RE-READING *THE PAINTED BIRD*

by

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(Under the Direction of David S. Williams)

ABSTRACT

Jerzy Kosinski’s controversial fiction, *The Painted Bird*, has elicited an array of negative reviews. As a Holocaust novel, it has been criticized for not reflecting Kosinski’s own wartime experiences. As such, it has been called fraudulent and inappropriately violent, grotesque, and exaggerated. Such understandings of the book have given it a denigrated status in the canon of Holocaust literature. I will argue that these are ineffective and misguided readings of the novel by laying out the issues and themes of the novel, its author, and writing on the Holocaust. Then, I will apply an existing understanding of Holocaust fiction to the novel in order to produce a fresh reading. I hope this new look at *The Painted Bird* will highlight its rich, narrative style that creates layers of perspectives unreachable by most authors and situate its rightful place alongside other important works of the Holocaust.

INDEX WORDS: Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*, Holocaust, fiction
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I would like to dedicate this thesis to Charles and Darla Schwerin for their unwavering love and support. Thank you for never encouraging me to pursue a “real” major.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 1965, Jerzy Kosinski’s controversial novel *The Painted Bird* has elicited an array of negative reviews. In terms of its status as a Holocaust novel, the most frequent criticism is that the story does not reflect Kosinski’s own wartime experiences, so both he and the book are frauds. Critics also regard the story as inappropriately violent, grotesque, and exaggerated. Such understandings of the book have given it a denigrated status in the canon of Holocaust literature, one riddled with accusations of misrepresentation.

However, I will argue that this is an ineffective and misguided reading of the novel. In the following pages, I will introduce the novel, its author, and the popular reception of the book. Next, discussion of the problems, themes, criticisms, and issues of Holocaust literature will provide the basis from which a corrected analysis can be formulated. To this end, I will explain a method of understanding Holocaust fiction put forth by Sara R. Horowitz in her text *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*. I will analyze *The Painted Bird* through this method and provide a fresh examination of the text. I hope that this new reading will demonstrate that *The Painted Bird* should be viewed as an important contribution to the canon of Holocaust literature. Its rich, narrative style creates layers of perspectives unreachable by most authors.
**THE PAINTED BIRD**

In *The Painted Bird*, Holocaust survivor Jerzy Kosinski tells the story of a young boy who travels through peasant villages in Eastern Europe during World War II. The boy’s parents send him to the countryside from their urban home in the hopes that he will survive the war without them. Although it is unclear if the boy is a Jew or Gypsy, his parents’ motivations for sending the boy away are connected to the father’s anti-Nazi political activity rather than his religious or ethnic status. The boy’s dark hair, eyes, and skin tone make his identity a question and an issue throughout the novel. His physical appearance also functions as a contrast to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed peasants, resulting in his alienation and subsequent struggle for survival.

At age six, the boy is initially placed into the care of Marta, an elderly peasant woman who dies shortly thereafter. The boy is then forced to leave her home and travel the countryside from village to village in order to survive. Each chapter of the novel is an episode in the boy’s journey, describing in vivid detail the experiences he has with each of his peasant caretakers. In a relatively short period of time, the boy witnesses and experiences a dozen horrifically violent and grotesque events. The boy is subject to episodes of cruelty, sexual and physical violence, and torture, all of which result from his status as “other.”

As a witness, the boy watches a farmer pluck out the eyes of his farmhand with a spoon. He sees a group of village women rape another woman with a bottle full of excrement, then beat and kill her. He witnesses the rape and torture of an entire village by the Kalmuks, a band of Red Army deserters employed by the Germans, who are allowed to rape and pillage as they please.

As a victim, the boy suffers from daily beatings, exposure to the elements, and a constant state of fear of his oppressors. At the hands of a peasant, the boy is forced to hang by his arms
for hours at a time dangling over a vicious dog trained to kill him. A group of local boys attack and force him under the ice of a frozen lake. He is buried in the ground from his neck down and attacked by ravens. A group of church parishioners throw him into a pit of excrement. These are a few short examples and a more comprehensive explanation of the events will be provided in subsequent chapters.

The climax of the story is his submersion in the excrement pool that renders him mute for the remainder of the novel. After this turn, the boy protagonist changes and adapts to the horrors that dictate his fragile existence. Though the boy is ultimately reunited with his parents at the end of the novel, it is clear that he is a different person. His development from a naïve, innocent child into a hardened, vengeful young man illustrates the effects of his experiences in the novel.

The novel addresses issues of identity, perspective, muteness, voice, religion and magic, nature, and the dramatic cruelty of the peasants against a subtle backdrop of the Holocaust. The novel’s title stems from one of the many caretakers the boy has throughout the novel. Lekh, an expert on birds in the countryside, plays a particularly cruel game in which he captures a bird, paints its feathers a rainbow of colors, and then releases it back to the wild. This results in other birds viewing it as an outsider and a danger to their flock, which leads them to kill the painted bird. This scenario reflects the predicament of the boy, who must navigate his way marked by his physical differences, in order to avoid the fate of the bird.

Kosinski wrote the novel in the first person from the perspective of the young boy. However, it is apparent that a retrospective narrative is interwoven in the text. There is a consistent mixing of perspective in the story that reveals the presence of an older, retrospective voice, presumably the boy as an adult. In the text, the adults around the boy often influence the narrative voice as well, resulting in the boy relaying information that would not otherwise have
been available to him. He adapts the language of those around him, imitating their stories, as if they were his own. Thus, the boy is able to tell his story through varying levels of narration and perspective.

The controversy surrounding the novel begins with the problem of categorization. With the dizzying combination of the Holocaust theme and the narrative style briefly outlined above, critics find themselves searching for a literary genre to use to identify the story. Once that is established, the tools and standards of the chosen genre are used to analyze, criticize, and understand the purpose and meaning of the text. In the case of *The Painted Bird*, this has not been uniform or clear-cut, since critics have assigned the novel to a number of categories, including Holocaust memoir, autobiography, fiction, autobiographical fiction, and even fraud.

Thus, debates over the nature and genre of the text have resulted in a number of drastically different understandings of the story. The most popular reception has been the designation of the novel as a fraudulent Holocaust memoir. Investigation of the legitimacy of the book’s author has directed this reception of the book. Both Kosinski’s conflicting personal statements and the text’s official foreword by him inform debates concerning whether he is the boy protagonist. In order to understand how the author’s personal life has so devastatingly informed the discussion of the novel, we must now take a brief look at the biography of Kosinski.

**WHO WAS JERZY KOSINSKI?**

Kosinski’s biography is speculative at best. The presence of many conflicting stories and details about his life results in little more than informed conjecture about his actual life. I draw most heavily on his foremost biographer, James Park Sloan, who provides the most
comprehensive attempt to find the “truth” behind Kosinski’s origins. Given that the subject of Kosinski’s biography has been exhausted by a number of critics, the purpose here is to relate a basic understanding in order to illuminate the points that critics use as evidence against him and the novel. I should note that I am making an intentional effort to limit serious and exhaustive discussion of Kosinski’s biography, due to my position that it is an unsuitable method by which to understand the novel.

Jerzy Kosinski was born on June 14, 1933 in Lodz, Poland, a Jewish, German, and Polish city. His father changed the family name from Lewinkopf to Kosinski in order to attain a certain degree of anonymity. The change from an overtly foreign and Jewish-sounding name to a common Polish name marked the family’s desire to remain unnoticed by the world at large. Due to his father’s wealth, connections, and wit, the family survived with Gentile papers in a peasant village of Eastern Poland. They adopted an entirely new identity as a Polish Catholic family that lived comfortably but not completely devoid of the fear of being exposed. Sloan outlines a number of events in Kosinski’s childhood during the Holocaust that mirror the experiences of the boy in *The Painted Bird*. These findings will be discussed in subsequent chapters to acknowledge the similarities, but, ultimately, they do not prove a strong enough connection to justify claims of the boy and Kosinski being one and the same. Regardless of what Kosinski directly experienced, his time spent in Poland during and after the war certainly indicates a familiarity of Polish peasant life.

Kosinski’s family survived the Holocaust, and he remained in Poland until immigrating to the United States in 1957. Kosinski wrote books on other subjects both before and after the publication of *The Painted Bird* in 1965. Neither he nor his publisher overtly stated the nature of the novel in its first printing. Kosinski relates in his “Foreword” to subsequent editions of the
book that he purposefully left out that very type of introduction so that the story would stand on its own. Sue Vice describes how “‘authority’ appears to be conferred on a writer if they can be shown to have a connection with the events they are describing; this obviously means that the writer’s biography must be transparently available for all to know.”¹ This is where Kosinski both wins and loses. He fulfills this distinctive requirement by being a survivor and thus an authority on the subject. Yet, he fails at providing a clear biography about himself. Kosinski’s controversy centers on the fact that he provided conflicting biographical details about his Holocaust experiences to various sources. In some accounts, he says he did not wish for the novel to be connected to his life. However, critics cite several anecdotes in Kosinski’s personal life and interactions that state the contrary.

First, Kosinski’s conflicting comments on his own biography abound. Many scholars have discussed whether Kosinski was Jewish or a non-Jewish Pole. This debate stems from Kosinski’s reported denial of his Jewishness to fellow survivor Elie Wiesel. Harry James Cargas relates this story in the following passage:

There were several reasons why I wanted to see Kosinski again, in particular to see if I could find out why he had denied being Jewish. Elie Wiesel, with whom I had coauthored a book, once told me that Kosinski had absolutely denied being a Jew to him. When I asked the Polish exile if he had denied his Jewishness, he denied his denials.²

It is evident that Kosinski may have invoked his story-telling tendencies depending upon his audience. Other critics will attest to this contradiction as a result from posing as a Catholic Pole during the Holocaust and his continued struggle with identity. He would later affirm his Jewish identity in response to provocations that he was not “Jewish enough.” Kosinski responded to

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these mild attacks by saying, “my past experience is sufficient to define me as a Jew.”\(^3\) If pressed, I think it would be easy to find ambiguity even in this assertion.

