Duality, Awareness, and Synthesis: The Jewish American Experience

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The Jewish American literary tradition frequently addresses the presence of binary opposites within the immigrant experience. Within many Jewish American books, characters are repeatedly struggling between two conflicting aspects of their own identities. Although the development of each character's identity seems to be vastly different, it appears that the element of binary opposition may be the key to why readers study Jewish American literature. As Michael Kramer argues, "We study Jewish literature because we want to know the answers, and the answers elude us. We may try to ignore them (some of them) but to ignore the questions is only to repress them" (678). He continues, "some critics turn to the study of Jewish American literature precisely because they are looking for an appropriate, satisfying mode of ethnic self-expression" (680). This is an accurate and all-encompassing answer to the question of why readers study Jewish American literature. The questions are what intrigue us; questions are what awaken our senses to the conflicting binaries within our lives. Therefore, what better literature exists to address these questions than Jewish American literature, which is the literature that supports and encourages the most rigorous use of the Socratic Method? Because it reflects on the experience of being Jewish in America, Jewish American literature is saturated with awareness, questions, and synthesis of the dualities faced by all humans. By addressing and questioning this particular element of the human experience, Jewish American authors are able to reach a larger audience of readers who are ready to relate to characters with similar problems.

Binary opposites are present within every human existence. Whether the binary is related to culture, gender, age, sexuality, or religion, every person faces a polarized existence at one point or another. The elements of assimilation, heritage, and religion are constantly in combat with each other; this conflict becomes especially obvious when we examine the migration of a culture to a new environment. Jewish Americans, for instance, faced America with cultural, linguistic, and economic barriers that made their ability to adapt to the new world difficult. Not only were they forced to scrape along the poverty line, but each day they also had to face a new landscape that was unaccommodating of their native culture. With their constant need both to fit in and to hear the echo of a lost tradition, immigrant Jews were forced to balance this conflict as they looked toward the future.

Call It Sleep

The duality and development of the protagonist within the novel *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth mimics that of the conflict present within the Jewish American experience in the early twentieth century. Although the novel is not inherently about Judaism, it is about the reconciliation of identity, a process of reformation that is imminent within the immigrant experience. By examining the main character of *Call It Sleep* and his development in relation to his confrontation with binaries, we as readers are able to access not only the duality faced by immigrants, but also the duality inevitably present

within the existence of the human personality and identity. Characters within Jewish American literature are challenged by society to synthesize the conflicting elements of their lives into one cohesive personality. This personality is achieved through the process of awareness and acceptance and can be fully analyzed within the critically acclaimed novel *Call It Sleep*.

Literary critics often consider binaries as the opposing obstacles that are faced during one's lifetime. These oppositions are struggles in which the human character is pulled in multiple (and often opposing) directions. All developing identities within literature begin with the presence of juxtaposed binaries and a character's awareness of these dualities. Once the characters have recognized these binaries, they must create their own healthy personalities by finally taking action. By taking control of their own lives, these characters are able to synthesize the binaries within their personalities, thus creating a stable, balanced, and coalesced identity, which is pertinent to our understanding of the Jewish American experience.

Roth uses symbolism to foster an atmosphere of development for the reader while he or she engages in the storyline of the novel. The four distinct sections within *Call It Sleep* create an atmosphere of psychological development; the sections are "The Cellar," "The Picture," "The Coal," and "The Rail." These titles lay the foreground for the exploration of identity within the novel. The cellar symbolizes the subconscious mind, where memories, awareness, and fears lie dormant within the personality until provoked, jarred, or awakened by specific events. The picture and the coal speak to the idea of awareness and reality; the first refers to perception and the latter refers to truth. The subconscious can be transferred into the conscious, studied, and examined by the subject. Now with fresh eyes (the picture), the character is able to see the potential or severity of reality (the coal). Finally, the rail represents a connection, an expansion, and the future. By reaching this last point, the individual has completed the development process and now has a fully synthesized personality. By taking an in-depth look at this process through Roth's main character, David Schearl, we as readers can see the juxtaposition of identity and, inevitably, the immigrant experience.

Innocence versus Sexuality

David Schearl seems to be struggling through a coming-of-age process, a transition from childhood innocence into adolescent awareness. He is faced with the oppositions of innocence versus sexuality, Judaism versus Christianity, and confusion versus translation. Through David's recognition of these dualities and his eventual control at the end of the novel, the reader is able to witness the development of his personality.

