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Artistic means of childhood trauma representation
in American 9/11 literature

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Abstract. The paper provides an analysis of how American 9/11 literature artistically represents the traumatization of children, conveys their psychological experiences and the subsequent journey towards healing in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. The relevance of the study is determined by the growing interest of contemporary culture in the exploitation of the image of the child, its aesthetic, and symbolic connotation in the process of representing the collective traumatic experience. In this research, a cultural-historical approach combined with comparative and literary psychological analysis is used. These narratives employ various techniques, such as metonymic representation of childhood trauma, symbolic picturing of PTSD symptoms, and imagery of fantasy worlds, to depict the trauma experienced by child-characters and child-narrators after the terrorist attack. The writers consider verbalization as one of the means of productive processing of the traumatic experience of the hero-child. In this way, 9/11 literature emphasizes the therapeutic journey of young protagonists towards healing, often reflecting the process of maturity. As a result of the conducted research, we draw the conclusion that 9/11 literature employs artistic techniques to portray the trauma experienced by child characters, illustrating their inner journey. Through artful storytelling, 9/11 literature underscores the idea that even in the face of profound tragedy, there is potential for recovery and renewal.

Keywords: 9/11 literature; American literature; Childhood trauma; Emptiness Symbolism; PTSD Symptoms; Fantasy world; Child character; Child-narrator

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Художественные средства репрезентации детской травмы
в американской литературе 9/11

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Аннотация. В статье представлен анализ художественных средств репрезентации детской травмы в американской литературе 9/11. Актуальность исследования обуславливается растущим интересом культуры к эксплуатации образа ребенка, к его эстетическому и символическому наполнению. В статье применяется культурно-исторический метод с элементами сравнительно-сопоставительного и психологического анализа. Текст произведений литературы 9/11 содержит различные средства передачи травматического опыта, такие как метонимическая репрезентация детской травмы, символика ПТСР и фантазийное многомирие, что способствует изображению травмы ребенка-героя и ребенка-повествователя. Писатели 9/11 представляют вербализацию как одно из продуктивных средств взаимодействия с травмой. Литературный сюжет 9/11 основывается на процессе проработки травмы, который запускает взросление и личностное становление персонажей. Результаты проведенного исследования позволяют сделать вывод, что литература 9/11 насыщена художественными приемами репрезентации детской травмы, которые используются для описания внутреннего пути героев. Художественное повествование литературы 9/11 транслирует идею о том, что даже на руинах трагедии остается потенциал для восстановления и обновления.

Ключевые слова: Литература 9/11; Американская литература; Детская травма; Символика пустоты; Симптомы ПТСР; Фантазийный мир; Герой-ребенок; Ребенок-повествователь

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Introduction

The terrorist attack targeting the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, initiated the appearance of a new thematic genre in fiction termed '9/11 literature.' The events of September 11, 2001, in New York

City, bound the entire American nation in their collective memory of this trauma. The terrorist attack became a defining historical and cultural moment for Americans, shaping their cultural identity. Contemporary American authors presented in New York

during that time unintentionally witnessed the catastrophe, and it deeply impacted their subsequent literary works.

A significant number of American 9/11 novels are devoted to the consequences of the terrorist attack experienced by children. The major protagonists of the 9/11 traumatic narrative are frequently children. American writers of the beginning of the 21st century provide a deep psychological insight into the tragic events through the eyes of juvenile characters.

The concept of childhood possesses a formative significance within American culture. Throughout the evolution of the US literature, the representation of a child has been used to explore diverse themes and acquired various symbolic and metaphorical connotations.

We support the viewpoint of Jacqueline Rose who in her essay "The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction" (1984), emphasizes the inherent challenge of fully grasping the essence of a child's worldview. Despite the fact that the writer is trying to recreate the features of the neuropsychiatric development of a child character and unravel the intricate network of internal social ties within the youthful community, the fiction image of a child is inevitably subjective and manipulated by the adult perception of childhood, which is influenced by the general cultural paradigm. Thus, the analysis of artistic portrayals of children in fiction effectively becomes an exploration of the attitudes of adult culture toward the concept of childhood (Rose, 1992). And that is exactly the issue we are going to address in our paper.

In conducting this study, we draw on psychiatric research data observationally, as our research objective is to analyze the artistic representation of childhood trauma in literary works, rather than conduction of a psychological or psychiatric analysis of living patients. Therefore, the statistical data of psychological studies on childhood trauma remain outside the scope of the article.

Main part

The purpose of the study is to identify the features of the representation of child mental trauma in American 9/11 literature, considering the portrayal of child characters in the cultural context of the 21st century.

The research material consists of a corpus of 9/11 texts and includes nine works published between 2003 and 2019 by American authors: "The Usual Rules" (2003) by Joyce Maynard, "Dear Zoe" (2004) by Philip Beard, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" (2005) by Jonathan Foer, "Falling Man" (2007) by Don DeLillo, "The Goldfinch" (2013) by Donna Tartt, "The Memory of Things" (2016) by Gae Polisner, "All We Have Left" (2016) by Wendy Mills, "Truthers" (2017) by Geoffrey Girard, "Hope and Other Punch Lines" (2019) by Julie Buxbaum.

