

**PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN WORLD WAR II LITERATURE:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOSEPH HELLER AND GRAHAM  
GREENE**

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**Abstract.** *World War II remains one of the most devastating historical events, profoundly reshaping the psychological landscape of the twentieth century. This article explores the poetics of trauma in contemporary American and British literature, focusing specifically on the depiction of World War II through the seminal works of Joseph Heller (Catch-22) and Graham Greene (The Ministry of Fear and The Heart of the Matter). By analyzing these texts, the study examines how literary narratives reflect the emotional fragmentation, moral injury, and existential dread experienced by individuals caught in the machinery of total war. Special attention is given to the narrative techniques such as dark humor, absurdism, fragmented structure, and psychological realism employed by these authors to convey the unutterable reality of combat and domestic anxiety. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how American and British wartime fiction shifts from traditional heroism to a complex representation of psychological trauma and moral dislocation.*

**Keywords:** *psychological trauma, World War II literature, trauma narrative, Joseph Heller, Graham Greene, absurdism, psychological realism, existential dread, moral injury.*

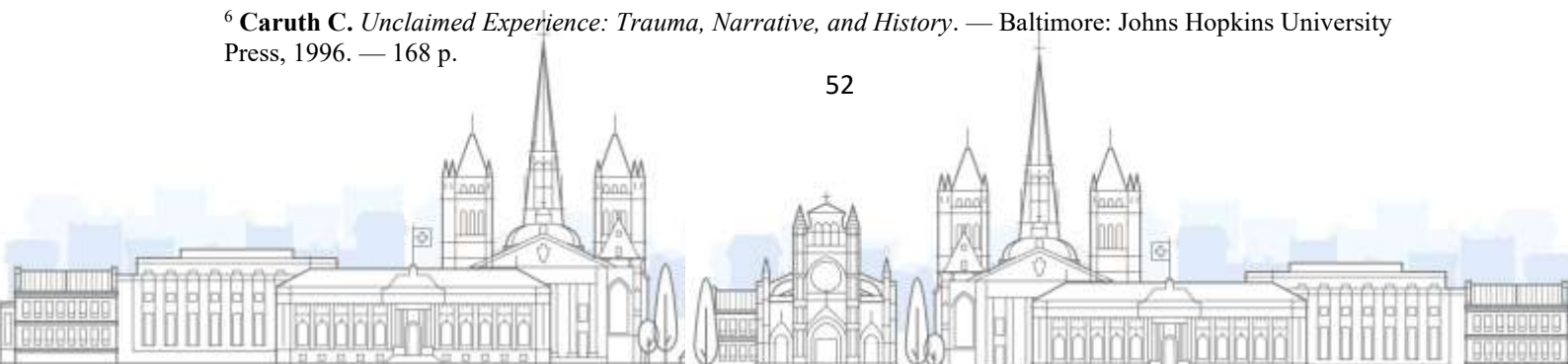
### **Introduction**

World War II was not merely a geopolitical clash<sup>6</sup> it was a profound psychological catalyst that shattered traditional belief systems, moral frameworks, and cultural narratives across Western civilization. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, both American and British literature underwent a significant paradigm shift as writers attempted to grapple with the overwhelming scale of industrial warfare, civilian displacement, and mass death. Traditional linear narratives of heroism and national glory proved insufficient to express the deep internal fragmentation experienced by those who survived the conflict. Consequently, the poetics of trauma emerged as a central framework for understanding postwar literature.

The psychological impact of World War II manifests differently yet fundamentally across transatlantic literary traditions. While American writers often confronted the

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<sup>6</sup> Caruth C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. — Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. — 168 p.



bureaucratic insanity and technological alienation of the war machine, British authors frequently captured the psychological decay, collective exhaustion, and moral compromise of a nation under siege. This article provides a comparative analysis of how psychological trauma is depicted in the works of American novelist Joseph Heller and British writer Graham Greene. Through their unique stylistic approaches, both authors move beyond the physical horror of trenches and bombings to map the internal wounds of fear, guilt, and alienation. The aim of this study is to analyze the structural and thematic devices used by Heller and Greene to articulate trauma, highlighting how their narratives give voice to the unspoken anxieties of the wartime generation.

