The Mythologization of Third-Generation Trauma

A comparative analysis of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*
and Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon*

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stef Craps

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
6

**Chapter 1 | Trauma, the Holocaust and mythology**  
8
1.1 Trauma Theory  
8
1.1.1 Defining Trauma  
8
1.1.2 Trauma Theory: an overview  
10
1.2 The Third Generation and the intergenerational transmission of trauma  
11
1.3 Writing as a way of working through: use of myths and fairy tales in  
14
third-generation trauma literature  
1.3.1 Origins and meaning of myths and fairy tales  
14
1.3.2 Myths, fairy tales and trauma  
15

**Chapter 2 | Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated***  
19
2.1 Introduction to the novel and plot summary  
19
2.2 Foer as a third-generation novelist  
21
2.3 Imagining the past: the Mythologization of trauma  
22

**Chapter 3 | Joseph Skibell’s *A Blessing on the Moon***  
26
3.1 Introduction to the novel and plot summary  
26
3.2 Skibell as a third-generation novelist  
27
3.3 Imagining the past: the Mythologization of trauma  
29
Chapter 4 | A comparison

4.1 The representation of Trauma
   4.1.1 Describing the indescribable: narrative strategies
   4.1.2 Love versus suffering as a way of rewriting the past
   4.1.3 Traumatic imagination

4.2 Mythology and rewriting the wounds of the past

Conclusion

Works cited
Introduction

A striking aspect of third-generation novels by Jewish American authors dealing with the Holocaust is the important role of myths and fairy tales in their work. The term ‘third generation’ refers to the grandsons and daughters of the survivors of the camps. Throughout the last decades there has been a continuous interest in the second generation. However, third-generation literature and its point of view on the Holocaust’s continued impact at an individual level, has been less closely studied, partly also due to the recentness of third-generation fiction. This dissertation examines the mythological dimension in third-generation trauma literature, looking at how Jewish American novelists try to represent the horror of such a traumatic past. My dissertation explores this feature through a comparative study of two novels by third-generation novelists, Jonathan Safran Foer's critically acclaimed novel Everything is Illuminated (2002) and Joseph Skibell’s A Blessing on the Moon (1991), both of which turn to mythology and fairy tales in attempting to re-write the wounds of the past.

In the first chapter I will discuss both Trauma Theory and its relation to the use of myths and fairy tales in trauma literature. To begin, I will deal with the term ‘trauma’ and Trauma Theory. As this dissertation is concerned with literary studies, it is not my wish to attempt to give a detailed psychological analysis of trauma. I will however try and define the concept of trauma and attempt to point out the origins of recent Trauma Theory by mentioning the insights of leading trauma scholars. Following that, I will discuss the term ‘third generation’. Who belongs to this generation and how do they deal with trauma? Lastly, in this chapter, I will address the concepts of ‘fairy tales’ and ‘myths’ and their use in trauma literature. The second chapter of this dissertation will deal with Jonathan Safran Foer’s debut novel and postmodern classic Everything is Illuminated. I will explore Foer’s background and the forces that drove him to write the novel. I will analyse Foer’s novel, linking it to the third-generation trauma discussion above, as well as looking at the use of myths and fairy tales in the novel. How does the novel deal with the trauma of the previous generations? How is it through attempts at re-writing the past one can work through trauma? In the following chapter I will examine Joseph Skibell’s unusual novel A Blessing on the Moon in an equal manner, addressing both Skibell as a third-generation novelist and the use of myth and fairy tales in his novel. I will examine how Skibell’s novel bears witness to the trauma of the Holocaust, as well as analyse the novel with an emphasis on how it rewrites the past. Finally, the concluding chapter will be devoted
to a comparison between the two novels. A great number of scholars examine how the mythological genre undermines a true representation of reality. However, as this dissertation argues, narratives that use myths and fairy tales to rewrite a traumatic past also provide an important perspective for writing about experiences of extreme violence. Exploring the role of myths in representations of violence and trauma, this dissertation proposes that rupturing a realist account with the mythological, often more closely resembles a ‘real’ world than narratives that try to mirror a reality that cannot be understood unless experienced. Hence, I will analyse *Everything is Illuminated* and *A Blessing on the Moon* and look at how both authors, in their own specific way, deal with the trauma of the previous generations. How do both novelists approach the subject of the Holocaust? How do they incorporate myths and fairy tales in their work? By comparing the two novels, this dissertation aims to situate third-generation trauma narratives within a mythological framework, connecting the patterns of incoherence and trauma with the mythological strategies employed by Foer and Skibell.
1.1 Trauma Theory

1.1.1 Defining trauma

Before starting my discussion and analysis of how myths and fairy tales are used to rewrite a traumatic past in *A Blessing on the Moon* and *Everything is Illuminated*, I feel it is important to explore some of the concepts and theories that I will draw upon throughout this dissertation and give an overview of some significant insights within the field of Trauma Theory.

There is no doubt that the twentieth century has been dominated by violence, tragedy and trauma. In this time period the world has seen two World Wars, genocides in Africa and Asia, labour camps, countless wars, acts of terrorism and, centrally, the Holocaust, an event of systematic mass torture and murder and one of the darkest chapters in the history of the modern world. One can state that trauma has inscribed itself into the collective memory of modern society and moreover, that trauma is an inevitable part of the human experience. To begin a discussion on the nature of trauma and trauma literature, some essential principles of Trauma Theory will need to be explained. As stated before, this chapter will not include a thorough analysis of trauma literature. The following theories are rather intended to introduce the key concepts of trauma theories. Before the trauma of the Holocaust can be discussed, it is necessary to look deeper into the concept of ‘trauma’. As American trauma scholar Cathy Caruth explains in her book *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, the word ‘trauma’ is derived from the Greek language meaning *wound*, referring to an injury inflicted on the body. Later on, the term 'trauma' also came to be used in medical and psychiatric literature, thus changing the meaning to “a wound inflicted [...] upon the mind” (Caruth 3). In addition, Caruth notes that the wound of the mind is “an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth 4). As Kristiaan Versluys and Sien Uytterschout’s point out in their article “Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*”, ...
a traumatic event is often so violent and disruptive in nature that it cannot be placed into existing referential frameworks. As a result, survivors of trauma cannot grasp the magnitude of what has happened to them. “A victim’s memory fails to register the event at the moment of its occurrence, because the extent of its violence has not yet been fully known” (Versluys, Uytterschout 217). In her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys further explores the history of the concept of trauma. In her introduction Leys points out it was only during World War I and the period after WWI – when soldiers returned from the front – that it became “impossible to deny the existence […] of traumatic symptoms” (Leys 4). The interest in trauma grew and mental trauma caused by war was finally recognized. During World War I many soldiers fell victim to anxious and disturbed behaviour. These traumatic symptoms of the soldiers were gathered together under the term “shell shock” (Leys 4). However, army officers were still wondering whether the soldiers were really traumatized or whether they were cowards who were trying to escape the front lines. Nevertheless, after the Great War the interest in trauma declined. That is to say, even though several theories had been put forward regarding the issue of war trauma, these were soon forgotten again when the war was over. Interest in the phenomenon returned when WW II erupted. However, as Leys states: “just as it took World War II to ‘remember’ the lessons of World War I, so it took the experience of Vietnam to ‘remember’ the lessons of World War II” (Leys 15). To clarify, once more it took a new drama to remember former conclusions. As Philippe Codde accurately explains, it was only after the Vietnam war that it was understood that “the pathologies that had variously been identified as ‘war neurosis,’ ‘shell shock,’ ‘combat fatigue,’ or ‘survivor syndrome’ were really manifestations of one and the same condition that became known as ‘trauma’ or PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)” (“Postmemory, Afterimages, Transferred Loss” 2). However, it took several more years for the disorder to be officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, which happened in 1980 (Leys 2). Cathy Caruth defines the concept of PTSD as follows: "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 57). After exploring the concept of ‘trauma’, I will look at the origins of recent Trauma Theory in the following chapter.
1.1.2 Trauma Theory: an overview

Many trauma scholars consider the origins of recent Trauma Theory to lie with Freud’s psychoanalytic exploration of the human mind. One of the most important Freudian concepts in relation to trauma studies is ‘nachträglichkeit’, translated ‘belatedness’ or ‘afterwardsness’, which refers to the belated return of a repressed traumatic memory. In other words, the traumatic nature of the event is not immediately registered and the experience is only later acknowledged as being traumatic. When considering trauma, it is important to not underestimate the significance of the passage of time. To clarify, the response to trauma evolves over time as it shifts from the present into the past. This concept of ‘latency’ is essential to the understanding of trauma and its effects. It has already been hinted at in the above mentioned definition of PTSD by Caruth (“often delayed”). Another renowned expert on the field of trauma is Dominick LaCapra, who attempts to link psychology and historical studies in order to analyse trauma, LaCapra mentions two fundamental responses to traumatic behaviour, namely ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’. ‘Acting out’ can be described as a posttraumatic pathological reaction, where one keeps returning to the moment of crisis. LaCapra defines it as “[…] emotionally repeating a still-present past” (Representing the Holocaust xii). Furthermore, the re-enactments of traumatic experiences often go hand in hand with a loss of orientation. LaCapra states: “[…] when the past is uncontrollably relived, it is as if there were no difference between it and the present. Whether or not the past is re-enacted or repeated in its precise literality […] one experientially feels as if one were back there reliving the event, and distance between here and there, then and now collapses” (History in Transit 119). ‘Working through’ then implies an overcoming of the post-traumatic effect, mostly by telling one’s story about the trauma. LaCapra states: “in memory as an aspect of working through the past, one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between […] the two” (Writing history 90). In other words, when a victim is able to work through the trauma, the victim is then capable of seeing the difference between the past and the present. The victim also tries to escape the circularity of the trauma. This concept of circularity is explained by Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist and author Dori Laub:

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 absence 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 associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (Laub 69)

Frequently, victims attempt to replace this temporal confusion with linearity by creating a rational and chronological narrative. They attempt to turn a traumatic, uncontrollable experience into a patterned and predictable story. In addition, many trauma scholars argue that trauma narratives are frequently characterized by absences and incoherence. As a symptom of PTSD, memories of traumatic events are often incoherent, incomplete and difficult to access. The field of trauma studies has grown tremendously over the past few decades and has become increasingly varied. While it seems clear that many personal and collective trauma stories are likely to remain only partially understood, the authors of trauma studies work to capture those feelings and thoughts which historians either disregard or are unable to deal with. As previously stated, the concept of trauma is generally applied to extraordinary experiences in the life of individuals which involve an element of shock that interrupts an ongoing activity. Consequently, the concept of trauma carries notions of a lack of cohesion and structure. For the most part, trauma literature involves exploring the unknown wounds of the past and attempting to narrate the unspeakable. Trauma is at the heart of every Holocaust victim and is an ongoing phenomenon. It is an atrocity, committed against people who, at that particular point in time, were perceived as other, and therefore threatening, by society. The Second World War and the Holocaust continue to impact the world in which we live today. Hence, questions of trauma remain relevant.

