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Psychological Trauma and Institutional Neglect in Barbara Kingsolver's Demon Copperhead

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The Author writes the original draft, validation, methodology, investigation, analysis, data curation, and conceptualization.

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* as a contemporary trauma novel that links psychological injury to institutional neglect. The study argues that *Demon's* trauma is not the result of one isolated catastrophe but the cumulative effect of poverty, parental loss, foster-care instability, exploitative labor, medicalized pain, opioid exposure, and the failures of systems that claim to protect vulnerable children. Unlike readings that treat the novel primarily as a Dickensian adaptation or an opioid-crisis narrative, this article foregrounds the connection between damaged interiority and institutional structures. Drawing on literary trauma theory, recent scholarship on the opioid novel, and current research on foster care and placement instability, the paper shows how *Demon's* first-person narration converts social abandonment into testimony. The analysis also integrates selected short textual quotations from the novel to ground its claims in close reading.

Keywords : Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*, psychological trauma, institutional neglect

الصدمة النفسية والإهمال المؤسسي في رواية "ديمون كوبرهيد" لباربرا كينغسولفر

قصي فارس عراقك / جامعة تكريت / كلية الآداب / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية رواية "ديمون كوبرهيد" لباربرا كينغسولفر باعتبارها رواية معاصرة تتناول الصدمة النفسية، وتربط بين الأذى النفسي والإهمال المؤسسي. وتجادل الدراسة بأن صدمة ديمون ليست نتاج كارثة معزولة، بل هي نتيجة تراكمية للفقر، وفقدان أحد الوالدين، وعدم استقرار نظام الرعاية البديلة، والعمل الاستغلالي، والألم المعالج طبياً، والتعرض للمواد الأفيونية، وإخفاقات الأنظمة التي تدعي حماية الأطفال المستضعفين. وخلافاً للقراءات التي تتعامل مع الرواية في المقام الأول باعتبارها اقتباساً من أعمال ديكنز أو سرداً لأزمة المواد الأفيونية، تُبرز هذه المقالة العلاقة بين المعاناة النفسية والهياكل المؤسسية. وبالاستناد إلى نظرية الصدمة الأدبية، والدراسات الحديثة حول روايات المواد الأفيونية، والبحوث الحالية حول الرعاية البديلة وعدم استقرار أماكن الإقامة، تُظهر الورقة كيف يُحوّل سرد ديمون بضمير المتكلم الشعور بالهجر الاجتماعي إلى شهادة. كما يدمج التحليل اقتباسات نصية قصيرة مختارة من الرواية لتدعيم ادعاءاته بقراءة متأنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : باربرا كينغسولفر، ديمون كوبرهيد، الصدمة النفسية، الإهمال المؤسسي.

.1Introduction

1.1Background of the Study

Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* is an important work in contemporary American fiction since the author manages to revitalize the classic orphan story for the era of opioid addiction, unstable childhood, rural poverty, and lack of administrative care. The novel published in 2022 transposes the Dickensian power of social criticism onto the Southern Appalachia landscape and uses the life of *Demon Copperhead* whose real name is *Damon Fields* as a case study for examining the social consequences of failures in care (Kingsolver, 2022.)

The wider context in which *Demon Copperhead* should be examined is the rise of literature that examines the opioid problem from the angle of a socially constructed phenomenon rather than an isolated individual failure. Huehls points to the appearance of a new kind of "opioid novels" that challenge the causal logic of the opioid epidemic via literary forms. In such a way, it becomes easier to place Kingsolver's novel in the context of recent American literature that discusses addiction as a structural phenomenon (Huehls, 2022.)

It can also be argued that *Demon Copperhead* needs to be discussed through the prism of administrative techniques that define the conditions of vulnerable lives. The discussion of the "paperwork of poverty" presented by Liu is particularly useful since the author demonstrates in her novel how foster care files, medical prescriptions, school decisions, and welfare processes transform the child into an understandable subject to institutions but do not necessarily make him safe. In such a way, this study discusses the novel as a trauma narrative and an administrative critique (Liu, 2026.)

