
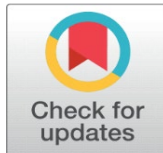
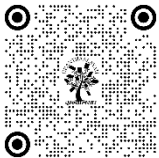


'GROWING UP' WITH TRAUMA: CHILD ABUSE AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN DAVE PELZER'S MEMOIRS

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse is prevalent throughout the world in various forms. Physical abuse, the most common form, has been taken into focus for this research paper. However, open discussions of child abuse are often silenced, especially when the abuser is the child's parent. 'Abuse' by parents is usually considered a way of disciplining the child. Abuse at an early stage leads to various mental illness as children grow into adults.

In most cases of child abuse, the victim transforms into an abuser. Factors like suppressed emotions, familiar environments, and lack of companionship push them to extremism and violent action. These individuals are called maladaptive individuals, and the victim-to-victimizer paradigm explains the process of maladaptiveness. On the other hand, some people break the cycle of violence, leaving behind the horrific past of pain and suffering. They thereby transform into adaptive individuals.

In this context, the paper reads the novels *A Child Called 'It'*, *The Lost Boy*, and *A Man Named Dave*, collected into one memoir, *My Story*, by Dave Pelzer. *My Story* surveys the author's life who was physically and emotionally abused as a child by his mentally deranged alcoholic mother. After crossing several hurdles, Dave becomes a successful man inspiring million worldwide.

The novels can also be read as Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, as the author is growing to maturity in dealing with and writing about trauma. In the process, Dave overcomes trauma and establishes himself as a successful person and an artist. He 'grows up' as a child abuse victim; however, he grows out of it by accepting his past and looking forward to what the future holds for him.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Mental Health, Trauma, Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman

1. INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is one of the most common social problems. Child abuse and neglect have negatively impacted people's lives directly or indirectly. Research shows how early abuse has impacted the behavioural or mental health of teens and adults. Isolation, anxiety, and a lack of trust are some of the immediate emotional effects of abuse and neglect that can have long-lasting effects, such as poor mental and behavioural health.

The trilogy taken for the study is the work of American author Dave Pelzer. *The Lost Boy* and *A Man Called Dave* are the two books in the series after *A Child Called*

'It'. The books record the author's life, who was physically and emotionally abused by his mentally deranged alcoholic mother, and his journey to his current successful position. [Admin \(2015\)](#)

Each of the three books can be considered a memoir. A memoir is a first-person narrative that describes the author's memory of a particular life experience. They focus on a single aspect of life, such as parenting, abuse, or addiction. Here the subtitles of the texts convey that aspect: *One Child's Courage to Survive, a Foster Child's Search for the Love of a Family*, and *a Story of Triumph and Forgiveness*. Unlike an autobiography or a biography, a memoir focuses more on the emotion of the subject rather than the facts. The author's primary concern is his feelings toward his memories. According to Kevan Lyon, a memoir must read more like fiction rather than stating facts. Doing so grabs the readers' attention and makes them one with the character. [Author Learning Center \(n.d.\)](#)

David James Pelzer is a motivational speaker and non-fiction author of American heritage. Dave was the second of Catherine Roerva Christen and Stephen Joseph Pelzer's five children. He was born in San Francisco and raised in Daly City, California. He was continuously mistreated as a child by his psychologically unstable, alcoholic mother until he was 12 years old. At that point, his teachers stepped in and placed him in foster care. His father, who was also an alcoholic, did not confront his wife about her addiction. Dave's case was regarded as the third worst occurrence of child abuse in California. After being relocated to several foster homes, he joined the U.S. Air Force at 18. He married his first wife at 20 and had a son, but the marriage did not last long. He later married Marsha Donohoe, the editor of most of his works.

Dave became an inspirational figure whom four American presidents commended within a few years. Serving in the Gulf War, receiving the JC Penney Golden Rule Award in 1990, carrying the Olympic Torch in 1996, and earning the title of California Volunteer of the Year were all accomplishments for this man. When Dave wasn't travelling the country giving speeches, radio interviews, or counselling, he volunteered as a fire captain for his neighbourhood for almost ten years. He had been involved in several destructive fires and floods. Due to his efforts, Dave was chosen twice as Volunteer Firefighter of the Year. [Author Learning Center \(n.d.\)](#)

Eight inspiring books, most of which are self-help books, have been written by Dave. When *The Child Called 'It'* was produced in 1995, it became an immediate bestseller. It sold approximately 1.6 million copies in five years and was included in The New York Times bestseller list. Critics accused Dave of publishing it conveniently after the death of both his parents as no one else could confirm his claims then. His maternal grandmother and one of his brothers deny any form of abuse to have taken place in the household. However, his other brother, Richard B. Pelzer, confirms his claims in his autobiography *A Brother's Journey* and talks about how he became Dave's replacement once his brother left for a foster home.

