The UnAmericans Study Guide

The UnAmericans by Molly Antopol

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

There are eight stories in the collection, each focusing on a different protagonist in a different situation but sustaining certain similarities in narrative style, thematic orientation, and emotional perspective: tensions between parents and children appear frequently, as do hints at varying experiences of exile, frank references to sexuality, and evocations of Jewish life, attitudes, and perspectives.

In the first story of the collection, “The Old World”, middle-aged protagonist Howard finds himself caught between an emerging search for spiritual connection with his abandoned faith (as represented by his newly orthodox daughter) and a similarly emerging search for emotional connection with a beloved (as represented by his newly minted relationship with the attractive Svetlana. In the next story, “Minor Heroics” a much younger protagonist (discontented Israeli soldier Oren) also finds himself caught between two conflicting desires: to be accepted and respected, out of the shadow of his more popular and successful older brother while, at the same time, concerned that that brother’s spirit, pride, and general identity have been shattered as the result of injuries suffered in an accident that was, in some way, Oren’s fault.

In “My Grandmother Tells Me This Story”, narrator Raya reveals secrets about a life full of regret and violence to a granddaughter that, she says, should not be digging around in uncomfortable truths, while in the story that immediately follows, “The Quietest Man”, protagonist Tomas also finds himself brought face-to-face with uncomfortable truths about himself and about his past. Unlike Raya, however, he doesn’t admit those truths: instead, he takes refuge in lies that, he says, will help his troubled daughter come to terms with herself, but which in fact lead that daughter to a false impression of her father that will only benefit her, not him.

The protagonist of “Duck and Cover”, teenaged Judy, is another troubled Jewish daughter. Her father, who is never identified by name, is active in the Communist Party of the 1950’s, a group who believed in radical economic, cultural, and political reform along the lines of those practiced by the inhabitants and government of the then-Soviet Union. Judy is resentful of the time and attention her father gives to the Party, both of which she believes she should receive more of. Her act of rebellion involves spending time with a non-Jewish, non-Communist boy, but her choices quickly re-prioritize when she discovers that her father has been arrested and will likely be thrown in jail. Meanwhile, in the next story (“A Difficult Phase”), another discontented female protagonist (mid-thirties Talia) begins a relationship with a man that is fulfilling for a short time, but which leads her into a more fulfilling, and more emotionally connected, relationship with the man’s teenaged daughter.

Another troubled parent/child relationship is the anchoring element in “The Unknown Soldier”, the story of a man who, like Judy’s father, was arrested as a result of his involvement in Communist Party activities and who, after his release from jail, is determined to bond with his estranged son. His efforts, as well intentioned as they seem to be, ultimately end in failure, but that doesn’t stop his son from continuing to reach for

him from his side of the divide between them. The final story in the relationship also features two characters reaching for each other – in “Retrospective”, recently separated Boaz struggles to understand why his estranged (and newly pregnant) wife Mira left their relationship, and also to reconnect with her. The possibility of that reconnection seems to disappear when he discovers both the truth behind her choice and the fact that her beloved grandmother made a similar choice – although in her case, her husband put up with the situation in a way that, narration suggests, Boaz is unable to.

The Old World, Part 1

Summary

Pages 1 – 14. In first person narration, dry cleaner Howard (early sixties, a lapsed Jew) describes how, four months after the end of his long term marriage, he begins a relationship with Svetlana, an attractive woman in her late thirties who comes into his shop. He discusses the situation with his daughter Beth, with whom he has been close, but who is now somewhat distant after her sudden conversion to Orthodox Judaism. Both Beth and her husband Ya'akov, (whom Howard refers to as "the fool"), are curious and cautious, but urge him to do what makes him happy.

On their first date, Howard and Svetlana discover a common background: they both are from Kiev in the Ukraine, Svetlana more recently than Howard, whose grandfather was an immigrant. Their closeness deepens, in spite of Howard making a thoughtless comment that, he says in narration, was one of those "moments in life that [he] feared [he']d become one of those old men [he] always saw here in the coffee shop, alone at a table, slurping soup.". Afterwards, Svetlana indicates that she wants to accompany Howard back to his apartment. When they arrive, they almost immediately have sex, which the middle-aged Howard sees as something of a miracle.

