



The child's perspective in Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird*

Tereza Šimečková

We would like to start this paper with a quote, which is by a famous Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert. Seifert wrote, in 1933, a review of a book *Voyage au bout de la nuit* written by the French author Louis Céline. The line says: "Opravdu, Celinova kniha není lekturou pro těhotné ženy."¹ This line perfectly suits Kosinski's novel, and also brings me to the topic of this paper: The child's perspective in Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird*.

The paper will start out with a quick introduction of Jerzy Kosinski and then go on to the analysis of the novel *The Painted Bird*. This section will be divided into two subsections. First we are going to summarize the plot, and after that we would like to analyze the child's narrator and its specific components. This also leads us to the goal of this paper, which is: how the child's perspective is expressed in the narrative, in what way the language is modified (if it is modified) and how this perspective is present in the perception of the world.

Jerzy Kosinski - Biography

Jerzy Kosinski was born 1933, in Lodz, Poland to a Jewish family. He survived the war, together with his parents, hidden in the Polish countryside. His father even changed his name from Lewinkopf to Kosinski to protect his family from the danger of Nazi-Germany. After the war Kosinski studied at the University of Lodz and earned two degrees: one in history and one in political science. In 1957 he immigrated to the United States, where he continued his studies at Columbia University, then worked as a lecturer at Yale, Princeton

¹ Really, Céline's book is not for pregnant women.



and other American universities. His first novels were published in the early sixties under the pseudonym Joseph Novak, but they weren't very successful. His third novel was published in 1965 and it became his most famous book. This third novel was *The Painted Bird*. After this book he wrote several other novels, scientific works and articles. Not only a writer, he also worked as an actor, screenwriter and photographer. Kosinski committed suicide in 1991.

The Painted Bird

D.G. Myers, who reviewed Kosinski's *Biography*² written by James P. Sloan, called Kosinski's life *as a life beyond repair*³. The same can be said about the fate of the main character in Kosinski's novel. The six-year-old boy was left by his parents because they thought he would have a better chance to survive than he would have had if he had stayed with them. His life really is beyond repair. After his parents leave him, he wanders through the countryside of the Eastern Europe (it is never mentioned exactly which country the story takes place in). The boy, who doesn't even have a name, is totally abandoned and due to his looks (he is described as an "olive-skinned, dark-haired and black-eyed" boy P.2) is considered a Gypsy or Jewish Stray and for this reason the local peasants hated and despised him. The hate and the spite changed into unbelievably cruel and heartless treatment, and the boy is a victim of various kinds of mental and physical torture. As he lives through six years of his life, he waits to see the Red Army to come and invade the country, he makes his first friends among the soldiers of the Red Army, who teach him to read and to write, and finally he gets to an orphanage where he is supposed to wait for his parents. Within these six

² Sloan, J.P.: *Jerzy Kosinski. A Biography*. New York: Dutton/Penguin. 1996.

³ <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9610/myers.html>



years he meets various kinds of people, experiences and witnesses many terrible and cruel things, and when he finally has the chance to be with his parents again, (they find him in the orphanage), the expected happy-end does not happen. He doesn't know how to connect with them after such a long time, he does not know them anymore, he is not the boy anymore whom they knew when they left him at the beginning of the war.

Kosinski's novel is a fascinating book. It leaves a lot of space for the interpretation, it raises a lot of questions, and it offers many ways how to answer them. The reception of the book ranges from total rejection (it is described as perverse, the violence is too explicit, and in that way also useless⁴) to admiration and positive judgment. Elie Wiesel wrote a review on this book saying: „I thought [*The Painted Bird*] was a fiction, and when he told me it was autobiography I tore up my review and wrote one a thousand times better.“⁵

Analysis

As it turns out the analysis of the novel is a very tricky and challenging at the same time. Is there only one narrator or are there two of them? Is it the child who tells the story or is it a grown-up who just remembers all the things he experienced when he was a child?

The whole story is written in the first person and it is a retrospective narration, the narrator uses the past tense to describe what happened. But while reading the book, one constantly has a feeling that something is wrong, that it is not only one person who is talking.

Sue Vice observes the same thing in her article about the novel. She uses Michail Bakhtin's term "double-voiced" and states: "In each utterance there is present the representing and

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerzy_Kosi%C5%84ski

⁵ Cp. Vice, S.: *Holocaust Fiction*. London; New York: Routledge. 2000. Str. 78



the represented voice. The presence of double-voice is clearer at some moments than others.” (Vice 2000: 82) It means that at some points in the texts the voice is of the little boy, the main character, and the voice of the grown-up who is actually telling the story blend together. Vice gives an example from the book, it is a scene where the boy is watching Marta, the woman, he used to live with for a while, burn. There was a fire in her hut but at the time she is already dead, that is why she sits still.

