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The Political Repercussions of Homosexual Repression of Masculinity and Identity in Martin Sherman's Bent

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THE POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS OF HOMOSEXUAL REPRESSION OF
MASCULINITY AND IDENTITY IN MARTIN SHERMAN'S *BENT*

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ABSTRACT

There are very few works of gay holocaust literature, mostly due to the fact that even post Nazi-Germany, homosexuality was outlawed. *Bent*, thereby serves as a testament of the persecution faced by homosexuals at the hands of the Nazis.

This paper argues that the play is developed to display the main character Max having a better chance of survival if he denies his sexual preference and instead claims he is a Jew. While some may argue that such a decision privileges being Jewish over homosexuality, the final argument proves that this is not the case.

Art is category of its own, one that is known for creating its own boundaries. In *Bent*, there is no privileging of one group over another; rather the play serves as a display of the disjointedness of the various communities in Nazi Germany.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE QUESTION OF LIMITATION IN HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION.....	5
III. LITERARY CRITICISM.....	11
IV. HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CONCEPT OF MASCULINITY.....	13
V. A TRAUMATIC ENVIRONMENT IN NAZI GERMANY.....	25
VI. CONTROVERSY CONTINUES.....	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	41

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Bent, by Martin Sherman, has been recognized by critics and theater-goers alike as the quintessential gay drama. The main character Max, a homosexual man in Nazi Germany, is forced to deny association with his lover Rudy in order to survive. He must further prove his non-homosexuality, that he is not “bent,” by performing an act of necrophilia on the corpse of a young Jewish girl. As a result of this “trauma,” Max attempts to redefine how he is addressed by society, specifically by members of the National Socialist Party. An example of following the ideology of what others define one to be is the concept of interpellation, as discussed by Louis Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Althusser discusses interpellation as a concept that society hails all individuals as subjects which fit into categories. Such categories define how an individual is labeled and without any alternative outside recognition change cannot occur. In *Bent*, Max ignores what he is labeled as, a homosexual, and responds to what was being called out by Nazis everywhere: Jew.

Placed into a situation where he has a better chance of survival if he denies his identity, Max blocks out his sexual identity completely, reconstructing himself anew as a Jew. Max attempts to repress hearing the murder of his lover Rudy on the train to the

concentration camp. An individual in a situation such as Max's has few other choices than to manipulate identity. However, Max's reconstruction of his own identity fails because he did not change of his own free will, but was forced into changing his identity to survive.

While it is easy to see how the play *Bent* would be controversial, the concept of the play is multi-layered beyond the obvious controversy of a homosexual choosing to be Jewish during the Holocaust. This play suggests is that there was a privileging of being Jewish over being a homosexual in Nazi Germany. A statement of this magnitude has multiple implications. In one way, such a statement implies that Jews could have done more to help themselves because they had a higher status than other groups.

Additionally, it is controversial in that it suggests that a member of an alternative group consciously chose to classify himself as Jewish. Such suggestions would have surely faced criticism at the onset of the play, but there does not appear to be documented outrage about such implications.

Composed in a time vastly different than today, *Bent* can be seen to some theatergoers as one among many gay dramas that share similar themes of depression, loneliness, oppression, and suicide. *Bent*, *The Normal Heart*, and *Angels in America* are three plays that each carry political messages of the 70s, 80s, and 90s; these plays were each, in their time, appeals for social progress and a call to change. For instance, while *Bent* addresses the importance of recognizing the persecution of homosexuals at the time of the Holocaust, *The Normal Heart* addresses another recognizable crisis in the gay community: AIDS. The main character Ned Weeks is similar to Max in that his behavior makes him an easy target for the audience's disapproval. His unwillingness to

compromise with others causes even his colleagues distress, ending in his eventual divergence from the activist organization. His divergence later led to his founding of “Act-Up.” Another play about isolation and hardship is *Angels in America*. This play again deals with AIDS and the turmoil the characters face in their personal lives as they deal with sharing or not sharing the news of their illness. Conclusively, all three plays are founded in delivering political messages to the general public; whether about the persecution of homosexuals during a time of war-fare, persecution against illnesses surrounded with homosexuality, or to further the representation of activist groups. Recently, a change has taken place in American gay and lesbian theater as current theater has changed its direction toward presenting “the everyday concerns of Americans in a gay context, thereby pressing the case that gay love and gay marriage, gay parenthood and gay adoption are no different from their straight variations” (Healy).

Currently, the stage has become an arena where “anything goes...and we’re seeing plays with more themes than those that are explicitly political or are about oppression alone” says Larry Kramer, founder of gay activist group Act-Up (Healy). While *Bent* is not a love story, it is a tale that discusses love and the difficulties one man faced when dealing with how to express his forbidden love. Comparatively, the Off Broadway musical *Yank* is also a play about two homosexual men serving in the Army in World War II. Unlike its predecessor *Bent*, *Yank* is a play that focuses on the love story between these two men, not the controversy that would have surely surrounded their relationship at the time (Hearly). The attention of playwrights and their audience has shifted from a political sphere to one that focuses on the love story between two characters. Certainly

persecution is still an issue at hand, yet the overall outlook at the situation has widened tremendously.

CHAPTER II

THE QUESTION OF LIMITATION IN HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION

Bent is also representative of the ongoing debate about Holocaust representation.

Following Theodor Adorno's questioning the validity of writing poetry after Auschwitz, many artists and theorists have faced the issue of reconciling the moral implications of Nazism with artistic freedom. Art is a category of work that is well-known for creating its own boundaries, suggestions otherwise would be an irritation to artists everywhere.

Berel Lang, author of *Holocaust Representation*, states that the Holocaust is not "unspeakable," but rather that the opposite is true—it should be spoken about (7). In fact, he insists that documentation of events of history is of primary concern, while intensions of the artist and writing styles are secondary issues to be addressed. Additional concerns within the field of Holocaust representation are questioning historical authenticity in art and the moral obligation of the artist to be as close to the original as possible. Such concerns could be seen as limiting the artist. For instance, any revision to past written work in a diary would be certain to taint the representation of the moment at the time of its occurrence.

Additionally, Lang recognizes that history, as a genre, upsets many people. While historical events are recognized beyond dispute, the representations of such recorded

events are what are questioned, as the same event could be described in alternative ways. Therefore, the argument is that art cannot fully represent reality. The problem is that if what an author writes is not “experienced but imagined, the words of his text might not change in the slightest, but can there be any doubt of the difference that [it] would, and should make in the response of his readers?” (Lang 33). Here, Lang is writing about Primo Levi (Jewish/Italian chemist and writer), and his (Levi’s) writing as he reflects upon the decision to be a student of Chemistry at the time of the Holocaust (32). Lang is then questioning and comparing scientific writing to that of Holocaust representational/fictional writing. Lang says that:

surely it is essential not only to his readers’ emotional reactions but to their understanding that the “Matter” of his writing—what he alleges took place—should in fact have occurred. If what he wrote had not been experienced but imagined, the words of his text might not change in the slightest, but can there be any doubt of the difference that would, and should make in the response of his readers (32).

