



The Making of the Byronic Soldier in Kevin Powers' Iraq War Narrative

The Yellow Birds

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Abstract:

Unlike any society's dream to live in peace, war does it all. *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers critically examines the protagonist's life through the lens of psychoanalysis, challenging the conventional depiction of the war hero as a Byronic or anti-hero characterised by guilt, moral ambiguity and emotional estrangement. The spirited war hero and a dutiful soldier-protagonist, John Bartle, goes through emotional dilemma, despondency, remorseful dreams, guilt and faded memory, where he is unable to exist in the real world other than a war zone with killings and casualties. The study further examines the tension between war and home, highlighting images of nature, water and childhood memories that serve as a fleeting psychological refuge from violence. The recurring binary oppositions of desert and water, life and death, warmth and coldness and green landscapes at the backdrop of fading brown desert symbolize Bartle's fragmented search for emotional stability amid traumatic disorder. The Trauma theory reveals that trauma constantly emerges from the protagonist's fear of moral betrayal, which gets heightened with Bartle's persistent guilt over the failure to uphold a promise made to a fellow soldier's mother, evolving into self-condemnation and psychological unrest.

The existing study interprets John Bartle as a traumatised anti-hero within the Iraq war narrative. However, this paper argues that Powers reconstructs Bartle as a distinct "Byronic soldier," a contemporary reimagining of the Byronic hero shaped not only by emotional suffering but also by alienation, repression and existential collapse. His inability to reintegrate himself into civilian life displays the transformation of the classical war hero into a psychologically deformed modern figure, followed by fractured consciousness, recurring guilt and emotional withdrawal. This viewpoint clarifies the psychological doubt of justice within the hierarchical military structures after confronting the brutal realities of war, like disfigured bodies, civilian casualties and normalised violence. The paper places Bartle within the literary tradition of the Byronic hero in *The Yellow Birds* within the context of the Iraq War. It deconstructs the myth of the heroic soldier by portraying war as a site of psychological disruption followed by emotional detachment, self-conscious alienation, moral ambiguity and failed redemption, leading a hero to a Byronic ending and the making of a Byronic Soldier.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of war narratives, literary traditions have celebrated heroism, sacrifice, valour and victory, constructing the main character as a heroic figure embodying national ideals or a messenger of god. However, the contemporary war narrative challenges the traditional representation of war by foregrounding trauma, estrangement and psychological disintegration. *The Yellow Birds* offers a powerful criticism of modern warfare, particularly the Iraq War, presenting both introspective and retrospective psychological scars left in the minds of soldiers upon their return from combat. The novel unfolds the deformed reality of war through the experiences of a soldier, transforming him into a Byronic hero and signaling the decline of heroic action into mere survival instincts, such as prioritizing one's own life over others'.

John Bartle, as a protagonist, is often analysed as a victim of post-traumatic stress, survivor's guilt and anti-heroic traits, but rarely examined as a character associated with the literary tradition of the Byronic hero. His fractured memory and non-linear narration pattern reflect moral conflict, heroic dilemma and emotional instability. The novel portrays war and soldiers not as a noble enterprise or a heroic endeavor, but as a site of "cruelty and unpredictability of death," leading to a moral dilemma that forces a soldier to normalize violence to survive the battle in Al Tafari. This paper argues that Bartle embodies the trait of "Byronic soldier," shaped by trauma, moral injury and the collapse of ethical values, which turns him against social and ethical rules. By employing psychoanalytical and trauma theory, the study explores how war disrupts identity, memory and morality, which render the idea of heroism untenable, as it comes at a profound psychological cost of emotional detachment and loss of meaning towards life. Peter L. Thorslev Jr. 's characterization of the Byronic hero as a proud yet psychologically burdened figure is important for understanding the emotional state of the soldier.

