

IN HIS MOTHER'S IMAGE: A LACANIAN ANALYSIS OF SECOND GENERATION SONS
IN THE SHORT STORIES OF J. J. STEINFELD AND LEV RAPHAEL

By

Raina L. Shults

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Religion

August, 2014

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Professor Adam Meyer

Professor Phillip Ackerman-Lieberman

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What was in his mother's clothes that bathed away his fear and pain, in the cotton, silk narcotics, alligator bags and gauzy slippers, all smelling so much like her they were more than her, more than any woman, a world of vague and promised bliss?¹

In this passage from Lev Raphael's "Secret Anniversaries of the Heart," young Second Generation Holocaust survivor David identifies with his mother through her physical entrapments of femininity. This passage stands out because it challenges Freudian notions of a child's psychological development. Instead of rejecting his mother and identifying with his father as part of his discovery of gender, David closely identifies with his mother. In fact, male protagonists who identify closely with their mothers appear throughout the stories of Second Generation writers Lev Raphael and J. J. Steinfeld, while the fathers in their stories fade into the background or are completely invisible. J. J. Steinfeld's characters are radically affected by their mothers' Holocaust experiences, and they wholly lose themselves by trying to become their mothers. By the end of his stories, they appear driven into insanity by their obsessions with their mothers' pasts. Each of Steinfeld's characters backtracks through Lacan's stages of

¹ Lev Raphael, "Secret Anniversaries of the Heart" in *Secret Anniversaries of the Heart*, (Wellfleet: The Leapfrog Press, 2006), 178.

psychological development: they each experience a second “mirror stage,” which thrusts them from the Symbolic Order back into the Imaginary Order. Lev Raphael’s characters, on the other hand, do not experience as extreme an identity crisis as Steinfeld’s characters do. They are troubled by their mothers’ pasts, and they identify with their mothers as a means of coping with the horror of the Holocaust. However, they are not driven to insanity like Steinfeld’s characters are. Instead, Raphael depicts his characters in the midst of a complex identity struggle which usually culminates in an awakening of some kind. Although Raphael’s characters fluctuate between Lacan’s orders, there is not an extreme regression into the Imaginary Order. Instead of manifesting a complete loss of self as a result of their mothers’ Holocaust experiences, these characters are able to identify with their mothers while embracing their own unique identities.

This divergence from the “normal” depiction of male psychological development raises the question: Does this strong identification with the mother signify that these male characters are stunted in their psychological development, unable to develop into their individual masculine selves, or does it challenge constructed gender stereotypes in the Jewish community in a post-Holocaust world? In fact, because these characters inherit and embody the effects of the Holocaust, they reflect a discordant psychological development while also allowing the authors to explore the implications of being a Second Generation son of the Holocaust.

Steinfeld’s characters reflect the psychological trauma the Holocaust has dealt to members of the Second Generation. These characters are pitiable and driven to the brink of insanity. Their strong identification with their mothers results from their extreme brokenness. In addition to this identification with their mothers, they also often attempt vicariously to experience the Holocaust through this identification. Raphael’s characters, on the other hand, are not as extreme

in their maternal identification. Additionally, while Steinfeld's characters are often depicted as hopeless by the end of his stories, Raphael's characters are depicted as exceptionally hopeful characters. Their identification with their mothers' holocaust experiences is a healing experience that often motivates their own individual awakenings, while, for Steinfeld's characters, this Holocaust identification is their ultimate undoing. In this way, each author emphasizes something different. Steinfeld depicts the darkness and severity of the Holocaust's impact on the lives of Second Generation witnesses, and Raphael depicts how identifying with the Holocaust can bring an important self-awareness that is crucial to psychological development.

CHAPTER II

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Jacques Lacan describes three orders of human psychological development: the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order, and the Real Order. The Imaginary Order is described as the order of the mother. This is the order in which a young child is unable to distinguish itself as a separate individual. Instead, the child imagines that it is one with both the world around it and one with its mother. The mirror stage occurs within the Imaginary Order when a child begins to recognize the boundaries of its own body, to see itself as an entity that is separate from its mother, and this is when the child begins to construct an identity. It is at this stage in childhood development that a human begins to feel the anxiety that results from the discovery of its separateness from its mother and the world around it. Lois Tyson explains this, stating that “unconscious desire is always seeking our lost object of desire, the fantasy mother of our preverbal experience.”² And it is at this stage that the child experiences lack or loss as a result of its knowledge of its separateness. This marks the child’s transition from the Imaginary Order into the Symbolic Order. The child begins to learn language, rules, and societal structures in order to deal with the anxiety that results from its understanding of its inherent separateness. In fact, language, rules, and social norms exist because of this loss. Tyson further explains that “[t]he use of language in general, in fact, implies a loss, a lack, because I wouldn’t need words as

² Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 29.

stand-ins for things if I still felt that I was an inseparable part of those things.”³ This transition from the Imaginary Order to the Symbolic Order marks a child’s journey from the realm of its mother to the realm of its father. This realm of the father is particularly significant in psychological development. Tyson argues:

So enormous is the role of the Symbolic Order in the formation of what we refer to as our “selves,” in fact, that we are not the unique, independent individuals we think we are. Our desires, beliefs, biases, and so forth are constructed for us as a result of our immersion in the Symbolic Order, especially as that immersion is carried out by our parents and influenced by their responses to the Symbolic Order.⁴

Therefore, the Symbolic Order is not only the socializing of the “self,” it is also crucial to the construction of the “self.” Although the Symbolic Order allows the individual both to deal with the anxiety of separateness and to construct an identity, it does not eliminate this anxiety, and, according to Lacan, this anxiety drives the human desire to experience the unattainable Real Order.

For American children of Holocaust survivors, this separateness from the mother is more extreme than it is for the average individual, and their experience of lack is more intense. In fact, these Second Generation witnesses may experience a second mirror stage in their adulthood where they not only recognize themselves as distinct from their mothers, but they also discover that their mothers are radically Other and that they will never experience the reality of the Holocaust even though they live in the wake of it every day. While each individual experiences anxiety as a result of the existence of the unattainable Real, this anxiety is intensified by the fact that the Holocaust represents the Real for the Second Generation. It is a reality wholly unattain

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 31.

able by them. They can feel the effects of it on their lives, and they can try to access it through language and history, but it is an unattainable Real. The memory of the Holocaust acts as the mirror that highlights and reflects the adult child's extreme separateness from its parent. The discovery of this separateness creates an anxiety in these Second Generation witnesses that forces them to be haunted by their parents' pasts. Their parents' pasts wholly separate the children from their parents and cause them to regress in their psychological development. The child is forced to relive the mirror stage, and instead of recognizing itself as a unique individual in the world, the child is haunted by a separation anxiety from a mother who is now recognized as wholly Other.

Much of the literature of the Second Generation reflects this psychological regression. Instead of developing their own distinct identities, many Second Generation characters lose themselves in their parents' history. Throughout this body of literature, protagonists struggle with the demons that have tortured their parents for years, continually being swept away by wave after wave of their parents' haunted past. Bernice Eisenstein says it best in her memoir *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* when she writes: "I am lost in memory. It is not a place that has been mapped, fixed by coordinates of longitude and latitude, whereby I can retrace a step and come to the same place again. Each time is different."⁵ The members of the Second Generation, however, are not lost in their own memories; instead, they are lost in their parents' memories. Some of these second generation characters are lost forever behind the cruel mask of their par

⁵ Bernice Eisenstein, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 10.

ents' past, while others learn to find themselves or gain the hope that they can find themselves amidst the wreckage that the Holocaust has left in their parents' lives.

The Second Generation is decidedly marked by a desire to understand their parents' past and how they fit into that past, particularly because that past is so disjointed from their own experiences and reality that it is difficult for them to make sense of it. In *Second Generation Voices*, Alan and Naomi Berger explain that "Their post-Auschwitz legacy is one of questions."⁶ These children are mystified by a past that is both dark and strange, struggling to gain access into their parents' veiled world. Some characters are so obsessed with their parents' past that their fantasies are not only haunted by the Holocaust, but they themselves are also driven by a desire to actually experience the horror of the Holocaust as means of better understanding their parents. The further their reality lies from their parents' past, the greater their anxiety over their separateness from their parents becomes, and they, in turn, become more consumed by these Holocaust fantasies.

