

Trauma, Recovery and the Phantoms of History in Oates' *Carthage*

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Abstract

Carthage is a novel published by Joyce Carol Oates in 2014. It portrays the trauma and recovery experienced by a veteran of the Iraq War through the narrative of a girl's disappearance. Previous studies reveals that it's connection with ancient literature and can be read as a modern gothic story. However, this study employs Caruth's trauma theory to reveal the causes and manifestations of the protagonist's trauma in *Carthage* and then utilizes Judith Herman's theory of trauma recovery to explore how the protagonist emerges from trauma and returns to normal life. Ultimately it aims to create connections between the traumatized individual, society, and the historical past. The finding reveals that while depicting the brutality of war and individual trauma, this novel seeks to subvert and rectify historical accounts that have been marginalized or inaccurately represented by conventional historical perspectives. By showcasing the authentic traumatic experiences of these marginalized individuals, it endeavors to construct novel historical narratives.

Keywords: trauma, recovery, *Carthage*

1. Introduction

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 significantly influenced American in various nuanced ways, including the breakdown of communication, identity crises, alienation, loss of innocence, and heightened relationship tension etc. As the United States grappled with the implications of the attacks, American writers have extensively documented this event in their works, employing various literary techniques and perspectives to capture and portray the profound impact of the 9/11 attacks on both society and individuals. Among these writers, Joyce Carol Oates was categorized as writers who assume responsibility for "witnessing" and testifying to traumatic events that are pervasively cultural and, at the same time, experienced and interpreted as personal (Horvitz, Deborah M., 2000, p. 1). She observed the traumatic effect brought by 9/11 and Iraq war and intertwined it with her novel recent novel *Carthage* (2014).

The settings in the novel are intricately connected to the social environment the author faced during its creation. It is framed against the backdrop of the 9/11 events and extensively incorporates actual locations, such as the small town of *Carthage* in New York and the Dannemora prison. The former is "a place contending with memory and trauma" (Olson, Daniel, 2022, p. 109) due to its origin of the name — a Tunisian city historically destroyed repeated over the past 2000 years. The latter is reconstructed from the largest asylum in New York State during the nineteenth-century. The novel starts from a mysterious disappearance of a girl named Cressida Mayfield in *Carthage*. In the father's frantic but futile search, Corporal Kincaid, a veteran from the Iraq War, became their suspect. Due to Kincaid's memory confusion, he confessed to the crime without any self-defense. However, as the story unfolds, his psychological trauma and struggles were presented gradually and more suspense emerged.

This novel expresses Oates's reflections on the U.S.-Iraq war and the exposure of the dark side of the American justice system under the cover of modern civilization. It also displays the disasters and challenges faced by ordinary families in post 9/11 America, demonstrating the tremendous impact of historic events on the daily lives of ordinary people, and provoking readers to think about war and human nature. In narrating this story, the writer's purpose is shown evidently: to use fiction as a means to shoulder the responsibility of a witness and expose the trauma caused by the massacres committed by the U.S. military.

2. Literature Review

Previous researches indicate that *Carthage* can be read as a gothic novel. Olson demonstrates that the prison that incarcerates Brett Kincaid bears a striking resemblance to a Gothic edifice, and Kincaid in conjunction with the Mayfield sisters form a trinity within the framework of a Gothic fairy tale. Concealed transgressions and lingering remorse give rise to a resurgence of the suppressed, while clandestine misdeeds and sins of omission operate in a manner that engenders apparitions, adhering to well-established conventions and structures inherent in the realm of Gothic literature (Olson, Daniel, 2022). Olson's discoveries in these aspects substantiate his conclusion that *Carthage* is a traumatic Gothic novel that explores the dark aspects of human nature and the violence that lies beneath the surface of civilization. Ruszkiewicz argues that *Carthage* can be read as a modern retelling of the Troilus and Cressida story, with similar themes of love, loss, and war. The article also examines the character of Juliet in *Carthage* and how she evokes the figure of Cressida from Shakespeare's play (Ruszkiewicz, Dominika, 2021). Additionally, Ruszkiewicz discusses the theme of rage in both the medieval and modern works, highlighting the similarities and differences in their portrayal. Rau explores the confusion, despair, and anger experienced by the veteran characters like Kincaid, illustrating how their strained relationship with civilian society transforms them from protectors of the homeland into perceived or actual threats themselves (Rau, Kristen, 2017). Although their research delves into the awkward situations faced by veterans, there is relatively little discussion on how these veterans overcome trauma and return to normal life.

