



VIOLENCE, VICTIMHOOD, AND MORAL BLAME IN NINETEEN MINUTES BY JODI PICOULT

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Abstract

This article explores the moral and psychological dimensions of violence, victimization, and moral guilt depicted in Jodi Picoult's *The Nineteen Minutes*. Through a detailed analysis of the story structure, character development, and key scenes, the study reveals how the novel complicates the roles of the victim and the perpetrator. Drawing on ethical literary criticism, it explores the social, familial, and emotional factors that contribute to school violence, encouraging reflection on fairness, empathy, and accountability in personal and social settings.

Keywords: Violence, victimization, moral responsibility, school shooting, Jodi Picoult, moral criticism, trauma, nineteen minutes.

Introduction

School shootings represent one of the most alarming and emotionally charged issues of modern life. In *Nineteen Minutes*, Jodi Picoult uses this backdrop to investigate the complex dynamics of blame and victimhood. Rather than offering a linear tale of good versus evil, Picoult presents a nuanced moral landscape in which guilt and innocence are blurred. The novel centers around Peter Houghton, a quiet, isolated teenager who becomes the shooter, and Josie Cormier, a popular girl with a hidden connection to him. Through these characters, Picoult challenges the reader to consider how violence is often born of long-term emotional suffering, social exclusion, and unresolved trauma. The ethical depth of the novel invites an examination not only of individual choices, but also of systemic failures.



Literature Review

Ethical literary criticism, as formulated by Nie Zhenzhao, emphasizes literature as a space for ethical confrontation — a moral trial through which characters, and by extension readers, explore questions of right and wrong [2:4]. In the context of contemporary fiction, particularly stories dealing with violence and trauma, this method allows for deeper engagement with social and personal responsibility. Picoult's fiction frequently revolves around legal and moral crises. According to Smith (2018), her narratives “reconstruct trauma not as event, but as echo” [4:119], which is evident in *Nineteen Minutes*, where the psychological aftermath of bullying and social alienation unfolds through fragmented recollections and shifting perspectives. Thomas (2020) positions Picoult's work as a critical force in the representation of youth and justice, describing her courtroom dramas as “tools for public introspection” [5:32]. Within this critical tradition, *Nineteen Minutes* stands out for its empathy toward both victim and perpetrator, suggesting that violence cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the emotional complexity of those involved.

Research Methodology

This study applies ethical literary criticism to interpret the emotional and ethical dimensions of *Nineteen Minutes*. A qualitative textual approach is used, focusing on close reading, thematic analysis, and character evaluation. Key ethical moments are selected for their narrative weight and potential to provoke reflection on moral responsibility. The sources include the novel itself [3], alongside academic interpretations of trauma, justice, and the psychological development of adolescent characters. All analysis is aimed at uncovering how Picoult uses storytelling not only to portray violence but to critique the structures that perpetuate it.

Analysis and Results. One of the novel's most powerful features is its dismantling of the binary victim/perpetrator divide. Picoult crafts Peter Houghton not as a monster, but as a deeply wounded individual shaped by years of bullying and neglect.

“When you're bullied for so long, you start to believe that's all you are. That's all you'll ever be.” [3:115]



This quote underscores Peter's internalization of cruelty. The scene occurs in a flashback, where Peter recalls being humiliated repeatedly by peers. Rather than excusing violence, Picoult highlights the psychological layers of trauma that precede it. The ethical dilemma lies in recognizing Peter's humanity without minimizing his crime.

"In nineteen minutes, you can get revenge. In nineteen minutes, you can understand what justice really means." [3:47]

This chilling reflection marks the moment Peter justifies his actions. The novel confronts readers with the tension between retribution and justice. The quote invites ethical discomfort: is justice ever truly served through violence, or does it merely replicate harm? Josie, too, is not a straightforward victim. Her moral ambiguity becomes central when it is revealed that she may have participated in or silently condoned acts that contributed to Peter's isolation.

"She had stood there, watching it happen. And she had done nothing." [3:284]

Here, Picoult explores the ethics of bystanderism. Josie's silence implicates her in Peter's suffering, but she is also a product of social pressure. The reader is left to question how passivity in the face of cruelty shares moral space with active wrongdoing. The novel's structure — alternating perspectives, courtroom sequences, flashbacks — mirrors the fragmentation of memory and the multiplicity of truth. Through this literary form, Picoult invites readers into the moral complexity of every character.

Conclusion / Recommendations. *Nineteen Minutes* is not a book about a single act of violence — it is a meditation on the emotional scars that make such acts possible. By blurring the lines between victim and aggressor, Picoult challenges readers to confront uncomfortable realities: justice is rarely clean, and blame is seldom simple. Through ethical literary criticism, this article has shown that Picoult's characters are not merely narrative devices but moral agents, each carrying the weight of choice, pain, and consequence. The novel forces a reconsideration of how violence is judged — not only in courtrooms but in the social imagination. Further research could compare *Nineteen Minutes* to similar works such as *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, or explore how literature handles ethical responsibility in digital-era bullying. Interdisciplinary



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approaches involving psychology, law, and education could deepen our understanding of these themes.

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