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Death as a Destroying Weapon: the Shattering
Consequences of Sexual Violence in Alice Sebold's
The Lovely Bones

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Abstract

Not so long ago, the act of rape was a matter that did not raise concern among people as it was not discussed or commented; it was just there, an issue lying in the dark. In America, sexual abuse started to be condemned by law, and many victims saw this as an opportunity to raise their voices and put an end to this. It has been a difficult road, one that is still going on, but women's requests are getting heard at last. Yet, some sexually assaulted victims prefer to write about their traumatic experience and the aftermath effects it had on them, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); others prefer to focus on emotions that present themselves when a person is raped and later murdered. In this case, the losing party will go through a phase known as grieving. Alice Sebold, who suffered from sexual violence when she was a college student, is one of the individuals who decided to write about the latter. That being so, her novel *The Lovely Bones* offers a reading in which main characters such as Jack and Abigail Salmon, parents of Susie, a raped and killed 14-year-old teenager, can be analyzed following the five stages of grief presented by the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross while they undergo different coping mechanisms in their grieving processes.

Resumen

No hace mucho tiempo, el acto de la violación era un asunto que no levantaba preocupación entre la gente ya que no se discutía ni se comentaba; solo estaba allí, un problema a oscuras. En Estados Unidos, el abuso sexual empezó a ser condenado por la ley y muchas víctimas vieron esto como una oportunidad para levantar sus voces y poner fin a esto. Ha sido un camino difícil, uno que todavía sigue, pero, finalmente, las demandas de las mujeres están siendo escuchadas. Sin embargo, algunas víctimas abusadas sexualmente prefieren escribir sobre esta traumática experiencia y sobre los efectos de tal desenlace, como el Trastorno por estrés postraumático (TEPT, del inglés PTSD); otras prefieren enfocarse en las emociones que se presentan cuando una persona es violada y luego asesinada. En este caso, las partes que salen perdiendo atraviesan una fase que se conoce como duelo. Alice Sebold, quien sufrió de violencia sexual cuando era una estudiante universitaria, es una de las personas que decidió escribir sobre esto último. Por ello, su novela *Desde mi cielo* (*The Lovely Bones*) ofrece una lectura en la que personajes principales como Jack y Abigail Salmon, padres de Susie, una adolescente de 14 años violada y asesinada, pueden ser analizados siguiendo las cinco etapas de duelo presentadas por la psiquiatra Elizabeth Kübler-Ross mientras se aferran a diferentes mecanismos para afrontar la pérdida en sus procesos de duelo.

Introduction

“Murderers are not monsters, they’re men. And that’s the most frightening thing about them” (Alice Sebold)

A crime such as rape, which is very frequent, is carried out when a person exerts his authority against another one without the latter giving consent. Hopefully, at this moment in time, we are moving towards a society that condemns these kind of actions, partly because women are rising their voices louder than ever. In America, rape is an offence that is underreported, meaning that either women prefer to keep quiet or they fall victims of their attacker and are silenced. Fortunately, literature is a massive weapon for sexually abused survivors who prefer to reflect their experiences on paper. Alice Sebold (1963-present) was one of these women; she was raped in college and later suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In her first memoir-like book *Lucky* (1999), Sebold explains with every detail the consequences that such an act had on her. Sebold considers herself ‘lucky’ to have survived because sometimes it is not the case. In her fiction book *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Susie Salmon is not so fortunate and, after being raped, she is murdered. In this way, Alice Sebold offers a reading in which death changes the behaviors of family and friends. Because of this, I will briefly talk about sexual abuse, paying special attention to America, since Sebold set *The Lovely Bones’* action in Pennsylvania, her hometown; then, I will discuss how trauma is applied to literature, and explain the grieving process and the five stages of grief proposed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004). Finally, I will focus on the aim of this dissertation, which is to explore the shattering consequences of sexual violence and focus on the parents’, Abigail and Jack Salmon, grieving processes applying the Kübler-Ross model. Firstly, I will analyze Jack, Susie’s father, who, after discovering that his daughter was murdered, starts grieving and follows the Kübler-Ross model in almost perfect order.

