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A reflection on the literary depiction of pain from the 19th century to the present

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Abstract:
This article explores the evolution of portrayal of pain in literary works from the 19th century to the 21st century. Focusing on Frankenstein *(1818) by Mary Shelley,* The Scarlet Letter *(1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne,* Johnny Got His Gun *(1939) by Dalton Trumbo,* Misery *(1987) by Stephen King,* The Road *(2006) by Cormac McCarthy, and* The Push *(2021) by Ashley Audrain, the study traces how the depiction of pain has shifted from symbolic and Gothic representations to more intimate, realistic, and psychologically complex ones. By placing each work within its cultural and historical context, the article highlights how depictions of pain reflect not only shifting social attitudes but also the personal experiences of the authors, viewing suffering as both a universal artistic and deeply individual phenomenon.*

Introduction to pain as a literary motif

Lord Byron once wrote that "the great art of life is sensation, to feel that we exist, even in pain" (Prothero, 2015, p. 123). Sensations and emotions are, indeed, vital elements of the human existence, guiding not just how we engage with the world but the way we perceive our own place in it. In literature, these elements immerse readers in emotional landscapes, connecting them with characters. Pain, unlike other feelings, has the ability to transcend the physical and psychological frames; the complexity of pain – its ability to represent both body and mind –

distinguishes it from other emotions and makes it an intriguing subject for research, as well as an enduring motif not only in literature but in art overall.

Scholars have discussed the centrality of suffering in art for centuries. Foundational perspectives include Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he describes the depiction of suffering as inherent to tragedy and aimed at evoking intense emotions to achieve catharsis, i.e. a purification of emotions. This establishes suffering not only as a dramatic device but as a core component of artistic representation and emotional resonance. Moreover, we might understand living itself as a work of art in progress. Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), builds on this by emphasizing the necessity of suffering for heartfelt artistic expression and affirming life: "The truly serious task of art is to affirm life, even in its strangest and most painful episodes." (2008 [1872], p. 82). The immense impact of pain on human expression and creativity is underscored in the works of contemporary scholars such as Elaine Scarry and Susan Sontag. Scarry (1985) argues that pain, while resisting language, also serves as a catalyst for artistic and cultural creation, expressing the inexpressible dimensions of human experience. Sontag (2003) extends this perspective, suggesting that representations of suffering, in fact, encourage audiences to confront the realities of human vulnerability, thus serving as a powerful medium for empathy and contemplation. The universality of suffering in art is undeniable: from the torment of the chained Prometheus to the anguish of fairy-tale characters like Cinderella, from Chaplin's comedic struggles in *The Gold Rush* to Kafka's alienated protagonists, and even to David Lynch's surreal explorations of pain and despair, suffering forms the emotional centre of countless works of art.

The evolution of language and cultural settings, among other factors, displays the shift in our relationship with pain and attitudes towards it. Käll (2012) argues that pain is typically regarded not as a separate problem but as a symptom suggesting the presence of a lurking disease, essentially, a mere consequence or a side effect of something else. This perspective raises intriguing questions when applied to the literary depiction of pain. Is pain in literature always a signifier pointing to another, perhaps more serious, issue? Can we portray pain as a central theme, prioritizing its depiction over its origins? This duality highlights the versatility of pain as both a metaphorical tool and an autonomous subject in literature. However, the depiction of pain in literature does not follow a singular, linear progression, as its internal and metaphysical dimensions have coexisted alongside bloody and physical ones throughout literary history. For example, in ancient Greek literature – where pain was depicted through a rich vocabulary influenced by medical and religious discourses of the time – Homer's *Iliad* emphasizes physical suffering, describing the wounds and hardships of warriors during the

Trojan War with nearly surgical precision (Clarke et al., 2023). In contrast, *The Odyssey* shifts focus to the internal and intimate struggles of Odysseus, exploring themes of longing, identity, and the psychological pressure of his journey home. This coexistence of external and internal dimensions of pain, even within works of the same author, highlights the complexity of its literary representation across history.

