

A Blessing on the Moon:
Between Magic and Reality

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Supervisor:

Dr. Philippe Codde

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1. Introduction

Joseph Skibell is a Jewish American author, novelist, and professor of “Creative Writing” at the Emory University of Atlanta. The grandchild of a Jew who fled Poland, Skibell has always been preoccupied with the loss of his relatives and the gap left by an unknowable past swallowed up by silence. The loss of his family and the atrocities associated with the Holocaust were never spoken of, as Skibell indicates in the following interview:

“When I was growing up, my grandfather and two of his brothers were living in my town. They never talked at all about these people, and as a normally sensitive child, I picked up on it. That silence was very palpable for me. As a child, I assumed that there was some sort of shame in it. Instead, I realized later that it was just horrible, horrible grief.” (Emory University)

Similarly to other writers from the second and third generation who lost the access to the life that existed before their birth, Skibell tried to “recover from the silence a family history that, except for a clutch of photos and whatever is encoded genetically, had all but disappeared” (Grimwood 83). “Consequently”, as Maria Grimwood indicates, “the protagonist of the novel is named for his great-grandfather, Chaim Skibelski, and the author’s dedication of the novel to all his great-grandparents attests to the commemorative and recuperative function he claims for it” (83). In contrast with many other authors who “engage with historical details from their families’ pasts”, Skibell takes a different approach by relying “to a larger extent on imagination to explore a link that he has said is nonetheless important to him” (83). In his attempt to create a response to the historical catastrophe that haunts his family, he blends magical realism, Jewish and Yiddish folk tales, fairy tales and allegories in an extraordinary tale about his great-grandfather. This is why Skibell’s novel “forms a particularly original addition to the Holocaust ‘canon’” (83).

In the light of assigning the novel to a specific genre, or, in this case, various genres, it is important to fully understand which events are presented in the reality of the novel. Therefore, I will give a short summary of the plot: The story, set in Poland during the Second World War, begins immediately with a description of the murder of Chaim Skibelski, a successful Jewish businessman, who is massacred just like all the other Jews of his small village. After climbing out of the mass grave and realizing that he has died, he begins a wandering journey in an extraordinary world in search for relief and maybe even a place in the World to Come. Accompanied by his rabbi who has been transformed into a crow, he returns to his old house, where a Polish family has taken residence. Chaim befriends their young and ill daughter Ola, the only member of the family who seems to be able to see him, and takes care of her until she dies. During his stay at the old house, the moon seems to have inexplicably fallen from the sky. After Ola's death, the rabbi guides Chaim back to the grave where the other dead Jews decide to join him on his travels. Roaming the fairytale-like landscape, they are faced with a pack of ravenous wolves, and in an attempt to scare the beasts off, Chaim gets separated from his company. However, he soon encounters a German soldier who kidnaps him with the intention of killing him all over again. Tired of the perpetual mistreatment, however, Chaim fights back by shoving the German's gun in his chest. The impact makes the soldier's head fall off, after which the terrified body runs away. Only then does Chaim realize that the German belongs to the world of the living dead just like him. After spending some time with Chaim, the soldier eventually dies, but not without having experienced his first feelings of remorse and guilt in relation to the execution of the Jews. Later, when Chaim is once more reunited with the other Jews, they encounter an unbelievably luxurious, even mirage-like hotel surrounded by a magical river. After being healed and completely freed from any physical pain by swimming through the river, they are cordially invited to take residence in the hotel where they are united with their dead family

members. Later, after dinner, all the Jews, except for Chaim receive an invitation to take the steam from where they will never return, much like the Holocaust victims who would never again leave the gas chambers alive. In search for his missing family, Chaim unintentionally stumbles upon a room with ovens where he realizes that his family has been burned and thus has died (again). Struck by intense grief, he finds himself wandering through the forest once more where he discovers a small hut, inhabited by two Hasids who claim to have caused the disappearance of the moon. With Chaim's help, they start the search for the missing celestial body. Eventually, they find it buried in a graveyard and, after some digging, they are able to restore the moon to the sky. Now, Chaim is finally free to leave the world and rest in peace. At the end, the description of the protagonist's 'unbirth' allows the novel to come to a full circle.

2. Hybrid

As Grimwood indicates, *A Blessing on the Moon* is a rather “unusual novel” characterized by “generic uncertainty” (87). Skibell tries to recreate his great-grandfather’s past by relying on various genres such as magical realism, fantasy, allegory, and other related forms. The use of these different writing styles gives rise to a “generic hybrid” (91) that generates different possible interpretations. This hybrid approach helps us to understand “events that are hard to comprehend within any single genre” (107). Grimwood refers to Gilead Morahg to indicate that the mind creates defences against the pain that is associated with traumatic experiences such as the Holocaust. By defying the relationship between reality and magic, Skibell ruptures these defences and provides the possibility to witness the horror from a safe distance “without diminishing its concreteness” (93). Thus, the use of different genres allows the expression of “a theme that on some level we cannot understand in a form that we can comprehend” (93). Because of the incomprehensibility often associated with traumatic experiences, Grimwood states that a discourse based solely upon realism is “inadequate in cases such as the Holocaust” (93). This is why Skibell incorporates magic in his novel. His goal is not to give a literal and impossible account of the Holocaust, but to express his own reaction to the horror of it. In this context, *A Blessing on the Moon* is not to be seen as “an authentic *representation* of the concentrationary experience”, but rather as “an authentic *response* to this experience” (93).

Moreover, the use of magical elements within the reality of the novel evokes “the profound sense of unreality” that attacked, on the one hand, “those who were cast into the concentrationary universe and discovered that all the normative categories that formed the world as they know it had been horribly reversed” (93), and on the other hand, those who, upon hearing about it, were reluctant to believe that the Holocaust actually happened. This reluctance to believe stems from the devastating horror of the Holocaust that no one ever

thought possible. As Gila Ramras-Rauch puts it, the realistic experience touches the dimension of the incredible”(Grimwood 92). This overpowering feeling of incredulity and confusion is present in Skibell’s novel on two different levels. On the one hand, the reader is bewildered by the magical events taking place in the reality of the novel. As Grimwood states, “the interplay of the . . . genres exploits the readers’ expectations by creating a disorienting space that never resolves itself sufficiently for confident predictions to be made” (91). On the other hand, the characters themselves are sometimes lost in a state of total incomprehension when they experience extraordinary events. This state of “disruption and unease” in which both the reader and the characters find themselves has proven a very “successful strategy for representing the Holocaust in fiction” (Grimwood 92).

Skibell has attempted to “resurrect the dead bodies linguistically and historically” and has placed them on the boundaries between different genres, “with an uncertain and shifting relationship to reality” (Grimwood 108) to give the suppressed and murdered Jews a voice in the dominant world of the oppressive perpetrators. It is up to the reader as well as the characters themselves to choose to hear these voices or to remain blind for the devastating horror caused by the Holocaust.

3. Terms

One of the different genres that can be detected in Skibell's novel is 'magical realism'. Before examining the evidence of this statement in the novel itself, it is important to understand the difficulties regarding the definition and application of the term 'magical realism' in general. 'Magical realism' is one of the three variations of a particular narrative mode that implies the use of two irreconcilable elements: magic and reality. Despite the fact that this paradoxical union of two opposites lies on the basis of their definition, the three terms originated and developed in different contexts and are by no means interchangeable. In an attempt to lift the confusion surrounding these terms that are often applied inaccurately, Maggie Ann Bowers indicates the differences between 'magic realism', 'marvellous realism', and 'magical realism':

The first of the terms, *Magischer Realismus* or magic realism, was coined in Germany in the 1920s in relation to the painting of the Weimar Republic that tried to capture the mystery of life behind the surface reality. The second of the terms, *lo real maravilloso* or marvellous realism, was introduced in Latin America during the 1940s as an expression of the mixture of realist and magical views of life in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America expressed through its art and literature. The third term, *realismo mágico* or magical realism was introduced in the 1950s in relation to Latin American fictions, but has since been adopted as the main term used to refer to all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, whereby, 'the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism' (Zamora and Faris). (2)

This passage shows the related, but nonetheless different nature of the terms. Bowers sees 'magic realism' as "the concept of the mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (3). This is contrasted with her perception of 'marvellous realism' which "brings together the seemingly opposed perspectives of a pragmatic, practical and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same novel" (3). This is slightly different from 'magical realism' which she understands as "the commingling of the improbable and the mundane" (3). Thus, Bowers indicates that the difference between the three variations can be found in their meaning of the term 'magic': "in magic realism 'magic' refers to the mystery of life: in marvellous and magical realism 'magic' refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science" (20).

4. Magical Realism

I have chosen to use the term ‘magical realism’ in relation to Skibell’s novel, not because it is the most popular of the three, but precisely because it “relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings” (Bowers 3). In contrast with ‘magic realism’ and ‘marvellous realism’, ‘magical realism’ does not only unite the opposing terms of magic and reality, but also breaks down the distinction between them entirely. As Bowers indicates, “[n]ot only must the narrator propose real and magical happenings with the same matter-of-fact manner in a recognizable realistic setting but the magical things must be accepted as a part of material reality . . . They cannot be simply the imaginings of one mind, whether under the influence of drugs, or for the purpose of exploring the workings of the mind, imagining our futures, or for making a moral point” (31). The reader has to accept “both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level” (4). A magical realist writer does not wish to give the *illusion* that something extraordinary has happened; he wants to convince the reader that something extraordinary *really* happened within the reality of the novel. These extraordinary events may belong to the sphere of mystery, the supernatural or unusual happenings including “ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres” (Bowers 21).

By representing the magical elements as real in the text, magical realist writers destroy the natural distinction between reality and magic. As I have indicated before, this creates just the sense of confusion and unease needed to transfer the horror of the Holocaust to the reader. This technique is also present in Skibell’s novel. He describes the walking dead Jews, the falling moon, Jesus and Mary floating in a carriage, the transformation of a rabbi into a crow, the talking wolves, the magical healing river, the talking head of the German, and other magical elements as if they were really there in the reality of the novel.

