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Beauty from Ashes: Analysing the Shaping of Behaviour of Elena and Lina Vilkas after Trauma in Ruta Sepetys' *Between Shades of Gray* (2011)

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Abstract

What good can come from trauma? This is the question that one asks himself in the wake of witnessing the victims that suffered and continue to suffer the evil of this world. Be it wars, natural disasters, crimes or conflicts, there is always a victim that has to cope with and overcome the traumatic experience. Eventually, and as a consequence of the traumatic event, the victim undergoes a shaping and change of their behaviour. That is what occurred in the lives of the Vilkas' family and many other victims of the communist regime, who had to endure a long and weary journey, under the command of inflexible authorities as a consequence of the political conquest taking place in their country.

This paper analyses the behavioural evolution of the main characters in *Between Shades of Gray* (2011) written by Ruta Sepetys. It follows Elena and Lina's lives throughout their traumatic experience, reflecting on concepts such as Viktor Frankl's logotherapy or Kübler-Ross' Change Curve Model, in order to portray an accurate representation of the theory of Post-Traumatic Growth.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the healing and growth of trauma survivors, by means of the representation of the characters analysed in it after facing a traumatic event and what it is to be learnt from their actions.

Resumen

¿Qué se puede obtener de positivo de un trauma? Esta es la pregunta que cualquier persona se hace al ver la cantidad de víctimas que han sufrido y siguen sufriendo la maldad de este mundo. Ya sean guerras, desastres naturales, crímenes o conflictos, siempre hay una víctima que tiene que sobrellevar y superar la experiencia traumática, lo que finalmente moldea y cambia su comportamiento. Esto es lo que ocurrió en las vidas de la familia Vilkas y muchas otras víctimas del régimen comunista, quienes tuvieron que soportar un arduo y difícil camino, lleno de sufrimiento como consecuencia de la contienda política que se daba en su país.

Este trabajo trata de analizar la evolución del comportamiento de los personajes principales de *Between Shades of Gray* (2011), novela escrita por Ruta Sepetys. Para ello, se centra en analizar a Elena y Lina Vilkas durante su experiencia traumática, prestando atención a conceptos como la logoterapia de Viktor Frankl o la curva de cambio de Kübler-Ross, para así poder apreciar la teoría del crecimiento postraumático en sus vidas.

El propósito de este trabajo es que, a través del ejemplo que representan los personajes analizados, las personas que han sobrevivido a una experiencia traumática puedan llegar a sanar y crecer más allá del trauma.

Key words: logotherapy, trauma, post-traumatic growth, post-traumatic stress disorder, change model, generational trauma.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Trauma theory and Post Traumatic Growth

Trauma theory as “the study of the psychological and emotional response of individuals who have experienced overwhelming events that leave a lasting impact on their memory and well-being” (Cash, Yoo, et al., 2022) has been existent in multiple texts throughout history. Even though the concept of trauma has been developed in a more accurate way in the 20th century as a result of Freud’s psychological studies or the consequences of World War II, there are examples of ancient texts that portray stress reactions to battles. However, the definition of trauma as Freud puts it is “any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield [so that] there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus which have broken in” (Terr, 1979). Therefore, trauma marks a critical point in the individual’s course of life, since it “breaks in” without the individual being able to “control” or “prevent the stimulus”. Thus, this uncontrollability of the stimulus hardens the task of writing an account of the implications of trauma. Therefore, it is the unspeakability of trauma that prompted authors to portray traumatic events in their literary works, in order to achieve the unachievable. On the other hand, along with the trauma theory, the post traumatic growth theory was developed. Tedeschi and McMillan defined the concept as “the experience of significant positive change arising from the struggle with a major life crisis” (2000, p.521). Therefore, and it is the focus of this paper, a “positive change” can happen as a result of a traumatic event.

