

Unreliable Truths and Buried Traumas: The Craft of Suspense in Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River*

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Abstract—This paper examines the role of suspense in Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River*, focusing on the themes of unreliable truths and buried traumas. Both novels create a sense of uncertainty by employing unreliable narration and fragmented memories, which keep readers questioning the nature of reality. In *Shutter Island*, the blurring of madness and reality challenges the reader's perception of truth. In *Mystic River*, hidden traumas from the past continuously shape the present, creating an underlying tension that unfolds gradually. The construction of suspense is achieved not just through plot developments, but by exploring the emotional and psychological complexities that arise from unresolved past experiences. The paper argues that Lehane's use of suspense goes beyond traditional thriller tropes, serving as a tool to delve into deeper themes of trauma, identity, and moral ambiguity. The study demonstrates that suspense in Lehane's work is a means to explore the instability of truth and the long-lasting impact of the past, creating a more profound narrative experience that challenges the boundaries of reality and perception.

Index Terms—suspense, memory, trauma, violence, investigation

I. INTRODUCTION

Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River* exemplify a sophisticated approach to the psychological thriller genre, offering more than conventional suspense and crime-driven narratives. At the core of both novels lies an intricate exploration of unreliable truths and buried traumas, which generates a persistent sense of psychological tension. Rather than relying solely on external action or plot twists, Lehane constructs suspense through the emotional and cognitive disorientation of his characters, where memory, perception, and trauma become key elements in shaping reality.

A hallmark of Lehane's narrative technique is his use of unreliable narrators and fragmented storytelling. In *Shutter Island*, the disintegration of the protagonist's psyche is reflected in a disorienting narrative that blurs the boundaries between delusion and reality. The setting, a remote psychiatric institution, serves as both a literal and metaphorical space where the protagonist confronts his suppressed trauma. Similarly, *Mystic River* portrays the lifelong consequences of childhood trauma, where a violent incident echoes into adulthood, altering identities and relationships. The suspense in this novel stems from the psychological burden of memory and guilt, which silently influences the moral decisions of the characters. Both works highlight the instability of truth and the fragility of identity. Lehane's manipulation of narrative perspective and structure invites readers to question not only the characters' experiences but also their own understanding of truth and justice. The line between victim and perpetrator is blurred, reinforcing the idea that personal histories and inner wounds distort perception and morality.

This study explores how Lehane integrates themes of psychological trauma, fragmented memory, and distorted reality to create suspense that resonates beyond the surface of the plot. In doing so, he challenges the reader to confront uncomfortable questions about justice, accountability, and the limits of human understanding. Suspense, in Lehane's fiction, becomes a vehicle for examining the deeper aspects of the human condition. Through *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River*, he constructs emotionally complex narratives that reveal how deeply the past intrudes upon the present, and how truth itself can become both a source of revelation and illusion.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have critically examined Dennis Lehane's works through various thematic and psychological lenses. Vaishnavi and Krisnaveni (2025) focus on the element of mystery, while Wedhowerti (2023) explores epilogue structures. Vinothini et al. (2023), along with Salini (2022), delve into psychological conflict and internal turmoil. Salihi (2024) emphasizes the lasting impact of wartime trauma, and Akash (2022) combines psychoanalysis with crime

narratives. Singh and Saritha (2021) examine paradox and tragedy, and Beheshti and Shafieyan (2016) study power manipulation. Sabouri and Sadeghzadegan (2013) discuss trauma and mental distortion. Huhn (1987) and Dubey (2020) contribute to understanding narrativity and the cultural relevance of detective fiction. Together, these studies highlight the psychological depth and narrative complexity in Lehane's fiction.

III. DISCUSSIONS

A. Mapping Suspense in Lehane's Fiction

Suspense in Dennis Lehane's fiction functions as more than a mechanism to sustain reader engagement; it is intricately embedded in the psychological and thematic core of his narratives. In both *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River*, suspense arises through the careful manipulation of time, memory, and perception. Delatorre et al. (2018) say, "Suspense is a key factor in different areas and a wide range of narrative media motivates the strongest interest of computational creativity in the field" (p. 1). Lehane constructs plots where truth is not readily available, and the path to discovery is layered with uncertainty, emotional weight, and psychological complexity. Rather than depending solely on external action or rapid pacing, he builds tension through the internal experiences of his characters and the gradual disclosure of essential information.

