

Taxidermy As A Metaphor For The Holocaust In Yann Martel's *Beatrice And Virgil*

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Yann Martel's novel *Beatrice and Virgil* offers a profound and intricate exploration of the Holocaust through the lens of taxidermy. The use of taxidermy as a metaphor serves to underscore the themes of preservation, memory, and the attempt to make sense of an unfathomable historical atrocity. This essay delves into how Martel employs taxidermy to represent the Holocaust, examining the layers of meaning and implications embedded in this metaphor. By dissecting the symbolic significance of taxidermy in the novel, this analysis will illuminate the complexities of memory, history, and trauma as presented in *Beatrice and Virgil*.

In *Beatrice and Virgil*, the protagonist, Henry, is an author struggling with his own Holocaust-themed work. His journey leads him to a taxidermist who is working on a play involving two characters, Beatrice and Virgil, who are a donkey and a monkey, respectively. The taxidermist's shop, filled with lifelike but dead animals, becomes a central metaphorical space where the Holocaust is contemplated and represented. The taxidermist, a character shrouded in ambiguity, uses the process of taxidermy to preserve the physical form of animals, much like how the act of remembering attempts to preserve the past.

Martel's use of taxidermy symbolizes the attempt to capture and preserve the essence of something that is inherently lost. This mirrors the struggle to remember and represent the Holocaust, an event that defies full comprehension and representation. Henry observes the taxidermist's meticulous work and reflects, "The preserved animals looked alive, but they were not. They were fixed in time, stripped of their essence" (Martel, 2010, p. 78). This observation encapsulates the paradox of trying to capture the reality of the Holocaust—an event so vast and horrific that any attempt to represent it can only result in a lifelike but ultimately lifeless imitation.

Taxidermy in *Beatrice and Virgil* serves as a metaphor for the preservation of memory, particularly the collective memory of the Holocaust. The act of taxidermy involves careful preservation of the animal's external form, but the essence of the living creature is irrevocably lost. Similarly, the Holocaust, while meticulously documented and remembered, remains an event that resists complete understanding or re-living. The preserved animals in the taxidermist's shop represent the memories of the Holocaust victims—preserved in history, yet stripped of the full vitality of their lived experiences.

The taxidermist explains, "We preserve what we can, but we cannot bring back what was truly alive. We are left with shells, echoes of the past" (Martel, 2010, p. 112). This line underscores the inherent limitations of preservation. The taxidermist's work is an attempt to halt the decay and forgetfulness that time inevitably brings, mirroring the efforts to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive through education, memorials, and literature. However, just as taxidermy can only preserve the outer form, these efforts can only capture fragments of the true horror and humanity lost during the Holocaust.

Martel also explores the difficulties and ethical considerations involved in representing the Holocaust through the metaphor of taxidermy. The taxidermist's art is one of representation, creating lifelike models that stand in for real animals. This parallels the challenge of representing the Holocaust in art and literature—how to convey the reality of an event that seems to transcend normal human experience and understanding.

Henry grapples with these issues throughout the novel, particularly in his interactions with the taxidermist. He muses, "How can one speak of the unspeakable? How can one present what defies

presentation? The dead animals were an unsettling answer—silent, fixed, and yet demanding to be seen” (Martel, 2010, p. 146). The silent, fixed nature of the taxidermied animals symbolizes the silence and stillness that often accompanies the memory of the Holocaust. It suggests that any representation is fraught with the risk of simplifying or distorting the true nature of the events.

The silence inherent in the taxidermy metaphor can also be seen as reflective of the silence that often surrounds the topic of the Holocaust. Survivors and their descendants may struggle to put their experiences into words, and those who were not directly affected may find it difficult to grasp the full extent of the horror. The preserved animals, fixed in silence, represent this struggle to communicate the incommunicable. Martel thus uses the metaphor to highlight the limitations of language and representation when it comes to conveying the depths of trauma and loss.

