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**AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM, JEWISH IDENTITY AND THE AMERICAN IDEA -
THEIR (HIS) STORY AND THE GHETTO OF THE MIND -
JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER AND PHILIP ROTH**

**EXCEPȚIONALISM AMERICAN, IDENTITATEA IUDAICĂ ȘI IDEA AMERICANĂ -
POVESTEA ISTORIEI (LUI) LOR ȘI GHETOUL GÂNDIRII -
JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER ȘI PHILIP ROTH**

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American literature in the middle of the twentieth century was mainly preoccupied with the relationship between the writer and the reader, between imagination and lived experience, between fiction and truth, between the reader and the text. Nowadays authors are preoccupied to define themselves in a postmodernist era. However, we have to bear in mind the fact that the twentieth century was one of the very problematical struggles and contested boundaries. It was also a period when literary art was struggling with what to do with the legacy of modernism in the early century. More than this, there was another tension going on in that period that matters most for our thesis and which was very present in the writings of Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright, namely the strain of naturalism. Even though these writers were very closely connected to the legacy of avant-garde modernism, they are also connected to a social realist strain.

Another important reference for the purpose of this thesis is the accent that needs to be made upon the principles of modernism in the context of the debates of Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, and Jurgen Habermas. The emphasis on memory, postmemory and the distinct position of Jean-Francois Lyotard which challenges Habermas' thought directly is also one that cannot be overlooked. If for Habermas the question of modernity is how to complete it, Lyotard seeks to challenge modernity itself. As such, for Lyotard, postmodernism can only be understood in its argumentative debate with modernism. Particularly, postmodernism does not emerge after a break with modernism but comes forth by working through modernism.

Altogether, the following question arises: has postmodernism become an 'exasperating term'? (Bertans, 1995, p.3) In answering this question, I attempt to map out and organize some of the definitions of the postmodern. Due to the tremendous volume of works and materials consecrated to the subject, but also because it is a vast debate going on about whether or not the term has any consistency in its various forms – postmodernity, postmodernist or postmodernism that is said to be its primary characteristic, defining it is a very daunting task. John D. Caputo, for instance, concedes that, whenever he wants to 'draw a crowd' he uses the term as a catchword, and thus capturing the pulse of the contemporary critical condition. David Harvey refers to the term as to

a “mine-field of conflicting notions” (Harvey, 1989, p. viii). Equally, Hans Bertens considers that “is several things at once”, and that “the term was deeply problematical almost right from the start” (Bertens, 1995, p.3). At the same time, Eagleton asserts that “it is such a portmanteau phenomenon that anything you assert of one piece of it is almost bound to be untrue of another” (Eagleton, 1996, p. viii). For Edmund Smyth, notwithstanding, it “is evident that no consensus exists regarding either the parameters of postmodernism or the precise meaning of the term” (Smyth, 1991, p.9). Adding to this, Alex Callinicos argues about the amount of postmodern leading definition of which he believes as being “mutually inconsistent, internally contradictory and hopelessly vague ” (Callinicos, 1989, p.2). Last but not least, Fredric Jameson claims that “is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson, 1991, p.xii). As such, Jameson regards postmodernism as a historical break from it (Ibid). Postmodernism is not just a movement or an aesthetic style, but an entire transformation of culture, representation or subjectivity. In this sense, conceivably "the most disturbing of all the circularities" (Ibid) produced by the postmodern is that of history (Idem). Thus, I consider that when talking about postmodern narrative we are talking about language, history, and trauma. Postmodernism, then, is characterized by the ‘authentic’ sublimity in whose stead modernism is only a joke because it offers a false nostalgia for the real thing. Thus, nostalgia can please you with its beauty; it is a pale pleasure that appears even poorer in comparison with the exquisite pain of the authentic sublime. In the light of all this, the success of the reason is indexed by the menacing failure of the imagination.

What is more, the two authors subject of this paper, Jonathan Safran Foer and Philip Roth are considered postmodern writers, even if Roth disagree with this label. Moreover, their works portray the true Jewish spirit and identity in contemporary America. Due to my Jewish ancestry, that my family preserves on the line of the paternal grandfather, I choose the subject of this paper, but also because during my MA in American Studies I become interested in Jewish writers in America. As such I was raised in the spirit of respecting any kind of identity and rejecting stereotypes and xenophobe.

The body of reference material necessary for writing the present paper has been gathered through a research scholarship from University of Sussex, UK, a study visit at Otto von Guericke Universität, Germany and the access that University of Sussex Library granted me at its online sources.

Subsequently, the present paper is not about the Holocaust or 9/11, it is about identity, collective past, memory, postmemory, and the way in which the above mentioned authors relates to trauma. Even if it is now over seventy years since the end of World War II, yet Jewish American contemporary writers continue to address the traumatic events of the middle of the twentieth century. This is because we have to deal with second and third generation survivals, people trying to understand the tragical events that touched their family history, and even if the tragedy did not affect them directly, shaped the lines of their identities and upbringing. Despite the fact that, Philip Roth does not write about the Holocaust per se in *The Plot Against America*, he draws on the 9/11 terrorist attacks and this opens a deep wound of his collective memory, placing the events sixty years before actually taking place in a world ruled by a fanatic which reminds us of Adolf Hitler. The core of the novels that make the subject of this paper is not so much the Holocaust itself, but the tension inherent in the act of “remembering” an event so far from the writer’s experience which nevertheless provokes a powerful feeling of proximity in the form of emotional response to the suffering of victims.

As such the purpose of this thesis is finding an answer to the subsequent research question: What is the relationship between the novels presented in this paper, American exceptionalism, identity and the tragic events that represent their background? and to the subordinated questions: How is this leap in time and experience handled in the novels that make the subject of this thesis, narratives that deal with events from the previous generation? Moreover, I will argue that the novels of Foer and Roth represent a compromise between a desire to break from the tradition and a tendency to turn modernism into one.