This "separation anxiety" is especially pronounced in the mother-son relationship, the mother being associated with both the Imaginary order and the mirror stage, and the son being the mother's radical Other. Additionally, the identity divide between American Second Generation sons and their mothers is particularly severe because Second Generation sons are distanced from their mothers not only by gender but also by an uncommon history, a different native language, and their inability to experience the suffering of the Holocaust. Therefore, this second mirror stage thrusts the Second Generation son into a cycle of psychological regression.

⁶ Alan Berger and Naomi Berger, *Second Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 2.

The Second Generation son will usually try to gain unity and oneness with his mother through language and traditions. However, when these elements of the Symbolic Order ultimately fail him, his mind will fall back into the pre-mirror stage Imaginary Order where he no longer sees himself as separate from his mother. Although “the Imaginary Order continues to exist in the background of consciousness even as the Symbolic Order holds sway in the foreground,” “[t]he Symbolic Order dominates human culture and social order, for to remain in the Imaginary Order is to render oneself incapable of functioning in society.”⁷ Instead of developing his own identity, he loses all sense of himself so that he and his mother are no longer separate and distinguishable identities in his own mind.

Because construction of fantasy arises from the separation that the members of the Second Generation feel from their parents’ darkened past, the greater the separation from their parents and the mystery of their past, the more obsessed with the Holocaust some characters become. The mother, then, whose complete otherness from her son distances her reality from her son’s by a further degree, becomes the focus of her son’s personal identity obsession. She is not only foreign to him, her past elusive and distant, but she is also distanced from him by her gender. She is wholly Other to him, which makes her an ideal subject for his identification through fantasy, and he becomes further detached from his own reality by retreating into the fantastical recreation of hers.

⁷ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 31-32.

CHAPTER III

DANCING AT CLUB HOLOCAUST

J. J. Steinfeld's "Dancing at the Club Holocaust," "Baruch's Undying Love," and "The Apostate's Tattoo" each illustrates a Second Generation son's second mirror stage, subsequent psychological regression, and eventual loss of self. In each story, a life event thrusts the protagonist into a second mirror stage, and he becomes obsessed with re-identifying with his mother by means of the Symbolic Order. When these means fail him, he ultimately regresses back to the Imaginary Order. The Imaginary Order is identified "through any experience or viewpoint that does not conform adequately to the societal norms and expectations that constitute the Symbolic Order."⁸ Steinfeld's characters are so obsessed with their mothers' Holocaust pasts that they are no longer able to conform to societal norms. Alan Berger argues that "they live on the margins of society and they are consumed by their Holocaust legacy."⁹ Each of the protagonists in Steinfeld's stories clearly exhibits this divergence from the norms of the Symbolic Order. Additionally, by the end of each story, the protagonists have completely lost all sense of themselves as unique identities and have been swallowed whole by their mothers' horror-filled pasts.

In Steinfeld's "Dancing at the Club Holocaust," Reuben Sklar is consumed and

⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁹ Alan Berger, *Children of Job* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 75.

psychologically troubled by his own Holocaust fantasies. Each week he finds himself in “a smokey basement club” of Nazis in New York City.¹⁰ In this club, a group of Germans gather to watch Nazi propaganda movies and sexually molest alleged “Jews” on stage. The images of the club are so fantastic that the reader is led to believe that they exist only in Reuben’s own imagination. For example, the narrator explains that “Reuben still remembered--and sometimes dreamed about---the first film he had ever seen at the Club: Paracelsus. Yet, regardless of the film, to Reuben it appeared more tangible than the audience or the smoke of the never-silent host.”¹¹ Here, the narrator intentionally blurs the lines between reality and imagination so that the reader questions Reuben’s reliability. During one of his therapy sessions, Reuben tells his psychologist, “I can see the concentration camps clearly. You have a look, doctor...Better yet, come to the Club Holocaust with me.”¹² However, both Reuben’s psychologist and his wife do not believe his stories.¹³ Whether or not this club is real, it is real for Reuben. Berger argues, “The reader discovers that the club actually does exist, at least for the patient, whose mother, a dancer before the war, was tortured by the Nazis and is unable to use her legs.”¹⁴ Not only is Reuben haunted by the Holocaust, he is haunted by the separation he feels from his mother. The Holocaust has created an impassable chasm between him and his mother, and thus, the Holocaust is the greatest cause of Reuben’s anxiety.

¹⁰ J. J. Steinfeld, “Dancing at the Club Holocaust” in *Dancing at the Club Holocaust: Stories New and Selected*. (Ragweed Press, 1993), 32.

¹¹ Ibid, 34.

¹² Ibid, 36.

¹³ Ibid, 34.

¹⁴ Alan Berger, *Children of Job* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 76.

Throughout the story, the narrator uses the therapy sessions to reveal the depth of Reuben's psychological illness, and the connection between his obsession with the Holocaust and his attempt to identify with his mother and her past. In the first narrated therapy session, Reuben reveals much about his obsession with his mother's suffering. Here Reuben breaks from the dialogue with his psychiatrist into a monologue about his mother's suffering. The narrator introduces Reuben's speech with the simple statement "the patient began talking about his mother without prompting."¹⁵ Reuben proceeds:

"My mother killed herself because she couldn't dance." When Reuben saw the doctor's indulgent expression, he raised his voice: "Goddamn it, she used to dance before the War. Her sister told me that at the funeral. My mother could barely walk as I was growing up. Until she killed herself she received *Wiedergutmachung* from the West German government for her crippled legs. You know what *Wiedergutmachung* means, doctor? Making good. Reparations straight from the Devil's ass. It's taken me all my life to comprehend that my mother had been a dancer before the War."¹⁶

This knowledge of his mother's past has driven Reuben to a severe point of psychological instability, and her past suffering has become his mental preoccupation.

This speech also reveals Reuben's mother's secrecy with regard to the Holocaust, for when he tells his psychiatrist about his mother's dancing, he substantiates his claim with the statement: "Her sister told me that at the funeral."¹⁷ Therefore, we learn that Reuben was unaware of this fact while his mother was alive. This discovery then acts as a second mirror stage, exposing Reuben's extreme separateness from his mother. Although he bore witness to

¹⁵ Ibid, 34.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

both her physical and psychological post-War suffering, he did not know the extent of that suffering because of his mother's silence on the subject. Therefore, Reuben is left piecing together both the mystery of his mother's horrific past and the reason for her suicide. He determines that this secret information about his mother's past suffering, the fact that she used to dance before the War, is the cause for her suicide. In fact, this secret bit of information forms the foundation of Reuben's Holocaust fantasies because it instigates his anxiety. The narrator concludes this episode with a frightening description: "Then Reuben Sklar the patient stood up and started dancing around the doctor's office like a madman... a very sad madman."¹⁸ He has become a sad madman because his own identity is becoming lost in his mother's suffering. He is trying to drown out his anxiety by taking on his mother's identity.

Not only does Reuben's obsession with his mother's Holocaust suffering harm him psychologically, but it also transforms his physical appearance. As readers, we are led to believe that Reuben's psychological state is slowly transforming him into his mother. The narrator describes this physical transformation in the setting of yet another therapy session: "'Look at your face...your eyes,' the doctor ordered. Reuben began to wander around the office in ludicrous pantomime, pretending to search for a mirror. Finally he ended his silence: 'If I was at my barber's I could see whatever your magic eyes see, doctor.'"¹⁹ The narrator leaves readers in the dark with regard to Reuben's appearance in this scene. What does the doctor see in Reuben's face...his eyes? The narrator, preferring mystery to description, leaves the reader with merely a clue in the following dialogue:

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 35.

Irritated by what he considered his patient's glibness, the doctor lifted the mirror higher this time and again ordered, "Just look at your face." Reuben slapped the mirror out of the doctor's extended hand, the glass shattering as it bounced off the desk and onto the carpet. "Sorry," Reuben said immediately, glancing at his renegade hand; he thought he saw his mother's concentration camp number but did not mention this to the doctor.²⁰

The narrator refuses to tell the reader what either the doctor or Reuben sees in Reuben's face.

This is because it is important that readers' perceptions of Reuben's identity are skewed like his own perception of himself. Instead, the narrator leaves the reader with a confused image of a man who can no longer recognize his own separate and individual physicality, for when he looks down at his arm he thinks he sees "his mother's concentration camp number." Reuben's transformation into his mother has begun. This transformation continues at Club Holocaust when the crowd begins to dance to a Nazi propaganda film. "Reuben wanted to arise and do his Dance of Death, but could make no movement. His mother's legs were his; he was almost all the way back."²¹ Both of these scenes illustrate Reuben's psychological regression into the Imaginary order.