In *Mystic River*, suspense is centered on the murder of Katie, the daughter of Jimmy. The narrative reconnects three childhood friends - Jimmy, Sean, and Dave, whose lives were forever altered by a traumatic event in their youth. When Katie is found dead, suspicion gradually shifts toward Dave, whose erratic behavior and vague explanations raise concern. The investigation unfolds alongside the resurfacing of past trauma, creating an atmosphere of emotional and psychological strain. Lehane handles suspense by withholding key information and using the characters' shared history to complicate the search for the truth. Sultonova (2023) mentions, "Crime fiction often features intricate plots that challenge readers to unravel clues and solve mysteries alongside the protagonist" (p. 89).

In *Shutter Island*, suspense is introduced with the arrival of Andrew (Teddy) at Ashecliffe Hospital, an isolated institution for the criminally insane. The setting immediately creates a sense of confinement and mystery. As the investigation into a missing patient unfolds, the protagonist's perception begins to deteriorate. Hallucinations, dreams, and fragmented memories complicate the narrative, gradually revealing that the protagonist is not a U.S. Marshal, but rather Andrew Laeddis, a patient at the institution. The suspense lies in the slow unveiling of this truth, with each scene deepening the ambiguity between reality and delusion. Lehane maintains psychological tension by immersing the reader in a mind that cannot be trusted, delaying the resolution until the final pages.

By mapping suspense through layered narrative structures and emotionally charged themes, Dennis Lehane redefines the conventions of crime and psychological fiction. His use of delayed revelations, unreliable perspectives, and fragmented timelines compels readers to navigate complex emotional terrain. His fiction not only sustains suspense but uses it as a lens to examine trauma, memory, and the fragile boundaries between truth and belief.

B. Collective Memory and Emotional Tension

In *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River*, Dennis Lehane explores how collective memory, the shared history and unspoken traumas of groups or communities, interacts with emotional tension to heighten suspense and deepen thematic complexity. These novels illustrate that memory is not a neutral record of the past but a site of distortion, repression, and emotional weight. Lehane uses this instability to generate tension not only within individuals but also across entire social environments.

In *Mystic River*, the neighborhood itself becomes a character shaped by past tragedy. The shared childhood trauma of the central figures lingers in the collective psyche of the community, fostering suspicion, grief, and an undercurrent of violence. The death of Katie reconnects childhood friends Sean, Dave, and Jimmy. Memories from their youth influence the decisions they make in the present, often leading to misjudgements or emotional regression. Dave's traumatic childhood experience contributes to his unstable behavior in adulthood. He is implicated in violent acts, such as the killing of Just Ray, the man who molested him years earlier. As the murder investigation progresses, long-suppressed emotions resurface, revealing how unresolved trauma contaminates interpersonal relationships. Emotional tension arises from the characters' inability to reconcile their past with their present, and the community's silence becomes both a shield and a burden.

Similarly, in *Shutter Island*, the isolated setting of Ashecliffe Hospital is steeped in an unspoken history of psychological suffering and institutional secrecy. As the story unfolds, the protagonist's past gradually comes to light. Previously as a soldier, he was involved in violent wartime acts, including the killing of innocents, women, children, and the elderly. These memories return to him in fragmented and distressing ways, contributing to his mental deterioration and diagnosis of schizophrenia. Salihi (2024) says, "The environment of *Shutter Island* is meticulously crafted to mirror the chaotic and fragmented structure of schizophrenia" (p. 3456). His hallucinations and delusions are deeply rooted in the trauma of his past, particularly the emotional turmoil connected to the death of his three children and his subsequent act of killing his wife. The emotional burden of these events overwhelms his present, disrupting his grasp on reality. The atmosphere of the asylum is dense with repressed memories and unresolved psychological trauma.

Gaps in both personal and institutional memory create a suspenseful environment in which truth remains elusive and emotionally charged.

Dennis Lehane's portrayal of collective memory underscores the emotional fragility of his characters and their environments. It reinforces the idea that trauma, when left unacknowledged, persists beneath the surface, shaping human behavior and community dynamics through tension, fear, and mistrust.

C. *Thrill as a Tool of Psychological Inquiry*

In Dennis Lehane's select novels, thrill is employed not merely to entertain or accelerate the plot, but to delve into the psychological dimensions of his characters. Lehane's use of thrill transcends conventional narrative twists; it serves as a lens through which internal conflict, fractured identity, and buried trauma are explored. Through immersive and emotionally unsettling storytelling, thrill becomes a vehicle for psychological inquiry, compelling readers to confront the mental instability and emotional repression of his characters. Samandarova (2024, p. 245) observes,

Creating a psychological portrait is one of the most effective methods in the field of crime analysis, in which the expert focuses on putting himself in the place of the victim and the criminal, feeling the experiences they experienced when they met, thinking as they think.

