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Honors Thesis

CHALLENGING THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF HOLOCAUST VICTIMHOOD:
EXAMINING THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements
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Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

CHALLENGING THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF HOLOCAUST VICTIMHOOD: EXAMINING THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

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Bachelor of Arts

Women are severely unrepresented in the master narrative that has come to define what it means to be a Holocaust victim. Although men and women were subjected to different forms of victimization, women's unique experiences of suffering have been marginalized and subsumed within the male-dominated master narrative. Examining the Holocaust through a gendered lens challenges this existing narrative of Holocaust victimhood. Conducting a gender analysis of the Holocaust is essential to fully incorporate women's experiences into Holocaust history and the grossly inadequate narrative society uses to define Holocaust victimhood.

An analysis of fifty Holocaust fiction novels revealed that literature's depiction of Holocaust victimhood is far more accurate than that of history, largely due to the consistent portrayal of five prominent distinctions between the experiences of male and female victims. The depiction of these five key dimensions of the feminine victim experience---sexual humiliation, assault, starvation, motherhood burdens, and camp

relationships---is examined at length across twelve novels to illustrate the importance of studying the Holocaust through a feminine framework. Studying the Holocaust through a gendered lens, specifically with attention to these five distinctions, is necessary for Holocaust history to be comprehensive and for the master narrative to be truly indiscriminate.

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Introduction

A period marked by indescribable suffering and loss, the Holocaust remains one of the most agonizing chapters of human history. While no one escaped this harrowing chapter unscathed, it was those imprisoned in concentration camps who bore the brunt of Nazi persecution, enduring unspeakable horrors that will forever haunt the archives of history. The experiences of these male and female prisoners, Holocaust victims if you will, have come to be represented in history by a singular narrative, which seemingly defines what it means to be a Holocaust victim. This master narrative is primarily derived from first-hand accounts of prominent male survivors and as a result, is largely male-dominated. While this prevailing narrative claims to equally encompass male and female victims, the generalized events it depicts fail to mirror any of the gendered differences in suffering that a simple comparison of male and female victims' accounts blatantly reflects. Very little of this pervasive narrative reflects how women experienced the Holocaust differently than men, which has left women victims virtually unrecognized in the pages of history. Despite the profound impact of women during this period and their unique experiences of suffering, women's narratives have been marginalized and subsumed within the broader male-driven framework of the master narrative. While some literary scholars have sought to bring a gendered lens to Holocaust literature in hopes of addressing this egregious misrepresentation, such efforts didn't take place until much after the Holocaust, and even still, the male-driven master narrative remains dominant.

This thesis addresses the lacuna between women's unique experiences as Holocaust victims and the corresponding representation, or lack thereof, of these experiences in the master narrative. I advocate for and contend that a gender analysis of

the Holocaust is essential for society to have a comprehensive understanding of this period and for the master narrative to accurately reflect the unique dimensions of the female victim experience. Examining the holocaust through a gendered lens, specifically accounting for five key dimensions of feminine experience, offers a deeper, more nuanced view of what the holocaust experience was like than the pervasive narrative currently depicts.

To illustrate the importance of conducting a gender study of the Holocaust, I selected fifty Holocaust fiction novels that portrayed predominantly female protagonists, which were based on real women from this period. I used that criteria to select my novels because I wanted to see how accurate literature's representation of men and women victims is compared to history, and reading novels based on real women allowed me to compare the novel's portrayal directly to concrete biographical research. An analysis of these novels revealed that the contrasting narrative patterns for male and female protagonists across fictionalized Holocaust literature was representative of the contrasting average experience of male and female victims. An examination of these patterns highlighted five prominent distinctions between the experiences of men and women, namely: sexual humiliation, sexual assault, starvation, and unhygienic living conditions, the burden of motherhood, and the formation of camp relationships.

While many more distinctions were reflected across the novel sample, I selected these five differences because of the consistency in which they appeared across the fifty novels and how much they juxtaposed the existing narrative. They are also all among the most frequently referred to distinctions by scholars, which was another contributing factor. These five key dimensions of the feminine victim experience exemplify how little

representation women have in history's master narrative of Holocaust victimhood and the importance of studying this period through a gendered lens. From those fifty, I selected twelve novels to use in this paper that best embody these gendered differences in victimization to illustrate women's uniquely different and the importance of enacting a feminine framework when studying the Holocaust to challenge the master narrative. I argue that considering the Holocaust through this feminine framework will more fully incorporate women's life stories into the history books and finally write women into the master narrative of Holocaust victimhood, giving women victims greater representation and generating a more complete record of the Holocaust.

Master Narrative

One of the most widely read texts ever published, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a cornerstone of Holocaust literature (Graver xiii). With no document compelling a fraction of the enamor and attention that this text has received since its publication, Anne Frank has distinguished herself as the most well-known author in this genre. However, although a woman authored what continues to be the most frequently referenced piece of Holocaust literature, it is an ironic, but unavoidable truth that society's perception of the Holocaust has primarily been influenced by men (Copeland 9).

This male-centered perception is not the result of a lack of female contributions, but society's treatment of select male Holocaust narratives as being representative of what victims suffered. While many women have added their personal songs of suffering and sorrow to the evolving body of Holocaust literature, their voices have largely been muted by the public's fixation on male survivor narratives. With the moving testimonials of men such as Elie Wiesel and Tadeusz Borowski being perceived as "encompassing

what all victims suffered during the Holocaust” and being treated as “definitive sources on “the” Holocaust experience,” a singular narrative to describe the universal suffering of victims during the Holocaust emerged (Copeland 9). While the mental image conjured varies from person to person, this narrative generally reflects a combination of specific experiences that have come to define a concentration camp experience and typically looks very similar to this: a Jewish person is taken and transported to a concentration camp where their possessions are seized, their bodies stripped, shaved, and tattooed, and their days subjected to hard labor, horrific living conditions, and the constant threat of impending death. When the average American thinks about the experience of someone who lived through the Holocaust, this is the prevailing narrative that consistently comes to mind.

Despite approximations that six million Jewish men, women, and children died at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust, and the millions of others who managed to survive similar persecution, traditional Holocaust studies promote this one narrative as a default representative for the experiences of all those who suffered. Although society uses this narrative as if it were gender indiscriminate, equally illustrative of the experiences of all the men, women, and children imprisoned, the lack of certain key feminine experiences it contains would suggest differently.

This male-dominated narrative is consistent with women’s depiction of war in general (Osler 219). Like the background dancers in a music video or extras in a movie scene, women are acknowledged for their involvement, but not credited for having any overwhelming influence. Despite the vast range of roles women fulfilled during the war, both at home and in uniform, and the fact that they, coupled with the elderly and children,

comprised two-thirds of the war's total victims, "the Second World War is generally perceived as a male enterprise" (Krimmer 2). Until recently the deaths of these women were not even classified as casualties, as the deaths of civilians were only considered "collateral damage," according to feminist historian Linda Grant de Pauw (Krimmer 2). With even their deaths classified as subordinate to the fatalities of their male counterparts in the official record of war, it is no shock that their unique, individual experiences have also been overshadowed by the accounts of men in the pages of history as well.

While a fair amount of women's Holocaust history exists, Maria Kaplan, Professor of Modern Jewish History and three-time winner of the National Jewish Book Award, notes that "these social and women's histories often *include* women but are not consciously *about* gender" (43). This distinction is important because it means that while women are mentioned in these histories, the defining differences that distinguish their experiences are not, making it appear as if the male-centered narrative in circulation does accurately encompass the experiences of female victims. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth expressed a similar sentiment in their book *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, stating, "Most widely read scholarship—historical, sociopolitical, philosophical, and religious—treat the Holocaust as if sexual differences did not make a difference," with the experiences that were specific to women being "submerged or ignored" and many details having gone "unmentioned if not unnoticed" (xi). With few historians seeming "to go beyond just including women" (Kaplan 43) and the "'canonical' corpus of Holocaust literature presenting mostly the male viewpoint," it is easy to see how a narrative allegedly representative of all victims could be so male-centered. Women may be

included in the pages of history and this default narrative of suffering, but the distinctive experiences they suffered as a result of their gender are not.

The underrepresentation of women in the historical narrative of Holocaust suffering was first formally brought into the limelight in early 1983 when Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz, feminist scholars of German history and culture, convened a two-day conference on women and the Holocaust. The mission of the conference, according to Professor of Religion and chair of the first session Alixe Eckardt, was to “add to the general knowledge about both the Holocaust and women's experiences during the period, “ as well as “identify and understand the response of Jewish women to this catastrophe, their coping strategies, if any, and their specific vulnerabilities as women” (Baer and Goldenberg xvii). In convening this conference, Ringelheim and Katz, in addition to the numerous other feminist scholars who attended, effectively challenged the existing body of knowledge about the Holocaust, and in doing so discovered that Holocaust history was “as male-centered as the body of knowledge in history and other subjects and disciplines” (Baer and Goldenberg xvii). As 400 women each day recounted their individual horror stories of imprisonment during the Holocaust, it became glaringly apparent that the male experience that history had generalized the female experience from was in actuality vastly different. While men and women experienced many of the same forms of persecution, women endured distinct kinds of maltreatment that color a very different narrative of suffering than they are currently being attributed.

With the different victimizations endured by women so vividly on display and the subject of women in the Holocaust transforming from a topic of intellectual inquiry to a legitimate area of scholarly research, a debate ignited as to whether the distinctions in

male and female victimization were important and whether they should be further researched. As scholars began seriously considering the importance and impact of gender during this period, two questions emerged as the century of controversy: “Did gender matter during the Holocaust? Should gender studies of the Holocaust be conducted?” Given the gravity of the period in question, scholars were quick to choose sides and declare their allegiance, with very few choosing to remain Switzerland on such a divisive and complex issue.

