

Anya Forger's Childhood Trauma in *Spy X Family* Season 1 (2022): Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi trauma masa kanak-kanak dalam *Spy × Family* Season 1 (2022) dengan menggunakan teori trauma Cathy Caruth. Meskipun anime ini secara luas dikenal sebagai komedi keluarga, karya tersebut secara implisit menggambarkan pengalaman traumatis melalui karakterisasi tokoh anak utamanya, Anya Forger. Penelitian ini berfokus pada pengkajian bagaimana trauma masa kanak-kanak direpresentasikan melalui struktur naratif, karakterisasi, dan simbolisme visual, serta bagaimana pengalaman traumatis Anya merefleksikan konsep trauma menurut Caruth sebagai pengalaman yang tidak sepenuhnya terasimilasi dan kembali melalui repetisi serta pemahaman yang tertunda (*belatedness*).

Kata Kunci: trauma masa kanak-kanak, teori trauma, kajian anime, *Spy X Family*

Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of childhood trauma in *Spy × Family* Season 1 (2022) using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Although the anime is widely recognized as a family comedy, it implicitly portrays traumatic experiences through the characterization of its child protagonist, Anya Forger. This research focuses on examining how childhood trauma is represented through narrative structure, characterization, and visual symbolism, as well as how Anya's traumatic experiences reflect Caruth's concept of trauma as an unassimilated experience that returns through repetition and delayed understanding (*belatedness*).

Keywords: childhood trauma, trauma theory, anime studies, *Spy X Family*

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, childhood trauma has become a central concern in interdisciplinary research, particularly in psychology, psychiatry, and cultural studies. Empirical evidence demonstrates that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including emotional neglect, abandonment, and unstable caregiving environments, significantly affect emotional regulation, attachment formation, and long-term psychological development (McLaughlin, Weissman, & Bitrán, 2021). Children exposed to repeated relational instability are more likely to develop heightened fear of rejection, hypervigilance, and insecure attachment patterns that persist into adolescence and adulthood (Humphreys, King, & Gotlib, 2020). These findings indicate that childhood trauma is not merely an individual psychological condition but a structural phenomenon embedded within social, familial, and institutional contexts.

Recent global reports further reveal that institutional care and repeated displacement remain pressing issues affecting children worldwide. UNICEF (2022) reports that children living in non-permanent caregiving systems are at higher risk of emotional insecurity and attachment disruption. Psychological studies confirm that repeated rejection or unstable caregiving contributes to internalized self-blame and chronic anxiety about

abandonment (Gunnar & Reid, 2019). Such conditions illustrate how trauma in childhood often manifests not through explicit recollection of painful events, but through persistent emotional patterns and relational insecurity.

Beyond clinical and developmental frameworks, trauma has increasingly been examined within literary and cultural studies. Cathy Caruth reconceptualizes trauma not as the event itself, but as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment it occurs (Caruth, 1996). According to Caruth, trauma emerges through *belatedness*—a temporal delay between the event and its understanding—causing the traumatic experience to return indirectly through repetition, emotional reaction, and narrative gaps (Caruth, 1996). Trauma, therefore, is characterized by disruption in memory and temporality, where the subject does not possess the event as a coherent narrative but encounters it repeatedly through symptoms and reenactment.

Within visual and narrative media, trauma representation frequently operates through fragmentation, silence, and symbolic displacement rather than explicit testimony. Whitehead (2004) argues that trauma fiction resists linear storytelling because traumatic memory itself is structurally disjointed. In

visual narratives, this disruption is often conveyed through spatial isolation, exaggerated emotional responses, or withheld backstory. Such strategies align with Caruth's assertion that trauma is experienced too soon to be fully known and therefore returns in altered, indirect forms (Caruth, 1996).

In contemporary popular culture, anime has emerged as a significant site for exploring psychological themes, including identity crisis, war memory, and childhood vulnerability. Although frequently categorized as entertainment, anime often embeds complex psychological and socio-political issues within stylized narratives (Napier, 2005). The flexibility of anime's visual language—through symbolic imagery, exaggerated expressions, and temporal shifts—enables the representation of trauma without relying on explicit verbal articulation (Lamarre, 2009). Consequently, anime provides a productive medium for analyzing trauma as a structural and affective phenomenon.

