Holocaust Literature: Reality and Fiction in
Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* and
Raymond Federman’s *The Voice in the Closet*.

Afstudeerwerk ingediend tot het behalen van de graad van Licentiaat in
de Germaanse Filologie

door Annelies Vande Wyngaerde

**Promotor:** Prof. dr. K. Versluis
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. This bold statement by Theodor Adorno has received strong reactions from supporters, critics, poets and novelists. His words led to a discussion about whether or not it is possible or desirable to represent the Holocaust in literature. How can it be justified that an event as horrific as the slaughter of millions of Jews is turned into entertainment? Those in favor of Adorno’s words believe that there is no way in which writings about the Holocaust can do justice to the events so the only suitable response is to remain silent.

However, it is important not to forget what unforgivable crimes were committed in Nazi Germany. Even though historians and statisticians may be able to write down the facts and numbers, they are not capable of communicating the pain of individuals. It is only in art that the voice of suffering can be expressed. So it is essential that works of art are created in the wake of the Second World War. Even Adorno himself later acknowledged that his previous statement was a mistake, saying that “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream... hence it may have been wrong to say that no poem could be written after Auschwitz” (Qtd. in Chandler).

After one has decided to give expression to the horrors, one is faced with a different set of problems. How can the unspeakable be represented? How can one write about an event that defies interpretation? This paper will offer a reading of two important Holocaust novels. The texts provides us with two very different approaches to that impossible theme. Both novels deal with the persecution of minorities by the Nazis during the Second World War and, more specifically, how this influences growing children. In spite of this thematic resemblance, the authors tackle the topic in a very different way.

The first text that will be discussed is the famous novel by Jerzy Kosinski The Painted Bird. It was Kosinski’s first novel, and it is definitely his most influential work. Raymond Federman is the author of the second book that will be treated. The Voice in the Closet is
his shortest novel, but it stands out for a lot of other reasons as well. Federman thinks of it as his most important text since it is here that he finally faces the ghosts of his past.

It is interesting to compare these two novels with one another because of their stylistic dissimilarities. *The Painted Bird* is a traditional novel, whereas *The Voice in the Closet* is an experimental one. It is surprising to find out that, in spite of their obvious differences, the two novels have approximately the same effect on the reader: a feeling of bafflement and shock.

With Holocaust novels, one of the most important elements on which the reception is based, is whether or not the text is a correct representation of the reality. All other topics allow and even encourage a high degree of creativity, but when it concerns a traumatizing event of which the scars are not yet fully healed, the general public is very critical and every deviation from the facts is seen as betrayal. So, in order to come to a better understanding of the writings, it is important to give some background information on the authors. Their experiences in life will prove to be essential for the reception of the works.
Chapter 2

The painted bird

2.1 The author

2.1.1 What Kosinski says

When one searches for information concerning the life of Jerzy Kosinski it becomes clear that the writer does not think such knowledge is relevant for his readers: the information he gives us about himself is very scarce. On the first edition of his debut novel *The Painted Bird*, there is no information about its author, and in those days he did not wish to give any interviews (Kosinski 1978, 5) In an “Afterward” to the second edition he explains the nature of this secretiveness: he thinks of himself as merely a storyteller and does not wish to be a spokesman for an entire generation, especially since he sees surviving as an individual act (Kosinski 1978, 5). The absence of personalia was meant to make sure people would not regard the novel as an autobiographical one, which would make it the story of only one life. A fictional figure on the other hand forces the reader to participate, to identify with the main character and therefore it is able to move a larger number of people (Kosinski 1978, 5-6). We can assume this is one of the reasons why he chose not to specify the names of his main character and the locations: it would limit the number of people that can relate to the events.

To Kosinski it does not matter whether or not the events described in his books actually occurred, and he definitely feels that claims about the veracity of *The Painted Bird* should not be a reason to read it (Kosinski 1978, 5). After all, the relevance of the book and the horrors of the Second World War do not depend on the truthfulness of the novel.

However, one could wonder why he remains so reticent about his own experiences, even when wrong assumptions about his life have given rise to misreadings of the book. For example, he objected when the publishers wanted to include fragments of their correspondence as a preface. He did not want to explain the book to his readers because he feared such an act would diminish its impact (Kosinski 1978, 5). He obviously wanted to leave them in the dark about his intentions and about himself. He must have been able to foresee, though, that
people would take the book for an autobiographical account. By not objecting to that in advance, he implicitly seems to confirm this.

The lack of information is exactly what made the critics so curious and what made them believe the novel was based upon Kosinski’s own experiences. They started to seek evidence that could prove their assumption. They wanted to label everything that he wanted to keep unidentifiable and a lot of them confused the author with the little boy he wrote about.

The scarce information Kosinski did give allows us to create the following course of life. He was born in 1933, in a country in Eastern Europe he leaves unnamed. However, when he specifies it as the country where most of the extermination camps could be found (Kosinski 1978, 1) , it becomes clear he is referring to Poland. When the war broke out, Kosinski says he was sent away by his parents, who believed he had a better chance to survive in the country. Once peace had been installed again, they were reunited. From then on we know a lot more about the author’s whereabouts. He went to the University of Lodz where he obtained degrees in history and political science. Later he worked as an assistant at the Polish Academy of Sciences. He wanted to leave his country because, even though it would hurt him to leave behind everything that was familiar to him, the thing he cared about most - freedom to define himself in any way he wanted - was impossible (Don Swaim). He wanted to flee to a multi-ethnic society where he could find anonymity. The three countries on top of his list were Argentina, Brazil and the United States. The first two saw him as a potential threat, due to his studies at communist universities (Landesman, 12). The United States, on the other hand, did let him in, so he exchanged his homeland for the Land of the Free, where the only person he knew was a blind uncle he had to look after. From the moment it was no longer dangerous to him, he started to openly criticize Communism and every limitation of freedom. He wrote two anti-communist books under the pen name Joseph Novak, about life under a totalitarian regime. His objective was to make the collective life in the East comprehensible to the West (Don Swaim).

In spite of these two works, Kosinski has claims that he always wanted to be as non-political as possible (Don Swaim). In America, he continued to study and graduated from Columbia University. He became a lecturer at Yale, Princeton, Davenport University, and Wesleyan. He obtained American citizenship in 1965, and was married twice. His first wife, steel heiress Mary Hayward Weir died of brain cancer in 1968. Katharina von Fraunhofer, a descendant of Bavarian aristocracy, was his next wife, but he was not the most faithful husband.

His first work of fiction was called The Painted Bird. He had a hard time trying to find a
publisher for this work about “a reality which is alien to Americans, set in an environment that Americans cannot comprehend and portraying situations, particularly the cruelty to animals, that Americans cannot bear” (Landesman, 25). He was advised to forget about the novel and to return to writing non-fiction as Joseph Novak. In spite of this initial denial he continued his search for a publisher and the book turned out to be a great success. Kosinski believes that this is not because of the reviews but in the first place thanks to the cover of the paperback edition (Don Swaim). On the cover was a monstrous figure, carrying an innocent child, part of a triptych by Bosch.

Kosinski continued to write fiction and though less controversial, his other books were also popular and shortlisted for awards several times.

When *The Painted Bird* was promoted as an autobiography Kosinski hardly objected. When Rocco Landesman told Kosinski that most people see his works as autobiographical, Kosinski did not deny this, but merely criticized the meaning of the word autobiographical which is not “easily justified”. He further says: “What we remember lacks the hard edge of fact. To help us along we create little fictions, highly subtle and individual scenarios which clarify and shape our experience. The remembered event becomes an incident, a highly compressed dramatic unit that mixes memory and emotion, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings.” (Landesman, 7-8). This creates the impression that, apart from a technical remark, his books are the account of what he lived through during his childhood. This seems to be confirmed when he calls *The Painted Bird* “the result of a slow unfreezing of a mind long gripped by fear” (Landesman, 8). Kosinski wants the book to lead a life independent of his own (Kosinski 1978, 5), but he has also claimed that all of his novels are “inseparable from his life” (Landesman, 20). The most obvious conclusion one could draw, is that the books tell the story of his life, but that he wants to be left alone.

In the infamous Afterward he also judges those who spent the war safely in Switzerland for their passivism, and repeatedly stresses that the situation in Eastern Europe was horrendous and that he was there (Kosinski 1978, 1-2). Another element that adds to the assumption that *The Painted Bird* was at least to a certain extent based upon his own life is that his other novels start with the note that they are completely fictional. A similar remark is not to be found in his most influential work. So, he never gave any reason to believe that the novel was not based upon his own wartime experiences and everything he says adds to the conviction that he was severely traumatized during the early forties.

In the same Afterward, he talks about how *The Painted Bird* has changed his life. When the novel was published, both the United States and communist Eastern Europe claimed it was a political work that discredited them and wanted to defend the other party (Kosinski
1978, 6). It is remarkable that not only the book, but also its author were severely under attack. Because of what he had written, Kosinski was portrayed as a man without any moral conceptions. It was also said that the book was his way of giving expression to his own grotesque fantasies and that it was despicable of him to involve the war (Kosinski 1978, 12). Americans and other anti-Russians felt that the book was a glorification of Russian soldiers, and thought that Kosinski’s book wanted to justify the presence of Soviet troops in Eastern Europe (Kosinski 1978, 6-7). There were both positive and negative reviews in the West, but all of them have an undertone of uneasiness because of the amount of violence and cruelty present in the novel (Kosinski 1978, 12). In Western Europe, much to the dislike of the Communists back east, Kosinski’s novels were “warmly received by the progressive leftist press” (Landesman, 6).

On the other side of the ocean, in Eastern Europe, a campaign was started against the book. Kosinski was said to have acted on orders of the American authorities to discredit his native region. He was accused of anti-polonism and of ridiculing folkloristic traditions (Kosinski 1978, 6-7). This is another reason why Kosinski wanted to leave the place of the events unidentified: to avoid such criticism. Nevertheless, some people claimed that they recognized themselves, or some of the places mentioned in the book (Kosinski 1978, 7). The Soviet media were eager to give them the chance to speak out loud and to judge the book and its writer. Kosinski believes that most of these people hardly knew what was going on, and were only afraid that they would be accused of something (Kosinski 1978, 7-8).

The campaign had not missed its effect: Kosinski received letters from opponents of the book who had only heard about it without ever taking the effort to read it (Kosinski 1978, 9). He even claims that he has been attacked in his own apartment by “patriots”, but managed to make his aggressors believe he was merely a nephew of the writer Jerzy Kosinski, who could come home any minute. Once they had installed themselves comfortably in the sofa with a drink, he managed to scare them away with his revolver (Kosinski 1978, 9-10).

Not only Kosinski, but also his family, friends and defenders were closely watched. A prestigious writer was made to revise a positive review on The Painted Bird (Kosinski 1978, 8). His mother was openly insulted, and her house surrounded by her son’s enemies (Kosinski 1978, 8). A young female poet who went to America to have surgery befriended Kosinski. Upon her return to Poland, she was forced to write a piece about him stating he is an immoral being. That was the last he ever heard from her (Kosinski 1978, 11-12).

In the last section of the Afterward, Kosinski looks back on all of these incidents, and wonders whether it was a good decision to publish the book. He feels that he would not
have written it, had he known how many problems it would get him and his loved ones into. However, he also feels that the book has survived all of the attacks (Kosinski 1978, 17). Unfortunately for Kosinski, in 1976 the worst was yet to come.

Kosinski called it ironic that the book had started to resemble its main character: both of them were thought to possess dark forces that could bewitch anything they met along the way (Kosinski 1978, 7).

In the Afterward, Kosinski also wants to justify what he has written by referring to other sources. He accuses critics of not making the effort to look at other honest accounts of the war that contain similar testimonies of violence and cruelty. More specifically, he refers to a report of how Kalmyks, Mongolian soldiers that have gone astray, and Germans went to “pacify” a village, and to the general policy of Germans with children (Kosinski 1978, 12-13). He even says -supported by old schoolmates of his- that his account is idyllic compared to what actually took place, and that his stay in America, where no war had been fought in a long while, has softened him (Kosinski 1978, 13-14).

He elaborates by saying that out of the 60 members of his pre-war family; only 3 were still alive when the war had ended (Kosinski 1978, 14). He claims that even his parents, who had witnessed WW I, the Russian Revolution and the suppression of minorities during the ’20s and ’30s were not prepared for WW II. They were constantly in danger. Forced to seek another hiding place almost every day, they were at the mercy of strangers and they were continually hungry and afraid to be discovered. They were also constantly tortured by their decision to send their son away: had it been the right choice? When they witnessed how small children were sent to camps, they felt awful (Kosinski 1978, 14).

Kosinski obviously searches for external ways to validate the novel: not once does he refer to where he was during the war. The only thing he tells us, is that he was separated from his parents. By claiming both that the war in the East European countryside was horrible and that he was there, the reader will be left to assume the most obvious scenario: Kosinski has suffered a lot and only managed to survive due to luck and cunning.

Kosinski also wants to explain why he has started to write, and why he chose to write in English. As Toni Morrison has put it eloquently in her novel Beloved, she wants to write for “the disremembered and unaccounted for” (Morrison, 274). Kosinski also wants to give a voice to the minorities who lived through horrors but are unable to express everything themselves (Kosinski 1978, 14-15). However, an important difference between the two writers is that Morrison uses this as a justification to write about something she did not went through herself, and she has made this clear from the very beginning. Beloved deals with slavery and
it was her opinion that this episode should not be forgotten. If no one is left to write about it, she will take that task upon her shoulders. All of her novels were received well, and there was hardly any controversy caused by the fact that they were fictional works dealing with serious traumas.

Kosinski, by contrast, always let his public in the dark about the relation between fact and fiction. He never said that the novel was not based on his own experience, only that the term “autobiographical” was problematic to him. Furthermore, he only points to other sources for the first time in the Afterward (Kosinski 1978, 12-13). Had he stressed them more, and had he been straightforward about his childhood, he probably would not have been called a profiteer.

Another element that may explain the different receptions, is the fact that *Beloved* and *The Painted Bird* were published more than 20 years apart, and that the trauma described by Kosinski is too fresh. However, during the mid-eighties, the controversy about Kosinski's life was far from over, and the political situation had hardly changed; and even though a lot of time has passed since the abolition of slavery, it remains the national trauma of the United States, while the Second World War was fought mainly on the other side of the ocean. So the only valid explanation for the controversy caused by *The Painted Bird* is the fact that Kosinski remained so vague about its degree of truthfulness.

This theory is even strengthened when we compare this controversy with a similar case of the Dutch writer Jeroen Brouwers. In his novel *Bezonken Rood* ¹ he writes about his years as a toddler in a Japanese camp. Brouwers had also made the mistake to call the work autobiographical and the unanimously positive reception changed into severe criticism when it turned out that not everything was accurate (Pieters, 105). Some of the events he had described did not occur in the camp where he stayed, and other survivors blamed him for spreading lies. Now, when the book is being discussed, most critics cannot surpass the discussion of whether or not the book is a correct representation of the camp.

Jerzy Kosinski’s father, Mojzesz Lewinkopf Kosinski mistrusted the written word and wanted to live an anonymous life (Kosinski 1978, 15-16). Ironically enough, it is exactly because of his father that Kosinski started to write, and more specifically in English. Mojzesz Lewinkopf Kosinski wrote his son six letters a week, containing English lessons “tailored to his needs” (Kosinski 1978, 13). He had already started to learn English in Poland, so once he got to America it only took Kosinski six more months to learn the language sufficiently to be able to write in it (Landesman, 13).

In spite of his secretiveness concerning his war-experiences, Kosinski does not avoid public

¹Translated as *Sunken Red* by Adrienne Dixon
attention and even seems to have a thirst for fame. He was a regular guest in the Tonight Show, starring Johnny Carson in the early seventies. He showed his acting abilities in a few movies in the eighties, and appeared on the cover of the New York Times Magazine. In the spring of 1982, he was watched by 600 million people as he presented the Oscar for screen writing.

So, from what Kosinski tells us about himself, we get a disjointed story. On the one hand, he remains vague about his whereabouts during the war, claims that he does not want to be a spokesman for an entire generation and that he wants to be an independent story-teller (Kosinski 1978, 5). But on the other hand, he wants to make people aware of the horrors of the war, agrees to become a television celebrity and openly judges people who took the easy way out and fled to Switzerland (Kosinski 1978, 1-2). So, even though he used to say he does not want to be a public figure, he seems to enjoy the attention that comes with it.

2.1.2 What is said about Kosinski

When *The Painted Bird* was first published in 1965, critics were puzzled. Because it provided no information about the author, except for his name, they did not know how to judge the book. Before it was published, Kosinski had confided to Dorothy de Santillana, a senior editor at Houghton Mifflin that he had a manuscript based on his own experiences. So she started to tell the world that it was her understanding that, “fictional as the material may sound, it is straight autobiography” (Myers, 59). The veracity of his words could not be checked due to the political situation of those days. Since Poland was governed by the Soviets, the Iron Curtain prevented Western critics from researching the area where Kosinski grew up. The book got a lot of reviews, both positive and negative ones. Striking are the opinions of holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel. He wrote in the New York Times Book Review that *The Painted Bird* was “one of the best” indictments of the Nazi era (Piotrowska).

He later said it was “written with deep sincerity and sensitivity” (Barnes and Noble). Cynthia Ozick asserted that she “immediately” recognized Kosinski’s authenticity as “a Jewish survivor and witness to the Holocaust (Finkelstein, 56). However, there were also numerous bad reviews, that did look beyond the violence and the horror. Kosinski has always been very tolerant when it concerns other people’s opinions, and has written several critical notes on his own works as well. He enjoyed reading reviews of his own works. He liked to read what others made of them and claimed that his own vision on what he has written is not superior to that of others. In *The Paris Review*, he said that he is only upset by bad criticism when it is also bad art (Landesman, 22). Some other negative reviews, written in a creative way and thoroughly analyzing the novel, were even appreciated by Kosinski.
His public, and the reception of his novels are both liable to change, or like he has put it himself:

The reception seems to vary from book to book, from country to country, and from period to period. I like to think that at different times different people read different books for different reasons. Or don’t read them. (Landesman, 23)

However, one cannot overlook the fact that the novel came to be a most influential book. In the late sixties, when artistic freedom was encouraged, *The Painted Bird* became an exemplary work. It was translated into numerous languages, and was compulsory reading in several courses. Kosinski himself also noticed this evolution. He was sent dissertations about the book, and got a lot of letters, especially from minorities who said they appreciated the book because they felt exactly like the boy (Kosinski 1978, 16-17).

In June 1982, a *Village Voice* article by Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith, called “Tainted Words” changes everything for Kosinski. The article makes two important claims. The first one is that Kosinski’s works are nothing but plagiarism: they are based upon Polish sources unknown to the English audience, and written by others. The second statement is that Kosinski’s novel *The Painted Bird* was not based upon his own life. In what follows, both of these allegations will be discussed in more detail. The article was a severe blow for Kosinski’s reputation and he never managed to regain his former status. Ever since, Kosinski and his books have been looked at in a different way.

2.1.2.1 The plagiarism claim

Stokes and Fremont-Smith gave two arguments to substantiate their first allegation. First of all they state that Kosinski’s novel *Being There*, is suspiciously similar to a 1932 Polish bestseller by Tadeusz Dolega-Mostowicz called *Kariera Nikodema Dyzmy* -The Career of Nicodemus Dyzma. Even though the book had been major success in Poland, it was never translated so the English-speaking world was not familiar with the story. Kosinski took advantage of this situation and put his own name on top of a story that is almost exactly like the one in the Polish novel.

The second proof of Kosinski’s criminal activities was found in his knowledge of English. It was argued that at the time *The Painted Bird* was written, Kosinski had only been in America for a few years and he simply did not know enough of the language to be able to write a book in it. Stokes and Fremont-Smith therefore believed that his editors did all of the writing, and they found further evidence for this charge in the stylistic differences that can be observed in his oeuvre.
In those days, George Reavey, a poet, publisher and translator stepped forward maintaining that he was the writer of the controversial book. It is assumed that he only said this to make up for an uninteresting career, so he was largely ignored by the press (Myers, 59). Even though it is certain that Kosinski has had the cooperation of several translators, it is generally accepted that he is the only actual creator of *The Painted Bird*. Nevertheless, it was a mistake of Kosinski to conceal the fact that he had received assistance to make his English sound more natural. He has been dishonest to both his public and his editors, but he saw this as a sacrifice he had to make in order to establish himself as a successful writer in a very competitive world. Even though some critics believe he regretted this (Pieters, 102), he has continued to deny the assistance he has received to the outside world.

When other papers and magazines wanted to doublecheck the allegations made in *Village Voice*, they heard an entirely different story. Some of Kosinski’s editors were contacted and they all assured that they had “never had any reason to believe that he has ever needed or used any but the most routine editorial assistance”. Even the female assistant whose testimony was used in the “Tainted words” article, accused the journalists of shoddy journalism, and asking leading questions. She insisted that she had never done anything but editing. She even sent a letter to *The Village Voice* denying their version. She could prove with a recording of the conversation that they had distorted her statements and even put words in her mouth that she had never spoken (Pieters, 93).

The so-called stylistic differences are also exaggerated, and not abnormal at all considering the time that elapsed since he started to write. His works are even remarkably consistent.

2.1.2.2 The Fiction claim

The article also presents a different view of how Kosinski has spent the war. Up until then, it was generally assumed that *The Painted Bird* was at least semi-autobiographical but now they come up with a completely different story. Stokes and Fremont-Smith are the first ones to tell this alternative version, which will later be supported by numerous others. Jerzy Kosinski was not mistreated during the war, he even spent it in relative safety. There is some disagreement about where he actually stayed, but there is a consensus that his experiences are completely different from the ones in *The Painted Bird*. Some claim he was sent away to live with a Polish Catholic family (Stokes and Fremont-Smith) but later biographies even believe that he was never separated from his family.

James Park Sloan was the first one that actually did scientific research on Kosinski’s life, but this was hampered by Kosinski’s own deliberate destruction of data (Pieters, 17). He had

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2 those others include biographers Norman Finkelstein and Joanna Siedlecka, James Park Sloan and Iwo Cyprian Pogonowski
tried to prevent biographers from ever discovering the truth. In spite of this, Sloan managed to construe a plausible course of events. In his work called *Jerzy Kosinski: a Biography*, he maintains that Jerzy Kosinski was actually born Josek Lewinkopf. When the threat of the Nazis increased his father decided to change their name to a more Polish-sounding one: Kosinski. They moved several times, but they never entered the ghetto, nor did they wear the Star of David. When asked about his Jewishness, young Jerzy was taught to deny it. Apparently this message has sunk in really deeply, for he has continued to deny it ever since. When they moved to Dabrowa Rzeczycka near Radomyśl, they received help from Father Okon, a Polish priest who helped many Jews. He gave Jerzy a false birth certificate, baptized him and allowed him to receive Holy Communion. To make the picture complete, Kosinski became an altar boy and their house was filled with pictures of Jesus, the Holy Family, and Our Lady. Compared to what others had to stand during the war, they lived in a paradise. Young Jerzy got the chance to study, they had a maid to do the cooking and cleaning, and there were even occasional parties with cakes and cocoa. It should not surprise then, that pictures taken right after the war show us a healthy young boy, who was obviously well nourished (Pogonowski).