Reuben's total loss of self culminates in the final scene of the story. The story ends hopelessly, for Reuben's identity crisis reaches its climax. The narrator gives us a final image of Reuben, now wholly possessed by the horror of his mother's past: "He danced furiously, kicking at anyone who came near him. In the midst of the commotion and spreading black smoke and retributive flames, Reuben Sklar moved through a marvelous, masterful *Totentanz*, movement

²⁰ Ibid, 36.

²¹ Ibid, 38.

and heat and damaged decades coalescing, and for the first time in his adult life, he felt happy.”²² In his review of the story, Michael Greenstein argues that “[d]ancing in the story becomes a metaphor for uniting with the past, for Steinfeld's story dances between past and present settings.”²³ Greenstein’s observation falls short. Dancing is not merely a metaphor for “uniting with the past,” for it is the manifestation of Reuben’s insanity. The last line is particularly curious. Why is Reuben happy for the first time in his adult life? Because this phrase is connected to Reuben’s transformation into his mother, the reader is left to conclude that Reuben is happy because he can no longer distinguish himself from his mother. He is no longer tormented by the anxiety of his separateness, for he can no longer distinguish himself from his mother.

This final scene depicts Reuben’s fall from the Symbolic order back into the Imaginary order. Before his dance, he screams three times into the crowd, “Ich bin ein Jude.”²⁴ The entire German language at the tip of his tongue, and all that he can say is “I am a Jew.” Interestingly, before Reuben’s final Death Dance, the narrator shows us his reliance on the symbolic: “Reuben opened another bottle of wine and went over to the dresser mirror to practice German. He had mastered the language and believed he could walk around Germany without anyone knowing he was not a native.”²⁵ In this scene, Reuben still looks at himself in the “dresser mirror,” seeing himself still as a distinct identity, forever separated from his mother. Additionally, he is

²² Ibid, 41.

²³ Michael Greenstein, “J.J. Steinfeld” in *Holocaust Literature*, ed. S. Lilian Kremer. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1222.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 40.

practicing German, embracing the language of the “fatherland” in an attempt to reconnect with his mother. However, language will never truly unite him with his mother. Instead, he must lose all sense of reality, all sense of himself as an individual. In order to overcome the great divide of the Holocaust, he must revert back to the order of the Imaginary, back to a place where he and his mother are one. This is the reason the narrator points out that Reuben is happy for the first time in his “adult life.” Recognizing his separateness from his mother and the impassable gulf of horror that separates them, Reuben has been tormented with anxiety, but, in the end, Reuben experiences what he has longed for all his life, although he experiences this at the cost of losing himself forever.

CHAPTER IV

BARUCH'S UNDYING LOVE

Like Reuben, Baruch also exhibits a progression toward a complete loss of self in “Baruch’s Undying Love.” At the beginning of the story, the narrator presents readers with an image of a troubled professor who is so tormented by the Holocaust that he is losing touch with reality. Looking out at the crowded lecture room before the start of his German History class, Baruch observes that it is “[p]acked, like a Nuremberg rally during the 1930s.”²⁶ Then, after “slapp[ing] at the side of his leg in an effort to banish the incongruous image,” he tells himself, “I’m in Halifax, *Halifax*.... This is 1986 ...”²⁷ Additionally, the narrator immediately clues the reader in to the cause of Baruch’s loss of reality: his preoccupation with his mother’s past. While Baruch is still paralyzed before the start of his class, the reader is told that “[h]e thought he saw his mother’s face near the front of the lecture hall, but he knew that was impossible, as impossible as erasing time or changing the past.”²⁸ This is the first place where the reader is shown both Baruch’s preoccupation with his mother and his loss of control over his own imagination.

Throughout the story, the narrator presents a series of letters that Baruch has written to his mother, each revealing Baruch’s progression toward losing himself in his mother’s identity,

²⁶ J. J. Steinfeld, “Baruch’s Undying Love.” in *Dancing at the Club Holocaust: Stories New and Selected* (Ragweed Press, 1993), 196.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

and only at the end of the story does the narrator reveal that Baruch's mother has been dead since before the beginning of the story. Therefore, we may rightly assume that the death of Baruch's mother is the event that has sent him into his psychological downward spiral. Not only is Baruch separated from his mother by suffering, history, language, and gender, but he is now also separated by the permanence of death. The narrator describes Baruch's struggle with the separation he experiences in the opening classroom scene, connecting the idea of Baruch's separation from his mother with his Holocaust obsession:

The professor stationed himself near the blackboard and looked at the faces before him. They weren't even born when the madness of the Second World War raged. Like me, they weren't even born. His facial muscles locked into a tense expression, his complexion becoming the paleness that only dread could paint. This is Halifax, the middle of the afternoon, a lifetime after it all happened, he told himself. He whispered the city's name and the year, trying to create an incantation that might offer sanitary from his fears...*Halifax... 1986...* Somehow the reminders and the words did not have the force of memory, could not resist the intrusion of the past.²⁹

Here, not only is Baruch recognizing that he has more experiential connection with his classroom of students than he does with his deceased mother (i.e. both he and his students were born after the trauma of the war that his mother experienced, and they are in Halifax in 1986, a present that his mother could never have experienced), but it is his recognition of this rift that provokes Baruch's psychological turmoil and loss of reality. The narrator again emphasizes the division created by time and space during the classroom scene describing Baruch, "Seeing his mother clearly in his mind --seeing her before he was born ---" as he writes Auschwitz backwards two more times on the board.³⁰ Here, again, the narrator connects Baruch's obsession with the Holo

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

caust with his desire to be united with his unattainable mother in a past that is inaccessible to him.

Studying and teaching the Holocaust fail to create the desired connection with his mother for which Baruch longs. Therefore, writing letters to his deceased mother provides a new outlet by which Baruch can seek to make this connection. These letters, although they employ language (which is both learned and employed in the Symbolic Order), illustrate Baruch's movement from the Symbolic Order back into the Imaginary order, chronicling his total loss of self until, at the end of the story, he imagines he has become his mother. The first letter shows that Baruch is still relying on language to relieve the separation he feels from his mother:

Dear Mama, Forgive me for not writing in such a long time. I won't let it happen again, not the way I feel now. I realize that I'm becoming more and more like you. I never thought it would happen, but it has, and I don't know if that's good or bad. I'm sorry I'm not writing in Yiddish but I can't remember enough of the words to make sense. I miss hearing you speak Yiddish to me, even if I fought against it when I was a kid. What does a kid growing up in Canada know about Yiddish? I wanted to be a hockey player and hockey players don't need to speak Yiddish.³¹

Hockey players may not need to learn Yiddish, but sons who are forever separated from their Holocaust-surviving mothers do, according to Baruch. Baruch also uses language as a means of reconnection to his mother's past when he insists on being called Baruch instead of Barry. Not only does he want to speak his mother's language, but he also wants to self-identify with her history and heritage by means of language.

Although it is clear that Baruch believes that language will bring him closer to his mother, his words reveal that it is his imagination that is allowing him to feel closer to, and

³¹ Ibid, 198.

eventually to believe that he is, his mother. Baruch is leaving the Symbolic order and regressing into the Imaginary order. For example, despite Baruch's insistence on learning, and subsequently writing his deceased mother in, Yiddish, the reader never sees evidence that he ever does so. Additionally, it is in Baruch's imagination rather than the means of either the study of language or the study of history that the reader sees him identifying more closely with his mother. In his next letter, Baruch writes: "It's difficult to explain, but I really felt you close by this week. I thought I heard you crying. I remember how I used to scold you for crying too much. Wasn't I the insensitive brat. I am feeling like you, Mama, the pain and sadness and fears, but I don't have any justification. You always took such good care of me, protected me from the past."³² In his imagination, Baruch hears his mother crying, and this is where we see him emotionally identifying with his mother's "pain and sadness and fears." Although Baruch is certainly journeying out of the Symbolic order, it is clear that he has not yet regressed into the Imaginary order because he still recognizes the great experiential gulf of separation that stands between them when he admits, "I don't have any justification. You always took such good care of me, protected me from the past."³³ He still recognizes himself as separate from his mother.

