

Narrativization of Trauma in Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*

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Abstract

The present research endeavors to explore the Narrativization of trauma Mitch Albom's novel, *Tuesdays with Morrie* to comprehend how human beings suffer psychologically at the news of the approaching death of the dearest ones. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom's central character, Morrie Schwartz faces a fatal disease, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). To analyze how the narrator of the novel, the author himself, undergoes a great psychological trauma caused by the death of the professor, Morrie Schwartz, the research tool used for the research is the theories of psychological trauma advocated by Freud, Lacan and Cathy Caruth. Mitch Albom depicts the reality of his traumatized psyche about his professor to reduce the effect of the shock. By the cause of the disease, Morrie has to lose his professor and he gets great psychological shock. The finding is that trauma affects the overall ways of life on human beings. Therefore the shock of the author is narrativized in this novel to heal his psychological trauma.

Keywords: - Confusion; Memories; Psyche; Stress; Threat.

Introduction

The descriptions and processing of traumatic events in literature have been key aspects of trauma theory. Trauma is assumed to be an element of psychology that is taken to sketch a person's motivations (Radstone, 2007). *Tuesdays with Morrie*, written by the newspaper columnist, Mitch Albom has certain psychological issues to be addressed by the researchers. It belongs to the psychological literature. Psychological literature refers to the study of psychic and creative process of an individual (Wellek & Warren, 1973). An inquisitive reader asks why his characters are obsessed with trauma and what impels them to remain panic, and why Mitch Albom uses Morrie Schwartz as his mouthpiece. Mitch Albom is an internationally renowned American author, journalist, screenwriter, playwright, radio and television broadcaster and musician (Shriver, 2014). *Tuesdays with Morrie* is the best-selling inspirational true story of Albom and records the discussions he had with his dying sociology professor and mentor, Morrie Schwartz (Weems, 2001). Albom received a B.A. in sociology from Brandeis University, where he met Morrie Schwartz, a professor who encouraged his students to follow their hearts rather than to strive to attain the highest-paying jobs they could find. Albom completed an M.A. in journalism at Columbia University and an M.B.A. in 1982. Albom becomes a successful sports column writer in 1995 for the *Detroit Free Press*. When he sees his former sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz in a television program on "Nightline", Albom calls his professor and plans to meet him in Massachusetts on Tuesdays.

This book is written in the student's point of view and is based on a true story. It conveys the idea that it is best to learn how to die in order to know how to live. The fiction is autobiographical in vein (Struckel, 2001). In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, as Irvin (2007) analyzes,

Mitch Albom chronicles his fourteen time visits to his professors, and the precious time spent with his 78 years old sociology professor at Brandeis University, Morrie Schwartz, who was dying from ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). The memoir is supplemented with lectures and life experiences of Schwartz. The ex-student of Schwartz, Albom had not communicated with his teacher after he left the college sixteen years ago. All the shocking events that occur in the novel provoke a researcher to analyze the text from the perspective of psychological trauma. The chief research question that lies beneath the survey is what impels Albom to be emotionally and psychologically attached with his professor with whom he had always been detached. The rationale of the paper lies in probing the cause of the protagonist's traumatic experiences.

Literature Review

Many critics have researched on Mitch Albom's the novel, *Tuesdays with Morrie* on it different aspects. There are some critics who have commented on its theme, characterization and narrative technique. Judging on the genre of the fiction, Weems (2001) remarks: "This life-affirming case study, the result of a series of taped conversations between Albom and his beloved undergraduate professor, the late Morrie Schwartz, represents good art in the Deweyian sense because it flows from everyday life experience" (p. 62). Mitch Albom captures the essence of Morrie Schwartz and his remarkable wisdom about life and death. According to Rothschild (2000), "The book, *Tuesdays with Morrie* is a magical account of the time Mitch spent by the bedside of Morrie, his teacher who was dying of a terminal illness" (p. 169). Stephenie (2005) also marks the inspirational account of human life in the novel, and comments, "*Tuesdays with Morrie* is more than just a dying man's last words; It is an inspirational recount of a man's life- a man whose passion for the human spirit has continued to live lone after his last breath" (pp. 3-4). For Sharabiani (2015), "Tuesday's With Morrie examines the interactions and phenomena between the human experience of living and dying. A theme of personal transcendence appears for both characters: Morrie and Albom" (para. 1). Although so many critics have approached the text from various perspectives, they have not noticed the role of psychological trauma in the novel projected through the character of Morrie Schwartz. And here lies the research gap. Hence, this article aims to explore on the research gap oriented to study the relationship between teacher and disciple through the memoirs of the protagonist, and relate that a disciple can learn a lot from the trauma caused by the dying teacher. It examines how human beings suffer psychologically at the demise of the inspiring person and how one can lessen the tragedy.

