

## ANALYSIS

### *Death Kit* (1967)



Susan Sontag

(1933-2004)

“*Death Kit* (1967), written during the height of the Vietnam War and the protests against it, turns America into a symbolic crypt, a necropolis. The central burial place is a train tunnel, where Diddy (Dalton Harron) changes the course of his life. Sontag’s purpose is to take the average sensual middle-class American man and alter his life by way of a dramatic event; in this instance, the drama is connected to Diddy’s murder of a worker in the tunnel, while the train is stalled because of an obstruction. On the way to a business conference upstate, Diddy leaves the stalled train, sees a worker hacking away at an obstruction, gets into an altercation, and smashes his head. Yet the act is so hallucinatory he is not certain he has committed the murder. Because the circumstances have confused him as to what is true, what untrue, what is subject, what is object, he needs external proof. The line between himself and the dead worker, becomes the compass point of the novel. Sontag’s area of movement is a Robbe-Grillet substructure.

*Death Kit* is a phenomenological novel, most of it taking place within Diddy’s head, or within the head of the young woman he goes with. Hester’s internality is forced by way of her blindness, an ailment that operations cannot help. Diddy’s ‘blindness’ is his exclusion from the vital centers of his own life; and the crime he commits, almost indifferently and gratuitously, gives him insight, makes him alive to himself. Further, Sontag makes the experience of the crime so confusing to Diddy he must work out his dilemma without really knowing what he has done. This gives Sontag the authority to use a shorthand language—fragments, phrases, pieces of information, synaptic elements—rather than a fully fashioned prose. While not experimental, the language is an attempt at a mental state, translated into words. She is particularly good on aspects of blindness....

Because the event in the tunnel remains so ambiguous to Diddy, he must research his own crime. The murder itself cannot be uncovered, for flesh and bone have been obliterated by the train. Diddy reads up on the death in the local paper, once he arrives at his conference, and then attends the services at the funeral home. After that, he visits the widow’s house and almost lets her make love to him. Intermixed with these acts of detection, which can only implicate him in his crime. Diddy pursues his professional career. The conference is aimed at increasing business for his company, which makes microscopic-camera equipment. As the rational part of Diddy’s life, the conference is set against the irrational element, his detective work.

A third line of development concerns Hester's hospital stay, in which there is a final effort to give her her sight. The operation fails, and Diddy and she leave to live together. He quits his job, so that his pursuit of a new reality will be unencumbered by extraneous circumstances. To discover the truth of his act, the truth of his blindness, the essence of his being with Hester overtakes all other considerations. His life becomes pure quest, channeled through compulsive sexuality with his blind partner, followed by his retracing his steps that led to the tunnel murder. Diddy and Hester reenter the tunnel and there they encounter another worker, who looks just like the murdered Icardona. Diddy repeats his act, killing this double of the murdered man, perhaps a brother, perhaps simply a reincarnation of what was then a dream. Hester is still blind to the crime, since she cannot observe, just as she was blind to the first crime when Diddy attempted to tell her what he had done. As before, there is no objective witness to the murder.

With only himself as witness, the murderer now enters his own death journey. This trip toward death has been implicit in Diddy's entire life, as he drifts down from an un-lived existence, through business relationships that have no meaning, into a marriage that has broken up when his wife left, through sexual encounters that are trivial, indifferent, or crude. Nothing has touched him. He is, in effect, a stranger to himself, although fully capable of functioning within a normal social or professional situation. He loses and gains weight with alarming rapidity; so that we see his body as either small or large, as going this way or that, without rationale or direction. Only his head counts. And it is his head he must set in order when he starts on his final tunnel journey.

After the second murder (or the first, if the first never occurred) he props Hester up in an alcove and moves along the tunnel. The tunnel becomes a necropolis, a series of interlinked rooms, large and small, which serve as crypts. The dead of all sizes and shapes, all ages, both sexes, young and old, civilian and soldier, lie here, some orderly, some strewn around. Many are in coffins, many others stood up. Before he arrives at the crypts, however, Diddy makes his way through a tunnel of detritus, the junk of a civilization that has never cohered. We find the discrete, anarchic, object world of American culture, neither lending itself to understanding nor able to be brought under control. It is a world of the absence of real things, filled with items of junk.

Then come the burial grounds. Here is the house of death Diddy has chosen to enter. America is a necropolis, the tunnel experience man's identity: angry, savage, murderous, intent on extinction and obliteration. Diddy is that man, otherwise harmless except in a tunnel situation. 'Diddy is exploring his death. Cautiously, thoughtfully, diligently. He wills to know, he will know all the rooms in this place; even if it's the house of death.' The inventory is complete when it catalogues Diddy's death. He moves to fulfill himself. 'More rooms. Diddy walks on, looking for his death. Diddy has made his final chart; drawn up his last map. Diddy has perceived the inventory of the world.' Minimalism meets apocalypse."

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*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 404-05