“I stood by the door, ready to run, still waiting for Marta to move. But she sat stiffly, as though unaware of anything. The flames started to lick her dangling hands as might an affectionate dog.” (P.11)

Vice continues: “The knowledge that Marta is really dead is shared by the representing voice and the reader, while it is the represented voice alone which is heard.” (Vice 2000: 82) There is a very cruel scene when a miller jabs out the eyes of a plowboy, because he is jealous and thinks that the plowboy is having an affair with his wife. The eyeballs lay on the floor and the boy looks at them with fascination:

“I watched them with fascination. If the miller had not been there I myself would have taken them. Surely they could still see. I would keep them in my pocket and take them out when needed, placing them over my own. Then I would see twice that much, maybe even more.” (P.38)

This sounds more like an internal monologue, like it is the boy talking to himself. So is it now the child speaking?

Kosinki’s novel is a vivid example of Holocaust Literature written through the eyes of children. But does the novel really fulfill these characteristics? It would be wrong to say that



the child's perspective is not important for the novel. But we have to be careful when we want to call the narrator the child's narrator. Sue Vice differs between two kinds of terms: the „child's perspective“and the „child's voice“ (Vice 2004: 7) which are to be differentiated in the narrative. And she writes that: „Such a technique, which represents a child's perspective, is generally more successful than efforts to represent the child's voice“ (Vice 2004: 7). As I said the novel is written in the first person, but the author doesn't want to reproduce the child's voice, he doesn't even use the child's language, and even if I suspect that the child's narrator is used in some parts of the text, he definitely is not used consequentially. More than the child's voice Kosinski wants to portray the child's perspective and the child's perception of the world. And in order to achieve this, he uses specific literary motives. And he focuses more on the substance than the style of the novel.

Before we go on to the second part of the analysis we would like to mention the prologue, which is at the beginning of the book, because it is important for the whole story. It is a part of the first chapter, but it doesn't really belong the story. It is written in third-person by a narrator, whose job is it to objectively introduce the time and the place where the story takes place to the reader. He offers the reader the historical facts, so he can get a better picture of the situation. This narrator doesn't appear in the narration after this. He also introduces the boy, who is described as “olive-skinned, dark-haired, and black-eyed. He spoke a language of the educated class, a language barely intelligible to the peasants of the east” (P. 2). The boy is, from the beginning, isolated on account of his looks and also his speech. We think that this verbal isolation, this unwillingness to communicate, is for the book quite important and on the stylistic level it is expressed with the absence of the direct



speech. This motif of the verbal isolation culminates in the moment when the boy suffers a big trauma and loses his ability to speak. He becomes mute.

α) Fairytales

In the second part of the paper we would like to analyze other components of the child's perspective. For the first ones we used the word **"fairytales"**, because some parts of the book are reminiscent of a fairytales. Children generally have a big imagination. They are able to imagine things that are not real; the insentient things that surround them are suddenly full of life and manage to do unbelievable things. The boy in Kosinski's novel is a typical child, however his world contains things that are dangerous, cruel and unpleasant. In the dark there are demons flying over his head, the trees want to catch him with their arms, the chatter of the leaves evoke the clatter of bones. There seems to be danger everywhere and the boy doesn't know how to defend himself.

"I remained alone, afraid, listening to the noise of the receding cart. (...) Around me the forest werewolves would slowly creep forth. Translucent demons would come flying on their beating wings from steaming swamps, and stray graveyard ghouls would collide in the air with a clatter of bones." (P. 58)

This fairytales features find their expression on the stylistic level, Kosinski very often uses personification, the insentient things get the character of a human being. The boy is commanded by fear during his entire wandering. The fear becomes his most faithful friend and every new person he meets feeds it. The peasants are at the beginning of the book, in the prologue, described as "ignorant and brutal, though not by choice" (P.2). They lived in small villages somewhere in the Eastern Europe, the country is not specified, where there



were no schools or hospitals, the peasants weren't educated and lived in the manner of their great-grandfathers. Because of this they were very superstitious and believed in black magic, ghosts and other creatures. The suspicious boy, who looked like a Jew or a Gipsy, presents danger and is accused of having evil powers.

"She called me the Black One. From her I learned for the first time that an evil spirit, which crouched in me like a mole in a deep burrow, and of whose presence I was unaware, possessed me. (...) This evil spirit, which dwelled in me attracted by its very nature their mysterious beings." (P. 18)

The peasants project into the boy their own fears and they tell him superstitions. The boy very quickly becomes a part of this world and he tries to deal with the things happening around him the best he knows how. His old safe world is lost, the boy remembers his parents for a few times at the beginning, but soon this memory is also pushed away by the boy's new life, which doesn't leave any space for sentiment or self-pity. The boy changes during the story, he matures and so does the way he views the world. In the *Encyclopedia Holocaust Literature* (Kremer 2003: 698) is written:

"Kosinski's text is a kind of bildungsroman manqué; it traces the boy's maturation but it is a maturation to disillusionment and, finally, if not nihilism, cynicism."

