sexual abuse have started to acquire more significance (Schönfelder 2013, 44). For instance, among the painful events that usually have a huge impact in the psychology and mental health of a person we find traumatic childhood experiences. This is due to the fact that children's brains are more vulnerable to traumatic stressors which can eventually deform their personality, which is in the process of being built (Schönfelder 2013, 72). Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, explains that constant exposure to interpersonal stress "severely disrupt an individual's perception of self and others and shake personal systems of meaning, leaving deep marks in the shape of lasting identity crises and ruptured relationships" (Herman 1992, 119-21). However, the impact of childhood trauma on mental health had it difficult to be socially recognized and it is surrounded by taboo because of the conception of family as a sacred and safe space (Schönfelder 2013, 73).

Many of the novels dealing with childhood trauma reflect the child's point of view as well as his perspective from the adulthood. This double point of view allows the reader to understand how childhood trauma has a deep effect into the grow-up survivor (Schönfelder 2013, 74). These novels have as a central trope the "disrupted and fragmented selves and identity crises that determine the life of an individual long after the traumatic experience(s)" and more specifically, its impact on memory, through flashbacks and intrusive images of the past as well as amnesic episodes where they are not able to remember what happened (Schönfelder 2013, 75).

One of the main issues concerning novels dealing with trauma is recovery and the therapeutic nature of language as a way of healing. As Schönfelder explains, "the novels not only give those suffering from mental disturbances a voice for telling their personal histories and individual tragedies, but they also investigate in detail the therapeutic power of oral and written self-expression" (Schönfelder 2013, 81). This idea has a scientific basis as "verbalization and narration are at the heart of many types of exposure therapy. According to numerous psychiatrists, the act of putting the traumatic

past into words and creating a narrative is of crucial importance to processes of recovery" (Schönfelder 2013, 82).

This allows victims of trauma to write their feelings and experiences and put them in context in the form of life-writing. This type of narration is directly related to recovery due to the nature of traumatic memories, which often are non-verbal. Trauma victims find themselves unable to speak about what happened and in a complete loss of words as a consequence of the shock created by the traumatic event (Schönfelder 2013, 83).

In this sense, Deborah Horvitz conducted a study on women's trauma writings in her *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction* (2000). There, she acknowledged writing and other types of artistic manifestations as a way of "working through" and recovering from traumatic experiences. She sustains that "as I hope my study illustrates, power lies in the capacity to find or create individual, personal meaning from a traumatized and tortured past. If traumatic events are not repressed, they can be used: victims remember and imagine stories to be repeated and passed on. That is, when the stories of the past are consciously recognized, the cycle of violence can end, because the narratives, not the sadomachism or the trauma, are repeated and passed on" (Horvitz 2000, 134).

This healing character of writing is the idea of Tom Spanbauer's concept of Dangerous Writing that I previously explored in this dissertation and therefore, closely related to the novel, which is the focus of my study, *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*.

4. Contents: Critical Analysis

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart deals with the experience of trauma of a little girl, Alice. The novel explores Alice's traumatic imprint as she grows older and tries to learn how to live with this painful memory and with the secret stories that remain yet untold. We see her journey of self-exploration, her doubts, her feelings and her final healing in which literature, reading and writing play a very important role. As I said before, fictional writings related to trauma have increased a lot due to the power of literary imagination to explore these rough events that are hard to understand and put into words thanks to its striking ability to symbolize and fictionalize (Schönfelder 2013, 29). These texts reflect the contradiction between the victim's attempt to communicate and the difficulty to remember, narrate and represent trauma. The fact that Alice uses writing as a tool to overcome her traumatic experiences parallels the author's, Holly Ringland, who used her own traumatic experience to write the novel through fictionalization, thus proving that trauma is indeed possible to be represented and it helps in the process of recovery after a painful experience.

a. THE ORIGINS OF TRAUMA

First of all, it is essential to recognize the experience that triggered the trauma in order to understand the victim's reaction to it and her consequent healing. The novel is told from the perspective of Alice Hart, who at the beginning of the story is a nine-year-old girl who lived in an isolated home on the Australian coastline with her mother, Agnes, and her father, Clem. Apparently, she had a good life, always in contact with nature, the flourishing garden of her mother, the cane fields, and the salty sea. However, her life was marked by the dark moods of her father and the violence that he exerted upon his wife and daughter. Clem Hart is depicted as a character of changing mood, alternating between a caring father and husband and a powerful, violent, and impulsive abuser, who did not have any piety when he beat them to calm the anger that consumed him, forbidding them to have any contact with the exterior world. Alice believed that "her father in a good mood had the same air about him as a rain shower falling from a sunny sky - you could never quite believe the sight" (27). Clem's unpredictable attitude made both Agnes and Alice feel in a constant state of danger and fear, making them want to escape from their reality to find a place where they could feel safe and calm. In Agnes's

case, it was her astonishing flower garden: “The more time she spent with her mother in the garden, the more deeply Alice understood […] the truest parts of her mother bloomed among her plants. Especially when she talked to the flowers” (16). As shown in the passage, nature performs a therapeutic role to soothe the mind and help her focus on an activity that belonged only to her, and that Clem could not touch or snatch from her hands: “The connection with nature is beneficial—even vital— for health. Walking in the woods, sitting on a park bench, tending the soil in one’s garden, and even watching the colours and movements of nature from indoors are all passive and active ways to connect with the natural world. They awaken our senses, encourage physical movement and exercise, facilitate social connection, reduce stress and depression, and elicit positive physiological and psychological response” (Cooper and Sachs 2013, 1).

However, sometimes this horrible abuse made Agnes sink into depression that kept her away from the real world: “Some days Alice’s mother disappeared from her body altogether […] Her mother would stay in bed with the curtains drawn against the blanching light, vanished, as if her soul had gone somewhere else entirely” (18). Even when Agnes got pregnant again, Clem’s physical abuse did not cease: bruises bloomed in her belly, arms, collarbone, and hips in the same way as the flowers bloomed in her garden, and Alice, aware of the situation, instead of being happy about having a brother, felt an enormous sadness and fear about having another precious thing that his father could harm.

All this situation had a huge impact on little Alice and started to forge her childhood trauma. As Schönfelder explained, the brains of children are more vulnerable to traumatic stressors which can eventually deform their personality, that in their early years is still in process of being defined (Schönfelder 2013, 72). In addition, the repeated exposure to stressful situations may disrupt their self-perception as well as their perception of the others, leading to identity crises and unhealthy relationships (Herman 1992, 119-21). This is clear in the case of Alice, who was forced to grow too fast and to take care of herself as well as feeling responsible for the protection of her pregnant mother. In addition to being beaten by her father, the figure who was supposed to protect and take care of her, she had to cope with the image of her mother’s bruises and aggression, with whom Clem released his rage, and with her mother’s anxiety and loss of hope. Even if her mother tried to mitigate and hide the pain in front of Alice, she was completely conscious of the circumstances: “a few times Alice had been woken in

the night by rough noises in her parents' bedroom […] On those nights, she stayed in bed with her hands over her ears, willing herself to escape into her dreams" (26). As Schönfelder argued, the effect of childhood trauma on mental health it is not easy to be recognized socially due to the traditional conception of family as a safe and sacred place (Schönfelder 2013, 73). Family has always been considered a space where children would be protected from any harm that could come from the exterior. The problem appears when it is at home where children feel in danger. This is the case of Alice, who saw her father as a dangerous and authoritarian figure. She thought a lot about the idea of escaping from the jail in which she felt that she was living and wondered that "if she went hidden through the sugar cane, she'd surely come out someplace on the other side, someplace better than her dark and silent home" (19).

