

## ***Schindler's List: A Postmodern Revisit***

Usa Padgate<sup>\*</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article offers to reread Thomas Keneally's 1982 novel *Schindler's List* through the lens of postmodernism. Even though the novel is not considered a postmodern writing, it displays a subject matter, tone and ethos that are the composite spirit of the postmodern movements. Three traits of postmodernism are traced and discussed within the context and the suggestion of the novel: the hybridity of fact and fiction, the application of irony, and the revision of a unified history. In acknowledging these sensitivities, one finds that the critical term that can be perplexing in its indefinite conceits is very well capable of expounding something as genuine as humanity.

**Keywords:** Schindler's List; Thomas Keneally; Postmodernism; Irony

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<sup>\*</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, e-mail: usapadgate@gmail.com

## ซินต์เลอร์ส ลิสต์: โพลโมเดิร์นพิกซ์

อุษา พัดเกตุ\*

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอมุมมองแนวหลังนวนิยายจากการศึกษานวนิยายเรื่อง ซินต์เลอร์ส ลิสต์ ประพันธ์โดย โรมัส เคนนีลลีย์ ซึ่งได้ตีพิมพ์ครั้งแรกในปี ค.ศ. 1982 แม้ว่านวนิยายเรื่องนี้จะไม่ถูกจัดให้เป็นงานเขียนแนวหลังนวนิยายก็ตาม หากแต่ก็มีเนื้อหา น้ำเสียง และจิตวิญญาณของกระบวนการเคลื่อนไหวแนวหลังนวนิยายอยู่ไม่น้อย การศึกษาครั้งนี้ได้นำเสนอและอภิปรายลักษณะของงานเขียนแนวหลังนวนิยายสามลักษณะที่พบในนวนิยายเรื่องนี้ ได้แก่ ความผสมกลมกลืนของเรื่องจริงและเรื่องแต่ง การนำเสนอความย้อนแย้ง และการทวนวิเคราะห์ประวัติศาสตร์เอกภาพ ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่ากระบวนการวิพากษ์แนวหลังนวนิยายนั้นสามารถเจาะในลักษณะอันแท้ของมนุษย์ได้ แม้ว่าโดยปกติของทฤษฎีวิพากษ์แนวนั้นจะมีความลวงของความคิดและจินตนาการที่ทำทลายความเข้าใจและอภิเชษฐของผู้อ่านอยู่บ้าง

**คำสำคัญ:** ซินต์เลอร์ส ลิสต์; โรมัส เคนนีลลีย์; หลังนวนิยาย; ความย้อนแย้ง

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\* ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ประจำภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัย  
นเรศวร ติดต่อได้ที่: usapadgate@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Keneally's historical novel *Schindler's Ark*, released in the United States as *Schindler's List*,<sup>1</sup> was published in 1982 and won the prestigious Man Booker Prize of that year. The book details the life story of German industrialist Oskar Schindler whose under-the-table dealings with the Reich officers saved the lives of more than 1,200 Jewish prisoners during the Second World War. The novel was adapted into the cinematic format by Director Steven Spielberg as *Schindler's List* and released in 1993. The film won awards worldwide including 7 Academy Awards. In 2018, Universal Pictures re-released the digitally remastered film to commemorate its 25th anniversary release. It was the first time for many members of the younger generations of audiences to watch it on a big screen and an opportunity for older ones to revisit the film in a fast-changing yet strikingly, paradoxically, similar world. It also encouraged readers to revisit Keneally's novel and compare notes as to how humankind and human nature have, or have not, changed. This study proposes to revisit the book and draw from it certain aspects that lend the weight of postmodernism to a writing about a modernist world.

## 2. Modernism and Postmodernism

In terms of definitions and timelines - both debatable, The word 'modernism' refers to the cultural period that extends from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the Second World War with an emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Since it is the better known title of the novel, this study opts, therefore, to refer to the novel as *Schindler's List*.

on epistemology, a quest for knowledge, whereas 'postmodernism' refers to a range of concepts stretching, most distinguishingly, from the 1960s to the present and preoccupied with a suspicion of the foundations and structures of knowledge and of any belief system that claims universality (Geyh, Leebron & Levy, 1998). The terms are often mentioned side by side not only because of the unresolved questions whether postmodernism is a mere extension of modernism but also because of their contesting ideologies. Modernism projects ideas of alienation, exclusion, dichotomy and polarity in its attempt to understand the nature of reality. 'White' is understood only in reference to its opposite, 'black,' for example. Postmodernism, on the other hand, embraces assimilation, inclusion, equality, and, inevitably, mystification in its egalitarian spirit, resulting in movements such as feminism, anti-racism, and post-colonialism.