Cargas also relates another biographical controversy in which Kosinski repeatedly regaled an audience with tales of his childhood that exactly mirrored the events in *The Painted Bird*. In one instance, Kosinski appeared on the Dick Cavett show in February 1979 and “told how the inability to speak came upon him through a physical accident and disappeared one day when he was in the hospital; a phone rang and he merely picked it up and began speaking.”\(^4\) This depiction not only references the ending of the novel and the experience of the boy protagonist, but also does not match up with his other accounts. Sloan describes how “in other versions, it was not a hospital, but a reform school, a special school for the handicapped, or a school for the deaf.”\(^5\) It seems clear that details of Kosinski’s biography changed based on the situation. This also appears to be symptomatic of a storyteller’s life.

Although these are just a few examples, the instances outlined here illustrate the nature of the inconsistencies in Kosinski’s statements that fueled the controversy. This is why critics do not treat the novel as a text that should be evaluated on its own. Nonetheless, my purpose is to evaluate the book as literature and as it stands. Kosinski’s inconsistent biography, statements, or stories will not interfere with that undertaking in this study.

**THE NOVEL’S RECEPTION**

A wide range of critics has analyzed *The Painted Bird* as literature, whether as autobiography, fiction, autobiographical fiction, or many other nuanced categories. The novel

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3 Ibid., 48.
4 Ibid., 50.
illuminates issues of perspective, authenticity, language, and the use of the Holocaust in art and literature. These issues are problematic in the general canon of Holocaust writing. The novel also challenges fundamental categories of literature, which critics have borrowed as the focus of their analyses of the novel. These issues will be discussed in length in the following chapter, but it is important now to address these matters briefly in order to introduce the novel’s reception. Simply put, how one categorizes the novel has influenced the understanding and analysis of the literature itself.

Questions of authenticity and perspective have plagued reception of the novel since its first printing. This stems from the lack of any acknowledgement of the novel’s genre as well as a foreword by the author. Without any official, overt information to go by, many initial reviewers described the book as an autobiography. As such, *The Painted Bird* was catapulted to “cult classic” status, while Kosinski was regarded as one of the “most promising writers on the American scene.”6 Once critics began investigating Kosinski’s background, though, they identified biographical elements that were inconsistent with the boy protagonist’s story. Critics accused Kosinski of passing off the story of the young boy as “the true story of his own experience during the Holocaust.”7 Many who interacted with Kosinski until his suicide in 1991 testify to Kosinski’s assertions that he was the narrator-protagonist of *The Painted Bird*, yet at other times he denied such an absolute identification. Ultimately, the initial lack of an authentic testament and Kosinski’s opposing stories led to the novel being dismissed by most reviewers as a fraudulent memoir.

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7 Ibid.
As a result, the early scholarship on Kosinski is problematic since most of it is based on an acceptance of one or more falsities. Critics have drawn numerous inadequate conclusions about the novel based on either an acceptance or rejection of the novel as purely autobiographical, often resulting from an incorrect understanding of Kosinski’s biography. To be fair, this is largely due in part to most critics’ genuine trust in Kosinski’s conflicting statements outlined above. As it turns out, this is a grave mistake that Sloan’s definitive biography of Kosinski illuminates. Since the much of the scholarship on Kosinski predates Sloan’s 1996 text, very little from this time period is functionally applicable to this study.

By way of example, scholars once asserted as fact that “Kosinski wandered as a child through rural Poland during the Second World War.”8 We know from Sloan’s biography that this is untrue. Yet, Byron L. Sherwin determines that Kosinski’s novels are “works of fiction and not autobiographical memoirs.”9 While this conflicting statement is somewhat redeemed by the qualification that the classification of “fiction does not preclude them from being accurate and true,” it seems that this evaluation of Kosinski’s work is just as confusing and contradicting as Kosinski’s own statements.10 This foundational misunderstanding in Kosinski’s biography tends to skew the resulting scholarship.

On the other hand, some earlier critics did focus on the literary value of the novel without dwelling on the biographical controversies. However, their reasoning for categorizing The Painted Bird as fiction differs. Norman Lavers felt that “the novel is too finely crafted, too economically structured, to be a record of actual and untidy life.”11 At the same time, he asserts that “Kosinski may indeed have personally experienced the horrors of the novel,” a fact that

9 Ibid., 11.
10 Ibid.
simply lends “power and authority” to the text itself.\(^{12}\) Though our foundational understandings of the novel somewhat align, Lavers conclusions are far different from the one I present in this study. Lavers seeks to identify the text as a “picaresque novel” and bases his textual analysis on this idea.\(^{13}\) His analysis of the novel’s themes of freedom, revenge, and education are excerpt-heavy with little unquoted material. From the outset, Lavers claims to review the book as fiction, yet concludes “to a greater or lesser degree, the novel *The Painted Bird* follows actual events in Kosinski’s life.”\(^{14}\) These types of analyses confuse the reader’s understanding of the novel as well as the methodology of one’s study.

Due to the reactions to the first edition, Kosinski wrote an introduction to the second edition of the novel in 1976. With more than ten years of negative criticism under his belt, Kosinski addressed several of the pertinent issues, including the novel’s genre. He lamented the post-war era and his inability to connect with others from his generation on the effects of the Holocaust. He also reflected on his post-war identity as a child survivor who did not see himself as “a vendor of personal guilt” or “as a chronicler of the disaster.” Rather, Kosinski identified himself as a “storyteller.”\(^{15}\) As such, he chose to write through a medium that “allowed him to deal with actual events and characters without the restrictions which the writing of history imposes.”\(^{16}\) Because of his position as a storyteller not a testifier, Kosinski omitted information about himself and “refused to give any interviews” upon the book’s release.\(^{17}\) It is this omission that led critics and reporters to investigate Kosinski’s background in order to label the story as not only an autobiography, but also a Holocaust memoir. The important factor here, which I will

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 52.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., xiii.
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
discuss later, is that the subject of the Holocaust in writing carries an immeasurable weight and responsibility. However, the reason for Kosinski’s omission, as he states in the introduction, was based on his opinion that his biography “should not be used to test the book’s authenticity.”\(^{18}\) In the same way, he advocated that his identity as a survivor should not persuade people to read his book. The point, then, is to read and evaluate literature on its own, without regard to who wrote it and why. Kosinski pointedly addresses the genre of the novel when he says that he “wanted to write fiction which would reflect, and perhaps exorcise the horrors that they had found so inexpressible.”\(^{19}\) Here, Kosinski refers to his parents’ wartime lamentations about the constant worry for his safety every time they witnessed children being forced into trains bound for the ovens. Kosinski addressed accusations that he exaggerated violence and slandered his native country of Poland through his unflattering portrayal of the peasantry with an anecdote about the novel’s reception by his Polish friends:

Perhaps the best proof that I was not overstating the brutality and cruelty that characterized the war years in Eastern Europe is the fact that some of my old school friends, who succeeded in obtaining contraband copies of *The Painted Bird*, wrote that the novel was a pastoral tale compared with the experiences so many of them and their relatives had endured during the war. They blamed me for watering down historical truth…\(^{20}\)

This unequivocal statement renders the critical focus on the text as fraudulent autobiography incorrect and misappropriated. Yet because of his conflicting, personal comments about the story and his life, Kosinski’s foreword to the second edition of the novel has often been regarded as inconsequential.

In addition to his foreword and the information supplied by Kosinski in the novel itself, there also exists *Notes of the Author* that were written in English to be translated as an appendix

\(^{18}\) Ibid., xiii-xiv.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., xxiii.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., xxii.
for the German-language edition of *The Painted Bird*. In these notes, Kosinski makes several important statements about the novel and the nature of the relationship between author and text. First, Kosinski observes that the categorization of the novel as “non-fiction” is “not easily justified.”  

To justify this statement, he comments on the nature of memory and recollecting events of the past that inherently “lack the hard edge of total fact.” He elaborates on this idea in the following passage:

> For we fit experiences into molds which simplify, shape and give them an acceptable emotional clarity. *The remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings*. If there were not these structures, art would be too personal for the artist to create, much less for the audience to grasp.

Here, Kosinski comments on the nature of representation in art, more specifically in literature. It is necessary for an author to process life events and rework them for literary representation. In this way, it becomes irrelevant whether someone actually walked down a certain street or performed a certain act. The point is that the author writing about the walking or performing knows enough about it to report on it. Another example would be a photograph of an apple. It is not the actual apple, but rather a representation of the apple. Does that mean that the photograph of the apple is a fiction or a lie? If the apple has been eaten and no longer exists, did it not actually exist at one point? Does the representation of the apple take away from the nature or veracity of the apple existing somewhere at some point in time? These restrictions of representation lead to the very heart of the novel’s accomplishments. In delivering a narrative about the Holocaust, there are limits as to what one author can represent. The conventional criticisms will be discussed in the following chapter, but it is the very configuration of *The

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
The Painted Bird as a fictional accounting of many Holocaust experiences that surpasses these accepted understandings of the limits of representation.

Kosinski made other comments that address aspects of the novel that will be explored in this study. He posited that the boy protagonist of the novel “could be the author’s vision of himself as a child,” where vision is emphasized as a metaphorical journey.24 It is not a “revisitation of childhood,” but rather symbols of feelings and events.25 He remarked that the “locale and the setting are likewise metaphorical,” while the “characters become archetypes.”26 These remarks clarify Kosinski’s position as a storyteller, not a historian or voice for the Holocaust survivor. The Painted Bird is a culmination of personal and communal experience, suffering, and emotion. Kosinski’s unparalleled skill in meshing these layers of perspective and experience justifies his position alongside other lauded works of the Holocaust. However, because critics have had difficulty accepting the separation between the boy protagonist and Kosinski himself, this is not how he is commonly viewed.

The fixation on Kosinski’s biography and personal commentary continued after the release of the second edition in spite of Kosinski’s commentary. The pursuit of these two issues as a method to discredit the book culminated in the Village Voice’s 1982 expose of Kosinski as a fraud, liar, and generally despicable human being. While the article addressed a number of Kosinski’s works, it accused The Painted Bird of being translated and edited by outside contributors. In spite of the scathing article, scholars attest that “the charge of plagiarism made against Jerzy Kosinski has not been substantiated, and seems to represent fallout from critical unease about his own autobiographical fictions, which made it easy to misread his novel as a

24 Ibid., 13.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
testimony.” This is an important point, since it distinguishes Kosinski’s actual work from his biography. It represents an acknowledgement in the literary field of Kosinski’s contributions independent from any controversial personal statements. It is in this same vein that I seek to present a reading of the novel independent from Kosinski’s personal life.

Sloan’s biography of Kosinski simultaneously vindicates and condemns these facets of controversy surrounding Kosinski and the novel. While tying a number of the novel’s events to actual events that Kosinski either experienced or witnessed, Sloan recognizes that they did not occur with the same level of violence as portrayed in the novel. For example, Sloan notes that Kosinski would have been well aware of the Kalmuks and their rampages of rape and destruction, though it is documented that the men never reached the small village where his family resided. He would have seen one or two of the men perhaps and only heard of the horrifying tales from other people. This is one of many examples that support the categorization of *The Painted Bird* as autobiographical fiction. Although Kosinski himself did not experience the grotesquely violent scene described in the novel, the story is representative of the climate of this time.

While I have concentrated on its negative reception, it is important to note that since its publication *The Painted Bird* has also received acclaim, especially from Holocaust survivors and authors like Elie Wiesel. In Wiesel’s October 31, 1965 *New York Times Book Review* of the novel, he notes the story’s “shattering eloquence” and “unusual power” in achieving the ultimate task of the chronicler of the Holocaust to “bear witness in behalf of himself and of those whose voices can no longer be heard.” In the same review, he labels the novel as a “memoir,” though it

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was never officially stated to be one. Critics later attributed this categorization based on Kosinski’s own statements to Wiesel, asserting that it was his autobiography.

Some positive voices notwithstanding, in the years following his death “the literary reputation of Jerzy Kosinski has continued to sink.” In 2001 a play about Kosinski entitled, “More Lies About Jerzy,” seemingly revived the exhausted accusations of his fraudulent life. Although Bruce Weber’s January 23, 2001 New York Times theatre review describes the play as “bulky and overloaded,” it still revitalized the old indictments that The Painted Bird was not Kosinski’s memoir, that he commissioned editors for the work, and that he stole ideas from other writers.

Ultimately, the abundance of Kosinski commentary used to formulate understandings of the novel is misguided. Even critics in the aftermath of his scandals and death recognize “it is surprising how Kosinski’s commentary has shaped criticism of the novel.” Accordingly, I contend that the negative views of The Painted Bird and attending allegations against its author stem from the problem of genre identification and the failure to evaluate literature on its own. In my view, The Painted Bird should be read and evaluated as autobiographical fiction in the canon of Holocaust literature. Thus, it is necessary at this point to evaluate the issues of perspective, authenticity, genre, and thematic problems inherent in Holocaust literature in order to justifiably situate The Painted Bird in its rightful place.

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29 Daniel R. Schwarz, Imagining the Holocaust (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 179.
CHAPTER 2
HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

Holocaust literature is a complex field of study that challenges our accepted notions of what literature is. The assumed conventions of literature become unraveled when writing about the Holocaust. Literature about the Holocaust stands apart from other literatures, such as war or horror literature, in the same way the Holocaust itself stands apart from other horrific events in history. Many scholars, such as Alvin H. Rosenfeld, have argued that Holocaust literature as a genre occupies a distinct position outside of “topical” literatures. By understanding the Holocaust as a unique occurrence that has no parallel or precedence in history, one can begin to examine its subsequent subversion of the very nature of literature, its devices, and its criticisms.

Holocaust literature has been understood as “a chronicle of the human spirit’s most turbulent strivings with an immense historical and metaphysical weight.” With this enormous burden both in a scholarly and creative sense, Holocaust literature finds itself delicately balanced between two poles. On the one hand, it must remain true to history. On the other, it tries to find a creative outlet in order to describe the indescribable. As a result, one discovers “the impossibility of reading Holocaust literature from a merely aesthetic perspective.” A sense of historical weight and the reality of these events is always present. However, there also exists a “strain of

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31 Ibid., 13.
irreality” that “runs through Holocaust literature and continually undermines it.”33 This is true for *The Painted Bird* in a different way than with most Holocaust literature. Commonly, the “irreality” lies in the horror of the memoir and the inability to identify with the concentration camp universe. Quite the contrary, *The Painted Bird* is very accessible given the violent episodes are told matter-of-factly from a child’s perspective. The novel is not cluttered with “emotionally charged adjectives” that leave the reader in a state of “appreciating” the trauma from the outside.34 Rather, Kosinski forces the reader “to participate and observe directly” the episodes through the plain depictions and perspective of the child.35 Given the lack of any comparable literature before the Holocaust, readers have little, if any, basis to prepare themselves for the kinds of imagery and testimony that saturates Holocaust literature. They are also unprepared for the vehicles or methods by which these stories are delivered.

How to read, respond to, and evaluate Holocaust literature are issues that concern the canon overall as well as our present study. Problems regarding historical accuracy, authenticity, perspective, and an ever-growing concern for the potential exploitation of the Holocaust dominate popular and scholarly concern. As we have already seen, this biographical issue of the author remains a key issue in the status of *The Painted Bird*.

Memoirs, diaries, notebooks, and other materials either left behind by victims or written in the post-Holocaust years by survivors come under close scrutiny for their authenticity and historical accuracy. Given the diverse nature of Holocaust experience, it is a sensitive endeavor to verify a survivor’s testimony that comes forth in the form of literature. It is in the space of this

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35 Ibid.
literature that “testimony [functions]… as a figure and literary device.” As such, one must read

testimony in a variety of ways. It is common that a diary of a victim and a memoir of a survivor
are written and reviewed in different ways. Diaries present a singular vision of experience and
cannot be expected to represent the Holocaust “experience” in a wider sense.

Kosinski felt that “autobiography emphasizes a single life.” As a survivor and a
storyteller in the 1960s, Kosinski was unique in his endeavor to write fiction rather than a
memoir. As such, I will demonstrate how his fiction emphasizes many lives, many experiences,
and many voices through the single life of his narrator-protagonist.

Though he chose fiction, given the broader demands of Holocaust literature, it remains
that Kosinski was not freed of the pressures of verifying his authority to write on the Holocaust.
On the contrary, the importance of historical accuracy extends to fiction writers, both survivors
and non-survivors. What is more, they have “this need to place documentary or expository prose
in apposition to works of fiction.” The autobiographical prefaces to many works of literature
and particularly fiction “would seem to indicate an awareness that imaginative literature on this
subject does not carry a sufficient authority in its own right and needs support from without.”
Authors of Holocaust literature tend to exhibit apprehension about putting forth work on the
subject without confirming its historical accuracy, lest it be judged as undermining the horror or
invalidating a testimony.

By way of example, Harold Bloom’s edited collection of essays addressing Literature of
the Holocaust includes an introduction that qualifies Bloom’s intentions. He informs the reader

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36 James E. Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of
Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), 53.
37 Kosinski, The Painted Bird, xiv.
38 Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, 79.
39 Ibid.
that his parents’ families were murdered in the Holocaust, which itself says several things about Bloom and his audience without him even having to say much more.\textsuperscript{40} Even as an editor, Bloom felt the need to present his qualifications that are not academically related to his ability to write, edit, or criticize literature in general. This qualification not only functions to lend a certain amount of authority to his endeavor but also acknowledges this pervasive need for an exceptional legitimizing of scholars writing on the Holocaust. He also ensures that the reader is aware of the fact that he is uncertain about “what is or is not possible to represent in imaginative literature.”\textsuperscript{41}

The first edition of \textit{The Painted Bird} did not offer readers any affirmation of authenticity since, as we have seen, Kosinski purposefully left out an introduction in order to distance himself from the story. As a result, Kosinski and his work were increasingly viewed with suspicion. By the time he delivered a foreword to his second edition, prevailing lines of critical reaction to him and his book had been forged. Adding to the negative reception were the inconsistencies in his printed and verbal remarks. Thus, where Bloom’s acknowledgment of authority exonerated him from critical inquiry as to his ability to write on the subject, Kosinski’s foreword seems to have fueled continued accounts of his inconsistent testimonies. If critics had accepted Kosinski’s published description of the novel, then it should have been classified as fiction at the very least. At that point, challenges to the historical accuracy of the events in the novel would have been irrelevant. James E. Young asserts that, “by mixing actual events with completely fictional characters, a writer simultaneously relieves himself of an obligation to historical accuracy (invoking poetic license), even as he imbues his fiction with the historical authority of real events.”\textsuperscript{42} Yet, because of the charges of fraud surrounding Kosinski, even this understanding of

\textsuperscript{40} Bloom, \textit{Literature of the Holocaust}, 1.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Young, \textit{Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust}, 52.
Holocaust fiction writing did not deter critics from condemning him for his questionable authenticity.

**HOLOCAUST FICTION**

Of all Holocaust literatures, the fictional novel is one of the clearest and most threatening challenges to the constructs of literature and imagination. The literary devices used to articulate themes in any other genre of literature do not hold up within Holocaust fiction. When writing about experience, characters, and their relation to the world, one must inherently address some type of understanding of the “topic” at hand. In the case of the Holocaust, scholars assert that no understanding exists. There are no analogies to draw between Auschwitz and something else in order to achieve an understanding of the camp. There is nothing to compare to the mutilation, torture, and devastating conditions in the Jewish ghettos of Warsaw, Budapest, and Krakow or the death camps of Treblinka, Sobibor, or Chelmno. Thus, drawing parallels and utilizing analogies in the writing of Holocaust literature time and time again fall short and are “introduced only to reveal their inadequacy.”

The elimination of the analogy in this writing demands a reevaluation of the standards of literature, imagination, and representation.

As a result, the device of myth lends itself to illustrating the other-worldliness of the Holocaust world when analogy falls short. Since we have found that fiction can manifest itself in a category of Holocaust literature that is not necessarily required to uphold historical authenticity, then “the Holocaust is (often) transmuted into more abstract visions of agony, absurdity, or mythic suffering.”

The ways in which understanding can be achieved fall into the hands of the absurd, the mythic, and the subversive, rather than the real, the approachable, or the

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44 Ibid., 71.
relatable. Truth translates into literary myth rather than a clear comparison of relatable things, experiences, or places. Rosenfeld emphasizes that this is true of most Holocaust fictions. *The Painted Bird* is the exception. The very aspect that sparks both criticism and acclaim is the story’s accessibility and its stark, matter-of-fact descriptions of suffering. They are not mythic or otherworldly. Unlike most fictions that fall into mythic dimensions for lack of analogy and understanding, Kosinski portrays suffering that is accessible without drawing analogy. *The Painted Bird* surpasses the mythic because of Kosinski’s exceptional literary techniques that will be further discussed in the coming chapters.

Other critics claim that “Holocaust fiction is seen by many readers as – at best – a weaker, softer kind of testimony when compared to the rigors of history, or – at worst – a misleading, dangerous confusion of verisimilitude with reality.”45 Interestingly, *The Painted Bird* is more the latter and certainly not the former. The negative criticisms of it outside of the autobiographical controversies are that it is too graphic, violent, and exaggerated. In this case, then, Kosinski gives us fiction that some claim is well beyond history, but not weaker or softer.

One of the most applicable understandings of fiction for this study comes from Sue Vice. In her *Holocaust Fiction*, Vice fleshes out many critical issues of fiction including an interpretation of how fiction uses time. Vice relates that fiction utilizes the “treatment of time, or the relation between story and plot, to use the Russian formalist distinction between chronological events (the story) and their fictional patterning (the plot).”46 Here, the story is the “events of the Holocaust,” while the plot is the “fictional rearrangement of that chronology.”47 In Holocaust fiction, the reader already knows the story, i.e., the historical events of the Holocaust

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46 Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, 3.
47 Ibid.
in the chronologically accurate way they unfolded. This part is essentially unchanging. Fiction
does not fabricate or change the story, the actual events, but rather the plot is its fictional
reconfiguration of the story. This clarifies the notion that whether or not certain people, places,
or events in a Holocaust novel are historically accurate, this does not result in a rewriting of the
original story. On the contrary, Vice’s treatment of fiction informs us that it is simply the pattern
of the story that changes. When this is executed with appropriate literary care, the plot does not
fundamentally change the story. It is a reorganization of those events through either wholly or
partially fictionalized people and places.

It is also in these literary spaces that authors like Wiesel laud the sheer flexibility and
opportunity that this understanding of fiction provides the writer. In fiction, “veracity does not
depend…on any exact fidelity to history so much as it does on the writer’s ability to absorb
history into myth or legend.”48 His comment on the nature of Holocaust fiction suits The Painted
Bird to the extent that it draws attention to the fact that veracity and historical accuracy are not
one and the same. In fact, this is evident among other critics who also find that “strategies of
narration and transmission (‘a novelistic structure’) do not impinge on the truthfulness of
testimony.”49 If we apply these notions to The Painted Bird, then we have a completely different
way to read the story and understand its role. If fiction functions as the vehicle for delivering a
testimony, then it does not alter it, just as a deliveryman has no influence on the contents of the
package he delivers. By understanding fiction as a device, literary strategy, and method for story
telling, then we can avoid the inclination to see “fiction” as implying that the contents of the
story are invented.

48 Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, 80.
49 Horowitz, Voicing the Void, 5.
The final major aspect of Holocaust fiction that concerns our study is the problem of perspective. Though the perspective of *The Painted Bird* has been much discussed, I will present a new reading that highlights the novel’s perspective as its most redeeming quality and the very aspect that secures *The Painted Bird* its rightful place as an important work of Holocaust literature.

The main question regarding perspective in Holocaust literature is from which point of view can a story of the Holocaust be told that is appropriate, accurate, and effective? Whether an author is or is not a survivor in some sense plays a large role in not only how the audience reads the text, but also how critics evaluate the work. When a survivor writes a work of fiction, it is nearly impossible to avoid investigation and speculation that the work is linked to the personal experiences of the writer.

In the case of Holocaust fiction written by a survivor, we see this notion come into play in the following passage:

> For survivor writing, a literature of testimony develops that encompasses not only autobiography but fictional autobiography and imaginative literature, as well as poetry. The actual experiences of the writer, whether represented or transfigured in the work itself, anchor and validate the writing.\(^{50}\)

At first glance, Horowitz’ analysis may lead back to the issue of biography already mentioned in this study. However, the broad category of “survivor” spans many different experiences at all levels of Nazi-inflicted suffering. The exact nature of one’s suffering does not come into play in this understanding. Rather, Horowitz reiterates the idea that survivor testimony does not conflict with historical accuracy regardless of the form it takes. Testimony is testimony whether it manifests itself in writing, art, or film. Horowitz asserts that it does not have to take the form of a

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 8.
memoir or an overtly Holocaust text. Alvin H. Rosenfeld echoes this sentiment when he emphasizes how “all novels about Jewish suffering written in the post-Holocaust period must implicate the Holocaust, whether it is expressly named as such or not.”51 This claim rings especially true for *The Painted Bird*, since the novel focuses on the multifaceted mass brutality that took place outside of the concentration camps. The reader has a series of allusions, contextual indicators, and only a few overt references to the Holocaust.

Having reviewed issues pertaining to the perspective of the author, we can now focus on the perspective of the text itself. With Holocaust fiction, one must decide from which perspective to tell the story. This is an exceptionally critical endeavor due to the many issues I have already discussed above. To find a suitable and appropriate viewpoint from which to tell a Holocaust narrative must be approached with caution. In the case of *The Painted Bird*, the protagonist and narrator is a young, unnamed, and unidentifiable boy from Eastern Europe. We can guess that he may be Jewish or Gypsy, but neither is confirmed in the novel. The decision to deliver episodic tales of suffering through the eyes of child serves several purposes.

First, Kosinski explains the basis of the novel as a “confrontation between the defenseless individual and overpowering society” where “man would be portrayed in his most vulnerable state, as a child, and society in its most deadly form, in a state of war.”52 This opposition creates a narrative climate that is highly charged and susceptible to the worst examples of suffering and oppression. The child’s experiences are inevitably going to affect the reader more strongly than if the protagonist was an adult. The child does not have the same strength for survival that an adult does. The reader unavoidably feels more sympathy for the weaker victim.

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51 Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 68.
52 Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*, xii.
In addition, the child’s perspective invokes “imaginative involvement” on part of the reader. Since most people do not have clear, direct access to their childhood, Kosinski believes the reader must participate in exploring the child’s consciousness, emotions, and perspective. Recalling childhood memories is an act of recreation and a retrospective journey. This unique perspective allows for many levels of perception and understanding inherent in the act of recalling childhood as an adult. The narrator simultaneously produces memory, testimony, and an account of events, while imposing an adult retrospection on those recollections. This is the most sensitive part of the novel, which demands a new reading in order to recognize its true contribution.

**PERSPECTIVE THEORY**

Horowitz has provided a critical evaluation of Holocaust fiction with a focus on muteness. In her study, Horowitz examines the short story “A Spring Morning” from Ida Fink’s collection of short stories on the Holocaust, *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*. The narrative begins with a discussion among Polish witnesses who relate the story of the local Jews marching to their deaths. The narrator describes one Jewish man in particular who crosses the river with his family. The story then relates the “interior monologue” of the Jewish man who has just died at the hands of the Nazis. The reader follows the posthumous experiences of the man as he realizes his own death and then tries to save his daughter from the same fate. His attempt to call his daughter toward a church results in a guard shooting her. The Jewish man now carries his daughter to their mutual resting places in a mass grave.

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53 Ibid.
54 Horowitz, *Voicing the Void*, 14.
In the first part of this narrative, the reader does not receive any insight into the life of the Jewish man. We only see him and his family through the distant eyes of a surviving Polish bystander. In fact, our knowledge of the Jewish man’s suffering is limited to the Polish bystander’s mundane musings of an event he had probably witnessed countless times before. On the other hand, the second narrative perspective of the deceased Jewish man is “impossible but revealing.” It is obviously a historically inaccurate account, since it is unfeasible to know what happens once the Jewish man died. However, it does not mean that the story is altogether false. Historical records reflect families being rounded up, murdered, and buried in mass graves throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union especially. Since the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people were carried out in this way, it would be rationally, authentically impossible to know of their testimonies. What makes this story so powerful is that Fink provides this man’s testimony of suffering, loss, and the Holocaust through an impossible narrative. In doing so, Fink does not seek to fabricate the Holocaust and does not lie about experiences in order to undermine the collective suffering of all victims. On the contrary, we learn far more from the fictional, posthumous account of the Jewish man than from the historically authentic testimony of the bystander. Thus, Horowitz formulates her theory of fictional narrative perspective in light of this story:

Fink’s story makes clear that without the fiction – without the narrator’s imaginative intercession into historical reality – the murdered man’s life, fate, and feelings, the tragic indignity and the superfluous cruelty of his suffering would remain untold, and hence unknowable, consigned by his death to a radical muteness.