Secondly, I will also give importance to Abigail, Susie's mother, who, even though she does not follow the five stages in order and also skips some stages, suffers greatly from her daughter's murder and so falls into a deep depression. Therefore, although the characters experience the same grieving processes, the stages and time spans in them are quite different. Their own coping mechanisms will affect their behaviors towards themselves, their remaining children and their own relationship as a couple.

1. A Look on America's Most Common Unreported Crime: an Approach to Sexual Abuse

According to the American Psychological Association, sexual abuse refers to "unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent" ("Sexual Abuse"). It would be a miracle to say that sexual violence is a term no longer in use, a thing of the past. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Nowadays, thanks to movements like #MeToo or feminist marches like the one that is celebrated every March 8th, women are getting to be heard at last. There is still much to do but, at least, these are some steps forward to a better future.

In America, rape is an issue that is being talked about more often. However, sexual assault continues to be one of the most underreported crimes in the country ("Forcible Rape"). Women who are raped do not usually report their incidents to the police, even though they are at a higher risk of suffering from this abuse. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) observes that "women and girls experience sexual violence at high rates" and estimates that "1 out of every 6 American women has been victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime", with 54% of these abused women between the ages of 18 and 34 years old ("Victims Sexual Violence").

Now, if we look back to fifty years ago, the issue of sexual assault was worse than it is today. Before 1970, the act of rape was hidden in the dark. Women did not have any kind of support for this matter and they could only endure. This changed when the first rape crisis centers were established throughout the country. Finally “the treatment of victims in the criminal justice system was questioned, and hundreds of laws were passed to protect rape victims in the courts” (Kilpatrick). However, this was not the end of it all. In the decade of 1980, people were shocked when they discovered that child abuse was also more common than they thought. Lots of children were lucky that the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect was created in 1974 and that the Child Abuse Victims’ Rights Act of 1986 was passed to give children the opportunity to speak out their abuse cases (“History Child Sexual Abuse”).

Sadly, many women and children were not so fortunate as to have their tragic events either heard or passed to court. As happens countless times with sexual violence, victims are brutally murdered by their attackers. Yet, there is always hope. The women and grown-up children who do survive this cruel act of violence learn that they had been quiet for too long. This is why, many of them decide to write about their experiences, reflect them in paper, and make clear that people who suffer in silence are not alone.

1.1. Trauma and Its Application to Literature

During the decades in which sexual assault was starting to be a major issue, there were important publications regarding the mental health of rape victims. In 1970, Sandra Sutherland and Donald J. Scherl published “Patterns of Response among Victims of Rape” in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. This was the first significant study of rape trauma, and “they were the first to delineate the ‘normal’ and predictable

psychological after-effects of rape” (Bourke). Before this year, sexual abuse and the ensuing psychological trauma were not seen as really relevant. What is more, the concept of trauma was fairly new and in constant exploration.

In the second half of the 19th century, psychologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) was one of the first people to contemplate the idea that psychic harm could alter the normal functioning of the nervous system after an overwhelming event. Later on, famous medics, such as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), expanded this concept. In Freud’s book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he argues that there is a kind of barrier in everyone’s head that blocks excessive stimuli from the external world. Therefore, when a traumatic event takes place, this shield breaks, and people are engulfed with feelings that cannot be put under control.

This idea of trauma was not met with much interest until the 1970s and 1980s, when the American Psychiatric Association acknowledged for the first time this psychic harm –and even used a new term for its long lasting effects: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). To give a brief explanation, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder happens when there is a failure of the recovery process, and it is diagnosed as such when symptoms like intense psychological distress occur even after a month (Chivers-Wilson).

