

Slippages of Meaning: Difference, Memory, and Unreliable Voice in Fiona Neill's *The Betrayals*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Fiona Neill's The Betrayals through Jacques Derrida's framework of différance, focusing particularly on how betrayal, trauma, and memory resist closure. Rather than offering definitive accounts, the novel resists definitive closure, presenting meaning as deferred, contingent upon unstable language and mutable perspectives. Employing four unreliable narrators, the novel dramatizes Derridian notion that meaning is constituted through difference, not presence. Daisy and Max embody the psychic toll of fragmented memory as their search for meaning in past events is thwarted by gaps, silences, and dissonance. These textual disjunctions highlight the dilemma of securing a fixed truth as memory emerges as a construct both formed and fractured by affective imprints. The novel thus enacts différance: a narrative where discordant voices never reconcile and interpretation remains endlessly deferred.

Keywords: *différance, unreliable narration, trauma and memory, narrative fragmentation, betrayal, Derrida, The Betrayals,*

INTRODUCTION

This study situates Derrida's idea of différance (1967) within the narrative structure of Fiona Neill's *The Betrayals* (2017). Différance, coined by Jacques Derrida, is one of the most influential concepts in postmodern theory. It shows how meaning is never stable but always deferred and produced through difference. Derrida describes it as a "neographism" (Christopher, 2002), underscoring that words lack single or fixed meanings but acquire significance through their shifting relations in an unending chain of différance. By developing this notion, Derrida (1967) problematizes Husserl's phenomenological emphasis on the belief that perception and memory furnish a stable foundation for knowledge. For Husserl, memory structures the very formation of consciousness. Derrida (1967) argues that the perceiver's mental state is never constant but always in flux. Thus, perception doesn't provide immutable truth, as recollection and re-reading are refracted through shifting contexts and perspectives. Derrida's concept of the Supplement further illustrates this instability, where meaning proliferates through excess, ensuring that closure remains impossible. Thus, truth emerges not as an absolute, but relational, provisional and always vulnerable to contradiction. Neill's narrative embodies this Derridian notion by staging four narrators whose competing accounts refuse reconciliation; Daisy's compulsions, Max's sense of guilt, Rosie's evasions, and Nick's self-justifications fracture the narrative into unstable and

intersecting truths. Mirroring Derrida's notion that meaning is never fully present but perpetually deferred, the novel denies the possibility of a single, authoritative viewpoint. Narration, thus itself becomes supplementary, with each version extending and displacing the others, leaving only partial truths shaped by unstable memory, trauma, and language.

The formulation of unreliable narration, first theorized by Wayne C. Booth (1961), intersects with the postmodern conviction that truth is neither fixed nor absolute, but relative and contingent. As per Booth's analysis, an unreliable narrator is granted narrative authority to tell a story but cannot be deemed entirely trustworthy. This idea parallels Jacques Derrida's *différance*, where meaning is never fully present but perpetually deferred, fragmented, and in flux. Accordingly, In postmodern fiction, truth resists fixity functioning instead as provisional shifting construct, mediated by perspective and interpretation. Building on Booth (1961), Ansgar Nünning (1998) outlines the study of unreliability by identifying three modes of detection. First, intratextual signs emerge within the narrative, such as contradictions and gaps in memory. Second, extra textual signs appear when the narration conflicts with the reader's general knowledge, which conflicts with the reader's general knowledge, and finally, interpretive, the reader's literary competence, awareness of conventions and stylistic devices that enable recognition of inconsistencies in narration.

Fiona Neill's narrative skillfully illustrates the concept of multiple truths through its four narrators: Daisy, Max, Nick, and Rosie. Each character presents events from their flawed perspective, creating a rich tapestry of viewpoints. Daisy, for instance, grapples with obsessive compulsive tendencies that emerge early in the narrative, revealing her compulsive counting and repetitive behaviors casting doubt on her reliability as a narrator. Daisy's rituals and fragile mental state highlight Nünning's three categories of unreliability: gaps in her memory, conflicts with what the reader perceives as logical, and a highly stylized narrative that underscores her subjective experience.