1.2 Historical context

Ruta Sepetys’ *Between Shades of Gray* takes place during the Soviet occupation that occurred in Lithuania and other Baltic states as of 1944. From then on, mass

deportations, imprisonments and killings were carried out by Soviet authorities whose main purpose was the sovietification of these Baltic states. In order to achieve the aforementioned purpose, they saw themselves as entitled to punish the so-called partisans, meaning the people that were considered to work against Soviet Union. “The Soviets deported whole families; infants, children, women and elderly to Siberia. Altogether, they deported 12 percent of the population.” Therefore, many lives changed overnight, when, suddenly, they heard the NKVD [People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs] yelling at their door to leave their home to embark to an unknown destination. Thus, Lithuanian victims had to endure a long and difficult journey far away from their home and with less to no hope. In order to survive, they were forced to work in labour camps for the Soviet authorities, who enforced harsh and cruel treatments to those they considered themselves superior to. It is relevant to mention that “Lithuania never agreed to occupation or subjugation” (Stasaitis, 1954, p.115), what is more, they resisted in all possible ways, even though the ending was tragic for many.

1.3 Plot analysis

Between Shades of Gray is the vivid example of a family that endures the critical state of the aforementioned historical context. It tells the story of Lina Vilkas, who along with her mother and brother suffer an unjust arrest and deportation to labour camps in Siberia for more than a decade. More specifically, *Between Shades of Gray* presents a regular Lithuanian family, who, apparently, do not present any distinctiveness other than enjoying life as a family of four. Lina along with her brother Jonas are the children of Kostas, a university teacher, and Elena Vilkas, a caring mother. The main character, Lina, has always been surrounded by everything her heart most desired: a loving family, strong friendships and an innate gift that qualified her to be part of a prestigious school of arts. Thus, it cannot be argued that Lina was born in a privileged household, even

though, at that time she does not realise it. However, this stable and blessed life that she enjoyed living, is suddenly interrupted one night with the harsh knocks of the Soviet authorities on their door. After being required to pack their belongings and leave their house without being granted with an explanation for such harsh treatments, she understands that tragedy hit her life. From then on, they experience a sequence of deportations, from one labour camp to another, finally ending up secluded in a labour camp in Siberia, under deplorable conditions and constant exposure to danger.

Following along with the literary aspects of the novel, it is Lina, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Elena, through whom the audience is able to perceive the story and become familiar with the traumatic event the family faces. Therefore, it is relevant to understand Lina as the internal narrator and the focalizer of the story. It is the representation of Lina's thoughts and flashbacks what contributes to our understanding of their traumatic process and what depicts the behavioural evolution that she presents. However, this aforementioned evolution could not take place, if Elena's character is not taken into consideration. The role of the caring mother in the novel is the object through which the main character can present a positive evolution in spite of the traumatic experience, to finally signal a post-traumatic growth. Lina is the character that presents a visible positive evolution throughout the entire traumatic experience; however, this paper argues that Elena has a crucial part in order for the evolution and post traumatic growth to occur.

2. Elena Vilkas: Empowered mother

Trauma can produce irremediable scars on the victim's soul, affecting not only the internal well-being of the afflicted, but their societal conduct as well. Suddenly, the survivor realises that the role they played in society can no longer be performed as before the traumatic exposure. The concept of logotherapy (Viktor Frankl, *Man's*

Search for Meaning) ventures to offer a solution for the person impacted by trauma, in order to find healing after the traumatic event, that is, finding a meaning for their life. More specifically, the concept of logotherapy is divided in three different principles that define it: freedom of will, will to meaning, and meaning of life.

Elena's character pictures the notion of logotherapy in its entirety, since, as it will be perceived, Elena's actions carry a considerable weight in the other victims' lives. It could be said that, even though she is not the main character of the novel, she is the axis around which everyone else revolves. In the novel, she is portrayed as the stable character, that in spite of facing the repercussions of hardship and suffering does not change or alter her loving and caring behaviour in any way. Thus, Elena is able to gain the confidence of her companions, not by means of proving her own strength but with repetitive and reiterative acts of love towards them. Even though she was laughed at, disrespected, hated, abused, and mistreated, she did not lose what made her strong: her love.

