

# Exploring the Irish Sea as a Metaphor of Trauma and Healing in Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time* (2023)

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of the Irish Sea in Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time* (2023), elucidating how it serves as a metaphor of traumatic memories and healing. Focusing on protagonist Tom Kettle, a retired police officer grappling with personal and historical wounds, the study intersects trauma and ecocritical theories to decode the sea's figurative resonance. The Irish Sea reflects Tom's ruptured psyche and the ebb and flow of suppressed memories. The study argues how the dynamic duality of forgetting and remembering signifies both the burden of the past and the possibility of healing. Barry dexterously weaves the sea's natural rhythms into Tom's emotional odyssey, suggesting that healing emanates through the integrated conduit of confrontation and release. The study aims to contribute by embodying the binary of suffering and solace, theorizing the novel's broader themes of memory, loss, and the redemptive power of nature.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Memory, Healing, Ecocriticism

## 1. Introduction

The recent advancement in contemporary literature, particularly in the arena of ecocritical studies, is more to be witnessed now than earlier that human attributes are figuratively inserted in the components of nature. As an individual confronts myriad psychological challenges and ecological imbalances, literature actively acts as a bridge between these realms, representing nature not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in human struggles and transformations. The work centers on the Irish Sea, a substantial and evocative entity that surpasses its physical existence to serve as a metaphorical environment intricately connected to the emotional and psychological odyssey of the protagonist, Tom Kettle. In retirement and isolation, Tom is tormented by multiple levels of personal and historical tragedy. The ocean, with its relentless tides and unfathomable depths, reflects his fragmented memories and the persistent anguish of unaddressed sorrow. The rhythms reflect the fluid and frequently erratic essence of memory, while its expanse represents the burdensome and unavoidable impact of past events. The study analyzes Barry's adept utilization of the Irish Sea as a primary motif, exploring its dual function as a vessel of anguish and a wellspring of potential healing. This research utilizes trauma theory, specifically the perspectives of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, in conjunction with ecocritical frameworks from Greg

Garrard and Lawrence Buell, to explore how the sea embodies the conflict between memory and oblivion, disruption and continuity. The study asserts that Barry's portrayal of the sea encapsulates the many nuances of human psychology, providing a significant reflection on the interconnected processes of suffering, self-reconciliation, and rejuvenation. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, employing textual analysis as the principal technique. A meticulous analysis of the narrative is performed to discern and elucidate pivotal excerpts in which the Irish Sea serves as a symbol for pain and recovery.

The study seeks to investigate the metaphorical importance of the Irish Sea in the narrative, analyzing its function in the protagonist Tom Kettle's engagement with trauma and his path to recovery. This research connects trauma theory and ecocriticism by examining the sea as a dynamic metaphor that represents the intricacies of memory, suffering, and recovery. This study analyzes Barry's depiction of nature to clarify how the interaction between human emotions and natural landscapes enhances the comprehension of trauma's psychological effects and the transformative possibilities of reconnecting with one's inner self and surroundings.

## 2. Trauma and Ecocriticism: Theoretical Conjunctions

The text analysis is based on two independent but complimentary theoretical frameworks: trauma theory and ecocriticism. Collectively, they provide a sophisticated perspective for analyzing the Irish Sea as a metaphorical and symbolic component that embodies the protagonist Tom Kettle's mental turmoil and path to recovery. Trauma theory offers a fundamental comprehension of how previous traumatic experiences undermine an individual's psychological and narrative coherence. Cathy Caruth's foundational research highlights the inaccessibility and fragmented characteristics of traumatic memories (Caruth, 1996). She contends that trauma is not entirely experienced or comprehended in the moment; rather, it is repeated through deferred action, or *nachträglichkeit* (Bistoien et al., 2004). This temporal disjunction, characterized by the recurrence of traumatic experiences in pieces, mirrors the ebb and flow of the Irish Sea throughout the novel. Tom's recollections of personal and historical disasters emerge intermittently, frequently provoked by his closeness to the water, which serves as a metaphorical reservoir for his repressed anguish. Judith Herman's framework in *Trauma and Recovery* enhances this analysis. Herman delineates three phases of trauma recovery: creating safety, recollecting and grieving, and reestablishing connections with community and self (Herman, 1992). These stages correspond with Tom's trajectory in *Old God's Time*, as he evolves from emotional paralysis to instances of catharsis and introspection. The sea, with its immense and mysterious vastness, symbolizes both the overwhelming nature of Tom's recollections and the possibility of renewal. Its rhythm—steady yet variable—mirrors the cyclical essence of Tom's rehabilitation, characterized by intervals of serene contemplation interspersed with episodes of sorrow and despondency. Furthermore, Caruth's concept of trauma as a narrative disruption is evident in Barry's disjointed narration. The novel's structure reflects Tom's fragmented psyche, characterized by fragmentary and non-linear recollections. This corresponds with the sea's volatility, which might be tranquil one moment and tumultuous the next. The sea serves as an external representation of Tom's internal conflict, highlighting the novel's examination of trauma as both an individual and communal phenomenon.

