

SECULAR SAINTHOOD — TOM KENEALLY'S OSKAR SCHINDLER

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Since this narrative has tried to avoid the canonisation of the Herr Direktor, the idea of the sensual Oskar as the desirer of souls has to be proved. (*Schindler's Ark* 351).

Herr Direktor is Oskar Schindler, and with these words the narrator homes in on the central concern of *Schindler's Ark*: the status of the principal protagonist. The short extract is indicative of the anomaly of this text: the narrator disclaims any attempt at hagiography yet in the same breath foregrounds the "absolute [religious] passion" (*Schindler's Ark* 351) with which Oskar Schindler acted to save the lives of his Jewish workers.

The extract above also illustrates that the status of the protagonist is problematic. The various attempts of critics to make sense of the portrayal of the person Oskar Schindler also reflect this. Peter Grosvenor refers to Oskar Schindler as a saint and a scoundrel (7); Edmund Campion's review is entitled "Schindler — a strange sort of saint" (82); Mark Bruer notes a "certain divinity" in Schindler, but writes that he was not a saint (20); and Michael Jackson writes that Schindler is "a moral man in an immoral world. Hardly a saint, but an ordinary man touched by fate" (13). To counterbalance these views, Richard Cohen writes that Schindler was not moral, not ethical, not religious — an "unlikely savior" (38).

This short paper will attempt to demonstrate that the fictional Oskar Schindler is a problematic protagonist. The paper will argue against the claim of the narrator:

When you look at other events of that mad winter, you can see that Oskar wanted the extra thirty [prisoners] not because they were an extra thirty. It is not too fantastic to say that he desired them with some of the absolute passion that

characterised the exposed and flaming heart of the Jesus that hung on Emilie's wall. (*Schindler's Ark* 351).

The text constructs Oskar Schindler as a saint at the same time as it deconstructs him as a desirer or a saviour of souls. There is no evidence to sustain the view that there is a religious motivation for the protagonist's actions.

There are two principal ways that Keneally constructs the status of the fictional Oskar. The first relies on a reader's extra textual information: the reader's knowledge of the holocaust and of the biblical allusions which the narrator frequently presupposes.

Few readers would open the pages of *Schindler's Ark* innocent of the history of the atrocities of the holocaust. They could not be expected even to be neutral in their preconceptions of the morality of the deeds and underlying beliefs of the perpetrators of those same deeds. The text does nothing to soften the horror: senseless killings, starvation, lashings, the establishment and the destruction of ghettos. Keneally depicts them in their raw brutality. In that world of seemingly limitless evil, Keneally spares nothing. Amon Goeth, commandant of Plaszów concentration camp, kills indiscriminately, lashes internees both male and female, orders subordinates to kill both former sex partners and assertive women prisoners, and personally supervises the destruction of the Podgórze ghetto. The narrative also depicts the expression of the holocaust in Poland, and in Cracow in particular. *Schindler's Ark* takes a particular stance on the Polish/Jewish relationship (*Schindler's Ark* 76 seq) implying that the Polish anti-Semitism made the clearing of Kazimierz and later the Podgórze ghettos very easy for the Germans. Polish anti-Semitism also indirectly privileges Schindler by depicting him befriending and assisting the Jews; he thwarted Germans and Poles alike.

The second assumed knowledge which the text relies on is the allusions to the "ark". The British/Australian title *Schindler's Ark* refers to the Ark of the Covenant, signifying the "special relationship between Yahweh and the Jews" (Keneally, quoted in Barker, 24). The parallel of Yahweh to Schindler is quite overt:

That summer a host of incidents occurred which augmented the Schindler mythology, the almost religious supposition among many prisoners of Plaszów and the entire population of Emalia that Oskar was a provider of outrageous salvation. (*Schindler's Ark* 210).

There are many incidents which illustrate the goodness of Schindler and the special relationship he had with his prisoners: hosing the train transporting the inmates to Auschwitz (*Schindler's Ark* 264), providing food for the Emalia prisoners, the saving of individual Jews during the awful times of the German occupation of Cracow, and warning Stern of the forthcoming pogrom in Kazimierz (*Schindler's Ark* 48).

The modern reader might be unaware of the allusion of the Ark of the Covenant, and would more likely know of Noah's Ark. Each reference, linked to Yahweh's salvation, and textually to Schindler, privileges the latter by the association. The text links the Jews with their forebears by the frequent use of the term "tribe" to refer to these people. In the scene where the young woman is sent to Auschwitz to sleep with the commandant the narrator comments:

It is a scene, a speech worthy of one of those events in the Old Testament when for the good of the tribe a woman is offered to the invader. (*Schindler's Ark* 318).

There are many references to the religious in the text and they indicate that the narrative is about more than the German/Jewish conflict during the years 1939-1945. The narrator presents the conflict as a religious one and Schindler's actions as significant in religious terms as well as humanitarian ones.

