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**TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL: THE CHARACTER OF MA  
IN EMMA DONOGHUE'S *ROOM*  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

The present thesis explores the trauma of the character of Ma in Emma Donoghue's *Room*. The purpose of this thesis is to analyse Ma's journey of traumatic recovery, considering the various factors that cause her trauma and hinder her recovery as well as the factors that help her cope with trauma and contribute to her recovery.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two core chapters and a conclusion. The introduction presents a short summary of the novel and the aspects that are further discussed in the thesis. The introduction also states the research questions that the study aims to answer.

The first chapter is a literature review. It deals with the child perspective of the novel's narration and provides a theoretical basis for understanding trauma in the novel. It defines the concept of trauma as well as elaborates on the specific types of trauma that Ma experiences, and coping with trauma.

The second chapter discusses the journey of Ma's traumatic recovery. It is based on the ideas about the types of trauma and coping mechanisms to analyse the key aspects of Ma's journey.

The conclusion provides a summary of the findings.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Cathy Caruth (1995: 9), for people who experience trauma, not only the experience itself is traumatic, but also the aftermath: "*survival itself /.../ can be a crisis*" [emphasis in original]. When a person escapes the situation that has caused them to experience trauma, it does not necessarily mean that they can immediately resume functioning as they used to. This is an important theme in Emma Donoghue's novel *Room*.

Emma Donoghue is a novelist, screenwriter and playwright who was born in Ireland and currently lives in Canada. Although she writes in various genres, she is best known for her fiction. She has written numerous works of historical fiction and also discusses same-sex relationships in her novels, especially those between two women. She has been nominated for multiple awards for her work. *Room* was shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize as well as the Orange Prize for Fiction. The screenplay Donoghue wrote for *Room* was also nominated for several awards, including an Academy Award, a Golden Globe and a Bafta. (Donoghue N.d).

*Room* is a story told through the eyes of five-year-old Jack, who, along with his mother, is being held captive in a garden shed by a man he refers to as Old Nick. Jack calls this garden shed Room and believes that it is all there is to the world, as this is what his mother has told him. Jack calls her mother Ma and the reader does not learn Ma's real name throughout the novel. Ma and Jack manage to escape Room, but the novel does not finish there, as it follows the struggles mother and child experience while trying to accommodate to society. They both encounter difficulties on this journey, however, this thesis focuses on the character of Ma. Ma's transition to society is not easy and eventually leads to her attempting suicide. Although we do not get direct access to Ma's thoughts and feelings, we get access to her story through Jack's reporting and direct speech spoken by Ma.

I have chosen to analyse Ma's trauma in the novel because even though the novel is

told through the narration of a five-year-old, the reader does get access to the story of the woman's trauma and survival. Donoghue manages to convey the story of a woman who is a survivor of rape and captivity while also representing the complexity of the functioning of trauma. The latter is one of the focuses in the thesis.

Another focus is the importance of storytelling as a method of coping with trauma. Considerable critical attention has been paid to the novel, including themes such as child perspective and narration, motherhood and trauma. However, while the importance of storytelling has been discussed by some authors, such as Kathleen Costello-Sullivan (2018), it has been given much less attention than other themes in the novel. By elaborating on the storytelling of Ma, the thesis aims to add to the discussion of this aspect in the novel.

The thesis seeks to find out the answers to the following questions:

- What causes trauma in Ma?
- How does storytelling help Ma in coping with her trauma?
- Which factors hinder Ma's recovery after escaping from Room and lead to her suicide attempt?
- What contributes to her healing from trauma?

In order to answer these questions, the first chapter of the thesis will point out the implications of the novel being told through the perspective of a child narrator. It will also provide the theoretical underpinnings of trauma relevant to the analysis of the novel. It will define the concept of trauma, outline the representation of trauma in literature as well as elaborate on the specific types of trauma that the novel addresses, and coping with trauma. The types of trauma discussed in separate subchapters have been established on the basis of the various kinds of trauma that the character of Ma experiences to understand the complexity of her trauma. Considering the scope of the thesis, these have been limited to three: the trauma of captivity, the trauma of sexual abuse and the trauma inflicted by the media. The

category of trauma inflicted by the medical system can be also identified but suffice to say, it complicates the recovery of Ma after captivity as does that of media. Therefore, only one type of traumatisation by the society after surviving the captivity in Room has been chosen for the analysis. Related also to Ma's suicide attempt, it best serves the purposes of argumentation. The theoretical background on trauma and coping with it lays a foundation to the second part of the thesis that analyses the journey of Ma's traumatic recovery. The chapter is divided into five parts, which dwell on the key aspects of Ma's process of traumatic recovery.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Child Narrator

*Room* is told through the eyes of five-year-old Jack. As narration is an important aspect of the novel and it is through Jack that the readers get access to the character of Ma, it is firstly important to discuss what a child narrator entails.

As the story is told through Jack's innocent perspective, it allows the readers to emotionally distance themselves from the horrors of the story (Caracciolo 2014: 200, Morales-Ladron 2017: 87). Critics suggest that as the readers are distanced because of the narrative device, there is a process of defamiliarization at work (Caracciolo 2014: 185, Morales-Ladron 2017: 87). The theory of defamiliarization by Victor Shklovsky claims that "by 'making things strange,' literary texts can de-automatize the way readers perceive story events and existents" (Shklovsky 1991 quoted in Caracciolo 2014: 185). Caracciolo goes further to argue that there is "a double ingoing defamiliarization at work" in the text, as not only is Jack and Ma's situation foreign to the readers, but the way Jack himself feels about it can be disorienting to the audience (Caracciolo 2014: 200).

Margarete Rubik (2017: 222) argues that readers who do not have preliminary knowledge of the novel being inspired by the real-life kidnapping of Elisabeth Fritzl are unlikely to suspect an imprisonment setting in the beginning. She suggests that readers may initially explain many of the anomalies by various alternative circumstances, and "attribute Jack's homebirth to premature labor, or extreme poverty, or a secret pregnancy, and the man's nightly visits to a secret amour" (Rubik 2017: 222).