Voices that Support the Master Narrative

Opponents of studying women’s suffering independently from the experiences of men were particularly swift and strident in voicing their objections to counter the support for gender analysis that the 1983 Conference produced. None more than Lawrence Langer—American scholar, Holocaust analyst, and Professor of English and Holocaust education—whose “unblinking assessment of the Holocaust as an event so vast and evil that it defies moral framing helped deepen scholarly and popular understanding of the atrocity” arguably more than any other (Risen 1). While a wide range of defenses have been presented in resistance to studying gender by numerous scholars, three main arguments have surfaced as encompassing the majority of the opposition’s objections, all of which Langer has been a leading voice of dissent on.

The first argument predominantly made is that studying the experiences of imprisoned men and women separately invites competition into whose suffering was greater and oftentimes by default places women’s oppression above men’s. Langer submits that “nothing could be crueler or more callous than the attempt to dredge up from this landscape of universal destruction a mythology of comparative endurance that

awards favor to one group of individuals over another" (58). Given the ubiquitous nature of this period of suffering, Langer asserts that performing a gender study of the Holocaust would be turning the tragedy into a "who endured the most" competition where one gender's experiences were awarded gold over the other. Many scholars echoed Langer's statement, with those especially critical of feminist historians' focus on Jewish women labeling a gender analysis as "privileging women" and "insisted on the irrelevance, indeed irrelevance, of this scholarship" (Kaplan 38). When men's and women's experiences are considered in conjunction under the same umbrella of victimization there is no room for differentiation, but evaluating them separately encourages comparison, with one naturally coming out on top.

The less prolific, but equally powerful, second argument offered by those rejecting the use of gender as an important factor in our evaluation of Holocaust suffering is that doing so softens the magnitude of loss that took place. Biographer and literary critic Ruth Franklin noted that the intense "pressure to make the Holocaust fit a moral framework" in the decades following the war left society grasping at straws to try and unearth a method for the madness that unfolded (Risen 1). This desperate desire to derive meaning from the Holocaust is human's natural response to tragedy, a defense mechanism to lessen the impact that anguish of this extent inflicts. Langer asserts that dividing the experiences of all those who suffered by gender is an attempt to carry out this innate inclination to find order in the inhumane insanity of the Holocaust, and offered this statement in response: "All efforts to find a rule of hierarchy in that darkness, whether based on gender or will, spirit or hope, reflect only our own need to plant a life sustaining seed in the barren soil that conceals the remnants of two-thirds of European

Jewry” (Ghiță 184). He goes on to say that the sooner we stop trying to make sense of what took place and accept the reality of the Holocaust as nothing more than a story of mass murder with no silver lining, the “quicker we will learn to face such chaos with unshielded eyes” (Ghiță 184). Langer, and the ensemble of scholars arguing similar sentiments, resist a gender study of the Holocaust on account of it inadvertently aiding in assuaging the immense loss and suffering that was experienced.

The third and most prominent argument posed by those adamantly on the opposing side of whether men and women should be considered two distinct entities in the study of the Nazi genocide is the distraction it serves from Jews being the target of mass extermination. Virtually all scholars who have dissented from the pro-women’s study movement have voiced a sentiment to this effect, arguing that focusing on the suffering of women given that the Holocaust sentenced all Jews to death—man, woman, and child—deprives Jews as a whole the focus they deserve. Once again Langer’s voice is among the loudest of those maintaining this stance, warning against "overstating the importance of a biologically unique experience" on the basis that the "ultimate sense of loss unites former victims in a violated world beyond gender" (57).

Cynthia Ozick, an American short storyist, novelist, and essayist whose renowned works focus on the American Jewish life, offered a similar insight, reasoning that by emphasizing the importance of gender in the Holocaust, society is identifying the Holocaust as a calamity that happened to women, making the Jewish nature of the victim's nothing more than a detail (Copeland 11). As quoted by Ringelheim in "The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust," Ozick declares, “It is not a detail. It is everything, the whole story...The Holocaust happened to victims who were not seen as men, women,

or children, but as Jews" (Copeland 11). With the Jewish community as a whole being the victim of Nazi ideology, scholars argue that focusing on any other aspect about those who suffered detracts from the revulsion of the mass murder that was carried out.

While serving as one of the editors for the "Commentary," a monthly magazine founded by the Jewish American Committee, Gabriel Schoenfeld referred to studying the Holocaust in terms of gender as "the worst of sins," claiming that the practitioners of women's and gender studies are insisting on a "macabre sisterhood with the dead Jewish women of Europe" (Turk 8). While Schoenfeld acknowledges that studying all the unique ways Jewish women experienced the ghettos and concentration camps is an undertaking "hardly without merit," he accuses feminist scholars of emphasizing the gender-differentiated instances of victimization in the name of promoting their "naked ideological "agenda"" (Schoenfeld 1). Many scholars shared similar thinking to Schoenfeld, believing that a gendered reading of this period "may denigrate the Holocaust's significance by turning the Shoah merely into an example of sexism" and "detract from the more fundamental fact" that the Holocaust was targeted towards Jews, not women, as reasoned by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth in their book *Different Voices: Women in the Holocaust* (Turk 8).

Despite authoring an entire volume dedicated solely to women's experience at Theresienstadt, the concentration camp she was confined to, author, journalist, and Holocaust survivor Ruth Bondy expressed similar misgivings when explaining her deep reservations about authoring a text focused on women. In her introductory remark, Bondy clarifies any misunderstandings about her position on having a gender-based approach to Holocaust studies, writing "Zyklon B [lethal gas] did not differentiate between men and

women; the same death swept them all away...Any division of the Holocaust and its sufferers according to gender seemed offensive to me” (Ghiță 184). In this bold statement, it is clear that no distinction between the sufferers of the Holocaust is more important than the unifying commonality of their being Jewish. With this declaration, Bondy joins the ranks of Langer, Ozick, Schoenfeld, and the copious other voices passionately opposing a gendered study of the Holocaust.

Voices that Challenge the Master Narrative

The 1983 conference was the catalyst in the discussion of women’s representation in Holocaust studies that prompted scholars around the world to begin adding their voices to the likes of Ringelheim and Katz in quick succession, adamantly offering their support for using gender as a lens of study. With the undeniable disparity between the reflection of men’s and women’s experiences in Holocaust studies on full display, many reasoned it was only logical that a gendered reading be performed so that these gender-centered distinctions could be better understood and incorporated into history.

Those in support counter the opposition’s objections of a gender study of the Holocaust predominantly on the basis that the purpose of studying women independently from men is not an attempt to detract from Jews being the target of this mass murder or promote women’s suffering as being greater than men’s, but to incorporate the overlooked experiences of women into Holocaust studies. Kaplan addressed the first concern directly in her publication *Did Gender Matter During the Holocaust?* saying, “To raise the issue of gender also does not place it above racism,” it simply provides a “more intimate, more nuanced story” that gives Jewish women “a voice long denied them and ... a perspective long denied us” (39). In regard to the second, scholar Judith Tydor

Baumel commented that women's suffering and survival strategies "were not better or worse" than men's, "but often different, due to their position in a gendered Jewish community" (345). The aim of pro-gender study scholars such as Kaplan and Baumel isn't to "privilege women's suffering" by awarding them favor at the expense of men, nor have gender upend Jews as the genocide's focus, but to better integrate the neglected experiences of women into the male-focused historical narrative of the Holocaust (Copeland 15).

Scholars Carol Rittner, Dalia Ofer, and Leonore Weitzman have fervently echoed the attitudes of the women above, describing the study of women as being "not only justifiable but necessary to redress the absence of women's lives and experiences in the documentation of Holocaust history and the preservation of Holocaust memory" (Ghiță 184). Kremer submits, "Study of the differences is informative, just as contemplation of commonalities is significant. Attention to gender is a salient component of the larger history and the complete text (3). For the history of the Holocaust to accurately reflect the lives of all those who suffered during this period, gender needs to be taken into account so that the distinct experiences endured by women can finally be recognized and absorbed into the master narrative. After all, "without women's memories we missed half the history of the Holocaust" (Kaplan 39).

While obviously supporters of a gender analysis of this period argue that gender did in fact matter and play an influential part in victimization experienced by sufferers during the Holocaust, these advocates equally emphasize that gender is only one component of survivors' experiences. With the ultimate goal being creating more space for women in Holocaust studies in general, it would be counterintuitive for women's

experiences only to be discussed in relation to gender, as that would further remove them from the master narrative. On this topic of acknowledging only the strictly feminine experiences of women, Sara Horowitz writes, "Limiting our discussion in this way would—ironically—serve to reinscribe male experience as normative for the development of a master narrative, and would relegate women to the category of the mother, or the victim of sexual abuse" (Copeland 11). The goal of gender studies is not to make any one group "separate," but to use the increased knowledge that studying the differences between the gender's experiences provides to better understand the victimization that occurred during the Holocaust.

This idea is encapsulated by women's lack of representation in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Permanent Exhibition, which Ringelheim draws attention to in her writing of "The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust." Although the Permanent Exhibition makes no attempt to conceptualize women's suffering in the war, it contains sections singling out the victimization of Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political prisoners. She points out the discrepancy to make the point that although she does not believe a segment dedicated solely to women is necessary considering "the lives and deaths of women are too integrated into the entire picture to segregate their experiences," (Ringelheim 347) the Permanent Exhibition should recognize and indicate "where appropriate, that women were victimized in particular ways" (Copeland 13). Ringelheim is not asking for a special separate segment to depict the experiences of women sufferers, in fact, she's calling for the opposite—for the distinct experiences of victimization faced by women to be acknowledged within the broader exhibition as a whole. Like Horowitz, she does not want women's experiences to

be considered respectively, which would further validate the male-centered makeup of the singular narrative but be encompassed in the main story the Holocaust Memorial Museum presents.

