
Trauma and Recovery in Young Adult Fiction: From “Soul Murder” to Psychological Healing in *13 Reasons Why* and *Speak*

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of adolescent trauma and the complex process of recovery in Jay Asher’s *13 Reasons Why* (2007) and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999). Drawing upon Leonard Shengold’s psychoanalytic concept of “soul murder” and Karen Duncan’s clinical model of the stages of healing, the study argues that the protagonists—Hannah Baker and Melinda Sordino—embody contrasting responses to trauma resulting from sexual assault and bullying. Shengold’s theory clarifies how abuse annihilates the victim’s sense of self, while Duncan’s model illuminates the conditions under which survivors may rebuild identity and agency. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates that *Speak* offers a narrative of reintegration made possible by internal resolve and external validation, whereas *13 Reasons Why* depicts the destructive culmination of unacknowledged trauma. By situating these texts within contemporary literary trauma scholarship, the paper underscores the pedagogical and social significance of young-adult fiction as a medium for representing psychological suffering and modelling recovery. Ultimately, it contributes to literary trauma studies by foregrounding adolescence as a distinctive site where identity formation, victimization, and healing intersect.

Keywords: trauma studies; young-adult fiction; soul murder; stages of healing; sexual assault; bullying; recovery

Introduction

In contemporary young adult (YA) fiction, narratives of trauma often intersect with the fragile processes of self-formation and psychological survival. The adolescent stage, marked by emotional volatility and the search for identity, provides fertile ground for exploring the impact of violence, sexual assault, and social alienation on the developing psyche. Within this framework, Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why* (2007) and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999) stand as powerful fictional case studies that confront the psychological destruction and potential recovery of young survivors. Both texts portray teenage protagonists—Hannah Baker and Melinda Sordino—whose lives are profoundly altered by the trauma of sexual violation and the subsequent bullying and ostracisation that follow. Yet their stories diverge sharply: while Hannah's narrative culminates in self-destruction, Melinda's story traces a slow but tangible path toward reclaiming her voice.

The emotional and psychological devastation that both characters endure may be understood through Leonard Shengold's notion of "soul murder," a concept that defines the annihilation of vitality and identity following extreme abuse or subjugation. In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah's loss of agency, compounded by societal indifference, exemplifies this psychic annihilation. In contrast, Anderson's *Speak* reveals how survival and healing can occur through processes of acknowledgement, articulation, and supportive relationships—elements that align with Karen Duncan's stages of healing from childhood sexual abuse. The intersection of these theoretical models offers a nuanced lens through which to read the oscillation between destruction and recovery in adolescent trauma narratives.

While trauma theory has established itself as a vital branch of literary studies since the 1990s, much of its critical attention has remained focused on adult or collective traumas such as war, genocide, or exile. The experience of trauma within adolescent subjectivity has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, despite its relevance to understanding the socio-psychological dynamics of youth culture. Existing trauma scholarship, particularly that of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, emphasises the inexpressibility of trauma, its delayed narration, and its fragmented inscription in memory

and language. However, these models rarely address the specific vulnerabilities and developmental stakes involved in adolescent trauma.

This article, therefore, intervenes in the field of literary trauma studies by situating adolescent trauma within a dual framework of psychological annihilation and conditional recovery. It argues that both novels portray trauma as an assault not only on the body but on the very construction of selfhood—a process Shengold identifies as “soul murder.” Yet, as Duncan’s clinical insights reveal, recovery is not guaranteed: it depends on the survivor’s ability to process emotions, form supportive connections, and reintegrate trauma into a coherent sense of identity. Melinda’s trajectory in *Speak* demonstrates the viability of this process, whereas Hannah’s fatal silence underscores its absence.

By analysing these texts comparatively, the article aims to illuminate how YA fiction functions as a mirror to the psychological realities of adolescent trauma and as a discursive space where readers may recognise, process, and empathise with such experiences. In doing so, it contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that bridges psychological theory and literary representation, showing how fiction can both reflect and facilitate understanding of trauma and recovery in the formative years of life.

