D. M. Thomas’ The Whit Hotel Essay, Research Paper

Donald Michael Thomas began his writing career as a poet, and his early work was notable for the way it ranged across the heights of the fantasy worlds of science fiction and of sensuality. Thomas was a superb writer, meticulous researcher, and a genius in deceiving the reader. He skillfully wrote The White Hotel, combining prose, poem, and science fiction, to make it a believable, conceivable, and a touching piece of literature. In his novel, Thomas makes realistic and believable references to Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic theories. Furthermore, he was able to capture the real Freud so well that many Freudian scholars believed this case study of Frau Anna G. to be a lost work of Sigmund Freud. This leads us to conclude that Thomas did not only possess a great imagination for fiction, but was also well studied in his accounts of Freud and the Holocaust.

Composed of a prologue and six sections, The White Hotel utilizes a variety of literary forms. The main characters of this novel are the celebrated psychoanalyst and theorist Sigmund Freud and Lisa Erdman, a twenty-nine-year-old, half-Jewish Viennese opera singer who comes to Freud for treatment of hysteria in 1919. This novel is by far one of the greatest works of English literature, exploring such concepts as, premonition, inhumanity, sexuality, and briefly, the concept of life after death. It is fashioned with many images of love, death, life, and desire, taking the audience on a horrifying and historical depiction of the Holocaust. Thomas novel is written using the third and first person narrator, which seems to have more knowledge than the reader or the character. I have to admit that I was distracted and even caught off guard by Thomas disorganization of chronological events. For example, the novel begins with presumably the middle of the story, after which the novel continues with the beginning and then ends the novel with a metaphorical new beginning for Lisa Erdman. Furthermore, many parallels and symbols can be seen in each section, which brilliantly connects them into a cohesive story filled with meaning and dire premonitions of an inevitable future.

Throughout this course, we have discussed various novels, from a psychoanalytic point of view, and we have been able to deconstruct many of the characters according to Freud s psychoanalytic theories. Ironically, in The White Hotel, it is those theories that allow the reader to be misguided, and not realize the important symbolism of Lisa s symptoms. As Freud does in the novel, we try to analyze Lisa according to her reports during therapy, and her writings to Freud. For example, we can explain why Lisa feels ashamed when having sex and understand her hallucinations of fire; we can explain why she has ambivalent feelings towards her deceased mother, and why she fantasizes having sexual relations with Sigmund Freud s son. On the other hand, we fail to make the connection between the aching pain in her breast and ovaries, and her death at the end of the novel. I was so captivated by over-analyzing Lisa s symptoms that I failed to see the symbolisms of her pains, which we now know to be historical pains and hysterical symptoms.

In the first and second sections, Don Giovanni and The Gastein Journal , hint and point to the section in the novel entitled The Sleeping Carriage , where we are first introduced to the reality of Babi Yar and the Holocaust. We also come to an understanding with Lisa s experiences and fears and the events that lead up to her death. I also will be looking at the parallels that exist between section one, section two and the last section, The Camp , where reality must be suspended as the novel brings back to life all who died throughout the preceding sections. Lastly, I will explore the unimaginable symbolism between Lisa s early symptoms and her horrific death in section five, and the concept of premonition.

Finally, with my newly acquired knowledge of the novel, I will attempt to analyze Lisa and explore a variety of Freud s psychoanalytic theories and defense mechanism, to see how Lisa may apply to them and see how she exhibits them throughout the novel.

Parallels and Symbolism

The metaphysical characteristics that Lisa possesses do not become obvious until Freud s correspondence with her and with the events of Babi Yar which take place in section five. During sections one and two, Lisa s poetic nature surfaces, alluding and directly paralleling the events leading up to and occurring at the Nazi concentration camp, Babi Yar. The fire, which consumed a portion of the White Hotel, parallels with the fire that consumed the center of the town of residence for Lisa and her stepson Kolya in section five. This is a direct parallel with the fire in the White Hotel. Lisa’s passion and sexual excess could explain the fire that blazed within the hotel. Lisa s heightened sexual excitement prompted such an outburst of passion that the hotel burst into flames. The shocking number of murdered Nazi prisoners and the evils the Germans are responsible for suggest a reason for the fire that attempted to cleanse the city of the German evil, but failed. In the same manner that passion evokes fire, it also evokes hate. This deeply routed hatred, possessed by the Germans toward the Jewish people, provoked the burning of victims by the German troops, so as to allow for more killing and genocide.