1.2 The Third Generation and the intergenerational transmission of trauma

Shortly after the Holocaust had ended, people who had managed to remain alive were given the label of ‘survivor’. When these survivors began to have children, the term ‘first generation’ emerged so as to distinguish them from the coming generation. In addressing these concepts, it is important to acknowledge the variation in people’s experiences. In this case, the term ‘first generation’ does not only refer to actual survivors of the Holocaust, that is to say,
people who were physically present in Nazi-occupied areas. The term also refers to people who lost their families, had to flee or live in hiding. Additionally, the term ‘first generation’ can also include a broader definition which encompasses every Jewish person who lived during the time of the Holocaust, though never came into contact with it directly. Furthermore, the Holocaust did not only have an enormous impact on the lives of those who have survived it but can also leave a great impact on the later generations. Some survivors spoke incessantly about the atrocities, others never mentioned them and instead passed on their sadness, despair and anger. In other words, many parents would transfer their own grief onto their children. The children of Holocaust survivors, referred to as the ‘second generation’, can be deeply affected by the strikingly traumatic experiences of their parents. Many previous studies clearly show that there are psychological after-effects of trauma. Despite the fact that the actual trauma occurred before they were born, LaCapra states that an “intergenerational transmission of trauma” can take place (History in Transit 108), meaning that emotional issues from the Holocaust may continue to impact future generations. The Holocaust, a trauma so deeply embedded in Jewish consciousness, continues to be transmitted to the following generations. Much has been written about how children of Holocaust survivors tend to absorb the psychological burdens of their parents. As Philippe Codde explains in his article “Transmitted Holocaust Trauma: A Matter of Myth and Fairy Tales?”, these second generation members can be affected by living in a family environment where there is no sense of stability and safety due to the variety of posttraumatic symptoms their parents suffer from (“Transmitted Holocaust Trauma” 63). Codde states: “the children do not inherit their parents’ traumas as such, but they are re-traumatized by the malfunction of the parental roles (“Transmitted Holocaust Trauma” 63). To clarify, these parents do not function as they are supposed to and as a result the second generation gets re-traumatized. It must be emphasized, however, that it is a different kind of trauma. To explain, the second generation is often burdened by a feeling of always having to feel happy and thus they feel haunted by their dead relatives. Dina Wardi refers to children of survivors as 'memorial candles' for the people who did not survive the war (Wardi 6). They are often named after their relatives who perished in the Holocaust and are repeatedly told about the horrors their parents went through. As a result, second generation members often feel as if their own lives are trivial in comparison with their parents. And the story continues as we come to the ‘third generation’, the grandchildren of first generation survivors. While much focus has been placed on the second generation and their experiences
of living in a home with a parent who survived the Holocaust, research about third-generation survivors and what role the Holocaust has played in their lives remains in its early stages. The Third Generation, the children of children of survivors, is however of great importance since in many families they are the last generation to have contact with the first generation survivors. Several scholars suggest that while it seems accurate to talk about ‘transmitted’ or ‘transgenerational’ trauma with reference to the second generation, the use of this term seems less defensible with regard to the Third Generation. Thus, it seems justifiable to ask the question whether we can still call the Third Generation ‘traumatized’. As Codde writes:

While the second generation, [...], can still be viewed as traumatized, [...] the term ‘trauma’ becomes increasingly problematic if applied to later generations. The danger lies in an unwarranted equation of radically divergent experiences: survival in a concentration camp and the experiences of third-generation American Jews, which are clearly situated on an entirely different level. (“Transmitted Holocaust Trauma” 63, 64)

While it is accurate to state that the experiences of both generations are entirely incomparable, the Third Generation still feels an extremely deep connection to the actual event of the attempted extermination of all Jewish people in Europe. In addition, as Marita Grimwood points out in her introduction of Holocaust literature of the second generation: “from a literary perspective, [...], what matters most is not whether the nature of the traumas experienced fit particular historical or psychological categories, but whether and how the experience is written” (Grimwood 6). Another key term in understanding the motivations of second and third-generation authors and thus often used with reference to inherited trauma is the concept of ‘postmemory’, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch. In her book Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory, she explains:

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. [...] 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. (Hirsch 22)
In other words, Hirsch defines it as an obsession of the second or third generation with the inaccessible past of their relatives. LaCapra later defined postmemory as “the acquired memory of those not directly experiencing an event such as the Holocaust or slavery” (*History in Transit*, 108). In essence, the concept of postmemory refers to the passing-on of memories, often traumatic, to those born after the events. In other words, instead of their own memories, members of the second and third generation have an “acquired memory” of that traumatic experience, acquired via their parents’ or grandparents’ stories and other testimonies, often “completed” by their own imagination. Closely linked to the intergenerational transmission of trauma is its application to literary works and the continued need felt by authors to represent the Holocaust in their work. As Melvin Jules Bukiet states in the introduction of his book *Nothing makes you free: writings by descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors*: “How do you deal with it? […] if you were a writer, you wrote. […] The comet hits at six million miles per hour and the waves spread” (Bukiet 14). This postmemorial mode of writing is found with both Foer and Skibell. Being members of the Third Generation, the unspeakable cruelty of the Shoah haunts the pages of both *Everything is Illuminated* and *A Blessing on the Moon*.

1.3 Writing as a way of working through: use of myths and fairy tales in third-generation trauma literature

1.3.1 Origins and meaning of myths and fairy tales

The relationship between trauma and its representation in literature has been increasingly studied since the acknowledgment of PTSD as a legitimate disorder, as discussed above. As already mentioned, an important issue within the study of trauma literature is the description and representation of trauma through the use of myth and fairy tales. In order to obtain a clear understanding of the use of myths and fairy tales in both novels, I feel it is important to explore what actually constitutes both a myth and a fairy tale and examine how scholars and writers have perceived their relationship with trauma. Generally, stories are important in people's lives. People gain a sense of who they are through narratives and the telling of stories. Literature can be seen as a compass that points the way to self-discovery and truth. In this case, myths are a fundamental part of all art forms throughout the ages. For the most part, myths are concerned with the origins of cities or families and the supernatural. In the Oxford
dictionary, a myth is defined as “A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events” (Oxford dictionary). Moreover, a myth can be a way to talk about one’s origins if these are unknown, a way to try and access the unknown past. In his book *Fables of Identity*, Northrop Frye explains the relation between myth and literature. According to Frye, mythology is a “total structure, defining as it does a society’s religious beliefs, historical traditions, cosmological speculations”, it is “the matrix of literature” (Frye 33). In a similar manner, fairy tales are concerned with supernatural characters and events. The origins of the fairy tale are a much debated topic among scholars. What scholars agree on is the fact that fairy tales are rooted in an oral tradition in the Middle Ages. In addition, fairy tales were never originally intended for children. Instead they served as a form of entertainment for adults. Later, in the nineteenth century, fairy tales started to be more directed towards a younger reading public, with the German Brothers Grimm as the most known writers. Myths and fairy tales, of course, rarely appear in their original form in modern literature. Instead, authors attempt to incorporate them in their stories, as will be discussed below.

1.3.2 Myths, fairy tales and trauma

In the following pages, I will examine the role of myths and fairy tales in representations of trauma. The work of third-generation Jewish American novelists frequently involves an attempt to uncover the past via fiction. As Anna Hunter states in her essay “Tales from Over There: The Uses and Meanings of Fairy-Tales in Contemporary Holocaust Narrative”, novels by third-generation authors are “the product of a generational gap between those who witnessed and survived the Holocaust and those who would seek to represent it [...]” (Hunter 61). It is this generational divide which then leads to this specific narrative form in which authors turn to mythology and fairy tales, as these novels “cannot rely upon the perceived authority of the narrator in order to underpin their narrative: the authority of the text must come from within the narrative itself” (Hunter 61). Furthermore, because of the extensive and lasting traumatic effects, events characterized by extreme violence often tend to resist rationalization and interpretation in a literary form. In this respect, writing about the Holocaust through the form of myths can make the horrific events less terrifying, because of
the creation of a fairy tale world. As trauma scholar Kali Tal writes in her book *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, “mythologization works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives [..], turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative” (Tal 6). This mythologization is not a development within Jewish fiction. In her essay “Jewish Post-Holocaust fiction and the Magical Realist Turn”, Caroline Rody explains how modern Jewish fiction has been influenced by the ’magical’ since the late nineteenth century:

> From its nineteenth-century beginnings, modern Jewish fiction has drawn on the “magical” strands of the Jewish textual heritage: the miraculous supernaturalism pervading the holy texts, from Genesis to the Talmudic legends known as midrash and aggadot; the mystical beliefs and practices of late medieval kabbalism, and the tales of miracles produced by seventeenth-century Eastern European Hasidism, and besides these a large, varied oral folklore that is as full of magic as any such literature in the world. (Rody 42).

Many decades later, young American Jewish authors struggling with the challenge of representing the unrepresentable subject of the Holocaust also turn to myths and fairy tales in their work (Rody 45). As literary scholar Jessica Lang argues in her insightful article “The History of Love, the Contemporary Reader, and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory”, the representation of the Holocaust in third-generation novels becomes often indirect rather than direct, as with previous generations. In addition, Marita Grimwood explains the use of myth and fairy tales in second and third-generation literature as a consequence of childhood stories, stating that “Children and grandchildren of survivors often write from the perspective of having grown up with the more disturbing aspects of their family’s history functioning as their childhood stories” (Grimwood 86). As Anne Karph, a member of the second generation, further notes:

> [T]he Holocaust was our fairy-tale. Other children were presumably told stories about goblins, monsters, and wicked witches; we learned about the Nazis. And while their heroes and heroines (I realize now) must have fled from castles and dungeons, the few I remember had escaped from ghettos, concentration camps, and forced labour camps (as cited in Grimwood 86).