One notable example is *Spy × Family Season 1* (2022), which narrates the formation of a pseudo-family in a fictional post-war environment marked by political tension. While the series is widely promoted as a comedy-action anime, its narrative structure subtly embeds themes of abandonment, secrecy, and institutional pressure. The child protagonist, Anya Forger, is depicted as having experienced repeated adoption and rejection before being adopted by Loid Forger. These experiences are introduced briefly and without detailed exposition, creating a narrative gap regarding her traumatic past. Instead of presenting explicit flashbacks, the anime portrays trauma indirectly through Anya's exaggerated fear of abandonment, excessive need to maintain family harmony, and disproportionate anxiety in evaluative settings such as Eden Academy.

Prastyadi and Pandin (2024) analyze the representation of childhood trauma in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* using Freudian psychoanalysis to reveal the complex relationship between trauma and emotion in fictional narrative. Through close reading of intrinsic narrative elements including plot, character, and conflict, the study demonstrates that the protagonist's adult emotional turmoil reflects formative childhood experiences that continue to shape cognition and behavior (Prastyadi & Pandin, 2024). This research is relevant to narrative trauma studies because it shows how trauma is embedded in fictional narrative structure and character development, offering an empirically grounded model for exploring trauma in contemporary fiction from a psychological and literary perspective. Safari Monfared et al. (2023) apply Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to analyze traumatic reenactment and melancholia in Gillian

Flynn's contemporary American fiction. Focusing on novels such as *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*, they argue that childhood abuse and neglect shape the narrative through flashbacks, hallucinations, and repeated traumatic imagery that persist into adulthood (Safari Monfared et al., 2023). The study underscores how literary fiction can represent trauma not only through event description but through styles of narrative repetition and psychological haunting. This framework supports the present study's methodological approach to reading trauma as narrative structure rather than explicit content.

Dhini and Haryanti (2024) investigate childhood trauma representation through elements of Gothic horror in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. Using a qualitative close reading guided by Caruth's trauma theory, they find that gothic symbols such as ominous settings, distortion of time, and supernatural figures function as metaphors for unresolved psychological wounds including loss, loneliness, and betrayal (Dhini & Haryanti, 2024). This research is relevant because it demonstrates how genre conventions in literature can encode childhood trauma indirectly through symbolic narrative devices, an insight applicable to the semi-symbolic narrative strategies in anime texts such as *Spy × Family*.

Nopriyanto (2024) explores the portrayal of trauma in young adult literature, examining Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* through Caruth's trauma theory. The study identifies key trauma symptoms such as hallucinations and panic attacks as the narrative strategy portraying the protagonist's response to catastrophic war events. It contributes to trauma studies in literary fiction by demonstrating how trauma can be embedded in narrative form and character psychology rather than described through explicit exposition, highlighting the narrative and thematic complexity of trauma representation in contemporary novels.

Academic research on trauma has traditionally focused on literary texts, especially novels, as primary sites for examining how trauma disrupts narrative coherence. Studies in trauma theory argue that traumatic experiences resist linear storytelling and are instead represented through fragmented narration, repetition, and temporal disruption. Maslida and Wajiran's (2025) analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates that trauma is represented through delayed recollection (*belatedness*), retrospective narration, and recurring identity conflicts. Their findings support the view that trauma does not remain confined to the past but continuously shapes narrative structure and character consciousness (Maslida & Wajiran, 2025).

Beyond literary studies, trauma research has expanded into audio-visual media, particularly film, where visual elements play a central role in representing psychological distress. Visual narratives allow trauma to be communicated through facial expressions, bodily movement, spatial isolation, and atmosphere rather than explicit dialogue. Rahmawati and Nugroho's (2024) study on the film *27 Steps of May* reveals that trauma is represented through non-verbal symptoms such as social withdrawal, emotional suppression, and limited verbal interaction. These representations highlight how trauma can be embedded in visual and emotional cues, reinforcing the idea that trauma often manifests indirectly in narrative media (Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2024).

