

TRAUMA AND THE SOLDIER'S MIND: PTSD IN TOLSTOY'S WAR AND PEACE AND CRANE'S THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

¹KAWSAR AHAMED

¹City University, Bangladesh

Kawsar Ahamed: kawsarsheikh.cu@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: KAWSAR AHAMED

ABSTRACT

Although post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was not formally recognized until the 20th century, 19th-century war literature anticipated its psychological manifestations through vivid portrayals of fear, dissociation, and alienation. This study examines the representation of trauma in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), exploring how both texts intuitively depicted the psychological consequences of combat in the absence of clinical vocabulary. Drawing upon trauma theory (Caruth, Herman, LaCapra), this research employs a qualitative textual analysis to investigate key scenes that reveal symptoms resembling PTSD, including emotional numbness, dissociation, and existential despair. The comparative analysis highlights how Tolstoy's psychological realism emphasizes alienation and philosophical rupture, while Crane's impressionistic style foregrounds fear, shame, and psychological collapse. By situating these works within the broader discourse on trauma and war literature, this article demonstrates the enduring significance of 19th-century literary texts in anticipating modern understandings of psychological trauma.

KEYWORDS: PTSD, trauma theory, 19th-century literature, *War and Peace*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, comparative war literature

1. INTRODUCTION

The psychological effects of war have long been reflected in literature, which often provides insight into experiences for which medical and social frameworks were absent or inadequate. In the 19th century, soldiers who returned from combat frequently exhibited symptoms that today align with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—including anxiety, dissociation, and emotional detachment—but such conditions lacked formal recognition. Instead, terms such as “soldier’s heart” or “nostalgia” were used to describe what was often dismissed as weakness or cowardice. Against this backdrop of limited medical understanding, literature became a vital cultural medium for articulating the psychological consequences of warfare.

This study focuses on two major 19th-century works: Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Both novels depict not only the physical reality of battle but also the inner struggles of soldiers confronting fear, shame, and existential despair. Their narratives capture what modern trauma theorists identify as fragmentation of consciousness and alienation from social life, offering proto-representations of PTSD before the term entered the medical lexicon.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Tolstoy and Crane depict psychological trauma in their respective war novels?
2. In what ways do these depictions align with or anticipate modern understandings of PTSD?
3. How do cultural and historical contexts—the Napoleonic Wars in Russia and the American Civil War—shape the portrayal of trauma in each text?

By engaging with trauma theory and comparative literary analysis, this article argues that Tolstoy and Crane, through different aesthetic strategies, produced some of the earliest sustained literary explorations of combat trauma. In doing so, their works enrich interdisciplinary understandings of the psychological consequences of war.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on trauma and literature has expanded significantly since the late 20th century, drawing on both clinical studies and cultural theory. Cathy Caruth (1996) emphasizes trauma as an experience that resists full representation, often manifesting in fragmented narratives and belated recognition. Judith Herman's foundational work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) situates trauma within clinical discourse, describing symptoms such as dissociation, numbness, and recurring nightmares that parallel the experiences depicted in war literature. Dominick LaCapra (2001) further explores how trauma

shapes historical memory and literary representation, highlighting the need to read cultural texts as sites of psychological as well as historical meaning.

Within war literature, scholars such as Paul Fussell (*The Great War and Modern Memory*, 1975) and Eric J. Leed (*No Man's Land*, 1979) examine the transformation of literary forms in response to the brutality of combat. While their focus is largely on World War I, their analyses underscore how warfare forces new modes of narrative and consciousness. More recent critics, including Roger Luckhurst (2008) and Stef Craps (2013), extend trauma theory into cultural and postcolonial contexts, demonstrating the interdisciplinary breadth of trauma studies.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, comparatively little attention has been paid to 19th-century war literature as a precursor to modern trauma narratives. Studies often focus on the World Wars as the starting point for trauma discourse, leaving earlier depictions underexplored. This article addresses this gap by situating Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* within trauma theory. By analyzing how these texts portray dissociation, fear, and alienation, the study highlights how 19th-century authors anticipated modern conceptions of PTSD and provided early literary frameworks for understanding the psychological effects of combat.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical research approach, grounded in the frameworks of trauma theory and comparative literary analysis. The purpose is to examine how 19th-century war literature represented the psychological consequences of combat in the absence of formal psychiatric terminology.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The analysis is interpretive rather than empirical, relying on close reading of selected passages from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). These texts were chosen because they represent two major 19th-century wars—the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War—and because they provide nuanced portrayals of psychological distress that align with modern descriptions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

3.2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth (1996), Judith Herman (1992), and Dominick LaCapra (2001), which emphasizes symptoms such as dissociation, belated memory, numbness, and alienation. By applying these theoretical perspectives, the analysis identifies how literary strategies—such as psychological realism in Tolstoy and impressionism in Crane—reflect the fragmentation of consciousness associated with trauma.

