Trauma, Gendered Violence and Coping-mechanisms in Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends With Us*
Abstract

This essay analyses the representation of trauma and gendered violence in Colleen Hoover’s novel *It Ends With Us*. To do this, trauma theory and the notion of gendered violence are applied in the analysis, as well as Dorrit Cohn’s ideas of diary novels, dissonant narrator and consonant narrator. The findings show that the protagonist, Lily’s, way of coping with her trauma and gendered violence during her teenage years, was to keep a diary, effectively using scriptotherapy. When that was not enough, however, she actively suppressed her problems. The essay also shows that Cohn’s ideas of dissonant and consonant narrator play a part in how Lily’s development is shown throughout the novel.

Key words

trauma theory, gendered violence, domestic abuse, coping-mechanisms, expressive writing, Colleen Hoover

Acknowledgments

I want to give a thank you to my supervisor, Anne Holm, for her guidance as well as her understanding during this term. It has been challenging, but with her help it has been a little bit easier. I also want to thank my parents for encouraging me and always believing in me. Most importantly I want to thank my partner, for simply being there and listening when I have needed it.
# Table of contents

1  Introduction  

2  Theoretical background  
   2.1  Trauma theory, and the representation of trauma in fiction  
   2.2  Trauma pertaining to gendered violence, and representation in fiction  
   2.3  Expressive writing as a coping-mechanism/healing device  

3  Analysis  

4  Conclusion  

5  Works cited
1 Introduction

In Colleen Hoover’s contemporary romantic novel, *It Ends With Us* (2016) the protagonist Lily Bloom explains, “My whole life, I knew exactly what I’d do if a man ever treated me the way my father treated my mother. It was simple. I would leave and it would never happen again” (242). Lily grew up in an abusive household, where her father repeatedly physically abused her mother. As a 23-year-old adult, she finds herself in the same situation as her mother once did. Lily goes through the trauma she suffered as a child once again, but this time around she is the one experiencing the physical abuse. She is unable to let go of her past experiences until she herself undergoes it and manages to break the cycle of domestic abuse.

According to Freud, whose ideas contributed to the birth of trauma studies, “the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3), which Cathy Caruth explains in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). The events and situations Lily is put through can be seen as traumatic; first seeing her mother being abused and then getting abused by her own partner. In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (2015) Judith Herman states that people who suffer from trauma are contradictory in the way they want to “call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it” (1). According to Herman, trauma survivors both want to talk about the traumatic event, at the same time as they want to forget it ever happened. Connecting *It Ends With Us* to Herman’s idea of the trauma survivor’s contradictory state of mind, it can be assumed that Lily tries to narrate her trauma by writing it down in the form of a diary, addressed to Ellen DeGeneres - she does however not talk verbally to anyone about what she is going through. As she grows older, it can be argued that she tries to flee from her trauma, in the way she moves to Boston away from her
parents; at the same time she admits to Ryle Kincaid, her partner, that her mother was abused during Lily’s upbringing.

Furthermore, a definition of what the terms domestic violence and gendered violence mean will be needed to analyse this novel. According to the Association of Chief Police Officers (qtd. in Harne & Radford 3), the term domestic violence refers to “any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse ... between adults who are or have been intimate partners regardless of gender”. However, despite the fact that domestic abuse occurs towards both men and women, there is an apparent pattern in gendered violence. Arguably, gendered violence is present in It Ends With Us, seeing as the two characters experiencing domestic violence are both females who undergo abuse from their partners. The father of Lily abuses her mother, exploiting his role as a husband, and later on Lily’s own partner abuses her.

Additionally, regarding children witnessing abuse in their household, Mary Allen writes in Social Work and Intimate Partner Violence (2013) that “children who have been exposed to family violence may have long-term physical, psychological and emotional effects. The longer family violence is experienced, the more harmful it is” (116). Tying this with It Ends With Us, Lily suffered from witnessing the abuse against her mother. Not only is she using expressive writing as a coping-mechanism, which I will explain further in the theory section, but she also suffers a similar fate as her mother when she herself finds an abusive partner. In the end, however, she manages to break the cycle of abuse by ending her relationship with Ryle, her partner, in contrast to her mother who lived with it throughout her entire marriage with Lily’s father; I shall discuss in more depth in the analysis how Lily breaks the cycle of abuse.

In this essay the aim is to investigate the representation of trauma and domestic violence in the form of gendered violence in It Ends With Us, and how the protagonist uses a specific coping-mechanism to handle her trauma. My focus will lay on Lily Bloom, the character from which the story is narrated, as she experiences abuse both as a child and youth, but also in her
adulthood. For this reason, the main theoretical approach in this essay will be trauma theory with a focus on gendered violence in the household. However, it should be emphasized that this novel has not been the object in academic study before, and therefore lacks previous research. Moreover, there is a general gap in the field of literary criticism regarding gendered violence. In addition, it will be argued, and demonstrated in the analysis section, that Lily uses expressive writing as a coping-mechanism in the form of diary entries. To do this, I will apply Dorrit Cohn’s concepts of the diary novel, as well as dissonant and consonant narrator. By using Cohn’s ideas I will therefore bring in a narratological angle, although it is not my main focus of this essay. The reason for choosing Cohn’s theories lies within the book’s retrospective perspective. Due to the flashbacks in the novel, in the form of diary entries, Cohn’s ideas will be applicable considering that her concepts concern retrospective narratology.

