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Representing Trauma Through Fragmented Memory in Charlotte Wells' Aftersun (2022): A Caruthian Analysis

Yazid Mishbahul Fikri[1], Dwi Nur Cahyani Sri Kusumaningtyas[1]

S1 English Literature, FBS, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding author: yazid.22115@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstract

Trauma is often represented in films through memory, emotional distance, and fragmented storytelling rather than direct explanation. This study aims to analyze how trauma is represented through fragmented memory in Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* (2022) by using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The study applies a qualitative descriptive method with a film studies approach. The primary data source is *Aftersun* (2022), while the data consists of scenes, dialogues, visual elements, and cinematic techniques related to trauma representation. The data were collected through repeated viewing, note-taking, and scene selection. The analysis focuses on Caruth's concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition. The findings show that trauma in *Aftersun* (2022) is represented through fragmented memories that gradually reveal emotional meaning. Through the use of camcorder footage, silence, visual repetition, spatial separation, and fragmented editing, the film portrays trauma as an unresolved experience that cannot be fully understood when it occurs. The study also finds that Sophie reconstructs her understanding of her father through retrospective interpretation, allowing traumatic meaning to emerge over time. Therefore, *Aftersun* (2022) represents trauma not through direct narrative explanation but through fragmented memory and cinematic form.

Keywords: Trauma, Fragmented Memory, Cathy Caruth, Aftersun, Film Studies

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is one of the psychological experiences that is frequently represented in films. However, trauma is often difficult to express directly because traumatic experiences may not be fully understood when they occur. Rather than simply reflecting reality, film represents psychological experiences by constructing meaning through narrative and visual forms (Hall, 2019). Instead of presenting trauma through explicit explanation, filmmakers often use memory, silence, emotional distance, and fragmented storytelling to portray its effects. Through cinematic techniques such as editing, framing, lighting, and sound, films are able to represent psychological experiences that cannot always be communicated through dialogue (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

One film that explores trauma and memory in a unique way is Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* (2022). The film tells the story of Sophie as she recalls a holiday she spent with her father, Calum, at a Turkish resort when she was eleven years old. Rather than presenting the story in a linear structure, Wells combines childhood memories, camcorder recordings, and fragmented

visual sequences that blur the boundary between past and present. As the film progresses, viewers gradually realize that Sophie is attempting to understand aspects of her father's emotional struggles that she could not fully comprehend during childhood. This fragmented narrative structure makes *Aftersun* an interesting object for trauma studies.

Previous studies have examined *Aftersun* from different perspectives. Whitehouse (2025) discusses nostalgia as a therapeutic tool that allows individuals to reconnect with the past. Alari (2025) focuses on analogue aesthetics and the role of recorded media in shaping memory. Ningsih, Amelia, and Pasang (2024) analyze identity issues through framing techniques, while Kotaman (2025) explores remembrance as a narrative strategy. In addition, Apriliana and Tandyonomanu (2023) examine the representation of depression in the film. These studies contribute to the understanding of memory, identity, nostalgia, and mental health in *Aftersun*. However, they do not specifically focus on how trauma is represented through fragmented memory.

Although previous studies have examined *Aftersun* from the perspectives of nostalgia, memory, identity, and depression, limited attention has been given to the representation of trauma through fragmented memory. Most studies focus on the emotional atmosphere of the film or its visual aesthetics rather than examining how cinematic techniques represent traumatic experience. Therefore, this study focuses on trauma representation by applying Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to analyze how fragmented memory functions throughout the film.

Memory scholars have also emphasized that remembering is not a fixed reproduction of past events, but a reconstructive process shaped by later interpretation and cultural context (Erll, 2017; Radstone, 2017). These perspectives help explain why memories often change over time as individuals reinterpret past experiences. However, while memory studies provide a broader understanding of recollection, this study adopts Cathy Caruth's trauma theory because it specifically explains how traumatic experiences emerge through delayed understanding, fragmentation, and repetition.

Cathy Caruth is one of the most influential scholars in trauma studies. According to Caruth (1996), trauma is not simply a response to a shocking event, but an experience that cannot be fully understood when it occurs. Because of this delayed understanding, trauma often returns through fragmented memories, repetition, and indirect recollection. Caruth introduces several concepts related to trauma, including unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition.