Some sexually abused people and those suffering from this disorder, in need to express themselves and break their silence, are brave enough and decide to explore more about rape and its consequences through literature. The representation of trauma in literature seems to be quite complicated because trauma is anti-narrative, meaning that if trauma is an experience that overwhelms the individual, it resists language (Nadal and Calvo 5). Yet, there has been a considerable amount of narratives dealing with other

aspects of trauma such as rape narratives. In earlier periods, narratives about sexual violence used to deal with the increasing frigidity of women after the assault and not so much with the significance in the development of emotional disorders (Bourke). As Bourke also explains:

Public narratives of violation in the earlier period located the harm of sexual abuse less in the woman's emotional or inner 'self' and more in her social and economic standing. Sexual attack only entered public discourse when it could be conceived of as an affront to a woman's ability to support herself or maintain her respectability within the family and community.

But these last decades, as Gunne and Brigley Thompson mention in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation* (2010), there is a dilemma that "raises the question whether rape narratives should be represented, theorized or discussed at all" (3). The thing is, rape narratives can be a double-edged sword because sometimes "showing rape, some argue, eroticizes it for the male gaze and purveys the victim myth" (qtd. in Gunne and Brigley Thompson 3). Still, the real objective of this genre is to create awareness and prevent rape from ever happening. Furthermore, whilst some people believe that rape stories only pay attention to the victim and perpetrator, it is the other way around: these narratives try to move on from these 'labels' and focus on other issues that are often forgotten.

A number of authors who write this kind of literature attempt to pay attention to these matters that so many times are ignored. Some of these writers try to heal from their own experiences, whereas some others try to explore the disruptions caused by trauma. That being the case, one of these disturbances is the emotional consequences that a person goes through after the death of a loved one: nobody is prepared for the

dying of a person, especially if this individual was raped and then murdered. Therefore, the living will go through coping mechanisms such as mourning and grieving so their loss is alleviated.

1.2. The Grieving Process: the Five Stages of Grief

Contemporary western society contemplates death as taboo because it is a topic no one likes to talk about. We have left behind old-fashioned customs that were an indication of our acceptance towards death, such as rituals where the deceased person was washed by the family at home, was laid out on the bed, and people came over to hold a ceremony. Instead, the more our society advances in science, the more we fear and deny the reality of death (Kübler-Ross 8). It is because of this progress that “men have been able to develop not only new skills but also new weapons of mass destruction which increase the fear of a violent, catastrophic death” (11). This is why we choose to use euphemisms, why we make up excuses for children, etc. We are trying to save ourselves from this anxiety and turmoil that death is sure to bring.

Because we live in a society, we are shaped by its norms. Therefore, it will not be easy for a person to witness the death of a loved one, be it a relative, a friend, or a lover: “Loss is understood as a natural part of life, but we can still be overcome by shock and confusion, leading to prolonged periods of sadness or depression” (“Grief”). Usually, to overcome these feelings of sorrow and to cherish the good times spent together with a loved person, people undergo the grieving process (“Grief”)¹.

¹ It is worth mentioning that this process can happen with any life circumstance that is thrown our way, as may happen with the loss of a job or poor academic results.

The grieving process is a moment of mourning and it can last for a long period of time, from months to years, as there is no timeline or schedule. Moreover, mourning is a personal process and everyone reacts differently to it. When the death of a loved one takes place, it is possible to come across a wide range of emotions (“Bereavement”). Some people may cry, some others may be angry, they will feel empty, etc. There is no correct or incorrect way of mourning and everyone should accept these difficult times as a natural process of life. However, it is important to note that some people may get stuck in this grief and see no end to it even if several years have gone by. This is known as complicated grief and can lead to chronic problems like depression (“Coping”). Still, even if grieving is a mechanism that functions according to each individual, there is no denying that there are commonalities that occur in most of these particular processes.

