



Original article

Transforming Trauma: Post-Traumatic Growth in Colleen Hoover's Confess (2015)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores post-traumatic growth in Colleen Hoover's novel Confess (2015), focusing on the emotional and psychological struggles of Owen and Auburn as they navigate grief, guilt, and confession. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the works of Judith Herman, Peter Levine, and Dori Laub, the study argues that although trauma is deeply haunting and psychologically disruptive, it can also enable resilience and transformation. The analysis examines Auburn's grief following the loss of her partner and her enforced separation from her child, alongside Owen's guilt after a fatal car accident that destroyed his family. Central to the narrative is the link between art and confession as therapeutic practices of disclosure and healing. Owen's art studio, filled with anonymous confessional artworks, functions as a sanctuary for externalizing trauma and fostering recovery. Through mutual openness, Auburn and Owen reclaim agency, heal emotional wounds, and resist trauma's silencing force.

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Received: 14 December 2025

Accepted: 03 January 2026

Published: 01 February 2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss1.1503>



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Cite:

Abas, A. A. M., & Mankhi, A. H. . . (2026). Transforming Trauma: Post-Traumatic Growth in Colleen Hoover's Confess (2015). Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 22(1). <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss1.1503>

Keywords: Trauma; narrative healing; creative expression; catharsis; communal storytelling

تحول الصدمة: ملامح النمو ما بعد الصدمة في رواية "اعتراف" لكولين هوفر (2015)

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المُستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث مفهوم النمو ما بعد الصدمة في رواية اعتراف (2015) للكاتبة كولين هوفر، من خلال التركيز على الصراعات النفسية والانفعالية لشخصيتي أوين وأوبرن أثناء مواجهتهما لمشاعر الحزن والذنب والاعتراف. واستناداً إلى نظريات الصدمة النفسية، ولا سيما أعمال جوديث هيرمان وبيتر ليفين ودوري لوب، يجادل البحث بأن الصدمة، على الرغم من كونها تجربة مروّعة ومزعزعة للاستقرار النفسي، يمكن أن تفتح في الوقت ذاته آفاقاً للصمود والتحوّل. ويتتبع التحليل حزن أوبرن العميق إثر فقدان شريكها وانفصالها القسري عن طفلها، إلى جانب شعور أوين الطاعني بالذنب بعد حادث سير مميت دمّر أسرته. وتتمحور الرواية حول العلاقة الوثيقة بين الفن والاعتراف بوصفهما ممارستين علاجيتين للإفصاح والتعافي. كما يُمثّل مرسم أوين، المزيّن بأعمال فنية اعترافية مجهولة الهوية، ملامداً نفسياً وجسدياً لتجسيد الصدمة ومعالجتها. ومن خلال الانفتاح المتبادل، يستعيد أوين وأوبرن فاعليتهما الذاتية، ويشرعان في شفاء جراح الماضي، ويتحدّيان في النهاية قوة الصدمة القائمة للصوت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة النفسية؛ الشفاء من خلال السرد؛ التعبير الإبداعي؛ التطهير النفسي؛ السرد الجماعي

Introduction

Colleen Hoover is a contemporary American novelist best known for her emotionally charged works which blend psychological depth and suspense. Hoover primarily writes novels in the romance and young adult fiction genres, yet some of her novels explore themes of trauma, grief, and healing. Many of her stories revolve around characters who struggle with their past, a past shaped by loss, abuse and conflict. By weaving elements of psychological tension mixed with thrilling portrayals of emotional pain, Hoover's creative creation not only captivates readers with the intensity of emotional display but rather illuminates the complex emotional aspect of trauma and recovery and sheds light on the power of confession and emotional cleansing which accompanies trauma and healing. Among her most notable publications concerning trauma are *Hopeless* (2012), *Losing Hope* (2013), *It Ends with Us* (2016), *Verity* (2018) and *Confess* (2015). In 2022, Hoover held six of the top ten spots on the *New York Times* paperback fiction bestseller list. She has won numerous awards for her writing, including the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romance in 2014 and the National Indie Excellence Book Award for Best Young Adult Fiction in 2019.