These novels were chosen based on their thematic link to the 9/11 event, the inclusion of child characters, the categorization as young adult literature, initial publication in the USA, and their original language being English.

While the novels by John Updike and Donna Tartt portray the protagonists who age as the story progresses, they are still included in our analysis since a prominent part of the novels is dedicated to their childhood traumatic experiences. Similarly, while Don DeLillo's "Falling Man" focuses on an adult survivor of the attack, the story also features his ten-year-old son, Justin, which justifies its inclusion.

Notably, while John Updike and Donna Tartt base their works on fictional terrorist attacks, the undeniable influence of the real-life 9/11 events on their narratives makes them relevant for our study. Given their impact on global literature, they are of great interest for the research of childhood trauma representation in contemporary fiction.

In our research, we have used a cultural-historical **method** with the elements of comparative and literary psychological analysis.

A comprehensive study of the representation of childhood trauma in 9/11 literature on this text corpus is undertaken for the first time.

Results and Discussion

Metonymic representation of trauma at the narrative, structural and graphic levels of text

To understand the mechanism of psychological trauma, Sigmund Freud suggests imagining a simplified living organism as an irritable substance. This organism's outer layer serves as a protective shield, keeping the inner parts safe from external irritants. The existence of such a protective layer allows the organism to survive in its environment. However, an intense irritation that damages this layer can traumatize the organism. Therefore, trauma is defined as a breach of the psyche's defense against external irritants (Freud, 2020).

Piotr Sztompka describes trauma as a disruption of normality. He notes that humans are inclined toward a routine, predictable order of things, emphasizing a desire for existential security (Kalinin, 2013). The painful experiences that arise when this familiar world crumbles can manifest themselves as traumatic.

In an essay analyzing musical pieces about 9/11, social philosophy researcher Tatiana Weiser states that post-World War II European literature and art underwent a profound transformation. Even if it is challenging to express the traumatic experience through visual, linguistic, or other means, there's still an attempt to uncover the theme of catastrophes (Weiser, 2017). However, the goal of these pieces is not to faithfully reproduce the painful experience but to influence the audience's perception, breaking their usual connection with the art. This representation model of trauma is termed "metonymic" (Nikolai, 2014: 153). It seeks to place the reader in psychological conditions that evoke feelings similar to those of the tragedy victims, creating a dissonance between their expected art form and the traumatic theme they encounter in the work.

The representation of trauma by means of classical narration also has numerous examples in the history of world fiction. However, the 9/11 novels we studied serve as a vivid example of contemporary autofiction with elements of hyper-realistic portrayal of reality. In the theory of metamodernism, such a form of historical event representation is a recreation of collective affect and is defined as "curated authenticity" (Browse, 2017). According to Tatyana Prokhorova, the metamodernistic narratives aim to affirm the value of personal sensory experience (Prokhorova, 2019).

One of the most representative artistic works that conveys the traumatic experience of the September 11th attacks through a metonymic narrative model is Jonathan Foer's novel "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." In Foer's work, the traumatic narrative is realized through the interplay of formal and graphic artistic techniques that complement and amplify the pragmatic potential of the text.

We suggest that the observations made by Tatiana Weiser when analyzing the musical piece "WTC 9/11" by Steve Reich are also relevant to literary works related to the same tragedy. That is, the classic narrative is insufficient to convey traumatic events and to fit the catastrophe into it, one must break it (Weiser, 2017). Presenting the author's ideas in a format unfamiliar to the reader is intended to induce a sense of dissociation between the perceived text and the perceiving consciousness. We will provide examples that pertain to different levels of the text but share a common goal – to place the reader in a state of incomprehension.

Caroline Magnin views the overall fragmentation and chaos of the text as evidence of the characters' trauma (Magnin, 2019: 135). The very factual flaws in the narrative of a traumatized subject about their experience testify to the truthfulness of their story, as they show that the narrated content is 'contaminated' by the way it is presented, says Slavoj Žižek. According to him, after Auschwitz, not poetry but prose is impossible

(Žižek, 2008). That is, a clear, sequential, realistic description of events eludes the victim of violence. Other, more emotional genres and forms of art are much better at depicting trauma. Distorted forms of characters' thoughts demonstrate the state of affect after a traumatic event. Fragmentation and abruptness in the narrative, as well as slowed speech, are perceived by the reader as evidence of the truthful account of an eyewitness to the tragedy. This corresponds with the metamodernist tendency to create works with curated authenticity.

Foer's work is a poly-coded text where the verbal and the visual merge into a coherent whole (Ryabtsev, 2018: 17). It is filled not only with detective mysteries for the characters to solve but also with silences, narrative gaps, and meaningful voids, reinforced both by the form of the text and additional visual means. The narration is non-linear: some events are merely mentioned and then recounted in more detail in other chapters (the legend of the Sixth Borough); the same situations are described differently by family members, with details contradicting each other (Foer, 2006). Thoughts, feelings, letters, and photographs of various people from different times create profound chaos.