Bowers indicates that magical realism is often considered a “disruptive narrative mode” and has therefore “become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems . . . by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely” (4). In the case of Skibell’s novel, or more generally the Holocaust, it offers the writers the possibility to attack the stability of the dominant system of the perpetrators which was based on pragmatic assumptions related to Darwinism. By introducing magic and, more specifically, living dead Jews into his novel, Skibell attacks the fundamental belief systems on which this world of reason was based and introduces fear of the Jewish ghosts in the heart of the perpetrators. The acceptance of magic in the reality of the novel allows the Jews to finally speak up and tell the oblivious and indifferent world the truth. In this context, Skibell gives Chaim a voice which is then heard by Ola, a previously oblivious bystander.

5. Realism

Because magical realism is closely related to realism, one can argue that Skibell's novel contains some elements which can be attributed to the literary realist style. The glossary of *Magic(al) Realism* defines 'realism' as follows:

In literature, the term 'realism' refers to the attempt to create an accurate depiction of actual life. Although originally a philosophical term, in the mid-nineteenth century it came into common use referring to the writer's creation of a believable fictive world. This approach to the experience of life relies upon the belief that it is possible to gain a faithful picture of reality through one's senses and to communicate this to another. In the twentieth century, as faith in the abilities of perception and communication were being questioned, debate concerning 'realism' focused on the process by which the illusion of reality is created. (133)

Bowers explains the relationship between the genres of magical realism and realism by indicating that "magical realism relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real". She states that "[m]agical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits"(22).

In order to make the magical elements of the novel seem 'real' and part of the reality of the novel, Skibell has indeed constructed a realistic context in which the magical events take place. He describes an ordinary village in Poland, a house where an ordinary Polish family has taken residence, and the life of Polish peasants who go about their lives concentrating ordinary things such as making dinner, playing cards, and consoling sulking daughters. He gives a faithful representation of the reality in which these Polish people – with some exceptions such as Ola - believe to reside, and then introduces in this realistic context an

extraordinary element which will be easily accepted as ordinary and real. A striking example of this technique can be found in the following passage:

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?” His lips are full and wet and his face, I notice for the first time, is not altogether unpleasant. “Let them keep it,” he says. “They’re the only ones who ever used it. It’s not as if they took the sun.”

“How that *would* be a crime,” his wife says, moving through the room with an armful of dirty plates. (26)

This excerpt shows how easily the extraordinary event of the disappearing moon is accepted by the Polish peasants in the reality of their world. To emphasize the realism of the scene, Skibell renders the realist elements in comprehensive detail. He describes ordinary things such as a family playing cards, bottle of vodka on a table, a cigar in someone’s mouth, and a wife preoccupied with doing the dishes. Moreover, Skibell’s writing style is not heightened or poetic, but natural vernacular, as it would be in the real world.

Another realist description is to be found at the beginning of the novel, when Skibell recounts the execution of the Jews:

It all happened so quickly. They rounded us up, took us to the forests. We stood there, shivering, like trees in uneven rows, and one by one we fell. No one was brave enough to turn and look. Guns kept cracking in the air. Something pushed into my head. It was hard, like a rock. I fell. But I was secretly giddy. I thought they had missed me.

...

I was lying in a pit with all my neighbors, true, but I was ecstatic. I felt lighter than ever before in my life. It was all I could do not to giggle.

And later, as dusk gathered, I climbed out of the grave, it was so shallow, and I ran through the forests. Nobody saw me. I ran with the dirt still in my mouth. I had to spit it out as I ran.

...

And I realized I was dead. I was dead. (3-5)

Again, Skibell describes details to increase the realism of the scene: he describes the Jews being shot and falling down, the sound of the guns, and the dirt in Chaim's mouth.

Additionally, Chaim's initial reaction is realistic as well. Based on the laws of reality of the world as he knew it before his death, he immediately assumes that he has survived the shot. It is only later that he finally realizes that he is dead. Although this fact disrupts the order of his former belief system, he is however not really surprised and accepts the magic of it immediately as real.

6. Surrealism

Another genre closely related to, but nonetheless distinct from magical realism is surrealism. According to Bowers, surrealism “is often confused with magical realism as it explores the non-pragmatic, non-realist aspects of human existence” (23). Thus, the similarity between the two genres can be found in their reliance on the paradox of unifying two opposing elements: the real and the unreal. There is, however, a striking difference, which becomes clear in Bowers’ description of Salvador Dalí’s painting *The Persistence of Memory* as an attempt “to portray an aspect of life, memory, that is psychological yet attempts to do so through pictorial and therefore physical means” (23). She indicates that “all of the elements of the painting are familiar in themselves and yet are distorted or placed out of context in order to express a non-physical aspect of life” (23). Thus, surrealism implies the exploration of human psychology and the unconscious and is, therefore, not the same as magical realism. In this context, Bowers emphasizes the fact that ‘magical realism’ relies upon the acceptance of magical elements as real, which would not be possible if these elements were presented in a dream, a hallucination, or another psychological experience. (24)

Although belonging, to some extent, to the genre of magical realism, *A Blessing on the Moon* contains however some elements that could be categorized as surrealist or at least be linked to this genre because of their expression of the human psyche, especially in relation to the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. This is the case for the description of the dead Jews: although represented as real, the Jews’ deadly mutilation and Chaim’s constant bleeding could be references to their psychological suffering as a result of the experienced trauma and their frustration at being unable to enter The World to Come. On a higher level, their physical suffering could be an allegory for the psychological suffering of Holocaust

survivors in general. Another example can be found in Ola's physical suffering. Her coughing fits and fevers may very well represent feelings of guilt and helplessness – hers as well as those of the real bystanders of the Holocaust – in relation to the suffering and killing of the Jews.

7. Fantasy

Bowers indicates that “[i]t is often erroneously assumed that magic realism and magical realism are forms of fantastical writing” (25). However, the fantastic is again a related, but distinct genre, that is present in Skibell’s novel. In fact, one could say that the book wavers around the borderline between the two genres, sometimes entering the territory of magical realism and sometimes wandering into the realm of fantasy. Grimwood refers to Tzvetan Todorov’s book *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique* to indicate the three conditions to be fulfilled for a text to be considered ‘fantastic’:

firstly, a hesitation on the part of the reader as to whether to interpret the events portrayed in natural or supernatural terms; secondly, a replication of this in the experience of a character, so that hesitation is thematized; and thirdly the reader’s refusal to interpret the text in an allegorical or poetic sense. (87)

Thus, the difference between the two genres lies in the perception of the magical elements. In fantasy, Bowers indicates, these elements “are presented by the narrators to be extraordinary events in a realist story”, whereas “[a] magical realist interpretation considers these . . . elements to be presented by the narrator to the reader as ordinary events in a realist story” (25). She explains further:

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist. (26)

Although Skibell represents the extraordinary elements as ordinary in the reality of his novel, Todorov’s condition of hesitation is sometimes fulfilled. Despite the matter-of-fact account of the magical events, the reader often hesitates between belief and non-belief in

these phenomena. Moreover, this confusion is sometimes mirrored in the musings of the characters. Most of the confusing questions voiced in the novel are in relation to the World to Come and the frustration caused by the delay of entering this world. Chaim as well as the other Jews repeatedly ask themselves and others why they are not in the World to Come. This question however does not indicate their hesitation regarding the reality of the magical elements, but rather their disappointment in their religious beliefs.

Mostly, as I indicated, all the characters accept the extraordinary events as part of the real world. Despite this overall acceptance, there are however several instances that display some disbelief. This causes difficulties in the classification of the novel. The ambiguity of magical realism and fantasy is already present in the beginning, more precisely in the description of Chaim's 'unburial'. As I indicated before Chaim's realization of his death can be considered magic realist: "And I realized I was dead. I was dead" (5). As Chaim understands this, he does not seek an explanation for what has happened to him, but expresses his condition in a matter-of-fact way. However, he is invisible to the Polish bystanders, which means that his magical situation was not a part of what he previously considered everyday reality.

Another instance of disbelief and therefore fantasy can be found further in the novel, when Chaim re-enters his village and sees "piles of vows and promises, all in broken pieces" (4) in front of the houses. The fact that he is every bit as new to magic as the reader is becomes clear when he confesses that he cannot tell how he could see such things. Later, when he returns to the grave of the Jews, Chaim cannot hide his disbelief when he hears voices coming out of the pit:

Faintly at first, but then more and more distinctly, I'm able to make out the sounds of Yiddish being spoken. How is this possible? I crawl about the mound, keeping my ear flat against it. Directly below me, mothers are clacking

out tart instructions to their daughters. I nearly weep to hear it! To my left, there must be a cheder, for a class is clearly going on. The teacher remonstrates with his students, spitting out the alef-bais for the hundredth time. Below me, to my right, two men argue passionately. About what, at first it's difficult to hear. But so persistent are they, each one repeating his entrenched position over and over again, that soon I understand their disagreement concerns the price of trolley fares in Warsaw. I laugh, holding my sides with joy. I can't believe it. (24)

His disbelief however turns rather quickly into joy and easy acceptance of the living dead Jews.

As the novel continues, the cases of disbelief become more profound and Chaim even even acknowledges the possibility of someone trying to deceive him by making him believe that magic is possible. In this context, he asks himself: "Who keeps playing these tricks on me?" (193). Furthermore, several characters even try to deny the magical aspect of some extraordinary elements by relying on rational logic and physics. This is the case when, after the joy of being dead but somehow still alive and together starts to wear off, some Jews begin to wonder about their strange condition. However, the discussion ends quickly, when reasoning brings them back to their initial acceptance of magic:

"Consider the facts," says one, a young firebrand, still muscular despite his time beneath the ground.

"And what are the facts?"

His eyes shine as he answers the men gathering before him.

"For one thing," he says, "we're moving around."

"True," the others have to concede.

"We're speaking to each other."

“It’s a good point,” the group turns in upon itself, mumbling, muttering.

“We’re all still bleeding.”