1.2Statement of the Problem

Demon Copperhead has attracted much attention as a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and a rewriting of *David Copperfield*, the connection between *Demon's* psychological damage and institutional processes that surround him has not yet been critically analyzed. An intertextual interpretation of the novel might reduce it to the status of adaptation, whereas a psychological approach risks removing *Demon's* psychological injuries from the social processes that exacerbate them. Thus, the issue discussed in this study is the necessity to unite three

aspects – trauma, bureaucracy, and social abandonment – into one analytical paradigm (Liu, 2026.)

One more problem is that the process of Demon's becoming addicted to drugs might be misunderstood as his personal deterioration instead of being interpreted as the result of social and economic forces. Recent research on Demon Copperhead has shown that the opioid crisis in Appalachia is presented in the novel as the combination of individualistic and structural causes of the issue. In response to this tension, this paper argues that Demon's drug addiction is both psychological symptom and institutional effect

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this project is to explore the depiction of psychological trauma in Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* and to illustrate how this trauma arises out of neglect by institutions.

The study pursues five particular purposes: first, to investigate the portrayal of trauma in childhood, through the experiences of loss of mother, poverty, and insecurity; second, to explore foster care as an institution of supposed protection that can actually create additional damage; third, to understand addiction as both personal tragedy and structural symptom; fourth, to analyze Demon's first-person narrative as testimony and partial healing; and fifth, to show how the book rewrites contemporary trauma literature in shifting its focus from the individual disaster to institutional trauma.

By following these purposes, the study will result in a publishable interpretation that combines close reading with recent scholarship on trauma, foster care, opioid literature, and Appalachian social crisis.

1.4 Research Questions

.1How does Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* represent psychological trauma through childhood abandonment, maternal loss, poverty, and emotional insecurity?

.2In what ways does institutional neglect shape Demon's wounded identity?

.3How does the foster-care system function in the novel as a site of protection in theory and injury in practice?

1.5Significance of the Study

The importance of the study rests in its attempt to combine theories of literary trauma, current opioid-fiction analysis, and institutional critique in an analysis of an important recent American novel.

From the point of view of literary criticism, the importance of the study can be found in its contribution to the debate about trauma fiction through the demonstration of how Kingsolver's novel complicates theories that focus only on belated or unspeakable memories. Demon's trauma is not merely delayed and fragmented – it is visible, repetitive, and institutionalized in systems of care that do not care.

From the perspective of current American studies, the importance of the research can be seen in its analysis of Appalachia as a central site rather than a stereotype or a backdrop, where economic abandonment, medical exploitation, failure of foster-care system, and social stigmatization intersect.

From the point of view of ethical criticism, the importance of the study is that it understands Demon's narration as a testimony.

1.6Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study will focus exclusively on analyzing psychological trauma and institutional neglect in Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*. Specifically, it will analyze childhood trauma, experience of being in the foster care system, addiction and voice in the novel.

While the study recognizes the fact that *Demon Copperhead* is in part based on Dickens's *David Copperfield*, it is not an intertextual comparison of the two works. The reference to Dickens's work is made only when it helps explain how the orphan narrative is reimagined and critiqued in the light of institutional poverty in Kingsolver's novel.

The study is a literary one. Where necessary, it uses the findings from recent research regarding the problems of foster care and opioid crisis if this helps in understanding *Demon Copperhead*. However, the purpose of this study is not a policy evaluation of the child welfare system or the systems for addiction recovery.

Another limitation of the study is that it will use short excerpts from the novel rather than large textual quotes.

1.7concept of Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma refers to psychic injury caused by overwhelming experience that disrupts emotional security, memory, identity, and trust.

In this study, the term refers to Demon's cumulative exposure to loss, hunger, shame, displacement, bodily injury, addiction, and institutional failure (Caruth, 1996.)

Institutional neglect refers to the failure of formal or socially recognized systems to provide protection, recognition, and care to vulnerable individuals. In *Demon Copperhead*, the term includes failures of foster care, schooling, medicine, sports culture, and community responsibility (Liu, 2026.)