According to Rubik (2017: 222), readers need to reconstruct the narrative for themselves based on the surprising and inconsistent information they are given by Jack. Marco Caracciolo (2014: 199) shares Rubik's view in this, claiming that "the audience makes up for the character's cognitive limitations while at the same time adopting his perceptual and

epistemic perspective." The reader, then, needs to engage in a process of textual interpretation in order to comprehend the situation of Jack and Ma.

Regarding the textual reinterpretation required from the reader of the novel, numerous authors have drawn attention to the scene where Ma is raped by Old Nick. Though the five-year-old narrator himself is not aware of what is taking place, the adult reader is able to interpret the information provided by Jack and realise the implications of the passage (Rubik 2017: 220; Lorenzi 2016: 24; Davies 2016: 156; Caracciolo 2014: 198-199). According to Ben Davies, because of this, the sexual abuse is simultaneously included in and excluded from the text, making it "narratively exceptional" (Davies 2016: 156).

Lucia Lorenzi (2016: 24) suggests that as the readers must decipher the text for themselves, they are not able to remain passive about the passage of sexual violence they are consuming – they must critically engage with it instead. Lorenzi goes on to suggest that the readers are challenged to think about the reasons why they recognise this scene as one of sexual violence, when the details reported by Jack – the sounds of orgasm and the bed creaking – could, in other contexts, be interpreted as adults engaging in consensual sex. Therefore, the text is forcing readers to acknowledge that sexual violence is complex and that "it does not always look (or sound) the way we imagine sexual violence to be" (Lorenzi 2016: 24).

Lorenzi (2016: 21) has also commented on the further implications of choosing to tell the story through a child narrator, rather than through the perspective of the perpetrator or the victim. She claims that each narrative voice entails its own risks. Choosing the perpetrator as a narrator "risks mirroring, in narrative terms, the violent control that perpetrators maintain over their victims' bodies" (Lorenzi 2016: 21). However, choosing the victim's perspective might cause the readers to "either over-identify or misidentify with a character's experience of violence" (Lorenzi 2016: 21). On the other hand, it has been argued by Laura Tanner that

giving a narrative voice to the victim might help the reader to better empathise with the position of the victim (Tanner 1994: 10 quoted in Lorenzi 2016: 21). Though choosing a child narrator can entail the risk of the narrator's credibility being questionable, Lorenzi argues that by choosing to voice the story through Jack as a "limited observer", Donoghue is critiquing "the fraught positions of both witness and victim", subverting "readers' expectations of narrative and visual pleasure" and as mentioned before, challenging the readers by not allowing them to remain passive while consuming scenes of sexual violence (Lorenzi 2016: 22).

## **1.2. Theoretical Underpinnings of Trauma**

This thesis is concentrated on the trauma of *Ma in Room* and its aftermath. Therefore, it is important to establish the theoretical underpinnings of trauma for an analysis of Ma's experiences. The following sections provide a definition of trauma and place *Room* in the context of trauma literature. As Ma's trauma in *Room* is caused by captivity and sexual abuse, it is necessary to deal with these specific traumas. After that methods of coping with trauma are discussed and finally, the issue of trauma inflicted by the media is addressed, whose violence is disguised as help to facilitate Ma's return to society and her recovery.

### **1.2.1. Definition of Trauma**

Laurie Vickroy (2002: ix) defines trauma as "a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption". According to Kai Erikson (1991: 457 quoted in Vickroy 2002: 12), trauma can result "from a constellation of life's experiences as well as from a discrete event". Fundamental to the definition of trauma is the helplessness experienced by the individual and the inability to influence the outcome of the situation (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1991:

446 quoted in Vickroy 2002: 13), which is also relevant to the analysis of the character of Ma in Emma Donoghue's *Room*.

Theoretical backing for the elaboration on the character development of Ma can be found from Cathy Caruth (1995: 9), who cites Freud's view of the relationship between trauma and survival, according to which not only the event itself is traumatic, but also "the passing out of it". Traumatic experience does not function in the same way as non-traumatic experience in the sense that it is not processed emotionally or cognitively, therefore the past remains with the individual unresolved (Vickroy 2002: 12). Because of this nature of traumatic experience, trauma is "repressed from memory and only reexperienced in repetitive, unconscious patterns" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1991: 441-442 quoted in Vickroy 2002: 12-13).

### **1.2.2. Trauma in Literature**

As the general definition of trauma and the key features of the traumatic experience have been given, it is now necessary to outline the function of trauma narratives in literature. Vickroy (2002: 2) points out four main functions of trauma narratives – they serve to demonstrate how common trauma is and the various factors which contribute to it; challenge our view of subjectivity; make us think about a number of our own anxieties related to trauma; and shed light on the relationship between those who experience trauma and the public, which is complicated because of the victims' defense mechanisms which might push others away and the public's negative view of trauma. According to Vickroy, trauma narratives serve to help readers sympathise with tellings of traumatic experience. Their aim is not to provide a superficial overview, but rather a deeper understanding of the subject. (Vickroy 2002: 2) Furthermore, trauma narratives "are often concerned with human-made traumatic situations" and aim to critique the "the ways social, economic, and political

structures can create and perpetuate trauma" (Vickroy 2002: 4). Considering its subject matter, Donoghue's *Room* makes a significant contribution to trauma narratives regarding sexual abuse which, according to Kalí Tal (1996: 156 quoted in Vickroy 2002: 6) "have borne witness to systematic violence against women, broken silence around incest and rape, and challenged 'laws and social conditions that protected sexually abusive men'".

### **1.2.3. Trauma of Captivity**

As Ma is held captive by the character of Old Nick for seven years in a secluded garden shed, called Room by her son Jack, it is important to discuss trauma of captivity. According to Judith Herman, trauma of captivity is distinct for the reason that unlike single traumatic events, the victim is not able to escape from the situation and therefore experiences "prolonged, repeated trauma" (Herman 1997: 74). In cases of captivity, the perpetrator plays an important role in the victim's life and "the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator" (Herman 1997: 75). Captors perform control over their victims by controlling the victim's "bodily functions" such as sleeping and eating, for example, and "even when the victim's basic physical needs are adequately met, this assault on bodily autonomy shames and demoralizes her" (Herman 1997: 77).