A starting point for answering all these questions is provided by the works of the European Enlightenment philosophers and scholars on which their American counterparts based their fervent intellectual ideas such as democracy, pluralism, existencialisms. Not once the American

scholars admitted that through the powerful works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus they discovered existentialism and is the foundation on which they have started to build the American existentialism. What is more, existentialists thought that they were creators of culture, not merely philosophers: "The philosopher, even if he is Kant, is a creator. He has his characters, his symbols, and his secret action. He has his plot-endings..." (Camus, in O'Brien, p.91). What is more, Sidney Finkelstein in his book 'Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature' (1968) emphasises the major influence that the European existentialism had on the mid 20th-century American literature, saying that: "the philosophical development and the literary expression make up one continuous history" (Finkelstein, p.1). In Chapter I (*EXISTENTIALISM OR THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF A DESTINY*) I investigate the grounds of American exceptionalism and identity and their history as concepts. Even though history is more complex than this brief summary, I think that is important for my argumentation to present the two powerful visions of the democratic ideas as they are represented in the studies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Alexis de Tocqueville.

In the attainment of oneness, rather than the persistence of separate identities lay the promise of American life. For modern pluralism, diversity has performed a special function, which was often missing in the romantic Madisonian tradition (Ibid, p. 332). It has consistently worked against authoritarian claims of exclusive or preeminent wisdom. Since the democratic aspirations of the Progressive Era colored and shaped the entire revolt against formalism, modern pluralism was initially harnessed to an egalitarian ethic (Ibid, pp. 334-336). Pluralists appealed for appreciations of differences to rectify inequalities (Idem).

Pluralism provided minorities with a means of resisting absorption; they claimed to constitute the very structure of social order. The standpoint of the integrationist or the tender of the melting pot, minorities must appear subordinated and declining elements (Idem). Pluralism, on the other hand, defined the minorities as primary. The unity of the whole resided in their relations with one another (Ibidem, p.335). This was the pluralist thesis, regardless of how one can identify America's minorities. They might be regional or ethnic, and later they were religious and sexual.

Therefore, the ethnic "pluralism would appeal to people who were already strongly enough positioned to imagine that permanent minority status might be advantageous" (Higham qt in Edwards, 1984, p. 146). Consequently, "cultural pluralism proved most attractive to people who were already largely assimilated. It was itself one of the products of the American melting pot"(Idem).

Moreover I draw on the notion of the American dream and its uniqueness. Hence, Michael Bellesiles in the introductory chapter of the collection of original essays: 'Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History'(1999) examine the role of violence in America's past, exploring its history and development. Moreover, he also disagrees with D.H. Lawrence, who argues that 'The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic and a killer' (Bellesiles, 1999, p.1). Thus, he concludes that most violence in the United States as in the rest of the world is and forever and a day have been committed by men. Secondly, after analyzing the works of Samuel Phillips Huntington, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Richard Crockatt, I do believe that America is a nation that is capable of reinventing itself, and it is still a powerful actor in the international system. Even if the American soul is hard and stoic, it is unquestionably a victor's one with a strong sense of 'national consciousnesses' and not a killer, as is depicted as well in the novel s of Roth and Foer.

Nevertheless, "born out of revolution, the United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society" (Lipset, pp.29-30). Moreover, "Americanism, as different people have pointed out, is an 'ism' or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are 'isms'" (Lipset, 1996, p.31). Moreover, the ideology of the American nation was formed around five concepts: "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire" (Idem) and "the revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth and nineteenth-century meanings" (Idem). Is America unique? "American values are quite complex," argues Seymour Martin Lipset, especially "because of paradoxes within our culture that permit pernicious and beneficial social phenomena to arise simultaneously from the same basic beliefs" (Lipset, 1997). What is more, "the United States has always considered itself an exceptional country of citizens unified by an

allegiance to a common set of ideals, individualism, anti-statism, populism, and egalitarianism” (Idem).

Finally, the chapter ends with the presentation of Jewishness and the American Idea just as the authors Philip Roth and Jonathan Safran Foer portrayed them and related to them in their works. The emphasis is placed on Roth's novels, due to the fact that no other American author fought as much as he did to challenge old stereotypes and establish his identity as a Jew in America.

Philip Roth is probably the modern American writer who fought the most to challenge old stereotypes and to establish his identity as a Jewish writer. We are not wrong to call him a true existentialist because he was writing almost obsessively about how an artist and man in modern and postmodern American environment can achieve maturity, independence, and authority. Moreover, his heroes are multiple facets of the same coin, namely of a single "mythic consciousness: the modern, urban Jew"(Girgus, p.118). One strong existentialist trait that can be found throughout Roth's fiction is the theme of "finding one's self-unable to escape the past and unable to overcome a perennial perspective from a psychic ghetto" (Ibid). Another important facet of Roth's coin is the importance of establishing his identity as an American writer. What is more, Roth urged the contemporary writers in trying to decipher the meaning of the American Dream and Idea and explain them to the contemporary readers. Furthermore, he asserted the importance of the Jewish writers in America as a way of developing new literary styles as both a legacy and a response to their status as immigrants and also as a way of fulfilling their literary credo.

Subsequently, we can recognise in Philip Roth the "justification for the argument that the Jewish writer and thinker is a linguistic innovator who develops the rhetorical and narrative structures of the myth and ideology of America while maintaining the role of the modern Jewish hero of thought" (Idem, p.119). Roth's concern in trying to portray American realities evolves into an affirmation of his writing credo. His vision about contemporary literature and culture is based on his understanding of the American literary tradition. Likewise, he finds himself confronted with the difficulty of depicting the American reality.

