Perry Smith and Josef Kavalier: Historical and Literary Victimized Victimizers

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PERRY SMITH AND JOSEF KAVALIER: HISTORICAL AND LITERARY

VICTIMIZED VICTIMIZERS

by

Noella Jeo

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ABSTRACT

PERRY SMITH AND JOSEF KAVALIER: HISTORICAL AND LITERARY VICTIMIZED VICTIMIZERS

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In literary trauma theory, victimized victimizers represent an ambiguous area. In my thesis, I show how Perry Smith, a historical figure in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and Josef Kavalier, a fictional character in Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, represent these ambiguities. Both men become murderers acting out violence that was inflicted upon them as children. However, only Kavalier seems to work through the trauma.
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Introduction

All cultures have myths involving birth and death, centered on the concepts of both creativity and violence. As myth and experience, violence can bring people together at the same time it pulls them apart; for example, war can rally people together at the same time that it pits neighbors against each other. After World War I, Sigmund Freud observed behavior among traumatized veterans that was inexplicable according to his earlier theories. In 1920, Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which suggested that human existence is a struggle between the sex drive and an instinct towards death. Thanatos, or the death instinct, strives to return to a state of quiescence where individuals are not be disturbed by life-events. Freud’s work legitimized trauma as a kind of psychiatric disorder that merits study. Continued historical trauma, including World War II and the Holocaust, has acted as a catalyst for survivor-authors that carry on the discussion of trauma through narrative. Such texts have caused a re-emergence of literary trauma theory that began again in the 1990s. In my thesis, I hope to further pluralize the discourse on trauma literature.

If, as William Faulkner said, “The past is not dead; it is not even past,” trauma continues to at least affect its victims if not to define them. Some critics of American literature and trauma theory treat victimized victimizers and victims ambiguously. Some victims may work through the trauma through compulsive repetition and may even perpetrate trauma on new victims. Perry Smith and Joe Kavalier represent two different kinds of traumatized perpetrators, Perry in the acclaimed *In Cold Blood*, based on actual murders in Kansas, and Joe in the Pulitzer Prize-winning work of fiction *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. The examination of texts involving murder can turn to
literary trauma theory to explore how authors represent trauma and its effects. Trauma theory does not provide a precise definition of what constitutes victimization or who qualifies as a survivor, nor does it privilege the validity of the traumatic experience of certain survivors over others, although the Holocaust has received the most coverage by theorists. However, trauma theory’s insights into cultural and literary phenomena are valuable for many reasons, including the voice it gives to marginalized groups who have a desire to bear witness to their fragmented experiences in a more ordered narrative.

There are four categories important to trauma literature: victims, victimized victimizers, traumatized perpetrators, and perpetrators. Victims are those who have been traumatized by a violent event during which their safety was threatened but are working through the trauma and have not perpetrated against others. On the other hand, victimized victimizers are those who have been victimized and have not worked through the trauma; instead these individuals act out the trauma and traumatize others through violent, criminal acts. Traumatized perpetrators are perpetrators who were not victimized prior to their violent acts against others but have since been traumatized from the violence that they themselves initiated and acted out. Finally, there are perpetrators who have not been victimized and are not traumatized by the violent acts that they initiate; such individuals can best be described as sociopaths.

Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience* that trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind and as such is not a simple healable event like some physical ailments (3). According to Caruth, trauma is an overwhelming experience that is best represented in a literary text because of the text’s symbolic and ordered narrative. What makes literature the privileged, though not the only, site of trauma is the fact that literature as an art form
can contain and present an aspect of experience which is not fully comprehended or mentally processed by either victims or authors. In other words, because of literature’s reasonable and symbolic nature as well as its use of figurative language, it serves as a medium for the transmission of trauma which does not need to be fully comprehended or understood in order to be present in a text which makes the literary text a representation of trauma as it cannot be fully ordered. The construction of trauma narratives in literature may also have redemptive qualities for survivors who are able to finally give order to their fragmented experiences by reading narrative presentations of these traumatic events.\(^1\) Traumatized authors are able to bear witness to their experiences and hopefully have them validated by their readers. Thus an author may present through a text a certain truth about history that is not otherwise available.\(^2\)

For some survivors, traumatic representations in limited verbal systems are not ideal, but are essential because they are one of the most fundamental ways that humans communicate with each other. Elie Wiesel has long affirmed his belief that the survivor bears an obligation to both the living and the dead to testify to the world about the horrors he has seen. Wiesel, who acknowledges that testimony is never fully adequate because it is unable to bridge the gap between language and experience, says, “Could the wall be scaled? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer to be No, and yet I also knew that No had to become Yes” (Tal 2). Although not every reader of a text can experience perfect empathy, it is important for survivors to communicate in hopes of encouraging readers to expand their worldviews.

One reason why traumatic experiences often defy representation is because the events are fragmented or incomprehensible for the survivors, who may not grasp why the
trauma occurred in the first place and what the repercussions of the trauma are for themselves and others. Caruth believes that trauma has two components, destructiveness and survival from which “we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” (58). The essence of traumatic events is, however, incomprehensible. For Caruth, this incomprehensibility is due to the fact that “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it . . . The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight . . . suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known” (91-92). In other words, victims and survivors alike seek to understand the incomprehensible event. Caruth employs the parable of Tancred, who unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda, only to discover afterwards that when he slashes his sword at a tree, blood streaming from the cut and Clorinda’s voice cries out once more that he has wounded her again.

Ruth Leys, author of *Trauma: A Genealogy*, argues that Caruth’s analysis of the parable is “weird” because it places Tancred in the position of victim twice over while Clorinda acts as a witness to the trauma (295). Caruth has to argue that Clorinda’s voice is not her own, as it is impossible for the victim of trauma to represent what she has experienced, but is instead the voice of a dissociated Tancred. Leys writes of this dual and dissociated personality:

Caruth’s analysis of Tancred-Clorinda as a dual personality expresses her primary commitment to making victimhood unlocatable in any particular person or place, thereby permitting it to migrate or spread contagiously to others . . . This suggestion epitomizes Caruth’s theory of trauma in that it places us in the
position of Tancred-Clorinda and then oscillates, in an unstable yet “exemplary” manner, between imagining oneself as the ineluctable victim of a trauma and imagining oneself as the listener to someone else’s wound . . . In relation to the Holocaust, it is as if she proposes that whether we experienced the trauma of the Holocaust directly or not, each of us, in the post-Holocaust period, is already a split or dissociated subject, simultaneously victim and witness. (296-97)

I will discuss the problematic understanding of everyone as a victim later in the introduction. However, we must note that the foundations of Caruth’s understandings trauma are riddled with problematic assumptions on unlocatable and watered down victimization.

While victims may be able to work through certain aspects of having lived through a traumatic experience, at some level the traumatic event continues to define them, according to Caruth. “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (7). This question forms a crucial foundation for Caruth’s dualistic construction of trauma. There is a correlation between the crisis of death and the crisis of life, “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). Thus, the near death experience is traumatic not only because of its danger, but also because the survivor is left to deal with the horror and repercussions of a largely incomprehensible event.

Kali Tal, a scholar in trauma criticism and author of *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, believes that “if survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can . . . force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to . . . codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain
unchanged. On a social as well as an individual psychological level, the penalty for repression is repetition” (7). In short, she suggests that survivors have a need to bear witness to the trauma they have endured before a change in the social or political construct can occur in the hegemonic society because the dominant culture is often comfortable with the status quo and their narratives will reflect this more complacent attitude. “Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it ‘real’ . . . such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author” (Tal 21). But trauma literature is not appealing only to survivor-authors.

For millennia, the trauma of tragedy has attracted crowds. Like Platonic tragedy, trauma literature is cathartic for the survivor-author, but may also be for an audience that by exposure to the material is better educated about another’s collective or individual experience. Such literature has a wide appeal because people can relate to unexplained trauma and tap into larger questions of why bad things happen to good people and how they are supposed to live afterwards. Thus, much of the literature that deals with trauma originates with individuals who write in an attempt to further grasp or understand an experience that defies social constructs and is incomprehensible.

 Literary trauma theory holds a special appeal because it feeds off a type of voyeurism of people fascinated with the horrors that others have often privately suffered. In our day, people often shun responsibility for their criminal actions which inflict trauma on victims because of the tragic circumstances they themselves have endured. While trauma theory does not directly create such voyeuristic attitudes, it does not particularly resist them either by addressing the dangers of such tendencies. At their worst, trauma
narratives could attempt to outdo others by including more gruesome and sensational details. And what of fictionalized accounts of “real” traumas? Fictional accounts of trauma are in fact creating trauma ex nihilo. What happens to the nature of the reality of the trauma faced by survivors when it is imitated through fiction by authors who are not “victims?” When fictional accounts have as much validity as non-fictional accounts of trauma, people may begin to disregard some truthful non-fictional accounts simply because they do not fit the traditional trauma narrative mold that they have come to expect based upon fictional accounts. For example, Schindler’s List is based on a non-fiction account written by Thomas Keneally, and although it does not have an overwhelmingly happy ending, the text and movie have come under criticism for their mixed optimism. Dominick LaCapra argues that the ending treats the Nazi genocide “in terms of a harmonizing narrative that provided the reader or viewer with an unwarranted sense of spiritual uplift” (14). LaCapra argues that there are certain elements that are appropriate for a Holocaust narrative and others that are not. However, is it not possible for spiritual uplift to occur in even some of the most unsettling and horrific circumstances? Trauma narratives that include untraditional elements should not be excluded from the genre or examination simply based on our codified construct of what constitutes acceptable narratives because that often reinforces the values of hegemonic culture at the same time that it further marginalizes alienated victims.

Authors who write a text that deals with trauma act as a witness of those who have suffered the trauma; and as such these texts should be treated with respect and care. While readers may prefer the most sensational text, trauma critics ought to avoid such voyeuristic tendencies because to indulge in such reading is a form of validating the
represented violence. Critics may be wary of texts that present violence as an appropriate form of titillation because it perpetuates the acceptance of violence in our society. On the other hand, trauma theorists may not dictate what makes a trauma account valid because as soon as they do already marginalized victims and their narratives become further alienated.

Some of the weaknesses of trauma theory include its voyeuristic appeal, the use of the term “victim” too loosely, and the consequent conflation of “victim” and “victimizer.” In my thesis, I hope to show how victimized victimizers, specifically Joe Kavalier and Perry Smith, represent an ambiguous area in trauma theory that needs to be more clearly defined. I hope to establish a clear delineation between perpetrators and their victims.

Readers may have more direct problems with traumatic narratives. Enjoying the sensational, gruesome details of a trauma narrative might lead to other problems, including readers who identify themselves inappropriately as the victims or perpetrators. Dominick LaCapra warns readers not to inappropriately identify themselves as victims or survivors because such identification blinds readers to the ways their lives are privileged. LaCapra clarifies that “we may opt out of certain responsibilities because, through more or less projective identification, we seek only to attain a testimonial voice that bespeaks, writes, or cries out unspeakable suffering and loss. But something different may be required of someone who has not lived through extreme events and been severely traumatized” (212). Acting as a second witness to trauma is important in helping survivors bear witness because it validates the survivor’s testimony and helps them express their own experiences in narrative and consciously realize some of the ways that
they may still be acting out the trauma. Still, readers should not think that their own choices have been limited or power has been taken away from them simply because they are witnesses to disturbing narratives. Reading a narrative is different than experiencing the trauma first-hand. And if all readers acted as if their choices were limited after every disturbing text they read, there would be fewer and fewer responsible citizens. An over-identification is problematic because readers who over-identify with victimized characters in the book may begin to have fragmented worldviews and act out violence that they themselves never suffered.

If trauma theorists were ever to delineate what specific terms must be met before individuals could claim the privileged status of “victim,” then they would also need to further differentiate between the traumatic and that which is simply uncomfortable or unfortunate. Such specificity in who qualifies as a victim is dangerous, however, and the hegemonic cultures are more likely than any individual survivor to codify an understanding of trauma, particularly since the dominant culture often perpetrates and marginalizes victims. Trauma theory nomenclature may ultimately further marginalize individuals and their experiences because it validates some experiences at the expense of others. Nomenclature may legitimize a certain kind of trauma narrative at the same time that it ignores those that do not easily fit the same construct. Therefore, while literary trauma theory may use the survivor or victim status too freely at times, I will show how this freedom of nomenclature is necessary to maintain an open dialogue where victims on the margin or outside of the dominant culture may continue to act as witnesses for their experiences, even if they do not easily fit into prepackaged cultural paradigms.
Trauma theory attempts to describe violent and, some would argue, normatively postmodern cultural and psychological phenomena. Freud defines trauma as powerful, external excitations which break “an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure” (33). These external stimuli defy the organism’s conceptual understanding of the world—there is no possible way to process or to fully internalize the aberrant stimuli and so the organism responds defensively. Once the barrier is broken, many otherwise seemingly normal excitations can become overwhelming because the whole system is overloaded. Following meetings with many shell-shocked WWI veterans, Freud revised many of his earlier theories, particularly to better explain the phenomena of trauma. For example, Freud originally argued that all dreams were fulfillments of wishes that are usually suppressed; however, Freud saw that trauma victims often have recurring nightmares of horrific experiences that they would rather not have. Freud posits “it is impossible to classify as wish-fulfillments the dreams we have been discussing which occur in traumatic neuroses, or the dreams during psycho-analyses which bring to memory the psychical traumas of childhood. They arise, rather, in obedience to the compulsion to repeat . . . to conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed” (37).

