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"THIS SOUL TRAPPED IN GLASS, / WHICH IS HER TRUE CREATION": THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-NARRATION IN THE MEDICAL PRACTICE FROM A LITERARY AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE. A CASE STUDY

ALBA DE JUAN Y LÓPEZ
Universidad de Oviedo

This article explores the intersectional relationship between domestic and medical gender-based violence, focusing specifically on the discursive aspect of medical practices. This research is based on the systemic disregard of female narratives in medical environments —particularly during screening and diagnostic processes— and the extreme technicality and personal distancing that certain medical discourses have acquired in the last few years. To this end, this article presents a close reading of Anne Carson's poem "The Glass Essay", included in *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), to advocate for the inclusion of more creative and freer narratives during psychological assessments and treatments to overcome those gendered discriminations that have been present in medical practices and have dismissed female narratives of illness and abuse as overly emotional and subjective. To ground this work, Rita Charon's studies in Narrative Medicine, together with a close reading of Carson's unique construction of the autobiographical self, will serve as a methodological basis to understand the relevance of gender exclusion in psychotherapeutic practices and the importance of using creative writing methods to allow victims of abuse to express themselves without the constraints of technicalities and gender-based stigmas.

KEYWORDS: Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay", Narrative Medicine, gender discrimination, autobiography, abuse.

"This soul trapped in glass, / which is her true creation": la importància d'una narrativa pròpia en la pràctica clínica des d'una perspectiva literària i de gènere. Un estudi de cas

Aquest article explora la relació interseccional entre violència de gènere en contextos domèstics i clínics, enfocant-se de manera prioritària en l'aspecte discursiu de la pràctica mèdica. Aquest estudi està basat en el menyspreu sistèmic de les narratives de dones en entorns mèdics —particularment durant les fases d'avaluació i diagnòstic— i l'excessiva tecnicalització i distanciament personal que certs discursos mèdics han adoptat en els últims anys. Per aquesta raó, aquest article presenta una lectura crítica del poema d'Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay", inclòs en *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), en

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favor d'una inclusió de tècniques més lliures i creatives durant els tractaments de psicoteràpia per tal de superar les discriminacions de gènere presents en pràctiques mèdiques que han considerat els discursos simptomatològics de moltes dones com massa emocionals i poc objectius. Per sustentar aquesta anàlisi, s'usaran les teories sobre narrativa mèdica de la Dra. Rita Charon juntament amb un estudi de la particular construcció del jo-líric autobiogràfic en els treballs de Carson com a base metodològica per a entendre la importància de l'exclusió de gènere en les pràctiques psicoterapèutiques i la necessitat d'adoptar mètodes d'escriptura creativa que permetin a les víctimes d'abusos expressar-se sense les limitacions que imposen els tecnicismes i estigmes de gènere.

PARAULES CLAU: Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay", narrativa mèdica, discriminació de gènere, autobiografia, abús.

"This soul trapped in glass, / which is her true creation": la importancia de una narrativa propia en la práctica clínica desde una perspectiva literaria y de género. Un estudio de caso

Este artículo explora la relación interseccional entre violencia de género en contextos domésticos y clínicos, enfocándose de manera prioritaria en el aspecto discursivo de la práctica médica. Este estudio está basado en el desprecio sistémico de las narrativas de mujeres en entornos médicos —particularmente durante las fases de evaluación y diagnóstico— y la excesiva tecnicalización y distanciamiento personal que ciertos discursos médicos han adoptado en los últimos años. Por esta razón, este artículo presenta una lectura crítica del poema de Anne Carson "The Glass Essay", incluido en *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), en favor de una inclusión de técnicas más libres y creativas durante tratamientos de psicoterapia con el fin de superar esas discriminaciones de género que han estado presente en prácticas médicas y que han tachado los discursos sintomatológicos de muchas mujeres como demasiado emocionales y poco objetivos. Para sustentar este análisis, se usarán las teorías sobre narrativa médica de la Dra. Rita Charon junto con un estudio de la particular construcción del yo-lírico autobiográfico en los trabajos de Carson como base metodológica para entender la importancia de la exclusión de género en prácticas psicoterapéuticas y la importancia de adoptar métodos de escritura creativa que permitan a las víctimas de abuso expresarse sin las limitaciones de tecnicismos y estigmas de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay", narrativa médica, discriminación de género, autobiografía, abuso.

