

Disintegration after Survival:

**Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and
Singer's *Enemies, a Love Story***

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Disintegration after Survival

Elie Wiesel stated that "at Auschwitz, not only man died but also the idea of man." Referring to Wiesel, Alvin Rosenfeld uses the expression "double dying" signifying both the physical extinction of the individual and the collapse of the traditional concept of the human being as well. The Holocaust succeeded in wiping out the lives of millions of people but more significantly, what it did philosophically was to shake the idea of the individual at its foundation. A human being ceased to be what people used to comprehend by the term.

In the fictional context of William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, a Love Story*, I would like to attempt an analysis of how this second phase of double dying takes place in the major characters who have survived the Holocaust. The disintegration of the idea of a unified self is divided into four aspects that the survivor-characters suffer from: 1) nullification of the moral scale 2) guilt feeling 3) sense of dislocation and 4) flight into the world of unreality. As a result of this double dying that the characters experience after the war in New York, they are described as facing another "death" either by suicide or disappearance. Except for the somewhat humorous pathos in Singer's story, the picture of life depicted in the stories is an unhappy one. Yet one of the survivors in Singer's novella seems to point towards a hopeful vision of human existence that defies the double or triple dying.

The dignity of the individual was subjected to humiliation at various times in the course of history both in the West and the East. One of these incidents is the Holocaust, the sacrificing of millions of Jews by the Nazis. Since the end of the World War II some people have tackled in writing the problem of recording Hitler's mass murder. The atrocity is the focus of many types of literature: history, memoirs, novels, short stories, plays, diaries, essays, songs, and so on. Similarly, the languages used are as multiple as the media, including English, German, French, Italian, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and Czech among others. Given the geographical spread of Nazi violence in Europe, the Holocaust literature is naturally quite international and the authors, too, include historians, journalists, philosophers, survivors of the concentration camps, witnesses, and people of other walks of life.

One of the common elements of the Holocaust writings is that they present to us not simply the tragedy of people's physical deaths but also the end of the common concept of person—what a human being is. The idea of the individual as traditionally understood, regardless of nationality, sex, or age, was shaken from its deepest foundation. When six million or more innocent people were systematically put to death in an ingenious homicidal industry, the very idea of the individual was forced to be rethought. The norms that had so far been used to describe the human being in literature also faced a serious challenge. When the philosophical basis against which a person is normally measured dissolves completely, "all narrative forms that posit the reality of persons—rational, educable, morally responsible beings—are undermined and perhaps even invalidated" (Rosenfeld 29). Neither the former tools nor the traditional values make sense for literature dealing with the Holocaust, either directly or indirectly, since the human consciousness, moral view and religious sensitivity have come to an entirely new stage. Elie Wiesel says

that "at Auschwitz, not only man died but also the idea of man" (190).

Here I would like to refer to two novels written by different authors which seem to present to us clear cases of this double dying within the framework of fiction. One is *Enemies, a Love Story* (1972) by Isaac Bashevis Singer and the other is William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1976). Both of these are concerned with Nazi survivors living in peaceful New York after the war. Although neither bears the color of documentation of the concentration camps in its strict sense, both stories deal with the impact of the extraordinary trauma upon human consciousness and behavior. In this sense both novels are similar to Holocaust literature whose attempt is "to express a new order of consciousness, a recognizable shift in being" (Rosenfeld 13).

In the case of *Enemies*, the main character Herman Broder, survivor of Nazi oppression, lives in Brooklyn with Yadwiga, a Polish peasant woman who hid him in Poland at the risk of her own life. Eventually, he marries this uneducated former maid at his home. To his great surprise, his wife Tamara who was supposed to have been killed in Poland appears in New York and succeeds in contacting him. To make the situation more complicated, Herman has a mistress by the name of Masha in the Bronx, another survivor. She desires to get a divorce from her present husband and become officially married to Herman. Herman ends up having three wives. Out of confusion and too much stress, Herman disappears at the end of the story, leaving Tamara to take care of Yadwiga and her baby by Herman. Masha commits suicide.

