



Between Remembering and Forgetting: An Exploration of Trauma, Identity and Memory in *Memento*

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Abstract

This paper, titled “Between Remembering and Forgetting: An Exploration of Trauma, Identity and Memory in *Memento*”, analyses the psychological complexities of trauma and its effects on memory and identity. The film centres on Leonard Shelby, who suffers from anterograde amnesia after experiencing a traumatic event, which disrupts his ability to form new memories and distorts his understanding of the past. Using trauma theory as a framework, the study examines how Leonard’s memory loss due to the trauma he experienced leads to a fragmented sense of self and a distorted understanding of reality. This paper explores how trauma severely impacts Leonard’s identity, driving his actions and decisions, while also highlighting the role of memory in his quest for justice. Through the nonlinear narrative structure of the film, the paper investigates how Nolan challenges conventional storytelling to depict the disorienting effects of trauma on the mind. His emotional and psychological state is further complicated by his inability to distinguish between truth and self-deception, which ultimately deepens the cycle of trauma. The paper delves into how the theories of scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman help interpret Leonard’s psychological state and his quest to reconcile with the past. By analysing *Memento* through the lens of trauma theory, this paper underscores the role of trauma in distorting not only memory but also one’s sense of reality and self, offering insights into the psychological impact of unresolved trauma on identity.

Keywords: Trauma, identity, memory, nonlinear narratives, self

Introduction

Identity refers to our sense of self, which includes our memories, experiences, relationships, societal obligations, etc., whereas trauma can be defined as difficult or disturbing situations that may impact an individual’s emotional and mental health. Trauma often leads to severe fragmentation or distortion of a person’s sense of self, making it difficult for them to understand who they truly are. It profoundly impacts how an individual views himself. It can also affect his/her sense of purpose in society and the world. Ultimately, trauma results in someone feeling disoriented, confused and perplexed. The term ‘trauma’ was originally used to describe physical

injuries or wounds. But it is now mostly recognised in its psychological connotation, as a distressing experience triggered by emotional pain and shock.

Accidents, war, natural disasters, death of a family member or friend, abuse, rape or violence, etc. are some of the reasons for trauma. This can lead to a range of emotions, both immediately after the event and in the long term. People may feel overwhelmed, helpless, or shocked and may have difficulty processing their experiences. Trauma can also cause physical symptoms. Therefore, individuals who have gone through such experiences often have panic attacks, fear, sleeping disorders and nightmares. The reason behind this is that traumatised individuals are always “haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive recognition of traumatic scenes- scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melonic feedback loop” (LaCapra, 2001, p.21). All these factors led to the emergence of trauma theory as a significant field of study.

Cathy Caruth, a pioneering figure in the field of trauma studies, in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, explains her concept of trauma: “In the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind”. Trauma theory is an interdisciplinary approach that examines how trauma is portrayed in literature, movies and other media, focusing on how societies and individuals cope with the repercussions from traumatic events. One of the main objectives of trauma studies is to understand the psychological impact of trauma on identity, memory and narrative by emphasising the fragmented nature of experience and the challenge of expressing trauma cohesively. Lenore Terr clarifies when and why trauma happens: “Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming, intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (1990, 8).

Materials and Methods

The paper delves into how the theories of scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman help interpret Leonard’s psychological state and his quest to reconcile with the past. By analysing *Memento* through the lens of trauma theory, this paper underscores the role of trauma in distorting not only memory but also one’s sense of reality and self, offering insights into the psychological impact of unresolved trauma on identity.

Results and Discussions

The Psychological Journey to Reconstruct Reality

Christopher Nolan is a British-American filmmaker known for his non-linear storytelling and psychologically complex characters. His films often push the boundaries of conventional narrative structures, which often challenge the audience’s perception of reality. Most of Nolan’s works explore universal themes such as identity, memory and reality through his emotionally disturbed characters. In Christopher Nolan’s films, trauma is a recurring theme. His characters frequently struggle with the psychological aftermath of traumatic events, leading to distorted perceptions of reality and self. Films like *Memento*, *Inception*, *The Dark Knight Trilogy* and *Interstellar* are just a few of the films that examine how trauma can fracture memory as well as identity. Nolan frequently employs intricate and non-linear narrative frameworks to reflect the disorienting effects of trauma on both society and the human psyche. Nolan’s characters often face

internal conflicts where trauma challenges their understanding of who they are and their place in the world. Nolan's exploration of trauma emphasises how it shapes a character's decisions and sense of identity.

The movie *Memento* by Nolan is about a man who suffers from anterograde amnesia, which makes it impossible for him to store new memories in his brain. The only way he can remember things is through the tattoos on his body and handwritten notes. The movie has a paranoia-inducing undertone, almost forcing the viewer to wonder if they can trust their own brain since our perception of reality can be easily distorted by others' actions. In *Backwards: Memory and Fabula Construction in Memento by Christopher Nolan*, Stefano Ghislotti argues that:

Memento is a film about memory and oblivion.... It tells the story of a ten minute guy, who would be unable, as Sammy Jankins was, to comprehend an entire film. Memento is a film about time passed by, and about remembering. The viewer is invited to use his cognitive and memorial skills to comprehend what the main character is unable to comprehend. If Leonard lacks the possibility of seeing the situation of his current life in its totality, the viewer can take this wide range look. And what the viewer can understand is the center of our interest (Nolan, 2000).