The theory of repression further explores the unprocessed traumatic experiences operating under conscious awareness and returning through anxiety, compulsive behaviour and psychological unrest. The psychological collapse experienced by Bartle arises not from the fear of death but from the guilt of his inability to protect Murph, which acts as a source of psychological torment, transforming heroic identity into moral ruin. By employing psychoanalytical, trauma theory and the literary tradition of the Byronic hero, this paper examines how contemporary war protagonists are depicted as psychologically fractured individuals who are incapable of redemption, emotional stability or reintegration.

The Byronic Soldier: Reconsidering the War Hero

The shaping of ancient literary heroes consisted of elaborate lyrical verses celebrating their nobility, divine origins, deeds transcending virtue and sacrifice and the portrayal of characters larger than life. The protagonists who displayed these qualities were termed epic or classical heroes, such as Rama, Arjuna, Achilles, or Hercules. As writing evolved, the archetypal character came to display flawed behavior or anti-heroic traits in the contemporary. This transformation becomes central to the emergence of the Byronic hero, a literary figure originating from the works of Lord Byron, a hero notably lacking gallant qualities, marked by guilt, conflict and rejection of traditional heroic ideals. They are often portrayed as cynical, arrogant, obnoxious, narcissistic, morally ambiguous or selfish, driven by dark passion towards their goal, regardless of their nobility, yet remain the central character in the story. The anti-heroic concept has shifted from idealised heroes to more realistic, conflicted figures such as Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Robin Hood, Loki or Deadpool.

According to Peter L. Thorslev Jr., the Byronic hero is “a proud, moody, cynical and defiant individual, often burdened by his mysterious past and marked by deep suffering” in *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (5). This definition emphasises the hero’s psychological complexity and estrangement from both society and himself. Bartle emerges as a modern Byronic character rather than a traumatised veteran, whose guilt and repression prevent meaningful reintegration into civilian life which represents “self-conscious alienation,” shaped by internal rebellion against moral and social conventions (McGann 89). Bartle is a hero in conflict with himself, unable to find meaning. The Byronic hero is characterised by “emotional detachment, self-destructive tendencies and a persistent sense of guilt and remorse”, which marks the significance of Powers’ war narrative (Stein 14). The alienation of traditional romantic Byronic figures emerges through social rebellion and Bartle becomes one through prolonged exposure to violence, moral injury and traumatic memory. The emotional withdrawal, self-destructive guilt, fragmented consciousness and inability to reconnect with ordinary life transform him into a distinctly post-Iraq War Byronic protagonist. The characteristics resemble the modern dilemma, depicting flawed behaviour and the true nature of war heroes in modern society. The war transforms Bartle into an unconventional war hero and a renewed expression of war-torn consciousness shaped by his troubled past and remorse.

The novel's opening lines illustrate these qualities and reveal the mindset of a soldier in a war zone, linking the character's experience directly to the themes.

A yellow bird

With a yellow bill

Was perched upon

My windowsill

I lured him in

With a piece of bread

And then I smashed

His fucking head... (Powers 2013)

The lines not only describe the cruelty of war but also the apathy toward the people. The disturbing image of lost innocence in these lines symbolizes the psychological conditioning of war itself, where the bird is lured into a system of violence that permanently damages soldiers' emotional consciousness. The passage reveals the normalization of violence within the soldiers' psyche. Soldiers leave the war grounds, but the war never leaves them. The hero finds himself unable to fit into a world that was once appropriately calm and peaceful. Thus, the hero struggles to reintegrate himself into a world that once felt familiar, where the simple activities, like meeting friends for a beer, become unattainable. Unlike classical protagonists, the Byronic hero is haunted by guilt rather than honour. He is isolated rather than admired, overwhelmed by shame instead of glory.