Structurally, 9/11 literature tends to fragment into sections narrated by different characters, and often, the name of the narrating character is not explicitly mentioned. The reader is left to discern whose voice they are hearing. The switch between narrating characters, along with the simultaneous development of multiple storylines in different temporal loci, is foundational in the structure of the other 9/11 literature pieces (such as "The Memory of Things," "All We Have Left," and "Hope and Other Punch Lines").

Some hints, seemingly randomly placed in the novel and sometimes represented graphically, remain unclarified. For example, Foer's chapter "Why I'm not where you are 4/12/78," which consists of a Grandpa's letter, is riddled with errors underlined in red. The father loved to correct mistakes in the "New

York Times" with this color. It prompts the reader to wonder if the father might have received one of Grandpa's letters, yet Foer never verbally answers this question (Foer, 2006).

The chaos of the plot, narrative, and book design serves a common purpose, immersing the reader in a state of dissociation. At the plot level, Grandma's thoughts dart about, and the narration leaps between three-time points: the day Grandpa leaves her, their shared life in New York, and the day of the Dresden bombing from her childhood. In the first chapter, Oskar's reflections continually jump from topic to topic. And at the start of the second chapter, addressed to an unborn son, the reader does not immediately recognize from whose perspective the story is told.

In the novel, the metonymic representation of trauma can be observed even at the graphic level. In three pages of the book in a row, there is a sequence of numbers that Grandpa refers to as the "sum of his life" (Foer, 2007: 151). Due to his muteness, he cannot speak on the phone, but to convey messages, he uses the correspondence of letters and numbers on telephone keypads. This code is nearly impossible for readers to interpret as 3-4 letters correspond to each number on a phone keypad. Over time, decoding Foer's digital code becomes even more complex, especially as modern smartphones no longer have button keypads.

At the end of the chapter titled "Why I'm Not Where You Are 9/11/03," Grandpa runs out of space in his notebook. The lines in the book become crowded, overlapping each other, and eventually merge into a solid black spot comprising layers of unreadable text. Lucie Kadlečková notes that at a particular stage of reading the novel, it becomes almost physically uncomfortable (Kadlečková, 2013: 7). This creates an obstacle in assimilating the information in a conventional manner. A similar mechanism of assimilating experiences works when an individual confronts traumatic events (Kalinin, 2013).

On the illustrative level, the novel's chapters are punctuated by random photos. Oscar has an album titled "Stuff That Happened to Me," where he prints and inserts images and photos of details from his investigation, taken with Grandpa's camera. These pictures of doors, bridges, and people (always shot from behind) supplement the novel's text. However, they are placed haphazardly in the book, with many appearing chaotically and being repeated. Similarly, Grandpa once took numerous cryptic object photographs of his apartment. These images, infiltrating the text as unexpected illustrations, are equally perplexing. For instance, amidst Thomas's account of losing his speech, a photograph of an octagonal doorknob suddenly appears, or a circular handle interrupts the narrative about the bombing of Dresden. Various doorknobs pop up unexpectedly throughout the story.

A striking illustration of things left unsaid is a letter from an inmate of a Turkish correctional labor camp that Oscar's grandmother receives in 1936 when she was still a young girl. All the critical information in the letter has been redacted by a censor. Fragments of a conversation between Oscar's mother and his psychotherapist also appear as near-meaningless speech snippets printed on a page with significant gaps. This dialogue is interrupted by an illustration of a man falling from the World Trade Center tower. However, the main symbol of traumatic silence is several completely blank pages from Grandma's book about her life, found within the text. These pages function at narrative, formal, and visual levels simultaneously.

The book's layout amplifies the text's impact. Each brief remark from Thomas's diary is printed with enlarged margins, centered on an otherwise blank page. The content from a pen sample notebook from a stationery store is also presented precisely in the form of a colored illustration. This unique presentation immerses the reader in the atmosphere and plot of the work. It feels as if, while reading the book, we are holding that very notebook, conducting the investigation

alongside Oscar, making us susceptible to the trauma described.

The metonymic representation of trauma raises questions about the ethics of art: what forms can a work of art ethically take (Weiser, 2017)? According to Dominick LaCapra, if a secondary witness identifies with a victim, they might also experience a muted form of trauma (LaCapra, 1999: 717). Engaging with works that represent trauma, though often met with a reader's natural resistance to believe what is written and a critical examination of the text's authenticity, involves a willing suspension of disbelief. As Elena Trubina states, the readiness to read literary works about trauma implies a certain mindset, a determination to "let in complex and disturbing content, which can cause sleepless nights and lead to heavy contemplation" (Trubina, 2009: 175).

PTSD symptoms and their symbolic representation in the 9/11 literature

Despite the generally life-affirming trajectory of the story, 9/11 literature does not avoid the theme of the trauma's inescapability. In the novel "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close", Grandpa Thomas admits that his muteness was not caused by fires or bombs per se but by the post-war feelings and experiences and the inability to erase traumatic events from memory. "There is no end to suffering," he writes to his unborn son (Foer, 2007: 16).