Horowitz outlines two important components that we will use to underpin a new approach to reading The Painted Bird. First, fiction is the vehicle for delivering testimonies, rather than a

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
descriptive evaluation of the testimony itself. In Fink’s story, it is only through being freed from
the constraints of rigid, historical responsibility that this particular testimony can be revealed,
since the man did not live to tell the story himself. Second, fiction is essential to revealing this
victim’s story, which would be lost without it. With six million Jews perishing in the Holocaust
and relatively few diaries left behind, we are left with millions of testimonies that can never be
told under the traditional standards of nonfiction, historical accuracy, or veracity. By utilizing a
fictional narrative, an author can reveal many unrecorded testimonies and provide a voice to
those who were silenced in the Holocaust. These “testimonies” are not intended to reflect
specific people, places, or events as they do in the traditional sense, but rather collective
testimonies of suffering and brutality during the Holocaust. This method ensures that all victims
will be remembered and honored even if they were not among those who have left their own
responses through their diaries and testimonies.
CHAPTER 3
APPLYING THE METHOD

As I have indicated, I will apply the literary method used by Horowitz to examine The Painted Bird. This method is based on the idea that fiction can be a vital vehicle for delivering testimonies, some of which would be lost without the liberties that fiction allows. The boy protagonist of the novel experiences more than a dozen brutally violent episodes throughout the story, which are typically separated by chapters. I would argue that the progression of violence at the hands of his caretakers and the villagers, soldiers, and other figures he encounters can be understood as reflective of experiences that involved more than one victim, which are telescoped into the story of one character for purposes of depiction. Thus we can analyze the boy’s experiences as representative of more general collective suffering during the time period covered by the novel. In the following section, I will highlight some episodes chronologically as they tend to be progressively more disturbing.

SELECTED EPISODES

The boy’s initial encounter with a group of villagers is a familiar scene: the stoning, humiliating, and beating of a pariah figure. The villagers pummeled the boy with “dried cow dung, moldy potatoes, apple cores, handfuls of dirt, and small stones.”\footnote{Kosinski, The Painted Bird, 16.} The public attack culminates with the boy being forced into a burlap sack and his internment in a small room in a
local farmer’s house where villagers watch the farmer whip him. Despite his deliverance from this particular farmer by the town’s witchdoctor, Olga, those same villagers later throw the boy onto a fish bladder sending him downstream. The boy asserts, “if the bladder should burst, I would immediately drown. I could not swim.”

The elements of humiliation ebbed in this episode are obviously very traumatic for anyone, much less a small child.

The boy’s next destination marks one of the first memorable acts of violence that the boy witnesses throughout the novel. He is now under the care of a new village’s miller, nicknamed Jealous. The drunken miller plucks out his farmhand’s eyes with a spoon in a jealous rage. The boy’s description of the scene in hauntingly, matter-of-fact detail makes the episode all the more “grotesque.” Through a youthful simplicity, the boy describes the scene as “the eye sprang out of his face like a yolk from a broken egg.” The poetic purity of this metaphor reflects Kosinski’s literary skill, while the boy’s feeling about the eyes that “surely they could still see” enhances the boy’s innocent perspective.

The motif of sexual violence manifests itself in the first of two particularly brutal scenes. At this point in the novel the boy meets Lekh, who is responsible for the novel’s title, and his lover Ludmila, who is branded the town whore because of her adulterous reputation among the married villagers. A mob of village women comes upon an orgy between Ludmila and two of the village men. The women proceed to beat her with rakes, tear her flesh with their hands, and kill her dog with a shovel.

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58 Ibid., 27.
59 Ibid., 38.
60 Ibid., 39.
This act of public brutality culminates in sexual vengeance in the following passage:

One of the women now approached, holding a corked bottle of brownish-black manure. To the accompaniment of raucous laughter and loud encouragements from the others, she kneeled between Ludmila’s legs and rammed the entire bottle inside her abused, assaulted slit, while she began to moan and howl like a beast. The other women looked on calmly. Suddenly with all her strength one of them kicked the bottom of the bottle sticking out of Stupid Ludmila’s groin. \(^{61}\)

This fierce act of communal vengeance and sexual exploitation against Ludmila represents local acts of alleged “justice.” This scene is unspeakable and shows humanity at its very worst. Regardless of the transgressions Ludmila committed, the reader certainly sympathizes with the unbelievable cruelty enacted upon her.

The most prolonged torment the boy suffers is certainly at the hands of the peasant Garbos and his vicious dog, Judas. In addition to Garbos’ daily beatings, the aptly named Judas functions as an instrument of fear and torture for the protagonist. This leads the boy to find avenues of redemption through religion, the church, indulgences, prayers, and the like. Meanwhile, the boy states that Garbos “invented new ways of persecuting me. Sometimes he hung me by the arms on a branch of the oak tree, leaving Judas loose underneath.” \(^{62}\) This event morphs into a daily hanging of the boy by his arms for hours, locked in a room, with Judas underfoot. It is during this episode that the boy makes discoveries about religion and God’s role in his suffering. The boy survives with a triumph of will through his recitation of “prayers to the exclusion of all else.” \(^{63}\) The boy’s understanding of the relationship between religion and suffering in this episode will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter. However, this horrific example of violence and persecution illustrates how suffering extended beyond the physical to the mental and religious realms.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 125.
\(^{63}\) Ibid., 133.
The boy protagonist’s next experience with violence arrives at the hands of young village boys rather than his caretakers. This example of abuse deals again with sexual violence in particular, but with boys raping boys rather than women. He begins with an eyewitness testimony of seeing “a band of cowherds raping a boy from another village who happened to wander into their territory.”64 Because of the boy’s firsthand knowledge of these occurrences, he is prepared for the group’s attack and plans his response accordingly. The boy describes: “I allowed them to take off my pants, pretending I was exhausted and could not fight any more.”65 The boy kicks one of his attackers, which results in an exemption from being raped. Instead, the gang force the boy under a frozen lake where “the cold encased” him and the air “felt like a stream of boiling soup.”66 The boy miraculously survives the frozen submersion with the help of a village woman.

Undoubtedly, the most gruesome episode occurs toward the end of the novel immediately before the Red Army temporarily adopts the boy until the war’s end. At age 11, the boy finds himself living in a village where the Kalmuks decide to attack. The boy knows about this band of Soviet deserters who joined the German army because of tales about them told by the villagers. The Germans permitted this group of lawless “volunteers” to join the army and “loot and rape in the manner of their war customs and manly traditions.”67 Above all others, this scene embodies the novel’s oft-criticized and allegedly exaggerated violence, as well as its macabre descriptions and the boy’s unwaveringly candid descriptions of incomprehensible trauma. The boy witnesses the Kalmuks’ invasion of the village from the temporary safety of some nearby bushes. The men of the village unsuccessfully try to protect their women and are wounded or killed. The boy

64 Ibid., 159.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 160.
67 Ibid., 175.
describes a farmer who “ran through the main street with his hand cut off. Blood was spurting from the stump while he kept looking for his family.”\textsuperscript{68} The boy witnesses the communal raping of several women:

Nearby the soldiers had forced a woman to the ground. One soldier held her by the throat while others pulled her legs apart. One of them mounted her and moved on top of her to shouts of encouragement. The woman struggled and cried. When the first was done the others assaulted her in turn.\textsuperscript{69}

The scene becomes increasingly more brutal when one girl is brought out, and “two men raped her at once, one in the mouth.”\textsuperscript{70} Not far from there, “some soldiers were raping from the front and from the back two young girls, passing them from one man to the next, forcing them to perform strange movements.”\textsuperscript{71} When the Kalmuks tired of these methods, the boy notes how they not only “copulated with each other,” but “then competed in raping women in odd ways: two or three men to one girl, several men in rapid succession.”\textsuperscript{72} As if this was not horrifying enough, we learn that the “younger and more desirable girls were nearly torn apart.”\textsuperscript{73} The Kalmuks continued to advance their attack by raping women on horses. Women were passed from man to man, horse to horse, and even “two soldiers raped the fainting woman simultaneously” upon one horse.\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 177.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 178.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
The scene continues with the gut-wrenching report of the Kalmuks’ attack on a young girl:

One of them rushed into a house and brought out a small girl of about five. He lifted her high so that his comrades could see her well. He tore off the child’s dress. He kicked her in the belly while her mother crawled in the dust begging for mercy. He slowly unbuttoned and took down his trousers, while still holding the little girl above his waist with one hand. Then he crouched and pierced the screaming child with a sudden thrust. When the girl grew limp he threw her away into the bushes and turned to the mother.75

The seven-page account culminates with a man who is held down and forced to witness the torture and rape of his wife and two daughters. The man finds an opportunity to strike back and “dealt a sudden blow to the nearest one.”76 The soldier’s “skull crushed like a swallow’s egg.”77 This results in a devastatingly gruesome revenge carried out against the man:

The enraged soldiers surrounded the peasant, overpowered him, and raped him. Then they castrated him in front of his wife and daughters. The frantic woman rushed to his defense, biting and scratching. Roaring with delight, the Kalmuks held her fast, forced her mouth open, and pushed the bloody scraps of flesh down her throat.78

What is arresting about these accounts is the sheer lack of flowery or distracting language. The boy’s perspective is stark and does not reflect judgment or emotion. Hints of the boy’s age and innocence are reflected in the inability to describe the sexual scenes in any kind of informed detail. The terrorized women are made to do “strange” movements or put into “odd” positions. There is an uncertainty of the sexual acts or positions the boy witnesses. In the midst of such bare and disturbing narration, these elementary adjectives remind the reader of the child’s viewpoint, which is still spotted with purity in spite of years of trauma.

The stories highlighted here are unspeakable and render the reader speechless in true disbelief. They are difficult to swallow, even more impossible to understand, and that is what makes the novel as effective as it is. These stories make up only half of the episodes of violent

75 Ibid., 179-80.
76 Ibid., 180.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
persecution either felt by the boy or witnessed by him. Totaling at least a dozen episodes of horrific trauma in all, the novel’s chronicling of one boy’s suffering during the Holocaust clearly invokes unparalleled emotion and reaction amongst readers and critics alike. While these episodic tales are difficult to swallow, it is clear that “we need to seek a definition of Holocaust fictions that extends beyond camp and ghetto sites, and includes terrifying war narratives of the Polish zeitgeist in the war years.”79 Kosinski refuses to allow the reader to become indifferent to the mass brutality inflicted upon the child, who represents the communal suffering of all during this time, but specifically focuses on suffering outside of camp walls. These episodes are obviously stylized in order to achieve the shock and awe effect that comes through so powerfully. Kosinski employs his matter-of-fact style in order to enhance the shocking viciousness of these episodes.