Some scholars focus on its narrative strategies in this novel. Tang Liwei highlights the multiple narrative angles and the conflicts of multiple discourses (Tang, Liwei, 2016); Xu Hui and Guo Qiqing concentrate on the utilization of various postmodern narrative strategies in the novel, such as genre blending, collage, and fragmented narration (Xu, Hui & Qiqing Guo, 2017). They posit that Oates's narrative strategies primarily serve as a guide for readers to reflect upon the post-9/11 era's anti-terrorism war, thereby exemplifying the interventionist value of literature in contemporary society. Although some explorations touch upon the challenges faced by veteran characters, but there is a noted lack of discussion on how these characters overcome trauma caused by war and successfully reintegrate into civilian society. Therefore, this article utilizes trauma theory to analyze the characters' life experiences in terms of trauma symptoms, causes of trauma, and trauma recovery. Through this analysis, it aims to explore the traumas they endure and how they move towards recovery, ultimately achieving self-reconstruction.

3. Representations of Trauma in Carthage

The earliest systematic exploration of "trauma" in theory can be traced back to Pierre Janet in France and Sigmund Freud in Austria, who approached the study of trauma from a psychoanalytic perspective. Since the 1980s, trauma theory has garnered widespread attention, particularly in the research on "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD) among Vietnam War veterans, marking a new phase in interdisciplinary studies. Scholars from various disciplines, such as Judith Lewis Herman, Cathy Caruth, Caroline Garland, Shoshana Felman, Doris Laub, Kathleen Laura MacArthur, Ruth Leys, and others, have delved into the study of trauma from different perspectives, including psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, education, feminism, film, political science, literary criticism, and more. Notably, Cathy Caruth has successfully applied trauma theory to literary criticism, making a significant impact in the field. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth defines trauma as:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (Caruth, Cathy, 1996, p. 11)

This definition has become an authoritative delineation of trauma, highlighting its characteristics of latency, fixation, and compulsive repetition. After conducting psychological and historical analyses of trauma, Caruth emphasizes that it is precisely this latency and repetition that constitute the core of traumatic pathology or symptoms. According to Caruth, literary works open a window of discourse for traumatic experiences, guiding readers to listen to experiences that can only be narrated through indirect and unconventional means. The purpose of trauma writing is not only to depict the enduring long-term negative impact of pain on individuals but, more importantly, authors often explore how individuals cope with trauma, overcome it, and return to normal life. Therefore, this study first uses Caruth's trauma theory to reveal the causes and manifestations of the protagonist's trauma in the novel and then employs Judith Herman's theory of trauma recovery to explore how the protagonist emerges from trauma and returns to normal life, ultimately this study aims to create connections

between the traumatized individual, society, and the historical past.

In *Flashbulb, Personal, and Event Memories in Clinical Populations*, Andrew Budson and Carl Gold assert that individuals afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) exhibit memories that are characterized by their excessive vividness and recurrence (Budson, Andrew E., & Carl A. Gold, 2017, p. 141). This observation is corroborated by psychologist Richard McNally, who identifies the hallmark characteristic of PTSD as the recurrent, involuntary recollection of the traumatic event through intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and vivid sensory memories commonly referred to as “flashbacks” (McNally, Richard J., 2006, p. 271). In essence, individuals experiencing nightmares and flashbacks may frequently engage in the rehearsing of memories stemming from their traumatic firsthand experiences, at times involuntarily, akin to the experiences of Kincaid, who frequently saw pictures of his comrades taking eyes, thumbs, and ears from insurgents as trophies.

