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**Philip Ridley's Dystopian Gothic: Childhood**

**Trauma And The Post-9/11 World**

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**Abstract**

Philip Ridley's plays, *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) and *Mercury Fur* (2005) showcase dystopian futures deeply marked by childhood trauma, mirroring wider cultural unease, much like Gothic narratives. These plays delve into how experiences—like fear, abuse, and neglect—shape both individual minds and the society at large. These settings often act as reflections of societal decline and stark emotional emptiness. Scholars have examined the socio-political aspects of Ridley's post-9/11 work, especially their critique of modern life. However, his application of Gothic trauma theory is underexamined, indicating a substantial opportunity for additional investigation and comprehension of its ramifications in modern literature and cultural studies.

This research examines how Ridley crafts dystopian worlds showing trauma's lasting impact, spotlighting the intricacies of memory and its ongoing effects in a society grappling with trauma.

Ridley makes use of disturbing visuals to bring sight into deep-rooted terror enclosed within memories and fear. His characters often experience scattered memories, depicting how trauma alters one's interpretation of reality. The vague hints at the collapse of moral systems within these stories reveals that the trauma does not only apply to private individuals – it seems to envelop the society as a whole. Ridley's imaginary worlds further develop these ideas, looking at trauma as a major influence of the present and the future.

By blending Gothic horror with dystopian fiction, Ridley offers a rather unique view of trauma post-9/11—one that contemporary audiences can deeply relate to. His plays suggest that trauma isn't just a personal issue but is instead a shared societal issue that reshapes our collective experience, asking us to really rethink the implications of shared trauma. This offers up new insights into where Gothic horror, dystopian storytelling, and the lasting psychological effects of childhood trauma all meet, establishing a substantial domain for investigation and discourse.

**Keywords:** Philip Ridley, Gothic Trauma, Dystopian Fiction, Trauma, Post-9/11 Theatre.

**الديستوبية القوطية لفيليب ريدي: صدمة الطفولة وعالم ما بعد 11 سبتمبر**  
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**الملخص**

تُسلط مسرحيتا فيليب ريدي، "مذرة ديزني" (1991) و"قرو الزئبق" (2005)، الضوء على مستقبل بائس طُبِعَ بصدمات الطفولة، عاكسةً بذلك قلقاً ثقافياً أوسع، على غرار السرديات القوطية. تتعمق هذه المسرحيات في كيفية تأثير التجارب - كالخوف والإساءة والإهمال - على عقول الأفراد والمجتمع ككل؛ وغالباً ما تُمثل هذه البيئات انعكاسات للتدهور المجتمعي والفراغ العاطفي الصارخ.

درس الباحثون الجوانب الاجتماعية والسياسية لأعمال ريدي بعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر، وخاصةً نقدتها للحياة العصرية. ومع ذلك، فإن تطبيقه لنظرية الصدمة القوطية لم يتم دراسته بشكل كافٍ، مما يشير إلى وجود فرصة كبيرة لمزيد من التحقيق وفهم تداعياتها في الأدب الحديث والدراسات الثقافية.

يبحث هذا البحث في كيفية قيام ريدي بصياغة عوالم ديستوبية تُظهر التأثير الدائم للصدمة، مع تسليط الضوء على تعقيدات الذاكرة وتأثيراتها المستمرة في مجتمع يعاني من الصدمة.

يستخدم ريدي صوراً مُقلقة لِيُلقي الضوء على رعبٍ متجذر نتج عن الشعور بالخوف واستنكار الذكريات الماضية. غالباً ما تُعاني شخصياته من ذكرياتٍ مبعثرة، مُصوّرة كيف تُغيّر الصدمة تفسير المرء للواقع. تظهر التلميحات المُبهمة لانتهيار الأنظمة الأخلاقية في هذه القصص أن الصدمة لا تقتصر على الأفراد، بل يبدو أنها تُحيط بالمجتمع ككل. تُطوّر عوالم ريدي الخيالية هذه الأفكار، مُعتبرةً الصدمة تأثيراً رئيسياً على الحاضر والمستقبل.