Following with the concept of logotherapy, the first subdivision argues that every human being has been granted a freedom of will. It can be slightly affected by the cultural or geographical environment the subject is born in, however, to a certain extent, every human being is free to choose their actions depending on the circumstance. Viktor Frankl, as a survivor of the Holocaust himself, testifies that, "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms— to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way". To put it in other words, there is no possible circumstance in which a person can no longer have a freedom of will, whether it is a positive or negative attitude, the individual must take the responsibility to choose which one they adopt. Secondly, Frankl argues that every human being possesses a will to meaning, that is, an innate desire to find something to

live for. Whether it is “to achieve an aim that the individual identifies himself with, or for the loved person, or for the glory of God”, there is always an internal power that impulses the human being to live with a purpose. However, this meaning must be found. On the contrary, there are negative examples as well, in which the victim after being suddenly exposed to an overwhelming situation, renounces to the possibility of finding hope and purpose after the traumatic event. As a consequence of the existential frustration of not finding a purpose, millions have given up on their lives, as a way to escape the suffering. Truth be told, it is no simple task to find meaning after an event that has altered the usual course of an individual’s life, however, Frankl argues that when pain finds a meaning, the suffering becomes a sacrificial act. The third concept, the meaning of life is the key point of Frankl’s logotherapy. Frankl defends that every meaning is subjected to each individual. Therefore, there cannot exist a meaning common for all, as each human being has unique life experiences, different cultural backgrounds and personal attributes that render it impossible to find a meaning applicable for all.

The individual must understand that he has a freedom of choice and, consequently, a responsibility for his actions. Then, he must have a desire, a will to find the meaning of his life, and finally, he must perform an introspection to discover the unique meaning that would help him overcome the traumatic experience.

Elena’s behaviour in the novel represents the embodiment of Frankl’s logotherapy and the verses described in the 1st letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, written by the apostle Paul are the example of it.

“If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

First, the concept of freedom of will in Elena's behaviour is perfectly depicted in her actions towards the other victims: actions led by love. An example of it could be that she understands the language of the oppressor and can communicate with them. Therefore, she possesses something she could boast about, yet in innumerable examples the story portrays her not keeping the information for herself, or using it for her own benefit. Moreover, she is always described helping other victims providing them with translations.

“ ‘Mrs. Vilkas, please tell the commander that I am explaining the situation to our friends,’ said Mr. Lukas. Mother translated.”

“Jonas looked at Mother for translation.”

Therefore, as portrayed in these examples, she is the bridge of communication between the Soviets and the Lithuanians. She translates for her friends what is being said by the authorities, and brings the requests of the former to the latter. The proper functioning of communication could not be performed if she was not there. There would be a more difficult understanding of the language, more patience required from the NKVD and eventually would result in a greater suffering for the Lithuanian victims. Therefore, in being a bridge of communication, Elena is sparing them some suffering. However, there is one point in the novel where Elena's pride and value are tested.

“ ‘They want me to work with them,’ said Mother once Jonas had returned us to the shack. ‘Work with them?’ I said. ‘Yes, well, they want me to work for them,’ she said. ‘Translating documents, and also speaking with the other Lithuanians who are here,’ she said. I thought of the file that the commander held. ‘What will you get for doing it?’ Jonas asked. ‘I'm not going to be their translator,’ said Mother. ‘I said no. They also asked me to listen to people's conversations and report them to the commander.’ ‘To be a snitch?’ said Jonas. ‘Yes,’ said Mother. ‘They want you to spy on everyone and report to them?’ I asked. Mother nodded. ‘They promised preferential treatment if I agreed.’ ”

Elena was offered better treatment from the NKVD if she used the tool she possessed, that is, speaking the Russian language, to report the activities of the other prisoners.

Even though she could take advantage of the offering, get preferential treatment and, this way, help her children survive in a better way, she refuses the offer. This action may be regarded as unwise, for, after all, she could have taken advantage of something she possessed in order to provide for her children, yet, in refusing better treatment, Elena displays a shocking demonstration of her humble and selfless soul. Therefore, as described in the letter, Elena “does not dishonour others, [she] is not self-seeking”. These examples prove that even though Elena’s freedom of will is tested under challenging circumstances, her positive attitude is enhanced in them. According to Frankl’s categorisation of human beings and as a result of her actions, she would fit perfectly in the category of “decent” people.