Traumatized victims act out the horrors they have endured in nightmares in an attempt to master the break in conscious experience that results from trauma and regain control over their fragmented lives.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, however, Freud gives attention not only to shell-shocked soldiers but also to his grandson who dealt with the trauma of absence and
loss through his childhood play. “In the case of children’s play,” Freud writes, “we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reasons that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of” (42). But children are not the only ones who find comfort in acting out trauma; adults express this same need for reenactment in alternative ways. Freud writes that artistic imitation of trauma carried out by adults for an audience “do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convicting proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind” (17). There is something hopeful about the reassuring ability to master trauma that appeals to audiences. It allows them the possibility of surmounting overwhelming matters in their own lives and enables them to feel more compassion as they relate to others. This desire to master the trauma through repetition has a profound impact on the victim’s fragmented present which has been overwhelmed by external stimuli and wants to return to its previous, more ordered state. Freud writes of such an individual, “He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past” (19). By continuously repeating the traumatic material in the present, the victim is not able to get enough distance from the overwhelming experience to be able to work through and give order to the fragments by using hindsight. Trauma victims often do not have the luxury of categorically putting the aberrant experience in the past because it is an overwhelming
experience that ruptures their understanding by dissolving their protective shell and
draws attention to itself in the present. Being racked with memories, nightmares, and the
desire to master the trauma transforms some victims into victimized victimizers, or
perpetrators that were originally victimized before acting out the trauma on others.

Another glaring problem with trauma theory is the question of what constitutes
victimization. Some trauma critics pose that we are all victims because we live in a
hyper-complex, postmodern world. Such critics argue that trauma occurs whenever
humans are not able to fully process or understand their experiences. Living in our
postmodern world dictates that we are exposed to many stimuli that we cannot fully
explain or comprehend, and that this experience is overwhelming and seemingly
traumatic. LaCapra, however, argues that when victimization is taken to such a loose
extreme of meaning, our understanding of victims and survivors loses its emphasis and
potency because everyone becomes a victim and there is very little in this logic that
separates the experience of a concentration camp survivor with someone who does not
fully understand the intricacies of the mechanics that run their computer and cell phone.
Such ludicrous relativism is dangerous when dealing with trauma for many reasons,
including that perpetrators are viewed as less culpable for their crimes. This perception
necessarily leads to relativism because it excuses responsibility for one’s criminal actions
if everyone is a victim. Extrapolating perpetrators’ lack of culpability ultimately leads to
that particular society’s willful resistance to the consequences that individuals and groups
face as a result of legitimate trauma experiences. Not only is such an approach ignorant
of the effects of trauma, it is also destructive to the victims’ healing because it
undermines the validity of their suffering, and this, in turn, encourages victims to continue to assert their suffering instead of focusing that energy on healing.

Controlling the status of legitimate victimization can have devastating political and ethical implications for victims and victimizers alike. For example, Omar Bartov argues that even while Nazis were killing Jews “many of the perpetrators perceived themselves as acting in their own defense against their past and potential victimizers. That the Jews appeared defenseless and helpless seems only to have enhanced the need among the perpetrators to view themselves as the ‘real’ victims and those they murdered as the culprits” (784). The Nazis used the status of their perceived victimhood as a weapon to legitimize their violence towards Jews and other non-Aryan groups. Asserting victimhood should only be done with caution because historically the status has been used by scheming groups or individuals to legitimize their own violent acts. There is a difference between victimizers who use their victim status to excuse violence and actual victims who defend themselves. It is very important to keep this distinction clear in trauma literature so that authors who want to increase sympathy for their own political or emotional biases do not easily manipulate readers.

Dominick LaCapra, author of *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, warns against the dubious ideology “that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a ‘wound culture.’” (As a recent public service message would have it, ‘Violence makes victims of us all’”) (64). As LaCapra argues, for the term “victim” to have potency it cannot be watered down to apply to everyone. Another example, one more obscure than Nazis because of its proximity in time and space, is Kali Tal’s classification of Vietnam vets as
one of three groups of victims she examines in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. She writes that in the Vietnam War, soldiers who were “exposed to combat or other life-threatening events . . . were traumatized . . . The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it. These soldiers carry guns; they point them at people and shoot to kill. Members of oppressed groups, by contrast, almost never control the tools of violence” (9-10). Controlling and employing the weapons of violence offers one key delineation between what constitutes a victim and who qualifies as their perpetrators (who themselves may be victimized). For many patriotic Americans, it is unsettling to think of U.S. soldiers as victimizers, because that would invalidate American political policies and involvement in wars. Instead, it is easier to view them in terms as what may be termed victimized victimizers, which decreases their (and our) sense of personal culpability.

Soldiers are trained killers who often struggle in civilian life to integrate their war experiences with the everyday details. Tal writes about the blurring of the distinctions between the soldiers in combat and their victims and suggests that “the confusion of perpetrator and victim, power and powerlessness, create in the survivors of war a duality of perception characteristic of trauma survivors. Their choice—to close their eyes to the horror of the past and deny their own experience, or to attempt to integrate the traumatic experience into the banality of everyday life—is always difficult” (114). Reintegration into the banality of everyday life offers a difficulty to victims whose experience is now fragmented and chaotic and involves compulsive repetition.

The difficulty in re-entering everyday life after a traumatic experience traps some victims in compulsive repetition. LaCapra asserts that trauma literature forms “a kind of
captivity narrative that has the power to make ordinary life seem difficult to reenter and ordinary explanations appear as placebos for what can be apprehended only with extreme difficulty and with no pretense to complete understanding” (211). This difficulty to reenter ordinary life or life as it existed before the aberration is one reason why some victims might be lead to acting out the trauma on others and become victimized victimizers. “The stories in no sense redeem what they discuss and do not provide us with the higher insight that is the recompense we might expect to derive from even the most tragic of accounts. At most they leave one in a state of necessary unease and with the perhaps equally necessary ‘never-again’ feeling” (211). While trauma narratives cannot preserve the events of the past, there is a kind of redemption found in refusing to passively allow a similar event to reoccur or to perpetrate other victims.

One specific manifestation of this repetitive behavior is the nightmares that victims have. Caruth also notes that trauma is “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). For Caruth, waking from the nightmare is just as disturbing, if not more so, than the dream itself:

[I]t is not only the dream that surprises consciousness but, indeed, the very waking itself that constitutes the surprise . . . What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one’s own survival. (64)
Survival is traumatic, too, because it leaves the victims alive to ask questions that do not have easy answers and to try to understand the horrific experience in pre-constructed ideas about the world. Thus, figuring out the implications of survival after a near-death experience and comprehending the meaning of the trauma are two struggles that victims grapple with as they begin their lives anew. Caruth’s construction of nightmares is reminiscent of her dualistic conception of trauma as being both the crisis of almost dying and the crisis of not having died.

This blurring of the distinctions between victimizers and victims is problematic, however, because it puts the two on comparable moral grounds and makes the killers less culpable for their crimes. Mark Seltzer, author of *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture*, posits that perceiving the killer who survives as “the only living witness” equates the “killer himself as trauma victim . . . the victor experiences himself and, in a literal sense, sees himself as a witness or spectator of his own acts. It may be useful to redirect attention from the trauma of witnessing to the deadly logic of the survivor: to killing as a form, albeit the lowest form, of surviving” (272). In Seltzer’s view, killing as a form of survival infuses the murderous action with a new meaning and likely causes us to feel more sympathy for perpetrators who are just trying to stay alive. Seltzer argues that “the killer who escapes death by apportioning it to others . . . externalizes the fear of his own pulpy and secret interior in the conversion of another body into the bloody pulp he then witnesses . . . Killing is . . . converted into survival” (272-73). In the following sections of my thesis, I will show how these ideas of killing as a form of survival in relation to the traumatized killer are played out in the texts *In Cold Blood* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. 
Both Truman Capote and Michael Chabon attempt to convince their readers of the victim status of Perry Smith and Joseph Kavalier by showing how the childhood trauma these characters endured continues to affect them as adults and, to a point, excuses their criminal actions. For example, Perry Smith has repeated flashbacks about abusive nuns and Joseph Kavalier dissociates himself from contact with his family and feverishly creates comics in which he acts out violence. While Chabon shows how the fictional Josef Kavalier first manages the grief of losing his family by creating “The Escapist” who employs violence, and then later joins the Canadian Army and kills a German geologist; Capote describes how the fictionalized Perry Smith murders four members of the Clutter family in an attempt to effect his own survival from traumatic childhood experiences (or so Capote would have us believe).

In the following section, I examine how Truman Capote manipulates his text to present Perry Smith, a historical figure, as a victim. Subsequently, I argue that Capote manipulates his text in such a way to create sympathy for Smith despite the murders, showing how Capote favors Perry over Dick in his narrative by creating complexities with Perry’s character through his victimized victimizer status. In the third section, I examine Michael Chabon’s novel Kavalier and Clay to show how Josef Kavalier was already victimized by the Nazis when he killed an armed German soldier while serving in the Canadian Army. Most importantly, Chabon’s text shows the deep remorse Kavalier feels and the ultimate failure of redemptive violence. This failure makes him a more sympathetic character and more comfortable fit for status of victimized victimizer. In the fourth section, I argue how it is easier to have sympathy for Joe because Perry is acting out violence while Joe is working through it.
Perry as Murderer and Victim

On November 15, 1959 four members of the Clutter family were killed with a shotgun held only inches from their faces. The spray from shotguns, while ideal for hunting birds, leaves horrific, messy wounds on human victims. The violent and dehumanizing deaths of the Clutters is degrading because their wounded, disfigured faces figuratively erase their existence by preventing others to recognize them. This event shook the nation partly because Americans felt uneasy that such a heinous crime could occur in sleepy and peaceful Holcomb, Kansas. Seeking to capitalize on the public’s horrified interest in these murders, Truman Capote’s “novel” *In Cold Blood* presents a literary adaptation of these events. He starts off his narrative by highlighting the Clutters’ last few days and then switches his attention to the murderers, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Surprisingly, Capote does not share details of the murders until much later in the novel when Perry confesses—and only after readers have been manipulated by Capote into feeling sympathy for Perry. The book ends shortly after Dick’s and Perry’s executions. Capote said that if he had understood what the emotional toll of writing *In Cold Blood* would be before he started the book and even as he was driving to Holcomb, he never would have stopped. “I would have driven straight on. Like a bat out of hell” (Clarke 320). And yet, the book is one of Capote’s greatest masterpieces, in part because of its complex portrayal of human behavior and victimization. Capote is able to craft a text that portrays Perry as a conflicted, victimized anti-hero doomed to become a criminal because of his past.
By portraying Perry as a victim, Capote runs into the danger of making Perry the victim of *In Cold Blood*. The novel is no longer about the other five lives that were lost, but rather its focus shifts to Perry’s status as a victim of society and his own execution “in cold blood.” By portraying Perry as a victim and including details of his own childhood trauma, however, Capote slights the Clutters’ victimization. While perpetrators may suffer from the trauma of their crimes, their trauma must be understood in terms that differ from the trauma that helpless victims who are acted upon may suffer. By lumping together both kinds of trauma we undermine the validity of the actual victims’ experiences, causing them additional harm. Furthermore, and more disturbingly, Perry’s culpability is all but absolved as his parents, the nuns, and society at large become seemingly responsible for the pathetic life he led and the murder of an innocent family.

Capote masterfully creates the fear and horror that the Clutters may have felt that fateful night, but his book becomes manipulative when he portrays Perry as a victim also. LaCapra suggests “not everyone traumatized by events is a victim. There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma . . . Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim. The fact that Himmler suffered from chronic stomach cramps” or that his associate von dem Bach-Zelewski had “nocturnal fits of screaming does not make them victims of the Holocaust” (79). Capote portrays Perry as a witness or spectator to his acts instead of a willing participant. Perry recalls that when he carried Mr. Clutter’s binoculars and radio to the car, he thought, “Why don’t I walk off? Walk to the highway, hitch a ride. I sure Jesus didn’t want to go back in that house. And yet—how could I explain this? It was like I wasn’t part of it. More as
though I was reading a story. And I had to know what was going to happen. The end” (240). By presenting Perry as a passive spectator to the scene, Capote decreases his culpability because he emphasizes Perry’s status as spectator at the same time he diminishes his role as active perpetrator of heinous crimes.

Gerald Clarke, Capote’s official biographer, examines the proclivity that Truman had for Perry as opposed to Dick. “When Perry sat down in front of the judge to be arraigned, Truman nudged Nelle [Harper Lee]. ‘Look, his feet don’t touch the floor.’ Nelle said nothing, but thought, ‘Oh, oh! This is the beginning of a great love affair’” (326). While Lee was being somewhat flippant, her words hint at the significant attachment that Perry and Capote had almost instantly for each other. Clarke also observes that their similarities went far beyond their shortness. He writes, “Their relationship was more complicated than a love affair: each looked at the other and saw, or thought he saw, the man he might have been” (326). Both Perry and Capote had suffered in their childhoods from alcoholic mothers, absent fathers, and foster homes. And “both had turned to art to compensate for what had been denied them. Perry was convinced that with a little encouragement, he could have made his mark as a painter, a singer, a songwriter” (326). Similar artistic inclinations, the sad similarities between their childhoods, and the fact that Capote may have viewed Perry as what he could have become is a compelling explanation for the sympathy Capote felt for Perry. It also helps explain his portrayal of Perry as a victim of society, whereas his portrayal of Dick’s character is significantly less sympathetic. Therefore it is Capote’s victimization as a child abandoned by his father and at times his mother that makes him unusually suited to
portray Perry’s victimization. Thus a traumatized author is often more likely to depict sympathy for his literary victims because of the empathy they themselves feel.

George Plimpton’s interview with Capote provides further insight into why Capote favored Perry, or at the very least found him more compelling than Dick. Capote told Plimpton that if Dick had been born in a wealthier social class, he still would have been a criminal. On the other hand, Capote said, “I think Perry could have been an entirely different person. I really do. His life had been so incredibly abysmal that I don’t see what chance he had as a little child except to steal and run wild . . . . Perry had extraordinary qualities, but they just weren’t channeled properly—to put it mildly . . . he had a genuine sensitivity” (42). Despite Dick’s advantages in life he does not have the same sensitivity that Perry does and that Capote assumes he has himself. To Capote, Dick is a heartless killer who enjoys murder and has nothing in his background to make him predisposed to violence. Perry, on the other hand, has valid reasons to be predisposed to violence and shows sensitivity to the victims before and after the murders. Furthermore, Capote stresses Perry’s sensitivity at times in the text by showing how he is a musician and has sensitivity about hurting innocent women. Capote is more lenient with Perry because he perceives that Perry has suffered more trauma as a child than Dick ever did, and his lenience is reflected in aesthetic choices that he makes as an author in how he portrays the two murderers.

One of the ways Capote crafts his novel to make readers feel sympathy for Perry is in the differences he describes between Perry and his foil, Dick. Readers learn how Perry, in comparison to Dick, is sympathetic to his victims’ feelings. Perry places a mattress under Mr. Clutter so that he did not have to be on the cold floor (241) and he
also removes his knife from a newly varnished chest so as not to ruin the finish and places a pillow under Kenyon’s head to help alleviate his coughing (242). In comparison, Dick coldly asks Mrs. Clutter, “How come you keep on crying? Nobody’s hurting you” (243). Moments after telling Mrs. Clutter “to go to sleep” and shutting her door, Dick turns to Perry and tells him that he is going to “bust that little girl” (243). Within a few feet of her terrified mother, Dick declares his intention to rape Nancy which only makes his words to Mrs. Clutter all the more condescending. The disgust readers feel for Dick’s plans makes them appreciate that Perry is there to protect Nancy. Even Dick feels sorry for “Little Perry” who was “always wetting his bed and crying in his sleep (‘Dad, I been looking everywhere, where you been, Dad?’), and often Dick had seen him ‘sit for hours just sucking his thumb and poring over them phony damn treasure guides’” (108).

Unlike Perry, Dick had an easy childhood and strong support from his functional, respectable family. Not even Capote tries to make him out as a victimized victimizer; instead he is simply portrayed as evil; Capote does not rationalize Dick’s motivations the same way he does with Perry. One scene that highlights Dick’s delight in violence is when he swerves his car towards an old dog on the side of the road. Hearing the small impact, “Dick was satisfied. ‘Boy!’ he said—and it was what he always said after running down a dog, which was something he did whenever the opportunity arose. ‘Boy! We sure splattered him!’” (113). Dick’s delight in violence is markedly different from the way that Capote portrays Perry’s reticence about employing violence. This creates readers’ antipathy towards Dick. Capote uses Dick as a foil to Perry so that readers are more likely to feel sorry for him as a victimized victimizer when compared with Dick, a callous perpetrator.
One of the areas in which Perry and Dick differ greatly is their sexuality. Perry prevents Dick from raping Nancy, telling him “you’ll have to kill me first” (243). Perry describes how Dick “looked like he didn’t believe he’d heard right. He says, ‘What do you care? Hell, you can bust her, too’ . . . I told him straight, ‘Leave her alone. Else you’ve got a buzzsaw to fight.’ That really burned him, but he realized it wasn’t the time to have a flat-out free-for-all. So he says, ‘O.K., honey. If that’s the way you feel’” (243). Stopping Dick in his attempt to rape Nancy might have also been cathartic for Perry, who was not able to stop older men from sexually harassing him. Preserving Nancy’s purity turns Perry into a savior figure of sorts—even as he kills her. For many of Capote’s readers, Perry’s elevated status from heartless murderer and rapist to thoughtful, compassionate killer blurs how readers respond to him. Also, Perry talks with Nancy and further establishes trust between them. This is crucial to her later murder and thus becomes a complete betrayal of that trust. This hinge-point scene helps to establish Perry as friendly and more in control of his sexuality, which makes him harder to vilify. The viewer hopes that Perry’s compassion will move him to action, or rather inaction, and decide to preserve Nancy’s life instead of murdering her.

Another rhetorical technique that Capote employs in manipulating readers to feel sympathy for Perry foremost as a victim is using other people’s accounts of Perry’s victimization and sensitivity to increase reader sympathy. One such person is Willie-Jay, the chaplain’s clerk of the Kansas State Penitentiary at Lansing where Perry was serving a prison sentence. Capote increases the reader’s sympathy for Perry who Willie-Jay views as a lost soul. When Perry hears Willie-Jay sing “The Lord’s Prayer” it is a religious awakening—although perhaps never fully materialized. Willie Jay recognized
in Perry a “cripple-legged body builder with the misty gaze and the prim, smoky voice ‘a poet, something rare and savable’” (42). For a time, it seemed as if Willie-Jay was going to be able to bring Perry to God when “one day Perry produced a pastel drawing he had made—a large, in no way technically naïve portrait of Jesus. Lansing’s Protestant chaplain, the Reverend James Post, so valued it that he hung it in his office where it hangs still: a slick and pretty Saviour, with Willie-Jay’s full lips and grieving eyes” (42-43). It is significant that in Capote’s account the Christ Perry chooses to paint is a man well acquainted with grief, a man who, like Perry, is tormented by the heartless people around him. The way that readers see the image of Perry’s Jesus is the way that Capote describes it and he does so in a way that features Perry’s suffering. Perry’s insight into the character of Jesus must have further convinced Willie-Jay of his perceptions about Perry.

Perhaps Willie-Jay has a more unbiased opinion than Capote. He is not trying to sell his views, like an author who hopes to sell books. Willie-Jay has nothing to gain if readers agree that Perry is a lost soul, Capote’s credibility, on the other hand, is on the line as he overtly tries to persuade readers to feel sympathy for Perry. The Willie-Jay readers are presented, of course, is filtered through Capote who makes use of the fact that he is able to look more unbiased than other figures in the novel. Readers want to believe that a man of God is telling the truth. And if Willie-Jay can look at Perry while he is in prison and see his potential, then the reader can too. Who wants to harshly judge or discard a man who is rare and redeemable? By adding a third-party, and seemingly impartial witness to Perry’s sensitivity and worth, Capote appears to become a more reliable narrator of the novel.
To strengthen his argument that Perry was traumatized as a child, Capote also includes the heart-wrenching story of when Perry is abandoned by his parents and left to the mercy—or the lack thereof—of other adults. Perry recalls being sent to a Catholic orphanage, “the one where the Black Widows were always at me. Hitting me. Because of wetting the bed. Which is one reason I have an aversion to nuns” (132). Capote encourages readers to imagine a lonely child in a shelter who desperately needs a compassionate adult’s care. Abuse at the hands of a nun could reasonably lead a child to question religion and the very existence of God. Capote provides additional “evidence” of Perry’s disillusionment with religion by describing Perry’s painting of Jesus to be hypocrisy and ‘an attempt to fool and betray’ Willie-Jay, for he was as unconvinced of God as ever” (43). If Perry has good reason to question the existence of God, then Capote encourages the reader not to judge Perry from a closed, religious point of view that is based on beliefs that Perry does not share. Capote’s decision to include this information from a first-person point of view compels the reader to consider the verbal and physical abuse that Perry suffered as a child.

In Capote’s framing of the narrative, readers are allowed to see how Perry offers further evidence of his childhood abuse in a letter to Dr. Jones, a psychiatrist who examined Perry and Dick before their trials, which Capote conveniently provides to the readers. In this letter, Perry recalls how he was moved to various detention homes, including one in which he says, “I was severely beaten by the cottage mistress, who had called me names and made fun of me in front of all the boys” (275). Not only were the cottage mistress’s words psychologically damaging, they were also divisive and prevented Perry from having the support of his peers. It is easy to see why Perry would
be anxious and have the patterns of behaviors that he developed as a coping mechanism as a child. Enraged and paranoid, “she used to come around at all hours of the night to see if I wet the bed” (275). Perry includes in his letter that “every night was a nightmare. Later on she thought it was very funny to put some kind of ointment on my penis. This was almost unbearable. It burned something terrible” (275). In these passages, Capote establishes Perry’s victimization by including accounts of his childhood trauma which implicitly suggest his predisposition to violence as an adult. Perry’s trauma was inflicted upon both his mind and body as a child and the attendant’s actions could have had an emasculating effect, or at least taught Perry to be ashamed of his sexuality and confused about his sexual orientation. Capote shows the degrading acts that Perry had to endure as a child and thus increases the reader’s sympathy for him.

Besides allowing his reader to view Perry’s written account of these abuses, Capote also allows the reader the chance to view the testimony of Perry’s father, who also witnesses to the traumatic childhood that Perry had to endure through a letter to the parole board. In his letter, Perry’s father discloses how his wife became an alcoholic and decided to leave him, writing, “my children all cryed at the top of their voices. She only cussed them saying they would run away to come to me later. She got mad and then said she would turn the children to hate me, which she did, all but Perry” (126). As he depicts these difficult events, Perry’s father tries to feature his son’s big heart and later mentions that he would go their school and try to see them in the schoolyard, Perry was the only one who would approach his father, giving him hugs and visiting with him (126). Perry’s big heart unfortunately did not equate to a more stable childhood.
Perry’s father recalls how he and Perry took to roaming and living in their house car so that he (the father) could forget about his broken heart (127). With so much emphasis on the father’s emotions, one wonders what emotions a young Perry had to sacrifice to be a support to his needy father. Moving around a lot did not improve Perry’s studies. With all of their moving, it is no wonder that Perry’s father recalls “he didn’t like school very well” (127). In this respect, the letter demonstrates how such a lack of education severely limited Perry’s employment opportunities. Nor did Perry have the chance to develop close friendships with his school peers, which is important to a child’s emotional development. In fact, Perry only made it through the third grade because for the next six years he and his dad “shifted around the country” and “never stayed nowhere too long” (132). Having such a transient life with little stability could be very unsettling for a young child who is trying to understand his self-worth, his relationships with others, and his potential. However, the letters are once again written by very biased authors because they lived through these experiences first hand and want to convince readers of individuals’ overall goodness. The letters from Perry and his father are texts written by unreliable narrators who underscore some events while ignoring others for their own purposes. Perry’s anti-social behavior may have stemmed from the coping behaviors he learned as a child trying to survive; however, he becomes a perpetrator when he perpetuates that violence on others by taking away their ability to make choices and to give voice to their needs and desires.

As Perry begins unwillingly to remember events surrounding the murder, he concedes that “there must be something wrong” with him, “an admission he ‘hated to make’” (110). But almost as soon as Capote’s text allows Perry to consider his own
responsibility, it immediately includes Perry’s troubling family history. Capote writes, “It was ‘painful’ to imagine that one might be ‘not just right’—particularly if whatever is wrong was not your own fault but ‘maybe a thing you were born with.’ Look at his family! Look at what happened there” (110, italics mine). Capote’s heavy-handed manipulation of the text increases as he focuses on the pitiful Perry Smith family history. “His mother, an alcoholic, had strangled to death on her own vomit. Of her children, two sons and two daughters, only the younger girl, Barbara, had entered ordinary life . . . Fern, the other daughter, jumped out of a window of a San Francisco hotel . . . And there was Jimmy . . . who had one day driven his wife to suicide and killed himself the next” (110-11). Nor did Perry have a good relationship with his only surviving sister. Perry did not appreciate the preachy letter that Barbara wrote to him while he was in prison. “One fine day he’d pay her back, have a little fun—talk to her, advertise his abilities, spell out in detail the things he was capable of doing to people like her, respectable people, safe and smug people, exactly like Bobo” (194). Perry planned on using his ability to murder to intimidate a sister that he resented because of her seemingly successful and comfortable life. Barbara shared with Harold Nye that she was afraid of Perry (181) and requested that he not be told her present address. Perry was later informed of his only surviving sibling’s wishes and “smiled slightly and said, ‘I wish she’d been in that house that night. What a sweet scene!’” (259). The family’s curse continued even after Capote’s text was published. The Las Vegas Review—Journal announced, “Tex ‘Buckaroo’ Smith was found dead on May 20, 1986, north of Reno at his residence in Cold Springs. Tex died at the age of 92 of a self-inflicted gunshot” (Rocha). To strengthen Capote’s point that Perry is not responsible for whatever is
wrong, Capote includes details of the overwhelmingly traumatic past of his family. Compared to other members of his family, Capote seems to suggest that Perry is somewhat more functional since he at least did not commit suicide. Even Perry’s wish for his remaining sister’s violent demise never came to fruition and he met his own violent execution by hanging.

As a survivor of childhood trauma, Perry would have learned techniques to preserve his life. Indeed, Perry was the last survivor because he outlives the four Clutters and even Dick. On their way to Holcomb, Perry has second thoughts. “‘No witnesses,’ [Dick] reminded Perry, for what seemed to Perry the millionth time. It rankled in him, the way Dick mouthed those two words, as though they solved every problem . . .” (37). Dick continues by trying to reassure Perry that they will not get caught, “I promised you, honey—plenty of hair on them-those walls” (37). After killing the Clutters, Perry recalls Dick’s words about leaving no witnesses alive and remembers thinking, “that’s when I decided I’d better shoot Dick. He’s said over and over, he’d drummed it into me: No witnesses. And I thought, He’s a witness. I don’t know what stopped me. God knows I should’ve done it. Shot him dead. Got in the car and kept on going till I lost myself in Mexico” (245). For Perry, the value of being the last survivor is a matter of control or overcoming trauma that he suffered as a child. Perhaps he even believes that by becoming the last survivor he can break the compulsive repetitive behaviors of acting out violence because he will have mastered it. Although he does not murder Dick, Perry’s desire to outlive Dick comes to fruition the night of their executions. The next day, the Kansas City Star wrote “Hickock, 33 years old, died first, at 12:41 A.M.; Smith, 36, died at 1:19” (337). Dewey recalls Perry’s determination to be the last survivor, “they was
gonna let them draw straws to see who dropped first. Or flip a coin. But Smith says why not do it alphabetically. Guess ‘cause S comes after H. Ha!” (338). Even in their executions, Perry strives to be the last survivor.

Further proof of Capote’s manipulation of the text is the details that he chooses to include or exclude. For instance, Capote chooses not to include any photographs in the text. During the trial jurors were shown photographs from the crime scene, concrete evidence of the murderers’ violent acts. The judge allowed the jurors to pass around the jury box the seventeen images of the Clutter family corpses, making a visible impression on the jurors. Capote describes how “one man’s cheeks reddened, as if he had been slapped, and a few, after the first distressing glance, obviously had no heart for the task; it was as if the photographs had pried open their mind’s eye, and forced them to at least really see the true pitiful thing that had happened . . . several of them . . . stared at the defendants with total contempt” (281). Dick’s father was saddened by the damning effect of the photos and proclaimed, “No sense. Just no sense having a trial” (281). The horrific photographs strongly affected many of the jurors’ perspectives on not only the nature of the crime but on the characters of Perry and Dick. Images can be more powerful in communicating traumatic events than even words because speech is filtered through one individual’s mind and then could be interpreted another way by the receiver. Images are more straightforward and while people may have a hard time recalling the exact wording of a conversation, pictures can easily be recalled to mind. Capote’s prejudice against the photographs and their affects comes out in the passage about the jury. It is significant that no photographs of the Clutters, dead or alive, are included in the text. If readers were shown photographs, Capote knew that they might have similar
reactions to the jury and decreased sympathy for Perry Smith. These images leave rhetoric behind and enable the viewers to make their own judgments. It is easier to feel sympathy after hearing about his traumatic childhood but the photographs leave little doubt about the brutality and violence of the crimes Perry committed.

Another way that Capote manipulates readers into seeing Perry Smith as a victim who deserves special compassion lies in the way that Capote depicts Perry’s refined, controlled speech versus the times that he speaks in a broken, even infantile manner. It is significant that throughout the novel, Perry is correcting improper English usage in newspapers and in Dick’s word choices, suggesting that if Perry had been given the chance to be educated perhaps he would not have become a criminal. One of the first interactions we see between Dick and Perry is when Perry is correcting Dick’s usage of “them walls” with “those walls.” Perry is then described as “a dictionary buff, a devotee of obscure words, he had been intent on improving his companion’s grammar and expanding his vocabulary ever since they had celled together at Kansas State Penitentiary” (22). A few paragraphs later in the same chapter, Perry corrects Dick again, this time with his verb conjugation. Not only are Perry’s words carefully chosen, but even his voice reflects his desire for precision in vocal communication. We learn that Perry’s voice “was both gentle and prim—a voice that, though soft, manufactured each word exactly, ejected like a smoke ring issuing from a parson’s mouth” (23). To emphasize his point, Capote has Perry share his knowledge that Dick’s parents hate him because of the “ineffable way they looked” at him (23). “Ineffable” stands out on in contrast to Dick’s slang and incomplete, short sentences. One of Perry’s most
fundamental character traits is his admiration of correct English usage and his control over his voice that, along with his carefully selected words, convey a sense of dignity.

Yet as Perry recounts the night of the murders to Dewey, his superior language ability collapses. Simply reflecting upon the overwhelming nature of the violence disarms one of Perry’s most fundamental personality traits. Perry talks in fragmented sentences about the events leading up to Mr. Clutter’s death and how he slit his throat. “See, it was something between me and Dick. I knelt down beside Mr. Clutter, and the pain of kneeling—I thought of that goddam dollar. Silver dollar. The shame. Disgust. And they’d told me never to come back to Kansas. But I didn’t realize what I’d done till I heard the sound. Like somebody drowning. Screaming under water” (244). If trauma is an experience that fragments one’s understanding of the world and relation to others, then Capote’s text is constructed so that Perry’s language truly reflects this sentiment with his abrupt sentences that do not directly address the trauma but provide a circumlocutory description of it. As Perry recalls the pleasant conversation he has with Nancy while they are alone, his register drops and his sentences become much shorter and at times are only fragments.

I asked Nancy if she had a boyfriend. She said yes, she did. She was trying hard to act casual and friendly. I really liked her. She was really nice. A very pretty girl, and not spoiled or anything. She told me quite a lot about herself. About school, and how she was going to go to a university to study music and art. Horses. Said next to dancing what she liked best was to gallop a horse, so I mentioned my mother had been a champion rodeo rider. (242)
The scene is chilling because it shows the pivotal moments when the murderer and victim connect. This makes the murder seem more tragic and fatalistic because Perry is able to create a genuine connection with a person one moment and then murder them the next. If trauma breaches a protective shield around our consciousness, as Freud suggests, then it breached Perry’s which caused him to have significant language changes when recalling the murders.

Capote also makes a point of Perry’s handicaps. Perry was also crippled by a motorcycle accident which left him maimed and for which “he had spent half a year in a State of Washington hospital and another six months on crutches, and though the accident had occurred in 1952, his chunky, dwarfish legs, broken in five places and pitifully scarred, still pained him so severely that he had become an aspirin addict” (31). Being dependant upon a drug to feel better makes Perry more vulnerable and perhaps less free to make his own choices. Perry’s father commented on the way that his son’s accident had marked him: “he’s a Cripple and almost middle-aged man. Perry knows he is not wanted now by Contractors, cripples can’t get jobs on heavy equipment, unless you are well know to the Contractor. He is beginning to realize that . . .” (129). Clearly, Perry’s father did not have much confidence in his son’s ability to be hired and keep a job, so why should Perry? If his father reinforced his son’s handicap and deformities, then Perry is likely to have had a very confused self-image and been envious of those who have seemed to do better and be luckier in life. Herb Clutter was such a man that Perry would have been envious of him. There were other ways that Perry was victimized, including the ridicule he faced because he was of mixed heritage.
Capote also depicts some of the overwhelming challenges Perry faced as a soldier serving his country in the merchant Marines throughout the entire Korean War. Although he didn’t mind the work, Perry said that he would never have joined if he knew that he was going up against (133). He recalls the “queens on ship wouldn’t leave me alone. A sixteen-year-old kid, and a small kid. I could handle myself, sure. But . . . they can get together and gang up on you, and you’re just a kid. It can make you practically want to kill yourself” (133-34). Still a legal minor, Perry was subjected to the unwanted and intimidating sexual advances of older, stronger men. Not able to protect himself against a group of men, Perry’s experience as he relives it bears the structure of rape or at the very least sexual harassment linked with violence. While his expression that it made him “practically want to kill” himself may be glib, it does reveal the great amount of frustration and desperation that he felt at the time and still remembered decades later as an adult. Following his stint as a merchant marine, Perry was stationed in Korea for the Army; he felt that after four years fighting through the whole Korean War, he should have been promoted to corporal. Perry said he was never promoted because “the sergeant we had was tough. Because I wouldn’t roll over. Jesus, I hate that stuff. I can’t stand it” (134). Perry believes that he was unfairly discriminated against because he would not comply with his commander’s every wish. Capote depicts how Perry was held back from promotion and was traumatized from these horrific experiences. While readers may feel sympathy for a character or individual’s suffering, they should remember that we are gauging the trauma that Perry endured through the literary medium that Capote with all of his biases has created.
*In Cold Blood* is a biased text that presents Perry Smith as a victim. Capote even admits in an interview with George Plimpton that his novel is manipulative. Even though Capote did not make himself a character in the text, he shared that “I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it . . . . In the nonfiction novel one can also manipulate: if I put something in which I don’t agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight” (3). Capote attempts to “set the reader straight” by providing them with facts that suggest Perry is a victimized victimizer, and the fact that Capote does not appear as a character but instead subtly arranges the text to meet his own purposes is more manipulative because of its subversive nature.

Plimpton’s interviews suggest that Perry was the sole murder of the Clutter family, that there was indeed a romantic relationship between Perry and Capote, and that Perry showed very little remorse at his execution for murdering the Clutters. Each of these points is different from the manipulative account provided in Capote’s novel. The many other witnesses and their accounts of the events described in the novel offer a valuable alternative to the manipulative portrayal of Perry who Capote shows as a victim of society. The other witnesses have different viewpoints and express themselves without first being processed through Capote’s filter so their perspective is important. Plimpton’s text shows that perhaps Truman was so emotionally invested in Perry that he didn’t want future generations to view Perry as a heartless killer, but instead a thoughtful, sensitive, misled man whom life had beaten down—and society at large is responsible for the crimes he committed.
In addition, alternative texts reveal that Capote left before Perry was executed because he was too upset. This suggests the strong relationship the two shared. The fact that he was not there but writes as though he was is a blatant example of how everything that is included in the novel is filtered through Capote and his biased opinion or his desire to have things “work” in his novel. Harold Nye recalls that when Perry came in the warehouse, “Truman fell apart. He ran out of the building . . . would not witness it. There was a reason. They had become lovers in the penitentiary. I can’t prove it, but they spent a lot of time up there in the cell, he spent a considerable amount of money bribing the guard to go around the corner, and they were both homosexuals that was what happened” (Plimpton 188-89). Nye’s testimony is compelling because it suggests that perhaps Truman and Perry also had a romantic relationship.

While I don’t condemn Capote for leaving before Perry’s execution, I do think that since he was writing a non-fiction novel he should have been more accurate and obscure the real trauma in the text less by diminishing Perry’s role as a victim. Capote even manipulates the readers with his account of the executions which he only partially witnessed. Detective Alvin Dewey, a friend of the Clutter family, said that Dick said he “hoped people would forgive him” (186). But Dewey doesn’t recall Perry expressing a similar sentiment. Charles McAtee, Kansas State Prison Director, recalls Perry saying, “Mr. McAtee, I’d like to apologize. But to whom? To you? To them? To their relatives? To their friends . . . And undo what we did with an apology?” (184). And so Perry’s attempt to apologize was cut short. Instead he hands McAtee a poem which emphasizes his own victimization instead of any remorse, “Oh would that I might raise my eyes above these walls of grey / To cast my hopes to freedom’s skies / And go on my
merry way” (184). Perry’s lack of expressed remorse differs from the account in Capote’s novel and is significant because Capote uses it to make their executions seem even more tragic. And yet in real life, Perry remained a psychopathic, unapologetic murderer until the end of his life.

In addition to Capote, about twenty others were present at Dick and Perry’s executions. Charles McAtee recalls the two killers said goodbye before Hickock was taken and at that time “Hickock emphasized that night that what they did was wrong, but he was not personally responsible for killing any of those people. I believe Perry killed them all. I really do. . . I think those two personalities, Herb Clutter and Perry, sort of fed off one another” (Plimpton 184-85). No living person is sure if Dick also participated in killing the Clutters, but Capote suggests this in his novel so that readers can’t place all of the blame on Perry. Capote purposely has Perry kill Herb and Kenyon but become too upset to continue and kill Nancy and her mother. In many readers’ eyes, this makes Perry look better than Dick since Mrs. Clutter had an unnamed mental disorder and Nancy was an innocent teenage girl who liked horses and had a bright future. It was and is a cultural belief that men should protect women and children from danger, even if it means sacrificing their own lives so that the women and children may live. Purposely killing them is incomprehensible to many in Dick and Perry’s world. However, it is possible that Perry, as many people believe, murdered the whole family while Dick stood by and watched.

Capote does include more damning evidence against Perry, however, he does so towards the end when readers have already formed opinions of Perry’s victim status and in the context of sharing an experience with his war buddy. While Dick expresses
remorse before his execution, Perry does not; however, both men fail to meet the criteria of traumatized murderers according to the most current definition of trauma. The definition of trauma in the third revised edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* was “outside the range of ordinary experience” (MacNair 94). However, in the fourth edition the definition was updated to: “(1) the person experienced, witnessed or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others; (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (MacNair 94). One of the reasons that the definition has changed is because some traumatic experiences, like abuse, are unfortunately not outside the range of ordinary experience and yet they can be very traumatic. “Though the first part of the definition certainly seems aimed at passive victims, it is worded ambiguously enough that it could still cover perpetrators as well. The second part . . . does include perpetrators who responded immediately with revulsion over what they had done” (94). However, Perry and Dick did not respond with “intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” On the contrary, Perry recalls:

> I think we both felt very high. I did. Very high, and very relieved at the same time. Couldn’t stop laughing, neither one of us; suddenly it all seemed very funny—I don’t know why, it just did. But the gun was dripping blood, and my clothes were stained, there was even blood in my hair . . . We smoked a cigarette, and Dick went on making jokes about what had happened back there. . . . I scraped a hole in the ground with Dick’s hunting knife, the one I used on Mr. Clutter, and buried in it the empty shells and all the leftover nylon cord and adhesive tape. (256)
Notice Perry’s detachment even as he is stained with his victims’ blood—he is not even connected to the rage he felt that lead him to commit murder, repressing it with laughter, and instead refers to his violent acts as “what had happened back there.” His choice of words, “what had happened back there,” reveal the almost-complete denial that Perry usually allows himself to feel about the heinous crimes he committed because he lacks the courage to even name it as murder or claim it as one of his actions. While Perry does eventually express some regret to Dick for the murders, his attitude seems to harden as time passes to where he tells his army buddy that he is not sorry about murdering the Clutters.

One lonely February morning, Perry receives a letter from Don Cullivan who served in the 761st Engineer Light Equipment Company with Perry during the Korean War. Perry was “thrilled by it. Eventually Cullivan visits Smith in prison and over cigarettes Perry confesses to him, “When you kill a man you steal his life. I guess that makes me a pretty big thief. See, Don—I did kill them. Down there in court, old Dewey made it sound like I was prevaricating—on account of Dick’s mother. Well, I wasn’t. Dick helped me, he held the flashlight and picked up the shells. And it was his idea, too. But Dick didn’t shoot them” (290). Perry also confesses to Dewey that he killed both the Clutter women (255). Capote plays his confessions down by emphasizing Perry’s status as a victim, but Perry’s own words incriminate him and seem to resist Capote’s attempts to manipulate the text. Capote’s inclusion of these details suggest that there is no definitive moral ground; in Capote’s world no one is all good or bad. Good men do bad things and evil men sometimes have redeeming qualities.
Not only does Perry confess to Cullivan that he shot the entire family at point blank range with a shotgun but he says that he does not feel remorse for his cruelty. “I don’t feel anything about it. I wish I did. But nothing about it bothers me a bit. Half an hour after it happened, Dick was making jokes and I was laughing at them . . . I’m human enough to feel sorry for myself. Sorry I can’t walk out of here when you walk out. But that’s all” (291). Cullivan, the religious and ethical man that he is, cannot understand how Perry can be devoid of remorse. Perry responds, “Why? Soldiers don’t lose much sleep. They get medals for doing it . . . Just remember: I only knew the Clutters maybe an hour. If I’d really known them, I guess I’d feel different. I don’t think I could live with myself. But the way it was, it was like picking off targets in a shooting gallery” (291). This looks like damming evidence against Perry, however Capote’s choice to include it here rather than at the beginning of the novel makes it a very different piece of evidence. And yet at this point, Capote has already manipulated the reader into feeling sympathy for Perry and pegging him as having a low level of culpability that these details, which are not emphasized greatly, are easily lost within the text. Notice that Capote, on one level, justifies Perry’s actions by relating it to his war buddy who was also a trained killer. Although Perry suggests that he would not be able to kill someone that he really knew, critical readers may not believe him because he seems to take delight in the idea of murdering his only remaining sibling.

Even though Perry hands the gun, in the novel, to Dick and tells him he’d “done all he could do” and wasn’t going to kill the women, Capote insinuates in his interview that Dick wasn’t a murderer. He shared that if Perry had faltered Dick would not have followed through with the murders. He said, “There is such a thing as the ability to kill.
Perry’s particular psychosis had produced this ability. Dick was merely ambitious—he could plan murder, but not commit it” (Plimpton 42). Capote implies that Dick couldn’t have murdered the Clutters as is presented in the novel because it wasn’t in his character. Capote himself seems to suggest that he purposely chose to change the identity of the man who murdered the Clutter women because Perry would have been more disliked by readers if he had been their killer.

LaCapra introduces some of the ethics involved for secondary witnesses (such as the interviewers, historians, and commentators), a part that Capote takes as writer of the text. LaCapra questions “the desire to identify fully with, and relive the experience of, the victim in however vicarious a fashion. The force of this desire may both occlude the problem of agency in one’s own life and desensitize one to the problem and process of attempting to move, however incompletely, from victim to survivor and agent in survivors themselves” (98). LaCapra warns against the over-identification with victims because that could lead to a secondary witness, those who have not directly experienced the trauma but act as witnesses to victims who communicate the experience to them, assuming that they too have been victimized and should be held less responsible for the outcomes of their own decisions. And in our culture’s fascination with trauma and suffering, it is frightening to consider the increasing numbers of individuals seeking out traumatic experiences of others and then internalizing them to the point where they begin to identify themselves as if they in fact were victimized. Readers of trauma literature also become secondary witnesses to violence and should avoid becoming stuck in a victim mode not able to function in their own lives. While readers of trauma literature are not likely to become catatonic or fall into a coma, they may begin to view themselves as if
they are the victims which they read about, and their own world views are fragmented in similar ways and they might even see themselves as less culpable for decisions they make or entitled to special privileges when dealing with others.

Reasonable individuals may question why Perry simply did not get over his childhood and lead a more law-abiding life. LaCapra’s view of the likelihood of transcending trauma, however, is pessimistic at best: “One may even argue that it is ethically and politically dubious to believe that one can overcome or transcend structural trauma . . . to achieve full intactness, wholeness, or communal identity and that attempts at transcendence or salvation may lead to the demonization and scapegoating of those on whom unavoidable anxiety is projected” (84-85). What Lacapra and Capote seem to be saying is that if some experts believe that it is not only impossible to transcend trauma, but that it is ethically wrong to judge those victims who are not emotionally intact, then it should cause readers to pause and consider what moral judgments they make about Perry Smith. The truth is that Capote manipulates readers.
Josef Kavalier: Murder in the Time of War

Born in Prague with an inclination for graphic design and magic, the fictional Josef Kavalier became a comic artist through a very unlikely set of circumstances described in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. In the novel, Josef is the only member of his intermediate family to escape Prague and the encroaching Nazis, and the only one to make it alive to the United States of America. Comics initially act as a medium for Josef Kavalier to work through the horrors of the Holocaust that he mostly vicariously experiences through the suffering of his family, but the comics eventually transform Joe and act as a catalyst to bring about a more violent reality in which he seeks deliverance and absolution.

Comics, the quintessential pop cultural art form, enable tragedies to be more authentic than either writing or pictures alone. Art Spiegelman, Pulitzer prize winning artist of *Maus*, said of Will Eisner, a Jew who helped develop many American comic strips through several decades, “comic books are to art what Yiddish is to language—a vulgar tongue that incorporates other languages into its mix, a vital and expressive language that talks with its hands. It's a form that's even laid out like a talmudic text, a form that avoids the injunction against graven images by turning pictures into words, or at least into word-pictures” (“Yiddish”). Referring specifically to *Kavalier & Clay*, Spiegelman said, “It has long been said that Jews are the People of the Book. What has been somewhat less known till Michael Chabon got a Pulitzer for his novel is that the Jews are the People of the Comic Book” (“Yiddish”). The involvement of Sammy and Joe, along with many other Jews, in the comic industry, along with many other Jews, is historically accurate for the 1930s, a time when “the pioneer comic-book artists—Jerry
Siegel and Joe Schuster, Bob Kane (ne Cahn), Stan Lee (born Lieber), Jack Kirby (ne Kurtzberg), Gil Kane (born Eli Katz) . . . and so on and on — were mostly Jews, children of immigrants” (“Yiddish”). Furthermore, the superhero’s creation is due in large part to its appeal to Jewish immigrants who felt helpless and unable to save many of their loved ones in Europe and expressed their wish for super-heroic abilities through the superhero.

Josef Kavalier works through the trauma of losing his family to the Holocaust through his comic strip. Chabon explores the motif of the superhero through his imagery of both the golem and the Escapist. One of the most well-known myths about the golem originates in Prague with sixteenth-century Rabbi Loew. Created to protect the Jews of Prague, the golem is given life through a magical formula. Made of the clay, the golem typically has a piece of paper inserted in his mouth or an inscription on his arm or forehead that contains the name of God or the word “truth.” Removing this paper or erasing the alef in emet, meaning truth, transforms the writing to met, meaning death, causing the demise of the golem. An important aspect of the golem myths is that the golem who is created to protect people grows in power and strength, eventually becomes destructive and menacing to the community he was created to protect. The Escapist represents a fallible human counterpart of the golem. Josef is drawn to the figure of a superhero because of his own vulnerability and the lack of power he feels.

The Escapist is not an all powerful super-hero, because he fails to destroy Hitler in reality or bring Josef’s family to the United States. As Josef and Sammy initially brainstorm the idea of the Escapist, Joe declares, “He is here to free the world” (122) at a time when Joe so desperately wishes to free his family from the oppression and eminent violence that Jews in Prague and all over Europe face. As the narrative of the Escapist
develops, the superhero’s heroic actions lead—at least in the world offered up in the comic books—to Hitler’s capture and the end of World War II, as Hitler is “sentenced to die for his crimes against humanity. The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted people of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free” (166). Upon the creation of their superhero, Sammy recognizes that if Joe “was not kept fighting, round the clock—his cousin might be overcome by the imprisoning futility of his rage” (171). Working and creating comics is the only way that Joe initially knows how to fight and repress his growing rage about his and his family’s circumstances in German occupied Prague Joe experiments with vicarious violence as the comics “allowed him to fight if not a genuine war, then a tolerable substitute” (167). Joe fights back with ink, creating comic book propaganda aimed at American audiences.