In *Mystic River*, thrill is rooted in emotional unravelling rather than traditional mystery elements. The murder of a young woman acts as a catalyst that forces multiple characters to confront long-repressed emotions and past trauma. The suspense surrounding the investigation, led by Sean and his partner Whitey, creates a charged atmosphere where guilt, fear, and mistrust proliferate. Suspicion falls on characters like Dave and Brendan, maintaining the sense of secrecy and danger throughout the story. However, the true source of thrill is the emotional discomfort that arises from facing buried truths. Each revelation threatens to collapse the carefully constructed identities and relationships of the characters. Samandarova (2024) comments, "A psychological thriller is a thriller genre novel or movie that focuses on the psyche of the characters and mentally manipulates the viewer or reader" (p. 246).

In *Shutter Island*, the rising sense of paranoia and disorientation directly reflects the psychological breakdown of the protagonist. As the narrative becomes increasingly unstable, the reader is drawn into a fragmented mental world where the distinction between illusion and reality becomes blurred. The protagonist, introduced as a U.S. Marshal, experiences hallucinations and false memories that distort his perceptions. He believes his doctor, Lester Sheehan, is his investigative partner Chuck Aule and misinterprets key events as part of a conspiracy. He also imagines moments of emotional connection and danger that do not exist in reality, such as embracing people who are not present or chasing non-existent threats. These experiences generate an ongoing sense of thrill, yet they simultaneously signal a deeper mental disturbance. Vinothini et al. (2023) comment, "Through Andrew's experiences, the novel demonstrates how traumatic events can shape a person's mental state and lead to a distorted perception of reality" (p. 654). The suspense in *Shutter Island* is thus not external, but internal, driven by the protagonist's deteriorating grip on reality and unresolved trauma. Every moment of tension propels both the story and the psychological unravelling forward, immersing the reader in the character's internal conflict.

Lehane uses thrill not as mere plot device, but as a method of uncovering psychological complexity. Through emotionally charged suspense, he invites readers to engage not just with the mystery, but with the deeper human struggles that lie beneath.

D. *Memory, Guilt and the Weight of the Past*

Memory is portrayed not as a straightforward recollection of facts, but as a fragmented and emotionally charged domain, shaped by guilt, trauma, and psychological repression in Dennis Lehane's novels. Rather than serving as a dependable guide to reality, memory becomes an unstable force that distorts perception and contributes to the tension that drives each narrative. In both novels, the past is an active presence, one that refuses to be forgotten or neatly resolved. The struggle to confront or suppress painful memories becomes central to character development and narrative suspense.

In *Mystic River*, memory and guilt remain central forces. The characters are deeply affected by a childhood trauma that remains unresolved and largely unspoken. Dave carries the burden of a violent experience from his youth, which continues to influence his behaviour and emotional state into adulthood. The guilt associated with a later crime and the emotional fallout from his actions isolates him from his family and community. The death of a young girl Katie serves as a catalyst for the resurfacing of these buried memories, forcing others to confront parts of their past they have tried to forget. The investigation becomes less about solving a crime and more about understanding how memory and guilt have shaped lives and decisions.

Similarly, in *Shutter Island*, memory is both elusive and manipulated. Teddy is plagued by recurring memories that intrude into his present, creating confusion between reality and delusion. Haunted by traumatic experiences, his recollections reveal a history of personal loss and psychological decline. His dependence on alcohol and the emotional distance from his wife contribute to a chain of tragic events. His wife, overwhelmed by her own mental instability, drowns their children, leading him to take her life in a moment of emotional collapse. These memories, suppressed and reshaped by the mind, form the psychological framework of the novel. Teddy assumes a new identity, dissociating from his past as a coping mechanism. The suspense intensifies as the truth about his identity and past actions gradually surfaces, demonstrating how deeply guilt and trauma can alter one's grasp of reality. The denial of traumatic truth

results in a psychological breakdown, where memory becomes both the source and the symptom of internal conflict. Teddy's love for his wife is echoed through his dream (Lehane, 2003, p. 188):

And Teddy kept waving, even though the girl wouldn't wave back as her mother carried her towards the mausoleum and the little girl stared at Teddy, her eyes beyond hope for rescue, resigned to this world, this sacrifice.

Lehane's portrayal of memory underscores its complexity and instability. In both novels, memory does not merely inform the plot, rather it constructs it, as characters attempt to live with, reinterpret, or escape the emotional consequences of their past.

