The Painted Bird Study Guide

The Painted Bird by Jerzy Kosiński

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Jerzy Kosinski's harrowing narrative, *The Painted Bird,* earned accolades from critics, yet also stirred a great deal of controversy when it was published in the United States in 1965. The novel, based on Kosinski's own experiences in Poland during World War II, centers on a young, unnamed boy's struggle to survive during the war by hiding in several remote villages in an Eastern European country. His parents had sent him to live with a foster mother while they hid from the Nazis, but when the foster mother dies, the boy is forced to wander alone from village to village. Due to his dark eyes and complexion, the villagers suspect he is a Jew or a gypsy and so continually torment him.

While some critics have found the novel's violence excessive, most applaud its realistic depiction of the horrors of World War II. Andrew Field in *Book Week* defends the novel, admitting:

So awful . . . is this book that I can scarcely 'recommend'
it to anyone, and yet, because there is enlightenment
to be gained from its flame-dark pages,
it deserves as wide a readership as possible.

Kosinski suffered years of torment after the novel's publication. The book was banned in Poland, his homeland, and he and his family suffered continual verbal and physical attacks by Eastern Europeans who considered the book slanderous to their culture. The novel endures, however, because of its powerful statement on the nature of cruelty and survival. In the Afterward of the second edition of *The Painted Bird,* Kosinski notes the impetus for the novel and for much of his writing: when his parents described their experiences during the war and their witnessing of "young children being herded into the trains," he writes, "it was therefore very much for their sakes and for people like them that I wanted to write fiction which would reflect, and perhaps exorcise the horrors that they had found so inexpressible."

Author Biography

When referring to his novel *The Painted Bird* in an "Afterword" published in its second edition, Jerzy Kosinski insists that he "remained determined that the novel's life be independent of mine." Yet scholars note that Kosinski's life closely echoed that of the unnamed boy in his first novel. Kosinski was born on June 14, 1933, in Lodz, Poland. His father, a scholar of the classics, and mother, a concert pianist, provided him with a sheltered childhood until Nazi Germany invaded Poland at the outbreak of World War II, when Jerzy was six years old. In an effort to save his life, his parents sent him to live with a foster mother while they went into hiding. After his foster mother's death a few months later, Jerzy was forced to find shelter and food in various peasant villages in Poland until he was reunited with his parents at the end of the war. The traumatic events he suffered through during this period caused him to become mute when he was nine. In an interview with Barbara Leaming for *Penthouse,* Kosinski commented, "Once I regained my speech after the war, the trauma began. The Stalinist [system in Poland] went after me, asking questions I didn't want to hear, demanding answers I would not give."

Kosinski studied sociology and political science at the University of Lodz and earned a bachelor's degree in 1950. He also earned two master's degrees there, one in history in 1953 and the other in political science in 1955. While studying for his Ph.D. in sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences, he and his family tried to gain permission to immigrate to the United States, but they were denied. Soon after, Kosinski created an elaborate plot to gain his freedom from his Communist-controlled homeland. He invented four scholars who he claimed were sponsoring research that needed to be completed in the United States. As a result, more than two years later, in 1957, he arrived in New York City□without finances or connections.

He soon learned English and continued his graduate studies at Columbia University. In his first book, *The Future Is Ours, Comrade: Conversations with the Russians,* a collection of essays written under the pseudonym Joseph Novak, Kosinski outlines the injustices of the Communist system. The work became an immediate bestseller. In 1965, he became a naturalized citizen, the same year his first novel, *The Painted Bird* was published, and it gained him more notoriety. Other successful novels followed, including *Steps,* which won the National Book Award in 1969 and *Being There,* which was made into a critically acclaimed film in 1979□ earning him an Academy Award for best screenplay. Kosinski is also noted for his photography, which he exhibited throughout the world, and for his portrayal of Grigory Zinoviev in the 1981 film, *Reds.* On May 3, 1991, while suffering from severe heart disease and depression, Kosinski committed suicide in New York City.

Plot Summary

Part One

The Painted Bird starts in a large Eastern European city, in the fall of 1939. A six-year-old Jewish boy is sent by his parents to live in a village, while the parents go into hiding. World War II has just begun and Jews in German-occupied countries are being executed or sent to concentration camps. Within two months, Marta, the woman who is taking care of the boy, dies, leaving him alone to fend for himself. He is soon taken in by a farmer, who beats him. One day, an elderly woman called Olga the Wise One buys him and takes him to her hut. She teaches him valuable survival skills, including how to build and use a "comet," a can filled with slow burning materials that provide a constant heat source. She is the first one to tell him an evil spirit possesses him. Others in the village fear him because of his dark hair and eyes and so often set their dogs on him. One day, one of the villagers throws him into the river and he drifts miles away from Olga and the village.

He survives, due to the skills Olga has taught him, and comes to another village. A miller, nicknamed Jealous, who often quarrels with his wife and "mercilessly" beats her for her suspected infidelities, takes the boy in. One evening at dinner, the miller, his wife, and his plowboy watch two cats mating. When the miller asks the plowboy if he lusts after his wife, the plowboy does not answer. The miller gouges out the plowboy's eyes, and the stunned boy runs away. Lekh, a young man who sells birds in neighboring villages, takes the boy in. Lekh is in love with Stupid Ludmila, a wild, lustful woman who often seduces the village men. One day, a mob of village women savagely beat Ludmila and she dies. The boy finds Lekh inconsolable and leaves.

The boy then lives with a carpenter and his wife, who are convinced that his black hair will attract lightning to their farm. As a result, during thunderstorms, the carpenter takes the boy out to the middle of a field, away from his home. The boy comes to believe he has this power when, during one storm, he stays in the barn and sees it catch on fire after being struck by lightning. When the carpenter catches him, the boy pleads for his life and lures the carpenter to an old, abandoned military bunker, which is full of ravenous rats. After the carpenter accidentally falls in, he is ravaged by the frenzied rats.

Part Two

The boy moves to a village that is regularly occupied by German soldiers who take the villagers' food and materials needed for their army. He lives with a well-respected blacksmith and his family, who treat him relatively well. Sometimes partisans come to the village and the house demanding assistance. One night, some partisans accuse the blacksmith of helping "enemies of the Fatherland" and beat the family. The partisans

find the boy and turn him over to soldiers at a German outpost. One soldier is ordered to lead the boy off and kill him, but the soldier allows the boy to escape into the forest.

The boy then moves in with a farmer in another village, where he sees trains full of Jews and Gypsies headed toward concentration camps. The peasants tell him that the Germans' extermination of the Jews is God's punishment for the crucifixion of Christ. The boy wonders "whether so many Jews were necessary to compensate God for the killing of His son" and worries whether God will punish him, too. He decides that fair-haired, blueeyed people are God's favorites and tries to think of ways people could change their looks so they could avoid the ovens.

One day, Germans capture the boy and a Jew who has also been hiding in the village, and transport them to a nearby police station. As they travel, groups of peasants beat them. A priest intervenes, but the Jew is killed. The boy is enthralled with a German officer's clean, hard appearance and becomes ashamed of his own by comparison. The boy declares, "I had nothing against his killing me." The soldier, however, hands the boy over to the priest, who finds a farmer named Garbos in the nearby village to take him in.

Garbos has a "dead, unsmiling face," and often beats the boy for no reason or sets his vicious dog on him. When the priest notices the boy's bruises and welts, he tells Garbos to bring the boy to the church. There, the boy begins preparations to become an altar boy and learns the rituals and beliefs of the Catholic Church. He decides that prayers will save him from harm, but Garbos finds new ways to torture him. While serving as an altar boy at a church feast, the boy accidentally drops the missal during an important moment in the service. Angry peasants throw him into a large manure pit, insisting the boy is a Gypsy vampire who will bring evil to the village. When the boy emerges, he discovers that he has become mute.