Literature Review

The study of trauma in literature has evolved from its psychoanalytic foundations to become one of the most dynamic areas of critical inquiry in contemporary literary theory. Originating in the late nineteenth century with Sigmund Freud’s work on hysteria and repressed memory, trauma theory was later expanded in the twentieth century to account for the interplay between psychological suffering and narrative form. Freud’s assertion that trauma often reemerges belatedly—“not in the event itself but in its repeated return” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 32)—laid the groundwork for later theories emphasising the haunting and repetitive nature of traumatic memory.

In the 1990s, scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra advanced trauma studies within the humanities by linking psychoanalytic theory with narrative analysis. Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) conceptualised trauma as a rupture in consciousness that resists assimilation into ordinary

memory or language. Her work, alongside Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), foregrounded the ethical and representational challenges of depicting trauma. Similarly, Hartman's engagement with Holocaust testimony underscored literature's role as a medium of remembrance, while LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma introduced the idea of narrative as a potential site of healing.

Although these foundational theorists profoundly shaped literary trauma studies, they have also been critiqued for privileging the experience of catastrophic collective trauma—such as genocide and war—while overlooking everyday forms of psychological violence, particularly those experienced by adolescents. Michelle Balaev and Laurie Vickroy have addressed this limitation by calling attention to resilience, recovery, and social context. Balaev's concept of the "pluralistic model of trauma" (Balaev 151) argues that meaning and recovery are shaped by cultural frameworks and interpersonal relationships rather than by universal psychic laws. Vickroy's *Reading Trauma Narratives* (2015) extends this perspective by emphasising the restorative potential of narrative empathy in contemporary fiction, suggesting that storytelling can transform private pain into shared understanding.

Within this trajectory, young adult (YA) fiction has emerged as a vital subfield for studying how trauma and recovery are represented during adolescence. Scholars such as Roberta Seelinger Trites and Peter Hollindale have explored how YA narratives often depict the struggle between individual agency and institutional repression. Trites' *Disturbing the Universe* (2000) highlights how YA fiction exposes power hierarchies that contribute to trauma, while Hollindale's *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997) reads trauma as a catalyst for moral and emotional growth. Maria P. Root and Catherine Jurca have further expanded the discussion to include the intersections of trauma with race, gender, and identity formation. Collectively, this scholarship situates YA fiction as both a reflection of adolescent distress and a pedagogical tool that encourages empathy and resilience.

Despite this growing body of research, the representation of psychological trauma in YA fiction remains underexplored in terms of its effects on identity construction and recovery processes. While studies have examined social causes—such as bullying, sexual violence,

and peer isolation—there is still limited attention to the psychological mechanisms that mediate destruction and healing in young survivors. This article addresses that gap by engaging Leonard Shengold’s notion of “soul murder” and Karen Duncan’s stages of healing to interpret the psychological dimensions of trauma in *13 Reasons Why* and *Speak*. Shengold’s model allows for a reading of trauma as the annihilation of the self’s vitality, while Duncan’s framework charts the gradual reconstruction of identity through emotional processing and social connection.

Within existing scholarship on Asher and Anderson, critics often focus on gender politics, mental health awareness, or the ethics of representing suicide and rape in adolescent literature (Dewi and Sunardi; Van de Kamp; McGee). However, few have examined how these novels map the psychic journey from disintegration to recovery, or how external and internal factors determine the possibility of healing. By situating the two novels within the evolving field of literary trauma studies, this article extends the conversation beyond pathology to include the conditions that allow for psychological restoration.

In sum, this review underscores the need for critical frameworks that link the destructive effects of trauma with the potential for resilience. The combination of Shengold’s psychoanalytic theory and Duncan’s therapeutic model offers precisely such an integrative lens—one that illuminates both the devastating collapse of selfhood and the fragile pathways toward renewal that characterise adolescent trauma narratives.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this study draws primarily on Leonard Shengold’s psychoanalytic theory of “soul murder” and Karen Duncan’s therapeutic model of “stages of healing.” Together, these frameworks illuminate how trauma simultaneously destroys and reshapes the self, and how recovery depends upon the survivor’s ability to reintegrate the fragmented dimensions of experience—emotional, psychological, and social.

