

Love's Hate Behind a White Veil: A Counterplay Between Ageing, Trauma and Revenge

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Abstract

The literary ghost of Charles Dickens' The Great Expectations, Havisham, is appropriately repositioned by Carol Ann Duffy as "the wicked old hag" in a contemporary setting in her poem "Havisham." The gory and decaying room of Havisham can be interpreted as a metaphor for an old-age home, portraying the struggles of aging, declining mental health, and temporal stagnation. The suspended state of the room covered in dust and taint reflects the fragility and fixation that can be seen in older people. Havisham's obsessive behavior and emotional extremity mirror the conditions of PTSD that are commonly found in geriatric patients with bitter past experiences who become social recluses. However, there is an exception to this. This research aims to study Havisham's voluntary isolation from the perspective of the autonomic nervous system, specifically the Dorsal Vagal system, characterized by immobilization in the Polyvagal Theory proposed by Stephen Porges, not as a clinical examination but as endorsed by a critical textual analysis, where her action is screened similarly to that of old people who would have faced traumatic betrayals in life.

Keywords: Literary Gerontology, Ageing and Modern Poetry, PTSD and Ageing, Polyvagal Theory, Trauma Studies, Carol Ann Duffy, "Havisham".

Introduction

Gerontology is a scientific study of aging. Literary Gerontology encompasses a range of literature that focuses not only on the physical changes that occur with age but also on their impact on the individual's mental state. It also accounts for sociological stigmas, attitudes of neglect, and the resulting marginalization of this vulnerable section of the global population, who had once been an integral part of it. Although aging has been discussed since the early days, gerontology as a science is a relatively new field of exploration. The term "gerontology" was coined by Élie Metchnikoff, a Russian biologist working at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, in 1903 in his book *Etudes on the Nature of Man*, who felt the need to study aging beyond myths and traditional beliefs systematically (Stambler, 2015).

As the global population ages, understanding the aging process is crucial. Gerontologists help improve the quality of life for older adults by studying how aging affects individuals and society and developing programs, policies, and innovations to address these changes. Since the average human lifespan has risen to 70 years in the twenty-first century, owing to technology-aided medical interventions, the population living beyond the accepted age of

retirement or respite from active professional life is not exempt from requiring an expert field of study to be addressed. The field is moving towards not only increasing lifespan but also improving “healthspan” – the period of life spent in good health. Innovations in gerontology are expected to yield new interventions that help people live healthier and more productive lives as they grow older.

Qureshi notes in *The Express Tribune*, “A majority of the elderly people I have encountered battle with unresolved grief from the past, while the transition towards old age is difficult for them. Both of these factors combine to cause depression at this age”. One of the major issues faced by the older generation is trauma; anyone can experience this deeply distressing or disturbing experience, and older adults are very vulnerable to it. They are at an increased risk of such traumatic events, which may result from experiencing the loss of their loved ones, serious illnesses, or even memories of past traumatic events that come back later in life. We noticed a resurgence of PTSD symptoms as they aged. All these past and recent traumas can have a very devastating impact on the overall health of the elderly, their mind and body, and if not treated well, the effects of these can last for years.

The global population is rapidly aging. The World Health Organization records that by 2050, people over 60 years of age are expected to make up approximately 22% of the world’s population. This demographic shift creates new challenges and opportunities, increasing the demand for research and expertise in aging. Gerontology imbibes knowledge from biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, economics, public health, architecture, literature, and more. This multidisciplinary approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the ageing process and its impact on individuals and society.

We can trace how literature has evolved over the years as an interdisciplinary domain; hence, Gerontology has secured its place in literature, both as a subject for creative exploration and as a field for scholarly analysis. Literary scholars formally began to recognize gerontology as a field of study in the early 20th century. Initially, they examined how aging and the elderly are represented in literature.