“It never stops, that’s true!” they cry.

“So perhaps...”

“Perhaps what?” Moyshe Leib the tailor steps forward. “Perhaps we haven’t died?” he asks incredulously.

“I feel we should at least consider the possibility. Or cease to call ourselves men!” the young hothead makes one last attempt to arouse the passions of the others.

“Reb Dovid, you were in a pit underneath the ground for how long” his antagonist counters, not unkindly.

“True,” Reb Dovid lowers his eyes, searching the ground pointlessly.

“With no air.”

“No, it’s true,” he is defeated, his arguments frustrated.

“Without food or water.”

“I know, I know. You think I didn’t notice!”

“Perhaps we haven’t died, you say? Perhaps we were never alive in the first place!” (84)

This acceptance of magic as part of their reality against better judgment is also illustrated in the German soldier’s story about the sinking boat:

“And so it sank, then, I suppose.”

“It sank, yes,” the head chuckles, shaking itself. “Of course, it sank. Only not downward into the river, as you might expect, as I myself expected, but upward into the sky. The holes, it seems, lightened the craft, so that it was able

to leave the river and sail into the night air, which I'm told is rather thick at certain altitudes." (108-109)

Other laws of physics are defied when Chaim and the other Jews arrive at the hotel Amfortas which is surrounded by a river with flowing water in the dead of winter:

A river surrounds it on all sides and its waters appear to be flowing.

"How is this possible?" I say to no one in particular.

"Look at it sparkle," Reb Elimelech hums beneath his breath.

"What is it?" Pillow cries.

"Certainly not water," Reb Elimelech pulls at the silver threads of his beard.

"Otherwise, it would be frozen." (120)

Upon seeing the hotel itself, Chaim cannot believe his eyes and tries to explain it a visual deception:

"A mirage," I say. "We've become snowblind."

"But I see it, too," Reb Elimelech confirms, shielding his eyes with the brim of his hat. (120)

Later, when the Jews are comfortably settled in the hotel, Marek, Chaim's son-in-law, proves especially sceptical of the magical aspect of their alive-while-dead situation. This becomes clear in the family's heated discussion about their deaths and the World to Come:

Perhaps Marek is right and all the promises were not promises, but lies. The memory of my murder is so distant that I have to remind myself that it happened at all. Still, I died, of this I'm sure. But somehow I survived and my body has been restored to me, as good as new, or very nearly. How can Marek explain this?

"An electromagnetic malfunction of our brain stems, perhaps," he says, tamping his cigar. "I couldn't really say." (159)

Chaim's and his family's doubts about the reality of magical aspects is also very prominent in the passage where the hotel's soup appears to possess extraordinary properties. After some experiments by which the characters hope to deny the magical factor, Chaim finally turns to the waiter who affirms the magic as a reality:

"Mama," says our Hadassah, "it tastes just like your soup."

Ester blows on her first spoonful and lifts it to her mouth. She keeps the broth on her tongue for a moment, tasting it completely.

Then, "No, no, sheyne," she says, swallowing. "I never used such basil. This is how your bubbe made it."

"I was thinking the same thing," says Naftali Berliner. "I was thinking that this was *my* mother's soup."

In fact, I myself had the same impression, that the recipe was my mother's.

"Let me taste," Hadassah says to her Naftali, and soon bowls are being exchanged around the table. The dead, we tell ourselves, needn't worry over germs.

And the results of our investigations? No matter what bowl we drink from, everyone's soup tastes like his mother's. Only my daughters' and son's soup taste the same.

"But they came out of the same pot!" Marek exclaims.

"I watched the waiter dish it out himself!" from Pavel. He wipes his spoon in his napkin and brings it to the edge of the tureen.

"May I?" he says, asking our permission.

"By all means," we consent. "Go ahead." And "Please."

He skims his spoon into the broth and raises its contents to his lips. He blows and on it and takes a taste, snapping his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "It's my mother's soup," he says. "I'd know it anywhere," tears welling in his eyes.

...

We repeat the experiment, each dipping our spoon directly into the tureen. Our initial impressions are confirmed. We are each eating our own mother's soup.

...

"Pardon me," I say to the waiter as he ladles another bowl for everyone.

"Yes, Herr Skibelski?"

...

"This soup," I say.

...

"What do you call it?"

...

"For you, Herr Skibelski," he says, "I'd call it Keila's soup."

He smiles like a man caught at some pleasurable taboo.

"Keila's soup?" I say.

"Yes, sir."

"After my mother?"

He winks, lifting the tureen from the table.

"Quite a recipe, isn't it?" (151-153)

The story of the sinking moon told by the two Hasids proves to be a factor of tension as well. Initially, Chaim refuses to believe that the moon was unable to support the weight of the silver after it had been transferred to the boat. He bases his argument on the laws of physics:

“But that’s impossible,” I say, not ceasing from my walking.

“Impossible? Of course,” says Kalman, giggling behind me. “Nevertheless, it’s true.”

“The weight of the silver, which was originally supported by the moon, even when transferred to the boat, couldn’t cause the moon to sink.”

“The moon doesn’t sink,” Kalman corrects me. “The boat sinks.”

“The boat sinks, all right. But it shouldn’t pull the moon down with it, since the moon is able to sustain the silver’s weight. And although the silver is transferred to the boat, its weight doesn’t increase. There is no added weight.”

“Except for our hearts, Reb Chaim. How heavy they grew, knowing the trouble we were causing, pulling the moon from the sky.”

He shifts the latter on his shoulders.

“That is something your mathematics and your astronomies cannot measure.”

(224)

Later, still uncertain about the dubious story, he convinces himself to ignore the laws of physics and to believe the Hasids on the grounds of religion:

Can it possibly be true, Kalman’s story? On the surface of things, I have every reason to doubt him.

...

Why should I believe their story? Still, he a trustworthy sort, this Kalman, and a fellow Jew besides. It’s forbidden for him to deceive me. Not that it hasn’t been known to happen, one Jew lying to another, we’re only human, after all, but, still, what’s forbidden is forbidden. Plus, he’s a Hasid, he’s taken on more than the Law requires. He’d be cutting his own throat, lying to me. (226)

A surprising scene regarding Chaim's acceptance of magic as part of reality can be found near the end of the novel. While searching and digging for the moon, Chaim asks a question that alerts the reader of his disbelief. However, reading further, we discover that Chaim's disbelief does not concern the reality of the magic, but their belief that they would be so lucky as to find the moon buried near the surface instead of deep under the ground:

Had we really convinced ourselves that the moon could be found lying beneath an empty field, ripe for the picking? No, whoever buried it has buried it deep, beneath layers and layers of corpses, so long ago now that the skin and the muscles have stretched and torn away, and there is nothing left but bones.

(230)

8. Allegory

Despite the presence of magical realist and fantastic elements, *A Blessing on the Moon* can be read in an allegorical way. Citing *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, Bowers defines allegory as the “descriptive or narrative ... presentation of literal characters and events which contain sustained reference to a simultaneous structure of other ideas and events”. She indicates that it is “a narrative that has at least two levels of meaning. On one level, the narrative makes sense as a plot. On another level, there is an alternative meaning to the plot which is often more philosophically profound than the plot itself”.

The difficulty to apply the term ‘allegory’ to Skibell’s novel lies in the fact that this genre theoretically excludes the novel’s interpretation as a magical realist text. According to Bowers, “[i]n allegorical writing, the plot tends to be less significant than the alternative meaning in a reader’s interpretation”, and thus, “the importance of the alternative meaning interferes with the need for the reader to accept the reality of the magical aspects of the plot” (27). In other words, a purely allegorical reading would undermine “the realism of the plot, which is needed to support the possibility of the magical occurrences” (31).

To abnegate the importance of the plot and literal content of Skibell’s novel and only consider its moral message would be unfair. Similarly, however, it is impossible to deny the existence of a double meaning underneath the surface of the story. Therefore, we have to acknowledge the presence of allegorical elements alongside the magical realist aspects. “A magical realist novel”, Bowers states, “may have important things to relate to the reader about their actual world, but the plot is not structured around this one message” (30). The allegorical interpretation of *A Blessing on the Moon* can refer to criticism and theories of the Holocaust and trauma in general, whereas the magical realist interpretation focuses on the realist narrative of a dead Jew roaming the earth in search of a buried moon.

8.1. Holocaust

As I have indicated above, *A Blessing on the Moon* contains several allegorical elements. Throughout the whole novel, very clear references are made to the Holocaust itself. As Grimwood indicates, there are many “uncanny resemblances between Chaim’s afterdeath experiences and the experiences of concentration-camp prisoners” (90). She states that many of these metaphors are very striking and “draw uncomfortably and unexpectedly close to historical events” (88).

A first resemblance can be found between the appearances of the novel’s dead Jewish characters and the real concentration-camp prisoners. The living corpses of the novel are described in a painfully realistic manner:

Although the harsh winter seems to have slowed their decay, their milk-white bodies show evidence not only of rot, but also of mutilation. I recognize a face or two. It isn’t easy. The soldiers’ lime has eaten into their skins, gnawing deep rouged gashes into their chins, into their cheeks. Their arms, raised, leave black shadows slanting across their pale, disastrous features.

But certainly there’s Reb Yudel the candlemaker. We nod at each other, a silent greeting, and I see that he’s missing an arm.

Whit a dirty hand, Basha Rosenthal wipes a tear from a lost eye. Her child plays at her broken feet, without its jaw.

Rivke Siedenberg, my old seductress, bravely holds her disembowelled viscera in with two unsteady arms.

A man I can no longer identify uses two pincer-like fingers to delicately extract a worm from the cavity in his blackened cheek.

...

My stomach heaves into my throat. I whistle through my teeth, sickened by the stench.

. . .