While the occurrence of a traumatic event may leave the trauma survivor shocked, fearful, and saddened, leading them to consciously or unconsciously avoid the traumatic experience, the impact of the traumatic experience tends to manifest in various symptoms on the trauma survivor, and these symptoms primarily include flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive recollections, avoidance, emotional numbness, and hyperarousal. Many characters in the novel undergo varying degrees of trauma, such as Cressida, who experiences parental neglect and coldness, Juliet, who is betrayed by her sister and undergoes a breakup with her fiancée, and also there are parents who lose their children. However, it was Colonel Kincaid who suffered the most intense trauma. He was initially an innocent boy with high expectations from his mother, filled with aspirations for the future, and devoted solely to the protection of the nation and its people. Because of 9/11, the winter/spring in 2002 was marked by a surge of patriotic enthusiasm, “it had not been an era in which individuals were thinking clearly, still less young men like Brett Kincaid who seemed truly to want to defend their country against its enemies. (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 41)” However, the traumatic experience in Iraq War eroded his patriotic fervor and altered him from a vibrant, enthusiastic young man to a solitary and irritable individual.

Kincaid’s wartime experiences had obviously influence his personal relationships and psychological well-being, bring him a profound and lingering trauma. After Kincaid’s return from the army, he avoided mentioning anything related to the war, even to his dearest mother and fiancée Juliet, because he believes that no one can “comprehend his confrontation with evil and death”. (Herman, Judith, 1992, p. 66) At times, his cold gaze frightened Juliet so much that she would shudder with fear, and he even abused her during an argument as the war has put him through tremendous mental stress and his psyche has been on the verge of breakdown. Discharge from the battle field didn’t signify the ending of his suffering; in fact, the vivid imagery from the battlefield continues to resurface in his consciousness. Since his injury on the battlefield in Iraq and his subsequent discharge, he has been living in nightmare and illusions:

JESUS! WHAT THEY’D DONE.

What they’d done was.

Held her down. Jammed a rag into her screaming mouth.

Taking turns with her. Grunting, yelping like dogs.

Then afterward one of them sliced her face.

Sliced halfway up her face on both sides. Corners of her mouth he’d sawed-at with a Swiss Army knife.

So she was grinning. Like a crazy clown.

And her eyes open, staring. (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 130)

The scene of his fellow soldiers massacring an innocent Iraqi girl emerged as “the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth, Cathy, 1996, p. 2). Finally, he was “neurologically impaired — “retrograde amnesia”— incapable of remembering with any degree of clarity, accuracy,” (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 153), which lead to his admission of crime he did not commit — killing Cressida. He was so haunted by terrifying experiences on the battlefield that he cannot differentiate between reality and nightmares, and this confusion led him to conflate the atrocities committed by his comrades against Iraqi civilians with his own actions, erroneously believing that he was responsible for the death of Cressida. He thought his life was “worse than damned” and was “no more worth than trash” (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 389), so when he was accused of being the murderer of Cressida, he offered no words in defense, nor did he even procure legal representation for himself. His plea of guilt can be understood as a form of redemption for his actions on the battlefield in Iraq. During his days in custody at sheriff’s headquarters he’d considered “if I reach for a gun. One of their guns. They will shoot me point-blank, put me out of my misery (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 160).” It is a stark illustration of how the scars of war have not only physically marked him but have also deeply penetrated his psyche, leading to a state of utter self-abandonment.