If we trace back the works of literature as early as from Greek and Roman traditions, we find the representation of old people as a stereotypical source of wisdom or, at times, as a burden to those around them or fraught with existential ambivalence. These portrayals have directly or indirectly influenced cultural attitudes towards ageing over the centuries, and they have been shaped by religious, philosophical, and political theories. Literary Gerontology has immensely contributed to the gerontological field by studying how narratives, characterisations, and themes in literature influence our understanding of ageing. From Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to modern-day novels such as *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, we can trace the evolution of gerontology in literature.

Carol Ann Duffy’s “*Havisham*” explores ageing in a grand literary manner through her character Miss Havisham, originally the jilted bride from Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. This poem leads us into the emotional and psychological effects of trauma that Havisham experienced over her lifetime, adding gerontological significance to the poem. Miss Havisham is portrayed as an elderly woman whose life is turned upside down by the tragic incident of her lover leaving her at the wedding altar on the day of her wedding. Over the years, this accumulated vengeance haunts her, resulting in deep psychological wounds and mental and emotional instability, which are all relevant to the major concerns in gerontology.

This poem portrays how Havisham’s unresolved grief, heartbreak, and isolation manifest as her bitterness, rage, and obsession, which later affect her identity and mental health, not just when she was young and beautiful, but also in her later years when she became old and weak. Havisham and her decision to remain aloof from society and human reign, and her constant fixation on the past and the trauma it had brought into her life, are some of the recurring themes that we can find in literature on ageing. These findings prove the risks of isolating oneself from society. Duffy explores how Miss Havisham’s sense of the ‘self’ is deeply altered by her trauma and how her “forever spinster” state is now knotted with her old age and societal expectations of being the older, unmarried woman. Duffy vouches for empathy for the elderly, especially for those who suffer from

unresolved trauma, loneliness, and mental health issues, by re-birthing the strong character of Miss Havisham from the classic novel.

Systematic Literature Review

The interdisciplinary field of Literary Gerontology has grown considerably over the past few decades, with many active scholarly engagements with aging in literature. It examines how aging, memory, and the psychological aspects of growing old are represented in literature. Literary Gerontology stands at the intersection of literary studies, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies, and encourages scholarly engagement to examine how aging and the social perception of aging are constructed and critiqued in literary narratives. Usually, old age in early literature is stereotypically associated with either a source of wisdom or the victim of social exclusion, but recent scholarship strives to represent aging as a complex psychological and cultural phenomenon often shaped by factors such as memory, trauma, and self-identity. This paper studies Carol Ann Duffy's "Havisham" from the perspective of betrayal-induced trauma, gradually aggravated by aging amidst loneliness. Hence, this literature review examines various studies on "Havisham" from multiple perspectives.

Camilla Nelson describes Miss Havisham as "a spectral spinster figure that haunts the western imagination, an emblem of an ostensibly 'unjustified' and 'unjustifiable' female rage, a repository for masculine fears and fantasies about women, age, sexuality, and power" (Nelson, 225). This interpretation of Nelson highlights how the cultural symbolism is rooted in the character of Havisham and how she personifies broader anxieties about ageing women and female autonomy.

Similarly, Almahasheer and Kitishat explore the "evolution of violence in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy and seek to explain the relationship between entities such as class, gender, and ethnicity using principles and theories grounded in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, biology, and culture" (Almahasheer and Kitishat, 587). Their work highlights how Duffy's poetry deals with the interdisciplinary approach used in psychology, cultural studies, and sociology.

Many existing scholarship studies "Havisham" through a feminist or gender-critical framework, but few have addressed the intersection of ageing, trauma, and psychological stagnation. This clear gap is significant because the poem portrays Havisham not merely as a victim of emotional betrayal but also as an aging individual whose emotional and psychological state has been shaped by her unresolved trauma.

