

MEMORY AND IDENTITY: EXPLORING DEMENTIA AND HYPERTHYMESIA IN EMMA HEALEY'S ELIZABETH IS MISSING

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Abstract

Emma Healey's novel *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014) offers a poignant exploration of memory loss, portrayed through the lens of Maud, an elderly woman struggling with dementia. As Maud's cognitive decline intensifies, the novel becomes a window into the fragmented and unreliable nature of her memories, inviting readers to experience the world through her distorted perception. This paper examines how Healey uses Maud's unreliable narration to explore key themes such as memory, identity, time, and the human need for coherence. By juxtaposing Maud's cognitive deterioration with the concept of hyperthymesia, an exceptional ability to recall autobiographical details with unparalleled precision. The study draws attention to the contrasting ways in which memory impacts an individual's sense of self. Hyperthymesia, which often proves to be as psychologically burdensome as it is remarkable, provides a critical lens through which to understand the implications of both memory loss and memory excess in shaping identity. Through a combination of literary analysis and cognitive theory, this paper situates *Elizabeth is Missing* within broader discussions of memory's role in selfhood and narrative reliability. By investigating how memory functions as both a source of emotional pain and a critical aspect of identity construction, the study engages with larger questions of how human beings use memory to navigate their lives, maintain personal continuity, and make sense of their pasts.

Keywords: dementia, memory loss, unreliable narration, identity, hyperthymesia, autobiographical memory, narrative theory,

Introduction

Memory is not merely a repository of past experiences—it is the narrative thread that binds the self across time, a cornerstone of both personal identity and narrative coherence. In psychological and philosophical discourse, memory has long been recognized as fundamental to the continuity of the self; John Locke, for instance, famously asserted that personal identity is grounded in the continuity of consciousness through memory (Locke, 1690). Without memory, the very notion of self becomes fragmented, elusive, and unstable. In literature, this ontological importance of memory is often dramatized through characters who experience its distortion, either through its loss or its excess. Characters who suffer from memory disorders challenge traditional narrative forms, and in doing so, they complicate the reader's understanding of truth, time, and the construction of reality. Emma Healey's *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014) presents a poignant case study in this literary tradition. The novel centres on

Maud, an elderly woman suffering from dementia, whose experience of memory loss transforms her into an unreliable narrator. Maud's cognitive decline is not only a medical condition but also a narrative device: her fragmented recollections and repetitive thought patterns mirror the structure of her disordered memory. This deliberate narrative unreliability draws readers into Maud's subjective experience, compelling them to confront the fragility of truth and the instability of remembered events. In this sense, Healey's novel is as much about epistemology—the nature of knowing—as it is about illness.

Scholars have approached *Elizabeth is Missing* from multiple critical angles, particularly in the realms of narrative medicine, dementia literature, and cognitive literary studies. Basting (2009) highlights how dementia narratives resist conventional plot structure through fragmentation and repetition, reflecting the disrupted mental state of their protagonists. Wolkowitz (2015) and Chivers (2011) further emphasize the significance of empathy and ethical spectatorship in such narratives, where the reader is invited to share in the protagonist's cognitive disorientation. Paul Ricoeur's (2004) theory of narrative identity has frequently been invoked to explore how memory scaffolds the self; as Maud's memory erodes, so too does her grasp of identity, time, and place. Yet, as scholars such as Caddell and Clare (2011) observe, individuals with dementia often retain long-term emotional memories even amid severe cognitive deterioration—a phenomenon that Healey powerfully dramatizes through Maud's fixation on her sister Sukey's disappearance. In parallel, theorists of unreliable narration such as Wayne C. Booth (1961) and Tamar Yacobi (1981) provide insight into the ethical and cognitive dimensions of Maud's narrative instability. Despite this growing body of scholarship, most critical analyses of *Elizabeth is Missing* remain focused on the themes of memory loss, cognitive impairment, and the formal implications of unreliable narration. What has yet to be explored in depth is how Maud's condition might be read in contrast with its cognitive and psychological inverse: hyperthymesia, or Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM). This rare condition, identified by Parker, Cahill, and McGaugh (2006), is characterized by an extraordinary ability to recall one's autobiographical past in vivid and exhaustive detail. While hyperthymesia is often assumed to be beneficial, emerging research and testimonies suggest that such unrelenting memory can be emotionally taxing and cognitively overwhelming. The comparative lack of literary studies that examine memory extremes—both deficit and excess—in the same analytic frame constitutes a significant gap in current scholarship.

