



Embers of War: The Erosion of Humanity and the Emergence of Cannibalistic Desire in Thomas Harris's *Hannibal Rising*

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Abstract: War brings destruction not only to physical spaces and human lives but also to the emotional and psychological spaces. When people experience violence, loss and fear for a long time, they often become numb, lose empathy and forget how to care for others. War creates an emotional emptiness where love, kindness and moral values fade away. The true scar of war is not just in the destruction it causes, but in how it makes people lose touch with their own humanity. Set against the backdrop of World War II, Thomas Harris' *Hannibal Rising* explores the deep psychological and emotional aftermath of war through the transformation of Hannibal Lecter. Despite his cultured upbringing and refined sensibilities, Hannibal's turn to cannibalism reflects the breakdown of his emotional world, driven by the lasting impact of traumatic war experience. Within this emotional void, his violent acts become haunting expressions of survival and emotional release. The study applies Affect Theory to examine how intense emotions like hunger, sorrow and anger take shape through violent acts. By focusing on the emotional landscape of Hannibal's character, the study reveals how violence becomes a means of coping in the absence of conventional mourning and recovery after war.

Key words: War, Survival, Apathy, Affect Theory, Trauma, Cannibalism.

World War II was a global military conflict that caused a catastrophic rupture in the fabric of human civilisation. Spanning from 1939 to 1945, it brought massive destruction, dislocation, and psychological trauma to millions. The war's brutal campaigns across Europe left countless families fractured, cities reduced to ruins, and moral codes shattered. Beyond the visible destruction, the war deeply scarred the collective human psyche, dissolving traditional ethical boundaries and reshaping notions of survival, loss and identity. In the article "Mental Health Consequences of War: A Brief Review of Research Findings," R. Srinivasa Murthy and Rashmi Lakshminarayana note that:

War has a catastrophic effect on the health... conflict situations cause more mortality and disability than any major disease. War destroys communities and families... The effects of war include long-term physical and psychological harm to children and adults... Death as a result of wars is simply the "tip of the iceberg". Other consequences, besides death, are not well documented. They include endemic poverty, malnutrition,



disability, economic/ social decline and psychosocial illness, to mention only a few.
(25)

While war's immediate toll is counted in bodies, its deeper consequences such as emotional trauma, social fragmentation, and long-term psychological damage remain largely unaddressed. Therefore, death is merely the tip of the iceberg concealing the silent epidemics of grief, displacement, and moral disintegration that affect generations. Thomas Harris's *Hannibal Rising* unfolds within this submerged landscape of wartime aftermath.

The study explores Affect Theory as a critical framework to examine how trauma operates within individuals during the periods of extreme social collapse. Rather than using Affect Theory merely as a lens to decode emotional responses, the study positions it as a diagnostic tool. It traces how trauma embeds itself in the body and psyche when institutional structures of mourning and justice collapse, particularly in the aftermath of war. Here, affect is not simply an emotional residue but a force that actively shapes ethical disengagement, identity fragmentation, and moral distortion. The novel *Hannibal Rising* shows how these unprocessed emotional states, shaped by war and personal loss, evolve into patterns of violence.

Thomas Harris is known for combining psychological depth with literary elegance in his thrillers. His writing explores the emotional and moral complexity of characters, especially those shaped by trauma. In *Hannibal Rising*, he uses poetic language and vivid imagery to portray the effects of war on the human psyche. The novel stands out for tracing Hannibal's transformation from a grieving boy to a killer, linking personal trauma to historical violence. Harris's unique style blends suspense with deep emotional and philosophical insight.

Thomas Hartris sets the novel during the chaotic period of World War II, when Lithuania is caught between the collapsing Nazi regime and the advancing Soviet army. This conflict causes a complete breakdown of law, safety, and daily life. People can no longer depend on the government or any kind of protection. As Hitler's rapid and destructive Blitzkrieg spreads through Eastern Europe, the Lecter family estate is overtaken by the Totenkopf Division, a notorious unit of the German military known for its brutality. Their peaceful life is shattered as they are forced to flee their home and seek shelter in the surrounding wilderness. The soldiers assert control by killing the family's gardener, Ernst, and replacing the Lecter flag with a swastika, symbolising the loss of their autonomy and identity.

