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## Captive Canaries and Splintered Frames: Unraveling the Tapestry of Trauma in Donna Tartt's *the Goldfinch*

<sup>1</sup>Dr. H. Jimsy Asha, <sup>2</sup>Benitta. G

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, PG & Research Department of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil-4, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abisheka patti, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamilnadu, India, Email: jimsyasha@holycrossngl.edu.in

<sup>2</sup>M.Phil Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil-4, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abisheka patti, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamilnadu, India, Email: benitta199978@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>Dr. H. Jimsy Asha <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6615-0162>

<sup>2</sup>Benitta. G <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5414-0987>

**Corresponding Author:** Benitta. G

### Abstract

In the realm of contemporary literature, Donna Tartt's exquisitely rendered prose, *The Goldfinch* stands as a poignant exploration of human psyche shadowed by the indelible imprints of trauma. *The Goldfinch* takes as its focal point a deeply embedded traumatic event that befalls its narrator, Theodore Decker and traverses the tumultuous journey of its protagonist, through a world marred by loss, tragedy and the haunting echoes of trauma. This paper entitled, "Captive Canaries and Splintered Frames: Unraveling the Tapestry of Trauma in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*" aims to dissect the intricate web of trauma woven into the very fabric of the narrative, shedding light on how the protagonist grapple with and attempt to reconcile his traumatic pasts through the prism of trauma studies. The study is structured to examine the manifestations of trauma, its psychological repercussions and the coping mechanisms Theo adopts in response to his traumatic past. Furthermore, the paper analyses the role of art as a therapeutic outlet as exemplified by Theo's fascination with "The Goldfinch" painting, illustrating how artistic expression can serve as a means of healing and transformation in the aftermath of trauma. Ultimately, this research endeavors to contribute to the growing body of literature that explores the portrayal of trauma in contemporary fiction, illuminating the enduring impact of adverse life events on the human psyche.

**Keywords:** Childhood Trauma, Disordered Psyche, Memory Distortion, Dissociation, Substance Abuse, Trauma Studies

Trauma studies which trace its origin in the 1990s explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical and cultural significance. Psychological trauma, its representation in language and the role of memory in shaping an individual are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. The concept of trauma is generally comprehended as a grievously disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world. A poignant effect of trauma is the necessity to reconfigure one's identity against a

new and unstable reality. Cathy Caruth elucidates trauma as "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (Trauma: Explorations in Memory). Freudian trauma model proposes trauma as an unrepresentable event that fundamentally fragments the psyche. Michelle Balaev recounts trauma as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev 148).

Tartt's *The Goldfinch* emerges in the wake of a cultural explosion of trauma studies. When Theo is on the cusp of adolescence his mother, Audrey Decker dies as a repercussion of the bomb blast in New York's Metropolitan Museum. In the vaulted galleries of the museum, Theo sees an awful, coarsely painted still life cadavers "sprawled glaringly in the open, amidst explosive stains. The splashes and bursts carried a violence, like big blood sneezes, a hysterical sense of movement in the stillness" (Tartt 49). This viscerally appalling tableau embeds as a bloodcurdling scene in Theo's memory. In the ensuing chaos discombobulated Theo frantically rescues a small portrait of Carel Fabritius' "The Goldfinch," a priceless Dutch masterpiece which becomes Theo's secret treasure. The descriptions of Theo recouping consciousness in the wreckage, and trying to find his way out of the ripped-apart museum gives an insight of the traumatized self of the protagonist.

In the first inciting incident of *The Goldfinch*, Theo's mother, Audrey Decker fatefully laments, "People die, sure, . . . But it's so heartbreaking and unnecessary how we lose things" (Tartt 31). The lamentation acts as an allegory to the novel and Audrey Decker's sentiment portends the relationship between the protagonist's piercing experience of trauma and his affinity for things. Tartt makes use of objects to convey tragedy and trauma and infuses objects with a zappy power that influences the protagonist's actions. Though Theo moves to the desolate suburbs of Las Vegas, he is devastated by the loss of his mother and continues to grapple with her tragic death throughout the novel. Theo bears the symbol of misery and grief from early adolescence into the adulthood fraught with trepidation and beset by addiction.