These concepts explain how traumatic experiences continue to affect individuals long after the original event has passed. In film studies, Caruth's theory is frequently used to examine how trauma is represented through narrative structure, memory, and visual storytelling.

To address this gap, this study applies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. According to Caruth, trauma is not fully experienced at the moment it occurs. Instead, it returns later through fragmented memories, repetition, and delayed understanding. Caruth explains trauma through several important concepts, including unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition. These concepts are relevant to *Aftersun* because the film presents memories that are incomplete, emotionally ambiguous, and continuously revisited by the protagonist.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how trauma is represented through fragmented memory in Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* (2022) using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory.

The research question of this study is:

How is trauma represented through fragmented memory in Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* (2022) based on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the representation of trauma in Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* (2022). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, emotions, and cinematic representations rather than examining numerical data. In addition, this study applies a film studies approach since the object of analysis is a film. Therefore, the analysis focuses not only on the narrative but also on cinematic elements such as editing, framing, lighting, silence, visual composition, and temporality. These cinematic elements are treated as meaningful components of film language through which psychological experiences can be communicated beyond spoken dialogue (Monaco, 2009).

The primary data source of this study is *Aftersun* (2022), directed by Charlotte Wells. The data consists of scenes, visual images, dialogues, and cinematic techniques that represent trauma and fragmented memory throughout the film. The seven analyzed scenes were selected through purposive sampling because they most explicitly illustrate Cathy Caruth's concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition. The selection was based on the presence of significant cinematic elements, including fragmented editing, visual repetition, silence, spatial separation, and temporal shifts, which directly contribute to the representation of trauma. Scenes that did not provide sufficient evidence of these concepts were excluded from detailed analysis.

The data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, note-taking, and scene documentation. During the viewing process, scenes related to trauma representation were identified and recorded. Screenshots and timecodes were also documented to support the analysis.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, the selected scenes and their interpretations were discussed with the research supervisor through peer debriefing. This process helped ensure that the interpretation remained consistent with Cathy Caruth's theoretical framework while reducing excessive subjective bias. In addition, repeated viewing of the film and cross-checking among visual elements, dialogue, and narrative context were employed to maintain analytical consistency throughout the study.

The data were analyzed using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly the concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition. The analysis began by identifying scenes that represent fragmented memory and emotional ambiguity. The selected scenes were then interpreted in relation to Caruth's concepts to examine how trauma is represented through cinematic language. Each scene was coded according to the Caruth's concept that most strongly characterized its representation of trauma before being interpreted in relation to the film's cinematic elements. Finally, the findings were organized according to the three concepts of trauma theory to explain how fragmented memory functions as the primary medium through which trauma is represented in *Aftersun* (2022).

Since this study is based on a qualitative interpretation of a single film, the findings are inherently interpretive and cannot be generalized beyond the context of *Aftersun* (2022).

Nevertheless, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of trauma representation through fragmented memory within the selected cinematic text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trauma Representation Through Fragmented Memory

The analysis shows that trauma in *Aftersun* (2022) is represented through fragmented memory rather than direct narrative explanation. Instead of presenting a clear traumatic event, Charlotte Wells constructs trauma through incomplete recollections, emotional ambiguity, and recurring visual patterns. Sophie's memories of her holiday with Calum are presented through camcorder recordings, fragmented editing, silence, and temporal shifts that blur the boundary between past and present. These cinematic elements reflect Cathy Caruth's view that trauma often resists direct representation and can only be understood through fragmented recollection.

The findings are organized into three concepts proposed by Caruth: unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition.

Unclaimed Experience

According to Caruth, traumatic experiences are often not fully understood when they occur. Their emotional significance emerges later through memory and reflection. In *Aftersun*, this concept is represented through several moments in which Sophie witnesses changes in Calum's behavior but cannot fully understand their meaning during childhood.

Figure 1. Calum on the balcony at night (00.08.34 - 00.10.29).