In second place, Elena depicts the second concept of Frankl’s logotherapy, the will to meaning, through two behaviour traits: her patience and hope. There are several examples that prove how Elena is able to resist the constant exposure to evil by means of her patience. Elie Wiesel states that “Patience is a difficult discipline, but one that is essential in times of frustration”. This mother is facing times of frustration, feeling incapable of improving her situation, or the lives of her children. However, it is perceived throughout the novel that she understands that there must be a final outcome for all the suffering, and it can only be achieved through a positive attitude and a patient heart. This example brings to mind the Theory of Delayed Gratification, by Walter Mischel (1970). The same way as the children during the Marshmallow Experiment endured the waiting to get a double ration of marshmallows, Elena strived to endure the painful suffering and harsh consequences of the war, in order to get the reward she desired the most: to be able to return home with her family. This leads to the second trait that exemplifies Elena’s will to meaning: her hope; and it is depicted in her actions in the following excerpt.

“ ‘Is there anything left in her suitcase?’ asked Mrs. Rimas. ‘I don’t think so.’ I pulled Mother’s suitcase from under the board she lay on. I was wrong. Inside were fresh, clean clothes. A light dress, silk stockings, shoes without scuffs, her tube of lipstick. There was also a man’s shirt and tie. Papa’s clothes. I began to cry. Mrs. Rimas brought her hand to her mouth. ‘She really intended to return home’.”

Elena truly wanted to survive and return home with her children, that is the reason why she left everything prepared for the day she would hear the sirens declaring the end of the war. Furthermore, she was aware that the only fruitful way to achieve it was through love. She understood that in order to conquer the enemy one must be better than them in that they are weak at. Therefore, she used the powerful weapon of love, because in order to have a will to meaning, one must give up on their impulses and act according to a purpose even when obstacles attempt at preventing the individual from the aim they hope to achieve.

Finally, Elena found the meaning of her life in “always protect[ing], always trust[ing], always hop[ing], always persever[ing]”. She displayed a role model attitude during the traumatic experience. Metaphorically, Elena became a light among darkness and a lamp guiding those around her. As a consequence, her death marked the difference. She was not thrown away as the vast majority of corpses. All the people she consumed her life for carried her to be buried. In spite of the poor health situations and the adverse weather conditions the other victims gave her a decent burial, because she gave them a decent life given the circumstances. In the words of Viktor Frankl “what is to give light, must endure burning”. That was Elena, a light that was burned until the very last, never failing those around her.

Therefore, Elena understood that if she “gave all she possessed to the poor and gave over her body to hardship that she may boast, but did not have love, she gained nothing. Elena was patient, Elena was kind. She did not envy, she did not boast, she was not

proud. She did not dishonour others, she was not self-seeking, not easily angered, she kept no record of wrongs. Elena did not delight in evil but rejoiced with the truth. She always protected, always trusted, always hoped, always persevered. Elena never failed those around her.” (author’s changes)

To conclude with, an evolution of Elena’s behaviour during and after the traumatic exposure cannot actually be perceived because she does not change. However, her life marks a difference in the lives of her companions, and as it has been previously analysed in this part, it is achieved by virtue of her understanding of the meaning and value of her life. Even though, Elena’s behaviour is not altered in the traumatic experience, her involvement in the lives of those around her, prepares the way for a clear evolution of a character in the traumatic process to take place, and that is Lina Vilkas.