The narrator is seen going back and forth, struggling to follow a memory, leading to a non-linear narrative pattern. However, the first few chapters are too vague for Bartle to remember, which reflects a lack of clarity about the war zone. Influenced by Freud's theory of belatedness, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of catastrophe but returns belatedly through repetitive and fragmented memory, leading to an incoherent chronological narrative sequence (12). She further explains that traumatised individuals relive painful experiences even when the mind tries not to remember the original shock. His inability to narrate events linearly demonstrates the trauma that resists the use of ordinary language and the breakdown of psychological stability. This disruption reflects the traumatic experience which emerges through intrusive images, dialogues, uninvited psychological patterns and emotional

disorientation. Similarly, according to Bessel van der Kolk, traumatic memories are often stored as sensory fragments rather than organised narratives. The writer reproduces this traumatic fragmentation by compelling readers to experience memory as a disjointed emotional recurrence rather than as stable historical narratives. Freud's theory further deepens our reading of repression by revealing how the unprocessed trauma continues to operate beneath the conscious level, which returns through anxiety and obsessive remembrance, leading to psychological unrest.

With reference to Tim O' Brien in *The Things They Carried*, he says, "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (80), suggesting the fragile emotional truth of war narratives which frequently surpasses factual sequence. He is not only affected by the horrors of war but marked with guilt by the death of his friend, Private Murph and so "Nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed" and his countless attempts "to return to ordinary life " become futile (Powers 11). Thus, Bartle's memories function less as objective recollections than as manifestations of unresolved guilt. Unlike the classical hero who returns from war with honour and recognition, the Byronic soldier returns psychologically exiled from ordinary existence. Bartle's inability to reconnect with family, friends and civilian life reflects his profound emotional estrangement, a trait Rutherford describes as a classic Byronic trait (72). Rutherford argues that Byron's heroes are characterised by rebellion against social conventions, emotional isolation and profound dissatisfaction with society and themselves. When Bartle's mother tells him that people want to see him and he must think about it, he responds, "Goddammit, Mama, all I do is think." Home becomes a very distant word and "Yet when she said, 'Oh, John, you're home'", he didn't respond. This remark highlights the trapped consciousness within the recollection of war and self-interrogation. These exchanges reinforce the deep internal conflict and estrangement at the core of the Byronic soldier, which leaves an indelible mark on the

psyche. He knows there's nothing that can be undone and he will forever be accompanied by the guilt of leaving Murph "in the river". This unresolved trauma restricts him from feeling at home and often challenges his actions.

The novel repeatedly disassembles the heroic myth through scenes of violence and moral ambiguity. Bartle realizes that the war zone wouldn't make him "stop until I was sure he was dead", highlighting the survival instinct that arises when one rejects ethical human values (Powers 21). Powers also rejects the romanticised depictions of military unity when Bartle concludes that "war is the great maker of solipsists" (12). War therefore transforms collective ideals of patriotism into radical psychological isolation, a defining characteristic of the Byronic condition. The anthology of war narratives, *Men at War* by Hemingway, describes war not as a site of heroism but of fear and psychological strain, echoing Byronic tendencies. Hemingway does not glorify military heroism but portrays war as a condition of psychological exhaustion, fear and moral uncertainty. His protagonists represent the mental burden of war, internal struggle, which blurs the line between justice and violence, leading to a decline in heroism after World War II, where soldiers survive combat only to experience emotional disillusionment and alienation afterward. Soldiers become survivors rather than heroes, making them mentally exhausted and emotionally damaged. This shift becomes significant in understanding Powers's representation of Bartle. The war has the same effect on the soldier as the disordered societies fighting to seek order. However, Powers intensifies the transformation of the modern soldier into a psychologically fractured Byronic figure through trauma and moral injury.