For the characters in Don DeLillo's novel, time seems to have stopped during the attack. The survivors dedicate their entire existence to reassuring themselves that they are still alive. Their metaphorical jump from the window of a burning skyscraper feels like it stretches throughout their entire lives. "I feel like I'm still on the stairs... If I live to be a hundred I'll still be on the stairs" (DeLillo, 2011: 25). The children's myth of Bill Lawton reinforces the idea of an ongoing, never-ending disaster. Children keep watching out for planes, believing they will return to truly demolish the twin towers, as they do not believe the towers have actually collapsed. In this way, a sublevel of narration arose in

DeLillo's novel, which is based on the genre of cryptohistory. The children's myth is based on the fantastic assumption that the factual information about the facts of world history has been lost, classified, or falsified (Khabibullina, 2015: 17). In Gae Polisner's novel "The Memory of Things," Kyle Donohue also fears that more than just two planes were hijacked, two destroyed buildings are not the end, and the attack will be continued (Polisner, 2016).

For Pippa, a character in the novel "The Goldfinch" who survived a museum explosion, time also seems to have frozen at the moment of the attack. She shares with Theo her thoughts on how children stop growing experienced trauma. She confesses to Theo that everything feels cemented for her: "When I come back here I'm thirteen again – and I mean, not in a good way. Everything stopped that day, literally. I even stopped growing. Because, did you know? I never got one inch taller after it happened, not one" (Tartt, 2014: 310). The protagonist in "Hope and Other Punch Lines" by Julie Buxbaum, Abby, also mentions her short height; she has not grown past five feet. Another Buxbaum's character, the survivor Chuck Rigalotti, has reached middle age, but with his lanky and worn-out appearance, he still looks boyishly awkward, as if he should be wearing pajamas with football players on them (Buxbaum, 2019: 102).

The novels naturally incorporate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as amnesia, muteness, deafness, nightmares, and obsessive thoughts. In some cases, the narrative revolves around trauma therapy aimed at alleviating a specific symptom (for example, post-traumatic dissociative fugue as depicted in Gae Polisner's "The Memory of Things").

As a metaphorical example of the lingering effects of psychological trauma that can manifest throughout the victim's life and ultimately even be fatal, Buxbaum introduces the concept of the '9/11 syndrome.' According to the writer, over a thousand survivors of the tragedy have died from cancer, and the

numbers continue to rise. For instance, upon seeing blood on a napkin after coughing, the novel's protagonist, Abby, becomes convinced that, like many other survivors, she is facing the manifestation of the 9/11 syndrome, and her days are numbered. Through Abby's illness, her moral preparation for death, and the joy from her unexpected 'recovery,' Julie Buxbaum showcases the emotions of someone who has experienced a life-threatening event. Just because Abby's tumor turned out to be benign does not mean it never existed – surviving a terrorist attack does not mean that the assault leaves the victim unscathed (Buxbaum, 2019: 279).

A prevalent fear haunting victims of violence and their relatives is the dread of not recognizing a loved one after a separation marked by tragedy or of being unrecognized themselves. Soviet and American psychologist Alexander Etkind suggests that physical non-recognition indicates a breach in the consolidating ties that bind family members. This leads individuals influenced by trauma to experience confusion, solitude, and guilt (Etkind, 2013).

After the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the inability to identify people in news photographs became a real issue for the relatives of the victims. This problem of unrecognizability underpins the detective plotline in Julie Buxbaum's "Hope and Other Punch Lines." Noah Stern aims to locate all the people captured in the famed Baby Hope photo, assuming one of them might be his father. Although Jason Stern's death was officially recognized by the court following an investigation, Noah holds out hope that his father, who had business in Manhattan on that day, survived the attack.

Abby's grandmother suffers from early signs of dementia. Abby is troubled by the idea that during their reunion, her Grandma might not recognize her. In their encounter, both the grandmother and granddaughter seem to be bidding each other a silent goodbye. The grandmother braces herself for worsening dementia symptoms and impending death while Abby prepares herself

for her own end due to a cough, a symptom she associates with the 9/11 syndrome. Both yearn to remember each other as they appeared that day.

The theme of memory loss runs throughout Julie Buxbaum's work. Abby's dementia-afflicted grandmother asks for a photograph to verify a life episode she cannot recall. Abby tries to imagine what it is like to be someone who understands their life through pictures and suddenly realizes she is one such person. She does not remember September 11, 2001, since she was just a year old then, but there exists a known photo proving she witnessed the tragedy (Buxbaum, 2019).

In Gae Polisner's "The Memory of Things," the protagonist Kyle embarks on an investigation to identify a girl he rescues from an attempted suicide on the Brooklyn Bridge on September 11. Due to traumatic shock, she either cannot recall her name or hides it to avoid going home. Kyle assumes she might be suffering from a specific type of amnesia – dissociative fugue. The author draws parallels between Kyle's interactions with this girl and a story from Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (1948). To jog her memory and uncover her identity, Kyle searches for clues about her school and parents, teaches her rapid memory exercises, takes her around New York in search of familiar places, and even subjects her to a hypnotic session. Over time, in a safe environment and through interactions with Kyle, fragments of her memories start to return (Polisner, 2016).