Anime as a medium shares similarity with film but also possesses unique narrative and visual characteristics that make it especially suitable for trauma analysis. Anime frequently employs symbolic imagery, exaggerated or restrained emotional expressions, and flexible narrative time. According to Napier (2005), anime often explores psychological complexity and identity crises through visual metaphors and stylized storytelling. These characteristics allow traumatic experiences to be represented subtly, aligning with Caruth's concept of *belatedness*, where trauma emerges indirectly through narrative repetition and visual symbolism rather than explicit exposition (Napier, 2005).

In *Spy X Family*, childhood trauma is rarely presented through dominant flashbacks or explicit explanations of past suffering. Instead, trauma is suggested through emotional distance, defensive humor, and the characters' persistent need to conceal their true identities. Such narrative strategies suggest that trauma operates as an underlying psychological structure rather than a visible plot element. This approach reflects Caruth's argument that trauma is often known only through its effects and repetitions, not through direct memory (Caruth, 1996).

Another significant dimension of *Spy X Family* is its juxtaposition of comedic elements with emotionally restrained characters. This contrast between humor and psychological tension can be interpreted as a coping mechanism within the narrative. Trauma studies suggest that humor and role-playing are often used as defense strategies to manage unresolved emotional pain (Herman, 1992). In this sense, the light-hearted tone of the anime does not negate the presence of trauma, but rather conceals it beneath comedic performance.

Furthermore, the pseudo-family structure in *Spy X Family* reflects a broader trauma-related theme concerning attachment and safety. While the family provides temporary emotional stability, it is built on deception, which prevents genuine emotional

disclosure. Trauma theory emphasizes that recovery requires safety, trust, and truthful narration of past experiences—conditions that are only partially fulfilled in the anime's family structure (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1996). This tension reinforces the idea that trauma recovery is non-linear and incomplete.

Despite the growing body of trauma research, several gaps remain evident. First, trauma studies have predominantly focused on canonical literary texts or realist films, leaving mainstream anime underexplored within trauma theory frameworks. Second, existing anime scholarship tends to emphasize genre, aesthetics, or cultural identity rather than psychological trauma as a structural narrative mechanism. Third, limited studies specifically apply Cathy Caruth's concepts of unassimilated experience, belatedness, and repetition to child characters in animated series framed as family entertainment.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the representation of childhood trauma in *Spy × Family Season 1* (Episodes 1–12) through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. By examining narrative structure, characterization, and visual symbolism, this research seeks to demonstrate that trauma in the anime is not merely a background element but a latent psychological structure shaping Anya Forger's emotional responses and relational dynamics. This study contributes to expanding trauma theory into contemporary popular anime and offers a critical perspective on how childhood trauma is represented within seemingly light-hearted visual narratives.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of childhood trauma in *Spy × Family Season 1* (2022) using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The primary data source is Episodes 1–12 of the anime series, collected through close observation of dialogues, character behaviors, narrative structure, and visual symbolism that indicate manifestations of trauma experienced by Anya Forger. The data analysis begins with repeated viewing to understand the storyline and psychological context, followed by identifying relevant scenes that reflect trauma. The findings are then interpreted using Caruth's concepts of unassimilated experience, belatedness, and repetition to explain how childhood trauma is represented structurally and visually within the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rather than functioning solely as a family comedy, *Spy × Family Season 1* (2022) embeds childhood trauma as a latent psychological structure that shapes both

characterization and narrative progression. The series introduces Anya Forger as a child who has experienced repeated rejection prior to adoption, yet her past is presented only fragmentarily. This narrative withholding reflects Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an unassimilated experience—an event that resists direct articulation and coherent recollection. Instead of explicit flashbacks, trauma emerges through Anya's disproportionate fear of abandonment, excessive selfblame, and anxiety in evaluative situations. Minor conflicts are interpreted as existential threats, demonstrating trauma's belated return within present contexts.

Furthermore, the constructed and secretive nature of the Forger family reinforces emotional instability, while Anya's telepathic ability symbolically represents premature exposure to adult anxieties. Accordingly, this study argues that *Spy × Family* represents trauma not as overt tragedy but as an underlying psychological infrastructure that subtly organizes social interaction, perception, and emotional response within the narrative. This implicit representation challenges conventional assumptions that trauma must be dramatized explicitly to be recognized. Instead, the series demonstrates how popular visual media can encode psychological depth beneath comedic surface structures.