It is the differences in victimization that men and women were subjected to on account of their gender that comprise the core of the supporter's argument, as it is the exclusion of these differences in the primary historical narrative that makes women so inadequately represented. Without these differences, the experiences of men and women would have been by and large parallel, making the singular narrative in circulation accurate and eliminating the need for a gender study. However, because the comparative testimonies of male and female sufferers demonstrate that they were indeed subjected to different kinds of persecution, acknowledgment of and more studies about women's unique experiences through gender analysis is necessary.

Internationally known licensed psychotherapist, author, and visiting university professor Joy Miller writes, "The thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of women in Auschwitz reveal distinctions unique only to females" (185). She makes the argument that "overlooking such distinctly feminine issues is to negate these women's unique experiences," which is why a gender study is so essential—the only way to recognize these distinctions is by studying women's experiences individually, making gender an important component of evaluation (Copeland 10). Ringelheim asserts that women-centered perspectives that highlight female-specific trauma need to be augmented into the main narrative because "the Holocaust produced a set of experiences, responses, and memories that do not always parallel those of Jewish men" for Jewish women (Ghiță 185). When referring to interviews she conducted with female camp survivors,

Ringelheim noted that when giving descriptions regarding the tragic persecution of Jews during this period, “the women interviewed discussed women's particular Victimization. They spoke of their sexual vulnerability: sexual humiliation, rape, sexual - exchange, pregnancy, abortion, and vulnerability through their children—concerns that men either described in different ways or, more often, did not describe at all” (Elstain 319).

When one compares the personal testimonies of both Jewish men and women victims, with these and many more distinctions so easily perceived, gender becomes an obvious and inevitable lens through which the Holocaust needs to be considered. “Along the stations toward extinction ... each gender lived its own journey,” (Kaplan 38) noted Professor of History and Women’s Studies Mary Felstiner, as “the road to annihilation was marked by events that specifically affected men as men and women as women,” according to Raul Hilberg (Turk 12). Myrna Goldberg coined the phrase, “different horrors, same hell,” and there seems no better phrase to encompass the distinctive experiences of men and women victims during this period.

While there is no doubt that every victim of the Holocaust—man or woman—was subjected to dehumanizing acts of physical, mental, and emotional torture, it is equally concrete that these oppressive acts varied based on gender. Failure to reflect the gender-specific traumas experienced by women in the pages of history has resulted in their exclusion from the singular master narrative of suffering as well, an error that can best be remedied through gender analysis. Proponents of a gender study of the Holocaust are advocating for the importance of gender as a component of analysis to provide a more robust look into the Holocaust as a whole so that women can finally be painted into the foreground with the men, not behind them in the background. As Ringelheim so

eloquently stated, when we fail to acknowledge that men and women suffered distinct persecutions, we "lose the lives of women for a second time" (Kremer 9).

Feminine Framework in Holocaust Fiction

While it is the plethora of first-hand survivor testimonies and memoirs from both male and female victims that factually confirm men and women were subjected to different forms of persecution, perhaps the best source illustrating many of these key distinctions in their experiences is fictionalized Holocaust literature.

Before proceeding, it must be acknowledged that the existence of Holocaust fiction as a genre is a controversy all in itself, with many questioning the authenticity of these texts and the threat that authors' usage of creative liberties poses to historical accuracy. Although the identification of factual errors spanning all the way from minute to egregious within various novels of this genre justify concern over the accuracy of information these novels are imprinting upon readers, comparison of these fiction texts to the non-fiction texts the storylines were gleaned from reveals that the overall image readers are walking away with regarding the victim's experiences are mostly accurate.

While there are glaring exceptions, John Boynes' *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* being one for example, a majority of novels convey an accurate representation of what all those who suffered in the Holocaust experienced. The extensive research conducted by virtually all authors writing in this genre has ensured that generally speaking, the lives of the protagonists in these novels do in fact largely mirror the real lives of those who suffered. Despite any of the minor or more flagrant historical errors present, the general impression that these novels give readers about what men and women victims suffered

while imprisoned is fair and informative, making the genre a valid source of reference for the purposes of this discussion.

With that being said, fictionalized Holocaust literature reflects the differences in victimization faced by men and women so acutely because of the stark contrast in the narratives of the novels featuring male camp prisoner protagonists versus those with females. When texts with male main characters are compared to those with female leads, a traceable pattern of seemingly gendered victimizations and responses is easily detected. While “Men and women shared a similar fate of annihilation,” “differences existed in the nature of the conflicts they had to confront,” and the “reactions they employed,” a sentiment that the consistent absence of specific events in the narratives of male protagonists validates as fact (Turk IV). “Unlike male narratives, in which women appear as minor figures and often as helpless victims, in women-centered novels female characters are fully defined protagonists, experiencing the Shoah in all its evil manifestations,” writes Kremer (5). She describes these women as being “assertive agents, forging communal bonds and struggling for control of their own destinies,” as they endured “daily rounds of hard labor, beatings, starvation, illness, sexual assault, forced separation from family and friends, and, for some unfortunates, subjection to medical experimentation” (Kremer 5).

While no two novels are exactly the same, they all consistently contain a combination of specific feminine victimizations that immediately set them apart from those with male main characters. Even without the inclusion of names or pronouns, the gender of Holocaust fiction can easily be determined based on the description of experiences inflicted on both parties and the inclusion of events only suffered by one.

While female-centered narratives describe camp initiation and the ongoing hardship of starvation similarly to those with men (albeit very differently as discussed later on), they also invariably “explore female related concerns such as abortions, killing of newborns, separation, and vulnerabilities specific to women's biology such as menstruation, amenorrhea, rape and other sexual offenses, pregnancy and childbirth” (Turk IV).

The differences in the experiences included and the descriptions of those shared in common in fictionalized Holocaust narratives featuring female protagonists versus those with male leads show how influential a role gender plays in distinguishing the victims' experiences and epitomize why women's experiences should be considered distinctly from men's. Through the pattern of gendered distinct experiences that are consistently present in novels with female protagonists and nonexistent in those with males, this subgenre of Holocaust literature reveals how little representation women have in the singular picture of Holocaust victim suffering that history paints. These female-centered novels make it abundantly clear that women had different experiences than men, yet these victimizations and their unique responses are not indicated in this larger master narrative. In doing so, women are invisible in the story that is supposed to tell of their suffering, which is why a gender study is so important. Further analysis into these female-specific traumas will deepen their imprint into the full historical narrative, finally awarding them inclusion into the history that they were fifty percent responsible for.

Key Gender-differentiated Distinctions

While infinite examples of the differences between the experiences of men and women victims are present in texts from this genre, the contrasting narratives created for the average male and female victims exemplify five of the most prominent topics of

distinctions: sexual humiliation, sexual assault, starvation and unhygienic living conditions, the burden of motherhood, and the formation of camp relationships. These five categories represent differences in the kind or degree of persecution inflicted between men and women and their differing responses to each, all of which are not represented in the singular narrative of prisoner suffering Holocaust studies depict. While there are numerous differences to be found, these five dimensions of feminine experience were most prominently portrayed across the fifty novels selected for analysis for this paper, as well as among some of the most noted by scholars advocating for gender studies. These distinctions epitomize why gender is important and gender analysis should be conducted because none of these female-specific traumas are being recognized to the degree they deserve and further study will help them become a part of the master narrative.

1. Sexual Humiliation

The first and one of the most evident differences between the experiences of men and women prisoners is the heightened sexual vulnerability of female prisoners. While both genders experienced the dehumanizing acts of being stripped and shaved immediately following their arrival during camp initiation, women were significantly more traumatized by the experience than men. “A comparative study of women’s and men’s testimonies suggests that more women than men describe the trauma of their initiation into the concentration camp world,” with women consistently writing “of the agony of having to stand naked in front of men, of being searched for hidden valuables, of being shorn of all their hair, and of being tattooed” (Waxman 673). In her contribution to *Women in the Holocaust*, Ringelheim noted that out of all the female camp survivors

she interviewed, “Almost every woman referred to the humiliating feelings and experiences surrounding her entrance to the camp (for my interviewees, this was Auschwitz): being nude; being shaved all over — for some being shaved in a sexual stance, straddling two stools; being observed by men, both fellow prisoners and SS guards (Elshtain 319). While men too were made to strip bare and be shaved, they “in general spoke far less about sexual violation or worried about nudity” (Kaplan 44). When they do speak or write about this form of dehumanization, “men typically write of this experience in terms of loss of autonomy and personal dignity,” as without the physical indications of social status like clothing and body hair, “the individual was far less visually distinguishable from others and deprived of the outward symbols of communal role as scholar, professional, businessman, community leader” (Kremer 10).

In contrast, women write of it “as a sexual assault during which they were shamed and terrified by SS men who made lewd remarks and obscene suggestions and poked, pinched, and mauled them in the course of delousing procedures and searches for hidden valuables in oral, rectal, and vaginal cavities” (Kremer 10). Prior to arriving at the camps, most daughters had never seen their own mothers undress, let alone exposed themselves in front of any males, so the impact of the forced nudity and the shaving of their head and pubic that followed was immense. When describing her own experience of having her head shaved, one survivor wrote, “We could have been shot, gassed... And yet, this single act of German brutality constituted a sacrilegious act on our bodies, our only possessions” (Goldenberg 150??). Given how traumatic this experience was for the female prisoners, Anthropologists have indicated that society needs to understand

violence in this context “not solely as physical but as an attack on the humanity, the personhood of individuals” (43).