Styron's *Sophie's Choice* is also a bizarre story of a Polish Catholic survivor, Sophie, living in Brooklyn. She is a highly sophisticated and cultured woman of beauty, who lives with her lover Nathan Landau, who has a serious case of paranoid schizophrenia. Sophie's accounts of her past experiences in the concentration camp form the core of this work. The listener and the narrator is a young Virginian,

Stingo, whose aspiration is to become a writer. Stingo goes through rare experiences as he gradually learns about the Nazis, about Sophie herself and about Nathan. This novel also ends with the deaths of both Sophie and Nathan.

Regardless of the differences of situations, the survivor-characters share certain common characteristic traits which may be summed up as 1) their experience of the collapse of morality 2) sense of guilt 3) uneasiness in the world in which they live and 4) escape into the world of unreality, whether fantasy, fraud, or joke. When we examine the common elements among the survivor-characters of the Holocaust, we can see the process of the disintegration of the self, caused by the collapse of the very idea of the individual human being. The disappearance of Herman and the suicide of Sophie are but external manifestations of the internal death of the idea of the self which has already taken place in the consciousness of these characters. Let us trace the two novels in more detail according to these four points.

The first common characteristic among the survivors is loss of morality. The victims's faith in God either completely disappears or becomes distorted. The harsh ironical view of God of Masha, in *Enemies*, for instance, gives a perfect example. She says, "But if God could allow the Jews of Europe to be killed, what reason is there to think He would prevent the extermination of Jews of America? God doesn't care. . . . If God is almighty and omnipotent, He ought to be able to stand up for His beloved people. If He sits in heaven and stays silent, that means it must bother Him as much as last year's frost" (39). God is likened to someone who "eats human flesh," who allows slaughter to happen (35). He is the one whose desire Hitler put into practice (103). Like a female deer that shows no apparent concern toward the bucks fighting over her, God remains unmoved at the sight of the persecution of Jewry. Masha's conclusion is that if "God can instill such violence in innocent beasts, there is no hope" (40).

Similarly negative is Herman Broder's concept of God. Excepting the label he puts on God once, "almighty sadist" (188), his is mostly a powerless deity, "only a helpless godlet, a kind of heavenly Jew among the heavenly Nazis" (115-16). Or at times Herman completely defies the existence of deity. At least there is no covenantal relationship between Herman the Jew and God. In fact he insists that he has no use for God. Yet, in his final confusion and trouble, Herman chooses to escape to the God of the Torah, to become Jewish in religion. His return to Judaism may be understood as an outcome of his distrust in philosophy which totally failed to integrate morality and the actual life :

One could be a Spinozist and a Nazi; one could be versed in Hegel's phenomenology and be a Stalinist; one could believe in monads, in the *Zeitgeist*, in blind will, in European culture, and still commit atrocities. (156)

Likewise, Tamara, his first wife, now negates the existence of God after all she saw at the concentration camp and the death of their own children. She despises those who are resigned to "God's will" in all tragedies and hence can survive without a qualm of conscience (96).

In the case of Sophie, the central figure in *Sophie's Choice*, the break from religion is more definitive. She grew up in a devout Polish Catholic family of upper middle class in Cracow with her father, a Professor of law, and mother who was highly musical and cultured. But the sudden arrest of both her father and her husband, and later her own arrest and the "choice" she was forced to make at the camp between her young daughter and son to be sent to immediate death, she loses faith completely. She says to her confidant in her broken English, "Stingo, if He exist. A monster!" (196). Also she says :

I said that I knew that Christ had turned His face away from me and I could no longer pray to Him as I did once in Cracow. . . . And when she [a Jewish woman] asked how

I know that Christ have turned His face away from me, I said I just knew, I just knew that only a God, only a Jesus who had no pity and who no longer care for me could permit the people I loved to be killed and let me live with such guilt. (87)

Sophie feels as if she sees God turning His back on her: "I felt I could actually see Him go, turning His back on me like some great beast and go crashing away through the leaves" (344-45).