In 1969, the Swiss-born psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004) developed the idea that grief could be classified into five stages in her book *On Death and Dying* (1969), a book in which she explores these stages with terminally ill hospital patients (“Elisabeth”). Her theory, today known as the Kübler-Ross model, was originally conceived for ill individuals; nevertheless, it has been adapted for other experiences of loss. It should be considered that it is necessary neither to experience all five stages nor go through them in a specific order. As Kimberly Holland states: “you may be coping with loss in the bargaining stage and find yourself in anger or denial next. You may remain for months in one of the five stages but skip others entirely”. The five stages that Elizabeth Kübler-Ross proposes and details in her book are the following: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

This first stage of denial is an armor after hearing unexpected and shocking news. People will ask themselves questions of the type: “How can I go on?”, “Why should I go on?”, etc.; they will also go numb and try to find a way to survive each

passing day (“Five Stages”). Some people will try to forget that the incident did even occur, and try to move on as if nothing happened. But this is not how it works: denial allows people to collect themselves and, with time, move to less radical defenses (Kübler-Ross 36). Denial gives people time to absorb this traumatic experience and process it; however, the feelings that at first were suppressed will soon arise.

As Kübler-Ross mentions: “when the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment” (45). Anger is a way to mask the pain for the loss. It can be directed to anyone: doctors, a person who did not attend the funeral, family members that are trying to help, etc. This feeling can also be directed to an inanimate object. This stage can be quite a feat; nevertheless, over time, this overbearing attitude is left behind and it is possible to begin to think more rationally and feel all those emotions that were blinded by rage (Holland).

Once the stage of anger wears off and rage is no longer an option, people may consider another approach. The grieving individuals will find themselves asking questions such as “what if” and creating statements like “if only”. These kinds of utterances are common in the stage of bargaining, which is the least well-known stage of the five. In this phase, people will attempt to postpone the tragic event and the emotions of sadness (Holland). Moreover, they will try to make promises in return of their loved one. But, these promises “may be associated with . . . excessive guilt, which is only enforced by further bargaining and more unkempt promises” (Kübler-Ross 75).

The following stage is maybe the most well-known one: depression. Kübler-Ross writes that “anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss” (76). It is in this moment when an individual feels grief on a deeper level and thinks it will last forever. Although most people can move on to the next and last stage, not everyone

is able to do so and this can lead to a greater problem: chronic depression. It should be made clear and understood that the individuals who experience this stage of depression are not mentally ill or suffering from clinical depression, it is their response to a great loss (“Five Stages”). What is more, it would be unusual for a person to not experience it.

Last but not least, there comes the stage of acceptance. This final phase should not be mistaken for a happy one, and it is instead a stage void of feelings, where the pain and struggling are finally gone (Kübler-Ross 101). “This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality” (“Five Stages”). Usually, from this point onwards, there are more good days than bad ones. People start living life again, this time, with a memory of the person that used to be there. In lieu of denying and covering the feelings of anger and sorrow, these people learn to listen to them (“Five Stages”).

Coping with loss will always be a difficult time to go through our lives. Sooner or later everyone will have to deal with this natural process that is grieving. It is inevitable. Still, there are times in which a person we hold dear is forced to leave us too soon, as is the case for some rape victims. Alice Sebold is a writer that decided to explore in her first novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2002), some of the main characters’ grieving processes.

2. Alice Sebold and Her Fiction Novel *The Lovely Bones*

Alice Sebold (1963-present) grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with her sister, her alcoholic mother, and a father that spent too much time reading books. Sebold inherited from her father that love for books and literature, and it may be one of the reasons why she decided to write *The Lovely Bones* (2002) after over a decade of

denying a life-changing episode when she was finishing her first year as a freshman student at Syracuse University, New York (Gesteland). Sebold was attacked and brutally raped, and that horrible event affected her deeply. However, as Buffachi and Gilson state, “after writing the first chapter of *The Lovely Bones*, Alice Sebold realized she needed to write her own rape story, before she could properly write her work of fiction” (28). She stopped writing her novel and focused on her memoir *Lucky* (1999). While reading this book, the reader learns several things about Sebold and her traumatic experience.

