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*Broken Strings and Rising Waves:*  
**Analyzing Trauma in Taylor Jenkins Reid's  
Fiction**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Words hold power. Beyond reflecting reality, they also shape it, influencing our perception of the world. As Sapir stated in *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, speech is a “cultural function” (2004, p. 2), which means language (and therefore words) is shaped by our cultural and social history, configuring what individuals are able to express.

This idea is especially significant regarding the expression of trauma, exposing a contradiction that has been at the center of trauma studies since the creation of the field: certain experiences or events are “too terrible to utter out loud” (Herman, 1992, p. 6). Put differently, trauma can often be considered irrepresentable and unspeakable, both in conversation and in written language. Nonetheless, it is also true that remembering and articulating said experiences “are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Herman, 1992, p. 6). Giving testimony allows listeners to understand trauma survivors while also serving as a mitigating factor for trauma (i.e., a coping mechanism).

In this context, literature is one of the most productive and effective mechanisms for depicting trauma, as it offers the possibility of processing events as they are being written, utilizing certain mechanisms (such as metaphors) to encode trauma. Therefore, a study of trauma in literary works is not only interesting from a research perspective but also necessary for promoting empathy and understanding.

In the present essay, the novels *Daisy Jones & The Six* (2019) and *Malibu Rising* (2021), both by Taylor Jenkins Reid, will be analyzed through the lens of trauma studies in literature. While it is true that the author’s intention was not to provide an account of the development

and healing of trauma, the protagonists of both books (Daisy Jones and Nina Riva) struggle with the consequences and symptoms of traumatic events that originated during their childhood. These consequences continue to haunt them in their adulthood, until they take the initial steps towards recovery and healing.

Though fictional, the traumas portrayed in both novels are far more common than the large catastrophes usually associated with trauma (such as wars, natural disasters, etc.). However, as the psychiatric Van der Kolk stated, trauma is not something so uncommon: it is visible in abusive households, abandonment by family members, grief caused by the loss of a loved one, sexual violence, and more. These types of traumatic experiences are also relevant, and their psychological impact is no less significant. Literature offers the possibility of giving testimony and validating these experiences through different strategies.

Thus, the goal of this dissertation is to analyze Reid's novels through the lens of trauma studies. First, the objective will be to determine whether trauma is representable or not for each of the two characters. To this end, the research of Cathy Caruth and Michelle Balaev will be considered, since they represent two different approaches in trauma studies: Caruth believes trauma is fundamentally irrepresentable. In contrast, Balaev maintains it can be representable. Additionally, the dissertation will include an analysis of various literary mechanisms used in the narration to portray trauma realistically and sensitively (mainly repetition, fragmentation, and the use of metaphorical and symbolic language). This analysis will draw on the work of scholars such as Dharmapada Jena, Kalyani Samantray, and Aurelija Daukšaitė.

The first chapter includes an overview of Jenkins Reid (the author of the two novels that will be analyzed), exploring her literary career and influences, as well as the main stages of her work and traits of her literary style. This section will provide a foundation for interpreting her narrative and its characters.

In the second chapter, the theoretical framework used for this dissertation will be introduced, with a focus on trauma studies. Among the scholars referenced will be Caruth and Balaev (two of the leading authorities in this field), whose approaches present a duality between the representability and irrepresentability of trauma, respectively. Their perspectives will be combined with the research of scholars such as Dharmapada Jena, Kalyani Samantray, or Aurelija Daukšaitė, who will explore the main mechanisms that allow the representation of trauma in literature.

Finally, the third and fourth chapters will be devoted to the analysis of Daisy Jones and Nina Riva, respectively. It is worth noting that the intention is not to carry out a psychological diagnosis of the characters, but rather to analyze the (ir)representability of trauma and the literary mechanisms used to depict it in a realistic and sensitive manner. Additionally, the characters' backgrounds and origins will be examined, along with the development of their trauma (and how it shapes their personalities and coping mechanisms), including the possibility of healing and transformation at the end of both novels.

## 2. THE AUTHOR: TAYLOR JENKINS REID

### 2.1. LITERARY CAREER AND INFLUENCES:

Taylor Jenkins Reid, author of *Daisy Jones & The Six* (2019) and *Malibu Rising* (2021), was born in Massachusetts in 1983. Although she had loved writing from an early age, she would not pursue this career path until she was in her mid-twenties (Reid, 2018, Q&A, Goodreads). At this point in time, she graduated in media studies and decided to relocate in Los Angeles, a city with a significant connection to her, along with its film industry (“Taylor Jenkins Reid Biography”, n.d.).

At that time, Reid was still trying to figure out how she would exactly fit in this universe. Firstly, she began her career in film production and casting assistance, which allowed her to explore the complexity of numerous characters. This experience, alongside her discovery of blogging which she took as a hobby, made Reid realize that she wanted to write her own stories.

Her writing inspiration comes from various sources: from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* or Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (Greenblatt, 2022) to Steve Martin’s *Shopgirl* (Reid, 2018, Q&A, Goodreads) and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Reese Witherspoon x Hello Sunshine, 2019, 02.08). In addition, Reid is also a fan of celebrity biographies, a great source of information for her novels. Nonetheless, what truly moves her to write stories is to share a message: to challenge the status quo through strong female protagonists (Cityline, 2021, 02.50), showing “what it means to be a woman and how society treats women” (Bellorin, 2018).

Awarded with prizes as important as the “Goodreads Choice Awards” or “Book of the Year” (by Book of the Month), Reid published her first novel in 2013, with the title *Forever, Interrupted*. Nonetheless, her main success to date would be published in 2017: *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. This novel obtained significant critical and commercial success, signalling a determinant shift in Reid’s work. She also wrote short stories, though the only one published is “Evidence of the Affair” (2018).

Reid’s subsequent novels, published from 2018 onwards, are the ones here examined: *Daisy Jones & The Six* (2019) and *Malibu Rising* (2021). Her most recent novel is *Carrie Soto is Back* (2022), though Reid will make a comeback in libraries in June 2025 with the novel *Atmosphere*.

## 2.2. STAGES OF REID’S LITERARY CAREER:

Since the release of her debut novel, *Forever Interrupted* (2013), Reid has published a total of eight novels (*Atmosphere* would be her ninth publication, forthcoming June 2025) and one short story. Through these twelve years, it is possible to see some constants and shifts in her literary career, which allow for the establishment of two stages in Reid’s literary development.

The first one, Reid’s earlier stage (2013 – 2016) is composed of four contemporary romance novels: *Forever, Interrupted* (2013), *After I Do* (2014), *Maybe in Another Life* (2015) and *One True Loves* (2016). These earlier novels are allegedly more intimate, dealing with love, marriage, the idea of fate, etc.; topics which align more closely with those associated to chick lit. In general, chick lit literature is composed of “stories written by women, about women, for women to read” (Cambridge Dictionary), addressing “issues of modern womanhood, often humorously and lightheartedly” (Editors, 2017).

During her earlier stage, grief makes an early appearance in her narrative: this theme will continue to be relevant in Reid's work, especially in *Malibu Rising* (Maurici, 2022). In addition, it is possible to see glimpses of a future female archetype: the unapologetic, fearless woman "who [has] steel[ed] herself from harsh realities with [...] talent" (Puckett-Pope, 2021), whose relevance will be later here examined.

After these four contemporary novels, Reid shifted dramatically from the contemporary romance genre in 2017 with the publication of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (Puckett-Pope, 2021). This novel, possibly her most successful work, both critically and commercially, signaled a major turn in Reid's literary career. Thus, it inaugurated the later stage in her literary career (2017 – 2022), commonly known as the "Famous Women Quartet" (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, 2018) and formed by historical fiction. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* was soon followed by *Daisy Jones & The Six* (2019) and *Malibu Rising* (2021). The quartet is finally closed by *Carrie Soto is Back* (2022). During this period, Reid also published the short story "Evidence of the Affair" (2018), reminiscent of her earlier stage in terms of theme and narrative strategies.

While these four novels still feature women and deal with their life experiences, they cannot be classified inside the chick lit genre, as opposed to the works from Reid's earlier stage. This is mostly because the presence of the historical element is way too significant to be ignored. Therefore, these novels would be classified as historical metafiction, since the author aims to problematize history through her characters (something which would be further explained in the following sections).

Her next novel, *Atmosphere*, will be published in June 2025. According to the author, this book will bring about a new stage in her career: the novel is set in the 1980s, in the context

of NASA and space discoveries, quite different from the narratives she has published (Taylor, 2024).

### 2.2.1. THE “FAMOUS WOMEN QUARTET”:

Reid’s later stage, dealing with historical metafiction, is particularly important for the analysis of the two novels here under examination, *Daisy Jones & The Six* and *Malibu Rising*. These books introduce four different women as protagonists, all of them famous in different industries (cinema, music, modeling and athletics, respectively) at different times (1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s) of twentieth-century America. Thus, they are usually referred to as the “Famous Women Quartet” and are considered to be Reid’s best works to date, especially *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (Srinivasan, 2023).