E. *The Role of Trauma in Shaping Perception*

Dennis Lehane presents trauma as a critical force that distorts perception, fragments memory, and shapes the psychological landscape of his characters. Both novels emphasize how unresolved trauma deeply influences, how individuals interpret their surroundings, relationships, and sense of self. Rather than being a past event confined to memory, trauma is portrayed as a continuous, active presence that colors the characters' present realities. Jaber (2022) asserts, "Trauma is a result, a consequence, an outcome, and it does not occur in vacuum" (p. 115). Lehane uses this distortion of perception as a central narrative strategy, constructing suspense through the psychological dissonance of his protagonists.

In *Mystic River*, the lingering effects of childhood trauma follow the characters into adulthood. Their perceptions are shaped by early experiences that remain unprocessed and unresolved. Daves marked by a traumatic childhood incident, struggles with emotional isolation and mistrust, which ultimately affect his actions and relationships. When his past is revealed to his wife, the emotional fallout leads to alienation. Viashnavi and Krisnaveni (2025) comment, "Dave's character offers a compelling examination of the lingering consequences of trauma, and his issues with belonging and identity are closely connected" (p. 257). Lehane uses these fractured perceptions to explore how trauma clouds moral judgment, distorts truth, and leads to fatal decisions. In *Shutter Island*, trauma operates as a psychological defense mechanism. Vinothini et al. (2023, p. 654) mention,

Distress in *Shutter Island* is analysed by two main elements: the mindset of its protagonist, Andrew, and the traumatic experiences that have influenced his psychological condition.

The protagonist Teddy, unable to face a deeply painful personal loss creates an alternate identity and constructs a false narrative in which he assumes a new role entirely. This dissociation from the truth allows him to escape emotional devastation, but it also fragments his perception of reality. The island setting becomes symbolic, a liminal space suspended between delusion and truth, where trauma continually disrupts clarity and meaning. The suspense intensifies as the protagonist's perception begins to unravel, revealing how trauma has shaped every aspect of his experience.

Across both novels, trauma is not simply a background element but a shaping force in the construction of narrative and character. Dennis Lehane demonstrates that trauma creates a fractured lens through which the world is seen, which fosters suspense, emotional tension, and psychological depth. The search for truth in these stories is thus not only external but internal, as characters wrestle with the ghosts of their past and attempt to reconcile them with their present understanding.

F. *Detective Figures and the Search for Truth*

In the select novels, Dennis Lehane reimagines the traditional detective figures, not as a clear-sighted, impartial seeker of justice, but as a complex, emotionally burdened individual entangled in a flawed and uncertain search for truth. These detective figures, whether formally appointed or informally involved, serve as vehicles for exploring the instability of perception and the ethical ambiguity inherent in human judgment. Rather than solving mysteries through logic and detachment, these figures are deeply immersed in the emotional and psychological turmoil that they seek to untangle, complicating their ability to uncover objective truth. Stowe (1989) comments, "In conventional detective stories crime is usually seen as a symptom of personal evil rather than social injustice" (p. 257).

In *Mystic River*, the search for truth is equally clouded by personal history, emotional entanglements, and past trauma. The murder investigation revolves around the death of Jimmy's daughter, Katie, and is carried out by Sean Devine, a childhood friend of the three main characters. Sean's investigation is hindered by his own emotional involvement, particularly his suspicions about Dave, who he believes might be involved in the crime. The tension in Sean's investigation lies in the emotional biases that influence his judgments, such as the long-standing mistrust between him and Dave. While the investigation reaches its conclusion and the true murderer is revealed, the process leads to tragic consequences, including Dave's death at the hands of Jimmy, who mistakes him for the killer. Despite Sean's methodical approach, the investigation is shaped by fear, guilt, and a desire for closure, showing how emotional biases can lead to irreversible decisions.

The investigation in *Shutter Island* begins with what seems like a typical detective case: US Marshal Teddy Daniels is sent to Ashecliffe Hospital, a psychiatric facility, to investigate the disappearance of a patient named Rachel Solando. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the search for truth is far more complicated than initially presented. Teddy, alongside his partner Chuck Aule, unravels disturbing secrets about the hospital's experiments on patients and the suspicious behavior of its staff. He (Lehane, 2003) says, "...the patients here, apparently, suffer a variety of delusions" (p. 22). As Teddy investigates further, he becomes increasingly disoriented, and it is revealed that

he is, in fact, Andrew Laeddis, the very person he believes is the perpetrator of his wife's murder. The detective role is subverted here, transforming from an external search for facts to an internal confrontation with the self. This blurring of lines between the detective and the subject casts doubt on the reliability of the investigative process itself, highlighting how perception is shaped by psychological turmoil.

