

Trauma and Redemption: A Study on the Traumatic Theme in *Falling Man*

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Abstract

“*Falling Man*” portrays the emotional void and desperation that victims of the 9/11 attacks experienced during and after the event. This paper uses trauma theory to analyze the characters and narratives, focusing on realistic depictions of psychic trauma and mental collapse from three perspectives: the unresolved trauma of an average family, the ideological conflict in characters’ disputes, and the crisis of belief marked by ignorance and disorientation. Through close textual analysis, it also examines pathways for victims to process and heal from trauma, highlighting the importance of literary narratives in trauma recovery and humanistic care.

Keywords

Trauma, Redemption, Healing, *Falling Man*

1. Introduction

Don DeLillo, a preeminent American postmodern novelist, dramatist, and essayist, has been recognized as one of the four significant American literary giants of his time by literary critic John Duvall, alongside Thomas Pynchon, Cormac McCarthy, and Philip Roth. His works, known for their diverse subjects including mass media, global terrorism, consumerism, and trauma, have earned him a reputation as a keen observer of modern American society. His 14th novel, “*Falling Man*,” released in 2007, received favorable feedback and widespread critical acclaim. As an influential work in the 9/11 genre, it has been analyzed from various perspectives, including historical depiction, psychological impact, aesthetic values, and trauma writing. In China, critical evaluation of “*Falling Man*” began notably around the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, focusing on plot introduction, thematic analysis, and postmodern writing techniques.

It is no coincidence that the novel "*Falling Man*" has been hailed as "the defining work of 9/11 fiction". It is not only because the events of 9/11 attacks are very deep in time and space for most Americans' memories; it is even more so because the novel breaks through the common sense of trauma narrative, "recording the seemingly chaotic fragments of different characters' memories, and then bringing them together to present multiple narrative voices", creating a space for multiple interpretations. It is also because the novel breaks through the ordinary meaning of trauma narrative by "recording the seemingly chaotic memory fragments of different characters and then bringing them together to present multiple narrative voices," creating a space for multiple interpretations. Some researchers have argued that the novel, on the one hand, "seeks to make sense of the events of 11 September 2001 through descriptions of pain and memory recovery, thus transforming them into shared memories to begin the process of healing", and on the other hand, it also "reflects the cognitive disorientation and insecurity that are gradually projected onto the readers", as well as the "confusion and insecurity that are gradually projected onto the readers". On the other hand, it also "reflects the cognitive disorientation and insecurity gradually projected onto the reader, as well as the turbulence of Western society in the aftermath of 9/11" (Silvia, 2010); some studies have found the novel's counter-narrative feature, which is considered to be "a clever way to fundamentally counteract some studies have found the novel's counter-narrative feature, arguing that it "fundamentally counters the conservative tendency of the dominant narratives created and disseminated by the media and the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11" (Michael, 2011). In the author's opinion, as a novel set against the background of the 9/11 incident, the *Falling Man* is bound to bear witness to history and characterise trauma; however, it pays more attention to the existential crisis of human beings, and tries to arouse the readers' thoughts on the root of the fall of human psychology and spirituality, as well as the road to salvation.

2. Literature Review

Since its publication, the novel has received favourable reviews from both the general public and critics. The *Harvard Review of Books* described the novel as the defining work of the events of 11 September. The *Times* considered the novel an anthem for New York and those who fell on 9/11.

Critics have mainly interpreted the novel in relation to the September 11 terrorist attacks, the war on terror in the United States, and the reaction of the government and the public to the events. Conte (2011) has argued that DeLillo's novel "dialectically reassesses the relationship between global corporatism and terrorism." Webb (2011) argues that the *Falling Man* recounts the event in a testimony-like manner and that "the book demonstrates that it is possible to live or die ethically and, in doing so, demonstrates the value of human life". Other commentators have analysed the novel in terms of its characters and structure,

for example, Paul (2014) argues that of all the characters in the novel, only Justin achieves a successful reconciliation of different cultural identities and perspectives, and that his “international identity” allows him to mature and succeed in the new cultural environment of global trauma. Parish (2012) demonstrates the impotence of this notion of masculinity as insufficient to provide an effective counter-narrative to terrorism by analysing the depraved figure of the hero Keith.