However, Reid does not focus on the bright side of fame. Rather, her portrayal of it is complex and ambivalent: fame is not only glamorous, but also dark in many aspects. Thus, she shows how the protagonists struggle with issues such as media portrayal, double standards, discrimination, and, more importantly, the struggle between the protagonists’ public personas and their private realities (Ukiomogbe, 2021). In the same interview by Ukiomogbe (2021), Reid herself encapsulates said struggle in the following quote by Cary Grant (English-American actor, active from 1922 to 1986): “Everybody wants to be Cary Grant, even Cary Grant” (Ukiomogbe, 2021). In other words, she deals with the idea of the characters’ fake, public identities and their real, private reality. Thus, her main characters often grapple with the tension between the two, feeling the pressure of meeting societal or self-imposed expectations.

## 2.3. REID'S POSTMODERNIST LITERARY TRAITS IN THE "FAMOUS WOMEN QUARTET"

Postmodernism is an intellectual, cultural, and artistic movement that emerged in the mid-twentieth century. According to Linda Hutcheon, it is "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (2003, p. 4). It emphasizes skepticism and relativism: postmodernists rejected any kind of metanarrative, as well as the principles of value, order, meaning, control, and identity "that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 13).

Therefore, as Filipino writer Miguel Syjuco stated, postmodernism "[is] about subjectivity" and about "the multiplicity of truths". As we may suppose, these traits can be best specified in disciplines such as literature, which "can certainly claim to be one of the most important laboratories of postmodernism" (Connor, 2006, p. 62).

In terms of literature, the focus is usually placed on the novel, and we may find a perfect example on Reid's fiction. Studying her literary work from a post-modernist perspective is an extremely valuable approach, as literary discussions tend to ignore the postmodern work of women, even though their "explorations of narrative and linguistic form have been among the most contesting and radical" in this field (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 16).

Reid's novels could be broadly categorized as postmodern in many senses, starting from their genre, which is historical metafiction: Reid rewrites history inserting her own characters in different historical contexts (all constructed through hyperrealist techniques), managing to establish a dialogue with history itself and problematize certain notions (sexism, discrimination, etc.).

In addition, her literary style also displays postmodern techniques (presenting complex characters and postmodern narrative techniques). Thus, Reid mixes the emotional depth achieved by the characters with a hyperrealist setting, which tends to mid-twentieth century California, and engages critically with it. These elements are perfectly connected by postmodernist narrative techniques, allowing her to perfectly encapsulate different perspectives, times, and forms of media altogether. These strategies create unique novels, well-loved both by the public and the literary critics, and will be analyzed throughout this section.

### 2.3.1. HISTORICAL METAFICTION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HISTORICAL ELEMENT

Reid's novels from her later stage belong to the genre of historical metafiction, being "intensely self-reflexive" while also related "to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 5). This quotation effectively emphasizes the genre's dual function: to make sense of the past through the discourses of history and fiction (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 89), and to expose the subjectivity of historical narratives.

While history was believed to be purely objective, postmodernists argued that it is subjective: to make sense of the historic past, humans use systems of discourse; implying a biased view on historiography (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 96), shaped by the author's language, perspective, and background. Therefore, it cannot be said that historical narratives are factual but rather constructed on the combination of different subjectivities.

Since subjective historical narratives are built on power relations, this poses a significant challenge for the dominated part, which tends to be ignored along with its perspectives, as they do not fit the dominant narratives. Ultimately, this creates inaccurate

discourses that continue to shape the collective memory to this day. To prevent this, historical metafiction aims to reassess the present, and to problematize the “entire notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 89) by focusing on “the specific and the plural”, challenging “all forms of totalizing thought” (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 98).

Some instances of this critical view of history appear in Reid’s fiction, which often recreates historical periods with impressive hyperrealism (achieved through detailed descriptions on the settings, complex fictional characters, and postmodern narrative techniques).

Within this setting, the author establishes a critical dialogue with history, challenging dominant historical narratives by focusing on her characters, most of which belong to overlooked groups (such as women, people of color, people from the LGBTQ+ community, etc.). Despite being fictional characters, the problems they depict are real issues that affect whole communities, which are in turn ignored. By introducing their perspectives, Reid gives voice to some individual experiences that were previously ignored.

The historical component in Reid’s work is also related to the so called “parodic” feature, which refers to postmodernist works that intertextually related to previous works and traditions, to perpetuate them or to challenging them (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 11). This constant re-interpretation of the past is very much present in Reid’s work, where she re-interprets history itself. For instance, the band presented in *Daisy Jones & The Six* is loosely based in *Fleetwood Mac*, and Reid also manages to include references to other rock bands of the 70s and 80s while incorporating her own characters into this picture to critically engage with history. In a similar fashion, the character of Evelyn Hugo (*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*) is loosely based on actresses of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood, such as Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor.

### 2.3.2. HYPERREALIST SETTING:

Using hyperrealist techniques, Reid manages to make an unfamiliar setting (late twentieth-century Hollywood) tangible and realistic to the readers, allowing them to immerse themselves in a journey across time and place. This sense of escapism comes mainly from research, which is carefully poured into the narrative through descriptions that allow the reader to take an inside look in the Hollywood industry, through the complexity of her characters and through different postmodern narrative strategies.

Reid's research process to write a novel lasts a few months, in which she consumes media, movies, books and documentaries from the targeted era and the topics she will handle, thoroughly informing herself (Cityline, 2021, 01.46). This aids her in creating the atmosphere for each book, maintaining it historically accurate and adding numerous allusions to pop culture. For instance, *Daisy Jones & The Six* is set in the rock 'n' roll panorama of 1970s America, exploring the technical complexities of the music industry, while also mentioning bands and artists such as "The Beatles" or Bob Dylan. In other words, Reid manages to capture a whole era inside a book, giving the reader the impression that they are actually experiencing those times.

The imprint that Reid's characters leave on this carefully crafted setting are so realistic and authentic – for example in *Daisy Jones & The Six* she narrates the whole making of an album, including the lyrics of every song – that their presence feels entirely natural to the readers, making them wonder whether the characters are truly fictional or real historical figures (Bleiweis, 2023). This blurring between the lines that separate fiction and reality is inherently typical of both historical metafiction and postmodernism (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 113), and it allows the author to remind the readers that history is always being reinterpreted by mixing reality and fiction.

### 2.3.3. COMPLEX CHARACTERS:

Reid's protagonists tend to be "unapologetic, flawed, strong women who don't shy away from taking up space" (Ismail Bari, 2023) in a male-dominated industry, like that in late twentieth-century Hollywood. Furthermore, Reid's heroines are glamorous, famous women: Evelyn Hugo (*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*) is an awarded actress, Daisy Jones (*Daisy Jones & The Six*) is a charismatic rock star, Nina Riva (*Malibu Rising*) is a well-known model and daughter of a famous singer, and Carrie Soto (*Carrie Soto Is Back*) is an elite athlete. Briefly put, these are characters that the average reader cannot identify with (Ismail Bari, 2023). Nevertheless, the audience is captivated by Reid's protagonists, and one of the main reasons has to do with parasocial relationships with celebrities. As Reid explains in an interview with Puckett-Pope (2021), "we obsessively track [celebrities] via social media, whom we worship just as often as we condemn".

However, the main reason why the reader feels so attached to Reid's characters is that, despite being celebrities with excentric and luxurious lives, these characters still feel close to the reader. The author accomplishes this by giving these initially unrelatable characters universal conflicts that any person could experience at a given point in life.

As a case in point, *Daisy Jones & The Six* follows the trajectory of a rock band during the 1970s. The band members are worldwide famous, so their social status is something that most readers would not relate to. Despite this, their struggles do resonate with the audience: desire for validation, feeling lonely despite being surrounded by people, etc. In particular, the main character (Daisy) struggles with mental health and drugs, something that humanizes her, because she is not just the perfect rockstar: she is also human and has her internal fights.

Ultimately, showing this kind of difficulties in the narrative helps the reader to empathize with the characters.

The case of *Malibu Rising* is another good example: the novel pivots on a family of four rich siblings, the Riva kids (children of Mick Riva, a famous rock star). While their lives seem glamorous, the reader also gets a glimpse of their not-so-fortunate origins: their father abandoned them to live a life of fame and excess, and they were left with a single mother, who loved them tenderly, but who could not cope with the absence of her husband, thus falling into alcoholism and depression. As this situation escalates, the struggles the characters will have to face are pretty much universal: grief, infidelity, complicated family relationships, etc.