3. Lina Vilkas: The artist.

As indicated before, *Between Shades of Gray* is portrayed through the eyes of a 15-year-old Lithuanian girl, Lina. Therefore, it is through Lina’s eyes that the audience can grasp the implications of her traumatic experience. Thus, this story is narrated through an internal narrator who, moreover, is the focalizer. As regards with the chronological element, the story presents itself in a simultaneous narration, with a number of flashback interventions of the character’s life before the traumatic exposure. These literary aspects, along with the influence of Elena Vilkas in the life of her daughter, work together to portray a clear evolution of the character’s behaviour during her traumatic experience. It is significant to keep in mind that, as the story is narrated through the eyes of a teenager, the narration is full of emotions and impulsive responses to the different situations she faces.

Lina's evolution during the traumatic experience will be analysed through the scope of Kübler-Ross's Change Curve Model (1969), that explains the different stages that the individual undergoes in response to a significant change. This model included originally five stages, however, over the time, it evolved into the following concepts: shock, denial, frustration, depression, experiment, decision and integration.

According to Kübler-Ross, the victim that has been exposed to a radical change influenced by a traumatic experience, first signals symptoms of shock. Similarly, when Lina recognised the NKVD authorities in her house, requesting her family to take their belongings and confront the new future, she suffered an emotional block. This mental fog is depicted in the following narration.

“Were we being arrested? Where was Papa? I ran to my room.”

“My bedroom began to spin. Mother's voice echoed inside my head. ‘Now. Now!’ What was happening? The sound of my ten-year-old brother running about his room pulled a cord within my consciousness.”

“ ‘Mother, why are you breaking your beautiful things?’ I asked.”

As presented in the excerpt, Lina, in the shock stage, has to cope with a wave of questions that stun her. As a consequence, uncertainty is the emotion that prevails. Therefore, at the beginning of this painful traumatic experience, she is not able to grasp the motifs that led to her family's arrest, or the reason of such harsh treatments from the authorities. Furthermore, she is not able to know what the future would hold, which fuels the uncertainty of the situation.

According to the Change Model, the shock that the victim experiences at first, is replaced with the denial of the traumatic event. This aspect can be exemplified when victims of a terminal illness receive the diagnosis and state “This cannot be happening to me”. However, the denial in Lina's evolution is portrayed in a different way. She is not denying that the traumatic event has happened, however she is denying that her and her family have done something to deserve it. She is denying the guilt that the

authorities are accusing her and her family of. Later in the novel, there is an excerpt that proves how Lina advocates for their innocence, more specifically when referring to her father.

“If we really were going to jail, I wanted to take her with me. But we couldn’t be going to jail. We had done nothing wrong.”

“I refused to believe that Papa had done something wrong. I turned it over in my head. Mrs. Raskunas worked at the university with Papa. She wasn’t deported. I saw her peeking out of her window the night we were taken away. So not everyone from the university was deported. Why Papa?”

Therefore, as this excerpt confirms, Lina refused to think that there was anything reliable that the Soviets could accuse her father of. Therefore, as it has been previously mentioned, the denial that Lina experiences in the story does not necessarily fit in the parameters of the concept of Kübler-Ross’s model, however, it deals more with upholding the innocence in spite of being treated as guilty, or with denying the accusations of guilt.

As the story unfolds, Lina experiences the frustration that conveys living in her situation. There are several examples that portray the poor conditions the victims had to endure. Lina starts to assimilate the new reality she was living in at that time.

“ ‘Mother,’ whispered Jonas, ‘these cars are for pigs and cows’ ”

“The inside of the car was stuffy and full of personal smells, even with the door open.”

The conditions hindered the acceptance of the new reality. Therefore, the frustration experienced, is an expected reaction given the circumstances. However, this emotional response is aggravated when the main character experiences a determining point in the traumatic process. When they were allowed to be washed, there is a short period of time when the victims stood naked in front of the NKVD waiting for their turn. Then, a soldier who was examining their bodies, stopped in front of her and took advantage of her.

“Another NKVD stared, grinning and biting his bottom lip. [...] He stopped at Mrs. Arvydas. She did not lift her head. He swirled a toothpick on his tongue and raised his brow, violating her with his stare. I let out a breath in disgust. Mother’s head snapped to me. The guard grabbed my arms and threw them down to my sides. He looked me up and down and grinned. He reached out and groped my breast. I felt his ragged fingernails scratch across my skin. I had never been naked in front of a man before. His touch, the rough hand on me, made me feel sick, and dirtier on the inside than I was on the outside.”