On his feet now, he brushes a colorless hand through the tangles of his long and silvery beard, combing crumbly balls of dirt and frantic insects from inside it. (77-78)

As Grimwood indicates, this passage is magical realist “for these people have climbed out of their grave, and their injuries are enough, if not to have killed them, then certainly to have prevented their behavior as described above” (88). But the description of the corpses can also “be read as an allegory for the unimaginable prolongation of suffering in the camps, in which the body underwent extreme and grotesque transformations” (88). To support this argument, Grimwood refers to Levi, a real Holocaust survivor, and “his description of his own body [which] evokes a corpse rather than a living being: it is ‘rotten’ and ‘grey’.” Furthermore, “his use of the term ‘puppet’ reflects the Nazi objectification and dehumanization of the living Jewish body” (88).

Additionally, Bowers refers to Brenda Cooper to indicate that “the appearance of the dead in the realm of the living is a negative commentary on the health of the human condition” (94). In Skibell’s novel this negative condition is the consequence of the deportation and killing of the Jews. In accordance with Skibell’s description above Jewish prisoners would indeed have been livid with damaged skin, mutilated bodies and unrecognizable faces, and their lamentable living situation would have caused an unbearable stench and the attraction of vermin. This negative condition however can also refer to their mental state: hopeless, torn, gloomy, heavyhearted, mournful, and lonely.

Another subtle reference is made to the Jews' unfortunate fate when Skibell describes the condition of the sick Ola:

With the clattering of her teeth and the whistling sighs her quivering chest forces from her lungs, she sounds like a train disappearing down a ghostly track and I doubt that she will live much longer. (33)

Skibell's choice to compare the noises to the sound of a train cannot be a coincidence. It evokes the thought of the deportation trains carrying away the Jews to a place where they, like Ola, will not live much longer.

Another allegory can be found in the hotel's Direktor instruction to the Jews to leave their clothes behind before crossing the river and his promise to present them with new ones. According to Grimwood, this "recalls the Nazi attempts to create a semblance of normality when directing victims to the gas chambers" (89). Furthermore, the description of the marvellous hotel Amfortas and the helpful and courteous behaviour of its staff can be considered an ironical inversion of the real concentration camps and its German employees. Skibell depicts a grand hotel with spacious suites "with warm cream walls above a coffee-brown wainscoting" (131) and fresh fruit and cigars on the table; a greenhouse with innumerable flowers; wardrobes and drawers filled with socks and undergarments; bright hallways humming with the activity of porters, chambermaids, pageboys, and musicians; stone floors with white carpets; corridors "hung with intricate tapestries, depictions of hunting parties and scenes of courtly love"(139); mirrors; impressive staircases; luxurious bars; and lanterns and hanging chandeliers. While accommodating in their assigned suite, the dead Jews are also presented with a woolen, custom tailored suit. This can be seen as an ironical reference to the prisoner uniforms the Jews were instructed to wear.

Grimwood offers another possible allegorical reading of the hotel's luxurious description. It echoes "Nazi propaganda encouraging elderly Jews to go to Terezin" (89). Thus, Skibell's account can also be seen as an allegorical hyperbole of the Germans' attempt to create a deceptive notion of the concentration camp of Terezin by optically improving its living conditions. The resemblances between the novel's hotel and the concentration camp of Terezin are illustrated in the following excerpt:

Hitler, the world was to be told, *had built a city for the Jews*, to protect them from the vagaries and stresses of the war. A film was made to show this mythic, idyllic city to which his henchmen were taking the Jews from the Czech Lands and eight other countries. Notable musicians, writers, artists, and leaders were sent there for "safer" keeping than was to be afforded elsewhere in Hitler's quest to stave off any uprisings or objections around the so-called civilized world. This ruse worked for a very long time, to the great detriment of the nearly two hundred thousand men, women and children who passed through its gates as a way station to the east and probable death.

...

The Red Cross was allowed to visit Terezin once. The village of Terezin was spruced up for the occasion. Certain inmates were dressed up and told to stand at strategic places along the specially designated route through Terezin. Shop windows along that carefully guarded path were filled with goods for the day. One young mother remembers seeing the bakery window and shelves suddenly filled with baked goods the inmates had never seen during their time at Terezin. Even the candy shop window overflowed with bon bons creating a fantastic illusion she would never forget.

When the Red Cross representative appeared before this young mother, she remembers being asked how it was to live in Terezin during those days. Her reply implored the questioner to *look around. Be sure and look around*, as she herself rolled her own widely opened eyes around in an exaggerated manner. The Red Cross reported dryly that while war time conditions made all life difficult, life at Terezin was acceptable given all of the pressures. The Red Cross concluded that the Jews were being treated all right.

There were so many musicians in Terezin, there could have been two full symphony orchestras performing simultaneously daily. In addition, there were a number of chamber orchestras playing at various times. (Jewish Virtual Library)

Another ironical inversion is made by Skibell's allegorical reference to the fact that Jewish families were torn apart when deported to the concentration camps. After an initial feeling of abandonment, Chaim is pleasantly surprised that the Maître d'Hôtel has arranged for him to sit with his family. Indeed, the hotel maintains a detailed guest list especially designed to reunite the Jewish families:

“This way, this way,” the Maître d'Hôtel says to Reb Elimelech. “Wait here, Monsieur Skibelski, and I will return for you in a nonce.”

“But why can't we sit together?” I say, feeling suddenly abandoned. “We are old friends.”

“Alors, monsieur,” he says, burnishing with a raised knuckle the twin wings of his mustache. “I have thousands of people to seat. Your Rebbe has established the order. We must follow it to the letter, I'm afraid. Understand. For nothing has been left to chance.”

...

“Monsieur Skibelski, if you will.”

...

“Monsieur, your seat.”

...

“Good evening,” I say, too unhappy and shy to look at more than their hands.

“I am Chaim Skibelski. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance at this lovely hotel.”

...

Finally, one of the women clears her throat and addresses me, sternly.

“Papa,” she says, “don’t you even know us?” (142-143)

Moreover, the Maître’s reassuring remark that “nothing has been left to chance” (142) is a rather frightening reference to the “Deutsche Gründlichkeit” employed by the German soldiers in their annihilation of the Jews.

Other direct references to the concentration camps are the steam and the ovens described in the novel. All of the hotel guests are cordially invited to take the steam after dinner. Just like the real prisoners, who were ‘invited’ to take a shower, but were gassed instead, these imaginary Jews will never leave the steam either. In the same context, when Chaim, being the only one not invited for the steam, roams the corridors of the hotel in search of his family, he sees how the Jews’ suitcases are being discarded, echoing the way in which the Germans disposed of the prisoners’ belongings. Later, Chaim finally ends up in a room with an oven where a baker proudly announces that they have baked the Jews. Of course, this is a clear reference to the concentration camps’ crematoria where the dead prisoners were burnt. The baker’s exclamation “There will again be sweetness in the world!” (181) does not only illustrate his joy in exterminating the Jews, but could also be a reference to the sickening smell caused by the burning of the corpses.

8.2. Trauma

Another central theme in the novel, apart from the Holocaust itself, is the idea of trauma, in all its devastating and inescapable reality. Chaim's journey evolves around the causes, the consequences, and eventually the (partial) cure, or rather acceptance of his traumatic experiences. The different aspects of the uniqueness and difficulties concerning trauma, especially in relation to the Holocaust, are all very prominent in *A Blessing on the Moon*. As Caruth indicates, the term trauma is not only applied to "combat and to natural catastrophes but also to rape, child abuse, and a number of other violent occurrences" (3). She explains this 'all-inclusiveness' by referring to the fact that all these events cause a disruption and "[bring] us to the limits of our understanding" (3).

The central trauma of the novel consists of the execution of Chaim and the other Jewish villagers at the beginning of the novel. In this context, Chaim's after-death suffering and wandering can be considered a metaphor for the time-consuming process of working through the trauma. This process reaches its climax near the end of the novel when the protagonist sets off on a quest for the elusive moon which will finally be restored in the sky and will allow Chaim to accept his traumatic past and rest in peace.

Another trauma the novel refers to can be found in the passages describing life at the hotel Amfortas, which is an ironical inversion of the terrible atrocities lived through in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. After the Jews' stay at the hotel leads to their inevitable death, Chaim, overwhelmed with grief and feelings of abandonment, is again traumatized by the horrendous events and is once more at the beginning of the long process of working through.

Furthermore, Chaim is also described as suffering from an event that took place before the barbarities of the Holocaust: when he was still young, he lost his first wife Ida and unborn child. The traumatic impact of this event on his life becomes clear when Chaim sees his

second wife Ester – now also a living dead - at the hotel. Chaim regrets not having loved Ester more, and believes that the cause of this lack of love can be found in his unprocessed grief over Ida:

She sighs, heaving her heavy chest, and I fear that I did not love her sufficiently, that I did not give to her the affection that was her portion, as another, more cheerful husband might have done. I was too preoccupied with my accounts and my ledgers, with my shipments of lumber and my forests to buy, with sending this child to America before that army could snatch him away or buying that child from this army when he couldn't be sent in time. When I married her, also, I was still grieving over Ida, my first wife. She had died some months before, so small and frail and unable to bring a baby into the world. (150)

Another trauma Chaim is faced with is the loss of his mother. According to Hirsch “the trope of maternal abandonment and the fantasy of maternal recognition . . . is pervasive in Holocaust remembrance”. In this novel, this loss or abandonment can refer to the death of this mother later in life, but it can also be linked to a much earlier trauma discussed in Freud’s psychoanalysis: the loss of the maternal breast and consequently the loss of the mother-child union. Chaim’s longing to be reunited with his mother is present in several passages in the novel. For example, he is terribly disappointed not to find her at the hotel among all the other dead Jews. That Chaim is not the only one yearning for the warmth of his mother, becomes clear when the Jews, eating soup at the hotel, each perceive this soup to be their own mother’s. Grimwood indicates that the figure of the mother can also be considered a symbol for Israel. (98) Therefore, Chaim’s eventual reunion with his mother at the end of the novel can be seen as a metaphor for the restoration of hope and faith for the Jews.

Although most of the traumas mentioned in the novel are experienced by the Jews, Skibell also briefly touches upon the possible trauma undergone by the perpetrators. This is the case when Chaim meets a beheaded German soldier whose own suffering and helplessness is symbolized by the literal loss of his head.