In novels of Holocaust fiction where the protagonist is transported to a camp, the initiation scene is a constant staple, but one that differs based on gender. Although the experience of being stripped and shaved is generally mentioned in novels with male protagonists, the description of the experience is often far shorter and far less graphic. More time is typically dedicated to the loss of personal property and them being tattooed than anything, with the depiction of nudity and shaving almost portrayed as insignificant in comparison to the other injustices being committed. Contrastingly, oftentimes pages and sometimes even chapters are dedicated to the initiation of women into these camps, with the agony described above on full display. Authors consistently depict these females cowering away from the blows of their captors inflicted for their resistance in complying with these orders and desperately covering their nakedness while standing in the showers, blissfully ignorant that this was only the first of many acts of sexual humiliation awaiting them.

In *The Girl Who Escaped from Auschwitz*, author Ellie Midwood dedicated an entire chapter, almost eight pages, to describing what horrors incoming captives experienced during block processing. With stripping the women being the first act of humiliation, one of the guards viciously commanded “Lose all of your clothes, you filthy sows! Schnell, schnell, schnell, move it, move it, quick! Everything off; yes, your dirty undergarments also, my gentle piglets” (Midwood 12). Such orders were met with considerable distress, especially amongst the mothers who desperately pleaded with the guards to spare their daughters the humiliation. As the novel’s female protagonist Mala

looked on due to her position as a lead interpreter for the SS, she noted that the mother's "tearful pleas were not about themselves either; it was their young daughters' modesty they were concerned about the most" (Midwood 12).

As Mala watched the distraught women progress from being stripped to being shaved, she was haunted by memories of her own shaving, which "would remain Mala's worst memory of her own first day at Auschwitz, for as long as she would live" (Midwood). Mala described the loss of her hair as a symbol for the loss of her freedom, something so painful she refused to part with it completely and definitely took a tuft of her cut hair from the ground before proceeding. Mala never parted with that piece, keeping it with her as "a reminder of her freedom lost and her promise to regain it one day" (Midwood 15).

Author Heather Morris also detailed the traumatizing initiation experience in her novel *Three Sisters*, describing the shame and embarrassment two of her three main protagonists felt while being undressed and shaved. Standing before the guards completely undressed, "Cibi and Livi and every other girl try to hide their nudity with hands and arms. The sound of men's laughter fills their ears as they shout obscenities at the naked girls" (Morris 53). Onto the next cruelty, Morris describes Cibi having her head shaved, writing, "He flicks on a crude shaving machine and runs it over her head, reducing her once proud head of hair to stubble. Not finished, and to her shame, he drops to a knee. Spreading her legs, he directs the machine to her crotch, where he removes the pubic hair. She tries not to think of little Livi enduring the same humiliation" (54).

Similar trauma is echoed in Martha Hall Kelley's *Lilac Girls*, as Kasia first is forced to watch her friend have her hair shaved, before enduring the humiliation herself.

“I saw Janina Grabowski, far ahead of me in line, wrestling with a guard and crying out,” pleading with the barber to “Stop, no—please,” as they tried to cut her hair off (Kelley 156). When describing her own harrowing experience, Kasia said, “I shook all over as every click of the trimmers sent hunks of hair sliding down my bare shoulders,” but that was not nearly as violating as the experience that followed. After “a second prisoner shaved me with a straight razor, leaving me cut and scraped,” a woman inserted a silver instrument inside her genital region and probed around inside her vaginal cavity. “She acted with no regard for the fact that I was young and she was violating me in a way that could never be undone,” said Kasia, who “had little time to mourn my lost virginity” before she was herded like cattle into the next phase of processing (157).

The youngest of all these female characters, Maria, main character of *The Last Checkmate*, resisted similarly to Kasia’s friend when her hair was about to be shaved, imploring “Please” to the scissor-holding prisoner even though she too knew it was useless. Maria viewed her hair as “all I had left linking me to the girl I’d been before. The girl I would never be again,” so the loss of her hair was a loss of her own identity (64).

While these examples reflect the larger pattern of how authors depicted the initiation being for female prisoners, men’s reaction to the same experiences are depicted much differently by authors of this genre. Morrison, while describing the process for her male protagonist Lale in *Tattoos of Auschwitz*, barely spent two pages illustrating Lale’s initiation. Unlike the women who were hurled with insults, his only commands during the undressing portion were “Strip” and “Faster, faster,” and he felt no shame for his indecent state, only anger. Morris wrote, “He knows he will probably not see his clothes again, nor the money inside them...outrage threatens to overwhelm him” (12). This rage continued

as he had his head shaved, during which he “sits straighter and lifts his head higher as the hair on his head is reduced to stubble, not flinching when the razor nicks his scalp” (13). No mention is made of him being even the tiniest bit sad to physically be losing his hair, suggesting that he has no emotional attachment to the hair, unlike the female characters who were clearly overwrought with pain.

Only allocating two minuscule paragraphs to describing the entirety of his male protagonist Yanek’s camp processing, author Alan Gratz does not even address Yanek being shaved, only including him having to change as a part of the initiation. To describe this experience, all Yanek said was, “A guard ordered us to turn over any valuables...After that we were ordered to take off our clothes. Reluctantly, I removed my dirty, too-short shirt and pants, and added them to a pile” (Gratz 64). While the female prisoners were pleading, wrestling, resisting this order, Lale and Yanek did it begrudgingly, but without a word, not even bothering to hide their nakedness.

While there are exceptions, this sample is representative of how differently these same two experiences are written about by authors depending on the gender of the protagonist. With authors basing these depictions on the real testimonies of survivors and other witnesses, the stark contrast in how they portray their characters reacting to these events shows that although they endured the same humiliations, men and women experienced differently.

2. Sexual Assault

Along similar lines, another difference in the victimization of male and female prisoners is the extent of sexual assault that was inflicted and endured. Although both men and women faced sexual and physical abuse while incarcerated by the Nazis,

"women were subjected to atrocities that men rarely experienced or reported" (Miller 185). Jewish women were "often raped by low-level functionaries" and "encouraged to exchange sexual favors for survival: an extra piece of bread, medicine, a pair of boots, a better job, escape from a selection," according to Kremer (11). Ghiță noted the use of women "as rewards for elite male prisoners" as another reason for forced prostitution being a regular phenomenon in the camps, in addition to the fact that it was often mandated as payment for "protection." Women were also reportedly forced to have sexual relations with homosexual men, whom the SS performed perverted experiments upon for their own amusement and in the name of "science" (Ghiță 186).

Although Rassenschande, an anti-miscegenation policy in Nazi ideology, prohibited Germans from having any sexual relations with Jews, women were still extremely vulnerable to sexual assault from the guards (Ghiță 186). While rape by the SS took place far less frequently than most believe as "racial laws forbade sexual contact between Germans and Jews and because the SS had an ample supply of their own women and healthier non-Jewish inmates in brothels," many prisoners were still tragically violated in this fashion (Kremer 11). Coming in the form of verbal attacks in addition to physical punishments, the infliction of sexual abuse by the SS was disgustingly common. Kremer noted that "Stripping all prisoners for selection inspections and ordering women, in particular, to stand naked in the cold either before or after showers in the presence of leering guards" was one of the most popular and utilized forms of sexual assault (11).

Often some of the most gruesome and heart-wrenching scenes included in the narratives of female prisoners protagonists in fictionalized Holocaust literature are the scenes of them being sexually assaulted and raped by other prisoners and the SS.

Although neither one of these experiences was exclusive to just women, an overwhelmingly disproportionate amount of novels with female protagonists opposed to men illustrate scenes of such sexual violation.

In *The Midwife of Auschwitz*, a young girl named Naomi, who main character and midwife Ana took under her wing as if she were her biological daughter, reveals that a German guard propositioned her, an “offer” that she knew she could not refuse. When asked if he forced himself on her, Naomi replied, “He.. he said he’d make it worth my while...I didn’t have much choice in the matter anyways, so I might as well make the most of it, right?” (Stuart 182). Naomi divulged this secret after publicly bribing their kapo with a diamond to spare their pregnant friend Ester a beating that surely would have killed her, admitting that it was a gift from the soldier as payment for her compliance.

Much like Naomi, sixteen year old Cilka, who appears in *The Tattoos of Auschwitz*, is also taken advantage of by a German, however in her case it is not by an everyday guard but the head of Birkenau, Schwarzhuber. The only woman to be spared the humiliation of having her hair cut and immediately being assigned to a favorable office position, Cilka did not understand the reason for her good fortune until she found herself being dragged from her desk and thrust into a room with nothing but a four-poster bed and an unsmiling Schwarzhuber. Quickly realizing what was being demanded of her, Cilka did as the commander asked, resigning herself to the violation that she knew lay ahead. Morris writes, “Terrified, Cilka attempts to cover herself as he rips her shirt open. She feels the back of his hand across her face as she closes her eyes and gives in to the inevitable” (101). While the continued sexual assault of her character was a tragic, but minor role in this novel, Morris continued Cilka’s suffering in a follow-up text entitled,

Cilka's Journey, in which Cilka was sentenced to twenty years of hard labor in a Siberian prison camp after the Siberian government charged her as a collaborator for sleeping with the enemy. In this secondary hell, Cilka is once again repeatedly raped until she is finally liberated.

Rena, a supporting character in *Lilac Girls*, confides in main protagonist Caroline about her sexual assault, which unlike Naomi's and Cilka's, took place outside of the camp's electric fences. After miraculously escaping from under the guards watchful eyes during the Death March, Rena finds temporary refuge in the home of a family of Jewish sympathizers, who she unintentionally spreads typhus to. With the disease killing the man of the house, the rest of the family is left unprotected as the Russians march through their town, pillaging the houses and assaulting the women. Rena tearfully admits, ““When the Russians came, I told them we all had typhus, but they laid a rug over my face and raped me anyways. Then they raped the farmer's wife and took her wristwatch” (Kelley 321).

