

The Characteristics of Mia Dempsey's Childhood Trauma in Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good*

Yovita Olivia^{1*}, Hariyono²

¹ English Literature Department, Universitas Dr. Soetomo, Surabaya, Indonesia

^{1*}yovitaolivia@outlook.com, ²hariyono@unitomo.ac.id

Abstract

Childhood trauma is a serious mental health issue with long-lasting effects on a child's emotional and psychological well-being. This study analyses the characteristics of childhood trauma in Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good*, focusing on Mia Dempsey, a teenager who struggles with traumatic experiences. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, collecting primary data from the novel's narrations and dialogues, and using Terr's framework as secondary data to analyse the characteristics of childhood trauma. The findings show that Mia experiences repetitive behaviours, such as repeated engagement in unsafe sexual behaviour and substance use, as attempts to cope with her past sexual abuse. Her traumatic experiences also change her attitudes toward people, life, and the future, as she struggles to trust others, feels undeserving of a good life, and becomes pessimistic about her potential.

Keywords: childhood trauma, Mia Dempsey, *You Know I'm No Good*, repetitive behaviours, changed attitudes about life, people, and the future

INTRODUCTION

Childhood trauma is widely recognized as a serious mental health issue that can have long-lasting effects on a child's emotional and psychological well-being. It is a global concern, affecting children across different countries and communities. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) reports that six in ten children under the age of five experience physical punishment or psychological violence from parents or caregivers, while UNICEF (2024) estimates that approximately one billion children aged 2 to 17 face physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect each year. These numbers highlight both the prevalence and the severity of childhood trauma worldwide.

According to Terr (1991), childhood trauma is the psychological result of sudden or repeated external events that leave children temporarily helpless and overwhelm their usual coping mechanisms. Such experiences may result in serious and long-lasting effects, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Downey & Crummy, 2022).

There are four characteristics of childhood trauma according to Terr (1991). First, visualized memories occur when children repeatedly relive or re-see traumatic events in their minds, even if they do not experience them visually. Second, repetitive behaviors appear when children unconsciously recreate aspects of the trauma. Third, trauma-specific fears emerge as fears closely linked to the traumatic event, often triggered by objects, situations, or people associated with it. Fourth, changed attitudes about people, life, and the future reflect how trauma alters a child's perception of others, their life, and what they expect for the future.

Literature often reflects human experiences, including psychological struggles such as childhood trauma. In this way, literature not only entertains but also helps readers understand human behavior and emotions. As Esten (1978) notes, literature provides a creative reflection of human life, while Eysenck (2004) emphasizes that psychology studies behavior scientifically, showing the close connection between the two fields. This relationship makes a psychological approach useful for analysing childhood trauma in literary works.

Many literary works explore childhood trauma, and one example is Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good*. The novel follows Mia Dempsey, a teenager who struggles with childhood trauma. This study focuses on analyzing the characteristics of Mia Dempsey's childhood trauma as represented in the novel,

using Terr's framework to examine her childhood trauma. By examining Mia's experiences, thoughts, and interactions, this study seeks to identify the characteristics of childhood trauma as represented in the novel.

METHOD

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative. Primary data come from Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good*, focusing on narrations and dialogues that reveal the protagonist's traumatic experiences, while secondary data include Lenore Terr's explanation of childhood trauma characteristics. The data are collected, categorized, and analysed, and conclusions are drawn from the overall findings and discussion.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the characteristics of childhood trauma experienced by Mia Dempsey in Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good*. According to Terr (1991), childhood trauma has four characteristics, which are visualized memories, repetitive behaviours, trauma-specific fears, and changed attitudes about people, life, and the future. In Mia's case, two of these characteristics are particularly evident, namely repetitive behaviours and changed attitudes about people, life, and the future. The following discussion explores how these characteristics manifest in her experiences.

Repetitive Behaviours

The main focus in Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good* is the childhood trauma experienced by the protagonist, Mia Dempsey. The first characteristic of her childhood trauma is repetitive behaviours. When Mia is thirteen, she experiences sexual abuse from a senior for whom she has feelings. Although she initially initiates physical closeness, his actions go beyond her intentions, leaving her feeling hurt and powerless while believing she may have encouraged it. Mia does not fully recognize or acknowledge the sexual abuse and responds by engaging in unsafe sexual behaviour to regain a sense of control, convincing herself that her actions are voluntary rather than coerced.

"So if you didn't care about them, and you don't feel they cared about you —why do you think you kept doing it?"

"I don't know. Because it was fun?"