Before moving on to the theoretical section of my essay, I will briefly mention possible issues surrounding literature that represents gendered violence. The reason behind a novel regarding violence of this kind can be to show what might be going on in abusive relationships. The difficulties with this lays within the ethical aspect; survivors of gendered violence who are reading this can be triggered and experience vicarious trauma through the main character of the novel. However, real life trauma is usually far more complex than it is portrayed in novels, which can lead to books about gendered violence being misinforming.

I will continue this essay by introducing the theoretical background and earlier research, which pertains to the thesis of my essay. I will after that analyse my primary text, *It Ends With Us*, by applying the theories presented in the theory section, as well as adding my own interpretations. In the conclusion I will make a concise summary of my findings in the analysis.
2 Theoretical background

In the analysis section of my essay, I will be using trauma theory to analyse the traumatized protagonist, Lily Bloom, and I will therefore go into more detail about trauma theory in the present section. I will also be covering trauma presented as domestic violence in the analysis, although I will refer to this particular violence in the novel as gendered violence. Additionally I will cover expressive writing as a coping-mechanism, the narratological tool of diary entries as a narrative, as well as dissonant and consonant narration.

2.1 Trauma theory, and the representation of trauma in fiction

The definition of trauma stems from the disciplines of psychology and medicine, but trauma theory has also come to grow into a field within literary studies in the last century, with several prominent critics and theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead. Formerly, the term “trauma” was used to refer to the injuries that were inflicted upon a physical body. However, in her book Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (1996) Cathy Caruth explains that in contemporary times “trauma”, notably after Freudian psychoanalysis, has come to indicate mental injuries, rather than bodily harm (3). In his article “Notes on Trauma and Community” (1991), Kai Erikson points out that trauma can stem from “a constellation of life's experiences as well as from a discrete event—from a pro longed exposure to danger as well as from a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault” (457). In It Ends With Us Lily is exposed to gendered violence from a young age, and she goes through it as an adult with her own partner. Her trauma thus originates from both an extended experience of violence in the home, but also from several situations where her own partner abuses her.

In addition, Herman writes that traumatic events usually concern situations that pose any sort of threat to a person’s life or their body, or “a close personal encounter with violence
and death” (33). Thus, trauma usually involves violence in some type of way. We cannot say that every act of violence will create trauma, but trauma can undoubtedly be the outcome of violence. Women, and men, who live with continual domestic violence repeatedly go through actual traumatic events, not just reliving it, whether it be physical or verbal violence. These traumatic events can lead to the survivor developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

While on the subject of PTSD, Herman further explains that there are three different categories within post-traumatic stress disorder: “hyperarousal”, “intrusion” and “constriction” (35). Hyperarousal indicates that the survivor is always alert for imminent danger and expects it perpetually; intrusion suggests that the survivor experiences the trauma repeatedly, as if the traumatic event occurs frequently in the present; constriction means that the survivor feels like he or she cannot affect the outcome of the traumatic event, and consequently shuts down their self-defence (35). One can argue that hyperarousal is present in *It Ends With Us*, due to Lily’s fear and paranoia of her partner, Ryle, after he has hit her more than once. I will explain further in the analysis how hyperarousal is applicable to the novel.

Caruth argues that the person experiencing, or surviving, trauma must go through the trauma more than once (7). In other words, the trauma does not only exist in the situation where the trauma arises, but also in the repeated memories. This mental wound might take years to cure, compared to a bodily wound that can heal in a few days or weeks. In the book Caruth edited, *Trauma: Explorations In Memory* (1995), she claims that trauma is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event … which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event” (4-5). Repetition is therefore intrinsic in trauma.

Furthermore, this is also something that Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès discusses in her chapter “From Traumatic Iteration to Healing Narrativisation in *Shalimar the Clown* by Salman Rushdie: The Therapeutic Role of Romance” (2012). She suggests that in order to overcome
the trauma the survivor must narrativise the memories, because until that is accomplished “the
traumatised subject lives in a sort of frozen present time, and is caught in a ceaseless imaginative
reiteration of the traumatic experience” (204). That is, the survivor must go, and will go,
through the trauma repeatedly, precisely like both Caruth and Fortin-Tournés have stated. In
Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (1992), Shoshana
Felman and Dori Laub explain that a traumatic event is an event that “has no beginning, no
ending, no before, no during and no after” (69). Trauma survivors are thus stuck in a repeated
traumatic experience, and to be able to get free of the memories the survivor must create a
narrative (Felman and Laub 69), which I will go into greater detail about in the section about
expressive writing as a coping-mechanism.

The representation of trauma in fiction has increased over the last few decades, and
Anne Whitehead states in her book Trauma Fiction (2004) that “trauma fiction seeks to
foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting
impact of the traumatic event” (82). That is to say, the aim with trauma fiction is to create a
narrative for the trauma. It is, however, important to note that most trauma fiction revolves
around either wars (such as WW1, the Vietnam war or WW2), colonialism (as in collective
trauma) or the fictional work deals with trauma narrativised as something supernatural, since
trauma can be so horrendous that it cannot be explained with anything other than with witchcraft
or the supernatural (Whitehead 83-4). This in turn creates a gap in representation within
literature: war and colonialism are not the sole causes of trauma, considering events such as
abuse can also be the origin for trauma.

Moreover, Laurie Vickroy states in her book Trauma and Survival in Contemporary
Fiction (2002) that many trauma narratives focus on the mother/child relationship, notably the
daughter’s identification with their mother. She says that “daughters feel a conflicted protective
fearfulness toward their mothers and a dread of reliving their mothers’ traumas” (4). Even
though Vickroy is mainly talking about colonization in this section, this can also be seen in contemporary novels like *It Ends With Us*, such as when Lily is afraid of leaving her mother alone with her father and yet she is terrified of suffering the same fate as her mother.