بمزج الرعب القوطي مع الخيال الديستوبي، يُقدّم ريدي رؤيةً فريدةً نوعاً ما لصدمة ما بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر - رؤيةً يُمكن للجمهور المعاصر أن يتفاعل معها بعمق. تُشير مسرحياته إلى أن الصدمة ليست مُجرد قضية شخصية، بل هي قضية مجتمعية مُشتركة تُعيد تشكيل تجربتنا الجماعية، وتدفعنا إلى إعادة التفكير جدياً في آثار الصدمة المُشتركة. يُقدّم هذا رؤى جديدةً حول التقاء الرعب القوطي، ورواية القصص الديستوبي، والآثار النفسية المُستمرة لصدمة الطفولة، مُؤسساً بذلك مجالاً هاماً للبحث والحوار.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** فيليب ريدي، الصدمة القوطية، الخيال الديستوبي، الصدمة، مسرح ما بعد 11 سبتمبر.

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## Introduction

Philip Ridley's theatrical work is noted for the combination of dystopian setting and gothic horror. His play, *The Pitchfork Disney*, written in 1991, and *Mercury Fur* from 2005 both depict trauma's impact on reality as being particularly detrimental for children and young adults. (Ferrone, 2017, p. 352). Both works reflect concern about the precarious nature of the human psyche and how significantly past experiences shape current actions. Ridley builds nightmarish worlds that reality and imagination contrive, which children are forced to helplessly survive in. These spaces are mirror-like to the blend of psychological inner-world instability and social turbulence, making Ridley's work profoundly introspective yet socially critical. (Urban, 2007, p. 325).

The combination of Gothic elements with dystopian fiction in these plays examines the imprint of childhood trauma on identity and the personal societal decay. The Gothic focuses predominantly on fears, horrors, and the supernatural, while a dystopian fiction outlines a bleak, oppressive world in the future. By synthesizing these genres, Ridley constructs merciless stories in which trauma is not an individual suffering but instead a societal breakdown. His characters often suffer from some psychological condition characterized by amnesia, paranoia, or homicidal tendencies, implying that trauma not only determines identities, but also the essence of the environment (McEvoy, 2007, p. 228).

Emerging from the post 9/11 era, *Mercury Fur* intricately weaves violence, remembering, or rather choosing to forget, and the collapse of morality while showing life and the world suffocating in agony. The play is based on a fictitious world where young people do

not pretend to act out scenes crafted by the rich, they go through real torture – violence, vicious killings and brutal fantasies where the wealthy ‘clients’ pay to witness these perverse plays. This nightmare reflects the dread of an imminent social disintegration where ethical and moral boundaries becomes collateral damage to continue existing. The characters’ struggles with the pain of eradicating addiction to hallucinogenic butterflies emphasize how trauma skews fragments of perception and identity and confront the viewer with the question, 'What is the price to pay to erase life?' (Golban & Benli, 2017, p. 305), (Magdy et al., 2014)

Even though *The Pitchfork Disney* was made before this period, the late 20th century, it captures the same underlying worries by depicting a reality where the phobias of young children take on monstrous and palpable shapes. The story follows two self-isolated siblings who try to escape their childhood terrors which start to become more and more real. The combination of not being able to confront their reality and the dysfunctional ways they deal with it showcases the trauma’s ability to anchor someone in relentless suffering. The nightmarish imagery throughout the play depicts the character’s trauma in a tangible form, visceral enough that it exposes the characters’ psychological turmoil to the audience (Limantoro & Atma, 2024, p. 109).

This research explores how Ridley portrays childhood trauma within a Gothic dystopian setting, looking at how his post-9/11 plays offer fresh perspectives on trauma theory and horror aesthetics (Mondal, 2017, pp. 48–50). Placing his work within trauma studies reveals how Ridley's narratives serve as allegories for real-world anxieties. This encourages audiences to confront the lingering

repercussions of unaddressed trauma, both personally and collectively. Furthermore, his blend of psychological horror with dystopian settings allows for a more in-depth exploration of dread, memory, and survival in a fragmented world. Through his characters, Ridley questions how people deal with traumatic experiences and if healing is possible amid widespread chaos. Ridley's plays are still relevant today because they touch on contemporary fears of instability, violence, and loss, thereby reinforcing the idea that trauma goes beyond individual experiences to affect collective consciousness. His unique combination of Gothic horror and dystopian fiction offers a powerful way to explore the widespread effects of trauma on both individuals and society overall.

