

Connecting Two Selves: Narrative Identity and the Integration of a Traumatic Past in Kristin Hannah's *Winter Garden*

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Abstract

War often leaves lasting wounds in the form of traumatic memories that continue to affect survivors long after the conflict ends. This study explores how storytelling helps confront such trauma in Kristin Hannah's novel Winter Garden. The story follows Vera, who loses her family during the Siege of Leningrad in World War II and later starts a new life in the United States after marrying an American. Her unresolved grief keeps her from connecting emotionally with her current family. She shares her experiences in Leningrad with her daughters by telling them as a fairy tale. This study argues that storytelling helps Vera reconcile her past and present selves, drawing on Paul Ricœur's idea of narrative identity, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, and Dori Laub's testimony theory. The main goals are to show that recovering from trauma means integrating painful memories into one's life story, not forgetting them, and that healing happens through narration and attentive listening. The study also suggests that storytelling turns private pain into a shared experience, building empathy between the storyteller and the listener. Vera's journey in the novel shows that healing comes from accepting and sharing painful memories, which allows her to reconnect with her daughters and find inner peace.

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Introduction:

People create personal stories that help them understand and define their lives. Dan McAdams explains that narrative identity links past memories with future hopes, helping people make sense of their experiences and find meaning and purpose (361). This identity develops as individuals interpret their life stories and autobiographical memories. Similarly, Ricœur believes that understanding one's life story is a key way people come to know themselves, as it combines both real events and imagination to form a meaningful identity (140–68). However, trauma can disrupt this process by breaking apart a person's sense of self and interrupting their life story. "Stressful war experiences can cause posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in survivors" (Nandi et al. 356). Survivors may distance themselves from traumatic events to cope with overwhelming memories.

Objectives and Aim:

This study examines the New York Times bestseller *Winter Garden*, which shows the difficult realities of peasant life during the Great Terror of the 1930s and the Siege of Leningrad from 1941 to 1944. Leningrad, now called Saint Petersburg, went through several name changes in the 1900s. The novel looks at how war affects Vera's mind for almost sixty years, influencing her new family, who do not know her past but still feel the effects of trauma passed down through generations. Published in 2010, Kristin Hannah's historical novel explores Vera's struggle with her two identities: Anya Whitson and Veronika Petrovna Marchenko. Vera uses the name Anya for fifty-six years to cope with her trauma. In this study, she is mainly called Vera to focus on the identity she eventually accepts. *Winter Garden* has been praised for its emotional depth, detailed storytelling, and portrayal of family relationships. The story also follows Meredith and Nina, two sisters with very different lives: Meredith stays home to care for her family and orchard, while Nina works as a photojournalist and travels the world. When their father, Evan Whitson, becomes seriously ill, the sisters come together and discover their mother Vera's painful past through a Russian fairy tale. These long-hidden secrets change how they see themselves and each other.

Analysis and Discussion:

Trauma, survivor's guilt, and the fragmentation of identity

One of the saddest parts of tragedies like the Holocaust and the Siege of Leningrad is that many victims' experiences are never recorded or heard. "Holocaust survivors experienced extreme trauma, including physical abuse and malnutrition, leading to various eating disorders" (Halioua et al. 974). Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is often hard to express because the pain can be too great for ordinary words. When these stories are forgotten, the identities of those who lived through such events are also lost. People shape their narrative identity

through the stories they tell about their lives, which helps them find meaning and continuity. Survivors' testimonies highlight personal suffering and individual voices, offering a different perspective from official historical accounts.

For sixty years, Vera keeps her grief to herself and never tells her family about her time in Leningrad. In the novel, her sacrifices—surviving starvation, losing loved ones, being imprisoned, and fighting in the war—are portrayed as acts of patriotism and necessary struggles for a better future. Vera's sense of duty, along with her unresolved grief and post-traumatic stress, stops her from sharing her past. But after she promises Evan to tell her story, she slowly starts to face her memories and open up to her daughters.