Representation of Childhood Trauma in *Spy x Family* Season 1

In visual anime narratives, trauma is frequently conveyed through aesthetic and structural strategies rather than explicit exposition. As Susan Napier (2005) argues, anime often embeds complex psychological themes beneath stylized visual storytelling. In *Spy × Family* Season 1 (2022), childhood trauma is not presented through detailed flashbacks but through narrative omission, emotional repetition, and symbolic framing. This approach aligns with Cathy Caruth's view that trauma resists direct articulation and reemerges belatedly through affective responses (Caruth, 1996).

The fragmented backstory, exaggerated fear of abandonment, and spatial isolation in key scenes collectively construct trauma as a latent psychological condition. Thus, trauma functions not as spectacle but as an underlying structure shaping character perception and relational dynamics.

Childhood Trauma and Fragmented Narrative Structure

The fragmented narrative structure of *Spy × Family* is one of the primary methods by which childhood trauma is represented. Instead of offering a comprehensive chronological narrative of Anya's history, the anime discloses only fragmented details on her childhood. This narrative incompleteness illustrates Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma cannot be entirely articulated due to the experience remaining psychologically unassimilated. The subsequent scenes illustrate how fragmented narrative enables the listener to progressively comprehend the effects of Anya's terrible history.



Figure 1. Anya has been adopted several times
Episode 1 [00.05.35 – 00.05.45]

Orphanage : "Hey, Anya, she's the smartest kid here. A bit of a silent type, but a good kid. And a weird, creepy kid, too. Just get adopted already, will you?"

Anya is introduced as a child who has been "returned" multiple times by previous adoptive families. This information is conveyed briefly through the orphanage caretaker's dialogue, without any in-depth background explanation. The scene that introduces Anya at the orphanage, where the caretaker briefly mentions that she has been returned by several adoptive families, shows a fragmented narrative structure related to trauma. The information about Anya's past is delivered very briefly and without further explanation. There are no flashbacks or direct expressions of Anya's feelings regarding her repeated rejection. This narrative gap suggests that Anya's traumatic experience is not fully understood or processed at the time it occurred. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is often experienced as an unassimilated experience, meaning that the subject cannot immediately comprehend the event when it happens.

In addition, Anya's perspective is completely absent in this scene, and the caretaker speaks about her rejection in a casual tone. This shows how Anya's trauma is normalized and not treated as an important emotional experience. Based on Caruth's theory, trauma often appears through silence and lack of narrative explanation rather than clear memory. Therefore, the fragmented narrative structure in this scene represents Anya's

childhood trauma by showing it indirectly. The trauma is not clearly told, but it continues to influence Anya's behavior and emotional responses throughout the series.



Figure 2. Anya is afraid of being abandoned
 Episode 1 [00.20.00 – 00.20.10]

Anya : "Anya wants to go home. To Father and Anya's home."

Loid : "Are u sure?"

Anya : "Anya will cry if you leave Anya behind."

The dialogue represents a fragmented narrative structure that reflects Anya's childhood trauma. In this scene, Anya does not explain her fear through a clear story about her past experiences of abandonment. Instead, her trauma appears indirectly through short and emotional statements. This narrative fragmentation shows that Anya's traumatic experience is not fully understood or processed at the time it happened. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is often experienced as an unassimilated experience, where the subject cannot fully comprehend the event and therefore cannot narrate it completely and coherently.

Furthermore, Anya's repeated emphasis on "home" and fear of being left behind indicates how trauma returns in the present without being consciously remembered. Rather than recalling her past rejection, Anya reenacts her trauma through emotional dependency and anxiety. In Caruth's theory, trauma does not appear as a clear memory but emerges through emotional reactions and repetition. Therefore, the fragmented narrative structure in this scene functions as a way to represent trauma indirectly, showing how Anya's unresolved childhood trauma continues to shape her behavior and emotional responses within the Forger family.



Figure 3. Anya was stressed during the interview
 Episode 4 [00.17.45 – 00.18.12]

Teacher : "If you gave your father and mother a score, what would it be?"