Later, the head of the village gives the boy to a farmer, Makar, who has been shunned by the village. The farmer lives with his son and daughter on the outskirts of town. Ewka, the nineteen-yearold daughter, teaches the boy how to sexually pleasure her. When the boy botches the killing of a rabbit, Makar kicks him so hard in the stomach that he is immobilized for several weeks. One night he sees Ewka have sex with a goat under the direction of her father, and determines that the family "is in league with the Devil." Later, he decides that he will call on powerful evil spirits to help him survive. When he sees Ewka having sex with her brother, the boy leaves.

Part Three

In another village, Labina, a woman who works as a domestic to some of the richer peasants, takes him in. He feels safe with her, although he is disgusted by her sexual activities with the men in the village. As the Germans begin to lose the war, the front comes close. Soon Kalmuks, Soviet deserters who had fought with the Germans, invade the village, raping and murdering the inhabitants. The boy decides that God has not helped him because he is of the same tribe as the savage, blackhaired and black-eyed Kalmuks. Soon, the Red Army saves the village.

The boy stays with the Red Army regiment that encamps near the village. The soldiers provide him with a safe, "calm and well-ordered" life. One of the soldiers, Gavrila, teaches him to read and explains the role of the Communist Party. Another soldier, Mitka, introduces the boy to poetry and sings songs to him. Through their influence, the boy accepts the Party's doctrine and determines to live as a communist. When drunken villagers kill some of Mitka's friends, Mitka takes revenge by perching in a tree and randomly shooting several villagers. The boy decides that revenge is a responsibility one must take.

When the war ends, the soldiers send the boy to an orphanage to await a reunion with his parents. There the boy pretends to be Russian and refuses to learn reading and writing in his own language. He makes a friend there, called "the Silent One," who is also mute. One day, the two visit a marketplace where the boy accidentally knocks down a table with produce on it. The farmer who owned the produce beats the boy savagely. In retaliation, the Silent One reroutes a train he thinks the farmer is travelling on, which causes the death of several people. Both the Silent One and the boy are devastated when they discover that the farmer was not on the train.

The boy's parents eventually find him at the orphanage and take him home. He, however, feels "smothered by their love and protection" and resents having to give up his freedom. His parents have adopted a war orphan who becomes "a nuisance" to him. One day, the little boy annoys him so much that the boy squeezes the orphan's arm until it breaks. Feeling restless, the boy falls in with people who roam the streets at night, gambling, drinking, and having sex.

Doctors advise his parents to send the boy to the mountains for his health, and he moves in with an old ski instructor. One day while skiing, the boy falls and is sent to the hospital. When he answers the phone he thinks, "somewhere at the other end of the wire there was someone who wanted to talk with me . . . I felt an overpowering desire to speak." The novel ends as he regains his speech.

Characters

Anton

Villagers call Makar's twenty-year-old son, Anton, "Quail," "because he was like that bird in his habit of speaking only to himself and never answering other voices." The villagers shun him as much as they do his father.

A Blacksmith

The boy lives with a well-respected blacksmith and his family, who treat him relatively well. The boy admits, "the blacksmith liked to slap my face when he was tipsy and I got in his way, but there were no other consequences." One day, partisans come to the house and beat the blacksmith and his family unmercifully, then turn the boy over to German soldiers.

A Boy

The narrator and central character is a six-yearold Jewish boy at the beginning of the novel. He chronicles his life for the next six years as he struggles to survive on his own during the harrowing years of World War II. When he first arrives at a remote village, an elderly woman named Marta cares for him. He desperately misses his parents and continually wonders when they will come for him. After she dies and he is left alone to fend for himself, his fears are compounded. At this point he has no survival skills and so must depend on other villagers to keep him alive.

The boy quickly learns valuable survival lessons from Olga the Wise, a woman he lives with for a time, proving himself to be quick-witted and resourceful. He applies these skills throughout his frequently traumatic experiences with various villagers. Through these experiences, he also learns to adapt himself to any situation or to flee to survive. Norman Lavers, in his article on Kosinski for *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online,* comments on the boy's "extraordinary ability to survive, noting,

> although he experiences some very low ebbs, he never curses the world itself or finds it unfair or unjust to him. He accepts it on its own terms, and continually tries to learn its rules, its central principles, so that he can function effectively in it. The key to his psychic health is his acceptance: his assumption of the normality of his situation.

Yet the atrocities that he witnesses and endures eventually become too much for him to bear and he is struck mute.

When others persecute him for his appearance, he gains a sense of inferiority that is only alleviated when the Russian soldiers take him in. Lavers concludes, "the boy is immediately, visibly different, arousing suspicion and fear. The lesson of being the odd man out, of the danger of being noticeable, is brought home to him over and over again." His initial feelings of inferiority make him a prime candidate for the indoctrination into the Communist Party, as directed by his Russian friends.

By the end of the novel, the boy has lost his innocence.

A Carpenter

A superstitious carpenter and his wife, who take the boy in, are convinced that his black hair will attract lightning to their farm. In an effort to avoid this, the carpenter leaves the boy shaking in fear in the middle of a field during thunderstorms. During one storm, the boy stays in the barn and it is struck by lightning. After the barn burns down, the carpenter beats him savagely and prepares to drown him. The boy, however, pleads for his life and lures the carpenter to an old, abandoned military bunker, which is full of ravenous rats. After the carpenter accidentally falls in, he is eaten by the frenzied rats.

The Cuckoo

See Mitka>

Ewka

Makar's nineteen-year-old daughter, Ewka, avoids her father and brother, fearing they will force her to spend the afternoon with them in the goats' stable, where she hints that they enjoy themselves sexually. The villagers shun her because they think that she has evil powers. Ewka teaches the boy how to sexually please her, and they often engage in sexual activities. Enjoying the physical contact with her, the boy says,

there was nothing I would not do for her. I forgot my
fate of a Gypsy mute destined for fire. I ceased to be
a goblin jeered at by herders, casting spells on children
and animals. In my dreams I turned into a tall,
handsome man, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, with hair
like pale autumn leaves. I became a German officer
in a tight, black uniform. Or I turned into a birdcatcher,
familiar with all the secret paths of the woods
and marshes.

When the boy sees her mating with a goat and engaging in sexual activities with her father and brother, he leaves. Later, he bitterly recalls how gentle and loving he had been with Ewka, and that she had preferred "a stinking hairy goat" to him.

Garbos

Garbos is one of the cruelest men the boy lives with. He has a "dead, unsmiling face," and often beats the boy unmercifully for no reason or sets his dog on him. Garbos often taunts the boy by letting his snarling dog come within inches of him. At these times, the boy admits, "my terror was such that it nearly transported me to the other world." He often tortures the boy by screaming him awake or by throwing the dog on top of him as he sleeps, so that soon he would get no rest. He also hangs the boy by his arms from the ceiling, which causes him excruciating pain. The boy suggests that Garbos's extreme cruelty stems from his bitterness over the death of his son.

Gavrila

Gavrila is a political officer from the Red Army regiment that encamps near the boy's village. After the regiment arrives, the boy stays with them and is cared for by Gavrila and his fellow officer Mitka, who provide him with a safe, "calm and well-ordered" life. Gavrila spends long hours with the boy, teaching him to read and explaining the role of the Communist Party. Gavrila is a loyal member of the Party, and so tries to teach the boy Communist politics.