Confess (2015) by Colleen Hoover is one of these artistic creations where past and present collide and where confessional depth and its representation through art underscores the multifaceted process of healing and recovery in a traumatic world. The lives of Owen and Auburn which were shattered by death and loss and later restored by sharing and empowerment, stand as a powerful testimony to the power of art as a force that resists the horror of trauma and advocates for the need to share one's pain when the words to articulate horrific past and emotional vulnerability are missing or inadequate. In tracing the characters' pains and emotional pasts, Hoover presents art not only as a cleansing tool and a thread that connects the artist to his past, but also as a haven that welcomes

troubled souls into its embrace. And in doing so, creates a safe communal place for sharing people's pain and resilience in the face of atrocities.

In terms of examining trauma and recovery in literary studies, the literature surrounding some of her novels has been predominantly directed towards analyzing traumatic injury and painful past with disregard to art as a convenient and unique approach to traumatic representation and healing. The role of art in facilitating growth has not been sufficiently addressed, leaving a gap in literary examination of the diverged and unique methods for rehabilitation and psychological recovery. Only one academic research paper has been found with the title "Bakhtinian Study of *Maybe Someday and Confess*" by Anam Tariq and Ayesha Abid. This paper draws on the observation of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic, and offers a dialogic reading grounded in Bakhtin's concepts (dialogism, carnivalesque, art as "answerability") and explicitly argues that Hoover integrates visual and musical art to shape character development and sentiment. However, the analysis remains literary-theoretical, focusing on the structural and philosophical aspects of art as discourse rather than its psychological or therapeutic dimensions and does not engage with trauma theory, art therapy, or psychology. The concept of "therapeutic" is used metaphorically as healing through communication not through clinically grounded mechanisms like externalization, catharsis, or emotional regulation and although the Bakhtinian study recognizes the dialogic and redemptive role of art in *Confess*, it does not investigate how artistic expression facilitates psychological recovery or trauma processing.

The existing literature surrounding Hoover's works, despite being insightful and significantly informative, has been constrained and limited in considering alternative approaches to traumatic representation and healing. In their study, "The Portrayal of Fear and Trauma as Roadblocks to Love in *Ugly Love*", Danu Wahyono and Risma Kartika Dewi employ a descriptive qualitative literary-psychological reading to examine the manifestations of fear and trauma within the novel. This psychological reading of *Ugly Love* examines causes, symptoms, and coping in Miles' trauma and concludes that by facing one's past and voicing their pain, a psychological transformation emerges. Ghada Ali Mohamed Al-Khurybi, an Egyptian researcher, has written an academic paper published in (2024) entitled "Gender-Based Violence, Trauma, and Strategies for Coping in Colleen Hoover's Novel *It Ends with Us*". The researcher focuses on script therapy to highlight the therapeutic power of writing in helping Lily, the main protagonist of this novel, to cope with her trauma and experiences of gendered violence which she endured by her father and husband. The study is well conducted and similarly insightful, yet it is primarily focused on writing and childhood abuse as two intricate dimensions in the study of traumatic past and future recovery through writing.

Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us* has been attracting the dominating academic research endeavors with many papers and thesis published articulating the different shapes of traumatic effects and mainly concentrating on trauma while rarely tackling traumatic recovery in other novels by her. For instance, in a journal article entitled "The Interplay of Trauma in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*: A Psychoanalytic Exploration through Sigmund Freud's Theories", the authors Hildegard Chantika Dapawole and Restu Arini aim to explore the trauma experienced by Lily and examine its impact on her behavior and social interactions using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as well