As Baruch progresses back into the Imaginary order, he not only imagines seeing and hearing his mother, he now sees himself becoming his mother. In one of his later letters, he writes: "I looked in the mirror today and thought I saw you. Knowing what you went through during the War made me weep. I'm going to get on a plane and visit you very soon. Maybe next

³² Ibid, 200-201.

³³ Ibid.

weekend. I can't free myself of the feeling I'm becoming like you, Mama."³⁴ This is where Baruch begins regressing to a pre-mirror stage of the Imaginary order where he not only sees his mother's and his image as one in the mirror, but he also begins to imagine that he feels like her. However, Baruch still struggles with the fact that he can never share her past when he confesses, "But it's your past. I love you as much as Papa loved you. Next week I'll see you. We'll talk about the world before Hitler and the Nazis ruined everything. I'll give you the best hugs you've ever had."³⁵ Here, Baruch teeter-totters in his ability to identify with his mother's past, first asserting that it is "her" past, and then later predicting a conversation with his mother about "the world before the Holocaust," a world Baruch can never know. Despite this division created by the Holocaust, Baruch does eventually regress back far enough into the Imaginary order that his mind no longer recognizes his own separate identity, and when this happens, his regression back into Imaginary order is complete: in his mind he and his mother are one again. The story ends with Baruch's last letter to his mother, a testament to his total loss of self: "Dear Mama, I am you. My undying love, Baruch."³⁶ With this statement, Baruch declares the oneness he now feels with his mother. This illustrates that he now believe that he is his mother. Now, in his mind, he and his mother are one, and he no longer struggles with the anxiety of his own separate identity

³⁴ Ibid, 205.

³⁵ Ibid, 206.

³⁶ Ibid, 207.

CHAPTER V

THE APOSTATE'S TATOO

Sam Morgan or Shlomo Markovitz, in “The Apostate’s Tattoo,” searches for his identity in his mother’s suffering, and he, too, is driven by an anxiety that stems from the divide that forever separates him from knowing his mother’s pain. In this story, unlike in “Dancing at the Club Holocaust,” the protagonist’s stark transition from unconcerned to Holocaust-obsessed is emphasized. The event that instigates this change and stimulates Sam’s separation anxiety is a trip to the place in Poland where his parents were born and his subsequent trip to Germany to the Displaced Persons Camp where he was born. The narrator emphasizes the fact that Sam was not preoccupied with his parents’ past before his “birthright tour” of Europe, telling us that “[o]nly after they had lived together for eight months and had begun to make marriage plans, did Sam tell Sylvie he was Jewish and his parents has anglicized his surname to Morgan when he was a boy.”³⁷ This not only reveals that Sam had exhibited little concern with his parents’ pasts, but it also reveals that his parents strove to keep him distanced from this past. Therefore, both his parents’ silence and the foreignness of their suffering have distanced Sam from them. The trip is an awakening for Sam because it shows him just how distant and separate he is from his parents’ past reality, and this is what causes his anxiety.

³⁷ J. J. Steinfeld, “The Apostate’s Tattoo” in *Dancing at the Club Holocaust: Stories New and Selected*. (Ragweed Press, 1993), 14.

Like Reuben, Sam first employs language as a means of traversing the gulf that separates him from his parents' pasts. We learn that he "had changed so much in the last two years --the way he spoke, behaved, even thought-- and now the expression that clutched his face was totally new."³⁸ Speech, behavior, and thoughts are all governed by the symbolic order, and Sam seeks to relieve his anxiety by altering these things. Additionally, "[w]ithin a week of his return he changed the whole direction of his career. He began to study Hebrew and Yiddish. He called his children by foreign names despite their objections."³⁹ By learning both Hebrew and Yiddish, Sam is not only trying to gain oneness with his parents, but he is also trying to unite himself with the legacy of his ancestors. It is also particularly significant that he changes his name to Shlomo Markovitz because this reveals his attempt to use language as a means of identifying himself in a way that erases the separateness he experiences. However, language fails to relieve his anxiety, so he, like Reuben, attempts a more drastic reunification.

Tattooing himself with his mother's concentration camp number is Sam's final and most drastic attempt at dissolving the Holocaust-divide. On the way to the tattoo parlor, when Sylvie questions Sam about where they are going, he merely tells her that all his life has been preparation for this day.⁴⁰ He later stresses, "I've been waiting to come here for so long. It's my destiny to come here."⁴¹ As they near the seedy tattoo parlor, Sam "remark[s] that this area

³⁸ Ibid, 12.

³⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid, 15.

remind[s] him of the most dreary, depressing parts of Poland.”⁴² The narrator is sending a hint to the reader that Sam is trying to connect with his mother’s misery. He is reaching back to Poland, and he is trying to reach back to the Holocaust.

Although the story at times describes Sam’s attempt to make a connection with the history of both his parents, toward the end it is clear that Sam is mostly obsessed with regaining his mother’s past. Even Sylvie recognizes the preeminence of Sam’s relationship with his mother when the narrator explains, “as she thought of Sam’s mother and the anguish her concentration camp experience caused him, Sylvie felt guilty for raising her voice.”⁴³ Both of Sam’s parents were in the Holocaust, but Sylvie does not think of Sam’s father, revealing Sam’s preoccupation with his mother. However, this is only the first indicator that Sam is trying to reconnect with his deceased mother. When he asks the tattoo artist for the tattoo, the narrator explains that “Sam knew the number as well as his own name; perhaps the number was his own name --or even more indelible than a name.”⁴⁴ Sam believes his identity is locked inside this series of numbers that replaced his mother’s name in the camps. By inscribing his mother’s concentration camp number on his own arm, Sam is trying to dissolve the lines of separation that have always distanced him from his mother.

At first, his action appears to be successful, and for a short period after receiving the tattoo he appears to be happy in the same way that Reuben is at the end of his story: “Halfway down the street to the car Sam began to walk on his own. His strength was returning: A few

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 18.

steps from the car he stopped, his mood suddenly vibrant.”⁴⁵ However, he is only happy so long as he sees himself as one with his Mother, and when he looks down at his arm he sees his mother’s arm, both arms one in the same. In fact, after receiving the tattoo, Sam appears to be expecting the dissolution of his two-year anxiety: “‘Voila!’ Sam said as he held his right forearm towards Sylvie, his voice strong with redemption, waiting for his wife’s approval. He looked to the sky as Sylvie saw the blue number pierced into reddened skin.”⁴⁶ Sam tries to persuade his wife: “I know I’ve been difficult to live with lately. Now I will be fine. This act was essential, believe me, Sylvie.” Sam is convinced that this act has redeemed him

However, Sam’s happiness is short lived, and soon he is left with a permanent sign of his separateness. The mood in the story shifts from hope to hopelessness in one sentence: “He was searching for something in the sky, perhaps an omen or reassurance, but the cloudless blue canopy was expressionless” (19). Sam’s attempt to find happiness by taking on his mother’s identity is fruitless, and when Sam “look[s] at his tattooed forearm,...His face crumble[s] in disbelief. He had told the tattooist the wrong arm....”(19). Greenstein argues that “[t]he misplaced number, like the displaced camp of his birth, points to the absurdity of the post-Holocaust world trying to come to terms with the tragedy of the earlier generation.”⁴⁷ Now, instead of tying himself to his mother’s identity and blurring the lines of separation between her identity and his, he has accidentally sharpened those lines. He now bears the reminder of this separation in his

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁷ Michael Greenstein, “J.J. Steinfeld” in *Holocaust Literature*, ed. S. Lilian Kremer. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1223.

flesh: “Sam stare[s] only at his right forearm and the misplaced number. Then he start[s] to scream as the image of his mother and her concentration camp number choke[s] his consciousness” (19). The image of his mother haunts him here precisely because it is an image of separateness. Sam is realizing the permanence of his separation, and the misplaced number on his forearm symbolizes the Holocaust-divide that separates them forever.

Despite Sam’s failure to achieve psychological “oneness” with his mother, it is important to note that Sam is not left in a state more hopeless than Reuben’s. Although Reuben achieves this oneness by the end of his story, he is consumed either physically or psychologically by the Holocaust. He may believe that he is unseparated from his mother, but this is merely a cruel trick played by his troubled mind. Reuben is lost forever by the end of his story, while Sam is merely being forced, yet again, out of the Imaginary Order. He can no longer be comforted by the hope of losing his separateness. The ending of Sam’s story, then, is less hopeless than Reuben’s story because Sam, though tormented by the sign of his separateness, is now forced to recognize himself as an individual.

