



## Rewriting Pain: Trauma, Memory, and Healing in Frankie Riley's *All the Dark Places*

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### Abstract

**Keywords:**

*Trauma, diction, imagery, figurative language,*

This study examines the representation of trauma in Frankie Riley's *All the Dark Places* (2022) by analyzing how traumatic experiences are articulated through intrinsic poetic elements. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research focuses on selected poems that portray themes of anxiety, abandonment, emotional abuse, and healing. The analysis is grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (1996), particularly her concepts of repetition, belatedness, and the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. The findings reveal that trauma in Riley's poetry is depicted not as a single past event but as a recurring psychological condition that continuously shapes identity and emotional experience. Through recurring metaphors such as drowning, storms, cages, and scars, the poems transform abstract suffering into vivid sensory imagery. Repetition of phrases such as "Some days," "And so, I became," and "I'm learning" reflects the cyclical return of painful memories while also signaling gradual personal growth. These patterns align with trauma theory, which emphasizes the intrusive and repetitive character of traumatic experience. The study further demonstrates that intrinsic elements—including diction, imagery, structure, tone, and figurative language—function as central mechanisms for expressing trauma. Riley's simple yet emotionally charged diction conveys immediacy and vulnerability, while fragmented structures mirror psychological instability. Shifts in tone from despair to empowerment illustrate a movement toward self-awareness and resilience. Figurative language, particularly metaphor and parallelism, enables the articulation of experiences that are otherwise difficult to express directly.

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## INTRODUCTION

Human experience is shaped not only by events that are consciously remembered but also by those that resist full articulation. Throughout life, individuals encounter moments of loss, abandonment, fear, or emotional rupture that leave traces beyond ordinary memory. While some experiences gradually integrate into personal narratives, others remain unresolved, exerting persistent influence over emotional regulation, self-perception, and relational patterns. These unresolved experiences are closely connected to trauma, which profoundly shapes psychological development and vulnerability (Herman, 1992). Trauma, therefore, must be understood not merely as an event but as a condition of disrupted emotional processing that continues to reverberate within the present.

Not all distressing events become traumatic. Trauma occurs when an experience overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope, exceeding emotional tolerance and resisting immediate integration into conscious memory. Van der Kolk (2014) argues that traumatic experiences disrupt normal memory processing and interfere with the brain's capacity to regulate affect, leaving fragments of sensation, emotion, and bodily response that persist without coherent narrative structure. In this sense, trauma is not simply remembered; it is relived. Freud (1961) earlier described trauma as an intrusion that breaches the mind's protective defenses, producing helplessness and psychic shock. Such experiences are not easily assimilated into language, and their persistence often manifests as anxiety, repetition, emotional numbing, or relational difficulty. Because trauma is stored affectively rather than logically, it resists straightforward explanation and often emerges indirectly through symbolic or fragmented expression (Caruth, 1996).

Literature provides a vital space for articulating these complex psychological realities. Unlike clinical discourse, which seeks diagnostic clarity, literary representation allows trauma to be expressed through ambiguity, metaphor, silence, and structural disruption. Leys (2000) observes that trauma in literary texts frequently appears through repetition, gaps, and symbolic displacement rather than direct narration, reflecting the fragmented nature of traumatic memory itself. In this way, literature does not merely depict trauma; it formally enacts its disruptions. Narrative discontinuities, temporal shifts, and emotional intensity become aesthetic strategies that mirror psychological rupture. Through such techniques, literary texts create a space where readers can encounter trauma not only intellectually but affectively.

Among literary forms, poetry is particularly suited to representing trauma. Its condensed language, rhythmic patterning, and structural flexibility allow for emotional depth without requiring linear exposition. Culler (1997) notes that poetry privileges intensity of feeling over narrative sequence, enabling writers to communicate inner turmoil through imagery, repetition, and fragmentation. The formal qualities of poetry—line breaks, silence, enjambment, and visual spacing—actively shape meaning and emotional resonance. Whitehead (2016) further argues that poetic fragmentation parallels the disrupted temporality of traumatic memory, making poetry a powerful medium for conveying psychological dislocation. Rather than recounting trauma as a completed story, poetry can evoke its lingering presence through rhythm, imagery, and tonal shifts. In this sense, poetic form becomes inseparable from traumatic content.

The literary engagement with trauma has a long tradition. Sylvia Plath's confessional poetry exposes fractured selfhood and emotional instability shaped by personal loss and relational violence (Plath, 1965). Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) illustrates how racial oppression and sexual trauma intersect with identity formation and the reclamation of voice. These works demonstrate how literary expression transforms private suffering into shared testimony, fostering empathy while preserving the complexity of traumatic experience. Contemporary poetry extends this tradition by foregrounding healing, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence within fragmented forms that reflect modern psychological realities.

