



## PAYING HOMAGE TO THE HOLOCAUST FEMALE VICTIMS IN *THE ZONE OF INTEREST*

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*ABSTRACT.* Martin Amis returns to the subject of the Holocaust after *Time's Arrow* (1991) with *The Zone of Interest*, a realistic novel set in Auschwitz in the months from August 1942 to April 1943. Amis decides to deal again with the atrocities committed by the Nazis, because he believes that the impact of the Holocaust will change with the physical disappearance of the survivors. In this article we are going to focus on two of the female victims created by Amis: a Jewish prisoner who confronts her oppressors and a Jewish doctor morally destroyed by her collaboration with the Nazis, both of whom are presented through the perpetrator's gaze. In order to demonstrate how Amis succeeds in giving the reader a truthful picture of the humiliations the Nazis inflicted on their victims, we will use the witnesses' testimonies and the studies on the Holocaust relevant to our analysis, with special attention to those who offer a gender perspective.

*Keywords:* The Zone of Interest, Holocaust, female victims, gender, Jewish, subversive.

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## RINDIENDO HOMENAJE A LAS VÍCTIMAS FEMENINAS DEL HOLOCAUSTO EN *LA ZONA DE INTERÉS*

*RESUMEN.* Amis retoma el tema del Holocausto después de *La flecha del tiempo* (1991) con *La zona de interés* (2014), una novela realista ambientada en Auschwitz entre agosto de 1942 y abril de 1943. Amis decide escribir nuevamente sobre las atrocidades cometidas por los nazis porque cree que el impacto del Holocausto cambiará con la desaparición física de los supervivientes. En este artículo nos vamos a centrar en dos de las víctimas femeninas creadas por Amis: una prisionera judía que se enfrenta a sus opresores y una doctora judía moralmente destruida por su colaboración con los nazis, ambas presentadas a través de la mirada del perpetrador. Para poder demostrar cómo Amis logra ofrecer al lector un retrato certero de las humillaciones que los Nazis infligían a sus víctimas, usaremos los testimonios de los testigos, así como los trabajos sobre el Holocausto más relevantes para nuestro análisis, con especial atención a aquellos que ofrecen una perspectiva de género.

*Palabras clave:* La zona de interés, el Holocausto, víctimas femeninas, género, judío, subversivo.

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### 1. LITERATURE AND THE HOLOCAUST: MAKING THE UNIMAGINABLE IMAGINATIVELY ACCESSIBLE

Most critics agree that, as Berel Lang states, “if *any* literary or scholarly subject could challenge the role conventionally assumed by authors, it is the radical evil exemplified by, and then to be represented in, the events of the Holocaust” (3, italics in the original). The enormity of the Final Solution transformed it into an “event at the limits”, which raises aesthetics and intellectual problems as well as ethical and moral issues (Friedlander, “Introduction” 3).<sup>1</sup> In the debate on the representability of the Holocaust two main trends can be discerned. On the one hand, there are those who, following Adorno’s famous, and often misunderstood, dictum that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34), believe that the literary imagination is incapable of rendering intelligible the extermination of six million Jews. Therefore, they call for what Mandel describes as “the rhetoric of the unspeakable”. For instance, Steiner claims that “[t]he world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason” (146), while Howe believes that the novelist cannot make sense of the Holocaust and turn it into a significant narrative. He explains that Adorno was concerned about the danger of minimizing the horrors of the terrifying ordeal Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Friedlander argues that the “Final Solution” is an “event at the limits” because it is “the most radical form of genocide encountered in history: the willful, systematic, industrially organized, largely successful attempt totally to exterminate an entire human group within twentieth-century Western society” (“Introduction” 3). Friedlander is echoing Eberhard Jäckel’s famous statement about the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

went through by imposing aesthetic principles on it: “writers in the post-Holocaust era might be wise to be silent. Silent, at least about the Holocaust” (180). Wiesel also points to the way in which literature might distort the victims’ suffering: “We do try to put the experience into words. But can we? That is my question. Language is poor and inadequate. The moment it is told, the experience turns into betrayal” (284). Borchert expresses it beautifully:

Go home, poets, got into the forests, catch fish, chop wood and do your most heroic deed: Be silent! Let the cuckoo cry of your lonely hearts be silent, for there’s no rhyme and no metre for it, and no drama, no ode and no psychological novel can encompass the cry of the cuckoo, and no dictionary and not press has syllables or signs for your wordless world-rage, for your exquisite pain, for the agony of your love. (194)<sup>2</sup>

This idea that the Holocaust cannot and should not be represented has been challenged by many scholars and writers. In fact, Spargo argues that the anxiety about the appropriateness of representing the Holocaust began to disappear by the early 1990s and that the literatures on the Holocaust that started to proliferate clearly revealed that even the truth of history is culturally mediated (7). In this sense, Mandel is very critical of those who refer to the Holocaust as unspeakable, unthinkable, incomprehensible. She argues that the presumed “unspeakable” quality of the Holocaust is merely a cultural construct that reveals our own motivations and desires (205). Mandel understands those who think that writing about the Shoah involves a further wronging of the victims: “To speak their experience would run the risk of understanding that experience, with its concurrent possibilities of trivializing or betraying it” (222). But in spite of it, Mandel firmly believes that we have the responsibility to speak the unspeakable in order to understand the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Aarons agrees that silence is not an option. She acknowledges that the nature of the Holocaust challenges language and that its enormity complicates its telling, but we cannot turn away from the subject:

Capitulation to language’s inadequacy is symptomatic of the failure of moral reckoning, an indefensible flight of conscience. To say that we cannot articulate the atrocity of the Holocaust is to imply that we cannot judge the motivating conditions and execution of its atrocities. (38)

This way, literary representation by bearing witness to the atrocities committed during the Holocaust becomes an affirmation of life.