“Dancing at the Club Holocaust,” “Baruch’s Undying Love,” and “The Apostate’s Tattoo” each present the stories of Second Generation sons who regress in their psychological development in order to relieve the anxiety that they feel as a result of their extreme separation from their mothers. Reuben, Baruch, and Sam each experience a second mirror stage that instigates this anxiety by revealing to them that they are not merely separate identities from their mothers, but they are entirely different from their mothers. While in normal psychological development individuals experience the mirror stage early on in their childhood and then begin to construct their own individual identities after recognizing their separateness, these Second Gen

eration characters regress in their psychological development, losing touch with their own identities, as a result of this second mirror stage. The realization that they are radically Other from their mothers severs even the slightest notion of any connection that they had ever imagined having with their mothers, and it sends them into a psychological regression that pushes them back into the Imaginary order where they can no longer recognize the boundaries between their own identities and their mother's identities.

Although all three main characters are psychologically troubled, Reuben and Baruch's stories end more hopelessly than Sam's does. At the end of their stories, both Reuben and Baruch have psychologically regressed so far that they can no longer distinguish themselves from their mothers. In their minds, they have become their mothers, which means that they are living within the Imaginary Order. They have become insane. Although Sam also regresses to the Imaginary Order, he never fully loses touch with his own separate identity because his attempt to lose himself in his mother's identity is thwarted when he receives the tattoo of his mother's concentration camp number on the wrong arm. Although readers are left with a bleak image of Sam as a man tormented by the memory of a mother forever separated from him, there is still the potential for the hope that he can come to terms with this separation and eventually reach a healthy psychological state within the Symbolic Order. However, despite Sam's potential hope of restoring some form of psychological stability, he, too, is depicted at the end of the story in a pitiable state of troubled identity.

These stories show the unique relationship between Second Generation sons and their mothers and also illustrate a pattern of adult psychological regression through Lacan's orders. Additionally, they illustrate the psychological turmoil that the Second Generation experiences as

a result of learning just how radically different they are from their mothers. This knowledge of separateness motivates these characters to lose themselves in their mother's identities. Her Otherness provides the most alluring and comforting of all disguises.

CHAPTER VI

SECRET ANNIVERSARIES OF THE HEART

Lev Raphael's stories "Secret Anniversaries of the Heart," "Caravans," and "Nocturne" do not feature male protagonists who are driven to the brink of insanity or wholly into it. Instead, Raphael's characters are far more psychologically balanced. They still identify with their mothers very strongly. However, they find ways both to identify with their mothers and still to retain a sense of their own identity.

While Steinfeld's characters are, for the most part, hopeless, Lev Raphael creates Second Generation protagonists who, although they identify strongly with their mothers, have a stronger and healthier sense of self. Additionally, Raphael's stories culminate in a psychological, and sometimes sexual, awakening for his characters. The unnamed author in *Kirkus Reviews* argues that "Raphael writes from a highly distinctive perspective: a compassionate celebrant of souls squeezed by mainstream pressures and fighting for pride."⁴⁸ At the end of his stories, his male characters are not left in a hopeless state, but they are usually in a stronger psychological and emotional state than they were at the beginning of the stories. There is not a dramatic regression into the Imaginary Order, no spiral into insanity.

Instead, the characters in Raphael's stories are more complex. The sons do strongly identify with their Holocaust survivor mothers; however, their relationships with their mothers are fleshed out in greater detail than the relationships in Steinfeld's stories. Raphael also highlights

⁴⁸ "Raphael, Lev: Secret Anniversaries of the Heart," *Kirkus Reviews* (2005): 1296.

the complexity of these relationships and the complexity of the Holocaust's effect on the sons' lives. Additionally, these characters learn how to overcome the anxiety they experience as a result of their mothers' Holocaust experiences. While Raphael's characters do transition between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders, they ultimately find a healthy way to exist within the Symbolic Order, and they do not wholly lose their sense of self. This is largely because Raphael's characters' psychological struggles, albeit weighty, are not as dramatic as Steinfeld's characters' struggles because Steinfeld's stories both highlight and fixate on the psychological turmoil of the Holocaust while Raphael's stories are more concerned with exploring the subtlety and complexity of the effects of the Holocaust on Second Generation sons and also often explore the implications of being both Jewish and gay for the Second Generation. Steinfeld's stories ask the question, "Can a Second Generation son have a healthy identity that is independent of his mother's Holocaust past?" while Raphael's stories often ask the question, "Can a Second Generation son identify with his mother and her Holocaust experience and be a proud Jew who is confident with his own identity?" Also, unlike Steinfeld's stories, there is hope for the Second Generation sons in Raphael's stories.

Lev Raphael's "Secret Anniversaries of the Heart" is a story of a son's struggle to translate his mother's existence when her suffering, history, and language are foreign to him. The story begins with the sentence: "David could never seem to translate his mother's life into English."⁴⁹ The word "never" indicates that David has always struggled with his mother's foreignness; whereas both Reuben and Sam's separation anxiety can be traced to specific life events

⁴⁹ Lev Raphael, "Secret Anniversaries of the Heart" in *Secret Anniversaries of the Heart*, (Wellfleet: The Leapfrog Press, 2006), 175.

(i.e. Reuben's mother's funeral and Sam's trip to Europe), David finds himself distanced from his mother by time, space, language, and experience, but this cannot be traced to a second mirror stage as it can with Steinfeld's characters. Additionally, instead of regressing into the Imaginary Order, David is able to lead a somewhat psychologically healthy life despite his fascination with and inability to translate his mother's past.

Like the characters in Steinfeld's stories, David is confronted with the problem of his mother's extreme "otherness." His mother's past is a foreign mystery, and he is separated from this past by time, space, and language. Additionally, David's knowledge of his mother's past is limited to mere fragments that slip into conversation and one photograph that was saved by an American relative. Ephemeral glimpses of his mother's past become the source of his fantasy. In this one picture that is available to him, he sees her as "dreamy there, foreign, her rich dark hair coiled and fragrant-looking even on dead paper"⁵⁰ It is his only window into her foreign world, and it gives him just a mere taste of a reality that will be forever beyond his grasp. Her past is a troubling and impassible gulf. Her past life is beyond his comprehension. On "the rare frightening times she spoke about her war years--the ghetto, the camps, the endless suffering--language failed him. He didn't know what to say. What could he say?"⁵¹ David lives in the comfort of America, how can he translate the horror of his mother's past?

The narrator emphasizes how untranslatable David has found his mother's life to be: "When she talked about gymnasium, he saw the ropes, mats and parallel bars of his gym instead of books and blackboards. When she described her blue pleated skirt uniform, David pictured the

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Catholic school girls with their matching satchels giggling on the No. 5 bus as it lurched down Riverside Drive.”⁵² This passage emphasizes the inability of the Symbolic Order to allow David to reach the “real.” David recognizes that language is failing to reach the reality of his mother’s past. When his mom describes her past, he is only able to understand it in terms of his own culture, language, history, and environment. Language only widens the gulf between David’s reality and his mother’s reality. The narrator also chooses to reveal that “David refused to speak Yiddish, even though he understood it perfectly.”⁵³ This illustrates David’s rejection of aspects of the Symbolic Order. Language is impotent: unable to connect David with his mother’s past even when it is a shared language. David refuses to speak Yiddish because he recognizes language’s inability to connect him with her past. However, the mystery that is created by her untranslatable life only makes her life all the more alluring to David.

As a child, David attempts to lose himself in his mother’s entrapments of femininity. The foreign comfort of her clothing allows him to forget himself, to lose himself in her image. The “world of vague and promised bliss”⁵⁴ that it offers is a world in which David no longer feels separated from his mother by the years of horror and persecution that she endured in a foreign country. Her clothing banishes the feeling of being irrevocably divided from his mother by the Holocaust. He can look in the mirror and see the boundaries between his and his mother’s identity fade away in the reflection. In this passage we see that the foreignness, or the complete otherness, of the mother is not only titillating and alluring to the son, but it can also be a comfort for

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 177.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 178.

the son to lose himself in her identity. In this passage, the mother's clothing cocoons David in a comforting disguise. He can slip into it with perfect ease, losing himself in his effort to be closer to her. When he wears his mother's clothes, David regresses into the Imaginary Order. He no longer needs to worry about how to translate his mother's life because, when he is in her clothes, he is once again one with her. The narrator speculates, "What was in his mother's clothes that bathed away his fear and pain, in the cotton, silk narcotics, alligator bags and gauzy slippers, all smelling so much like her they were more than her, more than any woman, a world of vague and promised bliss?"⁵⁵ This 'world of vague and promised bliss' is the unattainable Real Order. The reality that it offers is a world in which David no longer feels separated from his mother by the years of horror and persecution that she experienced in a foreign country and the years of comfort and peace he has experienced in America. They blur the stark, impassable division created by the Holocaust. The only way for David to traverse this gulf of difference is by physically making himself look like his mother.

