

MAGIC REALISM, IDENTITY AND THE HOLOCAUST IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

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Abstract: Magic Realism is a topic widely discussed and debated among critics all over the world. This term and this literary genre, from its very beginning, seemed to have created some difficulties in its usage and understanding. Many writers have chosen to use Magic Realism and to incorporate the magical into the everyday reality, writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Salman Rushdie or Laura Esquivel. In addition, there is an increased interest in literature and literary criticism for topics related to race and ethnicity and there is a considerable growth in the writings produced especially by American writers coming from different ethnic backgrounds. However, there seems to be a lower interest and amount of literary criticism given to those American ethnic writers who have chosen Magic Realism in their novels. These American ethnic writers seem to be concerned with specific literary themes, among which there is the theme of identity. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the Magic Realism and the theme of identity in the novel Everything is Illuminated written by the Jewish-American writer Jonathan Safran Foer.

Keywords: Magic Realism, ethnicity, identity, Jewish American, Holocaust

Magic Realism and identity

Magic Realism is a concept that has been defined in many different ways throughout time and which has applications in various parts of the world. In very large terms, Magic Realism is considered to be a literary genre which blends two opposing aspects: the reality and elements of the unexplainable, a genre in which magical and supernatural events as understandable and explainable phenomena of the everyday reality. One of the most famous Magic Realist writers is Gabriel García Márquez, as he is the one who made this genre very popular. Magic Realism is used nowadays not only by South American writers, but also by writers all over the world. In addition, Magic Realism plays an important role in the American ethnic literature, as well, so it can be understood as not only a literary genre, but also as a cultural phenomenon.

There are multitudes of different themes used by different authors throughout time in literature. These themes can be more general, like love, hate, life or death or they can be more specific and personal, closely linked to the individual. One of the themes that was of interest in the past and that is still representative in literature today, and also for Magic Realist writers as well, is the theme of identity. For years, humans have tried to answer questions related to their belonging and their place in the world around them, question like *Who am I?* or *Where do I belong?*. Therefore, the theme of identity is used by many Magic Realist authors in order to give voice to their interior thoughts or to give voice to a certain community that they represent, a community that, for various reasons, cannot speak for itself. The passage of time and the birth of nations throughout Europe lead to the development of a new sense of identity and of belonging. This was closely linked to the geographical and political state of the individual, which were all reflected in the way in which literature was being written.

Jewish-Americans and Post-Holocaust literature: shaping a new identity

In the melting pot society that is America, understanding and defining what it means to be Jewish-American seems to be a question without simple answers and explanations. The concept of Jewish-American identity is complex and complicated, even though today Jewish-Americans can express themselves more freely and openly than before. This means that a person can choose whether to accept and embrace their Jewish cultural and religious heritage and ancestry or to ignore it or even completely dismiss it.

Needless to say, the biggest event that marked the 20th century was the Holocaust, or the *Shoah*, the genocide that claimed over 6 million Jewish lives throughout Europe during World War II. An event of remarkable impact, the Holocaust became a source of literary inspiration for writers worldwide. Therefore, Jewish-American literature along with Holocaust literature were joined together in order to express different themes. Some of these themes were new in the literary canon, while others expressed older ones in new different ways. However, these texts mostly tried to bring into the written form different contradictory issues, such as “the meaning of being human, the place of tradition in modernity, the content of Jewish identity, the issue of memory, the nature of evil, and the role of God in history” (Berger and Cronin 1). This new type of writing, Holocaust (and then Post-Holocaust) literature is called by Elie Wiesel “testimony” literature (9), mostly because it relies on the personal memories and testimonies of those who experienced this great tragedy. He points out that each period has produced a specific literary form, and therefore, this was the one produced by the 20th century. Therefore, just as “the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony” (Wiesel 9).

The problem of identity is discussed in different Post-Holocaust writings. The war and the Holocaust have led to a fragmentation not only in the physical bodies of those affected by it, but also in their minds and souls. Therefore, the body of literature produced after this period deals with the search for a new identity of the Jews, who found themselves and their families scattered around Europe and not only. Moreover, the second and third generations of Jewish-American writers, those who have not experienced directly the Shoah, try to reconstruct the past using the memories and the testimonies of those before them, in order to answer the question: “What does it mean to be Jewish-American?”