Like Fabritius' eponymous Goldfinch chained to its perch, Larry Decker, Theo's father, a compulsive liar and swindler is chained to his pathological personality. Theo is mentally exhausted and undergoes great mental anguish from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Theo, who is abandoned by his self-absorbed father is haunted

by culpability, shame and self-loathing. Right from the very first line the narrator is cautious and treads heedfully while recounting his life. He pathologically relates details of his piercing experiences merely hinting at and eliding other crucial elements such as his perturbation, despair, self-hatred and self-destructiveness. This can be read as a representation of Theo's consciousness, fragmented by the bomb blast, leaving a deep anguish that cannot be healed.

Memory has invariably been a paramount theme in literature as it renders a strong link between past and present, the faculty of consciousness and thought. Not all memories are unfeigned, they undergo changes with the passage of time and are frequently constructed by an individual consciously or unconsciously. The protagonist slices and dices his past to come up with a self he can live with and Tartt constructs a powerful ambience of wretchedness and desolation around Theo's unremarkable past. Theo intakes alcohol and drugs deliberately to escape from the grim reality that causes ripple in the tranquil waters of his life. His trauma keeps him from apprehending the fundamental chaos and vagueness of his own experience.

Theo's act of displacement is recounted explicitly as a manifestation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *The Goldfinch*. He remarks that the detonation has knocked his body and his soul into two distinct entities, which is a vivid portrayal of the disintegration of his sense of self in the wake of trauma. The act of stashing the painting and beholding it as the greatest secrecy incurs in Theo a peculiar feeling of being dead. This secretive endeavor becomes a source of solace, a lifeline that keeps him tethered to a semblance of normalcy. In holding onto the painting as his greatest secret, he experiences an eerie feeling of being dead, echoing the emotional numbness often associated with trauma survivors.

Theo avows that the painting "was a support and vindication; it was sustenance and sum. It was the keystone that . . . held the whole cathedral up" (Tartt 559). Theo's assertion that

the painting is a support and vindication reflects his need for stability and validation in a world that seems to have abandoned him. The painting, being a precious artwork represents a semblance of order and beauty in his tumultuous life. Furthermore, the painting is described as the keystone that holds Theo's metaphorical cathedral together. This analogy signifies that the painting is the core element that provides structure and stability to his life much like a keystone supports the arch of a cathedral. For Theo, "The Goldfinch" undergirds and redeems his embodied self and makes him "a better person, a wiser person, a more elevated and valuable and worthy-of-living person on the basis of secret" (Tartt 559).

Tartt delineates Theo as a traumatized protagonist, who is struggling to banish unwanted and unintegrated memories from consciousness. Theo stashes the purloined painting within the fortified walls of a windowless storage facility, which he compares to a Mayan burial complex. The comparison of the storage facility to a Mayan burial complex serves as a metaphorical representation of Theo's subconscious. The analogy reflects the complexity and enigma of his inner world, akin to the intricacy of a burial complex that houses hidden chambers and concealed truths. This comparison underscores the buried trauma and uncharted territory within Theo's psyche, illustrating how the traumatic memories lie dormant, waiting to resurface and haunt him. Theo's expedition to the burial complex to check on the painting harks back a fearful and meandering journey into a gloomy and cavernous graveyard. This mirrors the daunting path the survivors of trauma must traverse to confront their past experiences. The cavernous and colorless graveyards symbolize the desolate and lifeless recesses of Theo's psyche, where traumatic memories fester, devoid of vibrancy.