In the Medieval period, works like Dante's *Inferno* (1320) reframed pain through a religious lens, interpreting it as "divine retribution" and a path to redemption, reflecting the stoic indifference of the time (Rey, 1995, p. 48). The era of the Renaissance shifted the focus to "the belief in an intimate experience of pain", both physical and mental, with Shakespeare's tragedies diving into endless existential suffering (p. 69). Following major advancements in medicine and the discovery of morphine (p. 328), the Romantic period focused on inner pain, where authors like Mary Shelley and Lord Byron stressed it as an intense emotional experience, often connected to isolation. However, the emergence of literary realism in the United States marked another change in the portrayal of pain, as William Dean Howells (*The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 1885) and Edith Wharton (*The House of Mirth*, 1905) accentuated psychological suffering, with Howells exploring moral struggles and Wharton highlighting social pressures. Meanwhile, Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884) and Charles W. Chesnutt (*The Marrow of Tradition*, 1901) examined pain's social dimensions, particularly its intersections with race and class, advocating empathy through depictions of systemic inequality and moral conflict (Altschuler, Constantinesco, 2024, p. 143). Modernist literature introduced a fragmented understanding of pain, reflecting the complexities of the subconscious mind and the fractured realities of a rapidly changing world. Authors such as Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka vividly depicted psychological suffering and existential angst through their characters. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf portrays the inner unrest of Septimus Warren Smith, whose post-traumatic stress and social alienation highlight the isolating nature of psychological pain (Goldman, 2006). Similarly, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) explores existential suffering through Gregor Samsa, whose transformation into an insect symbolizes alienation and the devastating impact of rejection by society and family (Duttlinger, 2013).

Postmodern literature, in turn, questioned the very nature of pain itself, often presenting suffering in disjointed or metafictional narratives that challenge traditional representations. For example, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut, Billy Pilgrim's trauma is depicted through nonlinear time travel and the alien Tralfamadorian perspective, stressing the fragmented and absurd nature of his suffering rather than providing a cohesive, cathartic resolution. Similarly, in *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace, pain manifests through

addiction and depression, explored in a digressive narrative that mirrors the fractured lives of the characters, challenging the reader with the complexity and pervasiveness of modern suffering. Contemporary literature frequently explores pain from diverse perspectives, including trauma, identity, and social issues. Authors like Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987) and Haruki Murakami (*Norwegian Wood*, 1987) address issues of mental health, systemic inequality, and personal grief, promoting a more inclusive understanding of pain as a multidimensional experience (Rey, 1995, p. 145). Perhaps it is a reflection of society's ongoing attempt to understand and describe the essence of everything, including suffering, stressing how literature not only mirrors but also transforms our perceptions of pain over time.

While suffering is a universal theme in art, shaping narratives across cultures and eras, I do not aim to exhaustively explore all representations of suffering. Instead, I present a targeted examination of how pain has been portrayed in selected works of Western literature from the 19th century to the present, focusing on how these works process and transform themes within distinct historical and cultural frameworks rather than suggesting a strict chronological evolution. In doing so, I treat pain, suffering, and agony as interconnected but definitely distinct concepts. *Pain* refers to immediate, localized experiences, whether physical or psychological. *Suffering* opens a broader, more prolonged existential dimension, tied to alienation, moral conflict, or spiritual crises. *Agony* represents an extreme or heightened state of suffering, marked by its intensity and disruptive force. Together these distinctions provide a framework for analysing the evolution of pain's depiction in literature and its capacity to reflect shifting cultural and philosophical perspectives.

In this study I examine six works: *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), *Misery* (1987), *The Road* (2006), and *The Push* (2021). Each of these books portrays pain in unique ways, reflecting its ever-changing depiction in literature. *Frankenstein* explores existential and emotional suffering tied to creation and rejection. *The Scarlet Letter* delves into moral and social pain rooted in guilt and resilience. *Johnny Got His Gun* emphasizes the physical agony of war. *Misery* examines psychological and physical torment within the dynamics of obsession and control. *The Road* portrays pain as a lens for survival and existential despair in a post-apocalyptic world. Finally, *The Push* focuses on the psychological pain of motherhood and identity. I aim to examine how these works can show the shift in literary depictions of pain from external, physical suffering to more internal, psychological struggles, reflecting changing views on suffering over time.

Promethean agony: *Frankenstein* (1818)

As Morris (1991, p. 15) notes, interpreting pain today involves layers of complexity not always present in earlier frameworks, where suffering was often attributed to divine will. In *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley explores the nature of pain through the intertwined fates of Victor Frankenstein and his creation, examining its moral, psychological, and existential sides. Victor is positioned as a god-like figure, driven by grief over his mother's passing to conquer death itself; his making of the creature marks the start of a tragedy where pain becomes a defining element for both Victor and the monster. Rather than offering a singular perspective, Shelley presents pain as a dynamic force that evolves and changes depending on the characters' experiences and choices. This antidogmatic approach critiques the moral implications of untamed ambition and its cascading consequences.