Although the cultural and literary movement of postmodernism is said to gain momentum in the 1960s, it was shaped by the results of technological exploitations of the Second World War, a 'modern' war in terms of its historical period and ideology. Disillusioned by the misuse of scientific advances relating largely but not exclusively to the mass genocide and the atomic bomb, the post-war generations steered away from the modernist ideal that civilization was a natural consequence of progress. They, in addition, became skeptical of institutional authority, social conformity, and political inequality. These traits soon became characteristic of postmodern sensitivity, a direct assault on the binary opposition of 'master-slave,' 'self-other,' and, in the context of Nazi-occupied Europe, 'Aryan-Jew,' in which the second of each pair had previously been subscribed as lesser beings. Consequently, the cultural paradigm shifted towards a more liberal tendency - "the tendency of indeterminance," as coined by Hassan (1998, p. 592) by incorporating two central constituents in postmodernism: indeterminacy and immanence. The results, as Hassan

describes, are that “the public world dissolves as fact and fiction blend, history becomes derealized by media into a happening,” and that “science takes its own models as the only accessible reality” (Hassan, 1998, p. 593).

In *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* (1998), Gehy, Leebron & Levy discuss characteristics of postmodern American fiction in 6 sections, thus providing 6 broad categories into which a postmodern work of fiction can be fitted, namely Breaking the Frame, Fact Meets Fiction, Popular Culture and High Culture Collide, Revisiting History, Revising Tradition, and Technoculture. This categorization constitutes an initial guideline for the analysis in this study. In addition, with a nod to the multifarious characteristics of the postmodern criticisms, the present study proposes to frame its analysis within the critical devices provided by Gehy, Leebron & Levy (1998) and the selected scholars included in the anthology, namely Michael Bérubé, Umberto Eco, bell hooks, Ihab Hassan, and Trinh T. Minh-ha.

*Schindler's List* is conventional in its narrative and presentation. There is no formal complexity nor chronological intricacy to confound readers, as is often the case with some flagship postmodern writings. Yet, its subject matter, tone and ethos can easily be included in the camp of cultural postmodernism. To illustrate this assertion, three aspects of postmodern approaches suggested in Gehy, Leebron & Levy's anthology (1998), namely the hybridity of fact and fiction, the application of irony without satire, and the revision of a unified history, are applied to the reading and discussion of Keneally's novel in the sections that follow.

### 3. A Postmodern Take on a Modern War

#### 3.1 Larger than Life: Fact and Fiction

“... pomo [postmodernism] has paid acute attention to how various human communities go about deciding what will count as ‘facts.’<sup>‡</sup> paradigm-shifts are matters in which ‘neither proof nor error is at issue,’ because different scientific communities were simply seeing different ‘facts’ even when they were looking at what we now think are the same phenomena...”

(Bérubé, 1998, p. 599)

In the Author’s Note of *Schindler’s List*, Keneally, while grounding the basis of his story with the methodology of standard journalism - first-hand interviews, on-site visits, official and private records and documents, etc. - admits that myths are likely to attach themselves to a man of Schindler’s stature, and that the novel’s devices seem suited for “a character of such ambiguity and magnitude.” (Keneally, 1994, p. 13-14) The borderline of fact and fantasy in this case, therefore, is drawn from the presentation of biographical and historical facts in a fictional format. There is nothing new about this technique in itself; the formal blending of journalism and fiction has been tried before with varying degrees of success. What is striking about Schindler’s life as gleaned from the accounts in Keneally’s novel is the fantasy of deliverance persisting in the psyche of many Jewish prisoners on their darkest days thanks to their faith in Schindler and the eventual materialization of that fantasy, turning it into a solid, commendable fact.

‘Fact Meets Fiction’ is, according to Geyh, Leebron & Levy (1998: 125)

a “central, even dominant source of artistic inspiration and innovation” in the postmodern era, and the blurred boundary between standard journalism and fiction could create “a new layer of narrative tension within the bounds of the traditional novel.” The circumstances surrounding Oskar Schindler inspire fictional writing, with a hideous backdrop of ruined, war-ridden cities, gothic villains, brutalized victims and an unlikely hero - “a figure of the imagination somehow as popular as the golden-hearted whore: the good German,” in Keneally’s own words (Keneally, 1994, p. 32). The fact that all these elements are factual renders a narrative tension that leaves one suspended between the realms of make-believe and reality check. The mythic air of Schindler’s wartime years, moreover, shrouds the retrospective tales of his earlier years and afterwards lends him a god-like persona that proves very reassuring in times dominated by human failings.