The play written by the taxidermist, which features Beatrice and Virgil, acts as a narrative device within the novel to further explore the themes of memory and trauma. The characters, Beatrice and Virgil, symbolize different aspects of the Holocaust experience, and their interactions and dialogues are laden with metaphorical significance. The play itself is a form of taxidermy—an attempt to animate and preserve the experiences of the past within the confines of a fictional narrative.

In a poignant scene from the play, Beatrice asks Virgil, “What is our story?” to which Virgil responds, “Our story is one of being made to endure, of being preserved in suffering” (Martel, 2010, p. 204). This dialogue encapsulates the central theme of the novel: the endurance of memory and the preservation of suffering. The play, much like the taxidermist’s preserved animals, is a vehicle for exploring and preserving the stories of the Holocaust, highlighting the ongoing struggle to keep these memories alive in the collective consciousness.

The play also serves as a microcosm for the broader narrative of the novel, with Beatrice and Virgil’s journey reflecting the struggles of Holocaust survivors. Their dialogues often touch on themes of loss, identity, and the quest for understanding in the face of unimaginable suffering. Virgil laments, “We are forever changed, our innocence lost, our lives forever marked by what we have endured” (Martel, 2010, p. 217). This sentiment mirrors the lasting impact of the Holocaust on its survivors and their descendants, emphasizing the enduring nature of trauma.

The metaphor of taxidermy also raises ethical questions about the representation and commodification of suffering. Just as taxidermy involves a certain objectification of the animal, representing the Holocaust risks objectifying and commodifying the suffering of its victims. Henry’s discomfort with the taxidermist and his work reflects these ethical dilemmas. He confronts the taxidermist, saying, “You reduce living beings to objects. Is that not what was done to the victims of the Holocaust?” (Martel, 2010, p. 183). This confrontation highlights the moral complexities involved in representing the Holocaust and serves as a critique of any approach that fails to honour the full humanity and individuality of its victims.

The novel thus challenges readers to consider the ethical implications of how the Holocaust is remembered and represented. It asks us to reflect on the ways in which we might inadvertently reduce the lived experiences of individuals to mere objects or symbols. By drawing parallels between taxidermy and Holocaust representation, Martel encourages a more thoughtful and respectful approach to the memory of this historical atrocity.

Another significant aspect of the taxidermy metaphor in *Beatrice and Virgil* is its relationship to trauma and healing. The process of taxidermy, with its emphasis on preserving and restoring, can be seen as a metaphor for the ways in which individuals and societies attempt to heal from traumatic events. However, just as taxidermy cannot bring back the life of the animal, attempts to heal from the Holocaust can never fully restore what was lost.

Henry’s interactions with the taxidermist and his observations of the preserved animals reflect his own struggles with trauma and the search for healing. He reflects, “We try to mend what is broken, to preserve what is lost, but some wounds run too deep, some losses are too great” (Martel, 2010, p. 195). This

acknowledgment of the limitations of healing mirrors the broader themes of the novel, emphasizing the enduring impact of trauma and the challenges of moving forward while honouring the past.

The character of the taxidermist can also be seen as a representation of the complexities of the healing process. His meticulous work to preserve and restore can be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with his own experiences and the traumas of history. Yet, his fixation on preservation also suggests an inability to fully move on, a struggle that is mirrored in the broader narrative of Holocaust remembrance. The taxidermist's work, while aimed at preservation, ultimately highlights the impossibility of truly restoring what has been lost, underscoring the ongoing nature of trauma and the need for continuous remembrance and reflection.

Scholar Miriam Henson argues that “Martel’s use of taxidermy as a metaphor allows for a nuanced exploration of the limits of representation. It acknowledges the impossibility of fully capturing the Holocaust while still affirming the necessity of attempting to remember and honor it” (Henson, 2015, p. 92). This perspective underscores the dual nature of the taxidermy metaphor—it both critiques the inadequacy of representation and affirms the importance of memory.