Ridley's storytelling is undeniably bold, breaking away from conventional theatrical forms. The result is a series of intensely provocative experiences that strike a deep chord with contemporary societal values. His plays aren't simply exhibitions of past horrors; Rather, they function as cautionary tales. Through these works, Ridley— similar to numerous playwrights—holds up a mirror to present-day issues, warning us of the future repercussions that can arise when unresolved trauma is ignored. By highlighting both the resilience and suffering intrinsic to humanity, Ridley compels audiences to confront their deepest anxieties. He encourages a genuine reckoning with the persistent effects of violence and pain, much like Atwood's characters, who are forced to grapple with complex moral dilemmas in her post-apocalyptic settings (Kururatphan, 2021, p. 2). Audiences, as spectators, find themselves compelled to grapple with uncomfortable truths about their own existence, pondering the moral outcomes of their actions (Burfeind et al., 2011, p.13). And so, Ridley's work acts as a catalyst for both reflection and open

discussion, encouraging audiences to embrace the stories that have shaped us and the conversations that will help us navigate the future.

### Literature Review

Ridley has been the subject of scholarly study with regard to socio-political allegory, psychological horror, urban decay and other themes. Dorothee Birke (2019) claims that Ridley's theatrical work serves as "a visceral response to societal breakdown, using horror to articulate urban anxieties" (p.89), implying that the settings mirror contemporary socioeconomic issues. Aleks Sierz (2001) places *Mercury Fur* in the sphere of "In-Yer-Face Theatre," stressing its "shock tactics to reveal the desensitization of contemporary audiences" (p.76), thus positioning Ridley within discussions of audience interaction in contemporary theatre. Still, Gothic trauma theory offers a novel lens through which to view the anxieties pervading Ridley's dystopian tales, though fewer studies have taken this approach.

Gothic trauma, according to Catherine Spooner (2006), is a narrative strategy that "externalizes psychological wounds through monstrous and nightmarish imagery" (p.45); this kind of imagery, she implies, is key to grasping the broken psyches of Ridley's characters. When applied to Ridley's plays, this idea illuminates how trauma informs dystopian worlds that obscure the boundary between reality and illusion, pushing characters through their warped mental realms. As Lisa Coulthard (2015) notes, "drama after 9/11 quite frequently engages with trauma-induced dystopias where moral absolutes collapse" (p.91), which serves as an essential context for considering Ridley's explorations. Dealing with this trend, Ridley's plays portray societies where violence, disjointed memories, and trauma emerge as

non-identity, and fragments of identity devoid of clear-cut morals; viewers are encouraged to change their perception of dystopian realities. These contexts portray not only the observable chaos but also the mental torment characters suffer while moving through broken realities.

Ridley's Gothic settings diverge from conventional dystopian novels by emphasising internalised trauma rather than external totalitarian regimes. Kelly Jones (2019) observes that "Ridley's plays invert dystopian norms by focusing on the psychological rather than the political" (p.112). This focus contributes to the terror within his tales, which further strengthens the Gothic tradition's emphasis on trauma—both personal and collective. That has been echoed in analyses of contemporary apocalyptic narratives that focus on internal strife (Kururatphan, 2021, p.2). In *Mercury Fur*, character attempt to navigate a world devoid of morals, while memories are either distorted or entirely absent, thus heightening the turbulence of personal identity in the context of a dystopia. The play's fragmentary form illustrates the uneven nature of trauma. This results in casting the audience in a role of disorientation as part of the narrative.

Similarly, *The Pitchfork Disney* portrays a dystopian reality fueled by subconscious fear, setting the characters' psychological states as central to the narrative. The protagonists of the play find themselves stuck in their traumatic histories, struggling to differentiate between memory and fabrication, hence urging us to dig into the mind's capabilities for both construction and destruction. Ridley's penchant for horrific images, grotesque figures, and visceral violence serves to portray psychological wounds, reinforcing Spooner's position that Gothic trauma leans on horror symbolism, especially in a post-



traumatic setting. Ridley transforms dystopian fiction into a study of human weakness and mental fragility by centering on internal fears rather than external tyranny, highlighting trauma's importance in narratives about societal collapse.