The Post-Holocaust literature is literature written by those who have not experienced the horror of the Holocaust directly. They are either sons or daughters of those who have, or they have relatives who have either won or lost the battle for life in different extermination camps. This is the case of Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of several novels such as *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. His maternal grandfather, Louis Safran, was a direct Holocaust survivor, which seems to have inspired Foer to tackle the problem of Holocaust along with its enormous consequences in his writings.

The quest for identity in Post-Holocaust Jewish-American literature

Everything is Illuminated is the first novel written by Jonathan Safran Foer, published in 2002. It presents the story of a young Jewish-American writer named exactly as the author, Jonathan Safran Foer. Jonathan travels to Ukraine in order to find Augustine, the woman who presumably saved his grandfather’s life during Nazi occupation of the city of Trachimbrod. Jonathan’s guide in his trip is a young Ukrainian boy, named Alex. The novel contains three different narratives: there are chapters written by Alexander Perchov, the Ukrainian tour guide, chapters written by Jonathan (which contain his story about Trachimbrod) and the letters written by Alex to Jonathan, which reveal the growing friendship between the two.

Foer’s novel is based on the trip he took in 1999 to Ukraine, in order to find out more about his grandfather’s past. The author claims that he had no intentions of creating a novel,

but rather to create a “non-fictional chronicle of a trip that [he] made to Ukraine as a 20-year-old” (Mullan). However, his trip turned out to be a failure, as he did not manage to discover much information about his grandfather’s origins and about his ancestry. In fact, he discovered “nothing”: “I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing – a landscape of total absence – nothing was to be found. [...] Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip – she would never have let me go – I didn't know what questions to ask, or who to ask, or the necessary names of people, places and things” (Mullan).

Therefore, this trip did not manage to shed any light into Foer’s own past. A third-generation Jewish writer, he tried to uncover an unknown part of his family’s past and their account of the Holocaust, by travelling to their place of origin. However, he discovered that he does not have enough information to create a complete image of his family’s past. While writing this story, he did not have any new facts, events or persons to write about and thus he decided to use his imagination and combine it with the history that he had already known. In this way, he created a story about the Holocaust that could be both true and false at the same time, as he declares:

Everything Is Illuminated proposes the possibility of a "did and didn't" duality, of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either "how things were" or "how things could have been", the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing attempts to reflect a kind of experiential (rather than historical or journalistic) truth. Novels do not strive to get to the bottom of things, but to express what it's like never to be able to. (Mullan)

Foer is one of the third-generation novelists that is concerned in his novels with shaping a new Jewish identity in the American society, while coming at terms with the traumatic past of his ancestors. As a novelist, he is preoccupied with finding and understanding his identity and one way of discovering this is by finding out the truth about his past. This is the reason behind his trip to Ukraine and this is one of the purposes of the protagonist’s travel to the imaginary city of Trachimbrod.

Regarding the quest for the discovery of the identity, two important aspects can be identified in the novel. One of them is the fragmentation of stories, while the other is the journey taken by Alex to achieve “illumination”. The stories in the novel are fragmented and interrupted, similar to the hero’s sense of identity. Jonathan has to put together the story of his past, much like trying to put together his own identity. Moreover, other than this, the novel explores the Alex’s physical and spiritual journey, from being an arrogant, clueless teenager boy to a rather affectional, truthful and responsible young man.

Jonathan’s identity is somehow distorted and incomplete. He wants to find out more information about his grandfather’s past and this is why he decided to go on the trip to Ukraine. He travelled to this mysterious foreign country with nothing more than a photograph of a woman named Augustine, who may or may not have saved his grandfather during the war and a map of Trachimbrod. As he cannot come to terms with the past of his own family, Jonathan embarks intentionally on a trip to discover not only facts about his past, but also parts of his own identity.