> *I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it. But this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us.*
>
> —ANNE CARSON (1999: 105)

In *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998), written by Canadian poet, essayist, and classicist Anne Carson, Geryon's life is marked by abuse and loneliness, only finding solace in writing his own story. [1,2] Nonetheless, his autobiography is far from the traditional idea of what this genre entails, as it breaks with the concepts of truth and self. Carson's works are known for challenging the formal limitations and genre purity of traditional literature categorisations. Her postmodern visions of poetry have presented new perspectives on the way fictional and non-fictional autobiographical texts can be constructed.[3] In this article, Carson's experimental writing will be applied to the creation of medical narratives, particularly focusing on how female[4] accounts of trauma and abuse have been systematically dismissed for their lack of supposed objectivity and deviation from the standardised medical discourse. This case study analysis of "The Glass Essay" (Carson, 1995: 1-38) pays special attention to the neglect of female narratives in screening processes,[5] advocating for creative methods to bridge this discursive gap. Carson's long poem, included in the collection *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), creates a sequential representation of emotional abuse within a romantic relationship from the perspective of the female victim. "The Glass Essay" interconnects an intimate vision of partnership and a panoramic journey through grief and

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[2] Geryon's character in Carson's text is based on the monster from the classical epic poem *Labours of Herakles* (Peisander, 6th-7th BC), specifically on Labour 10, where the eponymous character Herakles steals Geryon's cattle and murders him.

[3] In an interview for *The New York Times Magazine*, Anderson mentions how Carson is reluctant to define herself as anything. Even as a writer, her fans consider the author something "more" than just a poet, which has been the subject of extensive criticism (Anderson and Carson, 2013).

[4] The author wants to acknowledge that the use of any term referring to womanhood comprises any female-identified subject, independently of biological sex and gender stereotypes.

[5] "Formal interviewing and/or testing process that identifies areas of a client's life that might need further examination […] but does not diagnose or determine the severity of a disorder" (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment).

healing, bringing into light the poetic persona's childhood trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) caused by repeated episodes of abuse. To consider the suitability of Carson's experimental, stream-of-consciousness writing technique in the medical field, the poem then will be analysed through the author's construction of truth and autobiographical fiction, and from a Medical Humanities perspective, presenting both methodologies under a gender-oriented viewpoint. "The Glass Essay"[6] will be then evaluated for its fusion of literary genres and how the creative writing process becomes a therapeutic tool for the poetic persona through the different stages of grief.

Carson's experimental autobiographies are not limited to the aforementioned work. Similar patterns are also found in *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2002) and *Nox* (2010), a non-fictional scrapbook elegy for the author's estranged brother presented in a physical box format. However, framing Carson's works under isolated textual categories may lead to misreadings and incorrect interpretations. Mixing the personal experience of her fictional characters with theoretical concepts and excerpts written by other authors, Carson's autobiographical fictions are built under a solid ground of interconnected networks of thought that show the complexity of her lyric voices. This freedom of introspective creation is highly interesting under diagnostic umbrellas. The associations between fact and fiction in Carson's works show the complex trains of thought of characters who have suffered from PTSD. Her experimental writing turns, then, into a potentially complementary tool in psychological screening that could increase the information about the events surrounding trauma available for the medical expert in charge of providing a diagnosis.

As stated by Pederson, "the history of the relationship between trauma and narrative is almost as long as the history of trauma itself" (2018: 97). Creating a personal narration is the first stage in therapeutic sessions and the main source of information for the therapist. Pederson, referring to the works of Hartman and Caruth, contends that literature "might possess a privileged […] value for communicating our deepest psychic pains and helps us 'read the wound' of trauma", wondering if perhaps trauma "can only be reclaimed by literary knowledge" (2018: 98). However, this questions the extent to which personal narratives in clinical contexts prioritise factual information and structured accounts over the reality of traumatic recollections, which tend to be disorganised and highly visual due to recurrent dreams and flashbacks

[6] For space and fluidity reasons the title of the poem "The Glass Essay" will be also referred to as "TGE".

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caused by the traumatic event.[7] Statements like Pederson's highlight one of the main concerns of Medical Humanities scholars who wonder if communication between patients and practitioners is inherently flawed and who advocate for the inclusion of creative methods within medical environments. To approach this question, this article contemplates the possibility of including Carson's writing style as a complementary tool for medical humanities multidisciplinary teams to access a wider range of information on a subject's trauma narrative. The analysis will focus primarily on the interconnections the poetic persona makes of childhood, gender, emotional abuse, and literature to explain the evolution of her romantic relationship. To sustain the benefits of textual models like Carson's, two main theoretical grounds will be taken into consideration: the construction of Carson's fictional, biographical self and the studies on Narrative Medicine developed by Rita Charon at Columbia University.

Anne Carson's autobiographical self: How the female subject is internally constructed

Carson's autobiographical subject: Between fact and fiction

Anne Carson's thirty-eight-page poem "The Glass Essay", included in the collection *Glass, Irony and God* (1995: 1-38), is divided into nine different sections that present the story of a female lyric voice after ending an abusive relationship and going to her childhood house to visit her mother. The encounter will eventually lead her to understand that the trauma caused by her recently terminated romantic partnership is only the tip of the iceberg, as she reflects on the bond with her mother and the structural sexism she was raised into, projecting her thoughts onto the figure of Emily Brontë. "TGE" is composed of a non-linear, sequential plot structured in four-line stanzas, emulating the stream-of-consciousness technique. Carson alternates the lyric persona's recollections of the relationship with the events happening in her mother's house and a literary analysis of the reception of Brontë's work through a feminist perspective. While this structure may initially seem to hide the depth of the trauma the lyric voice presents, a closer reading shows the actual opposite. The use of repeated elements and the circularity of the poem sustain a panoramic vision of the poetic persona's emotional damage, giving the reader a global vision of the complexity of its subsequent trauma .

