Abstract. There has been a particular interest in trauma studies since the end of the twentieth century; not just in psychology and psychiatry, the main fields of study concerning mental disorders, but in every aspect of life. Consequently, a growing number of publications have been published that approach trauma from various fields: social and literary studies, comparative literature, philosophy, ethics, etc. At the same time, from talk shows to the news broadcasts, from popular media (post-apocalyptic movies, disaster films, games to art movies), from direct testimonies of survivors to fictive accounts of traumatic experience, there is a proliferation of all kinds of representations of trauma to the extent that testimony has been suggested as “the literary mode […] of our times”, whereas “our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony” (Felman 1995: 17). The question naturally arises whether trauma has become a cliché in contemporary literature and culture, or whether literature has always been centered around trauma, in which case only the approach of trauma studies is new.

Key Words. trauma, slavery, Toni Morrison, narrative, testimony

Introduction

Trauma has always been part of human life. Nevertheless, its diagnosis came relatively late, presumably due to the fact that our natural reaction to trauma, both on an individual and collective level, is to lose consciousness of the traumatic event itself: “Severe atrocities

1 Most notable theorists on trauma include Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Marianne Hirsch, Dori Laub, and Judith Herman, among others. Trauma studies, an interdisciplinary field, has been studied from several perspectives (history, psychology, psychoanalysis, medicine, etc.). The understanding of trauma proposed in this paper is based on the psychoanalytic approach.
naturally become unspeakable, as they violate people’s belief in a fair or safe world, expose their vulnerability and [...] the true capacity of evil committed by other human beings” (Mohácsi 2016: 11). A traumatic event oftentimes impacts subsequent generations, resulting in multigenerational trauma; moreover, it is painful for those who decide to listen, too: “[t]o study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events” (Herman 1997: 7), as the suffering, pain, and anxiety the victims felt can be transferred to those who listen to their testimonies as well. Even to define trauma has been problematic: it cannot be defined by the event itself, which may or may not cause mental symptoms, only by “the structure of its experience [...] : the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it”, thus, “[t]o be traumatized is [...] to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 1995: 4-5). Consequently, representing the elusive nature of trauma in literary works has always been a challenging task for writers.

Firstly, the history of trauma studies will be encapsulated, followed by a brief definition of trauma itself and its present understanding. After outlining its main symptoms, illustrated by literary examples, literature and culture’s role in illustrating trauma will be discussed. The aim of the present paper is to display the central role of trauma in cultural and especially literary studies at present and reflect on how the concept of trauma, instead of simply serving as a cliché, can generate a meaningful discussion on identity, memory, and history as well as function as a bridge between different cultures.

The History of Studying Trauma: An Overview

There have been three periods of time when trauma was in the center of attention, and it was always intertwined with a political movement. The first was hysteria, whose “study grew out of the republican, anticlerical political movement” (Herman 1997: 9) at the end of the nineteenth century in France. The second period centered around the so-called ‘shell shock’ or combat neurosis. Doctors recognized its symptoms first after the First World War, but interest in this particular condition persisted until the Vietnam War; naturally, its political context was the anti-war sentiment. At the end of the twentieth century, sexual and domestic violence and abuse became central in the study of trauma, due to the strengthening feminist movement.

In fact, the very first study on trauma was the investigation of hysteria, which was originally believed to originate from the uterus; hence its name. The first systematic research on hysteria was led by French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. He documented the symptoms of the disease and established its status as a mental illness. He understood first that the physiological symptoms are caused by psychological reasons. His followers, Pierre Janet in France and Sigmund Freud in Vienna continued his research and concluded that hysteria is indeed caused by psychological trauma, and that events that the human consciousness finds unbearable compel the human mind to create an altered state of consciousness directly responsible for the hysterical symptoms. They also observed that by aiding the patients to verbalize their traumatic memories, the symptoms could be alleviated, which is precisely how psychoanalysis was born. Nevertheless, when in 1896 Freud published The Aetiology of Hysteria, in which he reached the conclusion “that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience” (203), it caused such a scandal that he had to repudiate his theory.