as neuroses, repression and the compulsion to repeat. These different academic productions have been insightful; however, they remain rather monolithic in their inspection.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs the framework of art therapy in the study of psychological injury and post-traumatic growth. It argues for the use of art as a therapeutic agent in trauma recovery and healing by examining the traumatic landscape that haunts Owen's and Auburn's past, the two main protagonists in the work of Colleen Hoover *Confess* (2015). By drawing on the insights and assertions of Margret Naumburg and Cathy Malchiodi, the two pioneering figures in art therapy who advocate for the use of creative expression in psychological recovery, this study applies their theories to analyze the multifaceted nature of trauma and its visual representation in the novel. In trauma, many experiences are nonverbal, repressed or dissociated into the subconscious, and to put these experiences into a linguistic level resembles, for some patients, "unspeakable terror" (Kolk, 2014, p.43). Following Naumburg's assertion in *Psychoneurotic Art: Its Function in Psychotherapy* (1953), this study uses her perspective that non-verbal imagery (visual art) can express thoughts, feelings, and memories from the unconscious, especially those difficult to put into words. Naumburg's observation is critical in understanding that art can access the layers of subconscious by enabling the patient to interpret the interior images of his unconscious into pictorial projections.

Her view that the meaning of the artwork belongs to the person who created it informs this analysis by emphasizing the survivor's agency in constructing their own narrative. This is crucial in trauma work where survivors' own narrative, own meaning, is central to their psychological repair. Hence, art respects agency and helps avoid re-traumatization through misinterpretation. In the same vein, Owen's art is a source of agency that defies the helplessness of an injured psyche. Similarly, this paper applies Cathy Malchiodi's theoretical contributions from her work *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* (2011). Malchiodi's concept of representation and externalization is particularly useful in offering alternative channels for communication when words fail. Through her framework, the analysis considers how the release of pent-up memories and the exploration of pain on canvas enable transformation and healing. Malchiodi frames imagery as helpful to recover from traumatic losses or experiences and art as a medium to help people authentically express themselves, release powerful emotions, transcend trauma by tapping into those sensory layers of communication that permits natural relaxation of the mind's control and a deeper level of implicit experience that enhances verbal communication of memories stored on conscious and unconscious levels.

For secondary sources, this paper will integrate the perspectives of van der Kolk on traumatic memory, Judith Herman and Harold P. Blum on self-image and perception among traumatized individuals, and other experts in the field of trauma studies, whose opinions shall prove significant in understanding the dynamic of traumatic injury and how it effects the victims of psychological progression, their thoughts and emotions.

An Exploration of Traumatic Experiences in Colleen Hoover's *Confess* (2015)

Cathy Caruth, an American literary theorist and trauma studies scholar, proposes that trauma narratives are centered on survival and function as a double telling, reflecting “the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (as cited in Abdulateef.2020. p.2326). In *Confess*, the contrast between death and survival is shown through Auburn and Owen, two broken individuals separated from the people they love. From emotional traumatic partner's loss to a familial tragic accident, Auburn and Owen are two characters whose stories and struggles are inspirational and vibrant, particularly in the way the two confront trauma that feels far beyond their comprehension or control yet finding resilience in one another as they are faced with the shadows of overwhelming past. Starting with Auburn, a fifteen year old teenager whose boyfriend, Adam, as shown in the first chapter of the novel, is dying in a hospital room next to her as they both question the stressful reality of life and death, a reality which later claims the life of the one man she has ever loved, and now is declining slowly to his end. Adam tells her: “I want to thank you, Auburn... for being just as pissed off as I am...I'm referring specifically to how we're both so pissed at Death for being such a greedy bastard” (Hoover,2015, p.6). He adds, “but I guess I'm also referring to our parents, for not understanding this” (p. 6)

In their study that examined the relations between anxious attachment and posttraumatic stress disorder, Ogle et al. (2014) noted that “Anxious attachment in adulthood, however, has been linked to a variety of maladaptive outcomes, including heightened attention to negative emotions... the tendency to appraise events as threatening... and more severe symptoms of depression, anxiety” (p.2). Auburn's Anxious attachment with Owen, that is fostered by Adam's impending death, acts as an emotional anesthetic, a way to sustain connection when the mind cannot bear the idea of detachment. This is why as soon as Owen dies, Auburn's psychological state regresses and, with time, she feels overwhelmingly tormented by the loss, suffering from intrusive memories she cannot resist. During their time at the hospital, Auburn's psychological struggle grows deeper by the days knowing that each day the two spend at the hospital is one day closer to losing Adam. Yet, she finds their final moments together and the emotional attachment they hold as too deep that death cannot break or alter. And in an act of intimacy, the two express a profound defiance against their uncontrollable circumstances and a celebration of the life they had and will forever be remembered. Auburn narrates, “Everything else about the future, we had no voice in, but we could possibly have this one private thing that death could never take from us” (Hoover,2015, p.8).