Shengold’s Concept of “Soul Murder”

Leonard Shengold’s notion of “soul murder,” introduced in *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation* (1989), refers to the deliberate or unconscious

destruction of an individual's vitality, autonomy, and capacity for joy. Shengold extends Freudian psychoanalysis to describe the psychic consequences of sustained abuse—especially sexual or emotional abuse—during formative years. In his view, “soul murder” entails not only physical or emotional harm but the systematic erosion of a person's sense of identity and the will to live. The victim, stripped of agency and individuality, becomes psychologically paralysed, trapped between longing for connection and fearing further injury.

Applied to literature, Shengold's theory provides a compelling framework for reading trauma as a psychic death rather than a mere psychological wound. In Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker's experiences of sexual assault, bullying, and betrayal accumulate into precisely such annihilation. Each act of violation—ranging from gossip and objectification to physical abuse—represents another step toward the destruction of her “soul.” Her tapes, recorded before suicide, testify to the collapse of her capacity for communication and trust. They are both a memorial and an indictment, revealing how her environment's cruelty transforms her trauma into a terminal condition. Shengold's framework helps explain why Hannah's trauma culminates in irreversible loss: her identity, empathy, and vitality are extinguished by the persistent negation of her personhood.

Conversely, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* dramatises the possibility of resisting this psychic extinction. Melinda Sordino, silenced after a rape at a high-school party, initially exhibits the symptoms Shengold associates with soul murder—numbness, muteness, dissociation, and withdrawal. Yet her gradual reawakening through art, reflection, and the emergence of supportive figures (notably her art teacher, Mr Freeman) signals a partial restoration of selfhood. Shengold's concept thus helps delineate the continuum between Hannah's psychological death and Melinda's survival, clarifying how environmental validation or its absence determines whether trauma leads to annihilation or rebirth.

Duncan's Stages of Healing

Where Shengold's framework explains the destructive dimension of trauma, Karen Duncan's *Healing from the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse: The Journey for Women* (2004) offers a roadmap for recovery. Duncan proposes a sequence of interrelated stages—assessment, connection, emotional expression, identification of chronic patterns, and

integration—through which survivors of sexual abuse move toward healing. The model, though derived from therapeutic contexts, has literary resonance because it foregrounds the temporal and emotional labour required to transform trauma into narrative coherence.

In Duncan's first stage, "assessment," survivors recognise the presence of trauma and its effects on their lives. This corresponds to Melinda's initial awareness of her silence in *Speak*, where her internal monologue oscillates between repression and realisation. The next stage, "connection," involves confronting the traumatic memory and beginning to articulate it; Melinda achieves this partially through her art projects, which symbolise the unspoken pain that language cannot yet bear. Duncan's subsequent stages—"experiencing emotions" and "identifying chronic problems"—manifest in Melinda's gradual confrontation with her rapist and her recognition of how isolation perpetuates her suffering. The final stage, "integration," emerges when she reclaims her voice and identity, embodying the transformative potential of recovery.

In contrast, Hannah in *13 Reasons Why* fails to traverse these stages. Her trauma remains unassessed by those around her, and her connection attempts—most notably her tapes—occur only after her death. She experiences emotional overwhelm rather than expression, and her community's failure to acknowledge her pain forecloses any chance of integration. Duncan's model thus clarifies the structural and emotional conditions necessary for recovery: empathy, communication, and supportive recognition. The absence of these conditions transforms trauma into soul murder; their presence allows for the reclamation of selfhood.

Integrating the Frameworks

Bringing Shengold and Duncan together enables a holistic reading of trauma narratives in YA fiction. Shengold's psychoanalytic perspective reveals the mechanisms of psychic destruction, while Duncan's therapeutic framework provides the vocabulary for recovery and resilience. In both *13 Reasons Why* and *Speak*, the protagonists navigate the terrain between annihilation and rebirth, between silence and speech. The dual framework underscores that trauma is neither static nor self-contained: it is relational, evolving within social structures that either perpetuate or mitigate harm.