The Escapist also functions on an important cultural level to inform indifferent Americans to the atrocities of evil Nazis, long before soldiers landed on foreign shores:

Even after the Escapist went to war, he spent as much time sticking up for the innocent victims of Europe as he did taking divots out of battleships with his fists. He shielded refugees and kept bombs from landing on babies . . . In his combination of earnestness, social conscience, and willingness to scrap, he was a perfect hero for 1941, as America went about the rumbling, laborious process of backing itself into a horrible war. (360)

However, not all Americans were ready for the comic strip. Anapol generally looked “as if he was going to be sick” when he inspected Joe’s work which has been described as “wild, frenetic, violent, extreme” (172). Anapol tells Joe that he worries someday the
comics are going to go too far and “somebody is going to get hurt;” Joe’s reply, “Somebody is getting hurt already” reveals his frustration with indifferent Americans who show too little concern and have the attitude that because it’s “not around here” then it doesn’t matter (172). Joe’s frustration with Anapol’s ignorance is representative of his struggle to make Americans aware “of the fight to succumb to the propaganda that he and Sammy were unabashedly churning out. If they could not move Americans to anger against Hitler, then Joe’s existence, the mysterious freedom that had been granted to him and denied to so many others, had no meaning” (172-73). Even the cultural propaganda of the comics is described in violent terms, such as when Joe has a premonition that the comics are “going to knock them dead” (165) and later when Sammy shares that the comics were so successful that they “killed” (171). That both ideas of knocking them dead and comics that kill are used in a positive way is evident of the sentiments of frustration and latent violence waiting to emerge that Joe and by extension Sammy feel. The very slang they use to describe the function of the comics is violent. Anapol confides to Joe, “I’m worried about you, Kavalier . . . I suppose it can only be healthy for you to get your killer instincts or what have you out of your system that way . . . but I can’t help thinking that in the long run it’s only going to make you . . . make you . . .” (174). Anapol’s trailing thoughts are later consummated as Joe is no longer satisfied with vicariously experiencing trauma through his comics and starts to strike out literally at anyone of German ancestry.

At first the comics are a way for Joe to work out his grief, but soon they start to have unexpected influences—Joe himself becomes more violent and seeks ways to seek revenge for his family’s imprisonment. “There could not have been more than a couple
of thousand German citizens in New York at that time, but . . . wherever Joe went in the city, he managed to run across at least one. He seemed to have acquired, as Sammy remarked, a superpower of his own: he had become a magnet for Germans” (196).

Expressed in terms of superpower ability, Joe initially shows intense interest in watching and listening to Germans and German-Americans. However, soon he no longer contains the frustration that he feels and reacts with violence, beating up two Germans at a football game and receiving temporary relief from his pain, which he prefers over a type of emotional numbness. “It was not that he felt he deserved the pain so much as that it suited him. No matter how well he cleaned the cut, how tightly he compressed it, how thick the bandage he applied, within an hour or so, the first telltale freckle of red would have reappeared. It was like the memory of home, a tribute to his father’s stoical denial of illness, injury, or pain” (197). From then on, “Joe went looking for trouble” (197).

While most people want to avoid violence and trauma, Joe’s decision to seek it out is characteristic of victims who are trying to master the trauma through compulsive repetition. Joe feels victimized by violence and one way to become empowered is to inflict violence on a group of people that represents his perpetrators.

Joe reads his reality as if it were a comic strip. The trouble that he fantasizes is even influenced by comic strip panels, such as when he fantasizes about his heroic actions while standing outside the Aryan-American League:

Joe underwent a dark fantasy of running up to that office and bursting into that warren of snakes, feet flying right up at you out of the panel as jagged splinters of the door shot in all directions. He saw himself wading into a roiling tangle of brown-shirts, fists and boots and elbows, and finding, in that violent surf of men,
triumph, or if not that then atonement, retribution, or deliverance. (198, italics mine)

Joe’s visual fantasy is comparable to comic strip as he supplies the visual images flying “out of the panel,” and he experiments with violence as a means of retribution not only for his family’s suffering but also for his own deliverance—deliverance from the numb reality that he faces and absolution for having survived when his family has not. In such moments, pain acts as an antidote for a numbed reality by allowing victims to feel emotions that they usually desperately push away from conscious experience. However, this dependence on pain to feel emotion is destructive not only to the victim who becomes addicted to behavior that inflicts pain on themselves, such as cutting or anorexia, but it can become fatal for others when victims also become perpetrators of violent crimes as a means to escape the numbness.

Joe continues to seek deliverance from his numbness and eventually joins the Canadian Air Force and is sent to the Artic where he kills a German geologist. The reader never sees the murder but instead reads an ambiguous passage that does not always clearly identify the pronoun reference. “A chime tuned to C-sharp sounded in his ear, and with an odd sense of relief he felt his tormented bowels empty into his trousers. The American caught him in his arms, looking startled and friendless and sad. The Geologist opened his mouth and felt the bubble of his saliva freeze against his lips. What a hypocrite I have been! he thought” (464). While many may understand this passage as the German who looked startled and friendless and sad, feeling like a hypocrite, I believe a more compelling reading is that Joe felt these emotions. Joe feeling friendless and sad suggests that vengeance is not fulfilling in the way he had hoped it would be, leaving him
feeling hollow and alone. Both men were isolated and terrified and were brought together by Joe’s violent act in the same location and possibly with similar emotions and thoughts. The fact that it could have been either man’s or both men’s thought connects the two men. Chabon’s ambiguity allows this violent act to bring about a communion between two innocent men who immediately regret that they were trying to kill each other.

It is one of the most intimate parts of the book, as characters collide and the thoughts of one individual reflect the thoughts of another. Communion through violence complicates trauma theory—the murder scene is one of the most moving in the entire novel. If it is hard for scholars to process, it is almost certainly harder for the involved individuals to come to terms with. Regretting his decision almost instantly, Joe decides to try to help the German. He realizes that seeking revenge only has destructive consequences:

“Nothing that had ever happened to him, not the shooting of Oyster . . . or the death of his father, or internment of his mother and grandfather, not even the drowning of his beloved brother, had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization, when he was halfway to the rimed zinc hatch of the German station, that he was hauling a corpse behind him” (465).

Joe later recalls to Sammy that killing the German, “made me feel like the worst man in the world” (590). Enacting extreme violence fails to bring the absolution which Joe so desperately sought. Joe learns that extreme violence does not absolve him of his inability to protect his family from their fate, even though he is safe and has a successful career as
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an artist in the United States. Violence fails to bring Joe the peace and resolution that he desires and is a lesson to those who try to employ violence as a means of redemption.

Joe is not the only adult whose version of reality is shaped by his comic books. Carl Ebbling, the Nazi sympathizer in the novel, is also influenced by *The Escapist* stories. Because Ebbling is already interested in violence due to his political and ideological affiliations, the Escapist resonates with him, even though Ebbling is the very sort of individual cast as the enemy in the *Escapist* narratives. The realization that superheroes may at worst indulge Americans’ “own worst impulses and assur[e] the creation of another generation of men who revered only strength and domination” (204) disturbs Joe, since such impulses don’t differ that greatly from the deleterious values prized in Nazi Germany. After Joe and Ebbling’s violent encounter, Ebbling reacts by planting a bomb, an “old clock . . . taped to a couple of dowels painted red,” in Joe’s desk (216). The experienced fireman that arrives to “defuse” the fake bomb remarks that “dynamite isn’t even red . . . not really” to which Joe perceptively replies, “The guy reads too much comic books” (217). Ebbling’s violent response to Joe’s attack is shaped by his perception of reality as presented in comic books which depict dynamite as red, and to add validity to his actions he superimposes that reality onto the situation. The fact that Ebbling’s world view is shaped by his overindulgence in comic books is significant because it is one based on violence that does not explore the finality of the consequences of criminal, murderous acts. Plenty of comic books fans never commit crimes or attempt murder, but the violence of comics resonated with Ebbling who then could become lazy and let his reality be shaped by the comics.
The chapter preceding Ebbling’s attack on the bar mitzvah at which Joe performs has a similar style to the chapters in the novel that are dedicated to the plot of comic books that Joe develops. Ebbling’s actions are described in terms of the comic book character, the Saboteur. “One Saturday afternoon, after a particularly boisterous convocation of the Snakes, the Saboteur wakes in his sumptuous chambers and prepares to leave the Lair for the menial job that is a cover for his subversive activities. He peels off his night-black action suit and hangs it from a hook in his armory, alongside its six duplicates” (329). He subversively works as a server at the Pierre, a popular venue for Jewish wedding receptions and bar mitzvahs in order to one day enlighten “the mongrels of Empire City” to show them “something of the terror their mongrel brothers and sisters are undergoing halfway around the world” (333). Ebbling’s comic book reality gets reinscribed into novel as the Saboteur, so comic books affect reality which in turn affects the comic books. In an indirect way, Joe and Ebbling feed off of each other and provoke one another to more violence. This relationship of inciting more violence is similar to that of Perry and Dick. Further comparisons should be made between the two duos. Ebbling acts as a foil to Kavalier, in much the same way that Hickock is to Smith. Both Ebbling and Hickock function in the novels to make Joe and Perry look better by comparison to these heartless, vicious criminals.

In years to come the influence of comic books would be further examined as many American adults worried about the violence that comics inspire. The spring of 1954 was the start of one of the darkest periods in comic history. Dr. Frederick Wertham's book, _The Seduction of the Innocent_, was released. His book was very critical of and damaging to the comic industry. Later that year, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on
Juvenile Delinquency held hearings on whether comic books inspired juvenile delinquency. A lead witness, psychologist Wertham, testified that comics create a mental readiness for temptation and create an atmosphere of deceit and cruelty for children’s consumption. He even attacked Superman for arousing fantasies of sadistic joy in seeing others punished while the reader remained immune. Essentially, Wertham saw comics as drugs, a vice that even the poorest child could buy. His now-infamous book, Seduction of the Innocent, attempted to prove in its nearly 400 pages that comic book violence inspired juvenile crime, leading otherwise wholesome children down the dark path of crime and violence. He claimed children who read about a violent action would repeat and carry it out when the idea would not have even occurred to them otherwise, and cited various examples of juvenile delinquents “confessing” that sinister comics had inspired them to perform their horrible acts.

While I do believe that there are comic books that are designed for adult consumption even if they appear to be created for children’s amusement, I do not think that they should be censored because they represent a unique and important artistic medium. Chabon plays with this idea as “Carl Ebbling was, in spite of himself, a fan” (203). This leads to anything but “comical” results. Spiegelman acknowledges that while the word comics “brings to mind the notion . . . that they have to be funny . . . humor is not an intrinsic component of the medium. Rather than comics, I prefer the word commix, to mix together, because to talk about comics is to talk about mixing together words and pictures to tell a story” (“Commix” 96). Additionally, Spiegelman believes that “the strength of the commix lies in [its] synthetic ability to approximate a ‘mental language’ that is closer to actually human thought than either words or pictures
alone” (Young 672). Joe also admires the “inextricable braiding of image and narrative” that he observes in *Citizen Kane* and identifies with because of the blending of image and texts in comic books (362). The unification of words and pictures in comics is brilliant when one considers the almost impossible task of accurately depicting the traumatic events of the Holocaust because the blending depicts human experience in more realistic terms and because it is an innovative art form that does not stifle artists. By combining mediums, artists are not limited to words or text alone in representing trauma, which has been described as incomprehensible and presents a challenging task to anyone who wants to artistically capture its essence in a concise presentation.

Although Joe effectively combines text and pictures in his comics, he is still artistically bound as he is not able to directly address his concerns about what is happening to Jews in Europe, and more specifically to his family. The need to mask events is also played out in *The Amazing Adventures* because Joe cannot openly discuss such horrors with indifferent Americans; instead he can only indirectly deal with the animosity he feels towards Nazis through the Escapist, who takes on issues and individuals fearlessly and often violently. Joe’s comics sell but his chances of Americans sitting down to think about the injustices and being moved to action seem insurmountable. America represents to Joe a place where people still throw parties, go to movies, fall in love, buy apartments, and visit beaches instead of the concerns typical in war-torn areas that seem less frivolous and involve active attempts for survival. Not only do Sam or Ethel rarely ask probing questions about their family in Prague or actively attempt bring them to America; one person ironically very concerned with Jews in the novel is Ebbling. While Ebbling’s concerns are inspired by hate, Rosa’s are inspired by
love because she is able to compassionately place higher priority on Joe’s feelings and thoughts than her own. Joe can propagate his views to a largely indifferent audience through comics without being held directly responsible for them because he can always use the excuse that comics are meant for children.