The boy adopts Gavrila's atheism when he accepts the soldier's theory that "the order of the world had nothing to do with God, and that God had nothing to do with the world" because "God did not exist. The cunning priests had invented Him so they could trick stupid, superstitious people." Gavrila plainly feels superior to the peasants that the boy has lived with. He convinces the boy that

> "there was no God . . . no devils, ghosts, or ghouls rising from graves. . . . These were all tales for ignorant people who did not understand the natural order of the world, did not believe in their own powers, and therefore had to take refuge in their belief in some God.

Gavrila tells the boy that "people themselves determined the course of their lives and were the only masters of their destinies." He plays on the boy's feelings of inferiority when he insists that under Stalin's leadership, "the Red Army was bringing to the liberated peoples a new way of life, which made all equal." There would be no rich and poor, no exploiters and no exploited, no persecution of the dark by the fair, no people doomed to gas chambers. When Gavrila shows him a picture of Stalin, the boy admits "he looked more of a Gypsy than I did." Ultimately, the boy concludes,

> Gavrila's lessons filled me with a new confidence. In this world there were realistic ways of promoting goodness, and there were people who had dedicated their whole lives to it. These were the Communist Party members.

Gavrila's influence has become so strong on the boy that he determines to find a way to continue living with him. After he goes to the orphanage, the boy wears a Soviet uniform that had been made for him and, under Gavrila's direction, reads the Soviet newspaper, *Pravda,* on a daily basis. He also pretends to be Russian and refuses to learn reading and writing in his mother tongue.

A German Officer

The boy catches his first glimpse of a German officer when he is captured by soldiers and brought to a nearby police station. This officer comes to represent all Germans to him and a standard against which he measures everyone else, including himself.

The Handsome One

See Laba

Jealous

Jealous is the nickname of a quiet miller the boy comes to live with. The miller often quarrels with his wife and "mercilessly" beats her for her suspected infidelities. He gouges out a plowboy's eyes when he assumes the boy lusts after his wife.

Laba

Labina tells the boy about her husband, Laba, the handsomest man in Labina's village. He was also, however, the poorest. Labina ruined her health and her looks when, after marrying Laba, she was forced to do a great deal of physical work. One day, Laba left and did not return for more than a year. When he finally came back to the village, he brought with him beautiful clothes that impressed everyone. His dazzling dress greatly improved his stature in the community, and all the important people of the village vied for his attention. When his clothes were stolen, he hung himself, realizing he would no longer be highly regarded in the village.

Labina

A peasant woman who takes the boy in, Labina works as a domestic to some of the richer peasants. The boy feels safe with her although he is bothered by her frequent sexual contact with men from the village. When she engages in sexual activities with these men, the boy looks on with "disappointment and disgust at the two intertwined, twitching human frames" and decides, "so that's what love was: savage as a bull prodded with a spike." Labina had been beautiful, but she married a handsome, poor man, Laba, and so was forced to work constantly to support them.

Lekh

Lekh, who raises and sells birds, takes the boy in and teaches him about different species of birds. Lekh also teaches him about cruelty when he takes out his frustrations on the birds. When Stupid Ludmila, the woman he loves, does not come to him for a long time, he becomes "possessed by a silent rage." He then tortures one bird at a time by painting it bright colors and then returning it to the flock. The other birds reject the brightly colored one and attack it until it dies.

Makar

The boy lives for a time with a man named Makar and his son and daughter. Makar raises rabbits and goats and is treated as a stranger in the village since he has been there only a few years. The boy hears rumors about him having sexual relations with his son and daughter, which prove to be true. When the boy botches the killing of a rabbit, Makar kicks him so hard in the stomach that the boy is immobilized for several weeks.

Marta

The boy's parents send him to live with Marta when they go into hiding. Marta is a sick, elderly, peasant woman with a foul-smelling body due to infrequent washing. She, like the other villagers, is very superstitious, claiming that "evil forces nested [in the braids in her hair] twisting them and slowly inducing senility." She is the first to explain to him that his black eyes are Gypsy or witches' eyes and could, when looked at directly, cause crippling illness, plague, or death. When she dies of heart failure, the boy accidentally lights her on fire and burns down the cottage.

Mitka

Mitka is a sharpshooting instructor and a crack sniper from the Red Army regiment that encamps near the boy's village. He, along with his friend Gavrila, takes care of the boy and influences his views on life. Mitka introduces him to poetry and often entertains him by singing songs. The boy notes that Mitka is "one of the best liked and respected men in the regiment" and that he has "a fine military record." He considers Mitka to be a man "who worked for a better and safer world, not by praying at church altars, but by excelling in his aim." Mitka teaches him this doctrine as he takes revenge on the village after some men kill his friends. The boy watches while Mitka climbs a tree and randomly picks off several villagers and shoots them.

As a result, the boy decides that revenge is a responsibility one must take to regain the natural order and for personal satisfaction. He concludes that Mitka

"had meted out revenge for the death of his friends,
regardless of the opinions of others, risking his position

in the regiment. . . . If he could not revenge
his friends, what was the use of all those days of training
in the sniper's art . . . of what value was the rank
of Hero, respected and worshiped by tens of millions
of citizens, if he no longer deserved it in his own
eyes?"

From that point, the boy determines to live by Mitka's words and adopt his ruthlessness.

Olga the Wise One

Olga is a well-respected, elderly woman in the second village the boy comes to. She buys the boy from a farmer who had taken him in, and she teaches the boy how to survive on his own. She administers to the sick in the village with her homemade remedies. The boy greatly admires her for her talents.

Quail

See Anton

The Silent One

The Silent One is a young boy who has chosen to be mute and who befriends the boy at the orphanage. The Silent One tries to take revenge on the farmer who beat the boy, but he kills several innocent people instead, an act that devastates both him and the boy.

Stupid Ludmila

Stupid Ludmila is a woman who lives on her own in the forest outside of one of the villages and who lures men into sexual encounters. As a result, women often set dogs on her. When she was young, she refused to marry a man her parents had chosen for her. Infuriated, he enticed her outside the village where an entire herd of drunken peasants raped her until she lost consciousness. As a result, her mind became "addled." She is eventually killed by a mob of jealous women.

Themes

Coming of Age

The main focus of this semi-autobiographical novel is the tracing of the main character's coming of age in an Eastern European country during World War II. After the war begins and he is separated from his parents, he spends the remainder of the book trying to survive the brutal conditions he faces in various villages in which he lives. During this journey, he learns important lessons about himself and human nature in general.

Change and Transformation

As Kosinski unfolds this coming-of-age process, he reveals the changes and transformations the boy experiences. The biggest change occurs when the boy is wrenched from his parents and his comfortable life in a large city before the war and forced to live, as do many of the villagers, with deprivation and the constant threat of death. The boy also experiences internal transformations as he discovers necessary survival skills.

Alienation and Loneliness

One thing the boy learns to cope with is the alienation and loneliness that result when he is separated from his parents. He bonds to some degree with Marta, the first woman he stays with, but she soon dies, leaving him alone again. After that, the boy can only occasionally find a comforting relationship in his chaotic and dangerous world. Most of the comfort he finds is through women, but that comfort is always short-lived, as some outside force disrupts it. Olga the Wise teaches him valuable survival skills, including how to build and use a comet. The boy soon becomes separated from her, however, and again must find new shelter. Ewka provides him with physical comfort and introduces him to the mysteries of sexual love, but his time with her is cut short by her sexually deviant father, who forces Ewka to have sex with animals and with her brother. The Russian soldiers who take the boy in provide the most prolonged respite from his feelings of loneliness and alienation. He finds himself becoming part of a group and so begins to establish a sense of self.