In the end, because he does not succeed in finding out more about Augustine or his grandfather, he tries to put together an identity by putting together two different things: reality and imagination. This new “history” is illustrated by Jonathan in the story he writes about the village of Trachimbrod, a story that he sends to Alex in different letters. Therefore, he manages to come up with a story derived from reality, but at the same time, a story that seems to be far away from it. As he combines reality and elements of imagination, along with magical elements and Jewish myths and folklore, Jonathan manages to discover a new way of

telling an old story and to create a new history of a place and of his ancestors and their trauma during the Nazi occupation in Ukraine.

The story created by Jonathan presents the life of Brod, Safran's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother and the magical events that surround her entire existence. Brod is rescued from the river, after Trachim's wagon sank (thus, the villagers assume Trachim was Brod's father). However, her existence is miraculous and inexplicable. She was lacking an umbilical cord and she was believed to be "Trachim reborn" (Foer 16), and that Trachim was given a second chance to "right a previous generation's wrong" (Foer 16).

Growing up, Brod discovers that she is different from everybody at her age, that she is overwhelmed by an intense feeling of sadness and that she is "a prism through which sadness could be divided into its infinite spectrum" (Foer 78). Moreover, she manages to categorize her sadness, coming up with "613 sadnesses, each perfectly unique, each a singular emotion, no more similar to any other sadness than to anger, ecstasy, guilt, or frustration. Mirror Sadness. Sadness of Domesticated Birds. Sadness of Being Sad in Front of One's Parent. Humor Sadness. Sadness of Love Without Release" (Foer 79).

After her adoptive father dies, she marries "the Kolker", another inexplicable character. After a work accident, a saw disc remains stuck in his head, but it does not kill him until a year later. However, during this period, his relationship with his wife gets more and more complicated and eventually they end up communicating through a hole in the wall. In the same night that Brod gives birth to his son, the Kolker passes away.

Following this episode, Jonathan shifts the perspective to Safran, his grandfather and continues by presenting his life story. Safran is born with teeth and this makes it impossible for his mother to nurse him. Therefore, he ends up with a dead arm, which, later on will make him irresistible to many different women. However, in spite of all the women he has relations with, he only loves one girl, an unnamed Gypsy girl that he has met at the theatre. Unfortunately, he realises his love only after getting married to another woman, Zosha and only after the Gypsy girl kills herself. Moreover, his arm turns out to work like a lucky charm. This dead arm is the reason why he was saved multiple times during the Nazi occupation, as Augustine, the woman who saved him, fell in love with him because of it: "his arm saved him again when it caused Augustine to fall in love with him and save him" (Foer 166).

The mention of the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust are absent throughout the story, as the author (Jonathan) mentions it only at the end. Moreover, he combines the story of war and suffering with an episode of love. Although Safran was a notorious lover and had experienced many sexual encounters with many women, he experienced his first orgasm when he was being intimate with his wife, which happens exactly at the time while the Germans were attacking and bombing Trachimbrod.

Nonetheless, Elizabeth Hyzy claims "Jonathan's fantastical telling of pre-Holocaust history is a reflection of the Holocaust itself" (4). Therefore, Jonathan takes the parts of the story that he does not know from his ancestors' history and replaces them with magic realist elements and moments (Hyzy 4). The usage of magic realism allows him "to relive the past at a safe distance" and also to understand and combine a "seemingly impossible situation (the Holocaust) with the impossible (magic)" (Hyzy 4).

According to Hyzy, the struggle that goes on inside Jonathan to make sense of the fragmentation in his life can be seen in two important aspects of the novel: in Alex's description of Jonathan and in Jonathan's description of Trachimbrod (Hyzy 4). From the beginning of their encounter, Alex is not at all impressed by the young American Jewish man he meets. He claims that he was "flabbergasted" (Foer 31) by his appearance, mostly because he did not meet the expectations that Alex had about Americans from magazines or history books. He points out that "he [Jonathan] did not appear like either the Americans I had

witnessed in magazines, with yellow hairs and muscles, or the Jews from history books, with no hairs and prominent bones” (Foer 31). Moreover, Alex adds that “he did not look like anything special at all” and that Alex “was underwhelmed to the maximum” (Foer 31). This first impression does not seem to make Alex change his view about Jews, more specifically that they “were having shit between their brains” (Foer 3).