Anya : "A perfect 100! I love both my father and mother because they are fun!

I want to be with them forever!"

The scene in which Anya gives her parents a perfect score and states that she wants to stay with them forever reflects a fragmented narrative structure related to childhood trauma. In this scene, Anya expresses strong happiness and idealization toward her adoptive parents, but she does not mention her past experiences of abandonment or rejection. The absence of any reference to her previous trauma creates a narrative gap, where the past is excluded from the present conversation. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma often appears as an unassimilated experience, meaning that the subject cannot fully process or coherently narrate the traumatic event.

Furthermore, Anya's use of absolute and emotional expressions such as "perfect 100" and "forever" shows that her response is driven by emotional need rather than reflection. Instead of remembering or explaining her past trauma, Anya unconsciously responds by idealizing her current family relationship. In Caruth's trauma theory, trauma does not always return as a clear memory but can appear indirectly through emotional reactions and repetition. Therefore, the fragmented narrative structure in this scene represents Anya's unresolved childhood trauma by showing how it is hidden behind exaggerated positivity, while still shaping her emotional attachment to the Forger family.

Childhood Trauma and Characterization of Anya Forger

In addition to narrative structure, childhood trauma is also reflected through Anya Forger's characterization. Throughout the series, her emotional responses, self-image, and relationships with others continually demonstrate the enduring impacts of abandonment and insecurity. Instead of articulating her previous traumatic traumas expressively, Anya subconsciously manifests trauma through fear, remorse, and an overwhelming anxiety around the potential loss of those close to her. The following scenes illustrate how these behavioral patterns contribute to her characterization as a traumatized child.



Figure 4. Anya feels guilty
Episode 2 [00.08.17 – 00.08.21]

Anya : “A child makes you unpopular? Is Anya just a bother?”

The dialogue “A child makes you unpopular? Is Anya just a bother?” plays an important role in the characterization of Anya as a child shaped by past rejection. Through this question, Anya reveals her fear of being a burden to others and her anxiety about being unwanted. Although she does not directly mention her past experiences of abandonment, this moment suggests that such experiences continue to influence how she sees herself. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is often an unassimilated experience, meaning that the traumatic event is not fully understood when it happens and later appears indirectly through emotional reactions.

In terms of characterization, Anya is portrayed as a child who internalizes the possibility of rejection and questions her own worth in relationships. Rather than recalling her trauma as a clear memory, she reenacts it through self-doubt and fear of being disliked. In Caruth's theory, trauma does not return as a complete narrative but emerges through repeated emotional responses in the present. Therefore, this scene characterizes Anya as a traumatized child whose past experiences of rejection continue to shape her self-perception and emotional vulnerability, even when she is part of a seemingly safe family environment.



Figure 5. Anya has difficulty in social relations
Episode 7 [00.13.50 – 00.13.55]

Anya : “School is scary...”

The line “School is scary...” spoken by Anya after her apology to Damian is rejected functions as an important moment of characterization that reflects her unresolved childhood trauma. This reaction shows that Anya does not experience the rejection as a simple social conflict, but as an emotionally threatening situation. She does not explain why school feels frightening; instead, her fear is expressed through a short and emotionally loaded statement. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is often experienced as an unassimilated experience, where the subject cannot fully process the event and therefore expresses it indirectly through emotional responses rather than clear narration.

In terms of characterization, this scene portrays Anya as a child who associates rejection with danger and insecurity. Rather than remembering or explaining her past experiences of abandonment, Anya reenacts her trauma through fear and withdrawal. In Caruth's trauma theory, trauma returns not as a coherent memory but as an emotional reaction that repeats itself in the present. Therefore, Anya's statement that school is “scary” characterizes her as a vulnerable child whose past trauma continues to shape her perception of social spaces, making school a symbolic site of emotional threat rather than a neutral environment.

Childhood Trauma and Visual Symbolism

Furthermore to narrative and characterization, *Spy × Family* employs visual symbolism to describe Anya's psychological condition. Color scheme, framing, camera angle, lighting, and spatial arrangement are all examples of cinematic aspects that serve as visual indicators of emotional fragility, loneliness, and insecurity. Viewers are able to decipher Anya's emotional condition through the anime's visual language thanks to these visual techniques that support the portrayal of trauma without exclusively depending on spoken.