3.3 COMPARATIVE APPROACH

The research compares how each author's cultural, historical, and literary context shaped their representation of trauma. Tolstoy, writing within the Russian realist tradition, emphasizes existential despair and philosophical reflection, whereas Crane, writing in an American naturalist and impressionist style, foregrounds fear, shame, and psychological collapse. This comparative dimension highlights both universal features of war trauma and culturally specific modes of representation.

3.4 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study focuses specifically on two canonical works and does not attempt to survey the entirety of 19th-century war literature. Instead, it aims to demonstrate how these texts function as early literary sites for exploring trauma, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary discussions of psychology, history, and literature.

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: WAR, TRAUMA, AND THE ABSENCE OF DIAGNOSIS

The 19th century saw two major military conflicts that profoundly shaped both nations and individuals: the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) and the American Civil War (1861–1865). Soldiers returning from these conflicts often exhibited symptoms that resemble modern PTSD, including anxiety, emotional numbness, recurring nightmares, and flashbacks. However, at the time, psychological disturbances were poorly understood. Terms like “soldier's heart” and “nostalgia” were used to describe vague emotional or psychological ailments, often perceived as a form of weakness rather than medical conditions requiring treatment. The term “PTSD” itself did not enter the medical lexicon until the 20th century, following the experiences of soldiers in World War I (then called “shell shock”) and later in Vietnam. In the 19th century, soldiers suffering from psychological trauma were frequently dismissed or misunderstood. Without a framework for understanding trauma, literature served as a crucial medium for expressing the psychological effects of war.

5. TOLSTOY'S *WAR AND PEACE*: PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAGMENTATION AND NUMBNESS

Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) provides an expansive portrayal of the Napoleonic Wars and offers deep psychological insights into the minds of its characters. Two of the novel's central figures, Pierre Bezukhov and Andrei Bolkonsky, experience significant psychological trauma as a result of their involvement in the war. Through these characters, Tolstoy explores the long-lasting emotional and psychological consequences of combat.

Pierre Bezukhov's participation in the Battle of Borodino is particularly revealing. As a non-military figure thrust into the chaos of battle, Pierre becomes overwhelmed by the disorienting nature of combat:

"He could not make out what was happening. He saw only the fleeting gleam of bayonets, the movements of his own men, and others moving backward or sideways... The terrible din that usually accompanies battle did not seem to reach him. He was conscious only of an overwhelming sense of confusion and helplessness." (Tolstoy, 1869/2007, p. 837)

This passage demonstrates Pierre's dissociative state—a key symptom of PTSD. He becomes numb to the sensory overload around him, unable to process the violence, noise, and confusion of battle. Tolstoy's portrayal of Pierre's mental state mirrors the psychological fragmentation and emotional detachment often seen in trauma survivors. Later in the novel, Pierre experiences further trauma during his capture and near-execution by the French, compounding his sense of helplessness and psychological disorientation.

Andrei Bolkonsky, another of Tolstoy's central characters, undergoes a different but equally profound psychological journey. After being wounded at the Battle of Austerlitz, Andrei lies on the battlefield, reflecting on the meaning of life. Tolstoy describes his thoughts:

"What was passing through his mind? He was thinking of nothing. Life seemed to him a hopeless loss, a monstrous deception, something alien and incomprehensible." (Tolstoy, 1869/2008, p. 523)

Andrei's detachment from life and sense of alienation reflect the existential despair that can accompany trauma. His experiences on the battlefield not only cause physical injury but also lead to a deep psychological rupture, rendering him emotionally numb and disconnected from the world around him. Tolstoy's depiction of Andrei illustrates how war trauma disrupts a soldier's perception of life and self, offering a narrative precursor to what we now recognize as PTSD.

6. CRANE'S *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*: FEAR, SHAME, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), while written at the end of the 19th century, remains a seminal text for understanding the psychological impact of war. Set during the American Civil War, the novel focuses on Henry Fleming, a young soldier grappling with fear, shame, and his conception of bravery. Through Henry's experiences, Crane explores the emotional and psychological breakdowns that accompany combat.

At the outset of the novel, Henry is consumed by fear at the prospect of battle. His anxiety escalates to a near-psychotic level as he contemplates fleeing the battlefield. Crane writes:

"He felt that in this crisis his laws of life were useless. Whatever he had learned of himself was here of no avail... His mind seemed to be tossing about on waves of red terror." (Crane, 1895/2008, p. 72)

Henry's sense of helplessness and emotional paralysis capture the overwhelming fear and panic that soldiers often experience in combat. His eventual flight from the battlefield represents a psychological collapse under the pressure of war. Crane's depiction of Henry's psychological breakdown aligns with contemporary understandings of trauma, particularly the intense fear and dissociation that can result from combat stress.