Another thing that strikes Alex is the picture that Jonathan is carrying with him. It is the only proof Jonathan has regarding Augustine’s existence, this woman who seems to be so important for him. Alex observes and describes him to the readers: “He moved his finger along the face of the girl in the photograph as he mentioned her. She was standing down and right to his grandfather in the picture” (Foer 59). The other precious object, which Jonathan holds, is an old map. This map should help him find the city of Trachimbrod, but because it is so old, it is highly possible that the reality is quite different:

This is Trachimbrod,” he said. “It’s also called Sofiowka on certain maps. This is Lutsk. This is Kolki. It’s an old map. Most of the places we’re looking for aren’t on new maps. Here,” he said, and presented it to me. “You can see where we have to go. This is all I have, these maps and the photograph. It’s not much. (Foer 62)

The hero lacks any other tangible physical evidence in his quest to find Augustine or Trachimbrod, along with other details about his grandfather’s past. Moreover, lest he should lose the little evidence he had at that moment, he makes multiple copies of the photograph and of the map. This only proves the intense desire and ambition that he has for making his adventure successful. However, in the end, the photograph and the map turn out to be useless, as they never manage to find Augustine or any information about her, nor to discover the ruins of what was supposed to be the village of Trachimbrod.

The photograph and the map of Trachimbrod are considered by Hyzy to be “simply another incomplete part of the puzzle” (6) and that these two objects are ways through which the author shows how “fragmentation encumbers Jonathan’s journey” (6). After they manage to find what was supposed to be the village of Trachimbrod in the past, they discover that there is nothing left and nothing to be discovered. Hyzy points out that again, “this issue of fragmentation is a direct consequence of the Holocaust” (6) and that because of this, Jonathan has no concrete information to gather or to return to his family.

In his quest to complete the puzzle, the hero only discovers that there are even more missing pieces than he had known in the beginning. He decides that if he wants to finish to story, he has to fill in the missing parts himself, with his imagination. This is why, in Brod and Safran’s stories there are so many magical elements and magical episodes. The writer of the story (Jonathan-the character) fill in the voids that he cannot explain with events that also could not be explained and that have no logical counterpart in reality.

This writing strategy, of filling up the voids with elements of magic realism leaves the readers confused and brings up many unanswerable questions. However, this is what brings the readers (first Alex and then the readers of the novel) into a state similar to that of Jonathan, a state of confusion and lack of understanding. In addition, as Hyzy claims, magic realist elements, even though they fill in the blanks, they create even more confusion: “By glazing his story with magical moments that could be reality or fantasy, Jonathan leaves his readers as confused about his story as he is about his past. Magic partially solves the issue of fragmentation by filling in the gaps, but it also heightens it by confusing readers” (9).

The Trachimbrod story is nothing but a fragmented attempt to make sense of the hero’s past, a story filled with inexplicable and illogical events. Uncertainty dominates the narrative from the beginning: “It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B’s double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (Foer 8). Jonathan knows

that Trachim B died in the river, but he does not know any details about his death, that is why his account seems to be unclear as he “did” or “did not” got pinned by the wagon.

Soon after, the young twins discover more and more unusual things rising up from the river. There is a list of objects that seem to make no sense and that have no connection between them: “she picked up the hands of a baby doll, and those of a grandfather clock. Umbrella ribs. A skeleton key. The articles rose on the crowns of bubbles that burst when they reached the surface”, “a yellow pinwheel, a muddy hand mirror, the petals of some sunken forget-me-not, silt and cracked black pepper, a packet of seeds . . .” (Foer 8-9). Afterwards, the most unusual thing that they discover is actually a baby, baby Brod. This seems to be quite an unusual collection of items, from which the villagers have to make sense and understand the circumstance of Trachim’s death. Similar to this, Jonathan, armed only with an old photograph and an irrelevant map, has to make sense of his grandfather’s past and ultimately of his own identity.