This integrative approach thus situates the representation of adolescent trauma within a continuum of loss and recovery. It recognises that the self may be wounded to the point of psychological death, yet still retain the potential for regeneration through empathy, articulation, and solidarity. Within this dialectic, Hannah's narrative exemplifies the tragedy of unacknowledged trauma, while Melinda's journey embodies the fragile possibility of healing, together revealing the stakes of "soul murder" and recovery in the imaginative world of young adult fiction.

Analysis and Discussion

1. The Fragmented Self: Trauma and "Soul Murder" in *13 Reasons Why*

Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why* presents an unflinching portrayal of adolescent trauma as both a social and psychological phenomenon. Through Hannah Baker's posthumous narration, Asher constructs a fragmented narrative that mirrors the disintegration of her psyche. Each cassette tape represents a moment of psychic rupture—a piece of her "soul" destroyed by betrayal, bullying, and sexual violence. Shengold's notion of "soul murder," defined as "the deliberate attempt to destroy the self of another" (*Soul Murder* 6), aptly encapsulates Hannah's experience. Her trauma is cumulative, shaped not by a single event but by the persistent negation of her identity within a hostile social environment.

From the outset, Hannah's voice emerges as a paradoxical act of presence and absence. Speaking from beyond the grave, she reclaims narrative control even as her death signifies the ultimate silencing. This duality—expression through absence—echoes Shengold's description of survivors of soul murder as "alive yet deadened." Hannah's trauma manifests through alienation, self-blame, and the inability to communicate her pain effectively. Her school community, rather than offering empathy, perpetuates the cycle of emotional violence. Classmates reduce her to rumours and stereotypes, illustrating what Shengold terms "the psychic murder of empathy" (112), wherein others' refusal to acknowledge suffering becomes itself a form of violence.

The sexual assault that precipitates Hannah's final breakdown constitutes the point of no return in her psychological annihilation. Yet the novel also critiques the broader culture of silence and voyeurism that sustains trauma. Clay Jensen's retrospective listening to the tapes

transforms the narrative into a collective act of witnessing, but this belated empathy comes too late. Asher's narrative structure—alternating between Hannah's recorded monologue and Clay's reactions—reinforces the theme of temporal disjunction central to trauma studies: the impossibility of immediate comprehension. The belatedness of Clay's understanding mirrors Caruth's assertion that trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In Hannah's case, this temporal gap results in psychic collapse rather than recovery, as no supportive framework enables her to process or integrate her suffering.

From Duncan's perspective, Hannah's story reflects an incomplete or failed progression through the stages of healing. She identifies her trauma (assessment) and attempts to connect by creating the tapes (connection), yet the emotional catharsis and integration Duncan describes never occur. Her death interrupts the process, symbolising the tragic endpoint of unacknowledged pain. The narrative thus dramatises the lethal consequences of a social environment devoid of empathy—an environment that transforms trauma into "soul murder."

2. Reclaiming the Self: Voice and Recovery in *Speak*

In contrast, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* offers a narrative of gradual reawakening, positioning art and language as vehicles for psychological survival. Melinda Sordino's muteness following her rape is emblematic of trauma's silencing power. Her inability to articulate her experience renders her socially invisible and internally fragmented. However, unlike Hannah, Melinda inhabits a world that—though indifferent at first—contains spaces of potential recognition. Through the mentorship of her art teacher, Mr Freeman, and her engagement with artistic creation, she begins to externalise her trauma symbolically before verbal expression becomes possible.

The motif of the tree that Melinda repeatedly attempts to sculpt and draw functions as an extended metaphor for her psychological state. Each failed attempt to perfect the tree mirrors her struggle to process the violation that has "killed" part of her inner self. Shengold's "soul murder" provides a powerful interpretive lens here: Melinda's vitality has been wounded, but not irreversibly destroyed. Her artistic attempts represent fragments of selfhood

struggling to reassemble into coherence. Anderson's prose—fragmentary, internal, and often ironic—captures the nonlinear rhythm of trauma's aftermath, aligning with Caruth's observation that trauma "speaks through the wound that resists closure" (Caruth 8).