Tzvia Golan, author of *The Berlin Girl's Diary*, a fictional story inspired by her own mother's experience as a camp prisoner, writes about an officer nicknamed “the Eye” who her novel's protagonist Eva saw sexually violate her fellow prisoners on multiple occasions. Eva recounted witnessing this horror in her diary following her liberation, writing that “More than once he caught some miserable girl who appeared to be working too slowly, and performed terrible deeds on her in front of everyone” (Golan 51). Eva was so young while imprisoned that the other prisoners had to explain to her what sex was, an explanation that gave her nightmares and left her sobbing in her bunk night after night.

Equally young, but woefully more aware of the cruelties of the world, female lead Zofia recounted being extorted for a sexual favor in exchange for what she thought would be a better camp placement for her family. Monica Hesse, imagineer behind Zofia's character in her novel *They Went Left*, portrayed how vulnerable and easily taken advantage of women were during this period as they often had nothing but their bodies as assets for their survival. Hesse wrote that Zofia, having heard horrific things of the atrocities taking place at Auschwitz, pleaded for help with a young soldier who said, he could manage something, but it would be a big favor, requiring payment. I put my hand down his pants; I was very pretty then" (65).

Tragically these are only five out of hundreds of female centered novels in this genre showcasing instances of sexual assault, a pattern that is not paralleled in fictionalized Holocaust literature with male protagonists. Authors rarely include instances of male victims being sexually assaulted because while historically it happened, the record of it is so miniscule that including it would misrepresent the experience of the average male sufferer. The consistent inclusion of scenes of rape and other forms of sexual assault into the stories showcasing women versus men are another testament to the different victimizations suffered by both genders during this period, a sentiment history overlooks.

3. Starvation and Unhygienic Living Conditions

Like the humiliations inflicted during camp initiation, both men and women were subjected to starvation and unhygienic living conditions, but their responses to their excremental camp environments were again very different. While women reported being continuously devastated by their worsening appearance, men primarily focused on the

negative impact their physical deterioration had on their health and odds of survival. Having been “reared to shun physical prowess associated with athletic or military accomplishments,” with Jewish culture placing an emphasis on scholarship or professional achievement, Kremer asserts that Jewish men “do not appear to consider starvation an assault on their masculinity” (15). In contrast, the women, who were accustomed to investing in their physical appearance to satisfy societal standards, “were radically defeminized” (Kremer 10). Female survivors consistently noted how often they lamented the hygienic world they were accustomed to while imprisoned, the adjustment to life without soap, water, sewage systems, sanitary napkins, and adequate portions of food being just as dangerous to their mental health as it was their physical. When women referred to the living conditions they were subjugated to, the havoc these environments wrecked on their physical appearance is significantly more talked about than the impact it had upon their strength or daily performance.

This starkly juxtaposes the reports of male survivors, who “convey the effect of starvation and primitive sanitary facilities” had on their strength and health, hardly directing any attention to “the aesthetic and procreational anxieties of their physical deterioration” (10). While men were mainly concerned with how starvation would impact their immediate survival, women were additionally distressed as to how the insufficient diet would impact their fertility. Due to the drastic impact starvation had on menstruation, “women lived under the constant terror that they might never be able to conceive children again,” as procreating and motherhood were widely considered of paramount importance to a woman’s value (Ghiță 186). The deterioration of their appearance, loss of menstruation, and fear of sterilization are the consequences of these conditions referenced

most in the accounts of female survivors, three very different responses than those given by men.

These genders' divergent responses to starvation and the unsanitary environment are very evident in works of Holocaust fiction. Women are characteristically represented as being distraught by their declining appearance, whereas men are depicted as being far more troubled by their dwindling functionality, as related to matters of survival such as performing hard labor. Matters of hygiene and hunger are depicted as being detrimental to women's identity, as opposed to just threatening their personal dignity and chances of survival, which is often how these conditions are described as affecting male protagonists.

For example, young sister Livi in *Lilac Girls* is distraught by her appearance after she gets a glimpse of herself in a mirror at the camp hospital. Although she went to the hospital to receive aid for a serious and very painful hand injury, the only thing Livi can think about upon her return to the barrack and seeing her sister Cibi is how boyish and ugly she looks without her hair. “‘My hair...’ Livi says, running her fingers over her scalp, pulling them away in disgust. ‘They cut off my curls’” (Kelley 67). Cibi questions how Livi did not realize her hair was gone after seeing everyone else's shaved heads and knowing that she went through the same process, but comes to the realization that Livi had convinced herself the barber was just fiddling with her hair “like mom used to” because the reality was “too awful to accept” (Kelley 67). Despite everything they had gone through and their current afflictions, Livi is most disturbed by her grotesque appearance because that is what she had been raised to believe mattered most.

Hesse expands on the impact starvation and the unhygienic living conditions had upon the women by describing the long-term effect it had upon the women physically and mentally through her lead character Zofia. Prior to being intimate with her love interest Josef, Zofia warns him about her depleted appearance, worried that he would be repulsed. Beginning by divulging that she only has eight toes after two were lost to frostbite, they continue exchanging stories about the imprint imprisonment left upon both of their bodies, until finally Zofia brings up her loss of femininity when Josef asks if he needs to use protection. Zofia shakes her head and responds, “No...I haven’t bled in a long time. Josef when my clothes are off, you can count my ribs. Even after months in the hospital, I don’t look very...womanly” (Hesse 265). Unable to actually get the words out, Zofia thinks to herself, “*My breasts are gone*, is what I mean to tell him. My cycle is dried up. I am shriveled; I am a nothing-girl” (Hesse 265). Even freed from the camp, Zofia can not escape the damage starvation and the horrific living conditions imposed upon her self-image.

Both leading protagonists in Erika Robuck’s *Sisters of Night and Fog*, prisoners Violette and Virginia also comment on the impact starvation had on their femininity in terms of their menstrual cycle. When Violette first exclaims that “She can’t remember the last time she had her period,” she refers to it this occurrence with gratitude as “she’s glad not to experience the humiliation of blood running down her legs as so many women around her have,” but fears that this might be a sign she is expecting given she was raped shortly before (Robuck 396). A couple chapters later, Virginia reports that “None of them have their periods any longer, and while that is cause for some celebration, it has also taken away some of their health, along with their ever shrinking breasts” (Robuck 411).

Characters referring to the shrinking or altogether disappearance of their breasts is quite common, indicating that this was a sensitive and painful loss for women given that breasts were a symbol of womanhood. The male equivalent of men worrying about the size or appearance of aspects of their male anatomy is virtually nonexistent, validating that both genders responded differently to these same victimizations.

Robuck supports the idea that women were inherently more aware and concerned with their appearance by conveying the shame Virginia felt for her physical state during an interrogation with her clean captor. Robuck writes, “Taking in her own dirty fingernails and soiled clothes and knowing how greasy her hair must look and how badly she must smell, Virginia feels as much shame as she did when the officers requisitioned Cancaval and caught her in her bare feet. That she still has the instinct to feel that shame angers her” (358). Although she has no respect for the man interrogating her, she is instinctually embarrassed about how she looks, a natural response that deeply aggravates her considering she knows it is the fault of him and everyone else like him that she is in such physical disarray.

Virginia again exemplifies how women’s responses to these persecutions are primarily linked to appearance through her reaction to the other inmates when entering the camp: “Virginia can’t help but recoil from the stinking, shrunken, limping group of strange little men passing before them. She sucks in her breath however, when she realizes they are not men at all. They are women. Heads shaved bald, skeletal legs covered in sores, the outline of their breasts dropped and shriveled beneath their dirt-and-blood-stained blue-and-gray-striped prison rags” (Robuck 388). While male characters typically refer to themselves and other prisoners as being weak or sickly or incompetent,

describing how the starvation and living conditions have impacted their ability to function, authors generally have female characters refer to the effects of those same persecutions based on how they have made themselves and others look.

Women's fascination with appearance is also represented across this genre by the numerous descriptions of individuals' looks, especially by the prisoners. While in male-centered novels very little mention is made to how attractive any of the male prisoners or guards are, it is difficult to find a novel with a female lead where someone's beauty or lack therefore is not specifically made mention to or pointed out. For example, the immense attractiveness of an SS guard named Irma Grese is talked about in not just one, but two separate novels. She is described as being "petite and moviestar pretty, with almond-shaped blue eyes and naturally pink lips" in *Lilac Girls* (163), "whose perfect Aryan beauty was matched only by her cruelty," according to midwife Ana in *The Midwife of Auschwitz* (140).

This pattern of women acknowledging the enviable and the unfortunate appearances of those around them is a consistent component of the female narrative that is not reflected in the male alternative, once again demonstrating gender differences in the experiences of men and women victims. Women clearly cared about appearance in ways that men did not, so it's only logical that they responded to their deteriorating appearance differently, even though it was the result of the same forms of persecution.

4. The Burden of Motherhood

Although all three previous persecutions explored were experienced in varying degrees by both genders, women had to bear one cross that men did not: the burden of motherhood. The first and most prominent burden a majority of women who were

accompanied by children to the camps had to endure was the decision of their fate—to survive at the expense of their motherhood or choose unquestionable death.