A NEW APPROACH

Many critics have noted the unlikelihood of all of these shocking incidents happening to the boy at all, or at the very least within the scope of his witness in such a short period of time. However, I believe that we should read these accounts as a compilation of stories about suffering experienced by many people, rather than as the protagonist’s or Kosinski’s sole experiences. Following Horowitz’s approach, these collections of episodes about the horrors of mundane life during the Holocaust give a voice to stories buried with the victims. In this light, instead of debating whether Kosinski depicted his authentic autobiography in the novel, one can understand that he related stories of nameless and voiceless victims who experienced what the boy saw or knew about, in addition to what he himself experienced. In creating this Holocaust fiction,

79 Schwarz, Imagining the Holocaust, 174.
Kosinski took on the role of storyteller and used the boy as a representative figure for communal suffering.

Inevitably, Kosinski’s own wartime experiences and perspective meshes with the narrative, but this fact enhances the novel rather than detracting from or solely informing it. As Kosinski states in his foreword to the second edition, none of the events are “fiction,” in the sense that you can verify such instances of horror and tragedy in the historical records and testimonies of the Holocaust. One such account that mirrors Kosinski’s episodes in terms of creative brutality can be found in the historical accounts of concentration camp life:

In one case around October 1941 five homosexual prisoners were singled out and taken to the wash room. Their hands were bound behind their backs, and they were restrained by SS men while a hose was shoved down their throats and turned full on until they drowned. Any who struggled were beaten. When all five were dead, the corpses were hung upside down until all the water drained out, making it difficult to establish that the cause of death had not been natural.80

After reading this official, verified, historical account of unimaginable cruelty, Kosinski’s “tales” no longer seem to be so exaggerated.

Thus, Kosinski telescopes stories of cruelty and violence that were experienced by someone into a single narrative with one protagonist. While these events are not told from the perspective of a memoir or historical testimony, they also did not not happen. Kosinski uses the fictional boy protagonist as a vehicle to give a voice to nameless victims, delivering them from the fate of eternal muteness. Thus, the boy as an allegorical figure must witness or experience these horrifying episodes in order to tell the story of many muted victims who did endure these tragedies and cannot tell the story for themselves.

In this way, Kosinski’s representation, his fiction, is critical to our understanding of the Holocaust experience. In one novel, Kosinski succeeds in representing multiple voices, multiple victims, and a range of experience. As a novel, *The Painted Bird* surpasses the limits of fictional representation by crushing the muteness inherent in genocide and human tragedy. Inherently, this feat could neither be accomplished without invoking a fictional genre to speak for those without voice nor without utilizing Kosinski’s own wartime experience to illuminate the stories. Kosinski’s own childhood gives them life and authenticity from a perspective that was well acquainted with the realities of brutality, regardless of the extent to which they were directly experienced. The Kosinski family’s “easy” wartime existence posing as Christians rather than surviving the death camps does not refute the probability that he either heard of or witnessed similar events. Regarding this point, Sloan acknowledges:

> While many harrowing episodes of *The Painted Bird* did not happen literally as Kosinski would write and speak of them…at least one medical professional was persuaded that Kosinski’s anatomy revealed a physically traumatic event in which his shoulder sockets were damaged.  

Here, Sloan reflects the critical fixation on the correlation between Kosinski’s biography and the boy protagonist. Despite what Kosinski may or may not have said at various times throughout his life, the boy’s life does not mirror Kosinski’s. *The Painted Bird* is not his memoir. The information regarding injuries to Kosinski’s shoulders does echo the scene in which the boy is made to hang from rafters for hours. Sloan’s statement speaks to the influences in Kosinski’s life that illuminate the violent events of the novel. There is evidence from Sloan’s biographical investigation that Kosinski did experience or witness similar events during his childhood that are subsequently expanded upon in the novel. It is important that we explore these similarities in

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order to understand their role as assisting Kosinski in speaking to the conditions in rural Poland at this time, rather than as a literal transcript for the autobiographical accounts in the novel.

Sloan uncovers these corresponding details beginning with the Kosinski family’s first hiding place in an old woman’s cottage. This woman, “Pasiowa,” would later be the inspiration for Marta, the old peasant woman who initially cared for the young boy until her death. At the next point in their journey away from the closing ghettos of Lodz, a priest assisted the Kosinski’s in finding a safe village to reside. In the novel, it was the priest who also saved the life of the young boy, but then subsequently delivered him to Garbos. Once the family arrived and took over the apartment of another Jewish family who was rounded up and killed, a maid became a regular fixture in the household. Her name was Labina, who was “memorialized” in the novel with a character of the same name. Finally, Sloan discovers testimony that Kosinski dropped a missal during a mass service just like the boy in the novel. While Kosinski was not disciplined, Sloan speculates that it must have been a “devastating and pivotal event” for the adolescent Kosinski. From a young age, Kosinski was conditioned to assimilate in order to protect his family, and this event must have made him think he somehow endangered his family’s status in the community. This would account for the boy’s exile into the pit of excrement and subsequent loss of voice as symbolic of Kosinski’s inner feelings about the event, rather than the literal consequences that Kosinski experienced.

Sloan’s extensive biography reveals many more parallels between Kosinski’s childhood and the events of the novel. Unlike the common critical approach of aligning his biography with the novel’s episodes, these instances should be read as material that provided creative inspiration.

82 Ibid., 25.
83 Ibid., 28.
84 Ibid., 29.
85 Ibid., 35.
instead of source material for Kosinski’s attempt to fabricate his Holocaust experience. It is almost unavoidable that an author of fiction would be able to omit any personal influence on a story. With Kosinski’s unique role as a Holocaust survivor writing fiction rather than memoir, this understanding of literature and the role of the author are magnified. The vehicle of fiction gives survivors like Kosinski, Wiesel, and others the freedom to talk about the Holocaust without the responsibility of literal fidelity to any one life narrative or experience. In the case of *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski’s personal Holocaust experience contributes to the success of his telescoping efforts in portraying many Holocaust experiences. In some cases it is likely he drew on his experiences, but in other episodes not. The important distinction is that no matter the degree to which Kosinski expanded the episodes, they did not swell beyond historical records and testimonies of the mass brutality that occurred during and after the war in Poland and all over Eastern Europe.

In short, we must read the chapters of *The Painted Bird* as if we were reading a collection of testaments to the mass brutality that existed throughout Europe and the former Soviet Union. There were many people who roamed the Polish countryside, seeking asylum throughout the war. Many outsiders, whether Jewish or Gypsy, were beaten, tortured, killed, raped, humiliated, starved, intimidated, and punished amounting to levels of mass brutality that surpassed the barbed wire fences of the concentration camp universe. For the peasantry, the fear of outsiders and violent reactions to them in the height of war was pervasive given the level of punishment exacted on peasants who betrayed German soldiers and partisans alike. These unspeakable atrocities happened and illustrate communal suffering during this time. In order to successfully portray many instances of brutality that plague an entire generation and an entire people, Kosinski must use the literary method of telescoping in a fictional medium. As Kosinski states,
the novel is more effective as a collection of violence enacted on an innocent child to show the cruelty of human nature during the height of society’s most fragile state in war. These stories force the reader to confront these elements of the Holocaust that occurred outside of Auschwitz and the confines of the concentration camp.
CHAPTER 4
RE-READING THE TEXT

In light of this updated approach to the novel, we can continue by further examining *The Painted Bird* as literature on its own that is separate from its author’s controversies. Kosinski produces a literature rich in multiple levels of perception and vivid imagery that must not only be acknowledged as representing and conveying truth, but also as doing so in an unsurpassed way.

LITERARY CRITICISM

While a brief discussion of the reception of the novel has already taken place, it is pertinent to review some of the literary criticisms of the novel to pave the way for a close reading of the text. These evaluations speak of the novel on its own, without attaching biographical assessments to the literature.

One of the most common reviews of the novel as literature describes it as “essentially surrealistic, an initiatory experience grounded in an imagined world.” As we have learned already, Holocaust fiction often falls into the realm of the surreal, imagined, and otherworldly for numerous reasons. However, I contend that this reading of *The Painted Bird* is misguided. The novel’s matter-of-fact tone and consistent relationship with historical events grounds the story in reality. *The Painted Bird* haunts the reader with its graphic depictions of cruelty precisely because it is real and accessible to the reader. Scholarly criticism in this vein that employs

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descriptions of the text as “a parable of demonic totalitarianism” can undermine the fictional realism of the novel that makes it so successful as Holocaust literature. Additionally, Kosinski achieves an exceptional balance between real, horrifying events and his fictional presentation of them resulting in a “frightening artistic reality.”

Another widespread assessment of the story acknowledges the sheer, unspeakable terror embedded in each episode, yet fails to accurately align them within the realm of the Holocaust. By saying the novel is “a masterpiece of horror” or a “wildly fictionalized” account of “his own childhood in Poland,” scholars allow it to fall into the category of horror literature. This sentiment resonates in an accolade of the novel as “one of the best works of literature to come out of the European horror.” Even if the review strikes a compromise with the issues of realism, the notion that the novel is comprised of “horror stories for the ugliest kind of realism” still falls short of accurate classification. As discussed earlier, it is imperative that The Painted Bird is recognized as Holocaust fiction, which is set apart from other categories of literature.

Literary scholars also tend to associate The Painted Bird with fairytales. Interestingly, the whimsical nature of a fairy-tale becomes juxtaposed with the violence. This is evident in the evaluation of the novel as “an extraordinary work of combined fantasy and realism, a fairytale horror story.” Other critics are even more specific to include a reference to “Hansel and Gretel,” which exist as a contrast to the “folk-tale” and comments on the “anti-fairy-tale” nature

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91 Weales, “Jerzy Kosinski,” 147.
of the text.\textsuperscript{93} The story’s child narrator is likely the reason for this association, but the narrative is noticeably devoid of the colorful, carefree descriptions found in the fairytale. Finally, it is again through these simple associations that the unparalleled nature of this Holocaust fiction tends to be downplayed to a “series of fanciful variations on the basic themes of Nazi inhumanity.”\textsuperscript{94} Kosinski intentionally positions the narrative outside of the realm of Nazi inhumanity and brings forth the universal inhumanity of the Holocaust’s perpetrators who perhaps did not wear a uniform.