Lang is implying individuals who read a body of work based in history causes the work to be interpreted differently than it would if it were purely fictional. For example, if readers were to read Levi’s discussion of matter, and know that it is pure fiction they are not going to take it very seriously; whereas, if they read it knowing that this is a true discovery they are going to read it with wonder, amazement, and/or wanting to learn more. The same can be said about the Holocaust. Reading about the Holocaust generally teaches something new and unknown and should inspire readers to learn more about the event.

Furthermore, the Holocaust, as a genre of work instead of a period in history, can be described as “representation within the limits of history, [and] history within the limits of ethics” (Lang 34). Lang cites that there is no evidence in the Holocaust genre that there

is someone behind the scenes—an invisible hand. Yet, he says they “ [works about the Holocaust] exhibit a common extraliterary conscience, expressed, if not in a single voice, with the fine coordination of a chorus.” (34) His conclusion is that Holocaust genres have a transitive principle about them—that they are “representation within the limits of history, history within the limits of ethics” (34). Without history, the who and how many did what to whom and how many and when in Holocaust writing and its genres would be imagined.

The problem left for the artist is that committing fully to authenticity does not allow for imagination about the event. Fortunately, Lang sees the pedagogical function of the Holocaust as serving two purposes: to represent the facts of the time period, and to bring attention to the issues (49). This allows for the presence of so called “bad writing” about the Holocaust without there being any alteration in the magnitude of the event. Elaine Kauvar uses Saul Friedlander to point out in her discussion about writing about the inconceivable that “there are limits to representation which should not be, but can easily be transgressed” (qtd. in Kauvar136). Therefore, it is the issue with historical authenticity, the problematic elements of language, and the longing for “truth” that lead to a debate about transgressions of representation. The problem with language questions how to use one’s own language to discuss another’s experience; language cannot be appropriated from the anticipated other, so the representation of the event is always going to be altered from the original. Therefore, it becomes necessary for history and literature to recognize that both go hand-in-hand and each relies on the assistance of the other to represent facets of historical importance.

Critic Anna Richardson, who analyzes the work of Lang and Holocaust Representation, poses the question “How does one presume to represent something as extreme as the Holocaust, when in theory one cannot do so without in some way validating the culture that produced it?” Richardson, from the University of Manchester, is a critic who analyzes the limitations of literary Holocaust representation, specifically looking at *Schindler’s List*. She uses Adorno who states that anytime genocide becomes the property of literature it is easier to comply with a culture that allowed such an event to occur. This is coupled with the common idea that the Holocaust is something that is unspeakable. Many disagree with this concept; instead agreeing with Lang. Unlike Lang, Richardson believes that as a work of literature, “the representation of the Holocaust becomes intolerably offensive to both survivors and post-Holocaust cultural sensibility alike” (3). Lang, arguably, disagrees with Richardson, believing that all Holocaust genre writers have a common goal to make sure to present the material as respectfully as possible while spreading the existence of the event.

Giving concession to Lang, Richardson states that there is a solid case that the testimony of survivors does provide value both historically and psychologically, however, she wrestles with how to position “forms of Holocaust representation within such a precarious moral framework” (6). Discussing elements of the Holocaust are certainly not adding emphasis or increasing the valor of the Nazi regime. If there were no discussion, the opposite would occur—silence. Silence about a subject actually allows for a false narrative, one of denial of the event. For instance, if there were to be no discussion of the Holocaust in fiction or other various art forms, such inaction or censorship would favor the Nazi Regime. No discussion or representation would result in

a similar oppression of free speech as that maintained by Nazism (Richardson 7). Comparatively, the fear about discussing events of the Holocaust in fictional form is that it allows for those who deny the authenticity of the Holocaust to suggest that all elements of the Holocaust are fiction. Any representation suggests that there must be another option available, as there are always at least two opposing representations about the same event. However, there must be limits, as in order to explain something there must be another such thing to judge it by (Lang 54). Limits seemingly also dictate what the artist is capable of imagining and thus representing in his work. The question therefore remains as to figuring out what limits, if any, apply to the represented forms in art?

In essence, representation is subjective; however, as long as survivalists continue to testify, books continue to be written, films continue to be made, each representation allows for the presence of the next representation, maintaining the discussion and remembrance of the event. Lang indicates that there is a universal feeling and agreement amongst Holocaust writers that their common goal is to emphasize the occurrence and moral weight of the Holocaust (49). This seems more true to form about artists and their shared goal of representing the truth of the Holocaust and the Nazi Regime.

Additionally, Lang states that theory provides no grounds for dismissing certain appropriations of the Holocaust for others, thus making them all equally acceptable regardless of quality (88). Lang recognizes the argument that there is a practical sense that there is not enough time to teach or read good or great literature—so bad literature must be left alone.

There is one exception to the rule, however, and this is in cases of bad Holocaust writing. He states this “on the basis of the claim that much of *this* bad writing may

nonetheless have good effects” (48). Most writers agree that Holocaust literature has objectionable features—sentimentality and cliché, exploitation and tendentiousness, in short, literary and moral dishonesty. Therefore, there is always a chance for subversion or distortion of the Holocaust in writing—yet at least some of the writings that fully warrant such objections have arguably also been effective in calling public attention to the phenomenon of the Holocaust, in conveying information about it at least in a general form, and perhaps in shaping moral responses and attitudes about the Holocaust.

This debate about Holocaust representation is important to point out because current criticism about *Bent* focuses on its originality in form—there is a scarce representation of homosexuality in the Holocaust in literature. There may be those who could consider the idea that *Bent* is privileging Jews over homosexuals and take offense with such a suggestion. Lang points out that he finds any representation of the Holocaust helpful in some sense—in that it is at least getting information to the masses about the Holocaust and what happened during that time. Therefore, *Bent* is useful for educating through art events of the Holocaust that are not as well known. For instance, Sherman is quoted to have been inspired to write this play in order to educate his community. He wished to do this because in the gay community he was seeing a wide array of Nazi symbols—something he wished to come to an end.

CHAPTER III

LITERARY CRITICISM

As discussed, in current criticism, *Bent* has been discussed in a number of different ways. In John M. Clum's *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, *Bent* has been discussed in terms of the plot and groundbreaking moves it has created for homosexuality on the stage. Specifically, staged in 1979, this play was one of the first to portray homosexual love-making on the stage only by using language. Eric Sterling, in "Bent Straight: The Destruction of Self in Martin Sherman's *Bent*" analyzes the plot function, looking at the destruction of self and the repair to that destruction through learning to love. From a historical point of view, there is an argument for the existence of gay Holocaust literature as a category of its own by Kai Hammermeister in "Inventing History: Toward a Gay Holocaust Literature." Subsequently, most of the criticism about the play deals with the basic story line, not about the broader implications the subtext of the play is representing: homosexual identity issues.