The frustration that Lina experienced at the poor health conditions increases at the realisation that she cannot fight against the harsh treatments of her oppressor. Until this moment, Lina had not been individually affected by the NKVD; it is true that she had to suffer as the rest of the victims, however her mother always responded for her. Nevertheless, in this excerpt it is portrayed that the enemy assaulted her personally as a consequence of her actions. Thus, she comprehended that she was a victim and was susceptible to attacks as well, which consequently, fuelled her frustration. The confusion and fear that Lina felt at the beginning of the traumatic process engendered hatred towards the NKVD and the communist regime. The amount of hatred increased until the point where she states “I had played through scenarios of how I would get back at the NKVD, how I would stomp on the Soviets if I ever had a chance”. Therefore, Lina wanted them to suffer, at least as much as the victims suffered, and to remember all the atrocities they were causing and feel pain. Lina is not capable of responding in the same way as her mother did, she is not able to choose love and hope over hatred and anger. It is as a consequence of the frustration that Lina experienced, that she realised how incapable of changing her situation she was. At this moment of her traumatic evolution, she is not able to find a meaning in her suffering and choose to have a positive attitude despite the circumstances. The frustration she felt is replaced by depression when she faced that painful moment with the NKVD authority. She realised how little power she had in relation to her enemy. Therefore, the victim started to

experience “a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest.” The depression that Lina is exposed to is significantly relevant in the narratological aspect of the novel. Research has been done to prove that in depression, nostalgia is evoked as a way to cope with the distress. This is perceived in Lina’s narration of flashbacks in the novel. As it has been previously mentioned, the narrator tells the story of her traumatic experience as she lives it, however, with the intervention of several flashbacks of the life of the narrator before the traumatic exposure. The appearance of these flashbacks in the narration conveys the emotional reaction of the body to the pain experienced. They are the response of the brain to help the individual overcome the distress they are experiencing. Therefore, flashbacks are specifically used in the narration to convey nostalgia, meaning, “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition”. Examples of this interpretation are many:

“ ‘I think you look lovely,’ said Mother, stepping back to admire the dress. [...] I changed out of the dress and walked outside to meet Mother. She wasn’t there. I peered down the row of brightly colored shops but didn’t see her. Down the street, a door opened and Mother emerged. Her blue hat matched her dress, which fluttered around her legs as she walked toward me. She held up two ice cream cones and smiled, a shopping bag dangling from her arm.”

*“ ‘Dear Miss Vilkas,
Thank you for your recent application for the summer arts program, your samples are most impressive. It is with great pleasure that we offer you a place in our—’
‘Yes! They said yes!’ I screamed.
‘I knew it!’ said Papa.
‘Congratulations, Lina’ said Jonas, slinging his arm around me.”*

The role of flashbacks in the narration is to portray how the victim attempts to escape the reality of the suffering she was experiencing. It is through remembering the beautiful moments that had occurred before trauma, that the victim is able to cope with the new reality. Therefore, these excerpts are a proof that distress evokes nostalgia as a

tool for the victim to find relief and peace. These two excerpts include the most important things Lina had at that moment: her family and her art.

This leads to the following concept of the change model: the experiment stage. According to Kübler-Ross, in the experiment phase, the victim of trauma shows an “initial engagement with the new situation”. This engagement with the new reality is perceived in Lina’s art during the traumatic process. The novel depicts the modes in which Lina uses her art: on one hand, as to leave a trace for her father to find them, and on the other hand, as to leave a living testimony of the suffering they had to endure.

“We had passed through Vilnius, Minsk, Orsha, Smolensk. I wrote the path cities on my handkerchief in ink. Each day when the door was open to light, I would add more detail and identifying clues that Papa would recognise—our birthdays, a drawing of a *vilkas*—a wolf. I made markings only in the center surrounded by a circle of hands touching fingers. I scrawled the words pass along under the drawing of the hands and I drew a Lithuanian coin.”