The way that she found to get comfort, peace and safety was among her books and stories. "Telling and listening to stories, in whatever form, is really what life is all about. Our stories are the building blocks of our lives. Through them we connect with other people, deepen our self-understanding, and help to heal others and ourselves" (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 327). Here we find for the first time the healing character of literature, that helped Alice to forget her painful situation and immerse in a world of fantasy, where she could be whoever she wanted and imagine a better life far from her father's violent hands. Alice was not allowed to go to school, but Agnes taught her to read by herself by the time she was five and from then on, books and stories became her safe place. Storytelling was Alice's favourite activity, and hearing her mother's tales on the seashore was her main source of relief: "Alice often closed her eyes, imagining that every threat in her mother's stories might spin them into the centre of a chrysalis, from which they could emerge and fly away" (15). Storytelling is an inherent part of human beings that takes a great place in our everyday life. It serves as a tool to communicate with other people, talk about us and reflect about our present, past, and future. "We make sense of our lives by telling stories about them; and we learn about other people by listening to the stories they tell" (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 1). Also, storytelling helps us connect to our ancestors. It is an activity that comes from the oral tradition, through which older generations transmit to the younger ones their knowledge and learnings. "The telling and retelling of stories around the world is evidence of their power and ability to transcend time, language and culture" (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 206). In the African tradition, women are considered the

guardians of the beliefs of the tribe and the secret keepers of the cultural and linguistic heritage of a community. Moreover, they are seen as priestesses and deities. This important task of women is connected to their social role as mothers. Nevertheless, we live in a patriarchal male-oriented world in which women and men are regarded as biologically and socially different, based on the wrong idea that women are inferior to men. This perspective fosters the unfortunately common belief that women should be seen, not heard (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 233-234). Agnes used to tell Alice her fairytales and stories when Clem was not present, creating a moment of peace, confidence and serenity that belonged only to them two, strengthening the mother-daughter bond and providing to her daughter a tool that would help her forget for an instant the sad reality and immerse in a world of dreams and hopes where everything was possible.

The first fairytale that she borrowed from the library was one about selkies, women that come from the sea who had the power to shed their skin to acquire a different aspect and identity. This story inspired Alice with new wishes and desires of becoming one of those marvellous sea creatures, who could decide who they wanted to be and live the life that they longed for. Readers who participate in stories are thought to strengthen their own sense of self by identifying with the character and trying different versions of themselves: the one that they would like to be, the one they might become, or the one that they already are and would prefer not to be (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 41).

Another influential and striking story for her was a book of tales about the myths of fire. In popular culture, fire has always been related to the power of transformation, revival, and re-birth, embodied by the phoenix bird, a Greek mythological animal, whose immortal nature allows him to re-emerge from the ashes after being consumed by the flames at the end of its life. This story became a turning point in Alice's life, who thought that if the phoenix could be set in fire and be born again, maybe his father could do the same. The extremely difficult and oppressive situation of this little girl made grow in her feelings and thoughts that would lead her to a point of no return: "What might it be like if her father was consumed by fire? All his monsters burned to ash, leaving the best of him to rise, renewed by flames, remade into the man he sometimes was: the man who made her a desk so she could write stories" (4). However, she never

inflicted harm on his father on purpose, she was only a little child who was so uncomfortable and scared that tried to find any solution to put an end to her suffering.

One day, she unconsciously left a candle burning on his father's shed that produced a fire whose flames consumed the house, also killing both her parents. It was the most traumatic and definitory event of her life. As said in the novel, "Alice would always remember this day as the one that changed her life irrevocably, even though it would take her the next twenty years to understand: life is lived forward but only understood backward" (11). She was the one survivor of a tragedy that would mark her forever and contribute to the trauma that would accompany her from her childhood to her teenage years and eventually adulthood. In addition of having been a victim of domestic violence, she had to carry the weight of her parents' death, from which she felt guilty. Many survivors from traumatic experiences usually feel a sense of guilt for having survived and fear about starting their life again. This idea was studied by Dominick Lacapra, who sustained that victims of trauma feel this way because the reconstruction of a new life and moving on implies a betrayal of those who have been lost (LaCapra 1994, 200).

Moreover, the shock of the situation produces oblivion, and the traumatic event is forgotten, being impossible to remember what happened in the reality and distinguish it from one's own imagination and dreams. This circumstance is worsened by the fact that Alice was only nine years old when the accident took place, making it more difficult to process the emotions and understand the reality of it. The first thing that she thought was that she was the one to blame for the tragedy due to her previous desires about setting Clem on fire: "A question repeated over and over in her mind. It hooked through Alice and tore bits of her away. What had she done?" (49). She woke up at the hospital, surrounded by machines and doctors, away from her home and the only place that she had ever known and separated from her mother, whom she would not see again. All she could feel was insecurity, guilt, fear, and sadness. She was a little girl who had suddenly lost everything she loved and knew about and who believed that it was due to her fault: "Her unasked questions took up all the room in her body: the same one frightened her the most. What had she done?" (50). In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth explained that trauma is the story of a wound that tries to tell us the truth of a reality that is not available in any another way: "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 1996, 4). Alice's trauma emerged not only due to the violence of his father and the fire accident, but it also appeared as a response to the anxiety of not knowing the reality of what had happened.

The shock was so impressive that she lost her voice: "The weight of her accumulating questions hung from her ribs […] She tried to speak again but her voice would not come […] Was that a memory? Did that really happen? Or was it just a dream?" (47). As Schönfelder suggested, many literary trauma texts tackle the difficulty of survivors from tragedies to verbalize trauma and find a language to express their feelings (Schönfelder 2013, 33). It is common that victims of trauma feel unable to speak about the painful event and stay in a complete loss of words, but as LaCapra pointed out, the avoidance of speaking about it aggravate the problem (LaCapra 1994, 193). However, even if selective muteness is very usual in children who are processing deep trauma, it can eventually be overcome with good care, help, and time, as Alice did once she grew up and was able to find her own voice. A great therapy to heal and recover is the form of life-writing that Alice will employ in her teenage years and adulthood to reconcile with her past. This idea was more deeply explained by Horvitz, who said that "when the stories of the past are consciously recognized, the cycle of violence can end, because the narratives, not the sadomachism or the trauma, are repeated and passed on" (Horvitz 2000, 134).

Another common – and almost immediate – consequence of post-traumatic stress disorder is the presence of nightmares in the mind of those who have experienced a shock or a traumatic experience such as soldiers and survivors from any type of accident, as it was Alice's case. Caruth explained that the fact that the event has not been fully processed or assimilated justified the presence of these nightmares and repetitions because the shock that the traumatic event produced in the mind of the victim is not just the direct experience of the threat but also the missing of it, the attempt to grasp what could not be assimilated in the precise moment of the incident, forcing the survivor to confront it repeatedly (Caruth 1996, 62). This accounts for the fact that most of Alice's dreams were related to images of fire, the cause of her parents' death: "Dreams of fire left her drenched in cold sweat […] Every night she fought her way through waves of fire" (50). These constant nightmares did not stop and continued night after night, increasing her stress and fear: "Alice had mumbled incessantly about flowers when she was in the grip of her night terrors. Flowers, phoenix birds and fire"

(52). In addition to trauma as being a reaction to a shocking and painful experience, it appears as a response to the incomprehensibility of one's own survival. In this sense, as we have seen, Caruth sustained that "repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's own survival" (Caruth 1996, 64). Therefore, Alice's traumatic stress disorder is the expression of her near death as well as the encounter with her incomprehensible own survival.