Dave's second novel, *The Lost Boy*, published in 1997, records his journey through numerous foster homes and his search for meaning in life. His third novel, *A Man Named Dave*, published in 2000, concludes his journey as an adult in which Dave finally forgives his father and comes to peace with his life. The three books were compiled later under *My Story: A Child Called 'It', The Lost Boy, A Man Named Dave*. [Pelzer \(2002\)](#)

The three novels together could be read as Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman novels. Bildungsroman is a German term derived from 'Bildung' meaning education, and 'roman' meaning novel. It means an educational novel. Künstlerroman is a German term derived from 'Kunstle' (artist) and 'roman' (novel), meaning an artist-

novel. A bildungsroman is a genre of book that chronicles the hero or heroine's journey from infancy or adolescence into adulthood while they struggle to find their identity. A künstlerroman, on the other hand, is described as a book with an artist as its main character and charts their growth from childhood to adulthood and beyond. [Baldick \(2015\)](#)

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The paper's objective is to deal with the effects of child abuse that may result in adults with either one of the behaviours - maladaptive or adaptive, with the help of Dave Pelzer's trilogy *My Story: A Child Called 'It', The Lost Boy, and A Man Named Dave*. The paper will also establish the trilogy as a Bildungsroman and a Künstlerroman. [Child Welfare Information Gateway \(2015\)](#)

3. UNIQUENESS OF THE PAPER

Dave Pelzer, the protagonist, and the author of the novels has expressed through his writing how he has overcome the trauma of being abused by his mother and transformed himself into not just an ordinary individual but someone who has inspired millions of people around the world. He has recreated himself through his writing as he reminisces about his childhood and relives his traumatic past. Through this writing process, Dave not just revisits his past but creates meaning in his life and an identity that could be known worldwide. Such an aspect helps in looking at these novels as a Bildungsroman and a Künstlerroman. [Clark et al. \(2007\)](#)

4. THE ABUSIVE MOTHER VS THE DETERMINED CHILD

In the first chapter of *A Child Called 'It'*, titled "The Rescue", the author gives us a glimpse of his mother's treatment and quickly jumps to his rescue. The child is well aware of his mother's mood swings and actions, and he readily acts accordingly. However, he gets smacked or even worse when he misses doing so. He does not mind getting beaten as long as he is fed something. In the first few sentences of the chapter, he declares that his mother can beat him all she wants, but he won't let her take away his will to survive in any way, demonstrating his desire to endure no matter what. [Cuddon \(2013\)](#)

Making the child suffer has become one of the games that she enjoys. The more he entreats her to spare him, the more the mother derives pleasure from his pleas. Hence, she introduces different kinds of torture that would make him surrender on his knees. Nevertheless, the child feels the need to protect his perpetrator. He tries to defend his mother whenever the teachers question him about the wounds or poor clothing. The child goes through hell and cannot believe his eyes when the authorities finally rescue him.

The story shows how Catherine Roerva, the mother, transforms from a loving mommy to a despicable mother in the following chapters. She changes mentally and physically - she has put on weight, and her once beautiful hair has now become "frazzled clumps" [Pelzer \(2002\)](#).

The will to survive at all costs is something that the child has inherited from his mother. Initially, she was determined to have a real happy family, and later she was determined to put her child through hell no matter what process. All she wanted was to see him suffer. Even towards the end of her life, she was a headstrong woman who never readily admitted her misdeeds.