The text abounds in religious aphorisms and references to religious custom. Stern quotes the Talmudic verse to Schindler (*Schindler's Ark* 39) which the latter receives inscribed in the ring made from the gold fillings of Jereth: "He who saves a single life, saves the world entire." (*Schindler's Ark* 371). So it is not just the Jews of Cracow who are interned, maltreated and (some of them at least) rescued — it is the race, the "tribe" which suffers, now not at the hands of the Egyptians nor of the desert, but at the hands of the renegade Catholics (Goeth), or the devout Catholics (the

Polish people), or in the concentration camp (Plaszów). The saviour of the "tribe" was Yahweh, now it is Oskar Schindler.

The paper stated earlier that there are two principal ways whereby the narrator constructs the protagonist as a saint. The preceding remarks illustrate the extended metaphor which subtly presents the fictional Oskar as a modern Yahweh, saviour of a remnant of the tribe. The second method used to construct saint Oskar is far more overt and occurs in two related ways: the first is the direct portrayal of the protagonist and the second happens through the narrator as focaliser.

The text depicts Oskar Schindler as much through a binary relationship with Amon Goeth as through the description of the protagonist's actions, some of which have already been referred to. To return to the opposition of Oskar and Amon: the likeness between these two includes nationality, religion, physique and sexual voraciousness (*Schindler's Ark* 153-154). But there the likeness ends. The text presents Oskar as always holding his booze, a generous, fair-minded and heterosexual lover, a considerate adulterer. Furthermore, Oskar is ethically superior to Goeth:

... Oskar abominated Goeth as a man who went to the work of murder as calmly as a clerk goes to his office. Oskar could speak to Amon the administrator, Amon the speculator, but knew at the same time that nine-tenths of the commandant's being lay beyond the normal rationalities of humans ...

Oskar despised Goeth in the simplest and most passionate terms ... Just the same, the reflection can hardly be avoided that Amon was Oskar's dark brother, was the beserk and fanatic executioner Oskar might, by some unhappy reversal of his appetites, have become. (*Schindler's Ark* 164-165).

Schindler's superiority is nowhere made more obvious than in the scene where he and Goeth play cards, the winner to claim as prize the services of Helen Hirsch. If Amon Goeth wins, he receives cash and the girl would go to Auschwitz; if Schindler wins, she goes onto his list and on to Brinnlitz:

As for Oskar's part in this proposal, he had made it lightly. He did not seem to see, in his offer for Amon, any parallel

with God and Satan playing cards for human souls.
(*Schindler's Ark* 276).

The extract highlights the superiority of Oskar over Amon at the same time as it alludes to Oskar as God and Amon as Satan. The references slowly accumulate as the text leads inexorably to the depiction of Oskar as a saint.

The second way in which Oskar Schindler's sanctity is presented is through the narrator as focaliser. The narrator intrudes into the text to leave no room for independent interpretation either of incident or of character. One example might suffice to illustrate both the extent and the kind of intrusion common in the text. A female Jewish engineer had disputed a decision of Hujar, a guard, relating to the construction of the barracks at Plaszów and was brought before Goeth, camp commandant:

She went on arguing the case, and Amon nodded and presumed she must be lying. It was a first principle that you never listened to a Jewish specialist. Jewish specialists were in the mould of Marx, whose theories were aimed at the integrity of government, and of Freud, who had assaulted the integrity of the Aryan mind. Amon felt that this girl's argument threatened his personal integrity ...

The narrative describes the killing of the engineer, and concludes:

The knowingness of her eyes frightened Amon, justified him, elevated him. He had no idea and would not have believed that these reactions had clinical labels. He believed in fact that he was being awarded the inevitable exaltation that follows an act of political, racial and moral justice. Even so, a man must pay for that, for by evening the fullness of this hour would be followed by such emptiness that he would need, to avoid being blown away like a husk, to augment his size and permanence by food, booze, contact with a woman.
(*Schindler's Ark* 162-163).

The narrator does not leave the incident to speak for itself but rather directs readers to condemn the individual almost more than the act itself. There is also narratorial confusion. The text

describes Goeth as "justified" and "elevated", one who is awarded "inevitable exaltation": all terms with moral and religious overtones in an amoral and irreligious context.

The narrator also draws attention to Oskar as saviour through such intrusive commentary and linked to this, through depicting conservatism in religion as ineffectual. Cracow, site of the horrors described, is a "boom town of the new dispensation" (*Schindler's Ark* 21). Schindler's father is described as the sort of man "who drives a woman to religion" (*Schindler's Ark* 22). The closest friend of Emilie Schindler's father is the "dull parish priest" (*Schindler's Ark* 270). At his wife's funeral, Hans Schindler stands alone at the graveside except for "an unctious parish priest" (*Schindler's Ark* 28). When Emilie did not join Oskar at Cracow, the narrator intrudes with:

She believed it her duty to be with Oskar — in the language of Catholic moral theology, his absence from her house was a 'proximate occasion for sin'. Yet life with him in a foreign city would be tolerable only if he was careful and guarded and sensitive to her feelings. (*Schindler's Ark* 87).