8.2.1 Latency

Although several opposing definitions exist of post-traumatic stress disorder, Caruth indicates that “most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). An important element here is the fact that the traumatic event seems to be “not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4). This period of delay is precisely what piqued Freud’s interest while examining the behaviour of trauma patients. Caruth quotes his work to explain this specific aspect of the traumatic experience:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock of whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a “traumatic neurosis”. This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period” a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease. . . . It is the feature one might term *latency*.

Caruth states that “what is truly striking about the accident victim’s experience of the event [...] is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself: the person gets away, Freud says, ‘apparently unharmed’” (7). In other words, there seems to be an

“inherent latency within the experience itself” (8), “a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment” (10).

In Skibell’s novel, this inherent latency is symbolized by Chaim’s reaction after his murder. The description of the execution is immediately followed by Chaim’s incomprehension and denial of his death:

Guns kept cracking in the air. Something pushed into my head. It was hard, like a rock. I fell. But I was secretly giddy. I thought they had missed me. When they put me in the ground, I didn’t understand. I was still strong and healthy. (3)

Only after a while does Chaim understand that he is dead. After this realization sets in, he will be confronted with a continuous pain symbolizing Freud’s “series of grave psychical and motor symptoms” associated with real trauma victims. And, although patients suffering from PTSD have, of course, not died like Skibell’s protagonist, Chaim’s death can also be seen as a allegory for the intense pain and feelings of hopelessness experienced by these patients.

8.2.2. Possession of the Past

As I have indicated before, a patient's response to a traumatic event can take "the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (4). Caruth states that in the case of PTSD "the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them" (151). This possession of the past is also experienced by Chaim, who seems unable to shake the images of his death:

That night and for many nights after, I am unable to sleep. I toss and turn in Sabina's little bed, haunted by the queerest dreams. Not visions, as one might expect. Instead, I *feel* the approach of others near me, reaching out to me from all sides. (12)

Later in the novel, after the traumatic events that took place at the hotel/concentration camp, Chaim is haunted by visions of his dying family:

I close my eyes and see only the ovens and their flames, their blue tongues licking across the bodies of my Ester, my Sarah, my Edzia, my Miriam, my Hadassah, my Laibl; consuming my sons-in-law and their children, Markus, Solek, Israel, Pavel, Pola, Jakob, Sabina, Marek and his daughters; devouring my town as well. Everyone I know, everyone I have ever known, has disappeared into the ash. (191)

The protagonist's possession of the past is not only described literally, but is possibly symbolized by his physical pain and, more specifically, his perpetual bleeding:

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 neck-tie 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 like a fountain. (19)

This passage also emphasizes the victim's inability to contain the flow of intrusive images. He or she is completely possessed by the horror of the past and has no control over the body's and mind's involuntary reactions. In addition, this loss of control is symbolized by the German soldier's condition. After having lost his head, a metaphor for the traumatic experience he has undergone, the soldier is no longer in charge of his body:

. . . the head shouts frantic commands to its body – “Over here! Schnell! Schnell!” – but, of course, the body is deaf without its ears. It cannot hear a word. Indeed, it stumbles blindly about, searching on its knees for the lost gun, lashing out with its fists to fend off a slew of imagined aggressors. (94-95)

The feeling of helplessness and complete chaos is further emphasized, later in the novel, by the erratic pattern of footprints the body left in the snow:

Searching through the fields, we come upon a portion of the trail that branches off into the trees. . . . the footprints here remain equally chaotic – here and there, more often than I can count, they lead directly into a heavy solid tree! . . . (100)

8.2.3. Timelessness

Although the traumatic experience keeps revisiting the victim continuously in the form of dreams, hallucinations, and involuntary thought, the victim is unable to recall the memory of the event at will. The reason for this inability can be found in the fact that the patient was not fully conscious during the traumatic event. Lacan explains this further:

While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments. 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. (Laub orange 68-69)

Thus, as Leys states, “traumatic experience is defined by temporal unlocatability” (271). This loss of time and space is illustrated in *A Blessing on the Moon*. As Grimwood indicates, “Chaim loses all his markers of time . . . as symbolized by both the disappearance of the moon and the fact that he is no longer able to read his watch” (89). Additionally, while locked in the hotel’s pantry, Chaim, with some frustration, notes that “[t]here is no telling the time” (185). Skibell sometimes even succeeds in transferring the feeling of timelessness to the reader. While reading Chaim’s account of his time spent in his old house, one cannot help believing the illusion that just a few days – or weeks at most – have passed. This illusion is suddenly destroyed when one of the house’s inhabitants unexpectedly states that Chaim has been dead for years. The surprise is equally striking when the two Hasids state that they have been waiting 50 years for Chaim to come to their house and offer them his help.

Besides the timelessness, the ubiquity characterizing a traumatic experience is equally illustrated in the novel. Apart from some elements that indicate that the novel is set in Poland, there are no references to actual places. Chaim's village could be any Polish village; and the hotel, the Hasids' hut in the woods, and the moon's grave have a universal quality about them that is often found in fairy tales.

8.2.4. Need to tell

In order to escape the possession of the past and to turn the traumatic experience into a recallable memory, the victim has to overcome the temporal unlocatability of the event by fitting it into a story with a recognizable plot, a beginning, an ending, a before, a during and an after. In other words, the traumatic memory has to be turned into “a narrative memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past” (Caruth 153) in order to overcome its domination. Thus, telling stories becomes a process of healing. As Laub suggests, “[t]he survivors did not only need to survive so they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (Truth and Testimony 63). However, Laub indicates that in order to heal there has to be “an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Bearing Witness 68). He warns us that “[t]he absence of an empathic listener . . . annihilates the story” (68) and may lead to “a *re-experiencing of the event itself*” (67).

This “imperative need to *tell*” one’s story to “an *addressable other*” is again illustrated in Skibell’s novel. Chaim’s attempt to tell his story by screaming at the Polish peasants offers no salvation since they are unable to see or hear him. His story is annihilated and his condition worsens. Later, however, he seems to have found an empathic listener in Ola, the Polish family’s daughter and the only one able to see him. Even though Skibell does not literally describe how Chaim tells his story to the little girl, it may be found symbolized in the following excerpt:

The bleeding has begun again.

. . .

Instead of suffering politely and considerately this time, waiting for the wounds to drain, in the tub, for instance, or in the garage with my old car on top of the straw, I walk through the house, leaving trails in the hallways, through the rooms, on the staircases. I roll around like a god on its back in the beds, smearing the sheets. I leave red handprints on the patterned wallpaper, at every level, so they cannot be missed. Crimson palm prints on their family photographs. They've lined them up on the mantels of the fireplaces and on the piano top. For these, I rummage with two fingers inside my opened skull, leaving bits of brain in the stain like a painter's impasto.

...

I mark a slanted vermilion slash across every lintel and on the doorposts of their house, and upon their gates. But, of course, they do not see it.

They never will.

...

One of the daughters is screaming. (18-20)

Chaim's desperate attempt to make himself noticed can be linked to his need to tell, while the screaming of the daughter – Ola – symbolizes her perception of Chaim's story and her recognition of its realness.

However, Chaim is not the only one in need of an empathic listener. Also the German soldier, Chaim's family members, and the two Hasids insist on telling their stories. The account of a traumatic experience is, however, difficult to listen to. It requires energy and participation from the listener. This difficulty is emphasized when Chaim expresses his reluctance to listen to the others' stories:

Why must everyone I meet tell me his story? It's as though I wore a sign across my brow: Share with me the tedious details of your life! (222)

8.2.5. Failure of Language

Listening to a traumatic story is, however, not as hard as telling it. The horror associated with trauma is often beyond language. It is in this context that Leys refers to “the constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era” (267-268). However, LaCapra indicates, trauma can “register in language [through] hesitations, indirections, pauses, and silences” (122). Thus, the failure of language is in itself a witness of the traumatic horror. As Leys puts it, “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”. In other words, “language is capable of bearing witness only by a *failure* of witnessing or representation” (268).

The failure of language is illustrated in the novel when Chaim is unable to decipher the note left behind by his rabbi. When he asks the rabbi about it later, Chaim is astonished to hear that it was written in Yiddish, a language he should be able to understand. Another instance symbolizing the failure of language can be found in the following excerpt describing the rabbi’s cries:

He screeches out odd phrases of Hebrew and Aramaic, phrases I have never heard uttered in this fashion, nor in this order, and never in a voice so metallic and strange. (75)

8.2.6. Vicarious

As I have mentioned before, listening to a victim's traumatic story is not without difficulty or even danger. LaCapra indicates that the listener, although not having gone through the traumatizing events himself, can undergo the experience of trauma "in a secondary fashion". He distinguishes between "vicarious" and "virtual" experience of trauma. In the case of virtual experience, "one may imaginatively put oneself in the victim's position while respecting the difference between self and other and recognizing that one cannot take the victim's place or speak in the victim's voice". He links this option with "empathic unsettlement" and argues that this "is desirable or even necessary for a certain form of understanding that is constitutively limited but significant"(125).

In the case of vicarious experience, however, "one perhaps unconsciously identifies with the victim, becomes a surrogate victim, and lives the event in an imaginary way that, in extreme cases, may lead to confusion about one's participation in the actual events" (125). "This is", LaCapra indicates, "the case in the intergenerational transmission of trauma". As if there were a real transfer of trauma, "one may experience aspects of trauma or undergo secondary traumatization, at least through the manifestation of symptomatic effects such as extreme anxiety, panic attacks, startle reactions, or recurrent nightmares, without personally living through the traumatizing event to which such effects are ascribed" (114). Especially relatives of the traumatized persons are prone to such a response, since people are particularly sensitive to the pain of their intimates. However, according to LaCapra, "[e]ven those not the intimates of survivors or perpetrators may through identification come to manifest posttraumatic symptoms, sometimes with dubious effects in the public sphere if they pose as

actual survivors, the apparent case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, author of *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood* (108).