In the introduction to the collection of essays "Trauma:Points," Sergei Ushakin presents trauma as the "inability to integrate three critical experiences: the experience of what was lived through, the experience of what was articulated, and the experience of what was comprehended" (Ushakin, 2009: 8). For the protagonists of 9/11 literature, the process of signifying trauma is fraught with challenges. Traumatic memories and the words to express them often elude those who are traumatized.

The idea of the fundamental impossibility of representing trauma using natural language also appears in the works of cultural scholars and philosophers. According to Jeffrey Mitchell, for a traumatized individual, the language of mourning becomes 'pseudo-symbolic,' devoid of the means to signify the real experiences of the victim. Verbalizing trauma is only a simulated agreement to participate in a dialogue; in reality, the traumatized do not invest meaning in recounting their tragedy (Mitchell, 1998). As Žižek points out, language simplifies the defined object, reducing it to a single feature (Žižek, 2008). In literature, the search for new ways to express traumatic experience leads to the inclusion of new levels of text in the representation of trauma.

Ushakin emphasizes the discursive nature of Freudian 'amnesia,' the inability to verbally reproduce the sequence of a tragedy's development (Ushakin, 2009: 5–41). He also focuses on the inability to convey, using natural language, the history of trauma inflicted on an individual who does not share a similar traumatic experience. For example, Oscar's grandparents in "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" – both victims of the same tragedy – learn to understand each other without words, but their communication with the outside world is impaired.

In Donna Tartt's novel "The Goldfinch," the protagonist also prefers to communicate with relatives of other tragedy victims. For Theo, Hobie and Pippa become the people who can understand and share his pain. There are questions that only Pippa, another victim of the attack, can answer for Theo, such as: "Did she have nightmares too? Crowd fears? Sweats and panics?" This "edge of giddiness and hysteria" Theo associates with their shared near-death experiences (Tartt, 2014: 197). A consoling scene in the novel "Hope and Other Punch Lines" between Abby and Chuck, both subjects of the Baby Hope photograph, also aims to impress the reader: the two 9/11 survivors seem to understand each other without words.

In the presence of the Other, gaps are revealed as parts of memories that are not absent but are inexpressible, without means for symbolization. Attempting to represent her trauma, Oscar's grandmother from the book "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" embarks on writing her life story. However, Grandma's narrative is consumed by silence. As a result, the book of her life story consists of two thousand blank pages. She intentionally created this empty text, stating, "I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces" (Foer, 2007: 91).

Within the confines of their apartment, Grandma and Grandpa symbolically designate a place for Nothing, a space where each cannot exist. The battle between Nothing and Something in their home mirrors the inner struggle between traumatic memories and the attempt to suppress them: for instance, "the Nothing vase cast a Something shadow," reminding them of past losses (Foer, 2007: 57).

The symbolism of emptiness, as a consequence of trauma, permeates Jonathan Foer's work. Among other photographs in Oscar Shell's album, images evoke the trauma of loss. For example, in the chapter "Googolplex," there is an aerial photo of Manhattan where Central Park is replaced by a vast white rectangle. The absence of Central Park alludes to stories told by Oscar's father, the loss of his father, and the inherent impossibility of genuinely representing traumatic experience.

The novel is filled with silences, narrative gaps, and semantic lacunae reinforced by the text's structure and visual elements. The empty coffin that Oscar and Grandpa open in the novel's last chapter symbolizes this inability to convey traumatic experience. Even though Oscar knew beforehand that his father's body would not be inside, he is struck by the extreme emptiness of the coffin. Oscar and Grandpa fill the coffin with letters to the father, expressing their love and trying to fill the void in their hearts.

Traumatic silence in Foer's novel manifests itself in a tangible way through the muteness of Grandpa Thomas. He loses his ability to speak as a result of psychological trauma. The first word he cannot voice aloud becomes the name of his beloved Anna.

In Don DeLillo's novel "Falling Man," the ten-year-old protagonist, Justin, starts to speak using only monosyllabic words and increasingly falls silent. His parents make jokes that he is entering a new developmental stage. "How do you know the monosyllables were really a school thing? Maybe not," he says (DeLillo, 2011: 41). "Because maybe it was Bill Lawton. Because maybe Bill Lawton talks in monosyllables" (DeLillo, 2011: 41). An overwhelming fear of the mythical figure Bill Lawton pushes the boy into silence.

Muteness as a symbol of the impossibility of articulating traumatic experience is also encountered in Gae Polisner's novel "The Memory of Things." As a panicking crowd flees Manhattan, Kyle notices a girl dressed as a bird with large feathered wings on her back on the Brooklyn Bridge. The girl cannot escape memories of the tragedy that profoundly shocked her. All she can think of are bodies, smoke, glass, metal, and ash (Polisner, 2016).