Joe attempts to find redemption through the Escapist and absolution for leaving Prague and his family behind. The need for resolution and redemption is commonly expressed in Holocaust literature for many reasons, including the shattering nature of the experience that leaves many victims feeling like the trauma is something that they can never transcend. Because of this push toward resolution and redemption in such texts, it is ironic that *Maus* shows, as trauma scholar James Young suggests, that “the Holocaust was an irredeemably terrible experience then, had a terrible effect on many survivors’ lives, and endows its victims with no great moral authority now . . . Neither art nor narrative redeems the Holocaust with meaning” (696). Joe’s characterization resists the idea that trauma can never be transcended. While Joe may not find an ultimate truth through his art, he continues to artistically express his fears, hopes, past, and potential through comics and the creation of a new graphic novel about the Golem. Joe’s depiction is of the golem is essentialist in its visual representation, “one character, repeated over and over in the sketches on the walls, had barely any face at all, the conventional V’s and hyphens of a comic physiognomy simplified to almost blank abstraction” (542). Instead of focusing on the golem’s physical features, readers are drawn to the emotional and intellectual profundity of the graphic novel. Through his work on *The Golem*, “Joe came to feel that . . . telling this story . . . was helping to heal him. All of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express . . . all of it went into the queasy angles and
stark compositions, the cross-hatchings and vast swaths of shadow, the distended and fractured and finely minced panels of his monstrous comic books” (577-78). Instead of focusing on queasy angles and finely minced panels of his earlier comics, Joe is able to concentrate on representing the grief that he feels through the stark representation of the golem. Joe’s hopeful future is mostly due to his continued desire for expression and to bear witness through art, instead of closing himself off from his and others’ humanity.

Adorno’s famous comment, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” is compelling in relation to comic books dealing with Holocaust trauma because comic books, if viewed as merely children’s silly, entertainment, are even an even more inappropriate representation of horror. Dominick LaCapra has argued, “The very idea of treating Auschwitz in the comics seems shockingly inappropriate . . . The achievement of *Maus* is that one is tempted to argue that it does prove itself acceptable, and even that it accomplishes considerably more by addressing certain impossible issues and topics” (LaCapra 140). By stretching our conceptions about commix and what topics commix can appropriately examine—and in particular, by reassessing the value of those commix relating to the Holocaust—we are able to vicariously experience one of the most traumatic events of the twentieth century anew, freed from the shackles of highly commodified genres. Understanding the innovative genre of Holocaust commix and the American comics industry from the 1930s through the 1950s enables greater comprehension of how Chabon continues the dialogue that Spiegelman initiated through his work on *Maus*. Neither Spiegelman nor Chabon is a Holocaust survivor and is more removed from the events than survivors. However, in both texts, the Holocaust is experienced vicariously: in Spiegelman we learn about the Holocaust from the survivor
father; in Chabon’s text, we see Josef escape Prague before his family is even moved to the ghetto, and we only know about their life from a single letter that not even Joe reads. And yet the positional and temporal distance of Holocaust trauma is no less terrifying or disturbing in the texts.
Both books were published amidst great national turmoil and spoke to the idea of lost innocence and a greater knowledge that is borne from ignorance. *In Cold Blood* was not published until 1965, but Capote began his work in 1959 shortly after four Clutter family members were murdered. 1959 was a momentous year for not just the residents of Holcomb, Kansas but also for many Americans as actions were set in motion that would later define the next decade. That February a plane crash took the lives of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper. Don McLean later sung about their deaths and the changes in Rock music in his epic parable, “American Pie.” The year was also one of celebration as Alaska and Hawaii became the 49th and 50th States in the Union. The same year the Clutters were murdered, Fidel Castro overcame Batista and established a communist dictatorship in Cuba. On the other side of the world, the Viet Cong attacked installations in South Vietnam, initiating their civil war. The decade of the 1960s, marked by assassinations, riots, demonstrations, and confrontations, is said to be the time America lost its innocence. And as the current news become more and more distressing, Capote continued to research and write his novel about the loss of American innocence to show why America could no longer afford to be ignorant. Before the book was published, Americans would be affected by the Civil Rights Act of 1960, Kennedy’s election, the Bay of Pigs massacre, and Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, and the assassinations of famous leaders, such as Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy.

Vietnam was more than just the first television war; it was also the first war in which uncensored journalists reported widely and freely from the battlefield. Americans
were shown photos of dying soldiers and civilians in the newspapers, magazines, and on television. Articles were not censored and the public was told about the success or failure of battles. The result was a powerful body of graphic and critical news reports that helped shaped public opinion back in the U.S. Real-world violence was played out in homes across the country.

As the years progressed and Capote’s book remained unpublished because Perry and Dick had not yet been executed, the author became impatient. In a letter addressed to Alvin and Marie Dewey, Capote shares some of his feelings about Dick’s absurd behavior in 1961. “Did you read the brief he presented to the Kansas Supreme Court? I got a copy of it—really, it is too absurd. I especially liked his complaining that the sentence was unconstitutional because it meant ‘deprivation of life’” (323). Of the impending execution, he writes to them saying, “I shall write Cliff [Clifford R. Hope, Jr.] a letter about arranging for me to attend, to use Marie’s excellent phrase, ‘the final scene.’ I do hope Alvin is right, and we will reach that date sooner than later” (327).

There are interesting similarities between the America of Capote’s time and the America of Chabon’s time, namely those involved with destructive ignorance that violence destroys. In a pre 9-11 America, few Americans felt directly threatened by terrorism. And yet, their innocence was shattered when the World Trade Center towers fell not in America’s heartland, where Holcomb, Kansas lies, but instead in what many Americans consider the core or a microcosm of the country, New York. The images of the towers being hit by airplanes and their consequent collapsing are images that were repeatedly played in front of enraptured audiences who sat in front of their television screens for hours. The seemingly senseless violence begged the question, “Why” and the
lack of a satisfying answer is deeply unsettling. Such was also the case with the unsettling questions surrounding the murders of the Clutter family. The locations of the murders are also significant; Kansas and Artic are both somewhat isolated places, untouched by current events—timeless.

Both novels deal with the essence of American innocence and ignorance when it comes to trauma. Communities are important in both. Communities respond to the trauma at the church in Kansas and in small diners and communities of artists in New York. Innocent people die in both: the Clutters, Thomas, and the German geologist. Both protagonists of the book are drawn to redemptive violence as a means of overcoming their own trauma. Both Perry and Joe are drawn to artistic expressions of themselves; Perry sketches a drawing of Jesus in coal, likes to play the guitar, and reads poetry while Joe likes to draw and create comics. It is the suffering savior figures that they are drawn to: Perry paints a grieving Christ and Joseph creates the Escapist, a savior figure. Both perpetrators’ names also indicate that they belong to the larger, homogenized community. Kavalier is a gallant name. Perry Smith is a pretty indistinctive name. Both Perry Smith and Joe are “American” names that don’t distinguish them from other citizens. Both texts indirectly address family values and what to do after trauma. How should people live after a life-altering experience? How can their community and families help them?

Perry killed an innocent, ill woman, her upstanding husband, and two minors with a shotgun held at point-blank range from their faces. Kenyon’s face was even blown off. Such extreme mutilation is horrific and disturbing to readers—much more so than Joseph shooting an enemy soldier. The very manner that Perry murders the Clutters is
dehumanizing and robs them of their identity. Capote uses point of view to include descriptions of how he assumes that the Clutters felt. Capote shares disturbing details with readers that make them feel sympathy for real people who were killed:

But the voice plunges on, ejecting a fusillade of sounds and images: Hickock hunting the discharged shell; hurrying, hurrying, and Kenyon’s head in a circle of light, the murmur of muffled pleadings, then Hickock again scrambling after a used cartridge; Nancy’s room, Nancy listening to boots on hardwood stairs, the creak of the steps as they climb toward her. Nancy’s eyes, Nancy watching the flashlight’s shine seek the target (‘She said, ‘Oh, no! Oh, please No! No! No! No! Don’t! Oh, please don’t! Please.’ . . . He took aim, and she turned her face to the wall’); the dark hall, the assassins hastening toward the final door. Perhaps, having heard all she had, Bonnie welcome their swift approach. (244-45)

The sensory details that Capote imagines and shares are both memorable and haunting. The inclusion of the victims’ perspective is emotional disturbing and makes it harder for readers to feel sympathy for Dick and Perry, guessing the horror the Clutters experienced. Capote has Dewey recall in the novel, “The confessions . . . failed to satisfy his sense of meaningful design. The crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act; the victims might as well have been killed by lightning. Except for one thing: they had experienced prolonged terror, they had suffered. And Dewey could not forget their sufferings” (245-46). Even though Dewey feels a degree of sympathy for Perry, he cannot forget the horrible crime scene and the obligation he felt to make sure justice is served. Although most readers did not see the crime scene or personally know the Clutters as Dewey did, Capote’s inclusion of sensory details from the victims’
perspectives invites the reader to feel the terror, creating a connection between them and the murdered Clutters.

Joe uses terror to scare his victim also. Shannonhouse and Kavalier plan to surprise attack Jotunheim station. Unbeknownst to Shannonhouse, Kavalier “had broken the fictitious invisible barrier that had hitherto been maintained between Kelvinator Station and Jotunheim, transmitting the following six words to the Geologist, in German plaintext, at one of the frequencies regularly used by Berlin to contact him: WE ARE COMING TO GET YOU” (461). The geologist was unaware of the American presence in close proximity and not only did Joe take great efforts to plan out an attack; he also wanted the power that came from making the geologist fear him. His motives were straightforward but his ambivalent reaction was more complicated, as he felt “the elf-knot of pity, remorse, and a desire to torment and terrify” (461). Joe’s ominous words lead the geologist to a nervous breakdown. The terror that he felt prevented him from sleeping “at all in the five days since receiving the message that he had identified as originating from the American base in Marie Byrd Land . . . He was drunk, jacked upon amphetamines, and suffering from the effects of a spastic colon” (463). Although it was a wartime setting, Joe wanted the geologist to feel terror and suffer prior to his approach.

Whatever plans Joe may have had of hurting the German geologist before his arrival, Chabon presents his reactions as proof that he no longer wanted to harm his perceived enemy. Although, it is significant that readers are never privy to Joe’s motives or desires through his thoughts before the murder occurs. Instead Joe’s body language communicates to readers about the dismay and reluctance he feels about murdering the geologist. It could even be argued that Joe kills the geologist in self-defense because it
appears through his body language that he no longer wanted to kill the man. Joe is “extending his arms in a gesture of protest or supplication, when the first shot him at the shoulder and spun him around” (463). Klaus Mecklenburg, identified by his name only three times in the novel, not only aims and fires his gun at Joe, “he squeezed off the rest of the clip” (463). But even Mecklenburg’s body language betrays him just as it does Joe. “Only after he had emptied it did he realize that he had been firing with his eyes closed” (463). Mecklenburg is a timid, peaceful man who has a tremor in his hand and cannot even bear to keep his eyes open when he fires a pistol. The geologist is not a hardened, trained killer; indeed, he “had never fired a pistol before, and his arm rang with pain, as if the cold had frozen his arm and the recoil shattered it” (463). The geologist’s body language conveys that he is not intent on killing Joe but feels threatened and that he needs to protect himself. Readers are privy to the geologist’s thoughts, which include how “a boy had fallen out of the sky, an intelligent, able young man, one with whom he could discuss, in German no less, Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman, and now Mecklenburg had shot at him—emptied his clip—in this place where the only hope for survival, as he had so long argued, was friendly cooperation among the nations” (464). It is ironic how well the two could have gotten along since both men could speak German, were desperate for intelligent conversation, and had similar ideals. But Chabon shows how violence is rarely convenient nor does it always bring out the desired consequences.