Schindler spent a comfortable childhood in the industrial city of Zwittau in Czechoslovakia. The heroic actions of his later life gave birth to a tale about young Oskar defending a Jewish boy on the way home from school. (Keneally, 1994, p. 37) It was most likely fiction, Keneally hastens to add, conjured by a wishful interviewee. Even when an affirmed story is recounted, such as the one in which Schindler competed in a motorcycle race and lost against some of Europe’s best racers, he was said to have beaten them and lost “for a technicality.” (Keneally, 1994, p. 40) A flat-out, definite defeat was not to be in Oskar Schindler’s book, with or without the war.

Countless instances display the mythic aura of Schindler during the war years - the spells, and currencies, he cast on numerous, otherwise blood-thirsty, SS officers who authorized him to set up an enamel factory in Cracow, Poland, and then to relocate it to Brunnitz, Czechoslovakia, as an armaments factory which never produced a single artillery shell that passed quality control,

and whose influence rescued him from his three separate arrests by police officials. The incident that is best representative of the Schindler's lore, however, is told towards the end of the war, ergo toward the end of the book. By then, Schindler had become a living legend among the Nazi labor camp inmates. When the 300 female inmates he had 'purchased' out of the camp for his new factory in Brunnlitz were taken to Auschwitz by mistake, twenty-two-year-old widow Lusia, ill and wasted away by cold and hunger in the concentration camp, kept telling herself and the other women: "You'll see. It will all come out. We'll end up somewhere warm with Schindler's soup in us." (Keneally, 1994, p. 336) The same optimism took hold of another member of the group, Mila Pfefferberg, who could not tell where it came from. Meanwhile, Schindler sent a young woman, allegedly one of his many mistresses, with a suitcase full of drink, ham and diamonds, to grease the fingers of the functionaries in Auschwitz-Birkenau. When at last the women were delivered at the gate of Schindler's factory, the descriptions of the happy reunion and Schindler's presence and assurance are homeric:

"As they got closer to the gate, they became aware that Herr Schindler was standing in the midst of the SS men. They could tell at first by his memorable height and bulk ... A phenomenon in the mist ... Mila Pfefferberg, like others of the girls in the column that morning, remembers that it was an instant of the most basic and devout gratitude, and quite unutterable. Years later, one woman from those lines, remembering the morning, would face a German television crew and attempt to explain it. "He was our father, he was our mother, he was our only faith. He never let us down.



Then Oskar began to talk. It was another of his outrageous speeches, full of dazzling promises ... "When you go inside the building, you'll find soup and bread waiting for you ... You have nothing more to worry about. You're with me now."

(Keneally, 1994, pp. 357-358)

Although Keneally is careful not to go overboard in his 'journalistic' description of Schindler, thus making deliberate use of the man's many weaknesses in defining his 'human' character, the 'mythology' of Oskar Schindler is hard to suppress, with its unmistakable reminiscence of the Greek myth of Dionysus, the merry God of Wine whose loyal female followers, the Maenads, are said to be "possessed by the god" and to have "unusual strength," (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) and the only Greek divinity of the highest class who suffers death and rebirth according to the seasonal cycle of the vine. A heavy drinker - but never a drunk, a fun lover, a ladies' man and, ultimately, a provider, Schindler's vices and virtues, rises and falls, pleasures and pains, echo those of the most benevolent and conflicting god of humankind, further blending the already delicate line between the fact and the fiction that surround the life and legend of Oskar Schindler.

In a postmodern fashion, it must be said that in determining the value and truth of the Schindler's story, "neither proof nor error is at issue." (Bérubé, 1998: 599) The subjective versions of events, and the readers, make their own claim to truth. After all, as Minh-ha (1998: 654) emphasizes, "Literature and history once were/still are stories: this does not necessarily mean that the space they form is undifferentiated, but that this space can articulate on a different set of principles, one which may be said to stand outside the hierarchical realm of facts." Reading into the feats and failures of Oskar

Schindler, therefore, is a subjective experience where fact and fiction stand to be claimed shoulder to shoulder.

### 3.2 Flawed Hero: Irony

“The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited; but with irony, not innocently.”