Literary gerontology scholars propose that aging characters often portray complex psychological attributes deeply rooted within memory, identity, and physical decline. These representations portray broader cultural anxieties about aging as a process marked by physical decline, social isolation, and emotional vulnerability. Recent interdisciplinary research has also expanded trauma studies by including psychology, neuroscience, and emotional theory. Scarantino's *Emotion Theory: The Routledge Comprehensive Guide* (2025) presents an overarching overview of contemporary theories of emotion, emphasizing how emotional responses are closely associated with cognitive processes and social environments. This work contributes to trauma studies by showing that emotions such as grief, anger, and resentment are not mere individual feelings but a composite psychological state shaped by memory, perception, and interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, Hill's *Affect, Consciousness, and Self* (2025) charted the relationship between emotional feelings and identity formation. Hill argues that traumatic experiences often disturb an individual's sense of self by disrupting memory and shutting down emotional responses. This is relevant for interpreting literary characters like Havisham, whose identity is shattered by oscillating between love, hatred, and obsessive memories. Cao also explores the relationship between trauma and memory in her work *Memory: Shaping Connections in the Arts Therapies* (2024). Here, she examines how traumatic memories affect emotions and identity formation. Cao argues that trauma often manifests through constant recollection, where individuals are trapped in cycles of memory that constantly trigger emotional pain. This aspect offers a major insight into Havisham's psychological state, as the lines of the poem repeatedly hint at her revisiting

the crucial moment of betrayal, which creates a constant difficulty in moving beyond the traumatic memory. The role of trauma is further foregrounded by contemporary research in therapeutic and psychological disciplines. Brubacher's *Stepping into Emotionally Focused Therapy* (2025) underscores how unresolved emotional scars can trigger cycles of anger, withdrawal, isolation, and negative emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships. Her work contributes to trauma studies by showing how unresolved attachment issues often manifest through high defensive emotional behaviors, including withdrawal and aggression, which directly resonate with Havisham's extreme emotional response.

In contemporary times, art therapy scholarship provides important insights into trauma and emotional understanding. De Zarate, Waller, and Vaculik's *The Routledge International Handbook of Art Therapy Practice* (2025) showcases how creative expression allows individuals to process traumatic events and past experiences and rebuild personal meaning. They expand on how artistic representation often becomes a meditative method or medium through which trauma is understood and reflected upon. In a literary context, these frameworks help scholars interpret how psychological and emotional distress can be interpreted in a poetic landscape.

Recently, interdisciplinary studies have emerged that emphasize the role of communication and vulnerability in shaping traumatic experiences. Maatta, Puumala, and Ylikomi (2021) further explore how linguistic and psychological vulnerability affects individuals' ability to express their past traumatic experiences and reveal how trauma often disrupts language and communication. This can be particularly observed in the character of Havisham, highlighted by Duffy's poetic technique, where she uses fragmented syntax and rapid emotional changes that mirror the disrupted psychological state associated with the trauma.

"Havisham" is often read from the lens of feminism, portraying her as a villain, drowned in her revengeful evil pursuits, often ignoring her physical and psychic state. Havisham's stagnation is perceived as fixed in her traumatic experience of being jilted on her wedding day, and her age thereafter is disregarded. Hence, this study addresses

this gap by exploring Carol Ann Duffy's "Havisham" through the framework of trauma studies and literary gerontology, stating that the psychological stagnation of Havisham can be interpreted as a manifestation of unresolved trauma, justifying PTSD as the causative factor for Havisham's decayed state.

Duffy's elimination of 'Miss' in the title "Havisham" challenges the reduction of women's identities to their compulsive marital status within the socially appropriated 'marriageable' age and the non-compliance with which draws labels such as 'ghostly', 'witch-like', 'unattractive', 'misfit, and so on.

Research Objective

This research aims to study Havisham's voluntary isolation from the perspective of the autonomic nervous system, specifically the Dorsal Vagal system, characterised by immobilisation in the Polyvagal Theory proposed by Stephen Porges, not as a clinical examination but as endorsed by a critical textual analysis, where her action is screened similarly to that of old people who would have faced traumatic betrayals in life.