When the thirteen-year-old protagonist of the novel "The Goldfinch" enters the antiques shop "Hobart and Blackwell" to hand over the ring he received from a dying old man in the museum, he cannot put into words the events that took place at the explosion site. "It wasn't something you could summarize, stuff that didn't make sense and didn't have a story, the dust, the alarms, how he'd held my hand, a whole lifetime there just the two of us, mixed-up sentences and names of towns and people I hadn't heard of. Broken wires sparking" (Tartt, 2014: 62).

Interestingly, unlike other authors whose characters are direct victims of September 11 and suffer from traumatic silence, unable to verbally express their trauma, Philip Beard in "Dear Zoe" imposes on his fifteen-year-old protagonist, Tess DeNunzio, who loses her sister for a different

reason on the same day, not muteness but symbolic deafness. At the moment of the tragedy, Tess seems to lose her hearing. She cannot hear her own footsteps on the lawn as she runs to the accident site, does not hear the radio in the car that hit Zoe, and does not hear the impact or the sound of the falling body. Only after a long journey of processing her loss, on the same lawn in front of her sleeping home, the sounds of the nighttime street do return to Tess (Beard, 2006).

The temporary or actual orphanhood of characters is a common tradition in children's adventure stories. According to A. Odysheva, "entry into the Magical land with parents is forbidden" (Odysheva, 2011: 216). In works by Ch. Dickens, M. Twain, F. Baum, J. Barrie, C. Lewis, and others, child protagonists often find themselves separated from their parents. These children are either taken care of by substitute adult guardians (like tutors, nannies, or teachers), with whom they share fragile trust, or they are left entirely on their own. Typically, away from parental care is where their literary adventures begin. Often, the child's main objective, as they overcome fears, dangers, and challenges, is to reconnect with their parents and return home.

In 9/11 literature, the theme of orphanhood becomes particularly prevalent, sometimes even more intense than in 19th-century English classics. The motif of a child-hero's emotional detachment from parents is also evident. The strained communication with parents, exacerbated by the traumatic situation, intensifies this universal characteristic of childhood in 9/11 literature.

Following the tragic death of their mothers, the protagonists in the novels like Joyce Maynard's "The Usual Rules" and Donna Tartt's "The Goldfinch" are forced to move in with fathers they were never close to, facing a rapid growing up (Maynard, 2003; Tartt, 2014). Much like the traditional rites of initiation described by Vladimir Propp in "The Historical Roots of the Fairy Tale" (1949) (Propp, 2015), while grappling with the trauma of loss, these heroes find 'helpers' or elder companions who guide them through

their challenging journey: in Foer's novel, it is Thomas Schell; in Rogers's story¹, it is Mr. McNight; in Polisner's novel, it is Uncle Matt, and so on.

Some young protagonists in 9/11 literature lose their parents directly due to the terror attacks, as seen in "The Usual Rules" and "The Goldfinch." Others experience an emotional disconnect from their traumatized parents, who may suppress collective grief or be temporarily absent, as depicted in novels like "Dear Zoe," "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," "Falling Man," "All We Have Left," and "Truthers." The trauma of loss and resulting loneliness drive these adolescents towards abandoning school, associating with marginalized peers, committing minor crimes, experimenting with drugs, and eventually running away from home. Reviving historical forms of realism and reminiscent of *bildungsroman*, the authors like Joyce Maynard and Donna Tartt delve deeply into the world of a child bereft of family and their challenging path to adulthood.

Tensions in relationships with parents degrade the quality of communication between adult and child characters. This is further complicated by a widespread tendency to shield children from the details of the 9/11 tragedy, viewing it as potentially traumatic information, and by the challenge of verbally expressing traumatic experiences. When adults withhold the truth, it subjects the child characters to secondary traumatization: the trauma of not knowing. American historian and cultural theorist, trauma studies expert Cathy Caruth identifies this problem of not knowing as the cause behind persistent fantasies and recurring nightmares about experienced trauma. Unanswered trauma-related questions plague the individual through endless repetition (Caruth, 2009).

In Don DeLillo's novel "Falling Man," the attempts of adults to hide the truth about the tragedy from children encounter an

¹ Rogers, T. (2014). *Eleven*, Alto Nido Press, Los Angeles, USA. (In English)

unexpected form of resistance from the community of children. The children create their own version of the 9/11 events using the fragmented information they have gleaned. Even when presented with the full facts, they remain steadfast in their own myth. The boy remains convinced that despite the planes crashing, the towers did not fall – believing it to be a lie (Delillo, 2011).

In the novel “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” Oskar knows that his Dad disappeared and that his mother and Grandma buried an empty coffin. His mother insists that the coffin houses his father’s spirit, but Oskar demands the truth. As a result, Oskar keeps his investigation into the details of his father’s death a secret.

In Wendy Mills’ novel “All We Have Left,” the protagonist, a teenage girl named Jesse, has a father who not only remains silent about his elder son who died on 9/11 but also refuses to visit the Ground Zero memorial. Jesse’s father never speaks of Travis aloud and does not allow anyone to discuss his death. An honest conversation with his daughter and revealing the mystery of Travis’s last moments not only helps Jesse but also enables her father to begin healing (Mills, 2017).

The ‘silence’ of American culture regarding the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, faced criticism from the American authors whose works were published in the 2000s. By the 2010s, writers began to shift towards a stance of openness.