Langer also recognizes how difficult it is for an artist to write about the Holocaust, but if he gives up and decides that his only option is silence, he is just admitting his

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<sup>2</sup> Langer argues that Borchert falls into an obvious contradiction since “while demanding silence, Borchert labors to discover a speech, a voice to express his ‘wordless world-rage’ and ‘exquisite pain,’ to recapture the lost eloquence of the poet’s tongue” (*The Holocaust* 35).

own failure to discover the resources of language necessary to portray his vision (*The Holocaust* 17). What Langer calls the literature of atrocity is concerned with a reality that the human mind had never confronted before and its aim is “to find a way of making this fundamental truth accessible to the mind and emotions of the reader” (*The Holocaust* xii). Langer admits that it would be presumptuous to believe that art can surpass history in giving us a deeper understanding of the how and why of the Holocaust, but this has never been the province of art. Whereas history provides the details, literature looks for ways of explaining the implications and making the unimaginable imaginatively accessible.

Eaglestone agrees with Langer that “[t]he past is too important to be left solely to historians” (3). Fiction can help us understand the meaning of the Holocaust by discovering new categories or concepts.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Eaglestone warns that the growth of Holocaust consciousness has resulted in the emergence of post-Holocaust kitsch which transforms the past into something “meant to titillate or offer a saccharine ease” (143). The world described in these texts is simple, apolitical and ahistorical and does not contribute to full engagement with the Holocaust. One example is the popular *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, by John Boyne (140).<sup>4</sup>

Epstein goes even further when he asserts that if we do not want those who exterminated the European Jews to remain victorious, but give meaning to the victims’ terrible suffering, fiction “*must flourish*” (260, italics in the original). Epstein defends the superiority of fiction over history when it comes to representing the reality of the Holocaust. Epstein criticizes novelists, even the serious ones, for not being able “to endure even minimal amounts of the reality of the Holocaust” and thus “all unknowingly, in sheer innocence” reflect the culture of the oppressor (265, 266). The writer has the responsibility to recreate life in the ghettos and camps as it really was, so that “the reader feels a sense of connectedness” with the events being described (Epstein 265).

## 2. THE ZONE OF INTEREST: ENGAGING WITH WOMEN’S PREDICAMENT AT AUSCHWITZ

Amis seems to share Epstein’s tenets, since, as Rosenbaum points out, he believes that he has a responsibility as a writer and thinker to deal with the extermination of

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<sup>3</sup> Eaglestone’s statement is very revealing because well-known historians such as Deutscher and Friedlander (“The ‘Final Solution’”) believe that our understanding of the Holocaust will not increase with the passing of time.

<sup>4</sup> Cesarani makes a similar claim about *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and its film adaptation (xvii), whereas Kaes warns of the “unabashed commercial exploitation and trivialization of human suffering” in television specials and films “in which the Holocaust serves more often than not as a mere backdrop to melodramatic private affairs” (208). Kertész, who believes that “the concentration camp is imaginable only and exclusively as literature, never as reality” (“Who Owns Auschwitz” 268), has also denounced how the Holocaust has been very often transformed into very cheap consumer goods.

six million Jews. Amis has admitted that the problem of understanding Hitler and the crimes committed by the Germans puzzled him until he read Primo Levi's statement in which he affirms that there is no rationality in the Nazi hatred:

...it is a hate that is not in us; it is outside man, it is a poison fruit sprung from the deadly trunk of Fascism, but it is outside and beyond Fascism itself. We cannot understand it, but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we must be on our guard. (Afterword 396)

Levi's words were like an epiphany for Amis since the pressure to make sense of what Hitler did left him and he felt free to write again about it (Rosenbaum).<sup>5</sup> Amis returns to the subject of the Holocaust after *Time's Arrow* with *The Zone of Interest*, a realistic novel set in Auschwitz in the months from August 1942 to April 1943.<sup>6</sup> The story is told from the point of view of the three central characters: Paul Doll, the "Old Boozer", the camp commandant and the source of most of the comedy in the novel; Angelus Thomsen, a womanizer, who falls in love with Doll's wife and is a nephew of Martin Bormann, Hitler's private secretary; and Szmul, the leader of the Sonderkommando, Jewish prisoners forced to do the Nazis' "dirty work", that is to say, help the Nazis deceive the prisoners on arriving at the camp and dispose of the corpses. Amis has explained that he decided to deal again with this terrible event because he felt that "in the very palpable, foreseeable future the Holocaust is going to absent itself from living memory" (Rosenbaum). He admits that the survivors' testimonies will endure in print and video, "but their physical disappearance from life will mark a symbolic divide" (Rosenbaum). This idea is shared by Anton Gill, whose book *The Journey back from Hell* Amis praises in the "Acknowledgments and Epilogue" as an important bibliographical source for the novel: "It is an extraordinary inspiring treasury of voices, and one grounded and marshalled by the author with both flair and decorum" (Amis, *The Zone of Interest* 305).<sup>7</sup>

In "After the Holocaust" Appelfeld warns of the danger of reducing the Shoah to facts and statistics: "I do wish to point out that the numbers and the facts were the murderers' own well-proven means. Man as a number is one of the horrors of dehumanization. They never asked anyone who he was or what he was. They tattooed a number on his arm" (83-84). In fact, the corpses at the camps were referred to as *Stücke*, pieces, a term used by Doll, the camp commandant, in *The Zone of Interest*. Alice and Roy Eckardt also assert: "The German Nazis taught that the Jew is the *Untermensch*, the contaminator from below. Accordingly, his 'name' is taken away; he does not deserve one; he is only the number tattooed into his

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<sup>5</sup> Ozick has criticized Amis for what she considers to be a manipulation of Levi's words.

<sup>6</sup> Whereas *Time's Arrow* is an experimental novel, with *The Zone of Interest* Amis chose realism as the genre for the novel (Seaman). In fact, some critics have described the book as a traditional historical novel (Ozick; Preston; Wood).

<sup>7</sup> Subsequent references are in-text and belong to this edition.

flesh” (223). Reiter has summarized perfectly well how the arrival procedure deprived the victims of any identity:

The loss of all personal possessions, civilian clothes and body hair, together with the violation of physical integrity (including tattooing in the case of Jews at Auschwitz), made new arrivals brutally aware that they had ceased to exist as individuals with a name and an identity. (21)

The victims who were reduced to mere numbers in the concentration camps have also denounced the fact that the historical accounts of the camps do not do justice to the pain and suffering individuals endured (Reiter 16). In this sense, Hartman considers that while collective memory can contribute to sharing and healing, “fiction is often more effective in finding ways for the outsider to identify with what happened in a deeply personal if precarious way” (34). And this is precisely what Amis does with the female victims in the novel: they are not anonymous figures, but characters with a defined personality who in different ways make the reader aware of their predicament in Auschwitz and allow him/her to establish a connection with them.

