

Inclusive Reconstruction of Perpetrators as Victims in American Transmedial Narratives

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Abstract:

The paper explores how American transmedial narratives reconstructed certain perpetrators as victims, making them social constructs of injustice, trauma and historical circumstances rather than being purely evil. The paper focuses on the novels *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead and *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins along with the television series *Breaking Bad* which redefine villainy, softening the hard divide between perpetrators and non-perpetrators in all the transmedial narratives. With victimology as the theoretical framework, the methodology includes qualitative textual analysis of character development, narrative strategies and cross-media story telling techniques, identifying themes of systematic oppression, trauma and moral ambiguity. The paper aims to contribute to scholarly discussions about trauma, guilt, and redemption by highlighting the connection between being a perpetrator and a victim through the lens of victimology. It covers the research gaps created due to limited analysis of perpetrator's victimhood solely through lens of victimology. This approach enables interdisciplinary researchers to look further into the victim-victimizer bond in literature through different lens.

Keywords: individual, transmedial, victim, system, narratives

Introduction:

Background

In the 21st century, American Literature turned its focus to questions of justice, self and responsibility in novels, movies and TV shows. Because of more complex character developments, the visible divide between good and evil, victims and perpetrators started to blur. In American transmedial storytelling, there became a pattern of depicting perpetrators as victims which makes it harder for audiences to

see things simply as right or wrong. Instead of focusing only on villainous crimes, it was being recognized that many criminals are shaped by background failures, painful history or serious emotional experiences.

Aims and Objectives

This paper investigates how American transmedial narratives specifically *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, and *Breaking Bad* by Vince Gilligan, reconstructed the image of perpetrators into that of victims. The aim of this study is to reveal how these narratives work to avoid simple moral labeling by seeing perpetrators as victims. The objective is not to justify their wrongdoings but to study and look into the circumstances such as racial injustice, poverty, psychological trauma and lack of help, which shape these characters' decision and turn them into a perpetrator. This understanding prompts readers and viewers to face the ways that violent social systems affect individual lives.

Significance

The significance of this research is that it only examines these narratives through victimology, not psychology, trauma theory or media theory. Unlike trauma theory which looks at emotional scars and memories, victimology shows how the society and its history play a role in reproducing wrongdoing. It reveals how the perpetrators are victims somehow when they are acted upon by larger unjust influences. The use of this theoretical approach allows the paper to offer a new and sharp perspective on culpability, empathy and justice in literature and media.

Research Gap:

Although much has been written about American literature and culture, few scholars have used victimology as the main theoretical framework to study American transmedial narratives regarding perpetrators. This is where the research gap lies as current studies often discuss trauma theory, postcolonial theory or media studies, but much fewer studies explore only the re-examination of perpetrators through victimology. Because of this gap, it is important to look at how former, bad guys are now seen as victims and this can influence important moral lessons in the media. Since this research applies victimology alone and all the time, it differs from interdisciplinary models that do not pay enough attention to the details of victim and perpetrator relationships.

Methodology:

The methodology followed for this paper is qualitative narrative analysis, only using the theory of victimology. It considers both reading and reflecting on images, concentrating on how characters develop, their surrounding conditions and any moral uncertainties. The texts discussed span literature as well as television, to highlight how storytelling adapts across platforms. The analysis of each story uses victimological ideas such as structural victimization, secondary victimization and role reversal to build a strong structure for comparing different storytelling forms.

Future Implications:

For the future, this work offers insights that can influence other researches and how the public perceives these topics. It can help develop a different look at fictional heroes and people in the real world who have questionable morals. Advocating victimology in the study of literature and culture, this paper hopes to promote stronger, more thoughtful and caring talks about responsibility, fairness and kindness in the broken world. Besides, it provides a pathway to consider the effects of this reconstruction of perpetrators on public policy, ethics among the media and educational programs in the future. Furthermore, this raises the issue of how focusing on those who committed crimes would impact public policy, ethical guidelines for journalists, and educational materials in the future.