In addition, such relatability attached to Reid's characters also has to do with her inclusivity when creating them: "she includes women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community at the forefront of her plots to ensure that everyone can find themselves in these characters" (Bleiweis, 2023). These types of characters are what the postmodernists called the "ex-centric": those who are "identified with the center" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 60), a center which is denied to them, whether because of their class, their race, their gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. In this trait lies the pluralism that characterizes postmodernism: through this diverse ensemble of characters, Reid questions "any totalizing or homogenizing system", proving that "our culture is not really a homogenous monolith" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 12).

Nonetheless, Reid's characters are also flawed, and this is precisely what makes them relatable. For instance, Daisy – the protagonist of *Daisy Jones & The Six* – is a drug addict who makes mistakes and takes questionable decisions and initially refuses to rehabilitate herself because it is easier for her to escape her reality through narcotics. Another example is found in Nina in *Malibu Rising*, a woman who is far too accustomed to please everybody at the cost of

her own happiness, and this leads her to a complicated point in her life. In short, Reid's characters are not perfect, and in this lies their complexity and the reason why readers relate to them: because, like them, they are flawed. They go through problems, and they are not the perfect persona that they sell to the media. Far from that, they are quite similar to the reader, who can see themselves in them.

By giving her characters strong plot lines that “never feel like tangents to the main narrative” (Ismael Bari, 2023), Reid showcases complex, deep emotions that resonate with the reader's.

#### 2.3.4. POSTMODERN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES:

As was previously mentioned, subjectivity is a highly important feature of Reid's work, especially from the historical metafictional point of view, as it challenges the idea of metanarratives by introducing plural perspectives. To introduce such a degree of subjectivity in literature, authors use numerous narrative techniques: unreliable narration, multiple, perspectives and temporalities, among others.

This is precisely what Reid does in her novels: she tends to “switch from the narrative past to the narrative present, also switching perspectives” (Bleiweis, 2023). She tends to use predominantly the first-person narrator, which in itself makes the narration unreliable.

For instance, in *Malibu Rising*, the narrative is fragmented in time: some parts are set in the present of the novel (August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1983) and others in the years prior to the story's main events. The story is told from the perspective of the four Riva siblings, among other characters, so different versions of the same events are offered.

Another important postmodernist technique in Reid's work is the integration of "non-traditional mediums" (Bleiweis, 2023) into the narrative, such as fictional newspapers which are included in the narrative. This adds to the realism of her novels, as they revolve around Hollywood celebrities: including their repercussion in the press is a natural choice, which also allows the author to criticize the "disrespectful way the media treats women" (Bleiweis, 2023).

Speaking of non-traditional media being inserted into the narrative, the case of *Daisy Jones & The Six* is particularly striking: Reid did not limit herself to include other kinds of media into the story but transformed its format altogether into a piece of media. As a matter of fact, the book was entirely written in interview format (Maurici, 2022), where the characters give their own, plural version of the same story, as if they were participating in the making of a documentary.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRAUMA STUDIES

According to Michelle Balaev, trauma studies delve into the impact of trauma in literature and society, concentrating on how memory shapes identities and, more importantly, on the representation of trauma in language (2018, p. 360). The focus is then placed on the formal innovations of texts that showcase how “the unconscious [is] influenced by extreme events”, with the aim of “understanding and interpreting traumatic experiences” (Jena and Samantray, 2021, p. 1). Such formal and discursive innovations will be important for the literary analysis of *Daisy Jones & The Six* and *Malibu Rising*, by Taylor Jenkins Reid. This is due to the fact that these literary methods contribute to fully portray trauma, transcending basic description (such an approach would be overly simplistic for the topic at hand). Thus, they manage to reflect the emotional weight of traumatic stories and the characters’ consequent inner conflicts, showing how trauma shapes memory, identity, and personality. Overall, said narrative innovations succeed in depicting trauma in a manner that is both realistic and sensitive.

#### 3.1. THE CONCEPT OF TRAUMA

Despite being the central notion of this literary field, the concept of “trauma” has been subject to significant changes over the years. Originally from the Greek, the word “trauma” referred to a wound or anything “denoting a physical injury from an external cause” (Kurtz, 2018, p. 1). Today, however, the term alludes to inner or psychological issues. This new connotation emerged some decades after major war conflicts, following World War I (1914–1918), World War II (1939–1945) and the Vietnam War (1955–1975). After these conflicts there was a “renewed interest” in trauma (Caruth, 1995, p. 3).

In this context, the term “post-traumatic stress disorder” (hereafter PTSD) replaced earlier labels like “shell shock” or “stress”, as trauma was proving to be distinct and more intense than mere “stress”. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (who conducted the first studies on the effects of PTSD) explained that the feeling of stress vanishes once the triggering situation ends. In contrast, trauma is consistently relived by the body, even after the traumatic event is over (Big Think, 2021, 00:20). Van der Kolk initially associated trauma with an “extraordinary event” that is “outside the range of usual human experience” (01:46). In other words, he believed trauma was attached to human and natural catastrophes. Nonetheless, he soon deemed this definition to be too simplistic, as trauma is not something so uncommon: it can stem from abusive households, the loss of a loved one, unwanted sexual experiences, etc.

This is what happens in Reid’s novels: neither the main characters of *Daisy Jones & The Six* nor those of *Malibu Rising* have directly experienced wars or natural disasters. Their traumas —dysfunctional family dynamics, abandonment, infidelity, grief, etc. —are rooted in more “common” issues. Although these forms of trauma may be considered inevitable aspects of life, this does not diminish their psychological impact: even in its most universal manifestations, trauma can change an individual completely. Nina Riva in *Malibu Rising* serves as a good example: she experienced abandonment and the loss of her mother at an early age, forcing her to grow up faster and take on a parental role that did not correspond to her age, completely reshaping her personality and her life path.

Therefore, independently of its source, trauma involves a delayed, “intense personal suffering” as a reaction to “an overwhelming event” (Caruth, 1995, p. 4); which ends up, according to Balaev, impacting “the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world” (2018, p. 360).

This delayed reaction occurs because the event is so overwhelming that it cannot be processed as it takes place. As Cathy Caruth explained, traumatized subjects “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely process” (1995, p. 5). Since the event cannot be fully processed, trauma does not reside in the event itself, but in how it is received —that is, in the response of the traumatized subject, which may manifest through repetitions of the traumatic event in nightmares, flashbacks, behaviors, or other symptoms. These involuntary repetitions of trauma will come as a shock, producing uncertainty as to whether this event really happened or not, because the mind did not register it fully in the first place (Caruth, 1995, p. 6).

As can be appreciated, trauma is a complex concept in theory and even more so in practice, since it does not follow predictable patterns of memory or healing. Precisely because of this, there is a need to understand how to treat it and heal it. One of the most effective ways to do it is giving testimony: this allows the individual to make sense of the traumatic experience, while enabling the listener to understand the meaning of trauma. Additionally, according to van der Kolk, accompanying the traumatized subject through this process has proved to be a mitigating factor against trauma. Humans are “interdependent”, after all, and are more likely to cope with trauma effectively when supported by others than when they do so in isolation (Big Think, 2021, 03:27). However, we must listen and interpret traumatic testimonies “without losing their impact, without reducing them all into versions of the same story” (Caruth, 1995, p. vii). This task cannot be approached in a single way: such a multifaceted phenomenon, as is the case of trauma, requires “responses of different disciplines” (Caruth, 1995, p. ix), with literature one of the most productive.

According to Kurtz, “traumatic wounds [...] require interpretation” (2018, p. 2), and literature —especially narratives— serves as the perfect medium for doing so. Although narrative embodies the trauma itself, it also serves as an “expressive mechanism that might

potentially offer a solution to the problem” (2018, p. 4). Nonetheless, not all academics agree with this vision, as representing trauma in writing can be challenging (2018, p. 5), a topic which will be explored in the following section.

### 3.2. THE HISTORY OF TRAUMA STUDIES. DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Trauma studies developed during the mid-1990s, although their origins date back to the nineteenth century, when trauma was still understood as a physical wound, related to accidents produced by the new modernity and industrialization. This was the case of railway accidents: victims exhibited symptoms of anxiety and dissociation, attributed to the “railway spine”. This was considered to a condition that resulted from “spinal cord concussion or lesions developed due to the physical shock of a railway collision” (Kurtz, 2018, p. 37). However, as psychology emerged as a discipline, scholars like Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet, and Jose Breuer reinterpreted these symptoms as psychological ones, shifting the notion of trauma from a physical wound to a “psychic wound” (Kurtz, 2018, p. 37).

Sigmund Freud’s work—in particular, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)—would eventually constitute the basis of trauma studies. Freud argued that traumatic hysteria stemmed from repressed past experiences, which were unassimilated at the time they occurred because of their overwhelming nature. As a result, the mind of the individual would not be able to reproduce the traumatic event faithfully, since it was not thoroughly processed nor integrated when it took place. In order for the traumatized subject to overcome trauma, Freud recommends a narrative reproduction of the past: talk therapy and the reconstruction of a coherent narrative allow the individual to process the event “as something belonging to the past” (Balaev, 2018, p. 361, 362).