While 21st-century writers do not fundamentally question the possibility of overcoming the aftermath of a collective traumatic experience, they see potential in life after trauma. The 9/11 literature does not offer a fantastical healing for the traumatized individual because there are no ways to turn back time, resurrect the dead, or compensate for the loss. However, the 9/11 authors showcase to readers positive methods of engaging with trauma, outline therapeutic techniques, and present ways of adaptation in a post-traumatic world.

One method of processing traumatic experiences is verbalizing them, which can be accomplished through various coding systems. Collective mourning is expressed in the creation of documentary texts, artistic works, as well as various memorial objects and traditions. In Geoffrey Girard’s novel, Katie Wallace, who lost her mother, goes to the Flight 93 memorial, and that becomes a therapeutic experience for her (Girard, 2017).

Jeffrey Mitchell suggests using writing as a therapeutic tool for treating PTSD. Writing letters to deceased relatives helps the patient detach from the departed and finally accept that the missing person is no longer nearby (Mitchell, 1998). In 9/11 literature, writing often emerges as a way of processing trauma. Weeks after his father’s death, Oscar from Foer’s novel begins writing letters, which eases the weight on his heart (Foer, 2006). In the finale of Tartt’s “The Goldfinch,” the protagonist confesses to readers that the entire novel, written from his perspective, originated from letters he wrote to his mother (Tartt, 2014). Beard’s “Dear Zoe” is written in an epistolary style and consists of a series of letters from Tess DeNuncio to her younger sister, Zoe Gladstone, who died in a car crash. Tess feels that the best therapy for her grief would be an open conversation with a loved one (Beard, 2006).

One of the therapeutic means for interaction with trauma that contemporary 9/11 writers describe is the articulation of trauma through ironic stand-up comedy texts. Being both ironic and sincere is the innovation of the writers of the new era, writes Luke Turner² (Queen Mob’s Teahouse, 2015). Notably, American culture has taken a significant amount of time after the traumatic event to approach the tragedy with irony. For example, Julie Buxbaum’s novel “Hope and Other Punch Lines” was published in 2019, 18 years after the attack. One of the characters

² Queen Mob’s Teahouse (2015). Metamodernism: a brief introduction, available at: <http://queenmobs.com/2015/01/metamodernism-brief-introduction/> (Accessed 23 August 2023). (In English)

is Noah Stern, a young stand-up comedian who processes his psychological traumas by turning them into jokes. His main goal in comedy is to write a perfect joke about September 11, 2001: “I could laugh or I could cry. I choose to laugh” (Buxbaum, 2019: 295).

The fantasy world as the basis of the child’s perception architectonics

Russian psychologist Maria Osorina conducted an extensive study on children’s subculture, presenting her findings in the book “The Secret World of Children in the Space of the Adult World.” She endeavored to understand the contemporary child’s world model as a unique worldview paradigm that operates within adult culture but is starkly different from it. Observations of children, studying their verbal and material cultural creations, and summarizing information from adult interviews allowed Osorina to identify the foundations of children’s subculture. “Within the world of adults,” Osorina writes, “children construct the space of a child’s ‘cosmos’ that aligns with their logic and needs” (Osorina, 2019: 38). Universal characteristics of childhood, such as imaginative multiple realities, being closed off from adults, secretiveness – usually explained by features of a child’s psychological activity, like vivid imagination, eagerness to explore, inclination to magical thinking and naive causality, fragmented memories – are also evident in 9/11 literature.

According to Aleksandr Nenilin, from a negative perspective on childhood, children’s fantasy appears as a neurosis, jeopardizing the character’s mental well-being. From a positive perspective, it is seen as a “source of creativity,” providing the hero with the strength to overcome challenges (Nenilin, 2006: 111–113). 9/11 literature abounds with examples of both negative and positive influences of childlike imagination on a hero’s trauma absorption process.

In Foer’s novel, Oscar immerses himself in a world of fantasy, even if it causes him pain: he constantly imagines scenarios of his father’s death. Trauma pushes Oscar to frequently dive into nightmarish worlds and

experience the fear of death. Oscar finds himself walking across New York on foot because he is frightened of public transport, seeing it as an obvious target for terrorists, and avoiding the apartments on higher floors because he mistrusts tall buildings. Overcoming his fear and eventually climbing the Empire State Building, Oscar vividly envisions his own demise in a terrorist attack (Foer, 2006).

In Joyce Maynard’s novel “The Usual Rules,” the protagonist Wendy does not want to think about what her mother endured when a plane crashed into the tower. Nevertheless, these thoughts intrude on their own, especially at night (Maynard, 2003).

Children’s folklore, like superstition, myth-making, cognitive distortions, we consider as a way to interact with traumatic experiences. Traumatized children often fantasize about changing the past to resurrect deceased relatives, especially when their deaths are violent. Younger children adopt magical thinking, while teenagers shoulder guilt, believing they could have prevented the tragedy.

