

The Silver Pillow Short Guide

The Silver Pillow by Thomas M. Disch

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Characters

This tale features two characters: Bill Ostrowsky, the main character and focus of the action, and his mother, Mrs. Ostrowsky. *The Silver Pillow* is a psychological study, with most of the action taking place in Bill's confused mind. He does not love his mother, yet he takes care of her. When he can, he escapes into the fantasies of pornographic movies. He has enough selfawareness to know that he does not appeal to women; the tale implies that his miserable personality and ugly looks are the product of his upbringing by an insanely hateful woman. He seems to lack the energy to hate deeply, but at the same time lacks the insight to fully understand how hateful his mother is.

Mrs. Ostrowsky is a demonic force in the tale. If a parent through wise judgment and loving actions can raise a strong, well-adjusted child, then a blindly hateful and cruel parent can raise a warped child. Instead of becoming an angry, hateful adult, which might seem the logical result of a nasty upbringing, Bill becomes a nonentity who drifts through life, going in whatever direction he is pushed. His mother's domineering personality has almost crushed his. During the tale, Bill struggles to become an individual who is responsible to himself, not his mother. But the spirit of his mother, through the pillow, seeks to completely take over Bill's life and make him a mere copy of herself. There are no redeeming qualities to Mrs. Ostrowsky — she is utterly selfish.



Social Concerns/Themes

At the age of seventy-one, "too dilapidated to be considered an active menace to society," Mrs. Ostrowsky has been paroled into the care of her son from the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane at Northampton.

She is a nasty person who believes that her killing of her husband was his fault. Disch uses the problems society has in warehousing and caring for the mentally ill as part of the background for his tale.

The Silver Pillow: A Tale of Witchcraft focuses on a mother and her grown child. Although their relationship is a perverse one, its exaggerated tensions reflect common psychological aspects of mother-son relationships. Mrs. Ostrowsky is domineering, constantly bossing her son around. In this, she represents the role mothers must play if a small child requires constant supervision. On the other hand, as an old and frail woman, she is really at her son's mercy. After she has lived in his home for a few years, her son Bill realizes that he is more her jailer than her servant. Their roles have reversed, with Bill controlling much of his mother's life. Tension is created by Mrs. Ostrowsky's desire to continue to control her son, who has a quiet, sad life of work and sexual denial that he tries to keep distinct from his life with his mother.

A preternaturally evil woman, Mrs. Ostrowsky slowly exerts psychological pressure on her son through her constricting personality. Her death should liberate him, but through her silver pillow her spirit remains, talking to him, badgering him, and demanding to accompany him when he goes out.

The pillow symbolizes that part of a mother that remains a permanent part of her child. It is a common part of adult experience to find oneself repeating parental mistakes and advice, as well as remembering the rules of conduct learned during one's childhood. In the case of Mrs. Ostrowsky, the rules were nasty ones that stunted Bill's growth and maturity. He becomes a regular patron of a pornographic movie theater; ugly and socially maladjusted, he cannot have a mature relationship with a woman. Under the pillow's influence, he becomes more and more like his mother. The pillow constricts his life and demands that he harm women. At the last, the theme of the mother-son relationship is resolved logically. To become an adult, Bill must assert his own selfhood as a man responsible to himself, not his mother.

When the pillow commands him to murder a prostitute, he defies it, thus asserting his own mature moral code over the debased one of his mother. By attacking the pillow, he symbolically kills the Mrs. Ostrowsky within himself. Her killing him is a hollow victory, because he dies not merely as an extension of herself, but as a grown man who chooses to do what is right, even though it is contrary to his mother's wishes.



Techniques

The tale is told simply. Its atmosphere of suppressed rage is created primarily through ambiguity. Mrs. Ostrowsky plainly oppresses her son, but exactly how she does it is not clear.

The action takes place in a psychological world; thoughts and motivations in a person's mind are often vague, confused, and tied up with other feelings from unidentifiable sources. Bill's mind is more than usually confused, so his feelings and thoughts are more than usually vague. His world is suffused with his mother's evil, but how she makes him miserable is not always plainly shown. After her death, when her pillow exerts its influence on Bill, it is not clear whether Bill is deranged and is actually hearing his mother's voice from inside himself, or whether the pillow is indeed possessed by a demonic spirit. Bill himself does not believe in the supernatural and thinks that he probably is going mad, but he does not regard the pillow's influence on him as particularly alarming. No one takes an interest in what he does, anyway, so he believes his delusions can be kept to himself and secret. The ambiguous nature of Mrs. Ostrowsky's malevolent influence helps build suspense for *The Silver Pillow's* climactic scene in which Bill finally chooses between his mother's personality and his own.

Literary Precedents

The Silver Pillow is a gothic tale, featuring ghostly influences and psychological insight. From its inception, the gothic literary genre has used superstitions about the supernatural world to symbolize personality traits.

The monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a complicated being, but among other aspects of the personality of his creator, he represents the reckless lust to acquire knowledge without understanding it. In Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr.*

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), the character of Mr. Hyde represents the evil that lurks within every personality. The subject of the crazed mind is also common in gothic literature. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe presents such characters in several of his tales such as "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), and "The Black Cat" (1843). A more recent writer, H. P. Lovecraft, often sets his fiendish characters in urban locales, just as Disch does in his tale.



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