The only thing that helped her forget everything and escape from the painful reality was literature. When the nurse who was assisting her at hospital brought her a box of books, Alice felt happy for the first time: "She sighed with pleasure, scooping them into her arms. Thumbing through the pages, she breathed their musty paper-and-ink fragrance. Stories of salt and longing fluttered around her face, beckoning to her" (52). Fairytales and stories had become her refuge at home from her father's violent hands and just the touch or the smell of a book reminded her of her mother and their love for storytelling and fantasy: "She reached into her bag for her books […] Alice tugged from the bag the first one her fingertips touched and almost smiled at the sight of it. A perfect comfort" (62). This proved the therapeutic nature of books and stories in cases of severe trauma, especially during childhood.

She was sent with the only member of her family that was still alive, and who she had never seen before: her grandmother June, a strong-willed and courageous woman, the mother of her father Clem, who was the owner of a flower farm in which women who had been victims of abuse and violence could bloom and recover the peace and tranquillity that they had lost. This was a very hard situation for a little girl who was marked by a traumatic incident that ended with the death of her parents and her baby brother, whose unexpected survival is to be revealed at the end of the book. She had to confront death and feelings of blame that joined the previous isolation of her home and her father's constant domestic violence. She was taking the first steps into a new world that was completely unknown to her, far away from the sea and the comfort of her mother's loving arms, shocked by the existence of a grandmother from whom she had never heard before. The only thing that brought her comfort and well-being were the books, those imaginary stories that had always been her refuge from the hard reality and that she would use in order to recover and find happiness again.

b. FLOWER LANGUAGE AND SORORITY: THORNFIELD

June, Alice's grandmother, was the owner of Thornfield, a remote native Australian flower farm far from the seaside that had belonged to the women of her family from generation to generation. Inspired by the Brontë Sisters, whom she admired as a teenager, the author of the novel, Holly Ringland, decided to give the flower farm this name in order to pay homage to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Thornfield Hall was one of the locations present in this narrative work, the home of Edward Fairfax Rochester, with whom Jane Eyre fell in love. In Alice's story, Thornfield was a place of peace and recovery, where "flowers and women could bloom" (71) because the plantation was not just an isolated farm where they sold bouquets of flowers which conveyed deep messages and secret meanings, it also served as a refuge for those women who were going through a situation of mistreatment from their male partners, creating a beautiful community of women helping each other to heal. However, Thornfield also hid a sorrow and dark legacy of traumatic experiences that had marked the female members of June and Alice's family through many years, and which emerged as the perfect example of the male domination and abuse from which it seemed impossible to escape. It is in this traumatic heritage and turbulent past that had haunted the heirs of the flower farm that we find the connection with Charlotte Brontë's novel, as Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre* was presented as a frightening, ominous place, that also hid many secrets, suffering and traumatic experiences.

In the case of *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, the novel that is the focus of this dissertation, the legacy of trauma goes back to Ruth Stone, who was June's grandmother and the founder of the farmhouse. She had been traded by the owner of a brothel to Wade Thornton, a drunkard and abusive man, who drowned his demons in alcohol and took advantage of her body to vent his rage. She was like a bird in a cage, fighting to survive day after day in a cycle of male violence and patriarchy impossible to confront. And, like Alice, Ruth found her escape through tales and stories, a fact which shows the therapeutic role of literature, because "books and singing were all that kept her mind strong" (124), until she met her future beloved in the river. The river was her refuge, the only place where she could hide from that wretched man, and the spot where her love affair with Jacob Wyld started, which brought hope and happiness to her life again. In every visit, Jacob offered her different seeds of native Australian origin that she started to plant and grow. She noted each new flower in a little notebook, with the

corresponding meaning that they had for her, following the Victorian tradition: “in Queen Victoria’s time, people in Europe talked in flowers […] women who lived a long time ago, they brought that language all the way over the ocean from England, down the generations, until Ruth Stone brought it right here to Thornfield” (105). She created *The Thornfield Language of Australian Native Flowers*, a book that was passed from generation to generation and which became the essence of Thornfield.

Ruth transformed Thornfield, a place that had symbolised oppression and danger, in a native flower farm and she was able to find in flowers the way to communicate everything that words could not. This special tradition became the hallmark of all the descendants that came after her: “over the years, women who descended from Ruth have grown the language as they’ve grown the flowers here” (106), and Alice was not an exception. The muteness that she was suffering as a consequence of the traumatic experiences that she had faced was counteracted by the language of flowers. She learnt that every bouquet and blossom had a symbolic meaning and that they could be used to send secret messages. She acknowledged that sometimes words were not as necessary as we tend to think: “everyone needed silence sometimes. And that was the magic of Thornfield; it was a place where it was possible to say the things you could not speak. And, in her own way, Alice was beginning to understand the power of a language spoken in flowers” (122). The dictionary of native flowers became Alice’s favourite book, in which she found the best way to communicate her feelings, thoughts and needs without the use of the speech, which allowed her to take advantage of the therapeutic role of releasing her emotions through language without the need of spoken words.

During the first year that Alice spent in Thornfield, flowers became the only means of expressing herself until she started a diary: “her fingertips tingled for her pen and journal. How would she write about this day?” (173). Writing became another strategy to release her inner thoughts in the absence of spoken words and to keep in paper all her secrets, everyday experiences, hopes and dreams so that no one could snatch them from her. As experts sustain, the experience of severe trauma implies a before and an after for the survivor, leaving imprints that are very difficult to erase. There is a sense of vulnerability that makes the victim fear that all that is dear for her could eventually vanish (Thompson and Adams 2015, 66). By putting down everything that was important for her, Alice felt that she was the owner of these thoughts and that

nobody could have access to them. The process of writing about one's feelings has always been considered a therapeutic tool in the path to recover from a difficult event or trauma and even if "some experiences of trauma and loss will never be fully healed […] writing can give meaning to the experience and contain it" (Thompson and Adams 2015, 7). That is what Alice chose to do, she started to write a personal diary: "the journal in this way becomes a place of building a secure but permeable interpersonal boundary. Nothing defines the parameters of our own reactions like the actual screen or page filled with our own words. By leaving expressed feelings in the journal, we also have an automatic aid in containment. And by describing emotions in writing, we practice communicating those feelings" (Thompson and Adams 2015, 9). Therefore, journaling becomes a very useful practice to communicate and reconciliate with the self and overcome past traumatic experiences.

Nevertheless, muteness did not last forever and even if at the beginning Alice's communication was limited to flower language and writing, she was eventually able to find her real voice. This happened thanks to the discovery of her first friend and love, Oggi. They used to meet by the river, an almost mystical place that had so much significance for the women of her family. The day of her tenth birthday, she received the best gift that she could ever had: the return of her voice. She was with Oggi by the riverbank, and she opened the present that he had offered her. The emotion and surprise of seeing that it was a book led her to the articulation of her first words, proving that with care and a peaceful and appropriate environment and company, healing and progress are possible.

Furthermore, Thornfield, being a quiet, isolated, rural refuge, that provided women with the opportunity of leading a safe and simple life, far from the dangers that they had left behind, suggests the idea of the medieval literary topic of the *locus amoenus*. This expression means "a pleasant place" in Latin and it refers to an idyllic natural landscape, usually with flowers, water, trees, and birds that emerges as a place of tranquillity and peace.