Another important aspect of trauma theory is the memory of trauma. It is widely discussed and many theorists have different opinions regarding the recollection of trauma. One of Caruth’s more known arguments about trauma is that trauma survivors cannot remember the traumatic events until it is repeated through nightmares or flashbacks. She writes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, that a traumatic event is an event that “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). However, recent research has proven this to be inaccurate. Richard J. McNally writes in his article “Debunking Myths about Trauma and Memory” (2005) that “When the science is interpreted properly, the evidence shows that traumatic events—those experienced as overwhelmingly terrifying at the time of their occurrence—are highly memorable and seldom, if ever, forgotten” (821). Many critics of trauma theory have claimed that the traumatic events survivors’ experiences are so horrible that the human brain simply cannot process them like normal memories. The studies and research that McNally has presented disprove those particular statements made by Caruth, among others. Just because trauma survivors choose not to talk about the traumatic memories, it does not mean that they cannot remember them at all. In *It Ends With Us*, Lily remembers her trauma, but she does however suppress it when she is an adult.

2.2 Trauma pertaining to gendered violence, and representation in fiction

The definition of domestic violence has already been discussed in the introduction, but it is worth reasserting that domestic violence can involve “a pattern of coercive and controlling
behaviour … Domestic violence is repetitive, life-threatening, and can destroy the lives of women and children” (Women’s AID qtd. in Harne and Radford 4, my italics). It is therefore not only women who suffer from the violence; domestic violence can involve the children of abused mothers. The children grow up witnessing the abuse, whether it be by “simply” overhearing it, or actually seeing the abuse with their own eyes. Harne and Radford explain that children who grow up with violence in the household “are more likely to be fearful and anxious than other children” (58). When Lily grew up, she was never allowed to bring friends over, she was not allowed to sleep over at other children’s houses and she never really had any friends.

Domestic violence involves all types of violent acts, but they do not always have to be of the physically violent kind. Domestic violence can be verbal, too. Henceforth, I will be using the term gendered violence, for the reason that gendered violence is a narrower term that explicitly refers to the domestic violence towards women. It should be noted, however, that when Herman published *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) the most generally known term was domestic abuse.

As Christine Shearer-Cremean and Carol L. Winkelmann write in *Survivor Rhetoric: Negotiations and Narrativity in Abused Women's Language*, it is not certain that women who have experienced abuse are safe, due to the fact that they “may not be able to escape it even if they leave, or may find it re-created in other relationships” (10). Like Cathy A. Colton writes in her chapter “Shattered Dreams: A Material Rhetorical Reading of Charlotte Fedders's Memoir of Domestic Abuse” many abused women are confused, because they “are brutally ruled over by their husbands, whom they also desire, love, and often need economically” (121).

Gendered violence within a literary context lacks research and representation, as stated by Janice Haaken in her chapter “Damsels in Distress: Popular Culture and Stories of Domestic Abuse” (2010): “there has been relatively little attentiveness to tensions between literary and scientific representations of abuse in the domestic violence field” (80). Haaken explains that
there are three different genres of domestic violence narrative: stories of bondage, stories of deliverance and stories of struggle and reparation. Stories of bondage refers to the narratives that represent a female lead, trapped in a marriage and a household from which she cannot leave (and is often written as a gothic novel). Stories of deliverance focuses on the female as “an active agent plotting her escape”, such as novels like Safe Haven (2010) by Nicholas Sparks. The third and last genre, stories of struggle and reparation, involves stories that are more complex and focuses not on the “good side” and the “bad side”, but rather on things that reside in the grey area, such as reasons for the violence as well as society’s part in the abuse (84).

It could be suggested that while It Ends With Us has some qualities similar to both stories of bondage and stories of deliverance, the novel does not entirely belong to one genre only. That is to say, many novels about gendered violence generally are quite straightforward and follows a rather linear progress, but there is the occasional novel which cannot fit in to one category alone, such as It Ends With Us. Putting the novel in only one category could be misdirecting, not only for the book itself, but also for gendered violence, trauma and trauma survivors. Gendered violence is complex, and so are usually the situations surrounding the abuse. Showing that the novel is complex as well, and that it does not fit into one category, can be beneficial for the representation of gendered violence in literature.

Furthermore, Haaken notes that in stories of bondage, the female victim gives two faces to the man abusing her, “allowing her to separate the good man from the bad” (86). Lily does not see her partner Ryle as entirely bad, nor entirely good. She feels as if he is a good man, making bad mistakes. According to Haaken, in stories of deliverance the female lead is able to escape the abusive partner, sometimes introducing a second male authority, “a Good Man” who is a contrast to the abuser (89) – in It Ends With Us Lily finally manages to break away from Ryle, with some support from the gentle Atlas, her childhood love. It is important to note though, that Lily’s “escape” does not entirely depend on her reconnection with Atlas, but also
because she processes her trauma through rereading her old diary entries, among other things. I will be covering this more in the analysis section.

2.3 Expressive writing as a coping-mechanism/healing device

Susan J. Brison writes in her chapter “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self” (1999) about the importance of trauma narratives. According to Brison, by narrating the traumatic memories the survivor might be able to work through the trauma (40). In It Ends With Us, it is never mentioned that Lily seeks any professional help and through that would be able to create a narrativisation for her memories. She does, however, narrate her trauma by writing diary entries in the form of letters when she is younger that also serve as flashbacks for the reader. Felman and Laub explain that survivors of trauma are trapped in a “traumatic reality”, and in order for them to get out of the entrapment they must start a therapeutic process of formulating a narrative for their experience (69). Vickroy concur, and argues that through creating a “narrative reconstruction” the traumatic memory loses its power (3). Further, Herman likewise defends the notion that to be able to recover from a traumatic event, the subject’s main purpose is “reconstructing the trauma story” (3).