5. THE VICTIM-TO-VICTIMIZER PARADIGM

The readers feel that the mother must not have had a happy childhood. In chapter 2, she tears with joy as she admits to finally having a real family. This could have stemmed from the absence of one in her childhood and her yearning for a loving family of her own. Also, in the chapter titled "the source" in *A Man Named Dave*, the mother confesses to having been abused by her mother. She bursts into tears, saying that her mother would often lock her in a closet, starve her, chastise and order her in all walks of life. [Dorota \(2006\)](#)

Though Dave doubts his mother's claims, one cannot wholly ignore her case. The mother can be viewed as an individual with maladaptive behaviour through this claim. Negative behaviour that hurts a person is known as maladaptive behaviour. According to the social learning model of child abuse, maladaptive behaviour is usually formed by watching/imitating the closest person. Having observed her mother's use of violence to discipline the child, the mother follows the same. Hence, she could never admit that what she did towards Dave was more than disciplining the child. [Life Rich \(n.d.\)](#)

Some theories claim that learnt interpersonal patterns can contribute to child maltreatment. Parents could pick up violent ways to express their rage or dissatisfaction from their childhood. Later, these maladaptive coping techniques may mirror various aggressive behaviours, including child abuse. However, according to social learning theorists, not all social learning is attributed to parental models.

On the other hand, Dave is conscious of not wanting to become like his mother. He wants to be a loving father to his son Stephen and not cause him physical, mental, or emotional pain. When Dave is about to lose his cool, he remembers his son and all he had done not to become that one person he despised the most. Consequently, Dave broke the cycle and has become an adaptive individual. [Pelzer \(n.d.\)](#)

Repeated trauma in adulthood changes the structure of the already formed personality, but the trauma created in childhood "forms and deforms the personality." [Herman \(2015\)](#) The child tries to defend himself through available possibilities against the impending danger. Thus, in most cases, it creates "an immature system of psychological defenses." [Herman \(2015\)](#)

The child's primary caregiver/caretaker is his/her parents. It is natural for the child to form expectations and love towards the parents based on their earlier bond (described in the literature as the working model). [Iwaneic \(2006\)](#) However, as the child grows, the situation may change. Due to various external factors, the bond between the parent and the child becomes a relationship between the abuser and the abused.

A child's relationship with the parent is often seen as an emotional attachment. It is similar to the relationship of a parent towards a child though technically not described as an attachment. This relationship may not always be positive. Professor and writer Dorota Iwaneic, in her work *The Emotionally Abused and Neglected Child*, states that many women express feeling emotionally distant, empty, and alienated from their children, while others display strong animosity and aggressiveness toward their children. These mixed feelings might have nothing to do with the child's behaviour but must have grown out of the mother's suppressed childhood trauma and built-up emotions. To determine the factor causing distress between the parent and the child, it is essential to scrutinise personal history. This, in turn, will

help understand the emotional abuse and neglect faced by the child by its primary caregiver. [Pelzer \(2014\)](#)

6. READING THE TRILOGY AS BILDUNGSROMAN

From *The Child Called 'It'* to *A Man Named Dave*, the author has shown maturity in understanding his surroundings and people. Dave was abused from four to twelve when he lived with his mother. His mind had strategised ways to survive the hellhole from an early age. When other kids his age played on the streets, went on family trips, celebrated various festivals, and had three meals a day and proper clothes to wear, Dave had to complete his chores to get the leftovers from his brothers' plates. He was confined to the basement, having been "the reject" [Pelzer \(2002\)](#) of the family and the school. He had always known when to speak and stay silent to escape his mother's wrath. Even in his school, Dave had never been one to talk.

After being rescued by the authorities and placed in foster care, David found it even more challenging to make friends as he had never had a companion before. He had difficulty forming long sentences and conveying his thoughts without stuttering.

Moreover, this followed at times, even when he joined the airforce. Nevertheless, Dave was determined to improve himself. He was committed to making the best of himself and furthering his dreams. He dreamt of being rescued when he was just an imprisoned kid in the basement. When he left for foster care, he yearned to be loved. Furthermore, when he became an adult, he wanted to create an identity that he and anyone he knew would be proud of. [Pietrangelo \(2020\)](#)

From his childhood, he was very much interested in flying and aircraft. Unlike certain kids, he did not stop just dreaming about it but made every effort to fulfil his dreams. He never gave up when he was constantly rejected but studied hard and improved himself to make a better future.