For Theo, grasping onto "The Goldfinch" as a projective soul paves way for both the displacement and mushrooming of self. Theo articulates that unlike the rest of his ostensibly worthless, mortal being, the painting is a "deathless thing" (Tartt 695), "a radiance that

glowed in the mind of the world" (Tartt 490). "The Goldfinch" painting represents a snapshot of Theo's life before the explosion, an idyllic frozen in time, akin to the frozen moment of trauma that haunts him. As a result, the painting transcends its physical form, becoming a talisman of hope and a source of solace in his tumultuous life. It is a reminder of a lost innocence, a relic of a time before tragedy struck.

Theo's view of the painting as a deathless thing embodies a dissociative coping mechanism, characteristic of trauma survivors. This perception shields him from the harsh reality of morality, offering a semblance of permanence and eternity that his tumultuous life lacks. It showcases the human tendency to cling to objects or beliefs that provide comfort and stability in the face of existential dread and trauma-induced existential angst. Furthermore, Theo's description of the painting as "a radiance that glowed in the mind of the world" underscores his desire for the painting to be immortalized and remembered, much like the memories of his mother and the love they shared. This longing for the preservation of memory is a common theme in trauma theory, where individuals often seek to immortalize their lost loved ones as a means to cope with the void left by trauma.

Theo draws a parallel between himself and a bee witnessing the destruction of its hive as he watches his apartment disappear gradually. By employing the experience of losing one's abode as an archetype for trauma, Tartt constructs a universally relatable story. Tartt explores the abrasive contours of Theo's inner life and compares his harrowing experience to the sense of being displaced. Theo is constantly forced into estranged and disorienting abodes where the sense of place often relies on objects. Theo's apartment in New York, where "closets were packed to overflowing, where every bed had boxes underneath it and pots and pans were hung from the ceiling" (Tartt 250) is contrasted against the new abode in Las Vegas where the desolation of the dwelling astounds him. Elucidating how distressing experience plays havoc with the

protagonist's framework of reality, the absence of objects indicate that Theo must reorganize the self in relation to the new view of reality.

Balaev asserts that traumatic experience "causes a reformulation of perception of self and world" (Balaev 159). In *The Goldfinch*, the protagonist relies on objects to stabilize his disoriented reality. Theo's fixation towards the object world is explicitly described through the delectation and contentment he derives from Hobie's workshop which is "so rich and magical: a treasure cave" (Tartt 183). Working as Hobie's assistant, Theo is wholly immersed into a profound interaction with the materiality of things like "labeling jars, mixing rabbit-skin glue, sorting through boxes of drawer fittings" (Tartt 187). The world of materiality and palpability affords the distressed protagonist a distraction from the emotional turmoil of his disoriented reality and renders him the feeling of sinking in deep water like a calm stone.

To keep away from distressing memories and reminiscences, Theo fills up his mind with visions of material perfection and visualizes a life that unfolds within furnishings. He confesses,

In the night when I woke up jarred and panicked, the explosion plunging through me all over again, sometimes I could lull myself back to sleep by thinking of his house, where without even realizing it you slipped away sometimes into 1850, a world of ticking clocks and creaking floorboards, copper pots and baskets of turnips and onions in the kitchen, candle flames leaning all to the left in the draft of an opened door and tall parlor windows billowing and swagged like ball gowns, cool quiet rooms where old things slept. (Tartt 190)

The aforementioned excerpt extracted from the novel distinctly shows Theo's dream-like reveries and conception of fantasy world as expressions of ideal materialism. Theo wraps himself with the ease of the idealistic world of materiality where his acquaintance with antiquity shields him from

the pandemonium of the present. The way in which Theo copes with his trauma through mental configurations of Hobie's dwelling vividly shows how an abode can turn out to be an object of comfort for the traumatized protagonist.