Through these redefined detective figures, Dennis Lehane critiques the ideal of the impartial investigator, revealing that the pursuit of truth is never purely objective. His fiction explores how the search for answers is fraught with moral complexity, emotional risk, and the haunting presence of the past.

G. *The Interplay of Innocence, Violence and Suspense*

Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River* intricately explore the fragile relationship between innocence and violence, using this tension to drive suspense throughout both narratives. In these novels, innocence is never an absolute; it is either corrupted by traumatic events or overshadowed by the looming threat of violence. "Violence is pervasive in literature because literary authors and their readers want to get at the inner core of human nature" says Carroll (2014, p. 1). Lehane blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, suggesting that the loss of innocence is often deeply entangled with personal guilt, collective silence, and irreversible acts.

In *Mystic River*, the disruption of childhood innocence by a violent event sets the tone for the entire narrative. The loss of innocence is explored through various characters, each of whom grapples with violence in different ways. For example, Katie's tragic death is rooted in her innocence; she is killed simply for loving Brendan and deciding to elope with him, unaware that her decision brings her closer to death. Similarly, Dave, whose childhood innocence is shattered by the trauma of being molested by Just Ray, experiences a violent transformation. His childhood suffering resurfaces in adulthood, and when he encounters Ray again, he kills him violently. These acts of violence lead to the suspension of Sean's investigation, as he seeks to understand the true motive behind the murder. The novel examines how this formative trauma echoes into adulthood, shaping characters' identities and relationships. As the story progresses, moments that might otherwise symbolize innocence, such as childhood memories or family bonds, are increasingly charged with unease, revealing how violence has permanently tainted the characters' world. This atmosphere of moral ambiguity suspends resolution, keeping the reader in a constant state of tension.

The interplay of innocence and violence in *Shutter Island* creates a haunting psychological backdrop. Innocence is embodied in the character of Dolores, whose relationship with Teddy deteriorates due to his drug addiction. This neglect pushes Dolores into psychological distress, leading her to commit the violent act of killing their three children. Dolores (Lehane, 2003) is "...clinically depressed. She was diagnosed as manic depressive" (p. 295). Teddy himself also becomes a perpetrator of violence when he kills Dolores. The line in the novel (Lehane, 2003, p. 279) depicts this like, "God loves violence. There is no moral order at all. There is only 'can my violence conquer yours?'" The novel is layered with concealed truths and emotional wounds, and what initially appears innocent, whether a memory, a belief, or a motive, slowly reveals a darker undercurrent. Suspense is built through the gradual erosion of certainty, as what seemed pure or trustworthy becomes tainted by violence and denial.

Lehane uses this interplay of innocence and violence to deepen the emotional stakes of his narratives. Violence is not merely physical but psychological, and innocence often serves as a mask for denial. Together, these themes create a sustained sense of suspense that grips the reader until the unsettling revelations at the end.

IV. FINDINGS

The analysis of *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River* reveals that Dennis Lehane uses suspense not just for plot development, but as a tool for psychological and emotional exploration. Suspense in both novels stems from unreliable perceptions, fragmented memories, and buried traumas. The distortion of truth through guilt and denial intensifies narrative tension. Traditional detective figures are reimagined as emotionally entangled individuals, highlighting the instability of truth. Lehane also contrasts innocence with violence, showing how trauma corrupts purity and deepens suspense. Overall, the novels use suspense to probe the complexities of memory, perception, and moral ambiguity.

V. CONCLUSION

Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island* and *Mystic River* demonstrate how suspense can be a powerful literary tool to explore the deeper layers of the human mind. Rather than relying solely on external action or mystery, Lehane crafts narratives where suspense arises from internal conflict, fragmented memory, and emotional trauma. His characters struggle with guilt, repression, and distorted truths, revealing how past experiences continue to shape perception and behavior. The detective figure, traditionally a symbol of clarity and justice, becomes a mirror reflecting psychological uncertainty and personal entanglement. Through the interplay of innocence, violence, and unresolved trauma, Lehane's fiction challenges readers to confront the fragility of truth and the weight of the past. Moreover, suspense in his novels serves not only to engage, but to interrogate the boundaries between reality and illusion, justice and revenge, memory and denial. Dennis Lehane's work stands as a compelling example of how genre fiction can be elevated into profound psychological inquiry.

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