"You know, Mia, some cognitive psychiatrists believe that humans are often unconsciously drawn to the repetition of painful experiences." (Foley, 2020)

The quotation above comes from a conversation between Mia and her therapist, Vivian, at Red Oak Academy. Vivian asks why Mia continues engaging in sexual activity with boys she does not care about, and Mia replies that it is fun. Vivian then explains that some cognitive psychiatrists believe humans may be unconsciously drawn to repeat painful experiences. This illustrates how Mia's behavior reflects patterns of childhood trauma. Her continued sexual activity mirrors her earlier sexual abuse. It may serve as a way to cope with or regain control over her past trauma, rather than being solely motivated by pleasure.

Another example of repetitive behavior appears when Mia uses alcohol and drugs to cope with her emotions during sexual experiences.

"Physically. Emotionally. Did the sex make you feel good?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Definitely. Otherwise why would I bother?"

"Wow. That's great. Especially because it's very unusual for women—especially very young women, like yourself—to experience orgasm with a partner when there's no real intimacy there. And it's nearly impossible to experience orgasm when you're under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which you often were, when you engaged in these sex acts." (Foley, 2020)

In this conversation, Vivian highlights a contrast with Mia's statement that these experiences are enjoyable. She explains that young women rarely experience sexual pleasure without emotional connection and that being under the influence of substances makes it even more difficult. This suggests that Mia's claim of enjoyment may serve as a way of convincing herself rather than reflecting her actual feelings. Instead, she engages in unsafe sexual behavior to feel a sense of control over her sexual activity. She tries to act as if her participation is voluntary, even though she feels emotionally uncomfortable and often uses substances to numb herself. In this way, Mia's attempts to manage her earlier trauma through unsafe sexual behavior and substance use reveal how deeply her experiences affect her perception of consent and control.

"Scottie raped you, Mia. This is something you've always known. You just didn't want to believe it. And because you didn't want to believe it, you didn't know." (Foley, 2020)

In the quotation above, the gap between Mia's perception of her experiences and the reality of the abuse becomes clear. Although she initially tries to see her sexual activity as voluntary, the confrontation shows that her repeated actions, including unsafe sexual behavior and substance use, are influenced by earlier trauma. These behaviors function as a way for her to regain a sense of control and cope with the emotional impact of her past experiences.

This reflects Terr's concept of repetitive behavior, which describes a child's tendency to relive or re-experience traumatic events (Terr, 1991). Mia experiences sexual abuse at a young age before she is emotionally prepared to process it, and later repeats similar actions as a teenager. Her trauma is evident in her sexual behavior, even if she does not fully recognize it or intend to repeat it. Through these encounters, she attempts to regain a sense of control over her experiences, although the emotional harm remains unresolved.

Changed Attitudes about People, Life, and the Future

The second characteristic of childhood trauma in Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good* experienced by the protagonist, Mia, is a changed attitude toward people, life, and the future. Mia experiences multiple distressing experiences, including sexual abuse and bullying. She also experiences the death of her mother at the age of three. Six years later, her father remarries, and his attention shifts toward his new wife and children. Mia's stepmother shows little care or affection and often criticizes her harshly. In addition, she faces bullying from senior students, and her only friend distances herself from Mia. These experiences of abuse, neglect, and social rejection create a pattern of trauma that significantly affects Mia's emotional development and her ability to trust others.

"It's not that I didn't want friends. But I also liked looking at people in terms of what we could do for each other. There was no messiness. No gray areas. No commitments. If that makes sense." "It does, though I have to say, it sounds pretty clinical to me." "Maybe, but at least we were being real with each other. I can't stand fakeness." (Foley, 2020)

In the quotation above, Mia explains that she avoids friendships by choice. She prefers relationships where both sides are clear about what they want, without emotional complications. This approach allows her to feel safe and in control, especially because she believes many people can be insincere.

This attitude illustrates Terr's (1991) idea that childhood trauma can shape a person's perspective on life, other people, and the future. Mia's early experiences play a major role in this change. Her mother dies when she is three, and six years later, her father remarries. Following this, she feels neglected as her father's attention shifts to his new wife and children. This sense of neglect contributes to her caution in trusting others. As a result, Mia prefers relationships with clear expectations rather than deeper emotional connections to protect herself from being hurt again. This change also affects how Mia views herself and her life. She begins to believe that she does not deserve life. This is shown in the following quotation.