Tartt deliberately uses autodiegetic retrospective narration, and long-winded passages of imagery to express the perception of traumatic experience. Through *The Goldfinch*, Tartt demonstrates how a traumatic experience can restructure the perception of an individual. Theo's narration after the explosion is overwhelmed with images of "fragile fabrics, scratchy sisal rug" and furniture that "seemed spindly, poised at tiptoe nervousness" (Tartt 77). Substituting his inward emotional turbulence with descriptions of external environment, Theo's perception can be comprehended as a common response to trauma known as pathological dissociation, an excessive reaction to a traumatic experience that is characterized by derealization, a sense of unreality with detachment from one's environment and depersonalization, a sense of unreality with detachment from oneself.

The longer Theo dwells with his memories of harrowing experience, the more animated his object world becomes. The quote, "Objects in the apartment wobbled with my fatigue: halos shimmered around the table lamp; the stripe of the wallpaper seemed to vibrate" (Tartt 78) encapsulates Theo's evolving relationship with the physical world in the aftermath of his harrowing experiences. Theo's description of the objects in his apartment wavering and shimmering reflects dissociation, a common coping mechanism in response to trauma.

Trauma theory suggests that dissociation is a way for individuals to detach from the distressing reality of their experiences, creating a psychological distance from the overwhelming emotions and memories. In Theo's case, the wobbling and shimmering of objects signify a dissociative state, where the boundaries between reality and perception blur, providing him a

temporary escape from the haunting memories. Furthermore, Theo's heightened perception of the objects' movements and the halos around the lamp and vibrating wallpaper points to a state of hyperarousal. Trauma often triggers hypervigilance and heightened sensory experiences, leading individuals to perceive the world with amplified intensity. In this state, even mundane objects become charged with significance, reflecting the hypersensitivity and hypervigilance that trauma survivors experience.

Theo's fatigue-induced altered perception of the environment emphasizes how trauma can intrude upon one's daily life, affecting even the most commonplace experiences. Trauma theory suggests that traumatic memories can resurface unexpectedly, altering an individual's perception of the present moment. Theo's fatigue serves as a trigger causing his surroundings to take on an otherworldly quality, further underlining the disruptive and pervasive nature of trauma.

An undercurrent of trauma flows within *The Goldfinch* which is best traced through Theo's attachment to material things. Balaev asseverates that the experience of trauma is "repetitious, timeless and unspeakable." Theo attempts to recount the explosion to Hobie but their heart-to-heart chat is constantly disrupted by focalized descriptions of his material environment, "my shoes. It was interesting how I'd never really looked at my shoes. The toe scuffs. The frayed laces" (Tartt 141). Tartt's novel clutters with things perceiving the potential of objects to harbor perturbation. Unable to utter about the ugly repetitive flashes of the splattered insides of the museum, Theo's meditation pivots to "murky portraits, china spaniels on the mantelpiece, golden pendulum swinging, tockety-tock, tockety-tock" (Tartt 141). Between and around his utterances, objects stand in to buffer his recollections from becoming too intense. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, Theo's disrupted narration is another indication of pathological dissociation.

Welty's ring and the painting which acts as the epicenter of Theo's trauma is the mainstay of the novel and these objects can be apprehended as having psychological crutches for the self in crisis. Research in Consumer Psychology demonstrates that people may experience strong emotional bonds with objects and the objects may serve as extensions of self and identity. Donald Winnicott avows that attachment to objects ensuing from crisis is a common experience. During the transitional phase of infancy, the child develops a tendency to cling on to the first not-me possessions, such as a blanket or teddy bear. Though this habit typically dissipates as the child grows older, a "need for a specific object or behavior pattern may reappear at a later age" (Winnicott 93) when encountered with psychological or emotional deprivation. Clinging onto Welty's ring and his mother's favorite painting, "The Goldfinch," Theo's trepidation and sense of isolation is quelled by the physical presence of these objects.

