



## THEMATIC ELEMENTS OF THE NOVEL "THE WALL" BY JOHN HERSEY

Umirbekova Barchin

O'zDJTU 2-bosqich magistranti

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7565227>

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14<sup>th</sup> January 2023

Accepted: 23<sup>th</sup> January 2023

Online: 24<sup>th</sup> January 2023

### KEY WORDS

*Holocaust, Warsaw Ghetto, Docu-novelist, Resistance, identity crisis, Womanhood, Childhood.*

### ABSTRACT

*John Hersey, American Pulitzer prize winner writer published "The Wall" in 1950. It became successful English language novel of Holocaust literature. The Wall deserves wide recognition as it was the first representative of Holocaust theme and its tragedy for English readers. This thesis deals with analysis of thematic elements of the novel.*

The Pulitzer Prize winner John Hersey was born in Tientsin, China, in 1914. He lived there until his family returned to the USA. Hersey studied at Yale and Cambridge. He served as a Sinclair Lewis's secretary for a time, and then worked as a journalist for several years. From 1947 he mainly dedicated his time for writing fiction. He won the Pulitzer Prize, taught at Yale for two decades.

His historical fiction "the Wall" was published in 1950 and became bestseller novel in the USA. It was the first popular novel where Holocaust disaster introduced to American reader. In the novel writer used his experience of journalism and the whole novel was told by real testimonies of holocaust disaster. As James E. Young emphasized the impulse in Holocaust writers to insist on documentary link between their texts and the events inspiring them has not been limited to diarists and memoirists it extends to novelist and playwrights of Holocaust as well. <sup>1</sup> From that perspective Hersey can be considered as "docu-novelist"

The novel begins with editor's prologue where group of seekers find Levinson's buried archives then the story is told according to archive's letters and diaries.

The Theme of the novel

According to Oxford dictionary of literary terms theme is a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number of literary works. While the subject of a work is described concretely in terms of its action.

The theme of the novel is Holocaust disaster, its impacts on peoples psych. According to Alan Rosen the "Adversity" – What we now called the Holocaust (or, in its Hebrew counterpart - *Shoah*) the notorious attempt by The Nazi Germany to destroy European Jewry – grew in its proportions as the months and years went on.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Literature of the Holocaust. Edited by Bloom Holocaust documentary fiction: Novelist as eyewitness. p 75 Chelsea House publishers.2004

<sup>2</sup> Literature of Holocaust Cambridge University Press 2013 p 1



The Wall is the novel takes place in the Ghetto. The novel tells the story from 1939, November to 1943, May. The story about Warsaw Ghetto, the largest created by the Nazis during World War II.

*Events November 16, 1940. Entry Ditto. Noah Levinson.*

*...What pleasant days those were, when we locked in our little cell! And now, we have our ghetto. In all my thoughts of a ghetto – I never dreamed we would be locked within our wall.<sup>3</sup>*

In Warsaw Ghetto imprisoned nearly half a million Jews at its height nearly 30 percent of Warsaw's population were forced behind a wall that stood over 10 feet high. People inside the Ghetto had no right to live their usual life. The wall separated them from everything from home, from family, from rights of being human-being.

*Events March, 1941. Entry March 27, 1941. From Noah Levinson. How tenacious we are! We refuse to admit that our circumstances are changed. We cling stubbornly to our habits of life. We want to go on as usual. We pretend that the wall is not there yet it is most assuredly around us, and its existence affects all our small private motions and emotions<sup>4</sup>*

Behind the wall it was cramped, people starved, were brutalized tens of thousands of people died there, many more were sent to the Nazi's death camps. The life of Jew people was judged in a such easy way. Their life depended on one simple word:

- *Left ... left ... death ... death ...*

*Some of Jews tried to argue, some to beg; many were crying, men as well as woman. I suppose everyone knew about Treblinka by this time. Each person tried, I dare say to persuade himself that Treblinka does not exist: but each had to admit the possibility that it does.<sup>5</sup>*

The author depicted how people reacted to political and social oppression by the refusal of the reality. How psychological defense of human psych was resistant to disaster.

