

War Trauma Disorder: A Dual Representation of Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk

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Abstract

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk by Ben Fountain tells the story of a young American soldier, Billy, who is traumatized and horrified after experiencing near-death experiences in war. He is facing psychological trauma, which leads to PTSD. The dual representation theory by Brewin et al. has been applied to the text, which will talk in detail about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A major traumatic event causes individuals to experience disturbing images and flashbacks, which lead to PTSD. This research will center on traumatic experiences from the past that are relived in the present through flashbacks and nightmares, which later on increase their guilt and fear. Moreover, the struggle of soldiers can also be seen when their psychological state is belittled and ignored. Instead, they are glorified publicly for young civilians to follow. The primary purpose of this research is to analyze environmental cues related to trauma, causing disturbing images, flashbacks, and the relevant constructs of PTSD through dual representation theory.

Keywords: PTSD, War, Struggle, Power, Flashback.

Introduction

Ben Fountain is an internationally recognized American fiction writer with many awards for outstanding work. The fountain was built in 1958 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, United States. He graduated from UNC Chapel Hill and went to Duke University law school. He has lived in Dallas, Texas, for thirty years and still lives there. Fountain rose to fame with short stories like *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, which won the Pen New England Hemingway award in 2007, among other honors (Amazon). Ben Fountain, a Dallas novelist, is a finalist for a \$50000 prize for mid-career authors. Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn's Halftime Walk*, is one of the five people on the shortlist for the Simpson Family Literary Prize (Dallas News, 2016). Ben Fountain's remarkable debut novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, is a razor-sharp satire set in Texas during America's war in Iraq. It explores the gaping national disconnect between the war at home and abroad.

Billy Lynn's long halftime walk revolves around a nineteen-year-old Billy Lynn, who just lost a member of his Bravo Company while fighting in Iraq. A video of them going viral creates a massive response from people, so they get to go on a victory tour to show support from their people. Billy is constantly trying to understand how to respond to the celebration around him and

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the death of their member and friend, Shroom. He is shown traumatized because of everything that is happening simultaneously. Everything seems to be very overwhelming for him. He seems to avoid whatever occurs in the warzone, disturbing him even more. The constant struggle of trying to understand how to deal with grief and trauma is there throughout the book. Afterward, he has a hard time deciding whether to leave and go live with his sister Katherine or stay true to his commitment to his team and fight because a girl he just met told him to. The book ends with a very emotional scene showing Billy hallucinating and telling Shroom, "I love you" (*Billy Lynn's*, 1:46:45), a tradition they followed in the company before going to the warzone. He decides to stay back. By applying the DRT theory of PTSD to this movie, one gets to know how war deeply traumatizes a person and how it affects that person throughout his life. People with PTSD have intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings associated with their experience that last long, even after the traumatic event has ended, and they may have a substantial adverse reaction to something as mundane as a loud noise or accidental touch (Torres, 2020).

Dual representation theory (DRT) is a psychological theory of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) developed by Tim Dalgleish, Stephen Joseph, and Chris R. Brewin in 1996. According to this theory, many of the features and details of some traumatic events, i.e., the sounds, smells, and sights, are initially retained in a system called situationally accessible memory (SAM), somewhat related to episodic memory (Ross, 2016). When entities knowingly reflect upon this information, attempting to understand these features and details, the resulting insights are retained in another system called verbally accessible memory (VAM), somewhat akin to semantic memory. Sometimes, after a traumatic experience, individuals try to dissociate from the event because it distracts them from memories of that event to avoid negative mood states. DRT looks for and analyses stimuli or cues in the surroundings that are related to the traumatic event, which causes individuals to experience disturbing images and flashbacks and leads to PTSD (Ross, 2016).

Christopher Brewin (1953) is a professor of clinical psychology at University College London and an honorary consultant clinical psychologist with the Camden & Islington Mental Health and Social Care Trust. His clinical specialization is in the treatment of PTSD. Dr. Brewin is the author of "posttraumatic stress disorder: Malady or Myth?" (Guilford Press). Professor Chris Brewin's research focuses on trauma and identifying new therapeutic techniques for mental health problems. He is also a practicing cognitive-behavior therapist.