The “contagiousness of trauma” (LaCapra 126) is illustrated in the novel by the condition of Ola, the only one of the Polish family who is able to see Chaim’s blood smeared on the walls. While listening to Chaim’s story, symbolized by the perception of the blood, Ola is struck by the horror of the Jews’ execution, and the trauma experienced by Chaim is passed on to her. She undergoes what LaCapra calls “surrogate victimage” (114) and starts manifesting posttraumatic symptoms as a result of a trauma she has not actually lived through: she locks herself in her bedroom, lies in her own filth, barely eats, starts coughing up blood, suffers from intense fevers, and eventually dies. As Grimwood suggests, “the filthy conditions of her sick room come gradually to resemble those of a concentration camp’s barracks” (93-94). However, apart from this reference to vicarious experience, Ola’s illness can also be seen as a metaphor for the intense feelings of helplessness she feels in relation to the Jews’ execution and the confiscation of their houses and belongings, for the intense feeling of guilt for belonging to the side of the bystanders.

8.2.7. Truth

Apart from the theories of possible curing and vicarious effects, there is another element that is inevitably intertwined with the telling of one's story: the question of truth. Caruth states that "the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall" (153). In this context, Grimwood refers to Morahg to indicate that it is impossible to create "an authentic *representation* of the concentrationary experience" (93), and that one can only offer "an authentic *response* to this experience" (93). Hence, by relying on personal reactions to a traumatizing experience instead of absolute truth and unquestionable representation, one obtains a new way of understanding the past. To clarify this, Bowers refers to Rushdie who states that "[h]istory is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge" (77). Thus, as Bowers indicates, "reality, absolute truth and history are unknowable" (100).

Grimwood applies this theory to the specific case of the Holocaust by implying that "[t]he Holocaust 'lives' . . . in a different form, one that has evolved with and alongside successive generations, through the words and images these generations create" (107). This observation is also symbolized in Skibell's novel, more specifically in the passage describing the magical soup served at the hotel Amfortas. The soup, tasting differently to each member of Chaim's family, is a possible metaphor referring to the existence of various points of view of the past, and the inexistence of one truth.

8.3. Child's Vision

Outside the categories of allegories connected with trauma and the Holocaust, we can identify the unique allegory of 'the child's vision' in Skibell's novel. Grimwood indicates that "the child's perspective, in its blurring of real and imaginary, functions as a metaphor for that of the adult faced with understanding a history that seems both distant and improbable" (92). It is "constructed as the 'other' in opposition to the obtuseness and immorality of the perpetrators (represented by the German soldier) and the bystanders (represented by the Polish family that is only too pleased to take over Chaim's family property as its own)" (93). This outstanding ability to see through the illusions constructed by the perpetrators and the bystanders is very prominent in the character of Ola. As the youngest, she is the only one of the Polish family able to see Chaim's blood on the walls of the house and therefore, the only one acknowledging the reality of the atrocities done to the Jews. Moreover, her clear vision allows her to make a moral choice regarding this reality: she can ignore it, like her family members do, or acknowledge it. She obviously chooses the second option, which will lead to a vicarious experience and illness as I have explained in the previous chapter. As Grimwood indicates, "[t]his illness is clearly moral" (93): Ola feels guilty for what has been done to the Jews and expresses this clearly by calling her father a "murdering pig" (30) and refusing Chaim's help:

"You mustn't trouble yourself, Pan Skibelski." She holds up a nervous arm in protest. It shakes wildly in the space between us. "We are intruders here. We have no rights.

Ola's ability to really 'see' is emphasized by the fact that she and Chaim first acknowledge their awareness of each other by staring into each other's eyes:

. . . and am on my knees once again, peering through her keyhole. She's not well.

. . .

My brow presses against the cold metal of the doorknob plate and for a moment I have the dizzying impression of staring into the center of a whirling cyclone spinning in a green-grey sea. A pink curtain drops across the image and it disappears. The cyclone reappears almost instantly and I understand that I have been looking not at the sea but directly into a human eye. She's on the other side of the door, peering out. (31)

However, later in the novel, it becomes clear that Ola is not the only person who can see Chaim:

This afternoon, we walked through a small town, spilling our blood in its narrow streets. Only the children saw us. Most ran away in fright, by many threw rocks and jeered. (85)

The reaction of these children is distinctly different from Ola's. Grimwood explains this by observing that "[a]n ability to see the truth does not in itself equip the viewer with morality" (94). Unlike Ola, the other children do not react empathetically but choose to run away or attack the Jews. "However," Grimwood notes, "children in this novel at least have the chance, through their privileged vision, to understand and be appalled. Adults, it would seem, have lost the vision that gives them the capacity for pity and remorse altogether" (94). In other words, children "are not so fully caught up in adult ideology as to be unable to see the crime that has been committed, and to recognize its victims as human, even if they then choose to mistreat them" (94). In their ability to observe, criticize (like Ola), or celebrate (like the attacking children) the abuse of the Jews, the "[c]hildren here stand in for a more usual and desirable state of adult affairs, in which differing opinions are proffered, weighed, and

debated” (94). This is contrasted with the adults who acquiesce in “a collective, conspiratorial silence of denial, rooted in endemic anti-Semitism and reinforced by the possibility of personal financial gain” (94).

Connected with the idea of the child’s vision is Ola’s toy telescope. Being a child’s object, the telescope symbolizes once more the children’s ability to see through the illusion. Moreover, as Grimwood observes, the lens is fractured, thus producing a transformation. (95) This transformation is illustrated in Ola’s reaction to, after seeing the reality, choose the Jews’ side. The following passage describes another instance in which the crack in the lens enables the viewer to see the truth:

She repositions herself in her pillows and the telescope falls to the floor with a soft, almost apologetic *clink*, the sound of yet another thing breaking. Bending over, I retrieve the cylindrical tube from the floor, raising it to my eye, and peer through it out the window. The lens has sustained a crack, not severe enough to dislodge it from its casing. I scan my town and see it, as it were, divided in two, the vein in the lens rendering everything slightly askew. For a long time, there is nothing moving, nothing to see, but then, along then, along the river, my eye trails a young boy running in the thickets near its banks.

. . .

He flies through the grasses, as though chased, perhaps caught out too late.

. . .

Can it be that one of us is living still, hiding out somewhere along the river?

. . .

. . . he pumps his arms harder, jumps into the air, and disappears through the crack in the lens. He is gone. (41)

The lens enables Chaim to see the town as it really is: “divided in two”. This separation symbolizes the division between on the one hand, the Jews, and on the other hand, the perpetrators and bystanders. The fleeing boy, possibly a surviving Jew, belongs to the side of the Jews, but then suddenly disappears through the crack. This could indicate his death, or presumably his murder. Consequently, he no longer belongs to the world of the living Jews, and thus has disappeared in the crack, a place invisible for the living Jews in the one half of the lens, and for the perpetrators and bystanders in the other half of the lens. Also later in the novel, the cracked telescope proves a useful instrument. In the woods, Chaim uses it to identify a pack of wolves as the source of the threat he feels; and, in his quest, he uses it in combination with Ola’s compass, also a child’s toy, to find the buried moon and “to ascertain that [it] has returned to its proper place” (Grimwood 95).

Furthermore, as Grimwood suggests, “[t]he girl’s telescope is contrasted with another instance of distorted perception: . . . the broken spectacles of [the] German soldier” (95). At first, when his head is still in place, the soldier kidnaps Chaim with the intention of killing him again. However, when Chaim, refusing to tolerate yet another assault on his life, shoves him with the gun, the head falls down and loses its glasses. At first, there is no visible change in the German’s behaviour towards Chaim: he still despises and objectifies him and the other Jews. Later, however, the head begins to realize the vulnerability of its position and starts pleading. The dimming of its sight being its main problem, the head convinces Chaim to help him find his glasses. When Chaim accidentally breaks the glasses, a greater transformation can be perceived in the personality of the German soldier, as if the decreasing ability to see the illusory world created by the perpetrators is connected with the increasing ability to see the real world including the suffering of the Jews. The German’s feelings of remorse become clear near the end of his life when he is presumably almost completely blind:

“I have done things, Herr Jude, during the last days of my life, that I never dreamed possible, things which, as a child or even as a young man, I would not have believed myself capable. I don’t need to detail them to you. You are only too familiar with the kind of thing I mean.

. . .

I’m nearsighted, as you know, but this is worse. I’ve tried to convince myself that it is only a matter of finding my glasses, but I can’t lie to myself any longer. My sight is dimming.

. . .

. . . you are right, you are right to chastise me.

“I need to be forgiven, Herr Jude. Forgive me. Won’t you?”

. . .

“I sicken myself when I think of the things I have done!” (112)

The importance of the child’s vision is further emphasized by Chaim’s “special affinity for children” (Grimwood 96). This affection becomes clear in his relationship with Ola and later also the young Pillow, his decision to sleep in the nursery, his love for childlike Ida who was still very young when he married her, his permission to let his grandchildren draw pictures in his ledger book, and the treasures he hides in his pockets for his grandchildren to find them.

8.4 Mother's Body

Chaim's affinity for children and their small, frail bodies is contrasted with his revulsion toward the "excessive physicality" (Grimwood 97) of other characters. He expresses his affection for childlike characters like Ola, Ida, and his own mother, whereas he verbalizes his dislike of characters like the Polish peasants, the hotel's Direktor, Jesus and Mary whom he all describes as heavy and fat. His feelings of disgust are particularly prominent in the following excerpt:

Even now, see how they stretch and yawn, scratching their rumbling bellies before marching off to the dining room, like sleepwalkers. If it weren't for their intestines, they wouldn't even know they're alive.

...

... in order to continue living, to continue filling their bellies and sucking in air, as though there were not enough of it to go around, as though certain lungs must surrender their portion in other that pinker, more fortunate lungs might expand to full capacity!

