DISCOVERING TRAUMA IN MICHAEL CHABON’S THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY.
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DISCOVERING TRAUMA IN MICHAEL CHABON’S *THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY.*

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Preface

In the first place, I would like to thank dr. Philippe Codde for his help, inspiration, and the numerous suggestions and corrections he made. Much gratitude goes out to dr. Stef Craps and prof. dr. Kristiaan Versluys, whose courses – respectively on ‘Trauma Representation in Contemporary Art’ and ‘Jewish American Literature’ – stimulated my interest in trauma theory and Holocaust representation. Prof. dr. Filip Geerardyn’s classes about psychoanalysis and art only added to these fascinations. I would also like to thank my parents for granting me the opportunity to spend an extra year on what you are about to read.
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Introduction

After attending dr. Stef Craps’ course on “Trauma Representation in Contemporary Art”, I became fascinated with how the impact of a traumatic experience can reflect in works of art produced by trauma survivors. With only a limited theoretic background, our class started attempts at interpreting certain films and novels from a new point of view. As we were confronted with tales by survivors of American slavery, the Armenian genocide, rape, abuse, and other horrible events, I became very much interested in the influence of traumatic experiences on contemporary authors, not to mention the influence on them of the (more or less recently developed) branch of trauma theory in psychoanalysis.

This interest, combined with an admiration for contemporary Jewish American writers (which was incited even more by prof. dr. Kristiaan Versluys’ class on that subject) lead me to ponder on how an event as enormous and catastrophic as the Holocaust would have scarred and inspired contemporary authors, and Jewish ones in particular. After reading Michael Chabon’s stunning, Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (recommended to me by dr. Philippe Codde), it became clear to me that I would write my dissertation on a subject like this. I set out to study the basic works of trauma theory, by Cathy Caruth, Shoshanna Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra among others. Their findings, based on the theories of psychoanalysis by the likes of Freud and Lacan, gave me an insight at how to interpret works of art by and about trauma survivors.

When applying this theory to *Kavalier and Clay*, I envisioned several goals. I wanted to find out how Michael Chabon was influenced by the Holocaust – being a Jew of Eastern European descent himself – and how this reflects in the form and content of this novel. Secondly, because *Kavalier and Clay* is obviously about a young man who manages to escape Europe but loses his entire family, and
consequently about the problem of being Jewish after the Holocaust, I wanted to examine to which extent Chabon was familiar with trauma theory, and how this is made clear in the book. For we will notice that many of the phenomena mentioned in the theoretical part of this dissertation will return in the discussion of the novel. Furthermore, I intended to investigate how the author has dealt with the apparently impossible task to represent the Holocaust adequately. Because the enormity of the events, and the millions and millions of victims who all have their own story, representing the Holocaust is always controversial, and many attempts at doing so have been contested to heavily. Finally, I decided to have a look at Chabon’s own agenda: which feelings and opinions has he tried to disseminate throughout this novel? Which are the messages he has been trying to convey?

Practically, this dissertation consists of three major parts, subdivided into a number of smaller chapters. In part I we find the theoretical background which will prove indispensable for the later interpretation of *Kavalier and Clay*. This part is heavily influenced by the works of Caruth, Felman and Laub. It is meant to provide all the necessary information about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a term denoting a response to a traumatic experience. The history, symptoms, possible causes and treatments of this disorder are all being treated, and important terminology like “working through”, “acting out”, “survivor guilt” and “doubling” is explained. I have also included a chapter on the importance of humor in the process of “working through” a traumatic experience, focussing on Jewish humor in particular because we are dealing with a novel by a Jewish author, about the Jewish people (and two members of that people in particular). To conclude part I, there is a chapter on trauma representation in art, focussing on the impact of traumatic events on artists and illustrating this with a few examples of contemporary works representing the Holocaust.

Part II begins with an introduction to Michael Chabon, followed by a plot outline of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. The readers who are already familiar with the novel can easily skip this chapter, since no extra information is provided. The next chapters contain my analysis of the contents of the novel. I will try to point out the similarities between events in the novel and phenomena described in part I. We will discover that many of the protagonists’ reactions to traumatic events
are symptomatic for what we will come to know as PTSD. Furthermore, these chapters will reveal how the characters experience the process of “working through”, and how this affects themselves and their environment.

In the third and final part, we take a look at Chabon’s intentions, and how these are reflected in the form of the novel. We will point out the author’s concern with the power of the narrative in general, with the possibilities of comic books and fiction and with their influence on their authors and their readers. In these chapters, we will also discuss the distinction between fact and fiction, the use of time, space, points of view and multiple forms of narrative in order to figure out Chabon’s own position concerning the Holocaust and his ways of representing it. To conclude, we will come to consider the novel as a celebration of the survival of the Jewish people, culture and imagination, despite the Holocaust and numerous other persecutions, and this will explain the author’s seemingly unorthodox (and certainly unusual) ways of representation. We will see that the originality of *Kavalier and Clay*, its author’s use of imagination and his interweaving of elements from different cultures are the proof that Jewish culture and imagination are not buried in the ashes of the Holocaust.
Part I: Theoretical background

1.1 Definition of trauma/PTSD

Derived from Greek, the word *trauma* initially indicated a physical wound. Today, it is still used in this sense in the medical world, but it can also suggest an internal or external injury, a state or condition resulting from this physical injury. Moreover, in psychoanalysis a *trauma* is “a psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which may either be repressed and unresolved, or disturbingly persistent; a state resulting from this”\(^1\).

There is a long tradition of research in the field of psychosomatic medicine: from the 1840's onward, *neurosis* has been a serious subject in medical textbooks, and detailed studies have been made. An important step was the exploration of one form of neurosis, *hysteria*, in the 1870's by the famous French clinician Jean-Martin Charcot. His aim was to discover regularity amidst the seemingly endless and random variations of hysteria symptoms. He closely observed hundreds of patients, introducing the use of photography and of hypnosis into the psychiatric clinic, to come to the conclusion that in hysteria “nothing occurs at random but, on the contrary, all follows certain well-determined rules which are common to cases seen in both hospital and private practice”\(^2\).

Historically, there has been much interest in the traumas developed by war veterans. Sigmund Freud examined what was then called “shell shock” and other war neuroses during and after WWI. His encounter with the soldiers' suffering, with the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event in their nightmares and flashbacks, forced him to acknowledge something beyond his postulated "pleasure principle". Before these events, Freud had worked out a theory that endeavoured to encompass all human behaviour. He had come to the conclusion that sexuality was the main human "drive" or "instinct", the force that fuels our actions and emotions. Freud had

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to let go of this pleasure principle - the idea that all human behaviour is driven by desire, by a will to live - when he was confronted with the destructive behaviour of combat veterans (eg. the high suicide rates, the recurrent revisiting the pain by reliving the traumatic experience in dreams and hallucinations, etc.). In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud therefore allows a "death drive" (Thanatos) to exist as opposed to the sexual drive (Eros).

But written accounts dealing with symptoms quite similar to those referred to by Freud go back to ancient times, and during the American Civil War shellshock-like disorder was known as “Da Costa's Syndrome”. More recently, a lot of progress has been made following the examining of traumatized Vietnam War veterans. In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association coined the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in its third *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III). The precise definition of PTSD was contested by many, especially the suggestion that PTSD is a response to “an event outside the range of the human experience”. In DSM IV this phrase was replaced by “an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.”

Cathy Caruth gives a generally accepted, simple definition of PTSD as being:

> a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.

This definition may seem quite universal for a disorder that appears in different forms, varying from one person to another. But it is precisely this universality that enables us to point at the similitudes of its appearances, the accordance of symptoms, which may indicate that these symptoms stem from a similar cause.

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3 cf.infra: 1.3
Caruth also remarks that this classification is very universal, “a category of diagnosis so powerful it has seemed to engulf everything around it”, and that it does not give a “solid definition of disease”.\textsuperscript{6} Almost in the same way as patients' relations to reality are disturbed, the notion of trauma has disturbed the medical world: it has blurred the boundaries of what we can and cannot know. We should not take this to be a limitation, but think of it as a challenge to reflect upon the meaning and implications of PTSD. Throughout this work, when I refer to "trauma" or "PTSD", it is in the sense of the above quoted definition, into which I will dig a little deeper further on.

1.2 Symptoms

DSM IV sums up a whole list of possible PTSD symptoms. One of the most characteristic ones is the persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event, in the form of recollections, nightmares, hallucinations, illusions and/or dissociative flashback episodes. Often, there is also a persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event, an increased arousal to these stimuli, and a numbing of the general responsiveness.

Of course, given the highly individual nature of PTSD, symptoms can vary from one person to another. Some may suffer from insomnia, many deliberately avoid certain places or people, and others try to block thoughts and feelings about the traumatic events from their mind. They may be unable to recall important aspects of the trauma, feel estranged from others, show markedly less interest or participation in significant activities, have a sense of a foreshortened future, have a restricted range of affect, become hypervigilant, have difficulty concentrating, have sudden outbursts of anger, lose the ability to respond effectively to stimuli, etc.\textsuperscript{7}

Dori Laub gives a few clarifying examples of traumatized people suffering from these symptoms. He mentions the case of a female Auschwitz survivor: at Auschwitz, she had been part of the "Canada commando", inmates responsible for

\textsuperscript{6} ibid.: p.3
sorting out the properties of those who had been gassed, so that the Germans could recuperate the valuable items. But when she is asked if the term "Canada commando" means anything to her, her answer is “no”. She does remember, though, how she was in a group of people who left each morning and came back at night with clothes and shoes in excellent condition, which they handed out to their fellow inmates... She has banned the memory of recuperating valuables for the nazis, and replaced it by a more comforting memory of heroic behaviour.

There is also the case of the French Treblinka survivor Martin Gray. He had lost his entire family. Later in life, he builds a new family. When his new home and family are caught in a forest fire, and everything is destroyed again, he cannot but recognize this as a second Holocaust. He is unable to place these new events in another context than that of the Holocaust, of which he has not been able to let go. He relives his past experience in the same way as he may re-experience what occured to him during his time in Treblinka in flashbacks and nightmares.

Another example: a young boy is helped by his parents to escape from a Nazi labour camp. For years he has to survive alone on the streets of Krakow, with the occasional help of gentile families and street gangs. During this period, the only thing he holds on to is a picture of his mother, to which he turns daily. But after the war, when he miraculously finds both of his parents alive, he has grown estranged from them, and finds that he can only address them as “Mister” and “Misses”, instead of “Mom” and “Dad”

Trauma survivors do not necessarily exhibit all of the above mentioned symptoms, and also, these characteristics or disturbances do not last for an equal duration of time. In order to be diagnosed as a PTSD patient, one must suffer from a

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9 In part II, we will discover how the protagonists in Kavalier and Clay are affected by their traumatic experiences. We will see that they have to deal with many of the symptoms described above. The avoidance of stimuli, by trying to escape painful situations, will prove to be a major recurrent theme, as well as the difficulty of maintaining normal relations with other people and of reacting overaffectively to certain stimuli.
certain number of symptoms over a certain duration of time (at least one month). The American Psychiatric Association distinguishes three time-related categories of PTSD: the first two, "acute" (the duration of the symptoms is less than three months) and "chronic" (less than six months), refer to the duration of the symptoms; the third, "delayed onset" (the onset of the symptoms is at least six months after the incident) relates to the interval of time that passes between the traumatic event and the onset of the symptoms.  

This last category is an important part of the PTSD definition (cf. 1.1): the possible belatedness of the reaction to trauma. In his research on war neuroses, Freud remarked many similarities with the accident neurosis. Both groups of patients seemed to be possessed by a traumatic past; they kept on re-experiencing it:

Dreams occurring in traumatic neurosis have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little...11

Like the victim of a train collision (as Freud describes) who walks away seemingly unharmed, the trauma survivor may seem not all that much affected by what he has experienced. He may not develop any of the PTSD symptoms for several days or weeks, until the nightmares and hallucinations commence. This happens because the first encounter with trauma is not a real encounter: one does not fully know or understand what has happened; one does not really experience it. In Caruth's words: "it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all". 12

The effect of a traumatic event is so powerful that it resists interpretation. Dori Laub explains it in the following terms:

"The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absense of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness", a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery."13

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It is precisely because of this impossibility to master the event, because of the fact that it is not related to an experience of time and thus has never begun and will never end, that the trauma survivor gets trapped in the event.\footnote{14} That is why the traumatic event keeps returning in a very literal manner, very true to the event. In Caruth's words:

> It is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event.\footnote{15}

Caruth explains PTSD not as a symptom of the unconscious, but rather as a symptom of history: “they become the symptom of a history they cannot entirely possess”.\footnote{16}

The numbing that is mentioned in Caruth's definition is also related to the incredible impact and immediacy of the traumatic event: “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it”.\footnote{17} In their conscious lives, the traumatized may try to suppress their horrible memories, but in their dreams and hallucinations they re-experience what has happened very realistically and vividly, over and over again. They do not fully know what has happened, for, as Dori Laub puts it, “massive psychic trauma precludes its registration”\footnote{18}. And often they do not want to know. After a horrifying and overwhelming encounter with reality, survivors often become numb to the reality that has shocked them so: they become indifferent out of self-protection.

The traumatic event has such a devastating effect that it crucially alters the victim's way of experiencing reality. The event exceeds the victim's fears and expectations to such an extent that he cannot look at the world the same way. Dominick LaCapra identifies trauma as “an out-of-context experience that upsets

\footnote{14}{In part II, we will see that Chabon’s protagonists are haunted by their past (in the form of flashbacks and hallucinations) as well, until they find a way to confront it, come to understand their traumatic experiences and attempt to give them their right place and time in their own history.}
\footnote{16}{ibid.}
\footnote{17}{ibid.: p.6}
\footnote{18}{ibid.}
expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts”, and he explains that the experience of trauma often involves

a dissociation between cognition and affect. In brief, in traumatic experience one typically can represent numbly or with aloofness what one cannot feel, and one feels overwhelmingly what one is unable to represent, at least with any critical distance and cognitive control.19

1.3 Possible causes

If PTSD is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events”20, then it is crucial to define which events are "overwhelming" and which are not. After the 1980 publication of the American Psychiatrists Association's DSM III there has been much discussion about its PTSD definition. DSM III stated PTSD to be a response to “an event outside the range of the human experience”.21 But when does an event exceed the limits of human experience?

Laura S. Brown, a self-proclaimed feminist psychotherapist, looks at the limitations of this definition from an interesting angle. A patient of hers, repeatedly abused sexually by her stepfather, had all of the PTSD symptoms. The patient sued her stepfather, and in the courtroom Brown defended her professional opinion that the girl suffered from PTSD. The defendant's attorney disagreed, however, stating that many people go through incest; thus it cannot be outside the range of human experience. This case shows that the official definition of PTSD in DSM III was highly insufficient, and had to be changed.

Brown asserts that, for instance in courtrooms, the range of human experience more often than not is reduced to “the range of what is normal and usual in the lives

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20 ibid.: p.4
of men of the dominant class: white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men". 22 It is clear that the DSM III definition was not tenable.

Therefore, in 1994, the definition was changed. Since then, PTSD is described as a response to "an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror." 23 This definition takes the subjective character of PTSD much more into account. Everyone reacts in a different way to certain occurrences, and while they go through the same situation, they can very well experience different effects. One can imagine that not all survivors of a train collision develop PTSD.

Since we still know very little about the causes of trauma - neurobiological causes as well as psychological ones - it is important to focus on the symptoms to decide whether or not a person is suffering from PTSD. It is absurd to presuppose defined limitations of what human beings can go through without being affected in a serious way, because every human brain is different. The DSM IV definition of PTSD is less exclusive, which is positive for those who suffer from it. They need to be diagnosed adequately in order to be treated in an adequate manner. Nowadays PTSD patients need not be victims of large scale disasters or atrocities like war, genocide or natural disasters; also those who have been the victim of more personal (and more common), smaller-scale disasters can be diagnosed with PTSD and benefit from a more adequate therapy.

1.4 Acting out versus working through

Is it possible to overcome trauma? And if so, how? Is there such a thing as an "adequate therapy"? LaCapra uses the term "working through" to indicate a process of learning to cope with trauma, as opposed to the "acting out" of trauma. When a person is acting out the suffered trauma, it means that he is compulsively repeating it.

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Lacapra borrows the terms "Erlebnis" and "Erfahrung" from Walter Benjamin to explain:

Trauma as experience is Erlebnis rather than Erfahrung. As Erlebnis trauma is a shock to the system and may be acted out or compulsively repeated in so-called traumatic memory. Erfahrung involves more viable articulations of experience allowing openings to possible futures. The problem of working through trauma, or, more precisely, its recurrent symptoms, is to move from Erlebnis to Erfahrung to the extent that this movement is possible.24

As we have seen, it is the very inaccessibility of the traumatic event, the fact that it was never really experienced and therefore cannot be fully known, that causes the persistent re-experiencing of it. It seems that the dreams and hallucinations are an attempt of the unconscious to arrive at an understanding of what has happened.

To work through trauma thus seems to imply that the victim has to integrate the events into his life and into his past, that he has to put them in the right place and time, in order to mitigate the effects of the posttraumatic symptoms. LaCapra remarks that this does not imply that the entire (non-) experience should be completely known, nor that these belated recognitions should be conflated with teleology.25 The traumatized person should try to figure out what was his role in the event, not necessarily what was the entire truth of it, and he should be careful not to project future knowledge onto his later interpretation of the event.

The effect that a traumatic event produces in its victim is so overwhelming, however, that it would be quite unrealistic to suppose that a trauma can be healed completely. Traumatized persons are mostly treated with a combination of medication and psychoanalytic therapy. In therapy, the emphasis is on the construction of a narrative.26

Although victims can be treated, at least to some extent, they often resist to it. They have come to sacrilize their trauma; it is as if they cannot live with it, but they would not be able to live without it either. For them, working through trauma would

26 Cf. infra: 1.5.
be an attempt to become oblivious to it. The purpose of working through is of course to diminish the force of the posttraumatic symptoms. But it is precisely through the unconscious reliving of the event that they remember it so accurately. Several Holocaust survivors, Theodor Adorno for instance, felt that to work through their trauma was to betray their past and the horrible fate of the ones who did not survive. They want to be monuments for the ones who did not make it, they want to preserve their suffering in order to remember. Therefore, working through trauma should also involve the desacralizing of the trauma. Lacapra insists that this does not imply total redemption and forgetting of the past, nor that working through will lead to full “integration or transformation of a past trauma into a seamless narrative memory and total meaning or knowledge”.

According to him, working through is a partial overcoming of the symptoms;

[...] work on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting-out) thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency in the present and future.

1.5 Construction of a narrative

As mentioned above, the main focus of psychoanalytic therapy is on the construction of a narrative. It is important to come to understanding of the event, to give it a place and a time in one's own past. Since the victim does not know the trauma (this ignorance is what constitutes trauma), and because he is often reluctant to talk about it, psychoanalysts usually use the method of association. The patient is supposed to tell his analyst whatever comes to his mind, without thinking it over. This way of conversation, with the guard off, sometimes allows the unconscious to shine through. The traumatic event may then be recollected, not through linear narrative movements, but through the silences, the pauzes, the gaps, hesitations and slips of the tongue the analyst must know to interpret.

