

Hourglass

Peščanik

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The 1972 novel *Peščanik* (English: *Hourglass*, trans. Ralph Manheim, 1990) is part of a 'family cycle' by Danilo Kiš (1935–1989). The cycle is collectively called *Porodični cirkus* (*The Family Circus*). The Family Trilogy consists of short stories collected in the volume *Rani jadi: za decu i osetljive* (Engl. *Early Sorrows: For Children and Sensitive Readers*) and the novels *Bašta, pepeo* (English: *Garden, Ashes*) and *Hourglass*. The work is based on a letter discovered by the author from his Jewish father, Eduard, to father's sister, Olga Urfi. The letter, dated April 5th, 1942, is included at the end of the novel. It documents the inhumane Nazi policy towards the Jews and the complicated family relationships of the impoverished father who, together with his wife and children, realizes the fate of a Jew-wanderer. With extraordinary skill, ingenuity and fidelity to the facts, Kiš elaborates the themes of the letter into a novel. It is a kind of biographical novel about the father, about the fate of individuals, families and the nation in the reality of Hungarian-occupied northern Yugoslavia during the Second World War. It is about the reality of hunger, persecution, barbarism, forced labour, humiliation, fear, separation from loved ones, helplessness.

The pieces of the family cycle are diverse and are also divided by the time of their creation. *Hourglass* is the last part of the cycle. It is the least fluid, the least compact, the most avant-garde, complicated and difficult to describe. Instead of the warmth and lyricism of the previous parts, there is more of a cool documentarism here, recording events, meticulously describing photographs and balancing fictionality and facts. *Hourglass* is sometimes considered the most perfect part of the Family Trilogy, an objective vivisection of human destiny caught up in a history dominated by the demon of ideology. This postmodern novel contains both authentic and forged documents and deals with the act of forgery. According to the author himself, all these procedures are meant to lead to credibility.

The Family Cycle is a search for one's own (autobiographical) identity by recalling from memory the figure of Eduard's father, a Hungarian Jew, a victim of Auschwitz, who died in 1944 and before that was in the ghetto in Novi Sad. *Hourglass* has sometimes been described as an archaeological, anthropological, palaeological and palaeographic novel. Kiš himself describes it as an anthropological novel, but explains that anthropology contains palaeographic and palaeological layers. By referring to anthropology or archaeology, Kiš was indicating the almost scientific nature of the novel. This is because the anthropological story (here anthropology also in the sense of science/research) about the man (called E.S.) grew out of the study of documents, manuscripts and traces of the past material world. The novel can also be described as an exegesis of the found letter from the father to his sister Olga. The protagonist and narrator is the father, who appears here only under the initials E.S. - in other parts of the Family Circus he is called Eduard Sam (the name accentuates the protagonist's alienation and loneliness; in Serbian, Sam' means alone or lonely). E.S. has a certificate attesting to his own mental illness (the document is quoted in the novel). The

letter and the novel are a testimony to the clarity of mind of the mad, neurotic protagonist-narrator E.S. and to the madness of the historical period. *Hourglass* is one of Kiš's works about violence, rape, murder, war trauma, death camps and the Holocaust.

Any attempt to talk about Kiš's work requires a reminder of certain obvious things, one of which is the strong ideological and artistic affinity in his texts with Bruno Schulz and Jorge Luis Borges. This proximity has led to Kiš's work being described as Central European magical realism, reflecting the experiences of a Central European collective. *Hourglass*, like Kiš's other works, grows out of the heritage of Central European, Austro-Hungarian, Christian and Jewish culture. Kiš's father was a Hungarian Jew, his mother an Orthodox Montenegrin, and Kiš was born on the Hungarian-Serbian border. The most ingenious attempt to define Kiš's affiliation with some kind of 'national' literature is to refer to the non-existent country of which he was a citizen and to insist on the designation 'Yugoslav writer' – something he himself advocated. On the other hand, Kiš is the most Central European writer, counted among the canonical Central European three (with Milan Kundera and Imre Kertész) or the four 'K's' - depending on whether you want to include Miroslav Krleža.

The Central European experience most strongly present in Kiš's work is that of totalitarianism and dictatorship; in *Hourglass* he dissects Nazism. Kiš speaks both directly and through parable, metaphors and even fairy tale, as well as through artful phrases and intricate structures, and through the construction of the father figure. Various reflections and doublings play an important role in the novel, including mirror reflections that show unpredictable otherness and shift, mix and turn – just as in the hourglass. But the fundamental theme seems to be transience, the inevitable passing into the past. The sifting of the layers of Central European and personal history reaches its deepest layers, such as the bottom of the now-extinct Pannonian Sea on the territory of today's Pannonian Plain, to which Kiš felt a strong identity connection. In the original language, *hourglass* (*peščanik*) simply means a device for measuring time, while in Polish 'klepsydra' has two meanings, in addition to the primary one, it can also mean obituary. Kiš's *Hourglass* is both: it tells of the passage of time and is a public announcement of death - individual and collective. Primarily it announces the death of E.S.'s father, but also the death (annihilation) of a certain nation and world.

The hourglass, which measures and shows the passage of time and the mixing of layers, levels, consciousness, personal life, family life, historical and political events, is the protagonist and narrator E.S. himself – a split character, schizophrenic, mentally ill and at the same time sensing the approaching doom, a Jewish Eternal Wanderer, Ahaswer, Icarus, dreamer, philosopher, today a starving retired superintendent of the Yugoslav Railways, once co-owner of the company. The complex, mosaic-like structure is divided into chapters (plots or themes) entitled: Pictures of a Journey/Slike s putovanja (IV), Notes of a Madman/Beleške jednog ludaka (V), Investigation/Istražni postupak (IV), Interrogation of a Witness/Ispitivanje svedoka (II). The novel begins with a prologue and ends with a Letter or content/Pismo ili sadržaj. It can be read in the order of the chapters, in the rhythm of intertwining themes that model the protagonist from different perspectives, but it can also be read by following a single narrative thread. The extraordinary meticulousness, the detailed description, the extraction of details, the multithreading, closely linked to the dispersion of the narrator-hero's thoughts, make it difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the plot. In fact, it is difficult to speak of a plot in the traditional sense; it is rather a biographical novel of a special kind. First and foremost, the biography of Eduard Sam is reconstructed, but even this is somewhat duplicated, since the biography of Andreas Sam, Eduard Sam's son, and the biography of Danilo Kiš, Eduard Kiš's son, also appear, as does the fate of the Jews in the political and wartime context.

For his novel *Peščanik* (*Hourglass*), Danilo Kiš won the prestigious NIN prize in 1973, which he

returned a few years later due to a political dispute.

LANGUAGE: Serbian/Српски/Srpski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: