

TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY IN POST-WAR ENGLISH FICTION

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Abstract

This article explores the interconnected themes of trauma, memory, and identity in post-war English fiction. After the Second World War, English literature increasingly focused on the psychological and emotional consequences of violence, loss, and social disruption. The study examines how novelists represent trauma through fragmented narratives, unreliable memory, and complex character identities. It argues that memory functions as a central mechanism through which characters attempt to reconstruct their sense of self in the aftermath of war. By analyzing selected post-war English novels, the article demonstrates how fiction becomes a space for confronting collective and individual trauma, revealing the lasting impact of war on personal identity and cultural consciousness.

Keywords: trauma, memory, identity, post-war fiction, English literature, World War II

Introduction

The experience of war profoundly alters both individual lives and collective consciousness. In post-war England, writers sought to address the psychological damage left by the Second World War, moving beyond traditional narratives of heroism and victory. Literature became a means of exploring trauma, memory, and identity in a world marked by destruction and uncertainty.

This article examines how post-war English fiction represents the effects of trauma on memory and personal identity. It argues that writers of this period use innovative narrative techniques to express the difficulty of remembering, understanding, and integrating traumatic experiences. Through these representations, post-war fiction reflects broader social and cultural struggles to come to terms with the past.

Trauma and the Post-War Condition

Trauma in post-war English fiction is often portrayed as an ongoing psychological condition rather than a single event. Characters struggle with anxiety, guilt, and emotional numbness long after the war has ended. These symptoms reflect the disruption of normal life and the collapse of previously stable values.

Novelists depict trauma as something that resists clear representation. As a result, narratives frequently include silence, repetition, and fragmentation. Such techniques mirror the characters' inability to fully articulate their suffering, emphasizing the lasting and invisible wounds of war.

Memory as a Narrative Structure

Memory plays a central role in shaping post-war narratives. Rather than presenting events in a linear sequence, many post-war novels rely on flashbacks, shifting perspectives, and incomplete recollections. This fragmented structure reflects the instability of memory after traumatic experience.

Through memory, characters attempt to make sense of their past and reconnect it with their present lives. However, memories are often unreliable or painful, complicating the process of self-understanding. Post-war fiction suggests that remembering is both necessary and traumatic, as it forces characters to confront unresolved loss and guilt.

Identity and Psychological Fragmentation

The impact of trauma and memory directly affects the formation of identity in post-war English fiction. Characters frequently experience a sense of alienation, feeling disconnected from their former selves and from society. War disrupts personal identity, forcing individuals to redefine who they are in a changed world.

This fragmented identity is reflected in characters who struggle with social roles, relationships, and moral certainty. Writers emphasize inner conflict and self-doubt, presenting identity as unstable and continuously reshaped by memory and experience. In this way, post-war fiction challenges traditional notions of a unified and coherent self.

Collective Memory and Social Identity

In addition to individual trauma, post-war English fiction addresses collective memory and national identity. The war becomes a shared historical experience that shapes cultural narratives and social values. Writers explore how societies remember war through silence, myth, or selective recollection.

These representations question official versions of history and highlight marginalized voices. By examining collective trauma, post-war fiction reveals the tension between public memory and private suffering, showing how national identity is constructed through both remembrance and forgetting.

Conclusion

Post-war English fiction offers a profound exploration of trauma, memory, and identity in the aftermath of conflict. By focusing on psychological experience rather than external events, writers reveal the deep and lasting effects of war on individuals and society. Trauma disrupts memory, memory reshapes identity, and identity remains fragmented in a post-war world.

Through innovative narrative forms and complex characters, post-war English novels provide insight into the struggle to heal and understand the past. The study of these themes demonstrates the power of literature to confront historical trauma and to give voice to experiences that resist simple representation.

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