Throughout the novel, David is struggling between innocence and his rising awareness of sexuality. At the opening of the novel, it is apparent how attached David is to his mother. Throughout the entire first section, he spends the majority of his time with her acting as though he is still an infant. Fred Roth notes that David's mother is a representation of his innocence:

> Genya Schearl has been David's only comfort, his only friend, his only real joy. When frightened or hurt he runs to his mother and buries his face in the safety and joy of her comforting bosom. Unfortunately,

> his misshapen view of sex pollutes the purity of even this relationship when he becomes aware of his mother's sexuality. (218)

As his development as a character continues, David is less and less drawn to his mother because of this juxtaposition of innocence and sexuality.

Hillel Halkin states, "In *Call It Sleep*, a novel that revolves around the Oedipal triangle between a boy, his lovingly protective mother to whom he overdependently clings, and his cold, abusive father of whom he lives in fear, David Schearl is a prepubescent on the cloudy verge of a sexual understanding that eludes him" (45). This Oedipal element within the novel is demonstrated through David's thoughts and reactions to his mother's body.

Contrary to Halkin's argument, David seems to be very aware that something is going on inside of him in regard to sexuality and maturation. When a sexual notion pops into his head, even if it has only remote sexual connotations, he immediately changes the subject in an attempt to avoid his sexual thoughts: "Covered up all…. Cellar-floor dirty…. Like the nickel then…Gone. Gone…" (H. Roth 355). In this passage, when David is listening to Esther and Leo in the cellar, he is trying to cover up his *dirty* thoughts with distracting, yet symbolic analogies. This shows that David is in fact aware of, but not yet ready to face, his growing sexuality. David's reactions to his sexual encounters are proof that he is beginning to question the idea of his own sexuality.

David's first sexual encounter occurs during his first interaction with other children. When David goes to play with his neighbors Yussie and Annie, he is suddenly thrust into the world of sexual adolescence. Annie convinces David to get in a closet with her, and she forces him to engage in a game of "touchy feely." His reaction is what is most important in this scene. David hears his mother calling for him and immediately runs to her arms; he feels both distressed and confused. Although his mother attempts to comfort him, he suddenly realizes his distance from her: "But she didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself" (H. Roth 55). This passage makes it clear that David is becoming aware of both his sexuality and the outside world. As his awareness develops, he slowly loses the comfort of his childhood innocence. David and his mother are no longer one cohesive entity. Instead, they have become two separate individuals.

In the last section of the novel, "The Rail," David is subjected to yet another traumatizing sexual experience. Yet for David this encounter ends a little differently, which further lends itself to his development as an individual. When David introduces Leo to his cousin Esther, the situation inevitably leads to a forced sexual rendezvous. Although David is physically removed from the action, because he is hidden within the confines of the dirty basement, he is still mentally aware of what is happening between his cousin and his friend. Once the situation gets out of hand and Leo is caught, David reacts differently from his reaction during his first sexual encounter. Instead of running home to his mother, he ends up seeking salvation at the heder:

> He had run and run, and now his own breath stabbed his lungs like a knife and his legs grew so heavy, they seemed to lift the sidewalk

> with them. Tottering with exhaustion, he dropped into a panicky, stumbling walk, clawed at his stockings, gasped so hoarsely, people tuned to stare. Only one thought in the screaming chaos of terror and revulsion his mind had fallen into remained unbroken: To reach the cheder— to lose himself among the rest. (H. Roth 358)

These two reactions show David's development from childhood innocence into the awareness of his own sexuality. David is physically drawn toward his growing sexuality while at the same time he yearns for spiritual purity and knowledge, thus this creates a binary opposition. Although he is traumatized by both events, he no longer feels as if he needs the protection and shelter of his mother because she too is part of this thing called sexuality.

Judaism versus Christianity

As Hana Wirth-Nesher claims, "The internal struggle for self-definition is enacted in the novel as a *kulturkampf*, a battleground of languages" (393). This cultural battle is most evident in David's experience with the juxtaposition of Judaism and Christianity. Not only is he struggling to find a basis of paternity, but he is also trying to find his spiritual origins.

David begins to go to heder while simultaneously learning about his paternity. These two elements force him to face yet another obstacle that he must ultimately reconcile within his own identity. David is fascinated with Hebrew because it allows him to learn more about his heritage and question certainties without punishment. Through his attachment to learning the stories within the Torah, David further develops as an individual and becomes closer to a state of mental balance:

> The lyrical and symbolic resonances of the biblical text, with its metaphorical angel coal in contrast to the literal coal of his cellar, captivate David's imagination and mark a turning point in his movement away from his parents and toward his development as an artist. (Wirth-Nesher 394)

As David becomes more involved in his Hebrew studies, he becomes equally intrigued by the idea of his possible "gentile" father. With the assistance of his friend Leo, David learns more about Christian traditions. With his impressionable mind, David comes to understand that being Christian means that you worship a savior and receive good luck in return: "Crosses is holy… even if yuh wears 'em, dey bring yuh luck. When me ol' lady had her appendixitis cut out, she has one o 'dem under her piller ev'y night, an dat's w'y she got better" (H. Roth 304). David believes that Leo's faith is the reason for Leo's fearlessness, a trait that David longs for in his life. Therefore, he is stuck between these two worlds of spirituality, both of which provide the solace and understanding that he is looking for, yet he is lost in the wealth of misinformation and rumor.