Ecocriticism, as defined by scholars such as Greg Garrard and Lawrence Buell, investigates the intricate interaction between humanity and the natural environment, especially the representation of nature in literature. In *Old God's Time*, the Irish Sea evolves from a mere backdrop to an active player in the protagonist's emotional odyssey. Garrard's examination of ecological themes, including duality and

interdependence, is especially pertinent in this context. The sea represents the dichotomy of devastation and renewal, mirroring the profundity of Tom's trauma and the potential for his recovery (Garrard, 2023). Lawrence Buell's notion of environmental imagination further clarifies the relationship between nature and human experience in Barry's tale (Buell, 1995). Buell asserts that literature can elicit a deep sense of location and ecological consciousness, influencing the perceptions of both characters and readers regarding the natural environment. In the story, the sea's omnipresence cultivates a profound connection between Tom and his environment, facilitating times of reflection and tranquility. This corresponds with Herman's concept of reconnection, as Tom's interaction with the sea aids in his reintegration of a fragmented self-identity. Barry additionally utilizes the symbolic connotations of the sea within the Western literary canon, where it often signifies the subconscious, enigma, and metamorphosis. In the story, the Irish Sea represents these attributes, serving as a liminal area where the past and present intersect. The tidal rhythms symbolize the cyclical nature of remembering and forgetting, reflecting Tom's endeavor to come to terms with his experiences. The sea's expanse emphasizes the inevitability of memory, yet its potential for rebirth implies hope and salvation. This approach synthesizes trauma theory and ecocriticism to show how Barry intricately intertwines natural components with human psychology. The Irish Sea serves not only as a setting but also a dynamic entity that influences Tom's journey toward self-awareness and healing. Barry illustrates the link between humanity and nature, providing a profound reflection on the intricacies of memory, loss, and healing.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

#### 3.1. The Sea as a Metaphor for Memory and Trauma

In *Old God's Time*, the Irish Sea serves as a powerful metaphor for memory and trauma, representing both the expansiveness of Tom Kettle's memories and the tumultuous depths of his mind. The sea, with its infinite horizon and profound depth, reflects the formidable essence of terrible memories that evade containment or full comprehension. Tom's history is revealed through disjointed, involuntary memories that mirror the sea's erratic currents—oscillating between serene contemplation and tumultuous upheaval. Through this interaction, Barry adeptly encapsulates the core of trauma, which, as Caruth articulates, is an unassimilated experience that defies logical consistency. Tom's connection to the sea highlights the conflict between the need to forget and the inescapability of recollection. The Irish Sea functions as a reservoir of suppressed memories and a stimulus for their revival. Its pervasive presence in Tom's life mirrors the intrusive characteristics of trauma, as memories emerge involuntarily, interrupting his efforts to exist in the present. This phenomena is most apparent in moments where Tom is attracted to the coastline, impelled to confront the remnants of his past that emerge like flotsam. Barry employs the water as a metaphor that transcends its literal existence, converting it into a symbol of Tom's psychological conflict in reconciling with the grief and shame that characterize his past.

#### 3.2. The Paradoxical Nature of Trauma

The paradoxical essence of trauma is further exemplified by the dualism of the water. The sea symbolizes the burden of unresolved memories—a formidable, often threatening entity poised to overwhelm Tom. Conversely, it provides instances of tranquility and contemplation that imply the potential for self-awareness. The contrast between chaos and tranquility in the sea's behavior reflects the erratic patterns of trauma rehabilitation. Barry depicts these periods of tranquility not as resolutions but as interludes in Tom's continual struggle with his history. The sea's rhythmic ebb and flow symbolize the non-linear processes of recollection, amnesia, and recovery, illustrating how trauma distorts and reconfigures human

narratives. In Barry's grasp, the water transcends a mere backdrop, becoming a dynamic force that engages with Tom's psyche. It transforms into a realm where memory and reality converge, exemplifying the disorienting impact of trauma. For Tom, observing the sea serves as both a confrontation and a kind of catharsis. The expanse serves as a canvas for his scattered recollections, while its relentless movement symbolizes the inevitable progression of time—a reminder of both loss and continuity. The location of Tom's apartment with a view of the sea is noteworthy. The term "copper" implies a blood-like color and functions as a pun denoting the police force, since it is popularly used to refer to a police officer. This statement creates a tense mood by using the foreboding adjective "worse" to depict the impending night. It symbolizes the concept of maladaptive coping mechanisms being utilized to obscure trauma, and of violence being concealed by further violence, both of which are prominent themes in the narrative. It is evident in the text:

Even as they talked Tom felt obliged to whatever gods ruled that fake castle to gaze out occasionally on the copper-dark sea just now getting scrubbed over bit by bit by worse darkness. It was four in the afternoon and night was creeping in to take everything away till only the weak lights of the lamps on Coliemore Harbour would bounce themselves a few yards out onto the water, speckling the darkling waves. (Barry, 2023, p. 12)

### 3.3. Nature's Role in Healing and Catharsis

While the sea encapsulates the burden of memory, it also symbolizes the potential for healing. Its rhythmic waves suggest a cyclical process of emotional release and renewal, aligning with trauma theorist Judith Herman's stages of recovery: safety, remembrance, and reconnection. In *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), Rothberg discusses the notion of trauma and memory from the aspect of "polytemporality" (Tribble and Sutton, 2012) and opines that the concept of memory networked in different directions, as it may be seen in case of Tom. Rothberg argues that such memories are "meant to draw attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance" and "acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together spatial, temporal and cultural sites" (Rothberg, 2009, p. 11) The shoreline serves as a liminal space where Tom can confront his grief and begin to process his pain. In the interaction between land and sea, Tom discovers fleeting moments of serenity and clarity, demonstrating nature's healing capacity. Barry correlates Tom's recovery process with the ocean's natural rhythms, highlighting the rejuvenating characteristics of the natural environment. The ocean's capacity to purify and revitalize aligns with ecocritical viewpoints that emphasize the interrelation between human emotions and environmental dynamics. The natural cycles of the sea—its tides and its capacity for erosion and regeneration—mirror the emotional cycles Tom undergoes as he confronts his trauma. These comparisons indicate that healing is not a linear progression but rather a process characterized by fluctuations, like to the sea. Furthermore, the sea's significance in Tom's catharsis is emphasized by its ability to embody paradoxes. It is both a sanctuary of seclusion and a realm of connection, where Tom can engage in introspection while simultaneously feeling a deep sense of belonging to a greater entity. This paradox illustrates the intricate interaction between isolation and connection in healing, as Tom discovers peace in both solitude and his bond with the natural world.

Barry's portrayal of the Irish Sea elevates it beyond a simple backdrop, endowing it with a vibrant, almost sentient essence. The moods—serene, turbulent, enigmatic—reflect Tom's emotional states, establishing a symbiotic interaction between character and surroundings. The sea's energy serves as a barometer for Tom's inner turmoil, mirroring his fluctuating emotions and the instability of his recollections. The correspondence between the ocean's natural rhythms and Tom's psychological trip highlights Barry's

adeptness in employing the natural world as a medium for examining intricate emotional terrains. The sea's dual nature—its ability to devastate and to restore—reflects the overarching themes of the work. For Tom, facing the sea parallels face his trauma: a painful yet vital endeavor for growth and redemption. The sea serves as a figurative bridge connecting the past and the present, allowing Tom to traverse the transitional realm of memory and discover a way ahead. The sea serves as both a real and symbolic entity, grounding the novel's examination of trauma, memory, and rehabilitation.

### 3.4. Memory, Trauma, and Redemption

These three words memory, trauma and redemption play an intricate role in a tripartite model that is applied in the analysis of the protagonist's mind whose traumatic manifestations through the sea shape the identity of the character. As Geoffery Hartman has stated: "Literary verbalization [...] still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (Hartman, 2003, p. 259). Barry's utilization of the sea as a metaphor for memory and trauma extends to its function in Tom's journey toward redemption. The sea, with its perpetually changing tides, represents the potential for transformation—a reminder that even the most turbulent waters eventually subside. For Tom, the act of engaging with the sea becomes a form of self-examination, enabling him to confront the guilt and grief that have shaped his existence. This process of confrontation is not without its challenges; it is characterized by moments of despair and vulnerability. Nevertheless, it is through these moments that Tom begins to attain a sense of closure. The sea's capacity for renewal is reflected in Tom's gradual acceptance of his past. As he navigates the complexities of memory and trauma, the sea becomes a constant presence, guiding him toward a more profound understanding of himself. Its rhythms provide a counterpoint to the disarray of his thoughts, offering a sense of continuity that aids him in reconciling with the fragments of his history. In this manner, the sea embodies the dual nature of trauma as both a source of distress and a pathway to healing. It is, further, problematized, or rather, extended by the concept of "constellation" (Rothberg, 2009) that Benjamin describes the in-between space that weaves together present and past. The expression: "The burden of getting older was borne alone, but also as if by someone else, because he often couldn't recognize bits of himself, he caught in the mirror" (Barry, 2023, p. 25) reflects the protagonist's fragmented identity, shaped by personal trauma and the inexorable passage of time. The "burden of getting older" signifies the cumulative weight of unresolved memories, while the inability to recognize oneself hints at psychic disintegration—a hallmark of trauma. In an ecocritical context, this alienation parallels humanity's estrangement from nature, where ecological degradation mirrors the protagonist's internal collapse. Just as aging isolates him from his former self, ecological loss estranges humans from their environment, underscoring themes of disconnection and vulnerability in both personal and planetary realms. The discussed nuances on the perplexity of traumatic experiences, having the undertone of "pathetic fallacy" (Ruskin and Barrie, 1987) and "objective correlative" (Childs and Fowler, 2006), find intertextuality with *A Long Long Way* (Barry, 2006) and *The Secret Scripture* (Barry, 2015).