Similarly, Max's recollections are filtered through guilt, Nick's through self-justification, and Rosie's through her position as a victim of the family's disintegration. Each narrator embodies what may be termed 'perceptivism'; a distinctly postmodern narrative strategy where perception itself structures storytelling. By denying the presence of an omniscient, third-person voice, Neill constructs a deliberately fragmented narrative where truth is dispersed across competing accounts. Thus, the novel resists the possibility of a singular, authoritative version of events. Instead, memory, trauma, and identity emerge as fluid and contested, demonstrating how unreliable narration functions not as a flaw but as a structural principle that enacts *différance*. In *The Betrayals* (2017), no voice has the final word, and every truth remains provisional.

Elizabeth Loftus's research on unreliable memory provides further insight into the narration of *The Betrayals* (2017). Loftus (1992) identifies two key hypotheses that explain how memories can become distorted: the Strength Hypothesis and the Construction Hypothesis. The Strength Hypothesis suggests that memory may falter when one course of action is reinforced or encouraged more strongly than others due to contextual payoffs. The Construction Hypothesis suggests that if even accurate information can shape or alter a response, introducing false information can have an even greater effect, fundamentally reshaping recollection (Loftus, 1996). Loftus (1997) also identifies four natural factors that contribute to the development of false or distorted memories: individual differences, trauma, sleep deprivation, and false memory syndrome. Trauma is particularly significant in Fiona Neill's *The Betrayals* (2017), where nearly every character is marked by psychological rupture. Daisy suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, which fragments her perception and memory. Max is trapped in cycles of guilt, reconstructing events through remorse. Rosie struggles with betrayal trauma, her sense of identity destabilized by fractured trust within her family. Lisa attempts to cope with the trauma of cancer and its existential burden, while Nick is divided between guilt toward his children and love for Lisa.

In each case, memory functions not as a neutral record but an unstable construct filtered through subjective consciousness. Loftus's framework clarifies how trauma and individual psychology interact to produce divergent and unreliable versions of the same story. This aligns with Derrida's notion of *différance* (1967), since the meaning of past events in *The Betrayals* (2017) is never fully present but always deferred across competing, trauma-laden perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERSECTIONS OF MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND SUBJECTIVE NARRATION

Neill's *The Betrayals* (2017) paints a vivid picture of a family unraveling under the weight of secrets, lies, and emotional conflict. Lucas (2024) observes that the novel's tragic tone from the beginning suggests inevitability. Despite this clear sense of the story's direction, the final chapter stands out for its emotional depth and capacity to surprise readers. The emotional intensity grounded in the feelings of betrayal, sadness, and exhaustion is a key strength, as Neill animates the family's struggles and fractured relationships. The sense of betrayal is particularly striking, as each character contributes to the growing tension. These betrayals are not only pivotal to the plot but also reveal the complexities of trust and loyalty within families. Therefore, the novel's title is fitting, as the layers of deceit and hurt culminate in an unsettling conclusion.

In addition to its focus on family drama, *The Betrayals* (2017) offers a thoughtful exploration of human behavior. Lucas (2024) notes that Neill presents her characters as flawed and relatable, capturing the complexities of their interactions. The combination of strong character development and a hint of mystery adds depth to the narrative, making it a compelling read for those interested in the intricacies of relationships and the lasting impact of betrayal.

Hana (2009) situates memory within a postmodern framework, noting the proliferation of plots involving memory disorders such as amnesia, insomnia, dissociative identity disorder, and dementia in contemporary literature and film. She argues that this fascination reflects postmodernism's decentering impulse, shifting attention to the social and psychological margins. Among the many forms of memory disturbance, Hana identifies amnesia as the most prominent fictional device, as seen in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008). In that novel, trauma and personal loss distort memory and perception, leaving characters estranged from both reality and themselves. Auster's (2008) protagonist admits: "I'm alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I fight through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness" (p. 1).

Neill's novel echoes this link between trauma and perception. From its opening lines, Daisy's obsessive-compulsive disorder signals the fragility of her grasp on reality. She confesses: "Three is a good and safe number. I close my eyes and whisper the words three times ... Why is she writing to Mum after all these years?" (Neill, 2017, p. 1). Daisy's compulsive rituals and intrusive thoughts immediately establish her narration as unreliable, shaped as much by trauma as by memory itself. Like Auster's character, she embodies how personal loss and psychological struggle destabilize both perception and truth.