The Central Idea of the novel

The central idea of the novel is human spirit of resistance. Deborah E. Lipstadt argued in his critical essay "Holocaust" about resistance of people against The Nazis: Resistance- how did the Jews respond? Is there any truth to charge that they went "like sheep to the slaughter"? How do we define resistance? Do resisters include only those who physically resisted or can we adopt broader definition of resistance without diluting its meaning?<sup>6</sup>

Through the events heroes faced to several difficulties and they made them physically especially psychologically stronger, resistant to obstacles. The writer discovered unlimited power of human nature in critical situations, how resilient willpower can push heroes to freedom. The evil can be strong but human spirit of resistance is infinite:

*Berson says he was suddenly really afraid for the first time in his life: he felt a surge of panic, which he tried to put down, but it rose in wave after wave. He needed to cough, he wanted to cry out, he wanted to get up from this dark imprisoning place of refuge and crawl out to the daylight<sup>7</sup>*

Problems of the novel

---

<sup>3</sup> The Wall P112

<sup>4</sup> The Wall p 123

<sup>5</sup> The Wall p 338

<sup>6</sup> Literature of the Holocaust. Edited by Bloom. Holocaust Deborah E. Lipstadt p. 111. Chelsea House publishers.2004

<sup>7</sup> The Wall p 341



John Hersey created unique “problems” for each personage. These problems serve as a character developer element for them:

#### Problem of identity crisis

Personages of the novel experienced identity crisis. In a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity became insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Some of them faced to self- crisis and rejected his identity while some of them were strong in their belief

*Events August 15, 1941. Entry August 16, 1941. From Rabbi Goldflamm.*

*Goldflamm: ... What sets us apart from the rest of the world, as you well know, is not this wall around us, but our religion-and you cannot shake that*

*Pan Apt: I can't shake off something I've never worn. I'm practical man, Rabbi, I understand the usefulness of mysticism and ethics for some people, but for me I apply ethics when necessary and suspend them when necessary.<sup>8</sup>*

#### Problem of womanhood

Female characters tried to save qualities considered to be natural to or characteristic of a woman. The strongest among them instinct of motherhood which is natural to every woman. Dehumanized condition made people to seek for true love, sincere love of mother. Warmth of women gave them hope and support. Protagonist Rachel Apt is described as a mother for all “family” despite her youth by the writer and her characteristics of motherhood developed dynamically.

*Events September 5-10,1942. From Dolek Berson*

*...If there was danger of panic, she drove sense and steadiness into her companions. If they became apathetic and morose, she lifted them to proper level of apprehension. If a single man or woman began to feel self-pitiful, she was ready with comfort. The force of her sympathy was enormous; she could do more with a look than anyone else with a lecture. She had been singlehandedly cohesive, and once, more or less jokingly, Berson had called her “Little Mother”. He said, in some hard situation:*

*-What do you think, Mutterl?<sup>9</sup>*

#### Problem of childhood

Behind the wall destiny of millions of children was buried. Thousands of children starved, they were used as smugglers. Smuggling was universally accepted and highly organized by them to survive despite extreme danger of it.

*From Entry April 14,1941. Noah Levinson*

*...Officially the punishment for smuggling is ten-thousand-zloty fine and a year in jail. Often children are shot.<sup>10</sup>*

Probably the most influential and unforgettable story from the novel is how the writer portrayed insignificance of children's life. The writer depicted this tragic incident as usual and ordinary case in the background of holocaust.

*...The officer said:*

*-Right. What's in the suitcase?*

---

<sup>8</sup> The Wall p184

<sup>9</sup> The Wall p 375

<sup>10</sup> The Wall p 160



*-Personal possessions...*

*...Inside was a baby. It was perhaps a year old. It was alive. Its moth had been bound with strips of cloth...*

*The German officer, expressing neither surprise nor anger: - for the little stranger, left. <sup>11</sup>*

(In the Ghetto Germans sent people to left who sentenced to death camp – Umschlagplatz)

Conclusion

John Hersey's fictionalized story was the first attempt to introduce Holocaust theme and to American readers and became successful. Author developed the idea of resistant spirit of Jew people. Hersey drew the problem line for his personages individually and through this they experienced self-transformation to good or evil side.

### References:

1. Literature of Holocaust. Edited by Alan Rosen. Cambridge University Press 2013
2. The Wall. John Hersey 1988
3. Literature of the Holocaust. Edited by Bloom . Chelsea House publishers.2004

---

<sup>11</sup> The Wall P 339