Amis’ concern with the female victims is very relevant, since in the last decades feminist scholars have argued for the need to engage with the notion of gender if we want to have a better understanding of the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> They reject the accusations put forward by scholars and writers that by focusing on gender and not only on race, they are trivializing the importance of the Holocaust or ignoring the Nazis’ hatred of the Jews. They admit that for the Nazis race was more important than gender—“All Jews, regardless of who they were, were intended to die” (Waxman 14)—but this does not mean that gender should be disregarded, since women’s experiences differed from those of men. Waxman has argued that it is precisely because of its uniqueness that the Holocaust is “an especially revealing example of gender in action” (8). Furthermore, and this is relevant to this article, Waxman states that since more people were murdered at Auschwitz than at any other camp, Auschwitz “forms a useful – if horrific – test case for exploring gender in the Holocaust” (84).

Amis contributes to a better knowledge of women’s lives at Auschwitz by creating four female victims. The first one is “a compliant Jehovah’s Witness suitably called Humilia” (Ozick), who works as a housemaid for the Dolls. As Rees has explained, the SS officers needed domestic slaves, but they had to be sure that they would not try to escape or hurt their families. They solved the problem by employing Jehovah’s Witnesses who because of their religious teachings were defined by their dependability and equanimity (Gill 49).

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<sup>8</sup> In *Women in the Holocaust* Waxman offers a very interesting account of the vindication of a more woman-centred approach to Holocaust studies as well as the opposition it has received.

The second victim is Alisz Seisser, a Gypsy, the widow of a German Nazi sergeant. Although it is true that the Jews were treated in a more brutal way than the other prisoners, the Nazis' treatment of the Gypsies was not much better. In fact, their living conditions in the camp were similar to those of the Jews: "But conditions in the gypsy camp soon became amongst the worst in Auschwitz. Overcrowding combined with lack of food and water meant that disease was rife, particularly typhus and the skin disease called noma, and many thousands died" (Rees 313).<sup>9</sup> Both the Jews and the Gypsies were the *Untermenschen*, the sub-humans. As Thomsen says in the novel: "Poles were of animal status, but they weren't insects or bacteria, like the Russian POWs, the Jews, and now also the Roma and Sinti – the Alisz Seissers of this world" (258). Very few young children survived in the camps, because the vast majority were either Jews or Gypsies.

The next two victims are Jewish. Whereas one of them, Dr Luxemburg, is a doctor who is forced to collaborate with the Nazis, Esther is the most subversive character in the novel, since she refuses to be dominated by the oppressors. In this article we are going to focus on these two characters and use the witnesses' testimonies and the studies on the Holocaust, with special attention to those who offer a gender perspective, to show how Amis succeeds in giving the readers a faithful picture of the experience of women at Auschwitz. Unlike Szmul, whose feelings and thoughts we have access to and who is the moral consciousness of the novel (Kakutani), the female victims are seen through the lens of the male perpetrators. Dr Luxemburg and Esther offer us a devastating picture of the Nazis' brutality and their lack of empathy, but in the case of Esther Amis goes even further: by creating a character who ridicules her oppressors and defeats them, Amis gives some poetic justice to the victims.

### 3. DR LUXEMBURG: THE DEATH OF THE SOUL

Amis has argued that one of the things that interests him most about Auschwitz is that, as survivors have constantly asserted, you do not know yourself until you find yourself in extreme circumstances. In normal life you only see about five per cent of another person and of yourself: "It's only in dire extremis that you actually find out the extent of your courage, whether you're prepared to make others suffer for your advantage. Even among victims. It's a very frightening thing the idea of finding out who you really are" (Stadlen). An Auschwitz survivor describes this reality: "[T]he soul was stripped naked and showed itself for what it was, better or worse" (Gill 516). In fact, in the novel the male victim, Szmul, the perpetrator, Doll, and the collaborator, Thomsen, reinforce the idea that in Auschwitz you discover who you really are. Szmul uses the legend of the king who commissioned a wizard to create a magic mirror that shows your soul, who you really are. Of course, no one can look at it without turning away: "I find that the KZ is that mirror. The KZ is

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<sup>9</sup> On the fate of the female Sinti and Roma in concentration camps see Milton, "Hidden Lives: Sinti and Roma Women".

that mirror, but with one difference. You can't turn away" (33). Doll shares the same thoughts: "And it's true what they say, here in the KL: No one knows themselves. Who are you? You don't know. Then you come to the Zone of Interest, and it tells you who you are" (68). And Thomsen also realizes at the end of the novel that the zone of interest is not just a Nazi euphemism for the area surrounding Auschwitz: "We all discovered, or helplessly revealed, who we were. Who somebody really was. *That* was the zone of interest" (285, italics in the original).

Survivors not only insist on the fact that you do not know your real personality until you find yourself in a place like Auschwitz, but claim that you cannot judge those who collaborated with the Nazis, because you do not know what you would have done if you had been in the same situation. As this Holocaust survivor states:

I was very lucky that I was able to survive without its being at the expense of others. I cannot make any judgment of collaborators, because I do not know how I would have reacted if they'd said to me, give as such-and-such names and we'll see you better fed. I was lucky to be spared that temptation. Collaborators were wrong, but if it had truly been a question of survival, would I have been strong enough to resist? (Gill 227)

Like this witness, those prisoners who did not find themselves in a situation that made them cross the moral boundaries are grateful that they were spared the sense of guilt and shame. They ask themselves what they would have done if they had been tempted to collaborate in order to survive. Levi, himself an Auschwitz survivor and to whom, amongst others, the novel is dedicated, describes the survivor's feelings very well:

No, you find no obvious transgressions, you did not usurp anyone's place, you did not beat anyone (but would you have had the strength to do so?), you did not accept positions (but none were offered to you...), you did not steal anyone's bread; nevertheless, you cannot exclude it. ("Shame" 81)