The boy learns by observing and the way other people treat him changes his innocence to hate and roughness:

"As the wind whipped me I could hear other whispers, mutterings, and moans. The Evil Ones were interested in me at last. To train me in hatred they had first separated me from my



parents, then taken away Marta and Olga, delivered me into the hands of the carpenter, robbed me of my speech, then given Evka to the he-goat.” (P.165)

His parents find the boy after the war, but he is not able to restore the relationship to them. The ties were broken, the distance between him and them is too big and there is no way to fix it. And although he survived everything that happened to him, there is no hope in his story. Surviving is in the end as hopeless as if he would have died somewhere during this six years of the war. At the end he comes to the conclusion that everyone is alone in the world:

“Here was a grown man, educated in the city, who acted like a simple peasant and could not accept the idea that he was alone in the world and could expect no assistance from anyone. (...) It mattered little if one was mute; people did not understand one another anyway. (...) His emotions, memory, and senses divided him from others as effectively as thick reeds screen the mainstream from the muddy bank. Like the mountain peaks around us, we looked at one another, separated by valleys, too high to stay unnoticed, too low to touch the heavens.” (P. 238)

β) “Not understanding”

Another motif typical of the child’s perspective is the motif of **“not understanding”**. If we look up the verb “to understand” in the dictionary we find: “to know what someone or something means.”⁶ In other words: to know the meaning of something. The understanding we are talking about goes on two levels: the understanding of what happened, and the understanding of why it happened. For a child is this task very difficult, because it doesn’t have enough knowledge and experience. And in a situation when the child is alone and can rely only on itself, it is even harder. The boy comes across things children at his age wouldn’t

⁶ http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/understand_1?q=understand



normally come across including Death, mental and physical torture, sex and other sexual interactions which he is forced to witness, torture of animals and other things. The boy knows that he is mistreated because he has black hair and black eyes, but he is not quite sure why the dark-haired and black-eyed people are treated in this way.

“I wondered what gave people the ability to invent such things. Why were the village peasants unable to do it? I wondered what gave people of one color of eyes and hair such great power over other people. (...) I dozed off thinking of the inventions I would like to make. For example, a fuse for the human body which, when lighted, would change the old skin for new and alter the color of the eyes and hair.” (P. 93)

The boy reflects everything with his naive and innocent perspective. When Marta, the woman with whom he lived for some time, dies, he admires her for being able not to move for such long time.

“I tried to speak to her, but she did not answer. I ticked her cold, stiff hand, but the knobby fingers did not move. (...) Marta, I concluded, was waiting for a change of skin and, like the snake, she could not be disturbed at such time. (...) I admired her endurance. After having sat there all night and all day, she still did not stir.” (P.9-10)

The boy is at the beginning like a tabula rasa, the way he sees the world is pure. During the time though, he becomes more experienced and the more experience he has, the more difficult and confusing the world seems. In order to understand what is going on around him the boy tries to make parallels with the things he knows. Marta acts like a witch from a fairytale his mother used to tell him. Snakes lie very still before they change their



skin, people might do it in the same way. If we want to talk about the child's perspective in this novel, this is the point when it is the most evident.

χ) Motif of animals

The last motif we would like to talk about is the **motif of animals**, because we think there is a connection between the boy and the animals mentioned in the book. The boy is like an animal, chased into a corner. He tries to escape, he runs away, he tries to defend himself, but the others are always stronger and they have all the power. This comparison becomes clearer the moment when the boy loses his speech. The animals are mute witnesses. Their owners, at least in this novel, mistreat the animals, and they cannot defend themselves. The boy is treated like an animal. Olga, a woman, he used to live with for a while bought him from another man.

“One day an elderly woman called Olga the Wise One came to the hut. (...) She looked me all over, scrutinized my eyes and teeth, felt my bones, and ordered me to urinate in a small jar. She examined my urine. (...) After the inspection she haggled fiercely and at length with the peasant, until finally she tied a string round my neck and led me away. I had been bought.”

(P.16)

One of the most important motifs of animals is connected with the title of the book. The Painted Bird. The story is that Lekh, who was catching birds and selling them to the peasants, took from time to time one bird, and painted his feathers with bright colors so that the other birds from the flock didn't recognize him. He threatened them and finally they killed him. The boy is in the same situation as the bird. He is a part of a flock, as a person, human being is he a part of the society, but the society hates him and feels threatened by



him, because he is different. The peasants are at the beginning of the books described as “fair-skinned with blond hair and blue or gray eyes” (P.2). This means the boy actually is different from the other people, unlike the bird, that is made different by painting his feathers with bright colors. What is the difference between the bird and the boy? What is the real reason for the hatred? Is it really the differentness? There is a useful comparison which we want to use to explain what similarity or difference is between the boy and the painted bird. We remembered Forrest Gump. He is also different from the others but his mom keeps telling him that he is not different, that he is like anybody else. But it is not true. The fact is he is different. And so is the boy in *The Painted Bird*. So instead telling Forrest that he is the same like anybody else, his mom should tell the others that her son really is different and that it is not the reason to despise or even hate him. The real reason for the despise and hatred is not the differentness, it is just pretense. The real reason is the inability and unwillingness of the people to accept someone who is different. There is a famous quote that says: blind is the one who closes his eyes. And the peasants chose to close their eyes. And yet, remember the description of the peasants: they were ignorant and brutal, though **not by choice**. So did they decide to close their eyes or was it the situation, the time they lived in, that made them close their eyes? This is a very difficult question and I don't want to justify what the peasants did to the boy, it is just a very difficult question...



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