How they sigh and heave, these fatuous dreamers, flaunting the very air in their chests. Their exhalations fill my nostrils with a putrid stench. Oh, the living, how they stink! They stink! They do! They rot but do not decompose. And each day, these walking, stinking, breathing monsters devour whole forests of animals, entire oceans of fish, great farms of vegetables and to what end? That they may shit and fart and piss their way through another day of violence and

indifference. Well, let them pass their lives as someone else's uninvited guests.

I want them out! Now! Out of my house! (59-61)

Chaim's second wife, Ester, although not a dislikable character, is described similarly to these chubby characters. To explain this similarity, Grimwood observes that "Chaim questions the degree of his own affection for [Ester]", remembering how he was still grieving over his first wife Ida when he married her. (97) Moreover, Ester "denies him the proximity to children's sensibility and vision that he desires" (97). This becomes clear in the following conversation:

"Come on, Chaimka," she says, whispering in my ear. "You're not a baby now."

She beats my back with her hard fat hand. I look into her face. She has already wiped away her tears. There are wet smudges on her cheeks. "Are we little children, that we should cry?"

This she says and I nod. She is right, of course. We are not children. But a man can still mourn. Or must he be a child for that? (148)

The reason for Chaim's love of frail, childlike characters as well as his antipathy of plump, dominating characters can be found in his own situation as living dead. As Grimwood indicates, "Chaim himself is divorced from physicality. The 'body' he retains has no physical relationship to much of the world around him, and only serves as a reminder of the human body's potential for injury, illness, suffering, and decay" (97). As he is almost reduced to spirituality, he prefers fragile bodies which approximate his own bodily state to the fleshy bodies that remind him of the world he has lost. This feeling of detachment from the physical world is explained by Ramras-Rauch, who observes that "autism, the shattered self-image, minimalized experience, reduced existence, and self-negation" were all symptoms of the Holocaust survivor. (Grimwood 97) Chaim's physical detachment is symbolized by his

“unburial”, which Grimwood describes as “an image of rebirth, but rebirth without a body” (97).

Grimwood offers another theory for Chaim’s aversion to obvious physicality, “which relates to the fact that all mothers in the novel (except Chaim’s own mother) have excessively oversized bodies” (98). Like in the previous theory, the origins of his aversion can be led back to his “unburial”. However, instead of referring to it as a rebirth without a body, Grimwood now describes it as a rebirth without a mother. (98) This motherless resurgence could then refer to Chaim’s trauma caused by the loss of the mother-child union, symbolizing the Jews’ loss of hope and faith, which I already mentioned in the chapter about trauma. This sensation of loss is again annihilated at the end of the novel when the moon is restored to the sky, faith to the Jews, and motherly love to Chaim. To reinforce the feeling of renewal, Skibell describes Chaim’s ‘unbirth’ on the novel’s final page:

In his place is a young woman, a girl really. 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.

“Chaimka, Chaimka,” she sings. “Do you know me? Can you say my name?”

My history falls away, like sacks of grain from a careless farmer’s wagon. I begin to forget everything. Names of trees . . . times of the day . . . the words of the morning prayers . . .

. . .

Beneath this large woman’s caressing hands, I forget my children’s names.

Even their faces leave me. I no longer recall how I earned my living or why I died. I’m floating, free from detail, although I find I can still, without difficulty, remember my name.

Chaim Skibelski.

“Chaimka, Chaimka,” the woman sings, “look at the moon. Can you see the moon?”

My small body is flooded with well-being. I gurgle in her lap. With her large fingers, she carefully turns my head and the light of the moon fills my eyes, until it is all I see. (256)

8.4. Moon

Another important allegory present in *A Blessing on the Moon* is, as the title already suggests, the moon. The story about disappearance and restoration of this celestial body forms the core around which the novel is structured. Skibell's choice to make the moon the central element is no coincidence, since it plays a significant role in Jewish tradition. The origins of this role can be retraced to the myth about the waning of the moon (to which Skibell refers by naming the third part of his novel "The Smaller to Rule By Night" (189)):

. . . (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." (Liebes 47-48)

Yehuda Liebes observes that this myth emphasizes the connection between the moon and Israel. He states that "[t]o 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" (48) Similarly, Grimwood indicates that "[a]ccording to

Jewish tradition, the moon, on account of its monthly appearance, is considered as the emblem of Israel; the latter, like the moon, undergoing several phases through persecution without being destroyed” (90). This is why the disappearance and eventual return of the moon, as described in Skibell’s novel, can be considered a symbol for the murder of the Jews during the Holocaust, followed by the restoration of faith and hope.

The novel’s title itself refers to another Jewish tradition which requests “that the moon should be blessed on its reappearance each month” (Grimwood 90). In the novel, this tradition is honoured by Chaim and the two Hasids who use the ‘ritual of the blessing of the moon’ to try to restore the moon to the sky.

The story of the disappearing moon is mentioned several times, always in different forms to which each time new details are added. The first time it appears, the event is witnessed by Chaim:

I stare up at the full moon and, to my astonishment, it falls from the sky! The orange ball simply sinks and disappears behind the trees. (15)

Later, a subtle reference is made to the event when Chaim discovers in his lodger book a drawing of a “flying boat and a sleeping moon Izzie or Solek must’ve drawn” (18). This picture adds new element to the story: a flying boat. Further in the novel, Chaim recounts the event to Ola in the form of a bedtime story, adding the characters of the two Hasids and the discovery of the silver:

To change the subject, 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. (43)

After this, the German soldier narrates the story in the form of a testimony. The soldier adds some information about the discussions held by the Hasids and about the reason why they ended up there in the first place:

“We had rounded up a whole pack of them, but these two . . . Hasids . . . had somehow managed to escape.

. . .

We fanned out, some of the fellows and myself, to surround them, but after a bit, I seemed to be the only one still on their trail.

. . .

They were right in front of me, not more than a stone’s throw away. They had reached a river and it was impossible to cross.”

. . .

. . . when what do we notice right there on the bank? All three of us.

. . .

“Exactly. A boat. A small boat, but a boat nonetheless. Someone had tied it to a tree with a rope.

. . .

“No, they don’t take the boat.

“You or I certainly would take the boat. But not this odd pair. Instead, our little penguins sit upon its edge and debate whether it is permissible, *permissible!*, according to the Laws of Moses, for them to take the boat.” (105-106)

Eventually, the story is told by the two Hasids themselves who represent it in a magical realist way, by accepting the magical elements as part of their reality. They add some first-hand information about the experience of their trip, describing the feeling of the thin cold air and the beauty of the sky, and about their attempt to hide the moon in a barn where it grows inevitably smaller until it finally disappears. More importantly, however, they ascribe the sinking of the moon to the increased weight of their heavy hearts. This could be seen a symbol for the ‘heavy hearts’ of the Jews during the Holocaust reducing their hope until it eventually vanished. As Grimwood indicates, Skibell’s use of different forms to narrate the same story is a “reflection and illustration of the slippage between discourses that the novel exploits” (106).

Near the end of the novel, Chaim and the two Hasids finally find the elusive moon “buried . . . deep, beneath layers and layers of corpses” (230). Possibly, this depiction symbolizes the disappearance or burial of hope and faith under the weight of the constant massive killing of the Jews. Moreover, even though the moon and therefore hope is restored at the end, Chaim notices that “the moon’s surfaces are not clear, but have been mottled, as though with dark and purple bruises” (243), symbolizing the permanent impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish history.

8.5. Intertextuality

In order to create a further allegorical meaning for the novel, Skibell also relies upon intertextuality. He often inscribed details which subtly refer to existing texts, such as fairytales and Jewish stories.

8.5.1. Fairytales

The extensive use of fairytales by second and third generation writers originates from the fact that they grew up in an environment where stories about the Holocaust replaced the fairytales that other children were told. This is confirmed by Anne Karpf:

[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. (Grimwood 86)

According to Grimwood, “[t]he survivor’s tale [seems] to share certain features with the fairy tale which is almost by definition a tale of miraculous escape from danger” (86). The Holocaust can be read as a fairytale in which Hitler is cast as “fairytale king” who tries to protect his “glorious realm” Germany from the evil Jewish invaders. (104) Also (Laub paars) indicates the possibility to read the Nazi ideology as a fairytale. To explain his statement, he refers to the tale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes”:

It is in children’s stories that we often find the wisdom of the old. “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is an example of one such story about the secret sharing of a collective delusion. The emperor, though naked, is deluded, duped into believing that he is seated before his audience in his splendid new clothes.

The entire audience participates in this delusion by expressing wonderment at his spectacular new suit. There is no one in the audience who dares remove himself from the crowd and become an outcast by pointing out that the new clothes are nonexistent. It takes a young, innocent child, whose eyes are not veiled by conventionality, to declare the emperor naked. In much the same way that the power of this delusion in the story is ubiquitous, the Nazi delusion was ubiquitously effective in Jewish communities as well. This is why those who were lucid enough to warn the Jewish communities about the forthcoming destruction either through information or through foresight, were dismissed as “prophets of doom” and labelled traitors or madmen. They were discredited because they were not conforming by staying within the confines of the delusion. (67-68)

This Nazi delusion is also referred to in Skibell’s novel. As in the fairytale of the emperor, the Polish peasants hold on to their shared illusion that nothing is suspicious about the Jews’ disappearance. This illusion even takes a literal form in their inability to see the Jews. Also in Skibell’s novel, it takes an innocent child, Ola, to see the reality. However, similarly to the “madmen” Laub refers to, Ola’s reaction and even her illness are dismissed as childish tantrums not worth any attention.

Apart from these general similarities, *A Blessing on the Moon* also displays more specific fairytale elements. A very clear example of such an element is the first sentence uttered by the German soldier beginning to tell his story: “Once upon a time” (105). Other examples are the pack of (talking!) wolves Chaim encounters in the forest, the Direktor who as a Pied Piper in disguise tries to lure the Jews to the hotel using a megaphone rather than a musical pipe, and the ovens that immediately take us to the scenery of Hansel and Gretel. This

last reference is perhaps the most prominent of all. Skibell puts words in the bakers' mouths that seem to be cited directly from the fairytale:

“The oven is hot enough, ja?”

