

Trauma Narratives of Scottish Childhood in Janice Galloway's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

*Janice Galloway represents one of the most strikingly original voices in new Scottish fiction, which breaks with the tradition of conventional narratives looking back at the national history and looking up to larger-than-life male heroes. Instead, Galloway writes deftly crafted short stories of everyday life in contemporary settings, finding that the past informs the present and proceeding to explore how the stateless nation's cultural heritage affects her characters. This paper analyses selected stories from Galloway's collections *Blood* (1991) and *Where You Find It* (1996) from the perspective of trauma criticism, which seems a particularly fitting approach to the author's often disturbing narratives of violence and abuse. The focus is on child characters and on the ways that historical trauma, as introduced by Sigmund Freud and further refined by Cathy Caruth, is passed down to them. Finally, the paper provides examples from the individual short stories which illustrate how the traumatic experience can be acknowledged, witnessed, and ultimately communicated.*

KEYWORDS

Scottish literature, Janice Galloway, short story, trauma, childhood

Scottish literature has, since its inception, been preoccupied with the foundational themes of history and identity. What makes these issues particularly problematic for Scottish writers is their precarious position as citizens of a stateless nation, which is neither independent nor fully incorporated into the fabric of the United Kingdom. The turning point in Scottish history was the 1707 Act of Union, which yoked together the formerly sovereign kingdoms of England and Scotland and which had a profound impact on Scottish national identity. Widespread opposition to this more-than-three-centuries-old formative historical event has continued up to modern times, as evidenced by the 1997 devolution referendum, resulting in the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament, and followed by the 2014 independence referendum, resulting in a prolongation of the status quo amid continuing debate about a second referendum. Meanwhile, the Scottish nation has settled on self-identifying in opposition to the English, or, by extension, in opposition to the world at large, rather than cultivating a more wholesome sense of an independent national self. Out of this wilful defiance there emerges the archetype of the national hero, who is by necessity male, rebellious, and unyielding even in the face of certain defeat and death. While this larger-than-life figure of mythic dimensions serves its purpose well in historical novels, where sentimentalising the fight for a lost cause and glorifying violence are tools of the trade, such a character is very remote from the realities of contemporary Scotland. In this context, Monica Germanà observes the collective historical trauma whose ghosts still haunt the nation: “The impact of the surfacing of historical memory has a damaging effect on both individual and national psyches. A pervasive sense of alienation is generated by the gap between present identity and its bogus foundations based on forged narratives of the past.”¹

1 Monica Germanà, “The Sick Body and the Fractured Self”, *Gothic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 4.

The above brief sketch of the historical background illustrates that Scottish culture in general and Scottish literature in particular have been moulded in such a way as to develop a proclivity to revisit unresolved issues of the past, struggle with finding an authentic identity, and default to promoting toughness, resistance, and individualism. It follows that the prevalent mood of the Scottish cultural tradition is a hypermasculine one, which, among other things, entails the stereotypes of despising weakness, suppressing emotion, and as often as not threatening to erupt into violence. This narrowly focused cultural environment neither fosters nor particularly welcomes other voices and perspectives, to the extent that a continuous tradition of Scottish women's writing was established only in the 1980s, and even as late as in 1999, the female Scottish writer Janice Galloway argued in an interview that the "so-called women's issues are still regarded as deviant, add-on, extra. Not the Big Picture."² Earlier, Galloway talked about the guilt apparently inherent in female authors who venture to explore new themes from their own unique perspectives: "Scottish women have their own particular complications with writing and definition, complications which derive from the general problems of being a colonised nation. Then, that wee touch extra. Their sex. There is coping with that guilt of taking time off the concerns of national politics to get concerned with the sexual sort."³ Now an established, even canonical figure of Scottish women's writing, Galloway epitomises in her early short story collections the Scottish preoccupation with what is most helpfully described as trauma. An underlying experience of trauma is reflected in Galloway's explorations of contested identities, troubled memories, or even a total lack of memory, fragmentation of perception, and the limits of expressing all these multiple facets of the human condition in language.