27 In part II, we will be confronted, for example, with Joe Kavalier’s horror when he realizes that he is starting to forget about the details of his younger brother’s appearance, while the latter is still in Europe facing nazi persecution and Joe is living a successful life in the USA.
29 Ibid.: p. 121.
Constructing the narrative of one's life is in fact constructing history, for what is history but a linear succession of events? In trauma, it is precisely this linear movement that is disrupted: the experience is not related to time or space, has no beginning or end. Trauma victims seem to live in two worlds simultaneously: the one of their current life, and the one of their trauma, which has stopped developing. In order to work through trauma, as I have indicated already, one has to give the traumatic experience a place and time in one's life story. For every history is someone's story; it is always subjective. Everyone who tells or writes a history tells or writes in fact “his story”. Thus, constructing a narrative means constructing one's own history. Doing that, the victim has to make sure to give the trauma a beginning and, most importantly, an end, so he himself can be freed from the cage of trauma.

Cathy Caruth looks at trauma as a “symptom of history”, with the delay or incompletion in knowing as its core. Because the victims carry an unknown and impossible history within them, they become themselves “the symptoms of a history they cannot entirely possess”. But while in their conscious lives the traumatized do not fully know the events, and may even try to deny or forget it, the traumatic experience keeps re-occurring to them very vividly in flashbacks and nightmares. Thus, paradoxically, failure of memory can coexist with intrusive and repetitive images of the traumatic events. Caruth suggests that:

what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness. Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring "engraving" on the mind, the "etching into the brain" of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory.

Because the events are never fully experienced and never really understood, they return in their very exactness afterwards. But the impact and the meaning of these
flashbacks cannot be understood, either. It is precisely because it is not and cannot be grasped that this history is repeated. Pierre Janet opposes "narrative memory" to "traumatic memory". In narrative or "normal" memory, familiar and expectable current events are integrated into existing mental structures, without much conscious awareness\(^{34}\), while:

Frightening or novel experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration. Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control.\(^{35}\)

To construct a narrative or history of events one does not fully understand is not evident. The trauma victim has to dig into his unconsciousness, into the traumatic memory. He must make an effort to recall the events he has been trying to repress; events so frightening and devastating they have turned his vision of reality inside out.\(^{36}\) But, as Janet stated, action is necessary to overcome the posttraumatic symptoms. It is in fact “a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, that is fundamental to making an experience traumatic.”\(^{37}\)

To bring the traumatic re-experiencing to an end, the victim has to confront his demons. One “has to resign oneself to the fact that one has been subjected to this horrendous event or series of events”\(^{38}\). Psychotherapists can help their patients to achieve this goal, by suggesting an alternative scenario, one that is less negative. One therapist suggested to a concentration camp survivor that there was a flower growing in the assignment place of Auschwitz, an image which gave the man a lot of


\(^{35}\) Ibid.: p. 160.

\(^{36}\) In *Kavalier and Clay*, as we will see in part II, Joe Kavalier spends ten years of his life living as a recluse, in order to construct the narrative of his traumatic experiences. He creates a graphic novel in this period which contains his (hi)story. It is not until he has finished this work that he feels capable to re-enter the real world and reunite with his loved ones.


\(^{38}\) Ibid.: p. 178
comfort. One notices that the narratives that some patients in the end are able to construct, are not always accurate and objective versions of history, they are their own stories. To diminish the power of the traumatic memory, flexibility has to be introduced.

As the trauma victim becomes able to integrate the traumatic events into his narrative memory (into his own personal history) and learns to construct a narrative, the force of the posttraumatic symptoms decreases. The victim re-externalizes the event. There is a loss of precision of the traumatic recall, because according to Caruth “the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort”. Besides this loss, Caruth indicates a second loss, that of “the event's incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding”.

This loss of precision and that of incomprehensibility is exactly what makes some trauma survivors so reluctant to work through their trauma and to construct a narrative. While coming to understand what they have gone through, they also move away from the experience. To work through trauma implies that you partly distance yourself from it, that you remember it less precisely, thus in fact start to forget about it. First of all, survivors often do not want to understand, they do not want to integrate the traumatic event into their history, simply because it is too horrible and repulsive and because it is just impossible to comprehend. Secondly, they often do not want to forget, they would rather endure the flashbacks and the nightmares, in order to remember and to become living monuments for the ones who did not survive. But, in order for others to remember, the survivors ought to tell them their story. In this way, it is impossible for the victim to speak, but it is equally impossible not to speak.

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39 In Kavalier and Clay; when Joe constructs his narrative in the form of a graphic novel, he introduces the character of Josef Golem, who manages to redeem the Jews of Prague by sacrificing his own life.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
1.6 Bearing witness

To construct a narrative is one thing, but one also has to tell it to others, one has to testify. When Dori Laub, himself a psychotherapist and a child survivor of the Holocaust, writes about the testimonies he has heard from other Holocaust survivors, he claims they did “not only survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive”\textsuperscript{44}. This necessity to tell is of course strongly tied up with the need to construct a narrative, but to testify includes one extra factor: the addressee.

The traumatized stand alone. They stand alone in what they have experienced and they stand alone with the symptoms of PTSD they are experiencing. Quite often, when they painstakingly try to express what happened to them, the listeners do not believe them, or think they are overreacting, because what they have gone through is so unbelievably horrible. There is no addressee, no adequate listener. Dori Laub states:

\begin{quote}
The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an \textit{addressable other} an other that can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story. And it is, precisely, this ultimate annihilation of a narrative that, fundamentally, \textit{cannot be heard} and of a story that \textit{cannot be witnessed}, which constitutes the mortal [...] blow.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

It is clearly not enough to be able to verbalize one's own narrative; one also has to be able to address it to an other. And, this other has to be an adequate listener: he, too, has a task. Despite all these difficulties, the trauma survivor needs to know and needs to tell the narrative of the traumatic events. They feel responsible for spreading the word, because “the "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny”\textsuperscript{46}.

It is evident that the choice to testify is not an easy one: the victim feels an imperative to tell, he does not want to keep silent, he wants to be a witness of the traumatic event he has experienced, to establish an uprising against it. So while on the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.: p. 79.
one hand, to keep silent is to resign oneself to one's fate, on the other hand this silence is like a sanctuary. In relation to Holocaust survivors, Dori Laub writes that trauma survivors often feel that they belong to some kind of secret order, that they are the bearers of a secret. Since what they have experienced is a story of such incredible cruelty, they feel that they cannot relate it to anyone who has not lived through it.

To be a witness, to testify, has been proven to be necessary to try to overcome trauma, though. If the victim keeps silent, the dreams and flashbacks will keep occurring to him in all their strength. This must have consequences for their sanity. Dori Laub writes the following:

The "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.

The re-enactment of the traumatic experience becomes so powerful that the victim's perception of reality is seriously blurred by it. Besides the dreams and hallucinations, other symptoms like insomnia, amnesia, a restricted emotional life, inability to react effectively to stimuli, etc., can develop. It is necessary to give the traumatic event a place and time in one's life, to construct a narrative, and to address it to other people, to testify, in order to diminish the force of the posttraumatic symptoms.

1.7 The importance of humor

I believe that a very important factor to cope with stress is humor. In everyday life, when we are confronted with bad luck, we tend to “laugh it off”. This seems to be a quite universal human reflex. When we have to deal with the death of a beloved one,

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47 In part II we will discover Joe Kavalier to be able to write down his story in The Golem, but it takes him ten years, in which he does not speak to anyone at all about his traumatic experiences. We will also notice his relief when he has finished this graphic novel, he will feel like the creative process has helped him to heal. But it will not be until his best friend Sammy reads The Golem that the actual process of working through can start taking place.


49 Ibid.
or some or other mistake we have made, the most natural thing to do often seems to be to make a joke or a funny remark about it. It is a kind of defense mechanism; we use humor in order not to have to reflect seriously upon what happened. Is it possible that a similar mechanism could be at work during and after a traumatic experience, too? Or does the devastating effect of trauma preclude any form of humor?

Chaya Ostrower wrote a Ph.D. thesis about this subject, entitled *Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust*. She questioned 84 Holocaust survivors about the use of humor during the Holocaust. Her results prove that humor never vanished, however awful and difficult the circumstances. In this work, Ostrower distinguishes three functions of humor: a defense mechanism, an aggressive function and a sexual function.

The most frequent function seemed to be that of the defense mechanism. There was self mockery, for instance when the concentration camp inmates made fun of their own short-cut hair; or gallows humor, eg. the two Jews who meet in Warsaw, while one of them is eating perfumed soap. When questioned about his reasons for doing that, he answers: “If they turn me into soap, I might as well smell nice.” Jokes like these, just like the jokes about the food, etc., must have served as an attempt to make life a little easier.50

Other types of humor were used, too, but less dominantly. Ostrower notices the jokes that contain wished-for aggression towards the Nazis, those who portray the Nazis as being inferior to the Jews, or those that stem from frustration and jealousy of those who were better off. Sexually tinted jokes were far less common, for people who are starving are not very often all that interested in sexuality.

I will offer a couple of remarks the survivors themselves made about the importance of humor:

Look, without humor we would all have committed suicide. We made fun of everything. What I'm actually saying is that that helped us remain human, even under hard conditions.

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When I was interviewed for Spielberg and they asked me, what I thought was the reason I survived, they probably expected me to answer good fortune or other things I said that I thought it was laughter and humor, not to take things the way we were living but to dress them up as something different. That was what helped me I wasn't thinking about miracles and wasn't thinking anything, I only thought how not to take things seriously, as if I thought that this was the proportion that I was giving, and I guess it (this attitude) helped me. Because it was absurd all that time, it was unconceivable, that they could do those things to people.

Humor was one of the integral ingredients of mental perseverance. This mental perseverance was the condition for a will to live, to put it in a nutshell. This I am telling you as a former prisoner. However little it was, however sporadic, however spontaneous, it was very important, very important. Humor and satire played a tremendous role, in my opinion. It was a cemetery all right and exactly for that reason, the mere fact that we wanted somehow to preserve our personality, they wanted to make robots out of us.51

We notice that during the Holocaust, humor must have been one of the last things the victims could hold on to. It served as a defense mechanism, as a device to help them not to face reality all too directly.

A little research quickly shows us that humor has become a typical means of expression for the Jewish people, and there even appears to be a specific kind of humor directly related to being Jewish. Stephen J. Whitfield refers to the enormous representation of Jews in the world of stand-up comedy in the United States compared to the relatively small portion of the nation’s population they constitute, to illustrate his point that in modern times the Jews developed a talent for “what would be commonly be recognized as Jewish humor and wit,”52 that became “so endemic as to seem inextricably attached to the Jewish fate itself.”53 Indeed, we can think of many Jewish writers, performers and filmmakers who seem to employ a similar kind of humor: Isaac Singer, Sholom Aleichem, Woody Allen, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and numerous Jewish stand-up comedians. Before we explore the origins of this apparently typically Jewish humor, and try to find out why the Jews always seem to laugh at themselves, I will sum up some of its main characteristics.

51 Ibid..
53 Ibid..
What characterizes this so-called Jewish humor is that it seems to be celebrating weakness. Take a look at the recurrent character of the “schlemiel”, a loser who is victorious in defeat. A typical example is Singer’s short story *Gimpel the Fool*, in which we laugh at Gimpel, who naïvely accepts any ridiculous excuse from his adulterous wife Elka. More often than not, the protagonists in humorous Jewish stories are losers like Gimpel, and we are invited to laugh at their foolishness and naivety. Most Jewish jokes are full of self-deprecation. Instead of being aimed at another group, Jewish jokes mock typical characteristics of their own group. Whitfield sums up the most frequently appearing Jewish traits that are made fun of: their supposed avarice, their appreciation for learning, sympathy for other minorities and a distaste for violence and criminality.\(^{54}\) Other recurrent themes are urban life and familial conflict.\(^{55}\) In these jokes, there is often a mix of the trivial and the tragic, and suffering goes accompanied by laughter. Samuel Juni and Bernard Katz give an example of a typical Jewish joke:

Tanchum, the water carrier, was returning home one evening when a stranger rushed up to him and slapped his face. 
“Take that, Meyer!” yelled the attacker. 
Tanchum picked himself up from the street and stared at the man in amazement. Suddenly a broad grin appeared over his face and then he laughed uproariously. 
“Meyer, what are you laughing at?” exclaimed the other. “I just knocked you down!”
“The joke is on you,” chortled Tanchum. “I’m not Meyer.”\(^{56}\)

Tanchum is a typical schlemiel who, like Gimpel, is victorious in defeat.

In this self-directed humor we often find defeatist attitudes and complaints, apparently stemming from the conviction that life is absurd. We will explore this idea a bit more further on, when we discuss the origins of this Jewish humor. According to Hillel Halkin, who paraphrases Freud,

a classical Jewish joke is one in which:

1. The primary thrust of the humor is directed not, as in most jokes, aggressively or mockingly against the Other but rather against one’s own group, that is, against the

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\(^{54}\) Ibid.: p. 46. 
\(^{55}\) Ibid.: p. 43-44. 
Jews themselves. Moreover, such a joke is truly Jewish only when its Jewish teller identifies with this group. If mechanically repeated by a Gentile or an assimilated Jew, it would no longer be the same joke.

2. At the same time, there is in the self-denigration of this humor a dialectical element of self-praise, which works in the opposite direction. That is why Jewish-mother jokes, which are little more than “brutal comical anecdotes” aimed at women with no redeeming qualities, and whom the joke-teller does not acknowledge as his kith and kin, fail to constitute such humor.57

In short, the humor that is often labeled as being Jewish humor, distinguishes itself by being self-mocking and self-depreciating, aimed at the joke-teller’s own — Jewish — community. It is a humor of weakness, in which the teller’s Jewish identity is asserted and abused at the very same time. It has certain recurrent motifs, and very often laughs at suffering and the absurdity of life. But where does it come from?

There are no traces of this kind of humor to be found in Judaism as a religion, nor are there in the experiences of the Biblical Jews, claims Don L.E. Nilsen.58 It appears that it did not emerge until the nineteenth century. Whitfield sees Jewish humor as a phenomenon that developed out of Eastern European folk wisdom and “the frictions of encounters with the incongruities of civil society”59, both converging in the New World. Nilsen considers it to be the “result of a people having left their own country and having to maintain a precarious existence within the larger culture of Christendom.”60 In Juni and Katz’ words: Jewish humor is a “humor of transition.”61

After WWII and the Holocaust, when Jews were treated more respectfully and sympathetically because of their losses, Jewish writers and other artists started to stress

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their own Jewishness and that of their characters, where they did not overtly do this before.62

Halkin refers to a history of Jewish humor that goes further back than the nineteenth century: in the Middle Ages, many Jewish communities lived in regions that were mostly Arab. He points out that the Jewish tradition of carefully scrutinizing and interpreting holy texts, and consequently the wide-spread knowledge of these texts that makes it possible to make virtuoso games with God’s words appear humorous to large audiences, might very well be influenced by Arab culture. In Arabic writing, it was considered an art to skillfully insert Qu’ran verses into one’s own writings, and thus heightening the beauty of one’s own writings. In popular writing this technique, called “iqtibas”, was also used in a more blasphemous way: the holy verses were used for humorous purposes, to create double entendres. In a way, the Jews transcended this Arabic phenomenon, because in the increasingly conservative Muslim world this blasphemous use of Muhammad’s words was soon forbidden, while in Jewish texts the “shibbuts” or “insetting” became widespread phenomena.63 This tradition can account for jokes like the following, which is about the biblical injunction “Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother’s milk”:

Moses […], while copying down these words from God’s mouth on Mount Sinai, looks up and says: “Lord, you obviously wouldn’t be bothering us with a law that’s just about baby goats. You must mean that we shouldn’t eat any kosher animal at all that’s boiled in its mother’s milk.”

“Well,” God’s says, “all I told you was: ‘Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.’”

“But what’s the difference between milk and milk products, like butter or cheese?” Moses goes on reasoning. “And if we’re not supposed to eat meat with butter, surely we shouldn’t be cutting it with a knife that’s been used for butter, either.”

“Look, Moses,” God says, “we have only 40 days on this mountain. Do whatever the f--- you want and let’s move on to the next law.”64

64 Ibid..
To account for the self-depreciating and masochistic aspects of this Jewish humor, it is important to remember the powerless and oppressed position the Jewish people has all too often held throughout history. In resonance with Jewish humor being a humor of transition, Whitfield calls Yiddish “a language of exile”\(^{65}\), used by expatriots who find themselves in a position of vulnerability. The Jewish people’s history is full of misery: discrimination, persecution and diaspora appear to be recurrent tragedies. The paradox between the harsh reality and the Jews’ belief that they are God’s chosen people is probably the reason why many Jewish jokes prove to have a quite pessimistic undertone, and it can legitimate the idea that life is absurd, which is also quite frequently recurring in Jewish humor. From this point of view, both the stance that life is absurd and the self-depreciation and victimization we find in Jewish humor stem from the historically vulnerable position of the Jewish people. The fact that this kind of humor became so popular in the USA is probably that it formed a counterweight to the macho humor that was employed in the US in the nineteenth century, originated with the frontiersmen in the Southwest.

Juni and Katz believe that there are two dynamics behind Jewish humor. In the first place this humor stems from the Jewish people’s weak socioeconomic position, which results in psychic masochism and self-oriented aggression. Secondly, they assert that this kind of humor is part of an attempt at emancipation and integration: while trying to assimilate, the Jews laugh at the characteristics that can be ascribed to their past selves, not to the integrated (American) people they long and strive to be.\(^{66}\) But in the process of assimilation, a typically Jewish humor can also be seen as a way of preserving one’s Jewishness. In conclusion: all supposed causes for the rise of a Jewish humor support the assertion that Jewish humor is a humor of transition. Both marginality and assimilation must have been crucial factors. Lastly, Juni and Katz propose that the apparent masochism in Jewish humor is only pseudo-masochism, since its “underlying dynamics are adaptively oriented toward adjustment.”\(^{67}\)

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\(^{67}\) Ibid.
But what is the function of this humor, and how does it affect the Jewish people? Since it seems to stem mainly from the Jews’ position of weakness and oppression throughout the ages, self-oriented humor can be seen as a defense mechanism. According to Juni and Katz, joining their oppressor in persecuting themselves “can give the victim an (illusory) feeling of power in an otherwise uncontrollable situation,”68 while in the end the real aim of the “collaboration” is to end the painful situation altogether. Another point of view defended by Juni and Katz is considering the Jewish humor to be an “intrapunitive defense”: mocking their own people and looking for blame within their own community sets up “a shield against retributory threat from the external world.”69 The Jews “punish” themselves in their humor, thereby executing a pre-emptive attack on themselves so that others might not punish them further. And when an external attack does follow, it will seem less disturbing because “the harshness of internalized standards may, paradoxically, set up retribution expectancies that exceed reasonable punishment.”70 Furthermore, “blaming the self for random external events endows such disturbing events with purpose and meaning, resulting in a modicum of “retroactive control” over incidents that were threatening due to their unpredictability.”71 In short, we notice that the use of humor as a defense mechanism implies an assertion of mastery over situations which are otherwise out of the reach of control of its victims.72

So we see that humor can act as a defense mechanism during periods of stress and even during extremely traumatic experiences such as the Holocaust. Another question is whether humor plays a role in working through trauma. I am not a psychologist or a psychoanalyst, but it seems to me that it would be logical, if humor is necessary “to remain human”, to survive and to be able to “not take things seriously”, as Ostrower's witnesses have stated, that it might be important in posttraumatic therapy as well. I will not go in to this very far; because therapy is not my field of interest, but I do believe it would be interesting to further examine the importance of humor. After all, we have seen that in order to work through trauma,

68 Ibid..
69 Ibid..
70 Ibid..
71 Ibid..
72 We will find such attempts at mastering an otherwise uncontrollable situation in Kavalier and Clay as well, for instance when Sammy makes fun of his own limp, or when Joe makes The Escapist, the protagonist in a series of Kavalier and Clay comic books, defeat Hitler.
the victim has to construct a narrative and address it to someone else. I have also mentioned that a certain flexibility has to be introduced in the constructed story to diminish the force of the traumatic memory. There was, for instance, the case of the Holocaust survivor who was comforted very much by the idea (suggested to him by his therapist) that a flower grew in the assignment place at Auschwitz. Perhaps humor can be used in therapy in this way: to suggest a slightly less negative image of the traumatic experience to the patient.73

1.8 Survivor guilt

When trauma is discussed, people tend, naturally, to emphasize the horror, fear, and near deadliness that are involved in the experience. Of course this is a very important aspect of the traumatic event; after all, PTSD is by definition a response to “an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.”74 But there is another perspective from which to look at PTSD: that of survival.75 For if someone develops PTSD, it means that he or she has lived through these events involving actual or threatened death or serious injury.