I distinguish myself from these sources by utilizing Sigmund Freud's theory of traumatic repression in conjunction with Cathy Caruth's analysis of trauma and survival guilt as it applies to Max. In the play, Max consciously represses the murder of Rudy. He does not want to feel or think about anything, and instead is comforted by the fact that

he is recognized as a Jew amongst the officials. One of the only times in the latter half of the play where the audience sees Max exhibiting feeling is when he is pretending to have sexual contact; a method of escapism. In the concentration camp, being Jewish is preferred to being homosexual, as all groups looked down upon homosexuals. Such theories of trauma and repression are important tools of analysis when looking at any period of war-time or imprisonment. Additionally, analyzing Althusser's concept of interpellation in the function of the play assists in understanding the desperation felt by Max as he was repressed by the Nazis. An analysis of the play in terms of its gender ideology and the transformation of an individual within a restrictive atmosphere is another aspect of the play that none of the critical sources take into consideration in their analysis.

The general consensus about the "taboo" of homosexuality is, however, something that almost all of the critics discuss in their analysis of the play. It is important to recognize that homosexuality was not the norm and because of that, like all other non-normatives, members of such groups outside of the norm faced much persecution in all times, including during the Nazi regime. During the period of pre-World War II, aspects of being closeted and having hidden lives were beginning to shift. Pre-World War II, Germany saw a large increase in its "out" homosexual population, probably a factor in their being vastly targeted by the Nazi Regime.

CHAPTER IV

HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CONCEPT OF MASCULINITY

When discussing homosexuality, it is inevitable that the topic of masculinity and what it means to be “male” in society will arise. In part, this discussion is inevitable based upon preconceived notions about members of the homosexuality. In short, a homosexual cannot be male because he must not like or do the same things that the “normative” male does—for instance, having a female sexual preference. In modern society, masculinity is a normative behavior, an example of the way that things “should be.” According to R.W. Connell, “[m]asculinity’ does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’” (68). Accordingly, homosexuality and homosexual traits and tendencies cannot exist except in contrast with “straightness” or heterosexuality. This contrast between men and women seems to outline what activities or endeavors men participate in, in comparison to what activities women participate in; thus how their lives relate to one another. Connell states that masculinity is quite literally what bodies do, citing that masculinity’s “place in gender relations, [is] the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (71).

The definition of masculinity and what traits a masculine individual must exhibit come into conflict with homosexuality. The idea persists that if someone is attracted to a male then that idea is specifically feminine in nature. If the individual is not feminine “in the body, then somehow in the mind” they are feminine in order to be attracted to a male (Connell 143). There has been an on-going debate over the refusal to allow the admittance of homosexuals in the military. This has been argued about by critics, as many cannot see how a sexual preference could inhibit the ability to shoot a gun. This of course is not the main issue; there seems to be a permeating cultural requirement to maintain a certain ideology of masculinity within the field of the armed forces (Connell 73). The clearest reason for this reaction is that gayness is related to femininity. However, ideals associated with traditional masculinity were sometimes thought of as curative methods for homosexuals. One such idea would have been by joining a military force which exhibits the most outward traits of masculinity (Mosse 150). On the other hand, such male bonding, in military form, also raised fear of strengthening or increasing the occurrence of homosexuality (Mosse 175). One thing remains clear: homosexuality is something that heterosexual males fear for various reasons. In short, the presence or idea of having homosexuals participating in male bonding activities in a situation where they are away from home and women invokes “panic” in some heterosexual men.

Male supremacy over females represents an ongoing pattern that has perpetuated over much of the course of history, even still existing today. Additionally, within the male/female construction, there are “specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men,” most of which have to do with determinants of masculinity (Connell 78). Such rankings typically place homosexuality at the bottom of

the gender hierarchy. The various relations among masculinities, as described by Connell, are Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity, and Marginalization. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is recognized as the gender practice which exemplifies the current dominance of patriarchy that allows for the subordination of women for the dominance of men (Connell 77). So, whereas hegemony is related to male, masculine, dominance in society; subordination relates to the domination of heterosexual men over homosexual men. Wherein, the complicity of the problem is the fact that a very small number of men actually fit into a normative standard of masculinity (Connell 79). Yet, all men benefit from this small number since they gain from the patriarchal system—there is an advantage of being man in general over woman. Thereby hegemony, subordination, and complicity are all related to the gender order (Connell 80). Marginalization, on the other hand, is directly related to the approval of the hegemonic masculinity of the overarching dominant group.

Specifically, “[g]ayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure” (Connell 78). This idea of ranking differences between men and judging them based on their preferences and qualities is quite similar to Nazi ideology. In accordance with Nazi ideology, the Nazi’s were the hegemonic culture. They were the leaders, and those who exhibited the most desirable traits. Additionally, Max’s character, and the characters around him who are homosexual, out or otherwise, are all associated with the theater or dance. These are traits which would be considered predominately female according to the definitions of masculinity.

Furthermore, there is a multifaceted connection between the discussion of masculinity and homosexuality within the concept of violence. Most men who attack others, attack those who are weaker than they are. Such individuals do not feel remorse for the act, but instead, feel justified in their actions (Connell 83). This again reverts back to the idea of supremacy over others. Connell asserts that “[v]iolence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles” (83). It becomes clear that there is an example of such behavior in the representation of the conflict of the Nazi Regime. Conflicts within Germany about the direction of the country, including its military and political powers, were taken out in acts of violence against targeted groups.

The masculine stereotype persists not only through violence but through the negative connotations and judgment associated with being what is thought of as a “non-norm.” The German word *Bildung* is the goal of true manhood (Mosse 8). Manliness and the fight for true-manhood is just another act of violence. George Mosse notes that “manliness fulfilled its task of strengthening normative society against those who supposedly wanted to destroy its fabric, and who through their looks and comportment made clear their evil intentions” (12). Here, it becomes evident that masculinity, or emasculation, was and still is used as a unifying topic. Better yet, this is something that is used to unite men in a fight, a fight for their purity against the evil forces who want to ruin or diminish masculinity and maleness. Furthermore, Mosse maintains this idea in stating that “masculinity reaffirmed and strengthened its image in confrontation with its enemies, who represented all that the manly man was not” (12).