Herman (1997: 79) states that it is highly common for the victim to become attached to their captor, but she also points out that as long as the victim has someone else besides the captor to interact with, the captor holds less power. Margarete Rubik (2017: 233) comments on the significance of Jack's role in preventing Ma from becoming attached to her captor, saying that having Jack saved her from "possibly /.../ developing Stockholm syndrome".

### **1.2.4. Trauma of Sexual Abuse**

As Ben Davies (2016: 155) observes, Room in Donoghue's novel is a space designed

by Old Nick with the specific purpose of keeping Ma as a sex slave. Therefore, it is also important to pay attention to trauma caused by sexual abuse. As Laura S. Brown (1995: 102) points out, trauma of sexual abuse is often not considered "real" trauma, as it is the dominant groups of society who can act as victim who decide over the definition of trauma. It was not until after 1980 that the symptoms of sexual abuse survivors became to be viewed in the same framework as those of survivors of wars (Herman 1997: 32). According to research conducted in the National Victim Center and Medical University of South Carolina, statistics of depression and suicide attempts are considerably higher among rape victims than in non-crime victims: victims of rape were 13 times more likely to have attempted suicide and three times more likely to have experienced a major depressive episode (Kilpatrick et al 1992). The above provides background to understanding the struggles of Ma in Donoghue's novel, both during the time in captivity and after being released.

### **1.2.5 Coping with Trauma**

When discussing people's experiences with coping with trauma, there is an important distinction to be made regarding the different ways in which people may respond to trauma. While in some people, the traumatic experience "might trigger post-traumatic stress disorder or some other pathology", others are able to "confront and come to terms with" it and recover (Masten 1994; Masten 2001; Vera, Carbelo and Vecina 2006: 41 quoted in Morales-Ladrón 2007: 85). The response depends on what is known as "resilience", a concept that was introduced in the 1970s to denote "a certain protection against stressors that only certain personalities developed" (Kobasa 1979 quoted in Morales-Ladrón 2007: 86). However, studies have shown that resilience is not just something innate, but it depends on various factors, "rang[ing] from personality features, such as self-esteem and self-confidence, to social support, the perception of life as meaningful or the capacity to discriminate between

positive and negative experience" (Vera, Carbelo and Vecina 2006: 44 quoted in Morales-Ladrón 2007: 86). According to Morales-Ladrón (2007: 94), both Jack and Ma develop resilience in the course of the novel. Their resilience is manifest at the end of the novel in their "commitment to create a meaningful existence, in the projection of their life into a foreseeable future, in their adaptation to society and in their positive interaction with people" (Morales-Ladrón 2007: 94).

Creating alternative realities for oneself can help in coping with trauma. Traumatic events cannot be processed in the same manner as non-traumatic events in that they "cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (Janet 1889, 1919-25 quoted in Caruth 1995: 153). For this reason, memory of the traumatic happening cannot become a "narrative memory", meaning that it cannot become part of "a completed story of the past" (Janet 1889, 1919-25 quoted in Caruth 1995: 153). However, the ability to integrate traumatic memories into narrative memory is essential in allowing the person to process the memories. For this reason, it is important for the memory of the traumatic event to be "integrated with existing mental schemes and for it to be transformed into narrative language" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 176).

According to Kathleen Costello-Sullivan (2018), Ma also uses the act of creating alternative narratives for herself and Jack to help her cope with trauma. In the novel, Ma creates the illusion that Room is all there is in the world. While she does this largely to protect Jack, it is also an opportunity for Ma to create for herself "the alternate world called 'Room'" in which she is able to imagine a "fragile illusion of safety" (Costello-Sullivan 2018: 97; Costello-Sullivan 2018: 98). Although she is obviously aware that an outside world exists, engaging in this creation of a "fantasy space" helps Ma cope with her trauma in Room (Costello-Sullivan 2018: 97).

When talking about trauma, it is also important to note how an individual's trauma

relates to the surrounding people and general society. According to Lorenzi (2016: 28), Ma's commentary in the novel serves to acknowledge that trauma is not "a merely individual or psychological", but a "socio-political /.../ phenomenon". Furthermore, Ma's commentary also draws attention to the fact that what society defines as "traumatic" is not always "globally or historically consistent" (Lorenzi 2016: 28). This has an affinity with Laura S. Brown's (1995: 102) argument mentioned earlier in the chapter that often the dominant groups of society decide over what is seen as traumatic and what is not.

Regarding the discussion of an individual's trauma in relation to the society, critics also point out the important distinction to be made between how a person who has experienced trauma views themselves versus how society views them. Society often sees these people as victims, which is certainly understandable to an extent, but becomes problematic when the "victim" label is imposed on people based on what Laura Moss calls "presumptions of experience" (2015: 15). In *Room*, the victim narrative is imposed on Ma by the media, who according to Lorenzi (2016: 29), "enact a kind of public violence" by trying to "shape, control, and manipulate Ma's narrative."

### **1.2.6. Trauma Inflicted by the Media**

The violence enacted by the media becomes most evident in the scene where Ma is interviewed for television and subjected to a series of invasive questions. Moss (2015: 15) states that the interview scene "satirizes voyeurism, sensationalism, sentimentalism, and faux grief, as well as a desire for scandal". According to Lucia Lorenzi (2016: 27), the interviewer's questions directly aim to "provoke an emotional reaction in Ma", yet the interviewer "frames her manipulative practises not as a predatory technique, but rather as a form of assistance to Ma". Heather Hillsburg (2017: 306) adds to this discussion, commenting on how the interviewer's seeming eagerness "to help Ma tell her story" contains the

assumption that "Ma *wants* her story told for her" [emphasis in original] in the first place as well as the notion that "the public is somehow entitled to these details". She points out that there often exists the problematic idea that women who have experienced captivity are obligated to confess – that it is expected of them.

## **2. CAPTIVITY AND AFTERMATH: MA'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL**

### **Introduction**

In the empirical part of this thesis, Ma's journey of traumatic recovery is analysed. The factors that cause trauma in Ma and hinder her recovery as well as factors which contribute to her coping and eventually, the steps she takes in order to move on with her life, will be taken under analysis.

