

INVESTIGATING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: HOW IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE CONTRIBUTES TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SUFFERING

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Key Words: Child abuse, Suffering, Literary Analysis

Child sexual abuse is a heinous crime surrounded often by secrecy, shame, and a conspiracy of silence that contributes to suffering and may lead to serious health problems for adult survivors. While research indicates that full disclosure of the events surrounding child sexual abuse is therapeutic, it is often difficult to achieve full disclosure. Access to this information is limited often by the ability or willingness of the children to explain and describe the horrible things that have happened to them.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of a study that examined the lived experiences of sexually abused children. The study sought to add to our understanding of the factors that contribute to suffering in sexually abused children as well as those factors that promote survival and healing.

Method: The lived experiences of sexually abused children are examined through the analysis of two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*. Literary analysis is a new method in nursing research. The process will be explained and demonstrated in this presentation. Literary analysis is a valuable means of gathering data in studies of sensitive and disturbing topics, like child sexual abuse, because it enables a sustained type of examination that would not be possible or even ethically prudent with human subjects.

Findings: The results of the literary analysis indicate that the brutality of sexual abuse renders children powerless, helpless, and invisible. In essence, it strips them of their humanity and contributes to suffering of unimaginable proportions. The extent of their unbeing will be illustrated in a close reading of excerpts from the novels.

Discussion: The results of this study suggest that the ability to survive abuse and the suffering it causes is primarily dependent on the child's ability to establish a connection with an ancestral figure. In addition, writing not only helps to break the silence and secrecy that surrounds child sexual abuse, it serves as a form of resistance and a source of strength. Composing poetry, prayers, or other forms of writing enables children to transcend the damage and suffering that result from sexual abuse.

The suffering of children who have been sexually abused is an important concern for nurses. This study adds to our understanding of the horrors of abuse and contributes valuable information about the relief and alleviation of the suffering it engenders.