

Trauma, Transformation, and the Fractured Identity in Pierce Brown's Red Rising

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Abstract: *This research paper examines the themes of trauma, transformation, and fractured identity in Red Rising by Pierce Brown. The novel is set on Mars, where society is strictly divided into a colour-based caste system. Each colour represents a specific social role. The Gold class holds power, wealth, and authority, while the Red class and other lower groups suffer from oppression, exploitation, and injustice. Through this system, the novel highlights social inequality and the control imposed on marginalized people.*

The main character, Darrow, is a Red Helldiver who initially believes that his work is helping to prepare Mars for future human life. However, he later discovers that Mars is already colonized and that the Reds have been deceived and exploited. This realization marks a turning point in his life, initiating his ideological awakening and allowing him to recognize the main truths of his society.

A major traumatic event in the novel is the execution of Darrow's wife, Eo, for protesting against the system. Eo represents hope, resistance, and the desire for freedom. Her death deeply affects Darrow emotionally and psychologically, forcing him to recognize the cruelty and injustice of the ruling system.

This trauma becomes the catalyst for Darrow's transformation. His grief and anger motivate him to join a revolutionary movement that aims to revolutionize the oppressive system. During this journey, Darrow develops a fractured identity because he must live as both a Red (his true identity) and a Gold (his assumed identity). This creates internal conflict and confusion about who he really is.

In the end, Darrow becomes a revolutionary figure. His personal trauma motivates him to fight against injustice and work toward social change. The novel shows how trauma can lead not only to suffering but also to transformation and the reconstruction of identity.

Keywords: Trauma, Transformation, Fractured Identity, Execution,

I. INTRODUCTION

Pierce Brown is a modern American novelist. He is best known for his popular science fiction series, which began with Red Rising. He was born on January 28, 1988, in Denver, Colorado. Brown studied political science and economics, which significantly influenced his understanding of power structures, governance, and social inequality, central themes in his writing. His debut novel, Red Rising (2014), gained worldwide acclaim for its engaging narrative, complex characters, and its depiction of a rigid social hierarchy on Mars based on a system of 'Colours'.

Red Rising by Pierce Brown is a dystopian novel that shows social inequality, oppression, and resistance. The story is set in the future on Mars, where society is divided into different groups based on colours. Golds rule the society, and Reds are at the lowest level, forced to work hard based on lies. The novel not only shows social injustice but also explains its effect on the human mind. The main character, Darrow, faces many emotional and psychological struggles. These experiences fundamentally transform his sense of identity. His journey shows how trauma can break a person's identity but also help them grow and transform.



II. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To study the representation of trauma in Red Rising.
- 2) To analyse Darrow's transformation from an oppressed miner to a revolutionary leader.
- 3) To explore the psychological conflict created by Darrow's dual identity.
- 4) To understand the relationship between trauma and social rebellion in dystopian literature.
- 5) To study how oppressive social structures influence identity formation

III. TRAUMA

Trauma Theory developed as an interdisciplinary field influenced by psychology, psychiatry, and literary studies. Its roots lie in the work of Sigmund Freud, who argued that traumatic experiences are often repressed and later return through dreams, anxiety, or repetitive behaviour. The concept gained importance after World War I and World War II, when trauma came to be understood as both an individual and collective experience.

In the late twentieth century, Trauma Theory expanded into literary studies, distinguishing between personal trauma (individual suffering) and social trauma (collective suffering caused by oppression and injustice).

A major contribution to modern Trauma Theory comes from Cathy Caruth. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), she defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that is not fully understood at the moment it occurs but returns later through repetition. Trauma disrupts identity and is difficult to express, making it a "crisis of representation," while also linking personal suffering to broader social and historical forces.

These ideas can be seen in Darrow in *Red Rising*. After the execution of Eo, Darrow is unable to process his loss immediately, and the memory of her death continues to shape his thoughts and actions. His experience reflects both personal trauma and the collective suffering of the oppressed Red class.