As happens to most rape victims, it is not over when it is over. In fact, this seems to happen to all the people who undergo a traumatic experience, be it a war, rape, etc. The act in itself is finished but the consequences go on. One important piece of information that the reader grasps is that Sebold suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She was not aware of it until the very end of the book, when several years had already gone by. In the aftermath of *Lucky*, Sebold finds herself reflected by the words of Dr. Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992):

. . . People with post-traumatic stress disorder take longer to fall asleep, are more sensitive to noise, and awaken more frequently during the night than ordinary people. Thus traumatic events appear to recondition the human nervous system.

Paragraphs like this began the most gripping read I had ever had: I was reading about myself. (Sebold 250)

If Sebold was able to heal almost completely from this disorder and move on it was because she could identify her rapist and have him sent to jail while she finished her studies, a thing that did not happen to most of the abused victims that also appear in the book. Even though she was able to do so, she suffered a lot in the process: people

she held dear preferred to part ways, thinking of her as a pest, and the laws in the criminal justice system were still fairly new, so people were quite skeptical towards her. Nevertheless, after the process was over and *Lucky* was published, she could go back to writing the fiction novel she had in mind, regarding it as a “tool in understanding the impact of sexual violence” (Buffachi and Gilson 29).

The novel that Alice Sebold wrote, *The Lovely Bones*, is a fiction book in which a traumatic event takes place: the rape and later dismemberment of Susie Salmon, the main protagonist of the story, and its homodiegetic and omniscient posthumous narrator. Having Susie as narrator even after she is dead, is a unique form of literary survivorship: she gives “dignity and agency to those silenced by violence” (Whitney 356). Her heaven provides emotional support for readers as “we know that she continues a pain-free existence after death” (355). Therefore, Susie does not deal with any kind of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the deed is over. However, due to this inevitable death, she gains expanded consciousness and narrative control: she is able to listen to her family from her heaven and has access to people’s memories and events that happened even before her birth (356). She explores these ‘gifts’ for a decade before understanding that her family need to move on with their lives (Buffachi and Gilson 29).

This story also challenges the victim/perpetrator subject: the rape incident is not the most important part of the book. Alice Sebold decided to focus the narrative on how the sexual assault and death of the principal character changed the people Susie holds dear (29). They are the ones left behind by Susie, and thus, the ones in need of catharsis. Therefore, “Susie Salmon’s presence in *The Lovely Bones* allows for an elegiac narrative space to be woven about the impact of grief on family and friends” (30).

3. The Shattering Impact of Rape: Family Members' Mechanisms for Grieving and Coping with Loss

3.1. Jack: the Father Crazy with Grief

Jack Salmon is an accountant and father of three: Susie, Lindsey and Buckley. He loves his children dearly. But, from the beginning of the book, it is made clear that Susie is his favorite child. This is the reason why Jack was one of the most affected family members when the news of Susie's death broke out.

Since the moment that detective Len Fenerman announces through the phone the tragic event, Jack starts experiencing the five stages of grief in almost perfect order. First of all, he comes across feelings of denial and shock:

“So you can't be certain that she's dead?” he asked.

“Nothing is ever certain,” Len Fenerman said.

That was the line my father said to my mother: “Nothing is ever certain.”

For three nights he hadn't know how to touch my mother or what to say. (Sebold 16)

Jack's silence and lack of words show that he is paralyzed and does not know what to do in that situation. Moreover, he simply believes that his daughter is missing even though the evidences of her death are clear enough. Len Fenerman talks about “found[ing] only a body part” (16), which is soon revealed to be an elbow. Regardless of this, Jack still denies Susie's death: “Detective Fenerman called my parents. They had found a schoolbook. . . ‘But it could be anyone's,’ my father said to my mother as they began another restless vigil. ‘Or she could have dropped it along the way’” (21). As Susie herself says: “Evidence was mounting, but they refused to believe” (21). Later on, the police officers find a hat covered with Susie's saliva, an indication that she was silenced while sexually abused. Detective Fenerman considers treating the case as a

murder investigation, but even then Jack still refuses to accept the truth: “‘But there is no body,’ my father tried” (24). Finally, the shock wears off and the truth sinks in, leaving him devastated.