Even in the warmth of romance, Auburn is haunted by the truth that great love brings great grief, one she must face as Adam slips beyond her reach. His anticipated death leaves her with unbearable grief that crawls deep to her core. As they kiss and part, she contemplates her feelings of loss and heartbreak. Auburn meditates, “The sadness feels like warmth creeping its way up my chest, creating an insurmountable pressure the closer it gets to my heart” (p.9). Following Adam's death, Auburn starts to suffer from a case of complicated grief, a psychological disorder characterized by extreme longing and difficulty in accepting the loss of an attachment figure or a significant other, in her case, Adam. Two professors of Psychiatry, Katherine Shear and Sidney Zisook (2009) assert that

“complicated grief, sometimes referred to as unresolved or traumatic grief, is the current designation for a syndrome of prolonged and intense grief that is associated with substantial impairment in work, health, and social functioning” (p.67-69). They add: “symptoms include separation distress (recurrent pangs of painful emotions, with intense yearning and longing for the deceased, and preoccupation with thoughts of the loved one) and traumatic distress (sense of disbelief regarding the death, anger and bitterness, distressing)” (p.67-69).

Similarly, Auburn’s fails to integrate the loss of Adam and consequently feels troubled by a profound fear and grief. And with her feelings often dismissed by those around her, Auburn becomes deeply isolated and lonely. Francis Weller, an American psychotherapist and writer, highlights the importance of grief and emotional distress over loss as a basic human need and warns of its denial arguing in his book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (2015) that Grief “becomes problematic when the conditions needed to help us work with grief are absent... when we are forced to carry our sorrow in isolation, or when the time needed to fully metabolize the nutrients of a particular loss is denied” (p.18). He also notes, “we are told to “get on with it” and “get over it.” The lack of courtesy and compassion surrounding grief is astonishing, reflecting an underlying fear and mistrust of this basic human experience” (p.18). In the same vein, this lack of courtesy for Auburn’s emotional toll is the dismissal of her feelings by everyone, mainly Lydia, Adam’s mother, who tells her that her feelings for Adam, as genuine as they might appear, will fade with time, unlike his family who will have to cope with his loss as long as they might live. This remark adds another layer to Auburn’s psychological stress leaving her utterly shocked as she contemplates Lidya’s words: “It’s a strange feeling when you know at fifteen that you just lived through the harshest words you’ll ever hear. I didn’t even know what to say to her” (Hoover, 2015, p. 6). Auburn wonders “how can a fifteen-year-old girl defend her love when that love is dismissed by everyone? It’s impossible to defend yourself against inexperience and age” (p. 6).

Four years later, as Auburn moves to Dallas, a place where she feels alienated to protect and be around the one thing that keeps her emotionally alive, namely her son A.J., she grows ever more doubtful and concerned, preoccupied with feelings of worthlessness. She contemplates her inner struggle reflecting, “It’s the thirteenth time I’ve walked home in my new state, in a city inhabited by nothing but strangers, but I’m determined to make it the first time I’m not crying when I reach my front door” (p.13). Auburn adds, “My neighbors probably think I’m psychotic. It’s just such a long walk from work to home, and long walks make me contemplate my life, and my life makes me cry” (p.13). The act of walking home, for Auburn, goes way beyond physical space, rather it is an emotional journey of self-reflection which ends in tears and self-loathing that ultimately shatters her own self-image, revealing her vulnerability and loneliness in a new city where she feels being judged. According to Judith Herman (2015), a leading expert on trauma and psychiatry, “Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose trust in themselves, in others... Their self-esteem is deeply affected by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness” (p.56).

