

**Trauma's Influence on the Main Character's Identity and Relationships in
Hillenbrand's Novel *Unbroken***

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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 30 June 2025 Approved 08 July 2025 Published 18 July 2025 Keywords: Literary Trauma, Psychoanalytic Theory, Social Identity, Traumatic Experience	This study examines the profound impact of wartime trauma on the protagonist's post-war social identity and relationships as depicted in Laura Hillenbrand's literary biography, <i>Unbroken</i> . The research objective is to analyze the psychological and social responses of Louis Zamperini to his experiences as a WWII POW. Using a descriptive qualitative methodology, this research applies Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic trauma theory to conduct a close reading of the text. The results indicate that Zamperini's trauma manifests as classic PTSD symptoms—re-experiencing, avoidance, negative cognition, and hyper-arousal—which lead to alcoholism, aggression, and the near-dissolution of his marriage. The study concludes that Zamperini's healing journey, achieved through forgiveness rather than revenge, illustrates how a survivor can reclaim their social identity by reframing their traumatic narrative. This research contributes to the field by bridging literary analysis with psychological theory, demonstrating how literary biography can serve as a vital text for understanding the long-term social consequences of trauma and the complex path to resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

Life is a complicated path that brings happiness, struggle, and sometimes suffering. In most difficulties people deal with, very painful experiences emerge as situations that can change lives in deep and permanent ways. Trauma usually comes from abrupt, overpowering occurrences like tragedies, losing someone special, mistreatment, or even the brutalities of war. These situations hit without prior notice, leaving people unready both mentally and emotionally, often with wounds that last for years. The American Psychiatric Association defines trauma as a response to events that are "outside the range of usual human

experience," such as encounters with death, severe injury, or extreme adversity (Caruth, 2017).

The term "trauma," derived from the Greek word for "wound," originally referred to physical injuries but has since evolved to encompass emotional and psychological wounds. Psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, in his work on the "Survivor Experience and Traumatic Syndrome," argues that trauma frequently stems from confronting death or overwhelming loss, triggering what he calls "death anxiety." This anxiety can disrupt a person's sense of self, leading to confusion, disconnection, or even a fractured sense of identity (Lifton, 1995). Traumatic events are so intense that they overwhelm an individual's ability

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to process or cope, leaving lasting imprints on their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.

Understanding trauma is of utmost importance in today's world, as of May 2025. Millions of people have been displaced by ongoing international conflicts like those in the Middle East and Ukraine, and the COVID-19 pandemic's psychological effects are still having an impact on mental health around the world (Torales, 2020). According to recent studies, collective trauma from wars and pandemics aggravates mental health issues, so stories that provide guidance on how to heal are necessary (Mahamid, 2022). Through literary analysis of trauma, we can gain insight into how people and societies cope with and bounce back from such events, which can help us tackle today's pressing global issues. Literature, with its ability to capture the inner struggles of those affected, fosters empathy and connection with pain that is often hard to express (Hirschberger, 2017).

Trauma is a fascinating literary theme because it illustrates how resilient people can be in the face of hardship. Narratives, whether in literature, poetry, or film, provide a space for the exploration of the psychological and emotional consequences of trauma. In reading a narrative, (Vickroy, 2015) research fiction has become a means of carrying trauma, transforming the world of survivors into the world as it should be and creating the chaos and violence of it through their toes. Literature, therefore, renders "the unspeakable wounds" of trauma visible by connecting individual suffering and societal comprehension. The connection between trauma and the unconscious psyche is also forged in literature, as shown through psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic theory applied by (Caruth, 1996a) originated in Sigmund Freud's studies and observes how traumatic memories are denied but re-emerge as fragmented, affecting emotions and handling. Recent Psychoanalytic studies argue that the narrative can open up a space to the lasting impact of trauma by making conscious the unconscious conflicts that drive emotional outbursts, such as flashbacks (LaCapra, 2013). In the analysis of literature, this approach allows scholars to explore the characters' intimate struggles and reflect upon the way in which trauma corrupts the mind.

Trauma is a frequent subject in American books, especially in stories of war, survival, and

healing. With its unfathomable devastation, World War II left deep marks on people and countries, and prompted writers to ponder loss and resilience. There are striking examples in (Hillenbrand, 2010). The book tells the real-life tale of Louis Zamperini, an Olympian runner who became a soldier during World War II. The story takes a hairpin turn when his plane goes down — he is lost at sea for weeks and then becomes the prisoner of a particularly brutal enemy of war.

