

## Haunted by Memory: Trauma and the Search for Closure with Atwood and Munro

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Trauma has the power to shape identity, alter memory, and influence the way individuals navigate their lives, yet the way people process and respond to traumatic events varies significantly. The manifestation of the residual life-long effects of trauma are conveyed in literature similarly to how it is experienced in real life: unexpectedly and with no true path. Differences in how humans interpretate and experience trauma are acknowledged within the short stories “Stone Mattress” (Atwood 45) and “Gravel” (Munro 112). Whilst presenting two distinct ways of understanding and responding to past wounds, both short stories explore the lingering effects of trauma. In Atwood's story, trauma is displayed as a force that fuels revengeful and decisive action, while in Munro's it remains an impenetrable puzzle of memory and guilt. Through the lens of the protagonist, these stories question how memories construct – or distort – the past and heavily influence the present. This suggests that trauma is not just an event of the past, but an

ongoing force that conditions one's identity, perception, and propels a search for closure.

In "Stone Mattress" (Atwood 45), the protagonist, Verna, was raped as a young woman by a fellow school peer named Bob, a wealthy and privileged character. This trauma ultimately defines the entire rest of Verna's life and molds her distrust and view of men. Unlike in "Gravel" (Munro 112), where trauma leads to emotional paralysis, Verna's story leads to cold, calculated action, concluding as murder as a form of self-reclamation. In "Gravel" (Munro 112), the central trauma revolves around the drowning of the protagonist's older sister, Caro. At the time, the narrator is a young child and is unable to recall the event clearly but is equally haunted by its uncertainty. In contrast to "Stone Mattress" (Atwood 45) where the trauma is a direct act of violence, Munro presents trauma as a tragic accident with unclear responsibility.

Atwood describes the rape scene indirectly which allows for Verna's bitterness and inner thoughts to reveal its impact. There is major emphasis on how the event is dismissed by others, only reinforcing Verna's anger and furthering her feelings of isolation. The murder of Bob later in the story mirrors the original trauma, creating a constant cycle of violence. Alternatively, Munro focuses on the gaps in memory as the narrator has difficulty recalling the circumstances of Caro's

drowning correctly, which perplexes the matter of responsibility surrounding her sister's death. This lack of certainty in memory and concrete answers creates a more ambiguous emotional response than in Atwood's story where the trauma leads to decisive action.

The role of memory in processing trauma is paramount to the healing journey because it directly stores the details of a traumatic event. How these memories are retrieved and encoded significantly influences the psychological impact of traumatic experiences. Unresolved trauma can manifest into many harmful symptoms ranging from physical, psychological and behavioural. Atwood's protagonist experiences physical flashbacks (when she sees Bob again), intrusive thoughts (telling her to kill Bob), and engages in risky behaviour (killing Bob). Verna's memory is extremely vivid and defines her chosen course of action in the present, she does not question her own recollection but rather uses it as justification for revenge. Atwood suggests that memory is a driving force behind retribution and closure, whereas Munro displays memory as fragmented and uncertain, making it nearly impossible to find authentic closure. Munro's protagonist also experiences physical flashbacks of her sister's drowning, however, they present more of an emotional numbness, concluding that her experience instilled thoughts of self-guilt and loss of trust in her own reality.

Munro also emphasizes how memory can distort the past to guilt rather than resolve, this inability to reconstruct the past accurately contrasts with Verna's unwavering certainty.

In terms of understanding and responding to trauma, both authors have their own unique approach. Atwood's protagonist reclaims her power by killing her rapist, framing it as poetic justice. This act of murder serves as her own personal resolution to the violent trauma she endured at the hands of Bob. Atwood implies that some traumas are so defining that they shape our identity in irreversible ways, primarily resulting in negative outcomes. Atwood strategically plots Bob's murder in a nonchalant, almost matter-of-fact manner, weaving in so much backstory about Verna's trauma that the reader sympathizes with her more than the man she ultimately kills. Verna is even shown to give Bob a chance at redeeming himself – if he had recognized her and apologized, she would have spared him. Unfortunately, Bob did neither and his failure to do so only reinforces the story's commentary on the enduring consequences of trauma. In “Gravel” (Munro 112), the protagonist has a passive approach to trauma that highlights how some individuals struggle to find meaning and closure in the experience. Munro's protagonist remains stuck – almost frozen in time – and feels a strong sense of guilt, resulting in the inability to fully process her sister's death, regardless of the amount of time that has passed since the

incident. Munro proposes that some unresolved traumatic wounds have the power to shape one's entire life and understanding of themselves.