Once Jack acknowledges that Susie is gone forever, the pain that he is perceiving is masked by feelings of anger and rage. In his try to relieve his agony, he directs his temper towards one same object: “He smashed that one first . . . I watched him as he smashed the rest . . . The bottles, all of them, [laid] broken on the floor, the sails and boat bodies strewn among them” (42). The broken ships in bottles, fragile as life itself, hold deep meaning for Jack, as Susie was the only one who liked to help him in his hobby: “His own father had taught him how to build ships in bottles. They were something my mother, sister, and brother couldn’t care less about. It was something I adored” (41). Sadly, Jack is unable to face the memories that these crafts retain because, even if they evoke really good times between the two of them, they also remind him of his first child’s death. Now that Jack has no one to help him anymore, he regards his hobby as useless. After this outburst of rage, Jack goes to Susie’s room where “[h]e was about to smash the mirror over [her] dresser, rip the wallpaper down with his nails” (43), and instead he cries himself to sleep.

His unstable emotions because of the loss permit him to continue in his grieving process. Jack starts to feel guilty: “The guilt on him, the hand of God pressing down on him, saying, *You were not there when your daughter needed you*” (54). Guilt is a common aspect of the bargaining stage. Moreover, the grieving person will “look for ways to regain control” (“Five Stages”). Jack is willing to do anything to negotiate his way out of the hurt. Therefore, he seeks revenge. Jack’s interest in his daughter’s murder picks up after talking to Mr. Harvey, “a mild-mannered old bachelor to whom the local children sell Girl Scout cookies” (Whitney 354). Since their conversation, Jack

starts to suspect him: “He checked what he knew. Had anyone asked this man where he was the day I disappeared? Had anyone seen this man in the cornfield? [. . .] the suspicion he now held that kept repeating itself. *Harvey, Harvey, Harvey*” (Sebold 52, 56). Jack becomes obsessed with the case just to feel useful: “my father had called the precinct too many times and frustrated the police into irritation” (127). Even though his insistence could have turned the tables against him, Jack did not stop in his search for the culprit. His bargaining morphs into anger again one day when he sees from his study a shadow moving towards the cornfield: “‘Bastard,’ he whispered. ‘You murderous bastard’” (133). Unfortunately, after going out to chase the person and beating him, he finds that the boy was just Susie’s old classmate Brian, who was crossing the cornfield to reunite with his girlfriend. Finally, Jack’s hunt is put to rest by the insistence of detective Fenerman, whose lead is until the very end a buffoonery, as he “finds Mr. Harvey’s alibi ‘compelling’ and allows him to escape” (Whitney 358).

Jack’s confrontation in the cornfield leads him to a state of great loss and overall sadness. In addition, his grief increases when his wife Abigail leaves her family behind: “In the spring of 1976, with my mother gone, he would shut the window of his den on even the hottest evenings to avoid the sound” (Sebold 212). There are more instances of Jack’s continuing grief: “‘I’m sorry,’ my father said. ‘These are Susie’s clothes and I just...It may not make sense, but they’re hers — something she wore’” (252). Here, there is a clear indication that, even if several years have gone by, he still cannot let go of Susie. He reprimands his youngest son Buckley for using those clothes to build a tent in the backyard. This leads them to a dispute over Jack’s negligence towards his two remaining children; but the truth is that, although Jack has been going through a lot, he is their only parental figure and he does not let his sorrow consume him. He endures the pain by taking care of their kids: helping his daughter Lindsey with shaving her legs or

Buckley with his fort. He would not want anything bad happening to them again, and it shows when he says: “I’m just happy that the two of you are safe” (240) and “You can never choose. I’ve loved all three of you” (254).