Research Methodology

The methodology of this research is textual as constructed and guarded by circumference of trauma theory, especially psychological trauma. Apart from the making the intensive and close study of the text, *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom as the primary resource, the methodological tools are also drawn from different psychological based on trauma to analyze Schwartz's lectures, quotes, experiences and conversations and its traumatic impact on Mitch Albom. For the collection of the related materials, articles on *Tuesdays with Morrie* from the library, websites, and magazines are taken as secondary sources.

Trauma, according to Caruth (2006), is an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p. 181). Trauma affects psychic perceptions due to the occurrence of a disastrous event (Young, 2009). A terrible event causing the disruption of the human psyche is psychological trauma. Freud (1939) marked human trauma repressed in the unconscious part of human mind. Lacan (1977) hypothesized that as an object of anxiety, the real is the essential object which isn't an object any longer. But this is experienced when all words vision do not come clearly in a person's mind.

The traumatic approaches mentioned above are useful research tools used to examine how Mitch Albom is shocked by his dying professor.

Analysis and Interpretation

Mitch Albom's novel, *Tuesdays with Morrie* portrays the psychological trauma of the narrator caused by the death of his professor, Morrie Schwartz. Caruth (1996) describes trauma as an alarming experience of an unexpected blow. Mitch Albom depicts his experience in which his emotional experience gets overwhelmed. Albom depicts the reality of his traumatized psyche about his professor to reduce the effect of the shock. The central character of the *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie is the best professor of the narrator, the author of the novel. The professor is suffering from the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a fatal disease. The professor is going to die soon due to ALS. He gets pain and torture physically. It creates a mental torture to Mitch Albom, the author of the novel who is going to lose his professor. The news of the professor's disease is a catastrophic blow to Mitch Albom. By the cause of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Morrie gets physical pain for short times but he leaves all those remembrances from Brandies University to the his end of life. ALS creates a mind blowing pain. The repulsion from an object and the simultaneous obsession towards it generates pain (Young, 2009).

The repulsion and obsession towards ALS eventually generates the psychological trauma in Mitch Albom because there recollects traumatic feelings in the absence of Morrie. The narrator of the novel, Mitch Albom gives a brief introductory explanation of his weekly meetings on each Tuesday with Morrie. He calls these meetings as a continuation of his studies with Morrie. Each of them has a separate class of the meaning of life. The class has been held in Morrie's home, in his study room. There is a pink hibiscus plant which symbolizes the Morrie's life because it also losing its life as the life of Morrie:

The last class of my professor's life took place once a week in his house, by a window in the study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink leaves. The subject was Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience. (p. 1). The hibiscus plant symbolizes optimism in the pessimism. Mitch does not lament though no grades have been given in his class with Morrie. Morrie loved dancing on any music that was played. He visited the church in Harvard Square every Wednesday night for an event called “Dance Free” (p. 1). Here he cherished the company of students and other young people. Morrie got soaked with sweat during his dances.

Pearlman and Saakvitne (1992) opine that an individual experiences a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity in psychological trauma. When Morrie had developed asthma in his

sixties, he stopped going in dance because he experienced a threat to his life, his body integrity. A few years later, he had trouble walking and fell down on the stairs at a theater. On a hot day in August of 1994, Morrie and his wife, Charlotte, had been told by his doctor that he was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a severe problem which impairs the nerve systems and brings the problem in the muscle system. Morrie sensed that his life might end at any moment. Mitch compares ALS to a lit candle:

ALS is a lit candle. It melts your nerves and leaves your body a pile of wax. Often begins with the legs and works its way up. This takes no more than five years from the day you contract the disease. (pp. 9-10).