[7] The *DSM- 5* (*Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*) points at the presence of "recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or effect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s)" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 146) as one of the main diagnostic criteria for PTSD.

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Carson's use of familial trauma intersecting with seemingly detached academic issues is not a technique reserved for "TGE". *Autobiography of Red* (1998) also shows a similar pattern of self-narration. In this case, Geryon is portrayed as a red child whose redness and monstruosity become a metaphor for his repressed sexuality and the episodes of molestation he went through. As he grows older, he soon realises his only way of tackling the PTSD caused by years of abandonment and abuse is by writing an autobiography. Carson toys with the idea of truth behind these narrations and advocates for a suspension of disbelief, not because the narrator is actively lying, but because the truth these lyric voices present is limited to their own perspective. In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson warns the reader that the concept of truth is challenged in self-narration in favour of allowing an independent, creative speech. Something similar happens in "TGE", when the intimist, confessional construction of the events presents a one-sided vision of the breakup and childhood trauma, prioritising the emotional component over the factual truth. In the chapter "What About Autobiographical Truth?", Smith and Watson mention the case of Annie Ernaux's narratives in which a "nonfictional narrative can situate itself and ask to be read as an act of not just intersubjective exchange but access to shared experiential truth" (2024: 158). Similarly, Carson's autobiographical poetic fictions use the intersubjectivity of these trauma narratives portrayed in "TGE" and *Autobiography of Red* as fictive accounts of universal experiences of abuse and PTSD.

In his study of how the autobiographical self is constructed in Carson's text, Murray refers to Heidegger's idea that "what is closest to us experientially is furthest from us intellectually" (2005: 101). In *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon attempts to reach that intellectualisation by writing and stating facts about himself in the third person:

> Total facts known about Geryon.
> Geryon was a master everything about him was red. […]
> Geryon's mother was a river that runs to the sea […]
> Herakles came
> one day killed Geryon got the cattle.
>
> (Carson, 2016: 74)

Here, Geryon foreshadows what is going to happen and uses the metaphor of his murder and the theft of his cattle as a symbolic representation of the emotional and sexual abuse carried out by his lover, Herakles. Similarly, in "TGE" the lyric voice also presents facts about herself to give a sense of validity to her story: "It pains me to record this, / I am not a melodramatic person" (Carson, 1995: 9). The stanza break after "it pains me to record this"

that leads to the speaker's justification shows a potential intention to convince the reader that her emotions are rooted in something real and that she is not overthrown by her irrational response. Throughout the poem, the lyric voice shows a tendency to justify the consequences of abuse by besieging the reader with facts and distancing herself from the issue through the repeated use of metaphors and allegories, leading to her rarely addressing the issue transparently nor directly.

Nonetheless, justification and extreme rationalisation of abuse accounts in women are not rare. Several studies have confirmed that traditionally "female patients get more information with less medical jargon, ask more questions, present more symptoms, and give more detailed stories" (Sandhu et al., 2009: 348). Consequently, when we include the variant of sexual/emotional abuse, it is necessary to consider underlying feelings of shame, guilt, and fear of stigmatisation that may lead to a modification in their medical narrative, which can result in an incorrect prognosis. A study by DeCou states that "negative social reactions to sexual assault disclosure were associated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms and […] self-blame and avoidance coping", urging to take into account "negative social reactions to disclosure among sexual assault survivors as potential contributing factors to subsequent psychological distress" (2017: 2).

This shame is present in both *Autobiography of Red* and "TGE" in the form of an extremely self-introspective disclosure of the events that is only eventually shared with strangers. Unsurprisingly, the lyric voice in "TGE" will be indirectly shamed for showing the rawest version of the consequences of abuse by both her mother and her doctor, when her mother accuses her of "remembering too much" (7) and her doctor asks her, after she has described in detail her nightmares, "when you see these horribles images why do you stay with them? / why keep watching? Why not / go away?", to which she responds, "amazed. / Go away where?" (Carson, 1995: 18). The shame and victimisation these women project onto the lyric voice force her, like Geryon, to write her autobiographical recollection of the events to regain some narrative freedom. The poetic persona's account of sexual and emotional abuse, in this case, is highly characterised by metaphorical, poetic, and symbolic visual elements of self-reflection that create a unique language to speak about her experience. As previously mentioned, when women are placed in a diagnostic context they are prone to less technicalities and wider, more detailed accounts. In the case of "TGE", we see a clear example of this, as the lyric voice allows herself to mention what she considers important in the process of creating her self-narration, which eventually leads to her recovery.