Despite numerous achievements, there is still a considerable need for comprehensive studies on the interpretation of traumatic themes and the practical significance of trauma narratives within the novel. Building on prior research, this paper investigates the realistic portrayals of psychic trauma and mental collapse through trauma theory. It also explores the redemptive journeys of traumatized victims fighting against trauma and examines the positive impacts of literary narrative on trauma healing and self-redemption.

3. Realistic Manifestations of Psychic Trauma and Mental Fall in *Falling Man*

The novel opens with the apocalyptic aftermath of the horrific attacks, providing an intimate look at the post-9/11 world through the lens of an average American family. Keith, the male protagonist who worked at the World Trade Center, narrowly escapes death after the plane crash. Emerging alive but covered in soot and blood, he walks unconsciously toward the apartment he once shared with his estranged wife, Lianne. Despite the shock of Keith’s sudden return, Lianne is inwardly delighted to see him alive, cherishing the fact that her family remains a safe haven. However, Keith struggles to find peace of mind after the chaos, and despite several attempts to find meaning in life, he abandons his family, gradually reaching a dead end.

As a novel set against the backdrop of the September 11 incident, *Falling Man* is bound to bear witness to history and characterized trauma. Moreover, it focuses on the existential crisis of human beings and tries to arouse readers’ thoughts on the root causes of the psychological and spiritual falling of human beings as well as the paths to their salvation. Overall, the novel focuses on two narrative threads and three central characters, deeply exploring the traumatic experiences and existential crises of the traumatized victims.

3.1. Unrecovered Trauma of an Average Family

Shortly after 9/11, nearly all Americans were in a vulnerable state, as the terrorist attacks had left an open wound in the collective psyche. As Caruth explains, trauma is the overwhelming experience of catastrophic or sudden events, with responses often delayed, manifesting in the uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations (Caruth, 1996). Trauma can be classified into various types depending on an individual’s specific position and context within an event. Kaplan categorizes trauma into three types: direct trauma, family trauma, and media-

tized trauma (Kaplan, 2005). Haunted by his miserable personal experiences, Keith can be categorized as a direct victim of trauma. Based on Freud's research, the delayed nature of trauma allows the traumatic event to forcibly intrude into the victim's consciousness (Freud, 1989), which compels the victims to experience the painful moment repeatedly. Keith embodies the symptoms of individual trauma, particularly as he recovers from physical injuries sustained in the attack. Struggling to return to domestic life with Lianne, he avoids discussing the terrorist attack with family members. Despite his efforts, Keith cannot escape post-traumatic stress disorder. He then starts an aimless extramarital affair with Florence, another attack survivor, drawn together by their shared survival experience and psychological needs. Yet, their connection and conversations fall short of healing their trauma. Later, driven by the effects of psychic deterioration, Keith leaves his bleak domestic life to become a professional poker player, seeking satisfaction in the gamble. Despite his urge to return home, he cannot escape his nightmarish experiences. Reality brings back the trauma vividly, but while playing poker, he cannot recall these memories (DeLillo, 2007). Consequently, he wanders between reality and illusion, considering himself more a humanoid robot than a human being. Thus, trauma renders Keith physically present but psychologically absent.

We recognize trauma as a complex concept with a wide range of implications. Trauma not only traps direct victims in lasting personal consequences but also profoundly affects those who were not directly involved. Keith's ex-wife, Lianne, is deeply affected by trauma caused by a terrible event. She struggles with the intrusion and destruction of surrealism, suffering from both family trauma and mediatized trauma. As an indirect victim, Lianne witnesses her husband's detachment from reality. Initially, she attempts to manage the aftermath of the attack but soon realizes that the complexity of the event is beyond her comprehension. Keith's incurable trauma renders all of Lianne's efforts futile. She becomes irritable towards everything related to her husband. Furthermore, the trauma of the 9/11 attacks reminds Lianne of her father's suicide. She comes to understand that her father was not killed by Alzheimer's but by a despair so deep it was "sickness to death." Moreover, she begins to question her faith in God whenever she sees the desperate expressions on Keith's face, or when the media mentions the names of the deceased. Eventually, she becomes so agitated that she distrusts everyone around her. She constantly questions: Where is God when the attacks happen? Why does her neighbor Elena always play this particular music at such a sensitive time? Could her mother's lover, Martin, be a real terrorist? Thus, she finds herself in a paranoid state of rage against everything unfamiliar, becoming a vicariously traumatized victim.