Upon returning to the battlefield, Henry experiences further dissociative episodes, acting mechanically and without full awareness of his actions. Crane writes:

"He had fled, he told himself, because annihilation approached... He had fought at a barrier of flame and had been so thoroughly scalded that afterward, he could not recall any features of the conflict." (Crane, 1895/2008, p. 67)

This description of Henry's dissociation, memory loss, and emotional detachment reflects symptoms of trauma that are now recognized as characteristic of PTSD. Crane's focus on Henry's internal world rather than external battle heroics provides a psychologically rich depiction of war's impact on the mind, underscoring the personal costs of conflict.

7. CHALLENGES AND BEHAVIORAL ISSUES FACED BY SOLDIERS AND SOCIETY

In the 19th century, soldiers suffering from trauma faced numerous challenges in the absence of formal diagnoses like PTSD. Mental health conditions were not recognized, and soldiers who exhibited symptoms were often stigmatized. They were perceived as weak, cowardly, or malingering, further isolating them from society. Lacking both psychological language and medical resources to understand or treat their conditions, these individuals were left to suffer in silence.

Tolstoy and Crane, however, provide a literary framework through which the experiences of traumatized soldiers can be understood. By exploring the inner psychological worlds of their characters, these writers capture the alienation, numbness, and disillusionment that we now associate with PTSD. The following section provides an in-depth analysis of how trauma manifests in the lives of soldiers and society's failure to comprehend and address these challenges.

7.1 STIGMATIZATION OF TRAUMA

In Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry Fleming's overwhelming sense of shame after fleeing from the battlefield highlights the social and personal stigma surrounding cowardice and emotional weakness. Henry's fear is not just

about the physical danger of battle but also the potential social consequences of being labeled a coward:

“He was ashamed of his fits of terror, but still more he was afraid of the shame which he might be forced to endure. He considered himself an outcast... a deserter.” (Crane, 1895/2008, Ch. 10)

This passage reflects society’s expectation that soldiers should exhibit unwavering courage. Any deviation from this ideal, such as Henry’s fear and flight, was viewed as a moral and personal failure. The internal conflict Henry faces mirrors the external pressure to conform to an unrealistic image of a stoic, invulnerable soldier.

7.2 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ISOLATION

In *War and Peace*, Andrei Bolkonsky’s growing emotional detachment from life after his experience on the battlefield illustrates how trauma leads to social and emotional isolation. His injury during the Battle of Austerlitz and subsequent near-death experience plunged him into an existential crisis. He becomes disconnected from the people around him, unable to relate to those who have not experienced war firsthand:

“Life seemed to him a hopeless loss, a monstrous deception, something alien and incomprehensible.” (Tolstoy, 1869/2008, Book 3, Ch. 17).

This emotional numbness prevents Andrei from reintegrating into civilian life, alienating him from family, friends, and society. His trauma-induced withdrawal underscores the broader difficulty that many soldiers face in readjusting to post-war life, as their war experiences have fundamentally altered them in ways that others cannot understand.

7.3 LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Both texts highlight the lack of formal support systems for traumatized soldiers. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry’s psychological turmoil is intensified by the absence of any guidance or help from his fellow soldiers or superiors. He is left to navigate his fear and shame alone:

“He wished, without reserve, that he was dead. He believed that he envied those men whose bodies lay strewn over the grass of the fields... He was an outcast.” (Crane, 1895/2008, Ch. 7).

In Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the lack of institutional support is more implicit. Andrei’s emotional struggles after his injury are neither recognized nor treated. Instead, he is expected to continue with life as if nothing has changed, reflecting how soldiers were left to cope with their mental and emotional wounds in isolation:

“Everything around him was strange, dark, incomprehensible, and terrible.” (Tolstoy, 1869/2008, Book 4, Ch. 10).

This demonstrates the broader societal failure to understand the emotional toll of war and the absence of meaningful institutional mechanisms to help veterans process their trauma.

Authors like Tolstoy and Crane provided a crucial literary space where the struggles of soldiers were expressed, offering insights into the experiences of alienation, numbness, and disillusionment now associated with PTSD. Their works bridge the gap between personal trauma and the lack of societal understanding, serving as early representations of war-related mental health struggles.

8. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significance of 19th-century war literature in portraying the psychological effects of combat before the advent of modern psychological diagnoses. Through the characters of Andrei Bolkonsky in *War and Peace* and Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Tolstoy and Crane intuitively depicted what would later be identified as PTSD. Their literary techniques—interior monologues, fragmented narratives, and symbolic use of nature—provided readers with a nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological toll of war.

By examining these early literary depictions of trauma, we gain a deeper appreciation for how literature can both reflect and shape our understanding of mental health. While PTSD would not be formally diagnosed until the 20th century, the works of Tolstoy and Crane offer enduring insights into the complexities of war trauma and the human mind’s response to extreme stress. This research underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in studying the intersection of literature, history, and mental health, revealing that these early literary works continue to provide relevant frameworks for understanding the psychological consequences of war today.

ABBREVIATIONS WORDS

PTSD stands for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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