Nevertheless, this idea of the ideal community living in peace and serenity in an isolated natural environment is not just fiction, and it is possible to find some real examples of communities of people who lived in contact with nature to heal and develop a perfect society. For instance, Monte Verità ('Mountain of Truth') was a vegan

community founded in 1900 in Ascona, in Switzerland, by five “life-reformers”, whose main dream was to abandon the middle-class way of life in the city, which they believed that was making them ill, to start a life close to nature, establishing gardening as the main activity and source of supply. This community was soon turned into a sanatorium open to anyone who wished to experience this particular way of life, emphasizing the therapeutic and healing character of the direct contact with nature (Davidson and Saber 2019, 211). This conception of health is usually called “holistic” and it “considers both the environment and the human being as multi-dimensional and substantially interconnected. For this reason, each change or vibration taking place at one level and/or in one of both ‘systems’ has an impact on the ‘whole’ rest” (Davidson and Saber 2019, 213). Therefore, as the environment is believed to be linked to human beings, the care and respect for nature has beneficial and healing qualities for both. A simple and natural lifestyle, taking care of the flora through gardening will also have a positive impact in the mind and body of the person who is carrying out these activities and can eventually help overcome a traumatic event.

However, it is important to consider that Alice was not the only person living in Thornfield recovering from a traumatic experience. Her grandmother June lived there with her partner, Twig, an Aboriginal woman who had also undergone a tragic and painful story. As she was not considered a suitable caretaker for her children because she did not have a husband and she had a poor economic situation, the Australian authorities separated her son and daughter from her and put them under the protection of a white family, considered to be a better option for them. That devastating event led her to Thornfield, where she met June and started her healing journey. The native farm was also the home of Candy, an orphan found by June and Twig when she was just a baby, who instead of finding comfort and peace among books, used the kitchen as her refuge, becoming a great cook and an excellent pastry chef, proving one more time the therapeutic role of activities that involve creativity, such as writing or cooking. As already mentioned, Thornfield was also a temporary home for the so-called flowers, a shelter for all those women who had dealt with a situation of domestic abuse and violence from their partners.

According to the United Nations, “domestic abuse, also called “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence”, can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner.

Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person […] Victims of domestic abuse may also include a child or other relative, or any other household member" (United Nations). Sadly, domestic abuse and violence against women are part of a frighteningly common reality in this patriarchal society, which is present all around the world and which is sometimes accepted as a normal behaviour among the members of some communities (World Health Organization 2005, 7). The *WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence* showed that the fact that many women believed that these habits were normal as well as the conception of domestic abuse as a taboo topic explained the difficulty to react against this type of violence and challenged the traditional conception of home as a safe environment, by proving that women are more at risk of suffer abuse in bosom of an intimate relationship (WHO 2005, 7). For instance, Alice's mother was trapped in an abusive relationship with Clem, Alice's father, who blamed Agnes for his violence and physical and psychological abuse making her believe that everything was her fault and that his behaviour was justified: "He (Clem) wanted to reach out to her, to explain she just needed to be more mindful of her behaviour so he wouldn't be provoked" (11). Unfortunately, this is a recurrent struggle in the lives of many women, who tend to blame themselves for their aggressive partners' attacks and avoid speaking out against it. In addition, "violence against women has a far deeper impact than the immediate harm caused. It has devastating consequences for the women who experience it, and a traumatic effect on those who witness it, particularly children" (WHO 2005, 7). This is the case of Alice, as she grew with a vision of gender-based violence conveyed by her aggressive father that marked her early childhood and contributed to the trauma that she developed after the unexpected and terrible death of her parents in the fire. Moreover, she will also be a victim of abuse in a future toxic love relationship, since children whose parents have exerted violence against them are more likely to develop unhealthy relationships, whether as abusers or as victims.

As well as the victims' difficulty to talk about the abuse received from the part of their partners or family members, it is also important to acknowledge that, most of the time, women in this situation tend to look for help among their close circle of acquaintances and informal networks instead of seeking formal help (WHO 2005, 28). This can be explained due to the lack of resources and services, especially in rural areas, and the lack of confidence in the available authorities, which they do not consider to be

sensitive or helpful in their case. In this sense, it is essential to provide these women with better and useful support services to rescue them and give them a fresh start (WHO 2005, 26).

This was exactly the purpose of the flower farm: to give these women the possibility of a new beginning and a reliable environment where they could heal. The so-called flowers needed a safe place to stay while they overcame their trauma before starting a new life, far from the dangers of their past relationships. Consequently, Thornfield became a powerful community of women characterised by the values of sorority, empathy, and altruism, whose success manifested the benefits and advantages of women's cooperation and mutual support.

These values are the basis of the development of the feminist movements that have emerged throughout history and, especially, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose main goal is to give voice to the female members of the society that have so long been silenced and fight against male domination and superiority. "The traditional feminine fantasy of the perfect man providing financial security and a happy ever after ending is no longer wanted or tenable in a precarious economic climate where women hold more power in the workplace. Instead, the focus is on the loyalty of girlfriends. The male love interest is marginalized or rendered benign, and it is women's ability to shine for and with their girlfriends that drives the narrative" (Winch 2013, 91). Instead of competing, women must strengthen their bonds of collaboration to rely on each other and build networks of help and support to achieve equality and female empowerment. In this sense, female friendship is essential as "friends mirror the essential and authentic self, but friends can also be trusted in ways that men cannot" (Winch 2013, 50). Sisterhood springs therefore as a strong weapon that proves the necessity of empathy and solidarity among women to foster an empowering and liberating discourse in a patriarchal society in order to achieve social changes.

A real example of a community of women that portrays the advantages of developing a sense of sisterhood and collaborative growth is Artemisia, a group of female artists who "defined itself as feminist in creating a place for women to take control of themselves, their work and careers" (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 60). Artemisia appeared in 1973 in Chicago, in the context of a wave of devoted feminist campaigns in favour of "equal treatment for women in the workplace, affordable and accessible

childcare and health care, and the right to control one's own body" (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 59). Their purpose was to defy patriarchal rule in the world of art through the creation of a community where they could connect art with their feminist ideals through debates, lectures, seminars, and performances with the innovation of an exclusive membership restricted to women (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 56). The founders of Artemisia were weary of the constant submission of women in the artistic environment and believed that a feminist involvement was indispensable to finish with this legacy of male control that kept the patriarchal power structures alive (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 56). "For many women the organizational meeting of Artemisia was their "first taste of sisterhood" (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 59). However, to maintain the sense of community, they needed a non-hierarchical rule. The governance based on a hierarchy was a masculine ethic that did not reflect women's values, and which created a division between the private and the public realms. The alternative that Artemisia chose was to distribute authority equally among the participants, rotate responsibility roles and leadership and make the decisions all together. This work ethic "allowed women to meet without the presence of male interference and insured that their concerns and needs would finally be heard and addressed in a nurturing environment" (Gardner-Huggett 2012, 60-61). In the novel, Thornfield represented the same nurturing environment, where all women were welcomed and protected and where they could experiment a feeling of sorority and understanding by mutually helping each other grow and heal as long as they needed. In return, they collaborated in gardening and housing chores during the time of their stay until they were ready to start again on their own.