In "Jerzy Kosinski's East European Self," Thomas S. Gladsky argues that the novel indicts Poland "for its part in the Holocaust" through the boy's lack of connection to his homeland. Gladsky comments, "So alienated is Kosinski's young narrator that he will not identify his own cultural-religious background, refer to his ethnic traditions, or even mention the name of the country despite the obvious Polish setting."

Strength and Weakness

The boy's ability to cope with his harsh surroundings reveals his strength of character and the nature of human adaptability. To survive, he learns how to fend for himself in his harrowing environment and to win over the villagers. When he cannot turn a villager into an ally, he learns to avoid him or her. Cameron Northouse, in his article on Kosinski for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* notes that the boy also learns that "merely to react to the world is to be at its mercy," and that "the only important service is the service of survival."

Norman Lavers, in his article on Kosinski for *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online* concurs with this point, insisting that the boy survives by his wits rather than relying on "pure chance" to save him. He also adds that when the boy finds himself "in a situation of unremitting violence and deprivation," his strength and his need to carry on saves him. Lavers notes that the boy never allows himself to wallow in self-pity. He instead tries to adapt to his world and "continually tries to learn its rules, its central principles, so that he can function effectively in it."

One example of the boy's adaptability occurs when he is traveling to another village in order to find shelter and food. At one point he comes across a wounded horse and decides to bring him back to his owner, hoping to be rewarded with food or shelter for returning the man's property. When the owner decides the horse is no longer any use to him, the boy is able to shift gears and to convince the man that he is not Jewish or a Gypsy and is an "obedient worker," and so he is given a place to stay.

Violence and Cruelty

Through his experiences, the boy learns about the capacity for violence and cruelty in others as well as himself. He observes and endures constant brutality and horror as he struggles to survive. In his search for some measure of control over his life in this atmosphere, he discovers his own ability for cruelty. He comes to the realization that to survive in his harsh environment, he must become as vulgar as the others in his world. Paul R. Lilly, Jr., in his article for *The Literary Review,* notes that like most of Kosinski's characters, the boy's natural impulse is:

> to transform [himself] from victim to oppressor. . . .
> In the world of Kosinski, there are no other options
> open to the victim: he must seize power through deception
> or remain powerless.

The boy has transformed himself by the end of the novel into the oppressor as evidenced when he breaks his stepbrother's arm.

Style

Point of View

The main character narrates *The Painted Bird* from his point of view, which enables readers to more fully gain insight into the devastating consequences his nightmarish experiences have on him. The structure of the work creates a "Bildungsroman," which is a novel that focuses on the development of a young person, often symbolized as a movement from innocence to experience. Through the episodic structure of *The Painted Bird,* Kosinski plots the boy's development from a young, naïve, essentially helpless young boy to a mature, capable teenager who can survive on his own□and who has been forced to see the dark side of human nature within others as well as within himself.

Symbol

The title *The Painted Bird* refers to a ritual practiced by Lekh, one of the villagers with whom the boy lives for a time. When Stupid Ludmila, the woman Lekh loves, does not come to him for several weeks, he becomes "possessed by a silent rage." He then tortures one bird at a time by painting it bright colors and returning it to the flock. The other birds reject the brightly colored one and attack it until it dies. This cruel game provides the novel's dominant metaphor in its relationship to the boy's tormenting experiences during World War II. Like the painted bird, the boy is considered different when he is thrown in with his fellow human beings. Since he has dark eyes, complexion, and hair, the villagers, typically blue-eyed blondes, consider him an outsider. Their superstitious nature compounds their stereotype of the boy because they regard him as either a Jew or a gypsy with "evil powers."

The villagers treat the boy with the same cruelty as the flock that persecutes the bird. Because the villagers perceive him as different, they feel justified in harassing and ostracizing him. Some of the more cruel villagers consider it their right to beat and torture him.

Norman Lavers, in his article on Kosinski, argues that the boy's comet, a can filled with slow burning materials that provide a constant heat source, becomes a symbol of his developing strength and independence. Lavers writes that the comet is:

> a manifestation of the inner spark. It is the outward glow of the boy's determination to survive. But it is still more, it is his apartness itself, his individuality, that which is essential to survival 'without human help.' It is his essential aloneness, which is his independence and freedom. . . . With the comet to fend off the dark, the animals, the other humans, he 'felt perfectly safe.'

Historical Context

World War II

The world experienced a decade of aggression in the 1930s that culminated in World War II. This Second World War resulted from the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan. These militaristic regimes gained control as a result of the Great Depression experienced by most of the world in the early 1930s and from the conditions created by the peace settlements following World War I. The dictatorships established in each country encouraged expansion into neighboring countries. In Germany, Hitler strengthened the army during the 1930s. In 1936, Benito Mussolini's Italian troops took Ethiopia. From 1936 to 1939, Spain was engaged in civil war involving Francisco Franco's fascist army, aided by Germany and Italy. In March of 1938, Germany annexed Austria, and in March of 1939, occupied Czechoslovakia. Italy took Albania in April of that same year. On September 1, 1939, one week after Nazi Germany and the USSR signed the Treaty of Nonaggression, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began.

The Polish people suffered greatly during the war. A large part of the population of Poland was massacred or starved or placed in concentration camps. Polish Jews were almost eliminated from the country. Before the war there were more than 3 million Jews; after the war, there were only about one hundred thousand left.

German troops completed their withdrawal from Poland in early 1945. The socialization of Poland would soon begin. In 1947, Boleslaw Beirut, a Communist Pole and citizen of the USSR, was elected president by the Polish parliament. Soviet Marshall Konstantin Rokossovsky became minister of defense and commander in chief of the Polish army. In 1952, the constitution made Poland a model Soviet republic with an identical foreign policy to that of the USSR. The government cut off relations with the Vatican and religious leaders became chief targets of persecution.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the period during World War II when European Jews were persecuted and exterminated by Nazi Germany. The impetus for this persecution came before the war, in the early 1930s, when Adolf Hitler came into power in Germany. In the years before the war, many European Jews immigrated to other countries in an effort to save themselves. After the war started, however, those who did not escape were sent to concentration camps. The persecution stemmed from Hitler's determination to exterminate Jews in every country invaded by Germany during the war years. Six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

The Cold War

Soon after World War II, when Russian leader Joseph Stalin set up satellite communist states in Eastern Europe and Asia, the "cold war" began, ushering in a new age of warfare and fear triggered by several circumstances: the United States' and the USSR's emergence as superpowers; each country's ability to use the atomic bomb; and communist expansion and the United States' determination to check it. Each side amassed stockpiles of nuclear weapons that could not only annihilate each country, but also the world. Both sides declared the other the enemy and redoubled their commitment to fight for their own ideology and political and economic dominance. As China fell to the Communists in 1949, Russia crushed the Hungarian revolution in 1956, and the United States adopted the role of world policeman, the cold war accelerated.

The Cold War induced anxiety among Americans, who feared both annihilation by Russians and the spread of communism at home. Americans were encouraged to stereotype all Russians as barbarians and atheists who were plotting to overthrow the United States government and brainwash its citizens. The fear that communism would spread to the United States led to suspicion and paranoia, and the lives of many suspected communists or communist sympathizers were ruined. This "Red Scare" was heightened by the indictment of ex-government official Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for passing defense secrets to the Russians. Soon, the country engaged in a determined and often hysterical witch-hunt for communists, led by Senator Joe McCarthy and the House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). (In 1954, McCarthy was censured by the Senate for his unethical behavior during the Committee sessions.) By the time of McCarthy's death in 1957, almost six million Americans had been investigated by government agencies because of their suspected communist sympathies, yet only a few had been indicted.