David's attempt to lose himself in his mother's identity is different than Steinfeld's characters' escape from reality for two reasons. First, David's identification with his mother brings him comfort instead of psychological turmoil, and secondly, although he identifies with his mother to the point of dressing like her, he never wholly loses himself in this identification. The scene where this difference is most pronounced is the scene in which he raids his mother's closet:

He had plundered his mother's closet all those years when he was six or eight or even eleven, and left alone, to feel the ice cream smoothness of her dresses, to stroke them like a genie's lamp, to slip inside whatever beckoned, to rope and

⁵⁵ Ibid, 178.

pile her necklaces around his eager scrawny neck, squeeze her large earrings on, totter in her shoes, and stare into her bureau mirror, with no one home, no one in the world but him, turning, looking beautiful, like her, but like himself, a distant and imagined self.⁵⁶

While David attempts to lose himself in the trappings of his mother's physical appearance, disguising himself beneath layers of clothing and jewelry, he also stares into her bureau mirror and sees himself "looking beautiful, like her, but like himself, a distant imagined self." Here, David is attempting to regress to a pre-mirror stage of the Imaginary Order, imagining his own identity unified with his mother's. This "distant imagined self" is the "real" that David is trying to obtain. Although in this image David is trying to lose himself in his mother's image, no matter how many necklaces he layers on "his eager scrawny neck" or how eagerly he strokes her dresses "like a genie lamp," he is still there, "no one in the world but him, turning, looking beautiful, like her, but like himself." In this passage we do not see the utter madness of Reuben as he is dancing in Club Holocaust, a man who has lost all sense of himself to his Holocaust fantasy, nor do we see a tormented Shlomo bracing his arm and screaming at the sky because he has been unable to lose himself to his mother's Holocaust past. Instead, we see a son who is both comforted by his ability to make himself look like his mother and still ever-present throughout this identification. No matter how much he makes himself look like his mother, he is still there. He exists as an individual. David has retained his own separate identity, and he is not wholly tormented by his own individual existence.

While Reuben, Baruch, and Shlomo are, for the most part, hopeless characters as a result of their mothers' pasts, David is a hopeful character. Although David strongly identifies with his

⁵⁶ Ibid.

mother, so much that he dressed up in her clothes, he is unmistakably his own person. While the complete otherness of his mother is psychologically troubling, David does not lose all sense of himself. He is separate from his mother, and he is able to lead a psychologically balanced life as an adult. He recognizes the psychological brokenness that exists in his life as a result of being a Second Generation survivor, and he takes positive actions in his life as an adult to live a more balanced life. For example, he is able to come out as a gay man to his own mother despite her disapproval: “He had told her that he was gay when he graduated Columbia’s School of Journalism, and all she could say was, ‘Why spoil everything?’⁵⁷ Although her response is harsh, he continues on with his life independently, seeking counsel and comfort from other Second Generation survivors and meeting a lifelong partner: “So he never mentioned meeting Jake when he moved to a Detroit suburb and joined a group for children of Holocaust survivors, and how their first night turned into a lifetime⁵⁸” This is David’s first step toward redemption. In fact, David is more free to be himself than other characters in the story who are not children of Holocaust survivors. He is more free than either Gabriel or Chase from his writing group, who are not yet secure in their own sexual identity as gay men. David has Jake, and the strength and security of their relationship stabilizes David:

When they had met so many years ago, David had been like one of those storybook characters lost and bewildered in a terrible forest, who finds a shelter dazzling in its safety and warmth. So dazzling that its outlines never become quite clear. Jake rescued him, released him. And moving in together had been like opening a long classic novel he’d always heard about—Anna Karenina, perhaps—to follow the beckoning first lines that promised a chance

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 179.

to live another richer life. He had that life. Or nearly had it.⁵⁹

It is clear that David is more free than he was as a child because he has chosen to be secure in his own individuality and sexuality, and his relationship with Jake is the reason for this. Secure in his identity as a gay, Jewish man, David contributes to the redefinition of Jewish masculinity in a post-Holocaust world, and his very existence opposes homophobia and anti-Semitism. Jake makes one statement to David that truly resounds throughout the entire story: “Jews and queers, we just have history screwing us over.”⁶⁰ While Steinfeld’s characters struggle to be secure in their own identities, David is able to overcome the demons of his mother’s past in order to be a champion for gay Jews.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 183-184.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER V11

CARAVANS

The unnamed male protagonist in Raphael's "Caravans" is the son of two Holocaust survivors. His father is silent about the Holocaust, so he learns everything he knows about his parents' past from his mother. While both his parents' Holocaust pasts shape his identity, his mother's past is the object of his fantasies. While it is clear that the father plays a role in this character's development, the mother's influence is on a deeper more unconscious level. While this character is not as hopeless as Steinfeld's characters, it is clear that the past of his mother plays a critical role in his individual and sexual awakening.

First of all, the protagonist's preoccupation with his parents' past and his struggle with his identity are apparent from the beginning of the story. The story begins with a description of his parents that is constructed from both his own observations and the fragments his mother has shared with him about her past. At the beginning of the story, he describes his frustration with the way his parents met each other and their Holocaust survivor friends, Sam and Pauline, illustrating his desire to fantasize about his parents' Holocaust experiences: "That's where they all had met, after the War--not in some Displaced Persons camp, not in a sealed train or on a forced march, but in New York City. It disappointed me that they couldn't trace their friendship back across the ocean; it made the past even darker."⁶¹ This reveals the protagonist's struggle with the

⁶¹ Lev Raphael, "Caravans." in *Secret Anniversaries of the Heart: New and Selected Stories* (Wellfleet: Leapfrog Press, 2006), 45.

unattainable “real” of his parents’ Holocaust pasts. The past is made “even darker” when he recognizes that his parents’ friendship is not the product of the Holocaust. This reality makes the Holocaust an even more unattainable “real” for him.

Although both of his parents are Holocaust survivors, this protagonist identifies more closely with his mother’s past. As a result, she has a stronger influence on his psychological development. The character has little to no knowledge of his father’s past, and, as a result, there is great tension between the two characters. He explains:

[S]ometimes I wanted to storm in there and slap him so hard I shook just imagining it. I was ashamed of feeling that, but the fantasy of stopping him was so powerful I couldn’t control it. Perhaps what enraged me was that I had so little sense of who my father had been as a boy in Warsaw, his dreams, his schooling, his crazy cousins (I figured everyone had a few of those), that to have the door to all that wrenched open and slammed with each bitter ‘cursed’ was too much.⁶²

Although the protagonist desires to reconstruct his father’s past from his imagination, he is at a loss. Because he has “so little sense of who [his] father had been,” he is relegated to reconstructing his father’s past from general fragments (i.e. his father had “dreams,” went to school, and possibly had “crazy cousins”).

In contrast to the character’s dysfunctional relationship with his father, the character expresses a respect for his mother that stems from honest albeit sparse communication about her past: “Mom spoke sparingly about fleeing Warsaw in 1939 to Tashkent, deep in the Soviet Union, where her parents and sister starved to death, but she did answer my questions, and with remarkable poise, I thought.”⁶³ While it is clear that both his parents’ pasts greatly influence his

⁶² Ibid, 47.

⁶³ Ibid, 45.

life, he is able to fantasize and identify with his mother's past because he has learned bits of it, whereas he is bitter about his father because he is wholly shut out of his past. It is also important to note that his mother does not share everything about her past with her son. Rather, she "spoke sparingly," and these sparing bits allow her son to fill in the gaping holes with his own imagination. Therefore, the missing pieces of her past propel his Holocaust fantasy.

Although the story is narrated in the first person in order to give us entrance into the inner workings of this character's mind, the character is careful about what he reveals about himself. He never reveals his name, and, for the first half of the story, he filters what he reveals about himself through a lens of what he believes his parents think of him. In fact, the first description given of the protagonist is given in his father's words: "He dresses like a girl! *A feygeleh*."⁶⁴ This is important because the protagonist understands his identity through his parents' lenses. However, it is important for this story to be in first person because it reveals the protagonist's transformation from a son who understands himself in relation to his parents into an independent individual.