### 3.5. Ecocritical Perspectives on the Sea

"Ecocriticism remains the most familiar term associated with environmental studies in culture, hence the reason for its inclusion in the title of both conferences in Ireland" (Gladwin and O'Connor, 2017). Barry's portrayal of the Irish sea also invites an ecocritical interpretation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human experience and the natural world. The sea's role in Tom's narrative underscores the notion that nature is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in the process of healing. By situating Tom's journey within the context of the Irish Sea, Barry highlights the symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment, suggesting that the natural world possesses the potential to mirror and

mediate emotional experiences. This ecocritical perspective extends to the novel's broader exploration of memory and trauma. The sea, as a natural force, serves as a reminder of the cyclical nature of life and the inevitability of change. Its ability to erode and reshape the landscape parallels the way trauma reshapes identity, while its capacity to cleanse and rejuvenate offers a metaphor for emotional renewal. In this manner, the sea functions not only as a setting but also as a catalyst for transformation, illustrating the profound impact of nature on the human psyche. Through the narratives like *Old God's Time* that interweaves both the intricacies of memories and its reflections through the elements of literature, what the authors, arguably tend to advocate, is "environmental justice" (Rangarajan, 2018). Even at this century, trauma, albeit it blends the vicinity of sea or other environmental elements with human psyche, is not something all about the "irredeemable losses" (Roth, 2012).

#### 4. Conclusion

Sebastian Barry's *Old God's Time* offers a nuanced examination of pain, memory, and healing, with the Irish Sea serving as a pivotal metaphor that embodies these themes. The sea serves not only as a setting but also as an active element in the narrative, mirroring the fluctuations of Tom Kettle's emotional journey. The expanse, cadence, and variable essence reflect the intricacies of trauma, encapsulating both its bewildering burden and its capacity for rejuvenation. Barry underscores the inseparable connection between human psychology and environmental influences by connecting the natural world with the protagonist's inner existence. The narrative centers on the idea that the water reflects the broken and nonlinear characteristics of memory. Traumatic events frequently elude coherence, manifesting in disjointed bits that contradict logical chronology. Barry effectively illustrates this phenomenon through Tom's intermittent memories, often elicited by the sight or sound of the water. These disjointed memories mirror the erratic patterns of the tides, forming a powerful metaphor for how trauma interrupts the continuity of individual and historical narratives. The water, with its relentless movement and ability to unveil concealed depths, serves as a receptacle for Tom's repressed anguish and unaddressed sorrow. The contradictory essence of the sea—its ability to both overwhelm and comfort—further exemplifies the dualities present in trauma and rehabilitation. The sea symbolizes the unavoidable weight of recollection, a formidable and frequently ominous entity that jeopardizes Tom's existence. Conversely, its repetitive waves imply instances of catharsis and rejuvenation. This paradox illustrates the intricacy of healing, which is seldom linear and encompasses cycles of confrontation, introspection, and liberation. By depicting the water as a source of both torment and comfort, Barry illustrates the complex relationship between disruption and continuity in emotional healing. Barry's ecocritical viewpoint enhances the relationship between humanity and the natural environment. The ocean's rhythms reflect the natural processes of erosion and regeneration, mirroring Tom's psychological odyssey. As Tom addresses his pain, the sea acts as a locus for introspection and metamorphosis. The expanse provides a perspective, reminding him of the overarching flows of time and existence. The waterfront, a transitional area where land intersects with sea, serves as a venue for both conflict and release, allowing Tom to traverse the tensions between past and present, recollection and oblivion. Barry also invokes the wider cultural and historical aspects of trauma across the Irish Sea. The sea serves as both a personal and collective emblem for Tom, embodying Ireland's intricate history of loss, displacement, and survival. This dual resonance enhances the tale, placing Tom's individual sorrow within a broader framework of national and cultural memory.

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