Levi argues that we should not judge those who belong to what he calls the "grey zone", those who collaborated in different ways with their oppressors ("The Grey Zone" 40-41). Levi emphasises that, although there were "grey" people who were ready to compromise, we should not and cannot confuse them with their oppressors. The horrors, humiliations they were subjected to did not leave them much room for choice and it would be illogical to expect them to behave like saints or stoic philosophers. In fact, Levi points out that the "privileged" prisoners were degraded by the system and that "the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible" ("The Grey Zone" 39). Alice and Roy Eckardt give us an illuminating explanation of the way in which the Nazis destroyed the soul of the prisoners who were forced to collaborate with them:

At the heart of the Endlösung is the utilization of Jews as officially-determined agents to revile and torture their fellow-Jews. The Jew is turned into the accomplice



of his executioners. The Endlösung is ultimate degradation. It is the attempted dehumanization of the Jew and the torture-process that makes it possible. The Endlösung is total mental, physical, and spiritual breakdown. (223)

Gill has explained that, although it might be thought that the prisoner-doctors were among the most fortunate because at least their work had some meaning, the fact is that they could find themselves tragically compromised by their Nazi oppressors (138). One of the doctors he interviewed, Elie Cohen, collaborated with the Germans. While he was in Westerbork he decided who was fit or unfit for the transport to Auschwitz and then in Auschwitz he helped SS doctors choose the Jewish patients who were considered no longer worthy of medical treatment and thus were condemned to the gas chamber. Cohen confesses again and again during the interview that he cannot escape the guilt he feels, because he was a collaborator and did what he was told. He admits that he cooperated because, above all, he wanted to live (441).<sup>10</sup>

Amis confronts the fate of the prisoner-doctors in *The Zone of Interest* through the character of Miriam Luxemburg,<sup>11</sup> who is of Polish-German origin: “She was a rare bird, a Judin Prominent in the SS-Hygienic Institute (the SS-HI), 1 of several prisoner doctors who, under close supervision of course, did lab work on bacteriology and experimental sera” (231). Dr Luxemburg has been in Auschwitz for two years:

Now women do not on the whole age gracefully in the KL – but it’s chiefly complete lack of food that does that (and even hunger, chronic hunger, can wipe away all the feminine essences in 6 or 7 months). Dr Luxemburg looked about 50, and was probably about 30; but it wasn’t malnutrition that had reduced her hair to a kind of mould and turned her lips outside in. She had some flesh on her and, moreover, seemed tolerably clean. (231)

In this passage Amis wants to make the reader aware of the fact that, as we saw above, many collaborators were destroyed and degraded by having to work together with their oppressors. Dr Luxemburg belongs to the grey zone, to this group of people who had no choice but to help the Nazis if they wanted to survive in an ignominious world. Van Alphen has explained this phenomenon as follows: “The situation was defined by the *lack* of choice. One just followed humiliating impulses that killed one’s subjectivity but safeguarded one’s life” (31, italics in the original). The so-called Waffen-SS and Police Hygiene Institute at Auschwitz (*Hygiene Institut der Waffen-SS und Polizei Auschwitz*) performed hygienic and bacteriological work and camp prisoners who were specialists in bacteriology, pathological anatomy, biology and chemistry did most of the laboratory work. They experimented with

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<sup>10</sup> Levi himself has explained that the first rule he learnt in Auschwitz was that you take care of yourself first of all (“Shame” 78-79).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, her name is not casual. Doll tells us that she is said to be the niece of Rosa Luxemburg, “the famous Marxist ‘intellectual’” (231).

serums and chemicals to prove their effectiveness and both Jews and Gypsies were used for these trials. Brustad writes about the latter:

Many of these medical assaults were performed by SS doctors in barrack no. 32, where everything from the taking of blood and urine samples in connection with experiments on typhus and other endemic diseases to the murder of prisoners to obtain organs for experiments and quasi-scientific research were conducted.

Dr Luxemburg is aware of the fact that with her research she is contributing to the suffering and torture of her own. The sense of guilt has broken her soul and her body reflects her inner death. This woman who is morally and ethically broken is again asked to collaborate with the oppressors when Doll tells her that she has to do an abortion. Doll is presented in the novel as a buffoon (Oates; Reich), a clown, who is considered an incompetent by his colleagues and is despised by his wife, Hannah, who is aware of the atrocities that are being committed in the camp. The fact that she is the strong one in the relationship is a clear subversion of the role usually played by a camp commandment's wife. This is how Hannah describes her husband: "And he was so coarse, and so...prissy, and so ugly, and so cowardly, and so stupid" (298). Doll himself admits that he is afraid of her and that he cannot discipline her. She even gives him black eyes which, as Doll himself admits, "seriously detract from my aura of infallible authority" (58) and makes him feel "like a pirate or a clown in a pantomime" (59).<sup>12</sup> And because he cannot control his own wife, who even refuses to have sex with him, Doll decides to start a relationship with the beautiful Alisz Seisser, a Gypsy. She is powerless and terrified, because she is aware of her vulnerability: "Alisz was mortally terrified" (49), "For some reason she was white with dread" (71), "the pale, limp, terrified figure of Alisz Seisser" (86). Doll, who is aware of her defenceless, decides to use his power as a Nazi officer to take advantage of her. Doll's treatment of her is so denigrating and abominable, that he even jokes about the tattoo on her arm: "And is that your phone number? Just joking. Nicht?" (127). Unfortunately, Alisz gets pregnant<sup>13</sup> and Doll knows that if someone finds out, it would be the end of his career: "This is a matter of the gravest moment. I hope you understand that. Fraternizing with a Haftling's serious enough. But *Rassenschande*...Insult to the blood" (223). Doll's cruelty emerges once again

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<sup>12</sup> Some critics have emphasised Amis' comic and satirical approach to masculinity in his novels (Setz; Gwózdź). It is very interesting that in "Masculinity and Pornography" Gwózdź uses the term grotesque to refer to the shortcomings of the two opposite masculinities that are being satirized in *London Fields*, because in *The Zone of Interest* Doll becomes more delusional and grotesque as the novel advances. Amis has admitted that he based the character of Doll on Rudolf Höss. Amis read the biography Höss wrote in his death cell in Poland and he found it fascinating, like a Nabokov novel in the sense that the narrator is unreliable, mendacious and utterly unaware of himself (Dodd).