As a result, these childhood perceptions could then reappear in the work second and third-generation writers. Due to the recentness of third-generation fiction however, not much
research is available, and it is challenging to draw conclusions. Nevertheless, we can distinguish some shared characteristics and themes in their writing. Both *Everything is Illuminated* and *A Blessing on the Moon* use mythology in their representation of the Holocaust. In trying to fill in the blanks about the past, they turn to myths and fairy tales in order to find an explanation about their origins. Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Everything is Illuminated* includes an imaginative history of Trachimbrod, complete with prophetic dreams, intricate mysteries and unreliable recordings of shtetl life. Similarly, Joseph Skibell’s 1991 novel *A Blessing on the Moon* relies on imagination as the novel tells the surreal and macabre tale of Polish Jew Chaim Skibelski, following his violent death at the hands of the Nazis. Both novels are interwoven with magical elements that are perceived as normal by the characters and as a natural part of reality. The incorporation of imaginary features into novels is often referred to as *magic realism*. William Spindler describes magic realist texts as “texts where two contrasting views of the world (one ‘rational’ and one ‘magical’) are presented as if they were not contradictory” (as cited in Adams 4). In other words, magic realist texts are narratives that include mythological elements in seemingly realistic stories. However, while *A Blessing on the Moon* could indeed be considered a magic realist, Foer’s novel in itself is not a magic realist novel as both the other narrative strands are completely realist. Literary scholar Philippe Codde also challenges the reading of *Everything Is Illuminated* as a magic realist text, claiming that “this story is steeped in what some critics consider magical realism, but which is really closer to mythology” (“Transmitted Holocaust Trauma” 65). Furthermore, Codde links the appearance of myths and fairy tales in third-generation novels to Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’, as discussed above. Codde argues that “in order to bridge the epistemological abyss that separates them from this inaccessible era, third-generation authors take the imaginative leap implied by the concept of postmemory – Hirsch’s ‘imaginative investment and creation’ – to fill in the blanks left by their absent history” (“Transmitted Holocaust Trauma” 64). As a result of this inaccessibility and the obsession with their past, as described above, members of the Third Generation often try to access the traumatic past through their imagination. Further, Codde states: “Myth clearly serves as one of the central means for the later generations to come to terms with an inexplicable past” (“Transmitted Holocaust Trauma” 66). In other words, third-generation novelists seem to transform the pain of psychological wounds into creativity, using elements of myth and fairy tales, to come to terms with their past.
Having provided a general overview on trauma, the Third Generation and the use of myths in their work, I will now discuss two third-generation novels, *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *A Blessing on the Moon* by Joseph Skibell, and the way in which both authors attempt to represent the trauma of their ancestors through the use of myths.
Chapter 2 | Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*

2.1 Introduction to the novel and plot summary

*Everything is Illuminated* is a postmodernist Holocaust novel written by Jewish-American author Jonathan Safran Foer, who was born in Washington D.C. in 1977. He was only 25 when he published it in 2002. Before analysing the intersections between trauma and the use of myths in the novel, I will begin with a brief plot summary of *Everything is Illuminated*. Originating in a creative writing thesis written when he was an undergraduate at Princeton, it tells the story of a young American Jewish writer named Jonathan Safran Foer who travels, together with his guide Alex Perchov, Alex’s anti-Semitic grandfather, and a dog named Sammy Davis Jr. Jr., to a vanished shtetl in Ukraine. Together they search for Augustine, a woman who presumably saved his grandfather Safran from a Nazi massacre. Foer thus provides the reader with a fictionalized version of himself, who I will refer to as “Jonathan”.

The novel has a rather complex narrative structure as it consists of three strands: one narrated in peculiar English by Jonathan’s Ukrainian translator and guide, Alexander Perchov, who recounts their journey through present-day Ukraine; one consisting of Alex’s letters to Jonathan written in the aftermath of their parting – although the reader is never given access to Jonathan’s letter to Alex – and a third part comprising Jonathan’s magical-mythological tale about the history of the Jewish shtetl of Trachimbrod. Foer’s initial intention was to write a non-fictional account of his own experiences from a journey to Ukraine in 1999. Foer embarked upon this trip with only a photograph and a name to find the woman he believed saved his grandfather from the Nazi’s. As Foer himself describes in an interview, his principal aim of the trip was to learn more about the past of his grandfather. Once he arrived however, Foer’s hope to find out more about his grandfather’s past quickly turned into disappointment, as he found “nothing but nothing, and in that nothing—a landscape of completely realized absence – nothing was to be found” (Foer, Interview HarperCollins Publishers). As a result of this absence, this nothingness, Foer states that he felt compelled to use his own imagination to fill what was missing, to fill the void. As grandfather Safran states in the novel “he knew that the origin of a story is always absence” (Foer 230). However, as Foer points out in the same
interview, the choice to fictionalize the historical facts of the Holocaust was not an easy one to make:

My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one’s responsibilities to ‘the truth’ of a story, and what is ‘the truth’? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind’s eye? (Foer, Interview HarperCollins Publishers)

In *Everything is illuminated*, these questions take on the form of two radically different narrative voices, “one realistic, the other folkloristic” (Foer, Interview HarperCollins Publishers). The first voice is a realistic first-person account written by Alexander, the Ukrainian translator who accompanies the fictional Jonathan on his journey to find Augustine. The second voice refers to the fictional Jonathan who creates a magical tale about the history of the shtetl of Trachimbrod, his grandfather’s and Augustine’s hometown, from the year 1791 until the destruction of the village by the Nazis, in 1942. Foer himself states that:

> With the two very different voices, I attempted to show the rift that I experienced when trying to imagine the book. […] *Everything is Illuminated* proposes the possibility of a response of duality, of ‘did and didn’t,’ of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either ‘how things were’ or ‘how things could have been,’ the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing, attempts to reflect the way things feel (Foer, Interview HarperCollins Publishers).

As I have briefly discussed, these two voices are then interrupted by a third discourse consisting of the series of letters from Alex to Jonathan. In the following pages I will analyse Foer’s novel in reference to the third-generation trauma discussion and examine how Foer uses myths in order to represent his grandfather’s traumatic past. Consequently, in the remainder of this dissertation, I will only focus on the second voice, namely the folkloric saga of life in the shtetl of Trachimbrod.
2.2 Foer as a third-generation novelist

Foer, being a Jewish American grandson of a Ukrainian survivor and consequently a member of the Third Generation, is of course intimately tied to the Holocaust. When asked about his youth, he remembers frequent visits to his grandmother’s house. Foer states:

When I was young, I would often spend Friday nights at my grandmother's house. On the way in, she would lift me from the ground with one of her wonderful and terrifying hugs. And on the way out the next afternoon, I was again lifted into the air with her love. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was also weighing me (Foer, Interview HarperCollins Publishers).

It was thus only at a later stage in his life that Foer started to have a greater interest in his past. Describing his reasons for embarking on the trip to the Ukraine, he says: “[…] in retrospect, I'm not sure that the purpose was to find her. I'm not even sure I wanted to find her. I was twenty when I made the trip — an unobservant Jew, with no felt connection to, or great interest in, my past” and further he states: “The complete absence that I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom. The novel [Everything is Illuminated] wouldn't have been possible had my search been that other kind of success” (Foer, Interview HarperCollins Publishers). In other words, the novel would not have been written if Foer’s trip had been more fruitful. Even though the trauma of the Holocaust is described by Augustine as “It is not a thing that you can imagine. It only is. After that, there can be no imagining” (Foer 188), the novel itself is, of course, just that: an attempt at imagining the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. In Everything is Illuminated, Foer deals with uncovering and giving voice to the atrocities of the past. Foer’s novel seems to be an attempt at ‘illuminating’ his grandparents’ past. Many second and third-generation authors seem to feel compelled to explore the Holocaust because of a sense of absence, a lack of knowledge about the past. In an interview for The Times, Foer explained the sense of absence he felt when he travelled to the Ukraine:

There wasn’t a grandfather, there wasn’t a dog, there wasn’t a woman I found who resembled the woman in the book—but I did go, and I just found—nothing. It’s not like anything else I’ve ever experienced in my life. In a certain sense the book wasn’t an act of creation so much as it was an act of replacement. I encountered a hole—and it was like the hole that I found was in myself, and one that I wanted to try to fill up (Wagner 2002).
As the above excerpt alludes to, *Everything is Illuminated* is an attempt to fill this absence. The novel is an attempt to replace the emptiness with words. In addition, the novel also seems a to be a warning, as Alan Berger explains in his essay “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and Identity in Third Generation Writing about the Holocaust”, “*Everything is Illuminated* represents the universal dimension of intergenerational transmission of trauma. Jews were the killers’ obsession, but the lives of others were deeply etched by Nazism’s evil. Foer’s novel may in fact be read as a warning to humanity” (Berger 158). The warning being that an enormous and monstrous evil like the Holocaust, given the ‘right’ historical circumstances, can happen again. Furthermore, with his novel, Foer seems to try and keep the Holocaust narrative alive. However, for third-generation novelists, remembering the Holocaust in their fiction is not an easy task. In a passage in the novel entitled “Jews Have Six Senses”, Foer writes:

> Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing…memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks…that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like?* (Foer, 198-199).

This excerpt of the novel primarily reveals the difficulties in remembering the Holocaust for third-generation writers. Furthermore, being such a traumatic event, the Holocaust seems to challenge the possible forms of representation of the memory. Hence, new types of representation emerge to try and preserve these memories. One of these new forms which Foer uses in his novel is mythologizing the past, which will be discussed in the following pages.

### 2.3 Imagining the past: the Mythologization of trauma

As previously said, often only being witness to documents, third-generation novelists frequently try to reconstruct their grandparents’ past by inventing their own narratives to try and fill in the empty spaces. In *Everything is Illuminated*, the reader is presented with a mixture of historical fact and fiction, of realism and mythological invention. As Jenni Adams
has recently argued, Foer uses the fantastic in his novel “to both affirm and subvert a realist attitude towards the possibility of knowing and representing the Holocaust” (Adams 12). In the novel, Jonathan's wish to learn more about the past of his grandfather remains unfulfilled. As a result of this, he must reconstruct his own version of the past through his imagination. Whereas Alex provides the reader with a realistic and truthful account of their trip, the character of Jonathan creates a fantastic and bizarre tale about the life of his ancestors in Trachimbred and its mythological origins. In this case, Jonathan’s story about Trachimbred does not refer to a specific myth, but instead is the creation of his own myth. The tale, which can be seen as the core of the novel, begins with the birth of Brod and ends with the destruction of the shtetl. The story starts on March 18, 1791 “when Trachim B’s double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (Foer 8). Following this horse-and-wagon accident no bodies were found, except for a baby girl that floats to the surface of the water: “In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jelly-fish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum” (Foer 13). The new-born appears to be Jonathan’s first-known ancestor, his “great-great-great-great-grandmother” (Foer 16). Born seemingly from the river and without an umbilical cord, the girl is named Brod after the river in which she was found. Not only does the imaginative creation of Brod mark the beginning of Jonathan’s family lineage, it also marks the start of a tradition, referred to as ‘Trachimday’, which was named after Brod’s biological father and includes a re-enactment of the accident in the river. It is a tradition which will repeat year after year until the destruction of the shtetl in 1942. For the reader, Brod’s mysterious birth out of the water signals the entrance into the fantastic world, created by the author. Brod is adopted by Yankel D, a man who was originally called Safran (Foer 47). In addition, apart from her magical birth, the intelligent Brod has the miraculous ability to ‘see’ into the future. Besides her intelligence, Brod is also said to be extremely beautiful, which seems to arouse fear and jealousy:

The women of the shtetl raised their impressive noses to my great-great-great-great-greatgrandmother. They called her dirty river girl and waterbaby under their breath. While they were too superstitious ever to reveal to her the truth of her history, they saw to it that she had no friends her own age (telling their children that she was not as much fun as the fun she had or as kind as her kind deeds) (Foer 75).
As a result, Brod seems to become very lonely and sad: “She was a genius of sadness, immersing herself in it, separating its numerous strands, appreciating its subtle nuances. She was a prism through which sadness could be divided into its infinite spectrum” (Foer 78). Later in life, Brod goes on to marry a character called ‘the Kolker’, who appears in the narrative when Yankel dies. The Kolker has survived a flour mill accident, leaving him with a saw blade in his skull resulting in a split personality. After his death, the Kolker’s body is bronzed into a statue, known as the ‘Dial’ because the circular saw blade could be used to tell the time by the position of the sun. The statue becomes both a “symbol of luck’s power” (Foer 139) and a place of commemoration for the Kolker’s descendants. The story then jumps in time and starts covering the life of Jonathan’s grandfather Safran. Safran is described as a man who, due to his lifeless right arm, “had the power to make any woman who crossed his path fall in hopeless love with him […] (Foer 166). At the end of the novel, reality and fiction meet and the character of Safran merges with Jonathan’s historical grandfather. The Trachimbrod story culminates with the destruction of the entire shtetl and the death of Safran’s wife and their baby, when it is bombed by the Germans. In addition, within Jonathan’s fictional tale of Trachimbrod, two other 'stories' are incorporated. These stories take on the form of two books called The Book of Antecedents and The Book of Recurrent Dreams, which record and preserve the town’s history. The Book of Antecedents is a collection of surreal anecdotes about the shtetl and its people. It began as “a record of major events: battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences, the beginnings and ends of political regimes” (Foer 196). As the book evolved, it also came to include more trivial events, “as citizens contributed family records, portraits, important documents, and personal journals until any schoolboy could easily find out what his grandfather ate for breakfast on a given Thursday fifty years before […]” (Foer 196). Not only the past is documented, also the future is occasionally foreshadowed. This occurs in The Book of Recurrent Dreams, in which the citizens of Trachimbrod record their own dreams and memories. Segments of both books are inserted throughout the novel. Foer’s language and method of storytelling seems to provide a way of representing trauma in a way that ordinary language is not able. As Joe Langdon states in his article “Magical Realism and Experiences of Extremity“, unlike many other Holocaust fiction, Foer’s ‘aim’ with his novel is not to question or challenge mainstream historical representations of the Holocaust. Foer, however, seems to suggest that there is not just one reality and emphasizes the problems associated with representing both the past and the complexities of trauma (Langdon 16).
Infusing the story with mythological elements allows Foer to express the inexpressible. Foer’s use of fantasy provides a new language that is liberated from realism and opens up other ways of expressing a traumatic past.
Chapter 3 | Joseph Skibell’s *A Blessing on the Moon*

3.1 Introduction to the novel and plot summary

*A Blessing on the Moon* is Holocaust novel written by Joseph Skibell, a Jewish American novelist born in 1959. Skibell is the grandchild of a Jew who fled Poland and a third-generation descendant of Holocaust victims. In an interview added to the novel, Skibell discusses how his novel came to be. Starting out as an unwritable play, which was “about a character very much like [him]self, coming to terms with the effect his aunts’ and uncles’ and great-grandparents’ deaths in the Holocaust have had on him” (“Interviews with Joseph Skibell” 259), the story eventually became a novel. The 1997 novel, set in Poland during the Second World War, is Skibell’s intergenerational response to the Holocaust. The novel follows the experiences of protagonist and narrator Chaim Skibelski, a character which bears the same name as Skibell’s great-grandfather. Similarly to Foer’s novel, *A Blessing on the Moon* is divided in three parts. The first part of the novel, called ‘From the Mayseh Book’, begins with Chaim’s death: “It all happened so quickly. They rounded us up, took us out to the forests. We stood there, shivering, like trees in uneven rows, and one by one we fell. […] Guns kept cracking in the air. Something pushed into my head. It was hard, like a rock. I fell” (Skibell 3). Chaim then escapes out of the mass grave, only to find that he is in fact dead. As Rody points out, in contrast to most works of Holocaust fiction, the novel begins, rather than ends, with death (Rody 47). Dead but still conscious, invisible to others but still capable of thinking and feeling, Chaim sets off on a wandering journey accompanied by his dead rabbi, who has now transformed into a talking crow. He returns to his old house, which is now inhabited by a Polish family. During his stay there, he befriends the family’s dying daughter Ola, who seems to be the only one able to see him. After Ola dies, Chaim decides to leave his house. Following that, the second part of the novel ‘The Color of Poison Berries’ begins. Together with the rabbi, Chaim goes back to the mass grave. They ‘free’ the other thousands of dead Jews from the grave, who then decide to join them on their travels hoping that the rabbi will lead them to ‘The World to Come’. Shortly after however, Chaim is abducted by the disembodied head of a German soldier who claims to be Chaim’s murderer: “A young soldier
points his rifle at my face. ‘One step more,’ he says, ‘and I’ll kill you again’” (Skibell 93). Despite the fact that the soldier initially acts as he did during the war, later he takes the oppurtunity to ask for forgiveness. Chaim responds: “‘Little head,’ I say, ‘when you killed me, you took everything. My home, my wife, my children. Must you have my forgiveness as well?’” (Skibell 117). After a long journey through a forest, the group suddenly stumbles upon a luxurious, mysterious and almost paradise-like hotel, surrounded by a magical river whose water purifies and frees them from their physical pain. In the hotel they are reunited with their dead family members. After the reunion however, all Jewish guests except for Chaim are apparently invited to take a ‘steam bath’. By the time Chaim discovers what is actually being baked in the hotel’s underground ovens, it is too late and he, yet again, loses everyone he has ever known. Then, the third part of the novel, called ‘The Smaller to Rule by Night’ begins. After losing his family once more, Chaim finds himself wandering aimlessly through Europe. After decades of drifting, Chaim finds himself back in his old hometown, confused by the modern buildings, streets and technology. He then follows a trail into the woods and comes across a little hut, inhabited by two Hasidic brothers named Kalman and Zalman who have been waiting for him for fifty years. They claim to be responsible for the disappearance of the moon, which has been absent from the sky since the Holocaust. With Chaim’s help, they are able to find the moon, buried in a graveyard beneath the corpses of the dead. Eventually, after a long time of digging, they manage to return the moon to its rightful place in the sky. Now, Chaim is free to leave the world and his body is laid to rest at last.

3.2 Skibell as a third-generation novelist

As already mentioned, Skibell is, like Foer, a third-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors. However, as Skibell addresses in an interview added to the novel, like many other intergenerational witnesses to the Holocaust, his family never talked about the atrocities of the Holocaust and those who were lost. He states: “All in all, about eighteen members of our immediate family had just disappeared, violently, from the face of the earth. And no one ever talked about it. This silence, I think, haunted me as a child” (“Interviews with Joseph Skibell” 262). Further he explains his reasons for writing his first novel A Blessing on the Moon: “[…] the book is an attempt on my part to recover from the silence a family history that, except for a
clutch of photos and whatever is encoded genetically, has all but disappeared. It’s an imaginative reconstruction, of course, not a historical one, and because of that, I feel it is somehow truer” (Skibell 262). The novel can thus clearly be considered a work of postmemory. Growing up with this Holocaust silence, Skibell seems to try to give a voice to those who had been silenced. Furthermore, the fact that the novel is dedicated to all his great-grandparents and that their names will be printed and read in every novel, attests to its commemorative purpose. As Sarah C. Dean explains in her essay “Intergenerational Narratives: American Responses to the Holocaust”:

Unlike second-generation witnesses who directly experience narratives of the Holocaust from their parents, Skibell’s position as an intergenerational witness is marked by a different kind of closeness—the very real and felt absence of a large portion of his family. The presence of this absence has a profound affect of second- and third-generation witnesses that creates a different kind of closeness to the event (Dean 87).

In this case, Skibell’s family members are absent from the intergenerational relationship, which causes a void. As a result of the void that marks Skibell’s discourse and the discourse of his murdered family, Skibell turns to imagination to try and reconnect with his relatives and work through his trauma. As Dean concludes: “imagination functions where direct memory cannot” (Dean 89). In the novel, several references to the intergenerational transmission of trauma are made, such as when Chaim notes: “Many worlds have been lost, not simply my own” (Skibell 210), after he has met the brothers Kalman and Zalman. This sentence seems to be a direct reference to the future generations and their struggle to overcome their own postmemorial trauma. Furthermore, when Chaim, together with the brothers, is trying to return the moon to its place in the sky, he thinks to himself: “Forever now, the moon will appear this way, no longer the smooth and gleaming pearl I remember from my youth” (Skibell 244), again referring to the transgenerational transmission of trauma. In this scene, the moon “becomes their memorial, eternally bearing the stain of their deaths” (Rody 51). In addition, when the dead Chaim dies at last in the ending pages of the novel, he thinks: “I find I can still, without difficulty, remember my name. Chaim Skibelski” (Skibell 256). With this scene, Skibell memorializes his ancestor, having his name read by every reader.
3.3 Imagining the past: the Mythologization of trauma

In a similar manner as Foer, Skibell creates a fantasy world that is grounded in reality. Blending the ‘real’ with the ‘fantastic’, the novel is a reimagining of the past. In the words of Rody: “[A Blessing on the Moon] trades the horror a realist text would try to convey, the nearly inconceivable truths that survivors and others have found so hard to describe and with which we have become all too familiar, for different impossibilities that expressionistically convey the unnatural, terrifying facts of the author's family's deaths” (Rody 48). Skibell seems to draw on the fantastic in order to be able to deal with the horrors of the past. In addition, in his youth fairy tales were a big part of his upbringing. As Skibell himself explains, while writing the novel he was inspired by folk and fairy tales. He states: “[...] for years I’ve been a great lover of fairy tales and folk tales. Yiddish folk tales, especially, speak to me. [...] And I guess I had been soaking my consciousness in them for so long that a story with talking animals and Rabbis turning into birds and Jews unable to get into the World to Come didn't seem that strange to me (“Interviews with Joseph Skibell” 261). Consequently, the mythological references in A Blessing on the Moon are numerous. In fact, as Rody notes, Skibell’s novel can be “more readily describes as a fantastic fable than as a realist text punctuated by magical moments” (Rody 48). Perhaps an even better description of the novel would be a “generic hybrid” (Grimwood 91) of different genres, relying on fantasy, fairy tales and allegory. A Blessing on the Moon can be seen as an attempt to resurrect the dead bodies of the Holocaust both linguistically and historically, placing them on the border between fantasy and reality, in an effort to give the dead a voice (Grimwood 108).
4.1 The representation of Trauma

4.1.1 Describing the indescribable: narrative strategies

Having provided an introduction to both novels separately, this concluding chapter will be devoted to a comparison between the two. As already established, both novelists are members of the Third Generation and focus on small rural Eastern European towns in the novels that this dissertation discusses. Besides including mythological elements which challenge the laws of the physical world, their trauma narratives also reveal the struggles experienced in the process of retelling and re-experiencing the traumatic events. To clarify, writers of trauma narratives, like Foer and Skibell, often represent the conflicted relation to memory, as a result of traumatic experiences, through certain narrative strategies such as repetition, different viewpoints and gaps in the story. To begin, Foer’s novel seems to place the reader in a similar position as the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, as they are confronted with multiple accounts describing the same event. That is to say, as first-hand accounts become less and less available, members of the Third Generation often need to rely on highly mediated accounts by other people. In Everything is Illuminated, Foer creates a highly unreliable world by frequently including multiple voices describing the same event. By doing so, the reader is not sure who to believe to be telling the truth. For instance, in the first scene of the Trachimbrod history, Jonathan describes how “Trachim B’s double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River” (Foer 8). The “did or did not” is already a clear indication of the unreliability of the narrator. When Sofiowska N tries to tell what happened, he is not able to provide a coherent account: “I have seen everything that happened, […] I witnessed it all. […] and if that’s not exactly the truth, then […] and if that doesn’t seem quite correct, then what happened was […] (Foer 9). Furthermore, only moments after the accident, nobody in the shtetl seems to know what exactly happened: “almost all of the shtetl’s three hundred-odd citizens had gathered to debate that about which they knew nothing. The less a citizen knew, the more adamantly he or she argued” (Foer 12). This scene is followed by many other unreliable recordings of life in Trachimbrod. Besides the use of different perspectives,
many events also become highly mediated. This is the case in the final scene when the shtetl is bombed by the Germans, which I will come back to later.