Initially, when he was in foster care, having been influenced by a few older kids, he indulged in stealing and other kinds of troubles that, if left unchecked, would have cost him his entire future. Fortunately, he quickly regained his moral sense and returned to invest in his future. Later, when he had a son, he spent quality time with him despite his busy schedule. Even though his first marriage ended in a divorce, he never gave up on his son, unlike his father. He was always there for him and fulfilled all his needs. [Quinn \(2006\)](#)

Dave was not chasing money or fame. He earned to provide for his son, but his goal was to help people, especially those abused just like he was and show them the path of light. His mother stripped his identity and reduced him to just an 'it', but he inspired millions of people, especially teenagers, who underwent similar trauma in creating their own identities and leaving their mark on the world. [Wikipedia Contributors. \(2019\)](#)

Dave - the protagonist of the trilogy - a dreaded but wilful kid living in the basement, has gone through the journey of finding a place for himself in the world, not just physically but also mentally and emotionally, to prove that he is indeed worthy of love and care just like any other human.

This character with a traumatic past has matured more gracefully than a character with a happy childhood. However, the process had been challenging, making it appropriate to call the trilogy Bildungsroman.

7. READING THE TRILOGY AS KUNSTLEROMAN

Dave, the author considered an artist, has discovered the meaning of his life through his writing. By revisiting his past through writing, he has come to terms with his gruesome adolescence, which had always been the deepest scar of his life. In this process, he forgives his father, who had always been indifferent to his sufferings, mainly because he was never there in the home when the mother abused the child. Dave kept waiting for a miracle in the form of his father, who would rescue him from the evil clutches of his mother. Even in foster homes, his father would miss numerous visits and disappoint the child.

However, when he was on his deathbed, all Dave could remember was his handsome, energetic firefighter hero figure, who would fondly address him as a 'tiger'. He finally forgave his father and longed to spend more time with him. All these emotions could be expressed only through his writing.

In addition, the author has matured from book 1 to book 3 in addressing the issue. Dave seems more involved in *A Child Called 'It'*. He is more subjective in his initial writings than in his later writing. In *A Man Named Dave*, he distances himself from his past and can comprehend and come to terms with his situation. The initial few chapters summarise his childhood and adolescence experiences detailed in books 1 and 2. Though they are the same experiences, they seem more objective in *A Man Named Dave* than in *A Child Called 'It'* or *The Lost Boy*. He is concerned about his relationship with other people and, more importantly, about other people's pain than his own. He can look at things from people's perspectives instead of just thinking about how things would affect only him. Thus, Dave has matured through the years and has improved in communicating his pain, suffering and social skills in a more evolved manner. Furthermore, writing has provided a medium for the author to showcase his matured genius in dealing with a challenging past. This helps in rightly claiming the trilogy as *kunstleroman*.

8. FINDINGS

In the memoir collection *My Story*, the protagonist's mother, Catherine, who lacked and yearned for love as a child, and further claims to have been abused by her mother, transforms from an affectionate 'mommy' to a cruel 'mother'. This change in behaviour helps in claiming the mother as a Maladaptive individual who has succumbed to the vicious circle of child abuse.

Dave, the novel's protagonist, was abused as a child by Catherine and faced several struggles throughout his life. He was determined to break free of the violent cycle of abuse. Unlike his parents, he wanted to be a better father to his son Stephen. Thus, Dave became an Adaptive individual who rose to become a better version of himself by not letting his traumatic past ruin his future.

Furthermore, the novels can be read as *Bildungsroman* and a *Kunstleroman*: David grows both as a character and a writer. The readers also find maturity in his writing in *A Man named Dave*, which seems to be absent in *The Child called 'It'* and subtly present in *The Lost Boy*.

9. FURTHER SCOPE OF EXTENSION

This paper limits itself to exploring the victim-victimizer paradigm and its consequences as a reason for child abuse. That does not mean this is the only factor contributing to child abuse. Other reasons include drugs, alcohol, gambling

problems, stress due to financial pressures, job worries, health and medical issues, etc.

Also, the paper analyses the victim-victimizer paradigm only with a representative memoir. It can also be explored using literary and pulp fictional accounts or other genres like drama, prose, or poetry.

10. CONCLUSION

Most child abuse victims tend to become abusers themselves, as in the case of Catherine Roerva. But victims like Dave Pelzer, try to break the cycle of abuse despite going through lifelong struggles and hardships. The trilogy *My Story (A Child Called 'It', The Lost Boy, and A Man Named Dave)* establishes how maturity in dealing with trauma (Bildungsroman) and maturity in writing about trauma (Kunstleroman) helped Dave overcome distressing experiences of his life and shape himself as a successful person and an artist. His memoir, more than establishing himself as a successful child abuse survivor, exposes his life within the victim-victimizer paradigm of resistance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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