This passage represents the experiment phase, since she is trying to engage with her new reality and contribute to the improvement of her situation. Therefore, she takes advantage of the skill she possesses in order to leave a record of the reality. However, she did not only used her art to leave record of information but also of the harsh treatments that they were enduring. The following excerpt summarizes how Lina’s art was affected by her surroundings.

“My hand began to move in short, scratchy stroked. I took a breath. Fluid strokes. Mrs. Arvydas slowly appeared on the page. Her long neck, her full lips. I thought of Munch as I sketched, his theory that pain, love, and despair were links in an endless chain. [...] I drew her eye makeup, smudged by tears. In her watery eyes I drew the reflection of the commander, standing in front of her, his fist clenched.”

Lina used her gift to portray the reality she was living in. However, this decision brought two effects: on one side, she was harming herself, constantly remembering the atrocities endured by the victims and, on the other side, constantly risking being caught by the authorities and punished. However, it is art that helped Lina survive. According

to Adrian Hill (1945), the founder of art therapy, there is a healing power in art. Lina was able to bring out the pain that was inside of her, by the simple act of drawing what the eyes observed. Furthermore, she used her art to escape her painful reality. Even though what she portrayed in her sketchbook was the living testimony of her reality, she used it as following the current of Escapism, in order to find distraction and relief from unpleasant realities and routines.

Related to art and the testimony found in her sketchbook, there is a moment when Kretzsky tells her that he had seen all her drawings, the ones in which she projects the commander with his head surrounded by snakes and Mrs Arvydas crying as a consequence of enduring constant rapes from the NKVD and the corpses thrown away in piles. However, she is not punished for drawing them. This is the impact of Elena's life. According to my interpretation, Elena was able to show Kretzsky the love that he longed for, the love of a mother. Even though this is not specifically mentioned in the novel, there are several moments in which Jonas and Lina see their mother talking to him in a suspicious way. Therefore, I dare to interpret that Elena through her loving attitude was able to offer comfort to the perpetrator and that is what moves him to show mercy towards Lina.

Thus far, this paper has analysed the different phases that Lina has gone through in her evolution during the traumatic process. Among these, we have mentioned: shock, denial, frustration, depression and experiment. The decision and integration stages are analysed as one, since, integration cannot take place if there is no decision to integrate. This notion resembles the notion of will to meaning previously analysed, that stated that there must be a desire to want to have a meaning. This last notion of the Kübler-Ross model is of primary importance because it is what allows the victim to transcend and be able to achieve a post-traumatic growth. This achievement is perceived in the character,

when in spite of the circumstances, she chooses to show empathy towards her perpetrator.

“ ‘So, you hate me?’ He laughed. ‘I hate me too. My mother, she was an artist, too’ he said, gesturing with the bottle. ‘But she is with yours – dead. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said instinctively. Why did I say that? I didn’t care. [...] ‘The woman my father married, she hates me, too. She hates Poles.’ [...] Kretzsky wasn’t sick. He was crying. [...] I stood there, silent. ‘Nikolai.’ I reached out from under the wood. I put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I’m sorry’ I finally said. [...] ‘I’m sorry for your mother,’ he said.”

This unexpected response in the character takes place as a consequence of three main motifs, which eventually result in the integration and the post-traumatic growth of the victim.

Firstly, it is a consequence of the will to survive of the victim. In order for the post-traumatic growth to take place, the victim needs to have the desire to survive. Even though Lina had to endure the news of the death of both her parents and spent more than a decade in the camps forced to hard work, the desire to survive encouraged her to keep fighting. “Success meant survival. Failure meant death. I wanted life. I wanted to survive”.

