

# Trauma, Guilt, and the Fragmented Psyche: The Psychological Impact of the Iraq War on American Soldier

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 09 Feb 2025</p> <p>Revised on: 08 Mar 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 13 Mar 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> Iraq War, trauma, PTSD, fragmented psyche, American soldier</p>	<p><i>This paper seeks to investigate the psychological effects of the Iraq War on the American soldier through a literary analysis of Kevin Powers’ novel, The Yellow Birds. Adopting the psychoanalytical approach that has roots in literature, specifically the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, this study dwells on the main themes of trauma, guilt, suppression, and psyche fragmentation. That is to say, the protagonist John Bartle, who is the mouthpiece of the novelist Powers, stands as a case study to trace post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral wounds, revealing the deep psychological effects of war trauma. Depending on Freud’s theory of “repression” and Lacan’s conception of the “fragmented self”, the analysis elucidates Bartle’s conflict of integrating his war experience as an American veteran with his identity as a civilian. Moreover, the study incorporates the principal issues of reintegration post-war, highlighting the psychological aftermath via the perspective of literature. Thus, this papers aims to address the stark reality of veterans’ psychological problems and the need to get the acceptance and compassion from society.</i></p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

War has been a subject of literature since the emergence of oral literature, both as a historical record and as an investigation into the human psyche. The Iraq War (2003–2011) remains one of the most contentious and psycho-traumatizing theatres of conflict of the 21st century, cast with a deep shadow in all those who served there and lived its aftermaths as Iraqi civilians. Hence, the psychological challenges that the veterans had to face have been duly tackled in literature to present them as other victims of that war suffering from trauma, moral

injury, post-war conflict, social alienation etc., being at the forefront of the spectrum. A remarkable different contemporary war fiction can be found in Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (2012), which offers a hauntingly deep exploration of a soldier’s battle with himself, as he struggles to connect his wartime experiences to his post-war self. The novel does deliver a searing portrait of the psychological cost of war, portraying it as a rich subject for psychoanalytical studies. So, this research paper makes Freud and Lacan’s theories as the pivot around which the study evolves. It probes the deep

area of the protagonist's unconscious mind reveal his psychological fragmentation, and explore how trauma, guilt, and repression reform his post-war personality.

The American veteran, John Bartle, serves as the case study to reveal the psychological aftermaths of the American soldier who had to be indulged in the Iraqi war and witness atrocities under the blurred meanings of "freeing the nation". Bartle is young soldier who joins the American troops in Iraq to have only a self-conceit and pride among his peers. Yet, he comes back totally shattered, psychologically speaking. He must struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury caused by war.

PTSD is defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) as: "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury (APA, 2013). Powers's narrative reveals these symptoms clearly on the main characters, especially in their inability to escape haunting memories of atrocities and friends. Furthermore, moral injury, which is a concept explored by Litz et al. (2009), that refers to the deep psychological disturbance resulting from witnessing or participating in violent acts that disrupt one's ethical beliefs, is clearly detected in the novel. As different from PTSD, that resides in the psychological effects of fear, insomnia, isolation and so on, moral injury emerges by the feelings of guilt and shame, which makes it so hard to heal (Shay, 1994). The moral injury can be clearly traced in Bartle, the American veteran who has an overwhelming sense of guilt resulting in self-destructive tendencies inability to join the civilian life.

Freud's theory of repression stands as a basic framework for this study that tries to unravel the dilemma of Bartle's psychological state. The neurotic symptoms along with the psychological distress of Freud's studies are presented to understand Bartle's evolution in the novel before and after the war. Bartle's attempts to suppress his traumatic memories are deeply tackled. On the other hand, Lacan's theory of the "fragmented self" (Lacan, 1977) is presented to

identify Bartle's crisis of identity. Lacan's argument about trauma that disturbs the person's relationship with symbolic order, i.e., the system of language and associated meaning with reality, is clearly fathomed in Bartle's fragmented storytelling.