With most camps segregating adults by gender, men were usually immediately separated and transported away from their wives, who were left to care for their rightfully terrified children. With the Nazis only caring about those who could contribute to their regime's mission, children and the elderly were tragically generally led promptly to their deaths, while fit, working-age women were spared to be used for labor. This left mothers with the soul-crushing decision of accompanying their child or children to the gas chambers or preserving their own lives by presenting themselves as being suitable to work. Described as the ultimate “choiceless choice,” a term coined by Langer to describe the no-win situations Jews were faced with during the Holocaust, these mothers were forced to choose between dissociating “themselves from their children in the uncertain hope of survival, or accompany them to a certain death” (Waxman 670).

While some women did not know they were accompanying their children to their deaths due to the great lengths the Nazis took to conceal these acts of depravity, records suggest that a majority of women refused to be separated from their children and consciously chose to enter the gas chambers with them hand in hand. Despite the warnings of experienced prisoners who knew the incomers' fates to hand any children over to the elderly, Holocaust studies show that ““most women clung to their children (and many young girls to their mothers) and were sent to the gas chambers with them” (Waxman 671). In her recounting of women's experiences at Theresienstadt, Bondy says this about the mothers of children too young to be selected for labor: “Only two of about

six hundred mothers of young children appeared for selection; all the others decided to stay with their children to the end" (324).

While this burden is far too heavy in itself, there were additional horrors and “choiceless choices” awaiting the women who survived the selection. For those who managed to enter the camp with their children, whether that was in one of the women’s only camps or the family camp, the burden of their children’s survival still rested heavily on their shoulders. They were faced with the agonizing torture of watching their innocence and health deteriorate before their eyes, until more often than not they had to watch their child’s emaciated, lice-ridden body be snatched away. In some instances, the reprieve of death could not even comfort these women, as sometimes mothers were forced to watch their children be taken for medical experimentation, a truly different kind of hell.

For those that did not walk into the camp as mothers or with their children for whatever reason, pregnancy threatened to impose the burden of motherhood onto their sunken-in shoulders, as such a horror left women having to decide whether to give birth or have an abortion. In some camps this form of “choiceless choice” was not even theirs to make, as the discovery of pregnancy earned the prisoner a one-way ticket to the gas chamber. Preserved hospital camp documentation and testimonies of participants show that childbirth prompted women to be selected as guinea pigs for atrocious medical experiments where doctors tested different kinds of sterilization on their reproductive organs (Ghiță 186). Other experiments included doctors taping the nipples of breast-feeding mothers to measure “the endurance of the mothers and the babies,” with the

testing continuing while the mothers were in agony until their infants starved to death (Ghiță 186).

While men were certainly victimized by the immense terror that came with being separated from their wives and children, their immediate separation at initiation and gender, in general, relieved them of all of these specific traumas explored above. Men were not forced to choose between walking to their death holding their child's hand or living with the shame and guilt of watching them walk to the gas chamber instead, one's own self-preservation instincts choosing separation in order to survive. They were spared the horror of finding their youngest boy's lifeless body when they rolled over in the morning or watching their oldest daughter's breasts be groped by sneering camp guards during afternoon selections. They did not have to sacrifice portions of their already insufficient food allotment to the mouths of their children in hopes that their hearts would have the strength to beat just one more day. They never had to agonize over whether to have an abortion or try and carry their pregnancy to term, knowing that if they managed to do so their infant would likely only ever see the bottom of a bucket of water.

While men's minds may have revolved around thinking about their family's survival, women's *lives* revolved around it. As Ellen Fine so eloquently stated, "Being a mother directly affected the chances for survival; being a father did not" (Kremer 14). They bore the cross of their children's existence every single day, the heaviest cross of all. All of this is not to say that men did not suffer under the burden of fatherhood, but it is paramount that history recognizes the isolated traumas included in women's experiences as imprisoned mothers.

The heart wrenching extent to which these burdens are conveyed in novels across this genre with female protagonists is what so clearly differentiates women as suffering differently than men. If none of the other differences were convincing enough, the burden faced by women because of their positionality as active caregivers in the camp shows why women's experiences need to be studied independently from men. Women were forced to endure inconceivable horrors and make unspeakable decisions, but yet none of that is talked about or commonly known because it is not included in the main narrative of suffering that seemingly includes women, but is only generalized from male accounts. It is rare that a novel with a woman as the main character won't depict or use instances of pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, or mothering as key plot points.

In his novel *Auschwitz Lullaby*, author Mario Escobar writes one of the most haunting examples of a "choiceless choice" through his main protagonist Helene. The novel opens with Nazis pounding on the door of Helene's home to collect her Gypsy husband and by default their half-Gypsy blooded children for deportation. Although they instruct Helene to stay behind since she is of pure German descent, she refuses to stay behind and be separated from her children, despite knowing the certain death that likely faces her. Upon arriving at the Gypsy camp, Helene becomes the sole caretaker for all the children when her husband is sent elsewhere, doing everything she can to keep them alive and in good spirits. Dr. Mengele, nicknamed the "Angel of Death," assigns Helene the responsibility of creating and overseeing a children's school within the camp because of her German heritage, believing her to be superior to the other prisoners. At the end of the novel, Dr. Mengele gives Helene papers that would allow her safe passage out of the camp, which is about to be liquidated, once again giving Helene a "choiceless choice,"

but Helene refuses to abandon her children. She passionately declares, “My family is here. I can’t leave without them. I’m a mother, Herr Doktor. You all wage your wars for grand ideals, you defend your fanatical beliefs about liberty, country, and race, but mothers have only one homeland, one ideal, one race: our family. I will go with my children wherever fate takes them” (Escobar 258). Although she had not one, but two opportunities to save herself, Helene chose her family above her own survival and took her last breath alongside her children in the gas chamber at the conclusion of the novel.

Another mother, Martha, made a similar choice in *The Midwife of Auschwitz* when she elected to be deported from the ghetto alongside her children voluntarily. Ana, the main protagonist, acknowledged the loss of her volunteer assistant midwife amongst all others she knew from the ghetto who had likely died saying, “Martha had gone, refusing to let her children ride the train without her” (Stuart 101). These impossible choices were typical for mother’s in real life thus they were regularly depicted in the female narrative arcs for this genre. In contrast, men were far less likely to be depicted in situations such as this, where they had to choose directly between accompanying their family to death or their own self-preservation since the immediate separation of genders made it so these situations were a rarity. However, in instances where men are given these “choiceless choices,” their responses are far more varied.

For example, in *Prisoner B-3087*, the main protagonist watches a man be separated from his wife and children during camp processing, with him going to the side selected for work and his family assigned to the left line. When the man questioned where his family was going, the kapo told him they were being taken to the gas chambers and instructed him to shut up unless he wanted to join them, which inspired one of the

men behind the father to let them go and save his own life. Although “for a moment it looked like the man might say that he would” join them, “he stayed where he was,” preserving his own survival (Gratzn 152).

Another example of mother’s being forced to make these inconceivable decisions is illustrated in Adiva Geffen’s *Surviving the Forest*, when a mother gives up her infant to a sympathetic guard in the ghetto. While hiding in the attic of a building in the ghetto in hopes of avoiding the latest round-up, the infant began to cry, alerting the guards below that the room was not empty as they initially suspected. A guard climbed up that ladder and seeing everyone in hiding, gave the woman holding the baby the option of giving him the baby that he would pass off as having been abandoned or be rounded-up with the baby and put on the next transport. Not wanting to separate from the other members of her family, the mother makes the choice to give-up the baby and remain behind, a choice that haunts her for the rest of the novel. Shurka, a different mother in Geffen’s novel, is also traumatized by a choice she makes regarding her crying baby while hiding in a bunker in the forest. Fearing that the cries of her baby boy would alert the Germans searching the forest to their location, putting her family and all the other individuals in the bunkers in grave danger, Shurka “put her hand over Yitzhak’s mouth...and the cries softened until the bunker finally fell silent” (Geffen 141). In doing so, Shurka accidentally smothered Yitzhak to death so when she crawled out of the bunker, “Little Yitzhak lay lifeless in her arms” (Geffen 142).

Although Shurka inadvertently killed her child, Zofia, mother-figure to her youngest brother Abek, purposefully suffocated him before the train reached the camp so that he would not die alone at the hands of the Nazis. Zofia recalled, “I knew that his

ending, at that point, was inevitable. He was too weak. His death was the finishing stitch on a garment that is mostly complete. The only control I had in the matter was what kind of stitch I used” (Hesse 340). Believing she was orchestrating a mercy killing, Zofia started to tell Abek his favorite stories and held his jacket over his mouth and nose until she could no longer see his chest rising and falling. “It was an impossible thing that was more horrible than every other choice in the universe, except for the choice of letting the guards do it. At least this way, he wouldn’t be alone,” reasoned Zofia (Hesse 340). Zofia chose to live the rest of her life with the burden of having killed her brother so that he would not have to die by himself and in whatever painful way the Nazis chose to inflict, a burden so painful her mind blocked it from her memory for years following her liberation.

Another burden of motherhood so well represented across this genre is the complexity of childbirth and pregnancy within the camps and the medical experimentation that took place. While many novels use pregnancy and childbirth within the camp as a major plot point, none are as evocative as *The Midwife of Auschwitz*. Immediately following Ana’s arrival as a political prisoner at the camp, she is awakened to the cruel reality of life within the electric fence when the bunk’s kapo Klara drowned the beautiful infant girl Ana had just helped deliver in a bucket. “Behind her she could hear the mother screaming, the horrified eyes of the others filling the bunks loomed in on her,” said Anna, “and in the centre of it all was Klara, pushing the beautiful new baby further down in the filthy metal bucket until the bubbles stopped and it was still. Forever still.” (Stuart 133).