Such total collapse of one's faith and beliefs gives rise to distorted conscience and human behavior. In order to show her disgust with God, Sophie even has tried to commit the greatest sacrilege she could think of—to commit suicide in a church. Often, these choices of behaviors and of moral stance are made painfully out of one's personal experiences of agony. In the abnormal atmosphere of the concentration camps where human lives are regarded as trash, where food and life become one's sole object at the cost of everything, the whole gamut of values disintegrates. The normal scale such as mutual respect, love, and consideration ceases to operate in one's consciousness. Even before entering the concentration camp, Sophie, thirsty for good music, momentarily thinks that if her friend and underground resistance fighter Wanda could give her music, she could sell her soul to join the activity in spite of her obligation to her children.

In the reversal of values and confusion of moral and philosophical priority, the characters desperately struggle so as to live in a world that has some logic of its own. Hence, in order to explain sensibly the reality they witness, some of them negate God. The most pathetic effort to give order to one's personal life is described in *Sophie's Choice* by Stingo the narrator. Sophie reveals to him the story of the day of her arrival at Auschwitz. While waiting in line for the selection, Sophie attracts the attention of a SS doctor Jemand von Niemand. Instead of remaining quiet, Sophie blurts out that she is not a Jew but a German-speaking Catholic Pole who was

brought here by mistake. The drunken doctor says, "So you believe in Christ the Redeemer? . . . Did He not say, 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me'?" (483). After this question he gives an order to stunned Sophie to choose one of her children to be sent away to the gas chamber. A refusal means the death of both of her children. In her hysteria, Sophie pushes away her girl, Eva. Later Sophie learns that the doctor was once a steadfast believer whose desire to enter the ministry was thwarted by his father.

Stingo attempts a fascinating interpretation of this SS doctor's apparently cruel act. Judging from the fact that the doctor was drunk, which is dangerous conduct for a SS officer on duty, Stingo assumes that Jemand von Niemand was going through a personal crisis. He was in the position to select the victims for the gas chamber day after day. A heavy burden of conscience was laid on him and the only possible psychological escape for him might have been to deaden his sense of sin. Consequently, he performed his duty monotonously "in a vacuum of sinless and businesslike godlessness" (486). The negation of the feeling of sinfulness eventually destroyed the sense of sin within his mind. Where there is no sin, there is no need of God. Thus it seems that he did not have to suffer from his guilt. But when Sophie's mention of religion stirred him, the doctor, with his instinctive moral desire, struggled to re-establish his connection with God. Stingo's analysis is that the doctor first wanted to commit a sin so that, paradoxically, he could go back to Him:

Was it not supremely simple, then, to restore his belief in God, and at the same time to affirm his human capacity for evil, by committing the most intolerable sin that he was able to conceive? Goodness could come later. But first a great sin. One whose glory lay in its subtle magnanimity—a choice. (486-87).

Thus denial of deity and faith is seen among both the oppressors and the oppressed alike. Yet in either case, the negation may be

regarded as a cry of humans placed in an unthinkable disorder of moral values—an effort to give meaning to the hellish world they inhabit and to rescue themselves from too much agony, especially the sense of guilt.

The second characteristic of the Holocaust victims, namely guilt, goes hand in hand with the distortion of values. Characters are described as feeling guilty of having been conspirators and collaborators with the Nazis, guilty of having survived when many of their family and friends were exterminated, guilty of not having acted according to their convictions. They are ashamed of having been cowards and escapees. As Sophie confesses to Stingo, in spite of the fact that her choices of behavior were mostly taken out of physical necessity, there remains an inerasable sense of guilt deep within her heart:

“So there is one thing that is still a mystery to me. And that is why, since I know all this and I know the Nazis turned me into a sick animal like all the rest, I should feel so much guilt over all the things I done there. And over just being alive. This guilt is something I cannot get rid of and I think I never will.” (286)

Sophie suffers terribly from her memory of brave Wanda who committed herself to the resistance movement until death, whereas she, mother of two children, had to think of the safe way of non-involvement with the underground organization. Sophie blames herself for having worked later as a secretary to the SS Rudolf Höss who dispatched orders for the extermination of the Jews. She feels herself to be thoroughly soiled since she in her effort to save her son in the camp planned to make the best use of her father's anti-semitic pamphlet whose content she so much detested philosophically. Much later, when Stingo enters her life in post-war New York, after an attempted suicide in the sea, Sophie “smitten by a convulsion of ragged grief” moans, “Oh God, . . . why didn't you let me die? Why didn't you let me drown? I've been so *bad*—I've been so awful

bad! Why didn't you let me drown?" (364).