The Nazi invasion of Lithuania is depicted through powerful scenes of racial oppression and human degradation. During the takeover of the Lecter family estate, a loyal servant named Berndt is subjected to harsh interrogation and humiliating treatment by Nazi officers. The soldiers accuse him of being Jewish or Roma and demand proof of his identity. The major coldly asks, "'Are you a Jew?' 'No, sir.' 'A Gypsy?' 'No, sir'" (18). Further it becomes more degrading when the major inspects Berndt's earlobes and orders, "'Show the sergeant your dick.' Then, 'Shall I kill You or will you work?'"(19). This moment reflects the violent racism and inhumanity of the Nazi regime, reducing individuals to bodies to be inspected, judged, controlled, and ultimately killed.

The majority of Lithuanian historians distinguish several major groups of the Nazi and Soviet victims, though precise numbers are still disputed. For the Nazi period the most reliable figure of about 241,000 killed people is given by Lithuanian historian Arūnas Bubnys... The overwhelming majority, almost 71 percent of the Nazi victims, were the Jews. Lithuanians made up about 14 percent... (Davoliute and Balkelis 3)

The Nazi occupation of Lithuania illustrates the vast scale and cruelty of wartime atrocities. The targeted killing of Jews, Lithuanians and other groups reflects a deliberate attempt to erase



entire communities. Thomas Harris mirrors these historical realities in *Hannibal Rising*, where racial violence and systematic dehumanisation unfold under authoritarian control. The novel depicts individuals stripped of identity, treated as bodies to be inspected, exploited or destroyed. This representation aligns with the documented practices of genocide and racial persecution that marked much of twentieth-century European history.

As war spreads across the countryside, the natural world is transformed into a place of death and destruction. The lush grounds surrounding the Lecter estate, once vibrant and full of life, are now devastated by war and covered with the remains of soldiers, broken machines, and signs of decay. Paths that once led through peaceful forests are now lined with skulls and bones, turning the environment into a graveyard. “Besides the forest path the ball of a human femur stuck out of the ground like a mushroom” (255). The skeletal remains of a pilot, still seated in his crashed aircraft with his gunner behind him, lie untouched in the woods. Vines have grown around and through their bodies, curling between ribs and threading through empty skulls, blending death into the fabric of the forest itself. It is a stark critique of war’s dehumanisation, where even the dead are denied dignity.

In *Hannibal Rising*, the image of wounded swan reflects moral strength and loyalty, contrasting with the ethical collapse of humans in war. Its silent resistance highlights how violence strips people of empathy, while even animals retain dignity. This image deepens the novel’s critique of emotional and moral decay in wartime. Despite being shot and bleeding, the swan refuses to leave its injured mate. As Harris writes,

The wounded swan thumped heavily in the open field and did not move... The swan spread her wings and stood her ground over her mate even though the tank was wider than her wing, its engine loud as her wild heart. The swan stood over her mate hissing, hitting the tank with hard blows of her wings at the last, and the tank rolled over them, oblivious, in its whirring treads a mush of flesh and feathers.” (23-24)

This tragic image of devotion sharply contrasts with the selfish actions of characters like Grutas, who do not protect others but instead collaborate with the invading soldiers for personal gain. Grutas falsely accuses the cook of being Jewish, fully aware that this would likely lead to his death. While the swan demonstrates courage and loyalty even in the face of death, Grutas exemplifies moral collapse and betrayal. Harris shows that war does not just cause death but also reveals who people really are. While the swan stays loyal and brave, some people, like Grutas, become selfish and cruel to survive.

Affect Theory helps to understand *Hannibal Rising* by showing that emotions such as grief, anger, and trauma do not exist in isolation. These feelings are shaped by the events and environment of war, influencing how people behave and respond. Affect Theory, first developed by Silvan Tomkins and later expanded by scholars like Raymond Williams, Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant, focuses on how emotions and bodily feelings shape human actions, thoughts and relationships beyond logic or words. It sees affect as an innate capacity, that becomes shaped through cultural norms, past experiences, and surrounding conditions. This theory shows how emotions work in daily life, influencing how people connect with each other and how societies function.

Affect theory refers to the idea that attempts to categorize affects, which are frequently used interchangeably with emotions or subjectively perceived sentiments, and to characterize their physiological, sociological, interactional, and internalized expressions. According to affect theorists, the reality of humans is influenced by



nonlinguistic factors such as mood, environment, and sentiments, in addition to narratives and arguments. (“Affect Theory”)