It has been widely researched and noted that expressive writing, such as narrativising the traumatic experience, whether it be through letter-writing, diary entries or storytelling, can be therapeutic for trauma survivors. In Shattered Subjects (2000), the term “scriptotherapy” was coined by Suzette A. Henke. The definition, she explains, is “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (xii). By creating a narrative for their memories, the survivors can be able to work through the traumatic events. James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth argue in their book Opening Up by Writing it Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain that the method of expressing painful, traumatic events, particularly in writing, can be very healing for the
survivor, and that we humans have a need to “reveal ourselves to others” (1-2). In addition, in a study made by Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhelm, they state that expressive writing can be used as a therapeutic tool, whether it is in a clinical setting or as a “self-help” (342).

*It Ends With Us* is written in first person narration, with Lily as the narrator. She wrote diary entries during her teenage years and it can be argued that she used the entries to narrate what she experienced. In *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978), Dorrit Cohn’s classic study of how writers represent consciousness in narrative fiction, she dedicates a part of chapter 5 to the diary novel. She explains that “diarists ostensibly write, like monologists speak, only for themselves” (208). *It Ends With Us* is not a diary novel per se, but contains aspects similar to the diary novel. Cohn argues that “diary novels that focus … on the past … more closely resemble memory monologues” (209). The entries that Lily wrote as a teenager sound like a one-sided conversation with Ellen DeGeneres, that is, they can be seen as “memory monologues” addressed to another person.

In order to understand how Lily’s character progresses, it is important to cover a specific type of narration in the novel. In the fourth chapter of her book, Cohn discerns two different kinds of retrospect narrations: “dissonant self-narration” and “consonant self-narration”. She explains that a dissonant narrator asserts a certain distance from the past self and the present self; the dissonant narrator views the younger self through a retrospective lens, and distances the present self from the past self by showing that the present self has an improved knowledge. A consonant narrator, however, does not take any distance from their past self, and still identifies with their younger self (145-161). One might argue that the general narration in *It Ends With Us*, especially combined with the diary entries, exhibits a dissonant narrator. Lily does not feel the same way about things as she did when she was younger, and even in the end of the novel Lily has matured and renounces earlier statements. I will write more in the analysis section about how both dissonant, and consonant narration can be seen in *It Ends With Us*. 
The analysis section will be written in chronological order. That is, I will analyse the book as we read it, with the diary entries serving as flashbacks. This linear reading of the novel will serve as a way of understanding Lily, her progress and development throughout the story. I will examine the coping-mechanisms Lily uses as well as the representation of both trauma and gendered violence in the novel. I am going to do that by analysing certain sections of the book that cover those aspects. The sections and quotations written in cursive from the novel are from Lily’s diary entries, while those without cursive are present day in the story.

The first, but not the only sign, of hyperarousal is seen in the beginning of the novel. The chapter starts off with Lily Bloom, a twenty-something meeting her future partner, Ryle Kincaid. While Lily is sitting on top of a rooftop, Ryle comes up, visibly upset, and kicks a chair out of frustration. After that it is revealed that Lily had just come back home from attending her father’s funeral, and Ryle, being a practicing neurosurgeon, just lost a patient of his. Despite the fact that they do not know each other, Lily already, in a rather lengthy section, confides in Ryle that her father used to abuse her mother (4-16). Like I mentioned in the introduction, according to Herman, trauma survivors are usually contradictory in the way they both want to flee from the trauma, but also “call attention to [it]” (1). Lily has not seen a professional about what she went through as a child, and her only outlet when she was younger was to write in her diary entries. As far as we as readers know, she has tried to suppress her memories up until this point, after her father has died. This makes Ryle one of the few people that Lily has opened up to and consequently the reader also gets to see this side of her, and her experience of gendered abuse, as well:

“My father was abusive. Not to me— to my mother. He would get so angry when they fought that sometimes he would hit her. When that happened, he would spend the next
In this paragraph, the readers get to know about the traumatic events Lily went through for the first time. Lily is, in the beginning of the novel, angry at both her parents for the abuse. She blames her mother for staying with her father, and she saw the abuse as something unavoidable in the marriage, confiding in Ryle that “the abuse was inevitable with their marriage, and it became our norm” (17). Lily would anticipate and “look forward” to the abuse, because the following weeks after the violence nothing would happen and neither her nor her mom would have to walk on eggshells around the father. This ties together with the concept of hyperarousal, which I mentioned in the theory section. According to Herman, hyperarousal refers to humans going into a state of “permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment” (35). Lily (as well as her mother) always worried that the father might abuse the mother, and therefore followed his rules and pleased him so as not to trigger his anger. Herman also points out that when suffering from hyperarousal, the survivors “have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger” (36). Not only does the mind react to the trauma, but the body as well since it is a “fight or flight” reaction to the traumatic event. With this said, Lily does not show any symptoms of hyperarousal as an adult following her mother’s abuse. Her father, the one who hurt her mother and indirect hurt Lily, has passed away. She has also, for several years, suppressed what she went through, something that can have contributed to her not experiencing any hyperarousal at an older age. At the end of the opening scene, Lily and Ryle part ways without having exchanged any contact information.
The first example of Lily’s expressive writing is when she rereads old entries after her father has passed away, trying to “find a little strength for forgiveness” (Hoover 30). In other words, she looks back at what she wrote as a teenager, which leads to the novel occasionally being narrated by what Cohn calls a dissonant narrator (145-161). Adult Lily looks at her past self retrospectively, distancing herself from what she thought or knew back then. Furthermore, the diary entries serve as flashbacks for us readers. It should be noted, however, that It Ends With Us is not a diary novel; it only uses diary entries as a narratological tool to tell a narrative within a narrative.