Brewin is a world-renowned expert on the cognitive processes underlying the symptoms and psychological treatment of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. He has been closely involved with the Ministry of Defense in developing better mental health care for military veterans as Honorary Consultant Advisor in Clinical Psychology to the British Army (The Academy of Medical Sciences).

Statement of the Problem

The present study addresses the post-psychological trauma that soldiers go through. For its theoretical underpinning, the study deploys relevant constructs from the Dual representative theory through the lens of Tim Dalgleish, Stephen Joseph, and Chris R. Brewin. In this regard, it is essential to see what impacts the transformation of soldiers into celebrities leads to traumatic explosion in Ben Fountain's novel. In the same view, the study explores the verbally accessible and situational accessible memories suffered by the soldiers in the book.

Research Questions

1. How is post-psychological trauma like PTSD depicted in Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*?
2. How does the transformation of soldiers into celebrities lead to a traumatic explosion in Fountain's novel?
3. How are verbally accessible memories (VAMs) and situationally accessible memories (SAMs) suffered by the soldiers portrayed in the novel?
4. What are the reasons why nobody wanted to think about the war? Including the ones who are participating in it.

Literature Review

In his article, Richard Crepeau says that *Billy Lynn* is known as one of the first fictional American war stories mainly based on Iraq and Afghanistan. These American soldiers who are acclaimed as American heroes are seen across America, which they find very disturbing. They had news reporters and camera operators always roaming around with them during the war. He further says Billy faces death experiences and multiple destructions, making it an equally haunting and disturbing novel. The relationship between soldiers and civilians who see them as heroes is shown with humor and grim perception. This project clearly shows the difference between civilians' perception of war and the reality of war. The flashback technique describes Billy's experience of war and his family. The movie shows that war heroes like Billy can also face pressure and rejection from their own families. The most prominent example is his sister, who does not support him and begs him not to return to the battlefield, which can be taken as that in war, even families are horrified for their beloved ones. Further, he states that he sees this movie as a compelling piece of filmmaking that asks a few questions about the relationship between sport and war. Mainly about the Pentagon, which paid the NFL a huge amount to promote the armed forces with little price than deserved honor (Sport and Society for Arete, 2016).

Larry H talks about *Billy Lynn's long halftime walk* as a beautiful book written by Ben Fountain. He portrays the story uniquely about a young soldier facing the world's harsh realities, including his family and love. He further narrates that this story shows the struggles of soldiers at war, mainly Billy and his Bravo squad. They engage in a firefight, which labels them as American heroes. When Billy meets the Hollywood producer, he is forced to choose his heroic efforts to turn into a movie. Billy keeps struggling with whether he wants to return to Iraq (where they are already lined up to perform their remaining placement) while watching the game at Texas Stadium. This book is much more captivating than Larry H has expected. He finds the form and the structure enormous to understand the depth of the text. As he says, the storyline shows the realities of war from both sides. The way it affects the minds of the readers and the characters is outstanding (Good Reads, 2012).

In this article, Brian Williams investigates Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* as a regulating mechanism for veterans, challenging support-the-troops rhetoric. The celebrity-soldier is the humorous apotheosis of support-the-troops rhetoric, according to Fountain. Using celebrity studies as a lens, this article claims that such discourse transforms civilian fears into soldiers. The language intended to rehabilitate veterans dominates and displaces them, perhaps leading to a painful expulsion from the country by changing them from heroes to celebrities. Ironically, the apparent remedy for Vietnam's mythologized atrocities becomes an act that reflects the terrible dislocation many Vietnam soldiers experienced when they came home. They feel out of place, and the sense of isolation is always there. Fountain acknowledges that the battle experience profoundly

disconnects the soldier from their nation; present support discourse, while claiming to alleviate this separation, exacerbates it. It makes them question whether fighting in a battle is worth all the chaos (The Soldier-Celebrity, 2017).

The selected novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, by Ben Fountain, has minimal academic work done on it. The present study will analyze the movie with the perspective of dual representation through the lens of Brewin et al. No work regarding PTSD has been done before in the film. The applied theory revolves around voluntary trauma memories and involuntary flashbacks. This research will center around traumatic experiences from the past that are relived in the present and the struggle of each character with their trauma, and investigate how PTSD takes its toll on the soldiers when their psychological state is belittled and ignored.