The painting exerts a power which sways the narrator's sense of self. Theo depicts the painting as "an article of protection even wrapped up and out of view, like a holy icon carried by a crusader into battle" (Tartt 400). Theo slips Welty's ring on his finger which renders consolation for his emotional instability. Theo remarks,

When I hefted it in my palm, it was very heavy; if I closed my fingers around it, the gold got warm from the heat of my hand but the carved stone stayed cool. Its weighty, antiquated quality, its mixture of sobriety and brightness, were strangely comforting; if I fixed my attention on it intensely enough, it had a strange power to anchor me in my drifting state and shut out the world around me. (Tartt 106)

Tracking the strange power derived from the material substance of the ring, the aforementioned excerpt exemplifies how an object's guise can internalize feelings. The glistening gold ring uplifts Theo from the external surroundings of the

Barbour's practically lightless apartment. The warmth emanated from the ring contrasts against the Barbour family's unsympathetic mannerisms whose "reserve . . . had sometimes made me uncomfortable" (Tartt 88).

Despite the ring's tie-in to unwanted gut-wrenching memories, its physical presence is a consolation to Theo's traumatized state. Theo lets himself to revel in the strange power of the ring so that the harrowing memories cannot breach his materialized sense of self. The ring's strange power resonate Jane Bennett's idea of thing power, a concept present in Winnicott's description of the transitional object. Bennett enunciates, "we create intimate attachments to non-human or not-quite human things because of their effectivity, their material agency" (Bennet ix).

Theo's traumatic ordeal in the art gallery can be savvied as an allegory for the encounter with an immortal object of art. The purloined painting turns into Theo's emotional touchstone, capable of transfiguring his grief. The painting's comforting presence is construed as, "the reinforcement to infrastructure, and invisible bedrock rightness that reassured me just as it was reassuring to know that far away, whales swam untroubled in Baltic waters and monks in arcane time zones chanted ceaselessly for the salvation of the world" (Tartt 340). Theo is fixated to the painting for the emotional reparation and the tranquility it brings to his soul.

Perceiving objects as having personalities and souls, ultimately moulds the conception of the traumatized protagonist's identity as relational or as a non-binary organizing principle of the self and consciousness. Tartt subsumes trauma narrative in *The Goldfinch*, a psychological technique that aids the narrator to overcome the distressing memories cognate with the piercing experience through the power of storytelling. Tartt's trauma narrative conveys the process of reconfiguring the self and world through object matter. Theo relates, "If our secrets define us, as opposed to the face we show the world, then the

painting was the secret that raised me above the surface of life and enabled me to know who I am" (Tartt 856). Tartt's delineation of her protagonist's discovery of a stabilized self evokes the postmodern notion of the soul as emergent. To sustain the sense of self, the protagonist pins his hope on objects and is perceptibly sensitive to their abstract and vibrant nature.

Boris Pavlikovsky, an ebullient, happy-go-lucky friend of Theo purloins the painting, "The Goldfinch" and replaces it with a fraudulent substitute so that the theft goes undetected. Theo's detection of the act of treachery hurls him in the absurd predicament of unsuspectingly securing a worthless object and the irrefutable verity of losing a priceless art that has been swapped for treasures of inestimable worth leaves him shell-shocked. After the loss of his painting, Theo plummets into a catatonic state of desperation and is subsequently remoulded and reinforced by a dream-journey into the psyche.

Theo's tremulous journey inward after the loss of his painting vouchsafes his state of despondency. Tartt makes use of mirror imagery to represent his psychological state of mind. In psychology, mirror symbolizes the threshold between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. In the midst of his suicidal desolation, Theo has a horrific hallucination, where he looks into a mirror whose dimensions expand beyond his own reflection to reveal the presence of his deceased mother, "She was herself. An embodied presence. There was psychic reality to her, there was depth and information. She was between me and whatever place she had stepped from, what landscape beyond. And it was all about the moment when our eyes touched in the glass, surprise and amusement" (Tartt 725). By presenting the dream-vision, Tartt propounds that Theo is evoked by his prolonged devotion and apprenticeship to a work of art, which he considers as a paradox of celestial perfection.

Theo undergoes various psychological reverberations throughout the novel. He endures the loss of his primary caretaker, Audrey Decker.