All in all, *The Yellow Birds* surpasses the mere narrative a story of a soldier's suffering; it can be viewed as a mirror reflecting the broader crisis of war's mental impact. This novel invites its readers to confront the harsh psychological aftermath of war. So, this tackled this novel to highlight the scars of war trauma. It questions the use of war that destroys civilians and soldiers. It also underlines the critical need for more understanding and support for those who have served in the military. The study helps us grasp the deep psychological weights shouldered by combatants.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Trauma and War Literature

War literature has been always used to reflect the mental and psychological challenges that warrants face. An early psychological examination of war is also provided by Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which chronicles the internal conflict between a young Civil War soldier and his fears and self-doubt. Likewise, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a significant novel that stands as an early of this genre, effectively capturing the emotions of disenfranchisement, alienation, and survivor's guilt experienced by World War I soldiers. Remarque's depiction of war as a dehumanizing experience paved the way for later literary analyses of psychological trauma in war narratives. Paul Bäumer, the main character is the returning veteran who would become more and more cut off from civilian life and reshape the personality of veterans in the coming writings on war fiction.

Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), narrates the astonishing story of a World War I soldier who is severely injured and left without limbs, speech, or sight, offers a more contemporary interpretation. Trumbo's book reflects profoundly war dehumanization of people and captures the isolation and mental disturbance of veterans who face troubles in reintegrating into society (Trumbo, 1939). Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990)

also elaborates on the mental and psychological struggles that soldiers' challenges have long been reflected in war literature. These literary works can be notable samples of war literature which is abundant and rich.

This tradition continues to survive in twenty-first century works that portray the aftermaths of modern war. For example, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) juxtaposes the war experience of a young soldier with the shallow patriotism of American nation, underlying the emotional and psychological detachments between civilians and veterans. Moreover, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014) is a series of short stories that depicts the psychological and moral effects of war that soldiers returning from Iraq suffer from. Along with *The Yellow Birds*, these novels are considered great examples of modern war literature that trace the long-term psychological consequences of war, highlighting the notion that war lasts far beyond the battleground (Klay, 2014; Powers, 2012; Fountain, 2012).

### 2.3 Psychoanalytical Approaches for War Trauma

Freud's (1920) studies on trauma stand as a basic framework for analyzing war literature. His studies on war trauma that follow WWI forms the basis for following studies. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces the concept of repetition compulsion, in which individuals inadvertently relive traumatic experiences through, dreams, flashbacks and neurotic conducts. Lacan's (1966) brings the concept of "the Real" to psychoanalysis. This is constructed on Freudian theories and confirms that trauma is not fully explicable within the symbolic order and transcends language. Scholars such as Caruth (1996) emphasize that war trauma confines the narrative structures. She confirms that trauma is not a simple event that can be always remembered, it is an experience that returns unwillingly in the fragmented and haunting memories. This notion can be traced clearly in war literature, where authors adopt disjointed narratives, nonlinear storytelling and flashbacks to reflect the fragmented psyche of traumatized soldiers.

### 2.4 PTSD in Military Psychology

PTSD in military set of researches offers deep insight into the enduring impacts of combat introduction.

The American Psychiatric Affiliation (2013) recognizes PTSD effects as meddling recollections, passionate desensitizing, hypervigilance, and dissociative scenes. Hoge et al. (2004) shows that Iraq War veterans confront tall rates of PTSD, regularly battling to reintegrate into civilian life. These findings align with what is depicted within *The Yellow Birds* where Bartle illustrates evasion behaviors, neurosis, and enthusiastic separation.

Jonathan Shay (1994) extends on classical and cutting-edge injury hypothesis by presenting ethical injury, which happens when warriors breach profoundly held moral convictions. Not at all like PTSD, essentially driven by fear, ethical harm emerges from blame and self-condemnation. Shay compares advanced veterans to Homeric warriors, proposing that uncertain ethical clashes result in mental breakdowns. Litz et al (2019) clarify that ethical damage is particular from PTSD but frequently coexists in veterans' enthusiastic advance as in Powers' novel.

### 2.5 Guilt and Moral Injury in War Fiction

Feeling of guilt arises as a repeated theme in war fiction. It commonly serves as a driving power behind a protagonist's mental collapse. Litz et al. (2009) identification of "moral injury" as the mental trouble that is resulted from activities violating the one's moral set of values is central to *The Yellow Birds*. Bartle's narrative is immersed in guilt, as the protagonist tries hard to free his responsibility for his friend, Murph's tragic end. This can be compared with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), where Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist, faces this struggle during World War II leaving him in a state of defeat and existential doubt. Like Bartle, Pilgrim symbolizes the shattered psyche of a soldier who cannot reconcile his past with the present.