### **2.1. Coping with Trauma inside of Room**

#### **2.1.1. Story-telling as a Coping Mechanism**

Kathleen Costello-Sullivan (2018) states that Ma creates her own narratives in order to cope with the trauma she is experiencing. I will argue that the story she tells herself about the loss of her first baby is a coping strategy. Jack was not Ma's first child, as she had been pregnant with a baby girl before. Due to not having the appropriate conditions for delivering a baby in Room, the child was stillborn. In order to cope with such a loss, Ma creates for herself her own version of the story. In doing this, she is creating a softer and less harsh alternative to a traumatic experience, which according to numerous psychotherapists is helpful in coping with trauma (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 178). The reader does not learn about this story until after the escape from Room, but it becomes evident that she had been telling the story already in Room. While Ma and Jack are in the clinic, the reader learns that Ma has been

telling Jack already in Room that when he "came the first time, on Bed, [he] was a girl" (Donoghue 2010: 204). In the clinic she now explains why she has been telling him that – she believes that "the *her* part of her, that went straight back up to Heaven" (Donoghue 2010: 205). Telling herself that her stillborn daughter has been, in a sense, resurrected in Jack, can therefore be seen a coping mechanism to help her deal with her loss.

Furthermore, telling Jack about the first baby means that she is able to verbalise the experience of losing her baby and by doing so, give her experiences a narrative form. According to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1995: 176), verbalising traumatic experiences and putting them into narrative form is crucial in terms of processing trauma. The fact that Ma could tell Jack about her experiences through this story, then, was important in terms of dealing with her loss in the sense that she did not have to be alone with it. Furthermore, the fact that she is telling this story to her child rather than another adult plays a role in her act of storytelling. On the one hand, she had to tell the story in a lighter manner so as to make it less frightening for Jack. On the other hand, she perhaps would not have been able to tell this version of the story that helped her cope to an adult person for whom the story of the stillborn baby girl being resurrected in Jack could possibly have seemed too naive.

Another example of Ma using stories as a coping mechanism for herself is when she is telling Jack about the falling of the Berlin Wall. It seems especially telling because she is relating the story about the Berlin wall falling among classic children's tales – as Jack reports, "After dinner Ma tells me *Hansel and Gretel* and *How the Berlin Wall Fell Down* and *Rumpelstiltskin*" (Donoghue 2010: 71). While *Hansel and Gretel* and *Rumpelstiltskin* are classic stories to be read to children, the real life story of the falling of the Berlin Wall stands out among those. Although telling the story might also serve the purpose of educating Jack about world history, I suggest that her telling Jack about the falling of the Berlin Wall is her way of reminding herself that parallel to her current narrative of being a captive, narratives of

liberation and hope exist. After all, the falling of the Berlin Wall was a significant event in world history that marked freedom and the tearing down of confines. Escaping confinement is also exactly what Ma yearns for. It also seems revealing that her telling Jack this story comes right after she had told him about her family and life before being captured. In doing this, she was most likely reminded of her helpless position in Room. As is evident, storytelling is an important tool for Ma for coping with her experiences in Room.

### **2.1.2. Jack as a Saving Grace**

Andrea O'Reilly (2017: 95) states that "the birth of Jack gives purpose to Ma's life in Room and enables her to endure captivity through his love and their companionship". The television interview which occurs later on in the novel is one of the main accounts in the novel when the reader gets to hear Ma's perspective. One of the things the reader learns from the interview is the impact having Jack had on her:

"On that cold March day five years ago, you gave birth alone under medieval conditions to a healthy baby. Was that the hardest thing you've ever done?"

Ma shakes her head. "The best thing."

"Well, that too, of course. Every mother says –"

"Yeah, but for me, see, Jack was everything. I was alive again, I mattered. So after that I was polite."  
(Donoghue 2010: 233)

Ma seems to be emphasising the fact that for her, most likely even more so than to the average mother, having Jack has given her a sense of agency. Now, she was no longer alone in Room. Being mother to Jack meant that she would be able to take on a new identity as a mother, which was especially significant since up until that point, her identity had been that of a sex slave. While people leading regular lives outside of captivity might have identities as daughters, sisters, friends, colleagues, lovers, etc., Ma in her situation is not able to fulfil those roles. Although she still is someone's daughter, sister and friend, in Room she is not able to actively participate in those roles. The only thing that happened in her life before having Jack were the nightly visits from Old Nick, but after having Jack she is responsible for

educating and nurturing him and as she herself stated, has something to live for.

## **2.2. After the Escape**

### **2.2.1. Identity outside of Room**

Outside of Room, Ma needs to deal with her trauma and find a way to reconcile various aspects of her identity. Inside Room, a large aspect of her identity has been being mother to Jack. As she is now in the outside world, reintegrating into society creates complications for her. The "mother" aspect of her identity has been incredibly important to her. According to Elliott (2012: 77), in Room, as Ma was first and foremost fulfilling her mother role, she never gave thought to what society would have to say about her parenting. Outside of Room, however, she begins to think about society's view of her mothering. She feels threatened when anybody is seemingly questioning her mothering and gets defensive. During her first encounter with Dr. Clay, this defensiveness manifests itself when the doctor is wanting to examine Jack but Ma insists that Jack does not need treatment: "He's never been out of my sight and nothing happened to him, nothing like what you're insinuating. /.../ All these years, I kept him safe" (Donoghue 2010: 167).

She also feels the need to justify her mothering choices. This becomes apparent when Jack is playing with Play-Doh and Dr. Clay asks him whether he never got Play-Doh for one of his Sunday treats, Sunday treats meaning when Old Nick used to bring Ma and Jack non-essential items as presents on Sundays. Ma seems to feel as if she is being judged for her parenting and gets defensive: "Ma's sounding mad. 'You think I wouldn't have given Jack a different color of Play-Doh every day if I could have?'" (Donoghue 2010: 195) However, this defensiveness seems to stem from her feeling guilt over her parenting and doubt as to whether she did the best she could. "Noreen says it works better if you add as much salt as flour, did you know that? I didn't know that, how would I? I never thought to ask for food coloring,

even. If I'd only had the first freakin' clue –" (Donoghue 2010: 195).