Moreover, the focus of themes concern a myriad of issues like violence, security, anxiety, and loss resonates deeply in his works especially post 9/11 era (Burfeind et al., 2011, p.13). Ridley's dystopian landscapes are a rich tapestry of gothic nightmares where trauma as a consequence, disintegrates personal identity and society as a whole. His plays compel the audience to confront the profoundly unsettling realities of cognitive deterioration, placing them in dystopian settings that are hauntingly familiar. Ridley attempts to grapple with contemporary fears, but unlike other playwrights, he doesn't stop there. He deepens Gothic literature by telling stories of dystopian societies through the lens of trauma as a force of destabilization that stirs a vital discussion with horror and human existence.

## Discussions

### Philip Ridley's use of Gothic Trauma

Gothic trauma in Philip Ridley's works, *Mercury Fur* and *The Pitchfork Disney*, opens a window into how trauma inflicted in childhood alters one's perception and reshapes their reality. In *Mercury Fur*, Elliot and Darren, the brothers, try to exist in a monotonously bleak world where the only constant is a deteriorating moral compass alongside fading memories. Faded memories serve as a protective mechanism – a defense against unbearable trauma. The play's fragmented structure mirrors the broken narrative of the psyche of those who have undergone extreme forms of trauma (Caruth, 1996,



p. 61). Darren's inability to remember his past aligns with forgetting one's past due to trauma, a Gothic motif that highlights disruption in identity which is caused by trauma. The violent actions the brothers later partake in highlight the traumatic struggle people undergo which, in turn, creates a desperate cycle of survival, numbness, desensitization, and the erosion of morals. Gothic elements, like darkness, trauma, terror, and distorted reality, function as Ridley's instruments, exemplifying the effects of trauma. Through these means, the enduring colonization of the past on the present is shown—the past steals from the present in violently disturbing ways—childhood wounds dictate adult actions (Garland, 1998, p.6). Van der Kolk and Van der Hart (1991) assert that "Ridley's fragmented storytelling resonates with the disorientation experienced by trauma victims" (p.425), effectively illustrating the connection between narrative structure and psychological impact in his work.

Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* reveals an intricate landscape of fear, trauma, and isolation in the lives of Presley and Halley. Trauma has led the siblings to submerge themselves in a world away from the reality that they cannot confront, engaging with a past which feels completely disconnected to them. Their life is constructed around frightening delusions and childhood visions, which serve as a coping mechanism. The very space that is supposed to be a sanctuary morphs into a harrowing prison where psychological terror reigns, inhibiting their progress. The biscuits are a key point between them which underscores their obsession with anecdotal detail, yet it masks an emotional void:

Haley: *Biscuits? In the fridge?*

Presley: *Yes.*

Haley: *In a blue packet?*

Presley: *Yes.*

Haley: *A blue packet with yellow and red stripes?*

Presley: *Yes.*

Haley: *That means they're orange chocolate biscuits.*

Presley: *I know.*

Haley: *Well, why didn't you tell me? I've felt like an orange chocolate*

*biscuit all day.*

Presley: *You saw me put them there* (Ridley, 1991, p. 5).

The weird and scary figures, like Cosmo Disney, make them feel even more afraid and mess with how they see things. Ridley uses surreal stuff to show how trauma changes their view of life, making their fears feel more real than the outside world. They rely on scary stories because they can't process what happened to them, so they turn to horror as a way to cope instead of getting help (Pilný, 2016, p.29). The play suggests that when fear takes over, it blurs the line between what's real and what's not, trapping them psychologically with what seems like no escape (Griffiths, 2015, p.23). Presley and Haley's isolation is like a self-imposed exile, where fear keeps them going, making it almost impossible to break free. Ridley really highlights how unresolved trauma can engulf someone completely, showing how it can totally consume people, creating a web of suffering and survival, as Zanette et al. (2024, p. 1061) indicate. This cycle of fear and trauma creates a paradox in such a manner that the mechanisms that are meant to offer protection end up becoming the greatest prison; suggesting that there can only be freedom once people deal with

confronting their fears and painful realities (Zanette et al., 2024, p. 1062). In this way, Ridley's work reminds us of the enduring need of healing, as well as the possibility of resilience, no matter how dire the circumstances.

