

# **Epistemic Limits and the Inaccessibility of Trauma in *Dying City***

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**Abstract**— This paper analyzes Christopher Shinn's *Dying City* as a depiction of trauma that evades typical frameworks of loss, grief, and psychological paralysis. Reading it from the perspectives of contemporary trauma theory, the paper argues that the play presents trauma as an epistemic and moral standstill rather than an accessible and healable wound. Using core arguments of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, the paper finds that the play dramatizes trauma as an unclaimed experience which is resistant to closure and remains inaccessible to the talking cure. The protagonist's disillusionment with the cherished ideals behind a war he once believed in leads to a crisis of the self, primarily due to a shattering realization of his own complicity in the atrocities committed in the name of justice. Through emphatic stage devices such as pauses, fragmented narration, non-linear timeframe, and doubling of roles, the play skillfully employs the theatrical medium to stage the limits of knowing such incidents. The play also showcases how trauma moves beyond the individual to involve the survivors left behind in intimate domestic spaces. Their continuous struggle with the uncertainty of events relates to the core claim of the inaccessibility of trauma for those who survive. By exploring trauma as an ethical crisis alongside its psycho-social dimensions, this paper extends the implications of trauma in existing research on post-9/11 literature and adds a new dimension to debates around the morality of modern warfare, cultural trauma, and collective responsibility.

**Keywords**— cultural, disillusionment, epistemic, ethical, inaccessible, theatrical, trauma.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Christopher Shinn's *Dying City* is a formative play about the grim impact of the Iraq War in the wake of the upsurge of an absolute communal desire for retributive action after the 9/11 attacks. With its seemingly calm domestic setting reflecting on the burning universal themes of war, absences, silences, and death, it became a finalist for the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. There is no contesting that *Dying City* is a political drama with its backdrop of the Iraq War, its focus on 9/11, and how it turned New York into a dying city. However, the political in the play has been dexterously synthesized with the personal to narrate the tale of an individual loss that a common family in New York suffered as a result of the ongoing war, and the corresponding state of disillusionment and chaos a nation suffers in a blind rage for vengeance. It is Shinn's mastery that even though the play is centrally concerned with the day of the attacks and the resultant traumatic bearings of the war against terrorism in Iraq, it does not make explicit references to war or over-dramatize its aftermath.

Existing critical works focus on the cultural interpretations of the 9/11 attacks, the sense of urgency and collective helplessness they generated, and the traumatic aftermath endured by survivors and witnesses. Shinn's play also explores this disillusionment, raising critical questions about the moral grounds for the war in Iraq. This paper attempts to read *Dying City* as a play that dramatizes trauma as an experience characterized by epistemic limits—something that cannot be fully grasped or resolved by those who go through it. Using contemporary trauma theory, the paper argues that the play presents trauma as a fragmentary experience that resists closure either through narration or medical assistance. It also reads the play in larger contexts to ascertain how national violence can impact the most intimate spheres of domestic life. In doing so, it pays due recognition to the ethical cost of warfare, reframing trauma as a crisis of the encumbered self.

Existing research on the play lays significant thrust on its concerns with national grief, waning popular trust in political narratives, and the longstanding psychic wounds inflicted by terrorism and endless conflicts. Scholars have primarily focused on the vulnerable self and American identity in the days following the attacks on the Twin Towers. However, a specific kind of trauma—that of complicity—has received less consideration in literary research. The play foregrounds this complicity as a central concern rather than staging trauma merely as a shielding response to violence experienced. Read through trauma theory, studies often relate Cathy Caruth's concept of belatedness to instances of silence, repetitiveness, and fragmentation but rarely relate it to the ethical conundrum of realizing complicity, which also comes to affect the survivor belatedly. Even in the case of cultural trauma, critics often examine the play to ascertain the extent to which national crisis affects individual lives. This paper aligns the focus of such inquiries from trauma as an agonizing wound to trauma as an ethical crisis, arguing that the play dramatizes the limits of knowledge in comprehending traumatic experiences of war and annihilation.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRAUMA AS UNCLAIMED AND INACCESSIBLE

When people become unwitting participants in politically driven extremities perpetrated in the name of justice and patriotism, the resultant trauma of collusion appears unnerving. The protagonist's psychological suffering is not just the result of personal experiences of violence on the battlefield or personal tragedy suffered, but is essentially an ethical realization of being complicit in a mass massacre serving a war he once believed to be just and later came to disavow. Trauma theory, particularly through Cathy Caruth, posits trauma as an “unclaimed experience”—one that is not fully grasped as it occurs and returns belatedly through intrusive memories, nightmares, and repetitive behaviors. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between “absence” (a metaphysical condition) and “loss” (a historical event) further provides a lens to understand the play's engagement with mourning and irresolution. In *Dying City*, trauma is not merely a psychological condition but an epistemic rupture: what cannot be known or narrated becomes the source of enduring suffering.

## III. DRAMATIZING THE INACCESSIBLE: FORM AND PERFORMANCE

In a style closely similar to Harold Pinter, Shinn's writing, with its many pauses, showcases an atmosphere as tense and charged with emotions and conflict as the war itself. There are three characters in the play, and in each scene only two of them appear on stage. The play is primarily about a young U.S. Army soldier in his twenties, Craig, stationed in Iraq, who is killed, and his wife Kelly, who is shocked by his sudden absence and is unable to maintain a good relationship with Craig's twin brother, Peter, due to their obvious resemblance. The play is essentially a two-hander, but in flashbacks we see Craig's character, played by the same actor as Peter. This doubling is an effective staging device: Craig becomes a continuous symbolic presence in their lives, just as trauma presents itself as a renewed, unresolved conflict.