Sloan has tried hard to find out whether at least parts of the novel are based on true events. He has discovered that some of the characters may have been based on acquaintances of the Lewinkopf family. Marta, the first woman that gave him shelter, may be based on Mariana Pasiowa, the first countrywoman he ever saw. She was a kind old woman who took in Jerzy and his family for a while. There was a birdcatcher named Lekh living near the Kosinskis and occasionally he did paint birds. However, Jerzy never assisted the man. He may have watched him from behind the fence, but that is all (Sloan, 38-39). Stefania Labina may have been the inspiration for Labina, the caring woman who engages in wild sex with several men. Stefania was the maid of the landlord of the Kosinskis (Sloan, 29-30). One of Jerzy’s early love interests was called Ewka Migdalek. It is probable that he thought of her when he described the boy’s sexual awakening, guided by Ewka.

Similarly, some of the events described in the book resemble minor incidents that have left a great impression on young Jerzy. He had been intimidated by a gang of young boys who threatened to pull down his pants (Sloan, 34), and he has dropped a missal in church. However, he was never punished for it. These examples show that novel has indeed resulted from certain childhood experiences, but that it is by no means autobiographical.

The revelation of the true nature of Kosinski’s life has attracted a lot of interest, and even after his death he has been the topic of documentaries such as “The Passionate Eye: Sex, Lies and Jerzy Kosinski”, biographies and even a play. In 2001, the Vineyard Theater in New York
staged a play written by Davey Holmes titled *More Lies About Jerzy*. Kosinski was presented as a shallow man who was continuously searching for attention by telling impressive stories. In certain biographies, such as the one from Sloan a lot of attention is paid to his sexual licentiousness. Sloan tries to explain Kosinski’s adventurism as a love for sexual theater, and believes this can be found in all areas of his life, since he is a compulsive liar and poser. This picture differs significantly from the one of promising but traumatized writer, as he was said to be in the late seventies. Not all people have turned their backs on Kosinski. Some popular sources[^3] still believe that the book is autobiographical, and disregard all negative attention the author has received. He also continued to receive support from Elie Wiesel, the well-known Holocaust survivor, and the New York Times, who believed discrediting Kosinski was nothing more than a Communist plot (Finkelstein, 56).

Kosinski does not problematize the relationship between fact and fiction himself. Nor in the book, nor in later interviews has he made clear what actually happened to him during the war. Rocco Landesman, who had interviewed Jerzy Kosinski even wrote that “the events of his life correspond almost exactly to those described in his novels” (Landesman, 1). They had discussed both his novels and his life, but still the interviewer was convinced that Kosinski was the boy in the book.

When the *Village Voice* article made an end to all similar assumptions, a lot of people were raging mad at Kosinski. He defended himself by saying he never claimed his novel was a true account (Don Swaim). The main problem, however, is that he never said it was not true either. He seems to have enjoyed the attention, which was encouraged by his silence. No one could have assumed that the reality was so far away from what he wanted us to believe. Even though he was careful never to reveal anything about his own war experiences and only to hint at horrible things he went through, he has told several lies. On private occasions, he used to tell horrible stories about lonely wanderings in the countryside and he told his listeners that everything he said had actually occurred to him when he was a young boy (Myers, 59). In his Afterward he talks about his parents and about how they had to change hiding place every few days, how they felt horrible about leaving their little boy behind, and how they were constantly in danger (Kosinski 1978, 14). This does not match with what his biographers believe, so either they are wrong, or Kosinski was lying.

So basically, nothing that happens to the boy in the book is anything like the luxury life Kosinski lived. This has made a lot of people furious, because they feel he has exploited the Holocaust in his search for wealth and attention (Finkelstein, 55). One of the most-heard allegations was that he was just a sick mind, who wanted to make money on the backs of...
those who suffered (Myers, 58-63). Pogonowski states that when the book was translated into Polish, it was read by people who gave shelter to the Kosinski family during the war. They were appalled by all of the horrors their ward described, especially since he had used some of the names of other people they had kept safe. They pointed out that none of them had ever been maltreated, and that Kosinski never had given them any sign of gratitude for what they did for him (Pogonowski).

This controversy shows that fiction about the Holocaust is a delicate matter. It is often seen as not doing full justice to the true events, so prudence is advisable. In this case, people feel particularly betrayed since the book was promoted as an autobiography. The Second World War is still a very dangerous thing to write about. As long as there are witnesses left, people are traumatized by it. They feel personally mistreated when lies are told about it, because they feel it as an injustice to their memories. Moreover, when a writer of Kosinski’s caliber, who is generally praised as an authentic witness and survivor, is unmasked as a fraud, revisionists use it as another opportunity to question the entire Holocaust. After all, if this one great author made everything up, who can guarantee that all other accounts are true? However, there are still plenty of other sources left to prove that horrors actually did take place.

There are also plenty of fictional books, dealing with trauma, that are not as controversial. The difference is, that those authors have made it clear from the beginning that what they write is fiction. Had Kosinski been as straightforward as the others, his book probably would not have been as widely read, and definitely not discussed as often. So his initial silence can be seen as a good marketing move, to gain a lot of attention afterward.

2.1.2.3 Kosinski’s reaction

The 1982 claims have been a major blow for the author, and even though his reputation never seems to have gotten completely over them, Kosinski maintains that, if anything, he has benefited from the controversy. The article was a great stimulation for him and he sees all the attention as a compliment. According to Kosinski, novelists benefit from everything that happens to them (Don Swaim). Almost everything he did ever since can be seen as a response to the allegations made against him.

He has reacted very strongly against the claims that someone else wrote his books for him: “Not a single comma, not a single word is not mine—and not the mere presence of the word but the reasons why as well. This goes for manuscript, middle drafts, final draft, and every f—ing galley—first page proofs, second and third, hardcover editions and paperback editions” (http://www.angelfire.com/linux/whitney/authors/kosinski.html).

After the 1982 article, it took Kosinski six years to write his next novel: “The Hermit of
69th Street”, which is also an obvious response to the plagiarism claim. By the extensive use of footnotes and references, he wants to point out that every writer is in a way a plagiarist, which makes all authors equally guilty or innocent. In an audio interview with Don Swaim, he calls the work an “autofiction”, since no work can ever be purely fictional, just as it can never be one hundred percent autobiographical. After all, writing is always preceded by an experience from which you get the inspiration. This makes it a work based upon your own experiences. But on the other hand, writing incites the articulation of certain events, where the perception of the author changes what actually happened and turns it into fiction (Don Swaim). Since a writer can never be truly original, Kosinski situates the talent of an author in the successful combination of existing elements with an original context. They have to deal with their sources in a personal way in order to create a new entity.

For *The Painted Bird*, this comes down to the following. The war, and surviving it has been a great influence for Kosinski, he continually calls it unprecedented and unimaginable (Don Swaim). Like everyone else who was there, he has witnessed cruelties that others can never imagine. Kosinski did not want to interfere directly or on a political level, but his post-war experience made him want to be a writer (Don Swaim). So even though he is influenced by events that actually occurred, it is not required that he underwent them, he may have been just an onlooker. The novel is based on what actually took place during World War II, but his mind has transformed it into the fictional novel.

In an audio interview, Kosinski talks about how difficult it was to write “Being there”, and states it is the only book ever written where the main character is not driven by something (Don Swaim). Talking about writing this book and calling it unique, is supposed to make an end to the belief that it was a copy from a Polish novel.

In that same interview, Kosinski calls writing the justification for his existence. To him, writing is democratic, for it does not impose anything, nor does it offend anyone. Given the reactions his first novel let loose, one must frown, when hearing this. Kosinski continues by talking about the rights of author and readers. The writer can comment on anything he wants, he is allowed to make up names and events. The readers, by contrast, are not allowed to see themselves represented in the novel and to claim a character is based upon them and “if they did, it is only because they had fun doing that” (Don Swaim). This is obviously a reference to the television show, where people claimed that one of the characters in *The Painted Bird* was based on their personality.

In the years after the discrediting article, Kosinski has taken back some of the highly debated statements he had previously made. He deplored that some people exclude non-Jewish victims when they talk about the Holocaust because they ignore all the Gypsies, criminals and homosexuals who were killed during WW II. Finally, Kosinski also did justice
to the people who had been brave enough to give him shelter in spite of his Semitic appearance and the punishment they risked (Finkelstein, 57). On May 3, 1991, Kosinski decided to put an end to his life by taking an overdose of barbiturates. He was found in the bathtub of his New York apartment with a plastic shopping bag around his head, taped shut around his neck. He had left a parting note that read: “I am going to put myself to sleep now for a bit longer than usual. Call the time Eternity” (Sullivan).

2.2 Theme and motifs

Kosinski decided to start writing novels when he realized that political works never managed to express reality the way it is truly experienced and that such essays merely presented utopian promises (Kosinski 1978, 3). He turned away from social sciences and took up his pen. Strongly influenced by the horrors of the Second World War, Kosinski wanted to explore cruelty, affliction and despair in his writings. Once he got started he felt that one book would not be enough to deal with all of these themes sufficiently since he wanted to study them from different viewpoints. He therefore decided to write a cycle of five novels, all of them describing another relation between an individual and his surroundings. The Painted Bird, the first one of these novels was to portray a human being in his most vulnerable state trying to survive in a hostile environment: a child in wartime.

The title of the book was inspired by Aristophanes’ play “The Birds”, in which a bird is painted and then killed by its own kind. The painting of birds was also a medieval practice in Poland (Pieters, 15), and it appears literally in the chapter he spends at the side of Lekh, the professional birdcatcher. Whenever Lekh can no longer stand the absence of his loved one, he works out his frustrations on his animals. He picks the strongest bird he can find. He paints the creature until he is satisfied with its new vivid look and then releases the struggling bird. Relieved, it flies towards its own sort but due to his new look, the others fail to recognize him and start a fierce attack. The painted bird usually does not survive this and as soon as it falls from the sky, Lekh enthusiastically inspects the number of blows inflicted on it. The painted bird symbolizes the protagonist of the novel: the boy does not look like the others, and because he stands out he is constantly under attack.

The novel takes place in what Kosinski calls a “no-man’s-land between sane and insane, common and uncommon, between collective norm and the individual schism, indeed in this realm of unsaneness of the self as well as of its environment” (Landesman, 11). The entire story is set in a country in Eastern Europe that remains unnamed. Nevertheless, all critics agree that it concerns Poland. Within this unity of space, there is still a lot of variation. There is the contrast of the city versus the village. The boy grew up in the city, and even
though it is associated with the center of the war, it also the place where he felt sheltered. Most of the novel is set in the village, where the war is peripheral, but other threats are a lot more realistic. The forest stands for security. He can hide in there and has some of his happiest moments at Lekh’s side. This safety is interrupted by the villagers. They kill stupid Ludmilla and her dog because she arouses their men with her voluptuous body. The boy has to flee in order to escape the villager’s fury. The boy cannot stay in the safety of the forest forever, because it does not provide him with enough food. He has to return to the dangers of the villages because he is too dependent on others.

The novel deals with the persecution by the Germans of ethnic minorities, but it is definitely not a typical Holocaust novel. Even though the boy’s misery is caused by the Nazi scheme to destroy all those who differ from what they find acceptable, the Germans are not the main brutes in this novel. Those who really harm the boy are the Polish peasants. This is one of the controversial elements in the novel: Kosinski seems to shift the responsibility for the boy’s suffering from the Germans to the Poles. On the two occasions that the boy is confronted with German soldiers, the reader fears that this will be the end of him. But both times, the protagonist gets away unharmed. The Germans take pity on him and let him get away, while the Polish countrymen are the ones that keep on torturing him.

The cruelties of the Nazis are only indirectly present in the novel. The boy knows that they are capable of atrocities, but he is never a direct victim of them. The extermination camps are mentioned a few times: when the war is over, he sees camp survivors trying to rebuild their lives and he talks about the trains filled with people that are passing by. Since this short section is immediately followed by a longer one in which a Jewish girl is raped by a Pole, it is once again the violence of the locals that is remembered. The only time when the boy is in danger of being burned is when some villagers try to throw him into a fire. Once again, the Germans have nothing to do with it. The Poles are portrayed as worse criminals than the Germans. This is why the book was forbidden in Poland.

The controversy regarding Kosinski’s childhood has had the unfortunate consequence that a lot of critics could no longer look beyond the fact that The Painted Bird is not an autobiographical account. When it became clear that the novel was a product of Kosinski’s imagination, a lot of people came to think of the book as a collection of lies. However, this reaction does not do justice to the literary qualities of the book. In literary works the truth–false question is not relevant, the truthfulness of the events described does not influence the quality of a novel. The style of a written text is what can turn it into a work of art. How the events are reproduced is more relevant than what they are about. Nevertheless, it is Kosinski’s own fault that the shallow debate of whether or not his novel is a good representation of the war years in Eastern Europe dominates the discussion of his novel. He had made people
believe that the novel was the account of his own youth. This had gained him a higher social status and it made the book more popular. Now that we know it is a work of fiction, it loses most of its historical significance. At the same time, it gains an equal amount of literary value (Pieters, 44). We can now focus on the use of symbols, motifs and on the overall structure of the book.

After the novel could no longer be called an autobiography, it has been given numerous other labels but none of them seem to be completely satisfying. The novel has often been called a Bildungsroman since it is centered around the development of a young person (Costenoble, 40). In a typical Bildungsroman, the values of the childhood of a young artist are challenged, he goes through a process of maturing where he loses his innocence and there is an inconclusive end. This matches the story of the protagonist in *The Painted Bird* to a certain extent: an innocent boy gradually abandons his old lifestyle and there is a movement from innocence to experience. Even though the boy is not an artist, he does enjoy literature: he joyfully remembers the stories he was told by his nurse, gets a great deal of pleasure out of poetry, and finds the world of books more interesting than the real one. In the final lines of the novel when the boy regains his speech one might even find hints towards the creation of literary works in the future. From that perspective the boy may be considered as a creative mind, and thus even as an artist. Since these final lines can be interpreted in different ways, the novel does not have a conclusive end. There is no “happily ever after”. However, the novel differs from a typical Bildungsroman because the changes within the boy have an external cause, he does not seek to realize himself but is forced to do so due to the circumstances (Costenoble, 42).

It has also been suggested that the novel is a chronicle. It is a chronological account of events that have influenced the boy’s evolution, and equal weight is given to major and minor occurrences. He is as accurate about the delousing of a coat as he is about the beatings that he suffers. The problem here is that the timespan is not long enough to speak of an actual chronicle and that not enough attention is paid to the lapse of time (Costenoble, 43). No dates are given and there are a few jumps in time.

Another possibility is that the novel is like a fairy tale. The story is set in an unnamed country far away, where a young boy has to face witches, where dark powers rule, and where he is constantly tested. However, the extreme violence does not make the novel an appropriate children’s story, and the typical happy ending is not as happy as it should be. There is no engagement or wedding, but only hope for improvement.

Even though the story has clear elements of certain genres, none of them apply completely. In the same way that Kosinski did not want to specify the boy’s name or the place of the
action and that he has left some of the aspects of his novel ambiguous, he does not want to label his novel to belong to one category only.

2.2.1 Theme: evolution of the boy

The central theme of the book is the coming of age of a child who is trying to escape his role as a victim. At the start of the novel, the six-year old has been sent away by his parents for his and their safety. He ends up under the shelter of a weird woman called Marta who is nothing like his parents. When her looks are being described it is obvious that the boy fears her and that she looks and smells horrible. His life at her place is completely different from how it used to be: there are a lot of animals and most of Marta’s acts are guided by superstition. There are a lot of rules he has to follow in order to avert misfortune but even though he tries to obey all of them he is still blamed for everything that goes wrong. He is taught that his exceptionally dark eyes can cause death and disease, and fears that his parents are unaware of all these dangers that can possibly happen to them.

The boy tries to adapt as well as he possibly can: he comes to trust Marta, learns to appreciate the animals on the farm and befriends a small squirrel. Unfortunately, this relative quietude does not last very long. First his helpless squirrel is killed by some of the village boys and then at the end of the first chapter Marta dies. For the second time the boy has lost everything and has to start all over.

In this opening chapter Kosinski has created a dark environment where danger lurks everywhere. The contrast with the boy’s previous surroundings could not be more extreme. He used to be taken care of by a nurse, and his daydreams of a piano, toys and a hospital suggest that they were anything but poor. The main character is now left to his own devices but seems incapable to manage. He cries over all the things he has lost, but does nothing to improve his conditions. He weeps and waits. Since he has no surviving skills whatsoever, his only chance is that someone will take him in and look after him.

After a harsh beating by some of the locals, he ends up with Olga the Wise One who has agreed to look after him. He assists her when she is called upon to heal a villager, and gradually his admiration for her increases for she seems to be able to cure all illnesses. Once again he is very dependent: he is not allowed to go out by himself and believes everything she tells him. He seems to have forgotten about home or Marta and sees Olga as his new mother figure. After he drifted away on the river he is completely alone again. This time, however, he does not start to cry and he does not dream about his parents but he believes that his feet will be bewitched by Olga so that he will find her again. In the meantime he thinks that he will be able to survive thanks to everything he was taught by the wise woman. In the real world, her harsh lessons are more valuable to the boy than the years he spent in the safety of
his own house, where he was pampered by his parents.

Almost an entire chapter is dedicated to the list of advantages of a comet. Now that he
is on his own, he has to acquire one of these hand-made stoves in order to protect him. The
comet can be seen as a symbol for security (Costenoble, 60). Whenever he has it with him
the boy feels safe. Whenever he has other people looking after him, he does not need it and
no mention is made of it. Others see it as a symbol for the boy’s individuality (Pieters, 38).
The comet then shows the loneliness of the boy. When he has it with him he is all alone and
does not depend on others. However, this does not explain why the comet disappears at the
end of the novel, when he has decided that every man is on his own and when he tries to free
himself even from his parents. One would expect that at this point he would still cling to his
comet.

After he has witnessed the miller cut out the eyes of the plough-boy the boy would like to
get hold of them since he believes that it will double his vision. He also fears that he might
lose his own eyes and is determined to remember everything he ever sees. This is basically the
boy’s main education: to watch and learn. Unfortunately, what the young drifter witnesses
are not exactly things one would like to remember, let alone that one would want to derive
lessons from these occurrences. The fight between the miller and the plough-boy, for example,
has led him to believe that eyes are not fastened to the head sufficiently and that they can
be lost if you are not careful enough.

The boy is now wandering from village to village. Sometimes he is beaten, every now
and then someone looks after him for a while but he seems to be making no progress. He is
getting nowhere. This is literally the case after he ran away from the carpenter and his wife.
He was so busy running away from their village that he did not notice he had returned to
it the very next day. When the carpenter threatens to kill the boy, for the first time in the
book, the kid manages to survive not by running away but relying on his own cunning. He
makes the carpenter believe he has found a treasure and lures him into the forest to a place
where the boy had discovered a pit filled with rats. During the boy’s attempt to escape, the
grown-up loses his balance and falls into the pit where he dies a horrible death. In the face
of danger the youngster managed to remain calm and to come up with a ruse. For the first
time he actually stands up to his aggressor and gets away unharmed. He acted purely out of
self-defense and had no intention to kill the man. He is paralyzed when he is looking at the
scene that is going on down in the pit, unable to believe what he has just done.

He recovers quickly and once again undertakes an action that will increase his chances:
he takes the ox and the cart from the carpenter and moves to another village, where he offers
the animal in exchange for food and shelter. After this evidence of the boy’s spirit, he soon
returns to his state of passive victim. He first witnesses the partisans thrash his guardians
and then he is beaten himself. Next, he is delivered to the Germans. He knows that the German officer has been given orders to kill him, but he does not do anything to prevent this. He meekly walks along, thinking about death. Even when the soldier signals that he is allowed to run away, it takes a while before the boy actually does so. He had already accepted his fate without even trying to avert it.

In the next chapter the boy demonstrates his slyness again. When he finds a horse he takes it to the village hoping to get protection from the grateful owner of the animal. The man takes him in and treats him relatively well. Later on, some village boys attack him, but he realizes that their shoes will slow them down when they have to run. He hurts the largest boy and then he runs away as fast as he can. He rushes to the house of his master, but when he is not there to protect him the boy realizes that he is on his own. He digs up his secret supply of explosives and destroys the barn he used to live in. This gives him the time he needs to run away safely to the forest, knowing he can never return to that village. Once again, violence was the only option to save his own neck. He has hurt people, but only because he was in danger. He did not start the fighting, and he is relieved when he discovers that the house of his protector is not ruined by the explosion. This proves that the boy means well. When he inflicts pain it is because he has no other choice.

The following chapter is the first one that deals directly with the Holocaust: trains filled with people pass by on a regular basis and afterward the locals go on a treasure hunt to see if nothing was thrown out of these moving prisons. When a Jewish boy is found, our little main character pities the stranger. He believes that the young Jew would have preferred to stay on the train where he at least had the comfort of his relatives. Even though the words of consolation would be lies, he would not be alone and the first person narrator thinks the boy would have been happier with those lies than to be surrounded by those farmers who mean him harm. Like his own parents, the parents of the Jewish boy undoubtedly must have believed their child would have a better chance of survival away from them. During this novel the boy never blames his parents directly for abandoning him, but this passage suggests the idea that he thinks they have made the wrong choice. In spite of these obvious similarities between them, the narrator does not compare himself directly to the other boy. However, it is clear that he sees the Jew as a threat to his own position. When the foundling dies he is somewhat relieved because the presence of another dark-haired boy could only be dangerous to him. This is a selfish thought. The boy seems to have taken over the laws of nature where nothing is more important than self-preservation. During a raid in the village the boy is discovered by German troops. Once again the presence of these impressive men in uniforms turns him into a docile victim. He passively tolerates the harassments of the villagers who pelt him with stones, dung and rotten food; and he is almost eager to be killed.
by a charismatic SS officer. When a priest saves his life, he is somewhat disappointed because the clergyman looks shabby compared to the handsome soldier.