The reality of his ancestry and ethnicity, this internal battle between vulgar and genteel sensibilities emerge as an acute tension for Philip Roth the writer and intellectual. However, for the Jewish writer, such tensions can distract him from the regular stylistic norms and make one "alert to the inexhaustible number of intriguing postures that the awkward may assume in public, and the strange means that the uneasy come upon to express themselves" (Idem, p.83). As such, Philip Roth's sense of his own Jewishness is powerfully reflected in his work. Thus, enters the pavilion of modern Jewish writers with a sense of himself as inexorably Jewish regarding his experience and thought.

However, at the beginning of his career, in an interview, Roth opened up about the social and cultural roots of the Jewish writer dilemma who wants to rebel against his parents and their identity sensitivities. Due to the Jewish heritage and believe that they have to stay together no matter what, Jewish parents in trying to protect their children end up in expressing pride even in their rebellion and disobedience. And just like Alexander Portnoy, Nathan Zuckerman (*The Ghost Writer*) learns that no matter how hard he tries to escape his parents they will always find him, more often than not in a corner of his psyche. What I want to underline is the fact that not only guilt keep him close to home but being Jewish in America is the source of all anxieties and fears. Throughout Nathan's dialogue with E.I. Lonoff about the untouchable, yet sensible links between art, life and authorship on the one hand, and the nature of their work, on the other, Jewishness is a theme the two writers argue about, as well.

Moreover, Roth has repeatedly touched on the subject of the Holocaust, whether to show how it haunts the memory and psyche of the American-Jew who at first seemed that the tragedy cannot touch him anymore, such is the case of *The Anatomy Lesson* where the main character mother on her dying bed writes the word "Holocaust" when asked to say how is she called, or to satirize its use by Jewish-Americans as in "*The Ghost Writer*". In "*Operation Shylock*", for instance, Roth draws on the heirloom of the "Holocaust in 1980s Israel by integrating the trial of John Demjanjuk (the so-called 'Ivan the Terrible' of Treblinka) and the theory of 'Diasporism,' which states that Israeli Jews should re-populate the European 'homelands' from whence they came" (Ward, 2008). Despite this widespread opinion, which we have to bear in mind that the

story is told from a traveler's standpoint, the American prospect in Roth's novels is the cutting edge of the narrative.

Consequently, Michael Rothberg points out the fact that Philip Roth uses distance to separate the writer from the emotional implication within the narrative. The "distance between Jewish-American security and European tragedy" (Ibid p.62) can be distinguished through Roth's novels. However, Rothberg's argument doesn't make justice to the personal empathy Roth is capable of through his use of personae. Moreover, a character named Philip Roth is the narrator of both *Operation Shylock* and *The Plot Against America*. There are also two different perspectives of Roth's personae because the first novel is narrated by a young Philip Roth and the second one by a nine-year-old Philip Roth. Meanwhile, Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* novel are also narrated by a nine-year-old boy, even if Oskar is not Safran's alter ego. However, Foer's literary roots start with Roth and as such, in his debut book, *Everything is Illuminated*, a story about Holocaust, memory, identity and cultural heritage, the main character is young Jonathan Foer, the author's personae. However, by becoming a part of the narrative through his alter ego, who has to deal with the persecution of the Jews during Hitler's rule in *The Plot Against America* and the ongoing effects of the Holocaust on contemporary state politics in Israel, *Operation Shylock*, Roth draws on a very important aspect of "proximity" (Ward, 2008) using the technique of personal connection. Nevertheless there are also critics of this narration style, among them the Austrian writer, Michael André Bernstein, who in "*Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*" he calls this narrative model "backshadowing" which "is a kind of retroactive foreshadowing, in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by a narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events as though they too should have known what was to come" (p.16), therefore dismissing the whole concept upon which Roth and Foer built their narrative.

Furthermore, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* center the story of the past through the characters of the grandparents. As such, they are the ones that bring the past into the present. It is a story of self-discovering, a search for truth and identity which are being held captive in a traumatic past. It is a process of discovery; the novel brings to life two destinies, on the one hand, the story of a Holocaust survivor and that of its perpetrator, and on the other hand,

the story of a Jewish American young man search for the true life story of his grandfather and his counterpart a twenty-two years old Ukrainian who in the end find out the truth about his family history.

Nevertheless, this encounter with the past will lead to the illumination. What is more, this “lack of personal involvement” is not meant to diminish the powerful impact that the atrocities from the past has on present generations. Although nowadays Germans do not bear the fault for the deep wounds that their ancestors' involvement in the Holocaust atrocities caused to Jews and others, we nevertheless understand that the memory of the tragedy continues to haunt them. However, we believe that acerbic aftermath of past wickedness on present sensibility is still an important factor in shaping their sense of identity.

In Chapter II (*REPRESENTING THE UNIMAGINABLE*) I deal with the issue of Holocaust representation in literature and try to find the appropriate answer to the question of writing about the terrible atrocities in the works of Safran Foer and Roth and the why they relate to the traumatic events that marked their upbringing and shaped their identities. By way of illustration, the chapter emphasis the way that Safran Fore, a third generation survivor of the Holocaust relates to the traumatic event and how did he write about the tragedy in his first novel, *Everything is Illuminated*. Moreover, the novel must be regarded as an experimental and semi-autobiographical work that addresses themes of collective memory, family identity, and the ethical relation of the present to the past through a series of picaresque narrative, epistolary interludes, and magical realism. Last but not least, the chapter also deals with the difficulties of Holocaust fiction and with a further dimension of the debate on Holocaust representation brought forward by the concepts of memory and postmemory. Transgenerational empathy involves giving equal weight to “memory” and “history”. Similarly, Jonathan Safran Foer’s third-generation aesthetic of “post-postmemory” in *Everything is Illuminated* uses a “dual persona” device to foreground empathically the abyss at the heart of any attempt to recapture the past. However, the concept of “transgenerational empathy” would benefit from further research, both in terms of its “temporal dimension” and the use of narrative personae by other contemporary authors such as Philip Roth.