Shelley's style in *Frankenstein* can be characterized by Gothic elements and Romanticism, with vivid descriptions of nature and intense mental states amplifying the emotional depth of the characters' suffering. Her use of formal, elevated language and introspective monologues reinforces the philosophical burden of pain, foregrounding themes of isolation and alienation. Victor's suffering is deeply tied to his guilt and remorse over abandoning his creation. This internal struggle manifests in a deterioration of both his physical and mental health. Victor reflects, "The blood flowed freely in my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart, which nothing could remove" (Shelley, 2003 [1818], p. 91). His torment embodies the repercussions of "playing god", with his ambition trapping him in a cycle of suffering that also extends to the creature he brought to life.

The creature's pain, by contrast, emerges primarily from social rejection and an acute awareness of his own isolation. Shelley uses the creature's self-reflection to explore the existential side of suffering, showing his inner conflict as he navigates his identity. His awakening to his tragedy is infused by the discovery of Victor's journal and books like *Paradise Lost* (1667), which he initially interprets as factual history. Identifying with both Adam and Satan, the creature struggles with his duality – neither wholly human nor wholly monstrous, yet inevitably alone. This anguish is shown in his words: "God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions... but I am solitary and abhorred" (p. 151). While the creature initially seeks love and acceptance, the repeated rejection he endures twists his potential for goodness into bitterness and vengeance. The monster's reflection: "I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen

angel becomes a malignant devil" (p. 233), captures the devastating transformation of his character. This mirrors his earlier thoughts: "All my speculations and hopes are as nothing; and, like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell" (p. 224). These quotes emphasize the creature's descent into despair, likening his fall to that of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, further drawing parallels between the dangers of ambition and the inevitable suffering that follows.

Shelley's depiction of pain serves as both a critique of Victor's reckless ambition and an exploration of society's failure to embrace those who are different. Pain in *Frankenstein* is not simply a consequence of creation but a broader reflection of human limitations – unmet expectations, unacknowledged responsibilities, and the consequences of alienation. Both Victor and the creature endure suffering tied to their unfulfilled desires: Victor's inability to control his creation and the creature's crushed hope for connection. Shelley's narrative challenges the "inherent rationalism of the 19th century" (Moyar, 2010, p. 74) by illustrating how emotional and physical suffering expose the fragility of human ambition and the ethical complexities of creation.

Another layer to Shelley's portrayal of pain lies in its connection to her personal experiences. The loss of her mother and later her first child echoes in Victor's obsession with death and life, while her feelings of alienation in her relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley are echoed in the creature's isolation (Seymour, 200, p. 128). Both Victor and the monster suffer from the consequences of abandonment and rejection, reflecting Shelley's concerns about the moral and emotional costs of ambition and neglect (p. 170). In *Frankenstein*, pain is not simply a punishment but a deeper commentary on creation, isolation, and the moral dimensions of ambition. Victor and the creature are bound by their suffering – one by guilt and the other by rejection – inviting readers to clash with the ethical implications of their actions. Shelley's portrayal ultimately suggests that pain, while inevitable, offers a lens through which it is possible to explore empathy, morality, and human vulnerability, which aligns with Sontag's views expressed centuries later.

Judgment and resilience: *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) presents the parallel experiences of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale while showing pain as a layered and deeply contextual phenomenon. Set in the Puritan community of 17th-century New England, the novel examines how suffering arises from both external pressures in society and internalized guilt. Hester Prynne's suffering emerges from her public shaming and the shunning imposed by her

community. She must wear a scarlet letter, symbolizing not only her perceived moral decline but also the weight of collective judgment. Hester's endurance is marked by her reflection on the relentless nature of her pain: "She could no longer borrow from the future to help her through the present grief. To-morrow would bring its own trial with it; so would the next day, and so would the next; each its own trial, and yet the very same that was now so unutterably grievous to be borne" (Hawthorne, 2008 [1850], p. 91). This passage stresses how Hester's suffering is both cyclical and enduring, shaped by the social structures that isolate her.