Figure 6. Anya Orphanages Episode 1 [00.05.45]

The orphanage in *Spy × Family* is depicted with dull colors, flat lighting, and static framing. These visual choices create a cold, unwelcoming atmosphere, making the orphanage feel less safe or caring. The low-contrast color palette and even lighting reduce any sense of warmth or intimacy, emphasizing monotony and emotional emptiness. Visually, this setting represents Anya's psychological condition as a child living without a stable emotional attachment. In this context, her childhood trauma is not conveyed through dialogue but through the oppressive visual atmosphere.

Furthermore, the framing often places Anya at the edge of the screen or visually separates her from other children. This composition creates a sense of isolation and alienation, even though Anya is physically present in the same space as others. Such framing functions as a visual symbol of Anya's repeated experiences of rejection and return. She is not portrayed as part of the group, but as a figure who is consistently positioned at a distance. This technique indicates that Anya's trauma operates at the level of visual structure rather than solely through narrative explanation.

Overall, the use of color, lighting, and framing in the orphanage scenes forms a visual fragmentation that reflects Anya's traumatic experience. The trauma is not explained explicitly but is represented through visual language that conveys disconnection, insecurity, and the absence of belonging. Thus, visual symbolism in the orphanage serves as a narrative tool that strengthens Anya's characterization as a child growing up in an

emotionally fragmented condition, where warmth and emotional connection have not yet been fully established.



Figure 7. Anya's Eyes While Reading Loid's Mind Episode 1 [00.06.45]

The close-up shot of Anya's eyes when she reads Loid's thoughts, enhanced by excessive visual effects such as flashes of light, facial distortion, and rapid shifts in focus, emphasizes the psychological intensity of her experience. By positioning Anya's eyes at the center of the frame, the scene directs the audience's attention to the mental pressure she is undergoing. This visual technique indicates that Anya's telepathic ability is not merely a special power, but a continuous psychological burden. As a result, mind-reading is represented as a demanding and overwhelming process rather than a neutral or pleasurable experience for a child.

In terms of trauma representation, Anya's eyes function as a symbol of premature awareness, suggesting that she is exposed to knowledge beyond what is appropriate for her age. The exaggerated visual effects reinforce the idea that the adult world, with its threats and pressures, constantly intrudes into Anya's consciousness without limitation. The visual distortion highlights the imbalance between Anya's childlike body and the heavy psychological burden she carries. Consequently, trauma is represented as a form of ongoing overexposure, conveyed through visual symbolism rather than explicit dialogue, emphasizing the disconnect between Anya's biological age and her psychological experience.



Figure 8. Prestigious School Interview Episode 4 [00.16.28]

The interview room in *Spy × Family* is depicted as large, empty, and symmetrical, with Anya positioned as a small figure at the center of the space. This visual

imbalance between Anya's body and the surrounding environment emphasizes her vulnerability within an institutional setting. The emptiness and rigid symmetry of the room create a cold and intimidating atmosphere, suggesting that the space is designed for evaluation and control rather than comfort. Visually, Anya appears overwhelmed by the scale of the room, which symbolizes her lack of power when confronted with an authoritative institution.

The frequent use of high-angle shots further reinforces Anya's powerlessness. By positioning the camera above her, the scene visually places Anya in an inferior position, as if she is constantly being observed and judged. This composition represents institutional trauma, where the pressure of authority generates fear and insecurity rather than physical harm. Through spatial design and camera perspective, the scene uses visual symbolism to depict how Anya is psychologically "consumed" by the space, reflecting how institutional power contributes to her sense of helplessness and emotional insecurity.

Childhood Trauma through Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory

This study employs Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as its primary analytical framework. Caruth (1996) conceptualizes trauma not merely as a violent or catastrophic event, but as an unassimilated experience that resists immediate comprehension and returns belatedly through repetitive emotional responses. Trauma, therefore, is characterized by temporal disruption, fragmentation, and indirect manifestation rather than explicit recollection.

