

## *Trauma and Memory in Sebastian Barry's Old God's Time*

### *Trauma e memória em Old God's Time de Sebastian Barry*

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**Abstract:** *This article delves into the exploration of Sebastian Barry's latest novel, Old God's Time (2023), employing a Trauma Studies framework (Caruth, 1995; Alexander, 2004; Balaev, 2014) and drawing on the concepts of Trauma Fiction articulated by Anne Whitehead (2004). It aims at examining the novel's portrayal of individual and collective cultural traumas, with a particular focus on the representation of the enduring consequences of clerical child abuse in Ireland. The narrative unfolds through the lens of an unreliable narrator, weaving personal stories with broader societal implications, thereby shedding light on the far-reaching effects of violence and abuse that resonate across years and generations. By situating the novel within the Trauma Studies framework, it is possible to examine the mechanisms through which trauma is conveyed in fiction, emphasizing the interplay of memory, testimony, and narrative structure. The analysis extends to the characteristics of trauma fiction, showcasing how Barry's work aligns with and contributes to this contemporary genre.*

**Keywords:** *Irish Fiction; Sebastian Barry; Old God's Time; Trauma Fiction; Trauma Studies.*

**Resumo:** *Este artigo analisa o romance mais recente de Sebastian Barry, Old God's Time (2023), a partir de uma abordagem dos Estudos de Trauma (Caruth, 1995; Alexander, 2004; Balaev, 2014) e faz uso dos conceitos da Ficção de Trauma articulados por Anne Whitehead (2004). Pretende-se examinar a representação dos traumas culturais individuais e coletivos no romance, em especial da representação das consequências*

*do abuso infantil pela igreja católica na Irlanda. A perspectiva de um narrador não confiável, entrelaça histórias pessoais a implicações sociais mais amplas, discutindo sobre os efeitos de longo prazo da violência e do abuso que reverberam ao longo de gerações. Ao situar o romance no âmbito dos Estudos de Trauma, torna-se possível explorar os mecanismos por meio dos quais o trauma é transmitido na ficção, enfatizando a interação entre memória, testemunho e estrutura da narrativa. A análise aborda as características da ficção de trauma, destacando como a obra de Barry se alinha e contribui para esse gênero contemporâneo.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Ficção irlandesa; Sebastian Barry; Old God's Time; Ficção sobre trauma; Estudos do trauma.*

In his most recent novel, *Old God's Time* (2023), Sebastian Barry employs conventions of trauma fiction, as theorized by Anne Whitehead (2004) and others, such as a fragmented non-linear narrative, the perspective of an unreliable narrator, emphasis on memory and forgetting, repetition of motifs and images and evocative use of symbolism and metaphor, which mirror, stylistically, the psychological disarray caused by trauma. This article situates the novel within contemporary Trauma Studies, drawing on theoretical frameworks by Cathy Caruth (1995), Jeffrey Alexander (2004), and Michele Balaev (2014), among others, to analyze the novel's representation of personal and collective traumas that bring to the fore the sensitive issue of clerical child abuse in Ireland for decades, as well as the societal complicity in silencing survivors. Furthermore, it examines Barry's contribution to Irish literary discourse, contextualizing the novel within a wider tradition of addressing silenced histories.

The novel follows Tom Kettle, an ageing retired detective who has been living in Dalkey, a seaside suburb of Dublin, for nine months. He spends his days in his wicker chair, smoking cigarillos and staring out to sea, when his now quiet life is interrupted by the visit of two Dublin *Garda* – the National Police of Ireland – officers, who arrive seeking his help with a cold case regarding the murder of a priest accused of child abuse, because Tom had been involved with the earlier investigation of the case when he was still working. His former boss also came to see him on the following day and invites him to go to the police station and provide a DNA sample to ensure the police are following the correct procedures in such cases.

These visits stir up suppressed memories from Tom's traumatic past and initiate the narrative.

Set in the mid-1990s, Barry's novel mirrors a pivotal moment in Irish culture, when revelations of sexual abuse within the Catholic-run institutions, including orphanages, reformatories, and boarding schools, became public. The novel's setting is synchronous with the societal reckoning represented by the media's exposure of clerical abuse, making it a work deeply rooted in Ireland's cultural and historical context. In particular, the narrative draws attention to the systemic nature of abuse and the complicity of both Church and state in protecting perpetrators. The *Garda* detectives in the novel represent this new moment, when investigations could be conducted more seriously, and the Church could not entirely conceal its crimes anymore or prevent clerics from being tried and eventually condemned.