Shortly after the study of hysteria, the interest in psychological trauma re-emerged due to the devastating effects of the First World War. One of the first psychologists to observe the patients exhibiting certain nervous symptoms was Charles Samuel Myers, who attributed the patients’ condition to the effects of exploding shells. Although he did not invent the term “shell shock,” it was first officially used in his paper (1915: 316). Freud also observed common symptoms of veteran trauma patients; interestingly, he did not connect them to his
previous observations on hysteria. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* published in 1920, he contemplated the recurring dreams of veterans, in which they relived their traumatic memories but were unable to consciously recall them later. This observation is the basis of our current understanding of trauma, which Caruth, based on Freud, defines as a wound inflicted on the mind “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (1996: 4). During the Second World War and the Korean War, the term “combat exhaustion” (Ramirez 2016: 131) was used instead of shell shock, but it was not until the Vietnam War that the condition became recognized “as a lasting and inevitable legacy of war” (Herman 1997: 27), and in the official manual of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 it was added as a mental disorder under the name of ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD).

A more recent surge of interest in psychological trauma readdressed the issue of domestic abuse and sexual trauma. Rape had not been considered as a serious crime for centuries, especially not if a woman was raped by her own husband or by other family members. Often, the victims of rape and sexual abuse were debased and discredited if seeking legal help. Several works of fiction address the issue of victim blaming and portray the scorn of the community as well as the ignorance of bystanders. For instance, *Rape: A Love Story* by Joyce Carol Oates or *Bastard out of Carolina* and the short story collection *Thrash* by Dorothy Allison center around this particular problem. Assault against women has been a central topic in popular culture and media as well: it is enough to think about the #MeToo movement, an ubiquitous topic in media since 2017.

**The Effects of Trauma**

People have undoubtedly suffered from traumatic experiences from the beginnings of human civilization, however, due to advances in the medical field, especially psychiatry, now much is known about the physical and psychological effects of trauma on individuals. Traumatic events, which involve “threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death”, make individuals face “the extremities of helplessness and terror” (Herman 1997: 33). Consequently, the survivors’ nervous system is aroused, which in turn produces an adrenalin rush. Thus, people “enter a state of alertness. Traumatic responses occur when both resistance and escape are impossible, overwhelming the individual’s self-defense system” (Bouson 2000: 7). Trauma causes “profound and lasting changes in psychological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory”, and the individual experiencing trauma may undergo “intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” (Herman 1997: 34). In other words, traumatic memory is so devastating and overwhelming for human consciousness that it “cannot be integrated into existing mental frameworks”; instead, it is “dissociated, later to return intrusively as fragmented sensory or motoric experience” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 176). Therefore, dissociation is closely intertwined with traumatic memory: contrary to repression, which involves pushing memories down to the unconscious, “[d]issociation reflects a horizontally layered model of mind” in which the traumatic memory “is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness […] in traumatic reenactments” (168). Accordingly, Caruth regards PTSD as more a “symptom of history” than the “symptom of the unconscious” because trauma victims “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (1995: 5). Naturally, the portrayal of the effects of trauma is a challenge from the perspective of creating a coherent narrative, as
many times the characters in question are seemingly unaware of the original traumatic experience that governs their behavior in certain situations.

The major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder can be divided into the three distinct categories of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. As a result of hyperarousal, which means that the initial “[p]hysical arousal continues unabated” (Herman 1997: 35), the victim lives in a perpetual sense of threat and danger, thus feels anxious, has trouble sleeping, and can be irritated easily. Intrusion means that the traumatic memory recurs constantly, forcing the individual to live at the time of the traumatic event as if it was still present. Thus, the traumatic experience interrupts the lives of its victims, “as if time stop[ped] at the moment of trauma” (37). As a result, literary characters suffering from PTSD are oftentimes portrayed as stuck in time and/or place. For instance, Sethe’s rememories in Toni Morrison’s Beloved are perfect examples of this intrusion of the past, as she suddenly remembers already forgotten, that is, repressed memories of places and events and feels as if they were still present. In addition, at the end of the novel she has to reenact the original traumatic event at the exact same place with a different outcome in order to be able to heal; until then, she indeed remains stuck in time.