Harold P. Blum (2003), an American psychoanalyst renowned for his significant contributions to psychoanalytic theory, writes, “The effects of psychic trauma influence the way one perceives and reacts to external reality. It is stressful and confusing to live in two unintegrated worlds, before and

after sudden object loss" (p.415). He further adds, "In traumatic bereavement the object relationship before the trauma no longer exists. The world in which the patient finds him- or herself, and helps to shape after the traumatic loss, is significantly different" (p.415). For Auburn, the collision of two unintegrated worlds represents the past traumatic loss of Adam, which she is burdened with internally and longing for an attachment in a new external world, that is a new city.

Owen, on the other hand, is a struggling artist whose trauma, while different in nature, similarly causes rapture in his psyche. In parallel with Auburn, his emotional toll began four years earlier in a hospital room where he sat next to his injured father, following a car accident that claimed the life of his beloved mother and older brother, an accident which took place while he was driving them into an intersection. The youngster, being torn by the loss, has been unable to reconcile with the tragedy or initiate any meaningful psychological recovery as he considers himself responsible for their death. Owen recounts his feelings that day at the hospital as he watches his father in a critical condition: "I hate that as soon as he wakes up—if he wakes up—I'll more than likely have to go over every last detail of that night with him, when all I want to do is forget it" (Hoover,2015,p. 296).

According to Edward S. Kuban and Frederick P. Manke (1995), "Guilt is viewed as an unpleasant feeling accompanied by a belief that one should have thought, felt, or acted differently" (p.29). Guilt, being a symptom of post-traumatic stress, overwhelms Owen who is unable to reconcile with the tragedy, leaving him haunted by memories. Owen's feeling of guilt is so overwhelming that it gives rise to two conflicting emotional responses, one is exploring a logical justification for the accident, and in an attempt to bring a sense of psychological relief, frees him from ever taking accountability by redirecting his guilt and sadness toward a drunk man's irresponsible driving, who ran through the green light. The second response, by contrast, admits no excuse and is emotionally troubling, as it confronts Owen's inexperience as a driver and his disregard for his older brother's instruction to watch the road. Whether it is the former or the later, these conflicting responses fracture Owen's heart and mind who thinks: "The wreck wasn't my fault, but had I been more experienced, I would have known to look left and right first, even though the light gave me permission to move forward" (Hoover,2015, p.296). Owen consequently admits: "I've been broken since the moment it happened" (p.296).

Sadly enough, Owen traumatic regression is fostered by a negative cognitive assumption of accountability which does not ease with time but rather bonds him unbendingly with an incident he cannot forget, an incident which changed the way he perceives himself and others and which brought darkness and emotional distancing to his relationship with his father. Kubany and Manke (1995) have noted that "one of the reasons that memories about painful events often do not become less painful with the passage of time is that such memories are often accompanied by guilt-related cognitions that continually "recharge" the memories with negative valence" (p.31). This emotional predicament breaks Owen's father, who develops an addiction for drugs in an attempt to ease the tragic loss of his family. Yet, it tears the fabric of his relationship with his only surviving son, as Owen constantly begins to aid his troubled father by any means possible, even if it means breaking the law. Arguably, Owen tries to compensate for what has been lost or at least to gain his father's favor ever since the accident took place. Years later, Owen clearly shows such an attitude while detained for drug

possession, a crime he takes responsibility for in an act of selflessness by admitting that the drugs confiscated by Trey, Adam's brother, were his. Owen sadly expresses, "There are certainly a lot of things I want to say to him, but Callahan Gentry and his son are not the best communicators. Not since the night Owen Gentry became Callahan Gentry's only son" (Hoover,2015, p. 89-90). Owen reflects, "That's probably the only day out of my entire life I wouldn't trade this one for. That day is the reason why I continue to do the shit I do" (p. 89-90). He adds, moreover, "That day is the reason I'm sitting here, about to have to talk to my father about my option" (p. 89-90).