The film begins with Guy Pearce as Leonard Shelby murdering Teddy (played by Joe Pantoliano). Leonard has anterograde amnesia, which is a loss of the ability to create new memories after the event that caused the amnesia, leading to a partial or complete inability to recall the recent past, while long-term memories from before the event remain intact. Leonard was hit over the head during an attack which resulted in his wife being raped and murdered. Since the attack, Leonard has set out to exact revenge on the man who has done this to him. He helps himself by writing notes, taking photographs, and even tattooing himself with important notes and facts. These are substitutes for his failing memory. The audience also joins Leonard on his quest for the unknown attacker. Leonard, who is emotionally traumatised by his loss and psychologically weakened by his diminishing memory, has to sort out the intricate clues of Polaroid pictures and tattoos on his body. He must also distinguish friends from foes as he struggles to accomplish his new purpose in life.

Fragmented Memory and Trauma

In many films that explore the theme of trauma, filmmakers frequently employ the fragmented storytelling technique using non-linear storytelling, flashbacks/flashforwards, reverse chronology, parallel timelines, etc., in order to make the audience understand the fractured mental state of the trauma survivor. Classical narrative structure that follows a linear pattern might not effectively capture the profound impact of trauma on the human psyche. According to scholars such as Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth, trauma affects an individual's ability to process his/her past experiences, leading to fragmented memories and distorted perceptions of reality. This sense of uncertainty and disorientation is produced by nonlinear narrative structures that jump back and forth between past and present. The use of flashbacks, fragmented timelines, and nonlinear storytelling effectively communicates the disorienting effects of trauma on the mind and how it distorts both past and present. Filmmakers use these approaches to make the audience experience trauma in a visceral, subjective way, echoing the protagonist's psychological state.

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) is a prime example of a film that utilises a nonlinear structure to reflect on the psychological and emotional disorientation of the protagonist. Leonard is not able to form new memories as a direct result of a traumatic incident that happened in his life — the murder of his wife, and his quest for revenge becomes a way for him to make sense of his fragmented past. Nolan constructs the film's narrative in reverse, with scenes unfolding in the opposite direction from the film's conclusion to its beginning, mirroring Leonard's disjointed memory. The film's nonlinear structure serves as a cinematic representation of how trauma affects a person's memory, trapping the affected individual in his past.

The movie challenges established narrative standards of traditional storytelling conventions by adopting a unique and innovative narrative structure that simulates the protagonist's fragmented memory. The plot is split into two streams running in opposite temporal directions. Chronological scenes are shown in black and white; colour scenes are in reverse chronological order. In short, the middle of the story is the climax; two time slots are intertwined at the end of the film, and these two parallel stories colliding in the climax reveals the characters' full motivations and intentions. The dual narrative structure of the film not only captivates the audience but also takes them to a fragmented and disoriented world which makes them experience the same level of confusion and disarray Leonard feels.

However, when the two separate narrative sequences meet during the climax of the film it becomes clear to the audience that Leonard is not so innocent after all. The audience discovers that Leonard wilfully ignores fact when it suits him. He can erase his own past in an act of outrageous audacity and will. Teddy claims Leonard has confused parts of his own life and in fact his wife wasn't raped and murdered but it was Leonard who inadvertently murdered her. Teddy also accuses Leonard of deliberately creating an "unsolvable puzzle" to give himself purpose, and that his search could go on indefinitely. he claims they had already killed the guy who committed the attack over a year ago – they did it together. Leonard, in a conscious, deliberate decision, burns all collected evidence and writes a new note to get a tattoo of Teddy's car licence plate, setting Teddy up as a new suspect, ultimately leading to his murder, shown at the beginning of the film. The film's narrative initially sets up the audience to feel Leonard's confusion and to sympathise with him because they are also unaware of the preceding events and are trying to discover the truth too, however a much more bitter feeling towards Leonard is created for the audience at the end of the film once true style of Leonard's investigation is revealed. *Memento's* plot moves creatively to put the audience in a position of interest; they, too, want to know who the attacker was, and then they want Leonard to get the justice he deserves. Then, in a dramatic twist at the end, the audience understands the investigation and the events leading up to Teddy's murder.

In *Memento*, the backwards plot is the first strategy. Backwards plot, which is the reversed arrangement of time, is scarce in film history. The first shot of *Memento* is a trick shot that rewinds the film. Images of the Polaroid picture disappear as it is shaken, red blood goes up the wall, and a bullet goes back into a pistol. Such shots suggest that this film's time goes backwards. In the film, scenes are composed in about 10-minute units, just like Leonard's memory capacity, to show the viewer the information from the same time perspective as Leonard. The second strategy is a frame narrative. If this strategy is used separately, the scenes are in line with the natural development of chronological order, as in the traditional narratives. These scenes faithfully carry out their duties of setting up the narrative by introducing the protagonist and by presenting the first goal of avenging

his wife's death with clues such as tattoos, pictures, and handwritten notes. These strategies force the viewer to use their intellectual intervention to understand the plot. In other words, *Memento* has a structure that exquisitely inserts the backwards plot at regular intervals in the framework of the traditional narratives.