The third major symptom, “constriction or numbing” (42) is ultimately the result of self-defense. In order not to feel pain, trauma victims often remain detached from their bodies and disconnected from their everyday experience and ordinary life, not unlike as if they were in a trance. This altered state of consciousness is “one of nature’s small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain,” the symptoms of which include the “surrender of voluntary action, suspension of initiative and critical judgement, subjective detachment or calm, enhanced perception of imagery, altered sensation, including numbness and analgesia, and distortion of reality, including depersonalization, derealization, and change in the sense of time” (42–43). Naturally, numbing is an adaptive answer to trauma when the traumatic event occurs; however, afterwards it can precipitate post-traumatic amnesia. Furthermore, trauma victims, while trying to avoid any situations that parallel the original traumatic event, oftentimes confine themselves to living in a regulated, barren lifestyle, such as Marian Graves in Maggie Shipstead’s Great Circle in Alaska or Sethe in Beloved, whose “brain was not interested in the future” because it was “loaded with the past” to such an extent that “it left her no room to imagine […] the next day” (Morrison: 1998: 70).

Generally, after a traumatic event, individuals are “caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma”, that is, “between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all” (47). First intrusive symptoms dominate, then, as they commence to decrease, numbing symptoms become more prevalent, such as feelings of alienation, disconnection, and inner deadness. For instance, in Nora Okja Keller’s novel Fox Girl the eponymous Hyun Jin is disconnected both from her feelings and her body for the most part of the novel, which enables her to pursue the career of a prostitute. Likewise, the character of Lester Farley in The Human Stain by Philip Roth constantly feels he is dead inside. Moreover, traumatic memory is “an abnormal type of memory that spontaneously erupts into consciousness in the forms of flashbacks and nightmares” (Bouson 2000: 7). As any trivial, insignificant detail can trigger the traumatic memory, no environment remains perfectly safe for victims of trauma. An example from fiction would be Frank Money, the protagonist in Morrison’s Home, who has sudden flashbacks of the Korean War upon seeing red. It is important to add that as a result of “the nature of the conflict, characterized by quickly shifting front lines and widely dispersed battlefields” (Cameron and Owens 2004: 460), in the initial phase of the Korean war extraordinarily high rates of neuropsychiatric casualties were reported. In addition, there were rumors according to which “the army was using black troops as front-line shock troops” (Keene 2005: 229). The fact that African American veterans “did not receive the appropriate medical care they needed when they
returned from the war” (Ramirez 2016: 133), which is also addressed in Home, only aggravated the situation of African American ex-soldiers. In addition, trauma can “shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (Herman 1997: 51), while it also disturbs autobiographical memory, “ultimately fragmentizing a stable personal identity” (Mohácsi 2016: 19). Due to their socioeconomic situation and their treatment as Black soldiers, African American veterans had “severe identity issues connected to psychiatric disorder: despair, depression, shame, guilt, etc. As a result, traumatized soldiers, like victims of racism, develop very low self-esteem and self-worth” (Ramirez 2016: 136), illustrated by the characters of Frank in Home and Shadrack and Plum, WWI veterans, in Sula by Morrison.