Frankie Riley's *All the Dark Places* (2022) contributes meaningfully to this evolving discourse. As both poet and psychologist, Riley bridges creative expression and psychological insight. Her anthology, comprising 151 free-verse poems, explores themes of emotional neglect, childhood wounds, abusive relationships, self-doubt, and recovery. The confessional tone and absence of rigid structure mirror the instability and fragmentation characteristic of traumatic memory. Rather than presenting trauma as a singular catastrophic event, Riley's poems depict it as cumulative, relational, and often rooted in everyday emotional abandonment. Recovery appears not as resolution but as an ongoing process marked by reflection and vulnerability.

This study examines how trauma is represented in selected poems from *All the Dark Places* through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth conceptualizes trauma as an experience that is not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly through repetition and affective disruption. Repetition, within this framework, functions both as psychological symptom and narrative strategy. By applying Caruth's theory, this research analyzes how Riley's poetic language, imagery, rhythm, and structural fragmentation embody traumatic experience. Nine poems were selected for close textual analysis to ensure focused interpretation while maintaining thematic coherence.

By situating Riley's poetry within trauma theory and contemporary literary discourse, this study contributes to understanding how poetic form mediates psychological experience. It demonstrates that trauma in poetry is not solely thematic but formal—embedded in repetition, fragmentation, and emotional intensity. Through this exploration, the research highlights the capacity of contemporary poetry to articulate unclaimed experiences and to transform emotional rupture into meaningful literary expression.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine the representation of trauma in Frankie Riley's *All the Dark Places* (2022). A qualitative approach was selected because it enables in-depth interpretation of meanings, emotions, and psychological dimensions embedded in literary texts. Rather than relying on numerical data, this method emphasizes close reading and interpretive analysis to understand how trauma is articulated through poetic language. As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative research seeks to explore and interpret human experiences within their contextual complexity.

The primary data source was Riley's poetry collection, which consists of 151 confessional free-verse poems addressing themes of emotional neglect, abandonment, abusive relationships, and recovery. From this collection, nine poems were purposively selected based on their strong

thematic relevance to trauma and memory. Secondary data included scholarly works on trauma theory, poetry analysis, and Cathy Caruth's theoretical framework to provide conceptual grounding.

Data were collected through document analysis, a method suitable for examining written texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The process involved close reading, identifying significant lines and poetic devices, and marking textual elements that reflect traumatic experience. Selected excerpts were then categorized according to key trauma concepts.

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) systematic process of organizing, coding, and interpreting qualitative data. Caruth's (1996) trauma theory served as the primary analytical lens, focusing on concepts such as belatedness, repetition, absence, and unrepresentability. Intrinsic poetic elements—including diction, imagery, structure, tone, and figurative language—were examined to identify how trauma is conveyed formally rather than narratively. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how fragmentation, repetition, and symbolic imagery function as aesthetic representations of psychological disruption and recovery.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study, addressing two central questions: (1) how traumatic experiences are represented in the selected poems from Frankie Riley's *All the Dark Places* (2022), and (2) how those experiences are articulated through intrinsic poetic elements. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (1996), the analysis demonstrates that trauma in Riley's poetry is not narrated as a single catastrophic event but represented as a cyclical, fragmented, and evolving psychological condition. Through diction, imagery, structure, tone, and figurative language, Riley transforms internal suffering into aesthetic expression while reflecting the belated, repetitive, and often unspeakable nature of trauma.

### 1. Representation of Trauma: Cycles, Fragmentation, and Transformation

The poems examined consistently portray trauma as a recurring psychological state rather than a completed past event. In the poem beginning with "I keep drowning in my own thoughts," trauma is metaphorically constructed through oceanic imagery: "drowning," "riptide," "tsunami," and "treading water." These images symbolize emotional suffocation and instability. The repetition of the phrase "Some days" reflects fluctuation between temporary relief and relapse, echoing Caruth's notion of repetition as a defining characteristic of traumatic memory. Trauma resurfaces unexpectedly, much like waves pulling the speaker "back under." The structure of alternating relief ("I can finally breathe") and relapse ("a tsunami of anxiety hits me") enacts the psychological rhythm of survival and collapse.

Similarly, in "A Note to My Biological Father," trauma is represented as abandonment that shapes identity across time. The repeated clause "And so, I became" marks successive stages of life: child, teenager, young woman, strong woman. This repetition illustrates how trauma continues to echo through developmental phases. Rather than presenting healing as erasure, the poem portrays it as reinterpretation. The final assertion of strength does not negate earlier pain but integrates it, aligning with Caruth's idea that trauma is not fully resolved but re-signified through narrative.

Emotional abuse is depicted in poems describing toxic relationships, where trauma manifests through power imbalance and psychological manipulation. In lines such as “my success was his frustration, my happiness was his anger, my pain was his fuel,” parallel structure emphasizes emotional inversion. Positive experiences become triggers for aggression. The metaphor of the “tornado” reinforces uncontrollable destruction, suggesting that trauma disrupts even moments of joy. Here, trauma operates relationally, sustained by patterns of domination rather than isolated violence.