Research Questions:

The study will focus on the following three research questions:

- How do American authors and filmmakers view perpetrators as victims due to social norms and public policies?
- In which contexts and circumstances do we see traditional perpetrators viewed as victims in *The Nickel Boys*, *American Dirt*, and *Breaking Bad*?
- How much do victim-centered narratives make people question typical morals and their reactions toward guilt and understanding?

As a result, the main aim of this research is to analyze how changing the role of the victim reshapes ideas about morality in various forms of storytelling. By only using victimology to analyze the crimes, this study discovers that many aspects besides harmful actions play a role in causing or sustaining villainy. The narratives highlight both fictional examples and cultural aspects, illustrating how America has reconsidered aspects such as danger, law, and kindness in recent times.

Literature Review

In 21st century transmedial narratives in America, portraying perpetrators as victims brings new ways to think about victims and those who do wrong. Since 2000, many books, TV programs and movies have shown a rare kind of humanization in characters that were originally written or depicted as hostile and dangerous. By this method, these narratives are presented alongside other events, values and moments in history to encourage the audience to question their rights and wrongs of their acts. These violent personalities are explained in detail by victimology which looks at the structural factors around those who become aggressive. Victimology helps to show how different systems shape the personalities of violent people. It explains the complex causes of suffering, guiding the identities of each character in the process.

According to Richard Gray, in his 2012 book *A History of American Literature*, Whitehead shows how violence creates a blur between victim and perpetrator. He says, "Whitehead's depiction of institutionalized violence forces a reconsideration of the boundaries between victim and perpetrator" (Gray, 254). Similarly, Lawrence R. Hogue in *The Politics of Displacement* in Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* (2021) notes "The novel complicates the victim-perpetrator binary by

focusing on the migration journey, where migrants and those they encounter are both victims of larger socio-economic forces that push them into violent roles” (Hogue, 5). The stories reveal in what way victimology explains how lack of protection and justice drives victims to face more violence.

Barbara Harlow stresses in *Resistance Literature* (1987) that it is simplistic to describe the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Using the approach of victimology, her view that “the process of victimization can, in turn, create perpetrators; the cycle of suffering and violence feeds back into itself” (Harlow, 89) demonstrates the challenges of identity change under oppression. In *The Nickel Boys*, Turner responds to racial violence with aggression, showing how the cycle occurs in the novel. Laura Morris’s work *Racial Trauma and Violence in Colson Whitehead’s The Nickel Boys* observes that Whitehead’s characters are formed by a world in which racial wounds cause some to be abused and others to commit abuse. In quoted from the work itself, “Whitehead’s characters are shaped by an environment where racial trauma dictates both their victimization and their capacity to perpetrate violence” (Morris, 162). While accepting these people as victims, their later choices make it harder to label them simply as right or wrong, an issue that is central to victimology. *American Dirt* further depicts cartel members as having been formed by experiences of being poor, unloved and afraid which can be seen in what criminology calls a victim-turned-offender profile. In her article *American Dirt and the Politics of Empathy* (2020), Adriana Garcia warns that Cummins’ humanization of cartel members might lead to “erasing the evil of cartel violence,” but researchers in victimology say that such a question can help explain why terrible acts happen after repeated victimization.

What makes these texts challenging is that they mix things that are right and wrong. This dilemma is clearly seen in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), by chronicling how Walter White becomes a selfish criminal. Social and economic factors, as well as mental pressure, encourage people to descend instead of happening unexpectedly. Gitlin points out in *Media Unlimited* (2001) that, “In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White is transformed from a sympathetic figure to a complex antihero, challenging our moral compass and forcing us to reconsider what drives his actions” (Gitlin, 215). Walter fits the pattern for what victimology calls “cumulative victims”: people who suffer from so many wrongs that they eventually react by committing crimes. Miller’s study of *Breaking Bad* (2015) states that, “Walter White embodies the tension between victim and perpetrator, a tension that mirrors the socio-economic pressures many face in contemporary America” (Miller, 92).