In *Spy × Family* Season 1 (2022), childhood trauma is not articulated through detailed narration of past suffering. Instead, it surfaces through disproportionate anxiety, recurring fear of abandonment, and behavioral repetition. By applying Caruth's concepts of unassimilated experience, belatedness, and repetition, this section examines how trauma operates as a latent psychological structure that shapes Anya's perception, social interaction, and emotional regulation throughout the narrative.

Trauma as Unassimilated Experience

The first concept provided by Cathy Caruth is trauma as an unassimilated event. Caruth (1996) asserts that because traumatic experiences exceed a person's ability to understand them, they are not fully understood at the time they occur. As a result, rather than clear memories, trauma is indirectly represented through emotions and behaviors. The sequence that follows demonstrates how Anya's emotional bond to her new family is still shaped by her unresolved childhood experiences.



Figure 9. Anya begs Yor to remain her mother
Episode 2 [00.11.44 – 00.11.45]

Anya : "Ah... Anya doesn't have a mother, it's so lonely~ I long for the existence of a mother."

When Yor considers leaving the fabricated family, Anya emotionally begs her to stay and become her mother, saying, "Ah... Anya doesn't have a mother; it's so lonely. I long for the existence of a mother." This scene represents Anya's childhood trauma as an unassimilated experience. Anya does not refer to a specific memory or explain how or when she lost her mother. Instead, the trauma appears as an emotional state of loneliness and longing that emerges in the present moment. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is unassimilated when it cannot be fully processed or understood at the time of its occurrence and therefore does not return as a coherent narrative memory.

Rather than recalling the loss of a maternal figure as a past event, Anya expresses trauma through an urgent emotional reaction and fear of abandonment. Her plea for Yor to stay shows that the absence of a mother remains unresolved and continues to shape her emotional responses. In Caruth's framework, trauma resurfaces indirectly through repetition and affect, not through conscious recollection. Therefore, this scene illustrates how Anya's trauma is experienced not as memory, but as an ongoing emotional need, revealing that her childhood loss remains unintegrated and continues to influence her attachment to maternal figures in the present.



Figure 10. Anya's anxiety about her family
 Episode 9 [00.11.45 – 00.12.00]

Anya : “Father and Mother must not fight.”

Anya’s anxiety that an “imperfect” family image may lead to negative consequences reflects how she internalizes social threats on a deeply personal level. This anxiety becomes explicit in the dialogue “Father and Mother must not fight,” which reveals Anya’s fear that conflict between parental figures will destabilize her sense of security. Although there is no immediate or direct danger posed by Loid and Yor’s disagreement, Anya reacts as if the family’s unity is fragile and constantly at risk. Her response suggests that family harmony functions as a survival condition rather than a normal relational dynamic, indicating an underlying trauma related to instability and abandonment. From the perspective of Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, this reaction illustrates trauma as an unassimilated experience. Anya does not consciously reflect on her past experiences of rejection or being returned to the orphanage. Instead, the trauma manifests implicitly through heightened sensitivity to signs of potential separation or failure. The fear that her “father and mother must not fight” demonstrates how unresolved trauma shapes her perception of the present, causing her to interpret minor conflicts as serious threats. Trauma, in this case, does not operate through reflective memory but through emotional overreaction and anticipation of loss. Thus, Anya’s behavior reveals that her childhood trauma remains unintegrated, re-surfacing as an extreme fear of rejection and an urgent need to preserve the illusion of a perfect family.

Belatedness: Delayed Understanding of Trauma

Belatedness, which explains why the meaning of trauma frequently develops long after the original incident has occurred, is another crucial component of Caruth’s trauma theory. People react strongly to current circumstances that instinctively mimic past experiences rather than directly recalling the unpleasant event. The scene that follows illustrates how Anya’s excessive fear of punishment is a reflection of the unresolved childhood trauma’s delayed reappearance.



Figure 12. Anya wants apologize to Damian
 Episode 7 [00.08.00 – 00.08.10]

Anya : “Anya must apologize to the second son!”

Becky : “The second son? Oh, you mean Damian? He’s already left. Come on, forget about him already.”

Anya : “If I don’t apologize to him, I can’t bring peace!”