This paper aims to address that gap by proposing a comparative framework that places Maud's dementia in dialogic contrast with hyperthymesia. While Maud represents the cognitive deterioration of memory to the point of identity disintegration, hyperthymesia—though not directly represented in the novel—offers a theoretical foil through which the burden of total recall can be imagined. The juxtaposition raises critical questions: What does it mean to live with memories one cannot access versus memories one cannot escape? Is narrative coherence dependent on the capacity to forget as much as to remember? And how does each condition affect one's relationship to time, truth, and the self? To investigate these questions, the paper employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in close textual analysis of *Elizabeth is Missing*, supported by theoretical perspectives from memory studies,

cognitive narratology, and philosophy of mind. Key concepts from Ricoeur's narrative identity, Locke's philosophical empiricism, and clinical research on HSAM will be brought into dialogue with literary analysis to demonstrate how Healey's novel not only captures the experiential dimensions of memory loss but also illuminates broader cognitive and existential questions about memory's role in constructing the self. By expanding the critical lens to include both ends of the memory spectrum, this paper contributes a novel perspective to existing literary scholarship and deepens our understanding of the narrative, psychological, and philosophical implications of remembering and forgetting.

Overview of the Novel

Emma Healey's debut novel, *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014), is a genre-defying narrative that combines psychological realism with elements of detective fiction. It tells the story of Maud Horsham, an eighty-two-year-old woman suffering from dementia, who becomes fixated on the mysterious disappearance of her friend Elizabeth. Despite repeated reassurances from her caregivers and family that Elizabeth is safe, Maud remains convinced that something is terribly wrong. She obsessively writes notes to herself— "Elizabeth is missing"—as her memory rapidly deteriorates, leaving her with only fragments of the present and echoes of the past. The narrative unfolds through Maud's disjointed and unreliable perspective, which oscillates between the present-day mystery of Elizabeth and vivid recollections of a deeper, older trauma: the disappearance of her sister, Sukey, shortly after the Second World War. As Maud's cognitive state worsens, these two storylines begin to blur. Her attempts to investigate Elizabeth's whereabouts begin to mirror her unresolved quest to understand what happened to Sukey decades earlier. This dual narrative structure, delicately interwoven, allows Healey to explore the interplay between memory, time, and identity, with past and present collapsing into one another in Maud's mind.

Told entirely from Maud's point of view, the novel immerses the reader in the experience of living with dementia. Healey masterfully crafts a voice that is at once confused and lucid, vulnerable and determined. Through Maud's erratic recollections and repetitive thoughts, readers experience her mental decline firsthand, sharing in her frustrations and small victories. The detective elements of the story are unconventional, as they rely not on deduction and evidence but on scraps of memory, instinct, and emotion. The mystery is as much about Maud's psychological interiority as it is about finding Elizabeth or solving Sukey's long-unsolved disappearance. *Elizabeth is Missing* has been widely praised for its innovative narrative technique and empathetic portrayal of dementia. It was awarded the Costa Book Award for First Novel in 2014 and has since been adapted into a critically acclaimed BBC film. Beyond its genre-blending appeal, the novel resonates on a human level, offering insight into the lived experience of memory loss, the fragility of the mind, and the quiet heroism of a woman trying to make sense of a world she no longer fully understands.

Narrative Disorientation and the Cognitive Architecture of Forgetting

The narrative structure in *Elizabeth is Missing* is marked by profound temporal disjunction, recursive repetition, and shifting perspectives formal choices that are intricately tied to the

representation of cognitive decline. The narrator's frequent confusion and reliance on handwritten notes "I have to write everything down or else I forget it" (Healey, 2014) signal a deepening dependence on external memory aids in the face of internal mnemonic erosion. These fragments of written memory serve both as survival tools and as narrative anchors in a world where the line between past and present is increasingly porous. The novel's oscillation between contemporary events and half-recalled memories of a long-ago disappearance creates a layered, non-linear narrative that resists conventional chronology. These temporal shifts are not demarcated by clear transitions; instead, they bleed into one another, mirroring the narrator's mental state. This narrative disorientation draws readers into a lived experience of cognitive confusion, forcing them to engage with the story not as a coherent sequence, but as a fragmented collage of impressions, sensations, and half-formed recollections. Such formal fragmentation aligns with observations in clinical and narrative dementia studies. As noted by Capp (2021), individuals with degenerative memory disorders often experience an intensification of long-term, emotionally resonant memories as short-term recall disintegrates. This regression toward earlier cognitive states is not merely a symptom but a coping mechanism—an unconscious retreat into a more coherent narrative era. The novel dramatizes this shift by allowing memories of the past to emerge with more clarity and intensity than events unfolding in the present. In doing so, it subverts the assumption that the present holds more narrative truth than the past.