In literature, old age is traditionally examined through several recurring lenses. The first is the archetypal or stereotypical lens, where older characters are usually portrayed as a source of wisdom. The other perspectives are weak or comic relief, and in many cases, they are secondary characters in a narrative. Literary works that often focus on physical and mental decline, which is mostly associated with aging, explore themes of loss, nostalgia, separation anxiety, and loneliness, to mention a few. Old age is often portrayed as a period of inhibited isolation, marginalization, or invisibility, which highlights generational gaps and the loss of social roles. Elderly characters are instrumental in exploring themes of memory and changes over the passage of time. Some works even highlight the insight and perspective that come with age; older characters are portrayed as refugees of tradition or the moral compass.

Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Havisham" provides a scope for a very unique lens to approach ageing. Duffy presents Havisham as an elderly, direct, and powerful woman. This dramatic monologue allows

us to witness Havisham's innermost mental chasm. It divulges the psychological manifestation of the trauma that Havisham has endured over her lifetime. Her rage, heartbreak, and obsession are not mere emotions but ripples of her trauma that have shaped her self-image and mental state as she ages. Duffy achieves a chromatic sketch of these expressions as the long-term impact of Havisham's isolation and unresolved trauma, proving its intensity in old age.

Polyvagal Theory was developed by neuroscientist Stephen W. Porges in the 1990s. It has become an influential framework in contemporary trauma studies and in psychology. It shows how the autonomic nervous system, particularly the vagus nerve, regulates emotions, social connections, and responses to stress. It explains how the autonomic nervous system (ANS) regulates emotional responses and defensive behaviors when exposed to overwhelming stress. The theory has been further expanded in its application across fields such as neuroscience, psychotherapy, social sciences, and trauma studies, making it relevant for understanding emotional regulation and behavioral responses to trauma. According to this theory, the autonomic nervous system consists of a combination of three neural circuits that modulate human responses to safe and dangerous situations. These circuits include the ventral vagal complex, sympathetic nervous system, and dorsal vagal complex, each associated with distinct behavioral and physiological responses. The ventral vagal system is associated with emotional regulation, social engagement, and feelings of safety. When this circuit or system is active, individuals can communicate clearly and effectively, regulate their emotions, and maintain eye contact. It supports social behaviors and interpersonal relationships and enables individuals to experience trust and emotional connections. The second system is the sympathetic nervous system, which triggers the body's "fight or flight" response. In any situation of perceived danger or threat, the sympathetic system triggers physiological changes, such as increased heart rate and high alertness, which enable the body to respond quickly to potential threats. Sympathetic activation in trauma research is usually associated with anxiety and hypervigilance. The last system is the dorsal vagal complex, which regulates the immobilization

response in proximity to a threat. When the fight-or-flight response fails, the body sometimes activates a defensive shutdown mechanism, often characterized by emotional numbness, withdrawal, physical immobility and dissociation. However, prolonged activation of the dorsal vagal system in humans often results in chronic psychological states, such as dissociation, depression, and complete social withdrawal. Present-day interdisciplinary research highlights the connection between trauma and dorsal vagal activation. Studies have shown that an individual who has experienced intense emotional trauma may enter a state of complete physiological shutdown in the form of emotional numbness, decreased motivation, and social withdrawal. According to Thompson, such behavior patterns are often observed in individuals suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), where a traumatic recollection triggers autonomic dysregulation and disrupts the normal emotional functioning of an individual. Recent studies have highlighted the relevance of Polyvagal Theory in understanding the aging process and emotional regulation in older adults. Studies on trauma in older populations show that unresolved traumatic experiences may lead to behavioral patterns similar to dorsal vagal shutdown, including emotional stagnation and complete social withdrawal. Thus, this framework helps us understand how traumatic experiences shape psychological functioning throughout an individual's lifespan.

Thus, Polyvagal Theory provides a compelling framework for interpreting Havisham's character. Her state of emotional stagnation and obsessive recollection of betrayal can be interpreted as manifestations of unresolved trauma and a result of the dorsal vagal immobilization response. Instead of retaliating through active confrontation, she retreats into isolation, and her identity is shaped by her trauma.

We will also look into how PTSD is visible in old age, drawing inspiration from the legendary character of Havisham and how Duffy intends to make Havisham revisit and redesign her life so that she does not succumb to her trauma, but rather emerges from it, intending to show that the old and aging people are not weak beings but rather the storehouse of experience and values that they have learned

throughout their lives after facing many difficulties that have made them strong and determined.