As stated in the first chapter, trauma narratives are also often characterized by absences and incoherence. In his article “Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels”, Codde states that the novels of third-generation novelists are “haunted by absent presences” (“Keeping History at Bay” 674). In particular, in Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, these absent presences reappear throughout the novel as a significant motif (Keeping History at Bay” 678). The concept of ‘absent presences’ is in fact described in the novel itself in a passage in *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, entitled “The Dream of disembodied Birds”:

> You will remember when a bird crashed through the window and fell to the floor. You will remember, those of you who were there, how it jerked its wings before dying, and left a spot of blood on the floor after it was removed. But who among you was the first to notice the negative bird if left in the window? Who first saw the shadow that the bird left behind, the shadow that drew blood from any finger that dared to trace it, the shadow that was better proof of the bird’s existence than the bird ever was? (Foer 38)

The dream thus describes the aftermath of a bird crashing through a window, leaving behind a “negative bird” (Foer 38) in the glass. In the words of Codde: “the only proof of what happened is the void, the emptiness in the window pane, the trace of a presence that is already absent” (“Keeping History at Bay” 679). Codde further points out that even though the ending scene of the destruction of Trachimbrod constitutes the novel’s traumatic core, it is not directly represented in Jonathan's narrative. He notes that: “The bombing of Trachimbrod is represented as an absent presence in the novel” (“Keeping History at Bay” 678). For even though we do learn what happened to Safran and his family when the German bombs hit Trachimbrod, the event appears only in the most mediated form:

> […] my safran picked up his wife and carried her like a newlywed into the water which seemed amid the falling trees and hackling crackling explosions the safest place hundreds of bodies poured into the brod that river with my name […] the bombs rained from the sky and it was not explosions or scattering shrapnel that would be our death not the heckling cinders not the laughing debris but all the bodies bodies flailing and grabbing hold of one another […] (Foer 272).
Presented in a stream of consciousness, the bombing of Trachimbrod appears as a predictive dream in *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, entitled “The dream of the end of the world”, a dream invented by Brod. This description is in turn invented by Jonathan, which is in turn invented by Foer. In the words of Codde: “The event emerges as an after-effect that resonates in the form of a trace” (“Keeping History at Bay” 678). A final example of an absent presence in the novel is found in the scene when Brod speaks with her husband, the Kolker, and eventually makes love through a hole in the wall. The Kolker later dies and afterwards, Brod cuts the hole that separated her from her husband from the wall, and wears it on her necklace, stating that “The hole is no void; the void exists around it ( Foer 139). Not only can the scene of the destruction of Trachimbrod, as discussed above, be described as an absent presence, it is also notable because of another aspect, namely the difficulty in expressing a traumatic event. As Leys writes: “language succeeds in testifying to the traumatic horror only when the referential function of words begins to break down, with the result that […] what is transmitted is not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself” (Leys 268). To clarify, the mind is often unable to grasp the horror of the traumatic experience which can result in an effect on a person’s rational way of thinking. As a logical consequence then, ordinary language can also fail to represent the traumatic event. That is to say, the traumatic scene of the bombing itself is not represented. Instead Jonathan seems to try and suspend the fatal moment, to stall time in order to give the people of Trachimbrod an chance to escape, by substituting its description with almost two full pages filled with dots, thereby creating “an absence, a void within the novel that suggests the trauma's inexpressibility in language” (“Keeping history at bay” 678). However, this stalling of time is an illusion and alludes to an important theme in the novel: that you cannot change the past via writing. Furthermore, it seems that every time Jonathan attempt to describe a traumatic event, he is only able to represent it indirectly. A similar instance of this is the fragmented description of the rape of Brod, another traumatic event within the novel. Brod is raped when she is walking back home on the night of the thirteenth Trachimday festival. Brod’s trauma is first alluded to in a page in *The Book of Antecedents*, which Brod herself is able to read before the incident even takes place. Foer writes how Brod “lifts a powerful telescope to find herself” (Foer 87), which allows her to see her own future. While looking through the telescope, she is able to read the following passage:
THE FIRST RAPE OF BROD D

The first rape [...] occurred amid the celebrations following the thirteenth Trachimday festival, March 18, 1804. Brod was walking home from the blue-flowered float—on which she has stood in such austere beauty for so many hours on end, waving her mermaid’s tail only when appropriate, throwing deep into the river of her name those heavy sacks only when the Rabbi gave the necessary nod—when she was approached by the mad squire Sofiowka N, whose name our shtetl now uses for maps and Mormon (Foer 89)

This passage clearly demonstrates the difficulties of describing a traumatic event. That is to say, Jonathan focuses mostly on describing Brod’s appearance and the earlier events at the festival. It is only in the final sentence, when Sofiowka N, the man who raped her, is introduced, that the actual rape is hinted at. In addition, the rape is not described any further as the last sentence is left unfinished, which again can be seen as a reference to the difficulties of describing a traumatic experience. Later, as Brod in fact is at the festival, instead of on a page in The Book of Antecedents, the rape occurs but it is again alluded to rather than described with the sentence “[she] ignored them even when they made a woman out of her”. The full description of what occurred on the night of the Trachimbrod festival is only given much later in the novel, allowing the reader to finally understand what happened to Brod. However, the rape is described again The Book of Antecedents, when grandfather Safran reads it, meaning that it is still described in a layered manner, as the story is read by Safran.

This failure of language can also be found in Skibell’s A Blessing on the Moon. A first instance of this can be found in the scene where Chaim is unable to read a note left behind by the rabbi:

“Chaim, you didn’t get my note?”

“Your note” I say. “Yes, I got your note. Only how could I read it, scrawled in that pigeon scratch, you shouldn’t be offended.”

“Chaimka,” the jaw of his beak slackens. “That was Yiddish.”

“Yiddish?” I say. Impossible! (Skibell 67)

When Chaim asks the rabbi about the note, he is amazed to find out that it was written in Yiddish, a language he should be capable of understanding. Another instance symbolizing the failure of language can be found in the beginning of the novel, in the scene where Chaim
starts writing down his story in his ledger book, attempting to bear witness to his trauma. At first, this seems to work, however, after a while, the writing starts failing. When Chaim has put Ola to bed, he describes: “I sit near her bedside, attempting to catch up with my account in the ledger book, retrieved from my offices across the courtyard, but my words are as dry and my sentences as circular as word shavings” (Skibell 39). This sentence also hints at the concept of circularity of trauma, as discussed in the opening chapter, referencing the fact that Chaim tries to replace his frightening, uncontrollable narrative with linearity by creating a rational and chronological story. However his language fails him to do so. When Chaim is later attacked by the pack of wolves, he loses his book. After the horrific events in kitchen, Chaim leaves the hotel and in the woods finds back his rucksack with the ledger book in it: “The family pictures are missing, but the ledger book is neatly tucked inside. I open its covers and find that its pages have been singed and burnt. The remnants of my careful notes and drawings crumble and fall into the forest carpet. “Will it never end?” I shout this question to the trees” (Skibell 193). While the covers have remained untouched, the pages seems to have been magically burned, illustrating another failure of language. Furthermore, Foer seems to use the language of music when words are unable to express the complexity of reality. In the passage in the Book of Antecedents, it is stated that:

Music is beautiful. Since the beginning of time we (the Jews) have been looking for a new way of speaking. We often blame our treatment throughout history on terrible misunderstandings. (Words never mean what we want them to mean.) If we communicated with something like music, we would never be misunderstood, because there is nothing in music to understand. […] It is also the reason that the elderly among us, particularly those who survived a pogrom, hum so often, indeed seem unable to stop humming, seem dead set on preventing any silence or linguistic meaning in (Foer 203).

Music as an alternative to speaking or testifying seems to serve as a protection to help deal with the haunting memories of the past. Following that, the scene where Chaim is abducted by the German soldier can be seen as a form of ‘acting out’, involving repetitive compulsion, as discussed in the first chapter. The soldier who, so he claims, initially executed Chaim, literally says: “One step more,” […] “and I’ll kill you again” (Skibell 93). The scene seems to be a literal reliving of Chaim’s central trauma of the massacre, a repeated return to the original traumatic event. However, in this scene, Chaim fights back. He realizes that he cannot be killed again by the soldier: “All right! Enough foolishness!” I say, turning my face to him.
Taking its long barrel between both hands, I thrust the other end of his gun against his chest, knocking sharply into him with a hard dull thud” (Skibell 94). By magically returning to the original trauma, Chaim is able to take control and create an alternative version of his trauma.

As also discussed in the first chapter, the re-enactments of traumatic events often go hand in hand with a loss of orientation. In A Blessing on the Moon, Chaim is no longer able to keep track of time after he has died. After he has been writing in his ledger book, he states: “It must be late. Although I carry my pocket watch, the numbers no longer make any sense to me. The golden sticks whirl round and round chasing each other, but I have forgotten how to understand the little races that they daily perform” (Skibell 18). Following that, the moon is presumably also a reason for Chaim’s loss of sense of time, as Jews often follow the lunar calendar. For instance, Chaim seems unable to remember how long he has known Ola: “She too, seems years older than when I saw her last. Was it really only a night ago? How many years has she been living in my house?” (Skibell 55). Also, when he hides in a small cupboard to save himself from the bakers and their hot oven, he seems to have stayed in there for months as he asks himself when he comes out: “How long have I lain hidden in my little cupboard, cramped and twisted from fear? It must be early spring” (Skibell 187). This loss of time also seems to be transferred onto the reader. While reading the first part of the novel, it seems as though only a few weeks or even only a few days pass during Chaim’s stay at his former house. However, when one of the house’s inhabitants suddenly declares “Pan Skibelski is dead!” […] “They shot him years ago! His children are dead! His wife is dead! Everyone knows this!” (Skibell 54), it becomes clear that in fact many years have passed since Chaim’s arrival at the house. Similarly, when Chaim arrives at the house of the brothers Kalman and Zalman, it turns out that suddenly fifty years have passed.