Years of avoiding confrontation and neglect, primarily on the part of Owen's father, have destabilized the dynamics of Callahan Gentry's relationship with his son, driving the latter to be consumed with anger and disappointment. Frustrated by the constant lies of considering rehab told by his father, Owen expresses a darker side of his personality during a visit to his father's house after leaving detention and seeing him lying face down on the couch: "Knowing he's not in rehab sends a wave of disappointment through me, but I can't deny the small rush of hope that he's actually lying on the couch because he's not breathing" (p. 214-215). And with a heart full of dread, he realizes: "And that is not something a son should feel for his father" (p.215).

Owen is suffering from the lies of an unhealthy and intimately exploitative past, while Galahan clings to a false hope of change by considering rehab and believing he can become the father Owen deserves. People are often experts in wishful thinking and in obscuring the truth, especially when they obscure the reality of their pain or the fragility of their experience. Notably, these tendencies create more fractures and often turn into emotional fatigue. Bessel van der Kolk (2014), a renowned psychiatrist and trauma researcher, captures the complexities of human relationship that is based on lies quoting the words of his mentor Elvin Semrad, an American psychologist, "The greatest sources of our suffering are the lies we tell ourselves" (p.11).

Similarly to Auburn, what troubles Owen's mind is the thought of having no connection, not a deep one at least, considering that his few attempts to bond with others have been merely superficial in nature. To name a few, Hannah, Owen's girlfriend whom he broke up with knowing that their relationship lacked the depth of real communication or emotional disclosure. Owen speaks of her noting, "Hannah disappointed me when she spoke, which is why we spent a lot of our time together not speaking. And she always, always made it a point to tell me that her name, when spelled backward, was still Hannah" (Hoover,2015, p.30). However, Owen feels that Hanna not only lacks words to share, but the intellectual depth that comes with it, as she feels perplexed once Owen affirms that such a case is linguistically a palindrome. As a result, Owen concludes, "She looked at me, perplexed, and that's when I knew I could never love her. What a waste of a palindrome she was, that Hannah" (p.31).

Another relationship was with Mrs. Dennis, Owen's art teacher who, as Owen remarks: "loved art. Mrs. Dennis also loved artists. And one day, after seeing how incredibly talented with a brush she thought I was, Mrs. Dennis loved me" (p.31). Owen's intimate experience in high school, likely his first, is one he perceives as sinful in nature as he explains: "She was not a palindrome, but her name spelled backwards was still very fitting, because Dennis = Sinned, and that's precisely what we did. We sinned for an entire hour. She more so than me" (p.31). Owen believes this relationship must

remain secret, knowing that some truths are better left unspoken. This early intense experience planted the seed of Owen's reluctance to disclose, which years later has creatively been transformed into an art gallery filled with paintings inspired by anonymous confessions that strangers submit through a slot in the door of Owen's studio, marked by a sign that reads confess.

Art and Creative Expression as Means of Connecting Souls

In her book *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* (2011), Cathy Malchiodi has noted that "A nonverbal form of communication such as art can be a window to feelings and thoughts that might not be accessible through language" (p.12). This quality of art making can "open avenues to emotions and ideas that have remained unknown and unconscious" (p.12). For this reason, art, being a medium of representation and a vessel for unspoken truth, becomes an illustrative space where the shattered inner worlds of Owen, Auburn and countless others intersect and where people's painful experiences, vulnerabilities and struggles are celebrated and admired. Owen masterfully entwines the transformative powers of art and confessional writing, creating work that validates the power of artistic disclosure and the journey towards transformative healing. Through his art, he establishes a form of community where troubled individuals find peace in belonging to a larger, accepting collective community that understands and tolerates the unspeakable darkest desires, pains and past regrets, exposing the complexities of human nature and the shared burden of being broken. To this aim, Malchiodi (2011) asserts "The language of visual art—colors, shapes, lines, and images—speaks to us in ways which words cannot... and is a means of connecting what is inside us—our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions—with outer realities and life experiences" (xiii).