Moral responsibility can also be traced in Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), which explores the long-lasting effects of war trauma across generations. Scholars, like Luckhurst (2008), agree on the fact that war novels frequently portray characters burdened by ethical dilemmas, emphasizing that trauma encompasses not only physiological aspects but also profound moral and existential challenges. The psychological effects of moral injury in *The Yellow Birds* underline the struggle to find a post-war

recovery. Carter (2021) and Edwards (2024) dwelled on the challenges faced by soldiers, especially in terms of their moral injury and reintegration struggles. This will be thoroughly tackled in the coming chapters showing the ties with Powers' novel.

## 2.6 The Fragmented Psyche as Appeared in War Fiction

Both war novels by modernists and postmodernists employ fragmented narrative structures to replicate the fractured psyches of their characters. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), for instance, employs minimalist prose that is sparse to convey the emotional numbing experienced by soldiers. Literary critics such as Vickroy (2002) and Whitehead (2004) contend that this is a feature of trauma fiction since it replicates the nonlinear and recursive structure of traumatic memory.

The interference of the past with the present in Powers' novel stresses the instability of the ego due to trauma, which in turn emphasizes Freud's (1920) notion that repressed memories inevitably resurface. The fragmented psyche as Freud elaborated on is the result of the annihilation power within the psyche that tends to destroy itself. The inner conflicts and egos can be principle drives for this destruction tendency of the fragmented psyche.

### 2.6 Studies on the Novel

In a study on PTSD of the same novel, i.e., *The Yellow Birds*, Faizal Yusuf Satriawan and Mundi Rahaya discuss the trauma of the main hero according to Gerald Davison's theories of trauma released in 2006. The authors correlate John Bartle's PTSD with the destruction and loss he faces in the Iraqi War. The symptoms that they experience are "avoidance" which is the same as "denial" or "undoing" and "re-experiencing" because he remembers what occurred when he comes back from war. The research is based on the psychologist Gerald Davison's works on PTSD. It states Murphy's death as the primary reason for trauma. There is another noteworthy study on this novel published in *Gema Online Journal of Language Studies*, 2020. Its title is "Survival Psychology in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*". The research digs into the two main characters, i.e., John Bartle and Daniel Murphy in the three phases of "pre-impact, impact and post-

impact". The research is about the pivotal incidents that result in the trauma of the soldiers upon their arrival to fight in Iraq (Alosman & Mydin, 2020). Another article published in 2021 Sagar and Shehadah tackled the PTSD in the novel according to psychoanalytical theories and Anna Freud's studies of defense mechanism.

This study is an extension of the earlier ones. Yet, it applies other theories of self-fragmentation and guilt that gives it the originality. So, it raises the fundamental question of the American soldier's fragmentation and sense of guilt resulting from witnessing the atrocities of the Iraq War.

## III. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a psychoanalytical literary critical framework in order to investigate the psychological effects of the Iraq War in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*. According to trauma theories and psychoanalytic criticism, the study examines how the novel reveals the psychological breakdown and moral injury incurred by soldiers, the protagonist being Private John Bartle. By close analysis of the main passages, the research examines the PTSD of the protagonist, moral blame, and difficulties of reintroduction. The fragmented narrative style of the novel replicates Bartle's fractured psychological state, as non-linear narration mirrors the disorienting impact of trauma on memory and understandings of time. Freud's (1920) theory of repression is pivotal for the study as traumatic memories come the conscious mind involuntarily. This is applicable to analyze Bartle's character and behavior. Lacan's "fragmented self" is so significant as well for tracing the shattered self of the protagonist who is an American veteran. Recent studies, including psychological studies on PTSD (Litz et al., 2009) and moral injury (Shay, 1994), provides theoretical framework to apply to extend analysis of the psychological distress of the protagonist and how these issues contribute to larger narratives of military trauma.

The methods of analysis depend on the text to apply the theoretical theories on Powers's narrative. Powers's rely on symbolism, particularly the recurring motif of birds, is being analyzed for its

representation of Bartle's desire for freedom and his entrapment in psychological trauma and fragmented self. Moreover, the fragmented form of the novel is explored to show that the disintegration of the boundaries of time is usually experienced with PTSD, as in Bartle's blurring of past and present. The research also depends on literary writings of Carter (2021) and Edwards (2024) to reveal how Powers' narrative choices manage to portray the challenges faced by soldiers, especially their moral injury and challenges reintegrating. Thus, the research is analytical and descriptive as it analyzes the main character and presents description of its psychological dilemmas depending on psychoanalytical theories.