This paranoid atmosphere provided Americans with an impetus for conformity. Many felt safety could be ensured only by submitting to the traditional values of church, home, and country. Yet, during this time, voices of protest began to emerge. Some refused to succumb to the anti-communist fervor and thus would not cooperate with the Senate hearings despite the threat of prison or exile from the United States. Others rebelled against a system that they thought encouraged discrimination and social and economic inequality.

Critical Overview

The critical response to the publication in 1965 of Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* has been overwhelmingly positive but at the same time, extremely volatile. Many critics favorably compare the harrowing intensity of this novel to works by Franz Kafka and Albert Camus. Parallels are also made to *The Diary of Anne Frank.* Yet, the novel's graphic violence and bleak vision of humanity disturb some readers. The most vocal criticism came from Eastern Europe, where the book was banned for several years.

Oleg Ivsky applauded the novel in the *Library Journal,* commenting, "No matter how exaggerated and tendentious the horrors may seem in retrospect (especially cumulatively)□they all ring true. The simple, direct prose is as timeless as folklore." Ivsky "highly recommends" the novel for "discriminating readers with cast-iron stomachs." Andrew Field in *Book Week* echoes Ivsky's assessment when he writes, "So awful . . . is this book that I can scarcely 'recommend' it to anyone, and yet, because there is enlightenment to be gained from its flame-dark pages, it deserves as wide a readership as possible." Field also praises the novel's style, even though he finds "isolated incidents in the book that are rather strained and archly described," citing the motif of the painted bird, which he claims appears too often. He comments that "the overall performance is marked by a sureness of emphasis and tone of voice that has high literary merit."

Critics like Irving Howe in *Harper's,* wrote that "finally one wonders whether there is in this book a numbing surplus of brutality." Kosinski responded to the attention over the book's violence in his Afterward to the second edition:

> Whether the reviews praised or damned the novel, Western criticism of *The Painted Bird* always contained an undertone of uneasiness. Most American and British critics objected to my descriptions of the boy's experiences on the grounds that they dwelt too deeply on cruelty. Many tended to dismiss the author as well as the novel, claiming that I had exploited the horrors of war to satisfy my own peculiar imagination. . . . In point of fact, almost none of those who chose to view the book as a historical novel bothered to refer to actual source materials. Personal accounts of survivors and official War documents were either unknown by or irrelevant to my critics.

Anne Halley, in her review for the *Nation,* praises the novel's themes. She writes:

> [This] survivor's story . . . belongs to that 20th-century genre which teaches us that . . . human life, the cheapest thing there is, can be maintained and has been for centuries in the midst of chaos, brutality, organized

and disorganized ill will. . . . The various
episodes, no doubt based on experience, seem to embody
and play on recognizable folk-tale motifs, always
with that 'realistic' twist, or reversal, which
shows that there is neither justice, nor reason, nor
black or white magic to help one in extremity.

Kosinski suffered years of torment after the novel's publication. In an article for *The American Spectator,* John Corry notes that the novel was "the making of Jerzy Kosinski, just as it was his undoing." Corry explains that after the novel came out:

Warsaw had set out to hurt him. He was not an ordinary
anti-Communist émigré Pole; he was a celebrated?
anti-Communist Pole, and so he had to be discredited.
The Painted Bird, the propagandists said,
slandered Poland. In fact, it did not, but since the
novel was banned, who in Poland would know?

In his "Afterward," Kosinski describes how the Polish government responded to *The Painted Bird.* Poland's state-controlled publications insisted that he had agreed to write the novel "for covert political purposes" as sanctioned by governmental authorities in America. Other Poles accused the book of being "a libelous documentary of life in identifiable communities during the Second World War." Some critics attacked him "for distorting native lore, for defaming the peasant character, and for reinforcing the propaganda weapons of the region's enemies." Kosinski was also criticized by anti-Communists, who claimed that he portrayed the Soviet soldiers in a positive light in order to justify Soviet influence in Eastern Europe.

The campaign to destroy Kosinski's name continued as accusations surfaced that he had employed ghostwriters; wrote the book for the CIA; and was part of a Zionist conspiracy. Cameron Northouse, in his article on Kosinski for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* explains,

since the book was completely distorted in the Communist
press to depict it as an anti-Polish document
that slandered the people of Kosinski's homeland, the
local citizenry was aroused to violence. At one point,
Kosinski's mother was defamed in the newspapers as
the 'mother of a renegade' and crowds were incited
to attack her house.

Kosinski also suffered physical and verbal attacks, as he notes in his "Afterward":

On several occasions I was accosted outside my
apartment house or in my garage. Three or four times
strangers recognized me on the street and offered hostile
or insulting remarks. At a concert honoring a pianist

born in my homeland, a covey of patriotic old ladies attacked me with their umbrellas, while screeching absurdly dated invectives.

Despite the controversy surrounding its publication, most scholars consider *The Painted Bird* to be one of the best works to emerge from World War II.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland and has published several articles on British and American authors. In the following essay, she examines the theme of survival in Kosinski's novel.

In *The Painted Bird* Jerzy Kosinski creates a dominant metaphor that reflects an unnamed young boy's harrowing experiences in an Eastern European country during World War II. Norman Lavers in an article on Jerzy Kosinski notes that when the boy's parents send him to live in a remote village while they go into hiding, his dark hair, eyes, and complexion make him "immediately, visibly different, arousing suspicion and fear. The lesson of being the odd man out, of the danger of being noticeable, is brought home to him over and over again." Kosinski symbolizes this lesson in one of the novel's episodes when the boy observes a cruel ritual practiced by Lekh, one of the villagers who takes him in. Lekh chooses the strongest bird from those that he raises and paints it with bright colors. When he sees a flock of birds in the sky, he releases his painted bird, which soars "happy and free, a spot of rainbow against the backdrop of clouds." When the bird joins the flock, the other birds, "dazzled by its brilliant colors," kill it.

Like the painted bird, the boy is considered unusual when he is thrown in with his fellow human beings, and so they harass and often attack him. Yet, unlike the bird, the boy learns to survive his harsh world through his remarkable ability to adapt to his surroundings.

Cameron Northouse, in his article on Kosinski for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* argues that the boy becomes a survivor "who has been altered by his experience, who has learned that to merely react to the world is to be at its mercy." The boy's ability to adapt to his environment by altering his personal philosophies becomes the key to his survival.

Reflecting on the boy's survival skills in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online,* Norman Lavers concludes that even while confronted with continuous experiences of "unremitting violence and deprivation," the boy's instinct for survival becomes paramount. Lavers notes that the boy never becomes consumed with self-pity; instead he accepts his position in his world and "continually tries to learn its rules, its central principles, so that he can function effectively in it."

The first adaptation the boy makes is his acceptance of his otherness. Olga the Wise One, a kind, elderly woman who takes him in and teaches him crucial survival skills, informs him that an evil spirit possesses him. He soon notes that other villagers also believe this to be true, and as a result, they ostracize and torment him. Eventually, the boy comes to accept his uniqueness, acknowledging that he must be "possessed by an evil spirit," that crouched in him "like a mole in a deep burrow."