Moreover, fragmentation is what characterises Brod’s story as well. Regardless of the fact that she has kept a diary, Jonathan does not have much information about her and her life story. This is true for her husband as well, whose name remains unknown to Jonathan and he is addressed throughout the story only as “the Kolker”. Jonathan knows about him that he is from the village of Kolki and that he has won the Trachimbrod competition of diving into the river and discovering more objects related to Trachim’s death.

His grandfather’s story is filled with uncertainty as well; therefore, Jonathan fills in the void with numerous magic realist elements. As he has so many unanswered questions about his grandfather, about his past and about his own identity, Jonathan completes what is missing with impossible and inexplicable events. These events are, however, mostly part of Jonathan’s imagination. This is because he does not know a lot about his grandfather. His narrative is consisted of mere interpretations of different old photographs of Safran, enhanced by the writers’ lack of knowledge and by his own imagination.

Safran’s life is filled with magical and inexplicable events, according to Jonathan. Safran’s infant teeth is one of the most remarkable things about him, as Jonathan pointed out: “His teeth. It’s the first thing I notice whenever I examine his baby portrait. [...] The physician must have shrugged, as physicians used to do when they couldn’t explain a medical phenomenon, and comforted my great-grandmother with talk of good omens” (Foer 165).

Because of this extraordinary situation, Safran’s mother is not able to breastfeed him, which eventually leads to the death of his right arm: “Without proper calcium, his infant body had to allocate its resources judiciously, and his right arm drew the short straw. He watched helplessly as that red, swollen nipple got smaller and smaller, moving away from him forever” (Foer 166). This dead arm is the source of Safran’s success at women, as they seem to be attracted and fascinated by his incapacity. Jonathan suggests that Safran began being intimate with women from the young age of 10 and that throughout his life he acquired more than a hundred mistresses.

Another consequence of this abundant usage of magic realist elements, other than the confusion that it creates, is the fact that the author manages to distance himself from the story. According to Hyzy, this is a solution used by different American-Jewish authors who are interested in exploring the theme of the Holocaust in their writings, but who also want to protect themselves from the high amount of pain and suffering that comes along with it. Therefore, “associating characters with the impossible is Jonathan’s way of coping with their deaths; he cannot fully feel their loss if he does not believe they really existed” (Hyzy 12). By adding magic elements, he accepts that there is information that he does not know about his past and he protects himself from the pain that flows from the tragedy of those who experience and suffered the Holocaust.

It is important to mention that one of the most traumatic scenes in the Trachimbrod story lacks any magical elements. It is the scene in the final pages of Jonathan's story, where the Nazis finally invade Trachimbrod. Using the stream-of-consciousness writing technique, "Jonathan avoids the fantastic in this scene" but nonetheless, "the horror feels as unrealistic as the parts with magic" (Hyzy 16). The Nazis bomb the village first and the cruelty of this scene makes Jonathan add "here it is almost impossible to go on, because we know what happens and wonder why they don't. Or it's impossible because we fear that they do" (Foer 271).

After the bombing, the Nazis raid the village and they drown and burn the remaining Jews. Safran and his pregnant wife are forced to dive into the river, where Safran's wife gives birth and she and the new-born baby die. This is a passage described by Jonathan, using the stream-of-consciousness technique:

and the baby refusing to die like this was pulled up and out of her body turning the waters around her red she surfaced like a bubble to the light to oxygen to life to life WAWAWAWAWA she cried she was perfectly healthy and she would have lived except for the umbilical cord that pulled her back under toward her mother who was barely conscious but conscious of the cord and tried to break it with her hands and then bite it with her teeth but could not it would not be broken and she died with her perfectly healthy nameless baby in her arms. (Foer 273)

The tragedy of this moment is that it does not require any magical elements to be exaggerated, as this is something that could have happened, even though the situation seems absurd and unreal. Regarding the intensity of these moments, Hyzy points out that Jonathan (both the character and the author) "wants his readers to feel that this is real, that this is the pain that actually happened, and yet, even with the magic gone, it is hard for us to accept" (16). She also adds that this is a moment in which the readers of the story are hurt, mostly because there are no more magical elements and interventions that could actually save the characters (Hyzy 18). In this moment, "Jonathan—and his readers—know that the Holocaust happened, that one group of people took it upon themselves to eradicate another" (18), but are still "flabbergasted" when it comes to accepting and understanding it.