From a narratological perspective, the use of an unreliable first-person perspective one shaped by deteriorating cognition complicates the very notion of truth-telling in fiction. While traditional unreliable narrators, as theorized by Booth (1961), often deceive intentionally or strategically, here unreliability emerges not from deceit but from neurological vulnerability. The result is a unique form of epistemic uncertainty: the narrator believes what they recall, even when those recollections are demonstrably flawed or anachronistic. The reader, in turn, is compelled to navigate this unstable narrative terrain without the comfort of objective referents. This interplay between memory, temporality, and narrative form reveals the text's central epistemological concern: if memory is fragmented, can narrative remain whole? Can a story retain meaning when its sequence is shattered, its details distorted, and its teller unaware of the boundaries between reality and recollection? By embedding these questions into the novel's structure, Healey crafts not only a story about cognitive impairment, but also a meditation on the fragility of narrative itself.

Hyperthymesia: The Other Extreme

While much of the discourse on memory in both cognitive science and literature focuses on memory deficits—such as those experienced by individuals suffering from dementia there is a less frequently explored but equally complex phenomenon: hyperthymesia, also known as Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM). Unlike memory loss, which erodes the continuity of the self, hyperthymesia involves the exact opposite a condition in which individuals possess the extraordinary ability to recall minute details of their personal experiences with exceptional clarity and precision. This ability allows individuals to effortlessly recollect events, dates, conversations, and even emotions from their past with astonishing accuracy. As Parker, Cahill, and McGaugh (2006) note, hyperthymesia entails a

vivid recollection of autobiographical events, wherein the individual can "replay" personal episodes in their mind with such vividness that it seems as though they are living through them once again.

At first glance, hyperthymesia may seem like a remarkable gift an exceptional cognitive ability that would allow for unparalleled insight into one's own life. However, the psychological reality of hyperthymesia is far more complex and, in many cases, burdensome. While an individual with this condition has access to a vast and accurate archive of personal memories, they are also subject to the emotional weight of these recollections. Research suggests that individuals with HSAM are not merely able to recall events but are often unable to control the flow of memories, especially those associated with emotional pain (LePort et al., 2012). Traumatic experiences, grief, or difficult relationships become indelibly etched in the mind, constantly resurfacing with little opportunity for emotional closure. This constant replaying of past events, particularly painful or unresolved ones, leads to emotional distress and, in some cases, psychological maladaptation. In stark contrast to the cognitive decline experienced by individuals like Maud in *Elizabeth is Missing*, whose dementia causes her to forget vital aspects of her identity and personal history, hyperthymesia presents an entirely different kind of memory dysfunction. The key difference lies in the excess of memory rather than the absence of it. While dementia leads to the fragmentation of the self through forgetfulness, hyperthymesia results in a kind of stasis a psychological trap in which the individual cannot move beyond the past. For those with HSAM, the inability to forget can become just as debilitating as the inability to remember. The trauma of an unyielding, vivid recollection of past events may prevent emotional healing and complicate one's ability to live fully in the present. The present, in essence, becomes overshadowed by a past that never ceases to haunt the mind. In literary representations, hyperthymesia is often depicted as a double-edged sword. Characters endowed with such a gift of recall are frequently shown grappling with the inability to escape the weight of their past. In *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes, for example, the protagonist's past is constantly revisited and reinterpreted, leading to a confrontation with unresolved guilt and regret. In such narratives, the question arises: what is the true cost of perfect memory? Can an individual truly live in the present if they are forever tethered to the past?

The contrast between Maud's dementia and the theoretical burden of hyperthymesia raises profound questions about the ideal balance of memory for psychological well-being. Memory, as both a cognitive and emotional tool, plays a crucial role in shaping personal identity and narrative coherence. It allows individuals to reflect on their past, integrate it into their sense of self, and use it as a resource for growth and decision-making. Yet, if memory becomes either too fragmented or too vivid, it can disrupt the construction of a coherent, functional self. When memory fails, as it does in dementia, the self becomes fragmented and unstable. But when memory becomes inescapable, as it does in hyperthymesia, the self is tethered to an unchangeable and often painful past. The tension between memory deficit and memory excess invites reflection on the psychological and philosophical importance of forgetting an often-overlooked counterbalance to the process of remembering. As Paul Ricoeur argues in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), forgetting is not merely the negation

of memory but a crucial process for personal and social narrative construction. Forgetting allows individuals to filter, prioritize, and even reinterpret past events, enabling them to move forward emotionally and psychologically. In contrast, both dementia and hyperthymesia present versions of memory that are unfiltered, either by absence or by overabundance, which interferes with the individual's capacity to adapt, heal, and engage meaningfully with the present. In this sense, both conditions challenge the notion of memory as a neutral, passive archive of the past. They reveal memory as an active and potentially disruptive force in shaping identity. Whether through the confusion and loss of cognitive decline or the unrelenting flood of autobiographical detail, both memory deficiency and excess demonstrate the complex interplay between memory and identity. The human mind, it seems, requires a balance a selective process of remembering and forgetting to construct a life narrative that is not only coherent but also emotionally sustainable.