Secondly, as a consequence of the role model that her mother, Elena, was for her. The way that Elena did not respond to hate with more hate, but with love is what makes Lina, when she is put to test, to not hold onto the suffering that the oppressor performed in her life as an excuse to act in the same way, but embrace empathy. It is important to mention that her mother stopped what could have become a generational trauma. In having a positive attitude during her traumatic process, she did not allow for a generational trauma to occur, and in this way, she saved her children from the repercussions of her traumatic experience. Regarding the empathy that Lina showed towards her perpetrator, my interpretation is that, it requires strength to love, and strength to suffer with the one who suffers. Nikolai did not care about all the victims

that were constantly facing and enduring cruelty and wrongdoings, however, Lina demonstrated to be superior to him, in not responding with the same amount of hate. Her empathy conquered his wickedness.

Finally, as a consequence of the desire to let other generations know the history of the war from a victim's point of view.

*“Dear friend,
The writings and drawings you hold in your hand were buried in the year 1954, after returning from Siberia with my brother, where we were imprisoned for twelve years. There are many thousands of us, nearly all dead. Those alive cannot speak. Though we committed no offense, we are viewed as criminals. Even now, speaking of the terrors we have experienced would result in our death. So, we put our trust in you, the person who discover this capsule of memories sometime in the future. We trust you with the truth, for contained herein is exactly that—the truth. My husband, Andrius, says that evil will rule until good men or women choose to act. I believe him. This testimony was written to create an absolute record, to speak in a world where our voices have been extinguished. These writings may shock or horrify you, but that is not my intention. It is my greatest hope that the pages in this jar stir your deepest well of human compassion. I hope they prompt you to do something, to tell someone. Only then can we ensure that this kind of evil is never allowed to repeat itself.”*

This was Lina's meaning of life, and the reason why she was able to respond with empathy to her perpetrator. She understood that she had a greater purpose for her life, and that was to raise awareness of what the Lithuanian victims had to endure during the war. That is why she could not allow herself to be poisoned with hate and anger towards the perpetrator, because she understood the meaning of her life.

Therefore, Lina is the character that truly portrays an evolution throughout the traumatic process, however this evolution would not have been possible if not as a consequence of the three aforementioned motifs.

In conclusion, Lina is the character that presents a clear evolution in her behaviour during the whole traumatic process. It is as a result of the Kübler-Ross Curve Change Model that we are able to grasp how Lina evolved during the traumatic experience and the reason for her emotional responses. The main point of this part has been to prove that post-traumatic growth can be achieved if the victim of trauma has a will to survive

and a will to meaning. However, this achievement could not have taken place if the mother role was a negative one.

4. Conclusions

After having analysed the main characters of *Between Shades of Gray*, there are some conclusions that can be drawn.

Elena is the representation of the empowered mother, that saw herself responsible of her attitude's repercussions and therefore, chose to have a positive attitude in spite of the circumstances. As a consequence, she was able to lay the groundwork for her daughter's behavioural evolution to take place.

Lina, therefore, presents a clear evolution towards a better self. Her emotions are understandable due to the horrific pain she had to live in. However, she is able to change and improve; she does not hold onto her hate and, thus, she advances towards a humanly impossible accomplishment: feel empathy for her transgressor. It is important to notice that the notions of Kübler-Ross Model do not appear in the novel in chronological order, however they were used in the paper as a structure to follow for the understanding of Lina's evolution.

In order to respond to the question posed at the beginning, what good can come from trauma, this paper does not attempt to excuse the cruelty of the perpetrator by no means. However, it tries to enhance and bring to light that it can be possible to survive a traumatic experience, and to find something useful to learn from it. Therefore, it seeks to liberate the victim from the chains of trauma.

Ultimately, this paper sought to raise consciousness about the important role that an individual can play in the life of a victim of trauma, since the former can be able to guide the latter towards finding the meaning of their life and in this way overcome the

pathological anxiety of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that trauma creates. It helped primarily the author to understand and internalise a way to overcome difficult situations that one may encounter through their passing of life, however it seeks to contribute at helping other victims of traumatic experiences, overcome and find comfort, such as Elena did, and Lina learnt to do, as well.

This paper, therefore, aimed at contributing to the recovering of trauma victims providing a way that the individual can adopt to overcome the traumatic experience. It is not about forgetting the past, it is about healing from it, and thus, being able to advance and live with a meaning.

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