Cumulative trauma refers to repeated and layered injury that develops over time rather than through a single catastrophic event. Demon's trauma is cumulative because each experience of loss, displacement, and neglect is added to previous wounds (Balaev, 2014.)

Foster care refers to the child-welfare system that places children in substitute homes when biological families cannot safely care for them. In this study, foster care is examined as both a protective promise and a structure of potential instability (Maguire et al., 2024.)

Narrative recovery refers to the partial process through which a traumatized narrator organizes painful experience, reclaims interpretive authority, and resists erasure. The term does not imply complete healing, but rather movement toward meaning and survival (LaCapra, 2001.)

Witnessing refers to the ethical act of narrating, reading, or receiving traumatic experience in a way that acknowledges both suffering and the conditions that produce it. Demon's narration invites such an ethical position from the reader (Kaplan, 2005.)

.2Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory forms the first theoretical base for the current analysis since it offers the explanation of the nature of traumatizing experience returning via repetition, memory disruptions, and dislocation of the psyche. The idea offered by Caruth, who defines trauma as the "unclaimed experience" that is still applicable when analyzing literary characters with belated understanding of their life, needs some expansion in the case of Kingsolver's novel, as this literary work requires the theory, which will allow going beyond the traumatic incident itself towards repetition of social trauma (Caruth, 1996.)

Herman's theory is especially important for this study since it is concerned with the connection between trauma and the loss of power and captivity, as well as the destruction of the safety of relations. It

should be stated that recovery in *Demon Copperhead* cannot be analyzed as the personal achievement only, as *Demon* is constantly deprived of the necessary security and reliable attachment for recovery (Herman, 1992.)

The notion introduced by LaCapra of the difference between acting out and working through is important for understanding the peculiarities of the retrospection in the novel. *Demon* demonstrates the tendency to repeat the patterns of abandonment, shame, bodily pain, and dependence; however, he can find the way to organize the past and define the impact on his person via the narration (LaCapra, 2001.)

The contextual approach introduced in the literary theory of trauma by Balaev becomes especially valuable since it resists the attempts to develop universal theories that tend to divide trauma from space, socio-economic status, cultural peculiarities, and concrete conditions of people's lives (Balaev, 2014). *Demon Copperhead* requires a similar contextual analysis since the wounds of *Demon* are inseparable from the context of Appalachia, foster care, its stigmatization, and poverty.

The recent research in trauma fiction is focused on the increasing tendency to connect individual suffering and social context via literary strategies. The discussion of the modern trauma novel by Teliban allows defining trauma fiction as the attempt to make personal injury readable via the narrative strategy (Teliban, 2023.)

Moreover, *Demon Copperhead* belongs to the new genre of opioid fiction, which is currently developing. The idea of the "new opioid novel" introduced by Huehls is relevant for the novel by Kingsolver, as addiction in this case is not the plot device but the atmosphere of the region, which shapes the body, family, and future of people (Huehls, 2022.)

Finally, the more specific criticism of the novel under analysis is related to the interpretation of it within the context of opioid crisis and community vulnerability. Lemon's neuropsychological study of the opioid abuse in the novel is focused on recognition, belonging, and instability of the community, which is another reason to analyze the addiction in Kingsolver's novel as the social and personal condition (Lemon, 2024.)

Current research on children in foster, kinship, and residential care is important for the present framework, as Trubey and other authors state

that evidence-based approaches in care systems have to be focused on mental health, wellbeing, relationships, and trauma-informed practice (Trubey et al., 2024.)

.3Childhood Trauma and the Collapse of Care

In the novel, Demon's precarious position in life is immediately announced with the concise declaration, "First, I got myself born." This statement is short, funny, and defensive, but it also locates the child in a place where survival precedes protection. It seems to be the case that Demon is born into a world of uncertainty (Kingsolver, 2022, p. 1.)