### **Ridley's Exploration of Post-9/11 Anxieties in *Mercury Fur***

Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* evokes a sense of post-9/11 disquiet, depicting a dystopian reality where savagery transforms into a perverse spectacle, and societal forces undermine ethical principles. The play's setting presents a society feeding on reconstructed traumatic fantasies, showing how fear and brutality become worryingly commonplace, as Alex Ferrone (2017, p. 352) observes. The characters, generally speaking, take part in extreme acts, driven not only by survival but to fulfill the disturbing desires of the elite. This highlights the commodification of suffering, the transformation of human experience into mere spectacle (Spooner, 2006, p.52). The gradual wearing away of moral boundaries suggests a future in which collective trauma structures daily life and reduces human worth to little more than a statistic. Ridley's portrait of this turbulent world urges viewers to examine how relentless violence now shapes both cultural norms and contemporary political stories.

**Barry:** *Know who Enola Gay was?*

**Steven:** *Some pop group or something?*

**Barry:** *Hiroshima.*

**Steven:** *That.*

**Barry:** *The pilot of the aircraft – the aircraft that was gonna drop the bomb*

*... forget his name. Don't matter ... this bomb – this fucking fucking bomb– it's the biggest ever fuck-off bomb ever made, right? Everyone in the world knows. They've done the tests, for chriss akes. In that desert and stuff. The sand – it was turned to glass. You know that, brov? The heat was so fucking intense the desert became a sheet of glass. Like a wicked witch had come along and – Shazam! This fucking bomb ... this fucking bomb – whole islands were destroyed. You've seen that, brov, ain't ya? You must have. Those islands?*

**Steven:** *Yes, yes* (Ridley, 2005, p. 198).

*Mercury Fur* exposes a realm where devastation transforms into a grotesque display, interrogating our concepts of morality, survival, and the enduring effects of fear-driven cultures. According to Spooner (2006), "Ridley's dystopian horrors reflect collective anxieties about violence and desensitization" (p. 52). This corresponds with the Gothic tradition, which often explores ancient traumas that influence the present. Academics such as Judith Halberstam (2005) contend that "post-9/11 literature confronts the commodification of fear"(p.186), emphasizing how modern narratives exploit and capitalize collective anxieties to captivate audiences. David Punter also observes that "the Gothic mode persists as a mechanism for addressing cultural trauma, converting fears into symbolic narratives that expose societal vulnerabilities" (Punter, 1996, p.5). These viewpoints indicate that Ridley's work, akin to Gothic literature, serves as a mirror of societal anxieties and the mechanisms via which they are commercialized and sustained in contemporary society.

Both *Mercury Fur* and *The Pitchfork Disney* show how childhood traumas sculpt survival strategies. In *Mercury Fur*, Elliot crafts

elaborate fantasies, a way to shield his brother from their dystopian world's harsh realities.

**Elliot:** *Where the hell are you?*

**Darren:** *Dunno.*

**Elliot:** *Can ya see the dead dog?*

**Darren:** ... *Yeah.*

**Elliot:** *Step over the dead dog. Turn left.*

Slight pause.

**Darren:** *Where?*

**Elliot:** *Here!*

Waves torch.

**Darren:** *Gotchya!*

**Elliot:** *Comes back into flat and continues looking around* (Ridley, 2005, pp. 1-2).

### **Gothic Tradition and Unreliable Narration**

The concept of unreliable narration, a staple of the Gothic, is evident when characters grapple with trauma and the resulting distortion of their reality. Take, for instance, Presley in *The Pitchfork Disney*; he clutches at comforting childhood recollections, essentially turning away from the difficult realities around him (Edwards & Monnet, 2014, p. 45). This deep-seated fear, it seems, compels him to retreat into a self-made illusory world a space that feels secure even as it holds him captive (Hogle, 2002, p.12). This inability to confront the present, significantly shaped by trauma, highlights how psychological battles can fundamentally alter self-perception (Caruth, 1996, p.4). Like many other characters who indulge in some form of escapism,

Presley does not genuinely escape from his mental turmoil. Instead, avoidance deepens his fears and increases loneliness (LaCapra, 2014, pp.95-97). Ultimately, escapism does not genuinely help anyone for Presley or his peers, instead, it becomes a trap in a cycle that perpetuates psychological distress. Such approaches to shield oneself from suffering ironically make it harder for people to grow, as they remain locked in the box of their memories (Freud, 1915, p. 159).