There are two stories interrelated in this book, and as is often the case, one is more engaging than the other. *Everything is Illuminated* accounts for an American writer with Jewish roots search for his maternal grandfather history back in Ukraine. The protagonist of the book is no other than the writer's alter-ego, attempts to find Trachimbrod, his grandfather's former shtetl. He adventures in the journey with nothing more than a map and a photograph of a lady called Augustine, who allegedly saved Louis Safran, his grandfather from the Nazi. What is more, we cannot overlook that Jonathan's guide and translator on his trip is a Ukrainian man about his age, named Alexander Perchov. He learned English from Thesaurus, and plays yet another character in the novel, a nonhuman one, that of language. The boys are the same age, twenty-one. Alex's grandfather, who pretends to be blind, drives Jonathan through Ukraine. With them in this journey travels a seeing-eye dog, on his name Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, Grandfather's best companion.

It is the relationship between the dreadful past and the present that defines *Everything is Illuminated*, the story of a man with a secret past in which he locked up a war secret and who as a dying word tells his grandson that he was all his life "a good person who has lived in a bad time" (227). Jonathan Safran Foer belongs to the circle of contemporary Jewish-American writers and his signature novels are *Everything is Illuminated*, (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005).

The historical focus of *Everything is Illuminated* is not limited exclusively to the events of the Holocaust. In many cases, the Trachimbrod sections of the novel are those which most clearly employ an admittedly unconventional historical mode. These sections of the text are presented in the guise of a historical novel and deal with both the fictionalized history of Trachimbrod itself and more explicitly with that of Jonathan's family. A sense of historical certainty is introduced by the inclusion of dates within the chapter titles providing an immediate indicator of the supposedly historical focus of the sections. Thus, the first phrase of the Trachimbrod chapter states that: "It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axel wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River" (p.8). By presenting the date Foer gives us a certainty that the event happend. However, is undermined by the indeterminate phrase 'did or did not.' Given that the event is the one which shapes the future of Jonathan family and shapes the

future of the shtetl, the uncertainty comes as a surprise. Such uncertainty is not there by chance but creates all the mystery of the Trachimbrod chapters. Also, faith is very important throughout the shtetl, with lotteries being responsible for its naming and for Brod being raised by Yankel, while the flour mill claims its victims seemingly at random. Indeed, this feeling of chance and uncertainty prefigures a wider uncertainty towards history that is felt throughout the novel as a whole.

Throughout *Everything is Illuminated* Foer can be seen to adhere to the notion of “narrative nature” of historical meaning. Indeed, much of Trachimbrod’s understanding of its history is presented within the novel as being a broadly textual base. The novel is littered with texts that ostensibly form Trachimbrod ranging from "*The Book of Recurrent Dreams*" (p. 36) to sections of Brod’s diary, but the following examples show most clearly the textual and constructed nature of history. *The Book of Antecedents* is vitally important in demonstrating the textual nature of historical meaning, as it is the text from which the shtetl members learn their history.

The title of the novel can be interpreted twofold: everything is illuminated when we learn the truth about Alex’s grandfather and the way in which he betrayed his Jewish best friend in order to save himself and his family from the Nazi’s fury. Jonathan’s journey is meant to clarify the past of Alex’s family more than his own. Grandfather feel remorse for giving in his best friend, his only friend, this is why his name is not revealed throughout the novel. The act that he pretends to be blind signify that he does not want to remember the past, especially because the sight was the mean of his betrayal. He believes that if he does not see he no longer remembers. Another way of looking at the title is through the irony lenses. Regarded in this way Jonathan’s trip was in vain. The word *illuminated* (my emphasis) meaning that everything remains in obscurity.

Everything is Illuminated status as Holocaust fiction does not only affect its structure and generic choices, however. The novel’s heavy focus on the role and importance of memory is also due to its engagement with the Holocaust and is indicative of a wider trend within Holocaust writings. Young identify the central importance of memory within Holocaust texts when he claims that: “what is remembered of the Holocaust depends on how it is remembered, and how events are

remembered depends on turn on the texts now giving them form” (1998, p.1). Texts themselves, therefore, become part of “Holocaust memory” and in their representation of events come to define the ways in which they are viewed. In this sense, the concept of memory becomes vitally important within such texts, as they are both representing, and creating it. Henceforth, Foer’s focus on memory, and on the importance of remembering regardless of how difficult it may be to do so, is a logical inclusion.

Stating the postmemory status of *Everything is Illuminated* I contradict those who are saying that Foer reveals within the pages of this novel his narcissistic personality, because as Eaglestone has claimed: “Postmemory is a representation, mediated by and created by texts: family stories, books, tapes, and so en. These texts are, then, texts on texts, and texts about the effects of texts. They are in part about their own creation” (p.97). Thus *Everything is Illuminated* is not just a mix of many styles, and I argue that is not just a fictional device of the postmodern, but a statement for postmemory. Because it is in the texts, focus on Jonathan’s family that postmemory truly comes into being, creating special and explicit links across generations which lead down to Jonathan. The fictionalized texts, therefore, serves as a means with which to feel the void let my memory in his life, and helped by it and his imagination Jonathan brings the shtetl back to life, and we are left with the impression that progress and continuity are possible. For this statement, I consider *The Book of Antecedents* as being a very good example. From beginning to its end *The Book* represents at first a way for the shtetl to learn its history, is their second holy book, but as the events progress it becomes more and more important for the Trachimbroders because touches their individual subjective existence.