In the third chapter of Unclaimed Experience, Cathy Caruth explains traumatic neurosis as an experience of survival, through her interpretation of Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle. As we know, an important aspect of PTSD is that the traumatic experience is re-enacted repeatedly in the unconscious, while it is not directly available to consciousness. When we understand consciousness as “a barrier of sensation and knowledge that protects the organism by placing stimulation within an

73 If humor and flexibility can play a significant role in the therapeutic treatment of trauma victims, we can assume that it may also do so in literature and other forms of art trying to deal with traumatic experiences. I will dig further into this in 1.12. In part III, we will discover why Michael Chabon included several plot turns which seem to be inappropriate in a story about Holocaust survival. His use of humorous passages and elements from comic books and rags to riches stories, for instance, will prove to have a similar effect on the reader than introducing some flexibility in the trauma victim’s interpretation of the traumatic events he or she went through.
75 In parts II and III, we will discover that the story of Kavalier and Clay is told from the point of view of those who survived. It will even turn out that one of the major themes of the novel is the problem of how to be Jewish after the Holocaust. Survival will prove to go hand in hand with survivor guilt and self blame.
ordered experience of time,” we can define what causes trauma as “a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time.”

We have already indicated the importance of time experience. First and foremost, traumatic neurosis occurs because the experience cannot be integrated in the victim's personal history, he cannot give it a place or a time in his life. The event is not available to consciousness, but the trauma survivor re-experiences it in his nightmares and in flashbacks. The traumatic experience keeps reoccurring in the present, so the victim lives in the world of the past and the world of the present simultaneously. Secondly, there is the possibly belated onset of the posttraumatic symptoms.

Besides time experience, a crucial factor is fright. PTSD originates when a person has lived through an extremely frightening and threatening situation. Following Freud's notion that the reason we are frightened is that we are not prepared for anxiety, and his notion that the breach in the mind is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, but by fright, Caruth suggests that:

> it is not simply [...] the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind one moment too late. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not been fully known.

We know that because of this missing, the event is being repeated time after time. The survivor has never fully understood the experience, and therefore he unconsciously re-enacts it, as an attempt to master it afterwards.

Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life. It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living.

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.: p. 62
79 Ibid.
Robert Jay Lifton, in an interview with Caruth, compares the trauma survivor to the mythological hero. But whereas the hero emerges victoriously from his encounter with death and brings a new knowledge of death (and therefore of life) to his people, the trauma survivor is less superhuman. He, too, has obtained new knowledge of death, but he does not seem able to deal with it. He becomes haunted by the traumatic experience and displays destructive behaviour.80 81

Some traumatic events, such as rape and incest, generally happen to one person at a time, but others, like natural disasters or genocides, happen to thousands of people at once. To survive, then, implies more often than not that there are others who did not survive the event. In the survivor, a symptom known as "survivor guilt" is likely to appear. The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy describes it as follows:

A deep sense of guilt, combined often with feelings of numbness and loss of interest in life, felt by those who have survived some catastrophe. It was first noticed among survivors of the Holocaust. Survivors often feel that they did not do enough to save those who died or that they are unworthy relative to the perished.82

As a result of this guilt, the trauma victim suffers from a conflict between the need to testify and the impossibility to do so. They want to be a witness to the suffering and death of those who did not make it through the horrors they themselves survived. They feel a strong urge to tell the world what has happened, so that everyone would know and remember these events. But on the other hand, they do not want to testify, because it will have effects on their personal suffering. As we have seen before, the result of being able to construct one's history, and of being able to transmit it to an other, is that the force of the posttraumatic symptoms diminishes, which implies that the vividness and literality of recall also lose power. To testify, thus, leads to partial forgetting. The traumatized therefore often feel reluctant to relate their story. They would rather endure the posttraumatic symptoms and become living monuments to the ones who died.

81 In part II, we will discern similar behavior in the character of Joe Kavalier, each time he is confronted with the (often violent) death of a loved one.
1.9 Doubling

The enormous stress and fright caused by extremely traumatic events, lead to a radical change in the victim's personality. In *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton argues that the Nazi doctors had to create a new self, in order to avoid guilt and psychological breakdown caused by the awareness that they participated in atrocities such as the selection of inmates to be gassed, the "euthanasia" projects, the experiments with new methods of killing, the sterilization projects, etc.83 Lifton offers a clarifying image to explain this process of the splitting of the self, which he calls "doubling":

Doubling takes place [...] on a tree whose roots, trunk, and larger branches have previously experienced no impairment; of the two branches artificially separated, one grows fetid bark and leaves in a way that enables the other to maintain ordinary growth, and the two intertwine sufficiently to merge again should external conditions favor that merging.84

It is clear that not only perpetrators need to protect themselves from psychological breakdown. There are many testimonies of Holocaust survivors who explain they were “a different person in Auschwitz,”85 or rape victims who claim having observed themselves being violated as if they were floating in the air beneath the ceiling. Their ego is radically altered and they develop a traumatized self.86 This traumatized self is not entirely new, of course; it is “what one brought into the trauma as affected significantly and painfully, confusedly, but in a very primal way, by the trauma”.87 To work through trauma, seen from the perspective of the doubled self, means to reintegrate the traumatized self.

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84 Ibid. p.
86 As we will learn in parts II and III, the process of doubling appears in Chabon’s novel as well: many characters will prove to have developed fictional alter egos in order to escape reality.
1.10 The task of the listener

There is still a major problem left unsolved. As we have seen (in 1.5 and 1.6), the trauma survivor not only needs to construct his/her own history, a narrative which includes the repressed traumatic events, he/she also has to bear witness to what has happened to him/her to effectively work through trauma. This implies a very important role for the addressee of this testimony, the listener. It may take the trauma victim years to come to terms with the events and to be able to tell his/her story, so evidently this listening process is not your ordinary, everyday listening to a story.

The process of testimony requires a bond between speaker and listener. The narrator will only want to tell his/her story to someone he trusts, of course. He/she needs to know for certain that his/her addressee has only good intentions and that he/she will not dismiss the story as being overreacted or made up. “For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears,” Dori Laub writes.

This listener must have certain qualifications. As stated before, the reconstruction of the traumatic event is not easy. The story does not gulp out in one fluent movement. It is very important that the interviewer does not interfere with what the narrator is trying to say, as he/she is already having a hard time telling his/her story. This is something the narrator must do by himself/herself, for himself/herself. The listener must be capable of adequately interpreting the pauses, hesitations, gaps and slips of the tongue in the speaker’s tale, of asking the right questions and of distinguishing what is important from what is not. He/she has to respond accurately to the signs the narrator is, unconsciously, giving him. Furthermore, it has been noted that the trauma victim who starts to understand what has happened often desires to be left alone, while on the other hand he/she also desperately needs to be reassured that he/she is not alone, that there is an other, that the possibility of address still exists. Laub describes the task of the listener in the following way:

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89 As readers of Kavalier and Clay, we are addressees as well, and we have filter Chabon’s messages and intentions out of the text of the novel. We will dig deeper into this matter in part III.
Paradoxically, the interviewer has to be, thus, both unobtrusive, nondirective, and yet imminently present, active, in the lead. Because trauma returns in disjointed fragments in the memory of the survivor, the listener has to let these trauma fragments make their impact both on him and on the witness. Testimony is the narrative’s address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard, he will stop to hear – and listen to – himself.\textsuperscript{90}

Thus, the narrator has to pick up the cues the trauma survivor is giving and try to dig a little deeper into what is important, without actually conducting the plot of the story. In therapy, the victim tries to construct a story by associations. The analyst has to be very attentive, he/she has to “see and hear beyond the trauma fragments, to wider circles of reflections”\textsuperscript{91}. It is the analyst’s task to keep the associations coming, to sometimes encourage the narrator to further develop his/her thoughts on an interesting topic, but he/she must also make sure that the situation does not get out of hand when the flashbacks and associations become too vivid or intense. As a psychoanalyst, it is once again Dori Laub who tries to define how a traumatized person can access memory, and how the interviewer can help him/her do that:

Where [...] circles of associations and reflections intersect, converge, a latent and forgotten memory might suddenly emerge - come back to life – establishing a further link in the testimonial chain. The listener must firmly be there to confirm it, assist in its full deliverance. He has to move quietly and decisively in bringing things together, yet not succumb to the temptation and the danger of a premature foreclosure, which might be reached, alternatively, through a cognitive suppression, through an emotional catharsis or through a crushed surrender to the ubiquity of silence.\textsuperscript{92}

1.11 Secondary traumatization/ empathic unsettlement

When a trauma survivor attempts to bear witness to the traumatic events in the presence of an other, this other is in fact a secondary witness. The event of the testimony may have consequences for him/her, too. As there has to be a certain intimacy between the narrator and the listener, the trauma may have an impact on the latter. In order to help the trauma victim construct his/her narrative, the interviewer has to bond with him/her. This process may take months or years, during which one really gets to know one another, but also oneself. Dominick LaCapra believes that a


\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.: p. 70-71.
secondary witness can undergo some of the effects of trauma, without actually being exposed to a traumatic experience, because he identifies with the victim. He discerns two ways to undergo a traumatic experience in a secondary way: it can happen vicariously, or virtually\textsuperscript{93}:

In the vicarious experience of trauma, one perhaps unconsciously identifies with the victim, becomes a surrogate victim, and lives the event in an imaginary way that, in extreme cases, may lead to confusion about one’s participation in the actual events. [...] In the virtual [...] experience of trauma, one may imaginatively put oneself in the victim’s position while respecting the difference between self and other and recognizing that one cannot take the victim’s place or speak in the victim’s voice.\textsuperscript{94}

It should be obvious that the vicarious experience of trauma should be avoided by all means, but the virtual secondary experience, which LaCapra has termed \textit{empathic unsettlement}, is seen as a positive and even necessary reaction to trauma testimony. This form of empathy – without actually becoming the other in mind, thus with maintenance of one’s own history and personality – can help one to come to a certain form of understanding. Of course there could never be a way to completely understand something as extremely individual as a psychic trauma. As we have seen, it is the nature of a traumatic event that it cannot be understood. It is precisely this impossibility to grasp the event, and the impossibility to imagine or anticipate it, that constitutes trauma.

It is obvious that a person who learns of the existence of such an unimaginable experience through testimony does not remain untouched. In the virtual experience of trauma, the secondary witness feels empathy for the one he/she is listening to, the trauma survivor. Because of this empathy, the devastating effect of the traumatic event affects him/her, too. In LaCapra’s opinion empathy is an affective aspect of understanding and it involves “unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims”\textsuperscript{95}. It is a kind of heteropathic identification in which one does not take the place of the other.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.: p. 125.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.: p. 135
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
The listener has to pay a price: he/she comes to a certain – affective - level of understanding trauma, precisely because he/she experiences trauma in a secondary way. Faced with the unbelievable characteristics of a traumatic event the listener will try to maintain a sense of safety. He/she will experience defensive feelings such as a sense of total paralysis, or strong feelings of anger towards the victim. He/she can develop emotional numbing, strong fears, and may react hyperemotionally. Another possible effect of the exposure to trauma may be an attempt to achieve foreclosure through the acquisition of facts: the listener develops an obsession for the details of the story told by the narrator, and may appear to be a listener who already knows it all.97

These symptoms are similar to the possible symptoms we find with trauma survivors. Since they are also induced by a traumatic experience (here the experience is secondary, of course: it occurs through the story told by the narrator), we can speak of “secondary traumatization”98 in cases where empathic unsettlement leads to these symptoms.99

In conclusion: it is necessary for a trauma survivor to construct a narrative, to recreate his/her past, in order to work through trauma. Only then can the horrifying vividness of the acting out of the traumatic experience start to be mitigated. But constructing a narrative (if possible) is not enough: the victim also feels a necessity to bear witness to what has happened (despite the impossibility of telling what cannot be imagined). The listener to this process of testimony cannot be just anyone. He has to have certain qualifications, and the victim has to trust his/her listener-to-be completely before trying to testify. Very often, the listener – who has really come to know the victim and vice versa – will not remain untouched by the encounter with trauma: he/she develops empathic unsettlement in the face of the traumatic event, the

99 In 2.3.5, we will see that some of Sammy’s behavior in Kavalier and Clay may be explained by what we described in this chapter as empathic unsettlement. In 3.1, we will introduce “traumatic postmemory”, a term describing phenomena similar to traumatic unsettlement and secondary traumatization, to explain Michael Chabon’s own position concerning the Holocaust.
victim, and the perpetrator. He/she may even undergo secondary traumatization as a form of self-defence.

1.12 Trauma representation in art

As there are various forms of expression, there may also be different ways of bearing witness to trauma: testimony may not be limited to a face to face stumbling into narrative with the aid of a trained psychotherapist. Throughout history people have tried to translate their deepest emotions to literature, poetry, paintings, music, etc. But what effects does psychic trauma have on artists? Is it so devastating, so life changing that it blocks their creativity for good? Do they keep producing art? And if so, do they repress the subject of the traumatic event or do they give this radical experience a prominent place in their works?

Once again, we must emphasize the highly personal aspect of psychic trauma. It is impossible to generalize symptoms and there is no ultimate way of working through (if working through is possible at all). Consequently, it is impossible to define the effects of trauma on the artist. The only thing we can be quite sure of is that a traumatic experience does not turn a survivor into an artist overnight. He might feel the urge to write down his experience as an attempt at reconstructing his past, but this does not implicitly mean that he will write a work of art. We can only investigate the effects of trauma on the artist by examining his creative output. In literature on trauma theory this happens frequently. A strong interest goes out to poetry, for it seems that the poets are always more capable of voicing emotions adequately than theorists.

Sigmund Freud must have known this, and it is no wonder that Cathy Caruth harks back to him in her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*. The imagery of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* is used to explain the nature of trauma; its belatedness and acting out. Further on in the book, she uses examples from the works of writers like de Man, Kleist and Lacan, thus: theorists as well as writers of literature and poetry. In another standard work on trauma theory, *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman

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refers to Dostoevsky, Camus, Mallarmé and Celan among others for illustrations of her points of view. And literature is not the only medium that is able to contain the narrative of a traumatic experience: films like Lanzmann’s Shoah and Hiroshima mon amour by Resnais and Duras are also frequently cited. Though referred to far less frequently, I believe that other media, too, can be used to illustrate the workings of psychic trauma. Think of the sculptures by Camille Claudel, The Scream by Edvard Munch or Mozart’s Requiem.

All these examples – and there are many more – suggest that there can be creative activity after trauma, and that a work of art can be the expression (or an attempt at expression) of trauma. As there is a story behind every work of art, the art grown out of a traumatic experience can be seen as the construction of a narrative, and the work itself as a means of bearing witness. Once again, the major problem in this construction of a narrative is the impossibility of telling and the ungraspability of the traumatic experience itself. Because of this, artists producing works grown out of a traumatic experience are often (rightly) considered innovators of the medium they are working with. They cannot write down, paint, sculpture or compose their stories the way other people do. Their representation is distorted, it deviates from standard works precisely because they cannot and do not fully understand their subjects. They do not know how to tell their stories. In therapy, meaning is conveyed through significant gaps, silences, and slips of the tongue. In art and literature as well, what is not there might be as significant – or even more significant – than what is. The poetry of Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor, illustrates this: it tends toward silence, shuns decoration and aims at precision. Celan dislocates his esthetic mastery of language and defetishizes language by disrupting any unity, integrity and continuity of conscious meaning. Traumatized artists break down the language of their medium and they try to achieve knowledge by means of associations. This may lead to completely new conceptualizations of structure and meaning.

102 In part III, we will come to see that Kavalier and Clay is in fact a celebration of the survival of Jewish culture and Jewish imagination after the Holocaust.
103 In parts II and III, we will discover that the fictional character of Joe Kavalier as well as his creator, Michael Chabon, produce similarly original creations, because what they create is in fact the narrative of their traumatic experiences.
The reactions to posttraumatic art diverge: there can be disapproval of the innovations by traditionalists, disbelief, and of course misunderstanding by outsiders. On the other hand, innovative art may be welcomed and imitated. After the Holocaust a whole new view of art appeared. The German critic Theodor Adorno stated that “after Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems”\(^{105}\), pointing out that by estheticizing the Holocaust, its horror is being diminished. A similar idea was formulated after World War I: dada pleaded for “tabula rasa” in art, to start anew, without turning back to aesthetic norms belonging to an age of war. But Adorno also acknowledged that literature “must resist this verdict... It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it”\(^{106}\). Once again we are confronted with the paradox of the necessity and the impossibility to speak. While acknowledging this necessity there is also a “necessity for art to de-estheticize itself and to justify henceforth its own existence”\(^{107}\).

The Holocaust has always been a sore point in this discussion. Films like *Schindler’s List* and *La Vita è Bella* have been objected to because they are supposed to give an image of the Holocaust that is too one-sided and positive. Books like Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* have been criticized for not adequately showing the full horror of the prosecution of the Jews and the concentration camps. It seems to me that for a large group of people – not exclusively Holocaust survivors, Jews, and all other ethnic or other groups the Nazis intended to annihilate, but also various historians, literary scholars, writers and others – the Holocaust is a massive collective trauma that has not been worked through. In their behaviour we notice some of the symptoms we find in trauma survivors. These people seem to be possessed by the past, they have a fixed image of the event and to them it is sacrilegious to try to alter that image, although they did not necessarily live through the Holocaust. Once someone offers a different view, they reject it immediately, apparently without thinking it over.