The boy quickly adapts to his new vision of himself and uses it to his advantage. He reasons that since an evil spirit possesses him, and others could recognize this fact by

looking into his "bewitched black eyes," he could gain a certain power over them. He could accomplish this by casting spells over them through his stare. Adopting another valuable survival skill, he employs this perceived power whenever necessary. Sometimes, in an effort to cast spells on those who try to harm him, he shouts and glares at them. His belief in his special powers enables him to cope with the beatings he receives from Garbos, a cruel farmer with whom he comes to live for a time. He repeatedly glares at Garbos, who also believes in the boy's "evil powers" and so will not beat him to the point of death.

When he periodically escapes Garbos' beatings at a local Catholic church where he is training to be an altar boy, he begins to adopt some Catholic doctrine. Because he had tried to think of various ways to cast a spell on Garbos, "but nothing seemed feasible," he turns to what he considers to be the power of prayer. The priest teaches him that those who say more prayers "earn more days of indulgence, and this was also supposed to have an immediate influence on their lives." After this discovery, he insists that he has discovered the pattern of life. He states, "I understood why some people were strong and others weak, some free and others enslaved, some rich and others poor." As a result, he stops blaming others and takes responsibility for his misfortunes. His refusal to wallow in self-pity and his determination to adapt to his world gives him the strength to survive his harrowing experiences.

After he begins his daily prayer ritual, he concludes, "until now I had been a small humble bug that anyone might squash. From now on the humble bug would become an unapproachable bull." His belief that his prayers will earn him enough "days of indulgence" and so a deliverance from Garbos' brutality helps him withstand beatings and torture sessions where he is forced to hang from his arms for hours. Lavers notes that while the boy leaves himself open to new philosophies, he is "always an empiricist, always testing his theories against the facts of his world." When he discovers that the priest has become ill, he becomes confused, admitting, "I was astonished. The priest must have accumulated an extraordinary number of days of indulgence during his pious life, and yet here he was lying sick like anybody else." He leaves himself open to new interpretations of his experience in an effort to understand and thus cope with his world.

When he eventually escapes from Garbos' cruelty, he moves to a new farm where he gains a different type of education. Ewka, the nineteen-yearold farmer's daughter, teaches him how to sexually pleasure her. He finds comfort in his physical relationship with her. Yet when he sees her coupling with a goat, his vision of the world again makes a radical transformation. At first, he admits, "something collapsed inside me. My thoughts fell apart and shattered into broken fragments like a smashed jug."

He then makes a radical change in his perception of the nature of good and evil. Reflecting on what he has just observed, he determines that there are some, like Ewka, who are "in league with the Devil" and begins to think about the power of evil in relation to his own survival. He decides that by "signing a pact with the Devil," and committing oneself to inflict "harm, misery, injury, and bitterness" on those he encounters, he could become stronger. Responding to others with "love, friendship, and compassion" would only weaken and subject him to more suffering. He concludes that those committed to

"hatred, greed, revenge, or torture to obtain some objective" would receive help from the Devil.

Focusing on his own situation, he admits, "I felt annoyed with myself for not having understood sooner the real rules of this world. The Evil Ones surely picked only those who had already displayed a sufficient supply of inner hatred and maliciousness." In his newfound philosophy, the worse the act, the better the reward. Thus, he notes, "simply beating up an innocent man was worth less than inciting him to hate others. But hatreds of large groups of people must have been the most valuable of all." Reflecting on the suffering he has endured because of his "otherness," he notes, "I could barely imagine the prize earned by the person who managed to inculcate in all blond, blue-eyed people a long-lasting hatred of dark ones." He determines that because the Germans are "endowed with all their splendid abilities and talents" and are "invincible," "every German must have sold his soul to the Devil at birth. This was the source of their power and strength."

This newfound philosophy is reinforced when the villagers throw him into a manure pit after he drops the missal during an important church service. This experience causes him to lose his speech, and soon his thoughts turn toward revenge. He notes that he has often dreamed of punishing those who have made him suffer. Admitting that he has "already been recruited by the powers of Evil and had made a pact with them," he concludes that he now needs "their assistance for spreading evil." His commitment to revenge makes him feel "stronger and more confident," and so he declares, "the time of passivity was over; the belief in good, the power of prayer, altars, priests, and God had deprived me of my speech." He dreams of being as powerful as the Germans, which would enable him "to destroy others in the subtlest ways."

These ruminations fill him with a new sense of confidence and strength, and as a result, he admits, "I did not feel pain any more." As he wanders through the forest he hears whisperings and moans swirling around him in the darkness and decides, "the Evil Ones were interested in me at last. He concludes that they had made him suffer in the past, only "to train [him] in hatred."

The boy's powerful desire to survive ebbs, however, during his experience with the Kalmuks, who invade the village toward the end of the war and torture, rape, and murder the inhabitants. Initially, the boy identifies with the warriors, noting that they are as darkly complexioned as he is. Yet when he witnesses their unremitting brutality, he withdrawals into himself, "overwhelmed by dread and disgust." At this point, he again alters his worldview to cope with the dangers of his new surroundings. He now concludes that his extraordinary suffering results from his ethnicity. Since his hair and eyes look similar to those of the Kalmuks, he determines, "Evidently I belonged with them in another world. There could be no mercy for such as me."

Lavers notes that this is the boy's "very lowest moment" spiritually as well as physically because a Kalmuk had just severely injured his chest. When Russian soldiers capture the Kalmuks and hang them from trees, the boy finds death in the air and almost gives into it, but his will to live becomes stronger than his need for peace.

After the boy is rescued by the Russian soldiers, and enjoys, for a time a safe, "calm and wellordered" life, he readopts his belief in the power of revenge. Through his experiences, he has learned about the capacity for violence and cruelty in others. In his search for some measure of control over his life in this atmosphere, he also discovers his own facility for cruelty. Paul R. Lilly, Jr., in his article for *The Literary Review,* notes that like most of Kosinski's characters, the boy's natural impulse is "to transform [himself] from victim to oppressor," for at this point, there are no other options. He must seize the power of the oppressor and consider everyone and everything an enemy that must be controlled or destroyed. By the end of the novel, the boy has transformed himself into the oppressor as evidenced when he breaks his stepbrother's arm, probably in an effort to assert a position of dominance in the family.

The novel closes with an ambiguous portrait of the boy's emotional state. After he reunites with his parents, he finds it difficult to adapt to his new life because he feels that his parents inhibit his freedom. Lavers notes that he finds their restrictions "suffocating and unbearable." As a result he goes out only at night, when he can find other lost souls. Lavers argues, "He is coming now to what he believes is his final philosophical stance, his ultimate picture of the world." The boy now decides, "Every one of us stood alone, and the sooner a man realized that all Gavrilas, Mitkas, and Silent Ones were expendable, the better for him." Yet he cannot sustain this dark pessimism. At the end of the novel, as he recuperates from a skiing accident and answers a ringing phone, he has an overwhelming desire to communicate to the person who has called him. He admits, "Somewhere at the other end of the wire there was someone, perhaps a man like myself, who wanted to talk with me." As a result he has "an overpowering desire to speak" and eventually he does. His overwhelming need to survive prompts him to try to reestablish a connection with others.

In an interview with Ben Brown in the *Detroit News,* Kosinski claims,

> The whole didactic point of my novels is how you redeem yourself if you are pressed or threatened by the chances of daily life, how you see yourself as a romantic character when you are grotesque, a failure.