Chapters III (*IMAGINATION MEETS TRAUMA IN EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED*) and IV (*ILLUMINATION?*) situate Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* in the hall of fame for the holocaust literature depicting the problematic of magical realism and trauma and the way Foer chooses to portray the tragic events of the World War II. I analyse the novel through the lenses of Henry James's fairy-tale world. Notwithstanding, the structure of the book and the loss of convention together with the failure of comedy lead to Saran Fore's journey of self-discovery and illumination.

From the very first page of *Everything is Illuminated* the reader can sense that Foer starts a mute dialog with writers afore time. However, what strike the reader the most is the sense of proximity that one feels with the Holocaust when reading the novel. The motif that Foer chose to deal with in the novel is a testimony of his identity heritage. Although, As Yehuda Bauer said in an interview with Amos Goldberg in 1998, that Jews aren't agreeing among them with regard to what identity really is. Some argue that is a matter of the heart, others that it concerns only the religious aspect, or the ethnic one, there are scholars among them that consider identity to be a ethnic-religious problem, but very few are thinking to what proportions we can speak of religious, ethnic or personal identity (Goldberg, 1998).

There is almost no other event in history that was so much commented upon or written upon as the Holocaust and the suffering left behind is. The event that happened during the World War II are no longer, if ever was, solely a page of Jewish history. The atrocities of the Nazi have long ago chased to be just a part of Jewish history and stepped into the world history book.

The innovation of the novel *Everything is Illuminated* comes from the fact that the story is told by a third generation survivor and the way he relates to the tragedy. The story of the Holocaust has been revealed many times before Foer in many brilliant writing styles and narrative voices, by Art Spiegelman (2003, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*), but also by Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* (1990), and another famous example would be the novel of the German writer, W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001) had a very identical story line. The story has been told many times before Foer's. Besides, most of these prior versions in fiction and some in memoir have to do with the "first-generation American experience" (Hungerford, 2008).

Accordingly, I consider Safran Fore being double trapped: on the one hand because his story was told before and on the other because he is third generation survival. In being the grandchild of a survivor he was faced with the challenge of making the story his own, even if he knows his roots. He does this brilliantly by entering the depth of Jewish culture and its veneration for memory. It is a Torah legacy to venerate the past and the dead. The novel explicitly talks about the relation

that children have with the memory of the parents and grandparents. As such, Safran Foer makes out a strong argument out of this in the novel.

As such, the novel revolves around the "Identity Plot". Being a widely read book, *Everything is Illuminated* proved, once again, that Holocaust events still matter to further generations and that the innovation of the narrative goes hand in hand "with the excellence or importance that Foer's aiming at" (Idem). I assume that Foer wants to be unique and does not want to enter the category of representative writers. "It is in the effort to be important, to be writing about something important in his novel, that the Holocaust comes to have such a place in it, or that he chooses a story that has the Holocaust at its center" (Idem).

What I consider a subject worth mentioning in the construction of the novel is the bridge over time that Foer constructs between the first generation survivors represented by Jonathan's grandfather Saran, Alex's grandfather and the old woman whose identity is shifting because we do not really know if she is Augustine or Lista as she calls herself. First and foremost the story of Jonathan's grandfather is the engine that sets everything in motion. Safran was a Holocaust survivor who died a few weeks after his States and this is why Jonathan knows nothing about his life story or how he stayed alive during the war and he is searching for answers. Second Jonathan tries to reconstruct his grandfather life history based on a journal and some pictures. The fact that he has so little information at his hands can already signal that the story is a product of imagination. Finally, whereas Alex's grandfather and Lista are above all liberated by the fact that they can testify their trauma, about which they have been silenced for almost sixty years, Safran never has this opportunity. Based on this fact Jonathan feels the need to tell the story in his grandfather's place. Likewise, this need of testimony can be seen very clearly at the beginning of the novel, when Trachim B apparently drowns in the river and Brod is born. Nobody in the shtetl has any idea about what has happened, hitherto everyone is testifying: "I witnessed it all, and if that's not exactly the truth, then, and if that doesn't seem quite correct, then what happened was. Trachum died in the Night of the Longest Night. No, wait. He died from being an artist"(p. 12).

Last but not least, from my point of view whoever writes about *Everything is Illuminated* has to refer to the character of Brod. I also think it is a strikingly well crafted character. I believe that the reader, just like Alex wants a good life for Brod and just like Alex suffers at the injustice of her existence and of her inability to love. Brod is a complex character and this is due to the fact that she evolves as a character throughout the novel. This development makes her a complex character and gives her personality time to grow and change. As such she masterfully builds the father-daughter relation embracing the fact that she was adopted and she relates like a rational and strong woman in her marriage. What differentiates Foer from Roth is the fact that "he is fully identify with the community in a convincing way" (Hungerford, 2008).

Subsequently, Chapter V (9/11, A PLOT AGAINST AMERICA) deals with another traumatic and shocking event, September 11 and the way Philip Roth and Jonathan Safran Foer chose to relate to the tragedy. September 11 with all the terror created by the planes impacting on giant skyscrapers, and for all the suffering caused to the victims and their families and friends is eventually a semiotic event, involving the destruction of all the meaning-making symbols. The attacks had such a tremendous impact that writers and psychoanalysts expressed their stupor in words. As such, Toni Morrison in a prose poem composed two days after the events address a victim: "knowing all the time that I have nothing to say - no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become" (Greenberg, 2003, p1).