Consequently, trauma shatters the victims’ sense of time, space, memory, and identity, as they must inhibit “two utterly incompatible worlds” simultaneously: the constant presence of the traumatic event and their everyday existence. As the traumatic experience occurred at a definite time in the victim’s past, traumatized people “live out their existences in two different stages of the life cycle, the traumatic past, and the bleached present” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 177). In other words, they continue to oscillate between “a primary experience that can never be captured” (Luckhurst 2008: 5) and the present. As the traumatized part of the victim’s personality remains frozen at the time of the traumatic event, to connect the traumatic past to their present life is a daunting task. Building this connection between present and past is part of the psychotherapy available for PTSD patients, and this process is also often portrayed in trauma narratives.

Generally, in fiction focusing on individual trauma the traumatic event is shown belatedly, most often at the end of the work, when both the reader and the protagonist are ready to face the past trauma and its consequences. This is usually the moment when the protagonists finally comprehend that their present inability to enjoy life, grow, and change are due to their repressed past. For instance, this structure is employed by Joseph Heller in Catch 22 or by Morrison in Home and A Mercy, although it should be noted that in A Mercy, the reason behind the mother’s action who leaves her child behind is only revealed to the reader, not to her daughter, Florens. In other trauma narratives, time is rather circular, circling around the traumatic events itself, reflecting on its unspeakable nature, e.g. in Beloved or in Ian McEwan’s On Chesil Beach. In the former, the past resurfaces in the text several times, creating a circular temporality. Concerning Morrison’s historical novels, Peterson observes that they are structured “recursively: […] the narration of the present events is continually interrupted by the telling of ‘background’ stories” (1997: 205). Most African American characters try not to remember these stories, many of them painful; just like Sethe, who constantly represses her memories: “[w]orking, working dough. Nothing better than to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (1998: 73). Still, images of her past at Sweet Home and her daughter’s death continue to haunt her, and the past literally invades the present, personified by Beloved’s ghost. In addition, certain events are alluded to several times in the narrative, and they keep resurfacing, enabling the reader to understand more of what has happened. The central traumatic event, Sethe’s infanticide, is also alluded to several times before being described, finally, by Sethe, first using the four horsemen as focalizers. Sethe’s movement while telling her story also expresses the temporal structure of the narrative: “[s]he was spinning. Round and Round the room”, Paul D only watching “her drift into view then disappear behind his back, turning like a slow but steady wheel” (159). How Sethe narrates her story parallels how Morrison structures her narrative while the readers’ reaction is similar to the reaction of Paul D to the events:

It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way he was circling the subject. […] No, it’s the sound of her voice; it’s too near. […] listening to
her was like having a child whisper into your ear so close you could feel its lips form the words you couldn’t make out because they were too close. (161)

*On Chesil Beach* is similar in the sense that there are several hints to the sexual abuse of Florence as a little girl by her father, however, not even at the climax of the novella, when the couple fail at consummating their marriage due to Florence’s past trauma, can she completely recall what has happened to her. Even though they have a last chance to reconnect with Edward, she “cannot face nor verbalize her trauma,” thus “remain[s] stuck on Chesil Beach, a liminal space, forever” (Mohácsi 2021: 379), unable to create a psychical connection.

Like Florence, victims of trauma often find it difficult to trust others and can easily lose faith in the goodness of human nature. They question the existence of a safe world, and their sense of community is shattered or completely lost. Naturally, in this regard the reaction of the community to the victim’s trauma is also crucial. In the case of Sethe, as people shun her due to her perceived excessive pride, she is also unable to be reintegrated to the community. Thus, in her case the community shames, stigmatizes and ultimately expels her, although their rejection transforms at the end of the work. Nevertheless, trauma victims require help from other individuals and the community in general to be able to share their burden. They need someone to listen to their story, so they can verbalize their past trauma, and through this process, make it part of their own narrative. If memory is understood as past events told as a narrative, “[t]raumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static”; more like “a series of still snapshots” (Herman 1997: 175) without emotions. However, by reconstructing the traumatic memory and integrating it into their narratives, that is, their life stories, victims of trauma can finally be capable of reclaiming their identities while reestablishing their lost sense of community. As Herman explains the healing power of the community: “[t]rauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity” (214).