His father's statement — "He dresses like a girl! *A feygeleh*" — repeats throughout the story and plays an important role throughout the story because it identifies the protagonist with his mother and it sets the stage for his sexual awakening. While we are given this description through the words of his father, this description associates the character with the female sex, the sex of his mother. Additionally, the protagonist continues this description with his first self-description: "I cringed at *feygeleh*, as I always did when Dad made fun of my long hair and bannanas, my bell-bottoms, fringed belts, tapestry vests, my sandals and beads. It was not what I

⁶⁴ Ibid, 46.

wanted anyone to think of me.” It is important that he describes himself by his physical appearance because this is how he describes his mother:

My mother, a slim pale woman with deep-set narrow hazel eyes had a dreamy kind of elegance, as if when she lit her after-dinner cigarette or slipped a purse under her arm before going out, she was in a gentler, more refined world. There was something ineffably touching and distant about her: she was as beautiful as a summer garden seen from a speeding train. Her soft voice, for me, lit up pictures of dark paneled rooms, tiled kitchen stoves, thick velvet curtains, tea from a samovar: scenes from a Turgenev novel.⁶⁵

Not only does the character admire his mother’s femininity (her “dreamy kind of elegance and her beauty), her femininity also allows him to fantasize about her past. She is not merely “other” because she is female, for she is also a foreign “other” and she has been made even more “other” by the Holocaust. Although he can gaze at and admire her otherness, her foreignness, her femininity, and her Holocaust past are all unattainable. “There was something ineffably touching and distant about her: she was as beautiful as a summer garden seen from a speeding train.” She is both beautiful and alluring, but she is like a “speeding train” and is beyond his grasp.

This character’s identification with his mother is less intense than David’s. He does not imagine that he is his mother, nor does he dress up like her. His identification with his mother is rather normal and exhibits itself in both his daydreams and in his admiration of her. He explains, “I admired her; my friends thought she was ‘neat,’ liked her accent, the vaguely foreign coil of her dark red hair, the lightness of her attentions.”⁶⁶ Although her foreignness and femininity are alluring to him, he is not wholly consumed by this allurements, and he is in no danger of losing himself in this allurements.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 47.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Like David's story in "Secret Anniversaries of the Heart," this story explores both Jewish identity and sexual identity through the lens of a Second Generation survivor. First of all, circumcision is a main concern for this protagonist in relation to his Jewishness. He explains, "I hadn't even been circumcised like all my Jewish friends. When I was eleven, I asked my dad to tell me why, really. Over the year, he'd said things about 'health reasons,' but that didn't make any, sense, or not anymore."⁶⁷ Additionally, this character's religious awakening is synonymous with his sexual awakening. Berger emphasizes that "Raphael's work treats issues of identity that arise in coming out as a Jew and as gay."⁶⁸ When he spends the night with the Rosenthals, he participates in Jewish religious practice for the first time, and it is no coincidence that this is also the night of his sexual awakening with Daniel. The character describes this religious immersion stating, "I felt drunk with *yiddishkeit*, Jewishness, as if I were in a Jewish Disneyland; they all knew so much about history, tradition, customs, religion, books, and legends. I felt the way I imagined Hindus felt when they bathed in the Ganges—purified and whole."⁶⁹ His parents had protected him from these aspects of Judaism because they are survivors who have shied away from all religious involvement, but now he has come to see the important role that his religious heritage can play in his life.

At the end of the story, the protagonist lays in bed with his new lover mulling over what this encounter means for his future as an individual and what it means for his relationship with his parents. He thinks, "of all the times [his] father had called [him] *feygeleh*, not really meaning

⁶⁷ Ibid, 48.

⁶⁸ Alan Berger, *Children of Job* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 110.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 53.

it. What would he say now that it was true? How could [he] ever be able to reach him?”⁷⁰ What is of particular importance in this passage is the character’s preoccupation with what his father will think of him. This is because socialization occurs in the Symbolic Order, and his homosexuality stands against everything his father taught him during his socialization. In fact, while the characters in the stories explored so far have needed to be rescued from their descent back into the Imaginary Order, this character is too entrenched in the Symbolic Order. He needs to find a balance between the orders in order to be free to be himself.

After his sexual and religious awakening, the character’s preoccupation is not only with the loss of his father’s approval, but it also touches on his desire to preserve his Jewish identity. Can he be Jewish and be gay? Perhaps more importantly, can he be the child of Holocaust survivors and be gay? The character recollects his parents’ reaction to homosexuality:

I remembered the Stonewall riots I had read about in the Times that year, read in a fog of incomprehension and excitement, and how my parents had said, “It’s sick, like the Nazis.” I was sure they meant the police, and their harassment, the beatings, the oppression. But then my father said, “Men with men. It’s like the Nazis, disgusting.” And I had left the room so they wouldn’t see my reddened face. “They did that, you know,” he said. “*Parshiveh baheymehs*. Filthy beasts.”⁷¹

This recollection further complicates this character’s sexual awakening, his “coming out” because he must not only maneuver being gay and being Jewish, but he also has to maneuver being gay and being the child of survivors who associate homosexuality with the Nazis.

This character’s visit to the Rosenthals is an awakening for him because it is his first step toward being an independent individual outside of the world his parents have constructed for

⁷⁰ Ibid, 55.

⁷¹ Ibid.

him. Like Jake for David, Daniel serves the purpose of helping this character awaken into his own individuality. Throughout the visit Daniel is an active catalyst who both introduces him to Jewish customs and allows him to express his sexuality for the first time. After this sexual encounter, the character thinks to himself:

This was what I had never allowed myself, even in fantasy, the touch, the closeness of another man. In a flash, I thought of all the different times friends, guys on the track team, had suggested messing around, or been on the verge of it, and how I'd always changed the subject, or just pretended I didn't hear them. I had always known what to fear, and avoided it. That's why Dad's taunt of *feygeleh* had been so devastating. I hadn't known how to yell back without proving I was. Mortified, afraid, I'd said nothing.⁷²

His father's words were always there, preventing him from fully expressing himself and his sexuality. Daniel has saved this character, body and soul. After the sexual encounter, the character describes how their intimacy has rescued him: "And, when he held my head up to kiss me, I felt like a straggling desert caravan, savaged by bandits, swept up in a sandstorm, that had suddenly emerged near an oasis--still devastated, but humbled by relief."⁷³ The caravan like this character is still "devastated" in this image, but it is also "humbled by relief." Daniel is his newly discovered, lifesaving oasis, and now there is hope for an independent future.

⁷² Ibid, 54.

⁷³ Ibid, 55.

CHAPTER VIII

NOCTURNE

In Raphael's "Nocturne," the protagonist, Ben, struggles with the development of his identity throughout the story. Ben's father died when he was two, so Ben grows up with his older sister Rose and their Holocaust survivor mother. Their mother struggles to preserve their Jewish identity in America, and this creates great tension between her and her children, who are simply trying to fit in with their culture. When Rose moves away for college and their mother subsequently dies, Ben is left alone by himself to figure out who he will become as an individual. Unlike Raphael's other two stories, this story is not a sexual "coming out" story. However, the story does focus on Ben's struggle to become an independent individual in the wake of his mother's post-Holocaust existence.

While the male protagonists that have been examined so far have identified with and fantasized about their mothers' femininity, Ben does the opposite. Ben is the first person narrator, so we see his mother through his eyes, and he describes her as: "Mannish, gray-eyed, broad-shouldered, tall and dark, Mother was too magisterial to yell at, and too distant. She often had the air of a burly sculptor longing for his studio, forced to spend time with people who had no deeper vision than their plans for the weekend."⁷⁴ It is particularly interesting that Ben describes

⁷⁴ Lev Raphael, "Nocturne" in *Secret Anniversaries of the Heart: New and Selected Stories*. (Wellfleet: Leapfrog Press, 2006), 131.

his mother with the masculine adjectives: “mannish,” “broad-shouldered,” “tall and dark,” and “burly.” He even uses the masculine pronoun “his” when using a metaphor of a sculptor to describe his mother. He superimposes his own masculinity onto his mother and in this way attempts to dissolve the difference between them. This allows him to identify with her in a greater way.