In Nazi Germany, homosexuals were not the only group targeted by such “manly men” preserving the ideals of masculinity, but Jews were targeted as well. Historically,

Jews were often associated with unmanly, cowardly appearances even outside of Nazi Germany. Jews were gradually excluded throughout most of European society as “a way to draw the line between those who were acceptable to society and those whom society attempted to marginalize or to exclude from power” (Mosse 19). Ironically, Mosse points to a disparity in such ideas about masculinity and exclusion. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an archeologist and art historian was preoccupied with rediscovering Greek male beauty in sculpture (Mosse 29). Although he was a homosexual, he outlined much of what is traditionally thought of as outward masculine traits. Therefore, “a homoerotic sensibility stood at the start of an image that was to inform the ideal of normative masculinity such as the clean-cut Englishman or the all-American boy” (Mosse 32). In this case, the idea of a perceived homosexuality was currently accepted and allowed to remain within the normative culture.

The main fear of homosexuality by other males is its presumably threatening nature. Homosexuality is threatening in that it goes against all representations of manhood and invokes panic or fear in other males that they could somehow fall into homosexuality as well. There seems to be a countertype that was established, which allowed society to distinguish that which was acceptable and that which was not. Homosexuality soon paralleled stereotypes about Jews and their inferior masculine traits. The tolerance that was once displayed for Winckelmann diminished as the “homosexual was soon endowed with a body that in its ugliness matched that of the Jewish stereotype” (Mosse 67). At times, Jews were even accused of being homosexual to even further lower their status (Mosse 68). The countertype of the Jew and the homosexual were targeted because these

two groups were the most readily available and visible examples of what were determined to be “unmanly.”

The idea again reverts back to fear; homosexuals and Jews could have some anonymity within societal groups as there was no way to clearly identify them for certain. Members of such groups could be amongst the “norms” and the “norms” would have no idea: this is what scared them. Society in Germany, however, seemed to be more open to homosexuality than Paris in the early 20th century (Mosse 90). Magnus Hirschfield, German sexologist, listed over 20 homosexual bars or clubs in Berlin alone in 1904 (Mosse 90). In fact, according to Mosse, homosexual dances and clubs became part of a tourist attraction in Germany at the time. The German officials opened what was known as the “pink file”—a list of names of all the homosexuals in Germany (Mosse 98). The linking between such a file and the subsequent Pink Stars in concentration camps seems obvious. Homosexuals were a group that was considered lower than Jews by the Nazis in the concentration camps.

The idea of homosexuals being lower than Jews is carried out in Sherman’s *Bent*. Max, a homosexual chooses to declare himself a Jew rather than a homosexual to avoid additional persecution from Nazi guards. Max sees Horst’s Pink Triangle and asks “Pink triangle? What’s that?” (Sherman 33). Horst responds: “Queer. If you’re queer, that’s what you wear. If you’re a Jew, a yellow star. Political—a red triangle. Criminal—green. Pink’s the lowest” (Sherman 34). Max’s initial association with Nazi persecution is initiated from a fellow homosexual warning him of where his status places him. Rudy, the dancer, is targeted because he wore glasses, an unmasculine trait. Rudy’s appearance in the play is consistently more feminine than that of Max. Rudy is a dancer, he moves

around their apartment watering plants, or flowers, he talks about his figure and discusses his future as a dancer—feminine citations.

Wolf, on the other hand, the man Max brings home from the club on the fateful night of *The Long Knives*, is a more predominately masculine character. His name, indicates a feeling of dominance and masculinity. In addition, their sexual intercourse is mentioned as being violent. When Rudy retells the experience to Max he says, “you and your little storm trooper began to get rough with each other, and I know pain is very chic just now, but I don’t like it, cause pain hurts, so I went to sleep” (Sherman 12). The indication that Wolf and Max were having rough sex suggests that they perhaps are more masculine than Rudy. This is an important feature to pay attention to when recognizing that Rudy is violently killed almost immediately upon capture. When Wolf walks out into the living room wearing Rudy’s robe the first words out of his mouth are “Hi. The robe is short. I look silly” (Sherman 14).

Masculinity again comes into play in the discussion between Max and his Uncle Freddie who hails himself as a “fluff.” The word “fluff” is used to signify the homosexual who maintains a family lifestyle and operates his homosexuality from the closet. The very sound of the word is rather feminine and unmasculine in nature. Additionally, the word “fluff” literally means “something inconsequential.” It is of little importance to Max’s Uncle, a fluff, if his happiness is addressed, he must maintain appearances for the family’s sake; therefore, Freddie deems happiness to be inconsequential next to comfort and survival. In an effort to save Rudy and himself, Max pleads with his Uncle to allow him the chance to behave in this respected “normative” manner: to act as though he is straight. Uncle Freddie goes one step further from the

suggestion that Max attempts to “act normal.” He tells Max, “we’re not allowed to be fluffs anymore” (Sherman 23). This statement by Freddie is important, as it suggests he sees the lifestyle as an active choice that can be withdrawn at any time.

The text of the play revolves around the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany and their subsequent placement in concentration camps alongside Jews, political prisoners, and criminals. Although some dispute the actual number of homosexual victims in the era, historical research has recognized the discrimination and murder of homosexuals under Hitler regime as a “phenomenon of undeniable proportions” (Hammermeister 19). *Bent* begins with “the presentation of a gay community that breaks apart on the ‘Night of the Long Knives,’ when SA head Ernst Röhm and many of his close associates were murdered” (Seifert 110). Apart from Wolfgang Granz, a man who Max brings home from the bar, none of the homosexuals who are accordingly “found out” were members of a National Socialist organization or associates of Röhm.

The very concept of studying sexology and “maleness” was the work of German Jews. These scientists worked to identify male traits, explore sexology, identify homosexual traits, and study the sexual being of male. The father of the sexology concept was Magnus Hirschfeld, whose work, according to Erwin Haeberle, “was more unwelcome to the political reaction...than even Sigmund Freud’s” (271). The reason behind this reaction to his work is that his study was seen a propaganda campaign for homosexuality. However, upon Hitler’s takeover, all sexology study was abruptly stopped because it was primarily conducted by Jews (Haeberle 273). Additionally, Sherman consciously chooses to insert Hirschfeld into the plot of his play, as the cause for Horst’s

imprisonment. When Max asks Horst how he came to arrive at the camp Horst tells him he signed one of Hirschfeld's petition to "Make queers legal" (Sherman 37).

Regardless of association, all homosexuals were persecuted, even if they were members of the National Socialist Party. Critic Eric Sterling discusses the fact that Hitler knew for quite some time that a large portion of his closest and most esteemed followers were what would have been considered "sexual perverts" (369). Hitler chose to rid himself of troublemakers whose criminal actions weakened him politically and embarrassed his party: "He decided, consequently, that he would blame the homosexual leaders, such as Roehm and Karl Ernst, and not their numerous followers for his purge" (Sterling 371). Homosexuality was then used as a political ploy to eliminate the SA leader who was a homosexual and to allow Hitler to become the moral leader of the Nazi Party. Once Röhm was dead, Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code, banning homosexual activity, became a law that was strictly enforced (Sterling 371). The night on which Hitler enacted his violence against homosexuals became known as the "Night of the Long Knives," and on the first anniversary of this date an addendum to the law was added banning "lewd glances and even homosexual fantasies and thoughts" (Sterling 371).