The Burden of Total Recall: Hyperthymesia and the Inescapable Past

While much of the discourse on memory in literature focuses on its deterioration particularly in the context of aging, trauma, or neurological illness there exists a lesser explored, though equally complex, cognitive phenomenon: hyperthymesia, or Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory (HSAM). First documented by Parker, Cahill, and McGaugh (2006), hyperthymesia refers to a rare condition wherein individuals possess an extraordinary ability to recall personal experiences with astonishing clarity, specificity, and chronological accuracy. Those with HSAM can retrieve the minutiae of their daily lives' dates, conversations, even emotional states—with precision that borders on the automatic. This heightened memory capacity, however, is not necessarily a gift. It often proves psychologically burdensome, as individuals are unable to filter or forget emotionally charged or traumatic episodes, resulting in a form of involuntary memory entrapment. In contrast to the narrative of dementia, in which memory loss leads to the fragmentation of self and the erosion of temporal orientation, hyperthymesia reveals an inverse pathology: the impossibility of moving forward from the past. Where memory loss distorts identity by erasing connective tissue between past and present, memory excess disrupts identity by freezing the subject in an ever-present past. The hypermnestic mind is one in which memory is not voluntary or selective, but intrusive an unrelenting tide of recollection. Research suggests that individuals with HSAM often report obsessive tendencies, emotional dysregulation, and difficulty in adapting to change (LePort et al., 2012). Their autobiographical memory becomes a double-edged sword: simultaneously a source of detailed self-knowledge and a barrier to emotional resilience.

In literature, though depictions of hyperthymesia are rare compared to amnesia or dementia, characters who exhibit exceptional memory traits often struggle under the psychological weight of their recollections. For instance, in novels such as *The Housekeeper and the Professor* by Yōko Ogawa or *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes, memory serves less as a tool of empowerment and more as a locus of existential crisis, especially when it resists revision or erasure. These texts dramatize the idea that memory, in its extremes, may hinder rather than help self-understanding. Viewed alongside the fragmented, unreliable cognition of a narrator suffering from dementia, hyperthymesia offers a critical counterpoint. On the

surface, the two conditions appear diametrically opposed: one marked by forgetting, the other by total recall. Yet both raise essential questions about the function of memory in the maintenance of psychological equilibrium. If one cannot remember, one loses continuity of self; but if one cannot forget, one becomes mired in the past, unable to heal, adapt, or narrate the present coherently. This tension has been explored in cognitive theory as well. Paul Ricoeur, in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), argues that forgetting is not merely the absence of memory but a necessary condition for narrative and ethical self-formation. Forgetting enables the prioritization of meaning over detail, the construction of a self that is not overdetermined by every remembered fact. In this light, both hyperthymesia and dementia constitute narrative disruptions—pathologies not just of memory, but of story. The inability to forget is just as compromising to narrative identity as the inability to remember.

In drawing a conceptual contrast between memory excess and deficit, literature offers a unique space to reflect on the limits of human cognition and the paradoxes of narrative coherence. A mind that forgets and a mind that cannot forget both illustrate the dangers of memory unmoored from moderation. What emerges is a nuanced argument: that memory, for all its epistemic and emotional value, requires both retention and oblivion in order to sustain a liveable, narratable self.

Narrative Disruption and the Reconstructive Function of Memory

The structure of *Elizabeth is Missing* is deliberately fragmented, echoing the cognitive disarray of its narrator and foregrounding the complexities inherent in memory as both a psychological and narrative process. Far from employing a conventional, linear chronology, the novel is constructed around an episodic, looping form that shifts fluidly between the protagonist's present-day confusion and vividly detailed memories of a decades-old disappearance. This temporal entanglement does more than simply reflect the protagonist's deteriorating cognitive state—it enacts a structural embodiment of memory itself, understood not as a passive storage system but as a dynamic and reconstructive faculty. Drawing upon Frederic Bartlett's foundational theory that memory is "an imaginative reconstruction" rather than an exact reproduction (1932), Healey's novel invites readers into a narrative experience shaped by disruption, distortion, and selective recall. Just as the human mind fills in gaps and reshapes recollections according to present needs and emotions, the novel's structure compels readers to interpret events through fragmented cues and narrative lacunae. The story is not delivered in a cohesive sequence but emerges in disjointed pieces that readers must actively assemble—mirroring the cognitive labour of memory reconstruction itself.