At long last, the words come from his mouth: “She’s never coming home” (285). Due to the absence of Susie’s body, this comment holds deeper meaning: it brings closure. Jack is finally accepting the reality that his daughter is gone forever. Additionally, his reasons to move on increase when his wife comes back home after so many years, and his grown-up daughter announces her engagement. In the last chapter, Jack is turned into a grandfather. Now that “the shadow daughter [is] gone” (316), he dreams of teaching his granddaughter the craftsmanship of ships in bottles. Jack recognizes the sadness and joy it would bring to do so. The hobby will always have a bittersweet memory attached to it; but, overall, he is happy now.

To sum up, Jack’s grieving process follows an almost perfect order. When he hears of his daughter’s death, he goes through a first state of shock and denial; then, he focuses his anger on destroying ships in bottles; following this, he feels guilty for not being there for Susie and tries to find the culprit, only to fail and fall to the stage of depression. However, after eight years of suffering, with the help of his family, Jack is able to move on and accept that some people leave before it is their right time.

3.2. Abigail and Her Unsuccessful Ways to Forget

Abigail Salmon is the doting mother of three children; however, not by choice: “[Abigail’s] dreams of utilizing her education are stifled by [her] third, and unplanned, pregnancy” (Whitney 360). In this way, the loss of her first daughter is a kind of payback for her undesired motherhood and domesticity (360). Nevertheless, she suffers

deeply when she hears of Susie's first disappearance and later murder. Unlike Jack, she might not be the perfect example of a person experiencing the five stages of grief; even so, she is still a grieving individual and a very special one.

Although the evidences of Susie's death were clear enough, Abigail goes through a first state of clear denial:

“What?” my mother said impatiently. She crossed her arms and braced for another inconsequential detail in which others invested meaning. She was a wall. Notebooks and novels were nothing to her. Her daughter might survive without an arm. A lot of blood was a lot of blood. It was not a body. Jack had said it and she believed: Nothing is ever certain. (Sebold 23)

She clings to the hope that a person may survive without an arm or with blood loss. Nonetheless, she soon moves from this stage when the police find Susie's hat covered with her saliva. From this moment onwards, when the death of a cherished person is already known, Kübler-Ross states that there may be adjustments in the household (105). These changes are quite remarkable and are brought forward by Abigail herself. In contrast to Jack, she skips the stage of anger and instead moves into bargaining and depression: whilst she tries to postpone the tragic event and the emotions of sadness, as happens in the bargaining stage, she also feels the loss on a deeper level, common of depression. Therefore, Abigail will try to forget the traumatic event in any way she knows, but failing every time she does so.

Her desire to forget and her depression lead her to a state of constant apathy directed to her family that eventually tears them apart. Her children Lindsey and Buckley are a constant reminder that Susie is gone; they carry memories that Abigail is not able to deal with. For that reason, she gradually begins distancing herself from

them: while they are playing Monopoly she “[goes] into the dining room and [counts] silverware, methodically laying out the three kinds of forks, the knives, and the spoons . . .” (Sebold 66). In return, they also grow distant from her: “Buckley had gone to cling to my sister as he anxiously sucked his thumb” (138). Furthermore, she also detaches from her husband: “In those first two months my mother and father moved in opposite directions from each other. One stayed in, the other went out” (82). The connection they would have if they both were interested in Susie’s murder is not there. In contrast to Jack, Abigail does not find any kind of interest in the case and soon sides with detective Fenerman in his try to stop Jack from his unhealthy obsession in finding the killer.

Abigail, in need to avoid the sad reality in front of her, seeks comfort in the arms of the good man that is helping them with the crime investigation, none other than Len Fenerman:

She pulled Len in to her and slowly kissed him on the mouth. He seemed to hesitate at first. His body tensed, telling him NO, but that NO became vague and cloudy. . . She reached up and unbuttoned her raincoat. He placed his hand against the thin gauzy material of her summer gown. (144)

Susie’s mother uses this sexual behavior as a mechanism to deal with her overwhelming and confusing emotions. A way to “flee from [Susie]” and “drive the dead daughter out” (148). Abigail cannot refrain herself although she knows it is wrong from her. Their affair continues for several months until she decides that adultery is not enough.