His next owner, a man named Garbos, is a true madman: he enjoys beating the boy and searches for new ways to torture him. The boy, on the other hand, is trying to find ways to improve his living conditions. He overhears a priest saying that praying earns you days of indulgence, and from then on the boy becomes a fanatic. He is constantly muttering prayers and does not even stop when it leads to extra beatings. He also starts a quest for a special moth that could kill the oldest person in a household. The boy uses everything he has ever learned in order to find a way out of the misery he is stuck in. He is also physically becoming stronger: Garbos forces him to hang by the ceiling for hours on end, threatened by a hungry dog that will kill him the moment he lets go. At first, this is a true torture and it takes all of his strength to be able to hold on. The boy gradually grows muscles and is now able to stand the long sessions without too much effort. He enjoys this new kind of power, and starts to tease the horrifying dog that is waiting for him. The boy has obviously gained a lot of confidence and is stronger than ever before. On Corpus Christi Day the boy even disobeys the order to stay at home and goes to church. After all he praying he has done he thinks that nothing can happen to him in the house of the Lord. Things start out well: he is to replace one of the altar boys. Even the beatings he receives from the villagers and the other altar boys do not stop him. He is sure that this will be the start of a new episode in his life. Unfortunately for him it actually is. He is unable to move the missal and drops it. The local people beat him up and throw him into a nearby manure pit. When all of them are gone he manages to escape, but his voice is gone. From now on the boy is a mute.

As Paul R. Lilly has pointed out correctly (29) this passage is the turning point of the novel. Up until this point each of the chapters dealt with one specific location and the link between them were the wanderings of the boy. At the end of a chapter he was always forced to get out after an act of extreme violence had occurred. All of these units were claustrophobic cells: there was no way out, and the dangers were constantly closing in on him. Every chapter ended in an orgy of violence, and in the beginning of the following one, the boy had found a new residence. No linear progression can be detected: in some of the chapters he seems to be shrewd, but in others he is an acquiescent putty.

From now on this will change: there will be a clear linear trend towards self-reliance and eventually the boy will be able to manipulate others. He becomes more and more determined and depends less on others.

His new residence is the house of Makar, Anton and Ewka. He has fallen in love with Ewka, and for the first time ever the boy calls himself secure and happy. Whenever he is
alone with her he can forget about all of the misery he has gone through and just enjoy the time they spend together. When he witnesses the girl making love to a goat, he feels betrayed and changes his vision of the world. The only way he sees to stop being a victim is to become a perpetrator so he wants to start a pact with the devil and inflict pain. He feels strong and confident now that he has figured this out and immediately starts by stealing a comet from Anulka. He is actively searching for ways to improve his own conditions now, and is even willing to do so at the expense of others. It is the first time that the boy harms people without acts of self-defense. At this point, he no longer believes everything that he is told and starts questioning all the things he used to take for granted.

After the horrible attack of the Kalmuks, the boy walks towards the soldiers of the Red Army. He does not wait for them to find him. Ironically enough it is exactly at this point, when he seems strong enough to deal with everything on his own, that the boy ends up with two parental figures. Mitka and Gavrila, two Soviet soldiers treat him as a son: they teach him how to read and write and tell him about the basics of a Communist society. For the first time the boy enjoys the protection of people who belong to the dominant group.

The Communists are conquering the Germans, so Mitka and Gavrila have nothing to fear and it does not take long before the boy feels like part of the group. Gavrila feels superior towards the stupid farmers the boy has lived with for so long, and the boy comes to share this feeling. After all, they do not realize yet that their entire lives are centered around false truths: religion and superstition. This is the first time that the boy looks down on others. It shows us that he is gathering strength. He no longer sees himself as the weakest one. Mitka teaches him the value of self-respect and asserts that revenge is crucial in order to maintain one’s sense of dignity. Revenge is seen as a form of self-defense, for life is worthless if one lets one’s aggressor get away unharmed. Mitka and Gavrila protect him whenever they can without making him feel like a baby. Mitka takes him along when he shoots some innocent villagers after some of his friends were killed, but he does not allow the boy to watch the murders through his binoculars and he refuses to kill a dog when the boy asks him to. When they have to hand him over to an orphanage, they promise to take care of him after the war if his real parents do not show up.

His faith in the honesty of others has disappeared, and he is no longer sincere himself. He feigns indifference when he arrives at the orphanage, even though he is devastated about leaving the army. He immediately has to make a stand when they try to take away his Soviet uniform. He refuses to do so, and wins the quarrel. Now that the boy no longer has to fight constantly in order to survive, he can no longer control himself in dangerous situations and is unable to run away when other children attack him. He befriends a boy who refuses to speak: the Silent One. Even though they treat each other as equals, the Silent One is by far
the stronger one. After all, it is not in the nature of the narrator to defend someone who is weaker than he is. The boy wants to look tough so that he is left alone by the rest of the orphans. To achieve this, he risks his life by lying down on the rails when a train is passing. Even though he is in mortal fear, he does not want to acknowledge this to the others and repeats this act whenever necessary. After the boy is beaten on the market place, the Silent One wants to take revenge. The Silent One sabotaged the rails so that the train will crash, hoping that the brute who hurt the boy will be killed. After this act of revenge both of the boys feel happy. They have restored their self-respect. Just as in the case of Mitka’s revenge, the boy himself has done nothing: he merely witnessed the crash. It was the Silent One who acted by himself. Mitka took revenge for something that was done to his friends, and now the Silent One also avenges himself on the market vendors for what one of them has done to his best friend. Even though the boy has not done anything himself, the action was done in his name and he was glad after it had happened. When they find out that their target was unharmed by the train accident, the boy describes how devastated the Silent One is. He does not remark on his own emotions, so he does not seem to regret their action.

In the last chapter but one, the boy is reunited with his parents. When he first sees them he does not know how to react. He did not want them to find him because he wanted to be reunited with Mitka and Gavrila. After all, his parents sent him away when it got tough, while the Soviets took him in when he needed help. So he is convinced that they would be able to look after him far better than his parents. He does not want to show his emotions, so he feigns “an expression of indifference” (Kosinski 1965, 239) again. His parents, on the other hand, do react very emotionally: they look very excited and start crying. After everything he has been through it seems impossible for him to become someone’s son again but after a rational internal argument he knows it is for the best. After all, Mitka and Gavrila said his parents have the right to be with him. They do not look like they would beat him and running away would make it impossible to keep in touch with Mitka and Gavrila. On the one hand he believes that he is old enough to choose for himself the people he wants to live with, but on the other hand he does not want to run away out of pity for these crying people. He is drawn to them like a painted bird is drawn to his own flock, and finally agrees to go along. He feels very uncomfortable with this new situation. He is smothered by their care and attention and cannot adapt to a “normal” life again. He even prefers the dangerous life of the lonely wanderer he used to be over the comfort and predictability of his current situation. He continues his life by the rules he was taught during the war years: when his weaker brother annoys him, he breaks his arm and when an attendant at the cinema embarrasses him, he takes revenge by dropping bricks on his head. After this incident the boy no longer goes out during the day. He prefers the erratic nightlife of the city. His parents hardly respond to his
behavior. They do not reprimand him, or hurt him in any way. They must realize that he has been through a terrible ordeal and that he will not accept to be under the command of the people who have abandoned him the first time. They are afraid to lose their child again if they are too hard on him.

When he is arrested one night, he almost breaks the finger of a policeman who did not treat him with the respect he thinks he deserves. The boy has changed enormously since the beginning of the novel: he has turned from a passive kid that needs to be taken care of into a confident young man who is ready to fight everyone who gets in his way. He has lost his innocence. His parents do not give up on him and take him to the mountains, where a ski instructor looks after him. The boy has come to the perception that the only person you can trust is yourself. People care about no one but themselves. It does not even matter that he is a mute because even people who can communicate normally fail to understand each other. After a skiing accident the boy is in bed when the phone is ringing. A man on the other side of the line is desperately trying to talk to the boy, hoping to find an answer. Now that somebody is actually willing to listen to the boy he finally manages to utter sounds, and then words. His voice has returned from the moment he has found someone prepared to listen. He regained his will to communicate.

The boy goes through a major development during the course of the novel. At first he seems incapable of dealing with anything, but gradually he becomes more and more independent. Some of the miraculous rescues are merely a matter of luck, but most of the times it is due to his own cunning and adaptability that he manages to escape. A young boy out on his own could not survive the war without at least a bit of luck: he accidentally causes the carpenter to fall into a pit. The German soldier who was ordered to murder him took pity on the small boy and lets him escape. The second time he is facing the Germans a priest comes to his rescue and some of his temporary guardians create a secret hiding place for the boy. Nevertheless, on most other occasions the boy only makes it because of his own character. He is able to adapt to his new surroundings relatively quickly. It is only in the first chapters that he holds on to the past and that he believes that he will be rescued. It does not take him long to realize that he will have to deal with this new situation in the best way he possibly can: by observing, learning and imitating whatever he sees around him. He is not trying to establish his own identity. He just wants to conform in order to fit in. We see this for the first time when Olga tells him about the power of his eyes. He wants to use this to his own advantage by glaring at whoever is trying to hurt him. The boy is trying to fight back with the little power he has. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, he stubbornly continues to fight in order to find a way out. He does not feel like he is treated wrongly, but just assumes that he
will have to try harder. Before the truth about his life had been discovered, Kosinski claimed in an interview that he never thought of himself as a victim: “rather as one of the multitude” (Landesman, 8). This attitude seems to be present in the boy as well. He accepts everything the villagers do to him, hoping that in the end they will come to accept him as well.

The beatings and tortures he fell victim to have only made him stronger. The clearest example of this is to be found at Garbos’ place: when the boy is hanging from the ceiling for hours, he becomes stronger both physically and mentally. At first these sessions were very intense and he needed all of his strength and willpower in order to survive, but he persevered and after a while he was able to stand them without too much of an effort.

The only occasions when the boy is willing to give in, is when he is confronted with the Germans. Both times that he is about to be murdered by a soldier, the boy accepts his fate and does not struggle. Even though the boy appears to be weak at these times, it is likely that this is the only way he could have possibly survived these confrontations. They would rather let go an innocent-looking boy than a rebellious one. His obedience towards them is caused by his own feelings of inferiority. He believes that they have the right to treat him in any way they want because they look almighty. His low self-esteem is also what makes him an easy victim for different doctrines. Whenever someone treats him somewhat nicely, he looks up to them and takes over their world view. This is the case with Martha, Olga, Lekh and the blacksmith, but it is particularly clear with the Russians. They manage to turn the boy into a little Communist, and their lessons continue to affect the boy when they are long gone. It is only after spending enough time in the safety of his parents’ care again, that he can start to think for himself again instead of repeating what others told him.

2.2.2 Motifs

2.2.2.1 Nature

Throughout the novel a lot of attention is paid to natural phenomena. In the jungle where the boy has ended up he is not only fighting the people he encounters, but also the tough landscape. The icy winds, the vicious dogs, the piercing cold and the aggressive ravens all add to the hostile environment in which the boy has ended up. This section will focus on two aspects in more detail: the use of animals and the four elements.

One of the author’s main intentions is to show that man and animal behave alike. From the stories the boy remembers from his nurse, he learned that animals are a lot like human beings: they talk with one another and they have their own intrigues. Once he remembers this, he no longer fears the animals at Marta’s place. The boy’s belief in the human character of animals is strengthened when Lekh shows him the ropes of bird catching. Lekh grew up

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in the woods surrounded by birds and knows all about them. He knows why they act in a
certain way and, even more importantly, how their behavior influences the lives of the people
who witness it.

Almost all of the comparisons the author uses include animals. The boy repeatedly feels
like the helpless squirrel (Kosinski 1965, 15, 72) that was brutally murdered and on other
occasions he compares himself with a grasshopper (Kosinski 1965, 72), a caterpillar (Kosinski
1965, 119), a frog (Kosinski 1965, 15, 62), a dog (Kosinski 1965, 76) or a painted bird (Kosinski
1965, 241). Other characters are equally compared to animals: Anton is a quail (Kosinski
1965, 150), Mitka a cuckoo (Kosinski 1965, 196) and Garbos resembles his dog in almost every
way.

Several events are compared with something the boy saw animals do before. When Rain-
bow rapes the Jewish girl, for example, the boy compares them with mating dogs. On another
occasion, the behavior of an animal is used to provoke people to reveal their own desires. When
the miller suspects his wife of having an affair with the plough-boy, he invites the latter over
for dinner. While a tomcat is conquering a tabby in the same room, the manners of the
animals incite the wife and her admirer so that they betray the true nature of their relation.

This is Kosinski’s way of saying that in spite of our so-called civilization; we still act like
animals and are not able to suppress our instincts.

Animal behavior is repeatedly used to symbolize human behavior. The most obvious
example of the similarities between people and animals is the tale of the painted bird, but
it is certainly not the only one. When the boy is reunited with his parents, he remembers a
time when Makar wanted to tame a hare. The animal was rebellious when it was first caught,
so Makar put it in a cage and threw a cloth over it in order to tranquillize it. The hare
eventually gave up fighting and became a docile pet. When given the chance to run away,
it chose to remain in the safety of the cage. The boy feels the same when he is confronted
with his parents. When they had first abandoned him, he longed to be reunited with them.
However, he was forced to adapt to his new situation and the mental changes he underwent
make it almost impossible to return to his protected environment. Geert Costenoble thinks
of this as the reversal of the story of the painted bird (58). The boy belongs with his parents,
the hare in free nature, and both of them are acknowledged as such by the others, but they
have changed on the inside and no longer feel like they fit in.

The skinned rabbit in the novel is believed to be a symbol for the weakest human beings
in the novel: the Jews (Costenoble, 59). The Jews and the rabbit all face a certain death, but
beforehand they have to suffer. The rabbit loses its skin; just like the Jews in the camps are
shaved and undressed before they enter the gas chambers and just like the Jewess is stripped
and raped by Rainbow. However, the comparison is not entirely appropriate. The Germans
and Rainbow willingly humiliate their victims, while the boy did not have the intention to torture the rabbit unnecessarily. He was ordered to kill it, and wanted to hurt the animal as little as possible. When he noticed that it was not yet dead when he was skinning it, he was bewildered and did not know how to react.

Animals are constantly used by people for their own benefits. Makar uses them to give him sexual pleasure, horses are used to kill another horse, Lekh uses birds to forget about his frustrations, the boy uses an ox to gain him shelter, and the villagers use a horse to torture the boy. The only one who ever seems to care unselfishly for an animal is the boy. At first there is his squirrel friend he looks after, and later on he tries to tend a wounded horse. He is genuinely moved by the animals’ pain and feels bad when he does not manage to save their lives. However, it is particularly the use of dogs that is interesting in this novel. All owners of dogs use their animals to protect themselves and to harm others. Stupid Ludmilla feels safe as long as she is with her fearsome dog and Makar’s wolfhound Ditko protects him and his son when they are in the stables. When the boy is trying to steal food, his greatest attackers are the dogs. The dog that traumatizes the boy more than any other is Judas, Garbos’ dog. He is a constant threat and has already proved that he can kill with one bite. When the boy is assisting Mitka in his revenge, he points at a dog and asks the sniper to kill it as well since it reminds him of Judas. The Russian refuses to do so and disapproves of the boy. He has just killed several innocent people but does not want to murder an equally innocent dog. He seems to value the life of an animal more highly than that of a human being.

The four elements; earth, wind, fire and water, also appear regularly in the novel, and in most cases they make things even more difficult for the boy. The elements are depicted as violent, destructive powers that cannot be tamed by mankind. Earth and wind do not appear as frequently as the other two, but they always announce a low point in the boy’s life. Whenever Kosinski mentions the cold wind it is at a time when the boy feels vulnerable and an attack will shortly follow. The most poetic description of the struggling winds, for example, is followed by the attack on the ice.

On two different occasions, the boy is almost buried alive, an thus unified with the earth. The first time is when he is sick and Olga digs him in with only his head sticking out. At this point he feels extremely vulnerable, there is nothing he can do and he fears that nature is attacking from different sides. When ravens start picking at his head, all he can do is hope that they will go away. The second time is when he is thrown into a manure pit. The boy is suffocating and barely escapes a horrible death.

His first experience with the power of water is when he is thrown on a bladder and drifts off. He tries to fight the stream and longs for the safety of solid ground, but there is nothing
he can do. The boy cannot swim, so if the bladder bursts, he is lost. The powerful stream causes him to lose Olga, and he is all alone again. His following encounters with water are equally horrifying. The one that stands out is the attack on the ice. His attackers manage to drag him into a hole in the ice, hoping for the boy to drown. The icy water paralyzes him, but he still manages to escape from it. It leaves him with permanent aquaphobia.

Finally, there is fire. This is the only element that has two sides: a protecting one and a destructive one. Olga teaches him that even though fire is not a natural friend of man, it is essential to survive. Comets, portable cans with fire in them, allow you to cook and offer you protection. Yet, you have to be very careful with them so that the fire never goes out. You are not allowed to borrow it from others, for you will have to return it after your death in hell. You cannot count on it, for it might let you down. This happens to the boy when he is skating on the ice: when he needs his comet to protect him from some boys, it has gone out. He is defenseless now. The boy repeatedly experiences the destructive side of fire: he sees boys burning his squirrel, he accidentally sets Marta’s place on fire, sees how lightning destroys a house and uses fireworks to destroy his barn in order to escape. He also hears about ovens created to burn people, and peasants threaten to burn him as well after they hear about them. In the orphanage, there is a boy called Flamethrower, because he sets others on fire. So the boy experiences all elements as dangerous things that can destroy him in several ways. This consciousness increases his guardedness.

2.2.2.2 Appearance

In *The Painted Bird* people are constantly judged on their appearance, and if they look remotely different from what is considered normal, they are stigmatized and in constant danger of attacks. The tale of the painted bird symbolizes this: once the bird is painted, the rest of his flock no longer accepts the poor creature. They fear him and attack him before they even give him the chance to prove he is no different from them, he only looks different. It is a lesson the boy learned already at Marta’s place. When a lonely pigeon joins the hens in the farmyard they make it very clear that it is unwelcome. Even though the intentions of the poor bird are good, he is not accepted by the hens. They despise him and refuse give him any shelter when they are under attack. This makes the pigeon an easy victim for an overflying hawk: he is killed by the bird of prey.

In this community of fair-haired peasants the dark boy is like the pigeon in the farmyard, like the painted bird of Lekh: he is stared at, mocked and beaten because of his appearance. He looks different from what the locals are accustomed to. Whenever they see him, the women run away and the men try to attack him. Even in church he is not welcome because of his dark looks. One of his masters tries to make him look less suspicious by shaving his head,
but his dark eyes keep him from ever being accepted in the village. They do not even care about his true nature: it does not matter whether or not he is a Jew or a Gypsy, it is enough that he looks like one.

The boy suffers a lot from this approach and it causes him to feel inferior. When he is confronted with an SS-officer this becomes very clear: he worships the handsome man and feels so worthless that he thinks it is fair that he will be killed by the German. The boy ascribes several qualities to the man based on nothing but his dazzling looks, so he is also focused on appearances.

2.2.2.3 Violence

There is a lot of explicit violence throughout the book, and often Kosinski provides his readers with the most shocking details. A lot of the characters have a craving for destruction. Some of the violence is out of self-defense, but in most cases it is nothing more than a show of the power one possesses.

One of the returning patterns is a violent attack at a moment when the victim feels safe. Once again, the story of the painted bird can serve as an example: when Lekh releases the colored creature, the birds feels safe and happily returns to its own kind. It is exactly at this point, when it thinks the danger is gone, that it is attacked by his fellows. The young boy has a few similar experiences: at a moment when he is “completely relaxed and unsuspecting” (Kosinski 1965, 24) he is grabbed by a fat man and thrown onto a bladder and then he drifts off. Another time, when German troops discover him while he is hiding in the fields, one of them gives him a warm smile. When the boy feels comforted and wants to smile back, the man punches him hard in his stomach. At Garbos’ place when he is hanging from the ceiling, he once thinks that the vicious dog is asleep. From the moment he lets his feet down, however, he is attacked by the beast. There is also an example where a dog who feels safe ends up being killed. Partisans are playing with the animal but when he runs away to get the bone they threw him, he is shot. From all of this the boy learns that you are never safe. Whenever you are off your guard, you are an easy victim. In the second part of the novel, as the boy grows stronger, he turns this knowledge to his advantage. When some boys try to rape him on the ice, he pretends to be too tired to struggle but from the moment they loosen their grip, he attacks them. Here we have the opposite situation: the boy deceives his aggressors.

During the course of the book, the boy gradually turns from a victim into a perpetrator. He learns to see violence as a way of life. It is necessary not only to survive, but also to maintain his self-respect. In the first part of the novel, the boy is always the one who suffers
from the violence: at times he is a victim but on other occasions he merely witnesses cruelties against others. He receives several beatings from villagers, town boys, partisans and Germans but he seems to be equally hurt when he sees how his squirrel is tortured or how the plough-boy loses his eyes. Even though he is horrified by what he sees, it also fascinates him and he is not able to avert his gaze from the scenes. The boy is often a voyeur, watching violent scenes from a distance or through peepholes. All of the violence includes the abuse of power by a stronger party over a weaker one. On all of these occasions, the boy sympathizes with the underdogs. Most of the victims of these beatings are people who have helped him in one way or another, so the boy is taught that it is dangerous to help out others. One of Lekh's tales convinces him even more of the risks of giving aid. To take revenge on an aggressive stork, Lekh had put a goose egg in her nest. After it hatched, it was immediately clear that the small creature was nothing like its brothers and sisters. The female wanted to protect it from the attacks of her partner, and this kind-heartedness of hers caused her to be excluded from the flock. They left without her.

The first time that the boy inflicts harm on someone else, he does so unwittingly. After the carpenter threatened to kill him, he is tied by the strong man. When he is struggling to free himself, his abrupt movements make the carpenter fall into a pit filled with rats. The boy is stunned by what he has done. He did not have the intention to harm the man and only wanted to save his own skin. There is a similar situation where the boy has to resort to violence to save himself: when some village boys attack him, he hurts the largest one of them. He hopes that this will buy him enough time to run away from the others. In this case he does use violence himself, but only out of self-defense. Later on, he will also deliberately cause pain without reason since it seems like beating others is a mechanism that increases his own power. It is obvious that the boy sees violating those weaker than him as a natural thing. When he sees a small lizard, he realizes that he could kill the animal with a single blow. The only thing that stops him from doing so is the fact that he is tired. There is no ethical reason why he leaves the lizard unharmed. Nevertheless, when the boy finds a wounded horse he is sincerely moved by its agony. When he decides to return the animal to the nearby village it is not only out of expediency. He sympathizes with the creature and feels sorry when it becomes apparent that it will be killed. The boy is not yet completely heartless and is still able to feel compassion.

Mitka teaches him about vengeance and the boy is allowed to assist the sniper when he shoots some of the local farmers. It is not the first time that the boy witnesses a murder, but it is new for him to be on the side of the offender. This happens for the second time when he and the Silent One watch the train crash: he did not cause the accident but he does enjoy it. From supporting aggression to using it is only a small step. The boy hurts his little brother
when there is no reason to, and he drops bricks onto a man at the cinema. He no longer allows himself to be treated like a victim, and is willing to become a perpetrator if that is what it takes to grow stronger. He enjoys the feeling of power over others, because it shows that he has outgrown his status of victim, he is no longer the weakest one.