Overall, these works illustrate that systems of racial oppression, financial disparity and being neglected by society can make it hard for some characters to remain trustworthy. All three works, *Breaking Bad*, *The Nickel Boys* and *American*

Dirt, feature characters that end up doing wrong to others because they have faced years of abuse and extreme situations. M. J. Rykwert, in *The Transmedial Project* (2018), comments that, "Transmedial narratives allow for a more layered exploration of characters, where the boundaries of victimhood and guilt are reexamined across different platforms" (Rykwert, 41). Victimology explains that victim identity is capable of changing. Over the five seasons of the show, Walter White goes from being victimized to becoming a part of the problem. Turner finds himself disappointed after experiencing racism and marginalization. Lydia develops her threatening personality as a result of the anguish she faced as a child and the heartbreak of being left alone by her community.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative approach through textual and visual analysis. By using textual and visual analysis, this research studies how American transmedial narratives treat perpetrators as victims. In this study, *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead (2019), *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins (2020) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) on television are closely read and carefully analyzed. The texts were chosen because they focus on cultural issues and experiences as well as highlighting systemic problems, the failure of institutions and tricky morality.

Victimology is used as the main theoretical lens due to its capacity to explain how both people and society play a role in shaping individuals' roles as victims and as those who harm others. Although trauma studies often look at inner experiences and memories, victimology focuses on the ways institutions such as prisons, systems for immigration and healthcare fuel violence and uncertain moral guidance. For this reason, this theory fits perfectly for examining how Elwood, Turner, Lydia and Walter White are influenced by their situations.

Discussion and Analysis

In this new century, American transmedial narratives challenged the idea that people are either victims or criminals. Traditionally, evil characters were started to be explored in detail to show the traumas and neglect they might have encountered in society. While these writings describe these individuals as victims, they do not accept excuses for violence; they simply want readers to question the principles of personal responsibility. With a victimological perspective, these narratives bet against dualities and arrive at the conclusion that the roles of culprit and victim may be shared between different people.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead describes the experiences of Elwood Curtis and Turner, two teenagers who attend the Nickel Academy which was based on the Dozier School for Boys in Florida. Elwood is guided by Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings not to fight, but Turner becomes cynical and protective of his feelings. Turner's choice to pose as Elwood after Elwood dies is significant because it becomes a key example of victimology. Turner appears to be a fraud, but in reality, he is a boy

who has endured years of violence, staying hidden by using a different name. Whitehead says in the novel, "He had to take Elwood's name, wear it like armor. It kept the ghosts away." (Whitehead, 2019, p. 212) Using the armor's metaphor, it became understood that humans can turn lying into a way to handle their trauma and loss.

Children at the Nickel Academy are forced to hide their feelings due to the abuse they face. Persistent injustice lessens their ability to do the right thing. Whitehead uses the character of Turner to demonstrate that the error lies in the system, not in individuals. Interestingly, his version of Elwood keeps Elwood's essence and message alive. To acknowledge a good person in a bad environment, one must act in an immoral way. As a result, Turner acts as someone who steals identities and experiences being forgotten and mistreated just like other people. In *American Dirt*, the character of Javier is portrayed by Jeanine Cummins as someone who led a drug cartel and murdered Lydia's family. Along the way, readers learn about Javier's childhood and question whether he is really just a victim. The death of his daughter leads Javier to a life of violence, as he feels it was the society's mistake that allowed for her murder. Noticing the pain inside her father, Lydia can't help but feel troubled by it. She feels that, "There is something about the depth of his sadness that is unbearable. She almost believes he is the more wounded one" (Cummins, 2020, p. 376).