A critical experience of Demon's childhood would be the breakdown of secure attachment. It happens because his mother is loved by him, however, her drug use and mental instability make the care given to him unreliable and uncertain. The novel does not blame the mother in any way, but she is shown to turn out to be a vulnerable caregiver and, as such, become dangerous for the child. This situation is important for traumatized childhood as the attachment of the child is made conditional on his fears (Herman, 1992.)

However, the child's vulnerability is also of a social rather than of a domestic character. The poor status of the family determines the care environment through lack of food, housing, mobility, and institutional support. This means that Demon's childhood becomes an example of how trauma is developed in a context of deprived conditions that have become normal, rather than exceptional (Balaev, 2014.)

This interpretation of Demon's childhood is supported by the research of ACEs because they are rarely individual events, but are always the accumulative result of family instability, neglect, poverty, exposure to drugs, and poor care.

Demon's childhood demonstrates this structure because each new hurt adds to the previous trauma (Gehrenbeck et al., 2026.)

The death of Demon's mother is one of the most traumatic experiences of his childhood, however, the true achievement of the novel is in the demonstration of the fact that her death becomes the moment of the consolidation of the insecure pattern. He is not shifted from security into the condition of threat; he is shifted from a vulnerable attachment to institutional abandonment. This is the case because it removes the final unreliable attachment before the entry of institutions (Kingsolver, 2022.)

Another form of childhood injury is the shame. Demon's poverty and dependence on others make him exposed to humiliation, which makes social neglect turn into self-perception. This is how the trauma becomes internal because the child begins to understand the institutional abandonment as personal imperfection. This is why the novel constantly draws the connections between material neglect and lack of self-worth (van der Kolk, 2014.)

Thus, the collapse of care has familial, economic, emotional, and institutional dimensions. However, Demon's ability to survive does not make these injuries less visible; it reveals them.

.4Foster Care and Institutional Injury

It is through the foster-care institution that this contradiction between formal protection and neglect is performed most vividly. Demon enters an environment meant to secure him, yet ends up subjected to hunger, work, dislocation, and emotional erasure. The institution identifies him as a case long before it identifies him as a child (Kingsolver, 2022.)

Research on foster-care placement instability will help contextualize the significance of this representation. Maguire and her co-authors found a correlation between instability and behavioral and psychological problems, including externalization, internalization, and PTSD symptoms in foster youth, despite the field's current lack of standard measurements of placement instability. This finding supports the narrative's understanding of dislocations as traumatic events (Maguire et al., 2024.)

Repetition of dislocation is detrimental to Demon's self-conception as each dislocation teaches him about his own transitory belongingness. The expression "non-toucher kid" demonstrates how social exclusion turns into a category of self. Not only does it serve as a description of his state – it is the way a child categorizes himself according to the norms of untouchability (Kingsolver, 2022, p. 202.)

The foster-care segments show how documentation fails to translate into recognition. The files, the dislocations, and the procedure register Demon's existence, yet they are not necessary tools of ensuring his safety. This is where Liu's notion of administrative violence comes into play: the novel reveals how bureaucracy makes vulnerability administrable, but not less vulnerable (Liu, 2026.)

Demon's dislocations deny him an opportunity to express his voice. Being a child, he is aware of many of his situations being wrong, yet he is not empowered to articulate his opinion about them. It is the retrospective adult narrator who rectifies the situation by giving words to his injuries which he could feel, yet never articulate institutionally (Kingsolver, 2022.)

Not only does the critique of the foster care in the novel involve the issue of some people acting cruelly. Its more potent point is that the institution makes cruelty, neglect, and indifference possible, allowing them to recur. Recent research on mental-health interventions in foster care also stresses the importance of stability, trauma-informed practices, and sustained interventions (Trubey et al., 2024.)

Thus, the foster care becomes a structure of institutional injury as it turns vulnerability into a logistical problem. Demon is moved, placed, and assessed, but his inner world takes second place. It does not fail after an injury is done to him: it becomes one of the routes through which an injury continues to occur (Liu, 2026.)