These ideas would continue to be developed by different psychoanalysts, evolving further during World War I, when war trauma started to be recognized as a psychological diagnosis (labeled as “shell shock”). Simultaneously, trauma started to be explored in different literary works, such as Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

Trauma studies would reach new heights during World War II and the Holocaust, two events that shaped our understanding of personal and collective trauma (Kurtz, 2018, p. 6). These conflicts sparked a debate that persists in contemporary trauma studies: could literature ethically and thoroughly portray such horrific events, especially “on the part of those who did not experience it”? (Kurtz, 2018, p. 6).

The “single most important event for the concept of trauma” (Kurtz, 2018, p. 6) took place during the aftermath of the Vietnam War (1980s): the coinage of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (hereafter PTSD) as a psychological diagnosis. Initially, it was defined as a “distressing event outside the range of usual human experience”, accompanied by “intense fear, terror, and helplessness” (Balaev, 2018. p. 362). Nonetheless, according to academics like van der Kolk, this definition was too simplistic, and trauma was much more common than they realized at the time. Furthermore, even if the traumatic events were the same, patients’ responses to trauma were diverse and subjective, demonstrating that PTSD is a rather loose (though also helpful) category (Kurtz, 2018, p. 7).

A decade later (1990s), trauma studies emerged as an academic field, initially relying on Freudian theory. It soon intersected with literary studies, “where trauma theory has come to represent a discrete and significant critical approach” (Kurtz, 2018, p. 1). After all, narrative is one of the most effective ways to depict trauma. Narratives and storytelling serve as crucial methods of testimony for the recovery of the traumatized subject. Through these means, they can process and structure their traumatic experiences (Balaev, 2018, p. 362). At the same time,

these narratives function as testimonies to the audience, who bear witness to trauma, acknowledging its impact.

Within the literary approach to trauma studies, two different models stand out: the traditional model and the pluralistic one. On the one hand, the traditional model was the first to emerge at the origins of trauma studies, with academics such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman. This model relies heavily on Freudian theory, describing trauma as an “extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether” (Balaev, 2018, p. 360).

This model follows a neurobiological perspective: traumatic memories are so overwhelming that they rupture the mind and identity. As a result, it becomes impossible for the individual to process the event nor to make sense of it, preventing it from being narrated or coded linguistically. Thus, even though the traumatized subject may be able to recall fragments of the event, they will never fully assimilate it into the memory (Balaev, 2018, pp. 363, 364). Hence, scholars in this wake view trauma as entirely irrepresentable, questioning the ethical implications of essaying to depict it in literature.

Thus, within this framework, memory is viewed as a “storehouse of experience”, where traumatic memories are stored differently: they remain dissociated from consciousness. Such dissociation causes “emotional suffering” and “inability to identify [...] the meaning of the event” (Balaev, 2018, pp. 364, 365).

On the other hand, the pluralistic model —represented by academics such as Michelle Balaev, Greg Forter, or Naomi Mandel—directly challenges the traditional one. It argues that trauma’s unspeakableness is not its defining feature, but one of the various possible responses to a traumatic experience (Balaev, 2018, p. 360).

While this theoretical framework acknowledges that trauma alters the psyche, it also considers that this does not entail the impossibility of linguistic representation. Instead, trauma creates a new relationship “between experience, language, and knowledge”, generating “new knowledge” about the individual and the external world (Balaev, 2018, p. 366).

Balaev names this shift in perspective as a “reorientation of consciousness (2018, p. 366), changing the focus from the internal, neurobiological causes of silence in trauma toward the external ones. Thus, silences in trauma narratives are not necessarily caused by psychological gaps in the traumatized mind, but rather by sociocultural conventions that impact on how individuals choose to narrate their experiences (e.g., in some cultures people are taught not to delve too deeply into their feelings or personal struggles). Hence, studying the cultural context of traumatic subjects is crucial to understanding trauma representations (Balaev, 2018, p. 367).

Accordingly, the pluralistic model does not see memory as a static storehouse, but as a fluid process of reconstruction of the traumatic experience, which is “created and recreated in moments of recollection” (Balaev, 2018, p. 366, 367). In other words, trauma is not defined by a universal inability to remember the traumatic experience. Rather, it is diverse, with changing symptoms depending on the patient and their context (Balaev, 2018, p. 367).

Nowadays, “we live in an age of trauma” (Kurtz, 2018, p. 1), and as a result, the field of trauma studies in literature has continued to develop and specify since the establishment of the initial, traditional model. Over time, they have also intersected with other research areas like feminism, race, postcolonial theory, ethnic studies, and

ecocriticism; broadening its horizon to examine “trauma's significance in literature and society” (Balaev, 2018, p. 369).

### 3.3. TRAUMA IN FICTION: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

As mentioned in the previous section, the representation of traumatic experiences in literature has been a source of debate, primarily between two schools of trauma studies: the traditional model (which argues that trauma is irrepresentable) and the pluralistic one (which claims that trauma can be represented through specific strategies).

The traditional model is correct in asserting that trauma is challenging to represent in literature, as there is always a risk of diminishing its emotional weight or reducing it to a conventional narrative. Consequently, scholars have established certain strategies to tackle these “difficulties in representing traumatic experiences” (Jena and Samantray, 2021, p. 3). They aim to enable traumatized subjects to communicate “the unreality of trauma while remaining faithful to the facts of history” (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2550).

These experimental narrative techniques have changed fiction in their efforts to embody “at least at a formal level, the effects of trauma” (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2550). Accordingly, the main strategies used include repetition, fragmentation, and a lack of chronology (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2545).

Conveying repetition in traumatic narratives is essential, as it is one of the main symptoms of trauma: the constant reliving of the traumatic event because it was not thoroughly processed when it took place. According to Daukšaitė, this repetition can be rendered through language, plot patterns, or recurring motifs in the thoughts and experiences of the traumatized characters. This insistent return to the past also disrupts linear temporality, since the narrative

goes back to the time of the traumatic event. Nonetheless, repetition can also generate narrative cohesion by creating certain patterns and “fixed ideas” within the text, thus linking events and situations that otherwise seem disconnected (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2550). For instance, in *Daisy Jones & The Six* the reader can acquire a better comprehension of Daisy’s trauma through her recurrent patterns of self-destruction, both in her relationships and in the abuse of drugs and other substances.

Moving on to fragmentation, the overwhelming nature of the traumatic event is what fragments the characters’ mind and identity. Since there is a struggle to process experience, there is also a related struggle to voice said experience; something that leads to a fragmented speech. This is often achieved through syntactic disruption, ellipsis (Jena and Samantray, 2021, p. 4), typographical markers such as dashes and suspension points, and shifting viewpoints (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2551). In *Daisy Jones & The Six*, fragmentation is found in the very format of the story: it is presented through as a documentary interview, with multiple voices overlapping and producing a variety of perspectives on the same story.

Traumatic narratives are characterized by their lack of chronology: they often allow the past and the present to coexist, shifting from the first to the former and disrupting linear timing. This effect is achieved through flashbacks or dreams, for instance (Jena and Samantray, 2021, pp. 3, 4). This narrative technique is depicted in *Malibu Rising*: the present of the story intersects with prior decades of trauma, thus structuring the narrative.

The use of metaphors, images, and symbolism is also central to trauma fiction. Trauma is inherently complex and often resists simple interpretation; thus, these poetic devices offer a complex representation. Not only do they enrich the narrative, but they also facilitate a detailed understanding of trauma, creating “a ground to understanding” (Jena and Samantray, 2021, p.

3). Some symbols in *Daisy Jones & The Six* and *Malibu Rising* are drugs (in the first) and the fire and the sea (in the former), which will be analyzed in the following chapters.

In addition, intertextuality is highly important: it involves the relationship between literary works and previous texts and traditions (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 11). However, in trauma narratives, intertextuality tends to extend beyond literature and include other forms of artistic expression, “belonging to the audio, visual, and textual domains” (Jena and Samantray, 2021, p. 4). For instance, they include photographs inserted in the text, or “bits of songs, snippets of prayers, literary intertexts (...)” (Jena & Samantray, 2021, p. 5). In the context of trauma fiction, intertextuality seeks to reduce trauma’s unspeakability: some scholars argue that it is so complex that it cannot be conveyed through language alone. As a result, they incorporate photographs and other sources into the narrative. In doing so, the reader can truly witness “the protagonist’s working through of trauma” (Jena and Samantray, 2021, p. 5) in a more immersive, less superficial way. Intertextuality is one of the traits of Jenkins Reid’s literary style, present in most of her novels. An example may be found in *Daisy Jones & The Six*, in the interview format of the book and in the inclusion of song lyrics in the narrative.