### **Cosmo's Origin and Perception**

**Presley:** *What does your mum think about what you do?*

**Cosmo:** *Ain't got a mum.*

**Presley:** *Your dad then?*

**Cosmo:** *No dad either.*

**Presley:** *No mum or dad?*

**Cosmo:** *Nah.*

**Presley:** *You must have.*

**Cosmo:** *Why?*

**Presley:** *How else were you born?*

**Cosmo:** *I wasn't. I was hatched. Never saw my parents. I was hatched from*

*an egg and what you see is all I am. Once I had the skin of a baby and now I got this skin. I unzipped my old skin and threw it away. One day I was shitting my nappy, the next I was earning money. I had no childhood.*

**Presley:** *I had a lovely childhood (Ridley, 1991, p.57).*

This statement brings to the forefront how differently kids experience life, showing how influential our childhoods are on who

we are. Plus, it shines a light on the psychological puzzle of what growing up really means, especially when contrasting one world to another (Celbiş & Akin, 2022, p. 1017). In this framework, Cosmo's angle becomes especially pertinent for discussions centred around the ways origin molds the perspectives displayed in both fantastical and realistic storytelling (Celbiş & Akin, 2022, p.1018).

### **Impact of Trauma on Decision-Making**

Ridley's *Mercury Fur* and *The Pitchfork Disney* show that unresolved trauma can deeply shape how people view and make decisions, possibly leading to a continuous loop of dread and avoidance. The plays portray the characters with great detail which shows the impacts of childhood trauma, depicting the different ways individuals cope with their history. This not only focuses on the emotional consequences of trauma but also examines the behaviors that stem from such trauma and that may impede personal development and decision-making. As Sarawut Kururatphan (2021) points out, "Ridley's characters are trapped in their circumstances, forever influenced by their past experiences" (pp. 33–43). This paraphrase suggests that because they cannot deal with the traumatic memories, they become stuck in reactive decision-making instead of proactive decision-making. Moreover, this concept is also supported in broader trauma studies. Such studies show that responding to triggers stemming from previous trauma often leads to avoidance or hyper-vigilance and further limits one's ability to make fully informed decisions (Burfeind et al., 2011, p. 151). Therefore, the impact of trauma on decision-making is not merely anecdotal. This has been analyzed through literature. These psychological studies demonstrate the intricate relationships between experiences and choices.



### The Grotesque Imagery and Themes in Philip Ridley's Plays

Ridley's plays, furthermore, often employ grotesque imagery. This isn't just for shock value; it creates a strong sense of horror and, frankly, discomfort. It often mirrors societal decay, a moral corruption that festers beneath the surface. The images Ridley offers are often disturbing, lingering in the viewers mind and compelling them to confront harsh aspects of a broken world (Wyllie, 2013, p. 65). Consider Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur*. The violence onstage is not just graphic; it functions like a ritual. That framing turns each act of bloodshed into a harrowing mock-ceremony, a pointed jab at a world that now shrugs at cruelty. Characters do commit brutal deeds, true, yet those deeds unfold according to a fixed sequence. What appears at first to be chaotic aggression soon reveals itself as a grim performance, exposing their grim truth: they have normalized savagery because, in their eyes, it is the only way to endure. The ceremonial air surrounding their deeds reveals how thoroughly they have numbed themselves in a world marked by turmoil and pain. Their conduct reveals a distinct lack of empathy-violence fails to shock or provoke remorse; it seems simply another commonplace event. In such moments, Ridley shows that dire situations can force individuals to abandon their humanity without hesitation. He therefore depicts a broken society where brutal deeds are routine, moral norms vanish, and only the most basic survival instincts endure. As Darren pleads in the play:

**Darren:** *Ell! It's the bombs! They're here! Big bombs! Just like the Party Guest said! The windows are flaring with exploding bombs.*

Elliot looks at Darren. Slight pause.

Elliot takes gun from pocket and stares at it.

**Darren:** *No, Ell! Put the gun away. We've got to get out!*

Elliot continues to stare at gun.

**Darren:** *Ell! We'll be okay. We'll find a way. Like we've always done. Me and you. Ell! We'll survive, Ell. I know how. Trust me. We can do it. Put the gun away, Ell. It's not the way. I know that now. Ell! Ell! I love you so much I could grab you and grab you – Say, Ell! I love you so much I could – Come on, Ell* (Ridley, 2005, pp.145)!