The word “trauma” is derived from the Greek, meaning “wound” – physical, emotional, or psychological (Merriam-Webster, 2019). It could mean a wound visible to the naked eye, or it could also mean a type of wound that leaves no physical scars but psychological and mental impressions that affect the core that constitutes the essence of one’s personality. Trauma, as a concept in psychology, has been understood and studied for years. It was not until the Vietnam War (1954-75) that the trauma-induced psychological condition was termed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although similar symptoms had been identified and treated during earlier conflicts. This transformed the concept of “trauma” into a full-fledged area of psychological study, which was associated with the condition of shell shock or combat fatigue that soldiers of that period had gone through (Crocq and Crocq 47). But we can trace back these conditions of shell shock, anguish and trauma to the works of great war poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke, which proves that PTSD had been in existence even during the First World War (1914-1918).

Through the voice of Miss Havisham, the abandoned bride from Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Duffy showcases the misery of aging and emotional stagnation in her haunting monologue. Inspired by Dickens, Duffy breaks down the satirical distance of the book and delves straight into Miss Havisham’s raw and pure mind. In contrast to Dickens’ depiction of her as a revengeful and dark character, Duffy allows us to experience her suffering and witness the sadness of her life, which is frozen in time. The

outcome is a terrifying picture of what happens when heartbreak goes untreated, where the past is constantly pushed down rather than being recalled, like an unhealed wound that festers. Duffy turns this literary ghost into a living ghost of anguish, stuck in time, crumbling beside her decaying wedding feast. Duffy eliminates the title of “Miss,” making her simply Havisham, a name as lifeless and bare as the years she has lived in bitterness. This poem paints aging as a gradual withering process. It is not just a natural process of growing older but a symbolic and psychological one that reveals the deep scars of unresolved trauma. Her trauma related to aging is rooted in her inability to move on from the emotional devastation she experienced when she was jilted at the altar. Here, instead of leading to growth, wisdom, or healing, aging only intensifies her pain, wounds, and sense of betrayal. Havisham’s physical appearance mirrors her emotional state. Her wedding dress, which should symbolize joy and love, becomes a symbol of degeneration. Her physical aging is a direct consequence of the trauma. Her body mirrors the stagnation and bitterness that she feels within. Ageing here is no longer about growing older; it is a process of decay without transformation. She is consumed by her past as her body deteriorates. For Miss Havisham, aging becomes a psychological trap. The older she gets, the more she is locked into the trauma of her youth.

Critical Textual Analysis of the Poem

This paper studies Havisham’s voluntary isolation through responses like emotional extremity and immobilisation.

Emotional Extremity	“Beloved, sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then I haven’t wished him dead. Prayed for it so hard I’ve dark green pebbles for eyes, ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.” “Puce curses that are sounds not words.” “a red balloon bursting in my face.” “Bang. I stabbed at a wedding cake.”	“bastard”- deep bitterness and resentment. “prayed so hard”- extreme vengeance. “dark green pebbles for eyes”- envy. “strangle with”- the desire for violence. “Puce curses”- intensification of her rage. “Bursting”- the destruction of her happiness. “stabbed”- moment of joy – moment of aggression. “cake”- a symbol of celebration, an object of attack or revenge.
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Immobilization	“Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall”	“Spinster”- social and emotional stagnation.
	“Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.” “Don’t think it’s only the heart that b-b-b-breaks”	“I stink”- neglect, stagnation, decay “remember”- revisiting trauma. “Whole days in bed”- physical immobility “Nooooo”- helplessness. “wall”- entrapment. “honeymoon”- ironic (stagnant in her case) “b-b-b-breaks”- shattering

Lines from the poem:

“Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then / I have not wished him dead. Prayed for it so hard I’ve dark green pebbles for eyes, / ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.” We find words like “bastard,” which shows deep bitterness and resentment towards her betrayer. “prayed so hard” proves extreme vengeance as she prays hard for someone’s death that your eyes turn dark green with envy, it only reflects emotional extremity.