In his reading of Carson's works, Murray claims that "rather than attend to the truth-value of a subject's factual knowledge and […] to that subject's

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intentions and motivations, we might instead look to the wider consequences of those actions" (2005: 105). In a medical background, focusing on what the patient is saying, looking beyond the factual recollection of events, and prioritising the patient's vision of abuse could give renewed importance to emotional subjectivity. Murray agrees with Carson on the ability of language to shape reality and how words "refigure being, refigure the conditions of intelligibility [and] the meaning of things" (2005: 107). This challenges Elaine Scarry's idea that pain (of any nature) "ensures this unshareability through its resistance to language" (1987: 4) by presenting the possibility of creative writing as a complementary prognosis tool within patient-doctor communication dynamics. By allowing patients a freer approach to traumatic events (especially women), doctors can potentially create a safer space for them to express themselves without the burdens of being stigmatised by how they recall their own experiences of abuse. The inclusion of literary practises may be filling a gap in diagnostic criteria that overly technical medical language may not be currently considering.

Subjectivity and diagnosis: The implementation of narrative medicine

Wiesenthal, quoting Gilmore, points to how "TGE" "decenter[s] the autobiographical subject" by "moving away from recognisably autobiographical forms even [while] engag[ing] autobiography's central questions" (2018: 2), particularly those building life narratives that become "a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging past experience, shape identity in the present" (Smith and Watson, 2024: 3).

In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Aitken asks Carson about her statement that "her personal poetry is a failure", which led him to wonder if she "really fe[lt] it's a failure or [if that was just] the poem's persona talking?", particularly in poems like "TGE", to which Carson replied:

> There are different gradations of personhood in different poems. Some of them seem far away from me and some up close, and the up-close ones generally don't say what I want them to say. And that's true of the persona in the poem, but it's also true of me as me. […] I see it ["TGE"] as messing around on an upper level with things that I wanted to make sense of at a deeper level. I do think I have an ability to record sensual and emotional facts —to construct a convincing surface of what life feels like, both physical life and emotional […] when I wrote "The Glass Essay," I also wanted to do something that I would call understanding what life feels like, and I don't believe I did. (Aitken and Carson, 2004)

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Carson's response shows what Scarry and Heidegger have widely acknowledged: language seems insufficient to illustrate the immensity of human experience and literature is a way of timidly approaching that goal. When pain and life become inexorably coexisting forces, literature takes a healing role trying to shape those emotions by making them more graspable. Here is where the field of Narrative Medicine questions why medical communication is so overly technical and rigidly structured and whether pain is sometimes better tackled through artistic creation.

Narrative Medicine has become increasingly more present in the medical sciencies and the humanities of the last ten years (Zaharias, 2018: 177) and it "aims to introduce into daily medical practice the use of narrative as a tool to collect and interpret information on the patient's experience of illness" (Fioretti et al., 2016: 1). Most of these implementations of narrative practice in the medical field are based on research by scholars like Rita Charon, whose work has widely proved the improvement of screening procedures when literary creation is included in the process, advocating for a "medicine practised with these narrative skills of recognising, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness" (2006: 4). Charon firmly asserts that "narrative is an irreplaceable —and often silent or at least transparent— partner to human beings as they make and mark meaning, coping with the contingencies of moral and mortal life" (2006b: 40). This can be linked to Carson's autobiographical intention stated in the aforementioned interview of "construct[ing] a convincing surface of what life feels like" through her written work. While creating a narration is an inherent part of the screening and diagnostic processes —delimiting a timeline, explaining the physical symptoms, causes, or conjectures— many details tend to be disregarded due to time limitations and preference for technical approaches. Several studies accounted for not only differences in how female patients present their symptomatology but also how female practitioners establish that exchange, showing "on average [it] lasted longer comparing female and male physician's interactions while also offering higher additional times of communication" (Löffler-Stastka et al., 2016: 5). Female doctors also "showed more positive attitudes towards doctor-patient communication [such as] the belief […] that good doctor-patient communication leads to a better outcome and to a more successful therapy" and presented "a more patient-centered attitude" (5). Consequently, Charon started from the same conclusions as the aforementioned studies to implement new doctor-patient communicative methods in her consultations. She stated that when patient and physician meet a "story is recounted" resulting in a "complicated narrative of illness" that includes a wide variety of elements like words, gestures and silences showing how the role of the doctor when listening to these stories is not far from the "the acts of reading literature"

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(2001: 1897). Michael White states in his studies of narrative therapy that the inclusion of creative writing outlets in trauma sessions "provides a scaffold for people to bring together diverse experiences of life into a storyline that is unifying [...] and that provides for them a sense of personal continuity through the course of their history" (2004: 70), something that becomes increasingly necessary in cases of PTSD in which life narratives are clouded by trauma's own clinical profile.