Early in the novel, Lisa is running frantically and blindly, suggesting that she was being hunted. Lisa imagines herself turining into a tree and in order to allude the soldiers. This point parallels with her fight for escape from Babi Yar in section five. She makes many attempts to escape, even showing her Ukrainian passport, but unlike in section two, Lisa does not escape. “A German finished his coffee and strolled to a machine gun” (247, The White Hotel). Also, a little boy appears both in her accounts to Freud and in the massacre at Babi Yar. It could be argued that the image of the boy represents her stepson. The parallel between the lonely boy early in the story and Kolya exist in that they both are trying to escape from the soldiers, unfortunately Kolya is apparently killed in the massacre in section five.

Another parallel I will explore between sections two, three, and five, will allow myself to discuss the violence and sexuality evident in both scenes. We can conclude that the violence and the sexuality in fact intermingle with one another. In Lisa s poem, Don Giovanni , she writes to Freud of her sexual encounter with his son on a train, which we now know to be a fantasy, and in fact shows her sexual desires towards Sigmund Freud. The sexual encounter with soldier (Freud s son) is a devastating, graphical, violent and piercing sexual encounter: ” that night he almost burst my cunt apart ” (18, The White Hotel). As Lisa lies broken and half dead, she is stabbed with a bayonet in her vagina, suggesting that if it were not enough to beat her, her insides had to be ravaged. Violence and sex is also prevalent in her dream: “I was impaled/upon a swordfish (20, The White Hotel). This sshows how Lisa s premonitions foreshadow the violence, cruelty, and pain that she suffers during her graphic death in section five.

One of the most prevailing sources of evidence, which links Lisa s experiences in section two and the manifestation of those experiences in section five, are the pains she suffers from in her left breast and in her ovary. As the Nazi soldier, who is looting Lisa, forcefully kicks Lisa s breast and pelvic area, we finally understand the significance of these inexplicable pains. At the same time, Lisa s breathlessness can be connected to the silence she endured while at the bottom of the pile of dead Jewish bodies, during the execution at Babi Yar in section five. Freud suggested in section three, that Lisa s breathlessness was a symptom of the sexual abuse endured on the dock when she was fifteen years old. Surely, this can also be seen as a foreshadowing of her forced silence, during her struggle for survival in the last pages of the novel. Incidentally, this sexual abuse is an example of the religious persecution that Lisa had to live with as a Jew.

Sections two and three also offer parallels to section six where Lisa and others were resurrected. In both instances I believe the persona of Freud was represented, though not addressed by Lisa. She is incapable of recognizing Freud as the priest in the White Hotel, but makes a startling discovery as she does recognize him in the Camp, when she realizes that he was also the priest in her poem and prose: ” she suddenly realized that the old, drying-out priest in her journal had been Freud” (260, The White Hotel). The soldier who rapes her is also found in both instances and disregarded her bleeding or her menstruation cycle. Furthermore, her rape, which assuredly also made her bleed, apparently did not take away from Lisa her womanhood and or sexuality. Generally one would think that a violent act such as a rape would de-feminize and de-sex a women. Contrarry to that, in this story the soldiers dismissed the rape of Lisa, by acting as if nothing happened, despite the blood that she had shed. This in turn symbolically restores Lisa as a woman. In other words, the rape and de-humanizing attempt was defeated when the soldiers reacted affirmatively to the rape.

The final parallel that I will make between the sections is that of motherhood and nurturing. Breastfeeding is a nurturing and comforting act that a mother provides for her child. In two sections, Lisa breastfeeds and is breastfed. I believe this is to feel safer at the Camp as well as to bring Lisa s womanhood and motherhood relationship with her mother closer. Throughout the novel Lisa indisputably portrays qualities of a mother, while in her real life she could not fathom having children, and only became a stepmother late in her life after marrying Victor.

A New Analysis

Using Freudian psychoanalytic theories and my greater knowledge of the novel, a variety of different approaches can be applied to Lisa as her life unfolds in the novel. One particular analysis is one that was incorrectly explored by Freud in the novel, the theory of homosexuality. Freud believed that Lisa possessed homosexuality tendencies. In fact I believe that Lisa s mother and perhaps her aunt display more homosexuality tendencies than does Lisa. Early in the novel we find out of an occurrence during Lisa s younger years, by which Lisa witnessed her mother, uncle, and aunt engaging in violent sex acts. This fact leads me to believe that the mother and aunt do indeed posses lesbian tendencies which they have already acted upon. In section six Lisa’s mother comes to term with this idea as she discusses the affair she had with the Lisa s uncle.