\(^{106}\) Ibid.: p. 34.

\(^{107}\) Ibid.: p. 33.
As an illustration, let us take a look at Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow*. It is the life story of a Nazi doctor who takes part in the “final solution”, but the story is told backwards. Consequently, when the doctor (ironically called “Todt”) actually kills someone at Auschwitz, it seems as if he were bringing him back to life. Many people might be outraged, and accuse Amis of distorting the Holocaust reality and of inverting the horror, of turning the Nazi doctor into a hero. In fact, the attentive reader can understand the novel to be intended to shock. By inverting the chronology, the reader is made an accomplice of Dr. Todt; he feels a certain sympathy for the miracle doctor at first. When he realizes this afterwards, he is appalled. Also, he realizes more fully the horror of the concentration camps once he re-inverts the order. Amis’ aim was to resuscitate the Holocaust discussion because people were exposed to the traditional way of representing the Holocaust so frequently that they had more or less grown used to the displayed horror.

As noted above\(^{108}\), in the process of working through trauma a therapist often offers his patient a less negative or even slightly more positive image of the events. I have also discussed the potential importance of humor in this process. Perhaps a little open mindedness is also necessary to overcome the massive collective trauma the Holocaust has become. Of course there is but a very thin line between “a more positive point of view” and plain revisionism, but there must be room for discussion, for deviating testimonies. In this case a slightly more positive, and humoristic image, as presented in Roberto Benigni’s *La Vita e Bella*,\(^{109}\) might be a step in the right direction. Although the film was very much opposed to by many critics, it set up a debate about the representation of the Holocaust. A man like Gerald Peary, a Jew himself, called the film “a blasphemy,” because “the Holocaust misrepresentations of *Life is Beautiful* [are] unforgivably obscene,” and he proceeds to call Benigni a “revisionist.”\(^{110}\) Stuart Liebman claims that the film’s protagonist Guido is assimilated to such a degree that his Jewishness seems to be a mere afterthought, that Begnini’s description of life in the camps is highly inaccurate and impossible, and that

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\(^{108}\) cf. supra: 1.7.

\(^{109}\) In the following chapters, we will see that Michael Chabon’s representation of the Holocaust in *Kavalier and Clay* is rather unusual as well. But, as is the case with *La Vita è Bella*, the novel will prove to get its readers thinking about the Holocaust and its representation, and it will prove to be able to resuscitate the debate.

the director trivializes despair by using crowd-pleasing formulas.\textsuperscript{111} The main objection seems to be that a comic film about the Holocaust is not done, and that mass extermination should not be turned into mass consumption (an argument also frequent among adversaries of Spielberg’s Schindler’s List\textsuperscript{112}). Begnini himself, on the other hand, is convinced that “laughter can save us.”\textsuperscript{113} Film critic Maurizio Viano comes to Benigni’s defense and claims that “Benigni’s project, far from cheapening it, confirms the Holocaust as history’s worst nightmare and re-inscribes it in the collective memory through an unusual code.”\textsuperscript{114} By representing the Holocaust in an unusual way – the introduction of the comic aspect - Begnini forces us to look at it from another point of view. Like in Amis’ \textit{Time’s Arrow}, a controversial point of view forces the public into a debate about the representation of the Holocaust and therefore requires us to think about it and form an opinion.

In his defense of Benigni’s film, Viano quotes Leslie Epstein (the author of \textit{King of the Jews}, a novel about life in a Polish ghetto during the Holocaust, also famously employing humor and irony in describing the horrors the Jews went through):

“\textit{The war against the Jews was in many ways a war against the imagination (and at the bottom the Jewish conception of God): to suppress the workings of that imagination – to deny the sufferings of the Jews any sort of symbolic representation – would make that a war that Hitler won.}”\textsuperscript{115}

Viano acknowledges the impossibility of realistically portraying the horror of the Holocaust, and sees \textit{La Vita è Bella} as an allegoric fairy tale in which imagination is used to transform an event into another story.\textsuperscript{116} Characteristic for the survival of Guido’s imagination (and his son’s survival because of imagination) is “the game”:

Guido tells his son that all inhabitants of the concentration they are in are contestants of a game, and he transforms everything that occurs to them in the camp into a part or

\textsuperscript{111} Liebman, Stuart. “If only Life were so Beautiful”, in \textit{Cineaste}, Vol. 24, Issue 2/3, June, 1 1999.
\textsuperscript{116} In parts II and III, we will see that the survival of the imagination is a very important theme in \textit{Kavalier and Clay} as well.
rule of that game. In this way, he tries to distract his son and attempts to make reality look less horrific. Of course, this manipulation of reality is what causes the film’s adversaries to accuse Benigni of revisionism, but we should see it as the survival of the imagination and spirituality that seems to be so inherently Jewish. It is Guido’s imagination that leads the son, Giosuè, out of the Holocaust: “comedic spirit and laughter [can] constitute a weapon and a medicine, a response of resilience to an enemy that expected only tragedy’s lament.” Viano concludes: “Serious comedy (which [...] does not laugh at the Holocaust but against its deadening weight) may constitute a viable option [for representation].” As already suggested in 1.7, humor (employed in art as well as in therapy) may help constructing a more positive approach of events that are extremely disturbing, and may facilitate the process of working through.

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118 Ibid. p. 63.
Part II: Application of the theory to *Kavalier and Clay*

2.1 Introduction to Michael Chabon

Michael Chabon belongs to the youngest generation of Jewish-American authors. He was born in Washington, D.C. in 1963, in a Jewish family with Polish, Lithuanian and Russian roots. When Chabon was six, the family moved to Columbia, Maryland, a newly built town quite similar to Bloomtown in *Kavalier and Clay*.\(^{119}\) At age eleven his parents got divorced and Chabon grew up living with his mother. In his novels divorce, single-parenthood and, often, men struggling with parenthood became recurrent themes.\(^{120}\)

In 1984, the author earned his undergraduate degree in English, at the University of Pittsburg. Three years later he was awarded an MFA in the Creative Writing program at UC Irvine. Also in 1987, he married poet Lollie Groth, won a short-story contest and finished his master’s thesis, *The Mysteries of Pittsburg*. The latter, his first novel, tells the tale of the son of a mobster struggling with his love life and his sexuality. Chabon never intended to publish it, but his professor secretly sent it to an agent. Chabon was offered a very large sum for it, the novel was printed for the first time in 1988 and it became a great success. At the time of writing, a movie version of *The Mysteries of Pittsburg* is in production, featuring Sienna Miller and Jon Foster.

The next five years, Chabon spent his time writing a next novel, a work entitled *Fountain City*. It grew larger than a thousand pages, but the writer felt that he had lost control over it and ceased the work. The troubles he had trying to finish *Fountain City* became the source for another novel, *Wonder Boys*. This one he was able to finish. Furthermore, when it was released in 1995, it became a big hit and was even turned into a movie, starring Michael Douglas. This story, as well as that of


\(^{120}\) Raymond, Nate. The Amazing Website of *Kavalier and Clay*, 12/01/2005. http://www.sugarbombs.com/kavalier/mcbio.html (20/03/2006). The following biographical information is also based upon this text.
Mysteries of Pittsburg, deals with homosexuality. Quickly, the rumour spread that Chabon had homosexual tendencies himself. Although this was not the case, the author begot a faithful gay readership, and friendships between straight and gay men keep occurring in his work, for example in Kavalier and Clay.

After a divorce from Groth in 1991, Michael Chabon married fellow writer Ayelet Waldman in 1992. Since then, the couple has had four children: Sophie, Isaac, Rosie and Abraham.

In his youth, Chabon had been obsessed by comic books. Although his love for music had replaced this interest in his teens, he picked it up again while doing research for the novel following Wonder Boys. This novel, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, first published in 2000, is about two young Jewish cousins trying to make a fortune creating comic book figures. The author did a lot of research on comic books and their creators, New York City in the 1940’s, and escape artists, all this in order to create a realistic atmosphere for his tale of the two young men facing and escaping the reality of the comic book world and real life. Michael Chabon was nominated for various awards thanks to Kavalier and Clay, and he won important prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Society Library Prize for Fiction, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and the Commonwealth Club Gold Medal. The character made up by Kavalier and Clay in the book, The Escapist, was even turned into a genuine comic book hero by Dark Horse Comics. Furthermore, there are plans to turn this Chabon novel into a movie, too. Rumour has it that Stephen Baldry will direct, and cast members would include Tobey Maguire and Natalie Portman121.

Kavalier and Clay, as well as Chabon’s other novels, is also a quest to discover what it means to be Jewish in America. It is a known fact that Chabon himself is an active attendant at Kehilla Community, a Jewish Renewal congregation.

After writing Kavalier and Clay, Chabon has worked on various projects. Apart from various essays and short stories, he wrote Summerland (2002), a children’s novel, and The Final Solution, a novella telling a Sherlock Holmes story.

Starting in January 2007, a serialized novel, temporarily called *Jews with Swords*, will appear in sixteen parts in *New York Times Magazine*. Furthermore he has made attempts to write scripts for movies and TV-shows (culminating in the co-authorship of *Spiderman II*), and in May 2007 his fifth novel, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, is to be released.

Chabon has become somewhat of a celebrity outside of the literary world as well, which is shown by a guest appearance on *The Simpsons* in November 2006.

### 2.2 The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay: plot outline

*In this chapter I will provide a synopsis of the plot of Kavalier and Clay. It will prove absolutely necessary to fully understand the analysis of the novel that follows in the next chapters. Readers who are already well acquainted with the novel, however, can skip this entire chapter and go straight to 2.3.*

New York, 1939. An exhausted Josef Kavalier arrives at the apartment of his mother’s sister and her family. He has made a difficult and dangerous passage over Lithuania, Japan and California in order to get away from his hometown Prague, which is occupied by the Germans. After a first – legal – escape had failed, the elders of the Jewish community of Prague had decided to use Joe to get the Golem of Prague out of the city, out of fear that the occupying forces might obtain this artefact of ancient Jewish legend. Thus, Joe fled Prague, sealed in a gigantic coffin, lying on top of the enormous clay statue which was believed to once have been brought to life in order to assist the Jews of Prague in their resistance against their oppressors. Once in Lithuania, Joe and the Golem’s ways parted.

When Joe’s cousin, Sammy Klayman, discovers Joe’s drawing talents, they forge the plan to combine these with Sammy’s own attempts at writing stories and get them into the new and booming business of comic books. Sammy talks his boss,

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122 Raymond, Nate. *The Amazing Website of Kavalier and Clay*  
123 Ibid.
Sheldon Anapol, who leads Empire Novelty Company, Inc., into investing in comic books, referring to the success of the likes of Superman.

Both boys’ backgrounds lead them to come up with a unique comic book hero. Sammy, who suffered from polio in his youth and was left with “the legs of a delicate boy”\textsuperscript{124}, has been raised by his mother. Because of the heartless behaviour of his muscular father, circus strong man The Mighty Molecule, who left the family early after Sammy’s birth - and partly because of his own weakness - Sammy prefers a hero who is like everybody else, but uses his skills to help the world. Joe, on the other hand, was obsessed with Houdini in his youth, and was trained by Bernard Kornblum to become an escape artist himself. Both boys being Jewish, they mix in characteristics of a typically Jewish hero, the Golem (who’s acquaintance Joe ha made earlier on in life). Combining these influences, Joe and Sammy create The Escapist, an escape artist in costume, who frees the world of crime. His alter ego, Tom Mayflower, has a limp, but this disappears after he is given a magical golden key. The archvillain in The Escapist is, of course, Adolf Hitler and his Axis of Evil, but although they are clearly recognizable, Anapol insists that they are given pseudonyms, because he is afraid of getting sued. The boys get a team of writers and artists together and manage to complete an entire comic book in just one weekend. Anapol does not like it, but he realizes the potential of this new genre and offers Kavalier and Clay and their team a job.

The boys work night and day, and it pays off. *Amazing Midget Radio Comics*, as the collection in which the Escapist appears is now called, becomes quite a success. To such an extent that Anapol can rent an office for Empire Novelty Company Inc. in the prestigious Empire State Building and can afford to buy himself a house in Florida. In the meantime, the Escapist gets more and more involved in the war: Hitler and Germany are no longer concealed behind cheesy pseudonyms, and the Escapist even manages to end the war and free all oppressed people in Europe. On the one hand, this is Joe translating his wish fulfillment into fiction. But on the other hand, he is trying to make his American audience aware of the atrocities and insanity of the

war in Europe. He hopes to have a certain influence that will “move Americans to anger against Hitler”\textsuperscript{125} and get them involved in the war.

Joe’s behaviour becomes more and more provoking in real life, too. After hearing that his father has died from pneumonia, he grows weary of the Americans’ stalling to get involved in the war and decides to join the RAF in Canada. He changes his mind on the way, though, and back in NYC he starts to work out his violence against German immigrants. Harassing and insulting them, he ends up getting beaten up on several occasions. One day, he breaks into an office of the so-called \textit{Aryan-American League}, an organisation founded by Carl Eb ling, a German expatriot. It will turn out that Eb ling is a psychopath with nazi sympathies. He lives in a distorted reality in which he has made the Escapist his mortal enemy. Eb ling will later on disguise himself as the Saboteur: he threatens to bomb the Empire Comics office and even attempts to kill Joe with a bomb.

As the Escapist sells over 3 million copies an issue, Sammy and Joe become more or less celebrities themselves, getting invited to fancy parties where they meet people like Salvador Dali. It is at such a party that Joe gets acquainted with Rosa Luxemburg Saks, a girl he had briefly met before. It does not take long before they engage in a romantic relationship. Rosa introduces Joe to Hermann Hoffman of the Transatlantic Rescue Agency, for whom she works as a volunteer secretary. The T.R.A. is a miniature operation with the sole purpose of getting as many Jewish children out of nazi occupied Europe and into the USA. Hoffman is prepared to get Joe’s brother, Thomas, out of Prague and on board of the Ark Of Myriam, the only ship the T.R.A. owns. Joe, who has managed to save almost every dollar he has ever made with his comic books (which has turned out to be a very lucrative business), is prepared to pay the fare for some of the other kids as well.

The ever increasing success of the Escapist, which will now be made into a radio show, makes Joe and Sammy realize they are being taken advantage of. While Empire Comics’ bosses are getting rich due to the success of their comics, the boys are still working for their initial wage. Furthermore, since nothing concerning radio or

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.: p. 172-173.
cinema rights is included in their contract, they are afraid they will not get a dime from the impending radio show. This especially frustrates Joe, who becomes more and more obsessed with money. This, of course, because he wants to help the T.R.A. to get as many children out of Europe as possible.

They come up with a new character, the sexy Luna Moth. Empire’s bosses, Anapol and Ashkenazy, immediately recognize the potential of this scantily clad winged superheroine. Sammy and Joe insist, though, that they will only develop it for Empire if they get a raise, a percentage of the profits of the Escapist radio show, and a small percentage of the rights to the Luna Moth character (they do not own any rights to the Escapist). Anapol gives in, but he has one condition: in their stories, they have to stop fighting the nazis. He wants to avoid any further bomb or other threats by any means. Joe, for whom “[...] the steadfast and all-consuming persecution of a ridiculous, make-belief war against enemies he could not defeat by a means that could never succeed – had offered the only possible salvation of his sanity,” \(^{126}\) walks out at first, but is pretty soon convinced that with all the extra money he will make, he will be able to do much more than by fighting the Axis of Evil in his drawings, and he gives in.

With respect to money, 1941 turns out to be an even more successful year for Kavalier and Clay than the previous ones. While Sammy lives like a king, Joe continues to save his money to raise funds for the passage of the Ark of Myriam. Professionally, everything seems to fall into place for them: there are plans to produce an Escapist movie, and the two boys single-handedly innovate the genre of the comic book, heavily influenced by Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. Moreover, Joe realizes the futility of fighting the nazis in his work and finds new pleasures in creating non-violent comics.

On a personal level, things are far more complicated. Sammy comes to terms with his own sexuality and falls in love with Tracy Bacon, the handsome actor who plays the part of the Escapist in the radio show. But as the couple is confronted with homophobia and are sexually abused by policemen raiding a gay party, Sammy

abandons his plan to elope to L.A. with Tracy, and gets back into the closet claiming “I don’t want to be like this”. Joe’s life takes a disastrous turn as well. Apart from the already mentioned bomb attack against his life by Carl Ebling, he learns that the Ark of Myriam has been torpedoed and that his brother Thomas more than likely died in the shipwreck. When a suicide attempt fails, Joe enlists in the Army. Now that the USA have entered the war, Joe wants to avenge his brother’s death and kill Germans with his own hands.

It turns out differently: Joe is stationed in Antarctica, as a radioman. He cannot get any further away from the action. When he coincidentally survives a carbon monoxide poisoning that kills the rest of his company, he spends months and months alone with a dog, Oyster, and Shannenhouse, a pilot who also managed to survive. That maddening winter, he starts reading the letters Rosa has kept on sending him and he discovers she was pregnant when he left. He also learns that Rosa and Sammy are married now and that they are raising his son, Thomas. Tracy Bacon appears to have joined the US Air Force, and was killed in an airfight.

When spring comes, Joe and Shannenhouse decide to fix the airplane present on the base and try to escape Joe has discovered a nearby German base, Jotunheim, and he wants to go there and kill the one German geologist present. On the third day of their journey Shannenhouse’s appendix bursts and he dies. Joe continues the journey by himself and finally arrives at Jotunheim. The German shoots Joe in the shoulder and Joe accidentally kills him. Subsequently, the wounded Kavalier drags himself to a hut on the shore, ten miles away from the German camp. For more than two weeks he stays there, living on 35-year-old canned food, biscuits and morphine before a Navy ship finds him.

It is not before 1953, seven years after his escape from Antarctica, that Joe shows up again. In the meantime, Sammy and Rosa have both been engaged in the comic books industry, but have been far less successful than in the so-called Golden Age of the early Forties. Since the infamous attacks on the genre by dr. Wertham and Senator Kefauver, there has been a serious decline in the comic book sales. Together,

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127 Ibid.: p. 420.
they raise Thomas in Bloomtown, a suburban housing project near New York City. Both Sammy and Rosa seem unhappy in their settled marriage: they have both lost the loves of their lives. Sammy has tried to get out of the comics industry, but his attempts at writing more serious literature failed and left him without any other options than writing pulp stories and plots for comics.

Around this period, a person calling himself the Escapist threatens to jump of the Empire State Building. It turns out to be Joe, who has been meeting his son Thomas, or Tommy, in secret. Joe has been hiding, living and working for years in an office in the Empire State Building, after having learned that his mother had been killed in a concentration camp. In his years spent locked up in the Empire State Building, Joe has created a gigantic redemption-themed “graphic novel” with the Golem as its main protagonist. He does get out onto the roof, dressed in an Escapist suit, and jumps, his legs attached to a string made out of rubber bands. He survives, because he lands on a platform a few feet below him. He is taken to the hospital, and reunited with Sammy, Rosa and Tommy.