Translation versus Confusion

Similarly, the languages within David's experience also emphasize his existence in the void between two cultures; he is almost literally "lost in translation." In the following

lengthy passage, Hana Wirth-Nesher attempts to explain the presence of language within David's experiences and what language means in relation to his development:

> Throughout the work David is in the process of constructing a self out of languages that make up his world. First and foremost there is Yiddish, the language of home and the mother tongue, associated with his own nurturing mother and the Yiddish neighborhood of the Lower East Side. The formidable rival to that language is English, represented in the novel by the street lingo of immigrant dialects but also by the self-consciously literary passages that testify to the presence of a mind schooled in Anglo-American civilization. Also looming as a powerful linguistic force in the book is Hebrew, counterpoint to the mother tongue as it represents the Law of the Father in the words of the biblical prophets and the liturgy of Jewish ceremony…. The role of Polish is strangely a silent mirror image of English, for it is an inaccessible language for David, the vehicle for conveying secrets between adults that contain within them the key to his parents' past and to the circumstances of his own origins…. Polish is as inaccessible to David and to the reader as English is inaccessible to his mother. (393)

In other words, these conflicting languages represent his past heritage as well as his possible future in America. By sorting through this sea of languages, David is eventually able to reconcile his past and potential future by means of education and ambition.

Considering all of these conflicting elements within him, David seeks advice for which he is at first too timid to ask. During his first experience with the train tracks, it is apparent that he is both overwhelmed by and consumed by the power and illumination of the light: "Power! Like a paw ripping through all the stable fibres of the earth, power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day! And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips. The street quaked and roared, and like a tortured thing, the sheet zinc sword, leapt writhing, fell back, consumed with radiance" (253). Eventually, David comes back to the rails to find enlightenment; he longs for the power and influence of the lights.

David is forced to face several binaries within the novel, but the oppositions previously listed are perhaps the most prevalent. When confronting all of these conflicting elements within his life, David decides to revisit the train tracks in order to become closer to God:

> This scene—which is "apocalyptic" not so much because of David's close brush with death as because it is accompanied by a religious fantasy on his part in which the power-charged rail represents a terrifying revelation of God—has been justly acclaimed as a brilliant denouement to a superbly accomplished novel. (Halkin 45)

It is almost as if he sees the rails as the mouth of God, which explains his trek to this spot; he longs to obtain the advice from "the father" himself.

By taking action, David has successfully completed his coming-of-age process in spite of all of the obstacles created by the binaries within his environment. Although it was a foolish and dangerous thing to do, David was able to take control of his own life in order to achieve serenity. When he drifts off to sleep at the end of the novel, it symbolizes his peace of mind and synthesis of identity, which he has achieved through proactive means:

> It was only towards sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him, and over him and scudding ever toward him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, buniony, pavement-beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers, shoes, over one through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes. (H. Roth 441)

It is clear from Roth's usage of spatial awareness in this passage that David has finally awakened to the world and his place in it; he is no longer tormented by the dichotomy of his surroundings.

In Roth's novel, David has successfully reconciled with his binary worlds. However, Fred Roth argues that the synthesis at the end of the novel applies not only to David, but also to his parents: "When the interns carry David home, the stairs are no longer dark and they hold no fear for him. There is no longer any darkness between Genya's breasts, and there is no more fire in Albert's eyes. Darkness has been overcome, and, peaceful at last, David can go to sleep" (219-20). It is clear that David's parents have gone through some sort of development within their own experiences as well. By facing these conflicting elements within their own lives these characters are able to ratify the dichotomy by finding a balance within their own identities.

The developments experienced within these literary characters reflect the development of the Jewish American immigrant during the dawn of the twentieth century. Stories such as Roth's parallel the awareness of binary opposition, the acceptance of the conflict, and the ultimate completion of identity development through self-initiated change, so frequently experienced by Jewish American immigrants. Although Henry Roth's novel does not explicitly deal with the identity of the Jewish American immigrant, it does show the parallel themes of duality and synthesis that were common during this period. By portraying characters that are involved in identity conflicts not directly linked with Judaism, but rather the human condition of growing up, Roth is able to reach a larger audience and ultimately convey the feelings of juxtaposition within the lives of all people.

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