Our conflict-torn world urgently needs not only a ceasefire, but also a sustained and determined pursuit of positive peace, especially among the most vulnerable, war-affected populations. Adopting a human rights-based approach, this essay explores the role of children's right to play as an instrument of inner and social peace-making for the youngest victims of war. (Glos 578)

The "two selves" mentioned in the title represent two different versions of Vera that emerge throughout the novel: one is her identity before the war, and the other is the person she becomes after experiencing the trauma of war. In the United States, she is known as Anya Whitson, while in Russia, she is remembered as Veronika Petrovna Marchenko. Before the Siege of Leningrad, Vera is a fifteen-year-old girl full of optimism and imagination. She enjoys reading and writing stories, dreams about her future, and approaches life with happiness and hope. Hannah presents it as:

In June, when the air is redolent of flowers, and the evening itself is as brief as the brush of a butterfly's wing, she cannot help seeing her own bright future.

It is the time of white nights, when at its darkest the sky is a deep, royal purple, smattered with stars.

In these months, the streets are never quiet. At all hours, villagers gather on the streets; lovers walk.

Across the bridge. Courtiers leave the cafés very late, drunk on mead and sunlight. (58-59)

Vera's peaceful, hopeful life is shattered when she is compelled to face the devastating truths of war. During the seven years she has spent in Leningrad, the novel reveals how she experiences a series of losses, including the sudden arrest and death of her father, Petyr Andreyevich, a banned poet; the deaths of her mother, Zoya, and her son, Leo, due to starvation; and the deaths of her sister Olga, her daughter Anya, and her husband Aleksandr in two separate bombing attacks. Except for her father, Vera witnesses the deaths of every member of her family, leaving her as the sole survivor.

These repeated encounters with death become the source of Vera's disjointed memories, as she finds it difficult to process the reality of losing everyone she loves. Unable to accept her survival amid the loss of her family, she experiences survivor's guilt. William G. Niederland describes survivor's guilt, or survivor syndrome, as an unconscious feeling of betrayal that an individual senses when they are the sole survivor of a Holocaust, having lost all or most of their family and friends (413). Those affected often experience unresolved grief and trauma, feeling that their survival is undeserved and questioning why they lived when others did not.

Vera escapes from Leningrad by marrying Evan Whitson, one of the American soldiers who liberated the German work camp where she had been imprisoned after a desperate outburst in front of the Germans, as she had ordered them to shoot her. When Evan asks her name, she whispers "Anya," the nickname of her daughter, Anastasia Aleksovna Marchenko. She then adopts Anya Whitson as her new identity, which she carries for fifty-six years. She explains, "I could have taken it back later, but I liked hearing her name every time someone spoke to me. It hurt me, and I welcomed the pain. It was the least of what I deserved" (370). This decision shows her deep survivor's guilt, as she believes carrying that pain is her punishment for being the one who survived. While trying to preserve her daughter's memory, Vera gradually loses her own identity.

The divided self; Dissociation and traumatic memory

After moving to America, Vera builds a new life and has two daughters, Meredith and Nina Whitson. To Anya and Leo, Vera is the ultimate self-sacrificing mother, willing to endure unimaginable suffering to protect her children, much like the legendary pelican that gives its own blood to nourish its young. However, to Meredith and Nina, Anya Whitson appears as a distant and emotionally unavailable mother who remains trapped in her grief, choosing isolation over forming a close relationship with her daughters.

Herman clarifies that someone going through a traumatic event perceives the event as occurring to someone else rather than themselves (42-43). This detachment fragments the memory of the experience, separating it from conscious awareness, and Janet describes this process as dissociation. Bessel van der Kolk further argues that when trauma is triggered, the body relives the event as though the danger is occurring in the present (66). Speech becomes impaired, dissociation creates a feeling of detachment, and overwhelming helplessness prevents the experience from being fully processed, leaving the individual trapped in fear without words or a feeling of control. Similarly, *Freud* conveys that traumatic experiences are often repressed rather than consciously recalled. Although such memories are pushed out of conscious awareness, they remain active in the unconscious and continue to influence thoughts, emotions, and behaviour (149-150). The emotional unavailability of Vera to Meredith and Nina, her sudden outbursts toward them, and her cooking large quantities of food and cutting her finger all reflect the ways her unconscious attempts to express unresolved traumatic memories. In these moments, she seems

to become a different person as her past experiences resurface and influence her behavior in the present. Meredith, who is confused about these behaviors of Vera, shares her concerns with Dr James Burns as:

“There’s something wrong with her,” Meredith said . . . “She’s confused a lot. She’s hardly sleeping.