It is traumatic that in a short time Morrie cannot even go to the bathroom by himself which would be embarrassing for most people, though eventually, it is not for Morrie. Morrie becomes depressed after he attends the funeral of his colleague reflecting that the dead people never obtain the prospects to share, hear positive things remarked about them. According to Freud (1939), fright causes trauma. Fright is the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it. Mental illness, hysteria are generated by psychological trauma. Morrie's depression is caused by his fright. Thus, he decides to hold a "living funeral" (p.10) for himself, which is a great success. It creates good feelings toward meaning of life.

The trauma narrative is permeated with memories (Young, 2009). Mitch flashes back to the spring of 1976, when he has his first class with Morrie. Morrie takes attendance and asks Mitch if he prefers to be called 'Mitch' or 'Mitchell', a question he has never been asked by one of his teachers. He replies that his friends call him Mitch. And Morrie, after deciding on Mitch, replies that one day he hopes he will call him a friend.

The host of "Nightline", a program of ABC TV news interviews Morrie in March, 1995. The television crew visit Morrie's residence in West Newton, Massachusetts. Morrie can't walk properly because his amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) has begun to hinder him. He looks restricted to a wheelchair. Though the illness of Morrie is heightened, he doesn't look depressed. He writes philosophical notes that demonstrate that he has begun accepting his death. The behavioral responses to trauma include attempts to address and correct a stressor before it has a noticeable effect on lifestyle ("Psychological Trauma", n. d.). Mitch is changing the channels one night without any consciousness of his former teacher, when, by chance, he watches the television program. This event offers him an opportunity to reunite with his former professor.

As Mitch pulls up to Morrie's house in his rental car, he is on the phone with his producer. Morrie sits in a wheelchair on his front lawn waving at Mitch though Mitch slinks down in the seat of his car and finishes the conversation with his producer. It was their first reunion in sixteen years. Mitch becomes astonished marking at the deep affection of Morrie for him. Their traumatic connection is intensified when Morrie takes his pills and asks Mitch if he intends to hear what it feels like to be leaving the earth. Morrie proves to Mitch that he will die soon. So, he used to say not to break the promise as the previous. Morrie had broken the promises for 16 years to keep on touch with Morrie.

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, has a certain incapability of knowing it (Caruth, 1996). Mitch notices that there is a tremendous transformation in Morrie's behavior in these sixteen years. The mannerism and general behavior that Mitch exhibits at the beginning of the book differs from his behavior as

described in the flashbacks to his college years to understand the major changes in him in his old age. Mitch also feels that he has undergone through the transformation in his new bond with Morrie.

The traumatic people become depressed by the flashbacks (Young, 2009). Mitch recalls of his former days at Brandeis University. These flashbacks remind him how his pretty youthful days have been transformed and made him a self-concerted businessman in his adulthood. The flashbacks also remind him of his obligation towards his professor. Mitch and Morrie are embodied by the nicknames they call one another, Morrie being the ‘coach’ and Mitch being the ‘player’: “I began to call Morrie coach, the way I used to address my high school track coach” (p. 82). Mitch’s lamentation at Morrie’s illness is in a sense his own lamentation at his incapability to help his professor. A part of Mitch has died since his college days and he grows increasingly sad and nostalgic for that part of him. Mitch feels as if his emotions and enthusiasm have been deadened. Morrie however, suffers from just the opposite affliction which unlike Mitch’s problem is irreversible. What troubles Mitch is that Morrie’s spirit is trapped to suffer to death.