Finding words to express the inexplicable without minimizing the facts and without reducing them to a simple grammatical and interpretative scheme is the true quest of Foer's second novel. Jonathan Safran Foer has chosen to write his story in four voices. Even if critics have stated that there are only three, namely the voice of Oskar Schell, a precocious nine-year-old boy whose father died in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the voices of his estranged and mutually traumatized parental grandparents, Dresden firebombing residues, I argue that the fourth voice belongs to Oskar's father, Thomas Schell Jr. lost his life in the World Trade Center attacks and who is brought to our attention by little Oskar's memories. However, none of the voices are natural. To an extent they are almost reduced to silence. The Schell family is so traumatized by

the historical events that they lived and relived with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This is why language is strained to a point where it disintegrates. Being pushed to its expressive extremes of volubility, on the one hand, and on the other to extreme silence, language cannot comply with its basic function, that of the vehicle of communication between generations. Likewise, the novel consists of the desperate attempt of the characters to establish contact with one another. Hitherto, the entire novel is dominated by a feeling of ineluctable rupture. The scare core of a family, its unity, has fallen victim to the vicissitudes of history. Their family history is so cut through by pain, that if it is expressible at all that can only be expressed in an extravagant way.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, is a writing proof of the relation between language and trauma, a very explicit and clearly evident relationship. The originality of the novel consists in the attempt to construct what Blanchot refers to as the “writing of the disaster”(1980). Moreover, the novel explores the etiology of trauma and details its various symptoms and also relates the pain to the limit of supportability. It is a novel that suggest that there are no words in describing such atrocities. The title of the book signals an event that language cannot contain something unbelievable and beyond description that even words fail in depicting. The disruption in the narrative, the blank pages, the peculiarity of its tone, and the visual elements are meant to underline the incommunicability. Moreover, the novel is full of tricks that get in the way of the meaning-making process, because it speaks of an event that obliterates the means of creating meaning. Due to the shocking events that the narrators have to face linguistic means are evoking psychic paralyze, but at the same time as LaCapra argues the narrative fulfills the traditional redemptive function of putting things into perspective (2001. 156-157).

The main characters of the book are facing "an ineffable trauma, a truth" (Collado-Rodríguez, 2008, p.59) that cannot be articulated, but nevertheless, they try to reveal through language. The traumas that overwhelm the protagonists of the novel are disasters resistant to articulation. And one particular effect of trauma is its erasure of the ability to speak. As I will emphasize, later on, this is the case for one of the protagonists. The other two narrators feel the need to communicate, but they find themselves in the impossibility of doing so, regarding the difference of age, life experience, and the wounds that trauma left in their souls. And Judith Herman underlines once

more "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialect of psychological trauma " (p. 1).

The novel's plot revolves around some variables such as history, identity, family experience, trauma and the search for an appropriate means of communication. Grandpa and Grandma are so traumatized by the war that has become nearly impossible for them to build a new life. I see them as humans frozen in time.

The second part of the chapter deals with Roth's *Plot Against America*. He writes the novel three years after the tragedy but situates it sixty years earlier not post it. Are we to believe that Philip from *The Plot* is the actual Philip Roth? Through the lenses of virtual history we are going to enter the fictional world of *The Plot* and will discover the romanticized story of a family that fights to preserve its identity but, in the process, gives up to the American Dream. A first-person narration, *The Plot Against America* is listed as a Roth Book. The writer here invites the reader to acknowledge that the events presented are part of his life story. Therefore, Roth *the man* (my emphasis) is looking back at his young self at ages seven to nine. The fact that we have the certainty now that the Lindbergh plot against America is a writer's fantasy release Roth from the clutches of his more impassioned critics. The heroes of the book are Herman and Bess Roth, two people full of courage and wisdom in a stormy time. Nonetheless, a dream is wrapping the events of the novel and also on its cover is the soft tone illustration of a stamp. In little Philip's dream, his entire stamp collection has been destroyed.

The novel is structured in slots of time. What is more, time is not about a sequence of events, but about steps of Philip consciousness. Undoubtedly, as each wave of liberty is defended, Jews find their constitutional safety net coming from the America's core, the pluralist society. Therefore, pluralism in all its form is a philosophy of minority rights, for the reason that it arises when minorities become conscious of having a stake in the maintenance of their position within a larger society.

All in all, the terrible attacks of September 11 "are both the occasion and the rationale of a study that seeks to locate present events within an enriched understanding of their historical context

and political implications” (Watts, 2003, p.6). The attacks have underlined that a plot against America does exist and that the threat posed by ‘9/11’ was “consistent with long-established patterns in the way that America perceived its relations with the outside world” (Crockett *America Embattled*, 2003, p.45).

Next, Chapter VI (*WHO “OWNS” PHILIP ROTH?*) deals with the fiction of Philip Roth, addressing a few questions that, in my opinion, should be raised when one tries to analyze such a compelling and diverse body of works: Is there any difference between Philip Roth of The Books and Philip Roth of reality? Could one speak about the fact that the main character in *Goodbye, Columbus* is the individualistic American hero and also the prototypical ethnic American hero? What might be the verdict in the case of identity for Jewish character: to convert or not to convert? In which ways realism is filtered through a gendered sensibility? To be able to formulate some answers, I have chosen to deal in more detail with *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Five Short Stories* leading the way through new readings based on postmodern theories of identity, as well as developing discussions of ethnicity, consumerism, and the American Dream. As such, I would say that the only “owners” of Philip Roth are the protagonists of his essays and novels.