Interestingly, Auburn first thought upon seeing the sign which read *Confess* underscores the emotional weight of Owen's studio which almost appear spiritual for broken souls, serving as both a sanctuary and a heaven inviting troubled individuals into its embrace, including Auburn who notes: "The name leads me to believe it might be a church" (Hoover,2015, p.14). Such an invitation finds its way to Auburn's heart, who quickly becomes enchanted and emotional as soon as she begins to discover the artistry of each work and the depth behind every stroke. One painting seems to capture the magnitude of her experience: "It's somehow sad and breathtaking and beautiful all at once. The painting is of a woman who seems to encompass both love and shame and every single emotion in between" (p.25).

This artwork resonates with both Owen and Auburn, as Auburn feels that her experience mirrors the one on painting and the weight of motherhood and bad choices simply find their way back into the surface, making her fall in tears as she reads the confession attached next to the painting, "Sometimes I wonder if being dead would be easier than being his mother" (p.26). For Owen, his calling as an artist is to capture on canvas the raw, fragile, yet uniquely powerful expression of human suffering. Consequently, Auburn expresses a sense of belonging for the first time in years, leading her to realize, "I'm not sure if I'm more fascinated by the confessions, the art, or the fact that I feel like I can relate to everything in here" (p.27). Excitingly adding, "Seeing all of these secrets and knowing that these people have more than likely never shared these with anyone, and never will, makes me feel a sense of connection to them. A sense of belonging" (p.27-28).

Malchiodi (2011) argues that art “can also be helpful in releasing emotions...can be cathartic in that it may provide relief from painful or troubling feelings...can also alleviate emotional stress and anxiety by creating a physiological response of relaxation or by altering mood” (p.13). She further contends that art, “can actually increase brain levels of serotonin, the chemical linked to depression. Other people experience art as a form of meditation, finding inner peace and calm through art expression” (p.13). Similarly, for Owen, art plays a pivotal function since it externalizes the complexities of his feelings regarding each intense encounter he faces, such as that of Mrs. Dennis whom he celebrates noting, “And don’t think that hasn’t been a confession turned into a painting. It was one of the first I ever sold. I named it She Sinned with Me. Hallelujah” (Hoover,2015, p. 31). Another function of art is to depict yet another emotional side of Owen, Owen’s paintings help him to confront and eventually confess his deepest confictions, facilitating psychological and emotional reconciliation with the past and a contemplation of his thoughts considering the cruel cycle of life and death which unexpectedly took the life of his family. One painting in particular seems to echo such sentiment of a young woman which Owen entitles: “You Don’t Exist, God. And If You Do, You Should Be Ashamed” (p.32).

In her book, *An Introduction to Art Therapy: Studies of the “Free” Art Expression of Behavior Problem Children and Adolescents as a Means of Diagnosis and Therapy* (1950), Margaret Naumburg contends that art offers “a specialized additional nonverbal technique for releasing, through symbolic imagery, the unconscious, repressed emotions” (p.vii). Art addresses the defensively sensitive part of Owen’s mind which has been driving him on the edge ever since the accident, yet, in given shape and form to his pain and by engraving an emotional tie to his work through a confession. Owen is able to explore his feelings in a way that does not put him emotionally at risk, rather, it releases a pent-up emotional crisis and invites a contemplation of the unpredictability of life and of God’s greater design which he questions, driving him to think: “but this confession inspired me to paint my mother... The words just reminded me of how I felt in the months following her death” (Hoover,2015, p. 32-33).

Bessel van der Kolk and his colleagues Jennifer Burbridge and Joji Suzuki (1997) note on traumatic memories that they are “sensory imprints tend to occur in a mental state in which victims may be unable to precisely articulate what they are feeling and thinking” (p.100). Similarly, Owen, burdened by grief, wrestles with the haunting memories of his mother, the very embodiment of love and passion whose breath he believes was silenced by his own hand. The sensory details of his past, which for many trauma survivors are excruciating to experience, are transformed through creative art into a beautiful celebration of the beauty of motherhood and a coping mechanism that honors the memories of his mother. Owen speaks of his mother saying “no matter what... her smile would always comfort me. We could have been in the middle of a war and all she had to do was kneel down and look me in the eyes with that smile” (Hoover,2015, p. 151). Yet, he thinks “the only way I can make myself feel better is to paint her” (p.151).