Bartlett (1932) and Loftus (1996) took it further and emphasized that memory is not fixed but a reconstructive and often twisted process, prone to belief, trauma, and suggestion. This notion aligns with Derrida's (1967) concept of *différance*, highlighting the instability of meaning and the impossibility of a single truth. Together, these perspectives highlight the dramatization of the relativity of truth and the fragility of memory in *The Betrayals* (2017), situating it within broader postmodern and psychoanalytic debates on identity, trauma, and narration. Bartlett's theory of memory is of significance here as he asserted that memory cannot be perfect and is shaped by personal values and beliefs, and is often reconstructed rather than being recollected (Bartlett, 1932). In short, two people can have an entirely different recollection of the same event and this is quite apparent in court trials. Bartlett also gave the idea of schemata, which are the mental frameworks that guide how memory and experiences are stored and

recalled, and hence prove the unstable nature of the memory. This instability leads to broader debates on truth. For instance, Sober (1991) argued that truth and belief should be separated; believing something does not make it true, and truths can exist even if no one believes them. He warns against the pitfalls of the idea of “truth for me” as it reduces the truth to personal perspective. At the same time, postmodernists talk about the radical idea that each person’s “truth” is a version of reality because reality is constructed through individual perceptions. Literature has played with this idea often. For example, the narrator in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001) bent reality to survive, and the unreliability was revealed only at the end. This tension between belief, truth and memory leads to the idea of *différance* by Derrida. According to him, meaning is never stable but always deferred, slipping through language and perspective (Derrida, 1967). Memory is reconstructed, and belief does not warrant truth, and meaning remains fragmented. There is no final word or absolute presence, only shifting interpretations.

The Betrayals (2017) by Fiona Neill embodies this idea well with the use of multiple narrators. For instance, Daisy showcases the instability of memory and truth through her OCD, repetitive actions, and fragile mental state. She often contradicts herself, her recollections are selective, and her narration is subjective. She executes *différance* by doing so, as the reader is unable to come to a single truth and oscillates between belief and doubt. Her narration also destabilizes reality, showing how unreliability can be a structural tool in postmodern fiction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Memory, Reconstruction, and Distortion

Barlett (1932) emphasizes that memory is not passive but an active reconstruction of the past based on an individual’s beliefs, values, and cultural background. Using the concept of schemata, he highlights how gaps in memory are charged by interpretations instead of facts, thus distorting the process of recollection. It’s prevalent in the literary narratives where memory is heavily influenced by subjectivity and is used as evidence simultaneously.

Building on Bartlett, Elizabeth Loftus (1992, 1996, 1997) shows how memory can be reshaped under the influence of trauma, misinformation, or suggestion. She proposes two explanations: the Strength Hypothesis, where reinforced actions dominate recollection, and the Construction Hypothesis, where both accurate and false information reshape and distort memory. Loftus further identifies four natural factors that contribute to false memory formation: trauma, individual differences, sleep deprivation, and false memory syndrome. In *The Betrayals* (2017), trauma is central to narration. As discussed above, Daisy is suffering from OCD, Max is burdened by guilt, Rosie is a victim of betrayal, Lisa has cancer, and Nick is stranded between guilt and love. Each character projects fractured memory, creating conflicting versions of events as a result, highlighting the impossibility of one single truth.

Truth, Belief, and Perspectivism

Sober (1991) makes a distinction between truth and belief, demonstrating how there is a possibility that belief might not align with truth, and truth itself can remain unrecognized. This difference coincides with a broader postmodern perspectivism that suggests that individuals construct their own realities. Perspectivism, in narratives, is evident in the narrators whose subjective consciousness results in unreliability. For example, in Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001), there is a narrator who reserves and reconstructs truth for survival. Similarly, *The Betrayals* (2017) portrays characters whose beliefs are entwined with their psychological conflicts, making readers to pilot between opposing accounts of the same events.

Différance and Instability of Meaning

The idea of *différance* by Derrida (1967) further convolutes the possibility of stable memory and truth. Derrida (1967) challenges Husserl’s idea of stable perceptions and argues that memory is always deferred

and constructed by difference. His idea of ‘supplement’ illustrates how meaning is in constant flux and is contingent. This is particularly evident in *The Betrayals* (2017), where varying accounts always collide, and it is impossible to have one definitive version of reality. These theories lay the foundation for the critical framework of this paper. Barlett and Loftus talk about reality’s fragmented and distorted nature; Sober distinguishes between truth and reality; and Derrida accentuates how it’s impossible for meaning to be stable or fixed. These ideas reveal how Neill’s characters, marked by trauma, construct conflicting narratives, placing unreliability at the center of the novel’s structure.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: MEMORY, TRAUMA AND FRACTURED NARRATIVES IN *THE BETRAYALS*