When Morrie depends on an oxygen machine for breathing, Mitch makes a traumatic remark: “How one can be prepared to die” (p. 82). Morrie’s response reminds us of the Buddhist thought that every day one ought to ask the bird on his shoulder which day will be his final day. Morrie adopts values and parables from many different religions:

Morrie borrowed freely from all religions. He was born Jewish, but became an agnostic when he as a teenager, partly because of all that had happened to him as a child. He enjoyed some of the philosophies of Buddhism and Christianity, and he still felt at home. (p. 82)

Mitch refers to Morrie as a “religious mutt” (p. 82) because he has created his own religion from a variety of different religious philosophies. The Buddhist philosophy shared by Morrie is a metaphor. If we ask the bird on our shoulder if we are dying today, this awareness increases our trauma and conviction that he will die soon. The bird symbolizes Morrie’s sentimental awareness that his death is approaching nearer and his willingness to accept it though sadly when it happens to arrive. He intends to lesson Mitch about the same percept. When he narrates the parable, he wishes Mitch to perceive that this potential bird may lie on shoulder of everyone at every time, no matter whether he is young or old. The trauma of Morrie in departing from the world is perceived from his parable narrated to Mitch. In traumatic cases, reactive responses that occur after the traumatic events are aimed more at correcting or minimizing the damage of a stressful event (Psychological Trauma”, n. d.). Mitch iterates that “one must know how to die before one can know how to live” (p. 171). He implies pathetically that one ought to embrace the probability of one’s own death before he is capable of commending what he has obtained on earth, “as the sobering awareness that one day, it will all be out of reach, prompts the urge to appreciate and value what one can have only for a limited period of time, and to use every moment of that time doing something that one will not regret when the bird sings its last note” (p. 171).

McLaughlin and Lambert (2017) regard that trauma can increase one’s risk for psychological disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Morrie informs Mitch that he might not be ambitious professionally now as he has already ventured to accept his own death. He is carrying on the philosophy that “time is a precious,

irreplaceable gift” (p. 172). Morrie apprehends that Mitch is not going to be lazy; rather he is evaluating his priorities. One can mark the trauma of Morrie in such ideas. He assumes that if Mitch were to truly and completely realize that he will someday die, he would surely rearrange his values system and realize that dedicating his time to adore friends and family is much more significant than sparing his time at work. Morrie realizes pathetically that money cannot fulfil his desire to live with the closed company. The trauma of Mitch is intensified when he perceives a void all around his life. He shocks us when he stuffs his bed with dollar bills, questioning if material wealth can extend his life. Morrie acknowledges Mitch’s tragic desire, and ponders that the only thing that fills Mitch’s traumatic life is love and friendship.

Mitch keeps on reflecting on his life journey in the companionship with Morrie. He remembers his bygone days at Brandeis, the philosophical discussion he used to share with Morrie on Tuesdays. This enriches his trauma, and the values of a culture he has researched. Mitch has taken to researching various cultures since his reunion with Morrie, as his professor has stressed that he has created a culture all his own and to reject any part of the popular culture that does not cooperate with his own values. Mitch replies, “Forget what the culture says, I have ignored much of my life. I am not going to be ashamed. What’s the big deal?” (p. 176). Alexander (2004) views that cultural trauma builds a new understanding of how social groups interact with emotion to create a new and binding understanding of social responsibility.

Freud (1939) regards that traumatic characters are obsessed with willing a thing they intend to be away from. We can mark trauma in Mitch when he becomes less self-conscious and less nervous about assisting Morrie. However, he is obsessed with the instinct of helping him. Morrie is equally not so embarrassed by his own disabilities, such as “not being able to go to the bathroom without assistance” (p. 172). Morrie’s trauma is reflected when he complains that “the culture deems that natural physical need is socially embarrassing, and thus we must reject it” (p. 172). Mitch asks him why he had not moved to a place with a less selfish culture. Eyerman (2009) asserts that the articulating discourse surrounding cultural trauma is a process of mediation involving alternative strategies and alternative voices. Morrie says Mitch, “Every culture has its own problems. Thus, I’ve created my own” (p. 172). “The biggest problem with most cultures”, he says, “is its inability to visualize and utilize its potential” (p. 172). Morrie suggests that we must “invest in people as we need others not only at the very beginning and very end of our lives, but during our middle years, as well” (p. 172). Since his second visit, Mitch has brought Morrie delicious food to eat each time he arrives, as he remembers his professor’s passion for food. Mitch has brought the food believing that this is the only thing he can offer to Morrie to alleviate his pain. Mitch feels traumatic when Morrie can no longer eat solid food. Mitch recalls how he had become helpless when his dearest uncle had died. He experiences the identical helplessness against Morrie’s disease, and his powerless to protect his professor from dying. His trauma is sensed when he says, “Now, I can’t even bring him happiness by buying him food each week” (p. 171). Lacan (1977) proposed that when we couldn’t regain the real, the pristine glory that we experience during our pre-verbal stage, we experience trauma. Mitch becomes more pathetic on his eleventh Tuesday with Morrie when Morrie can no longer eat any of the food Mitch brings him: He is strictly given a diet of liquids by the doctor. Mitch’s sentiment is intensified when Morrie’s condition becomes drastically worse as “the disease has reached his lungs,