The numerous pauses between brief dialogues indicate hesitation and an inability to converse within the grip of personal trauma. Kelly draws a parallel between Peter's sudden appearance and the abrupt way in which the administration informed her of Craig's death: “You know, honestly – when they come to tell you – (Pause.) When they came to tell me about Craig, they just showed up – they just show up, no warning, they don't call or...” (4). Though a year has passed, she has not been able to assimilate the fact into her consciousness. Similarly, Peter lives in denial, noting that the date of his brother's death was ‘sort of floating around’ in his mind, troubled by the silence at the funeral.

The exchange of dialogues hints at disbelief in the military narrative regarding Craig's death—reportedly an accidental shooting with his own gun. While Kelly accepts the official account, Peter remains skeptical: “Okay. I thought you meant – knew what to say, like, weren't sure what to say because it seemed like maybe what happened wasn't what the military was saying” (9). This disbelief reflects a broader disillusionment with the war being waged in Iraq in the name of combating terrorism.

LaCapra's distinction between absence and loss clarifies the play's trauma: Craig's death is a “loss”—a particular moment trapped in temporality—not an “absence.” His death robs the family of a coherent sense of the world. Kelly sighs, “Time. I can't believe so much time has passed—”, to which Peter responds, “It feels like yesterday, right?” (11). As a therapist, Kelly understands that people often repress traumatic memories, yet she and Peter themselves live in a mode of denial. This denial is an act of departure, as Caruth describes: “The trauma of the accident, its very unconsciousness, is borne by an act of departure... linked to the sufferer in his attempt to bring the experience to light” (22).

#### **IV. NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION AND TEMPORAL DISRUPTION**

The second scene abruptly shifts to an earlier point in time, prior to Craig's involvement in the war. This strategy of alternating between the present and the past corresponds to the way survivors of traumatic events oscillate between timelines through flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive thoughts. As Jena and Samantray note, repetition and fragmentation are common narrative techniques in traumatic representation (04).

The performative aspects of the play make its traumatic dimensions more evident. Shinn uses theatre to convey psychological implications of incapacitating grief that cannot be expressed through words. The double role, the confined domestic space, and the strategic pauses keep the audience emotionally suspended, mimicking the disorienting temporality of trauma. The non-linear progression impedes narrative closure, reemphasizing the repetitive nature of traumatic memory. Meaning arises not through action but through silences, numbness, and confinement.

#### **V. ETHICAL CRISIS AND THE TRAUMA OF COMPLICITY**

Before Craig leaves for Fort Benning, a discussion about Iraq reveals underlying tensions. Peter, an actor, is excited about a film on special forces, which Craig finds unrealistic. In a conversation about one of Kelly's patients—a liar, according to Craig—Kelly suggests that even if his story isn't factually accurate, it may be the only way he can communicate trauma: "this 'story' is the only way he has of communicating that trauma" (31). This reflects Jeffrey Alexander's view of cultural trauma, where survivors construct narratives to make sense of indecipherable events.

Caruth's concept of belatedness manifests in Peter's experience: "The worst time for me was actually months after – when the official report came out that said it was an accident. After that I just couldn't sleep for some reason" (39). Kelly theorizes that people in noble professions like the military desire to be immortalized, their deaths symbolically reversed by a community seeking answers (40). This reflects the post-9/11 wave of sympathy and national unity, which later gave way to skepticism as the war's true motivations emerged.

Peter's traumatic imagination conjures a Black Hawk helicopter crashing through the theater ceiling, indicating a psyche continually feeling endangered. He feels he is becoming Craig: "But lately, it's like – I feel like Craig in the curtain call... So maybe it's a delayed grief reaction" (40). Craig's emails from Iraq reveal his transformation. Peter notes, "just – this extraordinary thing of him turning against the war, you know?" (62). This awakening is traumatic because Peter can never discuss it with Craig; he is left with conjectures and memories.

#### **VI. THE CLIMAX: REALIZING COMPLICITY:**

Peter reads a crucial email where Craig describes the human rights violations at Abu Ghraib: "From what I can tell, it's not a big deal to people at home either. I think the images are a real comfort to people – that we're the powerful ones, in control, alive, clothed" (67). Sarah Benson observes that the play "excavates the infection of 9/11, the war and the acute humiliation of Abu Ghraib... such that the 'dying city' is understood to refer as much to New York City as it does to shell-shattered Baghdad" (xiii).

Craig confesses to losing faith in the war and American ideals, suffering "a wound I do not feel" (67). The final email reads: "The city is dying and we are the ones killing it... I have begun to wonder if I myself will recover from who I have become here, in just a few short months" (69). The trauma of realizing he has become what he fought against shatters his identity. His suicide is an escape from this irremediable ethical crisis. The email also reveals Craig's infidelities, compounding Kelly's trauma, but Peter defends him, arguing that guilt and shame consumed Craig in his final moments.

#### **VII. CONCLUSION**

*Dying City* is a disturbing dramatization of trauma that goes beyond usual narratives of mourning and national loss. Craig's gradual disillusionment and his realization of complicity in violence expose a trauma rooted in ethical dimensions rather than merely physical or psychological harm. His description of a wound he does not feel underscores the inexpressibility and inaccessibility of trauma. His death evidences the disorienting impact of ethical corruption. The play also shows how such trauma extends beyond the individual: Kelly and Peter continue to grapple with a ruptured present, circling a past they cannot inhabit. Their inability to ascertain the truth of Craig's final moments reinforces the epistemic limits of traumatic experience—it can never be fully comprehended, and survival requires enduring its uncertainty.

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Through its innovative theatrical form—doubling, fragmentation, silence—*Dying City* stages the very impossibility of representing trauma. It reframes trauma as an ethical crisis of complicity, challenging readers and audiences to confront the moral ambiguities of war and the enduring, inaccessible wounds it leaves on soldiers, families, and nations

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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