Writing about the wounds of the past frequently stretches far beyond the limits of linguistic representation. For this reason, both authors use the above-mentioned narrative strategies in an attempt to represent the traumatizing past. By incorporating these devices into their works of fiction, Skibell and Foer make the reader, who is often dissociated from the events, engage with the Holocaust narrative and their trauma.
4.1.2 Love versus suffering as a way of rewriting the past

Besides the similar way in which both novels reveal symptoms of traumatic experiences, there are also significant differences to be found. Both Foer and Skibell attempt to represent the horror of their family’s past by turning to mythology and fairy tales, however, their focus seems to lie elsewhere. While *Everything is Illuminated* seems to put love at its centre, *A Blessing on the Moon* is overshadowed by its characters’ extreme suffering. To begin, probably the most important aspect in Foer’s representation of trauma is the all-encompassing notion of love. According to Rody, the purpose of this mythological mode of writing is “the recovery of transcendent love from a history of violence (Rody 55). Love flows through the words of each page, as a magical force that spreads around light in contrast to the darkness of history. Foer is able to rewrite death in a vision that celebrates the infinite power of love (Rody 56). To begin, no less than five chapters in the novel are called “Falling in Love”. In one of these chapters, towards the end of the novel, a young boy looking for a book browses the more than seven hundred novels written by the citizens of Trachimbrod between 1850 and 1853 and asks the librarian for help: “*What’s it about?* She asked. *It’s about love*. She laughed. *They’re all about love*” (Foer 202). This scene is crucial in showing how love is at the centre of every story. Also especially noteworthy is a significant passage where all of the people of Trachimbrod are making love at the same time on the night of Trachimday. From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light, exactly, but a glow that could be mistaken for light – a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut’s eyes. In about one and a half centuries – after the lovers who made the glow will have long since been laid permanently on their backs – metropolises will be seen from space. [...] The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves. [...] Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It’s difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine’s Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick’s. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle on each of Chanukah’s eight nights. Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric. We’re here, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. We’re here, and we’re alive (Foer 95-96).

In the same way as Skibell’s eternally stained moon, Foer makes the heavens bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust. Foer’s novel makes the shtetl of 150 years earlier and its
community visible to the present world, “preserving the love of Trachimbroders not only in its text but also as a projection into outer space” (Rody 55). Another noteworthy scene in this respect is the metafictional scene when Safran and the young gypsy girl create in fact a love story out of newspaper clippings about the war in Europe:

Meet me under the wooden bridge, and I will show you things you have never, ever seen. The "M" was taken from the army that would take his mother's life: GERMAN FRONT ADVANCES ON SOVIET BORDER; the “eet” from their approaching warships: NAZI FLEET DEFEATS FRENCH AT LESACS; the “me” from the peninsula they were blue-eyeing: GERMANS SURROUND CRIMEA; the “und” from too little, too late: AMERICAN WAR FUNDS REACH ENGLAND; the “er” from the dog of dogs: HITLER RENDERS NONAGGRESSION PACT INOPERATIVE … and so on, and so on, each note a collage of love that could never be, and war that could (Foer 233).

As Codde explains, they do not just put fragments together to create a new story, but also turn something bad into something good. Safran and the gypsy girl literally turn a bad history into passionate love notes (“Keeping History at Bay” 680). Questions about the meaning and nature of love also dominate the plot of all the ‘main’ characters. Being wise beyond her years, Brod quickly realizes that love is not easily found. She lives her life “searching for something deserving of the volumes of love she knew she had within her” (Foer 80) and later understands that “[…] she had to satisfy herself with the idea of love – […] Love itself became the object of her love. She loved herself in love, she loved loving love, as love loves loving, and was able, in that way, to reconcile herself with a world that fell so short of what she would have hoped for” (Foer 80). Above all, her intelligence allows her to discover that love is impossible within her world. Like Brod, Yankel, who is Brod’s adoptive father, comes to the conclusion that the emotion of love is unsustainable. Initially, he believes in the traditional notion of love and that his first wife was his “first and only love” (Foer 44). However, his idealized version of love is later destroyed when his wife leaves him and he quickly discovers that the love he once thought he knew never existed. With his former idealistic notion of romantic love disrupted, Yankel struggles to exist within the real world and sinks into depression: “By early afternoon he was overcome by the feeling that nothing was right, or nothing was right for him […] alone in the magnitude of his grief, alone in his aimless guilt, alone even in his loneliness” (Foer 47). However, when Yankel becomes a father to Brod, he sees an opportunity to reinvent the love story of his past. He tells the young Brod
that her mother died in childbirth and invents an entire love story between them, showing Brod exchanges of love letters between himself and his imagined wife. On the night of Yankel’s death, Brod meets the man who will become her husband, the Kolker. Initially Brod rejects the Kolker’s offers, screaming “Go away! Go away!” (Foer 98). However, eventually, with her heart full of grief, Brod allows the Kolker in, perhaps hoping she can find love after all. She thinks to herself: “This is love [...] isn't it? When you notice someone's absence and hate that absence more than anything? More, even, than you love his presence?” (Foer 121). However, Brod is living in an illusion she has created herself by choosing to exchange her intelligence for a chance at love. Even though he realizes Brod is holding back, the Kolker is able to fully love her. As a result of the Kolker’s tragic flour mill accident however, they are both forced to re-evaluate their relationship. The saw in the his head causes the Kolker to alternate between moments of kindness on the one hand and extreme violent moments on the other. In the novel, it is stated that “She never ran from his fists, but took them, went to them, certain that her bruises were not marks of violence, but violent love” (Foer 130). Continuing to struggle with the definition of love, Brod in the end is able to express to her husband “I love you” and thinks “for the first time in her life, the words had meaning” (Foer 139). Emerging only later in the novel, Safran, Jonathan’s fictional grandfather, seems to understand and learn love in a new way when he meets the Gipsy girl. Unlike all his previous mistresses whom he “never loved [...]. He never confused anything he felt for love” (Foer 169), the young Gipsy girl and her exoticism awaken something new inside him. However, yet again their love is an illusion for the reality that their love is impossible, is too painful to believe. In addition, Safran is promised to a Jewish girl named Zosha, who he does not love. Instead he only lusts for her and finds himself “filled with a coital energy of such force” (Foer 257). Almost at the end of the novel, Safran declares “And now I am in love” (Foer 263), referring to his unborn child with Zosha, finally discovering how to love.

While in *Everything is Illuminated* the power of love dominates the plot, Skibell’s novel seems to put suffering at its centre. The horrors of the Shoah bleed through every word in the novel. Portraying a bleak and dark world, Skibell seems to refuse to allow the reader to forget that Chaim Skibelski is dead. Even though Chaim is able to think and feel, the circumstances and details of his murder are constantly present throughout the novel. A first illustration of this is Chaim’s endless bleeding. In the beginning of the novel, Chaim decides to take a stroll along the river, however:
The bleeding has begun again. There is apparently nothing I can do. I imagine I have lost everything and am completely drained, when I feel it gurgling down my neck, leaking from the wounds in the back of my head. The spillage collects inside my shirt collar and I tighten my necktie in the hopes of stanching its flow. Because I no longer breathe, I'm able to pull the knot remarkably tight. But the blood simply reroutes itself and emerges from the star-like pattern of holes across my back and chest. It drains into my pockets and pools there, eventually cascading over like a fountain. [...] This is how it is every time I bleed (Skibell 18-20).

Although dead, Chaim and the other murdered Jews from his village are not immune to grief, fear, or suffering. Moreover, they bear the visible signs of their deaths and their suffering, both physical and psychological. Their suffering is present in every word of every page. In a later scene, Chaim’s bleeding body is described once more: “The blood drips back through my socks and runs inside my pant legs and up my thighs. [...] For a moment I am terrified I will fall asleep and drown in my own blood. But that is ridiculous. I am already dead” (Skibell 65). Throughout the novel, Skibell confronts the reader constantly with Chaim’s assaulted, mutilated and broken body. Even though Chaim suffers in a fantastic world, his physical mutilation feels nonetheless strangely real. Another illustration of how suffering dominates the novel’s plot is the continuous mentioning of the countless bullet holes. When Chaim takes a bath in his former home, the scene is described as follows: “The water rises in the tub, seeping through my bullet holes, filling the hollows of my body with its creeping warmth” (Skibell 67). Later, when he has returned to the mass grave together with the Rabbi to free the other Jews, Chaim encounters an old friend Reb Elimelech and the following conversation takes place: “So they shot you in the back of the head, did they?” I choke out the words, “Yes, and through my belly and chest as well.” [...] “Later”, I say, “In private, I’ll show you the holes.” (Skibell 78-79). Besides his own suffering, Chaim seems to associate almost everything in his surroundings with death. In the beginning of the novel, when Chaim tries to catch sleep, he describes how he hears the Polish family breathing: “from all the corners, their monstrous breathing rises and falls, vibrating through throats so thickened with sleep, it sounds like a mass drowning” (Skibell 12). Or later, when Chaim glances one last time at his former house, he remarks: “how small it appears form this distance, a flat rectangular box, no larger than a coffin” (Skibell 72). Chaim’s suffering finally ends in the concluding scene of the novel when
the moon is restored and Chaim reaches the World to Come, a scene which I will come back to later and analyse in more detail.

To sum up, both novels turn to mythology and fairy tales in an attempt to re-write the past, however, their main focal point seems to lie elsewhere. In trying to represent trauma, Foer seems to put the notion of love at the novel’s centre. Besides several significant scenes where love seems to play the leading role, questions about the meaning and nature of love also dominate the plot of Brod, Yankel, the Kolker and Safran. On the contrary, A Blessing on the Moon is dominated by its characters’ extreme suffering. In a refusal to allow the reader to forget that Chaim is in fact dead, Skibell constantly confronts the reader with Chaim’s mutilated body, making his character bear the visible signs of his death and suffering. Besides the continuous mentioning of Chaim’s bleeding and his bullet holes, Chaim also seems to associate nearly everything in his surroundings with death.

4.1.3 Traumatic imagination

Both authors also differ in their imaginative response to history. While in A Blessing on the Moon the marvellous is presented as a part of ordinary reality, the Trachimbrod chapters in Foer’s novel are clearly presented as an imaginary account written by Jonathan. Even though, within the Trachimbrod chapters themselves, the magical is also a part of reality, the reader is still constantly made aware of the imaginative nature of the text. Within the novel, there is a clear contrast between ‘reality’, meaning the recount of their journey to the Ukraine, and the story that Jonathan is writing. Codde demonstrates this by addressing the scene in the novel where Jonathan invents an entire story around his grandfather, based on one baby picture. In this case, Jonathan notices that in one of his baby pictures his grandfather has teeth, a fact which he then links to almost all aspects of his grandfather’s later life.

It’s because of those teeth that my grandfather was pulled prematurely from his mother’s well, and never received the nutrients his callow body needed. […] Without proper calcium, his infant body had to allocate its resources judiciously, and his right arm drew the short straw. […] So it was because of his teeth, I imagine, that he got no milk, and it was because he got no milk that his right arm died (Foer 166).
What is remarkable about this passage is the “I imagine” in the last sentence, which clearly highlights the inventive nature of the story. As Codde further states: “Foer stages his artistic project as metafiction, showing the hand of the novelist at work during the postmemorial invention of his character’s lives on the basis of a few material remnants” (“Keeping history at bay” 677). As already said, in A Blessing on the Moon on the other hand, the magical elements in the novel are just a part of everyday reality. From the very beginning, the magical is present in Skibell’s novel, constructed within a realist context. After climbing out of the mass grave, Chaim describes how he walks to his village: “When I got to our village, everything was gone. A dozen workmen were lifting all the memories into carts and driving off. “Hey! Hey!” I shouted after them. “Where are you going with those?” but they wouldn’t stop. In front of every house were piles of vows and promises, all in broken pieces. How I could see such things, I cannot tell you” (Skibell 4). Chaim is capable of ‘seeing’ vows, promises and memories as if they are objects. He does not seem amazed by this new obtained ability yet only states he cannot explain how he is able to see these abstract behaviours. Furthermore, when Chaim realizes that he is dead yet still able to think and feel, he does not seem that surprised by it and almost immediately accepts it as a part of reality. In addition, the reader simply has to accept this as well. Another example of where an extraordinary element is easily accepted as real is in the following excerpt:

At home, Andrzej and his cousins are playing cards. A bottle of potato vodka stands in the middle of their green-felt card table. There are small tumblers for everyone. “If the yids want the moon,” Big Andrzej says, removing one of his best cigars from between his teeth, “then what’s it to us?” […] “Let them keep it,” he says. “They’re the only ones who ever used it. It’s not as if they took the sun.” “Now that would be a crime,” his wife says, moving through the room with an armful of dirty plates (Skibell 26).