The first diary entries revolve around Lily’s first meeting with her childhood love, a homeless boy named Atlas. She is writing about how she saw someone sneek into the abandoned house behind hers, and then casually, she mentions how she shuffles cards when her parents are in a fight. She never had any friends when she was younger, the people that were supposed to help her were the ones causing her trauma, and she never saw a professional about what she went through. Her go-to coping-mechanism was to write in her diary, pretending to write a letter to Ellen DeGeneres. Arguably, Lily addresses the letters to Ellen in order to feel like she is talking to someone, not just feeling like she is writing it all down. Like I mentioned in the theory section, Pennebaker and Smyth argues that humans have a need to tell others about ourselves (2). This does however contrast Cohn’s point on the diary novel, in the way that the protagonist only writes for themself (208), but since Lily never intends for anyone else to read her diary – only addressing the entries to feel like she is talking to someone – this ties together with Cohn’s ideas. Moreover, Brison talks about how important it is for survivors to narrate their trauma, and how it can help the survivor to work through it (40). The only way for Lily to ever discuss, and narrate, her experiences is to write in a diary, pretending to write to Ellen DeGeneres:
... I was in bed shuffling cards. I know that sounds weird, but it’s just something I do. I don’t even know how to play cards. But when my parents get into fights, shuffling cards just calms me down sometimes and gives me something to focus on (Hoover 31).

Lily writes down what is happening, mostly due to the fact that she does not have anyone else to talk to. She does not have any friends, and neither of her parents talk to her about what is happening in the household. Consequently, her way of coping with the trauma is to keep a diary. Lily does not mention in this particular section, nor in the following entries, that her father is abusive. The subsequent diary entries follow Lily as she starts becoming friends with Atlas. The first conversation between them lead to Lily inviting him into her house to take a shower while her parents are both at work. The entire time Atlas is in the shower, Lily is panicking and worrying that her parents might come back and find a stranger in their house. This reaction connects back to Harne and Radford’s explanation of children growing up witnessing gendered abuse are most likely more frightened and anxious than children who do not grow up with abuse in the household (58), as well as Herman’s concept of hyperarousal. Lily wrote about how “my heart was beating so fast, because I knew how much trouble I could get into” (Hoover 36). Not only did she expect to get a punishment, but she also worried that her father might hurt Atlas, or her mother. At this point in the novel, her father had not yet laid a finger on his daughter, so Lily was not worrying for the safety of herself but rather of those around her.

The second example of Lily’s expressive writing comes after the novel has made a time-jump of 6 months, where it can be argued that dissonant and consonant narration mix together. This is noteworthy, because we get to see Lily’s development and how she distances herself from her teenage self. However, we also get to see the feelings that she has not been able to, yet, overcome. This part of the novel begins with Lily showing her mother a space she has bought with inheritance money she got after her father passed away, planning to turn it into a
flower shop. While standing in the shop, a woman, Alyssa, comes in and is looking for a job. Conveniently enough, Alyssa is Ryle’s younger sister. The story continues with Lily hiring Alyssa, them beginning with the renovation of the premises, and Lily ultimately meeting Ryle once more. After this they, although tentatively, begin a relationship. Lily continues to read through her old diary entries, and one particular section she wrote deals with direct violence. The entry describes the first and only time she gets hit by her father, although it seemed to be an accidental hit. 15-year-old Lily explains in her diary that her mother usually parks her car in the driveway while her father parks in the garage; in this specific incident her mother puts the car in the garage to easier unpack the groceries. Lily’s father comes home while her mother’s car is still in the garage:

*I’m not sure what happened when she went back outside. I heard a crash, and then I heard her scream ... I opened the garage door and didn’t see my mom ... He had her pushed down on the hood with his hands around her throat ... The next few minutes are a blur, but I know I started screaming at him. I jumped on his back and I was hitting him on the side of his head. Then I wasn’t. I don’t really know what happened, but I’m guessing he threw me off of him.* (Hoover 109-110)

When Lily has finished rereading the entries, she lays in her bed crying: “Every time I pick up this journal I think I’ll be fine—that it all happened so long ago and I won’t still feel what I felt back then” (119). Based on these passages, it could be argued that Cohn’s concepts of dissonant, and consonant narration clash. This can be seen in how Lily has suppressed everything she went through as a child and teenager to the point where she thinks she is fine with all that has happened. As a result, she takes distance to both what she felt and thought as a teenager, which is a characteristic of a dissonant narrator. However, when she is rereading her old diary, she
still, to a certain extent, identifies with the girl she was back when she wrote them, which is common for a consonant narrator. Rereading the entries also serves as a healing device. Going through her old memories, she realizes that she actually has come a long way from the girl she was, and she mentions how she feels for her mother and how she never really used to think about how much her mother experienced: “I haven’t really thought about everything she had to go through before my father died” (119).