The trauma of losing the primary caretaker is referred to as attachment trauma. Attachment trauma is a disruption in the salient process of bonding between the child and his primary caregiver. Attachment trauma transpires when the child goes through traumatic experiences at home, which results from the absence of the primary caregiver. The tragic death of Audrey Decker marks an irrevocable shift in Theo's life and the absence of an emotional tether leads him to his unhindered use of narcotics. Larry Decker's drug addiction and Boris' implicit use of alcohol and narcotics influence Theo to intake drugs for emotional stability.

Substance abuse is a common response to trauma, serving as a numbing agent or a means to escape the overwhelming emotional burden. Trauma theory emphasizes how individuals often turn to substances or unhealthy behaviors as maladaptive coping mechanisms to cope with their trauma. Theo, an evident victim of trauma-induced distress diagnoses and treats his anxiety with drugs and alcohol. His inability to administer proper dosage of drugs characterizes him as a drug addict. The American Psychiatric Association expounds addiction as a complex condition that is manifested by compulsory substance use despite harmful consequence. Tartt characterizes Theo in accordance with these conditions that sets him up for addictive tendencies.

Theo intakes drugs as an emotional suppressant and amasses disparate sorts of drugs to numb the feelings that transpire owing to horrendous memories. Theo's obsession on drugs to function stems from Boris' introduction to the drugs and it is his toxic companionship which drags Theo into the ruinous comportment of drug addiction. Boris rather than helping Theo out of his drug-induced state emboldens him to intake needless amount of narcotics. Boris and Theo, who share a heavy fixation on drugs pilfers an assortment of potent drugs from Xandra, Larry's girlfriend to reconcile emotional loss and mental trauma. Their shared fixation on drugs eventually leads them to a life of desolation and isolation, which Theo recounts as haunted doubleness.

Theo relates, "The painting, the magic and aliveness of it, was like that odd airy moment of the snow falling, greenish light and flakes whirling in the cameras, where you no longer cared about the game, who won or lost, but just wanted to drink in that speechless windswept moment" (Tartt 432). Theo's description of the painting's "magic and aliveness" highlights its therapeutic value as a coping mechanism to alleviate his profound loneliness and desperation. Trauma theory posits that trauma can lead to emotional numbness and detachment, making it difficult for individuals to connect with the world around them. The painting with its vibrant beauty and timeless essence offers a means for Theo to reawaken his dulled emotions and rediscover a sense of wonder and aliveness.

The comparison of the painting to a mesmerizing moment of snowfall, where one becomes detached from the concerns of the world and immersed in the sheer beauty of the moment reflects Theo's yearning for an escape from the harsh realities of life. This dissociative quality is a hallmark of trauma coping mechanisms, allowing individuals to momentarily detach from their distress and find respite in an alternate experience.

Theo uses recreational substances in an attempt to find temporary relief from his inner torment. The substances provide a sense of euphoria, creating a false reality where he can momentarily escape the haunting memories and emotional pain. Theo's drug use becomes intertwined with his search for solace and stability, even as it exacerbates his instability and impulsivity. Despite the illicit drug abuse as a depressant for the affliction of losing his mental anchor, he sets his foot on the road to recovery in the denouement of the novel. This lets the reader to envision a world where Theo experiences a complete healing from his dependency on objects and drugs as coping mechanisms for his trauma.

Donna Tartt's meditation on trauma attain its zenith in *The Goldfinch* and the trenchant novel tracks the origin of trauma through an apparently

uneventful life of Theo which leaves traces of unease that are arduous to dismiss. From the streets of New York to the dark corners of the art underworld, the soaring masterpiece examines the devastating impact of trauma and the affiliation that the narrator has for the purloined art. "The Goldfinch" in all its mysterious majesty and timeless beauty renders a semblance of stability for Theo and remains outstandingly remarkable for its eternal nature of a truly sublime art. *The Goldfinch*, a brilliant new chapter in Tartt's oeuvre makes every crafted sentence count.

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