“Puce curses that are sounds not words.” Words like “Puce curses” prove the intensity of her rage.

“a red balloon bursting in my face.” When the color symbolizes love and happiness, the bursting of the red balloon symbolizes the destruction of her happiness and dreams.

“Bang. I stabbed at a wedding cake.” A cake, which is a symbol of celebration, becomes an object of attack or revenge when it is supposed to be cut to celebrate moments of joy; she rather stabs it, turning it into a moment of aggression. To bring out another response, which is immobilization, let us look at the following lines. “Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days/in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall”. By calling herself, or rather, reminding herself of her “spinster” state, we can see how she is socially and emotionally stagnant. The stink from herself and the decayed environment proves her neglect of self-care. She repeatedly revisits her traumatic betrayal. Lines like “Whole days in bed” show physical immobility, how she is helpless and remains in bed the whole day, cawing no. The wall of her dejected room feels like an entrapment, where she has voluntarily isolated herself from the outer world. She wants a long, slow “honeymoon”, which is ironic because the sign of a new beginning here is stagnant in her case. The strong emphasis on “b-b-b-breaks” shows her

shattering condition.

Effect of Betrayal on Aged People

Betrayal can be traumatic because it can destroy the essential faith that sustains human relationships. Now, let us ponder the effects of this betrayal on both Havisham and most aged people in the novel. The foremost is the deterioration of physical stability, especially in old age. Betrayal comes not only from loved ones but also from our organs and body, which comes as a shock to most. The thought of losing control over one’s body is enough to make one feel limited in one’s existence. In “Havisham,” her yellowing dress shows the passage of time, while she is unable to take care of herself and her hygiene, which in turn leads to the deterioration of her physical stability. Another line is “Whole days in bed cawing Nooooo” where we find her whole days in bed, where she is unable to get up from the paralyzed state of trauma, like that of an old age person.

The plosive repetition of ‘b’ in “do not think it’s only the heart that b-b-b-breaks” indicates that it is not only the heart, but her physical body that explodes. Another effect is trauma due to abandonment. The poem’s fragmented structure and shifting pronouns reflect the instability of her identity and memory, issues often examined in studies of aging and cognitive decline.

PTSD in Havisham

We will also examine how PTSD is visible in old age, drawing inspiration from the legendary character of Havisham. A person who has led a fortunate life and has never suffered a traumatic event or severe emotional injury is fortunate. Many people can move on and heal from traumatic experiences; however,

this is not always easy. Post-traumatic stress disorder, strikes some people, and even if they do not display all the symptoms necessary for a diagnosis, they still suffer. Traumatic events frequently affect the memory of those who do not recover promptly. The symptoms are listed in category B of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD according to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (271). It has something to do with memory: involuntary memories, flashbacks, dreams of traumatic events, and negative reactions to cues that resemble the event. People with PTSD may find themselves stuck in their past, unable to break free from the trauma that has shaped their identity.

Duffy's Miss Havisham is a prime example of the misery and sorrow of a wasted life, unable to overcome the heartbreak of a previous betrayal. Duffy emphasizes Miss Havisham's internal conflict with themes such as ageing, betrayal, and emotional stagnation. Her wedding day remains halted in time, showing the emotional stagnation that can stem from cuts of unresolved trauma. Her thoughts are forever consumed by the betrayal, and she

expresses it as an obsessive desire for revenge. This obsession dominates all aspects of her life, including her thoughts and actions. At the root of Miss Havisham's trauma lies her inability to experience pure love. This emotional stagnation can also be a sign of PTSD, in which an individual becomes detached from their feelings as a coping mechanism. Traumatic moments from the past scarred her psyche so deeply that she refuses to believe in the existence of and her ability to savour the fruit of pure love. All she ever wanted was to be loved by someone wholeheartedly, and all these joys were snatched from her on the day of her wedding, which inflicted a deep scar in her heart, which eventually turned out to be a devastating force in her own life. Her desire for revenge is always justifiable; it is a way of taking control of the situation. However, focusing on revenge only deepens her suffering and keeps her trapped in a vicious cycle of trauma. let us discuss the evident symptoms of PTSD, such as flashbacks and contemplation, hypervigilance and anger, dissociation and identity crisis, and emotional stagnation, as deduced from the lines of the poem:

Symptoms of PTSD

PTSD symptoms	Examples from "Havisham"	Interpretation
Flashback and Contemplation	"Not a day since then I haven't wished him dead." "I stink and remember." "Love's hate behind a white veil"	She is trapped in the past, reliving the betrayal. Trauma keeps her stuck in the past.
Hypervigilance and anger	"I stabbed at a wedding cake." "Prayed for it/so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes" "ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with."	Acts of aggression due to unresolved pain
Dissociation and Identity Crisis	the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this to me?" "Beloved sweetheart bastard."	The trauma has shattered her sense of self. Conflicting emotions showcase a fractured self.
Emotional Stagnation	"Spinster. I stink and remember" Give me a male corpse for a long, slow honeymoon"	Her identity is reduced to her suffering. The decay around her mirrors her emotional numbness and detachment.

The above table links symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to specific lines from Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Havisham."

Flashback and Contemplation

"Not a day since then I haven't wished him dead."

"I stink and remember."

"Love's hate behind a white veil."

These lines show how Havisham is trapped in the moment of her trauma. The phrase “I stink and remember” reflects how she is decaying, not just physically but also emotionally, and is unable to move on from the past. The oxymoron used here, “Love’s hate behind a white veil,” reflects her emotional confusion and emotional turmoil, a major symptom of PTSD.

Hypervigilance and Anger

“I stabbed at a wedding cake.”

“Prayed for it/so hard I’ve dark green pebbles for eyes.”

“ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.”

The use of violent imagery, such as “stabbed at a wedding cake” and the wish of strangling her lover with “ropes on the back of my hands,” “dark green pebbles for eyes”, all these show how her unresolved grief took a destructive turn.

Dissociation and Identity Crisis

“the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this to me?”

“Beloved sweetheart bastard.”

Here we can trace Havisham’s fractured sense of self. She cannot recognise herself, which indicates dissociation, a common PTSD symptom.

Emotional Stagnation

“Spinster. I stink and remember.”

“Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.”

The word “spinster” hints at her stagnant state of mind, while “I stink and remember” exposes her emotional state to physical decay. Havisham’s wish for “a male corpse for a long, slow honeymoon” hints at the deep psychological scar that has been inflicted on her, which is keeping her stuck in time, proving her inability to move past her grief, and showing her emotional stagnation.

Conclusion

The concept of PTSD plays a pivotal role in forming the basis for understanding the deep emotional breakdown of Miss Havisham in Duffy’s poem. Instead of merely being portrayed as a

betrayed woman, she surfaces as a character whose trauma has altered her into someone engulfed by rage, anger, and obsession. This poem addresses how trauma can mold a person’s identity, keep them stuck in a moment in time, and abet self-harming behavior that stretches their suffering even further. PTSD sheds light on Miss Havisham’s deep psychological scars that redefine her life and her ultimate pursuit of revenge. As Qureshi rightly points out, “Apart from the anxiety about their bodies, the elderly also struggle with feelings of despair, loneliness, and depression, particularly when they are left with no caregivers.”

In contemporary reality, older people are often relegated to old-age homes or communities with few family visits, almost forgotten by their kith and kin. This often amounts to a silent smothering of natural emotions resulting from neglect and isolation. In the case of Havisham, expression in confinement is the only possibility for ventilation. Having no one beside her is similar to the abandonment of older people by their kinsmen.

Literary Gerontology attempts to bring the vulnerable population of older individuals to the center from their marginalized positions. True to Speers and Walker’s words, “To care for those who once cared for us is one of life’s highest honours” this emerging field of literary studies has redefined the epistemology of social science as a reflexive fabric of human ontology in the contemporary era.

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