Today she put her lunch in her pockets and talked about herself in the third person. She’s constantly worried about a lion, and she called me Olga. I think she’s confusing the fairy tales with real life.

Last night I heard her reciting one of them to herself... as if Dad were listening. You know she’s always been depressed in the winter, but this is something else. Something’s wrong. Could she have Alzheimer’s?”

“Her mind seems to be fine, Meredith.”

“But—”

“She’s grieving. Give her some time”. (Hannah 89)

After migrating to America, Vera avoids speaking Russian, distancing herself from the language that is deeply connected to her painful memories. Only after Evan’s death, many years later, does she speak it again. As she embraces his lifeless body, she whispers to him in Russian, hoping to bring warmth back to him. This moment unexpectedly recalls the memory of the cold body of Leo, forcing her to confront the grief and trauma she has kept buried for decades. Hannah portrays the scene from the perspective of Meredith as:

Turning, she looked at her parents again. They lay spooned together, with Dad on his left side, facing the dresser, and Mom tucked up against his back with her arms around him. She was whispering to him; it took Meredith a second to realise that Mom was speaking Russian.

“Mom?” Meredith said, frowning. For all of her mother’s Russianness, she never spoke that language in the house. “I am trying to warm him up. He is so cold.” Mom rubbed her hands vigorously along Dad’s arms, his sides. “So cold.” . . . “He’s so cold,” Mom said, sounding plaintive and afraid, almost childlike. “They always die cold . . .” (67-68)

Vera desperately tries to wake Evan, telling him that she has saved some bread for him, revealing that her mind has returned to the memory of Leo and the starvation she has endured in Leningrad. Meredith gently tells her that Evan has passed away and begins preparing for her father’s funeral, struggling to hold back her tears. Only then does Vera slowly return to the present and realise what has actually happened.

Fisher states that trauma can affect individuals in various ways, often disrupting their memory and sense of self. He further notes that a fragmented sense of self may cause people to experience changes in their behaviour, feelings, and responses depending on the circumstances or traumatic triggers they encounter. Throughout the novel, Vera occasionally slips back into her memories of Leningrad,

reliving moments from her traumatic past. In one instance, she prepares an unusually large amount of pierogi, a type of dumpling, and hides some in her coat pockets, insisting they are for Anya. However, Anya refers not to herself as Anya Whitson, but to her daughter, Anastasia Aleksovna Marchenko. Through this action, Vera attempts to fulfill the maternal duty she could not complete during the war, saving food for her starving child.

Concerned by these sudden changes in Vera's behaviour, Meredith takes her to see Dr James Burns. During the appointment, however, Vera appears completely composed and responds to the doctor's questions calmly and appropriately, showing no obvious signs of the distressing episodes that Meredith has witnessed. Hannah says:

"How are you today, Anya [Vera]?"

"I am fine, James. Thank you. Meredith is jumpy. You know this."

"Do you mind if I examine you?" he asked.

"Of course it is fine," Mom said. "But unnecessary." Jim conducted an ordinary flu-type examination. When he finished with that, he made a few notes on her chart and then said, "What day is it, Anya [Vera]?"

"January thirty-first, 2001," she said, her gaze firm and clear. "Wednesday. We have a new president. George Bush, the younger. And Olympia is the state capital."

Jim paused. "How are you, Anya [Vera]? Really?"

"My heart beats. I breathe. I go to sleep, and I wake up."

"Maybe you should see someone," he said kindly.

"Who?"

"A doctor who will help you talk about your loss."

"Death is not something to talk about. You Americans believe words change a thing. They do not."

He nodded.

"My daughter needs help, perhaps." (88)

Although Vera has displayed unusual behaviour only a few hours earlier, she appears completely calm and speaks with the doctor as though Meredith's concerns are unreasonable. When anyone asks about her current state or her past, Vera changes the subject. This avoidance shows that she cannot fully face or understand the strong emotions tied to her trauma.