The episodic structure of the novel is one of the critical aspects to the novel that contributes to its overall impact. Clearly, Kosinski is “not interested in conventional narrative technique.”\textsuperscript{95} However, I do not think it is a matter of interest but rather one of strategy. The story is only possible in snapshots for two reasons: effect and authenticity. The brief, yet powerful glimpses function as a constant stimulus for the reader. Kosinski never allows his reader to get comfortable, to become indifferent to the suffering. The novel’s events are flashes of lightning designed to jolt the reader to attention and involvement.

Additionally, a sequence of seemingly disjointed events reflects the child’s realistic perception as well as the adult’s retrospective memory. In the novel, “events are not coherently connected because for him time exists only in the present.”\textsuperscript{96} A child’s perception is in the here and now. Events occur sporadically without a causal connection. Kosinski explains that “events to the child are immediate: discoveries are one-dimensional. This kills, that maims, this one

\textsuperscript{95} Weales, “Jerzy Kosinski,” 148.
cuffs, that one caresses. But to the adult the vision of these memories is multi-dimensional.”

This understanding of the complexity of narration brings us to the intertwining of perspective. Not only does the boy’s adolescent perception carry the narrative, but also the boy’s presumably adult self actively participates in the act of remembrance. The adult’s presence in the narrative is clear when the reader intermittently sees that “the events have lost their isolation, have merged and fluxed, ebbed and flowed through the author’s mind like tides.” Kosinski meshes the two perspectives frequently resulting in a more complex, intricate story. This results in “not simply an adult’s catalogue of tidy facts, but spills out the involved, pain-wracked, fear-heightened memories, impressions and feelings of the child.” While the reader follows the simplistic telling of events the boy witnesses and experiences, the mature, retrospective voice fills gaps of understanding with information the boy would be unable to know.

In Barbara Tepa Lupack’s introduction to her compilation of essays on Kosinski, she echoes the sentiment that the “only true gauge of his [Kosinski] literary reputation is in his writing.” In this collection, a review of The Painted Bird by “noted psychiatrist” Robert Coles provides a glimmer of what will be expounded upon throughout this study. He comments how “the author [Kosinski] rather obviously sees him [the boy protagonist] as a representative of all refugees, all outcasts, all suffering and debased people.” Coles contributes one more hint to this idea in the subsequent paragraph when he describes the novel as “this story that tells a

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97 Kosinski, Notes of the Author, 15.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 9.
million stories.”\textsuperscript{103} This 1967 review is unique among understandings of \textit{The Painted Bird} for several reasons. Coles does not fixate on Kosinski’s biography in this short review, but rather analyzes the novel’s literary qualities. Additionally, he presents a reading of the novel in which the boy represents communal suffering instead of Kosinski’s autobiographical experiences. However, Coles does not expand upon these offhand comments or provide any substantive basis for them. He also omits the significant link between the novel’s violent episodes and the Holocaust, thus presenting a more generalist reading of suffering in all society. I hope to compensate for these shortcomings in order to present a broader, more complete understanding of the representative qualities of the novel.

**LITERARY STRENGTHS**

\textit{The Painted Bird} excels as literature due to Kosinski’s exceptional literary technique. He primarily manipulates perspective and language in order to achieve a chillingly stark narration of violence and torture. The many levels of perspective present in the novel are accomplished by his subversion of traditional standards of fiction. Some critics feel “the novel, presumably told from some point after the fact, is a catalogue of horrors rendered in a flat, descriptive monotone. It is not a victory of language over experience, but a way of using language to keep the experience at a safe emotional distance.”\textsuperscript{104} However, the chapter involving the infamous missal-dropping scene demonstrates the complexity in Kosinski’s writing that certainly does not render a feeling of monotony. Moreover, I will demonstrate how the novel’s language shocks, moves, and

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
compels the reader. In the case of *The Painted Bird*, accessibility does not equate to safety or comfort.

As we already know, Kosinski presents an impossible narrative from perspectives that would otherwise be lost. In addition, the boy protagonist’s perspective as a culmination of testimonies is also infused with the retrospection of the boy in adulthood. Many strictly literary reviews of the novel focus on the pervasiveness of violence. This is a critical aspect, one that informs the boy’s understanding of the world around him. It also supplements the boy’s evolving relationship with religion.

Accordingly, we must turn to the climax of the novel in order to explore the intricacies of these themes. In a single episode, Kosinski exhibits the significance of multiple layers of perspective, religion, language (both in narration and muteness in the boy), otherness, and of course, brutal violence carried out against the boy protagonist.

THE MISSAL SCENE

At nearly the very center of the novel sits the most religiously infused chapter. Kosinski purposefully juxtaposes religion with the most lasting and brutal suffering the boy experiences. The extremes of both themes are not present by coincidence of course, but offer poignant examples of Kosinski’s deliberate and effective technique.

The chapter begins as a priest saves the boy’s life from the hands of a Nazi soldier and delivers him to a farmer who sees him as “an unbaptized Gypsy bastard.”¹⁰⁵ The boy narrates this perception of himself to the reader, though he cannot actually understand the farmer’s language. The boy assumes the farmer’s reaction to him to be negative, presumably from tone

and mannerism indicators. Ultimately, this classification of the boy is an insinuation and indicative of the boy’s developing awareness of how he might be perceived depending on the situation. Given his unpleasant experiences thus far and negative reception amongst other peasants, the boy seems to understand how he is viewed in spite of the language barrier.

In a community centered on church activity in which the priest is a respected and powerful figure able to bargain with Nazi soldiers, it is clear from the outset the importance of religious practices such as baptism. The boy’s new caretaker, Garbos, has a reputation that precedes him. The boy learns of Garbos’ past by overhearing interactions between him and his neighbors. We learn that Garbos harbored an “orphaned Jewish girl” for whom he received money.\(^\text{106}\) Since an orphaned girl would logically have no person paying for her board, it might be plausible to assume Garbos received assistance from the church given the priest has brought another child to him. In spite of the monetary compensation, the neighbors assault Garbos with the accusation that he would “beat her daily, rape her, and force her to commit depravities until she finally vanished.”\(^\text{107}\) The decision to use the word “vanished” instead of ‘died’ or ‘murdered’ is a deliberate one. It echoes a child-like understanding of death, where the tone is immediate and the victim is simply gone. This word choice also underscores the nature of suffering at the hands of Garbos, a total and complete destruction of the body, mind, and soul. This destruction is evident in the constant and increasing brutality he inflicts on the boy.

As the days pass, we learn that Garbos beats the boy for no obvious reason. The beatings are also inventive, which suggests Garbos’ penchant for brutalizing the powerless on all levels. By way of example, Garbos sneaks into the boy’s sleeping quarters at night to wake him “by

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 116.
\(^{107}\) Ibid.
yelling into [his] ear” for entertainment. Garbos also beats the boy where the marks cannot be seen and threatens him with promises of his demise should he confide in the priest about his treatment. It is obvious that Garbos’ brutality is not limited to physical beatings but extends to psychological warfare by way of continual intimidation.

It is during this time that the boy begins a journey of self-awareness and a critical relationship with organized religion that initially functions as a realistic hope for redemption. Upon arrival to the village, the boy realizes “his total ignorance of religion and church observances,” so the priest instructs him in “the meaning of liturgical objects.” The boy’s religious education begins as a reprieve from Garbos’ relentless physical and psychological torture. At first, he relates the liturgical objects to things he knows. Up until this point, the boy’s metaphysical education has centered on magic and the mythological. From a child’s perspective then, the holy water “looked far less impressive than, for example, ground horse bones.” To him, the priest and the Mass are magic. It is the altar, however, that inspires an awareness of the organized religion’s superiority over the magic he has known so far. He compares “Olga’s hut…full of its evil-smelling frogs, rotting pus from human wounds, and cockroaches” to the “majestic tabernacle in which the divine spirit dwelled.” The boy presents a clear comparison between magic and religion with an obvious preference for the refined nature and status of the church. The boy tells us how the priest explained the symbolism of colors and fabric in the church. The priest also speaks “a different language” than Olga. These comparisons between the magical world and his newfound exposure to the church demonstrate his progression towards

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108 Ibid., 118.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 120.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 121.
organized religion as a foundation for understanding the world around him. The more appealing and legitimate religion becomes, the more he relies on it for answers and guidance.

As the torture intensifies with Garbos, the boy’s religious education with the priest reaches new levels of self- and metaphysical awareness. Simultaneously when Garbos “invented new ways of persecuting” the boy by hanging him “by the arms on a branch of the oak tree, leaving Judas loose underneath,” the boy eavesdrops on a life-altering conversation between the priest and a peasant.  

It is in this conversation that the boy learns of the concept of indulgences, which is the most relevant aspect of the church to his present condition. He “understood that those who say more prayers earn more days of indulgence, and that this was also supposed to have an immediate influence on their lives.” This revelation orients him to a new understanding of himself and the world around him. He determines it is not because of his appearance or “otherness” that he is persecuted, but rather his unfortunate ignorance of religious practice and lack of access to the church that has forced him into a life plagued with brutality. The boy reasons that those who do not suffer “had simply been the first to see the need for prayer and for collecting the maximum number of days of indulgence.” As a result, the boy accepts responsibility for his lot in life and seeks to free himself from Garbos’ cruelty by praying and acquiring indulgences.

This literal and simplistic understanding of the relationship between God and man reflects the boy’s present-centered perspective. Everything is immediate, existing in the here and now. However, an evolution has taken place in that the boy makes causal connections to his past, present, and future. Before, his tragedies were void of understanding and reason. Now, he

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113 Ibid., 125.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
develops a worldview beyond the understanding of child. This infusion of a higher understanding suggests the intervention of the adult perspective. In retrospect, the narrator can articulate a reward and punishment system in the world connected to a higher power. Moreover, his assertion that he “was ready to start a new life” echoes a more mature and reflective understanding of his situation that seems to exceed his other rudimentary assessments. At this point, the boy’s “new life” is “spent alternately praying and being beaten.” Kosinski reiterates the undeniable effectiveness of positioning one extreme against another. By placing religious belief next to undeserved torture, Kosinski appears to comment on the church and the product it is selling. Not only that, but what is the reader to understand about the power of humanity and its relationship to God if even religion cannot save the boy?