Naumburg (1950) contends that art offers “a specialized additional nonverbal technique for releasing, through symbolic imagery, the unconscious, repressed emotions” (vii). Art addresses the defensively sensitive part of Owen’s mind which has been driving him on the edge ever since the

accident, yet, in giving shape and form to his pain and by engraving an emotional tie to his work through a confession. Owen is able to explore his feelings in a way that does not put him emotionally at risk, rather, it releases a pent-up emotional crisis and invites a contemplation of the unpredictability of life and of God's greater design which he questions, driving him to think, "but this confession inspired me to paint my mother... The words just reminded me of how I felt in the months following her death" (Hoover,2015, p. 32-33).

In her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (2015), Herman argues, "traumatic events...violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (p.51). By making creative art, Owen is able to re-experience his trauma and, rather than being overwhelmed by anger and terror, uses it as a means to explore the ache beneath that silence. Owen's art presents a shift in his life's narrative and a powerful stand against the tyranny of traumatic silence and lack of representation, rather it defies the failure of language in the face of atrocities. Malchiodi (2011) explores another therapeutic dimension of art, the power of art as a mean to open up and share one's pain with another, she notes that art "is used to help people "open up,' to make visible their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions through drawing, painting, and other art forms" (p.175). She continues to say, "The goal of "opening up" is to help people understand the source of emotional distress or trauma and to alleviate and resolve conflicts "(p.175). Owen and Auburn's love for art ultimately drives the two to disclose parts of themselves that they have never dared to share before, and they come to recognize the sacrifices each has endured, mainly to protect those they consider family. It becomes only reasonable to think that their fates and the paths they have taken have ultimately led them to rescue one another. Hence, guided by the love and passion they share, Owen finds the courage to confront his father, inspired by the selfless maternal love which Auburn shows for A.J. Moved by her courage, Owen takes responsibility and throws his father's drugs away pointing to him: "I watched her with her son. I've seen what she sacrifices for him. I've seen what lengths a parent should go to in order to ensure their child has the best possible life they can give them" (Hoover,2015, p. 210).

Auburn, in turn, is profoundly inspired by Owen, which leads her to act decisively against Lydia and her abusive son, Trey, and as the novel reaches its peak, she admirably faces the tyranny of her insecurities and goes as far as to threaten Lydia with a recording of Trey's despicable trickery who tried to frame Owen for allegedly assaulting an officer. Lydia, surprised by Auburn's defiance and once she discovers that the recording would incriminate her son, signs a document relinquishing custody of her grandson to his mother. The two once fractured spirits are united once more and Owen's father does indeed find the courage to overcome his dreadful addiction. The story of Auburn and Owen is not one of great deeds and noble heroism, rather it is the story of resilience and empowerment, a rebellion against the silence which trauma demands. They do not emerge as heroes, but as survivors who dared to speak, to remember and feel, and in doing so took control of their life narrative and future. Their story echoes the conclusion of Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, who observed in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992): "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive" (p.78).

Conclusion

In *Confess*, Colleen Hoover weaves a deep exploration of trauma, loss, and healing, emphasizing that survival is not a return to the past but a transformation of it. Auburn and Owen's journeys highlight the painful realities they have endured through grief, loss, and emotional estrangement, yet their journeys have also led them to discover their inner strength through shared vulnerabilities and to gain empowerment from each other. By finding connection and expressing empathy through art, Owen and Auburns pain and pasts intersect. Art becomes a means of representation and a visual reminder of the repressed and frightening past, which the two are able to confront as they connect to one another's pain and challenges. Hence, art becomes a confessional act that validates pain and reconnects fractured identities. It is through the language of color, texture, and confession that characters rediscover their humanity and rebuild the fragments of their shattered selves. Their love story is not one of heroic adventure, but rather one that defies the silence that trauma imposes. By confronting their pain and vulnerabilities, the two are able to rewrite their life narrative, not by forgetting it, but by giving it meaning. In doing so, *Confess* becomes a literary exploration of post-traumatic growth, portraying remembrance as a path to becoming whole.

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