This was only the beginning of the atrocities that Ana would come to witness, as later on in the novel she was forced to serve in the camp hospital and attend to the patients Dr. Mengele had selected for his perverted experimentations. Ana watched in disgust as one of the doctors examined a tiny baby she had helped deliver four days prior, the mom a Jewish woman who had lost her three older children to the gas chambers on arrival in camp. Ana noted “There had been terrifying talk of her being taken to Doktor Nierzwicki, who was carrying out hideous experiments to abort and sterilize women, but then this new doctor’s eye had fallen upon her and she had been marked out for a different but equally cruel bit of speculative science” (Stuart 151). The new doctor in question being Dr. Mengele, he “wished to know how long a newborn could live without food and had been idly monitoring Rebekah Haim’s son since he had come into this dark corner of the world” (Stuart 151). Ana remarked that the already abhorrent circumstance was made worse given that Mrs. Haim, the mom of the infant, actually “had milk aplenty to feed the baby.” This was an unusual occurrence given the women’s poor diet, but Mrs. Haim was not allowed to do utilize this rare gift as “Mengele bound her breasts so tightly that it was a miracle her heart could still beat beneath them,” cried Ana, with the mother and child only getting a reprieve when Mengele ordered them to join the next group being taken to the gas chambers (Stuart 151).

Another instance of Dr. Mengele’s deranged experimentation and the burden of motherhood, as women had to watch their precious children suffer his torture, is found in *Auschwitz Lullaby*. While Dr. Mengele obviously experimented on women and infants, his “speciality” was twins, a fact Escobar used as a major plot device in his novel. Twins would often disappear from the children’s school at the request of Dr. Mengele, and

while everyone feared and whispered about what was taking place, the true heinous nature of his crimes was not revealed in the novel until two twin boys who had been experimented on were unintentionally released from the hospital. Hearing the anguished cries of the boy's mother, Helene runs outside and sees “how the twins backs and arms had been stitched together. The large wound was oozing pus and looked horrible, all discolored and swollen...The twins had literally been sewn together, their veins united” (Escobar 229). Deciding that the only humane thing to do was put the boys under with morphine until they passed given their fatal condition, Ana attempted to comfort the mother as they walked walk to their barracks, when “Suddenly she threw my hand away from hers and tore off in the direction of the electric fence...From just a yard away from the fence, she leaped and grabbed on tight... The woman convulsed momentarily until the charge threw her back” (Escobar 229). Death was an easier, preferable, alternative to living in a world without her sons, haunted by the agonizing death that they faced, and she could do nothing to prevent them from.

Whether they were actually mothers or not, women were victimized by the burden of motherhood in ways that men were not, as so clearly exemplified by the pattern of suffering and “choiceless choices” included in this genre’s female-centered novels. Given the consistently in which these burdens are utilized by authors in the narratives of their female protagonists, and the absence of them in those with a man as the main character, the distinct differences in the experiences of men and women prisoners seems irrefutable, and yet they remain unrecognized in the master narrative of suffering.

5. Formation of Camp Relationships

While the previous sections explore differences in specific kinds of persecution experienced by men and women and each gender's corresponding responses, this section refers to women's unique response to imprisonment and all that it encompasses as a whole. Although not every prisoner weathered the storm of oppression the Nazis inflicted the same way, a comparison of the men and women camps revealed that each gender collectively countered the tyranny in two very different ways. While men seemed to have employed an "every man for himself" mentality, drawing inward and focusing on their own survival, women were quick to develop relationships within the camp and treat survival as if it was a team sport in which no woman could be left behind. It seems women's most effective and employed response to Nazi persecution "was the formation of camp-sister relationships," which were meant for mutual help and strength in a sea of terror (Ghita 186).

Even in instances where women had familial or other pre-established relationships with fellow prisoners, they still formed these family-like ties with other women around them, cultivating deep, loyal bonds that were central to each female's survival. "Whereas many of the men in the camps concentrated on their own individual survival," Copeland writes, "many women fought desperately to save other women prisoners with whom they had formed an emotional bond" (12). Referring to these sister-like bonds, a Holocaust survivor is quoted in Ringelheim's "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research" saying, "Women's friendship is different than men's friendship you see ... we have these motherly instincts, friend instincts more ... But that's what was holding the women together because everybody had to have someone to lean on, to depend on. The men, no ... the men didn't do that" (250). The same survivor acknowledged that "Men

were friends there too,” but not nearly to the degree of the women as “they didn’t, wouldn’t, sell their bread for an apple for the other guy. They wouldn’t sacrifice nothing. See, that was the difference” (Ringelheim 250). Despite the limited resources available to them, women were quick to share their own ration of food with one another as needed and divide out any additional luxuries such as articles of clothing or soap, rather than hoard everything for their own personal gain. Women were willing to sacrifice everything, even their own survival in some cases, to ensure the well-being of their chosen camp family, a selflessness in nature that men did not display.

Rose, another Holocaust survivor interviewed by Ringelheim, gave a couple of examples of what she deemed women’s instinct to perform selfless acts and how they kept one another going, the first being the lice removal. She explained that women were always “picking each other like monkeys [for lice],” something she didn’t recall ever seeing the men do for one another (Ringelheim 324). Another example is the support women offered to one another during roll call, as they would hold each other up and keep each other warm, knowing that any signs of weakness would be cause for extermination by the guards. In contrast, Rose explained that the men were always “crouching into themselves” and physically demonstrated during the interview “how the men she saw put their arms around their own bodies, rather than around the next person for warmth” (Ringelheim 324). Based on the cumulative experiences of the women she interviewed and all the written and oral accounts of female survivors previously recorded, Ringelheim concluded “that women transformed their habits of raising children or their experience of nurturing into the care of their new, camp families” and became “mutually supportive of

each other,” which helped them “survive the dehumanization and hopelessness of the camps” (Copeland 12).

The formation and existence of these sister-like bonds is a trademark of fictionalized Holocaust novels with female protagonists, whereas the individuality of men’s suffering is a fixture of the male narratives. The complexity of the development and endurance of these female bonds is beautifully illustrated in this genre, which when compared to the colder, independent survival stories with male protagonists, emphasizes how vastly men and women responded to imprisonment. While neither response is greater than the other, the family-oriented approach to survival that was implemented by the women speaks volumes about their character and should be represented in history. Holocaust studies depict victims suffering as an individual pursuit and a feat of immense isolation, but the narrative of female suffering gleaned from Holocaust fiction accurately recognizes how selflessly motivated and unified their survival efforts really were.

The relationship that Ana develops with Ester and Naomi within the camp in *The Midwife of Auschwitz* is among one of the most touching examples of the close-knit bonds that women forged while imprisoned. While laying down one night reflecting on her her current situation, Ana illustrated just how close of a connection these three had formed with this thought: “She missed Bartek and her boys every single day but these two, and all the other women in her care, were her family for now and as she lay there, with her adoptive daughters curled against her, she swore to God above that she would do everything she could as a midwife, a mother, and a friend, to keep them safe” (Stuart 183).

The Tattooist of Auschwitz, despite centering around the love story of Lale and Gita, also testifies of the prominence of women supporting women and the cultivation of friendships through the circle surrounding Gita. While some of the relationships predated their arrival in the camp, some were formed during their imprisonment, such as the sisterhood between Cilka and Gita. After Gita is assigned to work in a role with Cilka, they form a connection and become inseparable, both acting selflessly at times to save the other. Knowing that Cilka has little ties within the camp, Gita introduces her to her other friends, who happily welcome her, demonstrating no signs of jealousy or bitterness, even though Cilka has a better job assignment than them and is allowed to keep her hair. When describing the introduction, Morris wrote, “Dana and Ivana greet Cilka with a hug. Gita smiles, happy that her friends are so immediately accepting of another girl in their midst” (86). Shortly thereafter, Cilka implores Schwarzhuber to grant reprieve for Lale from a punishment that surely would have resulted in his death, even though that further puts her at his mercy.

Even without having deep connections with one another, the team survival mentality of women often resulted in strangers helping strangers, even when it came at their own peril. In *The Berlin Girl's Diary*, Eva recalls how she managed to survive the Death March, saying, “I remember that we were three girls around the same age, sick and without a drop of energy remaining, but we held one another's hands and marched” (Golan 68). The women of the Ravensbrück concentration camp risked everything to protect the lives of “the rabbits,” the women whose legs had been so viciously experimented upon that they could barely walk after, those that survived that is. When it became clear that Germany was going to lose the war, the crippled young women were

sentenced to death in an effort to cover up the Nazis war crimes, but the camp's inmates devised and implemented a plan to hide these women until liberation so that their captor's heinous crimes would not be erased. Kelley described the group's hiding effort in *Lilac Girls*, writing "Everyone in the camp continued to hide the rabbits when roll call came. Some even traded numbers with us at great perils to themselves" (273).

In *Three Sisters*, a random prisoner brings Cibi back her socks and after she casts them aside once she realizes they are ridden with fleas that are biting her. She tells Livi that she "shook out all the fleas" and to keep them because "she'll need them" (52). Knowing how valuable something as small as a flea-ridden pair of socks were for survival, the girl easily could have kept the socks for herself, but she chose to help the pair of sisters instead. Another unnamed prisoner convinces Cibi and Livi not to commit suicide by running out into the dark winter night, promising to help them each find a blanket, which she immediately follows through on (133). Without her interference, both girls would have died within minutes, never living to see their third sister Magda join them or experience the joy of liberation, which is what ultimately ended up being their fate.

Sisters of Night and Fog is another truly touching story of women banding together to stare down hell as one, with countless examples of courageous women putting their lives on the line for the good of those around them. One of these instances took place during a morning roll call, when Violette, the bravest of them all, began loudly singing to distract the guards from watching her friend Nadine, who was seconds away from falling. When the guards identify her as the instigator of the spontaneous musical number, "The guards pounce on Violette and drag her off toward the solitary cells,"

arguably the worst punishment inflicted in these camps (Robuck 405). Having been there before, Violette knew how tortuous the punishment that awaited her was, but still chose to act out anyways so that the life of her friends might be spared.