Galloway entered the literary scene with the novel *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989), which won her immediate critical acclaim, as the author was hailed as one of the most creative, original, and intriguing voices in contemporary Scottish writing. She went on to publish her first collection of short stories, *Blood* (1991), and with the intermission of a minor novel, *Foreign Parts* (1994), her second collection, *Where You Find It* (1996). It is arguably in her shorter works that her subtly understated style shines the most: Galloway writes deft, condensed prose, displaying her sharp sense of detail and her mastery of seemingly small epiphanies that belong as much to her characters as to the reader. To exemplify her characteristic technique, the short story "Baby-Sitting" from her second collection is a disturbing vignette of two obviously neglected children, a toddler and his school-age brother, who, having searched their father's pockets for coins, scrape for food on their own. The father's presence looms throughout the story as a vague threat, and it is only in the last paragraph that the decisive hint appears that the father has been lying dead in front of the television for at least several days without anyone else knowing. Galloway is often emotionally devastating and always unflinchingly honest, which may come across as unwarranted brutality or even perversion, especially when coupled with her deadpan descriptions of absurd situations and morbid humour. As Douglas Gifford explains, however, "she is merely working with what's out

2 Qtd. in Cristie March, "Interview with Janice Galloway", *Edinburgh Review*, no. 101 (1999): 85.

3 Janice Galloway, "Introduction", in *Meantime: Looking Forward to the Millennium*, ed. Janice Galloway and Marion Sinclair (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), 5-6.

there in traditional urban-Scottish humour, so that she is simultaneously reflecting and satirising the way in which it mingles the humane and the cruel, the sympathetic and the savagely sceptical".⁴

Galloway's early work broke new ground and opened up new possible directions for emerging writers in several respects. First and foremost, in Glenda Norquay's words, Galloway "writes against the grand narratives and mastering discourses which shape us", and she does so with an awareness that "these mastering narratives are directly related to the materiality of people's lives".⁵ Galloway does not presume to create a new grand narrative to live by; rather, she is interested in the ordinary course of humanity, small people with their small concerns, and even more so characters at the periphery of existence, who would be considered too mundane, too low, and too unsavoury to deserve a place of their own in mainstream literature. As Mary McGlynn notes, Galloway fully fleshes out "characters normally sketched only as 'stock characters'",⁶ including very young children, such as the two brothers in "Baby-Sitting", where the exact age of the older boy is difficult to guess, but he is young enough to arouse suspicion and speculation on the part of the staff when he comes into a fish-and-chip shop with his toddler brother in tow. A child protagonist is, of course, no innovation in itself, as it happens to be the central character in traditional coming-of-age narratives; what is unique about Galloway's treatment of children in her fiction is their comparatively younger age and above all, the fact that the child here is the protagonist not of a growing-up story but of a trauma narrative. This upturns the conventions of the coming-of-age genre, which revolves around the child's more or less successful mental and emotional growth into young adulthood, whereas the experience of trauma works the opposite way, in that it arrests growth and paralyses the subject.

It seems fitting to apply the approach of trauma studies specifically to Galloway's short stories featuring children, not only because children are particularly vulnerable and impressionable but also because they are only starting the process of defining their own identities, making sense of the world around them, and figuring out the possibilities and limitations of language as a tool of communication. Galloway fully utilises the medium of the short story to set out, as a child would, on a journey of exploration and discovery, a quest for a complex identity consisting of individual qualities as well as the shared characteristics of gender, class, nationality, and more. For all her experiments, though, Galloway's "fictions are not expeditions into a radical and essential femininity from which to resist masculine power," as Carole Jones points out; "rather, her writing is informed by a conception of gender as relational and identity as discursively constructed".⁷ Identity is arguably the most pertinent issue in trauma criticism in that trauma is generally defined, as Michelle Balaev summarises, in terms of "a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's

4 Douglas Gifford, "Contemporary Fiction 2: Seven Writers in Scotland," in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 609.

5 Glenda Norquay, "Janice Galloway's Novels: Fraudulent Mooching," in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, ed. Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 135.

6 Mary M. McGlynn, *Narratives of Class in New Irish and Scottish Literature: From Joyce to Kelman, Doyle, Galloway, and McNamee* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 136.

7 Carole Jones, "Burying the Man That Was: Janice Galloway and Gender Disorientation," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 210.

emotional organization and perception of the external world”⁸ Trauma narratives, then, examine “the self’s comprehension of a traumatic experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped by language”, as Balaev adds, which typically entails formal experimentation and linguistic innovation.⁹ The linguistically experimental texts reflect the incoherent nature of mentally as yet unprocessed traumatic material, which may be represented in an impressionistic, fragmentary, and repetitive but at the same time incomplete manner.