Although we know that Lisa is attracted to Sigmund Freud and not Martin the novel decives the reader through Lisa s poems as she speaks of her sexual encounter with young Freud. In fact the text supports the idea that Lisa is attracted to Martin on various occasions. For example, when she accepts treatment with Freud she sees a picture of Freud s son, not only does she see this pictures but Lisa acknowledges the young officer s good looks. This is an example of transference because it seems Lisa is projecting her sexual fantasies into Martin, Freud s son. Though Freud does not provide a reason for this transference, he admits that this might be the key to Lisa s return to therapy.

With my greater knowledge of the novel I can now offer a step beyond the apparent attraction of Martin. We now would deduce that Lisa s intention was not toward Freud s son but rather they were directed toward Sigmund Freud himself. This is due in part to the idea that Lisa is actually substituting Freud for her father because she finds herself comfortable, trusting, and approving of Freud. Freud himself fails to see his counter transference on his patient by also wanting and desiring to be able to seduce this young woman. We find that after Lisa has left therapy and Freud publishes his case studies, he disguisses Lisa with Freud s beloved deceased daughter s name, Anna. As discussed in class Freud must be very fond of his Lisa to give her the name of his most beloved child, Anna.

Freud offers insight towards Lisa s sexual fantasies but does not go deep as to why. We know that Lisa has various sexual relations with other men. In all of her sexual relations we are led to believe that these sexual fantasies many times are violent in nature. I believe that the violent nature of sexual acts in this novel is directly connected to Lisa s presence during the sexual relation between her aunt, uncle, and mother. It is a fact that young children exposed to parents sexual intercourse cannot understand the sexual act, and take it to be a violent act. This is why I believe that Lisa s constant recreation or fantasies of her sexual encounters include such graphical, violent, and sometimes shameful acts of sexuality. For many years Lisa replaced the sexual images of her mother with that of her aunt, because she did not want to come to the realization that her mother was involved in adulterous relationship. According to Freud this represented a conflict that Lisa had to overcome in order to be better, not cured. Furthermore, Lisa s religion and beliefs introduce feelings of guilt, shame, and self-pity, that Lisa struggled with for the majority of her life.

During the novel Lisa projects her personal characteristics and confessed her close relation to the retired prostitute in the White Hotel. This is a defense mechanism that Lisa openly admits to in the novel. We realize that even though she is not a prostitute she compares her sexual actions and relations to the retired prostitute. Meaning she felt ashamed of her unruly thoughts (119, The White Hotel) and felt guilty because; she had pre-marital sex, deliberately aborted her child, wrote explicitly about her sexual encounters, among other disturbing occurrences.

Agree or Disagree

As it is required for any of the papers I must read an excerpt from the book Surviving Literary Suicide and agree or disagree with one point made by the author. Unfortunately, the author Jeffrey Berman did not include The White Hotel in this piece of Literature. However, in another book titled, The Talking Cure: Literary Representation of Psychoanalysis, also by Jeffery Berman, I was able to find an excerpt of the chronological events in the novel, The White Hotel. Something mentioned in the chronology was her reoccurrence of hysterical symptoms like her incapacitating pains in her breast and ovary. This statement is very vague, but after class discussion I agree with the statement. It is Freud s belief that Lisa s illness is mentally created and not physically. We know from the ending of section five that these pains were directly connected by means of premonitions to her laid out fate. Lisa s pains were not influenced by any physical abnormality, but rather influenced by a mental discomfort and a misunderstanding of the gift of premonition.

Conclusion

D. M. Thomas has been able to capture one of the worlds most respected psychoanalyst, and portray him in such a believable manner that we are intrigued and misled by the story. Thomas has also accomplished the art of foreshadowing, prose, poem, and fiction, as well as a brilliant, controversial, and surprising ending to the novel. In all Thomas was able to capture his readers in a web of misleading, confusing, and tangled thoughts. His ability to accurately connect factual historical events with a fictional, imaginative, and seducing plot, gives this novel its reputation as one of the best novel of the twetieth century, as well as one of the most difficult to understand.