Arthur Dimmesdale's pain, in contrast, is based on his hidden guilt and inability to publicly acknowledge his role in Hester's sin, which leads to deep psychological and physical suffering, as well as a persistent inner conflict. Hawthorne writes, "In our nature, however, there is a provision, alike marvellous and merciful, that the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it" (p. 61). This insight captures the lingering nature of Dimmesdale's pain, as his internal struggle escalates over time, affecting his health and mental stability. His suffering reveals the complexity of guilt when accompanied by failure in meeting social expectations. Hawthorne's portrayal of suffering extends beyond individual experiences to critique the collective morality of the Puritan community. The punitive practices directed at Hester expose the role of community in perpetuating pain, as they transform her into a symbol of sin while disregarding the wider human context of her actions. Despite this, Hester eventually reclaims her identity, redefining the meaning of the scarlet letter. Her resilience is also visible in her pragmatic view of life and death: "Death was too definite an object to be wished for, or avoided" (p. 230). This perspective illustrates Hester's ability to handle her pain without allowing it to completely define her. Symbolic imagery, such as the scarlet letter itself, intensifies the delicate nature of this pain, as it evolves from a mark of shame to a testament of strength and will.

Hawthorne's personal life substantially influenced his portrayal of pain, particularly in his depiction of gender dynamics. Raised by his widowed mother in a household dominated by women, Hawthorne grew up without a strong paternal figure. As Wineapple (2003) notes, Hawthorne's mother's resilience in the face of social pressures likely inspired his focus on strong female characters, such as Hester Prynne, who serves as the novel's emotional core. Similarly, Miller (1991) suggests that this upbringing shaped Hawthorne's tendency to depict male characters, like Dimmesdale, as orbiting around and often struggling to match the moral and emotional strength of their female counterparts. Dimmesdale's fragility and self-imposed torment contrast sharply with Hester's strength and adaptability, reflecting Hawthorne's observations of the endurance of women in patriarchal structures.

The thematic focus of *The Scarlet Letter* complements Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in its exploration of pain as an existential experience, though their approaches differ. While Shelley's story delves into pain through the lens of creation, Hawthorne's portrayal situates suffering within a strict moral and social framework. Both novels highlight the alienation and internal struggles of their protagonists, but Hawthorne emphasizes resilience in the face of judgment, whereas Shelley's characters remain trapped in cycles of guilt and despair. Furthermore, *The Scarlet Letter* anticipates the critique of institutionalized violence seen in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*. In this way, *The Scarlet Letter* serves as a bridge between Shelley's existential focus and Trumbo's political critique, illustrating the complex nature of pain as both a personal and systemic phenomenon.

The silent scream: *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939)

Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939) offers a harrowing portrayal of suffering within the context of war literature, presenting pain as both a physical and psychological phenomenon that critiques the dehumanizing effects of modern warfare. Reflecting modernist concerns of the 20th century, such as "industrialization, rapid social change, and mechanized violence" (Levenson, 2011, p. 38), Trumbo's depiction of pain builds upon earlier literary traditions while introducing a fragmented and introspective point of view. Unlike the moral and social dimensions of pain depicted in *The Scarlet Letter*, *Johnny Got His Gun* shifts the focus to the devastation wreaked by war, examining how institutionalized violence fractures both body and identity. Joe Bonham, the protagonist, is the epitome of this dehumanization. Rendered voiceless and paralysed by catastrophic injuries – losing his arms, legs, and face – Joe's condition embodies the absolute fragility of the human body in the face of war. His imprisonment in his intact consciousness within a shattered body symbolizes not only physical agony but also existential despair, as he becomes both a victim and a product of war's machinery. Trumbo's use of Joe's condition as a narrative centrepiece illustrates how war strips individuals of autonomy and humanity, reducing them to objects of institutional attention.

Trumbo's stylistic choices amplify the emotional resonance of Joe's suffering. The stark, fragmented prose and use of stream-of-consciousness narration immerse the reader in Joe's interior world, creating an intimate and claustrophobic portrayal of his pain. The disjointed narrative mirrors Joe's own physical disintegration, with the fragmented structure reinforcing the isolation and helplessness that define his existence. As Bell (2020) notes, the novel explores "the tension between Joe's phenomenal body", which retains his subjectivity, "and his reified body", which has been transformed into an object by war. This disconnect

intensifies the existential dimension of Joe's suffering, as he grapples with the loss of identity, autonomy, and humanity. Trumbo uses grotesque realism to vividly depict Joe's injuries, turning his body into a symbol of war's brutal consequences. As Joe reflects, "The aches and bruises and the awful weariness weren't the worst things. His body could keep up somehow but it was the things inside of him that began to strain and roar. […] There was nothing real but pain" (Trumbo, 2007 [1939], p. 21). For Joe, pain becomes his only reality, consuming his existence and severing his connection to the external world. The juxtaposition of his physical suffering with his lucid consciousness intensifies the horror, emphasizing the inevitability of his suffering.