For instance, in *Home*, Cee weaves a quilt, by which she symbolically becomes part of the female community of Lotus. Through preparing the quilt, she faces both her childhood trauma and her exploitation at Dr. Beauregard Scott, hence comes to terms with her barrenness. As Kim notes, weaving a quilt in Morrison’s novels entails “a communal effort of resisting oppressing voices of hegemony, confronting and articulating one’s trauma, and eventually healing his or her wound to come home” (2014: 243). At the end, the “siblings both reevaluate Lotus as a place of healing and a regained home” and are finally “ready to begin a new life of self-acceptance and self-authorship” (Mohácsi 2019: 62).

As opposed to individual trauma, collective trauma affects whole populations as well. For instance, as a result of systematic political violence, whole communities can suffer from PTSD, hence can be “trapped in alternating cycles of numbing and intrusion, silence and reenactment” (Herman 242). Furthermore, collective trauma is closely intertwined with group identity. According to Alexander, “[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (2004: 1). Thus, the memory of slavery for African Americans, the Second World War, the Vietnam War or the Korean War for veterans, and the September 11, 2001 attack in the USA are all examples of collective/cultural trauma. The process of how cultural trauma is constructed is particularly unusual in the case of slavery, which, as Eyerman argues, was formulated “retrospectively,” that is, after slavery had been abolished: “[t]he notion of a unique African American identity emerged in the post-Civil War period” (2004: 60). Eyerman concludes that “[t]he trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced by many of the subjects […], but came to be central to their attempts to
forge a collective identity out of its remembrance” (60). How slavery was commemorated, reinterpreted, and represented also underwent constant transformation, depending on the specific needs of the African American community. According to Eyereman, slavery was first expressed as “cultural trauma” (76) due to the failure of the restoration, when the promised equality was not reached. At that time, one’s identity as an African American was articulated as an American whose ancestors were seized from Africa to become slaves; hence, slavery was regarded as a common reference point for all members of the community. Since then, the representation of slavery has undergone rapid change. It is noticeable in Morrison’s works as well: for instance, A Mercy is set in the 17th century during the formation of racial slavery. As Morrison stated in an interview shortly before the book’s publication, she “wanted to separate race from slavery to see what it might have been like, to be a slave but without being raced; where your status was being enslaved but there was no application of racial inferiority” (2008), whereas her other novels explore the aftereffects of slavery on individual and collective identity starting from immediately after the abolition to present-day America.

**Trauma and the Role of Literature**

While trauma has become central in different academic fields, such as social or literary studies, ethics or philosophy, etc., there has also been a surge of interest in the representation of trauma in popular media, from post-apocalyptic movies, disaster films, computer games or even board games to art movies. The portrayal of trauma is so ubiquitous that as Felman suggests, testimony has become “the literary mode […] of our times,” whereas “our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony” (1995: 17). Perhaps it is due to the fact that the end of the twentieth century was an age of catastrophe: “[w]orld wars, local wars, civil wars, ideological wars, ethnic wars, the two atomic bomb attacks, the Cold War, genocides, famines, epidemics” (Berger 1997: 572) up to the conflicts with ISIS shaped our understanding of the world.

Literary texts regarding trauma can be understood as “verbal representations of a fracture” (Menyhért 2008: 5). Silence inevitably “accompanies both psychological, individual trauma and cultural trauma, where the latter is often even silenced by an oppressive government for ideological reasons” (Mohácsi 2016: 26). However, in order to heal, verbalizing the fracture is necessary. Even though sharing the traumatic experience ultimately traumatizes the audience, too, listening to the testimonies of trauma victims is our ethical responsibility. Consequently, it is essential to create a language in which the traumatic event can be articulated; that is, a language that makes this fracture visible and shows how language prior to the traumatic experience would have been incapable of portraying trauma authentically. Therefore, writers should be suspicious of the nature of language itself and must be aware of the limitations of language and the impossibility of total control over it.