Even though it is very understandable that the boy turns to violence after everything he has been through, Kosinski calls the boy the most negative character in the novel (Don Swaim). He has the darkest thoughts, and willfully inflicts pain when there is no need to. All other characters are positive ones, according to Kosinski, for even though some hurt him, they all let him live (Don Swaim). Even though this statement was probably only meant to pour oil on the flames, it does make us look at the situation from another perspective. The villagers may be cruel to the boy at times, but they do take him in at the risk of their own lives. The boy, on the other hand, does nothing in the course of the novel to help out anyone else. He may feel awful as he witnesses crimes, but he is not willing to go to their rescue.

Throughout the novel, aggression and sex go hand in hand. Almost all of the passages that deal with sex are among the most terrifying ones in the novel. The scenes between the boy and Ewka are the only exceptions where some tenderness can be perceived. But even there the girl seems to be taking advantage of the boy. She is only using him for her own pleasure. All of the other sex-related scenes are perplexingly violent. There are plenty of rapes and most of them are described in detail. The most striking example is that of the Kalmuks. They randomly rape whoever they can get hold of, and try to show off while doing so. But also Ludmilla, the Jewish girl and Labina are sexually assaulted, and Kosinski recounts all of these incidents.

Some other disturbing sexual acts include animals. At first there are only hints of bestialities when Ewka suggests that her father and brother pleasure themselves in the stables. Later the boy describes how some rabbits seem ill and are bleeding from their anus after spending time with Makar. The boy is too innocent to understand what is going on, but in the end of the chapter he is confronted with it directly as he sees Ewka copulating with a goat. He is horrified by it since Ewka is the one who taught him about intimacy. Now that will be forever associated with the horrible vision of her under the hairy beast. Another disillusion for the young boy.

In several beatings, the aggressor focuses on erogenous zones as a way to inflict excruciating pains. The boy suffers a lot of blows in his genitals and the blacksmith’s wife’s breasts are severely whipped by the partisans. Yet, the most horrible example is that of stupid Ludmilla. After being raped by the men and thrashed by the women, they shove a broken bottle in her vagina and kick it until it shatters.
The presence of sex has given cause for protests against Kosinski. It was argued that the sexual scenes in his novel were a cheap marketing strategy. In those days, sex was used as a means to oppose the Catholic Church and its Legion of Decency. The explicit presence of sex was a weapon for young people to react against the older, prudish generations. Critics accused Kosinski of taking advantage of this trend to sell more books. One cannot deny that there is a lot of sex in the book, but it is by no means pornographic. The sex is not meant to arouse, but to horrify. Kosinski shows that war also desecrates the most intimate act between men and women. No domain of life is left untouched.

2.2.2.4 Search for a general truth

The young boy witnesses and undergoes a lot of horrors. He wants to know why all of this is happening and searches for a general truth that will explain the way in which the world works. He hears a lot of different theories and is willing to consider all of them, as long as he is able to make sense out of the madness. As long as he was living with his parents he had nothing to worry about. He was taken care of and they meant well. Unfortunately, due to this type of education he was not at all prepared for the outside world where the law of the jungle prevails.

When he arrives at Marta’s place he is a naive boy who believes everything she tells him. She is highly superstitious and teaches him all about the dark powers that possess him: he is able to kill or to bring disease merely by looking at someone with his dark eyes. He desperately tries to learn everything she tells him and does not doubt the truth of her words. With Olga, his belief in the supernatural is extended even more when she teaches him about ghosts, phantoms, vampires and evil spirits that possess him. He believes that the world will make sense once he has learned everything there is to know about good and dark forces and omens. All of the households he lives with in this first part of the book reinforce this idea. Olga mainly taught him about different cures, while Lekh is mainly interested in the influence of the behavior of birds on people. The boy describes some of these alternative healing methods and common procedures based on superstition in such detail, that it becomes clear the boy is convinced of their veracity. He fanatically starts to count people’s teeth and automatically averts his gaze from those he likes while he glares at those who mean him harm.

Superstition is scary and comforting at the same time. On the one hand the boy starts to fear ghosts, vampires and above all himself, for his dark eyes can kill people. But on the other hand, his eyes can also be used to cure people and he is convinced that Olga will bewitch his feet so that he will find her again. It is a mechanism that allows the boy to understand his misfortune: there is a dark spirit that possesses him. Once he will be rid of it, his life will
improve again. Kosinski gives us an ambiguous vision on superstition. He seems to mock the
gullibility of the peasants who think they can solve all problems with animal excrement. But
at the same time there are a few occasions where the heathen beliefs are a fitting explanation
for events that would otherwise be extremely coincidental. The carpenter, for example, is
convinced that the boy’s dark hair will attract the lightning, so he orders the boy to leave the
house during stormy weather. The first time that the boy is allowed to remain inside during
a tempest, the house is indeed struck by lightning. Events like this suggest that superstition
is indeed a valid practice.

It is not until the eighth chapter that superstition distinctly fails. The boy has witnessed
a murder, but the bloodstains do not unmask the killer. It is common belief that they should
bring back and reveal the perpetrator, but even though the culprit has already returned several
times to the crime scene he has not yet been caught. Superstition can not be the truth he was
looking for. It is no coincidence that from this point on, the boy starts to doubt the things
that go on around him. He no longer seeks an explanation in the supernatural. The first time
he questions the current situation, he wonders “what gives people of one color so much power
over others” (Kosinski 1965, 92). It does not take long before he asks further questions: Is
changing eye color and hair color not easier than killing so many people? (Kosinski 1965,
103) If the Jews are being punished for the death of Jesus, why does it take God so many
people to make up for the death of one man? (Kosinski 1965, 104) Since the boy is not able
to come up with a satisfying explanation, he continues his search for a general truth.

The boy now seems to believe that beauty and virtue are linked with each other. After
all, most of the violence he has to suffer is preceded by a remark on his dark looks. That is
why he looks up to the tall, blond German SS officer: he believes that the handsome man
who looks superhuman has powers that normal people cannot understand. They must have
a divine reason for harming others the way they do. He is willing to surrender to the soldier,
for a man that good-looking will definitely make the right decision. When the Germans hand
him over to a miserable priest, he is disappointed. He had more faith in the beauty of the
soldier than in the kindness of the clergyman.

The priest brings the boy in touch with Christianity. A few chapters earlier he had already
claimed to be a devoted Christian in order to get protection, but is is clear that this was a
downright lie: he knows nothing about it. To him, it is equally odd as superstition. He does
not understand why the priest talks to God in his normal voice. When Olga was addressing
the forces she believed in, she seemed to be possessed by them and her incantations involved
a lot of movements and her voice was scrambled.

At Garbos’ place, the boy receives one beating after another and he starts to look for
a pattern. He is desperate to find out what causes the beatings. He does not believe in
groundless violence. He tries to link Garbos’ aggression with the movements of lice, and no longer scratches his head. When that does not seem to work out, he comes to think that it has something to do with the gate, so he decides to climb the fence instead of going through the gate. However, this only makes it worse. After his previous disappointment in superstition, he is now willing to give it another chance. He has counted all of Garbos’ teeth several times and wants to put a spell on the man. He remembers the qualities ascribed to a moth with a specific pattern on its back: if you manage to catch one and breathe on it three times, the death of the oldest person in the household will shortly follow. This time superstition does not let him down: after he finally managed to get hold of the specific moth, Garbos’ old turtle died.

The next persuasion of the boy is that praying will free him. The Christian priest who freed him from the Germans tells a man that praying can earn him days of indulgence, and the boy overhears this. The world makes sense again: the more you pray, the luckier you will be. Since he has never prayed before, he has had to suffer a lot of misfortune. So from now on, he will try to pray constantly in order to change his fate. Even though the constant murmurs earn him a few extra beatings, he does not give up. He starts to doubt the benefit of praying for the first time when the priest gets sick. This religious man must have prayed enough to earn him a lifetime of indulgence, and yet he has lost his health. But since the boy does not yet come up with an alternative, he continues his devotions.

Through the naive eyes of the young boy, Kosinski sketches in his novel a controversial image of Christianity. He is mocking some of the rituals and the priests and altar-boys are not the best role-models. The new priest does not allow the boy inside of his church, and on Corpus Christi Day when the boy serves as an altar-boy the locals interrupt the service to maltreat him. At this point the boy loses his faith in God and he believes that some greater force is commanding his destiny. He observes that the priests only talk about changing the world without ever acting accordingly, so religion will not bring him salvation. The boy remembers that successful people are often accused of being in league with the devil, and he is willing to make a pact with the dark side. After all, this point of view perfectly explains the success of the Germans. They are major wrongdoers and their behavior has given them control over most of Europe. The boy feels strong and confident now that he has figured this out, and immediately he wants to prove his loyalty to the devil in order to get its assistance. When this does not lead to an immediate result, he believes that he is being tested. He thinks of his entire life as a test. All along he has been trained in hatred, and that is why he has lost everything he ever cared about.

His conditions have hardly improved since he decided to turn bad, so that does not seem to be the explanation for his conditions either. He now addresses both God and the devil
and also turns to superstition every now and then, but no longer hopes that it will change
his life dramatically. He starts to think that if there is a God, He has enough to worry about
with this war and all the misery caused by it, so He does not have the time to worry about
a small dark-haired boy. But at the same time, his doubts about the Christian view of life
are becoming more pronounced. He no longer believes in a literal interpretation of the bible
and does not understand why an almighty God would allow the Communists, who are not
religious, to defeat the Germans.

As the Communists are approaching, the boy hears a lot about their beliefs, and he likes
their basic ideas. He would enjoy it to be considered by all women as their son, and to have
plenty of brothers and sisters. When the boy sees the Kalmuks, he is curious about them
since their hair is even darker than his. They turn out to be the most violent brutes he has
ever come across, and this leads the boy to think that he is doomed because of his hair. He
is convinced that God thinks of him as a Kalmuk and that this explains why bad luck always
pursues him: God has no mercy for his kind. The boy now believes that he has no chance of
ever becoming happy.

Once he meets the Soviets, they teach him that he should not give up on himself. After
all, there is no such thing as God and the only one who is responsible for you, is you. He
should try to make something of his life. This discovery that there is no God makes the boy
feel betrayed. All of the praying he has done was meaningless and prayers are nothing but
empty words. Nevertheless, the boy does not believe that the priests were trying to fool him.
He is sure that they really do believe in everything they have taught him and that they have
not yet realized that it is pointless. The boy thinks of the communists as the true promoters
of goodness. So in spite of his previous turn to the devil, the boy has decided that he wants
to do good again.

He now organizes his life by the laws of Communism and admires Stalin and the party
members. The only thing he is not sure about is whether putting the interests of the collective
first is a good thing for him. He does not know what he should do if they think he should
become a diver because he is terrified of water since he nearly drowned, but does not want
to disobey the party. So even though he is a convinced communist, he raises objections
against certain aspects of it from the very beginning. He no longer accepts everything he is
told without considering the downsides as well. Mitka and Gavrila teach him that the most
important battle a man has to fight takes place within. Everyone has to ensure that he finds
internal peace, and to obtain this he is allowed to take revenge. He owes it to himself to harm
those who have harmed him, for otherwise he will no longer respect himself.

Once he is reunited with his parents, the only thing the boy believes in is himself, he is
completely disillusioned with humanity. No one will help him, so he must look after himself
and makes sure that no one does him any harm without being punished. There are only individuals fighting for themselves, and if he does not fight for himself, no one else will. All of the different doctrines he has believed in gave him temporary strength. Whenever he thought he had figured out the way the world worked, he was confident. However, these short flickers of hope were always shortly followed by a disappointment when his theory did not seem to work out. At the end of the novel, he is convinced that there is no universal truth that explains everything and that creates a just world. Primo Levi was taught this very same lesson when he entered Auschwitz: “Hier ist kein Warum” (Levi, 29).

It is impossible to justify or even to try and understand all irrational and arbitrary horrors.

### 2.2.2.5 Language

Another important motif that can be found in Kosinski’s first novel is language.

One of the main problems that the boy encounters on his wanderings is the difference in language. The boy wants to be understood by others, but his otherness prevents this. This is the case in all domains, but it is literally so when it concerns his language. His dialect differs from that of the farmers and this gives rise to several problems. His otherness in language turns him into a victim. At parties he is forced to tell stories in order to entertain the guests. He is the laughingstock because they do not understand a word he says. He speaks too fast for them. Once he comes to realize that his language contributes to his status of victim, he wants to change it. However, he does not manage to assimilate his language sufficiently, and he the locals still “laughed at my unsuccessful attempt to speak the local dialect” (Kosinski 1965, 83).

It is significant that there is hardly any conversation in the novel. There is no direct speech and when a talk is mentioned, it is never recalled in detail. Even when the boy is capable of speaking, it does not help him to improve his conditions.

Halfway the book, the boy loses his speech after he is thrown into a manure pit. At first, the boy is shocked, but once again he accepts his fate relatively willingly. There are several possible interpretations for this muteness, and once again Kosinski does not specify his own interpretation. It may be a symbol for the opposition between the boy and the outer world that has reached a climax. His loneliness is deepened even further now that his speech is taken away from him, and he has given up hope for human understanding. It may also be caused by the incapacity to express the horrors he has lived through. Language cannot grasp what he has experienced, so he becomes literally speechless. A third option is given by Piet Pieters. According to him, the boy may have put up a wall between his inner self and the outer world. Not expressing his misery is then seen as a way of dealing with it, it helps him to endure it. In this case there is a strong relation between language and the boy’s mind: he
does not want to think about it. This makes the boy less human since a loss of language then
equals a loss of reflection, which is a loss of humanity (Pieters, 26-28).

Strangely enough, the boy’s aphasia does not cause a lot of extra problems. People had
never been willing to listen to what he had to say anyway and whenever he spoke in his weird
accent it only made them more suspicious. Initially, he is mistrusted by some people who
think he is faking it, but once they are convinced that he is a genuine mute, they seem to feel
sorry for him. The people who look after him now are a lot nicer to him than those in the
first part of the novel.

Now that he is a mute, he has to find other ways to communicate. Ewka teaches him that
gestures can be more meaningful than words. Her touch is most comforting to him, but he
rejects this when he sees her having sex with a goat and with her relatives. Gavrila teaches
him even more valuable lessons. The Russian soldier teaches the boy to read and write, and
the boy soon thinks that “the world of books, like meat in cans, was somehow richer and more
flavorful than the everyday variety” (Kosinski 1965, 196). In the orphanage, the boy gets to
know another mute; the Silent One. The difference between the two of them is that the Silent
One can speak. He only refuses to do so. The two boys manage to communicate with each
other in a very efficient way, without ever using a single word. The boy now believes that it
does not matter whether one is a mute or not; if people are not willing to listen to what you
have to say, there will never be any understanding. The novel ends when the boy regains his
speech. He has answered the phone, and both people on either side of the line really want to
talk to the other. The boy tries very hard, and finally manages to speak again.

Paul R. Lilly has tried to explain the entire novel from this angle in his work Words in
Search of Victims. He thinks of The Painted Bird as a novel about language testing (Lilly,
20). The boy’s evolution from victim to oppressor is also an evolution of language. Lilly sees
a connection between tale-telling and torture (Lilly, 22), and observes that the most powerful
narrators are also victimizers. He sees all actions as language acts and according to him,
"the boy learns that survival depends on observing the behavior of the oppressor, decoding
the oppressor’s language and eventually learning to speak that language" (Lilly, 23). That is
why the boy refuses to learn anything in his mother tongue at the orphanage. His language
had turned him into a victim, and he is convinced that only Russian can free him from this
position (Lilly, 18). After all, if one language can turn him into a victim, another one should
be able to save him. Words are not used to create hearers, but victims.

2.2.2.6 trauma

The final motif that will be discussed here is trauma.
In the course of the novel the protagonist undergoes several traumatic experiences. First of all, he is separated from his parents and brought to a strange woman with unfamiliar looks and habits. The boy responds to this like a normal six-year-old would: he misses his parents and longs to be reunited with them. He thinks back on the time he spent with his parents, when he was sheltered and safe. He cries and does not fully grasp what is going on. He believes that his parents will come for him shortly, and he does not seem to understand why they were separated in the first place.

In these first chapters, whenever the boy is confronted with violence, he cannot avert his gaze so he watches the scenes in shock. The first time he accidentally inflicts pain, when the carpenter falls into the pit with rats, he is paralyzed as well. These are all normal reactions for a young boy taken away from his protective environment.

As time passes, he no longer thinks back on his parents, and no longer counts on any protection from others. He is not able to deal with the horrors he has witnessed since he became a stray. He is repeatedly haunted by dreams, in which violence plays an important part. He dreams of dogs (128), of becoming a German officer (153), and about being locked up in a cage (154). After traumatizing events, it is normal to relive violent experiences in returning dreams. However, usually those dreams are literal (Caruth 1995, 5). The haunting dreams that come to a victim of trauma are usually an exact repetition of what actually happened. In this case, the dreams are far from literal. His nightmares contain several elements that refer to the violence he suffered, but they are not realistic.

The worst consequences of his experiences only become apparent once he is safe again. When the boy is sheltered by his Soviet friends, he no longer has to fight for his life and he can start dealing with his experiences. They have left some mental scars that are not easily healable. One of the first clear examples of how he is influenced by the traumatic experiences is that the boy claims to have aquaphobia (204). He nearly drowned after the fight on the ice, and this incident has caused his fear for water.

When he arrives at the orphanage, his behavior becomes even more alarming. The boy is upset and claims that his parents are dead. The other children at the orphanage are also influenced by violence and do not know how to respond in a nonviolent way, but when he is attacked by some of them he is not able to run away (226). On previous occasions he has often been able to escape in the face of danger, but now that he is in another environment he no longer manages to move when there is a direct threat. The boy no longer seems to be able to control himself.

The disability to control oneself is an element that it is not uncommon for trauma patients. Nevertheless, that disability is usually situated on the mental level rather than on the physical level. It is known that most trauma victims do not have control over their own thoughts.
They are unable to retrieve the memory of the traumatizing events at will, but the images continually return to them in an uncontrollable way (Caruth 1995, 4-6). The protagonist of this novel does not seem to suffer these intrusive thoughts and images.

As the boy is reunited with his parents, he behaves even more strangely. He pretends that he does not know them, and would prefer to continue his life as an outcast rather than to return to the protection of a loving family. He adapted himself remarkably fast to his adventurous and dangerous life when no one was looking out for him, but the opposite goes a lot slower. After everything he has been through, the boy can no longer behave like a normal child is supposed to. The events have changed him so that he prefers the dangerous nightlife over the kindness of his parents.

Finally, there is also the boy’s muteness that can be linked with trauma. The boy becomes a mute after a most terrible incident in which he is nearly killed. Since the boy regains his voice in the final chapter, his aphasia cannot have been caused by a physical problem. Events can be so horrifying that witnesses are “lost for words”. Such a confrontation with one’s own mortality can be most traumatizing, and it is often impossible to communicate such an experience. Most victims’ aphasia, however, is limited to the event. They are not able to talk about their shocking experiences, but they remain able to discuss all other aspects of life. Once again, the boy is an exception.

The book ends as the boy regain his speech. The novel thus has a happy ending. It seems that, now that he can speak again, the boy will be able to build up a normal life. Both his parents have survived the war as well, and things can only improve from this point onwards. However, in real life, traumas are not that easy to overcome. The victims are often incapable of talking about their experiences years after they occurred. Since the story is told by the boy, he has found a way to talk about the events. He has managed to turn his story into a coherent unit. He is not hesitant or emotional in any way.

So, even though a lot of the boy’s characteristics seem to be typical trauma behavior at first, there is always a discrepancy between the boy’s state and the description of trauma patients by theorists.

Some of the other characters are also severely traumatized. Ludmilla for instance, used to be a young and innocent girl but when she was forced to marry a cruel and ugly man, she refused. Her fiancé was so enraged by her reaction that he encouraged several men to rape her until she lost consciousness. After this experience, “her mind had become addled” (48). Ludmilla lived in the forest, wearing nothing but a sack that revealed her voluptuous body. She lured men into the bushes where she pleased as many as she could. “No one man could satisfy her; she had to have several men, one after another” (Kosinski, 48). Ludmilla was not
able to cope with the multiple rape, and she can no longer live a normal life.

With other characters it is not always as clear, but there are always indications that their unusual behavior is caused by a traumatic event in the past. Garbos’ cruel nature for example, can be explained from the loss of his boys. He has mistreated a girl, and now he is torturing the boy out of frustration for his own losses. The boy’s parents are also traumatized, but they react in the opposite way. They probably never forgave themselves for abandoning their child. Their separation must have been as hard on them as it was on the boy. To salve their conscience, they took in another orphan boy and once they are reunited with their child, they do not want to refuse him anything. Their trauma causes them to be softer.

The orphanage is an assembly point for children who have survived the war. Most of them have seen such horrible things that they can no longer return to a normal state. Violence has become a way of life. Some of the children have nicknames that refer to the violence of the war and they act accordingly: the Tank who beats everyone who gets in his way; Cannon, who throws object at people without any reason. Others include the Saber, the Airplane, the Flamethrower, the Partisan, the Grenade and the Torpedo. They are constantly fighting with one another because that is the only thing they have seen in the past couple of years. They do not feel any moral restrictions. They hurt people and think of it as a game The girls have a hard time dealing with the sexual abuse they suffered. Like Ludmilla, most of them react by inviting attention and provoking men to touch them. They talk about their abuse in a boasting manner. Still others are passive and seem indifferent, or even lifeless. They hang around without saying anything and without expressing any emotions.

Even though these people react in different ways, all of them are marked with trauma. They cannot go on with their lives because they cannot grasp the horrors that befell them. They are stuck in the past, but unwilling to face it.

2.3 Style

2.3.1 Traditional or experimental

At first glance the novel seems to be rather traditional: it is written in a clear, accessible style and it deals with the progression of a child. The events are told in chronological order: the story begins at the ending of 1939 right after the start of the war, and it ends on a day in April when the war is over. There are a few indications about time, such as spring, winter, a mention of the amount of time that elapsed since a particular event, etc. However, it is only in the introduction that a year is stated. There are a few flashbacks to events of his prewar life and there are a few jumps in time between two chapters, but none of this interferes with the clarity of the novel.
There are twenty chapters of varying length and at first sight there is little connection between them. Each chapter can be seen as a fragment, an individual short story. In every chapter, new characters and places are introduced out of the blue, only the boy appears in all of them. This makes him the link between the chapters, his progression holds them together and provides the book with a plot (The Novels Of Jerzy Kosinski, 44).

Nevertheless, there are certain particularities about both content and style that turn the book into an unforgettable reading experience.