After outlining the theoretical concerns surrounding unreliable narration, memory, and trauma, attention must now be directed to the focal text of this research: Fiona Neill’s *The Betrayals* (2017). It is built upon the repercussions of a profound act of disloyalty: Nick’s affair with Lisa, his wife Rosie’s best friend. The betrayal splits two families, and the story picks up eight years later, showing how the split still affects them. Neill’s narrative is particularly compelling because she uses four distinct narrators: Daisy, Max, Nick, and Rosie, each addressing the reader directly. This multiplicity of voices forces readers to confront fractured and contradictory versions of the same events, highlighting the instability of memory and the impossibility of locating a single truth. Anchored in the ideas of *différance* and the subjectivity of recollection, this examination investigates how Neill portrays the relativity of truth through the voices of her narrators. The trauma and psychological pressure experienced by each character not only influence their memories but also the way they recount their stories. Following these interconnected perspectives, the analysis illustrates how *The Betrayals* transforms narrative unreliability from a defect into a purposeful structural technique, urging readers to navigate fluctuating realities and discover incomplete, temporary truths.

Daisy’s Fractured Narration: OCD, Compulsion and the Instability of Memory

The novel opens with Daisy’s obsessive-compulsive disorder, highlighting both the instability of her perception and the unreliability of her narration. Daisy’s whispering at the very beginning, “*Three is a good and safe number. I close my eyes and whisper the words three times so no one can hear. They sound like a sweet sigh. If mum notices, she might worry*” (Neill, 2017, p. 1), sets the rhythm of her narration. Her compulsions structure her reality, and the repetition underscores how her memory and perception are always in flux, reflecting Derrida’s notion of *différance*, where meaning is never fully present but constantly deferred.

A letter from Lisa triggers old memories and intensifies Daisy’s compulsive rituals. She repeats phrases to reassure herself, “*not double but triple sure,*” as when she chants “*An ill wind, an ill wind, an ill wind*” (Neill, 2017, p. 1). Her reaction, “*WHY, WHY, WHY is she writing to mum after all these years?*” (Neill, 2017, p. 1) shows how her recollection of events is mediated by trauma and psychological fragility. Daisy’s narrative is shaped by subjective consciousness; her memories are partially reconstructed and deeply influenced by emotion, demonstrating the instability of truth and the impossibility of a singular perspective. Her interactions with Max further illustrate how her perception is filtered through mental and emotional states. Family interactions are interpreted through anxiety and compulsion, reflecting a constantly shifting and unstable reality. Her memory of shattering a mirror: “*I ran my finger across the hole at the bottom right hand corner of the mirror where there was a tiny slice of glass missing. My fault. The mirror came from the house in Norfolk where we used to go on holiday when we were children*” (Neill, 2017, p. 4) shows the fragmented recollection. This demonstrates how memory is reconstructed, fragmented, and relational rather than fixed, echoing Derrida’s insight that meaning is never complete but always deferred, shaped by difference, context, and perception.

Daisy's anxiety becomes visible when she attempts to open the letter from Lisa, which reminds her of past betrayal. She immediately questions Lisa's intentions, thinking, "*Lisa wouldn't have licked it. She's as careful with things as she's with people*" (Neill, 2017, p. 4). Her fear reflects a worry that the fragile balance Rosie has built over the years might be disturbed. Daisy experiences her anxiety physically, noticing, "*But as quickly a new emotion takes hold. This is the one I have not felt for years. My skin feels clammy and my ribs no longer rise when I breathe. I'M PROPERLY ANXIOUS*" (Neill, 2017, p. 7). In her struggle to regain control, Daisy tries breathing exercises and taps repeatedly on the bone below each shoulder, counting in multiples of three since numbers such as twenty-four unsettle her. These rituals reveal how her anxiety shapes her perception and memory. Each act is an attempt to stabilize her experience, yet it also highlights how her view of reality is fragmented and never fully settled. Seen through Derrida's concept of *différance*, Daisy's anxiety demonstrates the instability of meaning and memory. Her emotional response, physical reactions, and compulsive behaviors illustrate that her understanding of events is always partial and provisional. The anxiety triggered by the letter does not just reveal her psychological vulnerability; it shapes the story she tells, entwining memory, trauma, and perception into a fractured version of reality.