While experiencing the casualties of war, John Bartle describes it as a landscape of immoral and sinful activities. Murph joined the army to serve his country, but after realizing the true meaning of war, he eventually lost his mind, leading to alienation. "Alienation," as termed by

Rutherford, "becomes both the strength and tragedy of the Byronic character" (81). A similar kind of alienation was seen in Bartle, where he no longer associated himself with the outside or the inside of the warzone. Both Bartle and Murph witnessed the mortar attack at the medical facility, shattering their identity as heroes. The fall of the minaret symbolizes the downfall of the heroic image, giving rise to its Byronic characteristics. This "isolation becomes the natural condition of the Byronic personality" (73), as suggested by Leslie Marchand. The grounds of Al Tatar show humans used as bait with bombs inside them, animals exploited, 'the husks of dogs filled with explosives, and man made into 'an unwilling weapon.' There was no grief, joy, or pity (22) when the innocents died or when they aimed their guns at people, symbolizing their lack of emotional vitality. The Byronic hero becomes "marked by suffering and defiance" (Rutherford 7). The effects of war dehumanize soldiers into killing and isolating themselves from the horrors of war, leading to the Byronic Trait of "self-destructive" (Marchand 82). And then "nothing seemed more natural than someone getting killed" (Powers 11). The emotional vulnerability keeps Murph from focusing and protecting himself, which likely resulted in his death. Heroism becomes a shameful act for both Bartle and Murph. Even the strongest characters lose control of their minds and are unable to withstand the cruelties. Sterling is mostly portrayed as a classical hard-edged heroic character who uses coarse, insensitive language and resorts to violence. However, even he is a selfish, guilty, broken character hiding behind a mask. His guilt of getting rid of Murph's body led to suffering and self-destruction with his constant urge to "survive the war", and he finally concludes his life by pulling the trigger with a bullet in his mouth. Bartle realizes that Sterling was not this big, bad, cold-hearted character, but was made one to detach and isolate himself from the killings and casualties.

Suffering becomes inevitable for the Byronic hero and he stands "apart from ordinary humanity" (Rutherford 68) and still lacks inner peace because "everyone loves Bartle" and it drives him crazy (Powers 144). This is the Byronic dilemma that the soldier struggles with. Unlike classical narratives, *The Yellow Birds* presents war as a site where emotional endurance collapses under guilt, repression and unresolved trauma, leading the character to an inevitable Byronic ending.

Religious iconography and the Byronic Soldier

The religious allegory mentioned in the chapter "March 2005, Germany" begins with Bartle reluctantly entering a church cathedral after witnessing the war in Al Tifar. He witnessed the cold stone walls, candlelight, the pew, the noisy children and biblical imagery. The religious imagery within the cathedral does not function as a narrative digression but instead deepens Powers's construction of Bartle as a Byronic soldier, revealing his guilt, failed redemption and psychological repression. The figure of the "beautiful Sebastian" pierced with "arrows dangling from his chest" reflects perpetual and psychological suffering experienced by Bartle. Powers describes Sebastian's injuries as "spattered candle-wax, hardened and congealed" (56). This preservation of suffering in religious art reflects Bartle's inability to escape traumatic memory and pain, like that of Sebastian's wounds, as they become permanent and aesthetically frozen within his consciousness, from which he is unable to free himself, leading to self-destruction. Similarly, "the incorruptible, the soldier", Saint John Vianney, "who ran from Napoleon's Army" and heard "confessions for twenty hours a day", symbolizes the spiritual burden and moral responsibility. Bartle's inability to reveal the truth about Murph's death reflects Freud's theory about repressed trauma without eliminating its psychological influence. Freud says, "repression lies simply in turning something away and

keeping it at a distance from the conscious" (147), suggesting that traumatic experiences continue to operate within the unconscious despite conscious awareness. However, it repeatedly returns through compulsive thought, anxiety and emotional disturbance. Van der Kolke explains that traumatic memories get embedded in the body as muscle tension and bodily sensations, justifying Bartle's involuntary gestures like cracking the knuckles of his left arm over and over again, scratching a thin strip of lacquer on the next pew, and repeatedly lighting a cigarette inside the cathedral because the body remembers what the mind tries to forget from the past (53). Trauma is not fully experienced at the moment, but it returns through memories, flashbacks, nightmares and psychological disturbance, explaining the gestures that Bartle shows at the cathedral threshold, signifying his inability to find peace. He bears moral responsibility within his "undecayed" heart, suggesting lost emotional spirit toward the subject (Powers 56). The psychological scar is so evident that everything inside the church seems to be triggering his internal conflict. The church reveals Bartle's internal anxiety and fears through the phrases, "All that you see that is gold is truly gold" and "You are only as sick as your secrets." These conversations are central in understanding repression and internal guilt carried within from the days of war, which remain hidden from outside but active from inside, leading to irregular narrative patterns. The psyche suffers not just from the experience but also from suppressing it and creating a blank space between events of psychological disturbance. Bartle faces a dilemma in confessing to his trauma and secrecy further intensifies the psychological distress rather than alleviating it.