According to Elliott (2012: 75), after escaping from Room, Ma becomes aware that in being predominantly concentrated on being her mother self in Room, she has lost a part of her individual self-identity. While in Room, she was there to guide Jack and take care of his needs at every necessary moment, however outside of Room, she is not able to be there for him at every moment. For example, when her and Jack are going down the stairs, she goes ahead without waiting for Jack and Jack needs to hurry to catch up with her (Donoghue 2010: 210). She is also showing impatience with Jack. She is in a hurry to go outside in the fresh air with Jack, though for Jack this is a new and scary experience: "She's sounding cranky, she's tying her laces already" (Donoghue 2010: 210). However, she does realise that she is moving too quickly for Jack, saying: "I'm a bit strange this week, aren't I? /.../ I keep messing up. I know you need me to be your Ma but I'm having to remember how to be me as well at the same time" (Donoghue 2010: 221). This illustrates the difficulty of Ma attempting to balance her mother self with her individual self-identity.

### **2.2.2. Relationship with Her Parents**

Her traumatic experiences also affect her relationship with her parents. Her parents thought that she had died and had a funeral service for her. She also comes to find that her mother and father have moved on in their lives – they have separated and her mother has found a new partner. Ma is not happy about this, as she acts cold towards Leo, her mother's new partner. We find out through Jack's reporting that Ma's disappearance might have largely been the reason for her parents' split: "The real [grandpa] went back to live in Australia after he thought Ma was dead and had a funeral for her, Grandma was mad at him because she never stopped hoping" (Donoghue 2010: 188).

Furthermore, when Ma's father flies in from Australia to visit her, he is unable to

accept Jack as his grandson because in his eyes, Jack is a product of her daughter's repeated rape. When Ma first tries to introduce her father and Jack to each other, Ma's father does not want to talk to Jack or even be in the same room, saying: "But all I can think of is that beast and what he –" (Donoghue 2010: 226). Ma is extremely frustrated by his inability to accept his grandson and it creates tension between them.

Similarly to how Ma does not want her father to view Jack as a child of rape, she does not want her mother to see her as being defined by her traumatic experiences. This becomes apparent in the emotional conversation between the two where Ma's mother wants Ma to tell her "every detail" of her experience but Ma does not want to do this: "What's the point, Mom? It's over now, I'm out on the other side" (Donoghue 2010: 198). The reason Ma's mother asks Ma to tell her might be that it helps give her a sense of control in the situation. It is generally a parent's duty to protect their child and in their current situation, she was not able to protect her daughter. Having a detailed account of her experiences, therefore, would possibly provide her with a sense of control in the form of knowledge. However, Ma resists her request because she would "actually rather not have [her mother] thinking about that stuff every time she looks at [Ma]" (Donoghue 2010: 198). She does not want her mother to view her as a victim. However, her mother replies to this, saying that "all [she] thinks when [she] looks at [Ma] is 'hallelujah'" (Donoghue 2010: 198). This line shows that she does not view Ma in the light that Ma thinks she would, but is, most of all, glad to have her daughter back. As can be seen, there is a significant difference between how Ma's father reacts to her experience and how her mother does. This shows how people might react differently in response to a loved one's traumatic experience.

### **2.3. Interview**

The scene where Ma is interviewed for television is an important scene in the novel, as

it is following this scene that Ma attempts suicide. As discussed in the theoretical section of this thesis, the interviewer is invasive and insensitive in her questions and masks her "manipulative practises" as helpfulness (Lorenzi 2016: 27) when she is really attempting to "shape, control, and manipulate Ma's narrative" (Lorenzi 2016: 29). In the following, I will analyse how Ma acts during the interview, the reasons behind her behaviour and how she is affected by the interview.

Moss states that Ma resists the interviewer's attempts, as she "refuses to have her story be viewed as a paradigmatic case of sexual abuse, confinement and violence" (Moss 2015: 14). We can see her resisting the interviewer's attempts, for example, when the interviewer asks her about her breastfeeding: "You breastfed him. In fact, this may startle some of our viewers, I understand you still do?" (Donoghue 2010: 233) This question seems to be, as the phrasing of the questioning implies, motivated mainly by wanting a shocking scoop for the viewers. However, in response to this, Ma retorts: "In this whole story, that's the shocking detail?" (Donoghue 2010: 233) She stands her ground against the interviewer's sensationalist intents. Furthermore, when the interviewer asks Ma if she in any sense misses being in captivity, Ma turns to her lawyer and asks: "Is she allowed to ask me such stupid questions?" (Donoghue 2010: 236)

When the interviewer calls Ma "a beacon of hope", Ma responds, saying that she is "not a saint" (Donoghue 2010: 235). Instead, she acknowledges that her and Jack's trauma is not exceptional:

"I mean, of course when I woke up in that shed, I thought nobody'd ever had it as bad as me. But the thing is, slavery's not a new invention. And solitary confinement – did you know, in America we've got more than twenty-five thousand prisoners in isolation cells? Some of them for more than twenty years /.../ As for kids – there's places where babies lie in orphanages five to a cot with pacifiers taped into their mouths, kids getting raped by Daddy every night, kids in prisons, whatever, making carpets till they go blind." (Donoghue 2010: 235-236)

According to Lorenzi, she is not "minimizing or denying the severity of her own experiences" by acknowledging this but rather, realising that her trauma is not "operating

completely outside of the spectrum of 'quotidian' trauma that many people experience" (Lorenzi 2016: 28). Ma acknowledges that trauma is an extremely common phenomenon and is not always seen, such as in cases of incest which happens behind closed doors, or acknowledged as traumatic, such as in the case of prisoners in isolation cells. This confirms Lorenzi's claim mentioned in the theoretical section of this thesis that trauma is a "sociopolitical phenomenon" (Lorenzi 2016: 28).

While she manages to stand her ground against the interviewer for a large portion of the interview, we can see that she is still emotionally affected by the questioning. For example, it affects her when the interviewer brings up the topic of her stillbirth. The question catches her off guard because the journalist was actually contractually prohibited from asking about the topic. This attributes to her distress at the question while also demonstrating the audacity of the interviewer. Her distress can be read from her reaction, as reported by Jack: "Ma puts her hand over her mouth" and her "hands are all shaking, she puts them under her legs" (Donoghue 2010: 232). However, the interview culminates in terms of the emotional effect it has on Ma when the interviewer implies that it might have been better if Ma had asked Old Nick to take Jack away for him to be adopted. She suggests that maybe it would have been better "if Jack could have had a normal, happy childhood with a loving family" (Donoghue 2010: 237). While Ma defends herself, saying that "Jack had a childhood with [her], whether you'd' call it *normal* or not" [emphasis in original], that moment in the interview causes her to break down and cry (Donoghue 2010: 237).