As it happens, trauma studies started with Sigmund Freud, and though his reductionist view of trauma was quickly surpassed by a more nuanced model, he is to be credited with laying the foundations of the influential concept of historical trauma. In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud proposes the existence of a collective trauma that occurred historically but is passed down from one generation to the next in the form of an archaic “inheritance of memory-traces of what our forefathers experienced”, which contributes to “the formation of a national character” and causes an individual to act in response to “genetic events” in addition to the events experienced by the individual at first hand.¹⁰ Commenting on Freud’s interpretation of the Moses story and historical trauma, Cathy Caruth conveys the gist of Freud’s analysis in more readily applicable terms, observing “that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas”.¹¹ It is to be noted that one does not need to subscribe to Freud’s contentious claims concerning the genetic transmission of trauma in order to work with his notion of historical trauma at all, since human beings are more than simply the sum of their biology and are formed by nature as much as nurture. In other words, it is perfectly plausible for historical trauma to be inherited through the stories that a nation tells itself about its history, identity, and purpose. In fact, storytelling is a fundamental concept in trauma studies because first, the trauma must be retrieved from where it was suppressed in memory and then it must be narrated in its entirety in order to be integrated into normal memory, as Pierre Janet argues.¹²

Most of the defining attributes of trauma discussed above are to be found underlying Galloway’s story “Someone Had To” from her collection *Where You Find It*. The story elaborates powerfully on the motifs of silence and paralysis, which are a common initial response of the subject to the experience of trauma.¹³ The earliest trauma studies scholars follow the example of Freud in assuming that trauma is unrepresentable, unspeakable, and hence incommunicable in language;¹⁴ but again, Caruth qualifies this absolutist view with the caveat that even though it is extremely challenging, trauma can be communicated in a literary language, “a language that defies, even as

8 Michelle Balaev, “Trauma Studies,” in *A Companion to Literary Theory*, ed. David H. Richter (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 360.

9 Balaev, “Trauma Studies,” 360.

10 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1939), 159–160.

11 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 24.

12 See Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing: A Historical and Clinical Study*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 661–663.

13 Balaev, “Trauma Studies,” 360.

14 Balaev, “Trauma Studies,” 360.

it claims, our understanding”, as she puts it.¹⁵ The language of “Someone Had To” is exactly that: as the story moves beyond the relatively conventional exposition and goes on to escalate towards its brutal ending, the narrator starts losing control over his voice, and his sentences melt together in a single unpunctuated stream of frustrated fragmentary language, which at irregular intervals is further disrupted by shouted phrases styled in ALL CAPS. The narrator is the stepfather of the six-year-old Kimberly, who understands what she is told, as is demonstrated by her obeying her stepfather’s verbal orders, but never speaks, whether because of physical or mental disability, perhaps such as autism spectrum disorder. The latter is also suggested by Kimberly’s conspicuous lack of spontaneous expression and lack of display of affect, which enrages her stepfather to the point of cruel abuse of the child. Even as he burns her wrist with his cigarette, Kimberly remains silent and completely paralysed, not crying out, not trying to resist. This short story enacts in literal terms Caruth’s metaphor of trauma as “a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available”.¹⁶ The traumatised Kimberly does not and cannot speak up, and yet her literal wound is glaring enough to speak on her behalf.

“Last Thing”, another story from the same collection, similarly employs aspects of silence and paralysis but this time also adds the motif of guilt, not on the part of the person who inflicts a traumatic experience on another but on the part of the victim. As suggested in the introductory section, traditional Scottish culture shows little sympathy with the victim and goes so far as to argue that the victim is to blame, which is a sentiment internalised by many specifically female victims in Galloway’s stories. As Willy Maley observes: “Galloway identifies guilt as gendered. Male abuse of power is the objective correlative.”¹⁷ This is forcefully manifested throughout “Last Thing”, which recounts the last moments in the life of a schoolgirl who is returning from the cinema with her friend and makes the mistake of empathising with a suspicious stranger who complains that he has lost his mate. While her friend runs, the girl hesitates, which the stranger repays by dragging her into a dark alley, groping her, and strangling her at the same time. As the victim is being literally silenced, she has various thoughts, among which the most prominent is her concern that she will get her (un)just deserts at home: “I could get a row easy for there being marks on my neck maybe hit I wondered if it looked like love bites or hit for not being back on time.”¹⁸ The girl’s upbringing has clearly instilled into her an underlying sense of guilt, so that she readily accepts blame for whatever might occur, whether by a fault of her own or otherwise, which apparently does not make any difference. As Monica Germanà aptly concludes, “the collective psyche of Scotland, a nation possessed by the ghosts of its repressed traumas, is eminently affected by a profound, endemic guilt feeling”¹⁹

As has already been implied by the examples analysed above, Galloway’s stories consistently present a society where male violence is the norm rather than the exception, where women and children suffer in silence, and where none of the parties involved feels a need to change anything

15 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.