If the examples provided are insufficient of themselves to alert the reader to the central place of both ethics and religion in the text, the narrator makes sure that there is no escaping the message that organised religion is ineffectual in relation to the actions of the worldly saint Oskar.

The Prologue unashamedly draws attention to the central purpose of the portrayal of Schindler:

For this is the story of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil, a triumph in eminently measurable, statistical, unsubtle terms ... Fatal human malice is the staple of narrators, original sin the mother-fluid of historians. But it is a risky business to write of virtue. (*Schindler's Ark* 1).

Any moral weakness — sex and drink, the two sins of the flesh — is minor in comparison to the goodness of saving life. There is no attempt at avoiding the canonisation: the language, the intrusions, the use of contrasts to privilege Schindler, all point to the deliberate portrayal of a secular saint. Sinner he might be; saint he also is.

The opening paragraphs of this paper argued that the protagonist is problematic and that the text which constructs Oskar as a saint also deconstructs that same portrait. Is Schindler a "desirer of souls", one acting with some of the same religious passion as Emilie? At no point is it even hinted that Schindler is a thinker, in fact, the opposite is true:

Oskar ... wrongly fancied himself as a philosopher. (*Schindler's Ark* 39);

... if you wanted to talk to Oskar about fidelity, a look of childlike and authentic bewilderment entered his eyes, as if you were proposing some concept like relativity which could be understood only if the listener had five hours to sit still and concentrate. Oskar never had five hours and never understood. (*Schindler's Ark* 75);

... Herr Schindler was a philosophic innocent. (*Schindler's Ark* 116).

The extracts are consistent with the rest of the narrative: they present Oskar Schindler as a person of action, one with little insight and one with very limited idealism. There is no evidence to maintain the argument that Schindler consciously acts for the moral good. The statement "desirer of souls" is certainly not sustained by the text and, indeed, is compromised by the narrative's disingenuous admissions that Schindler's motivation and/or state of mind is unknown (*Schindler's Ark* 278).

This paper earlier argued that the narrator presents Oskar Schindler through the device of contrast with Amon Goeth. Whether wittingly or not, the narrator uses another binary opposition in Oskar's presentation, and that is through a contrast with Emilie Schindler. In contrast to the flamboyant, hard living, gregarious Oskar, is Emilie, described as:

a nunlike, gracious, unsophisticated girl (*Schindler's Ark* 26);
gentle Emilie (*Schindler's Ark* 74);
as quiet as a nun (*Schindler's Ark* 332);
a quiet and submissive wife (*Schindler's Ark* 332);
a quiet wife (*Schindler's Ark* 332).

The contrast between Emilie and Oskar is profound. But there are difficulties with such glib descriptions. The first is that Emilie is responsible for saving the prisoners at Brinnlitz (*Schindler's Ark* 332, 359). Emilie is as responsible for the saving of life as any other, and the text hints at its own denial of justice to her:

One wonders if some of Emilie's kindnesses in this matter may not have been absorbed into the Oskar legend, the way the deeds of minor heroes have been subsumed by the figure of Arthur or Robin Hood. (*Schindler's Ark* 333).

The second difficulty with the descriptions of Emilie is that, in contrast to Oskar, she is clear in her motivation for saving life:

There was what you could call an ideological commitment too. A picture of Jesus with his heart exposed and in flames hung on a wall of the apartment ... it hung like a promise, a personal one, Emilie's. (*Schindler's Ark* 315-316).

Emilie Schindler is that which Oskar is not: clearly motivated, integrated, faithful. The text does not prove Oskar as "a desirer of souls" — it proves Emilie is.

What the contrast highlights is an issue which has undergone change over time. The text sustains the argument that one's actions prove one's virtue, and in this scenario Schindler is a virtuous person. The narrator's foregrounding of motive, however, introduces an alternative view of virtue: that one's virtue is proven if there is a rational basis for one's actions (Jackson, 69). The text highlights the former morality — the actions of Schindler. It concentrates on his personal lifestyle and his activities as a small time enamelware industrialist. The text also underscores Schindler's motivation for his behaviour — be that behaviour his sexual life (*Schindler's Ark* 54, 335) or treatment of the Jews (*Schindler's Ark* 81). There is insufficient evidence to support the view that Schindler's morality has a rational basis.

Much has been written about *Schindler's Ark* and what a fine book it is. However, it fails in its central and declared purpose. The text succeeds at describing the events of Schindler's Polish years, but Keneally fails to resolve the difficulty of explaining Schindler's actions. At one glance it appears that David English's (23) description of Keneally's writings ("he lives in a world of

unresolved dualisms") is accurate; a close reading of *Schindler's Ark* reveals that the deconstruction inherent in the text resolves the dualisms and undermines the declared intention of the narrator.

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