Like the mothers in the previously examined stories, Ben’s mother is mostly silent about her horrific past, so Ben recreates her past in his own imagination from the little bits that she lets slip in her conversation. As he watches her play the piano, he fantasizes about her past:

When she sank into Chopin, a Nocturne perhaps, I could imagine her in another world, of school books and a uniform blazer, platters of food on a heavy-legged sideboard, cousins dropping by on holidays, city walks with her smiling parents who called her Masha—a whole world of lovely fragments, pieces of her past that had popped out of her conversation like grains from a sack with a tiny unseen hole.⁷⁵

Here the veil of silence is punctured by fragments of her life that she has revealed about herself. Music is also a vehicle that drives Ben’s fantasies because it is a direct connection between him and his mother’s past. He explains that “when she played even the saddest piece, her body rigid, head held back from the keys, [he] could imagine and love the girl she had been, the life that was stolen from her.”⁷⁶ His mother’s music allows him to see a glimpse of the person she was before the Holocaust ravaged her life.

Again, however, it is the silence and difference that fuel the fantasy. Because Ben only knows fragments of his mother’s past, he fills in the gaping holes with his own imagination, con

⁷⁵ Ibid, 132.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

structing a Holocaust fantasy out of both the recesses of his own mind and the history that he learns from society. He emphasizes: “She said so very little it was all shadows to me, except the War I had learned about from books.”⁷⁷ Ben recognizes that this reconstructed history is merely “a pall of dust thrown up by the traffic of time, setting on us all no matter how we might have struggled to be clean.”⁷⁸ However, this reconstructed history and his own imagination are his only vehicles to the “real” world of his mother’s past. He cannot reach the “real” of his mother’s past and feel one with his mother using the methods of the Symbolic Order, and this is the cause of his anxiety. The books that Ben has read merely offer a glimpse into a world he will never know. He describes the glimpses into his mother’s life that history books offered explaining that “I had seen pictures of those cadaver-faced men and women staring from the graveyard of Europe. She had looked like that in the last camp when the Americans swarmed into the trembling German city. Her tall strong body had been assaulted, melted, reviled by years of hate and mad efficiency.”⁷⁹ This image, however, is merely a construction of his imagination that is scraped together with images from history books and fragments of stories that he has heard from his mother, and this is the closest that Ben will get to his mother’s horrific past.

Ben’s psychological development becomes more complicated when his sister leaves for college and then his mother dies. Before these events, Ben struggles to find his own identity outside of the reality his mother had created for him at home. He explains that his “determination in junior high to excel in some sport, any sport, brought [him] to the swim team. [He] also discov

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 134.

ered a bent for writing, and edited the mimeographed school paper, then the yearbook. It was my own world, separate from Rose's, and from Mother's."⁸⁰ In this passage, Ben is fantasizing about a normal life outside of the wake of his mother's Holocaust past. However, Ben's fantasy only encompasses the superficial desires of a teenage boy. He has yet to flesh out the weightier aspects of his identity and what role religion, culture, and heritage will play in his life as an independent adult.

It is not until he is left alone in his mother's house after her death that Ben begins to contemplate the implications of his mother's past and death. "I wanted to be close to Mother's books and plates and records and combs and scarves and all the rest," he says, "to feel it there around me. I went through drawers, cabinets and shelves, looking at everything she had ever touched."⁸¹ He is desperate to feel a connection with his deceased mother. It is at this moment that Ben finds something that changes his life and invites him into his own self-discovery. He finds a phrase in Yiddish written in his mother's handwriting inside of a datebook. He describes his finding saying, "They were there in Mother's hand, in Yiddish, which I had once tried to learn. I sounded them out, slowly: *Mein ba-frei-ung*. My liberation. I sat on the kitchen floor with this book. The *idea* of liberation."⁸² It is not until this moment that he realizes "[t]he horror [that] had never been so real to [him]. She was gone and through her, a world [he] could never know. A world that was rightfully [his], but lost, bulldozed, bombed, burned."⁸³ This knowledge

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, 134.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

starts Ben on his journey toward self-awareness and the discovery of his identity. Before he learns the date of his mother's liberation, an invisible barrier, created by the weightiness and mystery of his mother's unspoken and traumatic history, has prevented him from discovering his own identity. Suddenly, he "[feels] an explosion of possibilities. [He] could go to Europe--or even Israel--or stay with Rose and Moshe for a while, maybe longer—or do all of that. [He] could be a Jew. Maybe it was time to learn what that meant."⁸⁴ As if a fog has lifted from around him, Ben is now able to envision his place and purpose in his family, cultural heritage, and in his religious tradition. These aspects of the Symbolic Order allow Ben to identify with his mother and her past in a constructive way. He is not weighed down by them to the point that he is unable to develop his own unique identity. Rather, he is able to use language, culture, and family to translate his mother's past into his future.

Ben's story ends hopefully. He is not psychologically crippled by either his mother's past or her death. Instead, Ben is liberated by his glimpse into his mother's past. In fact, his new-found knowledge has empowered him into his own independence. The story ends with a scene with Ben and Rose. Ben describes it saying, "I went to get my mother's datebook for Rose, who didn't know I had found it. Talking in the bright living room, Rose gave me a little wave as I headed upstairs. I waved back. My liberation."⁸⁵ While Steinfeld's characters plummet into insanity, sinking deeper and deeper into the Imaginary Order when they are awakened to the reality of their parents' pasts, Ben is empowered by his discovery.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 136.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 136.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

Using powerful imagery and evocative language, J. J. Steinfeld and Lev Raphael introduce readers to the powerful impact of the Holocaust on American members of the Second Generation. As unique Second Generation witnesses, each author conveys something different in his respective stories. Steinfeld's characters horrify the reader with their insanity, while Raphael's characters awaken and inspire the reader with their self-discovery.

The Holocaust survivor mother plays a crucial role in the stories of both authors. Characters in the stories of both authors identify strongly with their survivor mothers. This strong identification stems from the great separation that these characters feel from their mothers. They strive to find connection and unity with a strange and foreign mother who feels worlds away. They are not only distanced from their mothers by gender, but they are also distanced by culture, language, and experience. In Steinfeld's stories, this strong identification has a negative effect on the characters, while in Raphael's stories this identification has a positive effect. Steinfeld's characters attempt to become their mothers in their adult lives and ultimately lose sight of themselves, while Raphael's characters' identification with their mothers leads them to self-discovery.

Additionally, the order of the mother, or the Imaginary Order, plays an important role in both authors' stories. In normal childhood development, a child leaves the Imaginary Order and enters the Symbolic Order before he becomes a toddler. The Imaginary Order, however, plays a crucial role in the adulthood development of the characters in both Steinfeld's and Raphael's sto

ries. Steinfeld's characters regress back into the Imaginary Order as a part of their descent into insanity, and Raphael's characters fluctuate between the orders in their journey toward self-discovery. At the end of their stories, Reuben, Baruch, and Shlomo remain within the Imaginary Order, and only Shlomo is left with the hope of being able to exist within the Symbolic Order one day. All of Raphael's characters, on the other hand, have found constructive ways to live within society in the Symbolic Order despite their occasional association with the Imaginary Order.

As a result, Raphael's characters are more hopeful than Steinfeld's characters. This difference in hopefulness results from each author's message. When Reuben is dancing like his mother in the flame-licked Club Holocaust, Steinfeld is conveying the idea that the Holocaust has ravaged the lives of Second Generation witnesses, that the horror the mother has experienced has been passed down to the son. His characters are hopeless in order to convey the severity of the Holocaust's impact on the members of the Second Generation. When Raphael's unnamed character is lying in bed with his lover after being introduced to his religious heritage for the first time, Raphael is communicating a redemption that is possible not only for members of the Second Generation but also for members of the Second Generation that struggle with their religious and sexual identities.

In fact, Raphael's message answers the question that Steinfeld's stories raise. Steinfeld asks, "Are the members of the Second Generation lost forever?" And Raphael replies, "No, there is hope for every member of the Second Generation, even those who struggle with their cultural, religious, and sexual identities. You can be gay, Jewish, and a member of the Second Generation and live a psychologically balanced life." For this reason, Steinfeld and Raphael's respective

messages balance each other. Steinfeld communicates a severity that is essential to understanding the psychological trauma of the Holocaust that is inflicted upon Second Generation witnesses, and Raphael answers this severity with the hope and redemption that readers crave for this generation of witnesses.

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