The emotional and physical disintegration of Hannibal's family after they flee to the woods during World War II offers a powerful illustration of Affect Theory in action. When the Lecter family retreats to their remote lodge in the woods to escape the war, their lives quickly descend into terror and scarcity. A Soviet tank shell hits the lodge, killing Hannibal's mother, whose body lies burning in the yard. Amid flying ammunition, Hannibal tries to save her, but she is already dead, her dress on fire. Mischa, Hannibal's younger sister, runs to her mother and is covered in Lothar's blood as he is killed by shrapnel. Hannibal pulls Mischa back into the lodge and hides with her in the cellar as wolves gather outside. Later, he finds his mother's body frozen and tries to protect it. "Hannibal tugged at her, but her body was frozen to the ground. He pressed his face against her. Her bosom was frozen hard, her heart silent. He put a napkin over her face and piled snow on her" (43). In the face of death and unbearable loss, he turns his attention to Mischa, choosing to save her from the cold and danger. This moment reflects not only his instinct to protect but also marks the beginning of his emotional fragmentation, as the trauma of loss becomes inscribed in his memory and shapes his future actions.

While Hannibal remains surrounded by the frozen bodies of his family, reflecting the brutal consequences of war, Grutas and his men exploit the disorder for personal benefit. They utilise a Red Cross ambulance not as a means of humanitarian aid, but as a strategic disguise for looting and violence. The emblem of the Red Cross, widely associated with care and protection, is exploited to conceal acts of inhumanity, thereby subverting its ethical and symbolic significance. This exploitation of a humanitarian emblem exposes the severe erosion of ethical boundaries. Rather than serving its intended life-saving function, the ambulance becomes a vessel for transporting stolen goods and enabling abduction. Such a reversal indicates the breakdown of ethical structures under wartime conditions.

Grutas and his gang forcefully enter the lodge in the bitter cold of winter, where only Hannibal and his sister remain the only survivors, clinging to fragile hope amid devastation. Lacking food and driven by desperation, they chain the children together, treating them as property rather than human beings. As Mischa falls ill with pneumonia, the group begins debating which child to sacrifice for food. Their decision to kill and cannibalise Mischa reveals the complete collapse of ethical restraint. Their actions are marked by cruelty and calculation rather than pity or remorse. Grutas “turned his bloody face up to the children and he said, ‘We have to eat or die’” (53). This utterance signifies a moment where the urgency of survival is invoked to legitimise an unthinkable act, exposing the brutal erosion of humanity within the horrors of war.

Frozen at the threshold of unbearable loss, the line “That was the last conscious memory Hannibal Lecter had of his lodge” (53) marks a turning point. It shows the moment when trauma breaks the flow of memory. Hannibal's mind stops at the most painful event of death and cannibalisation of his sister. The memory becomes the emotional core of who he becomes. It shows how deep grief interrupts time. It fractures identity and disturbs the sense of self. Hannibal's sorrow over Mischa, his growing anger, and his violent actions reflect affective responses rooted in personal loss and a brutal environment.

Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is highly relevant to Hannibal's emotional attachment to his sister, Mischa. Cruel optimism refers to a condition in which an individual remains emotionally bound to something that ultimately hinders their well-being, because the



attachment itself gives meaning to life. Hannibal clings to Mischa's memory as a way to survive emotionally, but this connection intensifies his grief and fuels his violent impulses. As Berlant explains, "Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (*Cruel Optimism* 24). Hannibal's fixation on Mischa's memory, though deeply painful, becomes the emotional core of his identity. This attachment serves both as a preservation of her presence and a framework through which he constructs the purpose of his survival. His inability to release this memory results in emotional and ethical deterioration. While the memory gives him purpose, it also damages his future by keeping him trapped in revenge and pain.

Hannibal's recurring dreams of the men who killed Mischa reveal more than painful memories. They represent an internal image that drives his future actions. This idea connects to Silvan Tomkins' concept of the Image, which refers to a mental blueprint that shapes behaviour based on past experiences, present emotions, and imagined goals. As noted in *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for Affect Theory*:

In sensory and memory matching the model is given by the world as it exists now in the form of sensory information, and as it existed once before in the form of memory information. In the case of the Image the individual is projecting a possibility which he hopes to realize or duplicate and that must precede and govern his behavior if he is to achieve it. This Image of an end state to be achieved may be compounded of memory or perceptual images or any combination or transformation of these. It may be a state which is both conscious and unconscious, vague or clear, abstract or concrete, transitory or enduring, one or many, conjoint or alternative in structure. (Frank and Wilson 85)

The concept of image, as explained by Tomkins refers to an inner mental picture that shapes a person's actions. It is not just based on memory or sensory data but combines these with imagined possibilities. This internal image shows a future state the person wishes to reach and must exist before any action can take place. It helps to organise thoughts and emotions, guiding behaviour toward goals shaped by both experience and desire. In his sleep, Hannibal relives the trauma: the faces of Grutas and his gang, the cold lodge, and Mischa's suffering. These dream-images function as both a source of pain and a map for action. Governed by this inner image, he sets out to reproduce a sense of justice by hunting those responsible. Thus, the dream becomes a space where trauma is transformed into purpose, aligning with Tomkins' theory that an individual's projected emotional image can unconsciously direct their path.