In the end, Sammy is publicly identified as a homosexual in a courtroom trial accusing the comic books industry of corrupting young boys with homo-erotic imagery. Joe and Rosa, who have gotten back together, tell Tommy the entire truth. The heyday of the masked hero is over, and the Escapist has ceased to exist. The Golem of Prague has, too. His remains were delivered to Joe in the same box they both escaped Prague in, many years ago. Instead of taking Joe’s offer to take over Empire Comics, Sammy, driven by painful memories of Tracy and realizing he has been living a life that was never his, leaves the house and moves to Los Angeles.
2.3 Themes and motifs: traumatic events and the protagonists' reaction to them

2.3.1 Trauma and escapism

Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history – his home – the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered merely an easy escape from reality, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. He had escaped, in his life, from ropes, chains, boxes, bags, and crates, from handcuffs and shackles, from countries and regimes, from the arms of a woman who loved him, from crashed airplanes and an opiate addiction and from an entire frozen continent intent on causing his death. The escape from reality was, he felt – especially right after the war – a worthy challenge.128

The most obvious of themes in Kavalier and Clay is that of escaping. The protagonists’ initial reaction to trauma always seems to be avoidance. Joe Kavalier even appears to have succeeded in constructing his life around escapisty. In the quote above, Chabon describes how Joe has never been able to face reality. Reality, on the other hand, has been very hard on him. Living in nazi-occupied Prague in 1939, his family paid a large amount of money to smuggle him out of the country, to his aunt and cousin in New York City. But even before this major escape Joe was involved in escapisty, as a pupil of the great escape artist Bernard Kornblum. The great Houdini being his idol, Joe developed a passion for escaping tricky situations very early on in his life.

Everytime disaster hits Joe, he tends not only to avoid the stimuli that remind him of it; he always abandons the life he led previously to the event altogether. But, unfortunately for him, all of the escapes he performs fail to a certain extent. Joe flees Prague, but cannot live happily in the USA because he is tortured by memories and fears concerning his family. His suicide attempt, after learning of the shipwreck of his brother Thomas, fails. Soon after that, he leaves the woman he loves and his unborn child, as well as the luxurious life he leads to join the army in order to get his revenge on the Germans whom he considers as the cause of his family’s misery. He ends up

on a military basis on Antarctica, and when he finally kills a German, by accident, he realizes that

Nothing that had ever happened to him [...] had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization, when he was halfway to the rimed zinc hatch of the German station, that he was hauling a corpse behind him.129

As this image clarifies, Joe is haunted by death. Literally, when he travels around with the dead bodies of this German or that of the Golem of Prague, or figuratively as he is constantly tormented by memories of the loved ones he has lost.

The one thing Joe does not escape is life itself. For his own being is what keeps reminding him of the loved ones he has lost. He realizes this, though, and finds it unbearable to cope with. He begins to display self-destructive behaviour: when in the USA, he starts to harass Germans, causing him to get beaten up by a man who turns out to be a former boxing champion. It even leads to a bomb attack planned against him by Carl Ebling, a psychopath and the founder of the Aryan American League. But, as always, Joe manages to escape from any life-threatening situation. Even when he “did not plan to return alive, one way or another”130, he manages to survive. His suicide attempt fails, he gets out of Antarctica alive and gets rid of an addiction to morphine he developed on that continent.

Each time Joe has to face an overwhelming experience, he becomes indifferent to the people around him and the obligations he has towards them. When he learns his father has died, he tries to run off to Canada to join the RAF. After the news of Thomas’ shipwreck reaches him, he enlists in the US Navy. The only positive escape Joe seems to perform is to translate his grief and frustration into comic books. In this case, he escapes reality by creating a parallel reality in which the Escapist manages to defeat Hitler and his Axis of Evil. Sadly, after some years he has to admit that this fight is a pointless one, and he gives up on it, too. Rosa is a witness of Joe gradually giving up on his comic book war:

In the pages of *Radio Comics* [...] he and the Escapist continued to fight the forces of the Iron Chain, in battles that were increasingly grotesque and ornate. But the sad futility of the struggle, which Joe had sensed so early in his run on the magazine an which had been immediately apparent to Rosa, seemed to have begun to overtake the ingenuity of his pen. Month after month, the Escapist ground the armies of evil into paste, and yet here they were in the spring of 1941 and Adolf Hitler’s empire was more extensive than Bonaparte’s.131

Even worse than the fact that the Escapist’s fights do not inspire his American readers to stand up against Hitler is that they appear to incite people like Carl Ebling to violence, which is quite the opposite of what Joe intends to achieve. He becomes aware that the admiration for strength and violence in comic books comes dangerously close to fascism:

> Now it occurred to Joe to wonder if all they had been doing, all along, was indulging their own worst impulses and assuring the creation of another generation of men who revered only strength and domination.132

Although Joe is the master of escapistry, other characters in this novel also rather run away from their problems than to face them as well. When Sammy Clay stumbles upon two men tenderly kissing each other, he is left in awe:

> He knew about homosexuality, of course, as an idea, without ever having really connected it to human emotion; certainly never to any emotion of his own. It had never occurred to him that two men, even homosexual men, might kiss in that way. He had assumed, to the degree he had ever permitted himself to give it any thought at all, that the whole thing must be a matter of blow jobs in dark alleyways or the foul practices of love-starved British sailors. But those men with the neckties and mustaches – they had been kissing the way people kissed in the movies, with care and vigor and just a hint of showiness.133

Let us keep in mind that this scene takes place in the early 1940s, when homosexuality was anything but generally accepted: Sammy has not even allowed himself as much as imagining it as a form of love. The scene mentioned above is a revelation to him, and although he seems to be shocked by the sight of it, we will find out that he is actually shocked because it makes him better understand his own sexuality. It will not take long before he falls in love with Tracy Bacon, and actually engages in a loving relationship with him. At first, this new experience feels

131 Ibid.: p. 318.  
132 Ibid.: p. 204.  
133 Ibid.: p. 254.
liberating, because he has never known why he did not fall in love with some or other girl, like all of his friends did. Sammy's admitting his true feelings and giving in to them seems to be initiating his “escape” out of the closet, out of solitude. But as soon as he is confronted with the homophobia that surrounds him, he gives up on Tracy and eventually even marries Rosa, raising Thomas as his own son. But, secretly, he still regularly has dates with boys and men. This can also be seen as an escape from reality. But, once again, an escape that fails, because he can never really escape his true identity. Sammy is haunted by his sexuality in the same way that Joe seems to be haunted by death. We can relate this to the nature of trauma itself: because the past traumatic events were never completely mastered, because Joe and Sammy were never able to include those events into their history, the past keeps catching up with them.

Other characters try to escape harsh situations, and they are unsuccessful as well. Thomas does not get out of Europe alive; the Golem of Prague does reach the USA, but all that remains of it is a pile of dirt. Rosa marries Sammy after Joe’s departure, but she is just as unhappy as Sammy is.

Another aspect of escaping a traumatic experience, related to avoidance of the stimuli that may possibly evoke painful re-experiences of this event, is an obsessive engagement in other occupations. In Kavalier and Clay there is Joe, working on his drawings night and day almost from the very moment since his arrival in New York City. After Joe’s departure for Antarctica, it appears that Sammy as well as Rosa use every spare moment to come up with new comic book or pulp characters. This obsessive work ethic can also be understood as a way to avoid stimuli.

I think I’ve made it clear that the protagonists in Kavalier and Clay all show at least one of the symptoms of PTSD, as described in 1.2, i.e. a strong tendency to avoid stimuli related to traumatic events they have experienced. But is this sufficient to speak of trauma? Can we describe the events they are escaping from as traumatic? If we define PTSD as a reaction to an overwhelming event, there is no doubt that the (violent) deaths of several relatives, the persecution of the Jews in Europe, the confrontation with homosexuality in a homophobic era, are events that can transform peoples’ lives forever. There are insinuations of other symptoms that can occur as a
reaction to traumatic events, mostly concerning Joe. He suffers from hallucinations, for instance when he believes he sees his father in New York, just few hours before he learns that his father died in Prague some weeks earlier. At other times, he has a vision of Bernard Kornblum, and has a nightmare about a dog he had to kill. There are plenty of examples of Joe exhibiting self-destructive behavior: he picks fights with stronger men, runs off to join the Navy and attempts suicide. An increased arousal to certain stimuli is also hinted at: for instance, every time Joe is confronted with the word ‘family’, he responds in an awkward manner. There is, for example, his reaction to Rosa’s father welcoming him into his family: “I already have a family.”

In short, there are multiple passages in *Kavalier and Clay* that suggest symptoms identical to the ones described in 1.2, symptoms people who have developed PTSD may suffer from. But we must keep in mind that we are dealing with a novel, and not a scientific work evaluating a patient. Chabon is an artist writing fiction, not a therapist. By suggesting that the protagonists have developed PTSD, we are merely presenting a personal interpretation. Some of the main characteristics of PTSD, such as the persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event(s), the increased arousal to and avoidance of certain stimuli and the general numbing are hinted at, but not elaborated. This, again, because we are dealing with a work of fiction, not a medical journal. But we can read between the lines, add our own interpretations, and look beyond the main plot. Behind the obvious loss and pain suffered by the protagonists, which is striking but nonetheless the product of Chabon’s imagination, there is the very real problem of being Jewish after the Holocaust. In the following chapters, I will explore how the protagonists in *Kavalier and Clay* attempt to build and rebuild their lives around and beyond the horrors that happen to them and "their people", starting with the way certain events distort their reality and their reaction to this distorted worldview.

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2.3.2 The importance of magic

The impact of a traumatic experience is so tremendous that it alters people’s lives completely. The events are so overwhelming that they disturb their view on reality. In 1.4, we have seen that an essential aspect of the traumatic experience is that it cannot be understood completely. This impossibility to fully grasp the events which have altered their lives to such an extent is what causes the victims to doubt what is real and what is not. The world they live in seems to have lost its sense of normality; all relations are turned upside down. In this chapter we will examine the problematic relation between fact and fiction, between reality and the protagonists’ distorted view on it.

In 2.3.1 we have seen that the main characters’ confrontation with harsh facts often makes them try to escape from reality. For Joe Kavalier, Sam Clay and Rosa Saks, all very creative persons, the impossibility/unwillingness to deal with reality forces them to create a parallel counter-reality in their art. While on the one hand their very strong commitment to the world of comic books is a way to keep themselves from worrying about other things, they also use their work to express themselves and to project their own wishes upon the characters they create. Sammy gives Tom Mayflower, the Escapist’s alter ego, a limp like his own, but it is magically cured by means of a golden key. Also, Sammy provides every comic book character he invents with a younger boy for a sidekick. While critics like Senator Kefauver and doctor Wertham believe that the relationship between superhero and sidekick has homosexual and pedophiliac tendencies, Sammy points out that

Dr. Frederic Wertham was an idiot; it was obvious that Batman was not intended, consciously or unconsciously, to play Robin’s corrupter: he was meant to stand in for his father, and by extension for the absent, indifferent, vanishing fathers of the comic-book-reading boys of America.135

Just like Robin, Sam had once been a boy longing for a father figure Sam himself.

Brian Doherty puts it like this:

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The hero-sidekick dyad [...] is the fantasy of a healthy, loving, dedicated father-son relationship in a time – during World War II and afterwards – when American children were largely apt to lack it.\textsuperscript{136}

The Escapist manages to end the war and bring Adolf Hitler before an international court to pay for his crimes as early as 1941, while in reality the Germans were still progressing. Looking back upon her own comic book creations,

[...] Rosa, in a tireless and (for the most part) financially successful campaign to portray the heart of that mythical creature, the American Girl, whom she despised and envied in equal measure, [turned out to have] filled the pages of \textit{Heartache, Love Crazy, Lovesick, Sweetheart}, and now \textit{Kiss} with all the force and the frustration of a dozen years of lovelessness and longing.\textsuperscript{137}

Even the twelve year old Tommy has invented a fictional alter ego, the Bug, which allows him to live an imaginary life that is far more exciting than his everyday suburban activities. In the creation of fictional characters which are clearly endowed with character traits of their own, we can discern the process of doubling as described by Lifton and already mentioned in 1.9. Joe, Sammy, Rosa and Tommy all try to hide behind characters that are stronger than them, and that are able to handle the events they themselves cannot. Although they do not actually create a new self, the creation their fictional alter egos obviously helps them to live life in a more satisfying way.

Joe has means to “live” his dreams other than through the comic book heroes he creates, as well. In the first place, there is his interest in magic and escapistry, which he both started practising in his teens. Although there is no real magic involved – it is a matter of cunning and tricks – his profound engagement in these activities can be seen as a metaphor for his belief in the abilities of those who are willing. Once he has escaped to the USA, the decrease of his interest in escapistry seems to run parallel with the diminishing of his hope that his family will safely escape from Czechoslovakia, too. As more and more of the horrors that happen to the Jews in Europe reach Joe, he abandons escapistry altogether. He has given up hope almost completely, because he realizes the nazi bureaucracy is preventing nearly every Jew from getting out of Europe. He agrees to do one final escape when performing as the

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.: p. 548.
Amazing Kavalieri at a boy’s bar mitzvah, but this turns out to be a suicide attempt, after he has learned of the Ark of Myriam’s shipwreck. His brother Thomas’ escape was the last one he had hoped to pull off.

In the second place, Joe relies on Jewish folklore and legends, the character of the Golem in particular. Many of the comic book characters he comes up with are inspired by the Golem, and during the years when he secretly inhabits a room in the Empire State Building after the war, all he does is work on a kind of graphic novel (over two thousand pages long) with the Golem as its protagonist. Joe’s fascination stems from the impotence the Jewish people have to deal with: a giant made out of clay, brought to life to do everything his creator wishes for, would have been very appealing to any of them. In a way, all kinds of superheroes are modelled after the Golem: they are all creatures given superhuman powers by a miraculous event, and their purpose in life is to help others, preferably the weak and defenseless.

At first sight, this flight into the world of fiction appeared to be a way to keep busy and to avoid to have to think about what is happening in real life. But, as we will discover in the next chapter, by creating these stories the protagonists may also have found a way to work through their traumas. Joe, Sammy and Rosa are transplanting their own (traumatic) experiences into works of fiction, but in the worlds they create in their work, the outcome of the events is more often than not a more positive one than in real life. It is a way to bring a little hope into a world filled with despair. In 1.7 and 1.12 we have seen that this phenomenon, constructing a less negative view on the traumatic experience, can be an important factor to work through trauma.

From what precedes, one might come to the conclusion that the protagonists in Kavalier and Clay are dreamers who tend to avoid the dramas that happen to them by escaping to a world of fantasy and fiction. This is true only in part. In their own way, Joe, Sammy and Rosa also have to face reality, and they make attempts to do something about it. Through Rosa, who works – as a volunteer - at the Transatlantic Rescue Agency, Joe meets Mr. Hoffman, who runs this agency. In order to get Thomas on board of the Ark of Myriam, Joe works as hard as he can to make as much money as possible. This way he can pay the fare for his brother’s journey. But as Joe gets more involved, he does his best to come up with money to get many more Jewish
boys to the USA. As this appears to have more or less become Joe’s sole purpose in life, he is devastated when the Ark of Myriam is torpedoed to the bottom of the Atlantic. Joe reacts by attempting suicide, and when this fails he joins the Navy. On the one hand, this is again a form of trying to avoid the stimuli that remind him of Thomas and a display of self-destructive behavior. But it is a way of facing reality as well, getting personally involved in a war that is the cause of the many losses he has had to suffer.

In the beginning of their career as comic book creators, Sammy and Joe also believe that by provoking their audience, they have an influence on the USA’s involvement in the war in Europe. The Escapist’s archvillain is Adolf Hitler and his Axis of Evil: at first they are (barely) disguised by pseudonyms, but eventually their actual names are used. By openly picking a fight with the Germans and their allies, and by portraying the crimes against mankind they commit – albeit in a comic book – they hope to arouse the Americans’ sense of justice, and indirectly force the government to get actively involved in the war. They seem to have overestimated the power of art, though, and it is only after the attack on Pearl Harbor – when Joe and Sammy have already given up on their “comic book war” – that the US enters the war. By that time, Joe has come to the conclusion that he can achieve more with the money he makes, money that can help to evacuate more Jewish children to the USA.

The decline of Joe’s engaged writing can be compared to his abandoning of escapistry: as there is less and less hope for his family to survive, Joe gives up, but only to concentrate on getting Thomas out of the Prague ghetto alive. Another interesting parallel is that, as the situation becomes more hopeless, Joe also abandons the conventions of the comic book genre. As despair grows on him and his worldview becomes more and more distorted, he breaks away from the traditional ways to draw a comic book and, inspired by other genres like films, manages to revolutionize the genre of the comic book. In 1.12, we have noticed that the most gifted of artists, after being confronted with a traumatic experience, are often found to innovate the medium they express themselves in. This, again, because they cannot fully know the event(s) they went through. In LaCapra’s words:
As disaster after disaster hits Joe, it seems that he grows more and more estranged from reality, and this is reflected in his work. Where at first his experiments are careful steps to transform the genre of the comic book, attempts to make them more intellectually challenging, the work he produces after Thomas’ shipwreck and the following adventures in Antarctica breaks away from conventions completely. Working on *The Golem* for years, living completely invisible in the Empire State Building, he comes up with a 2256-page comic book; drawn only in pencil, with no words in it at all. In the next chapter we will further examine the therapeutic value this work has had for Joe.

The relationship between fact and fiction is not only problematic in the lives of *Kavalier and Clay*’s protagonists, the division between them is also blurred on the level of the form of the narrative. We will look into the matter of realism and fictitiousness in 2.4.

2.3.3 Constructing a narrative

I have indicated before that there is little mention of characters acting out trauma, i.e. persistently re-experiencing the traumatic event(s), in this novel, but it is hinted at. Chabon offers us a more detailed insight in the way his protagonists attempt to deal with their experiences. Nowadays, nearly everyone has a basic knowledge of psychology, and when someone displays symptoms of psychological problems, they are advised to go see a psychologist or a psychiatrist. When they are diagnosed to have developed PTSD, it is very likely that they will undergo therapeutic treatment as described in 1.5 and the subsequent chapters. We must keep in mind that *Kavalier and Clay* is set in the 1940s, when psychiatry was not as omnipresent as it is today. Apart from the fact that Joe’s parents, both doctors, must have had notions of psychiatry – especially his mother, a neurologist who has been analyzed by Alfred Adler and

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apparently works as a psychoanalyst herself\textsuperscript{139}—there is only one reference to one of the protagonists getting psychiatric treatment. This when Joe is rescued off Antarctica and “[…] taken to the base at Guantánamo Bay, where he remained under psychiatric examination and investigation by a court-martial until shortly before V-E Day.”\textsuperscript{140} Since Joe got off Antarctica in the fall of 1944, and “Victory in Europe Day” was 8 May 1945, we can assume that he was under this psychiatric examination for about six months. No details about the examination, diagnosis and possible therapy are given, but we can assume that Joe displayed symptoms of what was then called “shell shock”. It remains unclear what kind of treatment he underwent, but most likely it was a combination of medicines and psychoanalysis.