This concept of an active, immediate relationship with God begins to ravel for the boy. He arrives at the church to find the priest ill. The notion that “bad things happen to good people” confronts the boy, and he formulates this familiar idea: “I was astonished. The priest must have accumulated an extraordinary number of days of indulgence during his pious life, and yet here he was lying sick like anybody else.” A wrench is thrown into his logical mapping of the world, which signals the beginning of the end for his faith in the church. Subsequently, Kosinski duplicates the boy’s spiritual unrest in the physical realm when Garbos introduces the boy to his homemade torture device. The boy is made to hang by his arms from the ceiling, holding onto “leather straps” attached to “two large hooks.” Garbos proceeds to lock Judas in the room, leaving him to destroy the boy should he let go. The image this scene produces appears to mirror the position one would be in during a crucifixion. It is during this grueling battle of his mental

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116 Ibid., 126.
117 Ibid., 127.
118 Ibid., 129.
119 Ibid., 130.
and physical strength that he draws upon the prayers for help. Through hours of recitation, he asserts “thousands of days of indulgence streaked through the thatched roof toward heaven.”\footnote{Ibid., 132.}

He quite literally stakes his life on the power of these prayers and develops a confidence in them that inevitably betrays him. In this scene, Kosinski plays on religious images and themes to ultimately undermine them.

Finally, the storyline pushes us through spring and the boy is “already ten years old.”\footnote{Ibid., 135.} This is the longest episode thus far, and today is the feast of Corpus Christi. The Catholic festival, which celebrates the institution of the Holy Eucharist, is a distinctive event. As a new albeit unofficial member of the church, it is important for him to attend, since “it was said that on this fete day the bodily presence of the Son of God would make itself felt in the church more than on any other feast.”\footnote{Ibid.} This seems to be the boy’s last-ditch effort to gain favor in God’s eyes in order to be granted reprieve from his tortuous life. He acknowledges how his prayers “had not produced perceptible results,” yet asserts “they must have been noticed in heaven, where justice is law.”\footnote{Ibid.} Due to this perception, the boy is undeterred when the peasants “scourge” him at the entrance to the church with “osier branches and horsewhips.”\footnote{Ibid., 136.} He escapes and assumes his position as altar boy and carrier of the missal, which is “the Holy Book filled with sacred prayers collected for the greater glory of God by the saints and learned men throughout the centuries.”\footnote{Ibid., 137-8.} Kosinski mirrors the importance of this book as a religious object in its sheer size and weight, which the boy is unable to handle because of the torture inflicted upon him. Thus, it is the physical strain of constant torture from which this religious experience was
supposed to rescue him is what causes him to commit this deadly mistake. We see the
metaphysical, the boy’s commitment to prayers and his deep faith cannot overcome the physical
weakening of his body.

In response to the boy’s unintentional desecration of the Holy Book, the crowd of
parishioners drag him to a “large manure pit” and “hurled” him in. This marks the last straw
for the boy, and he is rendered mute upon emerging from the pit. The boy abandons his faith in
the church, indulgences, prayer, and God as a result of the peasants’ despicable reaction. Again,
it is no coincidence that the boy’s loss of faith coincides with his loss of voice stemming from a
brutal trauma. A series of tortuous events corresponding to religious gains culminates in the
boy’s rejection of God and humanity. If it is from this point on that the boy is markedly changed,
then what does it all mean?

Some critics like Lavers claim that the boy protagonist is symbolic of Christ. In light of
Kosinski’s statement: “Perhaps, in their deepest thoughts lies the belief that while both the
arrival and the appearance of the Boy endanger them, yet, he may have been sent to save,”
Lavers designates the boy as a “Redeemer” figure. For Lavers, this explains the
congregation’s violent reaction to the boy dropping the missal during the church service, in
which a parallel to Jesus’ own suffering at the hands of any angry mob is clearly drawn.

Another evaluation places the boy in very different role. In Paul R. Lilly Jr.’s essay on
violence in Kosinski’s fiction, he discusses the issue as “complex studies in the shifting identity
of victim and oppressor.” Lilly understands Kosinski’s literary violence to be about power and
how one evolves from the powerless to the powerful. The boy’s powerlessness and victimization

126 Ibid., 138-9.
128 Paul R. Lilly, Jr., “Vision and Violence in the Fiction of Jerzy Kosinski,” in Critical Essays
come to a head when the church parishioners nearly drown him in the pit of excrement. This is
the critical turning point for the boy in terms of both self- and worldly-realization. It is at this
moment that he relinquishes any faith in his religious truths and strives to reclaim power over his
destiny. Moreover, Mary Lazar notes how the peasants’ brutality speaks to a higher moral
message in this episode of the novel:

The Holocaust was not caused by a lone sadist but was the product of a generation which
chose (or was persuaded) to believe that its version of “the good” preempted all other
moral concerns. This is precisely the lesson taught in the Corpus Christi chapter.\textsuperscript{129}

This is a critical understanding of the role of religion representing morality rather than a specific
church or religious concept. Lazar also speaks to an issue already presented in this study: the
episodic violence that illustrates widespread brutality outside of the Nazi universe.

Thus, the prolonged torture, investment in religious faith, and ultimate religious failing in
dropping the missal renders the boy stripped of his worldview reflected in his physical lack of
speech. It is important to emphasize the interconnection of violence and religion and how they
effectively mirror each other. Critics note “Kosinski’s matter-of-fact articulation of the
unspeakable, as well as his singular appreciation of the more elegant forms of physical and
mental tortures.”\textsuperscript{130} Kosinski subtly entwines the two in the powerful build up to the climax of
the novel where they betray each other and ultimately the boy. Furthermore, the manipulation of
language through multiple layers of perspective takes on a new character and signals a change in
the boy. He no longer has access to speech, regardless of the peasants’ inability to understand
him. So while “the sense of alienation is heightened by depriving the characters of the ability to
communicate freely” throughout the novel, the boy’s muteness becomes a more compelling

\textsuperscript{129} Mary Lazar, \textit{Through Kosinski’s Lenses: Identity, Sex, and Violence} (Lanham: University
Press of America, 2007), 72.

\textsuperscript{130} Sanders, “{Review of} \textit{Cockpit},” 91.
“metaphor for dissociation from the community and from something greater.”\textsuperscript{131} It is no exaggeration to say that the boy is alienated from the foundations of his entire understanding of the order of the universe. While critics suggest, “the speechless child became a great symbol of the inadequacy of language confronted by atrocity,” Kosinski overcomes the prescribed shortcomings in his rich narrative.\textsuperscript{132} However, it seems implied that this is only possible through the adult’s perspective and his ability to reflect on atrocity at a later time.

\textsuperscript{131} Kosinski, \textit{Notes of the Author}, 16-7.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The Painted Bird is a novel that saddens, horrifies, and disrupts one’s consciousness. In spite of Kosinski’s rollercoaster career and damaged reputation, I hope this study has shown how the novel outshines the controversy. The Painted Bird stands as a representation of the general climate of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust and what humans are capable of.

I think that it is easier to regard a text like The Painted Bird as exaggerated or lies, rather than come to terms with the realities of the atrocities it describes. All too often, people refuse to accept mankind’s ability to enact such cruelty. No one wants to read about gruesome acts that one’s neighbor is capable of carrying out. This is why we make monsters out of men like Adolf Hitler. If we can blame someone, this evil monster who is far from human, then it is easier to deal with the suffering that is beyond our understanding, like the Holocaust.

Likewise, it seems Auschwitz has evolved into a synonym for concentration camp and for the Holocaust. The image of the camp filled with order and organization is one of the dominant portrayals of the Holocaust. However, we cannot allow the Holocaust to be packaged up neatly in the representation of a gas chamber, an oven, or a Nazi. That is certainly not to undermine the multifaceted horrors of the camps. But, it is critical to remember that the Holocaust embodied mass brutality, not simply mass murder. Many different people, in many different places, carried out the horrors. It was not confined to Nazi guards and German soldiers in prisons and camps.
It is dangerous to “other” the Holocaust in order to facilitate acceptance. If Hitler is an “other” who is distant from us, then we are safe. We adopt the mentality “that could never be me or my brother or my friend.” If the Holocaust is “other-worldly,” then it took place a long time ago in a distant land very far from my reality and what I know to be true about the human condition. It could never happen in this day and age. It is this false sense of security and understanding that we must protect against as time pushes us farther and farther away from the event. However, associating fiction with denial or undermining the Holocaust cannot accomplish this. It is through fiction that Kosinski makes it impossible to dismiss the gravity of the Holocaust to another place, another time, another society, and another world entirely.

In light of the impending turn the field of Holocaust studies is about to encounter with the loss of all survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders in the next decade or so, I think the field is going to have to deal with Holocaust fiction in a more thorough and productive way. They must confront and reconcile it with their understandings of the nature of representation, truth, authenticity, and experience. This will likely be the only new, emerging literature we have in order to talk about the Holocaust. There will be children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of all three groups who will write and represent their understandings of the horrors of the Holocaust alongside writers who have no personal attachment to the brutalities. It will be critical to accept this form of Holocaust writing and recognize its potential for representing themes of suffering and preserving the memory of the millions who perished.

Thus, The Painted Bird’s contribution to the field of Holocaust studies and the canon of Holocaust literature is substantial. It belongs alongside the great writings on the Holocaust because of its complex, rich narrative structure that represents and honors those who suffered mass brutality and did not survive. The victims of rape, torture, castration, beating, drowning,
and brutalization during this time are recognized through Kosinski’s skilled literary technique
and his employment of fiction as a vehicle to deliver these narratives. While it is not easy to
confront, it is our responsibility to do so.