The novel also critiques the complicity of the medical community in sustaining the horrors of war. Joe's treatment by doctors, who strive to keep him alive while reducing him to a "medical curiosity" (Blackmore, 2000), reflects the dehumanizing logic of institutional systems. Joe's internal plea – "The pain was so bad that all he could think of was please please please I'd rather die" (Trumbo, 2007 [1939], p. 27) – stresses the ethical dilemmas surrounding the prolongation of life at the expense of dignity. The medical community's actions, though framed as life-preserving, ultimately transform Joe into a symbol of war's disregard for individual humanity. Beyond its critique of institutional systems, *Johnny Got His Gun* delves deep into Joe's psychological torment. His sense of abandonment and alienation is captured in moments of introspection, such as when he reflects: "It was a sharp terrible personal pain, the kind of pain that comes only when someone to whom you have never done any harm turns on you and says goodbye forever without any reason for doing it" (p. 101). This passage highlights the loneliness and betrayal Joe feels, echoing the broader theme of soldiers' alienation from both their bodies and society, which moves on while *they* remain trapped in cycles of trauma.

Trumbo's own life and experiences shaped the novel's themes and portrayal of pain. As a dedicated pacifist and political activist, Trumbo was deeply critical of institutional violence and its human costs. His anti-war sentiment was informed by his outspoken opposition to World War I's lingering impact and the growing militarism of the early 20th century. According to Ceplair and Englund (2011), Trumbo's empathy for those affected by war and his belief in the moral failings of war directly influenced his depiction of Joe's dismembered body as a metaphor for the broader dehumanization caused by state-sponsored violence. Furthermore, Trumbo's experiences during the Red Scare, when he was blacklisted and ostracized for his political beliefs, may have added a personal layer to the novel's themes of alienation and institutional betrayal.

While *Johnny Got His Gun* shares thematic elements with other literary works that critique dehumanization, its depiction of pain transcends physical injury to address broader ethical, existential, and psychological dimensions. The novel portrays pain as an unavoidable consequence of war, one that consumes both body and soul. By presenting Joe's dismembered body as a "metaphor for the broader fragmentation of identity" caused by institutional violence (Machado and Barker, 2018), Trumbo forces readers to confront the human cost of militarism. Trumbo's anti-war message is clear: pain in *Johnny Got His Gun* serves not only as a personal experience but as an accusation of society. The novel challenges readers to question the morality of war and the systems that fuel it, presenting pain as an unrelenting reality that extends far beyond the battlefield. Through its uncompromising portrayal of Joe's physical, emotional, and existential agony, *Johnny Got His Gun* becomes a powerful critique of the devastating impact of war on human life.

The agony of obsession: *Misery* (1987)

Stephen King's *Misery* (1987) represents a significant change in the literary depiction of pain, shifting the focus from broader existential and institutional concerns – seen in works like *Frankenstein* or *Johnny Got His Gun* – to the intimate dynamics of power, control, and obsession within personal relationships. King's narrative aligns with trauma theory, which emphasizes how traumatic events disrupt the body and mind, creating cycles of psychological and physical suffering (Kolk, 2014). Paul Sheldon's experience illustrates this interplay: his physical injuries are accompanied by the emotional trauma inflicted by his jailer, Annie Wilkes, trapping him in a continuous state of hypervigilance and terror. King uses pain in *Misery* as a lens to explore themes of control, obsession, and the darker aspects of the author-audience relationship. Annie Wilkes, Paul's self-proclaimed "number one fan", exerts dominance not only over Paul's physical body but also over his creative autonomy, forcing him to rewrite his story to align with her expectations. This dynamic reflects Jenkins's (2006) concept of participatory culture, in which fans engage deeply with creative works, sometimes to intrusive extremes. Annie embodies a pathological version of this phenomenon, challenging Paul's role as the sole creator of his work. Her obsessive need for control mirrors the concept of the "death of the author", where, as Barthes theorized, a text's meaning is determined by the reader rather than the writer (Power, 2020).

Paul's frustration at losing control over his narrative is evident when he reflects: "The anger sparked again. Anger at her obdurate density, anger that she could actually kidnap him—keep him prisoner here, force him into a choice between drinking dirty rinsewater from

a floor-bucket or suffering the pain of his shattered legs—and then, on top of all that, find the nerve to criticize the best thing he had ever written" (King, 2016 [1987], p. 44). This critique of creative power dynamics illustrates how audience expectations can metaphorically – and in Paul's case, literally – imprison creators. Annie's interference becomes a metaphor for the external pressures that threaten artistic autonomy, with pain serving as both a tool and a symbol of this imbalance.