Chabon offers much more clarity on a very crucial aspect of working through: the necessity of constructing a narrative. As a traumatic experience is an event that is outside the range of human understanding, PTSD patients cannot give it a place and time in the story of their life. As we have seen in 1.5, it is precisely this impossibility to understand that constitutes the trauma, and in order to work through it, trauma victims must try to come to a certain understanding by re-externalizing it and including the events in their own history.

I have already pointed out, in 2.3.1 and 2.3.2, that Joe, Sammy and Rosa are artists. Whereas in real life they generally tend to avoid speaking to anyone about what is troubling them, the traumatic events that control their lives come back in the works they produce. Regarding Sammy and Rosa, whom we could consider to be Joe Kavalier’s “sidekicks” in this novel, I have already given a brief description of how they deal with their pain and loss in 2.3.2. In that chapter we were also reminded of the importance of flexibility: suggesting a slightly less negative image of the traumatic event may help the trauma victim to work through his or her experiences.

The main focus in this chapter is on Joe Kavalier, because his case is a good example of how the symptoms of trauma may be mitigated by placing the events in their proper time and place. We have seen that most of the effects of a traumatic


\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.: p. 467.
experience are to be located in the unconscious. Joe is not aware of the fact that he has possibly developed PTSD, just like he is unaware that he is constructing the narrative of his experiences in his artwork. We have already taken a look at his escapistry and his work on comic book heroes like the Escapist. In the latter, it was obvious that Joe included many elements of his own life. And it appeared that he had given his characters better outcomes of the events than he had experienced in real life, just as Sammy and Rosa had done in their own work. But when it comes to working through, Joe’s final work, *The Golem*, seems far more important. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that it is the only work Joe has done after Thomas’ accident, which seemed to be the final blow for his sanity. He starts working on it after his return to New York City in the fall of 1949, and in 1953 he finally finishes it. In these years he lives like a recluse, only coming out of his apartment to do the shopping that cannot be delivered to his door. Except for the people in Louis Tannen’s Magic Shop, no one knows for sure whether or not Joe Kavalier is still alive. It is only when he has finished the largest part of *The Golem* that Joe is able to face reality and starts looking for contact with Tommy, and through him with Rosa and Sammy.

Like the construction of a narrative in psychoanalysis, Joe’s process of creating of *The Golem* depends greatly on the unconscious. He comes up with it in a hallucinatory way, “[it] had been coming to him, panel by panel and chapter by chapter, in his dreams, in diners, on long busdrives [...].” 141 The story is set in the Jewish community of Prague, to which Joe and his family had once belonged themselves. It is a story “[...] of magic and murder, persecution and liberation, guilt that could not be expiated and innocence that never stood a chance [...]” 142, so obviously it deals with Joe’s personal experience of the Holocaust. It is also a tale of redemption: the protagonist, Josef Golem, sacrifices himself to save the community that had put all of its hopes onto this one creature. We can interpret the healing effects of creating *The Golem* on Joe in multiple ways. On a personal level, Joe deals with the losses he has suffered: he places the events in their proper place and time, he is writing his own history and that of his family. The adding of an element of hope, the possibility of redemption is the introduction of flexibility we have discussed in previous chapters, which makes it less devastating to remember the events and is an

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141 Ibid.: p. 577.
142 Ibid.
important step in the process of working through. On the other hand we can think of Joe’s inclusion of a saviour figure as an expression of survivor guilt, a phenomenon we have explored in 1.8 and will dig deeper into in 2.3.5. It appears that Joe wishes that he himself had been able to sacrifice his own life to save that of his family, and is very much frustrated at his incapability to have done so. The character of Josef Golem is acting out Joe’s wishes, and the inclusion of this character is an expression of the guilt Joe feels at being one of the few lucky Jews of Prague who survived the Holocaust.

On another level, the story of the Golem deals with the problem of being Jewish after the Holocaust. There is the question of survivor guilt for the entire Jewish people, which had more than 6 million of its members killed in World War II, that will also be explored further on. In a way, every Jew who survived the persecutions of the Holocaust can be seen as a trauma survivor, which makes the Jewish people a traumatized one. To a certain extent, Joe writes their history as well. By including many elements of Jewish legends and folklore, and by telling the story of the fall of a Jewish community, he attempts to contribute to the restoration of Jewish pride after centuries of persecution and discrimination. The Golem is a gesture of hope for the future as well as an effort to construct a narrative of the suffering of an entire people. By giving a typically Jewish character, the Golem, Christ-like characteristics of sacrifice and redemption, Joe’s work can be seen as a fictitious prophet, a harbinger of the Messiah the religious Jews are still awaiting. Just like superheroes for children, and Christ for Christians, the Golem is a character that may bring the Jews hope for a better world. Also, the idea of the sacrifice of one person being able to redeem an entire community, the possibility that the actions of one person can save every Jew in Prague of an almost certain death, is a way of introducing an alternative (wished for) ending to the atrocities of the Holocaust, which, although clearly merely fictional, we know to be an important aspect of working through trauma.

In creating the story of the Golem, Joe creates his own personal Golem: the story helps him heal his psychological wounds.

Joe came to feel that the work – telling this story – was helping to heal him. All of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express, before or afterward, not to a
This is exactly what the Golem stands for in Jewish folklore as well: it is a creation of man, designed to help him. But instead of producing a work that will come to his rescue after it is completed, in this case the process of creation itself is what helps Joe.

Joe has attached a great personal value to The Golem. This is illustrated clearly by his reluctance to publish it. I have already pointed out that Joe thinks the genre of the comic book highly underrated as a means of artistic expression. With The Golem he has produced a work showing himself at his artistic peak: not only will it probably revolutionize drawing techniques used in comic books, the kind of story that is narrated and the way this is done have never been seen before, too. The Golem might become the comic book that will finally make critics understand that the genre is more than mere children’s entertainment, and yet Joe feels it is too personal for publication:

[...] the more of himself, of his heart and his sorrows, that he had poured into the strip – the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression – the less willingness he felt to show it to other people, to expose what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution. It made him nervous just to have Sammy paging through it.144

When Joe finishes The Golem, he feels that “[...] he [has] run out of things to draw”145, his narrative is complete. And yet he still is unable to touch the money he had put aside to provide for his family when they would arrive in the USA, and the pain of loss is still ever-present: it appears that constructing his narrative is not enough to mitigate the symptoms of trauma to a more or less satisfying extent. “He needed Rosa – her love, her body, but above all, her forgiveness – to complete the work that his pencils had begun.”146 In the next chapter, we will look at the importance of testimony and bearing witness in the process of working through trauma.

143 Ibid.: p. 577-578.
144 Ibid.: p. 578-579.
146 Ibid.: p. 578.
2.3.4 Testimony

What is the use of a narrative no one ever reads or listens to? In 1.6 we have seen that trauma survivors often feel a strong urge to bear witness to what they have lived through. In Dori Laub’s words, while they “survive so that they could tell their stories; they also [need] to tell their stories in order to survive.” If they cannot testify about their traumatic experiences, the tyranny of the persistent re-experiencing of the events is perpetuated: their view on reality becomes more and more distorted by the enormous impact of the events, until they eventually come to doubt the reality of those events. Thus, bearing witness is a crucial factor in the process of diminishing the symptoms of PTSD. An indispensable element to bearing witness is finding a right addressee. There has to be a relation of trust between victim and addressee: it is important that this addressee can hear – and listen to - and feel the horror between the lines of the trauma survivor’s painstakingly composed and often incoherent narrative. If the addressee is not able to affirm the horrors the victim has lived through, and to recognize their realness, the victim will feel that he cannot be heard: his/her story will be annihilated, and he/she will continue to listen to himself through the constant re-experiencing of the traumatic event. We have also indicated other complications that may prevent bearing witness, such as the unwillingness to forget, the sacralization of the trauma and the survivors’ fear that their story is so intolerably horrible that no one will believe them.

In *Kavalier and Clay*, the best example of the need to testify in order to work through trauma is, again, Joe Kavalier. In the previous chapter we have seen that he is able to include the traumatic experiences of his life into a narrative, *The Golem*. He can express all the grief and blackness in it he never before managed to talk to anyone about; not psychiatrists, nor Sammy, nor Rosa. But although the story he comes up with is artistically the best work he has ever done, he does not want it to be published. Years before, in 1949, Joe had returned to New York City in order to create *The Golem*, and in the first place to re-establish the relationships with the only family he had left. But while his creativity peaked, he never managed to visit Sammy and Rosa. Instead he locked himself up in the Empire State Building. It is only because he can

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relate to his own son Tommy that Joe can re-enter the real world. In Chabon’s words: “Like Harry Houdini, Joe had failed to get out of his self-created trap; but now the love of a young boy had sprung him [...]”\(^{148}\) When Joe finishes *The Golem*, he is ready to go home, but he does not know how to do it. It is because Tommy understands his situation and manages to trick him out of it that he is freed.

And now, for the first time, [Tommy] appreciated Joe’s dilemma. It was not that he did not wish further contact with the world in general, and the Clays in particular. Maybe that was how it had started out for him, in those strange days after the war, when he came back from some kind of secret mission – this was what Tommy’s mother had said – and found out that his mother had been put to death in the camps. Joe had run away, escaped without a trace, and come here to hide. But now he was ready to come home. The problem was that he didn’t know how to do it. Tommy would never know how much effort it cost Joe that trip out to Long Island, how ardent his desire was to see the boy, to speak to him, to hear his thin reedy voice. But Tommy could see that Secretman [= Joe] was trapped in his Chamber of Secrets, and that the Bug [= Tommy] was going to have to rescue him.\(^{149}\)

Through Tommy, Joe is reunited with Sammy and Rosa. Those two and Tommy will hopefully prove to be the right addressees for Joe’s testimony.

Joe acknowledges that without Tommy he would never have escaped his solitude, and he knows he needs Rosa to come to terms with his past. But there are serious counterforces to Joe’s need to testify. He feels uncomfortable when Sammy is leafing through *The Golem*, because it contains the essence of his grief. This indicates that he has probably come to sacralize the traumatic events he has experienced. It appears that he is not willing to let others in on his secrets. But more importantly, Joe is very worried about forgetting, especially everything concerning his family. As *The Golem* is nearly finished and he is reunited with Rosa and Sammy, Joe is in the midst of a healing process. He does not realize it completely, but when he finds himself unable to spend the money he had put aside to provide for his family when they would come over from Europe, Joe admits to Sammy: “I forget every day [...] Days go by, and I don’t remember not to forget.”\(^{150}\) Since the goal of working through trauma is to mitigate the all-too-vividly re-experiencing of the traumatic events, a certain amount of forgetting is an indicator of success. Victims will evidently oppose this loss of

\(^{149}\) Ibid.: p. 524-525.
\(^{150}\) Ibid.: p. 593.
precision of the memory – they do not want to forget, they long to be monuments for
those who did not survive - but it is only through this that they will be able to stop
living in the timeless and spaceless dimension created by the inability to place the
event in its right context. The process of re-externalizing the experiences that have
constituted a very important and large part of one’s worldview is a long and painful
one, but it has to be gone through in order to live a life that is not controlled by one or
a few moments in one’s lifetime.

When Joe is in Antarctica, with only a mad pilot and a dog for companions, he
has nobody to relate to. This complete absense of any addressee, worsened by the
sunless Antarctic winter obviously “drove them [Joe and Shannenhouse, the pilot]
mad.”151 It appears that now that he is reunited with his best friend, Sammy, and
Rosa, the woman he loves, Joe will find them to be the right addressees for his
testimony. In the previous chapter we have seen that Joe has managed to include his
traumatic experiences in a narrative, and it appears that his traumatic memories are
becoming less overwhelming and penetrating. He knows that creating The Golem has
had a healing effect on him152, and he realizes that he will need Sammy, Tommy, and
especially Rosa153 to help him further. He has managed to break free from his self-
imposed prison in the Empire State Builing and seems ready to pick up the thread of a
more normal and regular life, living with Rosa and taking care of his son.But this is
where the story ends: we do not witness Joe addressing his story to any of them.
There are only indications that he will, one day. Although he feels nervous when
Sammy is paging through The Golem, he does not stop him, and “[he is] aware of a
strange warmth in his belly, behind his diaphragm, as he watched Sammy read his
secret book. “I – I guess I could try to tell you – “he began.””154 Joe displays a certain
willingness toward Rosa, Sammy and Tommy to tell his story, to explain them why he
left and never even let them know he was still alive. And although we do not witness
that moment, we can assume that they will be suitable addressees. They know Joe,
you even attempt to understand why he did all of those things.155 He will probably
find them to be attentive listeners, without trying to drag explanations out of him. And

151 Ibid.: p. 437.
152 Ibid.: p. 577.
153 Ibid.: p. 578.
155 Ibid.: p. 572.
because they went through most of the grief and loss together as a kind of family, we can hope that Joe’s bearing witness will be successful and will help him to further heal his wounds.

When it comes to speaking up and bearing witness, *Kavalier and Clay* also gives us an example of how not testifying affects the trauma victim. Sammy refuses to admit that he is a homosexual. After a short love affair with Tracy Bacon, he is faced with homophobic reactions and is even molested by a sadistic police officer because one weekend he attends a gathering of gay friends. He decides he does not “want” to be gay and pretends to be happily married to Rosa. While living this lie, he secretly goes on dates with other men, and feels miserable all of the time because his unwillingness to come out of the closet is making him live a life in which there is no place for true love. Everyone around him knows that Sam Clay is an unhappy and frustrated man, and it appears that this stems from the fact that he cannot – and does not want to – speak to anyone about what is constantly eating at him. His denial not only excludes the possibility of bearing witness to his true identity, it prevents him from creating a narrative as well. It is only when Sammy admits his real nature to Joe\textsuperscript{156} that he seems to admit it to himself. From then on, he is able to evaluate his own life and the causes of his unhappiness. When, later on, his homosexuality is publicly revealed in the Kefauver-Wertham trial, it is as if a large burden falls from his shoulders: now he no longer needs to go through all kinds of trouble to keep his secret safe. As he reflects upon his decisions regarding his affair with Tracy, Sammy realizes that

\[\text{[he] could not have known that one day he would come to regard all the things that their loving each other had seemed to put at so much risk – his career in comic books, his relations with his family, his place in the world – as the walls of a prison, an airless, lightless keep from which there was no hope of escape.}\textsuperscript{157}

Sammy feels “relieved”\textsuperscript{158} after his outing and moves to Los Angeles in pursuit of happiness, of a life without the denial of who he truly is. After years of keeping silent, he manages to construct his own history and is able to be the person he really is, thanks to testifying about his true identity. We should not think that his testimony is a

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.: p. 580.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.: p. 620.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.: p. 623.
forced one, because the public revelation of his homosexuality comes after he deliberately confessed to Joe, and thus in fact has already come in the clear with himself.

We could also consider Rosa Luxemburg-Clay’s case, but this would not lead us very far since it is not a very detailed one. Moreover, it is pretty similar to Sammy’s: after years of hiding her loveless life behind a busy career and the care for her family, she is liberated by Joe’s return. It is only then that she starts to evaluate her life. And when she comes to terms with her past, she can pick up her life with Joe – as much as that is possible – where they have once left it.

In sum, we have seen that in order to start working through trauma, it is not only a necessity to re-externalize the traumatic events - to put them in their right place and time in one’s past, fit them into their own history; one must also be able to relate this narrative to an addressee who is capable of listening to, interpreting and affirming the realness of the victim’s painstakingly composed tale. Only when the victim feels he is not alone to bear his enormous burden will he or she be able to partially let go of the events: the trauma symptoms will possibly diminish and the victim can start leading a more normal life. The protagonists of Kavalier and Clay proved to be much relieved by having the narratives of their traumatic experiences out of their system, be it in the form of their artwork or in testifying to the people that are the most important in their lives. But, as already indicated, there are factors that complicate bearing witness, and there can be important consequences for the addressees of testimony as well. In the next chapter, we will examine how survivor guilt may impede bearing witness and how addressees may suffer from empathic unsettlement or secondary traumatization.

2.3.5 Survivor guilt and empathic unsettlement

In this part, the main focus will be on the problem of being Jewish after the Holocaust. After that, we will take a closer look at the phenomena of empathic unsettlement and secondary traumatization. In 1.8, we mentioned that an important aspect of the trauma victims’ problems is the fact that they survived the traumatic
event(s). We saw that the trauma survivor is unable to deal with the threat of death, to fully grasp it, and is therefore confronted with it time and time again as an attempt to master it afterwards. Because the human mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly, survival becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of living. We also discussed the possible emergence of survivor guilt: If other victims were involved in the traumatic events which one or more victim(s) survived, there is a possibility that those people did not make it. The term “survivor guilt” implies a strong sense of guilt a person might feel because he/she believes he/she could have done more to save the ones who died in the events, and a feeling of unworthiness in comparison to the perished. People suffering from survivor guilt feel that it should have been them instead of others, they feel that the ones who died deserved to survive more than they do.

Before I examine how the question of being Jewish after the Holocaust is handled in *Kavalier and Clay*, let us first take a look at the most obvious of sufferers from survivor guilt among the protagonists. Joe Kavalier has fled Prague, leaving behind his entire family, to arrive in New York City. As it becomes more and more clear that his efforts to arrange visa for his relatives to enter the USA are without effect, and the news from Europe becomes grimmer by the day, it dawns on Joe that he might be the only family member who will have safely escaped Czechoslovakia. Knowing the horrible conditions his family is living in – the Jews are being amassed in ghettos, the war is steadily advancing, there are the first rumours of the deportations – Joe is unable to enjoy the life of relative wealth he leads in the USA. ‘He did not feel that he was entitled to such pleasures [...]’. After he learns that his father, mother, grandfather and even his brother Thomas are dead, Joe increasingly displays self-destructive behaviour. When he leaves for Antarctica, he has no intention to get back alive. In the years when he is missing, Rosa often suspects Joe of suffering from survivor guilt, and she is afraid he might have committed suicide because he could not live with the idea that he has survived while his family has not.

One heard more and more of suicides – suffering from “survivor’s guilt,” as it was called – among the more fortunate relatives of those who had died in the camps.

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Whenever Rosa read or was told of such a case, she could not prevent herself from picturing Joe performing the same act [...].\(^{161}\)

But Joe does come back alive, and after many years he starts working through the traumatic experiences that have constituted such an enormous part of his worldview. As he re-enters the world of everyday life, he has to notice that hope and love will have a place in it, too, instead of only grief and suffering. When he notices renewed feelings for Rosa, at first Joe feels “terribly guilty about it.”\(^{162}\) But as he slowly recovers from trauma, he also slowly manages to live without being constantly absorbed by guilt.

Hope had been his enemy, a frailty that he must at all costs master, for so long now that it was a moment before he was willing to concede that he had let it back into his heart.\(^{163}\)

In previous chapters, I have already hinted at the importance attached to the subject of being Jewish after the Holocaust in this novel. The nazis attempted to “exterminate” each and every Jew, only because they were Jewish. Millions of Jews did not survive these persecutions. The fact that an entire people was threatened with death makes the Jewish community a traumatized one, and it is very likely that they also suffer from survivor guilt as a community. This goes especially for the American Jews, who stood at the sidelines and practically did not intervene while their people were being persecuted and exterminated in Europe. You will probably not be able to find a single family who has not lost one or more of its members to the nazi atrocities. The fact that every Jew living after World War II is in reality a trauma survivor must have an enormous impact on the community and its individual members. The protagonists in *Kavalier and Clay* reflect how there are different possible reactions to deal with the Jewish past. Joe has only just arrived from the Old World, whereas Sammy has lived in the USA all his life. In what follows, we will examine how both men deal with the Jewish legacy and to what extent they take pride in their ancestry.