The psychological fall-out of the trauma, as conveyed in the novel, must be analysed by placing it in a clinical frame of reference, that of trauma with emphasis on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The first is the re-experiencing, or intrusive, recollection of the experience via nightmares, flashbacks, or distressing memories (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). This is often paired with a second cluster, avoidance, where a person consciously avoids any memories of the trauma through any thoughts, feelings, people, or even locations. The third cluster is negative cognition and mood, which includes negative alterations in mood and cognitions, e.g., lasting feelings of guilt, fear, or social rejection. This at all times networked nervous system is manifested in the last cluster, alterations in arousal and reactivity, which represent hypervigilance, irritability, sleep disturbance, reckless and self-destructive behaviour.

Earlier works have deepened our understanding of trauma in literature. In analyzing Endang Sartika's study focusing on Eka Kurniawan's *Vengeance is Mine; All Others Pay Cash* (2017), she investigates how the traumatic experiences of the characters that mirror Indonesia's socio-political history are formed in phenomenological and narrative terms (Sartika, 2020). Likewise, (Balaev, 2014) reads trauma in contemporary fiction, foregrounding its cultural and historical contexts. The more recent scholarship incorporates Freudian perspectives and explores how narrative identity and memory are shaped by trauma, as is the case in the work of (Kolk, 2024) and (Hyland, 2023). These two articles provide a way into the study of *Unbroken*, an account of trauma, both personal and historical, that fuses literary narrative and biography to offer a perspective on healing and resilience in everyday and extraordinary lives.

While existing scholarship has analyzed trauma's portrayal in fiction and non-fiction, there is a research gap in examining how literary biography, as a genre, narrates the specific impact of profound trauma on a protagonist's post-war social reintegration and interpersonal relationships. This article addresses this gap by conducting a psychoanalytic analysis of how Hillenbrand depicts Zamperini's traumatic memories influencing his social life. This study, therefore, aims to analyze the traumatic experiences of the main character. Based on the premise that victims of trauma manifest specific responses to such events, this research will investigate Zamperini's psychological and social responses as depicted in the novel, treating the literary text as a representation of actual human life altered by the physiological and psychological impact of trauma.

METHODS

The study applies descriptive qualitative research in order to answer the formulated problem. (Tenny et al., 2022) Define qualitative research as a form of research that investigates and offers profound insights into practical issues. sees the literary biography as a detailed depiction of human mental feelings, enabling a deep study of the main character's inner world as told by the writer. The main info comes from a careful reading of the novel, paying attention to clues about Zamperini's life after the war, his feelings, and relationships with others.

The analytic framework brings together the psychoanalytic trauma theory and an understanding of traumatic symptoms. The key theoretical lens is (Caruth, 1996) concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience". This study takes on Caruth's idea that trauma is not fully perceived at the time of its happening but rather comes to be understood later as a delayed response. Therefore, traumatic memory finds expression in belated intrusions such as nightmares, flashbacks, and repetitive thoughts. The re-experiencing symptoms shown in Zamperini's post-war life will be discussed through these as manifestations of the "unclaimed" nature of his ordeal.

In line with Caruth, this analysis will map the behaviors of Zamperini as seen through Maria Roots' framework of trauma responses in unsympathetic environments (Vickroy, 2014a), such as "quickness to anger, social and emotional

withdrawal, rumination or shutting down." The paper will discuss his violent outbursts and alcoholism as maladaptive ways of coping and social expressions of unresolved trauma. By linking the narrative traumatic events with their subsequent social and psychological sequelae, it will show how Hillenbrand's text acts as a compelling exposition of the long-term effects of trauma on the social identity and relationships of a survivor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion of this research are divided into three parts. First, it describes Zamperini's traumatic experiences in the novel, seen from the traumatic symptoms as proposed by Caruth and the American Psychiatric Association. Second, identifying factors that caused his trauma and how the characters deal with their trauma. Third, assessing how these experiences shape his social life in terms of relationships and community roles. This leads to Caruth's framework application that shall illuminate how *Unbroken* captures high-degree social effects of trauma, yet gives insight into human resilience that connects individual pain to larger human experiences.

Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken* takes careful notes of the multifaceted traumatic experiences endured by Louis Zamperini, offering a rich text for analyzing the profound impact of extreme adversity. These experiences can be broadly categorized into three distinct phases: the trauma of survival at sea, the trauma of captivity and torture in Japanese POW camps, and the subsequent post-traumatic struggles.

1. The Delayed Manifestation of Trauma: Zamperini's Post-War Symptoms

Based on the background of WWII, Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken* describes the traumatic ordeals of its main character, Louis Zamperini, whose mental coping mechanisms are stretched to the breaking point. The novella vividly shows how people are affected by terrible things to different degrees depending on a person's psychological ability to deal with them. Hillenbrand teaches timeless signs of trauma, quick anger, deep depression, and hallucinations through a viewpoint of how Zamperini evolves. These

literary representations align with (Caruth, 1995) theory that victims react to trauma with intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hyper-arousal, often accompanied by feelings of hopelessness, excessive anxiety, and distress. Furthermore, the novel shows how such traumatic responses, which can include shame and guilt, may destroy a victim's core beliefs about their personal safety and their view of themselves as decent, strong, and autonomous individuals (Vickroy, 2014b).

In alignment with Caruth's (1996) theory of trauma as an "unclaimed experience," the full weight of Zamperini's ordeal descends upon him not during the events themselves, but as a delayed response following his return to civilian life. His post-war experiences, as narrated by Hillenbrand, provide a vivid illustration of the four primary symptom clusters of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) outlined by the American Psychiatric Association.

"Louie was straddling Cynthia's chest, his hands locked around her neck. Through her closing throat, she was screaming. Louie was strangling his pregnant wife." (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 411).

The most potent symptom cluster depicted is re-experiencing. While Zamperini survived the physical prison, his mind remained captive. Hillenbrand details how "Every night, in his dreams, an apparition would form in his head and burn there. It was the face of the Bird, screaming, 'Next! Next! Next!'" (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 393). These nightmares were not mere bad dreams but visceral reenactments of his abuse, causing him to wake up screaming and lashing out. In a climactic and terrifying scene, this re-experiencing became physically manifest when he dreamed he was strangling "The Bird," only to wake and find his hands locked around his pregnant wife's neck (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 410-411). These episodes show how the traumatic memory, unprocessed, hijacks the present and turns the safest of spaces—his own bed—into a scene of terror. The next quotation is presented below;

"At first he drank just beer; then he dipped into hard liquor. If he got drunk enough, he could drown the war for a time. He soon began drinking so much that he passed out, but he welcomed it; passing out saved him from having to go to bed and wait for his monster." (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 411).

To combat the intrusive memories, Zamperini engages in the second symptom cluster: avoidance. His primary avoidance strategy is alcoholism. He discovers that a flask of whiskey could grant him "a pleasant numbness" and help him "drown the war for a time" (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 380-393). This self-medication is a direct attempt to avoid the terror of his own mind, particularly the nightmares that awaited him in sleep. His drinking becomes so severe that he passes out, a state he "welcomed; passing out saved him from having to go to bed and wait for his monster" (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 393). This avoidance extends to his emotional life, as he becomes withdrawn and unable to communicate his inner turmoil to his wife or family, creating a wall of silence around his suffering.

"No one could reach Louie, because he had never really come home. In prison camp, he'd been beaten into dehumanized obedience to a world order in which the Bird was absolute sovereign, and it was under this world order that he still lived. The Bird had taken his dignity and left him feeling humiliated, ashamed, and powerless, and Louie believed that only the Bird could restore him, by suffering and dying in the grip of his hands. A once singularly hopeful man now believed that his only hope lay in murder." (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 411).

These symptoms are interwoven with negative alterations in cognition and mood. The once-hopeful Olympian is depicted as a man consumed by rage and despair. He develops a cynical worldview, believing a malevolent God is toying with him, and his sense of self-worth is shattered. He feels "humiliated, ashamed, and powerless," and comes to believe that only violent revenge can restore his dignity (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 394-395). This profound negativity is also evident in his social withdrawal and his inability to find a new purpose after his running career is ended by his war injuries, leaving him feeling adrift and worthless.