#### IV. MAIN FINDINGS

With the fragmented narrative and development of the character of Bartle, *The Yellow Birds* recalls significant psychological theories, including PTSD, moral injury, and reintegration challenges. Powers' portrayal of Bartle's psychological fragmentation is an instant reaction to the traumatic impact of the Iraq War, and his struggles become a metaphor for the emotional and psychological disturbance of soldiers coming back from this war in general.

##### 4.1 Psychological Fragmentation and PTSD

The mind's fragmentation in *The Yellow Birds* lies deeply within the psychological effects of PTSD, a psychological disturbance that afflicts numerous soldiers who have returned from war, especially the soldiers who had been in the Iraq War. The fragmented nature of the presentation of the story in the novel echoes Bartle's fractured perception of reality itself, an expression of his own trauma. Powers (2012) employs the stylistic device of non-linear narrative to reproduce the psychological fragmentation of the soldiers. As per Carter (2021), "the novel's non-linear structure is an intentional reflection of the disorganized perception of time and memory breakdown typical of PTSD" (p. 239). Bartle's war trauma becomes outlined in his present life as the past keeps intruding in his mind. This interruption of continuity of time is a characteristic feature of PTSD, in which troops cannot differentiate between past and present because memories and feelings come surging back without any control.

Bartle's trauma is revealed in a vivid flashback related to the death of his friend Murph, which he witnesses amid a violent firefight in Iraq. Powers (2012) illustrates this point as Bartle remembers: "I understood that beauty was both in the things that we had and in the things we could lose" (p. 42). This sensitivity increases Bartle's sensitivity towards death and loss threat, a common occurrence among soldiers serving in active combat zones such as Iraq. Most American soldiers get to see their close friends like Murph die right before their eyes, giving an inflated sense of helplessness and guilt, and at times leading to the formation of repetitive intrusive memories and flashbacks. These disconnected recollections deflate the heavy stress of memories and contribute to healing trauma, which is a symptom of PTSD (Litz et al., 2009). Bartle's failure to move beyond these recollections and his continuous recalling of Murph's death, reveal how trauma detains soldiers in a cycle of psychological pain, unable to escape the psychological scars of war.

Moreover, Powers (2012) demonstrates the avoidance phenomenon in Bartle's character. In fact, avoidance is one of the main symptoms of PTSD. Bartle's detachment and inability to cope with those around him when he returns home are the direct result of his unwillingness to confront the trauma. He expresses that clearly as: "No one could understand what we had seen, and I had no way to explain it" (p. 178), demonstrating the isolation which soldiers feel having witnessed war atrocities. Avoiding confrontation with painful recollections is a psychological defense mechanism intended to prevent the subject from experiencing the overwhelming emotional effect of trauma. Yet, like Bartle, this avoidance can result in greater emotional splits and alienation from others.

##### 4.2 Moral Injury and Survivor's Guilt

Moral injury and survivor's guilt are central to the psychological suffering of the veteran in *The Yellow Birds*. Both of these are the outcomes of PTSD resulting from perpetrating or witnessing violent acts that violate their innate sense of right and wrong. Moral injury is specifically applied to the US soldiers who have served in Iraq, where the ethics of struggle tend to conflict with the individual soldiers' moral standards. Bartle's feeling of remorse for his role in Murph's death is an exemplary instance of moral

injury. Bartle internalizes the belief that he had lost Murph on his watch and that this belief follows him in life. Powers (2012) reveals this belief when Bartle says about, "I didn't know how to tell her that it was all my fault" (p. 145). This is survivor's guilt in its heaviest burden, a feeling shared by all soldiers who are left alive when others die. Bartle's failure to fulfill his promise to Murph's mother, the promise of keeping her son safe, provides further depth to the sense of moral wound. Self-self-destructive behaviors, solitude, and an irreversible feeling of uselessness result from internalized guilt.