(Eco, 1998, p. 622)

Irony is a common reference word for postmodernism. It underscores such concepts and practices as indeterminacy, discontinuity and deconstruction that are the hallmarks of postmodernism, and that distinguish it from the determinacy, continuity and totalization of modernism. Irony marks Schindler's ethical and economic aspirations, juxtaposes his heroic character with his heroic flaw, and discontinues the self-other determinacy attached to the Arayan-Jew ideology.

The story of Schindler is ironic at both personal and professional levels. The man himself is an epitome of a postmodern character in his disregard, eventually to the point of disdain, for the Arayan hierarchy, aloofness and stability of his era and status, although he never hesitated to take advantage of these social conditions to reach a desired end. At their first meeting, Inzhak Stern made an introductory statement required by law: “I have to tell you, sir, that I am a Jew,” to which Schindler growled “I’m a German. So there we are!” (Keneally, 1994: 48) His racial blindness impelled him to use nationality, not race, for self-description. If this could be claimed as evidence of his

nationalism - which would be very easy to disclaim - it could also support a premise that Schindler never seriously regarded racial differences as central to his interpersonal dealings, even before he ever thought of assuming the role of a savior. In a spirit of rebellion, Schindler ignored the prevalent racial hierarchy and extended generosity and camaraderie to Jews and Germans alike. He befriended many high-ranking SS officers and treated them sumptuously, simultaneously enjoying their favors and shuddering at the sadism and beastliness of many of them. On the other hand, he gave generously to his Jewish employees, risking his life to save theirs and parroting feeble excuses to employ them even if it was clear to everyone that they were too weak, too young, or too old - as was the constitute of each different laborer - and too unskilled in artillery production - as was the constitute of most laborers - to garner Schindler any industrial profit. Schindler's cynicism during the last years of the war regarding the pursuit of economic success - his resolution to "defeat the system" (Keneally, 1994, p. 147) - is a contrast picture to that of the self-proclaimed capitalist only a few years earlier whose oedipal goal was to outdo his own father financially with the help of war-time industry.

In salvaging so many lives, Schindler is generally hailed as a hero and a savior, with no religious attachment. Like Oedipus, he was imperfect, flawed by the sins of the flesh that traject both his manly presence and, paradoxically, his childish delight. His racial blindness was his redeeming virtue. Unlike Oedipus, though, Schindler was not a tragic character whose downfall brings about others' as pitiful as his own; Oskar Schindler is never associated with death, always with life. Yet again, he did not take on the role of a savior innocently or religiously. It came to him originally from the desire to make filthy money out of filthy means, to suck up to some of the most damnable

figures in modern history in exchange for financial profit and cheap labor, and eventually to do whatever it took to safeguard that labor that had become his consuming obsession. He depended on their survival as much as his laborers needed him for the realization of their salvation. In this way, the 'self-other' polarity was deconstructed and discontinued, and their existence became interrelated, even reversed. When Schindler became morally depressed by the imminence of an evacuation 'Aktion' of the Jewish population from the Cracow ghetto to a forced labor camp in Plaszow, it was Itzhak Stern, his Jewish accountant and one of the victims of the 'Aktion,' who comforted him:

"Itzhak Stern, coming to Zablocie one afternoon on business for the Progress factory, found Oskar depressed and sensed in him a dangerous feeling of impotence<sup>†</sup>

... All I can tell them, said Oskar, taking a second slug of cognac, is that they shouldn't try to hide unless they're sure of the hiding place. He'd heard that the pattern was to tear the ghetto apart after it had been cleared ...

So it happened oddly that Stern, one of the targets of the coming Aktion, sat comforting Herr Direktor Schindler, a mere witness. Oskar's attention to his Jewish laborers was being diffused, tempted away by the wider tragedy of the ghetto's coming end. Plaszow was a labor institution, said Stern. Like all institutions, it could be outlived<sup>‡</sup> It was degrading to have to line up for Plaszow on orders, but it wasn't the end of things."

(Keneally, 1994, p. 189)

The Schindler survivors call themselves *Schindlerjuden* (Schindler Jews), the term used willingly and gratefully - which under a different circumstance would most likely connote and promote the master-slave discourse - to celebrate life and the fact that they own him as much as he owns them. Having failed to make a living from any of a series of his post-war business investments, Schindler was 'rescued' time and again by his *Schindlerjuden* who became his 'family' and providers of both financial and moral support for the remaining years of his life. This reversal of fortune was perhaps most fittingly remarked by his estranged wife, Emilie Schindler: "Oskar had done nothing astounding before the war and had been unexceptional since. He was fortunate therefore that in that short fierce era between 1939 and 1945 he had met people who had summoned forth his deeper talents." (Keneally, 1994, pp. 428-429) The irony of all this was not lost. Who would want a perfect hero?