The play forces readers to look at the realities, the truly harsh realities, of trauma and how it dehumanizes people. Tatiana Golban (2021) notes that “The grotesque elements in Ridley’s work serve to expose the raw brutality of trauma” (p.266).

In *The Pitchfork Disney*, Presley’s fascination with disturbing fantasies clearly shows his deep struggle with past trauma. He often withdraws into grim, unsettling imaginings, a clear sign that he cannot confront the memories that wound him (Di Bártolo, 2013, p. 190). Those fantasies serve as his only shield against a reality he would rather not meet. Rather than face his fears head-on, he loses himself in made-up realms that grant him a brief, fragile reprieve. In that space his thoughts turn into a coping tool, letting him stuff his feelings deep inside (Hapsari & Estu, 2016, p.82). By tracing Presley's struggle, the play shows how unanswered trauma warps the mind and guides behavior, finally leaving one alone and emotionally cut off.

**Presley:** *You'll never have to go shopping again.*

**Haley:** *Promise?*

**Presley:** *Promise.*

**Haley:** *Perhaps we should put it in writing.*

**Presley:** *Why?*

**Haley:** *In case you forget.*

**Presley:** *I won't.*

**Haley:** *You might.*

**Presley:** *Jesus, Haley. This is just like you. Sometimes you're so –*

**Haley:** *What?*

**Presley:** *Forget it.*

**Haley:** *No.*

**Presley:** *Suspicious* (Ridley , 1991, p.7).

### **Gothic Elements and Memory**

Ridley's obsession with eerie images and frightening ideas shows his inner turmoil and his desperate attempt to find control in a chaotic world. Gothic scholars such as Andrew Smith and Ashlee Joyce believe that “Ridley’s surreal aesthetics mirror the fractured psyche of trauma survivors” (Smith, 2022, p. 1914; Joyce, 2019, p. 461).

In both *Mercury Fur* and *The Pitchfork Disney*, the concept of memory is pivotal in forming identity. In *Mercury Fur*, Elliot reconstructs the past in a specific way to protect his younger brother Darren. By changing details in memories and leaving out much more painful parts, he reveals how fragile history really is. His efforts show how important memories of what happened are in the chaotic world we live in. In a like manner, in *The Pitchfork Disney*, Presley holds onto memories but chooses what parts to remember. This results in a very shaky, unreliable view of the world. He filters out harmful realities and replaces them with feel-good fantasies, therefore creating his own version of reality that is safe but distorted at the same time. Although memories are the basis of one’s identity, Presley’s memories also trap him in a never-ending cycle of fear and confusion. Both

plays depict the impact of memory and how it can be manipulated for self-preservation or escape as a result of painful truths. Memory—and the conflict between remembering and forgetting while trying to attain stability—is what Ridley showcases through these characters. As Andrew Wyllie (2013) remarks, “Memory manipulation is a recurring theme in Ridley’s Gothic universe, reflecting the instability of truth” (p.67).

### **Social Critique in Ridley's Works**

Ridley also critiques society's indifference to human agony and suffering. In *Mercury Fur*, the protagonists are forced to confront challenging ethical dilemmas, illustrating how trauma progressively undermines moral boundaries. Their desperate actions illustrate how extreme circumstances drive individuals to abandon their ethics for survival. Joyce (2019) thus observes that "Ridley forces audiences to confront the moral consequences of desensitization" (p.461). He implies that Ridley wants his viewers to reflect on how repeated exposure to violence can numb them to suffering.

Likewise, in *The Pitchfork Disney*, Cosmo Disney's hideous acts reveal how society transforms vulnerability into amusement. His horrifying deeds serve as a metaphor for how people delight in taking advantage of the suffering and frailty of others. Through these unsettling portrayals, Ridley challenges a society that normalizes savagery and utilizes fear as a means of entertainment. Both plays compel spectators to interrogate their own participation in perpetuating a world where misery is rendered as spectacle. As Spooner (2006) contends, “Ridley’s Gothic spectacle exposes the voyeuristic nature of modern audiences” (p.24). This underscores the urgent need for moral reevaluation in the context of entertainment,

reflecting the themes of ethical accountability prevalent in Mary McCarthy's oeuvre—ethical considerations, as noted in literary criticism, are essential for comprehending societal dynamics (Kururatphan, 2021, pp. 1–3). Consequently, Ridley's in-depth explorations urge us, as spectators, to confront disquieting truths regarding our own complicity in a cultural milieu that prioritises amusement over empathy (Burfeind et al., 2011, p. 151).