What is more, Roth's half Jewish half American characters are recurrently and dangerously unbalanced amidst hold on to or dispose of their Jewish heritage for a new American identity. While one strength of Roth's story about Jewish Americans is he engages both Jewish as non-Jewish audiences; their ethnic grounds contribute to their longevity. However, this balance between the ethnic and the universal was a burden for Roth. He has expressed this sentiment at the beginning of his writing career: “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew” (Ozick, Art, 1983, p.158). Thus, if being an American requires a closeness with the Anglo culture and the abnegation of the immigrant background, "the Jewish characters who people Roth's stories and novels attempt to assimilate by replacing their cultural identifiers with those of the majority American culture" (Amendola, 2006, pp.5-7). Nonetheless, this implies a change of perspective. From a top-down approach of the American identity that takes under its umbrella the entire melting-pot process it becomes a bottom-up perspective which relinquishes

primordial identity to enroll in the “formation of a new, and often inauthentic, American identity”(Ibidem, p.7).

Therefore, the conversion of the American Jews in the novels and stories of Philip Roth extends far beyond the ecclesiastical borders and takes on a metaphorical substrate. Thus, we can speak about a wicked change of identity from Jew to American which calls for "a ritualistic performance involving the adaptation of the American way of life"(Idem). Here we can mention the adaptation of language, cuisine, clothing, competitive interplay and even becoming madly in love with their all-time favorite sport: baseball. However, Roth, as a literate and brilliant observatory and an accurate anthropologist of the Jewish condition, implies through his stories and his characters that one cannot be wholly American or wholly Jewish if does not actuate a hazardous “cultural split–personality”(Ibidem, p.6).

Consequently, Roth portrays in his writing what he considered being the "bipolarity of Jewish–Americans. As such, this duality affects every American, who claims to be a Jew and every Jew who claims to be American. And yet according to a large number of theories, ethnic identity is quintessentially American" (Ibidem, p.8). As Werner Sollors stated, “in America casting oneself as an outsider may, in fact, be considered a dominant cultural trait” (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 1986, p.31).

Last, but not least, Philip Roth in his novels and stories presents the division between the battles that takes place between the group and the individual identity when depicting Jewish American characters. What is more, Roth pays out the dynamics of assimilation constructing the entire range of various facets of an existence, and above all in the aspects where metaphors can reconstruct the reality. By relinquishing their Jewish ethnical identity, Roth’s characters through pastorals and passing rituals are entering into the American melting pot. However, all his characters are displaying a wish to create their own identity, and they cannot relinquish their origins and shape the "cultural identifiers" such as language, food, and competition.

To end with, what makes this thesis be different form all the others that have been written on the subject is the comparison I am making between the main character of Jonathan Safran Fore's

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince in the last Chapter (*OSKAR SCHELL, A MODERN LITTLE PRINCE*) of this study.

After reading *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* I had the impression that Oskar's quest is ultimately a quest for his personal self. The quest has a cathartic effect upon the little boy who in the end comes to peace with himself and the world around him. Oskar, just like the Little Prince at the end of his journey finds love, friendship, and nonetheless he recovers faith in himself. They both start a journey with heavy hearts. Oskar lost his father and looked for ways to recoup his loss, and the Little Prince leaves his planet because he is in love with a rose that hurts him with her vanity and fickleness. This is why he journeyed from one planet to another. The planets which the princes visited before he arrives on Earth are inhabited by men who each represent the follies and vices of mankind. The taste for power which is represented by the King, vanity represented by the narcissist, acquisition which is the only purpose of the businessman. Only the lamplighter leads a life devoted to something outside himself; his task has a sense; he does something for the wellbeing of the others.

Just like the Little Prince, Oskar sees the world magical again when due to the tragedy that he is facing he decides to start his bildungsroman journey. Nevertheless, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a slight variation of the initiation novel. Oskar at the end of his quest reconciles with the women in his life. Grandma believes that only in writing can express herself properly she writes a letter to Oskar, which she ends by stating her devotion in the simplest words: "I love you" (p.314).

However due to the tragedy that he is facing, Oskar, as well as the Little Prince, sees the world magical again when he decides to start his bildungsroman journey. Nevertheless, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a slight variation of the initiation novel. Oskar at the end of his quest reconciles with the women in his life. Grandma believes that only in writing can express herself properly she writes a letter to Oskar, which she ends by stating her devotion in the simplest words: "I love you" (p.314). We can find this bond in the Little Prince as well in the encounter that he has with the fox and with the pilot who has crashed his aircraft in the desert. Disappointed with earth, the Little Prince leaves, unexpectedly as he came, but not before telling the aviator that his life is not without purpose and that somewhere in the stars, lives a little

prince, who is his friend. The Little Prince leaves the Earth as suddenly as he came, but truly knowledgeable because the Fox shared with him its life secret: "on ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux" (Saint-Exupéry, p. 97). As such, we only see clearly with the soul. Oskar understands what is like to see the world with the heart, when at the end of the novel he learns to deal with his loss and understands that he is not alone.

Consequently, at the end of his quest, Oskar finds out that the search for his father is also the search for his mother. A child as tormented as Oskar can only be set right and find his peace when he discovers that, in spite of death, mom and dad have stayed together, and he is still the son of both. Also, it will be totally wrong to go as far as to state that Oskar hates his mother, on the contrary, but the events of "the worst day" have blocked off his means of expressing his love for her. During the ride to the cemetery, he has a hint of her mute suffering, and he observes that "Even though it was an incredibly sad day, she looked so, so beautiful. I kept trying to figure out a way to tell her that, but all of the ways I thought of were weird and wrong" (p. 7). Again the catastrophe has affected the most human and natural abilities to utter oneself in the most meaningful ways.

Within the metaphorical construction of the novel, Oskar has to overcome yet another obstacle, namely the depressing sense of anomie that results from living in a big city. Is what the German sociologist Georg Simmel described more than a hundred years ago as "The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of the emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" (Simmel qt in Bridge and Watson 2002, p. 11).