.5Addiction as Personal Suffering and Structural Symptom

In addition, addiction in *Demon Copperhead* is viewed as a combination of physical pain, emotional deprivation, regional neglect, and institutional incompetence. In other words, it is presented not just as a moral weakness. On the contrary, opioid dependence exists in a context in which pain prevails, care is inadequate, and drugs can be easily obtained, whereas sustainable help is unavailable (Tager, 2026.)

In addition, addiction is viewed in the novel as part of Demon's inherited environment via the example of his mother and the community that was already accustomed to dependency. This point is crucial for the understanding that Demon's later addiction to opioids did not occur out of nothing, as the availability of painkillers was facilitated by previous exposure to vulnerability and the culture that preferred chemical treatment to any other forms of care (Kingsolver, 2022.)

In addition, Demon's addiction occurs as a consequence of his body and injury and the medical system. Demon's football talents seem promising at first until he is injured and expected to return back to the game. In such a way, the sentence "Lortab was her name" personifies the drug as a relief that became emotionally charged because of lack of safer means of treatment (Kingsolver, 2022, p. 234.)

Finally, recent developments in public-health literature show that Appalachian region suffered disproportionately from the opioid epidemic and that recovery is hindered by geographical location, stigma, treatment accessibility, and lack of resources. Therefore, the context supports the realism of the novel in that way because Demon's addiction takes place in the region where recovery is not just an option for individuals (Horn et al., 2024).

The economic and medical exploitation that lies at the roots of the circulation of opioids also become evident. June's remark that some regions were viewed as "gold mines" demonstrates that Demon's region is not unfortunate; it is a resource. The quotation contains the novel's criticism of how suffering becomes exploitable and valuable (Kingsolver, 2022, p. 416).

Such a neuropsychological approach to interpretation as Lemon's is helpful for the understanding of why the opioids' consumption in the novel is related to recognition, belonging, and vulnerability. In other words, Demon's addiction should be regarded together with his foster care experience, poverty, and the desire to belong to someone. It is the embodiment of social injuries (Lemon, 2024).

Finally, addiction makes clear the problem of resilience as a cultural ideal. Demon is constantly expected to withstand pain, losses, and humiliation. The criticism of Kingsolver consists in the fact that the endurance should not be seen as justice because survival becomes morally problematic when praised by a society that created the necessity for it (Tager, 2026).

.6Narrative Voice and the Ethics of Survival

First-person narration is the formal core of Demon's trauma ethics. It is ironic, wounded, energetic, and observant. It denies Demon the right to be seen only as a victim depicted by institutions or adults. First-person narration is the means by which Demon turns into the interpreter of his own damaged existence (Kingsolver, 2022).

The narrator's humor is a way of defending himself against humiliation, but it is also the form of testimony. The narrator's ability to say painful things in humorous ways helps him maintain his dignity and reveal the absurdity of systems that are designed to support neglect. In other words, the narrator's voice does not reduce the intensity of the trauma; it provides the trauma with the idiom for survival (Teliban, 2023).

It is important to note the importance of narrative distance. Adult narrator can understand the patterns that child Demon could only suffer. Child Demon experiences hunger, placement, injuries, and shame while adult Demon tries to make sense of these experiences. In this way, the transition from experience to interpretation mimics LaCapra's "working-through" (LaCapra, 2001.)

The phrase "Still your jack-shit homeless orphan" captures the narrator's internalized shame and defensive self-recognition. It is a brutal phrase but also the example of the ways social abandonment turns into self-definition. The narrator does not just report what happens to him. He demonstrates the way devaluing language works inside the subject (Kingsolver, 2022, p. 255.)

Here, Liu's idea of self-narration as counter-record can help understand why Demon's voice is so important. The records are produced by institutions, but they cannot convey hunger, humiliation, fear, longing, and mistrust. Demon's narrative becomes the rival archive and challenges the inadequacy of bureaucratic record-making (Liu, 2026.)

Therefore, the role of the reader in this case becomes the ethical one. When the reader gets engaged with Demon's narrative, he or she becomes a witness of circumstances that made this suffering possible. In this way, the novel's ethics rests on the process of moving the reader from sympathy to recognition, and then to recognition of institutional responsibility (Kaplan, 2005.)