Discussion

Flashbacks

Rendering to the dual representation theory of PTSD, memory processes resulting from traumatic exposure may be able to explain complex phenomena, including avoidance and hyperarousal, as well as involuntary intrusive visions and flashbacks. Denial and avoidance behaviors are understood as ways of coping with undesirable re-experiencing through activating VAM and SAM structures, consistent with the schema model and the fear network theory. Traumatic events, and it is these structures that account for the variety of PTSD symptoms (Athanasidou, 2017). Brewin et al. suggest that it might not always be possible to process trauma-related VAM and SAM data successfully on an emotional level. They contend that in some situations, such as when there is a significant gap between the trauma and preconceived notions, the emotional processing of traumatic information might turn chronic. (Dual Representation Theory - Cognition and Emotion, 2022). In *Billy Lynn's Halftime walk*, Billy goes through multiple traumas that trigger him. While fighting in the basement parking, Billy has flashbacks about how Shroom died and how he couldn't save him, which starts his shock. The last gunshot he hears reminds him of the death of Shroom, his mentor. He says to Sergeant, "He's gone, Sergeant" (*Billy Lynn's*, 01:15:02). Then he returns to the present, listening to someone asking him if he's still here. The sound of bullets, the thud, heavy fires; these sounds don't let him fight like a soldier. This can result from SAM activation, in which a person encounters flashbacks and memories.

Secret Shame and Guilt

"If you could figure out how to live with family, then you'd gone a long way toward finding your peace" (*Billy Lynn's*, 01:59:30).

Billy learns more about himself and his family through the flashbacks by studying how he was raised. He also emphasizes the camaraderie that develops between troops who regularly face death in battle. In addition, a memory flashback shows him defending his sister's honor after her fiancé dumped her after a vehicle accident. Thus, the claim conveys the bond developed between members of the family or those who are considered family and how it affects the self. Henceforth, it also appeals to veterans who are attempting to rebuild their families while dealing with their post-traumatic stress. Lynn and other soldiers fight with dignity, honor, and self-care, but many do not consider all three equally important. Soldiers feel it is dishonorable to remove themselves from duty to deal with what are typically described as traumatic flashbacks rather than an actual brain injury.

Intense Distress at Real or Symbolic Reminders of the Trauma

Billy Lynn, a Silver Star soldier commonly known as an American hero for his incredible bravery, faces near-death experiences in the war with Iraq. Fighting with his enemies, losing friends, and being in situations that were very close to death naturally trigger him, which leads him to suffer from PTSD,

"Suddenly, for the first time in life. I feel close to something when Shroom died. I felt something passing through me" (*Billy Lynn's*, 00:36:14).

While entering the stadium for the halftime show, he goes back to Iraq where he was entering to attack a food market. Instead of cars, he sees army jeeps and tanks. Even small things like his mother smacking the table highly triggered him. According to dual presentation theory by Brewin et al.,

"Cues or stimuli in the environment associated with this traumatic event will tend to activate or prime the contents of this memory system. Individuals will thus experience intrusive images and flashbacks-hallmarks of PTSD".

Flashlights and fireworks in the stadium and guards attacking and choking them when Bravos were leaving majorly set him off. Noises of fireworks reminded him of firing and heavy shelling on the battlefield (Sicotests, 2016). Even when the show was over, he was still numb. Billy says,

"But for us, the war has always been real, sir, and we never needed cameras to tell us that" (*Billy Lynn*, 01:33:05).

Persistent Denial

As soldiers, they are not allowed to share their sufferings. Especially in public, they hide it and rarely show it because they are not allowed to. Many media members asked them questions like they have trouble sleeping or readjusting back to life at home, and all of them answered, "No, Maam" (*Billy Lynn's*, 00:28:03). Almost all members of Bravo are shown suffering from PTSD except Sergeant Dime. However, mainly Billy and Crack suffer. Dr. Paul Schatten says to Billy,

"Many returning soldiers have PTSD and are not diagnosed; the more courageous individuals like you come forward, the more we can help others" (*Billy Lynn's*, 00:57:04).

According to Brewin et al.

"Some people recall traumatic memory while others do not. To know whether the person has PTSD, patients should be urged to describe everything moment-by-moment in chronological order, including the worst moments and their thoughts and feelings" (Brewin et al., 2014).