In contrast to these and the infinite number of other instances of women forming long-lasting camp relationships, Gratz's *Prisoner B-3087* embodies the individualistic male response to Nazi persecution. While women were constantly pooling their resources, distributing their goods amongst close friends and strangers alike, the men were hoarding every advantage they could get to themselves. Yanek's uncle gave him this instruction when he gave him half a bread loaf he had bought with Yanek's smuggled in goods: "Don't share it with anyone. Not if you want to survive" (Gratz 80).

While Yanek abided by his uncle's advice for a while, he eventually broke while making the march to another camp when he began supporting the weight of a nameless prisoner who had stumbled on top of him. Not wanting to let him fall to his death, Yanek pleaded with other prisoners to help him support the man, but "he couldn't get anyone to help him help one of the other prisoners who couldn't support his own body weight anymore" (Gratz 177). Overcome with frustration over the men's unwillingness to assist, Yanek inwardly exclaimed, "It didn't have to be this way, every man for himself! If we all helped one another, if we became one another's family now, when all of our real families had been taken from us, we could be stronger too!" (Gratz 177). However, as much as he wanted that to be the case, he knew it was unrealistic because "Too many of them would only look out for themselves" (Gratz 177).

Not only did men not generally try to help one another, at times they purposefully threw each other under the bus for no reason at all. After a train car of documentation was

ruined, Yanek seized an opportunity to transfer into the line of Poles when the prisoners were being separated so that his chances of survival were better, but one of the other men ratted him out to the guards even though “there was nothing to be gained by it” (Gratz 237). Yanek would have gotten away with it and been in a relatively more favorable position, but another man stole that opportunity from him simply because he wanted to.

Men and women’s differing responses to Nazi persecution as a whole is evident based on the distinct depiction of camp relationships in this genre based on the main character’s gender. With authors creating these relationships based on factual historical records, it is clear that women reacted to victimization by coming together, whereas men stayed apart. Since neither reaction is superior to the other, both should be equally represented in the narrative of suffering if it is to truly be gender indiscriminate.

Importance of Feminine Framework in Challenging the Master Narrative

While fictionalized Holocaust literature has played an instrumental role in expanding the conversation surrounding women’s experiences in the camps and rewriting how they are represented, society cannot rely on nor solely be informed by literature’s depiction of a Holocaust victim. It is history, not literature, that holds the honor and obligation to accurately represent female Holocaust victims and convey their unique experiences, and thus it is history that is responsible for clarifying any misconceptions arising from the well-intentioned presence of these gendered patterns in literature.

The first and arguably biggest limitation arising from literature portraying men and women as having suffered so differently is the bounded box it categorizes women victims into. Although the generalized narrative of female suffering gleaned from Holocaust fiction is far more accurate and does women a much greater justice than the

gender indiscriminate narrative history offers, it is not representative of women who had experiences and made decisions outside of the “saint-like” mold this narrative creates. While no general narrative will ever be able to encompass the experiences of all those included within it, the gravity of the subject matter makes it paramount that the complexity of the period is not lost. It is vital that society recognizes that while this narrative may be true of many women’s experiences, there are exceptions that should equally be acknowledged.

With the multitude of stories of self-sacrifice and unrelenting love creating this image of women as “unproblematic victims,” in Holocaust fiction “Little reference is made to the Jewish women who, as a result of intolerable circumstances, acted contrary to traditional expectations of female behavior” (Waxman 663). Authors rarely highlight the women who chose self-preservation over motherhood, placing their own survival above that of their child, or the Jewish female prisoners who became camp Kapos in order to receive preferential treatment, despite the variety of accounts that testify such events took place. Tadeusz Borowski, one of the men whose writing the singular narrative was derived from, recalled witnessing a young woman “attempt to abandon her crying child and pretend no knowledge of it” upon arriving at the camp in hopes that she would not “share the child’s fate” (Waxman 671). Fania Fénelon, a member of the women’s orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau, described the transition her half-Jewish friend Clara underwent after entering the camp and being appointed Kapo, where she began to mimic the behavior of their SS captors. Fania lamented, ““Clara rose up before us, armband in place, club in hand... Everything that was left of the timid, bashful young girl

had just disappeared, destroyed once and for all by the environment of the camp” (Waxman 663).

While responses such as Clara and the unnamed mother might have been the exception rather than the norm, according to Waxman drawing figures to support that conclusion would be difficult given that women like them “are precisely the ones who are least likely to record their testimonies,” as “They are the ones who most want to forget the past, either because the pain of remembering is too great, or because of fears of retribution or condemnation (664). Given the prevalence of the heartwarming accounts of women acting heroically, Waxman explains that survivors “can feel compelled to make their experiences compatible with pre-existing narratives of survival” when giving testimony, understandably shying “away from confronting the full horrors of the Holocaust” and anything that would paint them in a poor light (674).

Even though there are testimonies and stories showing women acting differently than in the saintly stereotypical mother, daughter, sister fashion, authors largely refrain from having such stories be the focus of their work. Since the genre as a whole does represent women in such positive esteem, novels that feature females not conforming to this notion are not nearly as well-received. Making sense of the actions of women like Clara and the young mother “is not easy” within the framework of “the notion of the dutiful mother” that this genre abides by, prompting authors to instead focus their works on less morally ambiguous characters that are easier for readers to empathize with (Waxman 671). Between the disproportionate amount of redeeming versus troubling testimony given and authors prevalently casting their protagonists in the redeemed, hero role, the women who acted contradictory to the saint-like archetype are not

predominantly reflected in the narrative of suffering that Holocaust fiction assigns women.

Additional limitations of fictionalized Holocaust literature's portrayal of women victims correspond directly with one of the big concerns raised by opponents of gender studies as discussed previously: that this narrative can be used to soften the tragedy and manipulate what society takes away from the tragedy. Scholars note that while the formation of the camp families by the women is beautiful and emotionally compelling, it can be twisted and used to show "silver linings" of the Holocaust, attempting to lighten the bloody stain the genocide left on history. Referring to these camp relationships Waxman wrote, "Such images of mutual care and concern are very moving, but what is problematic is when they are used to obscure the horrors of the concentration camp by introducing a redemptive message into the Holocaust (672).

Journalist Anne Karpf used Anne Frank as an example of society using specific stereotypes to push political agendas and mislead individuals about the horror of the Holocaust, saying that her words have "been hijacked by those who want their Holocaust stories to be about the triumph of the human spirit over evil and adversity" (Waxman 667). She asserts that even though Frank's last entry states "A voice within me is sobbing... I get cross, then sad... and keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if ... if only there were no other people in the world," her most frequently cited statement is "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart" (Waxman 667). There is concern that the heroic portrayal of women victims across this genre can be used in the same problematic fashion, with female

survivors being turned into walking embodiments of “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

While these are valid concerns, ultimately the distinct narrative of suffering this genre has created for women is more advantageous than not. Holocaust fiction has finally bringing female victims out from the shadows history cast them in and into the light of recognition. Although the generalized narrative this genre assigns female victims may not be entirely reflective of all women’s experiences, it at least is indicative of what history shows to be the majority and acknowledges feminine-specific victimizations that the historical narrative ignores. Also, while some argue that focusing attention on women’s response to Nazi persecution softens the Holocaust, highlighting the additional forms of persecution inflicted on women because of their gender deepens the atrocities that were committed.

Ultimately, while imperfect, literature’s depiction of what it means to be a Holocaust victim is far more accurate than the pervasive narrative society uses to define Holocaust victimhood. Examining the Holocaust through this suggested feminine framework will challenge the master narrative until it first comes to mirror literature’s representation of women in Holocaust victimhood, and then eventually surpasses it. Literature’s representation of male and female victims has been crucial in spotlighting the contrast in men and women’s experiences, but it is not enough. The historical depiction of Holocaust victimhood needs to reflect men and women’s different experiences to overcome the limitations of literature’s representation of male and female victims. Literature has laid the foundation for challenging the master narrative, but examining the

Holocaust through this feminine framework is essential to fully challenge and reform the pervasive narrative of Holocaust victimhood.

Conclusion

With authors using two different baseline narratives based on the gender of the novel's protagonist, fictionalized Holocaust literature resolutely shows not only that men and women suffered differently, but how they suffered differently. While a comparison of these two narratives reveals a pattern of numerous gendered distinctions in their experiences, the exemplification of the five most prominent differences that are excluded from the main historical narrative justifies the need for a gender study. While the exploration of the shared victim experiences has helped historians, “it is equally important to thoroughly research and analyze gender distinctions in the experiencing and inflicting of pain and trauma” (Ghita 191). A gender study is needed “not only in order to redress the absence of their lives and experiences in the documentation of Holocaust history, but also for the preservation of Holocaust memory” (Ghita 191). According to Copeland, “because women's experiences have continually been marginalized,” much of the public's understanding of the Holocaust is likely distorted or incomplete, a wrong that can only be made right by incorporating those experiences into the singular narrative of suffering.

As the literature reflects, men and women suffered different victimizations and responded to imprisonment in different ways that need to be acknowledged in the master narrative. A gender analysis of the Holocaust would more fully incorporate women's life stories into the history books, giving women victims greater representation and generating a more complete record of the Holocaust. The burden of accurately

representing and commemorating female sufferers for all that they endured should not fall upon the authors of Holocaust fiction, but the authors of history, which is why historians need to study this period through a gendered lens. Gender most certainly was not everything, but it was an important component that differentiated the experiences of camp prisoners, and one that needs to be studied for the history of the Holocaust to be precise and the narrative of suffering it presents to be truly gender indiscriminate.

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