**Main Body** .To analyze the poetics of trauma in World War II fiction, one must first recognize that trauma in literature operates both as a thematic subject and a structural force. In the aftermath of global conflict, writers faced the challenge of representing experiences that defied conventional language and chronological order. Joseph Heller's masterpiece, *Catch-22* (1961), stands as a definitive text in American postwar literature, illustrating how the psychological trauma of combat is inextricably linked to administrative and bureaucratic absurdity.

Heller utilizes a heavily fragmented, nonlinear narrative structure to replicate the psychological reality of trauma. The protagonist, Captain Yossarian, is trapped in a repetitive cycle of flying increasingly dangerous bombing missions. The trauma of losing his comrades most notably the horrific and recurring memory of the young gunner Snowden dying in his arms disrupts Yossarian's perception of time and reality. Heller intentionally loops the narrative back to Snowden's death throughout the novel, mimicking the psychological phenomenon of traumatic flashbacks. Through the lens of absurdism and dark humor, Heller demonstrates that the true trauma of World War II stems not just from the enemy, but from an institutional system that treats human lives as expendable data. Yossarian's desperate attempts to be declared insane to escape combat reflect a profound identity crisis and existential panic caused by a world devoid of logic<sup>7</sup>.

In contrast, British novelist Graham Greene approaches the poetics of trauma through psychological realism, intense moral anxiety, and theological dread. Operating within the context of wartime and postwar Britain, Greene's narratives focus heavily on the internal landscape of guilt and emotional isolation. In *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), set against the terrifying backdrop of the London Blitz, the protagonist Arthur Rowe carries the heavy trauma of having mercy-killed his terminally ill wife, a personal wound that becomes mirrored in the chaotic, paranoid atmosphere of wartime London.

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<sup>7</sup> Heller J. *Catch-22*. — New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961. — 453 p.

Greene employs a dense atmosphere of secrecy, espionage, and emotional restraint to convey trauma. For Greene, World War II acts as an externalization of the fallen human condition. The constant threat of bombardment and betrayal strips characters of their psychological security, leaving them in a state of perpetual alienation. In *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), although set away from the immediate battlefields, the psychological weight of duty, pity, and colonial responsibility breaks down the protagonist's moral core. Greene's characters do not suffer from the loud, chaotic absurdity found in Heller's work; rather, their trauma is silent, heavy, and deeply tied to moral injury. They are overwhelmed by the impossibility of maintaining personal virtue in a world corrupted by systemic violence.

When comparing Heller and Greene, several crucial overlapping techniques within the poetics of trauma become evident: both authors reject straightforward chronology. Heller uses chaotic narrative loops to show a mind unable to process death, while Greene relies on heavy internal monologues and dream sequences where past sins and present terrors bleed into one another. In both universes, official language (military jargon in Heller, bureaucratic or religious dogma in Greene) fails to comfort the individual. True suffering is expressed through silent withdrawal or desperate, circular dialogue.

Trauma isolates their characters from communities. Yossarian becomes an outcast in his squadron as his self-preservation instinct grows, while Greene's protagonists intentionally sever emotional ties out of guilt or fear of inflicting pain on others. Ultimately, both writers use the localized trauma of their characters to offer broader social criticism. Heller exposes the cold, capitalistic, and institutional alienation of the American military-industrial complex. Greene, on the other hand, critiques the exhaustion of the British Empire and the fragility of human institutions when faced with spiritual and physical destruction<sup>8</sup>.

### Conclusion

The poetics of trauma in World War II fiction serves as a crucial lens through which the deep psychological scars of the twentieth century are made visible. Through this comparative study, it is evident that Joseph Heller and Graham Greene captured the essence of wartime trauma, albeit through vastly different stylistic traditions. Heller's (*Catch-22*) employs absurdism, dark comedy, and structural fragmentation to expose the traumatic insanity of institutional warfare and the fragmentation of the American individual. Conversely, Graham Greene relies on psychological realism, acute moral anxiety, and a profound sense of isolation to depict the quiet, exhausting trauma of the British wartime experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Whitehead A. *Trauma Fiction*. — Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. — 192 p.

Despite their stylistic divergence, both authors converge on a central truth: World War II permanently altered human identity, leaving individuals to navigate a world stripped of its comforting illusions. Their works show that recovery from such collective and individual trauma is a complex, non-linear process that challenges the very boundaries of memory and narrative. The study of trauma in the works of Heller and Greene remains deeply significant, as it reminds readers that the true cost of war is measured not only in physical devastation, but in the enduring wounds inflicted upon the human psyche.

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