An example of this appears in the first pages of "TGE". When the lyric voice is describing the moor where her mother lives she says "the ground goes down into a depression. / The ice has begun to unclench. / Back open water comes / curdling up like anger. My mother speaks suddenly. / That psychotherapy is not doing you much good [...] You aren't getting over him" (Carson, 1995: 3). Here we already see how she uses words like "depression"[8] or "anger" to describe the moor (which serve as a metaphorical projection of her psyche) and that description is immediately cut by her mother's comment, which could be interpreted as acknowledging her daughter's mental state. She responds by stating that her "mother has a way of summing things up" (3). This shows how straightforward and reductionist the parent's vision of the abuse is in comparison to the poetic persona's complex emotions she tries to describe in the poem by using a more metaphoric and image-based language. "TGE" shows all the underlying issues that had contributed to the extent of the damage caused by the relationship.

"The Glass Essay": A case study

The following section, which is divided according to the titles and divisions presented by Carson's original text, will analyse some of the relevant elements of the poem: the mother and Emily Brontë to explain the influence of traditional gender roles and sexism in the lyric voice's conception of femininity and relationships; and the role of male characters (referred to as "Law" and "Thou") to understand the development of the abusive relationship. These two elements will be accompanied by a study of the literary and linguistic choices that surround the poetic voice's construction of the narrative and Carson's experimental methods of genre fluctuation present in the text.

"I" and "SHE"

"I" (Carson, 1995: 1) introduces the poem by creating a duality of interpretations for the title, which foreshadows the dualities at play throughout the

[8] While she refers to "depression" as a geographical occurrence, Carson plays here with the ambiguity of meanings.

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poem. The reader does not know if she refers to "I" as the first person or as the number one in Roman numbers, presenting then a simple enumeration. This also places the reader in a position of many possible interpretations and ambiguities from the start.

As the poem begins, the first two stanzas encapsulate the situation the poetic voice is going to describe: "I can hear little clicks inside my dream / [...] At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking / of the man who / left in September. / His name was Law" (Carson, 1995: 1). Here Carson already presents several elements that will be repeated throughout the text, such as the termination of the relationship with Law and the nightmares caused by it. These will appear around the poem in the lyric voice's narration of the "Nudes",[9] revealing the psychological aftermath of the abusive relationship.

In "SHE" (Carson, 1995: 1-2) the lyric voice addresses the generational component that surrounds her ideas about oppressive gender roles and the construction of femininity. The first stanzas present a concise, detached introduction to her mother who "lives on a moor in the north. / [and] lives alone" (1), which contrasts with how she introduces the role of Emily Brontë —"whenever I visit my mother / I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë, / my lonely life around me like a moor, / my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation / that dies when I come in the kitchen door" (1-2)— and her personal connection with the Romantic author.

The technical elements of these stanzas show the relevance of the message the lyric voice hides between the lines. Throughout the poem, she compares herself with the moor on repeated occasions. This dissociation with her embodied self is emphasised in this next line when she talks about her unwieldy body trying to reach "a look of transformation / that dies" (Carson, 1995: 1-2) when she enters the kitchen. This line reflects how navigating through her own trauma narrative becomes challenging and unnatural and how the lyric voice is desperately trying to find consolation in her childhood home, only to realise that the root of the damage lies there.

"THREE" and "WHACHER"

"THREE" (Carson, 1995: 2-4) introduces the three women —and three visions of womanhood— the poem navigates around. The moor is described as "paralysed with ice", showing the stagnant psychological situation of the lyric voice and her positioning between the instability of her relationship and the entrapment of the memories that the childhood home brings her —"it is as if

[9] The "Nudes" are the titles the lyric voice gives to the nightmares she has after the termination of the relationship. Nightmares are a common side-effect of traumatic experiences and PTSD.

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we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass" (2). Nonetheless, it is in this chapter that she challenges the narrative that has been forced upon her regarding her abuse. After her mother directly blames her for not doing well enough in therapy she answers "it isn't like taking an aspirin you know, I answer feebly. / Dr. Haw says grief is a long process". Her mother answers with "what does it accomplish / all that raking up the past" (4), disregarding the importance of externalisation of the story of her abuse and creating her own narrative.

This section of the poem points to the importance that the narrative act will have for the lyric voice. When her mother asks what good that talking does, the lyric voice screams (in contrast to previous lines when she answers "feebly") "I prevail!" (Carson, 1995: 4). The triumph she establishes by asserting the benefits of her therapy sessions compensates for the silencing she has been forced to yield to in the romantic relationship.

Meanwhile, "WHACHER" (Carson, 1995: 4-13) exemplifies the internal organisation of the poem. In the text, Carson links concepts in a chain-like structure that only make sense after reading the entire text and, as the lyric voice, having a full picture of the story of abuse. This section ponders about the use of the word "whacher" in the works of Emily Brontë. The purpose of this word becomes highly symbolic to what the lyric voice is attempting to state between the lines: independence in creation, being misunderstood, and the connection between identity and language.