Divorce, Trauma and Daisy's Memory

Daisy's reflections on her parents' divorce further highlight how unresolved trauma shapes memory and emotional responses. She observes that her father does not remember when he began drifting away from her mother, and this angers her. She notes that he "*specialises in the nature of memory formation*" (Neill, 2017, p. 9), suggesting his selective forgetting contrasts sharply with the children's inability to let go. Daisy confesses, "I wish I were as good at forgetting as dad. I remember everything" (Neill, 2017, p. 9). Her vivid recollections show that trauma embeds itself deeply in memory, making her narration inherently unreliable and subjective.

When Daisy opens the letter from Lisa, she finds an old photograph of a family holiday in Norfolk, taken before the upheaval caused by the betrayal. The image captures a time when Rosie and Nick were still together, and Lisa was Rosie's best friend. Norfolk, where the children grew up, had been Lisa's second home before it became her first with Nick after the divorce settlement. Daisy examines the photo closely, noting that Nick stands beside Rosie yet "no part of his body is touching her" (Neill, 2017, p. 10). She also observes Lisa's children and her ex-husband Barney in the picture. Daisy's reflection, "*We used to be friends but not anymore. After everything that had happened*" (Neill, 2017, p. 10), captures the lingering pain and loss that colors her memory and perception. This moment illustrates how trauma fractures memory and distorts perception. This close reading of the image captures the tension between what occurred and how she remembers it, reinforcing the novel's broader theme of deferred meaning and the instability of narrative truth. Her interpretation of the past, filtered through hurt and anger, aligns with Derrida's notion of *différance*, where memory and meaning are never fully present but are always shaped by context, emotion, and difference.

Dysfunctional Family and Its Psychological Legacy

Neill foregrounds the emotional cost of a dysfunctional family early in the novel, as Daisy observes, "*The good thing about having a dysfunctional family is that there's not a lot to live up to*" (Neill, 2017, p. 11). This remark points to the reality that broken homes and family dysfunction profoundly affect children, shaping their mental health, sense of stability, and overall well-being. Daily life is marked by abnormality, basic happiness is compromised, and opportunities for a healthy, balanced upbringing are often lost.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Daisy and Max. Daisy struggles to process the trauma of her parents' divorce and the resulting instability, unable to let go of past grievances. At the same time, Max copes with the dual burden of his parents' divorce and his sister's illness. Studies suggest that divorce typically reduces day-to-day contact with one parent, often the father, and this diminished involvement

can weaken the parent-child bond. Research indicates that children experiencing reduced contact frequently report feeling less close to their fathers after divorce (Anderson, 2014). In *The Betrayals* (2017), this loss contributes to Daisy and Max's ongoing emotional struggles, demonstrating how familial dysfunction compounds trauma and shapes the subjective realities that Derrida's notion of *différance* helps to illuminate.

Max's Narrative: Guilt, Responsibility and Fractured Memory

Max, the second narrator in *The Betrayals* (2017), adds another layer to the novel's exploration of trauma. His story begins with two quick phone calls from Daisy, which he initially ignores, reflecting his desire to distance himself from the past trauma. He reassures himself that "*the days when communication from my sister required an immediate response are long gone*" (Neill, 2017, p. 12). This reflects the immense pressure he experienced while coping with Daisy's illness, his parents' divorce, and the betrayal. Throughout his narration, Max recalls the intensity of those years. He emphasizes their lasting impact with repetition that mimics Daisy's compulsions: "*Or rather long, long, long, gone, gone, gone, as Daisy might have put it*" (Neill, 2017, p. 12). Later, during a game of Truth or Dare with his girlfriend, Max admits that while he initially considered his parents' divorce the worst experience of his life, he now recognizes that Daisy's illness had affected him even more profoundly: "*When she asked me what was the worst thing that had ever happened to me I said it was my parents getting divorced but really it was Daisy getting ill*" (Neill, 2017, p. 14).

Max also carries a burden of guilt, believing he has "*a big part of the blame for what happened to Daisy*" and viewing himself as a "reliable witness" to her suffering. His anxiety resurfaces when he notices the return of Daisy's OCD symptoms during a family meal with Lisa and Nick. Observing her food arranged in separate piles of rice, samosa, and saag gisht, he notes, "*If you didn't know you would assume she was someone who had artistic sensibility about how food should be presented*" (Neill, 2017, p. 23). Despite a period of relative calm, Max finds himself becoming 'paranoid' again, underscoring how past trauma and ongoing concern for his sister continue to shape his perception and emotional state. From a Derridean lens, Max's account demonstrates how memory, guilt, anxiety, and trauma fragment narrative truth. His narrative, shaped by his consciousness, produces a subjective version of events that is provisional and incomplete. Max's perspective, like Daisy's, shows that meaning and emotional reality are never fully fixed but always in flux.