#### **2.4. Suicide**

The following day, Ma attempts suicide by overdosing on pills. In the following, I will analyse her suicide and the factors that contribute to her deciding to attempt suicide.

One thing to be noted about the suicide scene is that it comes as a surprise to the

reader. On the day of her suicide attempt, she was set to go to the Natural History Museum with Jack and her brother's family, but woke up in a depressed state. Jack reports her depressive state as her being "Gone". She had Gone days while being in Room as well. These were the days on which she spent the whole day in bed and was unresponsive. When finding Ma Gone in the hospital upon waking up in the morning, Jack reports: "I didn't know she'd have days like this in the world" ("the world" meaning outside of Room) (Donoghue 2010: 238). This serves to illustrate the unpredictability of the functioning of her trauma. One could assume that now that she has escaped from the traumatic environment of being held captive and sexually assaulted on a daily basis, she would immediately be on the road to recovery. However, this is not the case. According to Lorenzi, Donoghue choosing to portray Ma's journey in this manner serves to "contravene popular mythologies that may frame traumatic recovery as a more or less linear process" (Lorenzi 2016: 31).

However, in *Room*, her Gone days never lasted more than a day, which is why the reader would possibly assume that this is yet another one of those days and that she would be responsive again the following day. This, along with the fact that the reader does not have any other indications as to Ma being suicidal, contribute to the reader possibly being taken aback by the fact that she attempts suicide that evening.

Andrea O'Reilly (2017: 96) suggests that Ma's suicide is mainly triggered by the fact that the interview caused her to blame herself for bad parenting. As discussed previously, Ma's identity as a mother is highly important to her and having her parenting set under doubt affects her greatly. As it is the interviewer's attack on her mothering decisions that pushes her to the point of emotional breakdown during the interview, it is highly likely that Ma's guilt and self-blame over thinking she had made the wrong parenting decisions was one of the factors which contributed to her attempt to take her own life.

Elliott (2012: 78) suggests that Ma's suicide attempt was her "attempt to both escape

her trauma and return to her self – the self without a child or responsibility." In this sense, her suicide attempt can be, then, seen as a form of her taking control of her life. Davies (2016: 154) similarly suggests that Ma's suicide attempt is a "sovereign" act, as she "attempts to seize possession of her own life." This line of thought agrees with Herman's (1997: 85) statement, according to which, for victims of captivity, suicide is an act of "defiance", as they can take control of what they do with their lives in a situation where they cannot control anything else that happens to them. Although Ma is no longer being held captive by Old Nick, I suggest that Herman's statement can still be seen as relevant to Ma's case. She had experienced the feeling of powerlessness that comes from being held captive for seven years and now, during the interview, had again felt trapped because someone else's narrative was being imposed on her. Therefore, she might have felt herself not being in control of her life yet again and that might have contributed to her attempted suicide.

Furthermore, I suggest that in addition to the factors mentioned in this chapter, her suicide attempt was motivated by the trauma of her experiences in Room coinciding with the factors mentioned in previous chapters – her struggling to find her own identity and complicated relationships with her parents. She had, after all, experienced sexual assault almost every night in Room for seven years and suicide rates are incredibly high among rape survivors (Kilpatrick et al 1992). Therefore, I suggest that her suicide attempt was the result of everything she had experienced up until that point becoming too unbearable and that the interview scene acted as the trigger. What she told Jack in one of their phone calls when she was in the hospital after the attempt hints at this: "I was tired /.../ I made a mistake" (Donoghue 2010: 271).

## 2.5. Road to Recovery

### 2.5.1. Emotional State after Suicide Attempt

As we only get access to Ma's story through the reporting of Jack, the only information we get about Ma's recovery after the suicide attempt is through the phone calls Jack and Ma have with each other. The first thing she does after the phone is handed to Jack during their first phone call after her suicide attempt is that she apologises. This shows that she is feeling guilty over the effect her suicide attempt had on Jack. Jack thought that he might have completely lost his Ma. It was also the first time in his life he had gone a period longer than a day of being away from his Ma and it all happened very suddenly for him. Therefore, after her attempt, she might have felt guilty over putting Jack in such a position.

During the call Jack asks Ma: "You're not in Heaven?" (Donoghue 2010: 270). Jack reports a sound that Ma makes: "I can't tell if it's a cry or a laugh" (Donoghue 2010: 270). In response to Jack's question, Ma replies: "I wish." At this answer, Jack is confused, as he cannot understand why Ma would wish such a thing. Ma tells Jack that she was joking, to which Jack responds that it was not a funny joke. The reader, however, can gather something about how Ma is feeling from the way she replied. Jack's question can be read in two ways. The first one being the literal interpretation, as Jack is asking Ma this question in order to confirm to himself that his Ma is really still alive. However, Jack poses the question in a childlike manner, as he has been taught that when people go to die, they go to Heaven. Heaven is known to be a place of Paradise, one that is calm and peaceful. Therefore, although Ma responding to Jack's question that she wishes she was in Heaven could be interpreted as her wishing she had died, it can also be read as her longing to be in Heaven in the sense of wanting to be at peace. This gives insight into her mental state after her attempted suicide – the reader can infer that she was still feeling overwhelmed with her situation.

As the conversation continues, we get further insight into how Ma is feeling after her

suicide attempt. This is the first time Jack gets to ask Ma why she did what she did. Even though Ma's suicide attempt likely came as a surprise to the adults around her as well, it was probably even more confusing for Jack. He asks Ma: "Were you tired of playing?" (Donoghue 2010: 271) After a long pause, Ma replies: "I was tired /.../ I made a mistake" (Donoghue 2010: 271). Her saying this shows that she was feeling overwhelmed and acted upon those feelings. When Jack asks her: "You're not tired anymore?", Ma replies: "I am. But it's OK" (Donoghue 2010: 271). This shows that trauma is not resolved instantaneously. Lorenzi (2016: 31) states regarding the way that Ma's traumatic recovery is portrayed in the novel that it attests to "the possibility to disrupt the often simplistic binaries of death/life, trauma/ordinary life, tragedy/happiness". I suggest that Ma's statement in this scene attests to this same sentiment. She is not immediately healed from her trauma – her responses show that she is still hurting, but that at the same time she accepts that she can continue living even while feeling this way.