In *Enemies*, likewise, Masha and her mother more than once regret the fact that they are alive. Here in America they are finally enjoying life and an abundance of food, whereas many were put to ignoble deaths and starvation during the war. They feel ashamed of their life. And Herman, "lacking the courage to commit suicide," . . . "had to shut his eyes, stop up his ears, close his mind, live like a worm" in New York (23). The numbing of senses is the only solution to cover up the guilt feeling. "Those without courage to make an end to their existence have only one other way out: to deaden their consciousness, choke their memory, extinguish the last vestige of hope" (33).

As for the third point of the characteristics of the Nazi survivors, there is a general sense of "out-of-joint-ness" or "ill-at-easeness" with the world of reality. Herman admits, "Anyone who's gone through all that I have is no longer a part of this world" (28). He likens himself to the Talmudic sage, Choni Hamagol, who is said to have slept for many years and, when he woke up, not to have wanted to live any more, finding the world so changed. For this matter his first wife Tamara is the same. She says, "I really no longer think of myself as being part of this world" (95). She is in a sense "a corpse" (126), a "phantom" that has returned to Herman (122) which cannot be disturbed by anything of this world. All things have already happened with the Holocaust. Holocaust is the summary of all civilization, under whose shadow no human absurdity or sin can surpass its scale. Masha, too, feels that after her experiences with the Nazis, nothing, not even the distinction between death and life, makes much difference and her mother also feels that her heart which has gone through the excess of pains has lost its capacity to feel hurt any more.

Strangely numb and detached, abandoning all claims in life, and yet at the same time suffering keenly, these victims continue to live in the modern post-war city as if in a daze. Typically, Tamara still

suffers from insomnia at night. Her dead children come back to her in her dreams. And Herman cannot get rid of fear which was deeply imbedded in his consciousness during the war. Even now instinctively he searches for his hiding place from the Nazis: "Could a bunker be dug somewhere nearby? Could he hide himself in the steeple of the Catholic church? He had never been a partisan, but now he often thought of positions from which it could be possible to shoot" (20-21). Or, if it is not the threat coming from the imaginary Nazi forces residing in New York, he suffers also from a vague sense of imminent catastrophe: "Would not the entire planet disintegrate sooner or later?" (124). He remains aloof from his neighboring Jews, from the comfortable looking Jews in resort places and even from his old friends and relatives.

Feeling out of place, out of joint with themselves and with their surroundings, disorientated, it is natural for some of the survivors to find it hard to maintain their independence. They have lost the power of self-management. As Masha confesses, the unexpected effect of the concentration camp is the inability on the part of the survivors to do things of their own free will even after the war is over: "The Nazis forced me to do things for so long that I can't do anything of my own free will any more. If I want to do something, I have to imagine that a German is standing over me with a gun" (37). In Herman's case, it is his first wife Tamara who decides to take his life into her hands and thus become a sort of manager. "Let me be your manager. Put yourself entirely in my hands. Pretend that you're in a concentration camp and must do whatever you're told to do. I'll tell you what to do and you do it. I'll find you a job too. In your state, you're in no position to help yourself" (219).

The loss of spiritual autonomy is very evident in Sophie, too. She shows an unhealthy dependency on Nathan. A drug-addict and paranoid schizophrenic himself, Nathan occasionally breaks into furious violence in his treatment of Sophie. He inflicts not only physical pain but also psychological affliction on her, knowing diabolically