Thematically, the novel stands out because of the extreme violence that is portrayed and because Kosinski is not afraid to attack sacred cows. The boy’s view on certain delicate matters such as religion and war differs significantly from what is commonly acceptable. This was discussed in the previous section.

On a stylistic level, a great imbalance can be observed between the limited understanding of the first-person narrator and the extensive vocabulary of the adult writer that is used. The reader often understands more than the boy does. When Marta is sitting immobile on her chair, for example, the boy believes she needs to rest because she is waiting for a change of skin. The reader on the other hand knows that the truth is more regrettable: Marta will never wake up.

2.3.2 Points of view

The first two pages are introductory and they are completely different from the rest of the book. Such an exposition is typical for the “old novel” so it increases the traditional structure of the novel (Costenoble, 44), but it does more than that. A third-person omniscient narrator gives us some background information about how the boy ended up all alone and why the peasants react in such a hostile manner towards the little wanderer. The short introduction enables us to understand the rest, it gives us the frame in which we have to situate the novel. In the rest of the book, there is no further information about the time and location of the actions, so without this framework it would be harder to understand the novel.

This introduction is meant to convince he reader that the following story really happened. The narrator tells us about the larger political context, and gives historical meaning to the boy’s subjective experiences (Costenoble, 46). He is an objective voice and blames no one directly: conditions and coincidences force everyone to act the way they do in order to survive. We learn that the boy has caring parents who undoubtedly miss him, and acted in good faith. So this introduction already acquits them of all charges before the actual story begins. The peasants’ lives are turned into a living hell by the war because they are pressured both by the partisans and the Germans to deliver large parts of their meager crops, otherwise they will be severely punished. So they also have an excuse for their behavior.
These first pages already give away a great deal of the plot: most of the book the boy is a lonely stray looking for shelter but finding nothing but misery instead. So we already know that the boy will have a hard time, but the introduction does not tell us how the boy will react and whether or not he will make it.

Some other essential information one would expect to find in an introduction is also missing. We do not learn the names of the boy or the area he ends up in. On several occasions throughout the book, the boy is accused of being a Jew or a Gypsy, but we are never told whether he actually is. His parents are in danger of being deported, but this is due to the “prewar anti-Nazi activities of the child’s father” (Kosinski 1965, 1). Their race and religion are withheld. Kosinski feels that this kind of information is not relevant: it does not matter whether the boy is a Jew or a Gypsy or not. The boy is judged by his appearance and attacked because he is an easy victim.

In the rest of the book, we see everything through the naive eyes of the abandoned boy. This enables the readers to gain a complete insight into the effects of the nightmarish experiences on the boy. Because the work is written in the past tense, we know from the beginning that the boy will survive. However, this does not make the book any less exciting. The main interest is not whether or not he will make it, but rather how he will manage to survive and what the consequences of these horrors will be for the boy (Costenoble, p.46).

The fact that the boy renders his youth in such an aloof manner can signify two things. Either he is still not over his experiences and unable to express what he really felt out of fear that reliving the events will make him fall apart. Another possibility is that the boy has become a cool, calculating man who is constantly on the alert. Hardened by all brutalities, he is no longer capable of showing real emotions.

This viewpoint gives Kosinski a lot of freedom. He can write down opinions that would not be accepted from adults and present alternative visions on the war. For example, when the boy is faced with an SS officer he is impressed by the man and wishes to be exactly like him. Or when villagers try to burn him, the boy struggles because he will not come to an end in an improvised fire while he has already heard of special furnaces that were created by the Germans for this purpose.

2.3.3 Approach of the author

As was mentioned earlier, Kosinski is not a native speaker of English but he does not see that as a problem. He is very conscious of his use of the language and thinks of English as his only true possession, and he is possessed by it in return. (Landesman, 13) He has never been interested in conversing in English, only the written word interested him because it is articulate and at the same time abstract. He points out that writing in a language you did
not grow up with also has a few advantages. He compares himself with Joseph Conrad who
has been considered the most accomplished writer in English, even though it is not his first
language. Conrad mentally translated Polish into English, and that way he came up with
constructions natives could never invent. Kosinski is of the opinion that his language use
is richer than that of most native speakers because he combines two ways of thinking: the
English and the Polish way (Don Swaim). A second advantage of Kosinski’s alien relationship
with English is that he can “write dispassionately, free from the emotional connotation one’s
native language always contains” (Kosinski 1978, 3).

This emotional aloofness towards the vocabulary matches the style he adopts: he wants
his language to be as detached as the persona of the novel (Landesman 19). Kosinski writes
in a very calculating manner: he writes and rewrites until every word is exactly where he
wants it to be. His way of writing often gets on his publisher’s nerves for he continually makes
seemingly insignificant changes to the text, but Kosinski is convinced hat every adaptation
makes the book a little better (Landesman, 18). He crosses out everything he possibly can
until he is left with a dense text freed from all irrelevant elaborations. He does not wish to
be a “displayer of stylistic bonfires” (Landesman, 19), since such novelists focus on the form
rather than on the content.

Kosinski wishes to convey a vision, and believes that too many particularities in the
language prevent this. He wants the reader to feel the impact of the words without being
aware of their form, and wants the words to come to them in the same way as actual events
do. (Landesman, 19) As a consequence, The Painted Bird is written in a clear, sparing style
where a lot is said in few words. Kosinski shapes his sentences around verbs and nouns,
because in his opinion, they allow him to make a quick abrupt point (Don Swaim). Adjectives
and adverbs, on the other hand, have the tendency to make a text too heavy without adding
anything to the action.

Kosinski says that his way of writing resembles that of his poet friends (Landesman, 20).
He selects a fragment that he finds inspiring at the given time and starts from there. He then
either moves “above it” or “below it”. The first two passages he writes are the opening scene
and the final chapter (Landesman, 20). So he knows exactly how the book will end, and how
his characters have changed before he writes their actual story.

The use of imagery and figures of speech is limited to a few comparisons and the descrip-
tions give us nothing but the essential information needed to conjure up horrible images of
the violent scenes. All of the events are thoroughly described, but we are often left in the
dark with regard to the surroundings or the looks of the characters. This fits with the usual
observations of a young boy. He only remembers the things that were impressive to him, and
acts usually leave a deeper impression than looks do. He does describe Marta in a rather
detailed manner because she is different from all the women he knew in the city. The German soldier that is described is also significantly different from the locals. So he remembers what he looks like as well. Most other people are determined by a single character trait rather than by their appearance. Whenever he talks about the scenery, he does not specify everything but he sketches gloomy landscapes that enhance the hostility of the boy’s surroundings. The reader has to supply his own details.

One of the most disturbing elements of Kosinski’s use of language is, as Arthur Miller has pointed out in a letter to the author (Qtd. on the frontispiece of The Painted Bird), that he manages to make everything sound so normal. He talks about the most awful acts as if they are trivial, or even natural and by that he seems to be proclaim violence as a rule. The first-person narrator describes everything he sees with an accuracy that is chilling. No distinction in attitude is made when he is talking about his comet and his work, or when he is reporting the beatings he has received and the rapes he has witnessed. There seems to be no shock or disbelief. The boy just accepts and repeats whatever happens.

Words are used as weapons, and Kosinski carefully searches for the sharpest ones so that he can achieve maximum impact with as few words as possible. To make sure his words evoke the intended result, Kosinski often tests his stories on audiences to see their reactions. Once he got famous he did so in talk shows and interviews, but The Painted Bird was presumably developed during dinner parties where he enjoyed shocking people with macabre tales that deal with a lonely boy growing up in the Polish countryside under horrible conditions (Myers, 59). The Americans were intrigued when he told them about the way of life in a country on the other side of the world and were amazed by his survival skills. They looked up to the man who had changed his own destiny and he became a respected and welcome guest at social occasions.

In spite of what some critics tend to believe, Kosinski’s main intention is not to shock. He wants to show the distorted reality as convincingly as he can, hoping that the direct confrontation with violence will cause an emotional reaction within the readers and that, as a consequence, they will turn against the acts described. Comparable to what Gustave Flaubert attempted in Madame Bovary, Kosinski also wanted to teach people a moral lesson without making it explicit: neither one of them ever directly condemns the immoralities they describe, but they are confident that their public will draw the right conclusions and that they will make the moral judgment for themselves. Kosinski wants to urge people to think about what is good and what is evil through his books, and that requires the involvement of the reader. He wants them to visualize the acts he has described and he has made his story frightful enough so that no one can be left undisturbed. According to Kosinski, the imaginative involvement of
the reader is what makes books stronger and more terrifying than watching the same events on TV. After all, you cannot escape the imaginative processes that take place within since the screen is inside, while you can easily turn away from a television. (Landesman, 27) *The Painted Bird* is not easily forgotten exactly because of the extreme brutalities in it. Kosinski seems to believe that as long as one remembers the horrors from the book, one will continue to denounce violence. Unfortunately for Kosinski a lot of readers not only turned against these atrocities but also against the one who wrote them down. They see the lack of judgment as a silent approval. Kosinski was accused of being a sadist, and campaigns against him were launched. Similarly, Gustave Flaubert had been summoned to appear in court after he had written *Madame Bovary*. This shows that even though the writer is powerful and can have a major influence on people’s views, writing can also make him vulnerable. (Words in search of victims, 16)

Kosinski also wants his readers to feel involved on another level. He is fascinated by the ambiguity which language can express (Costenoble, p.1), and therefore he deliberately remains vague about the meaning of some of the symbols in his novel. He allows his readers to decide for themselves which interpretation they prefer. They are urged to think about them.
Chapter 3

The Voice in the Closet

3.1 The author

3.1.1 Life

Raymond Federman was born in 1928 in a Jewish family in Paris. The first significant event in the young boy’s life has haunted him ever since. On July 16, 1942, during a large round-up the police also came to the Federmans. His mother decided to hide her fourteen-year-old son in the closet of their apartment. Her last word to him was “Chut!”. Ironically, this hiss of his mother was also the first word he wrote down when he decided to break the silence and become a writer. He refers to it in several of his novels, and tries to find out what she actually meant by it: “be quiet and stay where you are” or rather “I am sorry to have saved you, maybe you should not come out” (Favre). The boy stayed in the closet for 48 hours before he decided to choose life, and take his chances in the outside world. The rest of the family, Raymond’s parents and his two sisters, were taken to Auschwitz and none of them returned. As the only surviving member of his family, he has been burdened with an enormous feeling of survivor guilt.

In 1947 he emigrated to the United States where he led an interesting life. In his first years there, he was a paratrooper in Korea, tried out for the Olympic swimming team but was a tenth of a second too slow to make it, played the saxophone in Detroit and was a dishwasher in a New York.

Later on he started to study literature and earned a PhD at UCLA in 1963. The subject of his doctoral dissertation was Samuel Beckett, who was then regarded as a charlatan. Even Federman’s colleagues tried to dissuade him from the topic, for they did not take Beckett’s writings seriously. Federman, on the other hand, stubbornly insisted that the writer of “Waiting for Godot” was brilliant and that he would be awarded a Nobel Prize. Federman turned out to be right and he has continued to read and admire Beckett’s works. He wrote critical works about him, addresses him directly in some of his works, and uses every occasion he can
find to praise the innovative writer.

Federman taught literature, creative writing, and French at SUNY at Buffalo from 1964-
1998, before retiring as the Melodia E. Jones Chair of French.

He has a double relationship with both his homeland and America. France constantly
reminds him of his past and of all the things he has lost, but as opposed to the United States,
it is also a country with an amazing literary tradition. America is the land of the free, and
Federman likes the idea of being able to do and say whatever he wants (Favre), but he never
really feels at home in this nation where everything is so superficial (Bernstein). In a lot of
his works he writes about America and it is clear that he feels like an outsider and that he
looks down on their way of living. He thinks of the Americans as shallow people with a “Walt
Disney mental level” (Amerika). Because Federman never feels at home, he is a typical writer
in exile (Sánchez and González, 241).

3.1.2 A voice within a voice

An important aspect of Federman’s life is his bilingualism and, by extension, his bicultural-
ism. He has written an interesting essay about it titled A Voice Within a Voice: Federman
translating/translating Federman. This voice within a voice signifies that “you can never sep-
arate your linguistic self from its shadow” (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). Federman
thinks and dreams both in French and in English, “and very often simultaneously” (Federman,
“A Voice Within a Voice”). However, he does not see this as a burden but rather as an en-
richment.

Even though Federman believes that both his languages “fornicate in the same cell” (Fed-
erman, “A Voice Within a Voice”), his bilingualism has an ambivalent side as well. Federman
believes that he is “left-handed in French and right-handed in English” (Federman, “A Voice
Within a Voice”). As a young boy he used to be completely left-handed, but due to a rupture
of his left wrist he was forced to become right-handed. Up until now, here are some things
he can only do with one of his two hands. In the same way, he has grown up with French
and was forced to learn English at a later age. Even though they overlap for the greater part,
certain things can only be said or written in one of the two languages.

He is not only a bilingual being, but also a bilingual writer: he writes in both English
and French, and that is rather exceptional. Samuel Beckett, Federman’s idol, is another one
of the few authors to write in two languages. When Federman is planning to write a novel,
he is always in doubt whether he should do so in his mother tongue French or in his second
language English. Most of his novels are written in English since this gives him a lot of
freedom. He says so himself in Aunt Rachel’s Fur:
I don’t speak British, I speak American... Oh no, it’s not the same, especially the kind of English I speak which I invent as I go along, but it’s normal, since English is not my mother tongue I don’t have to stick to the rules, I’m free to do anything I want with the English language (qtd. in Novack)

By contrast, when he is writing in French, he feels captured by its grammar rules. He is unable to experiment in it. He cannot write as freely in French as he can in English because he is over-conscious of using a language which is distant from him (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). A possible explanation he gives us, is that he feels imprisoned by the French culture because it literally captured him whereas he was liberated by the English (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). Nevertheless, Federman is more influenced by French than by English literature. He feels more affiliated to the Nouveau Roman than to the American avant-garde movement (Favre) He also feels that his writings would seem easier and definitely more natural to him if he could make the characters speak French when they feel like it. In most of his novels, the main voice is that of a Franco-American so it would be normal for him to use French when he feels the urge to do so. However, Federman keeps in mind that he is writing for an English-speaking public and therefore he limits the use of French in his English novels.

Even though Federman feels that “there are certain texts which I can only write in English, and others only in French”, eventually he always feels the need to translate them (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). He has a sense of “incompleteness” if a text does not have its counterpart in his other language. Self-translating initially scares Federman, but once he has started the horror often turns into boredom. In spite of this, he always feels the temptation to create a version of his texts in both languages. Once the translation is complete, it no longer seems to matter which text is the original, since the two versions complement and complete one another (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”).

He does not merely translate his texts. He prefers to think of it as rewriting, adapting, transforming or transcreating since he allows himself a lot of liberties one could not take when translating another author (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). This playfulness has the possibility of enriching the text. It gives the author the possibility to correct the mistakes he has previously made, and it is another chance to succeed. It can explain the text, amplify it or correct it but sometimes the alternative version can also diminish the original. “There is no doubt that the process of self-translating often results in a loss, in a betrayal and weakening of the original work” (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”), but it is the possibility of a gain combined with the need for completeness that always pushes him toward self-translation.

Most of his poems and short stories exist bilingually. Even though he also feels the urge to translate his novels; “laziness, fear, apprehension, and of course time” (Federman, “A Voice
Within a Voice”) prevent Federman from doing all this work. *The Voice in the Closet*, main focus of this chapter does exist in two versions. Federman has written them simultaneously (Avelot), and they are a lot more than mere translations of one another. They are different ways of telling the same story. For example, the French version, *La Voix dans le Débarras*, has twenty-two pages whereas the English only has twenty. This does not mean that more information is given in the French version, it just proves that Federman feels freer in English. It allows him to write more densely, and to be more creative with grammar.

There is no space in between the two languages he masters. On the contrary, Federman constantly wants to unite the two languages inside of him. He wants the two languages to influence each another, and thereby his own way of thinking. He does not want them to be as pure as the speech of natives, but he prefers his languages to corrupt one another (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). Federman would like to write novels in which both languages coexist, in which they can come together in the same sentences (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”). Then he would no longer feel the need to translate, since there would be no original language. These works would become the climax of Federman’s playfulness with his languages. The downside of such novels is that they would be unreadable to most people.

There are periods in which he rejects one language in favor of the other, but he is constantly influenced by both. When he is reading, for example, he is also translating the text mentally because he has the need to do everything in two languages at the same time. That is what he thinks it means to be a writer/self-translator: “that one is constantly displaced from one language (and one culture) into the other” (Federman, “A Voice Within a Voice”).

### 3.1.3 Works and Reception

Federman’s extensive oeuvre includes five volumes of poetry, books of criticism on Samuel Beckett, collections of essays, and numerous articles. He is considered an important theorist of contemporary fiction, but Federman thinks of himself in the first place as a fiction writer (Federman, Resume): he has written more than ten novels and numerous short stories. He has been awarded several prizes for his works, yet he is unknown to most people.

His first novel, *Double or Nothing*, was published in 1971 and won The Panache Experimental Fiction Prize. Experimental writers are often considered to be marginal and unreadable, and the same fate awaited Federman (Favre). When he was called post-modern, things got even worse and he was completely disregarded by the general public. Even though his works received some public attention due to the awards they received, they were scarcely read. Those who did take the effort to read his works only did so superficially and did not understand his novels as he had intended them. Of his favorite novel, *Take It Or Leave It*,
for example, he still claims that it has not been read for what it really is: “a monstrous collage/montage of discourses” (Amerika). He has often been appalled at how his books have been interpreted by the critics, and some of his theoretical works were only created in order to show his readers the way. He wanted to give them the key to understand his books and showed them how his works were supposed to be read. For instance, his essay on Surfiction was written with the sole purpose of explaining Double or Nothing, and that is the only novel ever to which the Surfiction theory can be fully applied (Amerika).

When To Whom It May Concern was also misread by critics, Federman wrote “The Lost Epigraph”. There he explains that an epigraph was meant to be included in the novel so that his readers would understand the shift in Federman’s style. In the text he criticizes certain scholars for their lack of insight into his oeuvre (Federman, “The Lost Epigraph”).

Federman has not only given criticism, he has also received a lot of it. He likes to disorient his readers, but they do not always appreciate this. Most people prefer a simple linear narrative with a happy ending over a fragmented one that shows a distorted world. One critic said about this: “If you shit on Federman know two things: one, that you are not the first. Second: Nor are you the last. Third: That Federman has the last word. Which is: now I have you where I want you” (qtd. in Federman, “Notes and Counter-Notes”). Even though Federman likes to make his readers laugh, he does not write to please them. He wants them to stop thinking of reality as a coherent unit, but not everybody is willing to give up this comforting idea of a stable world.

Federman’s novels have been translated into several other languages, but particularly the German versions have been very successful. In the late eighties Federman’s early works were translated into German, and they received a lot of attention. His work “does not simply float there, it invaded Germany, it corrupted Germany, it forced Germany to look at itself through [Federman’s] books” (Amerika). Reviews were published, books were written, and even more importantly: his novels were read attentively. Kosinski believes that the Europeans, and more specifically the Germans have managed to penetrate his novels in a way that Americans never did (Bernstein). The Germans have tried to analyze his works thoroughly, paying attention to both form and content and Federman feels that they did so in an intelligent way.

He does not ascribe his success in Germany to the fact that he is a Holocaust survivor. Even though the Germans do like survivors that do not blame them directly and have the ability to make them laugh (Amerika), that is not the main reason why his works have been read in Germany. When Federman wants to explain what did cause his success, he does so in a very arrogant and cynical way.

They love F because F went to AmeriKa and there struggled and there suffered
and there worked like a slave and there even starved and there became a writer
a real writer and what he writes is Amerika and the Germans love to read about
Amerika because they would all love to become Americans and forget their sordid
history.(Amerika)

The German (sic) have recognized that F is a fucking good writer, and that F
is not only a fucking good writer, but that he became a fucking good writer in
a borrowed language. The Germans love the English language, they all speak it
better than the Amerikans, and they admire a writer who is capable of working
in a language that is not his own.(Amerika)

But there is more, I mean why F is so successful in Germany – and when I say
successful, I don’t mean in terms of the number of copies the book sold – we not
talking blockbuster here or best-seller, we talking fame.(Amerika)

But what is important about the German edition of DON is not how many copies
it sold, it’s the fact that it got some 75 reviews in the major newspapers, and won
two prizes. For a totally unreadable, unmarketable book that’s not bad. I will
not go through the list of all the books, but what these reviews and articles, and
books (yes there are four books written about Federman in Germany, and several
doctoral dissertation (sic)) all admire in F’s work is the quality of the writing, the
daring of the writing, the blasphemy of the writing, the effrontery of the writing,
in other words the beauty of this laughterature.(Amerika)

Federman has not known this instant success in his homeland. For years, the only contacts
he had with French writers were of an academic nature. They did not see him as a writer.
In 1974 Federman had published a novel written in French: Amer Eldorado. The book got
great reviews and did well for a while, but when his publishing house was bought by another
company, the novel disappeared and no other publishers were interested. The French criticized
him for betraying his mother tongue by writing in English, and felt that he was just another
Jew trying to tell his story (Favre). They also disliked his style: he was too avant-gardist
and did not even attempt to write belles-lettres. Federman felt completely misunderstood by
the French because to him it would be impossible to write about such horrible events with
the elegance that they desired (Favre). He needs an obscene language that defies people just
as much as the unspeakable events do. After these allegations against him, Federman turned
his back on France and no longer attempted to publish his works there.

It was not until 2001 that Federman was rediscovered in France after almost 30 years of
being ignored. A young female poet read one of his novels and wrote him a letter promising
to make him famous in France. She was astounded that a novelist as talented and innovative as Federman was not known in his native country. She found him publishers in France, wrote articles about him, and praised him on radio shows. It worked out. In the past few years, most of his novels have appeared in France and they have received great reviews. Now Federman is even financed by the French Embassy to promote his works all over France (Dietderich).

3.1.4 Identity as a Jewish Writer

Federman’s life has been greatly defined by the loss of his parents and his sisters, and this is also what turned him into a Jewish writer. Not just any writer, but a Jewish one. The label of “Jewish writer” has been invented after The Second World War because a lot of survivors felt the need to write down their experiences (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). They wanted people to know what they had returned from. They wanted to tell people their truth, and at the same time the public demanded and expected them to do so (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”).

Federman feels that as a marginal survivor of the Holocaust, one who never got to see its worst horrors, it is at the same time arrogant and necessary for him to tell his story (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). The only ones who have the full right to talk about the Holocaust are those who died in the camps and those who were there but lived to tell the tale. Children of the Holocaust, including Federman, can only appropriate these stories and that is an arrogant thing to do. However, Federman sees it as his responsibility to tell his story anyway in order to “give back some dignity to what has been humiliated by the Unforgivable Enormity ...of the Twentieth Century” (Thwaite). To Federman, the Holocaust is the central event of the 20th century and it is definitely also the one event that has had the greatest influence on him. He feels that he has to write so that the horrors will not be forgotten.