which he had always said would mark his death. He is now reliant on an oxygen tank, and suffers violent, hour-long coughing spells, each a serious threat to his life” (p. 171).

In trauma, people’s philosophic expressions at their helplessness are observed (Vickroy,2002). Mitch realizes traumatically that the precious gift he has offered to Morrie is his friendship and his valuable time. Morrie commends Mitch not because he offers him good food every week, but because he remains close to him, listening to his life philosophies for hours and apprehending up the lessons he has provided him. Morrie wants Mitch to relay his story and his lessons to the largest audience possible. Morrie explains that “death ends a life not a relation” (p. 174). Life ends with a death but name and fame do not end. So he brings out this book as the gift to Morrie by the request of Morrie.

Mitch also provides Morrie with the gift of physical comfort which Morrie now needs as much as a small baby would from its mother. Morrie thrives on physical affection in part because he was so deprived of it as a boy, and also because in losing his independence, he has gradually metamorphosed into a child. Alexander (2012) argues that traumas are not merely psychological but based on the collective experiences, and that trauma work plays a key role in defining the origins and outcomes of critical social conflicts. Morrie reaction to trauma is our collective response to trauma. Morrie is saddened by popular culture’s dismissal of physical affection as a form of nurturing that is necessary only during childhood because he knows from experience that it is necessary throughout all stages of life, for children, for adults and for the elderly. Morrie relates a story about a wave on the ocean: “The wave had felt good until it had realized that, like all the other waves, it would soon crash to shore and be destroyed. Another wave tells him not to be afraid, for all of the small waves are a part of the larger ocean” (p. 173). That story is about the real life of Morrie. He mentions there are two waves having conversation. He assigns the answer for himself. The first wave says “You don’t understand! We’re all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn’t it a terrible!”(p. 179) Second wave replies “no, you don’t understand. You’re not a wave, you’re part of ocean” (p. 180). His story means that human life is to crash. Sometimes we are in center and after sometimes we are left to the shore.

Mitch is traumatized hearing the news of Morrie’s death on Saturday morning on the fourth of November. Two days before his death, he had badly slipped into a coma. His family members had watched at him at various time shifts. Morrie had waited until they had all gone to the kitchen for coffee and then finally he had passed away: “When those he loved had left the room just for a moment...go grab coffee in the kitchen, the first time none of them were with him since the coma began...Morrie stopped breathing” (p. 187). Mitch marks a purpose in this death event as well. He thinks that Morrie died this way so that he would “not scar any of his family members in the way that he had been scarred by each of his parents’ tragic deaths” (p.187). Morrie waits this chance because he had to suffer especially by his mother’s last respiration. Though many people had intended to attend the funeral gathering, it turned out to be very small. Mitch remembers Morrie’s suggestion that he should talk to him at his gravesite. And Mitch does during the funeral. To his surprise, it feels almost natural.

Trauma narratives help us to explore our ability to deal with loss and fragmentation in our lives (Vickroy, 2002). Assuming Morrie as his guideline, Mitch is becomes able to reincarnate himself in his life. He feels now that he has transformed himself as a man who was once motivated by material wealth into a man who is motivated by a passion to love and

to emulate the man who has so touched on his life. Morrie reveals that despite his old age, he is still changing as every person does until their dying day. Mitch realizes that Morrie might have obtained some form of new life after his painful death.