While none of the main characters in *Kavalier and Clay* are religious Jews, all of them are united because of their Jewish heritage. But every one of them seems to

\(^{161}\) Ibid.: p. 562.
\(^{162}\) Ibid.: p. 570.
\(^{163}\) Ibid.: p. 604.
have a different attitude towards this heritage. Sammy, for example, appears to have abandoned his Jewishness altogether: in order to look like your everyday American, he has even changed his original surname – Klayman – to the less Jewish-sounding Clay. He longs to be assimilated, he wants to fit in. If it takes him to deny his own identity in order to have more chances in life, he does not hesitate to do that, just like he decides to deny his homosexuality to escape discrimination. He does not want to belong to any kind of minority group: he is driven by personal ambition, not social engagement. Joe, on the other hand, has only been exposed to American individualism very recently. Moreover, he is still strongly connected to the Old World: he has spent all of his life there, and his entire family is still living in Prague when he arrives in NYC. Having lived in Czechoslovakia until 1939, he has also lived through the rise of nazism and fascism in Europe, and has personally experienced the discrimination of the Jews.

While Sammy’s background lacked strong Jewish influences, Joe’s upbringing in the outspokenly Jewish community in Prague certainly did not. In his childhood, Joe admired magicians and illusionists like Houdini, and he grew up with fabulous Jewish tales of creatures like the Golem, while Sammy’s heroes were his own father, a circus strong man, and the characters created by the first comic book artists. Sammy does have some notions of Jewish legends and folklore, through his mother and grandmother who both come from Prague as well, but he does not seem influenced by them in the same way Joe is. Joe often harks back to his heritage, while Sammy is highly Americanized. When the two of them start working together, the Escapist becomes a synthesis of Jewish and American traditions. On the one hand he is an odd character who, like the Golem, needs help from others to attain his true powers. Whereas the clay Golem needs a rabbi to write the Hebrew word for “truth” onto his forehead in order to come alive, Tom Mayflower needs to be given the Golden Key by a secret society known as the League of the Golden key, in order to free him of his limp. Both are thus supplied with a secret token that will enable them to use their powers to help the oppressed. A typically American element in the Escapist are the highly individual grounds for his actions: whereas the Golem acts strictly for the well-being of the Jewish community, the Escapist fights the evil order of the Iron Chain to revenge their assassination of his adopted uncle, Max Mayflower. The difference between Joe’s and Sammy’s attitude towards their Jewish heritage is more obvious in
the work they produce after the war. Joe comes up with The Golem, which we have discussed above and which proved to be very much influenced by existing Jewish legends of the Golem character. Furthermore, in this graphic novel the individualistic element has made way for self-sacrifice and altruism. Sam Clay, on the other hand, has become a pulp writer, creating rags to riches stories and tales of everyday Americans.

Thus, being Jewish after the Holocaust has inspired our two main protagonists to react in two opposite ways. Joe takes pride in his heritage and uses it regularly in his work, while Sammy denies it to a large extent. Actually, Joe contributes to the survival of Jewish folklore by adapting elements of it to fit into stories dealing with contemporary issues. Sammy on the other hand takes refuge in typically American clichés, because he wants to belong to American culture. By “betraying” his background he also proves to be less successful – commercially and artistically - than Joe: Sammy attempts to write in a tradition – that of the white, Anglo-Saxon protestants - he cannot completely master because he is not really part of it, although he longs to be. Joe combines elements of both of the cultures he has belonged to during his life and manages to create something that is new and original. The survival of a community after a large scale disaster that threatens its further existence, like the Holocaust for the Jewish people, depends greatly on its surviving members and their willingness and engagement to continue the community’s habits and traditions. Joe displays a deeper sense of ethnic pride, probably because he is more closely connected to Jewish culture than Sammy is, and is also more engaged in attempting to continue his people’s culture. When asked to come up with “a new Superman” Joe draws a Golem-like creature, and his graphic novel The Golem is crammed with references to rabbis and Jewish folklore. In his attempt to spread the beliefs and traditions of his ancestors in his adopted new homeland, he continues them and brings the survival of his people in effect. Emphasizing what keeps a people together becomes in fact re-establishing that mutual connection.

Joe’s greater engagement in preserving Jewish culture can in part be ascribed to the fact that he is more closely connected to it than, for example, Sam Clay and thus simply knows it better. But perhaps we can also link it to survivor guilt. Looking at it from that perspective, we can presume that Joe tries to preserve in fiction what he
could not in real life. For the people that connected him to his roots have all died in the harsh conditions of persecution. He feels like he has not made enough efforts to save their lives, although he has gone through much trouble to influence their fates. In this we find another aspect of being Jewish during and after the Holocaust. People can either resign themselves to their and others’ fate and try to keep themselves out of trouble by living an anonymous life denying their true identity, as Sammy seems to do all his life; or they can stand up for their own rights and those of others. In *Kavalier and Clay*, people like Joe, Rosa and Mr. Hoffman from the T.R.A. put their own lives at risk to convince others of the maliciousness of Hitler’s rule over Europe and to attempt to rescue as many Jewish children as possible out of Europe. Joe, Rosa and Mr. Hoffman each contribute in their own way to the workings of the T.R.A., either by donating large sums or by arranging all the necessary bribery and administration. In his comic book work, Joe portrays Hitler as the arch-enemy, pointing out the many atrocities his regime has performed, with the purpose of getting the USA engaged in the War. His attempts fail, however: his entire family dies during the war, in which the USA only participates because of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, at a moment when Joe has already given up fighting his comic book war. These facts nourish his feelings of guilt: he feels like he could have done more, and that it was he who should have died instead of them. These same feelings inspire Joe to write *The Golem*, in which a character, not coincidentally named *Josef Golem*, sacrifices himself in order to save his community. In a way, by denying himself access to the real world and the only family he has left – Rosa, Sammy and Thomas – Joe sacrifices part of himself to write his graphic novel and thus to help continuing a culture that is threatened by oblivion.

We know that survival implies that the survivor is confronted with a new knowledge of death he is unable to deal with. Attempts to master this confrontation afterwards lead to the trauma victim’s constant re-experiencing the traumatic events in such a vivid and penetrating manner that the victim’s life becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of living. We can observe this in Joe’s behaviour when he returns to the USA after his Antarctic adventures: for years he lives an anonymous life, without anyone knowing whether or not he is still alive. It is only when he has finished his masterpiece and has been reunited with Sammy, Rosa and Tommy that “[he sees] more clearly than ever that for the past dozen years or so, he had been,
more or less, a dead man.\footnote{Chabon, Michael. \textit{The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay}. London. Fourth Estate, 2001: p.570.} Other characters show identical reactions: people like Sammy and Sheldon Anapol, Joe and Sam’s boss, also hide behind made up identities to prevent themselves from showing their true colours. They are reluctant to insult Hitler and his collaborators in their comic books, while these are the villains that are persecuting and killing their own people, their own family who have not crossed the Atlantic to obtain relative safety in the USA. We can see their actions as feats of cowardice and greed, because these two assimilated Jews’ motives are highly individualistic and profit-oriented. But perhaps they too are paralysed by feelings of guilt; perhaps their lack of engagement is also an example of their inability to testify about what is happening to their people and, as such, a testimony to the impossibility of living. Whereas Anapol is portrayed as a businessman without scruples, Sammy’s behaviour appears to be more complexly motivated.

In 1.11 we had a look at empathic unsettlement and secondary traumatization. These terms indicate psychological phenomena from which secondary trauma witnesses can suffer. We have already hinted at the important role of the addressee of a trauma victim’s testimony. Because of the necessary intimate bond between victim and secondary witness, it is very much possible that this secondary trauma witness will not remain untouched by the trauma victim’s painstakingly constructed tale of horror and atrocities. He or she may come to identify with the victim. We discerned vicarious and virtual identification. The former implies that the addressee comes to identify himself completely with the witness and may feel that he or she lived through the events him/herself. The latter, which is a positive and even necessary form of identification – which is not the case with vicarious identification – implies empathic feelings leading to a form of understanding. These empathic feelings can leave the secondary witness unsettled: the secondary confrontation with traumatic events may even cause him or her to develop symptoms similar to those of the trauma survivor. As a form of self-defense, they may avoid stimuli reminding them of the events as well, and they may develop other symptoms like numbing. This phenomenon is called secondary traumatization.
In relation to *Kavalier and Clay*, we can perhaps see Sammy as a victim of secondary traumatization. As Joe’s best friend and his partner in the comics business, he has a very strong connection with Joe. Whenever Joe learns more horrifying facts concerning his family’s fate, Sammy is nearby. We can be sure that Sammy is affected by what happens to Joe’s family – who are also his relatives – and to the Jews in Europe in general. But, as indicated before, he does not seem inclined to do anything about it. Instead of speaking up for “his people” he does not speak about them at all. It is only when he sees Joe’s engagement, and realizes that the war his cousin is fighting in the comic books he creates is a very personal one, that he starts defending Joe’s rights to do so in front of adversaries like Sheldon Anapol. But that is about all the commitment we can observe from Sammy.

Perhaps empathic unsettlement can explain Sammy’s seemingly cowardly behaviour. His reaction to his being Jewish largely resembles that to his being homosexual: when he realizes that others are being discriminated, persecuted and even murdered for what they are but could never choose to be, he pretends to be someone he is not. He might feel unsettled by what has happened to “his kin” to such an extent that his reaction includes numbing and avoiding stimuli. This would account for his apparent lack of interest in the situation in Europe and his avoidance of the subject of homosexuality, two items which nonetheless predominate his life and the lives of the people he loves. Apart from the traumatic events he experienced himself - being confronted with homophobic reactions, losing Tracy Bacon and Joe - he may also have developed secondary traumatization by witnessing what happened to others who are like him. An indication for this presumption lies in the fact that he displays the need to create a narrative and to testify. I have already pointed at his relief when he no longer needs to pretend he is happily married to Rosa because he is publicly identified as a homosexual. Also, Sammy seems to be very much interested in Joe’s Golem story. This interest might be merely commercial, but perhaps *The Golem* helps him to re-relate to his own Jewish ancestry and culture. In helping Joe publish his masterpiece, and maybe adapting it a little to be understandable for a larger public, Sammy can contribute to the restoration and survival of the Jewish culture he has mostly denied for such a long time. Perhaps he adopts Joe’s narrative as an adequate expression of his own grief and losses, of his feelings of guilt because he is one of the Jews who survived the Holocaust. In that case, assisting in its publication can be seen
as a form of testimony and can in the end imply a way of starting to work through trauma, be it primary or secondary. Near the end of the novel, Sammy realizes that – unconsciously - his entire career has in fact centered around his being Jewish:

What, there all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don’t think he’s Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that, Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself!165

If we acknowledge that comic books can serve as a medium for bearing witness, we must also consider their impact on the readers, who then become addressees, at least to a certain extent. Joe is left disillusioned when he understands that his writings and drawings do not influence the USA’s position towards the war, and he gives up on fighting the nazis in the pages of the Escapist and some of his other creations. But the influence of comic books is probably bigger than he can imagine at that moment. Although they may not have a very big impact on international politics, as Joe was hoping for, they do offer a very powerful means of escape for their (mostly young) readers. Alas, Joe’s creations sometimes seem to have the reverse effect of what he intended: the way they applaud violence and the superhuman realizations of exceptional people often comes quite close to the ideology of fascists. It inspires people like Carl Ebling, a lunatic and nazi follower, to acts of violence and terror. So clearly, the influence of comic books, for good or for worse, is not to be underestimated.

But the importance that is attached to works of fiction is clearly indicated by the Wertham-Kefauver trial that occurs in the novel, and which actually took place in the USA in the 1950s. Although the accusation that the violence and the alleged homo and pedosexual tendencies in comic books are apt to corrupt innocent youths are far-fetched and quite insane, this renewed interest in comics, their enormous popularity and the widespread fear that entire generations might be corrupted by them prove that the influence of fiction is not to be underestimated.

Part III: The form of the novel/narrative.

In this third and final part, we will take a look at what lies underneath the level of the story told in *Kavalier and Clay*. Which message is the author trying to convey? Which means does he use to achieve his goals? How does the form of the novel resemble the trauma victim’s painstakingly constructed narrative? In what follows, I will try to provide answers to these questions while discovering how the story is constructed.

3.1 Fact and fiction

In Michael Chabon’s private life as well as in *Kavalier and Clay*, much importance is ascribed to comic books. In fact, the novel shares some of its characteristics with comics. One of these comic-like aspects is the novel’s at times striking lack of a sense of reality. While on the one hand Chabon appears to have put much effort in describing New York City in the 1940s as realistically and accurately as possible, there are some elements in the story that seem to be intended to diminish the plot’s credibility. The detailed descriptions of the creation process of a comic book and of Houdini’s wonderful escapes, the inclusion of contemporary landmarks like the World’s Fair and the Empire State Building, the mention of numerous important contemporary cultural events and personae construct a sense of reality and factuality which is subsequently undermined by a series of highly unrealistic events. There is the mythological Golem which has become real; Joe miraculously escapes Prague in a coffin; and Sammy and Joe rise from rags to riches in no time, after discovering and developing their talent for creating comic books almost overnight.

Furthermore, the protagonists’ course of life is not exactly average, either. Joe and Sammy combine superhuman luck with dramatic misfortune. As is often the case with comic book heroes, the incredible hardships they have gone through inspire them to perform great deeds. Superman is the sole survivor of his people, after the planet they lived on exploded; Batman’s parents were murdered by a mugger; Spiderman is an orphan who lost the uncle who took care of him in a robbery; Sam Clay grew up
without a father figure and struggles with his sexuality and Joe Kavalier lost his entire family to the Holocaust. Whereas the others grow up to be extremely successful and popular crime fighters, Kavalier and Clay discover their talent for creating comic books and they quickly arrive at the top, becoming rich and successful.

Other aspects that fuel the comparison with comic books are the quick succession of the action, and the appearance of subplots which are not necessary for the development of the main plot, like the chapter in which the first Luna Moth story is told. Why does the author include all these elements, which seem so inappropriate in a novel that deals mainly with the problems of being Jewish after the Holocaust? Did the comic books he collected in his youth have such an enormous impact on him that he cannot even escape their influence while writing a novel with such serious intentions? Are they meant to make this tale of death and loss easier to digest? Or are there more profound reasons to inject *Kavalier and Clay* with truly “amazing adventures”, thereby reducing the probability that this might actually have happened to certain Holocaust survivors to an absolute minimum?

In a review of *La Vita è Bella* by Casey Haskins, a Holocaust child survivor is quoted: “All of the many ways to represent the Holocaust are true, and all of them fall short.” We have already mentioned the difficulty of adequately representing trauma in 1.5 and 1.6, and in 1.12 we saw that Holocaust representation often stirs up controversy. Representing the Holocaust is especially difficult, because such an enormous amount of people was involved, and they all experienced the events in their own personal manner. In *Kavalier and Clay* Michael Chabon tells the story of a Jewish man who manages to escape Europe but loses many of his loved ones to the nazi atrocities - which was the horrible reality for many - but he interweaves it with an improbable rags to riches story. In reviews, Chabon has been criticized himself. Steward O’Nan writes that “the author’s conceit that his character’s lives are comic adventures as well [...] ultimately pushes the book too far into fantasy.”

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Hitler’s victims,”168 because he has created a story of “false mysticism,”169 with Josef being “an impossibly grand character, omnicompetent, capable of near-supernatural feats of skill, survival and self-sacrifice [which] make it difficult for a reader to feel any sort of commonality with him.”170 After reading Kavalier and Clay myself, I can definitely deny that the unrealistic elements in the novel prevent the reader from sympathizing with Joe: although he certainly does have far more luck and skills than ordinary people, the traumatic events he goes through were more than common for European Jews surviving the Holocaust.

In my opinion, the author is by no means trivializing the events: we have suggested before (in 2.3.5) that the experience of the Holocaust was so overwhelming that it traumatized an entire people, in this case obviously the Jews. Chabon, himself descended from Eastern European Jews, probably has to deal with what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”:

[...] postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.171

Thus postmemory, which is obviously closely related to the phenomena of emphatic unsettlement and secondary traumatization, constitutes a link between the children of trauma survivors and the traumatic events their relatives went through. If we consider the Jewish people to be traumatized as a whole by the Holocaust, we must acknowledge that traumatic postmemory remains present, unbearable and unassimilated for the children of survivors, just as traumatic memory is for their parents.172

169 Ibid..
170 Ibid..
172 Ibid.: p. 32.
If we keep in mind that *Kavalier and Clay* centers around the problem of being Jewish after the Holocaust, taking issues like survivor guilt and postmemory into account, we can consider the novel an attempt by Chabon to prove that life is possible after the Holocaust. If we see the book as the narrative the author has constructed to work through his postmemory, then perhaps the many details\(^{173}\) he includes are there to make sure the stories he heard of his father’s youth in the 1940s in Brooklyn\(^{174}\) are represented as accurately as possible. The unrealistic and even fantastic elements can then be seen as therapeutic efforts to construct a slightly more positive approach to the events.

We can also find the use of the rags to riches element in the aforementioned comic books like Batman, Superman and Spiderman. It is no coincidence that many of the earliest and most popular American comic books were created by Jews, and that many of their superheroes have gone through traumatic experiences. In retrospect, we can even interpret a story like Superman’s to be a metaphor for the lives of the surviving Jews: both Superman and the American Jew escaped a life-threatening situation in their old country, to build up a new life in the USA. To the Jewish emigrants, life without persecution in the USA must have seemed very promising, and the ideals of the American Dream and the self-made man appear in many of their artistic creations, like the first comic books for instance.

In *Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon combines elements of Jewish culture (the Golem for example) with elements of American (the American Dream, rags to riches) and Jewish-American culture (comic books). In 2.3.5 we mentioned that by combining elements of Jewish and American culture in his magnum opus *The Golem*, Joe Kavalier was contributing to the continuation of Jewish culture, which was threatened by oblivion. We can say the same of Michael Chabon, who mixes different genres and influences to come up with something that is original and new and at the same re-establishes his relation with the Jewish people as well the American community to which he belongs. Moreover, the surreal and fantastic elements in

\(^{173}\) Chabon even attempts to give his readers the impression that they are dealing with a non-fictional book by including footnotes, and he continues the hoax via websites.

Kavalier and Clay confirm the survival of the Jewish imagination. Let us remember the quote by Leslie Epstein I have already discussed in 1.12:

“The war against the Jews was in many ways a war against the imagination (and at the bottom the Jewish conception of God): to suppress the workings of that imagination – to deny the sufferings of the Jews any sort of symbolic representation – would make that a war that Hitler won.”