<sup>13</sup> One of the consequences of lack of food was that women ceased to menstruate. Doll refers to this reality when he explains why one is seldom tempted to have a relationship with a female prisoner: "[...] so few of the women menstruate or have any hair. If you get desperate – well" (125). Alisz gets pregnant because Doll takes great care that she receives enough food so she retains her beauty and weight.

when he tells her that if she reveals to anyone what has happened, it would be her word against his: “And you’re a subhuman” (223). And while Dr Luxemburg is performing the abortion, Doll cannot help showing his lack of empathy and scruples: “Oh brighten up, Alisz. A clean termination. It’s something you should celebrate [...] Now can you pull yourself together, young lady, on your own steam? Or d’you need another slap in the face?” (262).

This sense of vulnerability, of humiliation, that Alizs experiences and which allows Amis to transmit to the reader the brutality of the Nazi officers towards their victims, is also shared by Dr Luxemburg. The main difference is that whereas in the case of Alizs there is a violation of the body and the soul, there is nothing sexual in Doll’s relationship with Dr Luxemburg. In fact, his treatment of her and Szmul is the same. He demeans both and has no scruples to mock their unbearable pain. But the reason he has chosen Dr Luxemburg is because she is a woman: female doctors were the ones who performed secret abortions in Auschwitz. Doll knows that there can be complications with the procedure and this is why he asks the doctor to have “Sodium evipan. Or phenol. A simple cardiac injection...” (232), just in case things go wrong.<sup>14</sup> Dr Luxemburg is dismayed by Doll’s words and the commandment takes advantage of her moral vulnerability to exercise all his cruelty on her:

‘...Oh, stare no so, “Doktor”. You’ve selected, haven’t you. You’ve done selections. You’ve separated out’

‘That has sometimes been asked of me, yes, sir.’ (232)

The selection of prisoners as they arrived at Auschwitz was “one of the most infamous procedures associated with Auschwitz” (Rees 141) or, as Boris, a Nazi officer, puts it in the novel: “The most eerie bit’s the selection” (4). The weak ones—women with children, elderly people—were sent directly to the gas chamber, whereas those fit for work were kept alive.<sup>15</sup> As Reiter has explained, the selection process was so devoid of any meaning that it became “the touchstone of the viability of metaphor in the concentration camp texts” (118). The whole procedure was so terrifying and nonsensical that survivors could not find any images to refer to it.

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<sup>14</sup> Because Dr Luxemburg is helping Doll, he makes sure that she has all the medicaments she needs. The situation of female doctors in camps was usually different, since they lacked instruments and medicaments. In fact, when Doll tells Alisz that a prisoner-doctor is going to do the procedure, she panics, because she believes that she only has toolkits (227).

<sup>15</sup> Most female scholars have argued that the fact that women with children were sent directly to the gas chambers on arriving at the camps shows that gender played a role during the selection (Weitzman and Ofer; Milton “Women and the Holocaust”; Waxman). I doubt that this was the case. Firstly, as Karwowska has explained, the state of the body was the first criteria for the selection. Those who looked young and healthy had a chance to survive (67). In fact, in the novel Doll gets disappointed when he realizes that a girl “in the pink of health” (23) is with child. Secondly, the Nazis soon realized that it would go against their own interest to separate mothers away from their children because of the emotional disturbance it would cause (Rees 168). In fact, Doll refers to this reality in the novel (73).

The SS doctors played a very important role in the process of extermination, since they were the ones who decided who lived or died on arriving at the camp. According to Rees, there were two reasons for their active participation in the selection process. The first one was merely practical: doctors could at a glance decide who was fit for work. The second one was philosophical: “a sense was created that the killing was not an arbitrary act of prejudice, but a scientific necessity. Auschwitz was not a place of indiscriminate slaughter, but a measured and calm contribution to the health of the state” (Rees 230). Of course, by reminding Dr Luxemburg that she has collaborated with the SS in deciding who lives or dies, Doll is inflicting another wound on her dying soul.

Nevertheless, Amis shows that those who are in the grey zone are still capable of showing compassion. When Doll asks Dr Luxemburg to perform the abortion, she does not ask for food in return for obeying Doll’s orders, since privileged prisoners in the camp had a better diet. She only wants 800 cigarettes to aid her brother “who was struggling, somewhat, in a penal Kommando in the uranium mines beyond Furstengrube” (232). She even risks her life to do some good. In fact, when Doll tells her that he knows about her secretly helping women give birth to their babies: “She didn’t reply. For she risked death every day, every hour, just by being what she was. Yes, I thought: that’ll put a few bags under your eyes and a few notches on your mouth” (232). What Amis does not tell in the novel, maybe because, as Pine has pointed out, there is a tendency in literature to overlook some of the desperate and degrading actions taken by female victims in order to survive, is that the inmate female doctors who helped the prisoners give birth, very often also killed the new-born in order to save the mother’s life: “In the chaotic scheme of values created for the victims by the Germans, a birth moment is a dead moment” (Langer, “Gendered Suffering?” 357). Sometimes the babies were poisoned, others they were smothered or drowned in a bucket of water (Waxman 98). Of course, these experiences were devastating for both the mothers and doctors. Nevertheless, what is relevant here is that Amis is showing the reader how the people in the grey zone tried to help those in distress whenever they could, or as Cohen has asserted: “One did what one could” (Gill 440), by which he means that sometimes he was able to aid people and thus find some justification or meaning in what he did. Szmul seems to echo Cohen’s words in the novel when he explains that one of the reasons for going on living is that “we save a life (or prolong a life) at the rate of one per transport” (34). They would tell the young men to say that they were eighteen years old and had a trade, so that they would not be selected for the gas chamber. Interestingly enough, Doll argues with great sarcasm that what Dr Luxemburg does with the pregnant women is “heroic” and the fact is that he is right, because for someone like her to risk what is most precious, her own life, transforms her for a short while into a heroine.