After hitting Damian, Anya immediately anticipates extreme punishment, such as being expelled from school or abandoned, even before the school authorities respond. Her urgent reaction is reflected in her insistence, “Anya must apologize to the second son!” and “If I don’t apologize to him, I can’t bring peace!” Although Damian has already left and the situation has not yet escalated, Anya perceives the incident as a serious threat to her safety and belonging. This response shows that Anya interprets the conflict not as a normal childhood mistake but as a moment that could lead to irreversible consequences.

From the perspective of Cathy Caruth’s concept of belatedness, Anya’s fear does not originate from the present reality, but from the delayed return of past traumatic meaning. The anxiety surrounding punishment and rejection emerges before any factual outcome occurs, indicating that her understanding of the situation is shaped by earlier experiences of abandonment and return to the orphanage. According to Caruth, trauma is understood retrospectively, as its meaning surfaces later in unrelated situations. In this scene, the traumatic meaning of rejection is reactivated through Anya’s excessive fear of punishment, demonstrating how past trauma is “understood” belatedly through present anxiety rather than through direct memory or rational assessment.

Repetition: Trauma as Reenactment

The final concept discussed in this study is repetition, through which unresolved trauma continually reappears in present experiences. Rather than remembering the traumatic event consciously, the survivor repeatedly reenacts similar emotional patterns in different situations. In *Spy × Family*, this repetition is evident in Anya's recurring fear of failure, abandonment, and self-blame. The following scene illustrates how these repetitive emotional responses represent the persistence of childhood trauma.



Figure 13. Anya feels guilty toward Loid
Episode 4 [00.20.46 – 00.21.1]

Anya : “Father, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t do better on the exam.”

Anya : “Anya wants go to school, I have to go to school, or the mission will fail... And you’ll leave me.”

Anya’s apology to Loid, “Father, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t do better on the exam,” followed by her fear, “Anya wants to go to school... or the mission will fail, and you’ll leave me,” illustrates trauma through the concept of repetition. In this scene, Anya repeats a pattern of self-blame and excessive responsibility, even though her exam performance does not immediately threaten her place in the family. Her reaction shows that she interprets academic failure as a direct cause of abandonment, revealing how past experiences of rejection continue to shape her present behavior.

According to Cathy Caruth, repetition in trauma occurs when unresolved experiences are unconsciously reenacted rather than consciously remembered. Anya’s fear of being left behind mirrors her earlier experiences of being returned and rejected by adults. Instead of processing these experiences as events from the past, she repeatedly relives them through situations involving evaluation, failure, and authority. This scene demonstrates trauma as reenactment, where Anya’s emotional response is not proportional to the current situation but reflects a recurring pattern rooted in her unresolved childhood trauma.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that childhood trauma in *Spy × Family* Season 1 (2022) is represented as a latent psychological structure rather than as an explicitly narrated past event. By applying Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, particularly the concepts of unassimilated experience, belatedness, and repetition, the analysis reveals that trauma is embedded within narrative fragmentation, behavioral patterns, and visual symbolism. Anya Forger’s disproportionate fear of abandonment, excessive self-blame, and emotional hypervigilance indicate that trauma operates through delayed responses rather than direct recollection.

The absence of detailed backstory functions as a structural strategy that mirrors trauma’s resistance to coherent narration. Furthermore, visual elements such as spatial isolation, framing, and symbolic composition reinforce the representation of psychological instability. Thus, *Spy × Family* illustrates that anime, even within a comedic framework, can encode complex psychological realities. Trauma in this series functions not as overt tragedy, but as an underlying narrative infrastructure shaping perception, attachment, and social interaction.

SUGGESTIONS

Future research is encouraged to further interrogate *Spy × Family* Season 1 (2022) by situating its trauma representation within broader theoretical and interdisciplinary frameworks. While this study employs Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory to examine childhood trauma as a latent narrative structure, alternative approaches—such as attachment theory, affect theory, or visual culture studies—may generate more nuanced interpretations of character subjectivity and relational dynamics. Subsequent analyses could also investigate the continuation of Anya Forger’s psychological development in later seasons to assess the persistence or transformation of traumatic structures. Expanding the analytical scope would contribute to ongoing scholarly discourse on trauma in popular media and reinforce anime’s significance as a complex site of psychological and cultural negotiation.

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