4. Recovery Through Reconnecting

Traumatic experiences are mostly unspeakable and suppressed unconsciously although these traumas persistently repeat in the memories of survivors, disrupting their lives. To help trauma survivors understand their traumas and overcome them, Herman spent two decades doing research and clinical work with victims of sexual and domestic violence and outlined three stages of recovery for patients dealing with conditions such as hysteria, war trauma, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder, among which the process of reconnecting is designated as the third stage of recovery. The fundamental experiences of psychological trauma involve disempowerment and a sense of disconnection from others. Therefore, according to Herman, recovery is dependent on empowering the survivor and establishing new connections. (Herman, Judith, 1992, p. 133) In this phase, the survivor's pre-existing beliefs are challenged, and they must rediscover supporting beliefs to get over the trauma. (Herman, Judith, 1992, p. 205) In the case of Kincaid, before going into the battlefield, he firmly believed that fighting for the country was an honorable and respectable endeavor. However, witnessing his comrades massacre Iraqi civilians shook his long-standing patriotism, leading to self-doubt and self-abandonment.

The establishment of connections between Kincaid and Father Kranach, as well as with the external world, plays a crucial role in trauma survivors' recovery. During his stay in prison, Kincaid served as Father Kranach's closest and most trusted assistant in the Church of the Good Thief, he also participated in counseling sessions and did some editorial work for the prison newspaper. Lacapra contends that healing trauma is a process of narrating. For trauma survivors, articulating repressed traumatic memories is considered a necessary path to trauma recovery (Lacapra, Dominick, 2014). Therefore, one of the most effective way to address trauma is remembering, narrating, and communicating with others. Trauma survivors can find relief and ultimately move beyond trauma by speaking out the trauma, externalizing it, and providing solace to the suffering soul. The church and Father Kranach serve as the exact place for Kincaid to articulate his trauma. Through prayer, the corporal narrated his unspeakable trauma and his guilt, gradually he managed to regain his sense of self as a man, reclaiming his dignity and some semblance of his damaged soul.

Caruth has previously proposed the concept of "otherness" of traumatic voices, suggesting that the past trauma of the self encounters and resonates with the trauma of others. In the process of Kincaid's trauma recovery, a similar resonance occurred between Kincaid and Saint Dismas in the church. Saint Dismas, also known as the Penitent Thief or the Good Thief, is a significant figure in Christian tradition. He is mentioned in the New Testament, specifically in the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the Gospels, Dismas was one of the two criminals who were crucified alongside Jesus. While both criminals initially mocked Jesus, Dismas had a change of heart and repented, acknowledging his own sins and the righteousness of Jesus. Jesus promised Dismas a place in paradise, saying that Dismas will be with him in paradise. As a result, Saint Dismas is venerated as a model of genuine repentance and redemption, and his story is often cited in Christian teachings on the transformative power of faith and forgiveness.

Although Saint Dismas is not a widely recognized or traditional saint in the formal sense of the term. He is more like an ordinary person who have committed unspeakable acts, in this way he provides a way to God for individuals who find themselves in the most desperate circumstances, and who may have committed unspeakable crimes and feel very distant from God. For Kincaid, Dismas provides a potential path to redemption and spiritual solace. Just as Father Kranach said: "If Dismas is a 'real' saint or not is irrelevant, Brett. For all that matters is that men come to God through him, and find Jesus through him, who would otherwise be lost. That is enough sainthood." (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 387) Mirrored in the actions of the good thief, Kincaid came to understand the stillness and secrecy of the elusive god and began to recognize and reclaim a lost part of himself. The Church of the Good Thief had become his place of solace and comfort. "In this inwardness he came to understand that his maimed body was in its way a perfect body. As his maimed soul was in its way perfect." (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014) He used to loath himself for having been an executioner on the battlefield and, abandon himself entirely. However, influenced by the Father and the good thief, he rediscovered faith. He came to the realization that he didn't need to be a perfect person; instead, he could, like the reformed thief, courageously confront his mistakes. By earnestly seeking redemption, he believed he could still be in communion with God. This echoes with the epigraph of *Carthage*, which is also a quotation from *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky:

"Go at once, this very minute, stand at the cross-roads, bow down,
first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all
the world and say to all men, 'I am a murderer!' Then God will send you life again."