Despite working collectively, June was the coordinator and master of the plantation as well as the person in charge of taking care of the legacy of her family, that began the day when Ruth Stone, June's grandmother, started her native flower farm. However, the traumatic past is not easy to forget, and Ruth's story's bitter ending still resonated in June's mind: "the weight of Thornfield's legacy pressed as heavily upon her as when she was a teenager, when she'd been devastated by the story of what happened to her grandmother" (126). With the creation of her flower farm, Ruth recovered the hope and joy that she had lost and her visits to the river to meet his beloved Jacob became more and more frequent. Unfortunately, even if she tried to hide her adventure from Wade Thornton, the abusive man who controlled her and who believed that she was his property, he finally discovered her secret and drowned Jacob

in front of Ruth's eyes. Nevertheless, Jacob left her his most precious seed, which flowered in Ruth's belly until she gave birth to a little girl, that she called Wattle because it was the name of the first tree that she had planted after the drought. It had a very symbolic meaning: "a name that might embolden her to survive growing up in a house with Wade Thornton and his abuse" (138). But Wattle was not like her mother and decided to react against Wade's violence by killing him to end their suffering. Consequently, "the Stone women and the language of their flowers were decried as bad luck" (139), proving again how the male-dominated society and judgements prefer to blame the female sex instead of questioning men's actions and behaviour and make women the bearers of a curse when they try to rebel and abandon the submissive attitude that is socially expected. The only way to make Wattle innocent again was the false testimony of Lucas Hart, her beloved, saying that Wade killed himself accidentally, showing one more time that men's words were more powerful than women's. This story had a happy ending, as Lucas and Wattle were able to revalue Thornfield and make the flowers bloom again. June was born as a result of their love and the legacy of Ruth fell upon her, including her most deep desires: "to ensure Thornfield was never bequeathed to an undeserving man" (141).

Nevertheless, cycles of violence are difficult to break, and June was condemned to repeat the same mistakes as her ancestors by finding herself involved in a relationship with an undeserving man that left her alone with a baby, who would grow up and become Alice's father, Clem. June took care of the flower farm as expected and hosted all women in need of a shelter to hide from their abusive relationships. One of them was Agnes, Alice's mother, who fell in love with Clem. Unfortunately, Clem started to display an aggressive and possessive behaviour that scared June, who felt indebted to make sure that Clem would not inherit Thornfield, as she had promised to her mother and grandmother. This decision would mark the history of the family forever, making Clem flee Thornfield taking Agnes with him and leaving June with a feeling of remorse.

As already said, victims of trauma usually blame themselves for the consequences of their actions, wondering if they could have done anything to change the development of the course of events. This guilt that June felt for not having been able to protect Agnes from her own son made her take another defining resolution, encouraged by her wishes to keep Alice safe from the exterior world full of dangers and threats, especially coming from men. Every man that she had loved ended up leaving

her, so her own personal traumatic experiences influenced his determination to save Alice the suffering that she had felt: “June couldn’t bear it. She would not make the same mistake twice; she would not lose her family again. She’d done what was necessary to make sure of that. What Alice needed now was distraction and independence. A sense of worth, purpose and freedom. Which was exactly what June planned on giving her” (183). Even if her intentions were good, her means were not. June knew that Alice and her boyfriend Oggi were planning to start a new life in Europe, but June’s trauma led her to believe that he would break Alice’s heart like other men had done with hers. Therefore, she denounced Oggi and her mother of being illegal immigrants and had them deported, breaking Alice’s dreams of writing their future together and leaving her with many unanswered questions that she was not able to resolve: “the burden of her unrealised dreams hung heavily from her ribs, flattened by the weight of her sighs” (193).

All the secrets that surrounded her existence were too much for her, she needed to know the truth and find the answers to all the mysteries that had haunted her since she first arrived at Thornfield. She said: “I want to know stuff. I want to have an actual conversation rather than get a bouquet of flowers every time I get too close to the bone” (197). Sadly, secrets always end up coming to the surface in the worst way and Alice eventually found out that her grandmother was the person in charge of destroying her love story. “The shock of June’s betrayal went through Alice as though she’d been physically struck” (200), leading her to leave Thornfield with a feeling of disappointment and the necessity of setting out on a journey of self-discovery to finally be free and able to take her own decisions.

c. THE OUTBACK: THE BENEFITS OF LIFE-WRITING AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE SELF

Alice was immensely disappointed and hurt by her grandmother's betrayal. The weight of the secrets that surrounded the flower farm and the need to find responses to all these unanswered questions had always made her feel that she was missing an important part of her family history, but the treachery of June was the final push that made her take the decision of leaving Thornfield in a quest for self-discovery and personal knowledge.

She went inland, away from water and from everything that reminded her of home: "Alice pushed away thoughts about anything other than what was right in front of her" (203) and headed for the Outback, also called the Red Centre due to the reddish colour of the earth that characterizes these desert, dry and barren lands. Again, the descriptions present in the novel highlight the importance of the native Australian landscape for the author, who tried to depict the environment with great detail, including sounds and sensations, to allow the readers to project themselves in the same location and empathize with the protagonist: "Alice closed her eyes and listened. Birdsong, the humming air conditioners behind her, the desert wind, a small yap" (205), "the desert air was so dry and thin that the perspiration on her body evaporated before it could bead" (213). The locations in the novel are inspired by Holly Ringland's own life and this landscape in particular was influenced by her period as senior media officer of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and her stay in an Aboriginal community at the base of Uluru. However, the place names included in the narrative are fictional, such as Agnes Bluff, the town where Alice first stayed as soon as she arrived at the isolated heart of Australia, and which would correspond to real-life Alice Springs. It is also remarkable that both place names refer to characters in the novel: Agnes is the name of Alice's mother, and Alice is the protagonist of the story.

Alice spent some weeks at Agnes Bluff, trying to find her place and getting used to her new reality, avoiding any connection with the exterior world. She found comfort in the peaceful, natural environment that surrounded her but, most of all, in the wildflowers that bloomed in the dry ancient riverbed. She could run away from the place where she had grown, but she could not escape the heritage of the language of flowers, which had contributed so much to her healing and had had such an important significance for the women in her family. That is the reason why she found herself

collecting and pressing dry wildflowers in a notebook, continuing the tradition that Ruth Stone had begun when she transformed Thornfield in a flower farm.: “She had started to pick and press them, without fully admitting to herself that it was the familiarity of the flowers that brought her the most solace” (215). Alice’s behaviour shows again the essential role of gardening as a therapeutic tool for the protagonist, an activity that reminded her of her childhood and her home. She had grown surrounded by flowers and all her life, from childhood to adulthood, had revolved around nature and blooms, which became her safe place and, ultimately, her job. She had found in the language of flowers the way to communicate her feelings when she was not able to articulate spoken words. For Alice, flowers meant home, and by giving meanings to the new wildflowers upon which she stumbled, she enjoyed a peaceful feeling of familiarity and well-being, feeling closer than ever to her roots and her ancestors.

Nevertheless, the messages transmitted by the wildflowers were not the only thing that reminded her of home. As she used to do when she was a child, in an attempt to forget the abuses and bursts of her violent father, she found comfort in literature, recalling those moments with her mother when they would read fantastic stories that transported Alice to ancient times and unknown lands, far away from the harsh experiences she had to face. Books had a therapeutic role and had also become a great help in her period of adaptation in Thornfield, allowing her to imagine a different reality when the weight of all those traumatic events was too heavy: “Alice ran her fingers along the spines of the stories that she remembered reading as a girl. Her writing desk, her library bag, her mother’s ferns […] She spent the afternoon flicking through their pages, running her fingertips over stray sentences...” (216). Reading was the key to connect her present and her past, providing the energy that she needed to move on in difficult situations through the recollection of the good moments that she spent with her mother, which filled her with peace and solace.