The first time Lily experiences gendered abuse directed towards herself happens a few months into her relationship. Ryle hurts his hand and Lily laughs, consequently making him angry and he pushes her so badly that she falls and hurts herself:

I’m on the floor, my hand pressed against the corner of my eye. In a matter of one second, Ryle’s arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward … When I lost my footing, I hit my face on one of the cabinet door handles as I came down … And then I feel the weight. Heaviness follows and it presses down on every part of me. So much gravity, pushing down on my emotions. Everything shatters. My tears, my heart, my laughter, my soul. (Hoover 185)

In this section, Lily identifies, albeit briefly, with her mother. Getting hit herself, she got a similar flashback to when her father hurt her mother. Instead of Ryle’s voice apologizing, she hears her father’s voice apologizing to her mother: “I don’t hear Ryle’s voice this time. All I hear is my father’s voice” (186). Caruth’s idea of the survivor living through the traumatic events more than once is relevant here: even though Lily is going through something traumatic in the present, she gets a flashback to her childhood. She has been suppressing her memories as an adult, but they come back as a short flashback when she finds herself in the same situation as her mother. This can in turn be tied to Vickroy’s idea of trauma literature often focusing on
the relationship between the mother and daughter. Lily has spent years fearing her mother’s situation, and suddenly she is in a similar one. Although the focus is on Lily and Ryle in this scene, it is shown that her mother’s previous situation still heavily affects her.

Further on, Lily is still conflicted about the situation when Ryle apologizes and starts kissing her: “I want to lash out at him and react like I wish my mother would have reacted when my father hurt her … I want to believe that it really was an accident. Ryle isn’t like my father. He’s nothing like him” (188-189). Haaken points out that in stories of bondage, it is not unusual for the victim to give the partner, the abuser, two “faces” (86). Connecting to Haaken’s ideas, although Lily loves Ryle, at this point in the novel she will not leave him because she refuses to believe that Ryle is anything like her father; Ryle is still a good person. She wants to forget that the situation ever happened. She does however warn Ryle, that if he ever hurts her again, she will leave (191).

The last diary entry Lily writes when she is a teenager, and re-reads when she is an adult, is when Lily gets so traumatised by an experience that she wants to forget it. Atlas gets badly hurt at the hands of her father. Consequently, she ignores it and therefore suppresses her memories. McNally’s point on trauma and memory, that “traumatic events … are highly memorable and seldom, if ever, forgotten” (821) is applicable in this particular part of the novel. She is able to remember her traumatic experiences, but she does the active choice to not talk, or think, about them.

Adult Lily is rereading these entries after she has met Atlas for the first time in years. Needing to find closure for their past relationship, both because she is currently in a new relationship with Ryle and wants to be able to let Atlas go, as well as needing a closure for what happened in the past, she rereads her entries about Atlas. He now works as a chef at a restaurant and notices the cut by her eye, and Ryle’s bandaged hand when they are out for dinner. He puts two and two together and confronts Lily. Since Lily refuses to admit that Ryle’s abuse could
have been intentional, she says that the entire thing was an accident. Atlas tells her to leave Ryle, and when she defends him, he says “Funny. You sound just like your mother” (197). Lily has grown up, fearing that she would turn into her mother, or ever experience what her mother did; in one of her diary entries, she writes that her mother said “‘It’s not like that, Lily ... you’re too young to understand it.’ It got really quiet for a minute, and then I said ‘I hope to hell I never do.’” (156). This ties together with Shearer-Crêmean and Winkelmann’s ideas that women who have, somehow, experienced abuse are not necessarily safe after they have escaped it (10). Lily grew up witnessing her mother being abused, and then she found herself in an abusing relationship as an adult. Hearing Atlas tell her that she sounds like her mother stings, but she still will not leave Ryle, insisting that their situation is nothing like her parents’.

While rereading her diary entry, she reads the passage where her father walked in on Atlas and her in Lily’s bedroom and started attacking Atlas:

… when he threw open my door and saw Atlas in bed with me, he was angrier than I’d ever seen him. And Atlas was at a disadvantage by not being prepared for what came next. I’ll never forget that moment for as long as I live. Being completely helpless as my father came down on him with a baseball bat. The sound of bones snapping was the only thing piercing through my screams (Hoover 215).

After this, teenage Lily stops writing diary entries and distances herself from the traumatic events. Instead of relying on expressive writing as a coping-mechanism, she suppresses what she has gone through. She writes in the entry how writing no longer seemed to help her, and that it hurt too much to think about Atlas: “Writing to you reminds me of him, and it all hurts too much ... I’m just going to keep pretending to be okay” (217). However, she still felt the need to write all of her memories down on paper, indicating that she needed to at least get it out
once. Like Felman and Laub suggests, in order for the survivor to move on and heal, the traumatic memories must “be repeated” and turned into “a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative” (69). Whether it be by writing it down, or verbally retell the story, it is important for the survivor to at least articulate the memories in one way or another. Lily felt that it was too painful to talk about, less alone think about, Atlas, and yet she still narrated her trauma one last time to let it out.

It can be suggested that Lily felt responsible for the incident, and she had no one that supported her or could help her work through what had happened. Her father was not arrested, her schoolmates bullied her for having been with Atlas, and she had no longer any contact with him. He was, as well as her childhood love, her first real friend, and losing him because of her father’s abuse seemed to be too much for her to bear.