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, Svetlana tells Howard her story: orphaned when a girl, raised by her grandmother, married to a scientist (she's a historian) who came to America and who died within weeks of his arrival, and how she decided to stay because there were more opportunities. Her comments about how happy her marriage was lead Howard to consider how different his was (i.e. deeply unhappy), and to lie about it all to Svetlana. He also talks about how close he is with Beth.

The relationship between Howard and Svetlana (whom he calls Sveta) deepens over the next few weeks. Beth and Ya'akov carefully question whether Howard is being wise, touchy conversation leading to Beth's revelation of why she's gone so far into Orthodox Judaism: she now feels, for the first time, like she belongs somewhere, like the other people at the synagogue, and Jewish people in general, are a "safety net" for her. Meanwhile, Howard and Svetlana spend a great deal of time together and, in spite of Howard occasionally finding her weeping in the middle of the night, agree to get married. At the wedding, which takes place at a nearby synagogue so that Beth can attend, Howard is amazed to see Svetlana weeping: "My God," he says in narration, "this woman has tears of joy for ME."

Analysis

In the collection's first story, several of the book's key themes are introduced. Perhaps the most overtly developed theme has to do with the characters' differing experiences of being Jewish, aspects of which are explored several times throughout the collection. In

this story, that theme is particularly important: Howard's having lapsed from his faith is vividly contrasted with the deep intensity of the faith practiced by Beth and Ya'kov, commentary on which here foreshadows Howard's somewhat similar contemplations at the story's conclusion. Here it's important to note that questions of faith and community raised by Beth here, and reacted to by Howard both here and at the end of the story, are not exclusive to Judaism: they do, however, manifest in this story in relation to that particular faith, and can therefore be seen as facets of that faith, but not exclusively to it.

Other themes developed in this section include explorations of psychological wounded-ness (clearly implied in narration of Howard's emotional state after his divorce, less clearly implied – but nonetheless present – in the description of Beth's conversion, which seems to be in response to a sense of loss and/or emptiness) and the experience of "breaking open" – specifically, breaking open emotionally. It's important to note that that exact phrase or a variation thereof does not appear in this story in the same way as exact expressions of this theme do appear in many other stories: the fact remains, however, that in the same way as the characters in those stories feel their lives expanding as the result of new encounters and new relationships, the pattern is initiated here, with Howard. There are also references to the theme of "un-American"- ness, with both Howard and Svetlana finding themselves drawn to lives outside America, Svetlana more than Howard.

Further important points to note: Howard's reference, in narration, to the lonely man eating soup foreshadows his discovery, at the end of the story, that he has in fact become something like that sort of person; and Howard's somewhat touching assumption / self-delusion at the end of this section, in which he believes Svetlana is weeping for joy because of him. While the true reason for her tears is never explicitly revealed, either here or in the next section, the events of the second part of the story clearly suggest that there is something significant going on for / with her of which Howard has no real idea.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways is the collection's theme of "parent – child relationships explored or developed here?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Howard sees his sexual relationship with Svetlana in the way he does?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Howard lie to Svetlana about what his marriage was like?

Vocabulary

lament, solitary, mezuzah, flummox, Cossack, impregnate, babushka, deft, unison, wallow, scrimp, jittery, Kiddush, bodega, ambiguous

The Old World, Part 2

Summary

Pages 15 – 26. The day after their wedding, Howard and Svetlana travel to the Ukraine for their honeymoon, Svetlana becoming increasingly uncomfortable, which Howard initially believes is the result of a fear of flying. Narration refers to Svetlana's efforts to convince Howard that such a trip would be a good honeymoon, that he could see where his family grew up. He comments that he never felt inclined to look backwards but always forwards: nevertheless, he agrees to go.