This thought does not free the individuals from responsibility but helps them view things differently. Cummins relies on Javier to point out the reasons behind cartels' success: poverty, widespread bribery, and getting away with violations. Javier became a victim due to personal as well as social factors. He helps the narrative present the story in a way that defies stereotypes about gangs and their crimes. After Lydia realized, that, "He wasn't a monster. He was a man with a broken heart and too much power" (p. 241), the narrative reinterprets his violence as something spurred by grief which he expresses through the only authority he knows exists in a collapsed society. Javier's vulnerability and strong ability to do harm makes this story a complicated case of victimology. By doing this, Cummins creates a story where the reader questions moral judgments.

Breaking Bad, considered by many to be the most impactful narrative, examines how Walter White's actions reflect the decline of long-established values. His initial stage of cancer brings Walter to decide on making meth to ensure he can support his family in the future. The novel starts by explaining that Walter is taken advantage of by the system, since he does not earn much, has no insurance, and is left unrecognized. "You know the business," he tells Jesse. "And I know the chemistry" (Season 1, Episode 6). As he continues in his criminal ways, his true bitterness about life gradually comes out. Walter gradually becomes more and more cruel as the series

continues. Still, the show often points out how these failed elements helped create the character behind Heisenberg. Walter makes it clear to Skyler that he made his decisions for himself as he said, "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really... I was alive" (Season 5, Episode 16). This is a statement that both include an understanding of victims and a person's personal choices. Walter still has consequences, but this series does not paint him only as the bad guy. It convinces the viewer to consider cancer as representing an inability of economic structures to look after those who do not make money.

It also uses Jesse Pinkman to highlight the concepts mentioned in victimology. As the story continues, Jesse, who was only a small-time drug dealer, starts to appear more sympathetic. Both the main character and neglect within the system are responsible for Jack's repeated experiences of trauma. After being made to watch the death of a child, Jesse is angered and cries out, "He can't keep getting away with this!" (Season 5, Episode 12). Jesse becomes violent as a result of others betraying him many times. He suffers at Walter's hands and also because he was never prepared for this world.

Each narrative uses strategies like delayed revelation, unclear examples of right and wrong and close looks at emotions to turn perpetrators into victims in the story. This approach doesn't deny people's actions or suffering, but seeks to better understand the things that affect how people behave. The audience is encouraged to look beyond single actions, analyzing instead the wider culture and environments around crime. What is seen is a detailed picture that relates crime to its environment. Audience are drawn to understand and relate to what the people do and this does not ask us to forgive them, but to think deeper about the right thing to do. The narratives use the concepts of structural victimization and psychological trauma from victimology to highlight how harm, hurt, agency, coercion, justice and survival are hard to tell apart. As a result, these American transmedial narratives shift the focus from finding who is responsible to asking what factors make people responsible.

Conclusion

As it has been discussed in the previous section, using old distinctions like good versus evil and victim versus perpetrator does not explain characters affected by social discrimination. Therefore, this research has studied only victimology to reveal that many American narratives originally depicted as villains are actually suffering and trying to cope with trying circumstances. Its main goal is to question simple principles used in fiction and society for judging what is morally right and wrong.

The two novels *The Nickel Boys*, *American Dirt*, and the television series *Breaking Bad* reveal that narratives started to shape those who commit violent crimes as victims, due to their past stories or traumas.

Focusing only on victimology in this research has enabled further to understand how individuals begin as victims in their community and then, as a result of continual victimization, become oppressors themselves. Giving priority to the study of victims helps clear up the doubts surrounding moral and ethical choices while remaining meaningful both for readers and for researchers.

Future researchers could use this approach to study outsiders in refugee stories, films made by immigrants, and fiction related to climate issues, where the reasons for victimization are often connected to political factors. As a result, this work gives guidance on studying the conditions, habits, and patterns that affect what is ethical. It explains that vague terms for people are not helpful; instead, the environments should be analyzed that make particular actions probable or impossible.

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