When Lily started college, she desperately wanted to get out of the town her parents lived in: “Even though he [her father] was sick and could no longer hurt my mother, he still somehow made me want to escape the entire state of Maine, so that’s exactly what I did” (218). Not only was she starting to suppress her memories, she also, literatim, fled from her father by moving away to Boston. At this point in the novel, Lily does not yet identify with her mother, since she refuses to admit what Ryle and her father have in common, insisting that Ryle is a good person, and that the love he and Atlas have for Lily are the same: “[Ryle] loves me just like Atlas did” (218). Lily wanted to leave all along growing up, but never truly did until her father became too ill to hurt her mother. She was afraid that she would suffer the same way her mother did, and Lily was angry at her mother for never leaving her father. Consequently, this made her want to flee, but she felt guilty for not being home and helping her mother. However, when her father was diagnosed with cancer, “It completely changed the dynamic of their relationship and I no longer felt obligated to stay in Plethora to make sure she was okay” (39), and so she left. This can be connected to Vickroy’s ideas, that daughters “feel a conflicted
protective fearfulness toward their mothers” (4). Lily felt a deep-rooted responsibility for her mother, and only when her father was too ill to hurt her mother was Lily able to let it go.

The second time Ryle hits Lily she starts to identify more with her mother, but later concludes that her situation is not the same as her parents’. This happens after Lily has met Atlas, and as a safety measure Atlas gives her his phone-number. On this particular occasion, Ryle finds the number that has been hidden in Lily’s phone-case. He is about to leave when Lily tries to stop him, and he pushes her down the stairs:

“You fell down the stairs.”

But I didn’t fall.

He pushed me. Again.

That’s twice.

You pushed me, Ryle.

I can feel my whole body start to shake with the sobs. I have no idea how bad I’m hurt, but I don’t even care. No physical pain could even compare to what my heart is feeling in this moment. I start to slap at his hands, wanting him away from me. (Hoover 231)

Lily sobs, her hands are shaking and she slaps Ryle’s hands away when he comes closer to her. In this moment she is conflicted, because she wants him to apologize, but she also does not want him to touch her. She does not know how to feel: “I have no idea if I’m supposed to hate him. Or be terrified of him. Or feel bad for him. How can I be feeling all three?” (232-233). After Ryle tries to apologize, she kicks him out. Had it not been for Alyssa, Ryle’s younger sister, Lily would probably have left him that time. However, Alyssa begs for Lily to hear Ryle out, that there is a reason for him hitting her. In the beginning of the novel Ryle admits that a young patient of his died; in reality, it was his older brother who died when he was a child when
Ryle accidentally shot him. This trauma has in turn haunted Ryle, and even though he has been getting professional help, he still lashes out when he gets angry and does not remember what he has done. Lily decides to stay, but she still feels conflicted:

… even with everything he just told me, I’m still fighting my own forgiveness … I knew exactly what I’d do if a man ever treated me the way my father treated my mother. It was simple. I would leave … But I didn’t leave. And now, here I am with bruises and cuts on my body at the hands of the man who is supposed to love me … And still, I am trying to justify what happened … I’m supposed to be the woman my mother was never strong enough to be … My father never had an excuse for his anger, nor was he immediately apologetic. The way he treated my mother was much worse than what’s happened between Ryle and me. (242-243)

Lily makes up excuses for Ryle, trying to give some sort of reason for his abusive actions. Although Ryle never “brutally rule over” Lily, like Colton points out (121), he still uses Lily’s love for him against her, which is common in abusive relationships. By doing the exact same thing as her mother, not leaving the abuse and not being able to hate the one hurting her, makes Lily feel “pathetic and weak” (242). She compares herself with her mother, and her and Ryle’s situation with her parents’ situation. She does, however, come to the conclusion that their situations are not the same, and that she has a legitimate reason to stay with Ryle: “He’s struggling to be a better person for me” (243). She loves him, he is not a bad person and he does not mean to hurt her, and Lily insist that there “is so much more good in him than bad” (244). In other words, Lily is trying to convince herself that Ryle is absolutely nothing like her father was.
I have earlier discussed hyperarousal in the analysis section, albeit briefly, but in this section it is more evident in the novel that Lily experiences hyperarousal. It is also the last and third time Ryle hits Lily. Moreover, in this part we can see traces of both stories of bondage as well as stories of deliverance (84). Ryle has found out that one of Lily’s magnets was gifted to her by Atlas. Ryle gets jealous and angry when he pieces it all together. He starts to question her about it, but Lily does not want to give him a direct answer, out of fear for how he would react. Although Lily is not in a state of hyperarousal, it can be connected to Herman’s concept: she is scared of what might happen and is in a “fight or flight” kind of mind. Walking into their bedroom, she immediately sees that Ryle has read her old diaries, consequently violating Lily’s trust for him, and already knows about the magnet, among other things:

He spins me, but my eyes are still closed. I’m too scared to look at him. His hands are digging into my shoulders as he pushes me toward the bed. I start trying to fight him off of me, but it’s useless. He’s too strong for me. He’s angry. He’s hurt. *And he’s not Ryle* … All I can see when I squeeze my eyes shut is my mother crying on our old living room couch; my father forcing himself on top of her. Hatred rips through me and I start screaming. (Hoover 265-266)

Once again, she experiences flashbacks to her mother and father’s situation when she is in a similar one, showing that she has not yet overcome her childhood trauma. In this section of the book, concepts from stories of bondage and stories of deliverance mix. First, in stories of bondage the female survivor sometimes sees the abuser as two people (86). Lily still does not believe that her Ryle would ever be capable of doing anything like this, and therefore thinks “*he’s not Ryle*” (265) even when he is hurting her: he is still a good person, but also someone who makes poor choices. And second, in stories of deliverance, the survivor is able to escape
the abuser. Usually there is a second man involved in the escape, the so-called “Good Man” (Haaken 89). In this instance, Atlas acts as the “Good Man”, and helps Lily get to the hospital where she is told that she is pregnant.