IV. SOCIAL TRAUMA

In *Red Rising*, social trauma shows how the Red community is controlled and deceived by the Gold society. Darrow is a 16-year-old boy from the Red caste. The lowest level of society on Mars. He works as a Helldiver in the mine of Lykos. His job is extremely dangerous. He believes that his hard work and noble sacrifice made Mars livable for future generations. This belief leads to their suffering because the Reds are unaware that the Golds are lying to them.

The Golds deceive the Reds by creating a false reality. They make them believe that the surface of Mars is still uninhabitable, while in reality, it has already been terraformed and is being enjoyed by the higher classes. This lie becomes the foundation of social trauma because the Gold controls not only actions but also thoughts and beliefs of the Red. Darrow expresses that: "I am a Helldiver of Lykos. I am a Red. I am a slave." This shows how deeply deception has affected his mind. He accepts his suffering as natural, reflecting the success of Gold manipulation.

The Golds also deceive society through a false reward system. They introduce competitions like the Laurel to motivate the Reds. Darrow and his community believe that if they work hard, they will be rewarded. Darrow said, "We are the best. We will win the Laurel."

However, this is another illusion. Even when the Reds perform best, the Golds manipulate the results and deny them victory. This repeated cycle of hope and betrayal creates emotional pain and frustration not just for Darrow but for the entire society. It becomes a form of collective trauma, where everyone shares the same disappointment and helplessness.

Another example of deception is isolation and a lack of knowledge. The Reds are kept underground and are never allowed to see the real world. They are not given education or access to the truth. Because of this, they cannot question the system. The Golds control information, which helps them maintain power over generations. The reality of this manipulation is revealed in the line: "They let us fight, let us dream, but they control it all." This shows that even the dreams and ambitions of the Reds are controlled; the system gives them false hope but never real freedom.

The most powerful moment of deception is when Darrow discovers the truth. He states that: "There is no green land. There is no dream. Only lies." This realization is extremely traumatic. Darrow understands that his life, his struggles,



and even his dreams were based on lies. This moment represents not only his personal trauma but also the hidden truth of the entire Red society.

Finally, Darrow recognizes the true nature of the system. And he said that “We are not their children. We are their slaves.” This line shows his awakening. He begins to see how the Golds have used deception, false rewards, and control to exploit both him and his people.

V. PERSONAL TRAUMA

In *Red Rising*, the execution of Eo is the most vital turning point in Darrow’s life and the beginning of his psychological trauma. At the start, Darrow is a simple and obedient worker who accepts the difficult life given by the Society. He believes his suffering has meaning and does not question the system. However, everything changes when Eo rebels by singing a forbidden song. Because of this, she is publicly executed, and this moment completely breaks down Darrow’s understanding of his world. It is not only a personal loss but also reveals the shocking cruelty and injustice of society. After this event, Darrow feels deep pain and anger, often called “Red Rage,” and his old beliefs are destroyed. He begins to think about fighting against the system that caused her death.

Eo’s last words, “Live for more,” become very important in shaping Darrow’s new identity and purpose. These words inspire him to move beyond simple survival and seek a better life. His pain slowly turns into strength and determination. Darrow accepts Eo’s dream as his own, which he expresses when he says, “She was the dreamer. I was the dream.” This shows that. He now feels responsible for continuing what she started. Because of this transformation, Darrow changes from a Helldiver into the “Reaper,” a strong leader and symbol of rebellion. In the beginning, he is driven by revenge and the desire for justice for Eo. But over time, his thinking grows, and he understands that the fight is not only for the dead but also for the living. He realizes that real change needs courage and action, as shown in the idea that “Freedom is not given. It is taken.” Thus, Eo’s death becomes the spark that starts Darrow’s journey. Her memory continues to guide him and gives him strength, even when he faces pain, struggle, and difficult choices.

VI. THE CARVING OF A REAPER: DARROW’S TRANSFORMATION

In *Red Rising*, Darrow of Lykos changes from a poor Red miner into a powerful Gold. This transformation happens after the death of his wife, which becomes the turning point in his life. He joins the Sons of Ares, who want to destroy the unfair system. To do this, they change Darrow completely so he can live like a Gold and fight from inside.