“Why didn’t I die that night? Or so many other nights, when my luck could have—should have—swung in the other direction? It’s just another reason, as if I needed one, not to believe in God. Because if God were real, why would they cut down so many kind and decent people in the prime of their lives, so many brilliant artists, and then decide to spare a piece of shit like me?” (Foley, 2020)

In this quotation, Mia wonders why she has survived despite often putting herself in dangerous and reckless situations. She feels she should not have lived when others she sees as kinder, more decent, or more talented have died, reflecting her belief that she does not deserve to be alive. Following the sexual abuse she experiences, Mia repeats the trauma through sexual activity with people she barely knows, often at parties, while using drugs or alcohol to numb her emotions. This behaviour contributes to a sense of her life being out of control. Although she fears dying, she feels undeserving of a good life. Mia worries that her choices will lead to harm and begins to believe she will not live long because of them. This aligns with Lenore Terr’s concept that a child’s attitude toward life can change after experiencing trauma (1991). In Mia’s case, her reckless behaviour reinforces her sense of unworthiness and leads her to question her self-worth.

Furthermore, as a third example, Mia’s attitude toward her future changes. She loses interest in school and stops putting in effort, despite her intelligence. She believes her reckless behaviour has already damaged her chances for a better future, which is reflected in her deliberate decision to fail her classes, as shown in the following quotation.

“Every day he’d say to us, ‘You guys know you have to run the mile to pass gym, right?’ We’d nod. Then he’d say, ‘So, basically, by choosing not to complete this one simple task, you are ensuring your failure of this course.’ We’d nod. ‘And there’s nothing I can do to help you from here on out.’ We’d nod again, this time sympathetically, just so he understood it was nothing personal. We both liked Coach Townsend well enough; we just didn’t feel like running the mile.” (Foley, 2020)

In this quotation, Mia and her classmate Xander respond passively to their gym teacher’s instructions. Although they understand the consequences of their inaction, they make no effort to change their decision. Their refusal is not due to dislike of the teacher but rather a lack of motivation to complete the task. Mia begins to believe that failing once will lead to more failures, so she stops trying, as shown in the following quotation.

“I discovered that once you fail a thing and the world doesn’t implode, it becomes much easier to fail everything.” (Foley, 2020)

In this quotation, Mia explains that after experiencing one failure, other failures come easily in her life. Her confidence and motivation decrease, and she feels that trying is pointless because failure seems normal and expected. As a result, Mia stops participating in activities she enjoys, such as playing soccer. She worries about being judged and believes her reputation prevents her from joining the team, as shown in the following quotation.

“By the time spring soccer tryouts came around freshman year, I’d already been branded—the slut who seduced a senior girl’s boyfriend, who gets drunk at parties, who gets high, who gives blow jobs to near-strangers. Girls like that don’t play soccer. Everybody knows that, so what was the point in even trying out?” (Foley, 2020)

This quotation shows that Mia enjoys playing soccer but chooses not to try out during her freshman year because of the negative labels attached to her. She fears being judged based on her reputation rather than her abilities, which makes her feel she does not belong. Over time, this leads to a loss of interest in her passions and personal goals.

These quotations support Terr's idea that childhood trauma can change a child's attitudes toward people, life, and the future. In Mia's case, she loses trust in others, believes she does not deserve to live, and becomes pessimistic about her future.

CONCLUSION

This section provides the conclusion of Mia Dempsey's characteristics of childhood trauma in Jessie Ann Foley's *You Know I'm No Good*. Mia's repeated engagement in unsafe sexual behaviour and substance use reflects a pattern of re-experiencing earlier traumatic experiences, as Terr describes in her concept of repetitive behaviours. These actions are not simply choices but attempts to regain control over her life and cope with unresolved trauma. Traumatic experiences also shape Mia's attitudes toward people, life, and the future. She struggles to trust others, feels undeserving of a good life, and becomes increasingly pessimistic about her potential and passions. Her loss of motivation in school and withdrawal from activities she once enjoys demonstrate how trauma limits children's view of their future.

REFERENCES

- Downey, C., & Crummy, A. (2022). The impact of childhood trauma on children's wellbeing and adult behavior. *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 6(1), 100237.
- Esten, M. (1978). *Literature: An introduction to theory and history*. Bandung: Space.
- Eysenck, M. W. (2004). *Psychology: An international perspective*. Taylor & Francis.
- Terr, L. C. (1991). Childhood traumas: An outline and overview. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 148(1), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.148.1.10>
- UNICEF. (2024). FAST FACTS: Violence against Children widespread, Affecting Millions Globally. *Unicef.org*. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-violence-against-children-widespread-affecting-millions-globally>
- World Health Organization. (2024). Child maltreatment. *World Health Organization*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>