### **The Lasting Shadows of Childhood Trauma in Ridley's Plays**

Ridley's plays demonstrate the long-lasting effects that childhood trauma has on adults. Through a combination of Gothic horror and a grim dystopian backdrop, he transports audiences to worlds where brutality and neglect reverberate long after the curtain falls (Dye, 2018, p. 381; Kaplow et al., 2006, p.362). His plays do more than simply depict suffering; they investigate how lasting trauma shapes identity and influences decision-making. The dark, shadowy ambiance of the plays represents the profound psychological scars left by terrible experiences (Wyllie, 2013, p.68; Golban & Benli, 2017, p.314). Ridley suggests that unrecognized or untreated trauma repeatedly intrudes on a person's ideas, feelings, and social ties (Moser et al., 2020, p. 211). Throughout his plays, characters frequently wrestle with deep fear, lingering guilt, or raw anger, revealing how traumatic moments from childhood carve wounds that influence their adult choices (Sarode, 2023, p.65). His characters keep fighting to trust others, form healthy bonds, or escape old wounds; the choices they make expose the loneliness and hurt they keep trying-yet usually failing-to contain (Khan, 2024, p.110).

In *The Pitchfork Disney*, adults Presley and Haley cling to a "childish fantasy existence, subsisting mostly on chocolate" (Verma & Agrawal, 2021, p.14), a pattern that, rooted in trauma, shows the shame and self-blame common in survivors of difficult childhoods. The siblings' reliance on fantasy and violence as coping mechanisms illustrates how trauma distorts their perception of reality and relationships, mirroring findings that trauma impairs emotional regulation and self-concept (Banaj & Pellicano, 2020, pp.420-422).

*Mercury Fur* presents a more complex exploration of this dynamic through its depiction of brothers Elliot and Darren, who navigate a world where childhood has been entirely obliterated by systematic violence and exploitation. The play's examination of "child abuse become another source of income in this capitalist world that suffers from loss of communication and empathy"(Rahim & Muhi, 2024, p.53) demonstrates how trauma perpetuates itself through social structures that commodify vulnerability. The Gothic horror emerges not from supernatural elements but from the very real psychological and social consequences of a society that has abandoned its protective obligations toward its most vulnerable members (Rahim & Muhi, 2024, p.54).

Ridley's plays illustrate that without genuine healing the mind and heart remain ensnared by earlier wounds. Through his disquieting stories, he probes how individuals confront trauma and whether they can honestly progress past their hurtful pasts. In Wyllie's view, Ridley's plays act as cautionary tales warning of the perils posed by overlooked trauma and social indifference (Wyllie, 2013, p.72).

## Conclusions

Ridley's plays illustrate how unresolved childhood trauma can transform into a type of dystopian horror, thoroughly examining the psychological foundations of these profound experiences. His way of mixing Gothic elements with dystopian backdrops offers a distinct way to look at trauma's lasting impact on both individuals and society. Take *Mercury Fur* and *The Pitchfork Disney*, for example; they show how trauma messes with memory and distorts what's real, while also breaking down the moral codes that used to hold society together. Ridley's post-9/11 plays emphasize the disturbing connection between personal trauma and societal breakdown, framing dystopian nightmares less as straightforward political criticisms and more as psychological constructs reflecting profound fears. When we view dystopian fiction through the lens of Gothic trauma theory, we discover that trauma functions not as a single plot twist but as an insistent undercurrent that drives the entire story forward. This perspective helps to explain how Radley's plays depart from conventional models; rather than emphasizing oppressive regimes in the outside world, they probe the inner phantoms of anxiety and self-doubt that lurk within each character. These works act as strong statements on how societies deal with trauma, and sometimes even take advantage of it, after major disasters, suggesting that these experiences can have effects that last for generations. Weaving together horror, memory, and survival, Ridley's dystopian Gothic broadens the scope of trauma discussion in today's theatre, showing a sophisticated grasp of the complexities of being human after a disaster.



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