However, he does not support all of the efforts to keep the memory of the Second World War alive. He is disturbed by the way in which the Holocaust is treated nowadays. It has become a tourist attraction: monuments and museums have been set up, but those who visit them remain unaware of the actual horrors that took place. Federman wants to treat the topic in a more serious way and hopes that he will make people aware of what a totalitarian regime can cause.

He is well aware that it is only because of the atrocities of the Second World War that he became a writer (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). If Federman had not lost his parents in such an unacceptable way, he probably would have been an anonymous tailor or a teacher. It is very unlikely that he would have become an experimental writer, had it not been for the Holocaust. In *Take It Or Leave It*, the Jewish
protagonist even feels that he owes a lot to Hitler since Hitler is the one who saved him from being a mediocrity.

Federman does not write about the Holocaust, but mainly about the post-Holocaust era. About what it means to live with the responsibility of a survivor and to feel an enormous absence within. A lot of people that survived the camp were not able to cope with the life that came after it. Famous writer-survivors like Primo Levi and Jean Amery could not deal with the constant feeling of absence and chose to put an end to their life. In the camps they had struggled with all their might in order to survive, only to give up on life when they had recovered their freedom. They were not able to find their happy ending because even though the fire is out, “the smell of the smoke that always lingers after a great fire still pervades” (Federman, “The Federman Cycle”). Though they were no longer in constant danger, they could not leave the past behind them. It still refused to make sense. It is this debris that Federman wants to write about, as he believes that only artists can grasp the meaning, or rather the meaninglessness of the Holocaust (Federman, “The Federman Cycle”).

He feels that ethnic cleansings are not only the responsibility of those who carry out the acts of killing. Those slaughters are universal affairs in which everybody is implicated, and therefore the effort of coming to terms with them should also be a collective undertaking (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). When the end of the war was nearing, the Germans attempted to mask their crimes, and ever since a lot of people have doubted the degree of truthfulness of the testimonies of survivors. As long as people continue to deny the Holocaust it is impossible for its victims to deal with what they had to go through. That is why Federman focuses on the erasure and the denial of the extermination (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). Federman believes that when we eventually will come to terms with the Holocaust, it will be mainly through fiction and poetry. From that point of view, the accounts of the events are even more important than the events themselves (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”).

3.1.5 Representing Reality

Critics have always called Federman’s works autobiographical, but Federman himself does not label his works as such. Even in his novels, he wants to stress that he is a writer of fiction.

Federman learned that there are different ways of looking at one event when he was taking a course on medieval French literature. He read different texts on the crusades, and it struck him that the same event was given different interpretations that were sometimes even incompatible (Bernstein). Thus, a writer can never pretend he is writing down the truth. At
most, he can present his own interpretation of an event, but both the author and his public must remain aware that it is nothing more than a personal account and that other accounts can be equally valid.

Federman even takes this further. According to him, there is no distinction between memory and imagination (Bernstein). To Federman, there is no such thing as remembering. What we actually do is imagining what we think has happened in the past. We reinvent it (Bernstein). Or as he has said elsewhere: “Writing is not [we insist] the living repetition of life. Moreover, all writing is done [in our opinion] haphazardly” (Federman, “About Writers and Writing”).

The writer also states that he is constantly running from his own emotions. He tries to deny the horrors that befell him, because he still finds it unbearable to deal with the loss of his parents and his sisters. He persuades himself that he might meet his sisters on a street corner one day and claims that this belief is indispensable for him in order to remain sane (Bernstein). Since he is trying actively to manipulate his own past, it becomes even less justifiable to say that his novels are a faithful representation of his life.

Another reason why Federman objects when people call his novels autobiographical is that those people usually know nothing about his life apart from what they have read in his novels (Novack). Since they are not able to compare what he wrote with his actual life, he believes that they do not have the right to make such judgments. Even though he admits that in a way his novels are the story of his life, they remain fictional works. Federman does not attempt to write down “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about his life, as he knows that such a yearning is beyond reach. He talks about some of the liberties he allows himself in Aunt Rachel’s Fur:

Alright, quickly, more or less the story of my life up to ... up to now, well, a version of my life, you know what I mean, it’s hard to stick to the facts when the fever of recitation grabs you, one version among many possible others, somewhat distorted, exaggerated, accelerated, embellished, and greatly romanticized, what the hell, what’s the point of writing your life if you can’t improve it a bit, one can only tell the truth, I mean the real truth, with detours and lies, it’s an old dictum, and besides, the only way a life can pass for literature is through exaggerations ... do you really think I’m telling the truth here, how dumb can you be, it’s fiction what I’m talking here, just a story I’m making up as I go, I’m improvising (qtd. in Novack).

In spite of Federman’s comments, one cannot deny that most of his books draw directly
upon his own experiences. The essay *Fantasies of the Autobiographical Self* deals with contemporary autobiographical texts in more detail and allows us to understand why the genre is such a good medium for a nontraditional writer like Federman.

Contemporary writings in the autobiographical mode are “a reaction against the so-called crisis of the novel and a possible artistic solution to the fragmentary nature of human experience” (Hornung, 1). They stress the impossibility of a realistic representation of past events, and continually play with this idea. Even though writers like Federman know that continuity and coherence are beyond reach in an autobiographical narrative, they are nostalgic about it. They yearn to find stability, even though they are aware that such a pursuit cannot succeed in modern society. This paradox is at the center of Federman’s work.

He makes it clear that he does not believe in an accurate reproduction of his past, but nonetheless feels that he has to write about it. We can no longer think of history “as a unitary and continuous course of events” (Vattimo 134) that can be represented in an objective way. In a postmodern world, this idea has become clear and it allows us to write about historical events in a more imaginative and open-ended manner (Cornis-Pope). Because he does not try to represent reality, he gives himself a lot of liberties. He thinks of his writings as an immense playground where he is free to do whatever he pleases (Hornung, 4). His literary games include what he calls “playgiarism”, the use of different voices all stemming from the same person and the disregarding of the grammatical rules of the language he writes in. These elements add to the difficulty of the text, but they also make Federman’s novels more interesting to read. His fragmented stream of thoughts in *The Voice in the Closet*, for example, ignores all literary conventions but it gives us a clearer picture of the trauma of a survivor than any so-called realistic text possibly could.

Federman has received a lot of criticism for mocking the possibility of representation because that introduces a funny element in his writings about a serious theme like the Holocaust. Critics feel that mourning should not be a laughing matter, while some elements in Federman’s novels undoubtedly are. Federman, on the other hand, feels that having survived the Second World War and being alive should be an occasion for joy. After facing the enormous monstrosity of the Second World War and its consequences, Federman sees two possible options. Either one decides to put an end to it and commits suicide, as plenty of survivors have done; or one starts laughing with the human stupidity (Favre). Federman chose the second option.

That explains why most of Federman’s works are funny. He laughs with all the misery he has witnessed and mocks his own pain. It is also why he has been called a happy cynic. Federman compares the sense of humor in his novels to an acrobat who falls down (Bernstein). That is the kind of laughter he wants to achieve. It is no black humor, but humor in the same
vein as that of Beckett. He uses a tragicomic style that combines sadness and laughter, since they are both natural to him (Bernstein).

He is also cynical about writers in general when he makes remarks such as: “I never met a writer I liked, says the writer into the mirror” (Federman, “About Writers and Writing”) or “If one sits on one’s ass all day, in due course one will enlarge one’s asshole. This is why writers are classified as Big Assholes” (Federman, “About Writers and Writing”).

For a survivor of the Holocaust that is constantly asked to tell the story of his survival, it is hard to distinguish reality from fiction. When Federman is asked to tell his story, he responds “There is no story. My life is the story. Or rather, the story is my life.” (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). Life and fiction seem even more entangled in another statement of his: “life itself is a fiction. A life gains meaning only in its retelling, and since everything that is written is fictive, as Mallarmé once put it, we are all fictitious” (Thwaite).

In his fiction, the characters deal with roughly the same problems as Federman has encountered in his life. Nevertheless, when he talks about his works, he does not say that he is the main character, but rather that the protagonist is a French Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, or that the narrator is named Federman (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jewish Writer”). The author and his literary persona often share the same name, but it is a persona nonetheless. Once he writes down his name in one of his works, his name becomes a part of the fiction as well (Bernstein).

It is remarkable that he does not only use his own name like this in his fiction. He also talks about himself in the third person in his essays and even in interviews. Essays in which he talks about himself as if it concerns someone else include “Federman”, “Notes and Counter-Notes” and “The Lost Epigraph”. An interview in which he does so is “The World Being Talks. He does so mainly when he is talking about himself as an author. When he talks about his own life, he always uses the first person.

Only in The Voice in the Closet there is a role for the real Raymond Federman. The young boy blames him for failing to write his story. In an interview Federman has said that just this once, he is writing about the real him: Federman, the author incapable of telling the actual story (Bernstein).

3.2 Theme and Motifs

Initially, Federman wanted to include The Voice in the Closet in another novel of his titled The Twofold Vibration. When his publisher, Indiana University Press, refused to do so because they considered the twenty pages unreadable, he published them separately with Coda Press
in 1979 (Defraeye). The book consists of the English and the French text with in between a French text by Maurice Roche: “Echos”. The English and the French version are printed upside down with regard to one another. This unusual structure attracted a lot of attention.

The novel was a success: it has been adapted into a radio play, there have been stage productions, it has appeared as a CD recording and it was the inspiration for a modern ballet choreography (Defraeye).

It has become an essential Holocaust text as it manages to make clear the incomprehensibility of that slaughter and its lasting effect on those who suffered both directly and indirectly from the Nazi regime.

Federman calls *The Voice in the Closet* the core of his work (Bernstein). In these twenty pages he tries to stop running away from the most important event of his life, the deportation of his family and his own narrow escape. For the first time, Federman wants to allow the boy in the closet to tell his story, but the boy is equally incapable of representing what really happened. This is the central theme of the novel: the impossibility to talk about something as monstrous as the Holocaust.

The Voice in the Closet is that of a French boy, hiding in a closet while his parents are being deported by the Germans. The boy does not see what happens, but the sounds and his imagination allow him to create an idea of the unspeakable event that is going on outside of his box. The boy is talking to and about Federman, an author sitting behind his typewriter and trying to write down the boy’s story. An extra difficulty is that the boy hiding in the closet and the writer are one and the same man in two different stages of his life.

As the following passage will show, *The Voice in the Closet* is not a conventional novel. The lack of punctuation marks and the difficult constructions make it rather difficult to read. However, when one makes the effort of reading it attentively, it definitely proves to be worthwhile. The text is a unique assembly of the issues that occupy the author.

where were you when the door closed on my shouting I ask you when I needed you the most letting me be erased in the dark at random in his words scattered nakedly telling me where to go how many times yes how many times must he foist his old voice on me his detours digressions ah that’s a good one lies lies cancellations me to tell now procrastinations I warned him deep into my design refusing to say millions of words wasted to say the same old thing mere competence never getting it straight his repetitions what really happened ways to cancel my life digressively (Federman 1979, 5)

Here, the boy is mainly raging against the writer for his disability to write down his story.
The main theme, the impossibility of telling, is thus clearly illustrated here. The boy feels abandoned by the man, who is failing to find the correct words. The boy blames the writer for imposing his old voice on him and for delaying his story. It is clear that the writer has already attempted to tell his story numerous times, but he never succeeds and now he tries to postpone a new confrontation.

The short fragment also has references to some of the motives that will be discussed in this chapter.

The difficult approach of time is exemplified here as the boy, who spent two days in the closet in 1942, blames the writer not only for what he has written 30 years later. The two main characters, who are essentially the same man, thus live in a different time.

In the first line that is printed here, there is also a reference to his spatial environment. “The door closed on [his] shouting” (Federman 1979, 5), so he is clearly trapped on the inside. This closeness is not only apparent with regard to the content, it is also visible on other levels.

Time and space are thus very important factors as well.

The boy fears that the writer is “letting [him] be erased in the dark”. His closet would then become a grave in which he is buried alive. In other passages, however, the boy compares his closet to a secure, life-giving instance instead of a dark, disturbing one. This antithesis will be examined in the section “Survival”.

In the first two lines of the quoted passage, the boy changes his perspective. At first he addresses the writer directly, but in the second line he refers to him in the third person. This idiosyncrasy, and other stylistic features will also be discussed in a following section.

3.2.1 Theme: Impossibility of telling

The Voice in the Closet is not about how a young boy was pushed into a closet by his mother. Nor is it about what happened in the closet, for that is “irrelevant” (Federman 1979, 3). It is rather about how the writer that the boy became, does not succeed in telling the boy’s story. The attempt to reconstruct the past is doomed to fail, but nevertheless the boy wants to stop Federman’s imagination, hoping that he will be able to tell what actually happened. The importance of the past exceeds that of imagination (Sánchez and González, 230).

Not only what is told is significant, but especially what is not told is important here. There are no words to express the event, only words that say it is impossible to do so. Federman always thinks of language as an obstacle that must be overcome (Federman 1999 A), but there are some events that defy representation. In this novel, Federman tries to come to terms with this and even though he concludes that language fails him, he has been able to show his readers the magnitude of his pain.

The boy’s words are not only his. The writer is always meddling, because he is unable
to understand what he went through as a young boy. The boy fears that his story will be endlessly suspended and postponed by Federman (Wielgosz, 110). The writer has already made some “false justifications in the margins” (Federman 1979, 1), but those were all “false starts” (1) in which he is “evading the truth” (2). This time, the boy wants to tell “the real story” (4) in his own words. In spite of this intention, he does not tell us what has happened. He only repeats that he is stuck inside his closet.

The man behind the typewriter is trying in vain to rationalize the closet-experience, but he does not come to the core of the event. He continues to circle around them, getting nowhere. Therefore, the boy sitting inside of the closet is denouncing what the writer is typing (Sánchez and González, 243). The boy acknowledges that the writer tries, but his “verbal delirium” (Federman 1979, 4) consists of nothing but “lies” and “cancellations” (5). The writer is “never getting it straight” (5) and “cancels the real story with exaggerations” (6). He conjures up several “fake images” (7) so that “his fictions can no longer match the reality of [the boy’s] past” (11).

That is when the boy decides that he will “step out of [his] reversed role speak in [his] own voice at last” (14). From then on, the stream of words becomes even more disarticulated. The final pages of the text draw closer to silence and they become “mute speech” (Sánchez and González, 243).

This time it is the boy who is confronted with the unspeakability of his experiences.

3.2.2 Motifs

3.2.2.1 The Holocaust

The Voice in the Closet, like most of Federman’s novels, does not deal with the Holocaust but rather with the post-Holocaust. Even though we hear the voice of the young boy whose parents are being deported at that very moment, the readers remember in the first place how that event has continued to influence the life of the man the boy became. As such, the novel deals more with the trauma that the Holocaust has left than with the event itself.

Federman does not explain directly what has happened to the rest of his family. He makes several mentions of trains (Federman 1979, 6, 7, 19) and furnaces (6, 8, 16, 19), but he never specifies what they are for. In the same way, he does not talk about his Jewishness. We have to deduce it from the “the yellow star on [his] chest” (4). The references to The Star of David and to the final solution (6) are the only hints toward the Holocaust, and one can only fully understand these references after reading history books.

It is clearly not Federman’s intention to teach us about the Holocaust and how the Germans operated, as there are hardly any references to past realities. The author’s objective is rather to show his readers how a traumatic event changes one’s life.
3.2.2.2 Time and Space

The title already makes clear that space will play a crucial role in *The Voice in the Closet*. The closet is everywhere in the novel: it is not only the place where the boy defecates and where his voice comes from but it is also the place of Federman’s writing since he wrote these twenty pages in a garret on the third floor. Both the boy and the writer are trapped in a box on the third floor so they can only contact one another indirectly. They are separated from the other by their prison.

The sense of being stuck in a small space is also repeated in the visual aspects of the text. The twenty pages of text all consist of 18 lines with exactly 68 characters on each line (Kutnik, 209). The twenty blocks of text are perfectly square so, since there are no hyphenations in the text, Federman’s word choice depends on its number of characters. He had to choose them so that every 68th character would be the final letter of a word.

Each page is thus in itself a box, and the words are forced to obey the strict typographical rules. The boxes imprison the words. Even though the words depict the chaos inside of Federman’s head, they are ordered by that “unescapable form” (Sánchez and González, 236).

The first page of the novel is a drawing of a handleless door and after page twenty there are two drawings of a brick wall. The text does not only consist of boxes, these boxes are further held together by another one.

The image of a prison becomes even more apparent if, like Federman suggests, one could look at the novel on transparent paper (Bernstein). The reader would then be confronted with an unreadable cube that is dense and dark and equally disturbing as the actual closet was to the boy. The text would no longer make sense, but it would become what it represents: a suffocating box. The novel would no longer need to say what it is, it would be clear by just looking at it. (Bernstein)

There is yet another visual element that is meant to make the represented place correlate with the sight of the presented space (Wielgosz, 110). The text is always situated on the right-hand-side page, while the left-hand-side page shows us square and rectangular structures. These squares gain depth because the vertical lines are thicker than the horizontal ones (Sánchez and González, 235). As the novel progresses, these structures gradually accumulate and all of the new figures are situated within the previous one. So as one turns the pages, the structure becomes denser and the new boxes become smaller and smaller. According to Green this symbolizes the process of remembering (118). The harder one tries to get to the core of his past, the more it becomes apparent that memory is distorted by “intrinsic compartmentalization” (Green, 118).

All of these graphics enhance the idea of impermeability and impenetrability (Kutnik,
and they represent the closet from which both the boy and the writer operate. The boxes in which they find themselves give us the idea of loneliness and isolation, but also of protection. Even after the boy comes out of the closet, he still has that sense of isolation because of what he has been through. He is separated from all other people because they do not share his trauma. That explains why the writer is in a box as well.

The first words of the novel are “here now again” (Federman 1979, 1). This shows us that besides space, time is also an important element in *The Voice in the Closet*. The protagonist starts by situating himself both in a spatial and a temporal way, but he is very unspecific about it. Only when we continue to read, we find out more about the exact time and setting of the boy. The initial vague descriptions do create a sense of immediacy that urges the reader to continue.

When Federman writes, the world around him disappears and he is totally inside of what he writes (Novack). It feels like he has left planet earth and that he is traveling in space and outside of time. When he writes, he is everywhere at the same time (Novack). To Federman, time is not a straight line and he says so literally in *Aunt Rachel’s Fur*:

> What the hell do you think time is, a straight line that goes in one direction only, something stiff always standing at the same fucking place, how stupid can you be, the past and the future are not frozen like a scenery on a postcard (qtd. in Novack)

In *The Voice in the Closet*, Federman also plays with this alternative vision on time. The boy is talking to the man he will become later on. He is addressing the man who is sitting behind his typewriter more than thirty years after the boy has left his closet. When the boy starts to talk, he anticipates what will become of him so that “the past seems to take off on its own, pass by the present and and catch up with the future” (Wielgosz, 110). The boy constantly repeats things from the future. He talks about his past closet experience while he is still in it, and he talks about Federman’s past texts on this event even though these did not yet exist when he was sitting inside of his box. Both of these elements are carried over into the presence (Wielgosz, 110)

This seeming simultaneity can be interpreted in two different ways (Wielgosz, 111). Either one can think of it as an excess of time. Time is so densely condensed that different layers of time all fit inside of the closet.

The second explanation is the opposite of this: there is no time within the box. The closet is timeless. It withdraws from conventional senses of time. Either way, inside of the closet time functions differently than outside of it.
Time and space are thus closely related in this novel so that is a perfect example of a specific chronotope: “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought out concrete whole” (Bakhtin, 84)

The closet seems to be a place where the normal rules of the world do not apply: it is a safe place where time progresses differently. These elements reinforce the dichotomy between the inside and the outside of the closet. In a similar way, the boxes of the text are also places that do not follow the regular rules: the absence of punctuation marks and the grammatical irregularity can serve as examples.

The boy accuses Federman of making detours and delaying his story. He has enough of this: “no more false starts “ (Federman 1979, 1). He no longer wants to sit by and remain quiet while Federman ignores his voice. The final words of the novel suggest that the boy has succeeded in his attempt to come to the foreground. Even though he has not yet escaped his closet when the novel comes to an end, he has been given the chance to speak for himself: “here now again at last” (20)

3.2.2.3 Survival

Survival is a recurring theme in Federman’s work. After he narrowly escaped deportation to the concentration camps, Federman came to see the fragility of human life. The awareness that he only survived by a stroke of luck is very apparent in his works. He has called his survival an occasion for joy (Bernstein), but on the other hand it has also burdened him with the enormous responsibilities of a Holocaust survivor. Since he is the only survivor of his family, he feels obligated to make something out of his life. This is even increased by the fact that Federman’s survival was not his own choice. His mother made that decision for him when she pushed him into the closet. She did not want his life to end yet.

He feels that he has to talk about what happened to his family and to millions of others because they are no longer able to. This also entails that he cannot let go of the past. Because he has this constant feeling of absence, and the pressure of trying to tell something that cannot be told, survival feels like a burden sometimes. It would have been easier for Federman if he had just died along with the rest of his family. That is what he means when he says: “I endure my survival from its implausible beginning to its unthinkable end” (Federman 1979, 10).

In his novels, Federman describes this double feeling by comparing his closet alternatively to a womb and to a tomb. When he left his closet, he chose life. It was like a rebirth into a second life. Therefore his closet is a womb. On the other hand, Federman doubts whether he has ever been fully alive since. When he was put in the closet, everything he cared about was gone. Nothing of his prewar life was left. In that sense, the closet can be seen as a tomb.
Federman feels that maybe it would have been a better idea to stay in the closet where he was relatively safe (Favre).

In *The Voice in the Closet*, Federman does not use the terms tomb and womb directly. However, he does make use of the antonyms birth and death to describe this double feeling. He says that his "life began in a closet" (Federman 1979, 11). The closet saves him from being deported, thus it gives him life and he calls this a "symbolic rebirth" (11). Unfortunately, it is a "birth into death" (9). He has no hopes for his life out of the closet, since he has to start from scratch again and he is all alone. For the rest of his life, he will constantly be confronted with death through the tales of the Holocaust he feels obligated to tell, and through the loss of his family.

Further elements that link the closet to a womb are the namelessness and the nakedness of the boy (Sánchez and González, 237). As long as the boy is inside of the closet, he does not seem to have an identity. The writer had called the boy "Boris", but he then erased that "first false name" (Federman 1979, 6) and decided that the boy should remain nameless. This is the same as with an actual pregnancy: as long as the child is not born, it is nameless. Parents may have names in mind, but they only name their baby when he enters the real world.