The trauma of the 9/11 attacks caused immense suffering for both the direct victims and their families. However, the impact on those traumatized through media exposure should not be underestimated. Evidence shows that children, like Keith's son Justin, experience psychological trauma from constant news reports. Justin exhibits abnormal behaviors, such as only eating bread with mus-

tard and speaking in monosyllables. He also distrusts his parents. When Justin stays with his friends, he uses a pair of binoculars to scan planes in the skies. Justin's symptoms indicate that Justin lives in a state of illusion and pain.

The trauma experienced by Keith's family reflects that of many New York families. These rootless victims have endured the days and years following the 9/11 attacks, "filled with haunting dreams, trapped individuals, immobilized limbs, gasping breaths, and a pervasive sense of helplessness" (DeLillo, 2007). All of them seem lost and unaware, attempting to find something solid in a falling world.

3.2. Ideological Conflict of Characters' Disputes

Though the main storyline revolves around the aftermath of a catastrophic event that Keith's family experienced, the manifestation of trauma is not confined to the primary family member but extends beyond the leading characters through polyphonic narration. Supporting characters, such as Keith's mother-in-law, Nina, and Nina's lover, Martin, are woven into the trauma narrative. DeLillo once remarked that he aimed to reveal the overwhelming impact of a historical event on the smallest elements of ordinary life (DeLillo, 2001). As for the ongoing debate on the roots of terrorism, the opposing views of Nina and Martin are juxtaposed to reveal the ideological conflict.

Nina, a retired art professor, becomes irritable and hot-tempered after the attack. She condemns the terrorists for using a belief system to justify their actions, viewing them as isolated from the real world and acting out of sheer panic. She believes that the struggles in Islamic countries are due to their own history and mentality, not American interference, questioning why America should be blamed for the terrorists' actions. Nina's views align with the American mainstream, reflecting her patriotism and Western-centric perspective. However, Martin offers a different perspective on terrorism, arguing that the attacks are a result of politics and economics. He believes America's interference in other countries and occupation of their territories contribute to negative public ideology and motivate terrorists. He also criticizes America for denying responsibility for its actions worldwide. These remarks suggest Martin might sympathize with terrorists, causing Nina to feel fear and shame. Eventually, she breaks her twenty-year bond with Martin, a leftist, and loses her enthusiasm for life.

Outwardly, Nina and Martin have opposing views on the terrorist event. Their differences regarding terrorism underscore the ideological bias of "us versus them" and the contradictions between America's self-perception and how the world perceives America. Many Americans reject Islamic ideology, drawing a clear line between themselves and others. In Muslim countries, the reality is that their territories are oppressed by American hegemony. These conflicts reflect American prejudices against Muslims, representing the animosity and hatred between the superpower and Islamic nations. According to Martin, the Twin Towers were symbols of wealth and power, and their construction was a clear provocation, making their downfall inevitable.

3.3. Ignorant and Disorientated Belief Crisis

The manifestations of trauma are multifaceted, potentially visible or invisible, and can be physical or spiritual. The destruction of spiritual spaces poses a significant and lasting threat to individuals' religious beliefs. For Christians, it is a core ethical principle to treat others with brotherly love. However, the increasing exclusion of "others" has led to skepticism towards traditional ethical beliefs, coinciding with the proclaimed "death of God." This has resulted in widespread spiritual confusion and hesitation. People cannot reject their previous beliefs, while simultaneously doubting the existence of God more strongly. This sentiment of belief disorientation is becoming widespread in the West. In his novel, DeLillo vividly portrays this through the character Hammad, a young and frustrated immigrant who is transformed into a remorseless killer by the indoctrination of terrorist ideologies, highlighting the spiritual corruption of innocent youth.