While Tomkins explores how internal images direct personal behaviour, Sara Ahmed Sara Ahmed shifts the focus to how emotions move through social spaces, influencing relationships, identities, and shared memory. Ahmed explains that emotions do not reside only within individuals but move between bodies, histories, and environments, shaping social relationships and identities. These emotions become attached to certain people, events, or ideas, forming what Ahmed in "Affective Economies," calls "sticky" associations (120). In *Hannibal Rising*, this concept is reflected in the enduring impact of Hannibal's trauma. The violent death of his sister Mischa during the war becomes an emotional anchor that transforms his sense of self and others. Emotions such as grief and anger do not fade but remain tied to the memory of those responsible, influencing his identity and justifying acts of revenge. His actions are not merely driven by memory but by a persistent emotional force that blurs the line between personal pain and moral reckoning.

As Inspector Popil observes, "The little boy Hannibal died in 1945 out there in the snow trying to save his sister. His heart died with Mischa. What is he now? There's not a word for it



yet. For lack of a better word, we'll call him a monster" (335). This moment reveals how deeply affective experiences shape identity beyond rational understanding. Hannibal becomes a figure shaped by emotions that remain unresolved, consistent with Ahmed's claim that affect helps define the boundary between the psychic and the social.

Hannibal Lecter's psychological transformation illustrates the idea of cannibal ego as theorised by Maggie Kilgour. According to Kilgour, the cannibal ego represents an extreme form of the modern individual, one who is shaped only by appetite and self-interest. It lacks empathy and cuts off emotional connection with others. This figure absorbs the world only to serve internal desire. In "The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time." Kilgour defines it as "a literally cannibal ego...the most exaggerated version of the modern Hobbesian individual, governed only by will and appetite, detached from the world and other humans, whom he sees only as objects for his own consumption" (248).

In the novel, Hannibal's early trauma creates the foundation for this transformation. The brutal death of his sister Mischa becomes a permanent emotional wound. His memories become frozen images of suffering and loss. These memories replay in dreams and waking visions. Hannibal's grief does not heal but mutates into a desire for retribution. As he begins to track and murder the men responsible for Mischa's death, his identity begins to shift. He moves from being a grieving brother to a calculated killer.

Hannibal's acts of cannibalism, such as eating the cheeks of Dortlich, serve symbolic and emotional purposes. These acts become a method to reclaim power and control. Each killing is not random. It is directed by a desire to mirror the violence inflicted on him. Yet, unlike his sister's killers, Hannibal is refined, calm, and deliberate. This apparent civility masks a deeper detachment. By the end of the novel, Hannibal no longer acts out of pain alone. His violence becomes normalised. "He was not torn with anger at Grentz. He was not torn at all by anger anymore, or tortured by dreams. This was a holiday and killing Grentz was preferable to skiing" (380). He views killing as a routine task. When he murders the final enemy, Grenz, during a vacation, he feels no inner conflict. The act brings him peace, not sorrow.

This progression fits Kilgour's model. Hannibal no longer sees people as subjects with value. He sees them as objects to consume or eliminate. This shift completes his transformation into a figure of moral isolation. He becomes the embodiment of a self-contained will, driven by appetite, detached from any ethical framework. His emotional world centers on loss, but his actions reveal a deeper withdrawal from human connection. Through the lens of Kilgour's theory, Hannibal becomes the ultimate representation of the cannibal ego, a figure shaped by trauma but ruled by hunger.

Hannibal Rising by Thomas Harris presents a powerful story of how war affects the human mind and emotions. The study shows that Hannibal Lecter's turn to violence and cannibalism is not just a result of personal loss but also a response to the emotional damage caused by war. Using Affect Theory, the study examines how strong emotions like grief, anger, and trauma shape a person's behaviour. Hannibal's sorrow over his sister Mischa becomes a lasting wound that drives his future actions. Instead of healing, he becomes emotionally numb and begins to seek revenge. The loss of empathy shows how war and trauma can break down moral values and human connections. The study reveals the deep psychological scars left by war and highlights the urgent need for emotional recovery and the rebuilding of ethical values in societies affected by the consequences of war.



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