— SONIA TO RASKOLNIKOV, IN *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*, FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014)

It implies that through genuine repentance, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, and the willingness to face the

consequences, Kincaid may find a path to atonement and spiritual renewal, and that God will send him life again. Confronting trauma directly is both a fundamental condition and a crucial prerequisite for the healing and recovery of survivors. Under the influence of the “good thief” spirit, Kincaid finally began to accept his disreputable past in Iraq war and embark on a path towards renewal and rebirth.

Previously, Kincaid’s fantasy life was dominated by repetitions of the trauma, and his imagination was limited by a sense of helplessness and futility. But now he has “the capacity to revisit old hopes and dreams” (Herman, Judith, 1992, p. 202). After bravely acknowledging his imperfections and accepting himself, he began constructing a new identity. He volunteered to help teach literacy classes in the facility as and resumed his job as an orderly in the prison infirmary and in the mental unit of the hospice. He also tirelessly engaged in physical activities, such as sweeping, mopping, polishing the oak pews, repairing broken steps, washing the stained glass windows and cleaning the sculpted figure of Saint Dismas crucified.

While see the children in the open place, for the first time Brett felt the sharpness of his loss: “not only of his life as a man, a husband, but his potential life as a father, a man with a family”. According to Herman, this is the exact moment of Kincaid “rejoining the human commonality” (Herman, Judith, 1992, p. 214). Father Kranach and the good thief brought out the best in him, in return, Kincaid gained the sense of connection with the best in other people. When he bore witness to the testimony of a crime, he thought he should take the responsibility for restoring justice. To protect a young prisoner from harassment, he committed an attack and was given an “administrative punishment” of eight weeks in solitary confinement. The instinct to help this young stranger is so strong that he gave no consideration to the potential consequences or punishment he might face personally. Not long after, he once again attacked a guard to protect an inmate from being bullied by the guard, who was also involved in drug trafficking in addition to using violence. All of these actions highlighted his determination to atone and become a better person. In the fourth year of his incarceration, he finally agreed to see Cressida’s mother Arlette, signifying his newfound ability to bravely confront his traumatic past and break free from the repetition of earlier traumas. Arlette was traumatized by her lost daughter, to some extent, they were bound by a similar grief and got comfort from each other. Every time Arlette visited Kincaid, they just sit silently, however, this silence was so comforting to Kincaid that he gain powerful medication from it, he even began to regard Arlette as his friend. Reconnecting with Arlette signifies that he had finally mustered the courage to confront his past traumas and extend forgiveness to those who once misunderstood him. In this process, Kincaid’s damaged self-esteem has been restored and his important relationship had been established, which aligns with the criteria for the resolution of trauma proposed by the psychologist Mary Harvey. (Herman, Judith, 1992, p. 213)

5. The Phantoms of History in Carthage

Caruth suggests that history, much like trauma, is not an isolated and individualized experience. Instead, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of historical events and personal traumas, highlighting that they are intricately woven into the fabric of collective human existence. (Caruth, Cathy, 1996, p. 24) Similarly, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Lacapra engages in a profound exploration of the interconnection between history and trauma. He contends that trauma should not be perceived merely as a psychological or individual phenomenon; rather, it maintains a crucial linkage with societal and political dimensions (Lacapra, Dominick, 2014). Nevertheless, when historians undertake the narration of individual and collective traumatic events such as genocide, war, and rape, documenting the psychological trauma or post-traumatic effects proves to be a significantly more challenging endeavor than quantifying the number of fatalities or injuries. In this context, literature can serve as a means to aid our understanding of trauma and the concealed realities associated with it. The conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied in this text. Intertextuality and the allusion to history is omnipresent from the title *Carthage* (a warning of military hubris and overextension) to the names of characters, Zeno refers to the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea, Cressida reminds readers of a female character in the Trojan War. However, most importantly, Cressida’s disappearance in the novel conceals Oates’ more ambitious attempts. She seeks to redress or even subvert the grand official historical narrative in its traditional sense, giving voice to those who have been silenced and forgotten.

