

**Living With Absence: The Psychological Effects of Disappearance in
*Then She Was Gone***

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Abstract

This article examines the psychological effects of disappearance in Lisa Jewell's *Then She Was Gone*. Although the novel is structured as a psychological thriller, its central focus lies in the long-term emotional trauma experienced by families of missing persons. Through the character of Laurel Mack, Jewell explores ambiguous loss, unresolved grief, guilt, and the gradual fragmentation of family relationships. Drawing on trauma theory and psychological studies of grief, this article argues that the novel portrays disappearance not as a single tragic event but as an ongoing psychological condition that destabilizes identity, memory, and interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that confronting painful truths and accepting reality are necessary steps toward emotional healing.

Keywords: Ambiguous loss, disappearance, psychological trauma, grief, family fragmentation

Introduction

Lisa Jewell's *Then She Was Gone* (2018) moves beyond the conventional boundaries of psychological thrillers by emphasizing the emotional and psychological devastation caused by a person's disappearance. While the novel revolves around the mystery surrounding Ellie Mack's disappearance, its deeper concern lies in exploring the enduring psychological effects of unresolved loss.

Ellie Mack, a bright and promising teenager, suddenly vanishes, leaving her family in a state of uncertainty and emotional turmoil. Her mother, Laurel Mack, becomes the emotional center of the narrative. Laurel remains trapped in psychological limbo because she cannot determine whether her daughter is alive or dead. The absence of closure keeps her suspended between hope and despair, illustrating how unresolved grief can obstruct the process of healing.

Ambiguous Loss and the Psychology of Disappearance

One of the most significant psychological dimensions of the novel is its portrayal of ambiguous loss. Psychologists define ambiguous loss as a situation in which a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present. Unlike death, which allows for ritualized mourning and emotional closure, disappearance leaves survivors in a state of unresolved grief.

For nearly ten years, Laurel Mack does not know what happened to Ellie. This persistent uncertainty prevents her from completing the grieving process. According to Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma disrupts an individual's sense of safety and continuity, often leading to prolonged psychological instability.

Trauma and Family Fragmentation

Ellie's disappearance does not only affect Laurel; it destabilizes the entire Mack family. Trauma often isolates individuals and disrupts relationships by undermining trust and

communication. Laurel and her husband Paul cope with grief in different ways, which leads to emotional distance and eventually separation.

Ellie's siblings, Hanna and Owen, also grow up in a household overshadowed by unresolved loss. The home that once symbolized safety becomes a constant reminder of absence, showing how disappearance affects not only individuals but the entire structure of family life.

Memory, Guilt, and Psychological Compulsion

Laurel repeatedly revisits the final moments she shared with Ellie, searching for clues she may have missed. Over time, these memories become idealized. Sigmund Freud's concept of mourning and melancholia helps explain Laurel's psychological state, as her emotional attachment to Ellie continues in a self-punishing and guilt-ridden manner.

This persistent guilt prevents Laurel from moving forward. Her life becomes centered on the memory of her missing daughter, demonstrating how trauma can reshape perception, memory, and emotional stability.

Healing Through Truth and Acceptance

The novel eventually reveals the truth about Ellie's disappearance, providing long-awaited closure. Although painful, this revelation allows Laurel to move from ambiguous loss to definitive grief. Confronting the truth becomes the first step toward psychological recovery.

Acceptance does not erase grief, but it enables Laurel to reconnect with her surviving children and rebuild her identity beyond the trauma of loss. The novel ultimately suggests that healing requires the courage to face painful realities.

Summing up

Then She Was Gone portrays disappearance not simply as a narrative mystery but as a profound psychological experience. Through Laurel Mack's prolonged suffering, the novel explores ambiguous loss, trauma, memory distortion, guilt, and family fragmentation. The narrative demonstrates how unresolved disappearance can trap individuals in emotional limbo, destabilizing identity and relationships. At the same time, it emphasizes that truth and acceptance can open the path toward healing.

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