In *The Painted Bird,* Kosinski illustrates the strength of the human spirit and its overwhelming will to survive the harsh nature of reality.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *The Painted Bird,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Corry traces Kosinski's life and career, calling The Painted Bird *"the making of Jerzy Kosinski, just as it was his undoing."*

When I heard that Jerzy Kosinski had killed himself, I was furious and then I cried, a not uncommon reaction, I suspect, among so many people who knew him. "I'm about to put myself to sleep," he said in a note to Kiki, his wife, and then lowered himself into a bathtub half-filled with water, tied a plastic shopping bag around his head, and died. What a whole gallery of twentieth-century thugs had been unable to do to Jerzy, Jerzy had done to himself. The author of *The Painted Bird, Steps, Being There,* and eight other books, was dead at 57. Jerzy, I thought, how could you?

Well, he could because he believed it was the correct thing to do. Jerzy was his own master. His heart condition had worsened and, as he said in the note to Kiki, he feared he might one day be a burden. He was the most considerate of men, and the possibility of becoming pitiable must have appalled him. Besides, his writing had not been going well, and if his health got worse he would be unable to write at all. That would have been the same as death. Words meant more to Jerzy, perhaps, than to any other writer.

His life and his art testified to that. He was concerned with language and the mystical property of words, and what words and language could do. He once described Poland, which he fled in 1957, as a cage of words that had been placed around him by the world's most malevolent author. "I saw myself imprisoned in a large house of political fiction," he said, "persecuted by a mad bestselling novelist, Stalin, and a band of his vicious editors from the Kremlin, and, quite logically, I saw myself as a protagonist of his fiction."

Indeed he did, and he saw himself as the protagonist of his own fiction, too, although he could never quite come out and say it. Critics said his works were autobiographical; he said they were novels. Declare the works pure fiction, however, and he would insist everything in them was true. No other novelist of his time so joined his life and art, and no other novelist had his life so confused with his art. That was the Kosinski conundrum. His inner landscape was no secret□you had only to read the books to know thats□but the outside topography was mysterious.

Who was this exotic, hawk-faced man who aroused so much speculation? To begin with, he was witty and charming, and utterly bereft of malice. He was also a pain in the ass. He would badger friends about what he thought were matters of high importance, and keep badgering until he wore them out. He was fastidious, punctilious, and elegant. On the other hand, he made fun of himself. He mimicked his accent, ridiculed his physique, and laughed at his own eccentricities. He was a trickster, joker, and con man who was incapable of telling a lie. He was a casualty, mishap, and survivor who always feared he might hurt someone himself. He was, in short, one of the best men I knew.

I first met him in the late 1960s, just after he had won the National Book Award for *Steps.* Late at night he would nurse a glass of wine at a literary bar on Second Avenue and talk, firing words in bursts and ricocheting sentences and whole paragraphs off the walls and floor. Then he would fall silent and suddenly be out the door, taking his puns, epigrams, and dark humor with him. The other drinkers would speculate about where he had gone, though mostly, I suspect, he just went home to bed. Once he and Kiki invited me and my wife to dinner at their apartment on West 57th Street. After dinner, he told us he had a secret hiding place. If we left him alone for thirty seconds and then came back, he said, we would not be able to find him.

My wife and I stepped into the hallway, walked as far as the elevator, and then came back to the apartment. We looked under the bed and in the closets; we examined the furniture, windows, and doors. Kosinski had vanished. I remember being uncomfortable; for some reason I felt embarrassed. Finally, a cupboard door popped open and Jerzy unfolded from a shelf, where he had been lying behind some books. No matter where he lived, he said, he always had a hiding place. I had never met a Holocaust survivor before.

It was unpleasant, however, to think of that; in those days it was better to think of Jerzy as the subject of outrageous, appalling, but somehow amusing stories. Everyone knew them. Kosinski had missed a connecting flight to Los Angeles, where he was to stay at the home of Sharon Tate and Roman Polanski, because the airline had misplaced his luggage. That night, the Charles Manson gang invaded the household and butchered Miss Tate and her friends. The next day, Kosinski called the airline to complain again about the luggage. There were many stories about Jerzy Kosinski. You believed some, dismissed others, and treated a few as sly jokes. There were two running jokes in particular: Kosinski worked for the CIA and ghostwriters wrote his books.

That the jokes might have political purpose never occurred to me; that sleazy bureaucrats and Communist party hacks wanted to discredit a writer was unthinkable. I could not imagine that commissars had set slanders adrift like noxious fumes in their own stale air and then waited for cultural winds to disperse them. Kosinski's life was unimaginable enough already.

At age six, he had been separated from his parents and sent to live in the countryside when Germany invaded Poland. Everything afterwards, I think, always came back to that. His life as a child on the run from the Nazis became the basis for *The Painted Bird,* his first and most enduring novel. The boy in the novel is brutalized by villagers, but that is not its point. When Elie Wiesel reviewed *The Painted Bird* in the *New York Times,* he noted the "terrifying elements" in the "metamorphosis of the boy's mind." The boy discovered evil and learned the world was a dangerous place. He learned "every one of us stood alone." Wiesel was sensitive to that, but mistaken when he thought the narrator, the boy, was a Christian. "And their victim was neither Jew nor Gypsy," he wrote, "but a forlorn Christian child of good Christian parents." Of course, Jerzy Kosinski was Jewish.

Wiesel had read something that wasn't there; others would do that, too. Jerzy had not characterized the boy in *The Painted Bird,* other than saying the villagers thought he might be a Gypsy. Indeed, Jerzy had not even identified the boy as Polish. There was an artistic rationale for this Jerzy once wrote a booklet explaining itbut a simpler one will do. Jerzy purposely had made his own outline obscure; if he could exist in the shadows, so to speak, it would be harder to track him down. The villagers, wherever they might turn up, would not be able to find him.

In Poland, Jerzy had taught sociology at the Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. In New York in 1958, he received a grant to do post-graduate work at Columbia. In 1960 he published *The Future Is Ours, Comrade,* and two years later *No Third Path,* both under the pseudonym Joseph Novak. They were nonfiction works about life in the Soviet UnionJerzy had gone to school in Moscow in the early 1950sbut they suggested the novels later: the nearly anonymous Novak reported what he saw, expressing no viewpoint overtly. "The descriptions contained in this book do not propose moral codes and involve no judgments," Jerzy wrote in an epilogue to *No Third Path.* "They are sketches."

That wasn't true; Jerzy was just being slippery. The sketches showed a Communist society made up of oppressed and oppressor, and plainly Jerzy had made judgments. Years later, when the left got serious about discrediting him, it said the CIA had sponsored the publication of Jerzy's Novak books. It produced no evidence, of course, and in truth the spooks had had nothing to do with them, although it might have been nice if they had. The Novak books had literary merit, and they presented a more telling picture of the moral bankruptcy of Soviet life than the clunky memoirs Langley then seemed to favor.

The Painted Bird was published in 1965; *Steps* came three years later. "Celine and Kafka stand behind this accomplished art," the *Times* review said then. It was extraordinary, really. A man who escaped Hitler and Stalin had published four books in ten years in a language he had not grown up speaking. The *Times* of London compared him to Conrad, and certainly that was apt. His searches for just the right English word had been prodigious. In the beginning, he would even call telephone operators late at night and try out words on them: Excuse me, miss, but I am a foreigner, and I do not know what this means. Later *The Painted Bird* went through nine full drafts; Jerzy made sixteen or seventeen copies of each draft and passed them on to friends. "I chose some people whose language was not English, and some who were Americans," he once explained. "I asked them to make a little cross next to anything that didn't sound right. If enough people marked a sentence, I knew something was wrong with it."