Tom is now 66, living by himself and enjoying his retirement. For him, the whole point after retiring was to be "stationary, happy and useless" (Barry 10). His initial resistance to collaborate with the young detectives is due to his attempt to distance himself from painful memories: "Jesus, go home, boys. You are bringing me back to I don't know where. The wretchedness of things. The filthy dark, the violence. Priests' hands. The silence" (Barry 20). However, being a survivor of clerical child abuse compels him to collaborate with the investigation despite his desire of erasing his traumatic past. Tom's life is marked by personal traumatic experiences, as an abused child at a catholic orphanage for boys from where he escaped at 17, as a young soldier discharged from the army due to his PTSD condition, as a witness of extreme violence in his job as a criminal detective, and also by the tragic losses of his whole family; his wife June committed suicide, his daughter Willie, heroin-addicted, died from drug abuse, and his son Joe, a doctor, was murdered in America.

Barry's choice to set the novel in that era makes its depiction capture the tension between the personal and the collective, as individuals like Tom Kettle live with their private traumas within a society confronting its systemic failures. The novel transitions from individual to cultural trauma, as defined by Jeffrey Alexander (2004): "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 1). This group identification with traumatic experiences is fostered by literature. The novel's focus on societal reckoning with institutional abuse contributes to ongoing conversations in Irish literary discourse about justice, memory, and historical trauma. Barry's treatment of these

themes adds depth to Ireland's literary landscape by combining personal narrative with collective historical reflection.

Ireland's literary tradition has long engaged with themes of trauma and repression, particularly in relation to the Catholic Church. Writers such as Edna O'Brien (1930-2024) and John McGahern (1934-2006), among others, have explored the influence of the Church on Irish life, often addressing themes of sexual and institutional abuse in their works, as for example, the short story "Sister Imelda" (O'Brien 1981) and the novel *The Dark* (McGahern 1965). *Old God's Time* expands on this tradition, not only by addressing Ireland's history of clerical abuse but also by focusing on the lasting effects of trauma through multiple generations. Barry's work stands out for its integration of trauma fiction techniques, which allow him to reproduce in language the instability of traumatic memory survivors. The reader is often placed in a position of uncertainty, and is required to piece together the narrative from incomplete and inconsistent accounts.

As the narrative unfolds, Tom reveals memories from his past concerning his professional and family lives, as well as recollects good and bad moments. His confused mind sometimes realizes that he had been dreaming or experiencing some form of hallucination. His memories emerge unpredictably, intertwining past and present without clear boundaries, which aligns with what is stated by Caruth (1995) – that trauma resists integration into a coherent narrative, emerging as fragmented memories or flashbacks. Trauma fiction, as Anne Whitehead (2004) argues, employs fragmented perspectives to reflect the inarticulable nature of traumatic experience; thus, flashbacks and nonlinear narratives are recurrent in this category of fiction. These features are central to *Old God's Time*, where Tom Kettle's memories unfold in disjointed fragments, blending past, present, reality and imagination. This narrative structure mirrors Cathy Caruth's concept of belatedness, which considers trauma as an event that cannot be fully experienced in the moment, but returns later in fragmented and involuntary ways (Caruth 9). Tom's unreliable narration further complicates the narrative, immersing readers in his subjective experience of trauma. At times, entire scenes—such as his visit to the police station—are later revealed to be dreams. This nonlinear approach captures the fragmented nature of traumatic memory and highlights how trauma survivors, like Tom, struggle to make sense of their experiences. It not only illustrates the cognitive disruptions caused by trauma and age, but also invites readers to question the reliability of memory as a means of understanding the past.

Barry's novel not only addresses individual trauma but also examines the intergenerational transmission of pain and suffering. Through Tom and his wife June, who is also a survivor of clerical abuse, the novel explores how unresolved trauma is passed down, shaping the lives of their children. The intergenerational effects of trauma are depicted as a silent, unspoken presence that haunts future generations. Although Tom and June attempt to create a loving family, their past traumas permeate the family dynamic, affecting their children in subtle yet profound ways.

The concept of intergenerational trauma is central to contemporary trauma theory and is explored through both psychological and cultural lenses. Michele Balaev (2014) offers a pluralistic approach to trauma theory that emphasizes how trauma is not only an individual psychological experience but also a cultural phenomenon shaped by social and historical contexts. Balaev suggests that "unspeakability" is only one of many possible responses to trauma and that it is shaped by cultural and contextual factors (Balaev 366). In the case of Tom and June's children, their trauma manifests not necessarily through direct recounting but through the psychological residue of their parents' unresolved pain. This aligns with the broader societal trauma that Ireland as a whole carries from its history of abuse and silence.