In addition, it should be noted that ideology is inseparable from collective trauma. Ideology in this context means “the institutionalized collective amnesia following traumatic events” (28), for instance, the horrible atrocities committed during slavery, which were either intentionally obliterated or recreated by the dominant discourse after the restoration in a fashion which softened the brutality and barbarity of the acts. Literary and media representations are crucial in this regard. For instance, the recurring figures of the benevolent master and the cheerful, even grateful Negro slave were often employed to create a fake nostalgia towards the days before the abolition. Likewise, different media representations of armed conflicts oftentimes portray the soldiers as brave heroes, a phenomenon Vonnegut is

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2 All translations from Hungarian to English were made by me.

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highly critical of. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his friend’s wife accuses the narrator as follows: “you’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by […] some of those […] glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will just look wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs (2000: 12), which is exactly the opposite of what Vonnegut was intending to do in his novel. Naturally, collective trauma is highly vulnerable to distortion, as the community cannot create a coherent narrative of the events due to the latency embedded in the traumatic experience. Therefore, ideology can step in by offering a false interpretation or simply by silencing the atrocities, illustrated by George Orwell in 1984 and *Animal Farm* or by popular media representations of the Vietnam War, noted above in Vonnegut’s novel. Rosenthal calls this process “secondary traumatization,” which is caused by “the inability to talk about traumatic experiences” (1991: 37). Consequently, a linguistic paradigm is created, which “by masking; brainwashing; lying both in a moral sense and as a trope, as a verbal component; the gradual elimination of resistance; acclimatization; and by the institutionalization of violence” (Menyhért 2008: 8) manipulates members of the community to eventually recognize the dominant ideology as their own. Thus, first the victims must find their own voice that is capable to represent the fracture, which necessarily has to be free from the dominant ideological discourse.

Trauma is no longer unspeakable if it can be shared and listened to, which entails a listener or reader as well as the one telling their story. Whole generations previously marginalized, silenced, or oppressed by totalitarian governments are capable of sharing their stories through their written testimonies as long as there are people who listen. For instance, the way slavery has been constantly readdressed by African American writers has been creating a counter-narrative against the portrayal of slavery in the dominant discourse. Similarly, how certain authors from countries under the Soviet regime chose to depict collective traumatic events, after which they were often persecuted, was also a criticism of the dominant discourse. These texts, whether fictive or not, have helped the community understand their past and reject the false ideologies of official narratives of history. Still, whether the trauma of others can be truthfully represented and understood by others remains a question. According to Lyotard, “[w]hat art can do, is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it” (1990: 47).

**Conclusion**

As Miller and Tougaw suggest, “ours appears to be the age of trauma” (2002: 1), whereas trauma “has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life” (Luckhurt 2008: 80). It is undeniably true that PTSD and childhood trauma in general are clichés used in several works of popular culture. As Sehgal observes: “Trauma has become synonymous with backstory” and oftentimes the “trauma plot flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority” (2022). Still, through the lens of trauma studies debates concerning language, history, memory, narrative, and identity can be commenced.

Furthermore, trauma can function as a connection between different cultures. As Caruth observed, “[i]n a catastrophic age […] trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (1995: 11). In other words, “while trying to understand the trauma of other individuals, groups or cultures, we can also understand our own traumatic history better, and

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instead of the differences between cultures, the similarities of human suffering remain hard to deny” (Mohácsi 2016: 32).

Ultimately, Lyotard’s conclusion concerning the limitations of art is essentially the same as that of Vonnegut’s in Slaughterhouse-Five, where the narrator realizes that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (2000: 16), thus the novel is “a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt” (18). By comparing himself to Lot’s wife, who turned around even though she had known her action would be futile, still, it was the only ethical action to take, the narrator validates and defends his project. Thus, there is an ethical responsibility that demands Vonnegut to address trauma; and indeed, verbalizing traumatic events helps both the individual and the community to heal and forge a new identity.

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