To highlight the realism of the scene, Skibell seems to describe the mundane and everyday aspects of life in great detail, such as a family playing cards, a certain bottle of vodka on the table, someone’s cigar, a woman doing the dishes. The fact that the moon is missing from the sky seems just a part of an everyday conversation, a part of ordinary life.

To summarize, in A Blessing on the Moon the extraordinary is presented as a part of everyday reality. By describing the everyday aspects of life in great detail, Skibell succeeds in having the reader accept the extraordinary elements as part of reality. In Everything is Illuminated the
magical is also a part of reality, however, the reader is constantly made aware of the imaginative nature of the Trachimbrod chapters. The text is clearly presented as an imaginary account written by Jonathan.

4.2 Mythology and rewriting the wounds of the past

After having discussed the ways in which Foer and Skibell attempt to describe the indescribable past of their relatives, I will now explore how they incorporate myths and fairy tales in their work. Both *Everything is Illuminated* and *A Blessing on the Moon* are intimately tied to fairy tales and mythology. In the following pages, I will identify the mythological and fairy tale references that can be found in both novels, and compare the way in which both authors use myths and fairy tales to rewrite their traumatic past. In the novels, both elements of myths and the fairy-tale genre appear, as well as specific instances. To begin, as Hunter writes, everything about the shtetl of Trachimbrod is magical, except its fate at the hands of an all too real mass genocide (Hunter 66). Jonathan’s tale takes place in a complex world with magical events, dreams that predict the future and is populated with eccentric characters like The Wisps of Ardish: “The Wisps of Ardisht – that clan of artisan smokers in Rovno who smoked so much they smoked even when they were not smoking, and were condemned by shtetl proclamation to a life of rooftops as shingle layers and chimney sweeps” (Foer 16). A first fairy-tale element in *Everything is Illuminated* is Foer’s use of foreshadowing. As Hunter points out, “[f]oreshadowing is inherent within Holocaust survivor testimony, as the reader always approaches the narrative with the foreknowledge […] of the impending catastrophe” (Hunter 63). In other words, as the reader knows from the beginning that the shtetl of Trachimbrod eventually will be destroyed, every page within the novel “exists under the shadow of a future history” (Hunter 63). Besides this general sense of predestination, other instances of foreshadowing in the novel can be found. For example, in one of the final scenes between Safran and the gypsy girl it is stated that: “The final time they made love, seven months before she killed herself and he married someone else, the Gypsy girl asked my grandfather how he arranged his books” (Foer 229) and later it is stated in brackets: “Here it is almost impossible to go on, because we know what happens, and wonder why they don’t. Or it's impossible because we fear that they do” (Foer 270), where Jonathan seems to asks the
reader to join him “in turning away from the inevitable” (Hunter 63-64). Following that, while Jonathan’s tale in *Everything is Illuminated* can be described as a mythological creation of his own origins, the text itself also contains numerous mythological references. As Rody writes: “Foer's recreation of the shtetl is an unabashedly intertextual one, cobbled together, apparently, from multiple texts of Jewish literature, learning, and popular culture” (Rody 53). The first mythological reference in Foer’s novel can be found in the very first scene of Jonathan’s fable, the scene in which Brod is mysteriously born out of the river. In contrast to Skibell’s novel, which begins with death, Foer begins his novel with birth. Codde argues that this passage can be read as a reference to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess who was also born out of the water and set the world alight with love. Furthermore, both are so beautiful that they can make every man fall in love with them (Codde, “Course”). Unlike Foer, literary scholar Menachem Feuer reads this scene as an allegory of origin. In his essay “Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*”, he states that:

This allegory no doubt denotes a beginning born of trauma, wherein the subject of the trauma is floating in fragments. And if we look at this as a reflection of its author, it could imply that not just his lineage, but his task as a writer begins after the disaster: his role is to take fragments, in the form of words, representations, and memories of the past, and bring them together into a narrative (albeit a fragmented one) (Feuer 38).

In other words, Foer’s role as a third generation author is thus to put the fragmented pieces together to create a story. A second mythological reference can be found in the scene where Brod and her husband are separated by a wall after the Kolker’s accident resulting in his split personality and Brod cuts “a small hole in the wall to allow him to speak to her from the adjoining bedroom to which he had exiled himself” (Foer 134). This passage is a clear reference to the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe (“Keeping History at Bay” 690), in which both lovers are also separated by a wall. Through a crack in the wall, they whisper words to each other as they stand either side. Unlike Brod and her husband though, Pyramus and Thisbe only kiss through the wall. Finally, it can be stated that the Trachimday Festival is in itself a myth. The story of Brod’s birth out of the water becomes integral to the traditions of the town and marks the beginning of an annual celebration, which is later called Trachimday.
With *A Blessing on the Moon*, Skibell takes the reader into a magical world without rules, where animals can speak, where the moon has been taken from the sky, where the dead come back to life. The novel is filled with images and references drawn from specific myths and fairy tales. As Skibell himself states in an interview: “it always struck me how much the Holocaust [...] seemed foreshadowed in the tales of the Brothers Grimm” (“Interviews with Joseph Skibell” 261). With that in mind, as well as the author’s love for Yiddish folklore and fairy tales, as discussed previously, it is not hard to imagine that these magical stories influenced his novel. The allusions to Jewish fairy tales and myths are carefully integrated in Skibell’s story. To begin, the novel has a number of scenes in which the influence of fairy tales seems undeniable, such as the pack of ravenous wolves that threaten Chaim in the woods, who are able to talk. A second instance is the transformation of the rabbi into a talking crow. His transformation seems to be not only a physical one but also a psychological one. To clarify, the second chapter of the novel begins with “The Rebbe is not his usual self, that much is clear” (Skibell 8). His behaviour has changed as well as his appearance as he for example suddenly steals a wedding ring: “[…] no one is able to stop him as he tears the man’s finger from his hand and flies towards the forests, a golden wedding band glinting in his beak” (Skibell 10). Also, the magical river of which the water has healing powers seems to be fairy-tale inspired. Before finally arriving at Hotel Amfortas, the Jews have to cross a magical river: “Gone are the bruises and the scars, the deep red gnashes where the rifle bullets tore his flesh. Pillow is hole gain, his body healed” (Skibell 129. The scene seems to resemble an element of classic fairy tales where the prince must cross a river to reach the castle of his princess. While these scenes are influenced by fairy tales, the novel also contains several literal references to specific fairy tales. Perhaps the most prominent fairy tale element in the novel is the reference to the story of Hansel and Gretel. After Chaim has arrived at Hotel Amfortas and is reunited with his family, he goes to bed. When he wakes up, however, his wife and children are not in the bedroom any longer. Panicking, he starts searching for them and eventually arrives at the restaurant kitchen of the hotel. There, Chaim hears a baker yell “The oven is hot enough, ja?” and later “Hansel, stick your finger out so I can see if you are fat enough” (Skibell 181-182), an almost literal reference to the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel by the Brother Grimm, in which a witch plans to cook Hansel and Gretel in the oven in order to eat them. Standing in the kitchen, Chaim discovers what is actually being baked in the hotel’s ovens. The truth about the concentration camps is thus only evoked indirectly through the fairy tale of Hansel
and Gretel. Later in the novel, after Chaim’s wanderings in the woods, he arrives back at his old village. Looking at the ground, he notices “a stone, glowing faintly with a pale green light” (Skibell 200). He starts following the trail of little moon stones, “back into the forests, picking up the rocks and collecting them in my old traveler’s sack” (Skibell 201). The glowing stones lead him to the hut of the brothers Zalman and Kalman, who have been waiting fifty years for him to help them restore the moon to the sky. This scene also seems very reminiscent of the beginning of the story of Hansel and Gretel. They live with their father and stepmother on the edge of the forest and the family is very poor. The stepmother decides to leave the children in the woods so that she and her husband will not starve to death. The children, however, overhear the plan and Hansel sneaks out of the house and starts collecting white pebbles, hiding them in the pocket of his jacket. The following day, the family walks deep into the forest, however Hansel leaves a trail of pebbles behind. After they are left alone in the woods, Hansel and Gretel wait for the moon to rise before following the trail of pebbles back home. The fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel is thus once again, however more subtly referred to, as Chaim also follows a trail of ‘moon’ stones to a little hut in the woods. Following that, another fairy tale reference is made in the beginning of the first chapter, entitled “From the Mayseh Book”, when Chaim observes the Polish family who now inhabit his former home: “Upstairs are three more sons, big snoring lummockes, asleep in Ester’s and my bed. Fully clothed they are, with even their boots on. It’s like a fairy tale from the Mayseh Book!” (Skibell 6). The Mayseh Book or Mayse-bukh is a collection of Jewish stories, tales and legends, written in Hebrew script and printed in 1602 (Grimwood 103). In this scene, Chaim refers to a specific fairy tale, namely “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, which is included in the Mayse-bukh in a Yiddish version. In the original fairy tale, Goldilocks, an older woman, intrudes the house of the three bears while the bears are on a walk in the woods and sleeps the night in the bed of one of the bears. In a similar manner, the Polish family has unrightfully invaded Chaim’s former home. While Goldilocks is chased away when the bears return home, Chaim however fails in his effort. The father of the family even yells: “Look! Look at me! […] I’m a dead yid. I’m the ghost of that Jewish yid!” (Skibell 63), as he mocks and imitates Chaim in his attempt to chase the family away. The fairy tale reference seems to point out the unfairness of the intruders claiming his home and possessions. In an interview, Skibell also states that: “[T]he Pied Piper leading away the rats and then the children of Hamelin is, to me, the story of World War II” (“Interviews with Joseph Skibell” 261). In a similar manner as the
piper in the fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm, Hitler seduces the ‘rats’ dragging them to their forthcoming doom. During the Holocaust, the Nazis depicted the Jews as rats and vermin in need of extermination in their propaganda. In the novel, it seems that the Hotel’s Direktor has taken up this role, as he lures the Jews with a megaphone rather than a magical music pipe across the healing river towards the hotel and their impending death. Besides these specific fairy tale references, Skibell also presents the reader with a recurring story, that weaves its way through the novel, about two Hasids who pulled the moon from the sky. The story first appears when Chaim makes up a bedtime story for the ill Ola:

[…] I tell her a story of two pious Jews, two Hasids, who find a boat that takes them to the moon. The boat leaves the river and sails into the sky, where the night is thick with the moon's luminous tide. On the way up, the two men argue about who is to blame for what is happening to them. They blame each other, naturally. But when they arrive, they discover pots of silver waiting for them there. These they load onto their boat, which they have tethered to a long rope girdling the moon. But the silver is too heavy for the boat, and they have piled so much of it into their frail craft that the boat sinks, pulling the moon out of the sky and leaving the earth in darkness (Skibell 43).