Finally, a key element in traumatic narratives is found in “what is said and what is not said” (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2551). In other words, in the silence of the traumatic subject, which can be more powerful than speech itself: silences demonstrate the individual’s incapability to articulate their trauma, leaving space for the reader to interpret it. One instance of narrative silence can be found in the character of Nina Riva (*Malibu Rising*): she rarely voices the trauma caused by her mother’s death and her father’s abandonment. This silence has implications, which will be interesting to analyze regarding her personality and her working through trauma.

In the end, these narrative techniques promote empathy and understanding towards individuals who have been traumatized. Their stories are narrated in an insightful, non-

reductive manner, “recognizing the difference of [their] position and hence not taking [their] place” (2021, p. 4). While some literary critics argue that these techniques cannot capture trauma in its full complexity, it cannot be denied that they have provided meaningful and ethical ways of representation.

### 3.4. THE RELEVANCE OF TRAUMA IN REID'S NOVELS

According to Sonia Baelo Allué (Daukšaitė, 2013, p. 2549), there are two types of trauma novels. On the one hand, there are psychic trauma novels “that capture the effect of suffering on the mind of the individual”. On the other hand, there are cultural trauma novels “that focus on the social and cultural consequences of the events”.

Reid’s novels would be an example of psychic trauma novels, as they focus on individual experiences of trauma, rather than collective catastrophes. Her novels revolve around characters that deal with “universal” struggles (related to relationships, grief, loss, addiction, etc.), as has been explained previously.

Therefore, trauma is highly important to gain a thorough understanding of her characters. Reid’s intention was not allegedly to create a trauma-based story, but to narrate these women’s life account: their childhood, their fears, their dreams, their success... However, struggles and trauma are part of said life experience: they cannot be ignored, as they shape our identity, our personality, and our development. In addition, since Reid used several narrative strategies out of those mentioned in the previous section, it could be said that trauma also plays a role in the narration of her stories, giving them more depth.

Thus, it would be difficult to analyze and understand characters such as Daisy or Nina without taking into account the traumatic experiences they underwent throughout their lives.

As a matter of fact, it could be said that the main struggles they face in the novels are rooted in said traumas.

For instance, Daisy's conflict through *Daisy Jones & The Six* has to do with her drug addiction and her traumatic experiences of abandonment. These ideas stemmed from her childhood and adolescence and continued to haunt her during her adulthood, influencing her behavior and her personal relationships. In the case of *Malibu Rising*, Nina is constantly battling the struggles she faces as a consequence of trauma (which originated from her father's abandonment and her mother's death), questioning her personality as a product of the experiences she lived.

Thus, trauma is not a background theme in novels, nor anything similar to a subtopic. On the contrary, it is essential to gain a detailed understanding of both the story and the characters. Without this perspective or interpretation of analysis, the reading of both books would remain incomplete.

## 4. DAISY JONES: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### 4.1. DAISY'S JOURNEY THROUGH TRAUMA

A popular rock singer and songwriter in the 1970s, Daisy Jones was constantly acclaimed for her musical talent and her vivacious personality. However, despite the fame and praise received, Daisy always showed a strong sense of isolation and incomprehension, derived from childhood trauma. Raised in a wealthy but emotionally neglectful family, she drowned her loneliness in drugs, alcohol, and exploitative relationships in search of the validation she lacked. As she reflected, *"I wanted someone to single me out as something special. I was just so desperate to hold someone's interest"* (Reid, 2019, p. 10). Overtime, she still longed to find someone who truly understood her and worried about her.

In this context, Daisy found a healthy outlet in music, which enabled her to express her pain and to feel seen, reducing her sense of loneliness. Joining the rock band *The Six* allowed her to find the acceptance she had longed for, and although she still felt dissatisfied with her life, she also found someone who understood her pain and vision of the world: Billy Dunne, the band's leader. He had recently overcome his drug addiction; thus, he considered Daisy and her chaotic drug consumption as a threat to his sobriety. Even so, there was an undeniable attraction between them, which culminated in rejection: despite his own feelings, Billy remained faithful to his wife, Camila. This devastated Daisy, who believed she was unworthy of love once again: *"We are talking about probably the first man in my life who really saw me, who ever really understood me, who had so much in common with me... And he still didn't love me"* (Reid, 2019, p. 198). Deeply hurt, she entered a toxic relationship which offered her

validation but also encouraged her self-destructive tendencies: she lost control of her drug use and prioritized her partner's needs over her own.

After divorcing, Daisy reconnected with Billy, set boundaries on her drug use, and took the first steps toward recovery. Nonetheless, she also felt exhausted and disillusioned with her life, led by destructive patterns and addiction, not yet capable of committing to sobriety. In addition, she was both resigned and devastated, knowing that a romantic relationship with Billy was not possible.

This situation changed after Daisy had a conversation with Camila, who requested her to step away from Billy to protect everyone involved. More importantly, she reminded Daisy of her worth beyond addiction: she was surrounded by people who worried about her, and she was capable of recovery. Feeling grateful and inspired, Daisy was finally able to leave the band and the suffocating atmosphere created by her relationship with Billy. Soon after, she sought treatment at a rehabilitation center and transformed her life in a way that was previously unimaginable for her: she left music, wrote books, traveled, and adopted children.

## 4.2. IS TRAUMA REPRESENTABLE?

Regarding the representation of trauma, the novel presents a duality between present-day Daisy (being interviewed about her past) and past Daisy (living during the 1970s). For the latter, trauma is entirely irrepresentable, while for the former, it becomes almost completely representable. This difference has to do with the temporal distance between the two of them, as Daisy has matured and reflected on her past through therapy: "I've had a lot of therapy in my life [...] I see myself clearly now" (Reid, 2019, p. 11).

However, due to the trauma she endured since childhood, Daisy formerly struggled with vulnerability and with confronting her past, making trauma irrepresentable for her: facing it was overwhelmingly painful and confusing. As she explained, “I had no idea what I was doing or why I was doing things I didn’t want to be doing” (Reid, 2019, p. 11). Thus, when asked whether she felt all right, she responded dismissively: “Yeah, why?” (Reid, 2019, p. 130).

Therefore, Daisy reacted by avoiding any conversation about the struggles she faced. Thus, when questioned about her drug use, she responded with, “No one can dodge the answer?” (Reid, 2019, p. 149) or with an ambiguous, “I don’t know” (Reid, 2019, p. 150). To demonstrate control over her addiction, she even tried to give her pills away: “Take them [...] I don’t even need them” (Reid, 2019, p. 102). In other words, she tried to conceal her addiction to “hide the fact that” she was “a mess of a person” (p. 189). As Billy stated, “She was (...) the type of addict that thinks that other people don’t know she’s using” (Reid, 2019, p. 121).

Daisy channeled her inner turmoil through her songwriting (a theme further analyzed later in this essay). On the surface, however, moments of sadness were “rare” for her (Reid, 2019, p. 202), as she constantly exhibited a seemingly vibrant personality: “She was always laughing. There was nothing jaded about her” (Reid, 2019, p. 9). Nonetheless, internally, she experienced symptoms of depression, although she did not know how to exteriorize them: “I think I finally resigned myself to [...] how sad it all was” (Reid, 2019, p. 270); “I was so incredibly bored of my life [...]. It was so boring [...] that I wanted to die. I wanted a real life, for once. Anything real” (Reid, 2019, p. 272).

Following this last realization, Daisy requested help to detoxify herself, marking the first time she explicitly addressed her addiction as a problem she needed to overcome: “I want to get clean” (Reid, 2019, p. 274). Consequently, her vulnerability in that moment reflects the

confusion she felt: “Just... Right now just sit with me. And help me... Understand what I’m doing” (Reid, 2019, p. 274).

Over time, after detoxifying and attending therapy, Daisy was able to articulate many aspects of her trauma, as evidenced by her narration of the story. Nonetheless, even her present self finds elements that remain difficult to verbalize, evidencing specific limits to trauma's representability and leaving space for the reader to interpret it. For instance, Daisy still cannot explain why she perpetuated her addiction: “Why did I hurt myself like that? I can’t explain it [...] There are no good answers about this” (Reid, 2019, p. 170).

Although silence and loneliness contributed to the formation of Daisy’s trauma, they also became part of her response to it. Despite overcoming her trauma, some of its symptoms endure in these silences. Ultimately, this proves that certain parts of the traumatic experience may remain inexpressible even in the minds of the traumatized subjects themselves, resisting coherent representation or conscious understanding.

#### 4.3. NARRATIVE MECHANISMS PORTRAYING TRAUMA

In general, present-day Daisy can discuss her past experiences without difficulty, a development attributed to therapy and years of maturation. As a result, both the structure of the book and the way she conveys her speech reveal certain narrative mechanisms that represent trauma. These narrative strategies eventually make trauma more easily comprehensible, while promoting empathy towards the traumatized subjects. Some of those narrative strategies here examined are repetition, fragmentation and symbolism, as will be argued.