Results and Discussions

Cathy Caruth's (1996) foundational work on trauma theory reveals that trauma essentially defies conventional memory processes, manifesting as involuntary, fragmented flashbacks that are often challenging to integrate into a coherent personal narrative. According to Caruth, trauma arises from experiences that are intense or horrific, rendering them difficult to process or articulate immediately. This overwhelming nature of trauma creates a disjunction between the event itself and the individual's ability to fully grasp or narrate it. Caruth posits that traumatic experiences, because they defy easy comprehension and articulation, exist in a liminal space beyond immediate understanding. This leads to gaps in memory that present themselves not as seamless narratives but as disjointed, fragmented recollections that disrupt the continuity of an individual's life story.

In *Memento*, Christopher Nolan skillfully combines the themes of memory, identity and trauma illustrating how traumatic experiences can profoundly affect a person's sense of self. Memory impairment of Leonard results in a fragmented sense of identity, where he is unable to integrate new experiences into his self-concept. The film explores how trauma disrupts both memory and identity, leaving Leonard in a perpetual state of confusion and emotional stagnation. The lingering effects of his past have created a fragmented self-image deeply intertwined with unresolved grief. His traumatic experiences are not merely events stored in memory; they created a complex relationship between his past and present. Leonard says, "Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the colour of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts" (Nolan, 2000). He believed that memory is unreliable, that it can be changed or distorted. He had forged a strong link between the past and the present using notes, annotated polaroids and tattoos on his body. For him, anything that was inscribed on a polaroid photo or tattooed on his body served as a reminder of the truth and served as a reminder of his life's purpose.

Leonard has to rely on external aids to figure out what had happened to him- the only means to construct his identity. He is unable to create a continuous narrative for himself, since he cannot link his new experiences to his past. Memory is integral to the formation of our identity, and when memory is fragmented, so too is the sense of self. Hence, he is on a continuous quest for revenge through which he believes he will get closure. There are different ways to express the resistance, as stated by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*, namely forgiveness, compensation or, quite fittingly, revenge (1992). Revenge is seen as a counterpart for the traumatic memory where the victim and the criminal change places, a way of giving closure to the torment. However, revenge does not work in that way; it is the other way around. Those individuals who effectively retaliate are the ones who eventually end up dramatically disturbed (Herman, 1992). Leonard's quest, therefore, is fruitless, for it will not help him to get rid of the pain. Even though he states that his wife deserves to be avenged regardless of his remembering, it is revealed that revenge was not the answer, for he had already killed the man who broke into his house and assaulted his wife (Cabral, 2013). Teddy tells him they did hunt that man down, as Leonard looks at the picture Teddy took of

him right after killing him. Guy Pearce's acting is key in this sequence, for he manages to convey a feeling of remembering. Moreover, Leonard has always been looking for the wrong person, for the murder of his wife was committed by himself. Teddy breaks the news to him that he has been lying to himself with the intention to refuse to accept what really happened:

TEDDY: So, you lie to yourself to be happy. There is nothing wrong with that. We all do it. Who cares if there's a few little details that you'd rather not remember (Nolan, 2000).

When Lenny jots down Teddy's license number, he asks: "Do I lie to myself to be happy? In your case, Teddy... yes, I will" (Nolan, 2000). People often create their own "truth" and believe what they want to believe to cover the real truth for their contentment. Teddy assured Lenny that he had already slain the real John G. who had raped his wife, but Lenny still did not want to trust Teddy because his wife is his only source of happiness. This is because Teddy's condition only allows him to rely on his tattoos and notes of his Polaroid images; hence, there is no proof to support his claims. Regretfully, there were no notes on the picture taken after the real John G. was killed. In order to hide his memories, Lenny tells himself lies. Since he doesn't want to recall that he killed his wife, he started his investigation merely to give himself meaning and purpose in life. This denial was demonstrated when Lenny dismissed his recollection of administering the insulin injection to his wife's leg in favour of visualising it as merely a pinch.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Memento* offers an exploration on trauma's impact on memory and identity, and how a traumatic event can irreparably fracture one's sense of self. Leonard Shelby's struggle to navigate his fragmented reality, compounded by his inability to form new memories, serves as a stark portrayal of how trauma can distort both the past and present. Through the lens of trauma theory, a deeper understanding of Leonard's psychological state and the interplay between memory, identity, and the trauma that shapes them is analyzed. The nonlinear structure of the film not only reflects Leonard's disjointed memory but also immerses the audience in the disorienting effects of trauma. By following a non-chronological narrative that mirrors Leonard's fragmented psychological experience, Christopher Nolan challenges traditional storytelling techniques to convey the profound instability and confusion that trauma can impose. This examination highlights the complexity of trauma's effect on the human psyche, suggesting that healing or closure may be elusive when one is trapped in a continuous cycle of self-deception, memory distortion, and emotional stagnation.

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