As Litz et al. (2009) stated, moral injury tends to cause a serious psychological violation, not only between the soldier and others but also within the soldier's own self. For Bartle, this moral injury is one of the causes of his alienation and depression, as he struggles to come to terms with what he did during the war with his pre-war sense of morality. Shay (1994) also contributes that moral injury heightens PTSD symptoms to a multiplied effect that psychically shatters as well as morally stains the soldier. Bartle's breakdowns and self-loathing are the direct outcome of this moral damage, thereby not permitting the integration into civil life at any meaningful level.

#### 4.3 The Role of Memory and Temporality

Memory and temporality are pivotal to understanding the psychological split in Bartle's psyche. Powers (2012) has a deep look into traumatic memory is compromised for soldiers with PTSD. Accordingly, Bartle has said, "I could not tell what was past and what was real. It all blurred into a single thing" (p. 98). This displacement of temporal clarity is a diagnostic feature of PTSD: the inability to demarcate past traumatic experience from the present. This time-blurred way of seeing is characteristic of veterans returning from the Iraq War, where war intensity and immediacy of life-and-death situations make a lasting psychological impact. For Bartle, the war does not end on his return home; it is continually relived in his mind, and the past is indelibly connected to the present.

The time distortion in Powers' novel highlights the widespread psychological damage the soldiers endure. According to Carter (2021), "The novel's fractured structure mirrors the disintegration

of time in PTSD, in which time no longer moves linearly" (p. 240). For Bartle, this division of time does not permit him to move on, keeping him stuck in an emotional space that is just as much his here and now as it was during his tour in Iraq. This distortion of time is not just a stylistic technique but an actual reflection of the psychological reality of most combat soldiers returning from war, particularly those who fight in wars like the Iraq War, where the violence and loss one experiences can never actually be left behind.

#### 4.4 Symbolism and the Psychological Cost of War

Powers uses symbolism to further emphasize the psychological cost of war as birds being a recurring symbol in *The Yellow Birds*. Birds represent the desire for liberty in all creatures as well as the sense of enclosure that soldiers, particularly Bartle, feel and long to escape from the psychological weight of his recollections. Rodriguez and Patel (2023) suggest that the birds symbolize Bartle's yearning for freedom, but also the inability to break free from the trauma that encircles his existence. The soldiers in the beginning symbolize the soldiers who are entrapped into war. Bartle observes: "It moved without a purpose, and I envied it" (Powers, 2012, p. 112). This statement illustrates Bartle's deep desire to escape the futility and confusion of his life after the war, yet, at the same time, frustration that he cannot do so. The vanity of the bird's life symbolizes Bartle's lost state in a world that no longer makes sense now that there is the war. For many soldiers, this sense of purposelessness is an instant result of the psychological charge of war, wherein the simplicity of life before war is lost and replaced with a single-minded experience of disappointment.

#### 4.5 Reintegration and Isolation

Finally, this article probes the reintegration theme and the difficulty for soldiers to adjust to civilian life following the Iraq War. The emotional and psychological estrangement on Bartle's return home is a universal theme of *The Yellow Birds* that can be applied to all soldiers. The lack of ability to express what he experienced and felt to other people, combined with his sense of isolation, become a challenge for the majority of American soldiers to readapt to civilian life following war. Powers (2012) captures this isolation when Bartle comments, "No

one could understand what we had seen, and I had no way to explain it" (p. 178). This is the vast emotional gap between veterans and civilians, which is most often heightened by the society's incapacity to grasp and respond to the psychological needs of returning soldiers.

Thus, the novel evokes the inability of society to provide adequate reintegration assistance, which is a common problem experienced by most American veterans. Edwards (2024) further states that Bartle's silence when he returns is a sign of the large war veterans-civilian society gap, in which war crimes are unfathomable to non-veteran civilians.

## V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, *The Yellow Birds* is a depiction of the psychological impacts of the Iraq War on American soldiers, particularly from the vantage point of PTSD, moral injury, and reintegration problems as revealed in the novel presenting the disturbed character of Bartle. In the fragmented narrative, symbolic imagery, and introspective monologues, Powers presents the deep emotional injuries and self-shattering inflicted by the war. The novel's portrayal of Bartle's split of the mind, inability to re-enter society and intrapsychic guilt mirrors the greater psychological heritage that many Iraq War veterans endured. Powers's novel serves as a stark reminder of the long-term damage inflicted by war and of the psychological effects of modern warfare.

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