### **2.5.2. Moving in to Independent Living Facilities**

After Ma is discharged from the hospital, she picks Jack up from her mother's place and together, the two of them move in to independent living facilities. The reader gets another hint about Ma's mental state in terms of recovering from trauma when she is unlocking the door to the independent living and Jack reports that "she makes a face because of her bad wrist" when she is turning the key (Donoghue 2010: 302). "She's not all fixed yet," Jack reports (Donoghue 2010: 302). Although he is talking about her wrist, it is highly likely that this is Donoghue's way of hinting to the reader that the same goes for her mental state – she is not fixed yet, but she is slowly and steadily moving towards it. The fact that this is hinted in a scene that has to do with her broken wrist seems to confirm this. Her wrist was an injury caused by Old Nick in Room, meaning that it is a physical reminder of what she experienced

in Room.

The reader gets to see Ma actively taking steps towards moving on in life. In the assisted living facilities, Ma decides that her and Jack should have separate rooms for the first time. According to Elliott (2012: 79), them having separate rooms shows that they are working towards "individual autonomy". They set up an arrangement in which they still sleep in the same room, but spend time in separate rooms during the daytime. Ma suggesting this is significant, as it is a big step in terms of starting to separate her identity from being so closely intertwined with Jack's. She is working towards finding a balance between her mother self and her own individual self. While being a mother is certainly still a large part of her identity, creating healthy boundaries is a good step for finding a balance between her different identities. Having separate rooms is also beneficial for Jack, as it will help him become more independent and encourage his healthy development.

However, when Ma first suggests the idea of separate rooms to Jack, he resists and does not understand why having separate rooms is a good idea. He agrees once Ma suggests making nameplates for the doors. While this is settled without much conflict, they get into an argument when Jack wants to put the rug somewhere in the assisted living but Ma wants to get rid of it. Ma sees it as a reminder of seven years spent in captivity and thinks the rug filthy. Jack, however, has an emotional attachment to it: "Yeah and I was born on her and I was dead in her too" (Donoghue 2010: 305). When Jack protests to Ma's suggestion of throwing it in the incinerator, Ma gets irritated: "If for once in your life you thought about me instead of –" (Donoghue 2010: 305). However, Ma eventually compromises and allows Jack to keep the rug on the condition that Jack keeps the rug in his room, rolled up in the wardrobe. According to Costello-Sullivan (2018: 107), Ma allowing Jack to keep the rug is significant as in doing so, she is accepting the fact that her and Jack have a different interpretation of the past but that both of their interpretations are valid and can exist at the same time.

While at the assisted living facilities, Ma and Jack write down a list of things they would like to do in the future. Projecting their life into the future shows Ma's willingness to move on and take steps towards healing. The list contains things that are aimed at Jack's development, such as him going to school, having a playdate and taking swimming lessons. Some items in the list are for both Jack and Ma, such as flying in an aeroplane, living in another country and making new friends. They are also planning to move into an apartment of their own. This is an important step for them, as neither the hospital nor the independent living facilities are spaces that are truly theirs. Therefore, having a space they could truly call their own would potentially provide both of them, but especially Ma, with a great sense of autonomy. However, many of the items are steps, which Ma specifically can take in order to move on with her life. Some of them are short-term plans, such as having some of her old friends over for dinner, driving a car and going out dancing while Jack stays at his grandmother and Leo's house. Other items on the list are long-term goals for Ma, such as going to college and finding a job. Both the short-term and long-term goals are important in Ma moving on with her life and according to Elliott (2012: 79), show that Ma is putting emphasis her own needs. Elliott (2012: 79) also states that the fact that Ma had psychiatric assistance was a great help in her getting to this point in her traumatic recovery.

When Dr. Clay and Noreen, their nurse, go to visit Ma and Jack in the independent living facilities, Ma tells Dr. Clay: "It's perverse, all those years, I was craving company. But now I don't seem up to it" (Donoghue 2010: 314). She is surprised that she does not crave more company now and that Jack is enough company for her most days. Ma says that this is not how she remembers herself, to which Dr. Clay replies that she "had to change to survive" (Donoghue 2010: 314). According to Lorenzi, Dr. Clay's reply is an attempt to place Ma's statement in a framework of trauma (Lorenzi 2016: 31). Noreen, however, points out that Ma would have changed anyway: "Moving into your twenties, having a child – you wouldn't have

stayed the same" (Donoghue 2010: 314). Earlier in the novel, Ma's lawyer had insinuated that Old Nick had "robbed [Ma] of the seven best years of [her] life" (Donoghue 2010: 201). Noreen's comment contradicts this statement and could possibly help Ma make peace with the fact that the seven years she spent in captivity were not wasted or robbed from her, as the lawyer suggested, but that throughout the years in captivity she still kept growing as a person. As Lorenzi (2016: 31) puts it: "Living, after all, keeps happening whether one is out in the world or confined in a small garden shed".

### **2.5.3. Return to Room**

In the end of the novel, Ma agrees to go see Room for the last time at Jack's insistence. She is hesitant about going at first. Jack cannot grasp why Ma is against the idea. When Ma tells him that she does not think she can do it, Jack replies: "Yeah, you can. /.../ Is it dangerous?" (Donoghue 2010: 315) Ma says: "No, but just the idea of it, it makes me feel like..." (Donoghue 2010: 316) She does not finish her sentence, yet from her response it becomes apparent that even though there is no physical danger in going back to Room, it is precisely the feeling of being reminded of her experiences that presents difficulty for her. This illustrates how trauma is often seen in society. Those who have not experienced a severely traumatic experience could potentially be confused by why a situation such as Ma's would be difficult for the person, as there does not seem to be any imminent physical threat. However, for the person who is traumatised, the situation is difficult precisely because trauma is complicated in its functioning and can be triggered even after the traumatic circumstances have passed.