The persecution of homosexuals in Germany continued long after the conclusion of the Nazi regime. In an article from *The German Quarterly*, Kai Hammermeister notes that even throughout the 50s and 60s "German courts convicted homosexual men at a rate as high as that of the Nazi regime" (20). In fact, many of the men who had been incarcerated under Nazi regime became "classified as regular criminals immediately after the war and had to serve the prison sentences that had been levied upon them by the

National Socialist courts” (Seifert 97). Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code, which was established in 1935, actually remained a part of West German law until 1969, almost 25 years after the conclusion of World War II (Seifert 97). Public knowledge about the persecution of homosexuals during the Nazi regime is limited because of the long-standing tenure of persecution against homosexuals—even post WWII. In fact, it remained relatively limited until 1979 when *Bent* “dramatized for the first time the lives of homosexuals during the Nazi era” (Seifert 94). It is apparent why the treatment of homosexuals remained sealed for so long; until then they (homosexuals) had not had the freedom or opportunity to tell their story without fear of punishment or persecution. Seifert discusses that “their position as sexual outcasts...seems to render them immune to the appeal of the popular mass movement of the time” (112).

Due to the extremely harsh treatment from the internment camp guards, “60% of homosexual prisoners died in the concentration camps” (Sterling 380). Sterling quotes Frank Rector’s claim that:

gays were considered the lowest strata of KZ prisoners, and were generally singled out for the “worst” treatment, there were cases in which homosexuals attempted to “upgrade” their status by secretly trading a pink triangle for a Jewish yellow star or some other insignia in the hope of improving the chance of surviving. (379)

The dramatic and unjust treatment of the homosexuals in interment seems to validate Max’s motive in desiring to be recognized by the gold star rather than a pink triangle.

In trying to survive, many homosexuals altered their outward sexual preference in order to survive during the Nazi regime. In order to “re-educate” or to “cure” homosexuals, head of the S.S., Heinrich Himmler, created a prostitution house at Flossenburg, where mandatory regular visits were required to the brothel where the Nazi guards would watch the homosexuals have sex with Jewish or Gypsy women through

peep holes (Sterling 358). The prisoners regularly had sex with these women, and then were placed in situations in which other men would hit on them as a test. If they passed the test, most homosexuals were released, but continued to be monitored in order to ensure they did not slip back into homosexual tendencies (Sterling 359). What Sterling suggests is that some men in the curing facilities pretended to have a good time with women in order to free themselves from the situation at hand. Sterling cites that many homosexuals appeared to be “cured” because some of them “got wise to what was going on and had a jolly good time—heterosexually—and thus obtained their release” (379). These men are similar to Max’s character—not true to themselves, but rather reacting to the situation presented to them.

Rather than being shipped to one of these “curing” facilities, Max was transported to Dachau, Germany’s first concentration camp, which served as a prototype for all the future concentration camps in Germany. In Dachau, prisoners were unable to riot against authority. If prisoners chose to assert their identity as one other than detainee, they were choosing a certain death. These “camps” were first established to house “political prisoners” as Germany termed it. The camp ended up housing nearly 200,000 prisoners and at least 28,000 “perished there between 1933 and 1939, as well as an uncounted number of unregistered prisoners” (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum). In the camp, Max befriends a homosexual named Horst who implies that he was imprisoned “both for his political involvement and because of his occupation, since a homosexual male nurse was regarded as a potential, if not inevitable, transgressor of the law” (Seifert 113). The emphasis here is placed on the necessary discretion of identity. Because Horst signed a petition to abolish Paragraph 175, his sexual preference was made public and he was

deemed unfit to be a male nurse; instead, he became a prisoner of war. For instance, Greta tells Max and Rudy, “you queers are not very popular anyhow. It was just Röhm keeping you all safe. Now you’re like Jews. Unloved, baby, unloved” (Sherman 21). Sherman points out the similarity in treatment of both marginalized groups by the Nazis.

Sherman’s play is set in 1934—“before the Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht, gas chambers, Auschwitz and the active attempt by the Nazis to carry out ‘the Final Solution’” (Sterling 382). Timing of the setting makes it conceivable that homosexuals in *Bent* would have received harsher treatment than the Jews who were yet to experience the true atrocity of the situation. Sherman makes the conscious choice to focus solely on the malicious treatment of homosexuals and to include historical facts that there were occasions where homosexuals attempted to obtain Jewish stars due to Nazi brutality toward homosexuals (Sterling 382). According to Sterling, Sherman does not deny, minimize, or trivialize the cruelty inflicted upon the Jews during the Holocaust. Additionally, he points out that Sherman “himself is not only gay, but also a Jew” (Sterling 382). Both groups were obviously victims of many atrocities in the camps, and both surely found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy below the non-Jewish groups of prisoners.

CHAPTER V

A TRAUMATIC ENVIRONMENT IN NAZI GERMANY

The significance of *Bent* lies in Sherman's important, yet often overlooked, point that homosexuals were also victims of the Nazis. A majority of the imprisoned homosexuals were either killed in the concentration camps, or have likely passed on by now.

Therefore, there is little suggestion that a category of gay Holocaust literature will surface. It is important to take into consideration that:

the Holocaust literatures of Jews, gypsies, the handicapped, socialists, homosexuals, members of the Bekennende Kirche, and others must not be seen as competitive, nor as mutually exclusive. But they might serve different purposes for different groups, since commemoration, too, is largely determined by the needs, pains, and beliefs of the present. (Hammermeister 18)

Gay Holocaust literature is yet to have a category of its own; in fact, it is likely that many are unaware of the victimization of homosexuals during World War II. The reasoning behind the delayed stories of the homosexual is that there was never a lapse in persecution that would have allowed the homosexual prisoner opportunity to tell his story. One reason for the lack of knowledge on the topic is because "after their liberation from the camps, homosexuals were not only not recognized as victims of the NS regime, they were even the target of continued legal discrimination" (Hammermeister 20). It was

only after the turn of the 20th century, that the historical conditions been favorable for the emergence of such a literature.