June's suicide reinforced and turned the silent presence of trauma in her children into a concrete reality in their lives. A survivor of clerical abuse, she carried unspoken wounds that deeply affect their family. Her trauma of being repeatedly raped by a priest from the age of six, which she reveals to Tom in a moment of vulnerability, illustrates the pervasive guilt and shame imposed on survivors: "Maybe you should get rid of me. The nuns said it was my fault. On and on, till I was twelve. Can you imagine? Twelve is a big girl, Tom" (Barry 74). Besides the feelings of shame and guilt, the narrator keeps on saying that there was "not a tear on her cheeks, as if she were far beyond tears. The tears of a little girl. The dry, cool face of his wife" (Barry 75), which demonstrates that June repressed her experiences throughout her life, and even after telling her husband about it, she could never recover. Her trauma led her to develop a kind of emotional distance: "He had no way to reach her sometimes, even when she was home. She'd be like a telephone not plugged in then" (Barry 56).

She lived an apparently normal, but in the mid-eighties she could not cope with her painful wound anymore: "After the years of seeming normality, June one day, while he was at work, took the bus into town alone. ... She was forty-five years old. She took the one fifteen bus – he looked into all this later, taking statements, looking for witnesses, needing to know

the details, forensically ... in her nice summer dress she doused herself in the petrol and set it alight. No one saw her immediately. The black smoke brought three keepers in a four-by-four. When they arrived, the fire had burned itself out and the body was smoking” (Barry 161). The effects of trauma in June’s case could be read as an example of a delayed response, as Caruth (1995) developed. As the traumatic experience cannot be completely understood at the moment it occurs, silence is the first reaction to it. Only afterwards, those traumatic memories are relived and repeated, but still not processed. Thus, unspeakability seemed to be the reaction to traumatizing events.

In Barry’s novel, however, the characters present different responses to trauma, and even the same character reacts differently depending on the event and period of life. These different responses are in line with the contemporary pluralistic approach proposed by Michele Balaev (2014), that suggests that unspeakability is one among many responses to an extreme event, not a defining feature of it. The cultural and intersectional dimensions are considered in Balaev’s approach, and it relies more heavily on external factors to show that trauma occurs in specific bodies, time periods, cultures, and places, each informing the meaning and representation of a traumatic experience (Balaev 366).

Turning again to June’s inability to fully process her experiences, which led to emotional distance and eventual self-destruction, as she internalizes the shame imposed by her abusers, it is worthy to recur to Balaev’s pluralistic trauma theory, since it provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing the cultural and temporal specificity of trauma and its manifestations. Another aspect to be considered is that by situating June’s trauma within the context of Ireland’s history of institutional abuse, Barry highlights the societal complicity that allowed such atrocities to persist. His novel also engages with the ethical challenges of representing trauma, especially in relation to sensitive topics such as clerical abuse. In *Old God’s Time*, Barry does not sensationalize the abuse but instead focuses on the internal experiences of survivors, capturing the psychological complexity of living with trauma. The ethical concerns about representing such pain are addressed through the novel’s restrained but potent depiction of memory and suffering. As Anne Whitehead (2004) suggests, trauma fiction requires a delicate balance between witnessing the trauma and respecting its inexpressibility. One example of Barry’s ethical approach is his depiction of Tom’s memories of abuse at a Catholic orphanage. The narrative focuses on the emotional and psychological consequences of the abuse:

His own memories of the Brother, and the smell of urine, and the merciless lashing, the stick on his back, on his legs, every night for a thousand years, world without end, and him getting off lightly, compared to other boys, the Limerick lad that he supposed was murdered, ran off and taken back by the guards, and then left out in the yard for the winter, the winter, for weeks and weeks, and who knows what became of him ... Tom only wet the damn bed and was beaten for that, but also Brady, a kid two years older, the Brother's pet, trying to skin him with a knife, stabbed his thigh a dozen times, little pinpricks, while his cronies held him down, laughing" (73). He also remembers witnessing the sexual assault of boys — "with the light in their eyes put out"— at the hands of priests. Boys put to the sword of their lust. For ever. He had seen it. He had witnessed it when he didn't even know the words for it. (Barry 75)

Though disruptive, Tom's traumatic childhood memories are not described as having caused pathological symptoms. His traumatic experience in the Malayan war, as a sniper in the army, though, is narrated as having caused neurobiological responses such as the impossibility of sleep and the recurrence of terrible nightmares when sleeping, symptoms associated with a condition known as perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS), the form of posttraumatic stress disorder caused by killing or committing violence as the stressor, as studied by MacNair (2015). It is read in the novel that Tom murdered 56 Malaysians, most of them civilian natives. PITS symptoms are underscored as devastating to Tom Kettle:

Unlike many serving soldiers, he had killed a fair number of the enemy. He wished he hadn't. He wondered now about those lives he had ended. Mostly local men among the Malayan rebels. They had given him an honourable discharge after a year of that. He had begun to be sleepless, and to have nightmares when he did sleep. The army doctor had called it 'gross stress reaction'. Doctors had to give even terror a name, he supposed. The effects of Malaya had been like a series of aftershocks in the body – he was just a wreck when he came home. (Barry 98)

Symptoms like these are recurrently mentioned in the novel, as the ones Tom felt at some times at home in Deansgrange with his family:

That night he had lain in bed, unable to close his eyes for hours, seeing again and again the shapes on the street, the bloodied meat that once were people,

the unearthly silence of it. He could still hear the soundlessness of it, the profound silence after the bombs had done their devilish work. (Barry 97)

The novel depiction of Tom's symptoms resembles the ones listed by MacNair (2002):

... the traumatic event is persistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways: recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions; Recurrent distressing dreams of the event; acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated); intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event; physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event. (MacNair 6-7)

Feelings of dissociation and personal disintegration, together with a sense of unreality are also associated with PTSD/PITS (MacNair 8-9), which might be one cause of Tom's unreliable narrative, adding another layer to the complexity of his mind, which is also possibly affected by dementia. His unbalanced mind is also haunted by ghosts. He sees people, young children, running by the sea or dancing on the grass in his landlord's garden. They could be real. They might be ghosts. They might be just his imagination. Readers know that Tom's sense of reality fails. There are contradictions, denials of previous established facts, a blur between past and present. He frequently sees his dead daughter, she visits him, he talks to her (Barry 88).

As the narrative advances, the reader is more and more thrown into Tom's damaged mind, both by trauma and by dementia, and his conversations with her neighbour, Ms. McNulty, a young actress who lives with his little son, is marked by the mixture of reality and imagination, which reframe old Tom's memories of his and June's traumas, when Ms. McNulty tells about the abuse of her six-year-old daughter by her father, resembling June's abuse by Father Taddheus:

First, she had noticed problems with her daughter's body. She had brought her to the doctor in London because there was blood in her rectum – the child was only a little girl of six, and she had no idea what was wrong ... her little girl grew sicker and sicker, and died, right in front of her, she died, and



something had been ruptured in her that didn't have a remedy, and she died. She just died. And the post-mortem said she had been abused. (Barry 100)

After listening to his neighbour's story, Tom reflects: "this young woman was stirring at memories so deeply set that he didn't know if they were his or June's" (Barry 101). As the little girl, June also grew sicker and sicker and died because the wound she had inside her did not have a remedy. The blurring of reality and unreality grows gradually in the narrative, and the last chapter of the novel begins with this sentence: "his story was told and he had told it to no one" (Barry 176). After some pages in which reality and imagination are blended in a lyrical narrative, Tom is finally reunited with his beloved wife June, either in dreams, dementia or even death, left open for readers to interpret.

Along with the narrative structure that I intended to briefly illustrate here, Barry makes use of some stylistic features to convey the nature of trauma in the novel that might characterize his novel as an example of trauma fiction. As Whitehead (2004) states, among other key features, some which tend to recur in these narratives include intertextuality, repetition, a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice, memory places, and the presence of fantastic elements. The intertexts in *Old God's Time* show traces of the past that emerge in the present as textual echoes, determinations and directions. Repetition acts at the levels of language, imagery and plot, and one of the examples was the case of the dead six-year-old girl, daughter of Ms. McNulty, Tom's late wife, June, and Tom's symptoms of PTSD/PITS. Although there is not a formal presence of a fragmented narrative voice, the accounts of June's and Ms. McNulty's testimonies, as well as the adjustments the narrator makes in previous narrated situations, function as multiple perspectives within the plot. In *Old God's Time*, Deansgrange is a memory place, and Dalkey a place Tom chose to forget his life and try to find peace and happiness, far from his grief, which was not possible because his traumatic past emerged and put him seriously at risk. The fantastic is also present in the novel, there are ghosts and symbolic imagery through unicorns, besides Tom's dreamlike logic, emphasized in the conclusion scenes.

Among other reading possibilities of interpretations, *Old God's Time* intertwines history, trauma, ethics and love to serve as a commentary on Ireland's troubled past, particularly the systemic abuse within the Catholic Church that remained concealed for decades. It is also an extensive reflection on the nature of trauma and its effects on survivors, their families and society.

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