One example can be found in the balcony scene, where Calum stands alone outside the hotel room while Sophie sleeps inside. The scene contains minimal dialogue and relies heavily on silence, framing, and body language. Although nothing explicitly dramatic occurs, the visual separation between Calum and Sophie suggests emotional isolation. At the time of the holiday,

Sophie does not recognize the emotional significance of the moment. However, when the memory is revisited from an adult perspective, the scene acquires a deeper emotional meaning and appears to reflect Calum's psychological struggle.

Another example appears in the recurring camcorder recordings. The footage captures seemingly ordinary moments between Sophie and Calum, such as conversations and shared activities. However, these recordings do not reveal Calum's internal condition directly. Instead, they preserve fragments of experience that only gain traumatic significance when Sophie revisits them years later. The recordings therefore function as incomplete memories that require retrospective interpretation.

Figure 2. Sophie recorded her moments with Calum using a camcorder (00.24.07 - 00.24.31).

These scenes demonstrate Caruth's concept of unclaimed experience because the emotional meaning of the events is not fully understood when they occur. Trauma emerges later through reflection, allowing Sophie to reinterpret moments that once appeared ordinary.

Belatedness

Another important concept in Caruth's trauma theory is belatedness. According to Caruth, trauma is often understood only after the event has passed. The emotional meaning of an experience does not emerge immediately but returns later through memory and reflection. In *Aftersun*, belatedness is represented through Sophie's attempt to reconstruct and reinterpret memories of her father from an adult perspective.

Figure 3. Adult Sophie tries to reach Calum in a nightclub (01.30.35 - 01.30.52).

One of the clearest representations of belatedness appears in the nightclub sequences. These scenes are visually different from the rest of the film, featuring flashing lights, fragmented editing, blurred imagery, and unstable continuity. Throughout these sequences, Sophie repeatedly tries to approach Calum but never fully reaches him. His appearance within the frame is brief and inconsistent, creating a sense of emotional distance and uncertainty. Rather than functioning as a realistic location, the nightclub becomes a psychological space where memory, longing, and trauma overlap.

The nightclub sequences also blur the boundary between past and present. Through fragmented editing, adult Sophie and memories of her childhood become emotionally connected within the same visual space. This suggests that trauma continues to affect Sophie long after the holiday has ended. The delayed understanding of her father's emotional condition reflects Caruth's idea that traumatic meaning emerges retrospectively rather than at the moment of experience.

Figure 4. Adult Sophie watching her moments with Calum (01.33.35 - 01.34.29).

Belatedness is also represented through Sophie's repeated viewing of camcorder recordings from the holiday. Although the footage remains unchanged, Sophie's interpretation of it changes over time. Small details that once appeared ordinary gradually acquire emotional significance. Moments of silence, emotional withdrawal, and subtle changes in Calum's behavior become more noticeable when viewed from an adult perspective. As a result, memory functions not as a fixed record of the past but as an evolving process of emotional interpretation.

Through these examples, *Aftersun* (2022) demonstrates that trauma is not fully understood when it occurs. Instead, its meaning emerges gradually through retrospective reflection, supporting Caruth's concept of belatedness.

Repetition

The final concept used in this study is repetition. Caruth argues that trauma often returns repeatedly through memories, images, and emotional patterns. Rather than remaining in the past, traumatic experiences continue to resurface in the present. In *Aftersun* (2022), repetition is represented through recurring visual motifs, repeated emotional patterns, and cyclical narrative structures.

Figure 5. Calum pushes Adult Sophie as she tries to hug him (01.30.59 - 01.31.52).

One example of repetition can be seen in the nightclub sequences also demonstrate repetition. Each time the sequences appear, Sophie attempts to reach Calum but ultimately fails. The same emotional pattern is repeated through flashing lights, fragmented cuts, and disrupted movement. This repetition creates a cyclical structure that prevents emotional resolution and suggests that Sophie remains trapped within an unresolved memory. The repeated inability to reach Calum symbolizes the difficulty of fully understanding the past.

Figure 6. Calum recorded Sophie using a camcorder (00.12.44 - 00.13.05).

Another representation of repetition appears in the recurring camcorder footage. Earlier in the analysis, the recordings were discussed in relation to Sophie's delayed recognition of her father's emotional condition. Here, however, the emphasis shifts to their repeated recurrence across the film, through which Wells continually returns the audience to the same unresolved memories.