Here the poetic voice mentions how "whacher" was "what she wrote / whacher is what she was" (Carson, 1995: 4). Carson creates a direct connection between speech and identity, which becomes particularly relevant when we are talking about victims of trauma and abuse, as "trauma challenges self-narratives [and] it can be understood in the context of identity disruption" (Boyle, 2017: 71). In the case of the parallel association the lyric voice makes with Brontë's life, she equates the author's freedom of creating meaning to the construction and reappropriation of her own identity after the long-term consequences of trauma —"to be a whacher is not a choice. / There is nowhere to get away from it" (Carson, 1995: 4).

Similarly, the same linguistic process occurs when she mentions Brontë's naming of her lover as "Thou" (displaying a level of formality) in the same way the poetic voice refers to her ex-partner as "Law", both showing a certain detachment and a venerating quality. Here Brontë's and Thou's relationship is described as "for someone hooked up to Thou, / the world may have seemed a kind of half-finished sentence" (Carson, 1995: 5), showing again a connection between abuse and the resulting loss of identity and silencing of the victim. Equivalently, the haughty position of Law against the poetic voice appears reflected in the first hints she gives about the abusive side of their

relationship. The first description of Law is that in his apartment "time in its transparent loops [passes] beneath [her] / [and] still carries the sound of the telephone in that room" (8) as she recalls his manipulative reaction to her refusing to have sex with him —"No, I say aloud. I force my arms down / through air which is suddenly cold and heavy as water"(8).

The narration of the sexual abuse develops into the descriptions of the nightmares she experiences, called "Nude[s]", which become symptomatological of her psychological evolution. The metaphorical quality of these dreams opens "many possibilities for both reader and writer" showing the "brain's unique pattern of synaptic strengths and associations […] between certain people, places, objects and experiences in memory they "complicate and thicken our sense of the world and our place in it" (O'Rourke, 2023: 462), opening this way a wider path for a freer narration. In Nude#1 she describes a woman on a hill and a strong wind that "rip[s] off the woman's body" […] leaving, / […] an exposed column of nerve and blood […] / calling mutely through lipless mouth" (Carson, 1995: 9). Here, the reader sees a clear association between the cold air she mentions in the previous stanzas as a destructive force that violates and butchers her body, referring to both sexual assault and loss of identity. The figurative weight of the dreams becomes more noticeable a few stanzas later, as she returns to the last time she saw Law and how, after he broke up with her, she tried to sleep with him to mend the relationship —"I don't want to be sexual with you, he said […] / Yes, I said as I began to remove my clothes […] / Everything gets crazy. When nude / I turned my back because he likes the back. / He moved onto me" (11). Nonetheless, this leads to a strong sense of guilt, as she understands how that action has forced her into an undesired sexual act. Her regrets link closely to the loss of identity and speech as she mentions "there was no area of my mind / not appalled by this action, […] / But to talk of mind and body begs the question. / Soul is what I kept watch on all that night" (12).

"WHACHER" displays then the importance of language and identity in cases of abuse and how creative methods can potentially aid during screening processes. By creating a parallel between the poetic persona's experience and Brontë's and Thou's, she finds a way to channel her own perspective in a creative, more indirect way.

"KITCHEN" and "LIBERTY"

In "KITCHEN"(Carson, 1995: 13-6), Carson continues pondering the connection between Brontë's relationship with Thou and the difficulties of

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overcoming an abusive relationship —"cauterization of Heathcliff took longer" (14).[10] Nonetheless, we see a clear improvement when the lyric voice asserts that she is "familiar with this half-life. / But there is more to it than that" (14).

The hopeful take that evolves in this part of the poem is directly associated with the space of the kitchen for both Emily and the poetic voice. Here Carson presents the idea of the shared space of the kitchen in the Brontë's household as being far from its gendered, domestic purpose and as a place for creative freedom and dialogue between the sisters as shown in the lines "her question, / which concerns the years of inner cruelty that can twist a person into a pain / devil, / came to her in a kindly firelit kitchen" (Carson, 1995: 15). This kitchen becomes a safe area for both Brontë and the poetic voice —"Out the kitchen window I watch the steely April sun / jab its last cold yellow streaks" (15)— showing the importance of positive environmental and safety factors that "promote [...] self-exploration and self-reflection, which are likewise considered essential for psychotherapy" (Podolan and Gelo, 2023: 196).

Hence, when the lyric voice finds a safe environment to develop her narrative, she also begins to question the nature of her relationship, just as Brontë did with Thou. In "LIBERTY" (Carson, 1995: 16-21), the poetic voice describes her mental state right after the breakup and questions the nature of their relationship: "What is love? / My questions were not original / Nor did I answer them" (17). This process of introspection becomes a direct challenge to concepts of romantic love and abuse, which she slowly deconstructs to detach herself from her dependence on Law. This section links the idea of liberty to a self-built concept that appears after the relationship and how the poetic voice is capable of successfully wording the consequences of abuse by going to therapy and using Brontë and Thou's relationship as a starting point. Here she refers to the writer's lines "A messenger of Hope, / comes every night to me / And offers, for short life, eternal Liberty" (18). The lyric voice criticises how the reception of Brontë's desire for liberty has been coined "self-dramatising" and "bathetic melodrama" (19), which she immediately links with the description above of her termination of therapy after the response of her therapist to her dreams.