In both “Gravel” and “Stone Mattress”, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood explore the complexity of the relationship between trauma and memory, but it is done so in distinct ways that reflect their broader thematic concerns. Munro explores the ambiguity of memory showing how it can paralyze, distort, and leave individuals trapped in an unresolved past. Atwood portrays memory as the driving force that fuels agency, vengeance and action. These differing perspectives ultimately change the way the protagonists experience trauma, suggesting a much deeper philosophical meaning about how people respond to and process suffering and grief.

Margaret Atwood's portrayal of trauma in “Stone Mattress” suggests that it is not simply an event from the past but rather a defining force that shapes identity and further motivates future actions. Verna's remembrance of her initial sexual assault inflicted by Bob is vividly clear and unwavering, reinforcing Atwood's argument that when memory is tied to significant traumatic experiences, they are not easily altered or forgotten. For Verna, the past is not something that can be buried or ignored, as the trajectory of her life ultimately changed because of what Bob had done. Remembering becomes an act of

survival and demands retribution and justice, which is later shown in the story when Verna murders Bob. This perspective aligns with Atwood's broader literary themes that often examine female agency, justice, and the long-term consequences of male violence. This short story also raises moral questions about justice and revenge: Is Verna's murder of Bob merely another form of violence, or was it an act of empowerment? The reader is left with the reality that there is no easy answer to this question and is left grappling with the concept that trauma cannot just simply disappear; that it will eventually resurface and demand justice in one form or another.

In contrast, Alice Munro's "Gravel" suggests that memory can become fluid and subjective rather than a set truth. Throughout the short story, the narrator admits that certain details surrounding her sister's death by drowning are not easily remembered and are occasionally interchangeable. This phenomenon results in her being forced to reconstruct the event based on her own speculation, and what others have confided in her. This lack of clarity weighs on the narrator making it become more insidious and disturbing as it contorts her memory of the roles she did or did not play in the incident of her sister's death. The narrator is left to question whether she bears any responsibility or if she should have done something different in the moment. The narrator is essentially stuck in this memory and

cannot decide whether her sister's death was an avoidable accident or a preventable tragedy. This portrayal aligns with Munro's broader themes of regret, memory, and the limitations of human conceptualization. Munro's story explores how people can attempt to make sense of their past, resulting in a struggle of reconciling memories with an objective truth.

While both authors have a different approach to trauma and memory, they ultimately focus on how trauma is not something that can be easily left in the past. In "Stone Mattress" (Atwood 45), trauma pushes Verna to take control of her fate, acting in a way that she believes will restore a balance to her life. In "Gravel" (Munro 112), trauma is manifested as an ever-lingering unresolved presence that the narrator cannot either escape or understand, despite her best efforts. This contrast in portrayal displays how trauma affects individuals in deeply personal and varied ways.

Expanding on these authorial implications validates this essay's analysis by demonstrating how the two stories offer complementary yet contrasting perceptions on trauma and memory. While Munro proposes that it is a wavering force that can misconstrue reality and prolong suffering, Atwood sees memory as a means of reclaiming agency. These differing perspectives suggest a broader commentary on the human experience of memory and trauma. As discovered through these

stories, some people turn their pain into action, while others are left searching for meaning in the gaps of their recollection of events. By critically examining these implications, readers can gain a deeper understanding of how literature reflects the complex ways in which individuals process, remember, and respond to their most painful experiences.



## Works Cited

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- Munro, Alice. "Gravel." *The Broadview Anthology of Short Fiction*, edited by Laura Buzzard and Marjorie Mather, Broadview Press, 2020, pp. 158-167.