well when and how to hurt her most. This period of incredible rage, anger, jealousy is followed by a more tender time of friendliness and affection. Nathan's abnormal psychic fluctuation between the two opposing moods does not affect Sophie's devotion toward Nathan. She fears his disappearance and departure from her. She worries that he might die without taking her with him. Sophie's admiration for Nathan's cleverness soars up even to the point of adoration. His mimicry of different dialogues, dialects and accents, his scientific knowledge, and great achievement in his research, all help build up Sophie's inordinate sense of awe toward him. Truly Nathan is a savior figure for Sophie. Just as he controls her as her dialogue and language coach, so he has a total grasp on Sophie's personal life and choice. A sense of indebtedness and love increase within Sophie. As if to obliterate the nightmare of the past, Sophie plunges her whole existence into a self-destructive relationship with Nathan. There is something suicidal about her behavior in her life with her lover. For Sophie, who witnessed in the camp "death-in-life" which is "more terrible than death" (236), the only certain thing to affirm her identity is sex and the encounter of raw emotions such as could be expressed in her relations with mad Nathan. When the norm of values she used to depend upon regarding faith, principles, philosophy of life, decency and normalcy was violently torn down, some substitute became necessary. Even if it took the form of mental slavery and an overt and unhealthy dependence on, of all people, this madman, the presence of this personage against whom Sophie can measure her existence is of great value to her. Naturally such a morbid stance leads only to final destruction, an act of self-negation: suicide.

The fourth characteristic of the Holocaust survivor-characters can be seen in their inclination towards a non-real world. The actual expressions may take either some sort of falsehood such as lies, omission or creation of stories, or fantasy and imagination, or escape into the world of jokes and laughter. The survivors reveal their

past realities most of the times only piecemeal. The past is too much to remember and recount. The disclosure of their experiences comes only bit by bit. Sophie, for instance, tells Stingo about her personal history, little by little. There are so many layers of disclosure. Stingo increases his knowledge about her through the maze of lies and omissions. At the beginning he thinks that Sophie loved her liberal father, Professor Zbigniew Biegański, Professor of Jurisprudence at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. But he later learns that far from respecting her father, Sophie loathed him, actually a tyrant at home and an ultra-conservative anti-semitic who published a twelve-page pamphlet recommending the total abolishment of Jews. Her apparent admiration and devotion for her father was a pure fabrication, “a hopeless and crumbly line of defense between those she cared for, . . . and her smothering guilt” (237).

Also with regard to her daughter Eva, it is only in Chapter 15, one chapter before the closing of the book, that the true secret is told by Sophie to Stingo. The two escape the rage of crazy Nathan and start on their trip to Virginia, Stingo's birthplace, where they can tend the farm for the rest of their lives, according to his father's suggestion. In a hotel room in Washington, on their way, Sophie confesses what really took place in the concentration camp. It was she herself who had to choose, under the order of a drunken SS doctor, between her son Jan and daughter Eva to be sent to immediate death. In spite of Sophie's numerous lies, the compassionate listener Stingo interprets her untruthfulness as a necessary defense mechanism to protect her own shattered nerves:

Perhaps I should say she indulged in certain evasions which at the time were necessary in order for her to retain her composure. Or maybe her sanity. I certainly don't accuse her, for from the point of view of hindsight her untruths seem fathomable beyond need of apology. (97)

In a similar way Herman in *Enemies* also leads a life of lies. He continues to deceive simple-minded Yadwiga that all his overnight

outings are trips to sell Encyclopedia Britannica in towns outside New York, whereas in fact these are either visits to his lover Masha in the Bronx or to his first wife Tamara. His whole existence is, he feels, a fraud. As a ghost writer for Rabbi Lambert, he does research, writes sermons, articles, and books. Before the eyes of this rabbi he keeps it a secret that he is married to a Polish Catholic peasant. In his story to his employer he is a widower living in a rented room of his friend, a tailor without a telephone. At the beginning he has to tell lies to Masha too about Tamara who has unexpectedly appeared in New York, alive. Lies upon lies make it impossible for Herman to live straightforwardly. In fact, not only his petty lies but the whole idea of survival itself, he thinks, is "based on guile" (225). "The Jew had always stolen into Canaan and into Egypt. Abraham had pretended that Sarah was his sister. The whole two thousand years of exile, beginning with Alexandria, Babylon, and Rome and ending in the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna had been one great act of smuggling" (226).

Oftentimes the only world into which the survivors can escape is a world of fantasy. While shaving, Herman imagines the Nazi takeover of post-war New York, himself hiding in the bathroom whose door has been walled up by Yadwiga. When he reads newspaper reports on the nations' forgiveness of the Nazi crimes, he imagines his own personal ways of vengeance. In his reveries he brings to trials the Germans responsible for the annihilation of the Jews. In a congested subway Herman remembers the freight cars that carried the victims to the concentration camps and to the gas chambers. Unable to even move, pressed on all sides with bodies, he thinks of man "tossed about like a pebble or like a meteor in space," utterly devoid of free will (84).