It is not known whether Dime hid it well, or he really does not have any symptoms of PTSD like other members of Bravo, or maybe he has depression. On the other hand, nothing can be concluded, as he does not have flashbacks, but sometimes, he is impulsive, and other times, he encourages other soldiers to go back to war. When Billy asks him about choosing not to return to Iraq again, he answers him,

"Your question lacks relevance" (*Billy Lynn's*, 01:25:30).

Glorification as a Hero

According to dual representation theory, Holistic, dissociative memories or "flashbacks" would be considered to be the result of the activation of SAM representations (Brewin et al.), as this can be found in the psychological situation of the soldiers when they were brought to America to celebrate their victory. Their victory hid a depressing trauma, which society overlooked; instead, their triumph was glorified and excited. All incidents, including the fireworks and the flashlights, caused and triggered them to involuntarily go back to their past and relive all those moments again. The Bravos media heroes, who survived a televised fight during the early days of the war, had been handed seats to the 2004 Thanksgiving Day halftime show. Everyone they met recognized the Bravos collectively, thanking them for their contributions and heroism, even though no one seemed to know them individually. They were the current celebrities, lauded by men and sexually fetishized by women (Williams, 2017). When they became celebrities, PTSD triggered them even more, and they were unable to manage and suffered even more trauma compared to before. According to dual representation theory, civilians who applauded them after the war transformed them from heroes into celebrities. Still, the soldiers had PTSD and shell shock because they suffered a lot during the war. Even though they lost their soldier friend, civilians ignored the agony and suffering they faced during the war; instead, they focused on the exaltation, but this gave the soldiers more pain because of their past. They still had flashbacks from the time they brutally killed innocent people:

"And being celebrated as a hero, that's got a weigh heavy on a young man's shoulders" (*Billy Lynn's*, 01:33:15).

Big Money Behind War

Producers wanted to make movies based on their sufferings to make more money.

"But your story, Billy... you got to understand, it no longer belongs to you. It's America's story now" (*Billy Lynn's*, 1:33:08).

Patients who have PTSD often find it very hard to face or to be in public. Still, Bravos was being glorified in public, with no understanding of their depressing trauma.

"What you did that day at Al-Ansakar Canal was caught on camera, Billy, and for many folks, that's where the war became real"
(*Billy Lynn's*, 01:32:30).

As a result, the turning of heroes into celebrities both mutes the soldiers' reality and relegates these potential threats to civilian management. As civilians show their support for the troops, they infuse them with a unique and potent cultural capital, a capital that objectifies and silences the troops.

Losing One's Identity

Every human capital has some direct and moderating effects on their mental beings; while talking about this, the strategies and performances of the soldiers participating in war must have some crucial impact on them. Their stint includes seeing torture and debilitating deaths of several human beings, which can never make them love their jobs. They rarely see normal lives, living their everyday routines and issues and trying to find their escape in them. In the movie, Billy's sister, Kathryn, while sitting at the lunch table with the family table, says,

"Yeah, if they want a war so bad, they should fight it themselves.
It is not worth another American's life, especially not my brother's"
(*Billy Lynn's*, 00:55:30).

Misery and Despair

Without the realization of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to their work, they just do not want to hear about it, do not want to find themselves thinking about it, they do not even want to go back and continue their work. In the movie, Wayne Pfister says while the boys are sitting with Sir Serling at the lunch table,

"I can only imagine how hard it is to face violence."

Nothing can motivate them to go back to that environment. Their negative emotions, frustrations, and anxiety cause dread on their faces when someone addresses them about their work, which is understandable. In the movie, we see Billy telling Faison before he leaves that he wants to run away with her even though he has to return. The urge to run away comes from the desire to escape war and the misery it brings with it.

"Girl, I'd just about run away with you" (*Billy Lynn's*, 01:38:39).

Conclusion

The present study portrays how post-traumatic disorder is a common problem among soldiers. This is shown in detail by Ben Fountain in his novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, which shows that it is tough for soldiers to endure the trauma of war. The writer portrays the harsh reality of misunderstanding mental disorders and the civilians projecting soldiers as celebrities instead of heroes. This study also talks about the traumatic experiences from the past that are relived in the present through flashbacks and nightmares. Soldiers' dilemma can be seen when their psychological state is belittled and ignored. There is also complete neglect of grief and trauma, which creates more psychological damage for the soldiers. PTSD is ubiquitous but rarely discussed. However, more research can be done PTSD with regard to cultural context.

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