.7Rewriting the Orphan Narrative

Despite the fact that this paper emphasizes the theme of trauma and institutional neglect, the Dickensian frame is crucial as it locates Demon in the long literary tradition of abandoned and vulnerable children. Through rewriting David Copperfield, Kingsolver reveals that the phenomenon of child abandonment did not go anywhere; it simply acquired another institutional shape (Dickens, 1850.)

In Dickens, the story about the orphans reveals the barbarity of Victorian work, education, class stratification, and social hypocrisy. In Kingsolver, similar traumas are manifested via foster care, opioid economy, rural poverty, sports exploitation, and medically induced pain. The comparison proves that societies keep creating new languages of care but retain traditional mechanisms of abandoning (Kingsolver, 2022.)

Moreover, the adaptation of David Copperfield is significant since Demon Copperhead reinterprets the classic orphan plot by shifting the focus from individual success to structural violence. Unlike typical orphan stories, the plot of Kingsolver's book ends not with inheritance or recognition but with Demon's survival that does not mean the resolution of problems caused by the conditions under which he had to survive (Tager, 2026.)

Consequently, the image of an orphan can be described as both literal and figurative since Demon is not only deprived of his parents' care but he is also an orphan of institutions, policies, regional discrimination, and economical negligence (Liu, 2026.)

.8Discussion

The analysis shows that institutional neglect and psychological trauma cannot be separated in Demon Copperhead. Demon's sufferings stem from family disruption but are exacerbated by foster-care transitions, institutional apathy, sporting pressure, medically-induced pain, and regional stigma. Trauma passes through institutions rather than being contained in personal recollections (Balaev, 2014.)

First of all, it must be noted that the novel opposes the model of trauma that is grounded on a singular traumatic event. Demon's trauma cannot be described only by the death of his mother, one abuse or one bodily harm. On the contrary, it emerges as a result of continuous exposure to abandonment, hunger, shame, labor, and bureaucratic documentation (Liu, 2026.)

Secondly, the novel opposes separation of addiction from class and regional identity. Appalachia is not depicted just as a scenery but as a region that is affected by the economic exploitation and stigmatization as well as medical targeting and unequal care. That is why the opioid crisis in the novel takes the form of a social phenomenon rather than individual failing (Horn et al., 2024.)

Thirdly, Demon's narration is the act of resistance itself. He turns the institutional categories into personal testimonies and makes visible the things that cannot be understood within these systems. His narrative does not guarantee healing but produces another kind of record that reveals the forms of psychological damage and social abandonment (Liu, 2026.)

Finally, the novel's ethical dimension comes from the suspicion about simplified resilience. Demon's endurance is impressive but the novel does not allow making endurance to stand in place of justice. The novel invites readers to look at both the survival of traumatized children and the reasons why such a survival is required (Tager, 2026.)

.9Conclusion

Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver is a significant contemporary trauma novel since it presents psychological damage through the combined effects of personal loss and institutional negligence. Demon has been hurt physically and emotionally due to maternal instability, loss, poverty, foster care, hunger, bodily injury, opioid addiction, and emotional displacement. All of these have affected Demon personally, yet the novel clearly demonstrates that there are sociological factors that cause the damage as well (Kingsolver, 2022.)

This paper has shown that the institutional neglect is one of the crucial aspects of the representation of trauma in the novel. Demon's suffering is not only caused by personal experiences but also by the participation of the institutions such as the foster care, education, medicine, sports, and community life. Thus, the novel contributes to the development of trauma fiction through changing the focus from the catastrophe to institutional damage (Maguire et al., 2024.)

The paper has demonstrated that Demon's first-person narration is a means of survival and witnessing. The voice of the narrator helps to give meaning to the experiences which are not properly understood by the institutions. In this way, Demon Copperhead is a literary testimony against those institutions that record the lives of vulnerable children without taking care of their safety and wellbeing (Liu, 2026.)

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