For example, in “The Usual Rules,” Louie hopes a magical wand will bring his mother back. But when he realizes it is impossible, he matures, abandoning childhood behaviors. In “The Goldfinch,” Theodore frequently revisits the day his mother died, wondering if slight past changes could have saved her. Meanwhile, “Falling Man” by Don DeLillo showcases children who re-imagine global events like 9/11 (Delillo, 2011). Their fantasies deeply impact the adults and become central to the novel’s themes. In Foer’s novel, the fantasy world erupts into reality in the form of the legend of the Sixth Borough (Foer, 2006). According to E. Siegel, the legend imparts to Foer’s novel the features of magical realism (Siegel, 2012).

Dreams symbolize trauma’s lasting impact. Cathy Caruth suggests such dreams persist because trauma defies time boundaries (Caruth, 2009). In 9/11 literature, dreams provide a window into the characters’ mental state, showing their healing journey.

In “The Goldfinch,” the main character’s PTSD is evident through vivid nightmares, particularly the one filled with corpses. Meanwhile, Joyce Maynard’s narrative uses a symbolic dream to portray Wendy’s loss of her mother, emphasizing the healing power of imagination. Wendy’s dream takes her to a “Peter Pan” show where her mother, playing Peter, vanishes into the sky (Maynard, 2003), symbolizing her death. Wendy’s vivid imagination aids in her grief process.

Drawing from the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, contemporary 9/11 literature moves from contrasting the world of adults and the world of children to a comparative approach. James MacDowell observes that the ambiguities inherent in modern art cause characters to position themselves between naiveté and experience (MacDowell, 2017). Michial Farmer characterizes the worldview of the metamodern generation as informed naivety and pragmatic idealism (Farmer). Ekaterina Nechaeva describes the new structure of feeling with a metaphor of children’s play, where a child is aware of the ‘artificiality’ of the play’s reality but continues to play (Nechaeva, 2021: 199). Mikhail Epstein associates metamodernism with the “will to utopia,” which supports idea of the reality reflection through the motif of children’s play (Epstein, 2019: 300).

James MacDowell highlights a trend in modern art towards a model of decoration and “toy-like” qualities (MacDowell, 2017). While this deliberate artificiality is most evident in the cinema, 9/11 literature also showcases a similar model. For instance, the ending of the novel “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close” formatted like a flipbook, directs us to the inner world of a child expressing traumatic experiences through play.

At the end of Foer’s novel, Grandma has a dream where time flows backward, and the bombs are retracted into the planes above Dresden. Similarly, Oscar reverses the pictures of a falling man, who could have been his father, making it appear as though

the person in the photo is soaring upward. Foer proposes an unconventional method of assimilating traumatic experience, the so-called “correction of reality” (Ryabtsev, 2018: 19).

Among the characteristics of the worldview of “metamodernist personality” bearers, Anatoly Grebenyuk highlights the non-opposition of truth-seeking to the existence of belief and an optimistic response to any crisis through ‘as if’ way of thinking³. Thus, in terms of metamodernism, Jonathan Foer’s flipbook, which crowns the novel, represents a manifestation of truth that cannot be truth: the falling man would have flown back into the tower, and “the smoke would have poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of” and “we would have been safe” (Foer, 2006: 194).

Conclusion

To recreate the traumatization of the child-hero and the child-narrator, the 9/11 writers use various means of metonymic assimilation of the fiction text to the speech of the traumatized person. Techniques include fragmented narratives, semantic gaps, and shifts in the narrator-hero and chronotopic locus. At the symbolic level of the trauma representation, the writers turn to the image of emptiness as a synonym for loss, which is reproduced at various levels of the text and is depicted in multiple ways – from blank pages in Foer’s work to the theme of amnesia in Polisner’s character. Using unreliable narrators, the authors infuse their works with elements of magical realism, drawing from the boundless creativity of a child’s imagination, which is portrayed both as a source of creativity and as neurosis. The fantasy world, recreated with the help of children’s imagination, contributes to the disclosure of the inner world of the character and reflects the process of child interaction with trauma. Contemporary 9/11 literature, influenced by metamodernism, explores the

³ Metamodern: Journal on Metamodernism (2017). Basics of metamodernist psychology, available at: <https://metamodernizm.ru/metamodernism-psychology/> (Accessed 23 November 2021). (In Russian)

juxtaposition of childhood naiveté and adult experience, using playful and ‘toy-like’ artistic methods to convey complex emotions and realities, especially in grappling with traumatic experiences.

Despite the PTSD symptoms portrayed, a recurring theme in 9/11 literature is the therapeutic journey toward healing. While complete recovery from such profound mental wounds may be out of reach, these works emphasize the challenges and coping mechanisms characters use to navigate their trauma. The young protagonists of these stories, despite their youth, confront intense, mature emotions and experiences leading to accelerated growth and maturity.

Appealing to the traditional motifs associated with childhood, the 9/11 literature creates the image of a child traumatized by the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The fluid boundary between children’s fantasy and reality provides the writers with a canvas to create worlds that blend fact with fiction. Through these youthful lenses, the literature offers a multifaceted perspective of the consequences of the September 11 attacks, capturing the profound impact on both its direct victims and the society that bore witness.

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