The infamous hobbling scene, where Annie shatters Paul's ankles to prevent his escape, is a spontaneous depiction of physical suffering and its psychological implications: "The first time I was in so much pain that it felt like someone had put me into hell from the knees on down. And someone did. You did, Annie" (King, 2016 [1987], p. 200). This act is not merely a plot device but a literal manifestation of Annie's obsessive control, reducing Paul to a prisoner in body and agency. King's straightforward yet suspenseful prose immerses readers in Paul's suffering, with Brooks (2008) observing that King excels at making pain "both palpable and personal" (p. 72).

Paul's pain is cyclical, defined by acute physical suffering mixed with brief relief provided by painkillers. This rhythm mirrors the relentless nature of chronic pain, as Paul reflects: "[…] My life outside this room. Outside the pain. Outside the way time seems to stretch out like the long pink string of bubble-gum a kid pulls out of his mouth when he's bored. Because that's how it is in the last hour or so before the pills come" (King, 2016 [1987], p. 28). Such depiction resonates with ideas from the late 20th century that chronic pain is more than just a sign of an injury; it is a complex experience affected by mental, emotional, and physical factors (Rey, 1995). By embedding Paul's pain within this framework, King stresses its subjective and relational aspects.

King's personal struggles with addiction and the pressures of fame deeply influenced *Misery*. In his memoir *On Writing*, King (2000) discusses how his battle with substance abuse during the 1980s paralleled his fears of losing control over his creative output. King's own concerns about his audience's expectations and the commodification of his work resonate with Annie's obsessive control over Paul's writing. According to Collings (1985), King's depiction of captivity and torture reflects these fears, creating a psychological depth that elevates the novel beyond mere horror. His portrayal of pain also raises ethical questions about its representation in literature. Paul's suffering is not merely a narrative device but a medium through which King examines the complexities of human relationships, particularly the power imbalances and obsessive behaviours that can arise in the creator-audience dynamic. This dynamic invites readers to question the purpose of depicting pain in fiction: does it provide

catharsis as Aristotle wrote, or does it compel audiences to confront the uncomfortable realities of human experience?

Misery shows the late 20th-century shift in literary depictions of pain, recognizing it as a "complex and subjective experience" (Rey, 1995, p. 248). Through Paul's experience, King explores the intersections of physical suffering, psychological trauma, and relational power dynamics, offering a chilling reflection on the darker facets of creativity, control, and the human capacity to inflict and endure pain. King shifts the focus from the societal alienation in *Frankenstein* and the institutional critique in *Johnny Got His Gun* to the intensely personal. Paul's suffering is a combination of physical pain and psychological manipulation, as Annie's control isolates and dominates him. Unlike Shelley's exploration of existential rejection or Trumbo's systemic dehumanization, King emphasizes trauma within a single relationship, showing how power and dependency distort autonomy and amplify pain.

Survival and suffering: *The Road* (2006)

Nature meets humanity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), where pain is portrayed as an omnipresent force, deeply intertwined with the essence of existence in a post-apocalyptic world. Drawing on early 21st-century cultural concerns – rooted in events such as September 11, the Iraq War, and the looming threat of global warming (Mavri, 2013 – McCarthy captures the pervasive fear, insecurity, and hopelessness of the era. His minimalist, fragmented prose mirrors the desolation of the novel's setting, where every moment is steeped in physical, emotional, and existential suffering. Short sentences, sparse dialogue, and bleak language reflect the barren landscape the characters navigate, intensifying the audience's perception of pain as a relentless presence.

Pain in *The Road* is not a mere narrative device but a constant reality, echoing the inescapable suffering depicted in works like *Johnny Got His Gun*. The father's deteriorating health, marked by a persistent cough and the taste of blood – "He coughed till he could taste the blood and he said her name aloud" (McCarthy, 2022 [2006], p. 113) – serves as a reminder of human fragility and symbolizes the broader collapse of civilization. This physical decay parallels the moral and emotional decay the father and son endure as they struggle for survival. The "charred" landscape they navigate becomes a visual metaphor for both external desolation and internal despair, foregrounding the existential crisis of continuing to live in a world devoid of hope.