### 3.3 Deconstructing Alienation: History Rewritten

"Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups ... Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy - ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition."

(hooks, 1998, pp. 627-628)

By this line, it must be within the range of sound reasoning to claim that *Schindler's List*, in spite of the atrocity of its setting, is a story of assimilation, not alienation. The fact that so many former Jewish prisoners were willing to come forth with the stories of their traumatic past to contribute to Keneally's novel - Keneally quotes "fifty Schindler survivors from seven nations" (Keneally, 1994, p. 13) - is a testament to the value of inclusion they trusted in the stories they now told as witnesses, and never again as victims. Schindler's story in the renowned novel is the total of the personal accounts of these contributors; *Schindler's List* is their story. The marginal has become central.

The history of Schindler and the *Schindlerjuden*, now that they are one, celebrates life and survival. A motif in their 'history' revolves around the many cunning ways Schindler and the Jewish characters implemented to outlive strictures of their circumstances, and not necessarily around their tormentors.<sup>2</sup> Schindler expressed this spirit of solidarity in his final speech on the factory floor facing his Jewish workers and the SS garrison:

*"The unconditional surrender of Germany ... has just been announced. After six years of the cruel murder of human beings, victims are being mourned, and Europe is now trying to return to peace and order. I would like to turn to you for unconditional order and discipline - to all of you who together with me have worried through many hard years - in order that you can live*

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<sup>2</sup> This is where the cinematic adaptation departs from the original novel. Whereas Keneally's novel is a neat pastiche of personal and historical accounts collected during his research for the book and resulting in many different voices projected throughout the work, Spielberg's film understandably chooses to simplify the narrative by focusing more on 3 pivotal characters: Schindler, Stern, and Goeth.

*through the present and within a few days go back to your destroyed and plundered homes, looking for survivors from your families ...*

*Don't thank me for your survival. Thank your people who worked day and night to save you from extermination. Thank your fearless Stern and Pemper and a few others, who, thinking of you and worrying about you, especially in Cracow, have faced death every moment. The hour of honor makes it our duty to watch and keep order, as long as we stay here together."*

*(Keneally, 1994, pp. 400-402)*

In revisiting their past, these 'witnesses' reconstruct a narrative not only of a most humane Nazi party member but also of an intelligent, courageous, stoic people who in better times prove, against the propagandized stereotypes, to be generous, devoted and grateful.

Nevertheless, the 'official' history - of the racial discrimination, exclusion, and extermination of one race by another - cannot be disputed. Dismissing it would result in another form of oppression. It must, therefore, be revisited with "shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc." (hooks, 1998, p. 628) for the empathy necessary to prevent us from falling preys to future propagandas. For what it is worth, the 'official' account reminds us that what happened before can, without doubt, happen again since human nature has not progressed in the same way nor at the same pace as our technological advances. Our sophisticated scientific tools can once again override our judgment. We are reminded also that even in the case of such inherent authority as "the official version," there are voices to be recognized from the margins whose transforming force may breakdown the *Grande Histoire* of the past, rewrite the story about the present, and offer hope of coalition for the future.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Schindler's List* is not a postmodern novel. This, however, does not depreciate the postmodern sensitivity that can be observed from the book. Acknowledging the paradigm shifts (from modernism to postmodernism) frees us from the obligation of proof-error determinacy, thus granting us the liberty to explore 'indeterminance', and to see a god in a man and a friend in a foe. In addition, recognizing that the modern concept of 'progress' is brimmed with irony since it does not spontaneously lead to civilization that allows us a realistic decision to let go of, discontinue and/or deconstruct the status quo. Finally, admitting that an 'official' history could be a form of oppression in its exclusion and extermination helps us listen more carefully to voices in the margins, to empathize with their cries for their losses and celebrate their cheers for life, and to construct an inclusive history based on solidarity.

To conclude, this study has made a revisit to Keneally's famed novel and outlined three distinctive postmodern flavors which can be recapped in fragments as follows. The larger-than-life characters blur the line of fact and fiction. The unlikely hero breaks all kinds of law because he feels ashamed of crimes he did not commit, making his war years ironically worthwhile. A different history of a people begs to be heard, their survival to be celebrated, and their 'being' to be demarginalized.



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