"Rage, wild, random, and impossible to quell, began to consume him. Once, he harassed a man for walking too slowly on a crosswalk in front of his car, and the man spat at him. Louie gunned the car to the curb, jumped out, and, as Cynthia screamed for him to stop, punched the man until he fell to the ground. On another day, when a man at a bar accidentally let a door swing into him,

Louie chested up to him and provoked an embarrassing little scuffle that ended with Louie grinding the man's face in the dirt." (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 411).

Finally, Zamperini's internal chaos erupts outward through alterations in arousal and reactivity. His nervous system, conditioned by years of abuse, remains on high alert. Hillenbrand describes his "quickness to anger" (Vickroy, 2014) through his violent outbursts, such as assaulting a man on a crosswalk or instigating bar fights over trivial matters (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 394-395). His hypervigilance is starkly illustrated when a loud noise in a bar sends him diving to the floor in a panic, reliving the terror of the camps (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 394). These behaviors show a man whose body is still fighting a war that has long since ended, unable to differentiate between past threat and present safety.

2. Factors of Trauma and Character Responses

The trauma experienced by Louis Zamperini stems from two primary sources that worked in concert to dismantle his psychological well-being: existential abandonment and systematic dehumanization. The first factor, existential abandonment, is rooted in his 47 days adrift in the Pacific. This period was defined by what (Caruth, 1995) terms "death anxiety"—a state of constant, imminent threat from impersonal forces like starvation, thirst, and shark attacks. This experience obliterated his belief in a predictable and safe world, leaving him in a state of profound powerlessness. During this phase, his coping mechanisms were largely adaptive and geared toward immediate survival. Hillenbrand depicts Zamperini actively fighting despair by keeping his mind occupied, "telling and retelling stories of practical jokes" and conjuring detailed descriptions of his mother's cooking to create a psychological refuge for himself and his crewmates (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 161). This mental discipline was a crucial tool for survival, an attempt to impose internal order on external chaos.

The second and more damaging factor was the systematic dehumanization he faced in the Japanese POW camps. This was not the impersonal threat of nature but the targeted, sadistic cruelty of other human beings, which, as (Vickroy, 2014) notes, can destroy a victim's core

beliefs about their own decency and autonomy. The primary agent of this trauma was Corporal Mutsuhiro Watanabe, "The Bird," whose abuse was aimed at psychological annihilation. The beatings were not merely punitive but were ritualistic acts of degradation. For example, forcing Zamperini to hold a heavy beam over his head for thirty-seven minutes was a spectacle of humiliation designed to break his will (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 330-331). In response to this, Zamperini's coping mechanism shifted from mental discipline to overt defiance. Hillenbrand notes that "When he raised his eyes, all that shone in them was hate. To Watanabe... Louie's defiance was an intolerable, personal offense" (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 274). This defiance, while essential for maintaining a shred of dignity during captivity, became a problematic part of his psyche post-war. The unresolved rage and the "unclaimed experience" of his humiliation fueled his maladaptive coping strategies at home, leading to his "rumination" on revenge and his inability to process the trauma, as predicted by Caruth's framework.

3. The Impact on Social Life and the Path to Resilience

The culmination of these traumatic symptoms profoundly damaged Zamperini's social life, illustrating how an "unclaimed experience" can poison interpersonal relationships. His "quickness to anger" and "social and emotional withdrawal" (Vickroy, 2014) led to "bitter fights" with his wife, Cynthia, whom he physically bruised and emotionally alienated (Hillenbrand, 2010, p. 409). His alcoholism drove him into isolation, and his aggressive outbursts made him a danger to strangers and a source of shame to himself. He was a celebrated public hero but a broken man in private, unable to connect authentically with his family or community because he was still, psychologically, a prisoner of "The Bird."

This narrative of social disintegration serves as a powerful illustration of Caruth's framework. The trauma did not stay in the past; it repeated itself in his present, fracturing his social identity. Zamperini's turning point, as depicted by Hillenbrand, arrives not through revenge but through a spiritual conversion that allows him to reframe his suffering (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 419-421). The act of forgiving his captors, including

Watanabe, is the moment he finally "claims" his experience. By releasing his hatred, he breaks the traumatic bond with his abuser and liberates himself. This leads directly to his social and relational healing: his marriage is restored, and he dedicates his life to a new community role, founding the Victory Boys Camp to mentor troubled youths (Hillenbrand, 2010, pp. 428-429). Here, *Unbroken* captures the high-degree social effects of trauma while simultaneously offering profound insight into human resilience. It demonstrates that recovery is not about erasing the past but about integrating it into a new, life-affirming narrative, thereby connecting Zamperini's individual pain to the larger human capacity for redemption and healing.