Above all Foer has created for Oskar a context in which he has to confront two currents: the social instability resulted from the breakdown of values, a characteristic of modernity and the dispersion of meaning which is a characteristic of postmodernity. I believe that Foer implies the term postmodernity as described by Jim McGuigan, in *Modernity and Postmodern Culture*, in contrast with postmodernism and stating the different significations of the two terms. Because, for McGuigan, "postmodernism refers to philosophical ideas, mainly derived from poststructuralist theory, and cultural formations, especially associated with global popular

culture. Postmodernity, in contrast, refers to societal or civilizational claims; and, quite specifically the argument that we are living through the transition from a modern to a postmodern period of history ”(McGuigan 1999, 2).

As well, Oskar’s wish to see the effects of 9/11 annulled forms the optimistic core of the novel, because Foer, just like Oskar's father is an optimist. Thus, just like *The Little Prince* Oskar is depended on the act of speaking. Also, above all, through language and communication love conquers all the suffering of generations.

To conclude with, historical events tend to become less important, less relevant for the present and for the future in direct proportion to how long ago they occurred. However, this seems not to apply to the horrors of the Holocaust. Its importance and relevance are at least as great as, if not greater than it was sixty years ago when the event occurred. As Yehuda Bauer pointed out, this is the case because the Holocaust says something very important about all human beings: man is capable of such unimaginable cruelty, of such unspeakable barbarity, and, given the right circumstances, the seed of evil that helped bring about the Holocaust may cause similar events to happen. This is a terrible truth – and one that is not convenient to hear.

It could be said that the contemporary Jewish-American novelists are struggling with the "identity plot" concerning its place the cultural panoply of the "post-Holocaust age." It is also a matter of regaining faith in a God who let something like Holocaust happened. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a vivid example of the fact that the symbolic systems are expressed through signs. As such, following the line of words in Stephan Hawking’s letter, digging up the empty coffin is a “simple solution to an impossible problem”(p.321). This symbolic act signifies the son’s reconciliation with his father’s death. He first thinks of filling the empty coffin with memorabilia, like Georgia Black and her husband “who made museums of each other”(p.321). He abandons the thought when he realizes that memorializing thing is a way of fixating them, and finally comprises a sort of forgetting. Then he considers of filling the grave with paraphernalia that are the symbol of his neediness and unresolved trauma: the "things I’m ashamed of” (p.322). But Grandpa reminds him that physically buying things does not necessary mean that they are buried (Idem). In the end, he allows the coffin to be filled with Grandpa's

unsent letters to his son and then he realizes that the grave belongs to his father and not to a stranger. The fact that he allowed Grandpa to fill the coffin shows that Oskar completed his bildungsroman journey, and he learned to reach out and accommodate another's wishes.

What is more, Foer calls his first novel “act of replacement” and not one “of creation.” Foer bets on *Everything is Illuminated* introspective character in allowing the connections between symbols and in this manner, he deals with the critics' accusation of lack of representation and truth throughout the novel. However, the word replacement can stand for at least two things regarding *Everything is Illuminated*. On the one hand, it means the action of "putting something back where it once belonged", and on the other, "the act of substituting one thing or person for another" (Cambridge dictionary). In this light, one can say Foer's novel aims to replace the absent Trachimbrod, one that disappeared from the surface of the earth, with an imaginary one, colorful, imbued with life. In a way, the author tried to fill the void, to substitute presence for absence. Just as Louis Safran says when thinking about his Gypsy lover: “the origin of a story is always an absence, and he wanted her to live among presences” (p.230).

In what concerns Roth's fiction we have clearly seen that three questions are haunting it, namely, what is America, what means to be a Jew writer in America and how does one represent America? In Portnoy's Complaint Philip Roth gives an answer to the latter question “discussing the purposes of his art, Chekhov makes a distinction between ‘the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem’ — only the latter is obligatory for the artist”(Roth, 1994, p. 16). What is more, Roth adds that for offering a proper solution for the second question one has to eliminate moral ambiguities: “I am not interested in writing about what people should do for the good of the human race and pretend that's what they do do, but writing about what they do indeed do, lacking the programmatic efficiency of infallible theorists” (Roth, Reading Myself... p. 133).

Regarding the answer to the first question, which is to say how to define “America,” Philip Roth has given shape to it in "Goodbye, Columbus" in representing the Potemkin' suburban paradise. Moreover, in *American Pastoral* (1997), America is portrayed in Meredith Levov's, ironically named Merry, political radicalism. What is more, *The Human Stain* (2000), depicts the moral

outrage of an “F,” which is twice stigmatized: firstly because he is black, and as such invisible, and secondly because he passes as a Jew. In *The Human Stain*, Roth gives praise to a writer and an intellectual whom he appreciates, Ralph Ellison. What is more, the novel reveals the limitations of self-making in nowadays American culture.

America as an idea, America as a refuge, America as a promised land has always been at the core of Roth’s narrative. What is more, the protagonist of *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995), Mickey Sabbath is many times associated with America. His lover, the Croatian-born Drenka Balich, is anxious to go “dancing with America,” and she later says to him “You are America. Yes, you are, my wicked boy” (Roth, 1995, p.419). It bears mentioning that *Sabbath’s Theater* is in many ways a turning point in Roth’s writing career. In this novel, he mastered the games of postmodern narrative, and he meets head-on the pandemonium of contemporary American civilization and the place of the artist in it.

Moreover, the dual perspective that we have come across both in Foer and Roth narratives suggest the role of memory and remembrance and the way they shape the distance-proximity equation more directly regarding the temporal dimension. But it is clear by now that time does not work in a logical manner. All this might force the reader to confront the fact that human beings are capable of committing horrible deeds, which they, “in spite of everything”, are not “good at heart.”