In addition to the company of flowers and books, she adopted an abandoned puppy that she named Pip, which reminded her of the dogs that she used to have both in her parents’ house and at Thornfield, proving also that domestic animals can be therapeutic and useful in the process of recovery from a traumatic experience. A study published by the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* argues that “dogs appeared to contribute to hedonic wellbeing in two important ways: by promoting pleasure and enjoyment and by lessening pain and suffering (e.g., providing comfort and distraction,

helping to ease the pain of loneliness and loss, and reducing engagement in risky behavior). Dogs also contributed to aspects of eudemonic wellbeing, specifically through providing meaning and purpose, and encouraging positive relations with others and activities that can lead to personal growth and feelings of mastery" (Merkouri, Graham, O'Haire et al. 2022, 11). Pip became her best friend, the support she needed to avoid the feeling of loneliness and the proof that if she could look after someone else, in this case a dog, she was also able to take care of herself.

Hopefully, even though the puppy was a great help for Alice, after spending a few weeks in Agnes Bluff, she made the acquaintance of a woman that would change the course of her life. She was called Sarah, and she was the manager of Kililpitjara National Park. She offered Alice a job as visitor service ranger based on her career in communications and management in her grandmother's flower farm. This part of the novel was inspired by the author's life, since, as mentioned before, Ringland worked for a period of time in the desert of Central Australia, an enriching experience that allowed her to get in touch with the aboriginal communities of this territory. This opportunity turned out to be very useful in her endeavour of portraying a fair image of the life in the Outback, as well as the traditions and beliefs of these communities and their deep connection and respect towards nature. Nevertheless, she made the decision of giving fictional names to the places she described because she considered that she was not the right person to tell the stories of this region, as she did not belong to the aboriginal community. As Holly Ringland herself explained in the author's note at the end of the novel, "while I lived in the desert, I had the pleasure of meeting and knowing many women like Ruby. They shared their stories and their spirits with me, which taught me lessons I hadn't learned anywhere else" (376-377). Ruby was a fictional aboriginal woman in the novel, the Senior Ranger of the Kililpitjara National Park, responsible of taking care of the sacred places that her people, the Anangu, had been protecting from generation to generation, and preserving the magic tales and mythology that surrounded them. The Kililpitjara was also called Earnshaw Crater because it was the impact site of an iron meteorite that had crashed thousands of years before. In the middle of the crater grew the sturt's desert peas, which very delicate and flourished only nine months a year, attracting visitors from all corners of the globe. It was a "sacred site of deep spiritual and cultural significance to Anangu women" (223) because the legend said that the crater had been created by the fall of the heart of Ngunytju, a grieving mother who lived

in the stars. Her son had fallen to Earth from his cradle, and she was so distressed that she tore her heart off her body and threw it to Earth, to be forever with her lost child. In order to honour the myth, tourists were forbidden to pick any flowers. That was one of the main roles of the rangers, the preservation of the landscape and the transmission of the love and respect for the environment that was so much prized in the Anangu culture, and which reflects the importance of taking care of nature for the real Australian aboriginal tribes.

Alice accepted the job and settled in her new home with fear but also willingness and hope. Her new role as ranger in Kililpitjara National Park offered her an opportunity to make her own decisions and write the next chapter of her life as she wished, far from the desires of her grandmother and the weight of the unspoken secrets that had surrounded her existence. It is common in novels dealing with childhood trauma to reflect the adults' point of view as they grow old. This double perspective allows the reader to see the effects that the childhood trauma has into the grow-up survivor (Schönfelder 2013, 74). This is the case in *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, since the readers see Alice from infancy to adulthood, and witness the impact that the trauma she experienced as a child causes on the young adult she is becoming and how it defines her personality, which mostly develops during childhood. One of the common effects among children who undergo any traumatic situation is the appearance of "disrupted and fragmented selves and identity crises that determine the life of an individual long after the traumatic experience(s)" (Schönfelder 2013, 75). As is suggested in the novel, Alice was undergoing an identity crisis after the flight from Thornfield, so her new life in the desert appeared as a chance to define who she wanted to become and finally discover herself: "...there was something about feeling small, unfamiliar and out of place that Alice enjoyed. It was as she could, at any moment, recreate herself entirely, and no one would notice. She could become whomever she chose" (233).

One of the challenges victims from trauma have to overcome is the feeling of fragmentation, since their history, identity and place in the world have been disrupted. They are unable to assemble a clear vision of themselves and the action of articulating coherent personal narratives in these circumstances requires much courage and psychological resources (Hayes, Edlmann, and Brown 2019, 116). She wanted so much to forget all the experiences that had hurt her that she concealed her real identity to her colleagues, creating a false life and family, so as not to give explanations and avoid

recalling painful memories. Nobody knew her past or who she really was, so the new job implied the fresh start she had been waiting to begin the life she wished, away from the tragedies that had left an indelible mark on her memory.

However, before achieving the ultimate self-discovery, instead of trying to forget or hide the traumatic experiences of the past, it is necessary to overcome and accept the fact that these events have happened, as Dominick LaCapra sustained. He believed that the trauma of the past must undergo a process of working-through so as to move on and leave the cycle of repeated traumatization, in order to undertake new political and ethical projects that focus on the future instead of the wounds of the past (Debarati 2002, 301). That was Alice's main goal: to break with all the trauma of her past and be able to face the future with energy and self-determination. But recovering from trauma is not a simple task. There exists a great variety of tools, exercises and theories employed in psychology to help the patient overcome traumatic events. "Annie Parsons and Claire Hooker refer to the use of patient-centred stories as narrative therapy. In their article 'Dignity and Narrative Medicine', they state, central to narrative therapy is the idea that the narrating of the patient's story is a therapeutically central act, because to find the words to contain the disorder and its attendant worries gives shape to and control over the chaos of illness" (Davidson and Saber 2019, 48). This activity was performed both by the protagonist of this story, Alice Hart, as well as by its author, Holly Ringland, who also wrote the novel in an attempt to come to terms with her own traumatic experiences, as it is explained in the chapter dedicated to the contextualization of the novel. The concept of 'journey narrative' sustains that the exercise of narrating illness or trauma is like facing a challenge. The goal is not the outcome, but the inner development and growth achieved throughout the process (Davidson and Saber 2019, 154). To succeed, it is important that the victim externalize the problem so it "is not considered a part of the individual's personality, indicating that he is ill or hurt, but is a factor existing outside of him and it is possible to choose his position toward it. In therapy, the patient should be assisted to see that he has influence over his illness, transforming him from being managed by the problem to being its manager" (Davidson and Saber 2019, 154).

Writing was an occupation that Alice had never stopped performing and which had already been proved very useful while she was suffering domestic abuse inflicted by her father, during the mourning period after the accident that killed her both parents and

in the course of her adaptation to a new life in Thornfield. She paired her written thoughts with the messages she attributed to the wildflowers, following her family's legacy, thus combining her two greatest passions, literature and gardening: "late at night, when she was alone, Alice worked on her notebooks of flowers. They had become her solace and salve, her pressed and sketched flowers, her stories. Of childhood memories; loneliness and confusion; the life she'd lived without her mother; resentment, grief, fear and guilt. Her unfulfilled dreams. Her penance. Her yearning to be consumed by love" (263). Among many other emotions, LaCapra explained that it was common among victims of trauma to experience guilt about having survived and reconstructing their life again because they perceive it as a betrayal of those loved ones who did not survive (LaCapra 1994, 200). That is what happened to Alice, as she still felt the lack of her mother and the guilt of believing herself blameful for her death. She was also resentful of June's behaviour, which had denied her the opportunity of following her dreams of starting a new life with her friend and beloved Oggi in Europe. Alice felt that she was alone and that she had a hole in her heart that needed to be filled with love.