The end of this section shows once more how the narrative process eases the poetic persona's understanding of her own abuse. In the last stanzas, she mentions how Law defined love as "freedom", hinting at the possibility of infidelity, to which she replies "blank lines say nothing" (Carson, 1995: 20), followed by an extremely critical quote of Charlotte Brontë regarding those who

[10] The poem implies in previous sections that the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is inspired by Emily and Thou's.

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never say things clearly as "violent and profane" and their communication as "weak and futile" and concealing of horrors (20-1). The construction of the idea of freedom becomes, in this case, relevant to understanding the nature of the relationship and its emotional repercussions.

"HERO" and "HOT"

Following the progressive change in the poetic voice's discourse and narrative in the previous sections, in which she presents a more clear and critically escalating account of the events, the next passages explore upbringing contributing factors. "HERO" (Carson, 1995: 21-7) introduces the poetic voice's relationship with her mother and father and the degenerative brain disease thereof.

Here the lyric voice establishes her relationship with her mother as one of constant disagreements. Nonetheless, the one that holds more relevance for her is the one regarding rape, as her mother presents a victim-blaming discourse that affects her daughter (who has allegedly suffered from sexual abuse) by presenting statements like "those women! / [...] complaining about rape all the time [...] / those bathing suits— / [...] No wonder!" (Carson, 1995: 22). She confronts her mother about victim-blaming (triggered by her own experience and political beliefs) to which her mother replies "well someone has to be responsible", resulting in the poetic voice questioning "why should women be responsible for male desire?" (22) and referring again, indirectly, to her sexual relationship with Law. This moment leads to the lyric voice's realisation that her mother is as much of a victim of sexism as she is: "the frail fact drops on me from a great height / that my mother is afraid" (23). Her animadversion to feminist discourses may come from suffering the consequences of sexual abuse herself, as the reader will discover later on.

The father's introduction in the poem is primarily defined by his Alzheimer's disease through the use of overly technical terms (Carson, 1995: 23) and cultural facts, which turn out to be very similar to the poetic voice's associations of her state and the reception of Brontë's works. His father's disease is parallel to her trauma, as they both find common ground in the loss of speech and consequent loss of identity. He is described as a proud soldier who progressively loses his ability to create a coherent discourse, to which she replies with rage rather than compassion (24). Her response could feasibly be interpreted as a response to her own silencing in the romantic relationship. She mourns how he "uses a language known only to himself / [...] but no real sentence" and has "shrunk to the merest bone house" (25-6), linking these lines to the ones of the Nudes.

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Consequently, "HOT" (Carson, 1995: 27-31) retrieves the anger against her father's illness and projects it toward her relationship with Law, once again, through the description of her dreams. In this section, she mentions:

> I am interested in anger.
> I clamber along to find the source [...]
> Anger travels through me, pushes aside everything else in my heart [...]
> I want justice. Slam.
> I want an explanation. Slam.
> I want to curse the false friend who said I love you forever. Slam.
> (Carson, 1995: 28-9)

These lines, in which the reader noticeably observes the progression of her narrative into a more transparent one, link once again with Brontë's work as she mentions how she "was good at cursing" (Carson, 1995: 29) despite not bringing her any relief, as she quotes the author's lines "unconquered in my soul, the Tyrant [Thou] rules me still— / Life bows to my control, but Love I cannot kill!"(29). These lines reflect one of the diagnostic criteria included in the *DSM-5* for sexual-abuse-related PTSD. Anger has commonly been conceived as a maladaptive response to abuse. However, recent studies point out that, well directed, it "reflect[s] a survivor's appropriate but unmet desire to live in a world that is moral and may be an adaptive effort to reassert their bodily integrity and autonomy"(Berke, Carnet and Lewobitz, 2021: 5). This mirrors the poetic voice's recurrent, metaphorical mentions of harm toward her body and non-consensual sexual relationship.

The last stanzas of "HOT" show one of the clearest signs of recovery from the lyric voice. As she continues to reflect on Brontë's anger, she describes how "the poetry shows traces of a deeper explanation [...] / As if anger could be a kind of vocation for some women [...] / The vocation of anger is not mine / I know my source" (Carson, 1995: 30). These lines show a step outside the guilt she showed in previous lines towards accepting Law's responsibility and acknowledging the complexities of the abuse she went through. This switch of the blame becomes extremely important in the process of recovery of abuse victims. In her article about assessing psychic trauma in women and minorities, Brown brought special attention to the issue of victim-blaming, stating that "if we maintain the myth of the willing victim, who we then patologise for her presumed willingness, we need never question the social structures that perpetuate her victimisation" (1991: 127). This becomes highly relevant in the poetic persona's own assessment of her abusive relationship, as by questioning gender inequalities through the figure of her mother and the

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general acceptance of intra-marital sexual offense through the Brontë and Thou's relationship she is able to understand the complexities of her relationship and slowly begin a way towards recovery.