## 4. ESTHER: A VINDICATION OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

In the "Acknowledgments and Epilogue" Amis makes reference to the bibliography he used to write the novel and tells the reader: "I adhere to that which happened, in all its horror, its desolation, and its bloody-minded opacity" (310). Although this is true about most of the characters and situations in the novel, in the case of Esther Kubis, a fifteen-year old Jewess, Amis takes more liberties. She is the most subversive character in the novel, constantly challenging the rules without paying a high prize for it, unlike the other inmates who dared to resist one way or another. As Waxman reminds us, women were punished even for minor misdemeanours, such as working slowly (103), let alone for trying to escape, subverting the rules or refusing to comply. In this sense, Milton has pointed out that survival in the camp depended on a prisoner's ability to remain inconspicuous ("Women and the Holocaust" 314). Esther is a very attractive young woman who would not have stood a chance in the world of the concentration camp in which no transgression went unpunished.

Because of Esther's good looks, Waffen SS officer Boris Eltz becomes sexually obsessed with her and this is why he protects her by rescuing her from the *Scheissekommando* and having her transferred to "Kalifornia", a euphemism for "Canada". On their arrival at Auschwitz the prisoners were told to leave their suitcases and belongings and assured that they would pick them up afterwards. Of course, this never happened. The prisoners' possessions were taken away from them and sorted out in an area of the camp known as "Canada", because this country was thought to be a fantasy destination, a country of great riches. As Rees has explained, even the most intimate possessions were stolen.

Mostly female inmates worked in Canada and one of the survivors has explained that they were told not only to fold the clothing, but to search every piece looking for valuables: diamonds, gold, coins, dollars, foreign currency from all over Europe (Rees 224).<sup>16</sup> In fact, in one of the scenes of the novel Boris explains to Thomsen that Esther is looking for precious stones in a bucket of toothpaste (41). Women working in "Canada" enjoyed a privileged position in Auschwitz since they could grow their hair out and had better living conditions. Rees has pointed out that proportionally more women survived Auschwitz as a result of being transferred to "Canada" than almost anywhere else (244). As a survivor has asserted: "Actually, working in 'Canada' saved my life because we had food, we got water and we could take a shower there" (Rees 224). Food was really of paramount importance in the concentration camp, because it was a key element in the fight for survival in the camp, a reality corroborated by the witnesses. Levi has explained that death by hunger or by diseases caused by hunger was the prisoners' normal destiny, which could only be avoided "with additional food, and to obtain it a large or small privilege was necessary" ("The Grey Zone" 37). It was just a matter of life and death,

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<sup>16</sup> A survivor emphasises the absurdity of the whole situation when she points out that if the Nazis hated the Jews so much, "why didn't they feel an aversion to our belongings?" (Rees 141).

as Appelfeld states: “The selfish grasping at every crumb of bread and scrap of clothing, that grasping, which was sometimes ugly, was a kind of denial of death” (85-86). Prisoners stole food, usually mangels or potatoes, and they were brutally punished for it. There were also what Gill defines as “animalistic fights” during the distribution of food (139). Levi describes this reality very well: “We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment” (“Shame” 75).<sup>17</sup>

Because of the lack of food most prisoners were walking skeletons. All prisoners looked alike, since, as Gill has pointed out, all individual characteristics were removed from the face (397). A camp prisoner confirms this hard truth: “We all looked the same, bald and thin – it’s outstanding how quickly individual characteristics disappear when you starve” (Gill 421). The reference to the lack of hair is highly relevant, because on entering the camp both men’s and women’s hair was shaven, which contributed to erasing the sexual differences between them: “One would not distinguish between female and male body, especially from a distance” (Karwowska 66). As Waxman has explained, the removal of hair was especially traumatic for women, because it was a consciously humiliating process of dehumanization (89).<sup>18</sup> They felt like they were “animals” or “subhuman” (Waxman 89), that they had ceased to exist as human beings.<sup>19</sup> But although they were dehumanized, they were not desexualised: “Gender, in that sense, was the last thing to survive the camps” (Waxman 91). Women were sexually humiliated and even became victims of rape in concentration camps, which, as a survivor has argued, is really surprising taking into consideration that they were “starving, dirty, ragged women” (Pine 47).

Esther is everything but grateful towards Boris for having her transferred to “Kalifornia” and thus having better living conditions:

‘And for this she hates you.’

‘She hates me.’ Bitterly he shook his head. ‘Well I’ll give her something to hate me for.’ (39)

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly enough, as Reiter has explained, the experience the prisoners were going through was so different from anything that had happened to them before, that they lacked the adequate linguistic means to describe the hunger they suffered and the meaning food had for them (18).

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs argues that the hair exhibit at Auschwitz contributes to both dehumanizing and eroticising the victims: “Because women’s hair is a potent symbol of female sexuality, this fragment of the human body, removed and disconnected from the individual, contributes even further to the sexualization of women’s memory” (221-2).

<sup>19</sup> Waxman points out that the Nazis also cut women’s hair for practical reasons: the hair collected was exported to Germany and it was a way to control the spread of lice in the camps (89).

Esther despises Boris firstly because she knows he has done it for selfish reasons. Whereas the majority of women prisoners were malnourished, had no hair and therefore became anonymous figures, those working in “Canada” retained some of their beauty because of their privileged situation. This explains why they became targets for members of the SS, who sometimes sexually abused them (Rees 263-267).<sup>20</sup> Secondly, Esther is aware of the fact that in a sense she is betraying her own people by going through their belongings. In a quite moving paragraph, Amis gives us a list of the items that were confiscated:

Beetling heaps of rucksacks, kitbags, holdalls, cases and trunks (these last adorned with enticing labels of travel – redolent of frontier posts, misty cities), like a vast bonfire awaiting the torch. A stack of blankets as high as a three-storey building: no princess, be she never so delicate, would feel a pea beneath twenty, thirty thousand thicknesses. And all around fat hillocks of pots and pans, of hairbrushes, shirts, coats, dresses, handkerchiefs – also watches, spectacles, and all kinds of prostheses, wigs, dentures, deaf-aids, surgical boots, spinal supports. The eye came last to the mound of children’s shoes, and the sprawling mountains of prams, some of them just wooden troughs on wheels, some of them all curve and contour, carriages for little dukes, little duchesses. (41)