Understanding this "bewilderment" (Hyzy 18) is an essential part in Jonathan's (the character) quest to find his own identity. Coming to terms with the past and the trauma of his ancestors is one of the most important steps that the hero has to take. Faced with a lack of evidence and facts, he chooses to insert magic elements into an unknown reality, in order to make the trauma more bearable and nonetheless, to complete the bigger picture.

The novel also deals with the journey taken by Alex, while accompanying Jonathan in his quest for the past. During this journey, the reader discovers that Alex finds out important information about his own past and about his grandfather's past. Moreover, this journey is the start of the peculiar friendship between Alex and Jonathan and the starting point of Alex's maturation process. In the end, it seems as if Alex is the only character who gets to experience the "illumination" mentioned in the title of the novel.

The title of the novel is inspired from a quote from Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Vogel 74). The quote says: "In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated in the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine" (Kundera 4). It is important to mention that because of Alex's self-taught English, he often misuses the term "illuminate" in order to express clarification or to provide an explanation. He writes to Jonathan a letter regarding his understanding of Jonathan's story. He points out that he did not give in to his desire to throw the writing into the garbage and went on: "You will be happy to know that I proceeded, suspending my temptation to cast off your writing into the garbage, and it all became illuminated" (Foer 142).

For Alex, illumination is synonym with revelation. At the end of his own journey, he moves from a state of ignorance into the light of his recent discovered knowledge and information. Illumination comes by knowing the past and understanding its consequences in the present, not only on a worldwide scale, like the Holocaust, but also on a personal, individual level.

There are several important scenes in the novel where actual illumination takes place. One of those moments is when a wink of lighting illuminated the Kolker as he was watching Brod undress through the window (Foer 97-98). Another important illumination moment when the Germans bomb and burn down the synagogue (Foer 271), a scene presented by Alex's grandfather. He mentions the Germans that burnt down the synagogue with the Jews inside. However, he adds that they also burnt alive those Jews pointed out and betrayed by their neighbours and friends and that the fire "illuminated those who were not in the synagogue those who were not going to die and he cast it on the branches that were pushed against the synagogue" (Foer 251).

One of the most relevant scenes regarding illumination is the scene in chapter 13, entitled *A Parade, a Death, a Proposition, 1804-1969*. In this chapter, literary illumination takes places because the characters in the novel start making love. They start to glow in the dark and they illuminate so strongly that they can be seen from space: "From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light" (Foer 95). The narrator also adds: "The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves: newlyweds and teenagers who spark like lighters out of butane, pairs of men who burn fast and bright, pairs of women who illuminate for hours with soft multiple glows" (Foer 95). Although this glowing is part of Trachimbrod's folklore, it can be found in different parts of the world, some shining brighter than the others: "Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It's difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine's Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick's. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle on each of Chanukah's eight nights" (Foer 95-96).

This day, called Trachimday by the inhabitants of the village, is the only time when the little village of Trachimbrod is enlightened and can be seen from the sky. It is also a chance for them to affirm their identities: "Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric. We're here, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. We're here, and we're alive" (Foer 96).

Throughout the novel, it can be observed that Alex undergoes a process of maturation. In the beginning, he is an arrogant teenager boy who claims to be something that he is not, while at the end of the novel he improves and becomes what he likes to call "premium". While he grows and develops, his English and his writing style and technique also improves. At the end of the novel, he gives up his unrealistic hopes and dreams and decides to step up and take care of his family's well-being and happiness.