Throughout the film, Wells repeatedly returns to recordings of Sophie and Calum during their holiday. However, these repeated images do not provide new information or narrative closure. Instead, each return to the footage reinforces the incompleteness of memory and highlights Sophie's continued effort to understand her father. The footage gradually functions

less as a record of the past and more as a recurring reminder of an unresolved emotional experience.

Figure 7. Reflection as form from different perspectives (00.57.57 - 00.58.04).

The film further reinforces repetition through the use of mirrors and reflective imagery. Reflections appear throughout the narrative and often present fragmented or unstable images rather than clear representations. These visual motifs emphasize the idea that memory is incomplete and continuously revisited from different perspectives. As a result, repetition in *Aftersun* (2022) functions as a cinematic representation of trauma's persistence, showing how unresolved experiences continue to resurface over time.

The findings indicate that trauma in *Aftersun* (2022) is represented through fragmented memory rather than through direct narrative explanation. By applying Cathy Caruth's concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition, this study demonstrates that trauma in the film emerges through a gradual process of remembering and reinterpretation rather than through a single identifiable traumatic event.

Sophie's childhood perspective reflects ***unclaimed experience***, as she is unable to fully understand her father's emotional struggles at the time they occur. This delayed understanding develops into ***belatedness***, where memories are reinterpreted from adulthood through recurring nightclub sequences and camcorder recordings, allowing traumatic meaning to emerge retrospectively. At the same time, ***repetition*** is conveyed through recurring visual motifs, emotional silences, fragmented editing, and repeated returns to the same memories, emphasizing that unresolved trauma continues to resurface instead of reaching narrative closure. Together, these three concepts demonstrate that trauma in *Aftersun* is represented not as a single event but as an evolving psychological experience reconstructed through fragmented memory.

An important finding of this study is that cinematic techniques play a significant role in representing trauma. Fragmented editing, visual repetition, spatial separation, silence, and unstable temporality communicate psychological experiences without relying on explicit

dialogue or exposition. These techniques position the audience within Sophie's perspective, encouraging viewers to experience the same uncertainty and emotional ambiguity that characterize traumatic memory. Consequently, cinematic form functions not merely as an aesthetic choice but as the primary medium through which traumatic experience is represented and interpreted.

The findings of this study also extend previous scholarship on *Aftersun* by offering a distinct perspective on the film's fragmented narrative. Whitehouse (2025) interprets *Aftersun* through nostalgia as a therapeutic process, while Alari (2025) emphasizes the role of analogue aesthetics and recorded media in shaping memory. Likewise, Ningsih et al. (2024) examine the film through identity construction, Kotaman (2025) focuses on remembrance as a narrative strategy, and Apriliana and Tandyonomanu (2023) analyse the representation of depression. Rather than approaching fragmented memory primarily as an expression of nostalgia, identity, or mental health, the present study demonstrates that these cinematic elements also function as representations of trauma when interpreted through Caruth's concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and repetition. This finding suggests that the film's fragmented form is not merely an aesthetic or narrative choice but a cinematic strategy through which unresolved trauma is communicated and gradually reconstructed by both the protagonist and the audience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how trauma is represented through fragmented memory in Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* (2022) by applying Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The findings demonstrate that trauma is represented not through direct narrative explanation but through fragmented recollections, emotional ambiguity, and recurring cinematic patterns. Through the concepts of ***unclaimed experience***, ***belatedness***, and ***repetition***, the film portrays trauma as an unresolved psychological experience whose meaning gradually emerges through memory and retrospective interpretation. Rather than depicting a single traumatic event, *Aftersun* constructs trauma through fragmented editing, visual repetition, silence, spatial separation, and temporal discontinuity, allowing traumatic meaning to emerge gradually through cinematic form.

Beyond addressing a gap in previous *Aftersun* scholarship, this study demonstrates that fragmented cinematic form functions not merely as an aesthetic style but as a medium through

which traumatic experience is represented. By applying Caruth's trauma theory, the study highlights how cinematic language can communicate psychological experiences that resist direct representation and therefore contributes to broader discussions in trauma studies and film studies. Future research may extend this approach by comparing trauma representation across multiple contemporary films or by integrating Caruth's framework with broader memory theories to further examine the relationship between trauma, memory, and cinematic form.

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