...

“Hansel!” one of the middle bakers calls out, and he and his fellows move towards a large pantry. “Hansel, stick your finger out so I can see if you are fat enough!” The others respond with jovial laughter.

The men open the pantry door, disappearing inside.

“There will again be sweetness in the world,” the head baker sings, rubbing his hands in glee. (180-182)

The laughter of the bakers indicates that they as characters know the tale of Hansel and Gretel as well as the reader and consciously refer to it because they see the similarities with the Holocaust as well. The joyous exclamation of the head baker evokes the longing feeling the fairytale witch must have had in anticipation of her cannibal dinner. In the same context, the Direktor can also be compared to the witch in that he lures the Jews into the hotel with delicious food and false hospitality. Later in the novel, the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel is again, but more subtly referred to, when Chaim follows a trail of moon stones to a little house in the forest.

Perhaps a little more farfetched is the possibility of regarding the title of the second part of the novel “The Color of Poison Berries” (69) as a reference to the fairy tale of Snow White. The poison berries could be connected to the poison apple Snow White receives. Unthinking, she accepts this kindness, but turns out to have been deceived. This is also the case when the Jews willingly enter the hotel Amfortas and indulge their desire for new clothes and a warm meal. The colour of poison berries often considered red, it can thus also refer to the Jews' impending bloodshed in the hotel.

Although these fairy tale elements are accepted by the characters as a part of their reality, ironically, they sometimes use the term ‘fairytale’ to indicate their disbelief in relation to something. For instance, Marek exclaims “Spare me your fairy tales!” (158) when the family talks about the existence of the World to Come. Similarly, Chaim uses the term to label the Hasids beliefs as nonsense:

Among their Hasidic pieties is the quaint notion that the dead, on the Sabbath, are released from their torments and may feast. Our more rational philosophy never concerned itself with such fairy tales. (205)

8.5.2. Jewish tradition

As I have mentioned before, Skibell's use of intertextuality does not limit itself to fairy tales, but also includes Jewish traditional stories. Already in the beginning of the novel Skibell uses two quotations originating in Jewish tradition. The first one is an excerpt from the Book of Job, one of the books of the Hebrew Bible. The book's theme of "the eternal problem of unmerited suffering" (Britannica) is already in line with the topic of *A Blessing on the Moon*: the unmerited suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust and of the protagonist Chaim in particular. Just like Job "who attempts to understand the sufferings that engulf him" (Britannica), Chaim questions God's motives for making him suffer:

Why was I given a body! I shout this to the Heavens. Why was I restored to my place at the head of my family! Why did You, in Your infinite wisdom and Your mercy, invite me to luxuriate in the Hotel Amfortas, delighting in its gardens and its lakes, only to see every dear thing billow up the kitchen stacks in black and stenchy plumes?

What are You thinking?

For Who Else could be behind such a monstrous affair, from which even the Rebbe's tender guidance couldn't spare me. No, it's impossible to doubt God's hand. Who but the Almighty could take a shabby house painter and, in a few short years, make him Chancellor of all Germany? (192)

The second quotation in the beginning of the novel is taken from *Sanctification of the New Moon*, a work by Jewish philosopher Maimonides, also known as Rambam. In this guide, "he analyzed the numerical values of both astronomical and calendrical phenomena" (Rudavsky 9). This quotation can thus be linked to the Jewish tradition to reckon time by the moon instead of the sun. Another reference to Rambam's work is made later in the novel when Skibell describes Zalman's calculations to relocate the moon:

It is a map like no other I have seen.

There are no sketched representations of topographical features. Instead, what I see, laid out cleanly before me, resembles an unwieldy mathematical equation. Long lines of numbers cross the sheet at random angles. Unsteady columns of numerical values lean precariously in every quadrant. Great curving wheels of words whirl and turn in compressed spirals. Two-headed arrows crisscross everything in waves. The phrase *patterned energy* is underscored with violent blue hatchings. Zalman seems to have constructed a code using different colors: black, purple, violet, yellow, orange, amber. At the center of its four edges, he has sketched, in lurid detail, the heads of horrible demons, stiff tongues thrust forward through mocking grimaces, their eyes ablaze, and below each, the legend: *Beware! Beyond this boundary – madness!* (213)

Another Jewish work is referred to in “From the Mayseh Book”, the title of the novel’s first part. The Mayseh Book, or Ma’aseh Book is “[a] medieval compendium of Jewish legends. Most of the stories are derived from Talmudic/rabbinic sources, but with fabulous elaborations. It also includes supernatural stories of medieval worthies” (Dennis 157). By naming the first part of the book after a collection of magical stories, Skibell emphasizes the feeling of incredulity often associated with the Holocaust. The reference to this book can also be linked with Grimwood’s argument that “the Holocaust was superstition, folk belief, and fairy tale (specifically superstitious anti-Semitism) acted upon and carried to its “logical” conclusion in reality” (103).

During a discussion between Chaim and Reb Elimelech, Skibell inserts another Jewish work: Mishnah. This is “the oldest authoritative post-biblical collection and codification of Jewish oral laws, systematically compiled by numerous scholars (called tannaim) over a

period of about two centuries” (Britannica). This symbol of distinction between wrong and right is contrasted with the ambiguity of the situation in which it is mentioned:

“Then permit me to ask: how long have we known one another?”

“Forever,” I say. “Since we were boys.”

We’d sit in cheder, our heads pressed together, learning Mishnah.

Two men hold a garment. One says, This is mine, and the other says, This is mine.

“Have I not been a friend to you then all these years? Were your affairs not as dear to me as my own? Did your children not call me uncle and think of me, on occasion, as a second father?”

“Of course,” I say, shifting my buttock. The stump is growing cold. “You were as dear to me as a brother.”

. . .

“Then why did you leave me in the pit?”

I am startled by this question. “Pardon me?” I say.

“I must know.”

“Is this an accusation?”

“You just ran, didn’t you?”

“I ran. Of course, I ran! What else was I to do?”

“Without thinking to stop or help anybody else!”

“Keep you voice down,” I implore him, stealing a look into the sleeping field.

“But how could you just leave us there?”

“You were dead,” I whisper.

“But so were you!” he shouts.

“What did you expect me to do?”

. . .

“Didn’t you hear me calling? Why didn’t you look? Didn’t you even look!”

I stammer, seeing before me, in the tangled pile of bodies, an open screaming mouth.

“Yes,” I say. “Once. Quickly.”

“But you didn’t stop, did you!” . . .

“I’d been shot in the head,” I scream. “I wasn’t thinking clearly!” (86-88)

As Grimwood indicates, in this passage “Chaim [is] being criticized for his failure to act ethically” (88). Reb Elimelech expresses his disappointment in Chaim for having left him behind in the grave. According to Grimwood, “Chaim has not only failed to make the best moral choice, but is unconscious of having made a choice at all” (89). The passage illustrates the ambiguity of ethics in extreme circumstances such as the Holocaust. Although “[t]he opportunity to save yourself . . . does not absolve you from responsibility toward others”, the decision to help another is sometimes difficult to make, “for even small gestures of help to those at serious risk could threaten the lives of the helper and his or her family” (Grimwood 89).

Apart from Jewish works, Skibell also refers to some Jewish traditions. For instance, he mentions the ritual of Tashlich:

The day feels like Tashlich, when, at the new year, we’d walk, the entire town, to the river to cast our sins into its accepting waters.

Of course, today, we’d only find it frozen. (80)

As Skibell indicates, Tashlich is a “traditional Jewish religious ceremony, still observed by Orthodox Jews, that entails visiting a body of water following the afternoon service on Rosh Hashana . . . and reciting biblical verses expressing repentance and forgiveness of sins”

(Britannica). This passage also foreshadows the physical healing of the dead Jews when they cross the river around the Hotel Amfortas.

Another example of a Jewish custom is mentioned when Chaim and the two Hasids leave the little house in the forest and begin their search for the moon: the kissing of the mezuzah. A mezuzah, “the sign of a Jewish house”, is a “scroll with two passages from the Torah (*Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21*) written on it in Hebrew. These are the first two paragraphs of the Schema. They declare the oneness with God and the covenant relationship between God and the Jewish people” (Forta 66).

It is an ancient tradition to kiss the mezuzah as you pass through the doorway. (Zakon 144). By kissing the mezuzah on his way out, Chaim acknowledges the dedication of God and the Jewish people to one another. Thus, in describing this gesture, Skibell suggests that Chaim has not completely lost his faith despite his endless suffering.

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The concept of a Reality Marble (現実の結晶, Koyō Kekkai?, Innate Bounded Field) is one that centres around the materialization and projection of one's inner world onto reality following the Thaumaturgical Theory World Egg (世界タマゴ, Sekai Tamago?). Originally, it was an ability that daemons have as their Alien Common Sense (異次元常識, Ikai Jōshiki?), but some people such as The Twenty-seven Dead Apostle Ancestors and the greatest of magi have made this ability available to use through a long time. Practitioner of moon magic cast moon spells, including moon magic love spells, which consider the different phases of the moon for their spell work. In Egyptian Magic the Moon Phases are not considered in spell casting, however they are very important in harvesting and blessing ceremonies of materials and ingredients. The Phases of the Moon. The New Moon. For example, in a new moon, the first 2 days of the moon cycle, magic is generally performed between dawn and sunset. The power of the new moon is not very strong but the moon magic spells have a great deal of power that gradually increase as time goes on. Goddesses and some gods are invoked to make these spells work, which are focused on gardening, careers and romance. The Waxing Moon. A Blessing on the Moon book. Read 99 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Joseph Skibell's magical tale about the Holocaust—a fable in... This book takes fantastical routes through alternate realities to give an impression of devastation from the point of view of eternal hopefulness. flag 2 likes · Like · see review. Feb 19, 2009 Janet rated it it was amazing. Jaw dropping--the afterlife of a Jewish village exterminated by the Nazis in occupied Poland. Chagall between hard covers. flag 2 likes · Like · see review. Jun 30, 2018 Anne rated it liked it.