In *Daisy Jones & The Six*, repetition emphasizes Daisy’s recurrent behaviors and patterns of self-destruction. As an example, Daisy constantly expressed her wish to be seen and

loved. In this case, repetition reflects the depth of her need for a genuine connection, which shapes her relationships and her self-esteem: “I was just so desperate to hold someone's attention” (Reid, 2019, p. 10), “I want to be a member of this team. An important member” (Reid, 2019, p. 136), “Acceptance is a powerful drug” (Reid, 2019, p. 219), “I liked being married. I liked the idea [...] of being tied to this one person” (Reid, 2019, p. 229).

Another repetitive pattern in her behavior is the avoidance of situations that require emotional vulnerability or self-reflection, a trait that characterizes both her personal and professional life: “it was killing me. The vulnerability, the rawness” (Reid, 2019, p. 280). As Warren notes, “Daisy was always skipping out on stuff she didn't want to do” (Reid, 2019, p. 188). Firstly, she flees from home to escape the overwhelming loneliness she experiences. Shortly after, she turns to drugs as a means of numbing her emotions, unable to process them healthily. Her tendency to avoid discomfort and vulnerability is further proved when, after Billy's rejection, she withdraws from the band and spirals further into addiction to distract herself from her inner turmoil. Even in seemingly trivial matters, such as the recording of an emotional, vulnerable song, Daisy states, “*I couldn't deal with it, so I left*” (Reid, 2019, p. 172).

Furthermore, her coping mechanisms also reflect a great degree of repetition. Her drug consumption is highly routinized and methodical: “it was dexies to get through the day, reds to get through the night. Champagne to wash it all down” (Reid, 2019, p. 45). Additionally, during adolescence, Daisy engaged in various superficial relationships, adopting a submissive role to avoid abandonment. Reappearing in her relationship with Niccolo at the end of the novel, this pattern echoes Daisy's earlier experiences, underlining her former inability to break free from her destructive tendencies.

As previously mentioned, traumatic experiences fragment the characters' minds and identities, causing a struggle to process said experience. In *Daisy Jones & The Six*, the structure of the novel itself mirrors trauma (it is written in interview format, meaning the characters' perspectives are fragmented and intercalated with one another). However, fragmentation becomes most significant when considering Daisy's discourse production, presenting certain ellipses and unfinished thoughts.

While present-day Daisy is generally straightforward about her trauma (as a result of therapy and personal growth), it is possible to see some instances of fragmentation in her discourse. For instance: "I lost my virginity to somebody that... It doesn't matter who it was" (Reid, 2019, p. 10). This ellipsis indicates that there are specific parts of her past that she still struggles to revisit. Thus, in moments of emotional vulnerability, her speech shows pauses or ellipses, conveying pain and emotion: "We are talking about probably the first man in my life who really saw me, who ever really understood me, who had so much in common with me... And he still didn't love me. When you find that rare person who really knows who you are and they still don't love you..." (Reid, 2019, p. 198). Another revealing quotation is the following: "I... Let me put it this way" (Reid, 2019, p. 254). At this point, Daisy is giving an account of one of the darkest moments of her past. Hence, even though she can give testimony of her trauma, the fragmentation present in this quote evidences that she still has difficulty revisiting specific memories.

As already discussed, Daisy tends to articulate her trauma directly: "My heart dropped in my chest. I don't mean that figuratively. I could actually feel it sinking in my chest" (Reid, 2019, p. 196). Nonetheless, this straightforwardness coexists with a more metaphorical expression. For instance, the quote, "I'm just hoping somebody saves me from myself" (Reid, 2019, p.

172), is a metaphor for Daisy's inner turmoil, reflecting her sense of helplessness. Another example is found in the following quotation: "It's like some of us are chasing after our nightmares the way other people chase dreams" (Reid, 2019, p. 151), where Daisy metaphorically alludes to her self-destructive tendencies as "nightmares".

In addition, symbolism is highly important in the novel, mainly the one related to drugs and songs. Firstly, drugs represent excess, temptation, and darkness. They are both the symptom and the cause of her trauma: Daisy initially uses them to numb her emotions, although they finally immerse her in darkness and self-destruction. Hence, Daisy refers to her addiction as a wound that deteriorates over time: "The wound you were nursing has become an abscess" (Reid, 2019, p. 189). When she decides to detoxify, her mental health visibly improves, as if she recovered sanity. This is encapsulated in the following quote: "And when you rediscover your sanity, it's only a matter of time before you start to get an inkling of why you wanted to escape it in the first place" (Reid, 2019, p. 261).

Secondly, songs symbolize Daisy's emotions: since she struggled voicing her emotions out loud, instead she reflected them in her lyrics. As she stated, "It seemed clear to me that there were things unsaid that were being said in our work together" (Reid, 2019, p. 185). Thus, it is no wonder that her songs deal with addiction and her inner turmoil, including "a lot of imagery of darkness, running into darkness, chasing darkness" (Reid, 2019, p. 153). For instance, in "Turn It Off", she expresses her fear that she has sunken too deep into addiction: "There's no way up when you're this far down" (Reid, 2019, p. 318). In "A Hope Like You," she sings "I'm lost deep in crimes and vice" (Reid, 2019, p. 328): it is one of the first times Daisy admits having an addiction, even if she does not outwardly mention it. Additionally, her lyrics also addressed the romantic feelings she felt for Billy: "Say the things left unsaid / It is not all in my head [...] Maybe you can redeem me" (Reid, 2019, p. 320).

It is worth noting that the inclusion of song lyrics in the novel is an instance of intertextuality, aiming to reduce the unspeakability of trauma: some scholars argue that trauma is so complex it cannot be conveyed through language alone. Consequently, lyrics help to portray a more nuanced expression of Daisy's trauma.

Finally, Daisy also refers to several images in order to convey specific feelings or emotions: the blanket and the cage. On the one hand, for Daisy, "denial is like an old blanket (...). I'd ripped the blanket off of myself. And there was no putting it back on" (Reid, 2019, p. 280). Thus, the blanket represents her insistence on denying she was an addict and that she had fallen in love with a man who would never be able to start a relationship with her. Denial was comfortable, like a blanket, but it was too late to reach for that blanket again: she was finally aware of her feelings, and the only solution was to finally confront them. On the other hand, Daisy uses the image of the cage to symbolize her sense of entrapment and despair: she was confined in a band she formerly loved, forced to perform songs each night that represented her most intimate feelings. Thus, she reflected: "I'd chased this life with all of my heart [...]. But it became a hell I'd created myself, a cage I'd built and locked myself in" (Reid, 2019, p. 282).

## 5. NINA RIVA (MALIBU RISING): CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### 5.1. NINA'S JOURNEY THROUGH TRAUMA

Between 1978 and 1983, Nina Riva became a renowned surf model known for her beauty and her kind personality. However, she shows traits of emotional restraint originated from childhood trauma (due to her father's abandonment and her mother's death).

Born in 1958 to June Riva and the singer Mick Riva, Nina was the eldest of four siblings. Her father had abandoned them when she was barely two years old, leaving a void in the family. Even though he eventually returned, Nina presented a reserved demeanor towards him. Over time, however, thanks to his efforts, she "was in it with all of her heart now, as only those who have been hurt and learned to trust again truly can be" (Reid, 2021, p. 110). Thus, "in the comfort of that love, Nina bloomed" (Reid, 2021, p. 110) until Mick abandoned them a second and definitive time.

Thereafter, Nina was forced to grow ahead of time. She took on the role of caretaker for her mother (who struggled with alcoholism) and her younger siblings. On the inside, she felt afraid and stressed, a situation that escalated when June drowned in the bathtub after drinking. Since their father did not contact them, Nina (who was sixteen years old) sacrificed both her education and her adolescence to take care of her siblings. She took over her mother's restaurant and, when she became eighteen, she came to be her siblings' legal guardian. Despite feeling constant anxiety and fear, she tried to show an apparent calm, believing it was the only way to keep her family together and out of foster care.

By that point, Nina had learnt to accept any obstacle in her life: the loss of her mother, her father, and her adolescence. Moreover, she endured a job as a model which sexualized her and dismissed her skills in surfing. Even when her husband (Brandon Randall) left her for tennis star Carrie Soto, Nina internalized her pain without openly articulating it. She learned to ignore her own needs, at the expense of losing herself in the process. As her brother Hud stated, Nina tended to “[lose] herself in always putting others first” (Reid, 2021, p. 113).

In the summer of 1983, the Riva siblings prepared for their acclaimed annual party, held at Nina’s house. Suddenly, Brandon reappeared at the event, begging for forgiveness. Nina, feeling pressured, initially agreed, though she finally realized she no longer had to endure humiliation or carry other people’s burdens, and told him to leave.