An eccentric technique, perhaps, and one not likely to be taught at, say, the University of Iowa's celebrated writing classes or the earnest poetry hutches of the New School; but Jerzy, as I said, was his own master, and for him it worked wonderfully well. *The Painted Bird* will survive after most other books are forgotten. Surely, it was the making of Jerzy Kosinski, just as it was his undoing. That, however, came later, and for years Jerzy thrived. In 1970 he received the American Academy of Arts and Letters award for literature. In 1973, he was elected president of the American chapter of PEN, the

international association of poets, playwrights, editors, essayists, and novelists. The next year he was re-elected, serving the maximum time allowed.

He was an incongruous choice. PEN was approximately as politically diverse as the Soviet Writers Union, an organization with which it eerily shared some positions. (A few years after Jerzy left office, world PEN, with its American chapter applauding, sanctimoniously expelled the Chilean chapter, while allowing chapters from all Communist and Third World countries to remain.) Jerzy put PEN to actually doing something useful. He led it in a campaign to free writers imprisoned by tyrants of both the left and right. The key word here is "both." Before Jerzy, PEN had recognized only one kind of tyrant. When he left office, PEN's board of directors passed a resolution that said he had "shown an imaginative and protective sense of responsibility for writers all over the world," and that the "fruits of what he has achieved will extend far into the future."

I did not see Jerzy often in the years after that, although I did hear things about him. Whatever the fruits of his achievement at PEN, he was growing suspect in literary circles. He was too raffish, too prominent, and too likely to turn up as a guest on David Letterman. Warren Beatty had cast him in the movie *Reds.* Jerzy seemed to know everyone important. He referred to Henry Kissinger as Henry, an indictable offense in itself. His real sin, though, was that he was still his own man in a world where everyone else was the same.

There was, for example, the incident with Jack Abbott. Abbott, an imprisoned murderer, had corresponded with prominent writers, passionately pressing them to adopt his Marxist-Leninist worldview. Norman Mailer and others detected a rare literary talent in Abbott's letters and campaigned to have him released. Kosinski declined to join the campaign; he called Abbott a "misguided leftist." Mailer and his friends persisted, however, and Abbott won his freedom, a beneficence he repaid by immediately stabbing to death a young actor in the East Village. In the aftermath, Kosinski spoke of "criminal chic," and said the writers who supported Abbott had been drawn by his ideas and not by his talent. A few months later, the *Nation* magazine sponsored a conference of something called the American Writers Congress. It was a wholly anti- American gathering□financed by the usual foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts□ and Jerzy said it reminded him of Eastern Europe. Eventually, it was only a matter of who would mug Jerzy first.

As it turned out, it was the *Village Voice.* It ran a long story that said Jerzy had hired editors and ghostwriters to write his books, and that he was connected to the CIA. This, it said, was his "dirty little secret." The story was trash, full of evidence that purported to prove one thing, but which, read carefully, proved nothing at all. It was nasty, venomous, and sly, a paradigm of the distasteful, and had no purpose other than to discredit Jerzy and take his identity away. The terrible thing was that it was successful. The story in the cheesy little New York weekly was picked up all over the world. The *Times* of London even put its account on page one. Italian, French, and West German publications repeated the accusations, and an imaginative few made up some of their own. (*Les Nouvelles Littéraires* in Paris asked why Kosinski carried a gun, had dozens of false

identities, and kept tear gas bombs in his car.) The story turned up in daily papers in Turkey and Japan and Malaysia. And in Poland, where each innuendo and outright fabrication about Jerzy had come from in the first place, the Communist press quoted European and American articles about the story in the *Village Voice* as proof of what the government had been saying all along: that Jerzy Kosinski was an inveterate liar.

It was *The Painted Bird.* As I said, everything in Jerzy's life always came back to that. Even the headline in the *Voice*□"Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words"□had been a reminder. (How nasty that was; Jerzy had bled over those words.) When Jerzy published *The Painted Bird* years before, Warsaw had set out to hurt him. He was not an ordinary anti-Communist émigré Pole; he was a celebrated anti-Communist Pole, and so he had to be discredited. *The Painted Bird,* the propagandists said, slandered Poland. In fact, it did not, but since the novel was banned, who in Poland would know? The campaign went on for years: Jerzy used ghostwriters; he worked for the CIA; he plagiarized other novels; he was part of a Zionist conspiracy; nothing he said could be trusted. It was all fantastic, but in its way it worked quite well. Over time Warsaw's emissions spread like swamp gas and the *Voice* missed only the Zionist conspiracy.

After the *Voice* published its story, I told my editors at the *New York Times* I wanted to investigate its charges against Jerzy. Fine, they said, and I wrote a long article, carefully documented, tracing Warsaw's involvement. When it was published, however, it had an unexpected effect. Other publications attacked the *Times.* The best the other publications could say about Jerzy was that the charges against him were not proved. He deserved better, but he was not really surprised because he knew how treacherous words could be. It meant the villagers had finally caught him.

Source: John Corry, "The Most Considerate of Men," in *American Spectator,* Vol. 24, No. 7, July 1991, pp. 17-18.

Topics for Further Study

One of the charges against the book is that it presents Polish peasants as barbarians. Research the culture of Polish villages during the war years and compare your findings to descriptions of peasant life in the novel.

Study the psychological effects of war trauma on children and compare your findings to the behavior of the main character.

Investigate the efforts to reunite children separated from their parents during the war years. How successful were these efforts?

Write a poem that expresses what it feels like to be an outcast.

Compare and Contrast

1926: Joseph Stalin becomes dictator of the Soviet Union. His reign of terror lasts for close to three decades.

1991: On December 17, President Mikhail Gorbachev orders the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and a new Commonwealth of Independent States is formed by the countries that formerly made up the USSR.

1939: Germany invades Poland and World War II begins.

1947: The socialization of Poland begins with the election of Boleslaw Beirut, a Communist Pole and citizen of the USSR.

1989: Lech Walesa is one of the architects of Solidarity, the first independent trade union in a Communist country. After months of labor unrest that threaten the stabilization of Poland's economy, the Polish government does not block the creation of Solidarity.

What Do I Read Next?

Kosinski's *Steps* (1968), a sequel to *The Painted Bird,* won the National Book Award for fiction. This work focuses on the boy as an adult who becomes fixated on retaliation for what he suffered as a child.

The Empire of the Sun (1984), written by J. G. Ballard, chronicles the semi-autobiographical experiences of an eleven-year-old British boy named Jim living in Shanghai, China, during World War II. When the war comes to Shanghai, Jim is separated from his parents and sent to a prison camp, where he faces the harsh realities of war and learns important lessons about human nature.

In *Night* (1958), Elie Wiesel's semi-autobiographical tale focuses on a teenager's internment in a Nazi concentration camp, and his overwhelming feelings of guilt for having survived when so many others, including his family, did not.

Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl, published in 1947, chronicles the courageous life of its author, a gifted Jewish teenager, after she and her family went into hiding in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam. Anne later died in a German concentration camp.

Further Study

Sheehy, Gail, "The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man," in *Psychology Today,* December 11, 1977, pp. 126, 128, 130.

Sheehy explores the novel's psychological themes and includes an interview with Kosinski.

Sloan, James Park, *Jerzy Kosinski: A Biography,* Dutton, 1996.

Sloan provides details of Kosinski's life that parallel the boy's experiences in the novel.

Teicholz, Tom, ed., *Conversations with Jerzy Kosinski,* University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

In this collection of interviews, Kosinski talks about his life in Poland, the themes in his novels, and his writing style.

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Lavers, Norman, "Jerzy Kosinski," in *Literary Review,* G. K. Hall, 1999.

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Northouse, Cameron, "Jerzy Kosinski," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 2: *American Novelists Since World War II, First Series,* edited by Jeffrey Helterman, Gale Research, 1978, pp. 266-75.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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