Therefore, the cathedral functions not only as a religious setting but as a place where Bartle confronts the impossibilities of his redemption. The Byronic hero made mistakes and is well aware of "catching up hell" if he didn't find resolution. The biblical reference to Jonah further reinforces this struggle, in which, like Jonah, Bartle tries to escape psychologically but remains trapped by

moral responsibility and guilt. Bartle resembles Rutherford's concept of the Byronic figure who "rejects conventional morality while remaining painfully conscious of guilt", after witnessing the violence and failing to fulfill his promise (79).

The novel fails to provide repentance and spiritual restoration, unlike any biblical narrative, which restricts redemption. Regardless of all, Bartle imagines Murph floating down the Tigris, passing beneath the shadow of the mountain where Jonah was originally buried. This failed search for vindication becomes a defining characteristic in making Bartle a Byronic soldier.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Yellow Birds* serves as a profound inquiry into the complexities inherent in a soldier, which reframes our understanding of heroism in the context of war. Powers portrays war not as a site of glory but as a dreadful spectacle of misery and dishonour, challenging the traditional myth of military heroism. One of Murph's confessions, in which he states, "I'm never going to tell anyone I was here when we get back home" (164), encapsulates the enduring shame and alienation produced while living in the ground of Al Tafari. This perspective reframes the battlefield not as high ground or a place for heroic achievement, but as a space where identity itself fractures, laying the path to Byronic traits. The heroes are driven by fear and instinct for survival. In the battleground, no living soul escapes the horrors of the war and everyone is trying to dodge the bullet. It represents a landscape of psychological devastation, moral collapse and emotional estrangement. In this context, soldiers become instruments of violence rather than heroes, with survival itself emerging as a traumatic burden to them. They are not celebrated heroes but victims and instruments of violence, where honour turns to dust in the desert of Al Tafari. Bartle realizes that honour and respect come at a high cost of living in a physical space as hell. The repeated

imagery of death, disintegration of body and emotional instability demonstrates how war destroys not only physical life but also moral and psychological coherence. The soldier's narratives and actions after the war capture how the war has a pervasive effect on the hero, with a constant feeling of guilt and the desire to erase the images of war. This paper argues that John Bartle should not be seen solely as a traumatised anti-hero, but rather as a "Byronic soldier" who is selfish, arrogant and shaped by moral injury, repression and alienation. Powers transforms the classical heroic figure into a psychologically fragmented individual haunted and incapable of emotional reintegration. The cathedral episode reveals how religious imagery externalizes Bartle's internal suffering, highlighting how the Byronic soldier is trapped between guilt and uncertainty about his redemption. The guilt that accompanies Bartle after failing to protect Murph becomes a central source of his psychic unrest, supporting Shay's argument about moral injury, emerging from deeply held ethical beliefs that are violated in the backdrop of war. Similarly, Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma explains the fragmented narrative structure of the novel, while Freud's concept of repression illuminates Bartle's compulsive return to his hidden memories.

Hence, the war turns heroes into self-made villains, like Bartle into a Byronic soldier. Ultimately, *The Yellow Birds* unfolds the modern soldier as a Byronic figure whose survival depends on emotional repression and whose humanity remains permanently destabilised by the psychological consequences of war, leading to a Byronic ending.

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