Storytelling and the reconstruction of narrative identity

Rather than functioning merely as a repository of past events, it selects, interprets, and connects memories to create meaning and maintain a sense of self. In *Winter Garden*, Vera's narrative identity begins when, as Anya Whitson, she shares her autobiographical and traumatic memories with her daughters. *Trauma*

expert Bessel A. Van Der Kolk suggests that healing begins when traumatic memories are reconnected to an individual's present life through association, reversing the dissociation caused by trauma (217). By recalling and narrating painful experiences, individuals help their brains recognize that the trauma belongs to the past rather than the present.

"Many documentation initiatives and collections of testimonies were initiated in the immediate postwar period" (Tureby 620). Because traumatic memories are frequently fragmented by overwhelming emotions that are difficult to verbalize, recounting them in a safe environment enables individuals to assimilate these experiences into their life narrative gradually. As time passes, the memories become less emotionally overwhelming and start to occupy their proper place in the past rather than dominating the present.

Before his death, Vera promises Evan that she will share her painful past with their daughters. Initially, she recounts her experiences in Leningrad through the protective guise of fairy tales. As her traumatic memories gradually become integrated into her autobiographical memory, she is eventually able to recount the actual events, no longer relying on the veil of fantasy to shield herself from the past. Meredith and Nina, both in their forties, easily crack the code as some of the people and background Vera mentions correspond to real events during the narrative shift. She employs the phrases "Black knight", "snow kingdom", and "Enchanted Bridge". "Prince Aleksandr" and "royal library", which she later refers to as Joseph Stalin, Leningrad, Fontanka Bridge, Aleksandr Andreyevich Marchenko, and Leningrad Public Library, respectively. She has initially used these symbols to conceal the true nature of her experiences. However, the narrative gradually shifts as she begins replacing the fictional fairy-tale setting with real places and historical locations. Nina is the first to recognise this shift, and she shares it with Meredith as:

. . . It's the fairy tale. I can't get it out of my head." Nina looked up. "She mentioned the Fontanka. Bridge last night. It was always the Enchanted Bridge before, wasn't it? Does that seem odd to you?" . . . "Listen to this: 'The Fontanka is a branch of the River Neva, which flows through the city of Leningrad.'" . . . "She's Russian. The story takes place in Russia... Last night was all new". (Hannah 172)

They also notice changes unrelated to the fairy-tale narrative, such as smoking cigarettes, wearing sagging socks, and being pregnant before marriage. While browsing the internet, they discover that Galina Ulanova, whom Vera mentions, is a real, famous Russian ballerina from the early 1900s. The theatre with a lyre and crown on its cupola, the bronze horseman statue, and the Fontanka Bridge are all located in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Additionally, they find a letter from Professor Vasily Adamovich at the University of Alaska, who is researching testimonies from survivors of the Siege of Leningrad. The letter invites Vera to share her personal experiences during the siege. As they examine the letter, Meredith and Nina realize that Vera's narrative is not a fairy tale but a recollection of her own life in Leningrad.

The coherence of her narration reflects her gradual integration of traumatic memories into her autobiographical memory. She can finally tell her story as it truly happened, without relying on the protective framework of a fairy tale.

From fairy tale to Testimony: witnessing and narrative integration

Dori Laub affirms that bearing witness to the testimony of another person is fundamental because trauma often leaves survivors unable to articulate or express what they have endured fully (58). A compassionate listener provides a safe space for the survivor to share their story, allowing disjointed memories to become a meaningful, coherent narrative. With traumatic experiences involving another person, survivors are no longer forced to carry their suffering in silence. This acknowledgment marks the beginning of healing while also preserving the survivor's story as part of a shared collective memory.

"Writing a memoir has been a widespread phenomenon among Holocaust survivors" (Duchin and Wiseman 280). For Laub, testimony is not created by the survivor alone; it emerges through the interaction between the survivor and an attentive listener, whose presence helps assign words to experiences that were once too painful to articulate.

This dynamic is reflected in the relationship between Vera and her daughters. Rather than simply listening to her story, Meredith and Nina actively seek to understand the truth behind it. The three of them later travel to Alaska to meet the professor. Before meeting him, they celebrate Vera's eighty-first birthday at a restaurant there. During the celebration, Nina decides to confront the question that has been troubling her. She asks whether Anya Whitson is, in fact, the same Vera who is the protagonist of the story. Although Vera initially denies it, she eventually admits the truth, completing her trek from silence and concealment to open testimony. Hannah cites the brief acknowledgement of Vera as:

"We always wanted to have a birthday party for you," Meredith said. She reached out and put her hand on Mom's.