Later that night, Mick Riva appeared at the party, hoping to reconnect with his children. Nonetheless, Nina stated openly, “you are not anybody’s father” (Reid, 2021, p. 317). She described the pain he had caused through his absence, concluding: “There’s no room for you in my life anymore. And I don’t owe it to you to make any space” (Reid, 2021, p. 341).

After putting an end to the chaotic party with police intervention, the Riva siblings encouraged Nina to pursue her dream of moving to Portugal to surf. Even though she initially hesitated (due to her sense of responsibility), although she eventually agreed. For the first time, she felt free, no longer bound to her ex-husband or to the role of caretaker she played in her family. This moment marks both the end of the novel and the beginning of Nina’s healing journey.

## 5.2. IS TRAUMA REPRESENTABLE?

For the greater part of the novel, trauma remains irrepresentable for Nina. She tended to internalize and suppress her emotions, assuming a caretaker role that had to care for everybody except for herself. Nonetheless, as the plot advances, she starts to confront and verbalize her trauma, inaugurating her process of healing.

In general, Nina avoided conversations about her mother's death and Mick's abandonment. When Brandon tells her about his father's death, Nina is surprised by his calm way of talking about an experience she could never voice directly: she "admired how eloquently Brandon could talk about him. She found it hard to share anything about her mother without her voice catching" (Reid, 2021, p. 185).

Her difficulty in verbalizing trauma originated during her childhood. When Mick left, he became "a ghost" (Reid, 2021, p. 115) for his children, who rarely spoke about him. The absence of testifying trauma caused it to be unprocessed and irrepresentable for Nina. Consequently, when she realized that June had fallen into alcoholism, she attempted to manage the situation alone, never learning to articulate her experiences. Even when June burned their dinner, Nina was "prepared to act as if everything was fine" (Reid, 2021, p. 138). It was Kit (her youngest sibling) who, for the first time, explicitly acknowledged the reality: "We're not going to pretend you didn't just burn dinner like we pretend you're not a drunk!" (Reid, 2021, p. 138).

After June's death, Nina's wish to protect her siblings escalated. She understood she had to bear "all of the ugliness, the sadness, the things most people can't stand to even think about" (Reid, 2021, p. 147). In addition to managing this immense burden as a teenager, Nina also had to pretend to feel fine for her siblings' sake: "They would not be OK if she was not OK. So she had to find a way" (Reid, 2021, p. 152). Accordingly, Nina projected a calm façade,

comforting her siblings and hiding her own emotions. Her tendency to accept and adapt became more prominent as she strived to make things easier for everybody but herself. For her, there was “no room for distaste or weakness” (Reid, 2021, p. 147).

However, throughout the party celebrated in 1983, Nina started confronting these internalized beliefs after being told that her one and biggest flaw was that she had never “lived a single day for [herself]” (Reid, 2021, p. 232). Soon after, she discovered that Casey, one of the girls at the party, could be the daughter of Mick Riva, the result of one of his many affairs. These two facts created a turning point in the representability of trauma for Nina.

After Casey told her how she lost her adoptive parents, Nina (already reflecting on why she insisted on pleasing everybody) admitted: “My mother died, too [...]. She was the only parent I had. [...] So I... I’m sorry. No one should have to go through that” (Reid, 2021, p. 245). This marks the first time in the novel where Nina begins to voice what her mother’s death had meant to her. From this moment on, there is a shift in her character: she stops conforming to the idea of herself as an accepting caretaker. Thus, she openly tells her unfaithful husband she no longer wants to be with him.

This transformation reaches its climax when Nina decides to confront her father, not willing to be the one “that bent and broke” anymore (Reid, 2021, p. 317). Hence, she reflects: “Do you think Mom felt capable of raising four children on her own? [...] Do you think *I* felt capable of taking it all over after she fucking *drowned*? [...]. I didn’t feel capable of any of that! But did that matter? Of course not” (Reid, 2021, p. 340). For the first time, Nina offers a detailed account of her grief over the years, something she had never allowed herself to do previously. In addition, she mentions that she dislikes her job and confesses her true desire, which, until this point, was unknown even to the reader: she wants to move to Portugal alone and surf.

As soon as Nina finished talking, she sensed “a peace take over, as if by speaking her anger, she had freed it from where it had been living in her body” (Reid, 2021, p. 341). This proves that testimony is one of the most effective ways to treat and heal trauma, allowing the traumatized subject to understand the traumatic experience. As van der Kolk stated, humans are “interdependent” and more likely to cope with trauma when supported and heard by others (Big Think, 2021, 03:27).

All in all, trauma was originally irrepresentable for Nina. Due to the circumstances she lived in, she could not afford to exteriorize her pain properly: “Must be nice. To be able to be weak. I wouldn’t know” (Reid, 2021, p. 341). Nonetheless, after the turning points already mentioned, Nina changed her mindset. As Kit realized, “there was a version of Nina—the nice girl who always said the nice thing—who was gone”, leaving in her place “a slightly new Nina” (p. 355) who was ready to articulate her past experiences. By voicing her trauma, Nina began her healing journey, finally reclaiming her own identity.

### 5.3. NARRATIVE MECHANISMS PORTRAYING TRAUMA

Regarding the narrative mechanisms that portray trauma in *Malibu Rising*, the author employs repetition, fragmentation, and symbolism.

Among these, repetition plays a crucial role, especially in the representation of intergenerational trauma, which involves “the transmission of psychological and emotional distress” across generations (Chakraverty, 2023, p. 1). In the novel, intergenerational trauma is illustrated through the Riva siblings, especially Nina, who carries the emotional burden of her parents’ choices and constantly finds herself mirroring her mother’s life experiences.

Nina, like June before her, was abandoned by her husband. This causes her to realize that she is reliving a story that she had already experienced from a different perspective as a child, something that “haunted” her and that “just felt so familiar” (Reid, 2021, p. 94). After all, “family histories repeat” (Reid, 2021, p. 191), and, indeed, June’s life and choices seemed to be imprinted within Nina: she accepts Brandon back when he returns, like June had done with Mick. This evidences intergenerational trauma, though Nina begins to break free from the cycle by breaking up with Brandon.

However, there is still another instance of intergenerational trauma: like her mother, Nina also felt tempted to use alcohol as a coping mechanism. After Brandon’s departure, she thought, “It hurt so bad that there was a part of her that wanted to get out a bottle of Smirnoff and fix herself a Sea Breeze” (Reid, 2021, p. 143) her mother’s drink of choice). Likewise, when drinking wine, Nina “felt like she could get lost in it. And then she had this image, suddenly, of her mother on the couch in front of the television. Her blood ran cold” (Reid, 2021, p. 276).

These moments in the novel highlight the repetitive patterns associated with intergenerational trauma, as well as the differences between June and Nina. Unlike the former, Nina consciously breaks the cycle, resolving to lead a different life: she refuses to reunite with Brandon (unlike June did with Mick) and, most significantly, she confronts her father, voicing the damage he caused (something June never got to do). Thus, Nina’s choices prove that individuals have the agency to make their own decisions, despite one’s parents and background.

Additionally, repetition is also observed in moments of high emotional tension. For instance, when Nina finds her mother dead, “she felt like she was falling, falling, falling” (Reid, 2021, p. 146), as “she understood there was no one left in the world to count on, to lean on, to trust, to believe in” (Reid, 2021, p. 146). This reiteration reflects Nina’s anxiety and distress,

caused by grief and shock, something that is inevitably reflected in her inner monologue. A similar instance can be found in her reaction towards Brandon's abandonment: she started repeating "What?", caught in a moment of emotional shock (Reid, 2021, p. 191). Repetition is also used to convey grief and sadness: "She was crying because she missed her mother. She missed her perfume, her meatloaf, missed the way she made impossible things happen" (Reid, 2021, p. 169). The constant reiteration of the word "missed" perfectly captures Nina's devastation ahead of her mother's absence.

Repetition also appears in Nina's pattern of self-sacrifice: she initially agrees to take Brandon back and remains in a job and a house she dislikes. This pattern is visible in more trivial matters, like agreeing to buy a china set when she thought the idea was "sort of silly" (Reid, 2021, p. 305). Furthermore, Nina tends to show fascination or surprise towards outspoken people with clear life goals, as they are the exact opposite of her. Thus, she repeatedly admires how these persons "never pretended to be anything" they were not (Reid, 2021, p. 228) and wonders how she could "feel comfortable in the middle of causing discomfort" (Reid, 2021, p. 229). She initially does not find the answer, and reacts with shock to the dramatic interventions of characters like Carrie Soto: "How was it that this woman could shout out every thought running through her head? Why was it that Carrie Soto felt entitled to scream? [...] Nina was sad. Sad that she'd never lived a fraction of a second like Carrie Soto" (Reid, 2021, p. 271). Ultimately, this constant wondering leads her to break the cycle of conformity, not willing to "bent and [break] anymore" (Reid, 2021, p. 317).