McCarthy also examines moral suffering through the father's decisions, particularly in his refusal to help a dying man: "I'm sorry for what happened to him, but we can't fix it. You

know that, don't you?" (p. 50). This moment illustrates the necessity of moral compromises in a world where survival overrides empathy. The father's emotional anguish stems from his protective instincts for his son, which force him to suppress compassion and humanity. As Škrovan (2022) observes, human behaviour in *The Road* is "stripped of the human part" (p. 35), creating a tension between the instinct to survive and the moral cost of doing so. The existential weight of pain in *The Road* is articulated through the father's contemplation of his impending death: "I am going to die. Tell me how I am to do that" (McCarthy, 2022 [2006], p. 114). This line captures the dread saturating the novel, as the characters confront a world offering no redemption, higher purpose, or resolution. Unlike narratives that develop meaning from resilience or growth, McCarthy presents pain as an unrelenting reality, mirroring existentialist themes. Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have argued that life lacks inherent meaning, and individuals must create their own purpose within an indifferent universe (Crowell, 2008, p. 34). McCarthy's narrative reflects this struggle, with the father and son's journey serving as a contemplation on the human condition, where survival offers no reward beyond the continuation of suffering.

McCarthy's personal life influenced his portrayal of pain and survival in *The Road*. The novel was written in the wake of his becoming a father late in life, at the age of 65, and his intense bond with his young son inspired the central relationship in the story. McCarthy has noted that the book was shaped by his fears for his son's future in a world facing increasing environmental and political instability. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, he described the genesis of the novel as "a concern for what kind of world my son was going to inherit" (Reaves, 2009). This personal connection to the father-son relationship enriches the novel with an emotional depth that enhances its exploration of moral and existential struggles.

Despite its cheerlessness, *The Road* suggests that human relationships can serve as a frail source of meaning. The father's abiding concern for his son, even as his own life nears its end, shows what Camus might describe as an attempt to find purpose through connection in a purposeless world (Crowell, 2008, p. 42). This bond offers a faint glimmer of hope amid the pervasive despair, contrasting with works like *Frankenstein*, where relationships collapse under the weight of ambition and alienation, and *Johnny Got His Gun*, where institutional forces sever individual connections.

The Road resists the redemptive arcs often found in post-apocalyptic narratives, portraying pain as a constant, inescapable force. McCarthy's exploration of suffering reflects the cultural fears of a post-9/11 world, where terror, insecurity, and the trauma of global events weigh heavily on collective consciousness. Pain, in its physical, moral, and existential forms,

dominates the novel, serving as both a reflection of the characters' immediate hardships and a broader commentary on the human struggle to maintain dignity and humanity in the face of danger.

Inheriting trauma: *The Push* (2021)

Ashley Audrain's *The Push* (2021) invites readers into the psychological and emotional dimensions of pain through a focused examination of modern motherhood, offering a layered portrayal of social expectations and personal struggles. Audrain's sharp, intimate prose captures the unravelling of protagonist Blythe's psyche, with the novel's confessional tone and intertwined flashbacks intensifying the proximity of her suffering. This narrative approach immerses readers in Blythe's emotional tension, aligning with contemporary discussions on identity, mental health, and the pressures of parental roles. As Modak et al. (2023) note, "no mother stands alone in her motherhood journey" (p. 1), and Blythe's isolation sharply contrasts with this ideal, illustrating how social narratives of maternal perfection can amplify inner conflict. Pain in *The Push* is not only an outcome but also a driver of Blythe's experiences, manifesting through her strained relationship with her daughter Violet. Her fear of failing as a mother and her inability to conform to social standards of nurturing perfection reflect broader cultural debates on how expectations around motherhood shape emotional well-being. The novel critiques these pressures explicitly, as Blythe reflects on critical moments that transform her identity, observing, "There are days, like that one, which mark the moments in our life that change who we are" (Audrain, 2022 [2021], p. 168). This focus highlights how her pain arises from the intersection of external demands and internalized doubts, creating a cycle of guilt and inadequacy.

Audrain extends this exploration by linking psychological pain to its physical manifestations, as when Blythe describes, "The pain stopped thumping in my bones" (ibid., p. 137). This vivid imagery underscores the interplay between emotional suffering and bodily symptoms, emphasizing the heavy impact of trauma. Her occasional longing for sharper pain – I wish it hurt more. I wish I could still feel it like it happened today" (ibid., p. 132) – reveals a sense of detachment and numbness, a hallmark of unprocessed trauma that disrupts one's sense of self and identity.

Audrain's personal life influenced her depiction of motherhood and its accompanying challenges in *The Push*. As a mother herself, Audrain has openly discussed the difficulties of raising children and the social expectations placed on mothers. In interviews, she has noted that the novel was inspired by her own fears and observations about motherhood, as well as the

pressures to meet an unattainable ideal of maternal perfection (Audrain, 2021). This lived experience adds authenticity to Blythe's struggles, as Audrain translates her reflections on the cultural and personal weight of motherhood into a story about the emotional toll of generational trauma and judgment.