16 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

17 Willy Maley, “Onto Plums: Spending ‘A Week with Uncle Felix,’” in *Exchanges: Reading Janice Galloway’s Fictions*, ed. Linda Jackson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Review, 2004), 51.

18 Janice Galloway, “Last Things,” in *Where You Find It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 191.

19 Monica Germanà, *Scottish Women’s Gothic and Fantastic Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 158.

about it. This is most directly and unmistakably shown in “Fearless”, a story in Galloway’s first collection, *Blood*. The story portrays a community terrorised by a male figure with a strong symbolic resonance, as the offender is characterised by intense anger, unprovoked violence, and casual abuse of women, children, and animals. Significantly, he is also compared with a ghost haunting the streets, which fall silent on hearing his approach, “the clink and drag, clink and drag, like Marley’s ghost”.²⁰ Women use him as a “bogeyman” to scare their children into obedience, imprinting on their minds that he is a force to be reconciled with and never fought against.²¹ Even more tellingly, the women blame themselves instead of the aggressor: “After all, you had to remember his wife left him. It was our fault really. So we had to put up with it the way we put up with everything else that didn’t make sense or wasn’t fair; the hard, volatile maleness of the whole West Coast Legend.”²² Here again, as is the case with Galloway, there comes the striking discrepancy between male violence and female guilt for it; or as Victor Sage puts it, “the sadism of the culture dwarfs the subject”, so that the traumatised subjects of the systematic abuse deeply embedded in the social structure start to consider themselves inferior and deserving of whatever is being inflicted on them.²³ A society that is the carrier of such a culture perpetuates its historical trauma indefinitely and creates a climate of fear, frustration, and distrust.

Galloway’s stories of Scottish childhood incorporate an impressive number of dubious clichés and misleading half-truths that are mechanically repeated by the characters who act on them; bringing to mind Freud’s observation on “the compulsion to repeat” the formerly repressed traumatic experience, once it has been partly recalled.²⁴ What is being reiterated here is not only words but above all, patterns of behaviour which the parents in Galloway’s stories intentionally pass down to their children. The most frequently recurring educational maxims include sparing the rod and spoiling the child, being cruel to be kind, teaching someone a lesson, and, of course, boys will be boys. In a short story from *Blood* called “Scenes from the Life No. 23: Paternal Advice”, these are the very phrases of would-be-encouragement that the father rehearses in his internal monologue as he is coaxing himself into teaching his little son a lesson: “it was for the best after all and a father had to do his best by his boy even if it was hard even if he didnt want to bad father that shirked his responsibilities no bloody use to anybody the boy had to be learned right and learned right right from the word go right spare the rod cruel to be nobodys fool that sort of thing right.”²⁵ The sense of a historical trauma being re-enacted is emphasised by the formal arrangement of the story, which is laid out as a theatre play in which both the dramatis personae, the father and the son, have their spoken lines prefaced by their names printed in upper-case letters. This layout also draws attention to the uncomfortable silence of the boy, who has the word “silence” following his name where the speech normally would be and who is allowed a single word, “Dad!”, a cry of surprise and fear, as his father hoists him and then puts him down standing upright on

20 Janice Galloway, “Fearless”, in *Blood* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 112.

21 Galloway, “Fearless”, 112.

22 Galloway, “Fearless”, 113.

23 Victor Sage, “‘The Grail, or the Holy Bloodshed...’: Cruelty, Darkness and the Body in Janice Galloway, Alison Kennedy and Louise Welsh,” *Gothic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 64.

24 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 20.

25 Janice Galloway, “Scenes from the Life No. 23: Paternal Advice,” in *Blood* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 11.

a high mantelpiece in the room.²⁶ In the chilling lesson that follows, the father deceives the son, persuading the boy to jump off the mantelpiece and promising that he will catch him because he is his father, after all. As the hesitating boy finally does what he is told, the father quickly steps aside, letting the child crash onto the tiled floor and concluding with the moral: “Let that be a lesson to you son. Trust nae cunt.”²⁷