The situation of panic was created among homosexuals at the start of the Nazi Regime. Their worlds were altered from an era that was seemingly booming in the acceptance of homosexuals to a sudden fluctuation in what was now deemed acceptable. Homosexuality was almost overnight intensely persecuted against in Germany by the Nazis. As Greta tells Max and Rudy in the film version of the play (screenplay also written by Sherman), “Queer is out. Queer is dead” (*Bent*). This change would have been incredibly traumatic for both those who were captured; and those who remained uncaptured, aware of friends who had not escaped as they had. The neurosis that would occur at such a time is explained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where Sigmund Freud associates neurosis with mental impact, repulsions, obsessions, compulsions, and general hysteria. Two sources of “unpleasure” exist in Freud’s analysis: repression and the reality principle. He states that most of the unpleasure humans experience is perceptual, possibly put in place by external perception of something as distressing or dangerous. The fact that the unconscious mind can recall traumatic events is something that Freud finds troubling because he believes dreams were examples of wish fulfillment. His conclusion, therefore, is that humans must dream these “unpleasurable” dreams either as self-punishment, or because humans suffer neurotic trauma from the inside out—the trauma in the mind exhibits itself outward, to various parts of the body. According to Freud, the unpleasure of the repetition compulsion must take place in order to receive pleasure from the mastery of this compulsion. He believes humans are unhappy because of their inability to remember the unconscious state. It is Freud’s overall assessment that

there exists in the “mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (24).

According to Freud, psychological trauma is an emotional blow, especially one which has a lasting psyche effect connected to an earlier event that the mind attempts to cover up. At the conclusion of World War I, Freud began studying a condition he termed “traumatic neurosis” where a person exhibits the inability to control themselves—displaying a form of hysteria (10). Freud was unhappy because the mind is unable to fully remember the unconscious, and he attempts to interpret the mind through psychoanalysis. The “struggle against resistances is resistance on the part of the unconscious” repressed portion of the mind (Freud 20). What remains in the conscious mind from the unconscious is not the trauma, but some kind of trigger for another thing that happened during the moment.

Rereading Freud, Cathy Caruth associates trauma as it is connected to wars and historical violence in her book *Unclaimed Experience*. She defines post-traumatic stress disorder as the experience of “sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 57-8). Caruth states that traumatic repetition destroys lives because the repetition results in defining or consuming the life of the impacted person. Caruth believes it is not the actual traumatic incident that destroys a person, but the repetition of the memory of the incident that destroys their life. The traumatic event is considered “traumatic” because the conscious mind cannot remember it; it is unclaimed experience; the conscious memory is blocked. Caruth argues that it is not the fact that the traumatic event happened that is detrimental, but it is survival itself that becomes

perplexing to the person. This analysis brings to light the question Caruth poses: “What does it mean to survive?” (60). The barrier of the conscious mind seemingly exists to protect the person who experiences a traumatic event. The discovery or realization of survival occurs in the moment they wake from dreaming about the traumatic event.

Caruth believes that Freud’s theory of trauma and historical violence represents his “formulation of trauma as a theory of the peculiar incomprehensibility of human survival” (58). The recognition of survival is confusing because the traumatic event causes the conscious mind to be in an unconscious like state for a period of time—being in a state of just going through the motions. This results in the mind’s failure to recognize the apparent threat until after the event has occurred. The survival of a traumatic event forces one to impossibly question how actual the threat to one’s life was. The trauma, then, occurs not from only confronting death itself, but also from having survived death while being consciously unaware of the event’s occurrence.

Sherman’s character Max initially experiences trauma when Nazi officials raid his apartment, murdering his one-night stand Wolf, forcing him and his lover Rudy to endure two years of life on the run living in the woods in constant fear of being captured. Once captured, on the way to Dachau, Max’s lover Rudy is taken away by the guards. Rudy’s screams can be heard off stage, and Max stiffens, desiring to move to find and help his loved one. A prisoner wearing a pink triangle, Horst, moves toward Max telling him to stay put because nothing he can do will help Rudy. Faced with the realization of what is happening to them, Max repeatedly states: “This isn’t happening... This can’t be happening... It isn’t happening... It isn’t happening... it isn’t happening” (Sherman 46-7), as Horst attempts to comfort and talk him through the situation. Sherman uses repetition

of words to convey the denial Max is experiencing. Complying with the unpleasure of Freud's repetition, Max repeats the same phrase again and again in the attempt to block out what is happening at the time.

Max's trauma becomes real when the guards bring Rudy into the same car as him, commanding that he watch as they beat him. The guards realize that Max is associated with Rudy due to his inability to watch the situation in front of him and because Rudy has called out for Max several times. They attempt to force Max to concede his special relationship with Rudy:

OFFICER. Your friend?

MAX. No. (*MAX continues to focus on floor and closes his eyes. The OFFICER hits RUDY in chest. RUDY screams.*)

OFFICER. Your friend?

MAX. No. (*Max stares straight ahead*)

OFFICER. Hit him. (*MAX stares at OFFICER disbelieving*)

Like this. (*OFFICER hits RUDY in chest. RUDY screams. MAX stares straight ahead. He shuts his eyes.*)

OFFICER. Hit him. (*MAX doesn't move*)

Your friend? (*OFFICER crosses DR of MAX, faces RUDY .*)

Your friend?

Max finally concedes to the officer's demands and hits Rudy, at first, quickly in the chest. He is encouraged and commanded by the officer to hit him again and again as he slugs Rudy in the chest. Rudy falls limp to the floor and the officers remove Max to a separate car on the train. Sterling explains that "the cruelty of the Nazis forced people to act despairingly and thus to turn against others and even against themselves" (377).

The scene in the film version of the play flashes back and forth from black and white images of the exterior of the train to that of color inside the car. Horst is already in recognizable prison garb, while others are still in the clothes they were picked up in. When the officers come into the car to take Rudy, all of the prisoners are sitting around

the edges of the car with space in the middle. In the film, Rudy's screams can be heard in the next car over the loud noise of the train on the tracks. Once Rudy is brought back into the car for Max to beat, his body takes up the empty middle space. There is a transformation that takes place when Max begins to hit Rudy; he cannot stop. Max is then clearly alienated from the rest of the passengers as they all huddle together on one end of the car while he sits alone on the other side nearby Rudy's corpse.

Later, when Max sees Horst again at the camp, Horst is surprised to see that Max is wearing a yellow star, associated with Jews at the camp. When he expresses his surprise, Max explains that he made a deal with the Nazi soldiers. As Horst challenges Max's suggestion, Max admits to what actually occurred on the train, resulting in his obtaining of a yellow star. Max explains in disjointed painful language how he had sex with a young dead Jewish girl. Max explains the situation to Horst, and tells him how the soldiers enjoyed his performance: "I said, I'm not queer. And they laughed. And I said, give me a yellow star. And they said, sure make him a Jew. He's not bent. And they laughed. They were having fun. But . . . I . . . got . . . my . . . star . . ." (Sherman 56). It is clear in Max's language that he is struggling with what happened in order for him to acquire his star. When Horst attempts to touch Max to try to comfort him, Max quickly pulls away and reverts back to a child-like state; he counts until the blackout at the end of the scene in order to gain control over the situation.