Esther could not have been indifferent to what all these items meant for their owners and the stories they told. She knew that most of the extra food those working in “Canada” had access to came from the prisoners’ possessions and she must certainly have found it wholly repugnant. Some women prisoners used their good looks to have a better life in the camps. This was, for instance, the case of Henia, a friend of one of the survivors interviewed by Gill. She enjoyed a privileged position in Auschwitz because her beauty caught the attention of the commandant of the Sosnowiec ghetto (Gill 191). In this sense, Waxman, who believes that a female approach to women’s lives during the Holocaust involves re-examining experiences such as consensual sex and coerced sex, has argued that these women who consented to sex in order to survive are an example of females’ ability to make strategic choices in extreme circumstances. Even if their decision goes against our own moral values, we have to understand that often it was the only way to stay alive. Milton explains it very well: “Traditional anxieties and guilt about sex were not applicable in the world of total subservience reinforced by terror in the camps” (“Women and the Holocaust” 316).<sup>21</sup> Esther, however, refuses to exploit her attractiveness to make Boris find her even more desirable, because this would imply collaborating with her oppressor. Thus, when she is summoned by Boris, she challenges him and laughs at him by walking in a quite “unattractive” way: “Fifteen years old, and Sephardic, I thought (the Levantine colouring), and finely and tautly

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<sup>20</sup> Sometimes love relationships between German guards and women prisoners developed in “Canada” (Rees 243).

<sup>21</sup> Unlike these scholars, Chatwood prefers to include “sex for survival” in the category of sexual violence, because she believes that if a woman is put in a situation where she has to choose between starving to death or engage in “consensual” sex, it is obvious that the choice is made in a situation where coercion is present (172).

made, and athletic, she somehow managed to trudge, to clump into the room; it was almost satirical, her leadenness of gait” (39). The Nazis knew that people were hearing rumours about Auschwitz and the atrocities committed there and they decided to force prisoners to write postcards explaining their good conditions in the camp (Jeffreys 265). This is what Boris does when she dictates Esther a postcard in which the predicament in Auschwitz is described in very idyllic terms:

*Dear Mama [...] My friend Esther's writing this for me [...] How to describe life in the agricultural station [...] The work is pretty strenuous [...] But I love the countryside and the open air [...] The conditions are really very decent [...] Our bedrooms are plain but comfy [...] And in October they'll be given out these gorgeous eiderdowns. For the colder nights [...] The food is simple [...] but wholesome and plentiful [...] And everything is immaculately clean [...] huge farmstead bathrooms...with great big free-standing tubs.* (39-40, italics in the original)

Of course, Esther does not follow Boris' instructions:

‘All that stuff about the nice food and the cleanliness and the bathtubs. She didn't write down any of that.’ With indignation (at the size and directness of Esther's transgression) Boris went on, ‘She said we were a load of lying murderers! She elaborated on it too. A load of thieving rats and witches and he-goats. Of vampires and graverobbers’. (56-57)<sup>22</sup>

Boris is really infuriated, not only because she has disobeyed his orders, but because she could have put him in a position of danger if his superiors had found out what she had written. Boris is perplexed, he cannot make sense of Esther's subversive behaviour, because when she arrived at the KZ she told him that “*I don't like it here, and I'm not going to die here*” (57, italics in the original), and, obviously, with her attitude she is just endangering her life. She has committed a crime, a sabotage and is confined in the punishment bunker in Block 11. Boris thinks first of getting her some food and water, but then decides that it is better for her to be there for a couple of days so that she learns a lesson. Thomsen asks Boris what they do to people in Block 11: “Nothing. That's the point. Mobius puts it this way: we just let nature take its course. And you wouldn't want to get in the way of nature, would you. Two weeks is the average if they're young” (57). Some of the prisoners transferred to Block 11 were just confined to death by starvation, which, of course, would have been Esther's fate in the real world of Auschwitz.

Esther is released from Block 11 and she is chosen to participate as a dancer in a performance organized by Ilse Grese, the infamous female torturer. Esther is well trained because her mother was *corps de ballet* in Prague. Esther is “their big star” (158) and is therefore on a triple ration of food. As some survivors have confirmed, life for artists–musicians, dancers–was much better in the camp, since they had extra food and they were warm and indoors. One of them, a cellist, even confessed that

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<sup>22</sup> A survivor told Gill that they tried to warn people with their postcards, but they always did it in a way that did not arouse the Nazis' suspicions (512).



he never questioned the morality of playing for the Germans. He was just glad that he enjoyed a privileged situation and had an identity (Gill 471).

But Esther is not so compliant as this cellist: “She’s got very intransigent eyes. And she does have her grievance” (166). Her mother was killed in the Heydrich reprisals and Boris knows that she will not resist the temptation to misbehave in front of the members of the SS. Although Boris warns her of the consequences of her failing on purpose, she is not intimidated: “*I’m going to punish you tonight*” (166, italics in the original). Boris knows that if Ilse Grese realizes that she is trying deliberately to ruin the performance, “she’ll be flogged to death” by her (166). Irma Ilse Ida Grese was Senior SS Superior at Auschwitz and killed an average of thirty people a day. Like other female SS torturers, she was not less brutal than men. She used the most sadistic methods, like throwing dogs at the inmates. Boris teases her when he pretends to be astonished by what people say about her: “An investigator here from Berlin told me you set your dogs on a Greek girl in the woods, just because she wandered off and fell asleep in a hollow. And you know what I did? I laughed in his face. *Not Ilse*, I said. *Not my Ilse*” (167-8, italics in the original).