After an uncomfortable taxi ride from the airport, and after their arrival at their shabby hotel, Svetlana seems even more uncomfortable and upset. Howard attempts to make love with her, but she says she's jetlagged and needs sleep. After a short nap, Howard sees she is still upset, and chooses to leave her on her own. As he's going out, he hears her pick up the phone, make a call to her cousin in America, and start to cry.

After exploring the hotel and picking up some souvenirs (including a matryoshka doll), Howard returns to his room, and finds Svetlana still in tears, telling him to go explore the city. Howard comments, in narration, that he thinks Svetlana realized she made a mistake, but wonders whether she might also be upset because the world she left behind (Kiev, when she immigrated) is not the world she thought it was or hoped it would be when she returned. As Svetlana is again urging him to go, Howard asks her to say whether he'd done anything wrong. She says "I'm sorry" and gives him a guidebook.

Howard explores the city, paying no attention to his guidebook (referring to himself in narration as "mapless and lost") and occasionally taking pictures to prove to Beth and "the fool" he was actually there. He imagines Beth still at home, "sleeping beside a man she barely knew: the things we do when we're lost", but wonders whether she really had discovered, in a new faith, a way to not be alone. Eventually, Howard makes his way into a restaurant, has some vodka, realizes that he has become "just another sad old man at a table for one", and imagines with some dread what it will be like to leave Kiev without Svetlana. He tries the only thing he can think of to make himself feel better: he prays. As the restaurant closes and the other customers leave, he prays for a "safety net" of people to arrive in the same way as they have arrived for Beth, for them to "stretch their arms open wide, ready to take [him] in."

Analysis

The second part of this story contains one of its most significant symbols, and indeed a symbol that foreshadows the experiences and situations of several of the characters throughout the collection. This is the matryoshka doll, a uniquely Ukrainian doll in which a hollow, relatively large figure (usually female) contains a series of increasingly smaller

dolls within it, each one stacked within a larger. The image as the various sizes of dolls are unveiled is one of layering: the dolls within the exterior doll can be identical to the first one or slightly varied, suggesting the different layers of personality and/or identity within a person – or, more specifically, the different layers of feeling / identity in Svetlana. The specific image of the doll never appears in the collection again: nevertheless, it is a clear and vivid foreshadowing of the appearances of other characters who all / each have similar layering within their identities / personalities.

Other important elements in this section include the irony associated with Howard's comments, in narration, about Beth and Ya'akov (i.e. he thinks critically of Beth for developing the same sort of relationship with Ya'akov as he, Howard, developed with Svetlana) and Howard's experience of drinking alone which, for the reader, is a clear and vivid echo of the reference, in the first half of this story, to old men sitting alone and eating soup: Howard has clearly become what he feared becoming. The story is unclear as to whether Howard himself sees the connection. Then: in the story's final moments, the references to faith and to a "safety net" are clear references to comments made by Beth earlier in the story. Howard seems to have discovered faith in the same way as his daughter has, and perhaps for the same reasons.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the significance of this story's title?

Discussion Question 2

Here again in this section, Svetlana is teary and emotional. What do you think has made / is making her so upset?

Discussion Question 3

The narrative never reveals what happens between Howard and Svetlana. Given what the story and analysis have suggested, what do you think DOES happen?

Vocabulary

malarkey, secular, interim, infuriate, impulsive, smitten, concierge, inconsequential, tenement, glamorous, pious, reverent, serene

Minor Heroics, Part 1

Summary

Pages 27 – 42. First person narrator Oren (a young Jewish soldier living in Israel) describes a weekend day in his life working on a tomato farm, weekends being the time he has away from a hated minor chauffeuring job in the military. He describes concerns over high temperatures causing rot in the tomato crop; comments on how his popular, athletic older brother Asaaf has recently been discharged from active duty in the Gaza Strip; and gripes about how Asaaf and his girlfriend Yael seem to be taking it easy while he's working. Oren insists that Asaaf get up and work, but an accident with a tractor leads to Asaaf being injured and Oren, along with their mother and Yael, driving him through the nearby city to the hospital, commenting in narration that for the first time in his life, he is not crumbling under pressure (a situation that has led him into the menial job he now has).