The performative form of “Scenes from the Life No. 23”, along with the disturbing silence of the young trauma victim, correspond to Caruth’s characterisation of trauma as “a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness”.²⁸ The audience bears witness to a “scene”, as the title of the aptly named story indicates, the actors in which are not yet aware that they are rehearsing a traumatic experience, which also means that they are incapable of narrating it. The act of witnessing an event implies observing it, seeing it happen, or even watching intently as the event unfolds. This is especially relevant in several of Galloway’s stories featuring female victims because Galloway often uses the power of the gaze “as a source of feminine counterpower” to the “illegitimate male brutality at the heart of the patriarchal system”, as Jorge Sacido Romero phrases it.²⁹ Returning to “Someone Had To”, an already-discussed story, what the abusive stepfather of the quiet girl complains about in particular is the child’s fixed gaze, her blue eyes like “little pinpoints, little drill holes”, which are “STARING all the time like I’d done something wrong”.³⁰ By his own admission, he is the only one to see it, but he insists that the girl has “A NEED TO DEFY”, which on a certain level proves to be the case when he administers his most brutal punishment yet.³¹ Unnerved by her gaze and, hopefully, some deeply buried sense of guilt that he did indeed do something wrong, he immerses the child in a bath filled with boiling-hot water. Not even this stops the girl’s eyes from haunting him, and the story concludes with “those big blue eyes still staring up like butter wouldn’t melt”.³² In this case, the girl is a silent witness to her own trauma, and her unspoken testimony does not seem to make any difference, apart from provoking the aggressor to even more extreme abuse.

In another previously discussed story, “Fearless”, a similar scenario as in “Someone Had To” is followed through to a more encouraging ending. The ghost-like male presence that terrorises the town in “Fearless” does not tolerate being looked at, as the first-person female narrator, then “a wean in a pixie hat”, explains in painstaking detail.³³ She however goes on to relate one occasion when Fearless, as the disturber is ironically nicknamed, singles out the narrator and her mother for a close inspection to decide, apparently at random, whether they are breaking the no-looking rule or not. Though unprovoked, Fearless starts hurling obscene insults at the mother, and acting

26 Galloway, “Scenes from the Life No. 23,” 14–15.

27 Galloway, “Scenes from the Life No. 23,” 16.

28 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.

29 Jorge Sacido Romero, “Unmasking Male Violence in Four Stories by Janice Galloway,” in *On the Move: Glancing Backwards to Build a Future in English Studies*, ed. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz and Jon Ortiz de Urbina Arruabarrena (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 2016), 347.

30 Janice Galloway, “Someone Had To,” in *Where You Find It* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 135–136.

31 Galloway, “Someone Had To,” 137.

32 Galloway, “Someone Had To,” 139.

33 Galloway, “Fearless,” 114.

against her better judgement, the girl responds by turning around to gaze at him. Taken by surprise by this apparently unprecedented act of defiance, Fearless falls silent, at which the girl panics and kicks him in the shin. What is most striking is the reaction of the mother, a compliant perpetrator of the historical trauma of male abuse, whom the narrator remembers “shaking the living daylight out of me, a furious telling off, and a warning I’d be found dead strangled up a close one day and never to do anything like that again”.³⁴ Finally, it transpires that this happened a long time ago, so long ago that both the narrator’s mother and Fearless are dead by now, which means that the story has been narrated in retrospect. This seemingly inconsequential detail is in fact the key element in trauma studies, as it represents the last step in the sequence of actions required for a trauma to be resolved: it must be remembered, acknowledged, and repeated in narration. As Caruth emphasises throughout her interpretation of the traumatic experience, “what returns to haunt the victim... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.”³⁵

In her own words, Janice Galloway writes to explore the question “What is it like to be an intelligent woman coping with the late twentieth century?”³⁶ The answers can be as multifaceted as her short stories, which allow her to observe and report various aspects of contemporary human existence in a condensed space. Even though the setting of her stories is firmly rooted in the present day, she acknowledges the past and reflects on how a seemingly bygone history shapes each present moment. Galloway’s stories are unobtrusively yet recognisably Scottish in their accents and turns of phrase, openness in approaching disturbing topics, and characteristically dark strain of humour. Happening to be Scottish involves an often-ambivalent attitude to the national history, culture, and identity, which have been significantly affected by the collective experience of historical trauma, indefinitely perpetuated by its being passed down from one generation to the next. Galloway rarely engages with this difficult inheritance in direct terms, and yet her stories bear witness to the fact, populated as they are with violent fathers, enabling mothers, and abused children. From the perspective of trauma studies, the survivor may first perceive the horror as literally unspeakable, so that the apparent incommunicability of the traumatic experience may lead to mutism, paralysis, and repression of the memory. For the trauma to be resolved, to the extent that it is possible, the event must be retrieved, recognised, and above all, retold. This is precisely what Galloway achieves in her short stories: through the medium of artistic expression, she provides testimony and narrates on behalf of those who cannot.

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34 Galloway, “Fearless,” 114.

35 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

36 March, “Interview with Janice Galloway”, 85.

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