
**Invisible Wounds: A Journey Through the Unclaimed Experience of
Trauma in Joyce Carol Oates' "The Pursuit"**

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Abstract:

Trauma refers to a physical and psychological response to a severely distressing series of events. These events can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope and cause high emotional arousal in the victim. However, it leads to serious and long-term consequences for the victim, such as traumatic memories, loss of identity, and PTSD. So, when an individual experiences traumatic events, their memory can be affected in various ways, the effects of trauma can manifest in both psychological and physical symptoms. Trauma response varies by individual, and the healing process often requires time, support, and appropriate interventions like therapy. This paper highlights how literature serves as a medium in interpreting the unclaimed experience of trauma through various perspectives concerning Joyce Carol Oates' novel "The Pursuit."

Keywords: Trauma, PTSD, traumatic memories.

Introduction:

Trauma is the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event. The concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" refers to the idea that traumatic events or experiences can be so overwhelming and incomprehensible that they escape immediate understanding or assimilation into a person's conscious awareness in this view trauma resists being fully processed or integrated into the narrative of one's life leaving it unclaimed or unacknowledged this inability to fully claim or articulate trauma can lead to a haunting effect where the traumatic memory continues to impact the individual often in fragmented or dissociative ways this concept is explored deeply by scholars like Cathy Caruth who

emphasizes that trauma is not just the event itself but also the way it returns often in indirect or delayed forms because it was never fully grasped when it initially occurred trauma in this framework disrupts the normal flow of time and memory causing a break or fracture in understanding this makes it difficult for the individual to fully possess or claim the experience in their memory or identity the idea also connects with the broader understanding of trauma as a form of knowledge or expertise that escapes language and comprehension leaving the individual struggling to make sense of something that resists being fully known.

TRAUMA AS AN “UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE”

Joyce Carol Oates' has written over a hundred books, spanning novels, short stories, poetry, essays, and plays. Her versatility and prolific output are unmatched in modern American literature. Oates' work often delves into themes of violence, family dynamics, and psychological turmoil, and she has a reputation for confronting the darker aspects of human nature. Despite this, she's also explored various genres, from gothic and horror fiction to historical and realist narratives.

This research paper aims to analyze how Oates portrays trauma as an unclaimed experience in the novel *The Pursuit* highlighting the psychological, emotional, and societal impacts on the Protagonist Abby. Trauma is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, but it is generally understood as a deeply disturbing or distressing experience that has a profound impact on a person's physical and emotional well-being.

In Joyce Carol Oates's novel, *The Pursuit*, trauma operates as an unclaimed experience, weaving through the narratives in subtle and complex ways. The Characters face a series of psychological and emotional upheavals that are not immediately processed, creating unresolved pain and suffering. The concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" refers to an idea that individuals who experience trauma may not acknowledge fully at the time of its occurrence, and often, they cannot articulate or even understand the full impact of it. As Cathy Caruth says, trauma remains latent, emerging in fragmented ways through memory, dreams, or behavior rather than as a fully comprehended event. The protagonist, Abby, is pursued by a figure from her past, her estranged husband Willem, whose abusive behavior haunts her even as she tries to escape from it. Abby's attempts to start a new life are hindered by the unprocessed trauma of her relationship with Willem. Abby's fear and anxiety manifest in subtle ways, showing how trauma can be experienced but unclaimed throughout her life. The novel opens with Abby's wedding with Willem Zengler. As days pass, a series of anonymous phone calls and messages serve as a sign of psychological thriller elements in the plot. Abby's behavior shaped by the traumatic past reveals that she is undergoing PTSD and a sense of being hunted—the novel alternates between Abby's present-day narrative and flashbacks of her traumatic childhood. Abby grew up with an abusive father, and her mother, who

vanished without explanation when she was a child, looms as a mysterious figure in her past. These unresolved traumas shape Abby's fragile psyche and influence her perception of danger. As Abby grapples with her fear of Willem and tries to uncover the truth about him, the novel also explores Willem's back story. It turns out he has his dark secrets, including a tormented relationship with his family. The suspense builds as both characters' pasts are gradually revealed, showing how their traumas shape their actions.

Through a series of flashbacks, the readers learn about Abby's past life. Those memories between the past and the present create a parallel between Abby's past life and current fears. Though trauma as an unclaimed experience reflects Abby is directly influenced by the traumatic memories. Abby's actions reveal that she cannot confront the memories. As Abby's wedding approached, she couldn't maintain normalcy, and she felt trapped. Particularly the haunting memory of her abusive father, whom she believed had died during her childhood. Abby believes that her father is still alive and monitoring her. These unclaimed and haunting memories lead to a fragile mental state where she begins to question her perceptions of reality and safety.

The tension escalates as Oates skillfully portrays Abby's psychological deterioration. Her feelings of being pursued intensify as the wedding becomes an ironic symbol of her inability to break free from Willem's control. Oates uses the motif of a bride as both a symbol of new beginnings and an unsettling reminder of Abby's imprisonment. After their marriage, Abby realized that Willem was not only emotionally abusive but physically dangerous. Abby begins to take extreme measures to protect herself, but she struggles to distinguish between reality and paranoia.

Oates deepens the novel's psychological thriller aspect here. Abby's paranoia and fear blur the lines between real danger and her internalized trauma, reflecting the complexities of living with the unclaimed experience of a traumatic past. The title, *The Pursuit*, becomes more literal, as Willem actively seeks to control and follow Abby while also representing Abby's mental pursuit of understanding her past and present fears. Towards the end of the novel, the readers are able to feel where the psychological tension reaches its peak. The confrontation between Abby and Willem is the culmination of the novel's exploration of power dynamics, fear, and control. Oates uses this moment to emphasize how trauma can push a person to the brink of rationality, leading to extreme actions. The question is whether Abby can fully claim her trauma or if it is still an unclaimed experience. Oates closes the novel ambiguously, with Abby's future left uncertain. This ending reflects the ongoing nature of trauma and its unclaimed effects. While Willem may be out of Abby's life, the psychological damage lingers, suggesting that trauma is not easily resolved. The novel's unresolved ending mirrors the fragmented and incomplete process of healing from trauma.

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Conclusion:

In conclusion, *The Pursuit* can be seen as a profound experience of unclaimed experience, where Abby's life explores the quest to confront and reclaim unsolved aspects of her past. However, through this novel, Oates suggests that certain experiences, particularly traumatic experiences, remain elusive. Thus, the novel ends that some experiences may forever remain unclaimed, complex, or painful to confront.

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