The process is called the “Carving.” It is very painful and changes his whole body. His bones, muscles, and face are rebuilt to make him stronger and look like a Gold. After this, he becomes tall, powerful, and almost unrecognizable. Mickey explains this transformation by saying, “I could have made you a king... But I have made you a god.” This shows how extreme and unnatural the change is.

But the real struggle is inside Darrow. He has to forget his old life, his language, and even his family. He must act like a Gold all the time. This creates a deep conflict within him because he is still a Red at heart. He himself says, “Everything is a lie... Everything but the rage.” This shows his pain and anger.

In the end, Darrow’s transformation proves that the power of the Golds is not natural. It is created by control and resources. His journey shows that even a low-born person can become strong and challenge the system. His change is not just physical; it becomes a symbol of rebellion and hope.

VII. FRACTURED IDENTITY

In *Red Rising*, the idea of fractured identity is clearly shown through Darrow O’Lykos. His identity is divided because he is forced to live as both a Red and a Gold at the same time.

After the Carving, Darrow’s body becomes Gold, but his heart and memories remain Red. This creates a deep inner conflict, and he often feels like “a lie” because he is always hiding his true self. A strong example of this fractured identity is the novel, when Darrow is forced to kill Julian au Bellona. Julian is innocent, yet Darrow must act like a



ruthless Gold to survive. This moment shows how he is pushed to become the very thing he hates. As he admits, “I am a Red... but I am a Gold in my heart’s dark places.”

Another important event is when Darrow lives and works with the Golds at the Institute. He forms real friendships with them, even though they are his enemies. This creates guilt and confusion because he feels he is betraying the Reds and Eo’s dream. These events show that Darrow cannot fully belong to either world. He is not completely Red, and not truly Gold. His identity remains broken and divided. This example shows that his fractured identity becomes one of the central struggles of his life.

VIII. TRAUMA AND REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

In Red Rising, Darrow becomes a hero, leader, and reformer through his actions, intelligence, and vision for change. At the Institute, he does not follow the traditional Gold system of leadership, which is based on power and domination. Instead, he creates a new style of leadership based on unity, trust, and cooperation. He treats Sevro and the Howlers as equals, not as servants, and builds strong relationships with them. Because of this, his followers remain loyal to him and support him in every situation.

Darrow also proves himself as a leader through his intelligence and strategy. He does not rely only on physical strength but also thinks differently from others. During the capture of Olympus, he understands that the system is unfair, and instead of following the rules, he breaks them by uniquely climbing the mountain. This shows his courage, creativity, and determination. His background as a Red helps him to work harder and think in new ways, which gives him an advantage over others.

At the same time, Darrow becomes a powerful symbol known as the “Reaper.” This identity makes him both respected and feared. His confidence and strong actions inspire others to believe in him and follow his leadership. He brings people together and creates unity among them, which is very different from the selfish nature of other Gold leaders. Thus, in Red Rising, Darrow emerges as a hero, leader, and reformer. He challenges the existing system, introduces new values of unity and loyalty, and proves that true leadership is not about controlling others, but about guiding them toward a common goal and a better future.

IX. CONCLUSION

In Red Rising, identity is shown as something that can change through pain and experience. Darrow’s journey from a Helldiver to the “Reaper” proves that trauma is not only suffering but also a force that shapes a new identity. The cruel system of the Golds controls the Reds by creating a false reality, keeping them trapped in ignorance and hope. However, the execution of Eo becomes the turning point in Darrow’s life, pushing him to fight for a greater purpose and to “live for more.” As Darrow undergoes the Carving and enters the Gold world, he develops a fractured identity. He must act like a Gold while still feeling like a Red inside, which creates constant inner conflict. Despite this struggle, it helps him understand both sides of society. In the end, Darrow becomes a different kind of leader. He does not follow the Gold idea of power and control but believes in unity, trust, and sacrifice. His journey shows that even though trauma can break a person, it can also rebuild them into someone stronger. Darrow’s fractured identity becomes his greatest strength, allowing him to lead change and work toward a better future.

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