Zamperini's eventual path to healing through a religious awakening, prompted by Billy Graham's sermon, marks a significant turning point in the narrative. This experience allowed him to reframe his suffering and find a new sense of purpose, leading to the cessation of his nightmares and his ability to forgive his captors, including "The Bird". This transformative healing, while deeply personal, reflects a broader theme in trauma literature: the search for meaning and the reconstruction of a coherent self-narrative after shattering experiences (Sartika, 2020). Hillenbrand's depiction of this recovery underscores the possibility of "traumatic escape" not through forgetting, but through a profound reintegration of the traumatic experience into a new, life-affirming framework.

The detailed portrayal of Zamperini's journey in *Unbroken* serves as a powerful literary testament to the extremity of human suffering during wartime and the complexities of survival and recovery. By meticulously documenting both the overt brutalities and the subtle psychological erosions, Hillenbrand gives voice to experiences that often remain "unspeakable." Zamperini's story, while unique, resonates with universal aspects of the trauma response—the fragmentation of identity, the haunting presence of the past, and the arduous struggle for healing. In a contemporary world still grappling with the repercussions of conflict and collective trauma (Alexander, 2012), *Unbroken* offers not only a historical account but also enduring insights into the resilience of the human spirit and the

challenging, yet possible, journey toward reclaiming a life from the ravages of trauma. The narrative's relevance is amplified by current global events, where understanding the long-term psychological impact of war and displacement on individuals and communities remains a critical imperative (Hirschberger, 2018).

Hillenbrand's depiction of Zamperini's post-war life serves as a profound literary illustration of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. For Caruth, trauma is defined by its belatedness—the event is so overwhelming that it cannot be fully experienced or integrated at the time, only to return later in the form of intrusive, uncontrollable reenactments. Zamperini's story is a case study in this phenomenon. While adrift and in the camps, his consciousness was focused on the singular goal of survival. The psychological wound was inflicted but not processed. It is only upon his return to the supposed safety of civilian life that the trauma truly "arrives." His nightmares of "The Bird" are not simply memories; they are, in Caruth's terms, the literal return of the event. When he unconsciously strangles his wife, he is not remembering the abuse—he is living it. The past has violently asserted itself into the present, demonstrating that the traumatic experience was never properly left behind. His obsessive quest for revenge can also be understood as a form of this traumatic repetition, a desperate, unconscious attempt to master the past by re-staging it with a different outcome. This analysis reveals that the core of Zamperini's social suffering is not just the memory of what happened, but the way the trauma itself lives on, unspoken and unclaimed, within him, undermining his ability to engage with his present life.

CONCLUSION

This study asserts that *Unbroken* is a compelling piece of literature about the legacy of trauma on a survivor's social identity and relationships. Thus, the results reveal that Zamperini was deeply influenced by what would now be considered a late-stage expression of his wartime experiences, pre-existing from the start of the war's impacts through the post-war era, in line with both clinical conceptualizations of PTSD and Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic conception of 'trauma' as an "unclaimed experience". His

decline into alcoholism, violence, and relational discord reflects the way unacknowledged trauma can break the social bonds of a survivor. Critically, the story excavates a recovery not through revenge, which reinforced his psychological enslavement, but through a redemptive forgiveness process, which allowed him to reclaim his life and reconstruct his social world.

What this work is able to offer the fields of literary and trauma studies is the bringing of a hybrid psychoanalytic/clinical framework to the domain of literary biography, and in the process, to mediate a perceived divide between narrative study and psychodynamic theory. By examining the social sequelae of trauma, this research underscores the fact that individual distress is rooted in social and community relationships. Moreover, I must conclude that this examination of *Unbroken* suggests it is not simply for its historical or literary reconsideration but for the part it has played as a major text in understanding the ongoing legacy of post-traumatic reintegration. It is relevant to current measures towards long-term welfare of the veteran and survivor of war, and how the written word can cast light on the hidden and tortuous road from breakdown to repair and meaning.

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