Sadly, Alice did not find in the desert the healthy love that she deserved and found herself involved in a toxic relationship with an abusive man that paralleled that of her mother, demonstrating that the past has a painful way to come to the surface. Her boyfriend was called Dylan and he also worked as a ranger in the national park. When they began their love relationship, it was beautiful and passionate, but as time passed, it became abusive and unhealthy. Dylan started to imitate many of the behaviours that Clem, Alice's father, used to have with his wife, but they were so subtle and apparently meaningless at the beginning that they went unnoticed. The first step in the decay of their relationship was Alice's progressive isolation, since Dylan separated her from her friends and demanded her constant attention, so as to be in control: "they spent every spare moment together. Alice knew she was neglecting her other friends, especially Lulu, but she didn't want to be with anyone else" (285). Her life revolved around him to the point of moving to his house to be all the time together. Whereas spending time in couple is not negative, it can become dangerous if it becomes an obsession and the previous activities and acquaintances are neglected in order to focus on the partner exclusively. It is very important to have one's own freedom and agency in a relationship and Alice was starting to lose them. The next step Dylan took consisted in arising in Alice feelings of blame and responsibility, convincing her that she was guilty of his

behaviour. He made her feel that she was in charge of his own mistakes: “Why would you ask me that and ruin our first weekend away together? (292) or “you even ruined dinner” (293). These feelings of blame recalled the guilt Alice used to experience when she was just a child and believed herself in charge of her father’s violent attitude: “she snuck a look at her father. His jaw was set [...] Alice bit back on tears. She’d ruined it” (31). Alice’s reaction was that of submission and acceptance, believing that he was right and apologising for hours: “Alice’s efforts to be as calming and compliant as she could seemed to have Dylan back to her” (293). Instead of reacting against his abusive attitude, she took the decision of controlling herself even more in order not to lose him: “She’d just have to be more careful in future. She’d have to be mindful before she spoke” (294), “as long as she was mindful, alert and responsive, they were blissfully happy” (300), “he’d just lost his temper. Everyone does that now and then” (321). She forgave him no matter what he did and tried to justify him by all means. Dylan was so convincing that she even thought that her imagination was making it all up: “it was all in her head. She was making the man a monster” (303). However, the relationship only went worse, and he started punishing her for not telling him where she went, or with whom, claiming a complete domination and control over her and her decisions and thus preventing her from moving freely. He was extremely jealous and made her feel blameful for using beautiful clothes for fear she had the intention of seducing other men. At the beginning, the punishment consisted in ignoring her or avoiding her sight; then, he moved on to insulting her; and finally, the critical moment came when he started to hit her, as Clem had done with Agnes when Alice was a little girl: “sometimes hearing things was worse than seeing them: the dull thud of her mother’s body hitting a wall; the nearly silent, tiny exaltation of breath from her father when he hit her” (46). The trauma of her childhood was repeating itself: Alice was suffering the same physical and psychological abuse as her mother Agnes and found herself trapped again in a cycle of male violence, proving that women are constantly being relegated to a submissive position of inferiority and acceptance in the patriarchal society. Dylan was extremely violent and took advantage of his superior physical condition: “her throat burned as he shook her hard by the neck. Her spine clicked and popped” (305), “when he threw her into the wall, the force of his strength winded her. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t hear. She willed herself to flee” (316). Alice had bruises and injuries all over her body that recalled those of her mother, but instead of breaking up with him or denouncing his

behaviour, Alice decided to hide any proof of Dylan's crimes, as she had seen her mother do when she was young.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that these experiences of domestic abuse suffered by Agnes and Alice also have an autobiographical nature, as they were inspired by the author's own trauma of having been trapped in a toxic love relationship during her stay working in the Outback. "Everybody has a story that conveys meanings and feelings, and everybody should be given the opportunity to tell this story. However, when this story is about pain and illness, people will tell it differently; they will adopt diverse narrative strategies and unique techniques to express something too personal and utter the unutterable" (Davidson and Saber, 2019, xiv). Ringland used the strategy of dangerous writing created by Spanbauer to take advantage of all her pain and suffering and transform it into a fictional work. Spanbauer sustained that since every human is fighting a battle within himself, we should acknowledge that this battle is what makes us human and begin putting down how it feels to be living with a constant struggle in our hearts (Spanbauer 2016, 37). Holly Ringland decided to apply this theory and started to write *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* in an attempt to reconcile herself with her traumatic past and be able to move on. This explains the abundance of autobiographical influences that are recognizable in the novel and allude to Ringland's own life, even if the story is completely fictional. Moreover, Holly Ringland went even further and not only applied this strategy of dangerous writing to her own traumatic episodes, but, as I explained previously, she also described how, in the novel, Alice used the same tool of writing in a therapeutic way, by writing down in her flower notebooks her feelings, experiences and thoughts.

Following the most violent episode of Dylan's anger, Alice felt the need to escape and was finally found by Candy and Twig. They revealed her that June, Alice's grandmother, had died from a heart attack just after Alice's flight from Thornfield, and that she had spent the last year of her life writing down Thornfield's stories so as to eventually be able to fulfil her promise of disclosing to her granddaughter all the secrets that surrounded their family, and which she had not been able to talk about. All the silent answers that Alice had received as a child were finally completed with those words that had taken so much time to arrive, starting by the story of her parents. Again, writing appears as a tool that allows June to talk about those sorrowful tales of the past which she had kept hidden in the deepest part of her brain, avoiding being remembered.

Alice's parents, Clem and Agnes, had fallen in love in Thornfield, but during Clem's teenage years, he had already started to show toxic attitudes that did not pass unnoticed to his mother, June: "June saw how possessive Clem could be of your mum when they were kids [...] how aggressive he was with the rest of us. Jealous if he wasn't the centre of attention. Mean-spirited if he wasn't in control. Sometimes violent when he lost his temper" (324). In light of these behaviours, and following the will of Ruth Stone, the founder of the flower farm, of never bequeathing Thornfield to an undeserving man, June took the decision of leave Clem out of his will and entrusted Thornfield to Agnes. Her choice made Clem's blood boil, and, in a burst of anger, he took Agnes with him and left the flower farm to never come back, hurting his mother June and instilling in her a painful feeling of blame that grew into trauma. She felt guilty of the sorrowful events that her decision had triggered so she avoided remembering or talking to Alice about it. This revelation shocked Alice, but it was not the only secret that she unearthed. Alice had always thought that her baby brother, who was in her mother's belly when the fire took place, had died during the accident. The surprise came when Candy and Twig told her that he was alive, that he had survived the fire and that he was under the care of Sally, the librarian of the town, the only person that Agnes trusted.

In addition to confusion and disorientation, mixed feelings of pity, sadness and resentment against her grandmother arose in her for having hidden from her truths that she had the right to know. Nevertheless, she found the strength and courage necessary to leave her job in the desert and finally get away from Dylan, thus avoiding her mother's mistake of staying with a man who just brought with him pain and distress. Alice realised that the only means of reconciling herself with her past and overcome the trauma that had chased her from her childhood was to stop running away and face the reality once and for all. This was the intention behind her decision of coming back to her native soil and meet for the first time the only person of her family who was still alive: her brother, named Charlie, of whom June had refused to take care.