Concerning fragmentation, it serves as a fundamental mechanism in the structure of *Malibu Rising*, since the narrative is fragmented in terms of time and perspective. While the main plot takes place in August 1983, the narration shifts in time (from 1956 to 1983), also

alternating between various characters (the Riva siblings, their parents, friends, etc.). This extremely fragmented structure allows the detection of the origins of Nina's trauma (through direct access to the account of her childhood and adolescence), while also mirroring the fragmented nature of trauma. This parallelism reflects the way traumatic memory resists objectivity and chronological organization (as it fragments the traumatized subjects' minds).

In addition, fragmentation is visible in Nina's speech. After all, she gradually learns to articulate her thoughts and experiences, a process that naturally results in struggle and fragmentation. For instance, when talking to a girl who had also lost her mother, Nina said, "So I... I'm sorry. No one should have to go through that" (Reid, 2021, p. 245). As previously mentioned, this is one of the first instances where Nina expresses openly what her mother's death meant for her. Therefore, the use of ellipsis along with a slight repetition indicates emotional vulnerability and highlights the difficulty of processing and voicing traumatic experiences.

Another example of fragmented speech appears when Nina reflects on Brandon's abandonment: "Once he left ... I don't know, our relationship felt over for me. I was mourning it. [...] And I've been really sad [...]. That I ... that I meant so little to someone who had made me believe I meant so much" (Reid, 2021, p. 276). In this passage, Nina exhibits doubt, repetition, and ellipsis, attempting to voice complex feelings that stem from her childhood trauma (her father's abandonment, particularly). Thus, this quotation exemplifies how trauma disrupts coherent and fluid expression.

Fragmentation is also noticeable in moments of painful realization or high emotions. When Nina was asked why she bought a china set she disliked (pressured by her mother-in-law), she began to reply, "I ..." and then changed the topic (Reid, 2021, p. 305). This lack of explanation suggests an inability to confront the answer. Another striking incident occurs after

Nina's conversation with her father. When Hud asks if she is okay, Nina is overwhelmed by "so many feelings dancing around inside her" that she is "out of the grasp of words" (Reid, 2021, p. 352). Consequently, her only response is, "I mean ..." before giving up trying to explain. This suggests the intensity of her feelings, so strong that they exceed the capacity for linguistic representation.

Finally, concerning symbolism, it has already been explained that trauma often eludes direct representation. Thus, the presence of metaphorical or symbolic language is required to convey what cannot be expressed directly. In Nina's case, the ocean, the fire, and her house are essential symbols to analyze.

For Nina, the ocean represents healing and freedom, offering her a sense of escapism. Even during her childhood, the ocean allowed her to find "a small slice of the peace" she needed in the waves (Reid, 2021, p. 27), making her feel "weightless and free" (Reid, 2021, p. 123). This strong connection is significant when analyzing Nina's trauma, since it constitutes one of the few healthy outlets for her trauma and emotions. The ocean is even described as a source of survival, a notion that is further proven after June's death; when Nina guides her siblings to the ocean with their boards and states, "This is how we survive" (Reid, 2021, p. 152). Hence, the ocean provides Nina with emotional relief, allowing readers to understand that it offers her a sense of purpose and peace that transcends literal description.

In *Malibu Rising*, fire symbolizes destruction and renewal. The novel opens stating that Malibu's fires leave behind "a scorched earth" that later becomes "young once again, ready to grow something new" (Reid, 2021, p. 4). These quotations establish fire as a destructive yet transformative force, something that becomes significant by the end of the novel, when Nina's house is destroyed in a fire accidentally ignited by her father, Mick Riva. Micks' role in causing

the fire mirrors his impact on his family life: he sparked both fire and pain before leaving and not returning, causing pain to his children and his wife. Consequently, the fire represents the damage Mick caused. However, destruction leads to the possibility of renewal: following her confrontation with her father, Nina finally finds a sense of closure. In the end, she understands that “it was one fire, in a long line of fires in Malibu since the dawn of time” (Reid, 2021, p. 365). She realizes that fire, like her father, had caused destruction, but it was something she could survive and grow from. As the narrator concludes, “It had brought destruction. It would also bring renewal, rising from the ashes” (Reid, 2021, p. 365); giving the novel a cyclical structure (the story begins and ends with reflections on Malibu’s fires). Thus, the symbolism of fire emphasizes pain caused by parental abandonment but also brings healing and the possibility of transformation.

Ultimately, Nina’s house is another relevant symbol. Chosen by her ex-husband, the house on the cliff was a place that Nina disliked. It was “too much. Too big and too beige and too industrial and... There was no soul in there” (Reid, 2021, p. 189). Thus, when Brandon left, Nina felt trapped in the house, which came to represent everything she wished to escape: her job, the pressure to please others, the unwanted attention she gained, etc. During her annual party in 1983, the house slowly begins to deteriorate as the event becomes more chaotic, representing Nina’s inner beliefs and emotions; she was also breaking down as she discovered she did not have to please everybody nor carry other people’s burdens. The deterioration of the house is reflected in the chandelier and lamps, broken on the floor, along with shattered vases and paintings. Finally, the house in its entirety is destroyed by the fire. This moment is highly symbolic: it marks the end of a life that Nina no longer wants. Thus, she feels free leaving the house and everything it stood for behind her: “She felt unbridled glee at [the house] not being her problem” (Reid, 2021, p. 362).

On a concluding note, it is worth mentioning that, in literature, houses often represent the emotional state of the characters. Perhaps the best-known example of this trait is found in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher", where the physical decay of the house mirrors the decay of the Usher family. In the case of *Malibu Rising*, the deterioration of the house mirrors Nina slowly leaving behind her trauma to reclaim her own life and identity (understanding she does not have to keep on assuming the role of a caretaker). While the symbolism of the house in Poe's story is undoubtedly darker, both narratives utilize the house as an element that initially holds negative symbolism, which deteriorates over the course of the story. Eventually, the house reaches its final destruction, which has a deep symbolic meaning in both stories.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In both cases, the origin of Daisy's and Nina's trauma can be found in childhood abandonment: the former was constantly neglected by her parents, while the latter was abandoned by her father and lost her mother later on. Over time, trauma would lead Daisy into addiction, developing a dark vision of life and never feeling fully satisfied with herself and her achievements. Meanwhile, Nina was forced to adopt the role of a caretaker for her siblings, a responsibility that transformed her into a reserved and pleasing person.

Despite sharing similar origins to their traumas, their personalities and coping mechanisms differ. Daisy has a strong, independent personality and is generally unbothered by others' opinions. Thus, she assured: "I don't change for anybody" (Reid, 2019, p. 151). This statement would sound alien to Nina, someone who constantly breaks and bends to accommodate to those surrounding her, often forgetting her own wishes. In addition, the differences between them are also visible in their coping mechanisms: Daisy is self-destructive, whereas Nina is self-depriving. Daisy often turns to drugs and unhealthy relationships to numb her emotions, even allowing her healthiest outlet (music) to become a toxic environment for her (due to her relationship with Billy). By contrast, Nina denies herself her true wishes and needs, willing to remain in an unhappy marriage while pursuing a career she dislikes.

For Daisy and Nina, trauma is initially irrepresentable. Daisy, conditioned by years of emotional neglect, learned not to express vulnerability, numbing her pain with drugs. Only when she decided to detox was she able to start confronting her past. Although it is true she could not commit to sobriety in the beginning, she ultimately entered a rehabilitation center and became fully sober. Presumably, after this she started attending therapy, which allowed her to share her testimony and understand her past experiences and behaviors. Similarly, Nina

could not afford to exteriorize her pain: being assigned the role of caretaker for her siblings, she attempted to be a model of stability for them at the cost of her well-being. Like Daisy, her healing journey begins when she allows herself to speak and be heard by others (proving the transformative power of giving testimony), focusing on herself for the first time.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that trauma is not presented as static, but as dynamic. Initially, Daisy and Nina are trapped in their own lives, repeating the same patterns and coping mechanisms. Even though it seems unlikely that they will change, Reid's final message is one of hope: through testimony and by acknowledging one's own needs, both characters manage to confront their past and heal their wounds.

Moreover, if more space had been allowed, this dissertation would have also included an analysis of other interesting characters from both books. For example, Karen and Billy (from *Daisy Jones & The Six*), or June (Nina's mother in *Malibu Rising*). Another interesting take I would have followed would be to include the analysis of Evelyn Hugo and Carrie Soto (the protagonists of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* and *Carrie Soto Is Back*, respectively). This would provide a detailed analysis of the "Famous Women Quartet" and would allow for a meaningful study on the female experience with trauma.

On a final note, Daisy and Nina offer two different stories of trauma, which intersect in some respects (its origins, representability, and ability for healing). Despite their differences, both characters show the importance of testimony: the act of speaking and feeling heard (in the context of trauma) gives a positive final note to both novels, establishing the capacity for transformation.

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