Nakedness is a metaphor of origin, conception and dispossession and it also signifies cleanliness, innocence, purity, fragility and defenselessness (Sánchez and González 237). All of these terms apply to the boy in the closet. Just like the nudity of a newborn, the boy’s nudity is not obscene. As long as he is inside of his closet, nobody can see it and nakedness only exists when someone is watching (Sánchez and González, 237). The closet, like the womb, is a protective area where the boy is safe from the outer world. Inside the box, he matures at an astonishing speed until he is ready to come out and enter the real world.

However, the boy’s nudity does not only refer to the womb. It also indicates that the boy is exposed by Federman for the first time. Federman has always hid him under other voices, but now he wants the boy to come forward. The boy feels very vulnerable because he is not used to this attention.

Federman’s survival is "a mistake" (Federman 1979, 8). It was both forced and accidental. He was meant to die along with the rest of the family, but his mother prevented this. Now he has to try to find a way of dealing with the deaths of those around him and with his own life. When he talks about his "shadow box of guilt" (19) it becomes clear that he feels guilty. This guilt can be situated on two levels (Cornis-Pope). First of all he feels guilty for surviving, while those around him did not. Second, he feels guilty for not being able to tell the tale. His experiences are being replaced by false stories that do not capture the true nature of what took place.
3.2.2.4 Faeces

Faeces are one of the recurrent elements in *The Voice in the Closet*. The boy is afraid to leave his box, but he has to empty his bowels. He then decides to do so on a newspaper, after which he folds “the paper into a neat package” (Federman 1979, 7) and puts his excrements on the roof. It is the only thing the boy possesses as he ventures out again.

Repeatedly, the boy in the closet refers to Federman’s writings as “wordshit” (4, 14, 16, 18) or “nonsense excrement” (7). The man sitting behind his typewriter wants to release himself from the constant pressure that he feels within, but the result is useless.

Both the man and the boy want to create something in order to be freed from their anxieties but they end up with a worthless yield that is not going to solve their problems. The boy is still alone and afraid in his closet, and the man is still haunted by the ghosts of his past. They are both in their box, with nothing but crap. This image shows us that the man and the boy are still very much alike. The writer has never been able to free himself from the boy, just as the boy in the text is inseparable from the man.

3.2.2.5 Escape

Federman longs to escape his box and everything it stands for. He wants to leave the closet behind and step into the real world. That also implies that he wants to come to terms with his past and thus heal from his trauma. However, he is still unable to do so.

The returning images of a bird and a sphinx denote this in the text. On the one hand there is a yellow bird. Birds are free and mobile creatures so they symbolize the boy’s longing to escape. The boy sees birds and a bird even flies into his head (Federman 1979, 9). He wants to go out and be free. However, the bird is only in his head, where it is stuck.

The image of a sphinx returns several times as well (4, 11, 19). Sphinxes are mythical creatures that symbolize destruction and bad luck. They are immobile guards who strangle those unable to respond to their riddle. The boy compares himself to this creature because they share the same submissive posture: they are “crouching” (4). The boy cannot be free as a bird yet, since Federman is unable to tell his story. As long as the boy’s story has not been told, he is stuck in his closet like a guarding sphinx. Federman will only be able to leave the closet when he manages to solve the riddle of its representation.

Federman leaves the boy on the threshold (8). He is outside of his closet and into the real world, but he is still linked with the box. This is a metaphor for Federman’s life: he has never really left the closet. He is looking at the real world, but still feels an outsider. He is afraid to look behind him for he would be confronted with the box once more.

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3.3 Style

There are some stories that cannot be told, but to say that it is impossible to write about them is taking the easy way out. The Holocaust is one of those events that refuses to be represented, but nonetheless it is of crucial importance that it is not forgotten. Therefore, people must continue to write about it, even if it is an impossible task to do so in a satisfying way. Federman’s poem “Here and elsewhere” deals with this problem of not finding the right words to talk about this one event around which his entire existence is centered.

Federman sees this as the dilemma of all Jewish writers today: they feel the constant need to speak and write about the Holocaust even though it is impossible describe the monstrosity of the event accurately (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer”). They know very well what they want to say, but they do not know how they could possibly do so. Federman blames the failure to reconstitute memory on the instability of language itself. You cannot enter the past through the present, he says (Washington 27). After the unjustifiable mass murder of The Second World War, it is no longer possible to write in a convincing way about ideals like rationality and revolution since they could not prevent the horrors. Writers can no longer rely on these old “metarecits” (Cornis-Pope).

However, these problems do not stop Federman from trying to speak about it. Moreover, he came to the theory that the central theme in writings about the Holocaust should be exactly its unspeakability. The only way to write about the Holocaust, is by centering the narrative around this impossibility to write about it (Federman, “The Federman Cycle”). Federman has suggested that the literary innovations in the second half of the previous century were invented in an attempt to deal with the Holocaust (Cornis-Pope). Since the Holocaust is seen as the divider between modernism and post-modernism, it has even been suggested that postmodernism and the post-Holocaust are “mutually intertwined issues that are best addressed in relation to each other” (LaCapra 1994, 188).

Sukenick (40) is also of the conviction that for some experiences, like that of the Holocaust, words fail. The only way to communicate these events is by a denial of language. This denial has been accompanied by a reconstructive effort (Sánchez and González, 242).

Writers today should no longer express what has happened, but in the first place that it is impossible to express what happened. They should question and challenge the medium of story-telling and thus focus on the form rather than on the content (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer”). The style should intensify the content. In that way, Federman responds to the cruelties of history with an equally violent act toward the language (Avelot). He demolishes all its rules. That is how he hopes to find the limits of his self (Favre). He is trying to invent a language that is appropriate for his experiences.
In his struggle to break the totalitarian character of language, Federman creates not only its destruction but also a new language within the language (Washington, 24). *The Voice in the Closet* does not make use of difficult words, but because of its grammatical complexity it still requires the reader’s full attention. The syntax often betrays the apparent meaning of a given group of words (Washington, 24) and this has a surprising consequence. The readers are puzzled, do not understand the text immediately and have to reread fragments. After this second reading they notice that the meaning is different from what they initially thought and they are left puzzled and troubled. Federman urges people to expect the unexpected, and this makes them think more as they read. He needs this language outside of the parameters of normal language to deal with events that were also outside of what is considered standard.

An example illustrating how he tries to overcome this unspeakability is the symbol (x-x-x-x) that he uses in all of his fiction. These four crosses in parentheses stand for the loss of his four family members. Federman says that this symbol may be a cover-up or a form of evasion, but it is certainly also a way of pointing out “the inadequacy of language in the face of an event as hideous and unspeakable as the Holocaust” (Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer”).

Another example of Federman’s deliberate attempt to achieve a new kind of literature that comes closer to an accurate representation of his past is the term recitation. He has borrowed the word from his esteemed friend Samuel Beckett and it is defined as a specific process of narration: a self-conscious, histrionic activity of combining memorization with invention, oral production with the rewriting of preexisting scripts (Cornis-Pope).

Federman has invented the term “pre-texts” for his kind of writings because they are texts on the problems of writing about reality rather than representations (Hornung, 4). His works are metafictional: he constantly draws attention to the fact that they are nothing more than fictional works. They deal with the shortcomings of traditional literary form and consciously seek an alternative. He continually postpones what he actually wants to say, and therefore his novels remain necessarily unfinished (Defraeye). The focus on the problem of story-telling causes the erasure of the past. The past is gradually replaced by discourse and imagination, and only visible through traces of that erasure (Hornung, 5). So in a way, the focus on the problems of representation allows Federman to run away from his past. He willfully circles around the topic he cannot deal with because he fears the confrontation. In *The Voice in the Closet* he no longer wants to run away from his past, and wants to face the boy in the closet. He no longer wants to suppress that other voice within him.

In his telling, Federman simultaneously refuses to allow a simple telling. There is a
constant tension between articulation and cancellation. His novel is an antiexpression as much as an expression (Sánchez and González, 229).

There is no regular narrator, but he makes use of a plurality of voices. However, “even the fact of pretending to write a piece of fiction which doesn’t reveal the voice of the author is a way of pointing to that voice, or to the absence of the voice.” (qtd. in Sánchez and González, 229).

Federman has made a bold choice by abolishing all punctuation in this novel, but it fits surprisingly well in this case. It allows us to grasp the way his mind works more than well-organized sentences could. His way of writing is as fragmented and disorientated as Federman feels. By turning his back on realism, he has created a style that is hyperrealistic (Avelot). Thoughts do not have any capitals or commas. They have an uncertain grammar and they are hesitant, even though they never fully stop. In our thoughts, we often repeat the same thing and we make allusions that are not always easy to understand. The Voice in the Closet is an interior monologue: one long stream of thoughts. Federman’s wayward attempt to convey the workings of the mind of a traumatized writer is more successful than a realistic representation could ever be. Unspeakable events can only be referred to in this kind of style that deliberately creates chaos. The suffocating effect of the text is meant to resemble the author’s constant feelings of absence, that are just as haunting.

The author uses all of the tools that language offers him to express his anger and to show the rupture within him (Avelot). The use of pronouns can serve as an example of this. They are elements that add to the coherence of a text but in this novel the use of pronouns is rather limited. Washington (25) sees in this lack of pronouns Federman’s uneasiness with “demarcating the self of the closet from the self writing the history”. The Voice in the Closet is, then, Federman’s attempt to reconcile the boy with the man.

3.3.1 Traditional or experimental

Federman does not believe in realism or naturalism (Thwaite). These genres pretend to represent reality, but they fail to show the complexity of our world and, as such, they deceive their public. The authors of traditional works manipulate their readers. They offer a specific meaning, while Federman wants to allow his public to interpret his text in its own way (Federman 1975, 14). He does not want to steer them in a particular direction, as long as they reflect on what they read. Federman therefore has started a search for other, more honest ways of telling a story. He wants to find ways of symbolizing today’s world more truly, but according to him, that is by no means more realistically (Federman, “The Real Begins Where The Spectacle Ends”). He wants to come to a way of telling his story “without tumbling into the imposture of realism and the banality of sentimentality” (Thwaite).
Federman has written a lot of theoretical texts on this new literature, and how it should operate. Today’s serious writers have to distance themselves from what Federman calls “the Spectacle”. He defines Spectacle literature as writings that no longer understand the world. Such texts accept the crisis of representation (Federman, “The Real Begins Where The Spectacle Ends”). The authors of spectacle texts no longer try to overcome the “impossibility of telling” but choose the easy way out. Their writings are banal, predictable and insignificant. Those texts are mere entertainment and no longer have any meaning. The real world is far more complex, chaotic and painful than the false images we are shown by those Spectacle writers. The challenge for writers who want to go beyond this level of meaninglessness is to write literature

that resists the recuperation of itself into distorted or false figures and images. The kind of literature we need now is the kind that will systematically erode and dissipate the setting of the Spectacle, frustrate the expectation of its positive beginning, middle, and end, and cheap resolution. This kind of writing will be at the same time frugal and denuded, but rhetorically complex, so that it can seize the world in a new way. This kind of writing must create a space of resistance to the alienated devotion to images – to the refining and undermining of the world by images. This kind of writing should be like an ironic free tense within the opacity of the Spectacle. (Federman, “The Real Begins Where The Spectacle Ends”)

Raymond Federman is one of the most innovative contemporary authors. He throws all literary conventions overboard and starts from scratch. He wants to come to a new way of storytelling: one that will allow him to talk about his experiences in an appropriate way. Unfortunately, Federman feels that he has not yet succeeded in conveying his message. The Voice in the Closet seeks to deconstruct traditional prose. Federman disobeys all grammatical rules and makes no use of capitals, punctuation marks or even pagination. He has been called a postmodernist and an experimentalist, but he does not agree with these terms (Thwaite). They are used to refer to unreadable, incoherent texts, while Federman thinks of his works as completed works that have been written with the intention of challenging the boundaries of traditional writing. They are more than mere experiments.

That is why he has invented new terms for his writings, meant to make clear what his style is all about. Unfortunately, these terms are never explained in a clear, unambiguous way and have the tendency to make his works look even more complex. That is why it has been said that “Federman’s literary theories were invented to ward off readers” (Federman, “Notes and Counter-Notes”).

The most important labels Federman has used for his works are “surfiction” and later
on also “critifiction”. Even though these words are his own creations, Federman is not able to define them. Over the years, he has given them a lot of different explanations that were often contradictory. Therefore he can no longer attempt to explain what they stand for. He has written an essay on each of the two words, but even there the terms remain vague and abstract.

Today, Federman no longer believes in Surfiction because its principles have been used by inferior writers who do not even know why they used those principles (Amerika). The entire concept of Surfiction was created to explain his novel *Double or Nothing*. It can also be partly applied to *Take it or Leave it*, but everything he has written since can only be called Critifiction (Amerika). Nevertheless, in an interview that dates from 2005, Federman still called himself a surfictionist. On that occasion, he describes that term as “one who writes fiction on top of the fiction of life” (Thwaite)

Another concept of Federman’s is plajeu or playgiarism. Once again, Federman is not able to define the term or to explain how it works. The laws of playgiarism are unwritten, and those who do not understand them now, never will. Those who deny that they use playgiarism confuse it with plagiarism, even though there is a huge difference between the two. Playgiarism differs from plagiarism because playgiarism makes fun of what it does while doing it” (Amerika), whereas plagiarism is sad. Plagiarism “always apologizes” (Amerika).

Federman places himself next to great writers like Homer, Shakespeare, Proust and Beckett and calls them playgiarizers as well. Their novels, like those of Federman, refer to other works they have read without being self-reflexive. They add something to the original text. The closest Federman gets to a definition is when he says that “playgiarism is above all a game whose rules are the game itself” (Amerika).

### 3.3.2 Influences

Federman has been a saxophone player in Detroit, and jazz has clearly influenced his way of writing. The structure of his novels reminds us of jazz compositions: ruptures in the narration, constant changes in the rhythm, digressions, etc (Matricule des anges). He constantly wants to step across the limits of language just like jazz musicians want to expand the possibilities of their instrument. Federman says that jazz has taught him how to tell a story (Favre). A writer should not conform to the rules of grammar or chronology. He has to improvise (Favre). He thinks of grammar as a prison one must try to escape. According to Federman, “a true poem cannot, must not, will not respect the rules of grammar” (Federman, “Reflections Concerning the Translation of Poetry”). Or even more radically: “the day grammar was invented poetry was enslaved”.(Federman, “Reflections Concerning the Translation of Poetry”) While he writes, Federman also wants to listen to jazz. He believes that it gives
Another important influence on Federman’s style is Samuel Beckett. Ever since he first saw a performance of *Waiting For Godot*, he has been fascinated by this experimental writer. He did not completely understand the theater production, but he realized back then that he had witnessed something that would change literature (Favre). He describes his feelings as follows:

When Lucky walks on stage with that rope tied around his neck, that long rope extending off-stage and one hears Pozzo shout, Go Pig, I was horrified. Who is this writer who has the guts, the courage to show us something so horrible, so inhuman, and yet make us laugh at the same time. I was horrified, and yet like the rest of the people in the audience, I too laughed. That’s when something slipped in me. This was about the time when I was starting to write. And I told myself, if I write the story that I have in me, the story of a survivor of the Holocaust, then that’s how I must tell it, in the tragicomic mode. With a mixture of sadness and laughter. Or what I eventually called Laughterature (Thwaite).

Federman calls Beckett the second greatest writer of the twentieth century. He only has to tolerate Marcel Proust above him. Federman obviously looks up to the man who, like himself, speaks and writes both in English and in French. He believes that Beckett has made him a better writer. But just like it is impossible to write like Shakespeare, one cannot equal the style of Beckett. Nevertheless, Federman has learned a lot from him. Beckett has shown him the flaws of realism and naturalism, and taught him about alternative ways of expressing one’s concerns (Favre). He also learned from Beckett to keep his work interesting until the ending, even when you know that Godot will never come (Favre).

### Voices

One of the aspects that makes *The Voice in the Closet* such a difficult novel, is the relation between Federman’s different voices. For Federman does not create characters, but voices. “The notion of character is obsolete for him.” (Amerika). Characters are things of the past. They belong in a realistic 19th century novel, but no longer in contemporary works.

Federman gives these different voices different names, such as federman (Federman 1979, 2, 3, 4, 11, 15, 16, 20), moinous (5,11,16), namredef (6), and featherman(6). All of these names are variations on Federman’s names, except for moinous. Moinous is a name he gives himself “when he pretends to be a spy, or a musketeer, or a paratrooper, or a jazz musician, or a French lover, or an experimental writer.” (Federman, “Federman”) This name is the contraction of
two French pronouns, signifying me/us. It is at the same time singular and plural. This shows that even though there is but one person, he thinks of himself as different characters. An individual with different voices. Sánchez and González (230) give an even more specific interpretation for the name. They think of moinous as the confrontation between Federman’s memory of the past and the writer’s imagination in the present. So according to them, the term does not refer to all of Federman’s voices, but only to two of them.

The other names are all variations on the author’s real name: Federman. He thinks of his name as yet another thing he can play with, and he enjoys doing so. He has even written an essay about it called “Federman”, in which he describes how he came up with these different names.

Federman’s different voices are often competitive (Cornis-Pope). In The Voice in the Closet this is also the case. The ‘I’ is trying desperately to rid himself of the influence of the other voices. These other voices are referred to with different names, but they are interchangeable: there is no clear distinction between namredf, moinous and featherman.

It is not uncommon for postmodern historical fiction to make use of different voices, since they allow an author to problematize two essential elements: the narrative and the communicative situation of fiction concerning unthinkable events (Cornis-Pope). None of the voices pretend to convey an accurate and complete reconstruction of the past. They are all mere attempts.

Apart from this, one can also think of other, more specific reasons why Federman prefers the use of these voices instead of characters.

In the first place, these different voices show us that human beings are complex. Because all of these voices’ names, stem from Federman’s real name, it seems like they all represent a different aspect of the author’s identity. Just as reality is not the coherent, linear unit most people believe it to be, people are also versatile. They do not develop in one singular direction, but they feel different things at the same time, and their inner self often contains contradictory elements. This grammatical split as a sign of a split personality can be found in all of Federman’s texts (Hornung, 8).

Another reason for Federman’s use of these different voices is the hope that it will lead him to self-understanding. Through his writings, Federman wants to come to terms with his past. Understanding his past, and therefore also understanding himself are crucial in order to come to acceptance. It is through the other that we can come to a better understanding of the self. However, since he is the only one who is constantly present in what he writes, he feels forced to split himself up into these different voices (Favre). These alternative versions of himself intensify his awareness of the surrounding world and his position in it (Hornung, 10). The conversations between these different voices expand his knowledge of his own life.
Finally, one can also think about this multitude of voices in the opposite way. Instead of trying to come to a better understanding, Federman is constantly running away from himself. He creates these other voices so that he can play hide-and-seek with himself, hoping that there are some voices within himself he will never find again: “he [Federman] continues to scream multiplying voices within voices to silence me [the boy]” (Federman 1979, 7). The dialogues between those different voices of Federman then allow him to divert himself and his audience from certain profound aspects of his life. In *The Voice in the Closet* Federman wants to get rid of this multitude of voices so that he can bring The Voice in the Closet to the surface.

Federman’s other novels also make use of these different voices, but what makes *The Voice in the Closet* so unique is the shift of perspective. In this novel, Federman wants to allow the boy in the closet to tell his story. He tries to reduce the author to a technical device, a word processor. Or as it is called in the novel, a “Selectricstud” (Federman 1979, 1, 5, 13, 15, 19). The writer’s task should be limited to registering the boy’s words. He should no longer interfere, or run away from this voice, but he should allow the boy to step up. The “I” is in this novel no longer the writer, but the one whose words are written down. He thus reverses the logical course where the present self looks back on the past: here the protagonist is looking at his older self who is a writer recreating him. This unusual tension is what makes the novel so exceptional.

The writer is referred to alternately as “he” and “you”, depending on how the boy’s feelings toward the writer are at that particular moment. Because the boy usually talks about the writer in the third person, it is clear that he is addressing another audience. Since Federman writes to come to a better understanding of his own self, maybe the boy is only addressing the real Federman.

It is only when the boy is angry at the writer that he addresses him a few times directly. This is when the boy blames the writer for not being able to represent his feelings and when he wants to be freed from him. “cut me now from your voice” (3), “your verbal delirium” (4) Nevertheless, the boy realizes that he and the writer are in this literary endeavor together. They are connected with one another, and therefore the boy talks about “us” and about “our project” (4). Later on, the boy calls himself a “puppet” (5), so the boy feels powerless. He depends on the writer and only exists through his hands. He knows that he has no reality or identity outside of the narrative discourse of his creator (Cornis-Pope). When the boy feels that the writing process is not going well, he even goes further and calls himself “a puppet-child whose strings are entangled” (Federman 1979, 12).

Since the boy and the man are essentially one and the same person, “I”, “you” and “he” all refer to Federman. He is desperately trying to melt his different selves together again
(Sánchez and González, 238). The fragmented way of narration thus represents his fragmented mind. He wants the boy and the man to reconcile their quarrels to overcome this so that his wound can heal.

Federman’s use of the second person is another element that does not appear for the first time in *The Voice in the Closet*, even though its nature changes. The second-person pronoun can be used in fiction for different purposes. In Federman’s early works it is mainly used to emphasize “the conflicting selves of a character-narrator” (Cornis-Pope) and to create empathy for the fictional protagonist. He wanted to show his internal conflicts and the tension between fact and fiction. In his later novels, Federman makes use of the second person to “designate the communicative relation situated at various levels of narrating and listening” (Cornis-Pope). He now wants to “enhance the cooperative, integrative aspect of narration” (Cornis-Pope).

*The Voice in the Closet* can be seen as a transitional stage. Here, the use of the second person shows a split in a character’s internal perspective for the last time, but the shift in perspective is what makes this work such an essential part of Federman’s oeuvre.

### 3.4 Trauma

The Second World War and, even more specifically, the persecution of minorities by the Nazis was an unprecedented wounding event. In the wake of that slaughter all those who came in contact with it, however indirectly, had to find a way of dealing with what they witnessed. *The Voice in the Closet* can be regarded as Federman’s personal attempt to come to terms with his painful past. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the text from the perspective of trauma-theory. This will allow us to come to a better understanding of both the author and the novel as most of the issues treated in this text are typical for victims of trauma.

#### 3.4.1 Federman as a Trauma Victim

Even though there is no general consensus about a definition of trauma, most theorists do agree that

there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with a numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event (Caruth 1995, 4).

Trauma is caused by a ‘shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 1996,61). One of the main
requirements for an event to be traumatizing is that the event was not fully experienced as it occurred (Caruth 1995, 151). Because of its overwhelming nature, trauma victims are not able to understand the event as it occurs. It is impossible for them to possess the memory of the traumatizing event because it was so overwhelming that they could not understand what was going on. As a result, the past event becomes an obstacle that prevents them from going on with their lives in a normal way (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 158). So the unexpected immediacy is what causes the belatedness of the reaction (Caruth 1995, 6). Because of the fright they were experiencing at the time, they were not prepared to take in the stimulus.