The trauma narrative in the novel supplements the voices that have been submerged in the grand official hero narrative because trauma is always “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, Cathy, 1996, p. 4). Indeed, one of the ways history is not merely professional or a matter of research is that it undertakes to create a critically tested, accurate memory as its contribution to a cognitively and ethically responsible public sphere. Memory of this sort is important for an attempt to acknowledge and relate to the past in a manner that helps to make possible a legitimate democratic polity in the present and future. (Lacapra, Dominick, 2014, p. 91) Commenting on the complicated relationship between historiography and fiction, Lacapra upholds that truth claims are “relevant” to works of art because it may “offer significant insights (or, at times, oversights)” into history (Lacapra, Dominick, 2014, p. 15).

Official history represents the culture and ideology in power, imposing a linear historical narrative onto the essentially nonlinear, pluralistic, fragmented, intersubjective experiences of oppressed groups. Simultaneously, it imposes the rulers' experiences and interpretations of societal life onto the oppressed, using the guise of "human right" to enforce its own interests upon the marginalized. In doing so, it suppresses and conceals the voices of minority groups in historical narratives. As exemplified in the Iraq War mentioned in the novel, official records present it as a just war, it is "a fight against the enemies of U.S. morality — Christian faith." (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 132) The Al Qaeda blew up the World Trade Center out of "a pure hateful wish to destroy the Christian American democracy like the pagans of antiquity had hoped to do, centuries before". (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 132) The officials declared there can be no choice, the U.S. has been forced to react militarily. The innocent people killed in the terrorist movement is called "collateral damage". In the U.S. military, it's "a principle of war". It's "a strategy". (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 310) However, Kincaid's trauma provide a counter-narrative. In the name of patriotism and national defense, this war inflicted irreparable harm upon countless Iraqi civilians:

"Fuck they deserved some fucking fun, the guys said. If you survived and had not been blown up or shrapnel in your guts or heads you deserved some fucking fun shooting at civilians like rats freaking in terror, cutting off a finger, an ear, a teeny dick, nipples — making a pouch of civilian-Iraq faces sewn together like to keep snuff in, or meds." (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 395)

In the United States, the war on terror has been used to justify actions that might otherwise be considered violations of constitutional rights. It has been employed to legitimize the suspension of certain constitutional rights, particularly for individuals accused of terrorism. This could involve measures like warrantless surveillance, detention without trial, and other tactics that limit civil liberties. However, Kincaid's trauma expose that wars are far more devastating than the officially claimed collateral damage in the name of self-defense. They perform acts of inhumanity, wanton massacres, and the brutal mistreatment of civilians, just like Zeno, Cressida's father, comments: "our bellicose American presidents, was pushing for conquests, ever more conquests, with disastrous results." (Joyce Carol Oates, 2014, p. 339)

The rumors suggest that Corporal Kincaid might have provided information against some of his fellow soldiers in an army investigation into atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers against Iraqi citizens, while Zeno wanted to know more about this investigation, he couldn't find any official record of it or charges against anyone in Corporal Kincaid's platoon. Most possibly, the U.S. Army conceal the result of the investigation, attempting to hide their misdeeds from the public. This incident suggests that the authorities are actively involved in the deliberate control and suppression of historical facts to shape a particular narrative or to safeguard certain interests.

6. Conclusion

By integrating the phantoms of history into the author's imagination, this novel brings marginalized and vulnerable groups onto the historical stage, providing them with an opportunity to articulate their experiences and convey alternative histories that diverge from the grand official narrative. In the postmodern context, historical writing no longer adheres to a continuous, linear trajectory; instead, it seeks fragmented and reflective spaces within the overarching historical context. This novel not only delves into the trauma of the Iraq War and explore the ways to heal it, but also further elucidate that the consequences of war extend beyond catastrophic impacts on nations and ethnicities, affecting innocent civilians and their families at large. The author blurs and transcends the boundaries between literature and history, presenting the fragmented alternative history through the literary form of the novel, reflecting a respect for diverse and pluralistic historical perspectives.

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