This layering of memory and narrative serves several critical functions. On one level, it collapses distinctions between past and present, treating both as equally real within the protagonist's mental landscape. Memories of past trauma are not framed as retrospective musings but as immediate experiences that intrude upon the present, blurring ontological boundaries. This mimetic portrayal of memory aligns with contemporary cognitive narratology, which holds that memory is always "re-remembered" reconstructed each time it is accessed and shaped by current context, emotion, and identity (Neisser, 1982; Conway, 2005). Healey's use of this technique compels the reader to experience temporal instability

not as a stylistic flourish but as a central epistemological concern. Moreover, by anchoring the narrative exclusively within the consciousness of a cognitively impaired narrator, the novel disrupts conventional hierarchies of narrative authority. There is no omniscient voice to correct or clarify events. Instead, the reader must navigate a text that withholds certainty, echoing the indeterminacy of lived memory. The past is filtered through subjective and unreliable recollection, making it difficult to distinguish hallucination from reality, and fact from affective residue. This aligns with postmodern critiques of historical and personal narrative, particularly those advanced by theorists like Linda Hutcheon, who assert that all acts of remembrance are inevitably acts of interpretation. In this sense, the narrative structure of *Elizabeth is Missing* functions as a meta-commentary on the limitations and possibilities of memory. The novel suggests that memory is not a means of recovering lost truth but a mode of meaning-making—one that is fragmentary, recursive, and emotionally inflected. It is through this interplay of disjointed moments, remembered and misremembered, that the novel constructs its emotional and philosophical depth. Ultimately, the story's form demands that readers not only witness but participate in the process of narrative reconstruction. Just as the protagonist sifts through fragments of her life to make sense of her world, so too must readers sift through disordered chapters, recurrent phrases, and cryptic clues to piece together coherence from cognitive chaos. This participatory narrative strategy transforms the act of reading into an analogue of remembering: active, interpretive, and profoundly uncertain.

Conclusion

Elizabeth is Missing is not merely a poignant narrative about aging or illness; it is a sophisticated meditation on the fundamental role memory plays in shaping narrative coherence and personal identity. By crafting a story through the lens of an unreliable narrator suffering from cognitive decline, Healey disorients traditional readerly expectations of truth and temporality. This narrative strategy does more than evoke empathy; it destabilizes the epistemological assumptions that undergird both fiction and lived experience. In the absence of clear recollection, where does truth reside? And when memory fails, what remains of the self?

The novel's structural and thematic preoccupations position it at the intersection of literary fiction, cognitive science, and philosophical inquiry. Its fragmented form mirrors the disruptions of memory loss, while its emotional arc explores the personal cost of disorientation, vulnerability, and forgetting. Yet, by invoking the opposite extreme, hyperthymnesia, or the condition of possessing an overabundance of autobiographical memory, the novel also gestures toward the other side of the mnemonic spectrum. Just as memory loss disintegrates the continuity of the self, so too does memory excess burden the individual with an inescapable past. The juxtaposition reveals a profound insight: that memory, whether absent or overwhelming, is not neutral; it exerts force over our emotional lives, our relationships, and the stories we tell about who we are. Through this lens, Healey's novel becomes an inquiry into the human need for narrative control, and the psychological balance required to sustain it. Memory is shown not as a static archive of the past but as a mutable, often unreliable process of interpretation, omission, and emotional filtering. The protagonist's desperate attempt to hold on to meaning through scraps of memory through notes, routines,

and reconstructed episodes symbolizes a universal human drive: the need to forge coherence in the face of entropy.

Moreover, the novel prompts critical reflection on what it means to know and to remember, drawing attention to the ethical dimensions of storytelling and truth. In aligning the reader's experience with the protagonist's disorientation, Healey collapses the distance between cognitive disorder and narrative strategy, asking us to consider not just what memory is, but what it does. It constructs our reality, frames our relationships, and shapes the narrative arc of our lives. And when it falters or overpowers the entire scaffolding of selfhood is called into question. In this way, *Elizabeth is Missing* stands as both a literary achievement and a philosophical provocation. It reveals the fragile architecture upon which identity and understanding are built, and it challenges us to think more critically and more compassionately about the role's memory plays in literature and life. Ultimately, Healey's novel reminds us that memory is not only a means of accessing the past, but a crucial faculty for navigating the present and imagining a coherent future. In both its presence and its absence, memory remains the silent author of our stories.

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