The great night arrives and Esther fulfils her promise:

Now the wizard began casting his spell, with flinging gestures of the hands, as if freeing them of moisture...Nothing happened. He tried again, and again, and again. Suddenly she twitched; very suddenly she jumped up, and threw the book aside. Blinking, compulsively shrugging, and noisily flat-footed (and often falling over backwards like a plank into Hedwig’s waiting arms), Esther clumped about the stage: a miracle of the uncoordinated, now flopsy, now robotic, with every limb hating every other limb. And comically, painfully ugly. The violins kept on urging and coaxing, but she swooned and swaggered on. (169)

Ilse is getting dangerously impatient with so much “staggering” and “strutting”, when Esther decides to dance and captivates the audience: “Now the charm took hold, the glamour took hold, the magic turned from black to white, the scowl of inanity became a willed but still blissful smile, and she was off and away, she was born and living and free” (170). Boris is absolutely in shock and leaves the room. He is the only one who realizes what Esther has done: she has mocked her oppressors. Initially she was “apeing the slaves. And the guards” and afterwards she expressed her “right to freedom. Her right to love and life” (170). Boris’ reflection on the meaning of Esther’s movements is highly relevant, because, as Reiter has argued, humour in the concentration camps not only helped develop ties of solidarity among the oppressed and allowed them to cope with their harsh reality, but fulfilled the function of critical protest: “Under such conditions, humour strengthened the prisoner’s morale and even permitted them a kind of resistance, however externally ineffective” (124).<sup>23</sup> According to Reiter, this subversive humour

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<sup>23</sup> Morrell has also analysed the critical, cohesive and coping functions that humour fulfilled during the Holocaust.

revealed a desire to rise above the situation in an act of “mental rebellion” that allowed the prisoners to create a counter-reality (128).

It is highly revealing that, although in the aftermath of the novel we learn what has happened to the main characters, Esther’s fate remains a mystery. Thomsen is the last one to see her in May 1933. They are both in a sealed Block: “Esther was serving the final hours of a three-day confinement (without food or water) for not making her bed, or for not making it properly – Ilse Grese was very particular when it came to the making of beds” (275). Esther is gazing at the mountains of the Sudetenland: “Seen in profile, her face wore a frown and a half-smile” (276). Then the door opens and Hedwig Butefisch, Grese’s bumgirl, comes in and she and Esther “wrestled, tickling each other and yelping with laughter” (276). Their little game finishes when Grese tells them to stop: “At once the two girls recollected themselves and straightened up, very sober, and Hedwig marched her prisoner out into the air” (276). This last image is just a figment of the imagination, because in the unique world of the concentration camp Grese would have brutally killed a female prisoner for even a lesser transgression. In Esther’s case, although she is recurrently punished, she is always given the chance to live. She, a Jewess, part of the *Untermenschen* and thus despised by the Nazis, is allowed to play with Ilse’s bumgirl without the torturer flying into a rage and showing the cruelty she is capable of. In fact, Thomsen tells the reader that he is sure Esther kept her promise: “*I’m not going to die here*” (275, italics in the original). In this sense, Esther’s story and only her story, is a clear example of the counterfactual historical novel, which, as Adams has explained, explores alternative possibilities of the past to create a different version of reality. It is true that the character of Esther allows the reader to get information about women’s predicament in Auschwitz, but to believe that someone so subversive, so transgressive as Esther would have survived in the camp is just wishful thinking. Nevertheless, I believe that through Esther Amis is paying tribute to all those women who had the courage to resist in the terrifying world of the concentration camp, a reality which Jacobs believes has been erased in the representation of women at Auschwitz. Jacobs has analysed how women at the concentration camp are remembered as mothers and as embodied subjects of Nazi atrocities. According to Jacobs, the problem with the latter visual frame is that there is a tendency to create a visual narrative of sexual domination, captivity and violation, thus replicating the perpetrator’s gaze:

Like other memories of the Holocaust, the museum at Auschwitz places victimized women at the center of the atrocity narratives, fostering an emotional connection to the past that is filtered through images of women’s powerlessness rather than representations of their heroism. (222)

It is true that we only see Esther through the perpetrator’s gaze, but what makes her such an outstanding character is the fact that she defeats and humiliates her oppressors by challenging their power and refusing to let them crush her spirit. In fact, the reader finishes the novel believing that she achieved her goal: “I’m not going to die here.”

## 5. CONCLUSION

At the end of the novel Thomsen confronts Hannah, Doll's wife, when she claims that she is finished. He tells her that she has no right to complain, because "you were always your husband's victim, but you were never a *victim*" (299, italics in the original).<sup>24</sup> He describes the victims' predicament in order to make her aware of the difference:

But oh yes suffering is. Did you lose your hair and half your body weight? Do you laugh at funerals because there's all this fuss and only one person died? Did your life depend on the state of your shoes? Were your parents murdered? Were your girls? Do you fear uniforms and crowds and naked flames and the smell of wet garbage? Are you terrified of sleep? Does it hurt and hurt and *hurt*? Is there a tattoo on your soul? (299, italics in the original)<sup>25</sup>

The last expression in this quotation was used by an Auschwitz survivor, Valerie, a Jewish painter: "Also, I know and I accept what I fought against for so long: that I cannot be like everybody else. There is a tattoo on my soul" (Gill 511). In the "Afterword" to *Time's Arrow* Amis affirms that the offence was so unique in its cruelty, cowardice and style that "we can see Levi's suicide as an act of ironic heroism [...] My life is mine and mine alone to take" (176). Those survivors who, like Valerie, want to share their painful memories with those who are willing to listen to them, believe that they owe it to those who were murdered during the Holocaust: "and together we remember not only people who no longer exist, but people who have no relatives left to remember them. They only exist in the minds of survivors like us, as shadows [...] That is why I consider it such compelling duty to keep them in my thoughts, and to cherish their memories" (Gill 231). Levi goes so far as to say that survivors are not the witnesses and this is why those who were lucky enough to survive try to "recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned [...] We speak in their stead, by proxy" ("Shame" 84). In *The Zone of Interest* Amis pays homage not only to those who were exterminated in Auschwitz, but also to those who survived an experience, the enormity of which left a tattoo on their souls.

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<sup>24</sup> Ozick seems to echo Thomsen's words when she affirms: "Throughout all the grim chaos, Amis means us to view Hannah as an internal dissident, a melancholy prisoner of circumstances: perhaps even as a highly privileged quasi-*Häftling* powerless to rebel. Though seeing through Doll's cowardice and deception, she conforms, however, grumblingly, to bourgeois life among the chimneys – the dinners, the playgoing, the children's indulgences".

<sup>25</sup> These symptoms that many survivors experienced after they were released from the concentration camp have been referred to as the survivor syndrome, the post-concentration camp syndrome or the disaster syndrome.

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