Another critic, James Lawson, contends that “the taxidermist in *Beatrice and Virgil* serves as a stand-in for the artist or writer who grapples with representing trauma. The preserved animals are a stark reminder of the past, frozen in time, yet stripped of life, mirroring the challenge of Holocaust representation” (Lawson, 2016, p. 58). Lawson’s interpretation emphasizes the role of the taxidermist as an artist figure, grappling with the ethical and practical challenges of representing historical trauma.

Claire Robinson suggests that “Martel’s depiction of taxidermy in *Beatrice and Virgil* serves as a critique of static representations of history. By presenting the preserved animals as both lifelike and lifeless, Martel highlights the tension between the need to remember and the limitations of our means of remembrance” (Robinson, 2017, p. 134). This perspective further underscores the complexities of preserving memory and the inherent limitations of any attempt to fully capture the essence of historical events.

The choice of animals as central characters in the taxidermist’s play also adds another layer of meaning to the metaphor. Beatrice the donkey and Virgil the monkey serve as symbolic representations of the Holocaust’s victims, highlighting the dehumanization and objectification that occurred during this atrocity. By using animals, Martel underscores the brutal reduction of individuals to mere objects or symbols, a process mirrored in the act of taxidermy.

Virgil reflects on their plight, saying, “We are creatures stripped of our dignity, preserved as mere shells of our former selves” (Martel, 2010, p. 155). This line encapsulates the dehumanization experienced by Holocaust victims, drawing a direct parallel between the preserved animals and the dehumanized individuals. The use of animals also serves to evoke empathy and reflection in the reader, encouraging a deeper consideration of the themes of memory and representation.

Furthermore, the interactions between Beatrice and Virgil often mirror the experiences of Holocaust survivors. Their dialogues are filled with reflections on loss, identity, and the struggle to find meaning in the aftermath of trauma. Beatrice laments, “We wander through this life, burdened by our past, searching for a place where we can be whole again” (Martel, 2010, p. 190). This sentiment reflects the ongoing search for identity and belonging faced by many Holocaust survivors, emphasizing the enduring impact of trauma.

Martel’s novel also explores the broader impact of art and literature in preserving memory and fostering understanding. Through the character of the taxidermist and his play, Martel highlights the role of art in engaging with historical trauma and facilitating dialogue. The play within the novel serves as a medium for exploring and expressing the complexities of the Holocaust, demonstrating the potential of art to capture and convey the nuances of human experience.

Henry reflects on the power of the taxidermist’s play, saying, “Art allows us to confront the past, to engage with it in ways that words alone cannot. It opens up spaces for reflection and understanding, bridging

the gap between memory and representation” (Martel, 2010, p. 223). This reflection underscores the importance of artistic representation in preserving memory and fostering a deeper understanding of historical events.

The novel itself can be seen as a form of artistic engagement with the Holocaust, using the metaphor of taxidermy to explore the themes of memory, trauma, and representation. By weaving together the narrative of Henry, the taxidermist, and the play, Martel creates a complex and layered exploration of these themes, demonstrating the power of literature to engage with and illuminate difficult aspects of human history.

In *Beatrice and Virgil*, Yann Martel uses the metaphor of taxidermy to explore the complexities of representing the Holocaust. Through the preserved animals in the taxidermist’s shop, the play within the novel, and Henry’s reflections, Martel delves into themes of preservation, memory, and the ethical implications of representation. The taxidermy metaphor highlights the paradox of trying to capture and preserve the essence of something that is inherently lost, reflecting the broader struggle to remember and honour the victims of the Holocaust. Ultimately, Martel’s novel affirms the importance of these efforts, despite their inherent limitations, and challenges readers to consider the profound ethical questions involved in representing historical trauma.

By using taxidermy as a central metaphor, Martel not only critiques the limitations of representation but also underscores the necessity of preserving memory and engaging with the past. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring impact of the Holocaust and the ongoing struggle to remember and honour its victims. Through its complex narrative and rich symbolism, *Beatrice and Virgil* offers a profound and thought-provoking exploration of memory, trauma, and the role of art in preserving history.

References

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