In the film representation of the play, the officers return to the car to retrieve Rudy's dead body. They make Max watch as they toss Rudy's lifeless body off of the moving train. Next, they take Max into a car full of officers and a very young girl dressed all in white. Max begins to spin. The screen shows the images of multiple officers, spinning

around in a circle. Smoking, laughing, drinking. Max seems to black out, surrounded by laughter and Nazi officers. A gunshot is heard. The next image that appears on the screen are Max's eyes staring out of a crack in the cargo car, watching the landscape speed by. Notably, when the train stops, Max jumps off the car carrying what appears to be a yellow star in his hand. Later, when Max finally confesses to Rudy what happened on the train, the scene is staged in pouring down rain. Max is crying, and all the travelers are sitting outside in the rain. This image adds to the emotion of the scene as Max flashes back to reveal him holding the young girl in his arms, bullet to the head, and he is cradling her. This seems to be the only image he can conjure up from his time in the car, the rest is all too painful.

Max's repression continues throughout the entirety of the play. Horst seeks to comfort Max several times, apologizing about what happened to Rudy. Horst, who did not know Rudy, calls him Max's friend, to which Max continuously questions who he is talking about. Max's common response is, "Who? Oh, the dancer," unable to recall Rudy's name. By displacing his sexual interest from Rudy to the dead girl on the train, Max is condemned to suppress his memory of his former lover. Hammermeister states that a "memory for its own sake is not only rather empty, it is—as we have learned from Freud—also hardly possible" (22). Painful memories that are not related to the present situation of moving rocks day in and day out is something that Max is interested in forgetting. He has no reason to commemorate his suffering and sorrow because he is consistently encountering other forms of suffering and sorrow at the camp.

It is because of this repression, that Max attempts to block out his gayness and change what he is called by the Nazi's, preferring to be categorized as a Jew rather than a queer.

Althusser's notion of interpellation involves the process of recognition of interaction with the ideology at hand. Althusser suggests that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation" (174). Following this idea, all humans are hailed by what society calls out to them. The answer to whatever is called is what forms a person and becomes his or her identity. A Lacanian reading of this idea would suggest that when called into language, the subject is immediately misrecognized because external language cannot match how the internal language would describe itself. So, what would happen if someone is defined by language that injures them, such as a slur? The problem would be resolved if the person were able to re-do how society hails him or her and the suggestion exists that each individual should have agency over what he or she is called or hailed by. Max attempts to re-do what he is called by society, specifically by the National Socialist Party. Instead of answering to homosexual or queer, he rejects this association and as a substitute prefers to be hailed as a Jew. Thereby, Max reconstructs his identity inside of the concentration camp, making himself a Jewish prisoner.

In Max's situation denial is survival. He is advised by a stranger on the train (Horst) to deny association with Rudy if he wishes to survive the train ride. Horst tells him, "Listen to me. If you survive the train, you stand a chance. Here's where they break you. You can do nothing for your friend. Nothing—" (Sherman 46). Keeping this ideology in mind, Max decides to concoct a situation where he is more likely to survive. Taking the little knowledge he has, he strikes up a deal with the soldiers on the train and procures a yellow star for himself—one that ranks above the pink triangles (homosexuals) at the

very least. By making this conscious decision Max actively changes what society calls him. Max alters his identity, switching from being recognized as queer to now being hailed: Jew.

In fact, Max wishes to erase his former identity entirely, repressing much of his past identity while he is at the camps. Sterling notes that “when Max erases his identity as a homosexual, he destroys his character and renders himself anonymous” (373). In pre-Nazi Germany, Max was very open about his sexuality. At a meeting with his Uncle in the park before his capture, Freddie tells Max: “The family takes care of me. But you. Throwing it in everyone’s face. No wonder they don’t want anything to do with you. Why couldn’t you have been quiet about it?” (Sherman 33). Essentially Max tells his uncle that he couldn’t be quiet about it because that would not be true to his character. However, now that he has realized the consequences Nazi Germany is enforcing upon homosexuals, Max is already beginning to change his mind.

Faced with desperation, Max bargains with his uncle, conceding to marry a nice girl as the family desires and says, “eventually, when all this blows over, you can get me back to Germany. If I want a boy, I’ll rent him. Like you. I’ll be discreet, quiet . . . fluff. Fair enough? It’s what father always wanted. Just get us *both* out alive” (Sherman 35). Recognizing the desperation of his situation, Max is willing to do whatever it takes to survive being on the run—even if it means altering how he is recognized by the outside of society. Nazi Germany changes how Max sees himself as a homosexual—causing him to realize it is imperative to go underground in order to be himself. Sterling affirms Max’s position saying, “Sherman’s portrayal of Max as a homosexual who wishes to

erase his identity is important because such a self-effacement is based on historical truth” (372).

Max learned about the importance of such a closeted identity long before the aftermath of the Night of the Long Knives, hiding, and capture and imprisonment at Dachau. These events reinforced the lesson in self-oppression that Max learned when his father fired a young worker Max loved as he explains that he was taught: “Queers aren’t meant to love” (Sherman 81). Max warns Horst of falling in love, and tells him that he (Max) is incapable of loving anyone because of that lesson he learned long ago. Being in the concentration camps is only reinforcing the lesson that Max was taught as a child—that he should practice self-oppression.

Max is emotionally unable to adapt to his newly formed identity. While at the camp, he and Horst seemingly fall in love with one another. Hammermeister acknowledges this fact stating, “[p]erverse though they may seem, love stories in concentration camps are attempts to survive by using pleasure as an antidote to torture” (24). What Sherman’s two characters gain from their relationship is strength—the strength to continue on through all the obstacles. Hammermeister suggests that having a “strong will to not break under the torture of the guards” is necessary for Max and Horst’s survival (24). Max uses his “skills” to request that Horst be put on duty where he is assigned so that he can watch over his friend who is in a lower situation than he. Sherman employs dramatic techniques to situate Max and Horst in a love scene, fully clothed on stage staring straight ahead.

Within the text of the play, the only stage directions for this scene are “*A loud bell rings. MAX and HORST put down their rocks and stand at attention staring straight*

ahead” (Sherman 52). For the remainder of the dialogue the only major direction given to the men are “*Silence*” (which is used multiple times) and two simple statements: “*has orgasm*” (Sherman 57). In the film, director Sean Mathias stages his scene to show the men twitching, smiling, and sweating. While they never look at each other throughout the scene, there are critical moments where there is a close up to each of their faces showing the intensity between the two characters.

John Clum proposes that “[g]ay men (and women) can read the scene as an enactment of the duplicity gays historically have had to stage in their own lives and can enjoy a verbal eroticism seldom presented so candidly in mainstream drama” (11). As the two men become one on the stage, Max learns to love both Horst and himself. The representation on the stage presents “an ironic reversal: usually it is not sex gay men are denied by a heterosexist society but the right to speak openly of their desire, the right to express their love” (Clum 184). Although their relationship must progress solely through language, it becomes a source of strength for both of the men in this desperate situation. Max and Horst must imagine being with one another in order to survive the camp’s atrocities. The act of making love with one another validates to Horst that they are human, and that “They’re not going to kill us” (Sherman 58). Max and Horst are re-making their own reality inside the camp, just as Max attempts to re-make his identity.

In the end, it is Max’s loving bond with Horst that incites him to take pride in his sexuality, and he refuses to hide who he is anymore. Sterling argues, “Max discovers that although the Nazis destroy the bodies of his homosexual lovers (Rudy and Horst), he himself is responsible for the destruction of his identity and conscience” (373). Early on in the concentration camp, Horst asks Max how the bodies get into the pit that is nearby

them. Max explains to Horst what is commonly known as the “hat trick.” The hat trick is where the guards throw their hats on the fence and request that the prisoners retrieve them. When the prisoners attempt to retrieve the hats, they discover that the fence is electric as it electrocutes them to death at the amusement of the guards (Sherman 65).

Again, it is because Max loves Horst, he tries to look out for him while they are at the camp. He notices that Horst has a cough and asks him why he does not request medicine from the guards. Horst is stern in his reply and says that he cannot get things because he is a pink triangle. Max uses his skills of striking deals to get medicine for Horst. Horst persuades him to confide in him how he managed to get the medicine. Max finally tells him, “I went down on him” (Sherman 93). Horst, in shock refuses to believe what Max is saying:

HORST. Is he queer?

MAX. Who knows? Just horny maybe. Sure, he could be queer. You don’t like to think about that, do you? You don’t want *them* to be queer.

HORST. No I don’t. (Sherman 94)

It is this act of compassion for Horst that eventually ends in his death. The guard who Max “went down on” visits them at their rock moving station and inquires about Max’s health. The guard hears Horst coughing and realizes that it was he who Max acquired the medicine for, not himself. The guard pulls the “hat trick” on Horst who, wise to this trick, pretends to go toward the hat and at the last minute turns and lunges at the guard. He reaches the guard and manages to scratch his face before being shot and killed. This silences Max.

The guard exits, telling Max he hopes the medicine helped him out. Max begins talking to himself, exhibiting signs of his traumatic repression:

Horst? (*Silence.*) You know what? (*Silence.*) I think... (*Silence.*) I think I love you. (*Silence.*) Shh! Don’t tell anyone. I think I loved . . . I can’t remember his name. A

dancer. I think I loved him too. Don't be jealous. I think I loved . . . some boy a long time ago. In my father's factory. Hans. That was his name. But the Dance. I don't remember. (Sherman 103)

Max moves Horst's body into the pit as he cries. He returns to moving the rocks. A moment later, he jumps in the pit and puts on Horst's jacket. According to Sterling, when Max "dons Horst's jacket, Max becomes reborn, regaining his lost identity and self" (386). Suddenly, a bright light flashes across the stage, indicating that Max jumped on the fence, choosing to end his life rather than to continue living a lie. Instead of allowing the Nazis to control him, as he does throughout the play, in the conclusion, Max finally assumes control over his own life and becomes proud of his homosexual identity. Sherman's play "responds in part to the difficulty for heterosexual audiences to acknowledge the 'humanness' of homosexuals" (Sterling 373). The conclusion of the play celebrates the return of Max's dignity, his recognition of love and "paradoxically enough, the defeat of the torturers" (Hammermeister 26). A celebration about suicide and death could be disputed by some, however this celebration exists in an ironic sense. Max has gone through so much over the course of the play, and he has done so in a trauma-like state. Through much of the action, he has been emotionally detached—feeling and remembering very little. In this aftermath, Max is in a way cured, as though he has snapped out of his trance mere moments before his suicide. However, he is not actually "cured" because in snapping out of his sub-reality he comes to the conclusion that he cannot live as a zombie any longer. The realization of all that has occurred and is occurring around him is too much to bear, and the only solution is for him to end his life.

CHAPTER VI

CONTROVERSY CONTINUES

Max experienced trauma watching the death of Wolf, being on the run, experiencing capture, participating in the murder of Rudy and the degradation of the poor Jewish girl, watching the starvation and torture of Horst, and committing his eventual death. Max experienced repression and hailed himself by a name other than the one he was known by. It was his emotional numbness and self-hatred that led to his self-affirming final gesture. Max's suicide was not an example of self-sacrifice; it was an expression of the inability to survive in the situation that he was experiencing. Caruth discusses trauma theory in that many times survivors wake up and cannot understand or believe they survived. They have experienced brain deterioration due to their repression, and the realization of this is so traumatic that they cannot fathom handing survival, resulting in their decision to choose suicide.

In addressing the question about the privileging of Jews over homosexuality, Sherman does not seem to be taking such a stance. An off-handed look at the situation may initially invite the application of such an idea, however as Michael Fox notes, "part of the problem in pre-war Germany was that groups were separated...gays didn't concern themselves with the larger political situation" (qtd. in par. 6). Sherman uses Greta as a

tool to point out just how disjointed one community was from another. Max asks Greta “Who’s Karl Ernst?” and Greta replies, “What kind of world do you live in? Aren’t you guys ever curious about what’s going on?” (Sherman 20). Groups and individuals within those groups turned the other way and thought it none of their business what was going on in the political sphere and persecution of others. This ideology looking the other way can be seen many times throughout the movie. When the Nazis went to Max and Rudy’s apartment for Wolf, more than one of their neighbors stopped and watched the Nazis run past them. In fact, Mathias directs part of the action to show a couple closing the curtains so as to not see what was occurring in the building as Rudy and Max were being chased. It was not until it was too late and too wide-spread that there began to be some recognition of the damage caused by the Nazis.

Sherman’s innocence in providing a provocative scenario is not as it seems; he had a legitimate ulterior motive. Fox quotes him as stating that the subsequent removal of Nazi uniforms and symbols from the homosexual community was one of the factors that led him to write *Bent*. He wished to incite a change in the ever increasing presence of such paraphernalia amongst homosexuals who were unaware of the history.

While there can be no clear answer to whether or not artists are allowed to write about controversial topics, it certainly could be argued by some that artists are appropriating the time, using words to describe scenarios, places, and events that cannot possibly be described. However, many would agree with Lang in the recognition of the overall achievement of most works to simply increase awareness and remembrance. This play is not parodying the Holocaust or suggesting it was “better” to be a Jew than a homosexual.

It is representing the time and placing attention and emphasis on a persecuted group that is mostly unknown.

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