Alex is introduced as an arrogant and cocky character. He like to praise himself and to boast about his many qualities. He affirms, "I have always thought of myself as very potent and generative" (Foer 1), while he adds that he has "many many girls" (Foer 1). He likes to point out that even though he is so extraordinary, he does ordinary things as well:

I dig American movies. I dig Negroes, particularly Michael Jackson. I dig to disseminate very much currency at famous nightclubs in Odessa. Lamborghini Countaches are excellent, and so are cappuccinos. Many girls want to be carnal with me in many good arrangements, notwithstanding the Inebriated Kangaroo, the Gorky Tickle, and the Unyielding Zookeeper. If you want to know why so many girls want to be with me, it is because I am a very premium person to be with. (Foer 1-2)

According to Alex, his appearance is of premium quality. He mentions that he is “unequivocally tall” and that he does not know any woman taller than him (Foer 3). He has an “aristocratic smile” and a very strong stomach, “although it presently lacks muscles” and his eyes are “blue and resplendent”. (Foer 4). He enjoys “handsome hairs, which are split in the middle” (Foer 3), mostly to get back at his mother for splitting his hair on the side when he was a young boy. The consequence of this is his mother pointing out that he looks “mentally unbalanced with [his] hairs split like that” (Foer 4).

Considering this description, it would seem that Alex is a strong, fit, well-looking young man, with great physical and psychical potential, rich and extraordinary. However, as the story unfolds and as he becomes more sincere, it is revealed that this is just a pretence and that in the beginning he was just an arrogant, clueless young man, who tried to show an image of himself different from the reality. One of the things that helps him become a better person is the letters that he keeps sending to Jonathan. Apparently, these letters are supposed to help him improve his English and his writing skills, but they become like a sort of diary, in which Alex discovers and reveals himself.

The turning point in Alex's life can be considered the moment when he discovers the truth about his grandfather's past. During the Nazi occupation, the Germans entered his grandfather's village and asked the villagers to point out the Jews among them. Alex's grandfather, believing that he does the right thing and trying to save his family, points out to his friend, Herschel, which eventually ends up murdered by the Nazis. This episode has haunted him for the rest of his life and it is obvious that even in the end, he has not come to terms with it and has not forgiven himself. He confesses:

Everything I did, I did because I thought it was the correct thing to do.

I am not a hero, it is true.

But I am not a bad person, either.

The woman in the photograph is your grandmother. She is holding your father. The man standing next to me was our best friend, Herschel. Herschel is wearing a skullcap in the photograph because he was a Jew.

And he was my best friend.

And I murdered him. (Foer 228)

After this discovery, Alex is faced with a decision. He either can condemn his grandfather for his actions or can choose to forgive him. However, Alex comes to understand that everybody makes mistakes and that you have to accept the fact that the past cannot be changed. He decides to forgive his grandfather: “Grandfather is not a bad person, Jonathan. Everyone performs bad actions. I do. Father does. Even you do. A bad person is someone who does not lament his bad actions. Grandfather is now dying because of his. I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good” (Foer 145). Moreover, he decides to forgive his father as well and, in the end, to forgive himself for his past mistakes. He decides to try his best to become a better person.

At the end of the novel, Alex makes several changes to his life. He gives up his daydreaming about the immigrating to America and decides to take matters into his own hands. He realises that he and Little Igor (his younger brother) will never be able to move to America “it is a dream that I have woken up from. I will never see America, and neither will Little Igor, and I understand that now” (Foer 241). He decides to take care of his family and to escape from his abusive father, while at the same time he decides to forgive him.

Therefore, Alex goes through a process of maturation, from a young ignorant boy to an affectionate and sincere young man. His journey and his correspondence with Jonathan make him a better person and make him strive to be a better brother, son and grandson. At the

end, he starts telling the truth and decides to give up on himself in order to serve those around him, those that he loves and cares for.

In this paper I have tried to analyse the concept of identity and the use of Magic Realism of the Jewish American author Jonathan Safran Foer in the novel *Everything is Illuminated*. For this, I have look over some general concepts, like the definition of Magic Realism and the importance of the theme of identity in literature. Afterwards, I have analyzed several aspects related to the Jewish identity in America, particularly in the Post-Holocaust era. This analysis has brought to light several important aspects regarding the quest of identity of the Jewish-American, such as the fragmentation of the self and the painful process of reimagining the past and creating a new story in order to obtain the complete picture, all of which were present and illustrated in the novel *Everything is Illuminated*.

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