If we take this into account, we can interpret the novel to be Chabon’s assertion of Jewish survival, as a confirmation that life is still possible for the Jews and Jewish culture, even despite events as devastating as the Holocaust. Moreover, the novel is an affirmation of the possibility to successfully blend into American society while at the same time preserving one’s Jewishness.

3.2 The use of multiple forms of narrative

When we take a look at Kavalier and Clay, we immediately notice Chabon’s mix of different genres and styles. At times he wants to gives us the impression that we are reading a non-fictional biography; some parts describe the progress of World War II, and some other chapters consist of entire plot outlines of a comic book. We can consider the novel a Bildungsroman portraying the psychological evolution of Joe Kavalier (and of Sammy Clay, to a lesser extent), or the description of the downfall of a Jewish family during the Holocaust. It is a story of rags to riches, of escape, and of love. It contains elements of legends and folklore, popular culture and art, it is Jewish and American, combines high and low brow culture. The tale is conveyed to the reader by the narrator, by dialogues and, occasionally, letters.

We can account for this seemingly incoherent diversity of genre if we remember that this is Chabon’s attempt to construct a narrative in order to work through traumatic postmemory. In part I, we saw that this is a very difficult process, in which there is an important role for the addressee. We are of course dealing with an acclaimed author, who has painstakingly composed his novel and thought it over

thoroughly, yet we still have to read between the lines to filter out Chabon’s message of survival and redemption for the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The Luna Moth story, for example, might have been important for the development of Joe Kavalier as an artist and an important source for Kavalier and Clay’s growing commercial success, but it is rather irrelevant for the larger picture this novel wishes to represent.

By creating a post-modern collage of genres and influences, the author inscribes his story, which is set in the past, in the present. From one point of view, as already mentioned in 3.1, Chabon creates something original out of Jewish and American influences, thereby continuing Jewish culture, a feat which seemed impossible to many after the Holocaust. From another, the inscription of history in the present is yet another reminder of the fact that the traumatic past will always catch up with us as long as it has not been sincerely worked through. Perhaps Chabon is trying to resuscitate the debate concerning the Holocaust by representing it in such an unusual manner, with the use of highly unrealistic elements and an important part for the comic book, otherwise not often acknowledged as a medium for great art. As some reviews of Benigni’s La Vita è Bella show, the Holocaust is a trauma that many millions of people have not been able to work through: many critics have fulminated against Benigni’s introduction of a more positive perspective and of slapstick in a film about the Holocaust, while films like Benigni’s and novels like Kavalier and Clay may help others to realize that a certain flexibility can be possible in Holocaust representation, and it may help them to construct their own narratives. Also, perhaps inspired by Art Spiegelman’s Maus, a comic book famously dealing with the topic of Holocaust survival, and the importance he once attached to comics himself, Chabon suggests that the artistic possibilities of the comic book should not be underestimated, even when dealing with serious subjects like the Holocaust. The narrator of Kavalier and Clay puts it like this:

Although all the world – even Sammy Clay, who had spent most of his adult life making and selling them – viewed them as trash, Joe loved his comic books [...] Most of all, he loved them for the pictures and stories they contained, the inspirations and lubrications of five hundred aging boys dreaming as hard as they could for fifteen years, transfiguring their insecurities and delusions, their wishes and their doubts,
their public educations and their sexual perversions, into something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status of art.\textsuperscript{176}

*Kavalier and Clay* is an attempt to change people’s view on comic books, just as Joe Kavalier’s *The Golem* tries to do.

Finally, we can consider the mixing of genres to be a proof of Chabon’s successful assimilation in American society: he is acquainted with both American and Jewish culture, and in his attempt to put his story into words he can choose from both to get his message across adequately. Furthermore, the collage of influences he has created is an indication of the universality of pain and loss.

### 3.3 Temporality and space

Chabon switches between spaces and time as easily as he moves on to another genre: we move back and forth between New York City, Prague and Antarctica; and between the years when Joe and Sammy were children (the early 1920s), the transition between 1930 and 1940s, and the early 1950s. There is a time lapse between 1943 (Joe’s escape from Antarctica) and 1953 (the end of the novel, in which Joe is reunited with Rosa, Sammy and Tommy) which is easily explained by the fact that Joe, the novel’s main protagonist spent those ten years as a recluse, concentrating on his work on *The Golem*. Most of the other sudden movements in time are flashbacks, which are a frequently appearing symptom among trauma victims, but which appear just as frequent in literature as well, of course. Nevertheless, since we are dealing with a novel written by a descendant of Holocaust survivors, about Holocaust survival, we can assume that these breaches in time and space are not there coincidentally.

The basic principles of psychoanalysis belong to everyone’s common knowledge nowadays, especially in the United States, where psychoanalytic treatment is a widespread and widely accepted phenomenon. Moreover, we can link psychoanalysis to Jewish American culture. Based on the work of European Jews like Adler and Freud, psychoanalysis reached its peak in post-war USA. Its growth in

importance runs parallel with the rise of Jewish American writers: starting in the second half of the twentieth century, writers like Isaac Singer, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, J.D. Salinger, Gertrude Stein and many others became the leading men and women of contemporary North American literature. And now a new generation seems to take over, authors like Chabon, Paul Auster, Dara Horn, Jonathan Lethem and Jonathan Safran Foer. Perhaps we can relate this strong Jewish interest in (and influence on) American writing to the importance of the narrative in psychoanalytic treatment. We have come to see the Jewish people as a traumatized one: from that perspective, we can explain their relation to psychoanalysis. To work through their trauma, they need to construct a narrative in which the traumatic events are placed into their historical context. Of course this does not imply that every Jew who wrote his or her story down created a work of art, but the striking importance of Jewish American authors in contemporary literature may be accounted for by the fact that traumatized artists often come up with highly original work, as we have seen before. Moreover, Michael Chabon indicates that he knows at least some basic notions of psychoanalysis and its history, by mentioning dr. Alfred Adler177 and by creating the character of dr. Anna Kavalier, Joe’s mother and author of a work entitled “Reinterpretation of Dreams.”178

With that in mind, we can interpret Chabon’s construction of Kavalier and Clay as a deliberate attempt to reflect the difficult construction of a narrative in order to work through a traumatic experience. It is the reader’s/addressee’s task to retrieve Chabon’s message from what is an incoherent text at first sight. The form of the novel illustrates how the past can suddenly penetrate the present in a trauma survivor’s experience, how the victim can never escape the unprocessed traumatic events. Through the process of doubling, the victim may enable himself/herself to live a seemingly normal life, but as long as he or she does not work through trauma, the past will haunt him forever in the form of flashbacks, nightmares and hallucinations.

The victim whose difficult endeavor to construct a narrative Chabon intends to reflect can either be Joe, Chabon himself or the Jewish people as a whole. The story of Kavalier and Clay is mainly that of Joe’s attempts to survive the nazi persecutions

177 Ibid.: p. 22.
and to start a new life in the USA despite the horrors that occurred to his family. But it is also a result of Chabon working through traumatic postmemory: he did not experience the traumatic events himself; all he has are stories passed on to him, of which he has created his own narrative. In his attempt to pass on these memories of others and to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, he is confronted with the difficulties of representing the Holocaust adequately. He experiences the impossibility of telling as well as Holocaust survivors do, and this reflects in the apparently incoherent structure of this novel. Apparently incoherent, because the attentive reader manages to reassemble the various uses of genre, time, place and point of view\(^{179}\) to form a coherent tale of pain and loss. Finally, we can also interpret *Kavalier and Clay* as a product of the painful and difficult rebirth of the Jewish people and their culture, quite literally from the ashes of the Holocaust they managed to survive. Seen from this point of view, the novel is an exponent of the narrative painstakingly constructed by an entire people attempting to survive and to work through an unprecedentedly horrifying series of atrocities.

### 3.4 Points of view

When reading *Kavalier and Clay*, we are presented with the opinions and convictions of a variety of characters. Because the story is told by an omniscient narrator we get an insight in the thoughts and feelings of Joe and Sammy, but also of Rosa, Sammy and even Carl Ebling. There is an entire chapter, for instance, in which we see the world through the eyes of Ebling. It is because of this chapter that we realize that he is not a harmless fool, but a psychopath who is convinced he is “the Saboteur, King of Infiltration, Vandal Supreme,”\(^{180}\) who has the task to hang “the subnormals, mixed bloods, and inferior races [...] by their mongrel necks.”\(^{181}\)

The narrator often supplies the reader with information he or she would not be able to retrieve from the words and actions of the characters. Since we can see *Kavalier and Clay* as a novel dealing with the psychological development of its

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\(^{179}\) As we will explore further in 3.4.


\(^{181}\) Ibid.: p. 329.
protagonists, this information is often crucial to understand what they are going through. But why does Chabon give us so much information, why does he not only illuminate the motives of the protagonists, but also those of less important characters like Tommy, Ebling and even Tom Mayflower, who is a fictional character in the novel?

One possible explanation is that Michael Chabon has tried to emphasize the highly personal nature of traumatic experiences. By voicing various characters’ thoughts and emotions, he can point out different and similar reactions to traumatic events. In characters like Joe, Sammy, Rosa and Tommy, for instance, we have noticed the same escapist reflex, and the same process of doubling – creating an alter ego in the form of comic book personalities. But there is also the difference in reaction between Joe and Sammy: whereas the first refuses blindly to accept his fate and quickly proceeds to action, the latter often struggles with uncertainties and eventually does not react at all. Examples are Joe’s numerous (physical) escapes, in contrast to Sammy’s resignation to a life of self-denial (psychological escape) with Rosa and Tommy.

From this point of view, the passages containing the story of the Escapist are interesting as well: since Tom Mayflower is the alter ego that Joe and Sammy have created for themselves, we can learn about their fears and wishes by interpreting the character traits and emotions with which they have endowed this character. This way, we discover that Sammy is not as comfortable with the fact that he has a limp as he would like to appear, and that both boys sincerely wish for a chance to escape the circumstances that are the cause of their grief and losses. It is also interesting to notice how the Escapist relies on violence to achieve his goal, to free the world of crime. In this aspect, he is no better than his sworn enemies of the Axis of Evil, or the likes of Carl Ebling. Because of Chabon’s approach of the story from different angles, we realize the impossibility of representing the Holocaust adequately: it is impossible to acknowledge one point of view as the “true” one. Chabon also points out that it is hard to maintain the classical dichotomy between “good” and “evil.” For how can we account for the similarities between victim and perpetrator, when in both cases their inner demons lead them to the use of violence, for instance? The Holocaust was such a massive, enormous event, experienced by such an enormous number of people, that
it is impossible to construct a narrative of the events in which all possible points of view have their place, let alone to construct a “definitive” narrative which cannot be disputed. Chabon tries to avoid telling a onesided story by presenting us with the perspectives of several characters, including a nazi supporter who is clearly out of his mind. Once again, it is up to the reader/addressee to construct a story that makes sense.

We have seen before that we consider *Kavalier and Clay* a narrative about working through traumatic events, and that we also consider its author a trauma victim to some extent. The latter thesis suggests that we can see the novel as a means to work through trauma as well. In 1.5 and 1.6 we mentioned the difficulties trauma victims had to deal with in constructing a narrative and bearing witness. One of the obstacles is the fear that no one will ever believe their amazing tales of horror and atrocities. When we look at *Kavalier and Clay* from that point of view we can interpret Chabon’s inclusion of so many details about the personal lives of such a large variety of characters as an attempt to make his story as plausible as possible.

One last possible explanation for the numerous points of view in Chabon’s novel is the fact that the author did not experience the Holocaust himself. He is dealing with traumatic postmemories, caused by the many stories he has undoubtedly heard of the fate of his grandparents’ generation. Instead of traumatic events, he has traumatic narratives to work through. Taking this into consideration, we can interpret *Kavalier and Clay* as the narrative construction created by Chabon out of the stories that haunted him, and because of his ability to construct this narrative he might be able to start working through his traumatic postmemories.
Conclusion

In this conclusion, we will sum up the goals and intentions Michael Chabon had when writing *Kavalier and Clay*, and which messages he is trying to convey. We have seen that this novel is a celebration of the survival of the Jewish people and their culture, despite the Holocaust and the preceding centuries of persecution. By creating a highly original work of literature that combines elements of Jewish and American culture, Chabon produces evidence of the survival of Jewish imagination and culture and therefore contributes to its further development. We also noted that this confirmation of survival can be interpreted as a trauma victim’s testimony. By creating the story of *Kavalier and Clay*, the author has started the process of working through the traumatic (post)memories of his own and of his people, and he has also produced a text that may help the entire Jewish people to come to a better understanding of their own traumatic experiences.

In the novel, the character of the Golem symbolizes the healing effects the process of creation can bring forth. To Chabon, *Kavalier and Clay* is the creation of a personal Golem, of a means to help working through trauma, just as *The Golem* is to Joe Kavalier. It stands for hope and faith in the power of the imagination. But what should we think of the fact that, although the Golem is real for the protagonists, it cannot be brought to life? A Golem is nothing more than a statue made of clay if the word “truth” is not written on its forehead during a complicated ceremony. Perhaps Chabon uses this powerful image to indicate that during the Holocaust, there was no hope whatsoever for the Jews. No force was strong enough to bring hope – which is symbolized by the Golem - back to life, not even religion. Or perhaps we should interpret the lifelessness of the Golem as an accusation towards the entire world (and American Jews in particular) for looking away while they knew – or at least could have known – what was happening to the Jews. From this point of view, it is the rest of the world who deprive the Jewish people of hope: by their unwillingness to face the truth and react properly, they annihilate the possibility of writing the word “truth” onto the Golem’s forehead, and thus bringing hope to life.
Apart from celebrating the survival of the Jewish people and condemning their persecutors and those who looked away from what was happening, *Kavalier and Clay* also asserts the power of fiction. We already mentioned the positive effects the creation of *The Golem* had on Joe, who “came to feel that the work – telling this story – was helping to heal him.”¹⁸² But apart from the creative process of constructing a narrative, Chabon also stresses the positive aspects of a more passive experience of fiction. Whereas the opponents of fiction – and comic books in particular – like dr. Wertham and Senator Kefauver disapprove of the easy escapes these pastimes seem to offer to their (young) readers, Chabon considers these escapes very positive and even desirable in a world where children grow up surrounded by violence and injustice. In the novel, Joe Kavalier shares this opinion: “The escape from reality was, he felt – especially right after the war – a worthy challenge.”¹⁸³

Although characters like Joe, Sammy, Rosa and Tommy all manage to escape from their problems – be it by reading comics or by creating alter egos in their own comic books - their escapes are only temporary. Chabon does not portray fiction’s powers of distraction and wish fulfilment as negative, but he does realize that no real escape from reality is possible: the traumatic past will always keep catching up with the victim, if one lives in denial. For the attempts at escaping in *Kavalier and Clay* are numerous, but in the end the protagonists have to face reality and their responsibilities. It is only when one faces one’s demons and attempts to understand the traumatic events and tries to place them in their proper context – as Joe does when creating his graphic novel – that the actual process of working through can begin. And only then can one start to loosen the tight hold the past has on one’s present life. Fiction can thus be a powerful means of escape, but in order to work through trauma, one has to face reality and (re)create his or her own (hi)story. In both cases, however, there is an enormous stress on the importance of the narrative.

While obviously defending fiction and comic books for the positive effects they can have on their readers, Chabon also acknowledges the limitations of escapism. Comic books might have a negative influence on people who are mentally unstable. In

¹⁸³ Ibid.: p. 575.
In *Kavalier and Clay*, the violence in the issues of *The Escapist* inspires the psychopath Ebling to perform acts of terrorism. Nevertheless, I do not believe that Chabon wishes to indicate that the influence of comic books might corrupt people and incite them to harm others. After all, any material may influence the psychopath’s unpredictable behavior and cause him to act dangerously. The passages concerning Ebling seem to be included rather to stress the author’s aversion to violence. For in *Kavalier and Clay* Chabon apparently tries to show that violence – be it used by the “good ones” or by the “enemy” – always leads to more violence.

But the novel also shows that escaping one’s past is never possible unless one faces it. We have seen many times that the past of *Kavalier and Clay*’s protagonists always catches up with them, until they finally confront it. We can probably conclude that Chabon ascribes positive effects to escapism, but those are only temporary. While the escape into fiction can give the readers hope for a better life, it can also have a negative influence on them, for example concerning the admiration of strength and violence. Chabon effectively shows in this novel that one can temporarily escape one’s problems, but will ultimately have to deal with them.

Concerning the Wertham-Kefauver case, we have already seen Michael Chabon’s opinion shine through the thoughts of Sam Clay, who is convinced that “dr. Frederic Wertham [is] an idiot.” Instead of seeing superheroes like Batman as the corrupters of their young male sidekicks, the novel suggests that they are father figures, “meant to stand in for [the] father, and by extension for the absent, indifferent, vanishing fathers of the comic-book-reading boys of America.” Furthermore, Chabon acknowledges the artistic aspirations and possibilities of the medium of comics. In the novel he stresses the influence the genre underwent from other art forms, like Orson Welles’ film *Citizen Kane*, or the surrealistic movement in the art of painting. And not only does he stress comics’ artistic qualities, he also gives utterance to his belief in the genre’s expressive possibilities. After all, it is by creating a graphic novel that Joe is finally able to construct the narrative of his traumatic experiences.

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185 Ibid..
In conclusion, we have seen that Michael Chabon intended much more than telling the story of a young man who manages to escape Europe and the Holocaust and successfully builds up a new life in the USA, despite all the pain and losses he has had to suffer. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* portrays how fiction can offer an escape – temporary but soothing - from reality, and how the process of creation can help a trauma victim to work through his experiences. He stresses the positive aspects of fiction, his aversion to violence and the artistic possibilities of the comic book. More important is the emphasis on the power of the narrative and the imagination. Similar to Joe in the novel, Chabon uses the power of the imagination to transform a tale filled with death and grief into a story of redemption that celebrates the survival of the Jews. He stresses the fact that the Jewish people, their culture and their imagination are still standing, despite the Holocaust and previous persecutions. As we have seen in 1.7, the introduction of a certain degree of flexibility and humor in the interpretation of traumatic events can help the victim(s) in the process of working through. Apart from facing his own traumatic postmemories when constructing this novel, Chabon has also written the narrative of an entire people. *Kavalier and Clay* offers an escape from reality, but it also invites its readers to face it, and to try to come to terms with the past. The novel is a means of working through trauma, while at the same time, it is about it. This shows in its content as well as in its form. By creating this highly original work of literature, combining elements of Jewish and American culture, Chabon contributes to the continuation of the Jewish culture which this novel celebrates. More important still, by taking an original point of view and not shunning controversy, he makes us reconsider the problem of Holocaust representation. I think I have adequately shown that the use humor, of elements taken from comic books and rags to riches stories etcetera, do not affect the novel’s serious intentions and do not forestall the respectful treatment of a subject as serious as the Holocaust. It rather implies that there is still hope left. Nevertheless, Chabon’s approach is unusual. I believe, however, that works like *Kavalier and Clay* can really make us think about the Holocaust and the impossibility to represent it in a manner that everyone will find adequate. Perhaps works like these can be a start to work through the collective traumatic (post)memories the Holocaust created for the Jewish people – and by extension for the entire world, without ever forgetting or diminishing the enormity of what happened.
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