After surviving the fire inside Agnes's pregnant belly, Charlie had been adopted by Sally, the librarian of the town, following Agnes's wishes. She would like her children to be put under the custody of the nearest family or, exceptionally, under the supervision of Sally, in case neither of the relatives wanted to take care of her offspring. Alice felt an immense sorrow when she realised "the point of fear her mother must have reached to have had the need for a will" (357), especially because Sally and Agnes did

not have a close relationship. However, they had some things in common, since both had been in love with Clem and carried on their backs the heavy weight of pain, as Sally had lost her daughter Gilly due to leukaemia. Thank to Sally, Alice could finally discover all the truths she had never heard and learnt that Gilly was, in fact, her half-sister, the result of a euphoric night that Sally spent with Clem. This information disoriented Alice completely, who thought that she had lived all those years in a lie and felt that she needed time to take it all in. Along with her traumatic past and the domestic abuse she had suffered, she had to internalise sorrowful truths about her family, the existence of a brother she thought long dead and the passing of a half-sister she would never be able to meet. All of this while she was dealing with the recent breakup with her boyfriend, with whom she kept a toxic relationship.

Notwithstanding, the end of the novel is hopeful and positive, and demonstrates that even after the worst storms, the sun always shines again. “Both as tellers and listeners, the storytelling process helps us remember who we are, awaken to possibilities for our future, and serve and care about one another in communities worldwide. We are encouraged to let go of stories that harm and hold on to stories that heal” (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 228).

Alice needed time, as well as the help of a counsellor to assimilate her new reality and all the sudden changes that she had just experimented. She counted on the support of Sally and her brother Charlie, with whom she became extremely close, since they shared a common past, blood and grief. Yet, writing was still one of her main allies to reconcile herself to her traumatic past and to digest those new striking revelations. She had spent her time in the desert and at Sally’s house capturing by means of dry flowers and written words the experience of her life, including feelings, doubts, fears and regrets, which explained all the decisions that had brought her to that specific moment: “she pored over the books. Paused to name every sketched and pressed flower aloud and speak its meaning; an incantation to end the burden of carrying an untold story inside her” (370). It was the perfect moment to write the last page of her story and close the book, both literal and metaphorically, in order to embrace a new beginning.

At this moment of the narration, in the very last pages, the metaphysical dimension of the novel is displayed: “she watched the words she’d written on the covers until they were no longer legible: The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart” (373). The title of

Alice's book corresponds with the title of the novel and results in a revelation for the readers, who realise that the novel they have been reading is actually the book that Alice was writing. Moreover, every chapter carries the name of a native Australian flower that has a symbolic meaning in relation with the events recalled in each section. Alice's wildflowers appear also in the form of drawings, accompanied by a short description of their appearance and qualities in the beginning of every chapter, trying to imitate the dry flowers that Alice kept in her diary.

In addition, it is important to remark that the book has a circular structure because it ends with the same words as the first chapter begins, so as to emphasize this metafictional dimension of the novel and allow the reader to understand it properly. This disposition gives the impression that the story is a recollection of Alice's experiences as rendered by a third-person, omniscient narrator through Alice's focalizing vision.

"Life stories have the power to grab our attention, pass on values and traditions, and increase empathy, connection, and healing in the world. We synchronize our minds, pattern our lives, and become known to others through our stories" (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown 2019, 228). Therefore, even though trauma always leaves a print that is impossible to erase, this novel shows that writing can be helpful to accept what happened and be able to move on, a lesson that the author Holly Ringland attempted to transmit by telling the fictional story of Alice Hart at the same time that she benefited from the curative powers of writing, in order to heal her own wounds.

5. Conclusion

Holly Ringland's *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* proves the initial hypothesis of this dissertation about the therapeutic character of literature in the process of recovery from trauma, since both the author of the novel, Holly Ringland, and the protagonist of the story, Alice Hart, resort to writing to express their emotions and thoughts.

The difference lays on the verisimilitude of the recollection. Whereas Ringland decided to fictionalize her own traumatic past through the creation of Alice's universe following Spanbauer's concept of "dangerous writing", the main character made up by the author chose to put into words her real feelings and traumatic experiences. Alice started writing in her diary when she lost her voice after the traumatic event that marked her childhood, the fire that killed her parents and destroyed her home, as it was the only way she found to communicate without articulating spoken words. However, she kept this habit as a strategy to relieve her deepest feelings and experiences many years after having her voice back.

Moreover, it is only at the end of the story that readers discover the metafictional nature of the novel, since the actual book that they are reading turns out to be the one Alice had been writing during her stay in the desert and when she went back to the coast, capturing the events that had marked her life. Therefore, writing appears as a means of putting into words those unspeakable truths, fears and emotions, helping Alice heal and move on from childhood to adulthood. In this sense, this is a coming-of-age novel, since we see Alice grow and set on a journey of self-discovery, escaping her past but being always chased by the influence of trauma.

As already explained throughout this critical analysis, Alice's improvement and progressive recovery was possible thanks to a combination of different activities apart from writing. Reading was also helpful, as it was the pastime that she shared with her mother, as well as gardening, especially in Thornfield, where she learnt the language of flowers, which allowed her to communicate secret messages without the need of uttering words. Nature acquired an essential role in the narrative from the beginning to the end, also due to its importance among the aboriginal communities. At this end, there is also an urge to seek the professional help of psychologists to overcome successfully difficult situations.

Nevertheless, the novel not only deals with Alice's experience of trauma, but it also portrays the reality of the patriarchal society in which many women are subordinated to men, being victims of physical and psychological abuse from their partners. Thus, this story shows female strength and the possibility of putting an end to their painful situation through sorority and collaboration. *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* is the perfect example of how women must help women to change the system and the established gender roles to create a more equal and supportive society.

To end with, there are some topics that were mentioned throughout this dissertation that would be interesting for further research and analysis. Firstly, the symbolism of fire, which was introduced at the beginning of the novel as a powerful force that recalls the phoenix, a mythological bird which was reborn from ashes. Fire has at the same time a positive and hopeful connotation, as it brings about change and renewal, but also a negative one, since its destructive power killed Alice's parents. Fire is repeated throughout the narration as a recurrent symbol of death and rebirth and it would be interesting to study more deeply its significance and influences from classical literature and mythology.

Secondly, the language of flowers is a motif backbone of the narrative: in fact, flower language entails Alice's alternative way to express herself without the use of speech, but it also illustrates Alice's physical – and bodily – inscription on the pages of the book, with the presence of drawings and names of flowers titling every chapter. Flower language has a Victorian origin that would be relevant to explore more carefully, going even further in its possible implications, by turning it into a means of sending secret messages and developing a new system of communication, for instance, in cases of male violence. This strategy would allow women in danger to claim help without the fear of being caught by their abuser. Related to this idea, the subject of domestic violence and male superiority is a very interesting field to study, not only applied to love relationships or couples but also to the consequences for children.

Finally, there is another topic that was mentioned but which could be analysed in more depth, namely, the aboriginal mythology and culture of Australian native communities. Their love for nature and respect towards the environment is a lesson that the contemporary society must learn. Global warming, the contamination of the sea or the pollution of the air are serious problems of which citizens should be aware.

Aboriginal societies had a deep connection with their roots, as they believed we all belong to mother earth, and that is the reason why we must take care of it. This is a precious teaching that we should adopt and internalize to make a better world and save the planet before it is too late.

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