Duncan's stages of healing map almost precisely onto Melinda's journey. In the "assessment" phase, she recognises the pervasive effects of her silence and isolation. The "connection" phase emerges through art, where she indirectly confronts the repressed memory of her rape. The third stage, "experiencing emotions," unfolds when she begins to cry during one of her projects, symbolising the surfacing of buried pain. Eventually, the stage of "integration" is realised in the climactic moment when Melinda verbalises the assault, saying, "He hurt me" (Anderson 198). This act of speech, however minimal, signifies a reclamation of power and identity.

Melinda's recovery is not absolute—it remains tentative and incomplete—but it demonstrates the transformative potential of expression and empathy. The supportive environment, embodied by Mr Freeman and Melinda's eventual reconnection with her peers, provides the social scaffolding that Duncan identifies as essential for healing. Unlike Hannah, Melinda moves from paralysis to agency, embodying the "working through" process that LaCapra distinguishes from repetitive "acting out." Her voice, once silenced, becomes the instrument of reconstitution, transforming trauma into testimony.

3. Comparative Dimensions: Conditions for Healing

The contrast between Hannah and Melinda underscores the conditional nature of recovery from trauma. Both characters experience psychic devastation that aligns with Shengold's definition of "soul murder," yet only one finds a path toward restoration. The decisive factor lies not merely in personal resilience but in the presence or absence of recognition. As Judith Herman asserts in *Trauma and Recovery*, "Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (133). Anderson's narrative validates this assertion by providing Melinda with interpersonal and creative outlets that transform pain into meaning. Asher's novel, by contrast, illustrates the dangers of an unsympathetic social structure that denies the victim's humanity.

Furthermore, the gendered context of trauma in both texts reflects broader cultural anxieties about female agency and sexual violence. In both novels, the victims' silence is misread as consent or weakness, reinforcing the patriarchal mechanisms that sustain abuse. Shengold's insight that "soul murder requires a perpetrator who insists on dominance and a victim deprived of autonomy" (Shengold 27) resonates here. Hannah's victimisation becomes a public spectacle, while Melinda's is rendered invisible. Both forms of erasure perpetuate trauma, yet Anderson's narrative offers the possibility of reclaiming visibility through speech.

From a narratological perspective, both novels deploy fragmented, nonlinear storytelling that mirrors trauma's temporal dislocation. The oscillation between past and present, memory and narration, externalises the internal fragmentation of the traumatised psyche. However, where Asher's structure reinforces finality and despair, Anderson's invites reconfiguration and renewal. The reader's role also diverges: *13 Reasons Why* implicates the audience in Hannah's suffering through voyeuristic listening, while *Speak* encourages empathetic engagement and reflection. These differing narrative ethics reflect the novels' contrasting outcomes: one perpetuates trauma's cycle, the other gestures toward transcendence.

Ultimately, both texts reveal that healing from "soul murder" is contingent upon acknowledgement—both self-recognition and recognition by others. Without an empathetic listener or a validating environment, trauma remains suspended, unprocessed, and deadly. Melinda's story illustrates that recovery requires not only courage but also communal empathy; Hannah's tragedy demonstrates that without it, even the act of storytelling cannot save the self.

Conclusion

Through a comparative reading of *13 Reasons Why* and *Speak*, this study demonstrates that adolescent trauma in YA fiction is not simply a narrative of suffering but a psychological exploration of the boundaries between destruction and regeneration. Shengold's "soul murder" clarifies the devastating psychological effects of abuse and silencing, while Duncan's "stages of healing" reveal the fragile mechanisms by which survivors can reconstruct selfhood.

The two protagonists embody divergent trajectories: Hannah Baker's death marks the culmination of unacknowledged trauma, a descent into psychological nullity, whereas Melinda Sordino's journey affirms the restorative potential of empathy and expression. Both narratives, however, expose the social complicity that sustains trauma and the ethical imperative of recognition within adolescent communities.

In a broader sense, this analysis contributes to literary trauma studies by extending its scope from collective catastrophes to the intimate devastations of youth. YA fiction, as these novels illustrate, serves not only as a mirror to real psychological experiences but also as a pedagogical tool that models both the perils of silence and the transformative power of articulation. By tracing the movement from "soul murder" to psychological healing, these narratives reaffirm literature's enduring capacity to render pain intelligible and to imagine recovery, however tentative, as an act of resistance against annihilation.

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