The extreme case of fantasy is Masha's imagined pregnancy and the actual growth of her stomach. As one of the neighbors says, "Everything happens to [refugees]. [They] suffered so much under Hitler, [they are] half crazy" (168). When this conception is dis-

covered to be a product of mental imagination, Masha loses her control over herself altogether. The disillusionment with life and in fact with everything else eventually leads her to suicide.

In a sort of black humor or bad joke about life, the survivors think of the continuity between the Nazi atrocity and everyday life. The human being is like a Nazi toward animals: "As often as Herman had witnessed the slaughter of animals and fish, he always had the same thought: in their behavior toward creatures, all men were Nazis. The smugness with which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right" (234). In the Bronx Zoo, Herman likens the animals to the victims in the camps. "Like the Jews, the animals had been dragged here from all parts of the world, condemned to isolation and boredom" (53-54). The creatures all long for freedom, for their homelands, "deserts, hills, valleys, dens, families" (53). Masha is another one who refers to the whole human race as Nazis, since with regard to sexuality, people are all alike, whether German or not. In the basic drive and need all human beings are exactly the same. After all, the atrocity of Nazism that took place in special places in a special epoch of history is not limited to these places and time. The Holocaust is but a microcosm of humans' behavior among themselves and toward others.

So far I have traced the impact of the Holocaust upon the survivors as expressed in the fictional characters. The physical deaths and the collapse of the concept of the individual leave scars upon the psyche of the survivors. In the two fictions discussed here the common denominators of the aftermaths are classified into four major points such as the end of morality, guilt feeling, lack of the sense of belonging, and fantasy. The self which managed to survive the butchery still encounters these plights even after the nightmare in history. Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Singer's *Enemies* provide us with some eloquent commentary especially upon the result of the

second half of the double dying, the death of the idea of the individual. Namely, when the concept of the human being conspicuously deteriorates, the outcome is the disorientation and the collapse of the value system. This in turn leads to a possible tripple dying as it were—the seemingly inexplicable and unworthy suicide or disappearance of the victim-survivors as we see in Sophie, Masha, and Herman. The tragedy of the Holocaust lies not simply in the actual wiping out of some segments of humanity but in its grotesque degradation of the idea of the individual to the extent that no simplistic nihilism, anti-religious stance, fatalism, and so on can sufficiently explicate its significance.

Fortunately the author Singer has provided us with another possibility that defies pessimism. Singer seems to reveal his staunch belief in humanity when he describes his character Tamara. Tamara is given an extraordinary resilience as she lives in New York after the war. Here is a picture of wholesome living, given the plight she has had to endure. Out of the shambles, she resurrects like a phoenix. She arranges her own life as best she can and she also tries to help others with their lives. She takes things as they are, doing her best to grapple with reality. Thus she agrees to give a divorce to Herman who is in the midst of entangled human relationships. She explains the situations about her position to her uncle and aunt and arranges the reasonably acceptable choice for her former husband—that Herman continue to live with Yadviga as his new wife and not return to his official wife Tamara. By thus adjusting herself to the actual reality, Tamara manages to maintain sanity and avoids the tripple dying which other characters eventually encounter. She is gifted with the ability, crucially imperative for her survival, to “make what we can of our condition with the means available . . . to accept the mixture as we find it—the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it” (Bellow 16). Rosenfeld’s description of Holocaust writers fits the character Tamara: she is like one of the “one-eyed seers, men possessed of a double knowledge; cursed

into knowing how perverse the human being can be to create such barbarism and blessed by knowing how strong he can be to survive it" (32). It seems, then, that the collapse of the concept of the individual is not necessarily the sole outcome of the Tragedy. And the fact that readers continue to be fascinated by such figure as Tamara may lead to a notion that the traditional kind of fiction with definable characters will not be obsolete after all. Let us not accept Alain Robbe-Grillet's idea too unreservedly that the apogee of the individual is over (26).

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