Resentment, Distance and Children's Bond with their Father

Max and Daisy's relationship with Nick is marked by mistrust, anger, and distance. They carry deep resentment for the betrayal that broke their family, feeling that their abnormal childhood and ongoing struggles are the result of their parents' choices. Their anger and mistrust shape every interaction. The discomfort is apparent when they meet Nick and Lisa at a restaurant. Max notices that his father seems oblivious of how hyper-aware the children have become, how even small gestures of intimacy feel loaded with meaning. This sensitivity comes from the shock and betrayal they experienced. Daisy often refers to Lisa bluntly, calling her "*Dad's fck buddy*" (Neill, 2017, p. 24), reflecting lingering hurt and anger. Nick's attempts to explain to himself that he still loved Rosie but was no longer in love with her do little to repair the damage. The children are especially stunned when they learn Nick is marrying Lisa. Even though Lisa invites them, saying "*Rex and Ava would love to see you again*" (Neill, 2017, p. 24), Max and Daisy cannot escape the sense of loss, not just of family stability but of their friends, routines, and normal life. Max, in particular, feels frustrated that his father has no understanding of what Daisy endured, and by extension, what the children collectively suffered. Their reactions show how trauma reshapes perception. Max and Daisy's memories and feelings about Nick and Lisa are intensely personal and filtered through anger, guilt, and hyper-vigilance. What appears on the surface as resentment also reflects a deeper struggle to reconcile past betrayal with present reality. The children's view of their father is

neither fixed nor simple; it shifts with memory, perspective, and emotional context, echoing Derrida's idea that meaning is never fully present but always influenced by difference and deferral.

Rosie's Betrayal Trauma: Intimacy, Trust and Psychological Fallout

Rosie experiences betrayal on two fronts: by her partner and best friend. According to betrayal trauma theory, certain types of betrayal, particularly by trusted individuals, can lead to long-lasting psychological and physical effects, including PTSD (Freyd, 2020). In Rosie's case, both interpersonal and intimate partner betrayals leave deep emotional scars. The mind often dissociates under such trauma, resulting in hyper-independence, trust issues, and difficulty forming meaningful relationships, traits clearly visible in Rosie's character. Nick's betrayal is compounded by gaslighting. Even after shattering the family, he gives confusing and contradictory explanations. When confronted, he offers excuses like needing space, wanting to find himself, or claiming that the marriage had been over for years, never mentioning Lisa. Rosie is thus doubly isolated: abandoned by her husband and confidant simultaneously. Before the affair, Rosie and Lisa shared moments of closeness, such as duetting "*Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves*" at a karaoke bar (Neill, 2017, p. 31). The betrayal took away her support system as well. To cope, Rosie attempts to distract herself with dates and attempts to normalize her life, but these efforts fail to heal the underlying trauma. Each encounter with Nick and Lisa reawakens a "*familiar sense of loneliness*", reminding her that the betrayals continue to shape her emotional world (Neill, 2017, p. 31). Her experiences show how trauma can fragment perception, memory, and trust, illustrating the deep psychological consequences of intimate and interpersonal betrayal.

Nick's Denial, Lisa's Health and Varying Perceptions of Reality

Nick's perspective is quite different from Daisy's and Max's. In his mind, his love for Lisa is not a betrayal. He neither grasps the severity of Daisy's OCD. He carries no regret over his affair, and his perception of reality diverges sharply from that of his children. His memory reconstructs the past to rationalise his choices, reaffirming Barlett's (2000) view that memory is shaped by personal schemas. Lisa's breast cancer further complicates the narrative. This news forces him through the stages of grief, with disbelief dominating his thoughts. He confesses, "*I can't accept this is happening to us. I'm going through the stages of grief and am stuck on disbelief*" (Neill, 2017, p. 42). The situation is compounded by the contrast between his rational, intellectual approach and Lisa's insistence on false hope through meditation and yoga. He attempts practical acts of care, like buying an organic watermelon to avoid infection, yet internally struggles with helplessness. He closes his eyes to "*crush the pinpricks threatening behind his lids*" (Neill, 2017, p. 42). This scenario is crucial to understanding Nick's perception. Before the diagnosis, he and Lisa lived together, seemingly happy, with no regrets about their choices. Their reality, shaped by their perspective and subconscious assumptions, clashes with the experiences of Daisy and Max. While Nick's life may appear stable and controlled, it highlights how subjective perception can diverge dramatically from those affected by the same events, reinforcing the theme of fractured realities and the relativity of truth.