In order for Lily to sort out her rather complex and confused feelings, she decides to take up the pen and write, which she has not done since she was a teenager. She hides in Atlas’ apartment, staying away from Ryle and not answering his text. As a result of Lily’s state of mind, the concepts of Henke’s scriptotherapy as well as Cohn’s dissonant narrator are applicable to this section of the novel. Lily writes the last entry after getting the news of her pregnancy:

_I am in love with a man who physically hurts me. Of all people, I have no idea how I let myself get to this point ... How she [her mom] could possibly love a man who had laid his hands on her. A man who repeatedly hit her. Repeatedly promised that he would never do it again. Repeatedly hit her again._

_I hate that I can empathize with her now._ (Hoover 281)

Lily writes in the entry that she cannot process her emotions and that she feels like she simply has to “get them out on paper” (281). This is in accordance with what Pennebaker and Smyth argues, that there seems to be a feeling of need “to reveal ourselves to others” (2), because Lily once again addresses the entry to Ellen. She is so distressed that she feels the need to write it down and get it out, just like she did when she was a teenager. Henke’s concept of scriptotherapy connects to these feelings: Lily feels the need to write through her traumatic experience as a form of therapy. She continues the entry by reflecting over her mother, and why she never left her father. Lily has a better financial situation, more support, and her mother did
not want to take Lily away from her father when she was used to having both parents around (282). Here we see more of Cohn’s idea of dissonant narrator; younger Lily resented her mother for staying with her father, and she could not understand why she stayed. Adult Lily, once again turning to diary entries to cope, writes that “There were many times growing up I wondered what was going through my mother’s head in the days after my father had hurt her” (281), but now she instead relates to her mother, therefore taking distance to what her younger self once thought.

In the last chapters, Lily has finally come to terms with ending the cycle of abuse. She has just given birth to her and Ryle’s daughter. She tells him that she wants a divorce, thinking about her daughter while making the decision; “I don’t want her to live like I lived. I don’t want her to see her father at his worst” (360). Ultimately, although she used expressive writing as a coping-mechanism during her teenage years, and she was able to reread and process everything as an adult, Lily only came to the decision of leaving Ryle once her daughter had been born: “he [Ryle] would do anything to protect her … It isn’t until this moment that I finally make a decision about him” (357). She started to reflect more over her mother’s decision of staying with her father and what kind of consequences that had for Lily growing up: “I hated him [her father] so much more than I loved him … Five minutes of witnessing him at his worst couldn’t make up for even five years of him at his best” (357). However, by rereading her old diaries she managed to overcome what she went through as a child. When she finally sees her daughter, she knows that she cannot continue to be in a relationship with Ryle, living with the fear that he might hit her and that her daughter has to witness it. Thus, the cycle of abuse ends here, for Lily is making sure it does not repeat itself in her daughter’s childhood.
4 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to analyse the representation of trauma through the lens of gendered violence in *It Ends With Us*, as well as the way the protagonist copes with the trauma using various coping-mechanisms. The focus has been on Lily Bloom, the main character and narrator of the story. I have in the analysis section shown how Lily uses expressive writing as a coping-mechanism and healing device, and how she, when that is not enough, actively ignores her traumas to cope.

To sum it up, the trauma Lily went through as a child and a teenager put her, especially in her teenage years, in a state of hyperarousal. This is shown through her diary entries that function as a form of scriptotherapy. Looking at the points Felman and Laub made about children who witnesses gendered violence are generally more anxious and scared, Lily was afraid of her father’s reactions, and therefore hid her relationship with Atlas from both of her parents. Not only to protect herself, but also her mother and Atlas. However, by using her diary, Lily also managed to get her feelings out through expressive writing, without actually having to confide in anyone. That is, until Atlas gets so badly hurt at the hands of her father that she cannot fathom writing about him. After this traumatic experience, Lily instead suppresses what she has gone through, choosing not to write in her diary anymore.

She does so, up to the point when her father passes away, which leads her to confiding in a complete stranger: Ryle. This in turn connects to Pennebaker and Smyth’s ideas, that humans have an innate need to “reveal ourselves to others” (2) – Lily has tried, for years, to not talk or think about her father and what happened during her upbringing, and yet when she meets Ryle, a complete stranger, she tells him about her childhood.

With all of this said, Lily never really acts as though she has gone through something traumatic as a child: other than her feeling anger at her parents for making her experience gendered violence, she does not show any symptoms of hyperarousal as an adult. This can be
seen as a result of her actively suppressing her memories. However, when Ryle has hit her more than once, she does start to show signs of hyperarousal once again, which is demonstrated when Ryle finds the magnet and her diary. After the last time Ryle hits her, she writes another entry, serving as a form of therapy for her, further tying her use of diary entries together with scriptotherapy.

Cohn’s concepts of dissonant and consonant narrator can be seen throughout the novel, in particular when Lily rereads her old diaries. We can see that she both identifies with her teenage self on multiple occasions, but she does however grow as the story progresses, and we see more of a dissonant narrator towards the end of the novel. By rereading her entries as an adult, as well as experiencing gendered abuse directed towards herself, she considers her mother more than she did as a teenager. It was also shown in the analysis that the novel does not belong in a single category, demonstrating that stories of gendered violence does not always have to be straight forward and linear, but rather a complex story that has more too it than meets the eye. It is shown several times that *It Ends With Us* contains concepts from both stories of bondage and stories of deliverance.

In the end, Lily moves on from Ryle and leaves her abusive relationship, for the sake of her daughter, as to not repeat the cycle. She used expressive writing as a coping mechanism during her teenage years, and narrating her experiences would also come to help her in the future. Had she not reread her old diaries, maybe she would not have come to the decision at the time that she did.
5  Works cited


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