"I have made so many mistakes," Mom whispered.

"Everyone makes mistakes," Meredith said.

"No. I . . . I didn't mean to be that way... I wanted to tell you . . . but I couldn't even look at you; I was so ashamed."

"You're looking at us now." . . . "You want to tell us your story. You always wanted to. That's why you started the fairy tale."

Mom shook her head.

"You're Vera," Nina said quietly.

"No," Mom said, "that girl is not who I am."

"But she's who you were," Nina said, hating herself for saying it, but unable to stop.

"You are a dog with a bone, Nina." She sighed. "Yes. Long ago I was Veronika

Petronova Marchenko.”

“Why—” “Enough,” Mom said sharply. “This is my first birthday party with my daughters. There will be time later for the rest of it.” (284-285)

Anya Whitson is, in fact, Vera, a fact she ultimately acknowledges herself. Before fully reclaiming her identity, however, she chooses to spend a calm moment celebrating with her daughters, strengthening the relationship they have rebuilt over the course of her testimony. She openly identifies herself as Veronika Petrovna Marchenko Whitson the second time when sharing her experiences once again as part of Professor Vasily Adamovich’s Leningrad study. This time, however, she tells her story from the very beginning, no longer relying on fairy tales or concealment, but presenting her past as a truthful and coherent account of her life. Hannah documents it as:

I am not Anya Petrovna Whitson. This is the name I took, the woman I became.” She took another deep breath. “I am Veronika Petrovna Marchenko Whitson, and Leningrad is my city. It is a part of me. Long ago, I knew those streets like I know the soles of my feet or the palms of my hands. But you are not interested in my youth. Not that I had much of one, when I look back on it. I started to grow up at fifteen when they took my father away, and by the end of the war, I was old. . That is the middle, though. The beginning, really, is June of 1941. I am coming home from the country, where I’d been gathering vegetables to can for the coming winter. . . (338)

Reclaiming the self; integration of past and present identities

Vera’s acceptance of her true identity denotes a significant turning point in the formation of her personal identity, indicating the successful integration of her traumatic memories into her autobiographical memory. The fusion of her two names into one symbolizes her emotional healing, marking the end of her traumatic past and the restoration of her identity. After completing her testimony, she breaks down emotionally, fearing that those around her will judge or even reject her for the choices she made. Instead, Meredith and Nina, along with Maksim, the son of Professor Vasily Adamovich, who has been recording Vera’s testimony in place of his ill father, respond with compassion and admiration, recognising her courage and fortitude.

Their acceptance allows Vera to grieve the losses she has carried for decades. Embracing her daughters, she calls each of them “moya dusha” in Russian, which translates to “my soul”—a term of endearment she has once used for Anastasia and Leo. This gesture symbolises her acceptance of Meredith and Nina as her daughters and her inclination to fully embrace her identity as their mother. By bringing her story to a close, Vera also completes her journey toward recovering her authentic narrative identity.

Conclusion

Through storytelling, Vera connects her past identity as Veronika Petrovna Marchenko with her present identity as Anya Whitson and becomes Veronika Petrovna Marchenko Whitson. By narrating her experiences, she can integrate her traumatic memories into her autobiographical memory and reunite the different parts of herself that have remained separated for decades. She finally embraces a complete and authentic sense of self as Vera, accepting her past rather than hiding from it.

Hannah effectively portrays this transformation in “*Winter Garden*,” revealing Vera’s true narrative identity after fifty-six years of silence. This process becomes possible through the attentive listening and acceptance of her daughters, Professor Vasily Adamovich, and Maksim, who provide a space for her story to be heard and acknowledged. For much of her life, Vera has only been able to express her experiences through fairy tales. However, through testimony and the recognition of those who listen, she can reclaim her identity and openly face the reality of her life in Russia during the Siege of Leningrad. She continues her life as Vera, no longer needing to hide behind another identity or create emotional walls between herself and her past. By accepting her traumatic memories as part of her own life story, she is finally able to accept her authentic self.

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