When avoiding her family is no longer a viable option and Fenerman does not provide the catharsis she desperately needs, Abigail leaves the household and seeks

solace on the coast: “My mother made it through only one winter in New Hampshire before she got the idea of driving all the way to California” (216). It is there, in California, after several years of working in a vineyard in isolation, where her depression hits rock bottom. In that moment, she considers suicide as a way of putting off the pain:

She couldn't help thinking of the books she had read in college. *The Awakening*. And what had happened to one writer, Virginia Woolf . . . stones in the pocket, walk into the waves.

She climbed down the cliffs . . . Down below she could see nothing but jagged rocks and waves . . . she was thinking *reach the waves, the waves, the waves*. (218)

Susie's mother is instead 'rescued' by a family crisis: Jack suffers from a heart attack and she is forced back home. It seems that facing Susie's death might be the only alternative for her. Then, Abigail comes back home, this time to stay.

Abigail's way to heal is to share her emotions with Jack, who is convalescent in a hospital bed: “If members of a family can share emotions together, they will gradually face the reality of impending separation and come to an acceptance of it together” (Kübler-Ross 112). That being the case, Abigail recognizes she was the “weaker one” (Sebold 273) and that, even in California, “[Susie] was everywhere” (277). Her attempts at forgetting were a failure; however, now that Jack knows that she cared all this time, they start to heal together: “And I watched as my parents kissed. They kept their eyes open as they did, and my mother was the one to cry first, the tears dropping down onto my father's cheeks until he wept too” (278). Apart from that, Abigail leaves her nonchalance behind and rekindles her relationship with their children.

Finally and most importantly, Abigail finds closure when she ventures into her daughter's room, which was not touched since the day she died, as she was not brave enough to enter it: "My mother had not touched it. My bed was still unmade from the hurried morning of my death" (40). After eight years, Abigail's catharsis begins by reciting some simple words in that lavender bedroom: "I love you, Susie" (313). Now Abigail understands that "love would not destroy her" (314) and thus, she starts her road to recovery.

In summary, even if Abigail does not undergo the five stages of grief, she shows denial when the evidences of Susie's death become too much; when this first stage wears off, Abigail skips the stage of anger, instead falling into bargaining and depression: she starts avoiding her family and having sexual affairs in an attempt to forget. This depression is so deep that, once she leaves home and isolates herself, Abigail contemplates suicide. Yet, life has other plans for her and she returns home, where she starts healing slowly but steadily.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, in her memoir *Lucky* (1999) Alice Sebold experiences firsthand sexual abuse and later Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, an affliction that affects sexually assaulted women and children. Unlike Sebold, who thanks to the advance of modern medicine could be treated granting her a faster recovery from these sequels, in the past, women and children did not know how to deal with this disorder and so, many of them who suffered from PTSD chose to write about their episodes, thus exploring literature to break their silence and bring awareness. Still, Sebold wrote *The Lovely Bones* (2002), a story in which the author reminds readers that the outcomes of rape are quite often

forgotten or denied, like she herself tried to do once without avail. Therefore, instead of emphasizing the cruel act of rape, *The Lovely Bones* allows for a different reading: it brings importance to the aftermath of such deed and the brutal consequences for the victim's family. Susie's rape and murder in the story permit readers to focus on the different coping mechanisms and grieving processes that important characters such as Jack or Abigail Salmon, the parents of the fourteen-year-old teenager, go through. Using the Kübler-Ross model on Jack and Abigail let us observe how the five stages of grief affect them, their connection with their remaining children, and their relationship as a couple. Eventually, after years of grieving, they manage to accept their daughter's death and together they begin to recover.

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