The novel's treatment of psychological pain contrasts with earlier works that focused on physical suffering. *Frankenstein* explores the emotional consequences of rejection and ambition, tying pain to existential questions of creation and alienation. Conversely, *Johnny Got His Gun* emphasizes the brutality of institutionalized violence, presenting pain as a direct critique of war's dehumanization. While these texts foreground external forces of suffering, *The Push* turns inward, locating pain in the intimate dynamics of family life and social pressures. Blythe's struggles echo themes in Stephen King's *Misery*, particularly the loss of autonomy under the control of another. However, Blythe's torment emerges from social expectations that penetrate her sense of self, unlike Paul Sheldon, whose suffering stems from an individual's captivity. Audrain's sophisticated portrayal of a mother's pain reflects a cultural shift toward acknowledging the mental and emotional toll of trauma. The novel critiques the unattainable standards of modern motherhood, illustrating how these ideals lead to psychological conflict rather than fulfilment. Audrain shows the complexity of pain by setting Blythe's suffering in both societal and familial settings. The story prompts the reader to think about how outside influences interact with one's identity to create emotional experiences. This focus situates *The Push* as a valuable commentary on the evolving understanding of trauma in contemporary literature.

Conclusion

The portrayal of pain in the discussed novels reveals a complex and flexible progression, highlighting how suffering, a timeless element in art, adapts to cultural, historical, and personal contexts. Rather than following a strict linear trajectory, these works demonstrate diverse approaches to pain – ranging from existential and societal dilemmas to internal, psychological conflicts – reflecting shifting attitudes across time.

In *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley examines pain through a Romantic lens, intertwining themes of creation, rejection, and isolation. Victor Frankenstein's torment and the creature's anguish come from existential crises tied to ambition and alienation. Shelley's personal experiences of loss and societal constraints on women add depth to her exploration, infusing the narrative with authentic emotional resonance. The *Scarlet Letter* (1850) complements Shelley's existential focus, addressing personal and social suffering through

Hester Prynne's ostracism and guilt. Hawthorne's critique of Puritan hypocrisy shapes this depiction of judgment and resilience, bridging themes of individual and collective pain.

With *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), Dalton Trumbo shifts the focus to the horrors of war, exploring the physical and psychological devastation of Joe Bonham, a soldier reduced to an object by warfare. The political critique embedded in Joe's suffering reflects Trumbo's anti-war activism, grounding his portrayal of pain in the harsh realities of modern conflict. In contrast, Stephen King's *Misery* (1987) delves into the relational dynamics of suffering. Paul Sheldon's captivity and torture by Annie Wilkes blend physical agony with psychological dependency, a reflection of King's struggles with addiction and the pressures of fame. King's depiction emphasizes how personal relationships can distort control and intensify pain.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) reimagines existential suffering within a post-apocalyptic setting, where pain becomes a constant presence tied to survival. The father's physical decline and emotional burden of protecting his son mirror McCarthy's reflections on mortality and late fatherhood, creating a meditation on the fragility of humanity. Finally, Ashley Audrain's *The Push* (2021) brings pain into the intimate sphere of motherhood, illustrating how societal expectations and personal trauma intersect to shape emotional suffering. Blythe's psychological unravelling reflects modern concerns about mental health and identity, with Audrain drawing on her own experiences to enhance the narrative's authenticity.

Together, these works illustrate the flexible nature of pain's portrayal in literature, adapting to external societal pressures and the personal contexts of their authors. Pain moves from external forces like war and societal judgment to deeply internalized struggles with identity and relationships. This thematic shift underscores the evolving cultural understanding of mental health and trauma. Yet, pain's universality ensures its enduring role in art, transcending temporal and thematic boundaries. The nature of pain, as explored in these texts, continues to invite deeper inquiry, revealing how literature reflects and transforms our understanding of it across time. The intersections of pain with race, gender, and class in contemporary works, the intricate manners in which postmodern and metafictional approaches interrogate the very concept of suffering, and the role of non-physical pain in narratives traditionally dominated by bodily suffering, such as war literature, are all areas that deserve more attention from literary criticism. Furthermore, the psychological aspects of pain in speculative fiction and the impact of authors' personal traumas on their portrayals of pain are still understudied, providing a promising foundation for future research.

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