As one of the attackers, Hammad is a novice recruit unclear about his reasons for hijacking the plane to hit the towers. He appears lost, not inherently evil. His actions are driven more by religious fanaticism than personal choice. At the start of the so-called "holy war," he questions whether people should fully sacrifice themselves to achieve a goal. However, his doubts are silenced by Amir, a higher-level jihadist fanatic, who justifies the violence and instills the idea of jihad revenge in the name of religion. Consequently, the jihadists' words start to sound philosophical and erase his hesitations. Interestingly, Hammad is a bulky man who believes that an unnamed energy is trapped in his body, too constrained to be released throughout his life (DeLillo, 2007). Thus, he is determined to join in the highest jihad, which involves shedding blood—his own and that of others. As the teachings of Islam spiritually captivate him, he perceives everything as twisted, viewing Western culture as corrupting both the mind and body. After receiving flight training at Nokomis, he naively believes he understands the essence of Islamism by picking up a stone and holding it in his fist. This reinforces his resolve to embrace death and sacrifice his life for a significant cause. His spiritual journey culminates at The Hudson Corridor. Seconds before the plane's impact, he monitors the aircraft, feeling a faint pain in his arm. In the final moment, he realizes he is merely a pawn in a political struggle, akin to Shia boys on the battlefield in the Shatt al-Arab. Yet, he can do nothing but recite the sacred words, believing that "in the seconds to come, every sin of your life is forgiven. You are wishing for death, and now it is here in the seconds to come" (DeLillo, 2007). Overall, Hammad is driven by the revenge against "the dissident" under the guise of religious belief. His self-destruction is manipulated by the ideologies of Middle Eastern religion. This illustrates how the ambivalence and decay of personal belief lead to the moral decline of American people and the spread of belief disorientation.

4. Redemptive Roads for Working through Trauma in *Falling Man*

Trauma is a central theme in *Falling Man*, where the lives of traumatized victims

seem stagnant, showing no signs of recovery. Researchers say that trauma is an injury imposed on the victim's mind that destroys the victim's sense of time, self, and the world, and causes great psychological distress to the victim (Caruth, 1996). In the post-9/11 era, fighting trauma has become a societal focus. Victims struggle to escape nightmarish memories and the impact of trauma. However, instead of succumbing to pervasive trauma, some self-redemption strategies are evident in the trauma narratives of various characters. While these paths to healing do not guarantee an end to all victims' pain and suffering, they offer some possible avenues for trauma recovery. The novel pays significant attention to how to assist traumatized victims in overcoming unutterable terror. From a literary perspective, traumatized victims face several healing processes, such as working through and acting out. Working through is primarily achieved through the victims' narratives, while acting out is related to the repetitiveness of trauma.

4.1. Oral Presentation of Trauma

The core of trauma lies in traumatic memories. As Merwe claims, the struggle with trauma is a struggle with memory (Merwe & Madikizela, 2008). Initiating a conversation is crucial for victims, transforming the fragmented remnants of overwhelming experiences into narrative language. As the trauma of terror is difficult to diminish, effectively treating traumatized individuals involves regaining the motivation and ability to narrate, thereby restoring their confidence in life.

Based on textual analysis, oral presentation is identified as a narrative method employed in healing victims' trauma, transforming traumatic memories into narrative ones. According to Herman, traumatic healing consists of three stages: establishing a safe environment, recalling or mourning, and establishing new relationships (Herman & Vervaeck, 2009). The rebuilding of a secure environment can be achieved through trauma empathy, group experience, and confidence reassurance. An example from the novel illustrates how Florence's healing process is facilitated by sharing her traumatic memories and interacting with another survivor, Keith. Initially, when recalling her past experiences, she falls into panic, reminiscent of terrorist attacks. Her narrative is temporally dislocated, blurring the lines between reality and illusion, making it difficult to discern whether the trauma is happening in the present or occurred in the past. Her narration, characterized by broken discourse and loose logic, is more a collection of traumatic fragments than a coherent story. This impairment of narrative ability is common among traumatized individuals, who often struggle with memory and lose the ability to speak normally. Yet, with a firm belief in her ability to recover, Florence bravely confronts her suppressed memories and makes significant efforts to articulate her painful experiences. Keith, having similar traumatic experiences, naturally becomes a part of Florence's life. His presence allows Florence to share her terrifying memories more openly, thereby alleviating her inner terror. Through this process of personal narration and mutual witness, Florence

gains the strength to overcome her emotional trauma, embarking on a journey of self-redemption and rediscovering the courage for a new beginning.