Later, when Chaim is captured by the dead German soldier, the tale returns. The soldier starts telling him almost the exact same story and even though the soldier begins his story with the phrase “Once upon a time” (Skibell 105), he tells it as though he has witnessed the events with his own eyes. The final repetition of the story occurs when Chaim meets the two Hasids and is asked to help them restore the moon to its rightful place in the last part of the novel. Grimwood argues that this transition of fairy tale, through testimony, to reality “[…] is a reflection and illustration of the slippage between discourses that the novel exploits” (Grimwood 105-106). In other words, the different ways in which the story returns reflects the ways in which the novel itself alternates between various discourses. Put simply, the story of the disappearance and eventual restoration of the moon seems to form the core of the novel. Conspicuous by its absence, the moon seems to be the centre of Skibell’s novel. Since ancient times, the moon and the lunar cycle have played a major role in Jewish literature. The origins of this can be traced back to a myth, which Skibell refers to in the title of the third part of his novel ‘The Smaller to Rule by Night’. The myth is told in the Book of Genesis:
[...](Genesis 1:16) And God made the two great lights [...]. The greater light [...], and the lesser light. Said the moon unto the Holy One, blessed be He: “Master of the World! Is it possible for two kings to wear one crown?” He answered, “Go then and make thyself smaller.” “Master of the World!” cried the moon. “Because I have suggested that which is proper must I make myself smaller?” He replied, “Go and thou wilt rule by day and by night.” “But what is the value of this?” cried the moon. “Of what use is a lamp in broad daylight?” He replied “Go. Israel shall reckon by thee the days and the years.” “But it is impossible,” said the moon, “to do without the sun for the reckoning of the seasons, as it is written (Genesis 1:14): ‘and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years.’” “Go. The righteous shall be named after thee as we find, Jacob the Small, Samuel the Small, David the Small.” On seeing that it would not be consoled the Holy One, blessed be He, said, “Bring an atonement for Me making the moon smaller (as cited in Liebes 47-48).

In his book *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, literary scholar Yehuda Liebes states that in this myth about the waning of the moon the connection between the moon and Israel is clear. He notes: “To compensate the moon for its waning, God ruled that Israel shall reckon their days by it instead of by the sun [...] and lunar eclipses are therefore considered a bad omen for Israel in the Talmud” (Liebes 48). As Grimwood also explains, according to Jewish tradition, the moon is considered a symbol for Israel, undergoing the phases of waning and waxing parallel to Israel’s cycles of historic rise and fall. She argues that, within *A Blessing on the Moon*, “[t]he moon’s waning is [...] envisaged as persecution. The disappearance and eventual restoration of the moon during the Holocaust [...] therefore symbolizes an unprecedented threat to the Jews, followed by a resurgence of hope” (Grimwood 90). The fact that they are able to restore the moon seems to symbolize that Jewish history has not yet come to an end. In addition, Grimwood also discusses another Jewish tradition, which is referred to in the novel’s title, namely that the moon should be blessed each month on its reappearance (Grimwood 90). In the last part of the novel, in an attempt to restore the moon into the sky, Chaim and the two Hasid brothers indeed ‘bless’ the moon according to this tradition: “Praise God from the sky, praise him in the Heavens! Praise him all His angels, praise Him all His Hosts! Praise Him sun and moon, praise Him starts of light. Praise Him skies of skies, and the water above the skies!” [...] "Blessed be your Former, your Maker, your Possessor, your Creator!” (Skibell 245-46). However, it is only after the Rabbi commands the moon to return to his place in the sky that the moon eventually wakes from his slumber and starts ascending. This final release of the moon from its burial site also
coincides with the release of Chaim from this dark and hopeless afterlife. In the concluding scene of the novel, Chaim finally reaches the World to Come through a reunion with his mother: “I am lying on her square and enormous lap. Her black hair is wild and untied, it falls into her face, a face I know, but which I have never seen so young” (Skibell 256). At last, Chaim is free to leave this cruel, dark world. As Grimwood states: “Finally, he returns to (or through) the large maternal body […]” (Grimwood 99), enabling him to be ‘unborn’ and to rest at last.

Next, two specific magical elements are present in both novels, the first of which is a telescope. In *Everything is Illuminated*, the telescope is able to bridge time and allows Brod to see into the future. She is able to see a glimpse of her own terrifying future, as discussed previously. A telescope is also present in Skibell’s novel, namely in the form of a toy telescope belonging to Ola. While in Foer’s novel the telescope lets the observer see the future, in *A Blessing on the Moon*, the telescope seems to allow the observer to see the ‘truth’. When Chaim first looks through it, he remarks:

> The lens has sustained a crack [...]. I scan my town and see it, as it were, divided in two, the vein in the lens rendering everything slightly askew. [...] along the river, my eye trails a young boy running in the thickets near its banks. [...] The boy is carrying something, food perhaps, and when his hat blows off his head, he does not hesitate or look behind. Neither does he stop to retrieve it. Instead, he pumps his arms harder, jumps into the air, and disappears through the crack in the lens (Skibell 40).

The lens of the telescope has thus ‘sustained a crack’ and the boy, probably a Jewish survivor, ‘disappears’ through it. As Grimwood writes: “[the boy’s] disappearance “through the crack” is one of the novel’s many refusals to clarify its proposed relation between reality and fantasy” (Grimwood 95). A second magical element that is present in both novels is a magical river. In Foer’s novel, it is the place where baby Brod was born, however also where she presumably lost her parents. In addition, the trauma of Brod’s origin in the river seems to mirror the trauma that leads to the destruction of the shetl. At the end of the Trachimbrod history, Safran’s wife Zosha gives birth to a daughter in the river and “she would have lived except for the umbilical cord that pulled her back under toward her mother who was barely conscious” (Foer 273). In Foer’s novel, the river is thus a place of both birth and death. In *A Blessing on the Moon*, the river is said to have magical healing powers. When Chaim and the other Jews
arrive at Hotel Amfortas, they need to cross the river in order to reach the entrance of the hotel. By doing so, suddenly their wounds are magically healed. Finally, when we compare the ending of both novels, another difference becomes clear. In *Everything is Illuminated*, the tale of Trachimbrod ends with a prophesy of its ending. The end of the shtetl is however not caused by any mythological or magical factor but by human people, by German soldiers and bombs. The horrors of reality break through the mythological surface at last. Furthermore, ironically, nearly the entire population of Trachimbrod dies by drowning while they are in the midst of celebrating the long tradition of commemorating Brod’s miraculous birth from the river. The end of the shtetl comes as a disruption, an abrupt and untimely ending, rather than a necessary conclusion. By contrast, *A Blessing on the Moon* ends with a peaceful conclusion. There is little sadness in the depiction of the laying to rest of Chaim Skibelski. He is finally able to leave this dark world and rest at last.

When we compare both authors, it can be stated that the way in which *Everything is Illuminated* and *A Blessing on the Moon* incorporate elements of myths and fairy tales does not vary that greatly. In their novels, myths and fairy tales seem to be used as a substitute narrative in order to help both the reader and the author engage with the unknowable past. Furthermore, they seem to offer a familiar stability and feeling of safety as an alternative to the world of reality where chaos reigns. While numerous critics and writers have argued that the unspeakable cruelty and atrocities of the concentration camps during the Second World War cannot be represented in a fictional manner and have asked the question whether history should be imagined in literature, other critics have rightly pointed out that Holocaust novels are often mythologized in order to more closely resemble the real world, not to distance the stories from reality. In his book *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams writes: “Myth has been held to be a truer […] version of reality than […] history or realistic description or scientific explanation” (Williams 212). Third-generation novelists find the language of realism to be inadequate to convey the extreme suffering and extent of the horror. Furthermore, American literary critic Robert Scholes observes: “Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it. It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention […] we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come” (Scholes 13). In conclusion, storytelling by invention may perhaps even be superior to narratives that try to mirror a reality they cannot possibly grasp. For third-generation novelists such as Joseph
Skibell and Jonathan Safran Foer, highly imaginative forms of writing may be more ‘truthful’ than novels which attempt to be realistic.
Conclusion

By providing a general overview on trauma and the Third Generation in the first chapter, I was able to explore Foer and Skibell’s background and the forces that drove them to write their novels. Being members of the Third Generation, both Skibell and Foer attempt to uncover and give voice to the wounds and atrocities of the past. Being a narrative blend of history and fiction, of life and death, of past and present, both novels share certain characteristics. In their representation of trauma, both novels reveal the struggles experienced in the process of retelling and re-experiencing the traumatic events. In a similar manner, both authors use the certain narrative strategies in an attempt to represent the traumatizing past. By incorporating these devices into their novels, Skibell and Foer make the reader more engaged with the Holocaust narrative and their trauma. Besides these similarities in their style of writing however, the main focus of their novels does seem to lie elsewhere. While Foer seems to put the notion of love at the novel’s centre, A Blessing on the Moon seems dominated by its characters’ extreme suffering. Furthermore, both authors also differ in their imaginative response to history. While in Skibell’s novel the extraordinary is presented as a part of everyday reality, in Everything is Illuminated the reader is constantly made aware of the imaginative nature of the Trachimbrod chapters. After exploring the ways in which Foer and Skibell try to describe the indescribable past of their relatives, I was then able to discuss how they incorporate myths and fairy tales in their work. As a way of dealing with their trauma, members of the Third Generation often incorporate fairy tale and mythological elements into their works of fiction. By comparing Everything is Illuminated and A Blessing on the Moon, this dissertation aimed to situate third-generation trauma narratives within this mythological framework, connecting the patterns of incoherence and trauma with the narrative strategies employed by Foer and Skibell. After examining these strategies in both novel, it became clear that the way in which both novels incorporate elements of myths and fairy tales does not vary that greatly. By using myths and fairy tales in their novels, Foer and Skibell help both the reader and themselves engage with the unknowable past. By distancing themselves from conventional narrative techniques, the reader is more able to broaden his perspective and
capacity of understanding trauma. As an alternative lens for history, imaginative literature is able to provide the reader with a link between the own reality and the unrepresentable aspects of reality. Furthermore, trauma narratives that use myths and fairy tales in an attempt to rewrite a traumatic past often more closely resemble a ‘real’ world than narratives that try to mirror a reality that cannot be understood unless experienced. Both novels, and in fact all Holocaust novels, are a way for them to work through their trauma and at the same time an attempt at keeping the Holocaust narrative alive. As Daniel Schwarz writes: “in truth it is barbaric not to write poetry, in part because if we do not write imaginary literature, how can there be a post-Holocaust era?” and further notes: “Fifty years later the Holocaust lives because the Nazis genocidal efforts to erase all traces of a people and to deprive the Jews of their private selves have been flouted by word and image” (Schwartz 22-23), illustrating the necessity for authors to keep writing, re-writing and imagining history while the shadows of the Holocaust continue to fade.
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