The traumatized mind of the author entering into the novel being narrator brings out the real story how he has left his days with his professor in their college life in Brandeis University and even in the end of the life of the professor. His trauma is an emblem of the collective trauma. Garrigues (2013) argues that collective trauma is a trauma that happens to large groups of individuals and can be transmitted to other generations and across communities. Human beings do not bring anything with their dead bodies but they left their remembrance to the living people. Due to the love and remembrance of the dead people, the dearest relatives mourn on their demise. To forget the pain and sufferings at the demise of the dearest people, the living people do something to heal the shock.

The traumatized people seek many means of releasing it (Vickroy, 2002). Mitch Albom keeps various poets and philosopher's views to add more stress to relief his psychological trauma. He refers to a quote of Henry Adams "a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops" (p. 79). Teachers' teaching is not for a single moment. It stays for eternity. Mitch Albom has also kept W.H. Auden, Morrie's favorite poet's views: "fate succumbs many a species: one alone jeopardizes itself" (p. 122). Mitch Albom tries to give peace for demised professor's soul by keeping his favorite poet's views in his memoirs. He also adds Mahatma Gandhi's views, "each night, when I go to sleep, I die. And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn" (p. 129). Mitch wants to meet with his professor in the dream. So, he recites here the views of the Gandhi where sleeping is a kind of death. e. e. cummings had given a salutation to his father which was cited by the Morrie's son, Rob, in memorial service, "my father moved through me, singing each new leaf out of each tree" (p. 189). This Rob's recitation adds a peace to Morrie's soul. So, Mitch Albom's may get a bit relief by putting the salutation of the family to his dearest professor. Mitch Albom wants to add more peace for the demise soul. Therefore, Mitch has used 'my professor' that signifies that the most closeness to them. 'I' becomes responsible to 'my' because 'my' is the possessive form of 'I'. So, Mitch becomes the responsible factor for fulfilling the desires of Morrie. There are some dots which have left by the coach they should be fulfilled by the player, Mitch. While saying good bye he teaches his student to say good bye by putting his hand to self-chest and says, "This ... is how we ... say good bye. Love ... you" (p. 185). These all dots need to fill. These all dots signify that the rest of the works are to be completed. Hence, Mitch Albom's mind gets great psychological trauma to complete the spaces of the dots. So, he leaves all as it is to analyze to all readers how he has to be responsible.

Hirschberger (2018) regards that we find all natural surrounding associated to trauma. It proves that Mitch himself gets a great shock so he can imagine the mourning of all images. Mitch Albom presents all images as lively as they are for the seeing off to his friend, Morrie. He says that all surroundings are mourning in the death of the professor: "When there is funeral process, there is the wet grass; sky was the colour of milk, pond water lapping against the edges, ducks shaking off their feathers" (p. 186). All these symbols signify that the climates, surrounding and all human beings were psychologically traumatized by the death of Mitch Albom's dearest professor.

Mitch raises a question even in his acknowledgements. He asks if we have ever had a teacher like this. He remembers his professor in the lines of the whole book. This question adds teacher's value and their love for their students. After reading this novel or even reading the acknowledgements, readers once diverts their mind to their teacher. Mitch raises this question keeping all the memoirs in his mind. It also proves that Mitch Albom was psychologically traumatized.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel is written to heal his psychological trauma at the loss of the dearest professor. It can be said that this book is the fulfillment of Morrie's incomplete life's desires. These all desires stop due to the death. The death occurs because of the ALS. Therefore, the ALS becomes the foundation of creating psychological trauma to the narrator, the author of the book. All the subjects that are stopped due to the demise of the professor are to be fulfilled by the author. Therefore, *Tuesdays with Morrie* comes out due to the ALS to Morrie. Mitch Albom extracts all his memoirs in this book from Brandies University to the Morrie's funeral possession with various flash backs. Coming back to previous days are the great examples of psychological trauma. He extracts all memoirs in this novel to heal the psychological trauma. In this novel, he collects all his memoirs of the past and brings out in the lines of the novel. So, this novel is the outcome of a psychologically traumatized mind of the author.

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