4.2. Written Description of Trauma

It is widely known that trauma often results in memory loss and the inability to articulate experiences, characterized by gaps in visual and spatial perception. Beyond oral recounting, written narratives serve as a therapeutic avenue, enabling victims to reinvent themselves and reassess their past. This process, akin to script therapy, alleviates symptoms through the act of writing about their traumas. In the novel, Lianne's journey towards self-healing exemplifies this. She leads writing sessions for early-stage Alzheimer's patients, aiding them in reclaiming fragments of their memories and identities by encouraging them to document their experiences. This effort not only helps the patients but also provides Lianne with the emotional strength to face her own anxieties. Lianne's behavior aligns with the concept of empathic unsettlement (LaCapra, 2001), which is a focused engagement with the trauma of others. As the writing group evolves, Lianne becomes deeply involved, compelled to confront her own traumatic past. Ultimately, she manages to move beyond her memories, achieving a form of catharsis. In summary, writing offers a viable path to healing, fostering a renewed sense of confidence and rebirth in victims.

4.3. Ritualized Performance of Trauma

In treating trauma, the first step is to help victims transform their trauma into narrative form. More importantly, the goal is to assist victims in returning to a normal condition. As Taylor claims, performances serve as essential acts of transfer, conveying memory and a sense of identity through repeated behavior (Taylor, 2003). The ritualized performance of trauma in the novel is seen as a form of acting out, aiming to reestablish traumatic representations among the victims. The novel's title comes from an electrifying image of the "Falling Man," a performance artist named David Janiak, who appears unexpectedly in various New York locations, reenacting the horrifying pose of the 9/11 victims who jumped from the North Tower in spite of the dread and anger of spectators. His performance forcibly recalls the dire moments in the burning towers when victims were compelled to jump. While some express outrage at his spectacle, others view Janiak as merely a heartless exhibitionist. Yet, as the Twin Towers collapsed, so did Americans' belief and confidence, leaving terror and trauma lingering in the nation's psyche with no sign of fading. In the post-9/11 context, the "Falling Man" is not just a performance but a metaphor for Americans, symbolizing irredeemable loss and collective pain. Janiak's act aims to remind people that facing the painful reality is essential, rather than escaping it through therapeutic processes. Moreover, Janiak's performance holds a deep symbolic significance, suggesting that the artist, like a falling angel on a mission to save humanity, believes in the power of the traumatized to find courage for self-redemption.

5. Conclusion

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, *Falling Man* vividly presents the devastating psychological and spiritual impacts on the public's mindset and life outlook, especially highlighting the turmoil within traumatized victims. The novel addresses the existential uncertainty tormenting those with traumatic experiences, offering paths of redemption as a glimmer of hope. It underscores the role of trauma narratives in the healing process. Furthermore, by emphasizing the importance of family, affection, and friendship in recovery, the narrative suggests that reclaiming one's humanity is the key to moving beyond the metaphorical "falling." It posits that only through unwavering determination and courage can victims navigate through disaster and achieve self-salvation.

The trauma theme study profoundly explores human psychological responses in the face of setbacks, suffering and pain, focusing on presenting how individuals seek redemption and rebirth through internal struggles and external support. The significance of this study lies in the understanding of the human psyche and emotions, as well as the importance of the individual's vitality and social humanism. The novel blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in the narrative, bringing the unknown silent majority to the forefront, and conveying the author's commitment to purify the spiritual home of mankind and his ideals as an artist. In addition, a person's correct and firm faith is also an effective way to help him realise self-redemption.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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