The Betrayals: Perception, Conflicting Realities, and Unreliable Memories

Perception in *The Betrayals* (2017) varies sharply across characters, highlighting the subjective nature of reality. While Daisy, Max, and Rosie see Nick as primarily responsible for the family's trauma, Nick himself holds a different view. He perceives Rosie as overly conservative, "*someone who limited possibilities and saw problems where there were none*" (Neill, 2017, p. 46). He even suggests that Daisy's illness "*might have been exacerbated by Rosie's uprightness and desire to control*" (Neill, 2017, p. 46). Nick also interprets Rosie's professional dedication as a source of relational tension, claiming, "*No one can compete for attention with Rosie's work. That's why she's so good at her work and so bad at*

relationships” (Neill, 2017, p. 47). His perspective underscores how characters construct their own versions of reality, filtered through personal experience, bias, and emotional investment. The novel emphasizes that perception is never neutral; memory, trauma, and personal values shape every narrative, producing multiple, sometimes contradictory truths.

The unreliability of memory is a central concern in *The Betrayals* (2017). The novel illustrates how memory itself can be distorted by trauma, perception, and personal bias. This theme is made explicit when Rosie asks Nick, “*Are you trying to do some test on unreliability of flashbulb memories to spot how our versions of the same event differ?*” (Neill, 2017, p. 50). She refers to his research on how memory shifts over time, specifically in relation to the London Underground bombing, noting that her own recollections have changed dramatically over the years. Nick reflects, “*The purpose of memory isn’t so we remember what happened but what those memories teach us in terms of how we react in the future*” (Neill, 2017, p. 51). Nick attempts to preserve every note and message from Lisa, aware that after her illness, all he will have left are these unreliable memories. He observes how memory is prone to distortion and reconstructs events to favor himself, rationalizing his betrayal as “*saving Lisa from a dysfunctional relationship with an aggressive alcoholic*” (Neill, 2017, p. 51). This subjective reconstruction aligns with Bartlett’s theory (2000), which suggests that memories are not exact reproductions of events but are reconstructed based on personal schemas, beliefs, and emotions.

Daisy’s memory is equally unreliable. Her perception of what happened between Lisa and Nick eight years ago is only partially accurate. She recalls seeing them together in an intimate moment, when it was Rex. The confusion, amplified by Max’s interference with the letter, leads Daisy to construct a false memory, highlighting how trauma and limited understanding can warp recollection. Through these examples, the novel demonstrates that memory is inherently unreliable. Each character filters events through personal trauma, guilt, and perception, creating multiple, often contradictory narratives that challenge the notion of a singular, objective truth.

CONCLUSION

Despite the unreliability of memory and the differing perceptions of events, Nick’s betrayal had a lasting impact on everyone involved. His actions not only hurt Rosie, Max, and Daisy but also affect Lisa, showing how his inability to confront the consequences of his desires perpetuates ongoing pain. While all the characters are flawed and their narratives unreliable, their unreliability is largely unintentional. Nick, however, repeatedly justifies his actions, using selective memories to excuse his present behavior, dismissing and invalidating the feelings of Rosie, Max, and Daisy. Derrida’s (1967) notion of *différance* helps us understand this instability. The novel demonstrates that truth and memory are never fully present; they are always deferred, shifting, and constructed through individual perception. Each character’s version of events supplements another, creating a chain of partial truths in which meaning is never fixed. This mirrors Nick’s attempts to rationalize his actions while others experience the lingering trauma of his betrayals. Although past mistakes might be forgivable given human imperfection, Nick’s ongoing betrayals, such as having an affair with his son’s girlfriend and failing to support his dying wife, cannot be excused under the guise of personal perspective. These betrayals caused profound trauma, particularly for the children, and fractured family relationships irreparably. *The Betrayals* (2017) is a psychological family drama that enacts Derrida’s *différance* logic, highlighting memory and narration’s fragility and subjectivity. The novel reveals how betrayal distorts perception, destabilizes memory, and impacts mental health, offering a nuanced exploration of human vulnerability and the enduring consequences of deceit.

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