Although the reader is not privy to Joe’s thoughts or feelings prior to the end of the chapter, his body language conveys that he changed his mind about killing the German and is both surprised and upset when he dies. Joe is going to throw the gun aside when the German misinterprets his actions as threatening and tackles him, struggling for
the gun. In retrospect, the geologist realizes that “the American had been in the act of
tossing the pistol aside, that his unthreatening and even wistful air was not some
elaborate ruse but merely the relief, dazed and unsteady, of someone who had survived an
ordeal and was simply, as he had suggested, glad to be alive” (464). Feeling backed into
a corner, Joe shoots the geologist. The only recognition and acknowledgement that the
geologist makes about the wound is that his “tormented bowels empty into his trousers”
and he hears “a chime tuned to C-sharp” (464). Although the geologist is conscious
during his murder, he does not feel fear the moment he is murdered; instead he
recognizes that “the American caught him in his arms, looking started and friendless and
sad” (464). What is significant about this ambiguity? It is as if the geologist and Joe like
the readers don’t understand everything that is going on until it is done—and therefore
they are less responsible for their crimes because it wasn’t premeditated. That
recognition connects the two men as they both feel remorse about what has happened and
realize that they would have liked things to end differently, perhaps with a friendly
conversation and restful relief. The fictionality of the event allows Chabon to ascribe any
meaning or feelings to both Joe and Klaus.

Joe’s violence connects the two men as they both have a new understanding about
each other and life. He feels immediate regret for shooting the man and exerts much
energy to “drag the German across ten of the twenty meters that separated them from the
hatch of Jotunheim. It was a terrible expense of strength and will, but he knew that he
would find medical supplies inside the station, and he was determined to save the life of
the man, who just five days before, he had set out across eight hundred miles of useless
ice to kill” (464). Joe not only changes his mind about wanting to kill the man he once
thought his enemy, but his heart changes too. “Nothing . . . had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization, when he was halfway to the rimed zinc hatch of the German station, that he was hauling a corpse behind him” (465). Why would Joseph grieve more for this stranger than for Oyster or Thomas, his own brother? In all of his life, Joseph had never purposely chosen to initiate tragedy as he had when he decided to set out to kill a man that he had never met.

In contrast to Joe’s reaction to violence, Perry’s violence is divisive. He does not stay to catch the victims in his arms or hold them as they die. Instead he blows off their faces and walks away to the next victim. Another way that Perry’s violence is divisive is that he and Dick split up the family and murder them in separate parts of the house so that they do not have the comfort of each other in their last moments, instead they have only terror as they hear what is happening to their loved ones while isolated from each other.

Initially, Perry places Kenyon “in the room with his dad. Tied his hands to an overhead steampipe. Then I figured that wasn’t very safe. He might somehow get loose and undo the old man, or vice versa” (241). Notice how Perry says that it would not be safe for Kenyon and Mr. Clutter to be in the same room—safe for he and Dick is what he means. Perry betrays the Clutters’ trust when he starts to murder their family. He betrays Mrs. Clutter who asked “about Dick. She didn’t trust him, but said she felt I was a decent young man. I’m sure you are, she says, and made me promise I wouldn’t let Dick hurt anybody” (242). While Perry does not explicitly promise not to hurt Nancy himself, he either reneges on Mrs. Clutter’s trust if he shot Nancy or breaks his promise if he let Dick shoot Nancy.
Not only does Perry betray Bonnie, he betrays each of the four Clutters individually as he murders them. Perry also betrays Mr. Clutter who asked Perry and Dick to “please leave his wife alone. There was no need to tie her up . . . He said she’s been sick for years and years . . . an incident like this might cause her to have a setback. Nor do the murderers bring Dick and Perry closer together. I know it’s nothing to laugh over, only I couldn’t help it—him talking about a setback” (241). If Perry thought it was not appropriate to laugh then he did not care because not only did he laugh, he also shot the entire family. Perry also betrays Nancy whom he protects from being raped by Dick before he has a casual and friendly conversation with her from which he surmised that he “really like her. She was really nice. A very pretty girl, and not spoiled or anything. She told me quite a lot about herself” (242). Why would a man take time to build a relationship of trust through casual conversation only to murder an innocent girl minutes later? Whatever his motivations, Perry did not have enough honor or respect for human life to just walk away. Perry also betrayed Kenyon’s trust that he gained in an implicit way. As Perry is tying a rope around Kenyon’s hands, neck, and feet, he recalls, “I put the knife down on this—well, it was a freshly varnished cedar chest; the whole cellar smelled of varnish—and he asked me not to put my knife there. The chest was a wedding present he’d built for somebody. A sister, I believe he said. Just as I was leaving, he had a coughing fit, so I stuffed a pillow under his head” (242). By moving his knife and respecting Kenyon’s wishes, Perry implies that he is trustworthy and will not harm Kenyon. Surely Kenyon’s sister would be more upset about her relatives’ murders or any blood that splattered on the cedar chest instead of marks that the knife might have made on the varnish.
Conclusion

While my thesis looks specifically at *In Cold Blood* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* to examine the need for a clearer delineation between victimized victimizers and victims, these concepts can be expanded to other texts and issues. One group perpetrates against others and the others choose not to but instead are advocates of compassion and peace. While it is good to reserve judgment and shower compassion on victims, literary critics should not ignore common sense which dictates that the two groups have some important differences, such as culpability or deciding not to be a perpetrator; these differences should not be overlooked. There do remain critical intersections and junctions between the two groups’ behavior and morality that influence how one looks from an outside perspective into a victim’s experience without being voyeuristic.

I argue that scholars of literary trauma should establish criteria for judging the morality of characters and their criminal actions to ensure that literary trauma scholarship doesn’t fall into the trap of mere voyeurism. For example, what right do people have to judge others who have not been traumatized in the same way? Are there methods of judging literary trauma and its victims that are more effective than others? And on a more personal, subjective level, how much compassion do we feel towards Perry Smith and Joseph Kavalier, both of whom were victimized as children, and grew up to be murderers?

I believe that there is not a literary line that once crossed characters no longer deserve sympathy that should be shown towards victims—there is no hard and fast rule. As I highlighted in the first section of my thesis, although scholars like Dominic LaCapra
believe in codifying elements of trauma theory, codification of rules such as which victims merit readers’ sympathy would lead to further alienation. To argue that such a line exists further marginalizes an already alienated group, victimized victimizers, by assuming that codified structures can be applied with exact precision to something as complicated as human behavior and understanding perpetration.

Joe and his family are victimized by the Nazis and Joe decides to join the Canadian Air Force to fight Germans. Eventually, he kills one in a wartime scenario, albeit a geologist-soldier who advocated peace. Yet, Joe’s violence is more directed towards his targeted victims than is the violence of Perry Smith towards his. Perry, who is angry that he was abandoned by his parents and abused at orphanages by nuns, kills an innocent farmer’s family in rural Kansas—an action that bears little to no resemblance to the trauma Capote would like us to believe he suffered as a child. While violence is never excusable, the lack of direct causality between Perry’s supposed trauma and his crime is especially infuriating and works against the reader’s desire to feel sympathy for him.

Both *In Cold Blood* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* raise questions about representation, such as what thematic elements are lost or gained through representing a historical act first as a novel and then as a film, or in the case of *Kavalier & Clay*, representing trauma through stylized violence and comics. Additionally, an examination of these two texts also raises questions about the effects of stylized violence in comprehending actual trauma and violence and their implications in the lives of both victims and perpetrators. Closer examination of stylized violence beyond those presented in my thesis may yield further interesting insights about a victim’s ability to transcend
trauma that does not contain violence that is stylized as it is so often in martial arts movies, comics, and avant garde literature.

Some stylized violence glosses over the finality of consequences for violence in real life for victims and their loved ones. Nor do unexpected consequences often occur in stylized violence where everything is carefully controlled and manipulated by its creators. It would also be interesting to examine the effects of the presentations of stylized violence in the ways that perpetrators’ understand their crimes: if they feel fulfilled through the experience or if the violence wasn’t as artistic or as sensational as they wanted which may drive them to even more heinous acts. If stylized violence does affect the way some perpetrators enact their crimes or hinder some victims from validating their experience, then what responsibility do writers, movie producers, comic book artists, and other creators have? And what responsibility do consumers have in their purchasing choices? The consumption of sensational violence is ultimately dissatisfying because there is always more titillating material available on TV, in books, and on the Internet.

A current cultural trend is the reaction of people being tired of how everyone is a victim and so they start to want to learn more about the other angle—victimized victimizers—which is more perceived as being more compelling. In my thesis, I’ve argued that we can’t talk about victims without talking about victimized victimizers at the same time because trauma theory has carelessly lumped the two groups together, since those individuals that perpetuate trauma are often the very ones who have suffered most from traumatic experience. In this light, I would argue that my thesis forecasts a broader need to reorient the current cultural fascination with victimized victimizer culture on shows like *Oprah* and *Jerry Springer* that glorify or excuse perpetration. No longer in
vogue to consider victimization because that has been played out too many times, instead our focus has turned to victimized victimizers and “understanding” their stories. While fascination with victimized victimizers may be a natural extension of the desire for round characters that are not stock representations of archetypes, it should not replace readers’ ability to have compassion for trauma survivors who may not be tormented and attempt to perpetrate against others.

In addition to the need for rounded characters in literature is also the need for tension and conflict in the plot—something has to go wrong or become uncertain to drive the story. In other words, trauma is a necessary part of “good” fiction. Who wants to reads stories about happy people that face no conflicts? And what implications does reading conflict-laden stories have? There is something satisfying and cathartic about reading about how tragedies play out in peoples’ lives. It can bring hope to readers who learn that it is possible to live through the conflicts. We read to know that we are not alone and that we belong to communities of people who can empathize with us because it is life-affirming.

Trauma isolates and alienates people from their communities, but reading and creating texts can reintegrate them into other communities and help them rebuild the broken pieces of their lives, just as it did for Kavalier. Horvitz asserts, “If traumatic events are not repressed, they can be used: victims remember and imagine stories to be repeated and passed on. That is, when the stories of the past are consciously recognized, the cycle of violence can end, because the narratives, not . . . the trauma, are repeated and passed on” (134). If as Freud suggests that victims have a need to master the trauma and may attempt to do so through compulsive repetition, it is better that stories are passed
from person-to-person rather than the violent acts themselves. This process of repeating narratives, not violence, is constructive for victims who are able to legitimize and bear witness to their experiences through texts that have the potential of reaching beyond themselves. Furthermore, it helps to educate the societies and communities in which they are apart. By sharing stories, isolated victims can be reintegrated back into communities that before did not understand or care about the victims’ histories because they now have greater empathy of their struggles. The prevention of speech and not listening to marginalized voices represent two elements of violence. It is not enough simply to allow those on the margins to speak, but we must also listen.
Bel Canto, a novel by Ann Patchett, is an example of a text that may help survivors of a hostage crisis to better understand how it is normal to sympathize, and in some cases even like, the revolutionaries who held them captive. Additionally, Michigan Health Networker suggests Bel Canto as a resource to better understand group psychotherapy. (http://www.mhweb.org/miscellany/recread.htm#J)

Julia Alvarez openly admits that her novel In the Time of the Butterflies, about the historical sisters who fought against the dictator Trujillo and were ultimately killed, is fiction. Significantly, she believes that the novel’s fictionality is what makes the text more accessible and believable to the reader. Alvarez wrote, “I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart” (324). Some accounts of trauma remain incomprehensible as long as they are historical because we have not personally experienced the trauma ourselves. However, fictional accounts have the potential, at times, of being more believable because we respond to them as if they were more proximate to us both in time and space. Alvarez closes her novel addressing the trauma, “To Dominicans separated by language from the world I have created, I hope this book deepens North Americans’ understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered—of which this story tells only a few. Vivan las Mariposas!” (324).

Capote also depicts how having parents of mixed ancestry could have been traumatic during the first half of the twentieth century. In a time before the Civil Rights
movement and political correctness, there were disadvantages to being a minority, such as Perry and his part-Irish father and part-Cherokee mother. Perry would likely have encountered and fought many stereotypes. As a young child passed amongst different orphanages, Perry was ridiculed because of his race. Perry recalls his mistreatment by “a nurse, she used to call me ‘nigger’ and say there wasn’t any difference between niggers and Indians . . . Oh, Jesus, she was an Evil Bastard! Incarnate. What she used to do, she’d fill a tub with ice-cold water, put me in it, and hold me under till I was blue. Nearly drowned” (132). Perry caught pneumonia and almost died from the experience and was in the hospital two months before his father was able to take him home. To the nurse and many others of the time, different races were not celebrated but ridiculed, discriminated against, and in some cases even consumed. Perhaps one reason why Perry’s mother was even hired at the traveling circus shows had more to do with her Native-American heritage than any talents that she possessed, and having a spectacle for a mother would not have been that easy for Perry, either. An objectified mother no longer belongs to her child but in part to everyone who consumes her as a spectacle.
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