"THOU"

"THOU" (Carson, 1995: 31-38) is the closing section of the poem, showing the development of the lyric voice's perception of the abuse toward a more hopeful future —"astonished light is washing over the moor [...] / I am walking into the light" (31)— making reference again to the image of the moor as a reflection of her emotional state.

The opening stanzas of this passage allude to the beginning of Emily and Thou's relationship (and, concurrently, to Law and the poetic voice's). Here the reader finds a strong criticism toward Emily Brontë's devotion to Thou as something almost religious, to which the poetic persona replies with opposing feelings of longing and rejection: "it would be sweet to have a friend to tell things to at night / without the terrible sex price to pay" (Carson, 1995: 31). The relevance of these lines lies in the fact that they are the first time she openly shows the abusive side of her and Law's sexual relationship, linking them to her upbringing as she mentions how ingrained gender roles were in her education, in which "no direct speech [was] allowed" and her mother "laughed with ropes all over it" (32) when her father made sexist remarks.

However, the following stanzas show how much of that improvement is linked to her creative process. The lyric voice, going back to one of Brontë's poems, mentions how the author switches the roles between victim and master and that,

> She has reversed the roles of thou and Thou
> not as a display of power
> but to force out of herself some pity
> for this soul trapped in glass,
> which is her true creation.
>
> (Carson, 1995: 34)

Brontë's empowerment is as timid and seemingly irrelevant as a change from referring to Thou as "thou" rather than "Thou" in capital letters, erasing that reverence he previously had for him. Nonetheless, the creative freedom she allows herself to tell her story and change the narrative becomes her "true creation", showing how her worth was more than her role in the relationship. On that same note, the lyric voice matches this hopeful take by stating that "with Thou or without Thou I find no shelter. / I am my own Nude" (Carson,

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1995: 34). While these last lines that return to the subject of her nightmares may seem discouraging to her recovery, they present quite the opposite. Using the creative outlet of establishing a parallel between her relationship and the one of Brontë and Thou, she can shape the experience of abuse into something she can emotionally bear and work on. It is not coincidental that following that statement she presents the rest of the "Nudes" series without fear of being judged (as happened with the therapist), concluding by stating that she "stopped watching [the dreams]. / [She] forgot about Nudes. / [She] lived [her] life." (38).

Carson closes the poem with Nude#13, which comes to the lyric voice "like Nude#1. / And yet utterly different" (Carson, 1995: 38). She once again refers to an exposed body against violent winds but this time "there was no pain. / The wind / was cleansing the bones" (38), showing the purgative role the writing process has had for her and the possibility of healing. Nonetheless, the closing lines that follow those above encapsulate what this ambitious poem tries to achieve:

> They stood forth silver and necessary.
> It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.
> It walked out of the light.
>
> (Carson, 1995: 38)

Here Carson potentially implies that this character's autobiographical fiction holds truth in its transformation into a universal experience. The poetic persona's case is far from being unique and isolated, showing the reality of many women who experience abuse from their partners and find themselves alone in the task of understanding the depth of the trauma they have experienced.

Conclusion

Carson's closing stanza displays the synergic quality of abuse and the importance of overcoming gender biases in therapy. While not directly addressing them, at the end of the poem it is easy to realise how the circle of abuse has a generational component mainly based on the silencing of female voices through generations who, as her mother, ended up feeling an underlying sense of shame despite being the victims of structural sexism.

The lyric persona created by Carson emphasises the importance of creative outlets when approaching trauma. The recurrent parallelism with Brontë's experience together with the extended metaphor of the changing moor give the reader a wider perspective of the lyric voice's emotional state after the abusive relationship. The very personal recollection this female

voice gives to her own traumatic experience reveals an allegory to the generational and structural component of gender violence and the shame and isolation experienced by many victims of abuse. By travelling through her relationship with Law, with her mother and with her therapist, the reader may not finish the poem having all the information about the abuse in itself, but a panoramic vision showing the expansiveness of the mistreatment and how misunderstood victims can feel if they are not given a judgement-free space to share their trauma.

"The Glass Essay" becomes a clear example of how the lyric voice's creative process becomes an active aid toward her recovery by shaping her experience in an innovative and intimate way, proving that women's discourses of trauma are not perfunctory displays of seemingly disconnected events, but complex constructions of narratives that deserve space and consideration within medical practices. Carson's writing extends itself from autobiographical fiction to humanistic and psychological analysis, showing the interconnectedness of literature and trauma and the potential that creative writing tasks could have as complementary tool in diagnostic processes. Carson's portrayals of abuse reinforce how artistic creation and trauma lean on each other on the path toward recovery and how the conjunction between medical science and the humanities could build common ground in the poetic text.

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