The reader also witnesses Ma giving up her storytelling as a coping mechanism in the end of the novel. When they arrive in the back yard where Room is located, Jack remembers that Ma had told him that the stillborn baby girl was buried there. However, it turns out that

Ma has had the baby dug up because she did not want her body to be in the same back yard as

Room:

"We'll put her somewhere better," Ma tells me.

"Grandma's garden?"

"Tell you what, we could – we could turn her bones into ash and sprinkle it under the hammock.

"Will she grow again then and be my sister?"

Ma shakes her head. Her face is all stripey wet. (Donoghue 2010: 318)

As discussed previously, the story Ma had been telling herself in order to cope with losing her daughter had to do with the baby girl being, in a sense, reincarnated in Jack. The question Jack poses now contains a similar allusion to the baby being reincarnated, this time as growing from the ashes into his sister. However, Ma's reaction in denying that sentiment shows that she has given up her coping narrative. Even though her narrative of imagining the baby being reincarnated was an important coping mechanism for her in Room, the fact that she is now able to let go of the story means that she can finally accept the loss of her baby girl. Her being able to do so shows that she has come a long way in terms of her traumatic recovery. By accepting that the loss occurred, she has integrated the experience into the story of the past, which according to Van der Hart and Van der Kolk (1995), is crucial when it comes to processing trauma.

## CONCLUSION

Trauma is a complex concept that can often be difficult to understand. Trauma narratives in literature help shed light on the complicated ways in which trauma functions. Emma Donoghue's *Room* is one of such narratives. It tells the story of a woman who is a survivor of rape and captivity. In my thesis, I have analysed the journey of the character of Ma in her dealing with her trauma. The various factors, which caused her trauma and hindered her traumatic recovery in the outside world, as well as factors, which helped her cope and contributed to her recovery were discussed.

Putting traumatic experience into narrative form is crucial in dealing with trauma (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995). In my thesis, I have explored how Ma uses storytelling in order to deal with her trauma in *Room*. Storytelling in *Room* helps her put her experience of stillbirth into narrative form, as she gets to tell Jack about it. This means that she does not have to be alone with it, which helps her better cope with the trauma she is experiencing. Through storytelling, she is also able to reimagine her stillbirth as well as captivity in a more positive light for herself by creating alternative narratives, which is another coping mechanism.

An important aspect of the novel is that Ma's traumatic recovery is not portrayed as a linear process. It could be assumed that after Ma escapes the immediate environment that is causing her trauma – *Room* – she would be able to thereupon begin healing from her trauma. However, the novel illustrates that this is not necessarily the way in which trauma functions, as after escape, Ma experiences great difficulty in accommodating to life outside of *Room*. She comes to find that her parents have moved on with their lives and her father struggles to accept Jack as his grandchild due to seeing Jack as a product of Ma's rape. Furthermore, while in *Room*, being a mother was her entire identity and while this helped give her a clear focus and purpose in *Room*, outside of *Room* it becomes a hindrance for her. She struggles with

finding an identity of her own next to her identity as a mother.

When Ma is interviewed for television, the interviewer exemplifies the kind of behaviour that should not be engaged in when speaking to someone who has undergone trauma. She is extremely invasive in her questioning and attempts to impose her own narrative on Ma. Because of the interview, as well as the entirety of her experiences both inside and outside of Room becoming too overwhelming for her, Ma attempts to commit suicide. As her suicide scene largely comes as a surprise to the reader, it again serves to illustrate how trauma works in an unpredictable manner and does not necessarily follow any logic.

Her recovery process after the suicide attempt again illustrates that recovering from trauma is not an immediate or linear process. However, she is slowly moving on. She is setting healthy boundaries between herself and Jack and in doing so, moving towards reconciling her personal self-identity with that of being mother to Jack. In the end of the novel, Ma agrees to go see Room with Jack at his insistence. It becomes evident that she has come so far in her recovery that she is able to give up the storytelling she used in order to cope with her trauma and instead, is able to fully accept the experience and integrate it into the past.

Emma Donoghue's *Room* illustrates the complicated nature of trauma and shows that trauma may not follow any predictable patterns or regular logic. It also shows how storytelling functions in coping with trauma. Ma's use of storytelling as a coping mechanism has received considerably less attention from critics than other themes in the novel. With my thesis, I have contributed my own analysis to this discussion.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Agnes Anijalg

Trauma and Survival: The Character of Ma in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

Trauma ja ellujäämine: Emme tegelaskuju Emma Donoghue romaanis "Tuba"

Bakalaureusetöö

2020

Lehekülgede arv: 35

Annotatsioon:

Bakalureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida ema tegelaskuju ehk Emme traumat Emma Donoghue teoses "Tuba". Töö analüüsib Emme toimetulekut traumaga ning tähelepanu pööratakse erinevatele teguritele, mis tekitasid temas trauma ning takistasid tema traumast paranemist, aga ka teguritele, mis abistasid teda traumaga toimetulekul ning aitasid kaasa tema paranemisele.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist ning kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatuses antakse lühike teose sisututvustus ning tuuakse esile peamine eesmärk ja sõnastatakse uurimisküsimused, millele töös vastust otsitakse. Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade, mis selgitab lapsjutustaja rolli romaanis ning annab traumateoreetilised lähtekohad teose analüüsiks. Lisaks trauma mõiste definitsioonile ja ilukirjanduse rollile trauma kujutamisel käsitletakse ka peamisi romaaniga seotud trauma alaliike, mida Emme tegelaskuju kogeb.

Teine peatükk koosneb viiest alapeatükist, milles uuritakse lähemalt erinevaid faktoreid, mis mõjutavad Emmet traumaga toimetulekul. Töö tulemusena selgus, et Toas olles on loojutustamine Emme jaoks oluline toimetulekumehhanism. Emme ei saa alustada oma traumast paranemist kohe peale Toast pääsemist, sest uuesti ühiskonda sisse elamine osutub tema jaoks keeruliseks ning viib Emme nii kaugele, et ta teeb enesetapukatse. Romaani lõpus aga on Emme teel paranemise poole, kuigi tema paranemist ei näidata kohese ega sirgjoonelisena.

Märksõnad: Emma Donoghue, lapsjutustaja, trauma, loojutustamine.

## **Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks**

Mina, Agnes Anijalg,

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) minu loodud teose

Trauma and Survival: The Character of Ma in Emma Donoghue's *Room*,

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