As the victims were not fully conscious at the time of the event, they do not possess the memory of it. Instead they are possessed by their memory of the event (Caruth 1995, 4-6). The mind cannot control the event, so the event takes the control over from the mind (Caruth, 1996, 58). As a consequence, the traumatizing event is inaccessible to conscious recall and control (Caruth 1995, 151) but instead, it returns to the victims over and over again against their will (Caruth, 1995, 6). This possession takes the form of hallucinations, dreams, intrusive images and thoughts, repetitive actions of the survivors, etc. When the event returns in dreams and hallucinations, it is remarkably accurate and detailed. However, after regaining full consciousness, the victims are incapable of repeating what they have just seen. The destructive repetitions of the event come to govern the survivor’s life (Caruth 1996, 63) The subconscious memories control ongoing behavior (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 164).

The haunting nature of a traumatizing event stems from the fact that it occurred unexpectedly and that the survivor did not completely understand it at the time (Caruth, 1996, 6). Because the event was not fully experienced as it occurred, it continues to impose itself on the mind (Caruth, 1996, 62)

The traumatic memories are inflexible and invariable. Where ordinary memory serves a social function, traumatic memory is a solitary activity (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 163). Traumatic memory is not addressed to anybody and it does not respond to anybody.

Raymond Federman suffers most of these symptoms. The overwhelming experience he responds to, is the separation from his family followed by their deportation and death. The Germans came so unexpectedly that the boy was thrust into his closet without understanding why. They did not even have time to say goodbye. Even though there was no bodily threat it was a very close encounter with death.

Once the boy was alone, he did not think about his situation. He was checking out the other items in his closet, he was crapping and, even more importantly, he was masturbating. This can be seen as an attempt to flee from consciousness. He hopes that self-gratification will
prevent him from facing the truth. Suzanne Ginestet-Delbreil believes that this is a normal reaction: when the psychological system is unable to cope with a situation, the body takes over (Avelot, 3). So Federman did not fully experience his parents’ deportation at the time.

It is an experience that Federman cannot leave behind. The Voice in the Closet was written more than thirty years after it took place, but he is still not able to talk about it in a coherent way. It still controls his life. He is possessed by it. He has a constant feeling of absence within him, and is repeatedly and against his will confronted with his painful days in the closet.

Since Federman’s novel is not an attempt to communicate his story, his memory does not serve a social function. Rather, it is a personal effort to restore his fractured mind. Federman did not write it for an audience, he wrote it in the first place for himself.

3.4.2 Dealing with Trauma

Trauma is a wound of the mind, but unlike a wound of the body that is easily healable, the breach in the mind is most difficult to overcome. There are different ways of dealing with a traumatic experience, but they are not alternatives of one another (LaCapra 1994, 192). Most victims combine the different approaches and go through all of them during their long healing process.

3.4.2.1 Denial: Repression and Minimization

A first possible approach toward trauma is denial. The victim goes on with his life as if nothing has happened. He tries to continue the life he was leading before the incident so either he represses the traumatic experience or he treats it as if it is a banal memory. In the first case the victim denies that anything has happened while the second option is a desperate attempt to treat the memory like a regular one.

According to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart there are two different directions in which the traumatic event is repressed (168). On a vertical level the memory is pushed downward into the unconscious so that the subject no longer has access to it. From then on, the memory is only available through indirect, symbolic indications. On a horizontal level, trauma victims make use of dissociation. In that case the memory is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness. This alternate stream can become the dominant one during traumatic reenactments that are typical for the so-called “acting-out”.

When a victim denies that the traumatic event was unusual, he is minimizing it. He tries to come to a totalizing discourse of the event that makes sense of everything (LaCapra 1994, 90). In that story he treats the topic in a detached manner, as if it concerns someone else. There is often an effort in these tales to accentuate the positive. They talk about the event
as an uplifting one, without mentioning the fright they experienced. The minimization of trauma may be soothing at first but it is no long-term solution. Eventually, the traumatic memory will return to the victim in its initial, frightening form and it will be more haunting than ever. Neither one of the ways of repression thus allows the traumatized to heal. If left unattended, trauma will reproduce itself (Vickroy, 3)

3.4.2.2 Acting-Out

The second response to trauma is called acting-out. In this stage the victim is uncontrollably and against his will confronted with his past. The traumatic event is now prevailing over all other memories, both past and future ones. The trauma governs the victim’s life and this aggravates the trauma even more (LaCapra 1994, 193).

Most of the symptoms of trauma that were discussed in the previous section clearly come forward in the acting-out of the victims. The possessing memory causes them to have hallucinations and nightmares in which they relive the traumatic event over and over again. The traumatized’s behavior clearly demonstrates a fractured state of mind. In this stage, the victims realize that they have been through a traumatic experience, but they are convinced that it will control the rest of their lives. They are stuck in their past and do not see how they can possibly unify their fragmented mind in order to come to “suturing” (LaCapra 1994, 193).

3.4.2.3 Working-Through

The first two approaches to trauma are not ideal since they do not allow the victims to give their experiences a proper place in the past. They must come to the final approach of working through the trauma if they want to be freed from the ghosts of their past. However, working-through does not stand in opposition to acting-out as the former presupposes and even requires the former (LaCapra 1994, 174). Before someone can come to terms with a traumatizing past, he must be aware of the extraordinary nature of what he has been through. He must acknowledge his position of “trauma victim” in order to change it.

Working-through is similar to mourning. It is a slow process in which a victim tries to specify the haunting aspects of the limit experience. He must confront himself with his trauma, but only in mediated doses so that the memory of the traumatic event is no longer as shocking as with acting-out (Caruth 1995, 153). This requires critical distance. He has to reconstruct the larger context and compare it to other experiences so that he will be able to learn more about his trauma (LaCapra 1994, 200-201). The process of working-through is a movement from Erlebnis to Erfahrung (LaCapra
Erlebnis stands for an immediate or shock experience that is disrupting, while Erfahrung signifies a more conscious experience that is accessible to recall in memory. It is a process in which the possessing memory gradually becomes possessed and integrated into the victim’s past.

In the process of working-through a traumatic experience, there is also a constant repetition of the event. The difference with acting-out is that this time, the repetition is controlled by the victim. He willfully thinks back on the past until he is able to retrieve the memory of the traumatic experience in a selective and critical way (LaCapra 1994, 174). Once flexibility is introduced in the previously static memory, it starts losing its power over current experience (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 178). Eventually the traumatized will be able to integrate the reality of loss (Santner, 144).

Working-through has been mistakenly understood as a betrayal and a transcendence of trauma (LaCapra 2004, 122). To avoid this betrayal, the traumatized should not give in to the temptation of closure (Friedlander, 261). Even though the victim can come to a symbolical burial of his trauma once he is able to control the memory (LaCapra 1994, 193), he may never forget that some aspects of his experience will forever be incomprehensible (Friedlander, 261). He should remember the extraordinariness of what he has been through.

When a victim is recovered from his trauma, he no longer suffers from any reappearances of traumatic memories. Instead, he can tell his story and look back on what happened. “He has given it a place in his life history, his autobiography, and thereby in the whole of his personality” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 176).

3.4.2.4 Federman’s way of dealing with trauma

The Voice in the Closet proves that after thirty years, Federman has still not recovered from his traumatic experience. Initially, he tried to repress his memory of the event. The novel tells us that Federman used to push the voice of the boy down. He did not try to minimize the event, he just avoided confronting it. The fact that he felt the need to write this novel, illustrates that repression did not stop the memory from returning to him. It is more than likely that he went through a period of acting-out, for in this novel he has reached the stage of working-through.

This text is an attempt to reunite the man with the boy. The author realizes that he has a problem in the past that prevents hi from living fully in the present. He wants to look back on the past, to discover when he started to live his life on two levels. For the first time, the boy does not have to force his way into Federman’s mind. Federman wants the boy to speak now. He wants him to tell the story so that they can both find rest.

Because the memory had been repressed for so long, the boy speaks in an even more
disarticulated way than Federman. The memory is not yet transformed into a coherent narrative as it only the very beginning of the mourning process. The final words, “at last” (Federman 1979, 20) should be interpreted not as the ending, but rather as a new start. Finally Federman is willing to face his problems and to start the healing process.

3.4.3 Problems
3.4.3.1 Impossibility of Telling

Trauma victims all suffer from the same dilemma: should they tell their story or should they remain silent? They are “caught between the compulsion to complete the process of knowing and the inability or fear of doing so” (Laub and Auerhahn, 288).

On the one hand, it seems impossible for victims to tell their story. Traumatic events are beyond the limits of human understanding. We are not able to grasp, to transmit or to imagine what has happened (Laub 1995, 68). Victims are not able to organize their experience on a linguistic level. They experience “speechless terror” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 172). The horrors leave the victims lost for words.

To speak the unspeakable is problematic as it does not do justice to the events. Testimonies often understand too much (Caruth 1995, 154). They rationalize the event and do not mention its inaccessibility to conscious recall. When victims tell about their experiences, their account loses the precision and force of the unpossessed memory. The horrors and incomprehensibility of the event are not found in most testimonies, and therefore they are inaccurate (Caruth 1995, 153-154). Testimonies can be a betrayal so it is a sacrilege to bear witness (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 179).

Moreover, speaking about a traumatic experience van be very traumatizing because it makes the narrator relive a horrific experience. Giving testimony is then not a relief but a retraumatization (Laub 1991, 67).

Another reason why it is difficult to write about traumatic experiences is that narratives are recreational. They are meant to entertain people whereas it seems unjustifiable to squeeze pleasure out of traumatic experiences. Theodor Adorno already said in 1949 that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. That is an event that should not be turned into entertainment.

On the other hand, however, it is only through telling that they will find peace.

A lot of camp survivors only fought back as long as they did because they dreamed to be free to tell their story to the world one day. They wanted to live long enough to be able to testify. However, the opposite is also true. They did not only survive to tell their stories, but they also had to tell their stories in order to survive (Laub 1995, 63). Since the Nazis did not intend to have any survivors, testifying is a way of standing up to them. Testifying
is saying that you survived, and that you want the world to know what they did to you. Giving testimony is an important step in the healing process. The narrator, who survived a traumatic experience, reclaims his position as a witness as he tells his story (Laub 1995, 68). Bearing testimony is thus necessary to accept his new identity.

It is also only through testimonies that outsiders can learn about the suffering of the traumatized. It is only in art that suffering can get a voice, so it is essential that artists step forward after a traumatic event and express their pain.

So, it is impossible to speak, but it is also impossible not to speak. Laub has managed to summarize the ambiguous nature of bearing witness:

The act of bearing witness at the same time makes and breaks a promise: the promise of the testimony as a realization of the truth. On the one hand, the process of the testimony does in fact hold out the promise of truth as the return of a sane, normal and connected world. On the other hand, because of its very commitment to the truth, the testimony enforces at least a partial breach, failure and relinquishment of this promise. (Laub 1995, 73)

A lot of trauma victims choose to remain silent. They know that it is impossible to tell what really happened, so they do not even try. However, their choice does not make them happy (Laub 1995, 64). Those who do not tell their story suffer from a distorted memory. The longer they refuse to speak about it, the more distorted the event becomes in their mind. Eventually they start to doubt the reality of the event (Laub 1995, 64).

Especially in relation to the outside world, silence commonly prevails. Within survivor communities there is more openness since they understand one another. They can fill in the blanks in the stories of their fellow-survivors. It is when they have to talk about it to outsiders that they refuse to. The silence is partly caused by shame (Friedlander, 259). They know that their story must appear unbelievable and that their experiences are out of tune with surrounding society. Those who remain silent believe that the reality of a survivor is too different from the lives of others for them to understand each other.

In the literary world, the Holocaust is one of the most avoided themes (Green 115). There is no prescribed method to respond to such a limit event, but a lot of novelists have received criticism for the way in which they dealt with the Shoah. Because it is a limit event that is unimaginable, fictional treatment of it always seems unsatisfying (LaCapra 2004, 133). It seems inappropriate to “overly objectify, smooth over, or to obliterate the nature and impact of the traumatic events” in artistic treatment, but it's difficult to come up with an alternative (LaCapra 2004, 197). Attempts to represent the Holocaust in art are often salvationist. They
portray it as an uplifting experience in which the heroic strength of the spirit is celebrated (LaCapra 2004, 197). Other representations explore the other extreme: they sketch the Holocaust as the ultimate evidence of human bestiality. Neither one of these extremes offers an accurate perception.

The “excess of event” is thus a challenge for those who want to represent it in an artistic way (LaCapra 2004, 133). That is why a lot of survivors have tried to develop a different way of expressing their experiences. They turn away from the so-called realistic approach and seek another style that allows them to communicate their fractured state of mind.

The structure of trauma narratives should give insight into the uncertainties of the traumatized. Writings that deal with life after a limit event should reveal the obstacles of communicating the experiences of the narrator (Vickroy, 3). The story should make it clear that the event was not fully perceived as it occurred. It should stress the inaccessibility of the event and show the endless impact that trauma has on a life (Caruth 1996, 7). Convincing trauma fiction must be written in “a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 1996, 5).

LaCapra feels that writings about the Holocaust should be complex accounts that address the different, conflicting dimensions of the history (1994, 186). They should problematize the relation between empirical events and one’s values and they ought to be self-critical. He further argues for “emphatic unsettlement” in Holocaust literature (LaCapra 2004, 137). The works should not be harmonizing, but instead they should take risks on all different levels so that the readers are disturbed by their aberration from the fiction they know. Emphatic unsettlement prevents “unmodulated, neopositive objectification” and “unmediated identification” (LaCapra 2004, 136). Objectification and identification are two of the unwanted consequences of realistic novels about traumatic experiences. The readers think they understand what the victims went through and they even feel connected with them. The truth is, however, that they can never fully understand what trauma does to someone. Emphatic unsettlement is meant to make this clear.

Even though Federman’s novel is experimental and innovating, it obeys all of the rules theorists find essential in trauma narratives.

The impossibility of telling is the central theme of the novel. Federman has tried to avoid this telling by repressing his memory and not talking about it. He has been silent for a long time, but it did not bring him peace. In this novel, he tries to tell his story for the first time, but he stresses that it is impossible to communicate the inaccessible memory of a traumatic
There is definitely emphatic unsettlement in this text. There is no harmony whatsoever, and the novel is disturbing on various levels. The unusual visual elements, for instance, give the reader an immediate feeling of claustrophobia that is further enhanced by the lack of punctuation, the shift in perspective and the complex way in which meaning is created. The hesitant style of the first person narrator proves that he is uncertain. The alienating text prevents all forms of identification or objectification. The novel mainly shows the impact that trauma has on the life of an individual. It is thus a perfect illustration of a trauma narrative.

3.4.3.2 Time

Traumatic experiences are lost in time. They have no place in the past where they were not fully experienced, but they do not belong in the present in which they are not fully understood either (Caruth 1995, 153). The traumatic experience is timeless. It is impossible for the traumatized to transform it into a story placed in time (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 177).

Because the experience was not experienced in time, it forces itself repeatedly on the victim in the present (Caruth 1996, 62). Since the past experience is corrupting the present, it is as if there is no difference between past and present (LaCapra 2004, 119). The past and the present are often so interwoven that the traumatized persons seem to live in two different worlds that are impossible to bridge: “the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 176). Some patients continuously switch between these two internal worlds, but there are also more extreme cases in which the traumatized completely lives in his unremembered past (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 177-178).

Federman’s complex relation with past and present is also very clear in The Voice in the Closet. The two main characters are the past and present version of the same, traumatized man. Federman is trying to bridge the two realms so that the boy and the man can be reunited. Only then will Federman be able to leave the past behind and live in the present.

3.4.3.3 Survival

“For those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic” (Caruth 1995, 9). A previous section already mentioned that a lot of survivors are not able to cope with what comes after their rescue. Trauma theory allows us to understand why survival can also be a crisis for those who narrowly escape death.

After a traumatic experience, victims have to reclaim their lives, but a lot of different
emotions prevent them from doing so. In the first place, they feel guilt about surviving (LaCapra 1994, 200). Especially Holocaust victims had a hard time dealing with the fact that they survived while millions of others died. They did not do anything to deserve their survival nor did they do anything to prevent the others from being killed. This burdens them with the idea that their survival was accidental. It was “a mistake” (Federman 1979, 8).

Apart from the guilt, most victims also suffer from anxiety about rebuilding a life (Lacapra 1994, 200). The trauma has breached their identity and now they must reclaim their lives. Their close encounter with death leaves them with an increased awareness of mortality and fear of breakdown (Vickroy, 26). During the traumatic incident their personal safety was put into question and as no one can fully understand what this has done to them, they often have a sense of isolation and disconnection. Survivors often feel, quite justifiably, abandoned and alienated because of their differences with others (Vickroy, 23).

The healing process includes frequent repetitions of the traumatic experience. Every repetition involves reliving and can thus traumatize them even further (Caruth 1996, 63). Acting-out then becomes a vicious circle that becomes harder and harder to overcome.

This shows that the survivors’ struggle is not over once they are safe. Their rescue is but the beginning of a long process in which they have to come to terms with their survival. The fact that survival is also a motif in The Voice in the Closet indicates that Federman also has a hard time dealing with his existence after being faced with death.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

After looking at both novels separately, now the time has come to compare these texts and their authors with one another.

The two authors resemble one another on different levels, but at the same time there are a lot of differences between them as well. They were both children as the Second World War broke out in their homeland and due to their Jewish background, they were in danger of being deported and killed by the Nazis. Both of them managed to escape the camps, but they have been largely influenced by the Holocaust throughout their lives.

Once the war was over, both of them chose to leave their homeland and become an exile in the United States. Their interest in literature increased and they both took up their pen. Both of them are bilingual, but only Federman writes in both his languages. Kosinski was the more successful writer of the two, but also the most controversial one. Federman’s success did not come as sudden as that of Kosinski, but his works have been widely praised in the literary world. While Federman gradually gained fame, Kosinski’s glory was beginning to fade after it became clear that his novels were fictional.

The two authors are interested in what critics write about them, but Federman is a lot less tolerant toward critics. While Kosinski likes it when his works are being interpreted in a way he never intended, this infuriates Federman. Federman does not allow his readers to identify with his texts, whereas Kosinski willfully seeks his readers’ identification by leaving out details so that his works can apply to a larger audience. An explanation for this can be found in the fact that Federman’s novels are more personal than those of Kosinski.

Both of them are reluctant to call their novels autobiographical, but their reasons differ significantly. Federman believes that it is impossible to represent reality. Kosinski has made a similar remark, but the true reason for his refusal to denote them as autobiographical stems from the fact that they are not. Kosinski enjoyed the speculations of critics that *The Painted Bird* was the story of his youth. After it became clear that he was not the boy from his novel, he spent the rest of his life defending himself against the label “Holocaust profiteer” until he
ended his life in 1991. Federman is still alive, and, if anything, his popularity is rising.

The two novels that were discussed in this paper also have several similarities. They tell the story of a young boy, from the child’s perspective on how they were abandoned by their parents. They both come out of a loving family, and they are left behind because their parents believe that they have a better chance to survive away from them. Both novels have been called Holocaust narratives, but strangely enough, neither one of them deals directly with the camps or with the cruelties of the Germans. They are mentioned only in an indirect way, since the boys have other problems to tackle.

Apart from these resemblances, there are also a few obvious differences between the novels. Federman’s focus is how one single event in one’s childhood can control one’s life as an adult. Kosinski only deals with the events themselves. His novel ends when the war is over and when the boy is safe again. Kosinski’s ending makes us hopeful for the boy’s future, while Federman’s text is telling that it is impossible to escape the haunting experiences from your youth.

Since they deal with different stages of painful events, they also focus on different types of pain. Kosinski mainly shows us the physical pain and suffering of the boy. There are hints that the physical pain leaves mental scars as well as long as he is in the orphanage, but they seem to disappear when the boy regains his speech. The world in which Kosinski’s novel is set is a dangerous one. Whenever the boy gets the illusion of safety, a horrifying event convinces him of the opposite. However, in this case as well, the dangers seem to have faded as the boy is recovering in the mountains with his loving parents.

Federman, on the other hand, does not mention any physical pain. All the suffering is on a mental level. The difference is, that the pain does not diminish when the war is over. Even thirty years after the boy was in the closet, Federman is confronted with that painful memory over and over again. Even when there is no longer a direct threat, the pain can return in the form of dreams and intrusive thoughts.

On a stylistic level, there are only differences between the two novels. Kosinski and Federman tackle their topic in a completely different way. The Painted Bird is a realistic, or even naturalistic novel that is rather traditional. The only elements that make it somewhat special are the unusual, naive perspective and the distant style. The Voice in the Closet, by contrast, is an innovative experimental novel in which the possibility of accurate representation is mocked. Federman does not believe in naturalism or realism and he problematizes the relationship between fiction and reality. The possibility of story-telling is challenged on various levels, and that makes it a difficult novel.

Because of the centrality of mental scars in The Voice in the Closet, it is a narrative that can be read from the perspective of trauma theory. Federman attempted to order his present
thoughts on a past he cannot grasp. It is an effort to reunite his fragmented state of mind, but it is also a perfect example of a trauma narrative. Not only does the main character suffer the symptoms of a trauma victim, formally it also follows the guidelines of trauma critics on how to write about the unspeakable. As his novel was published in the late seventies, when trauma theory was not yet as popular as it is now, it is a safe assumption that Federman did not consciously try to match his work with the theory. It is more likely that he is just an honest trauma victim whose feelings match the theory.

In *The Painted Bird*, trauma is but a motif. Kosinski has inserted several elements that show the mental consequences of the physically shocking events, but it is definitely not his main concern. He has added the motif consciously to make his novel more convincing and even more haunting, but he has not succeeded in sketching an accurate image of trauma patients. There are so many deviations from how trauma patients usually react, and their recovery is so sudden that the characters lose credibility. While Federman writes about trauma victims, Kosinski is only pretending to do so.

In spite of the different approaches of the authors, both novels leave the readers with the same discomforting feeling. They show different sides of the horrors of the Holocaust and their effect on individuals, but they are equally appalling. After reading either one of the novels, it is impossible to remain unmoved. However, once we take into account the personal background of the authors, our opinion on both books changes. Since *The Painted Bird* is a fictional work, it becomes less threatening. Readers are inclined to forget the horrors as they can reassure themselves they did not actually happen. The opposite is true for *The Voice in the Closet*. When we learn that the author really did spend time in a closet while his parents and his sisters were being murdered, the story becomes even more unsettling. There is a shift in the reader’s mind when he learns that it is an honest view on Federman’s feelings: it strengthens the feelings of unease even more.
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