The representation of trauma, however, is not confined to suffering. Several poems articulate liberation and recovery. In the poem featuring the “little bird, tattooed on my wrist,” the bird symbolizes rebirth and autonomy. The repetition of “Free” underscores emotional emancipation, contrasting with earlier images of cages and drowning. Likewise, in the healing-focused poem beginning “There came a point in my healing journey,” repetition shifts from cyclical despair to progressive growth: “I’m learning.” Unlike earlier repetition that signals relapse, this repetition conveys gradual empowerment. Trauma is thus portrayed as dynamic: painful, repetitive, but capable of transformation.

## 2. Intrinsic Elements as Vehicles of Trauma Expression

The second major finding concerns how intrinsic poetic elements embody traumatic experience.

**Diction** plays a central role in conveying immediacy and authenticity. Riley employs simple, direct language—“drowning,” “scared,” “cry,” “leave”—to evoke emotional clarity. This linguistic simplicity avoids abstraction, allowing readers to experience trauma viscerally. The use of blunt phrases such as “You fuck up. / I cry. / I leave.” mirrors the repetitive and predictable cycle of abuse. Short, declarative sentences reinforce emotional exhaustion and inevitability.

**Imagery** consistently draws from physical and natural metaphors—oceans, storms, cages, bruises—to make psychological pain tangible. Trauma “sticks to your bones,” blurring the boundary between body and memory. This aligns with Caruth’s assertion that trauma resists direct articulation and instead appears through symbolic representation. By materializing emotional pain, Riley renders internal suffering visible and sensory.

**Structure** further reflects trauma’s fragmented nature. Many poems employ short lines, abrupt breaks, and repetition. These formal disruptions mirror fractured memory and emotional instability. In contrast, poems centered on healing adopt a more balanced rhythm and extended lines, symbolizing increasing psychological coherence. The shift in structure parallels the movement from chaos to integration.

**Tone** evolves across the poems, moving from despair and accusation to reflection and empowerment. Early poems exhibit urgency and suffocation, while later works adopt calm, affirming tones. This tonal progression reflects a psychological journey rather than a static condition. Trauma is thus not only represented but narratively developed.

**Figurative language**, especially metaphor and parallelism, functions as a bridge between unspoken pain and communicable meaning. The metaphor of oxygen as domination (“it was his oxygen”) suggests that control sustains the abuser’s identity. Parallel constructions—“my success was his frustration...”—intensify emotional distortion while revealing systemic

imbalance. Through such devices, trauma becomes structured and comprehensible without being simplified.

## Synthesis

Overall, the findings indicate that Riley's poetry enacts trauma rather than merely describing it. Repetition mirrors intrusive memory; fragmented structure echoes psychological rupture; and metaphor transforms unspeakable pain into symbolic language. In line with Caruth's trauma theory, trauma in *All the Dark Places* is portrayed as belated, cyclical, and interwoven with identity formation. Yet the poems also suggest that language offers the possibility of reclamation. Through poetic form, traumatic experience is not erased but reshaped into testimony.

Thus, Riley's work demonstrates how poetry can function simultaneously as representation and reparation: a space where fragmentation becomes expression, and suffering evolves into resilience.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined how trauma is represented and articulated in Frankie Riley's *All the Dark Places* (2022) through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (1996). The analysis focused on two primary concerns: the representation of traumatic experiences within the selected poems and the intrinsic poetic elements used to convey those experiences. The findings reveal that trauma in Riley's poetry is portrayed not as a singular, isolated event, but as a cyclical, evolving psychological condition that shapes identity, memory, and emotional development over time.

The poems demonstrate that trauma manifests through recurring patterns of anxiety, abandonment, emotional abuse, and self-doubt. These experiences are not presented through detailed narrative exposition but through symbolic language, repetition, and metaphor. Oceanic imagery such as "drowning," "riptide," and "tsunami" reflects emotional instability and the repetitive resurfacing of distress, aligning with Caruth's concept of trauma as belated and intrusive. Similarly, repeated phrases such as "And so, I became" and "I'm learning" illustrate how trauma influences identity formation across different life stages. These repetitions signify both the persistence of pain and the gradual movement toward healing.

The study also confirms that intrinsic poetic elements play a crucial role in expressing trauma. Riley's diction is simple yet emotionally powerful, allowing complex psychological experiences to be conveyed with clarity and immediacy. Imagery transforms abstract suffering into tangible sensations, while structural fragmentation mirrors the instability of traumatic memory. Tone shifts from despair and vulnerability to reflection and empowerment, reflecting a psychological journey rather than a fixed state of suffering. Figurative language, particularly metaphor and parallelism, serves as a bridge between unspeakable pain and communicable meaning.

Ultimately, *All the Dark Places* portrays trauma as both wounding and transformative. While the poems acknowledge the lasting impact of abandonment and abuse, they also emphasize resilience, self-awareness, and emotional growth. Trauma is not erased but reinterpreted through language. Riley's poetry illustrates how artistic expression can function as a space of testimony and reclamation, where fragmented memory becomes structured meaning and personal pain evolves into strength.

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