Oren makes it safely to the hospital, where Asaaf is immediately wheeled into surgery that results in his left leg being amputated below the knee. After Asaaf is safely in recovery, Oren takes his mother and Yael back home, the two women spreading the word of what happened to Asaaf, and Oren's role in saving him, via their cell phones. When they get back home, they find friends and extended family waiting for them. Oren's narration reveals that he received a great deal of attention and commendation from everyone, and enjoyed it but was careful not to brag. He also describes how Asaaf resents both his own military service and the military in general, but manages to put a positive, dutiful, loyal mask over that resentment. He then comments on how, when he (Oren) was younger, he and Yael had a good friendship that Oren hoped would become something more. But then, Asaaf and Yael developed a relationship, one that Oren says makes them both better people and one that was going to take them to America to work on a yoga farm / retreat.

Eventually, Asaaf is brought home. He rejects Oren's efforts to help him across a difficult threshold into the house, and also stoically accepts the visits and comments of a steady stream of visitors. Uncomfortable with all the attention, and having experienced returning memories of his father's death (killed by "a mine while he was on reserve duty, almost twenty years ago"), Oren leaves the house and screams his frustration into the sky. That night, he is restlessly unable to sleep. He masturbates to thoughts of Yael, then cleans himself up and goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth. There he finds Yael, herself unable to sleep because of Asaaf's own restless discomfort. Oren finds himself comforting her with a hug, and feels "the night expanding …everything real was happening right here … as if we were reaching some different, newer kind of intimacy that had nothing and everything to do" with Asaaf. Later, after Oren and Yael have gone back to bed, Asaaf wakes everybody up with his screams of pain. As his mother and Yael comfort him and give him some painkillers, Oren sets up a bed for Yael on the couch.

Analysis

Here again, discussion of the story can begin with its thematically central exploration of being Jewish – in this case, the experience of every young Jewish person living in Israel being required to serve in the army. This can also be seen as relating to the collection's title-based interest in "un-American" – ness, since such mandatory conscription (i.e. military service) is not an element of American life.

Meanwhile, there are developments in the collection's thematic consideration of psychological wounded-ness, as the mental / emotional / psychological scars at work in the lives of both Asaaf and Oren are revealed, the revelations here foreshadowing further revelations, in the second half of the story, of the deeper wounded-ness of both characters. A related point is the quite apparently negative self-image held by narrator Oren who, it seems, has a great deal of resentment towards his brother that is in similarly apparent conflict with his (Oren's) almost hero-worship of him. In short, theirs is a very complicated relationship, very intriguingly so – one that develops the collection's thematic interest in psychological wounded-ness, and one in which the two characters have common experiences (i.e. their attitudes towards military service, their attraction to Yael) and yet are very, very different. This, in turn, feeds the story's contemplation of a theme that exists solely within itself, and doesn't manifest anywhere else in the collection: the theme of competition, and how destructive it can be.

Other points to note here include the early reference to the danger of rot in the tomato crop (which foreshadows important plot developments in the following section); perhaps unexpected developments in the relationship between Oren and Yael, which foreshadows similarly unexpected developments in that relationship in the second half of the story; and a frank, unapologetic reference to sexual activity (i.e. Oren's masturbation) which echoes the similarly casual references to sex in "The Old Country" and foreshadows other casually referenced sexual encounters in other stories, "A Difficult Phase" perhaps being the most notable.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the difference between the circumstance in which Oren succeeds (i.e. successfully getting Asaaf to hospital) and the other situations in his (Oren's) life that left him feeling so much like a failure?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the collection's overall thematic interest in people's lives / souls "breaking open" explored in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Oren means when he describes his encounter with Yael as having everything and nothing to do with Asaaf?

Vocabulary

pomelo, stucco, finagle, amputation, prosthesis, desolate, remnant, scrutinize, mottle, cinch, irrelevant, sequester

Minor Heroics, Part 2

Summary

Pages 43 – 57. As Oren describes Asaaf's reaction to being put on morphine, his narration refers to how badly he (Oren) failed at all his placement testing and exercises, results that led him to his detested job as a mere driver. He then describes how a trip to get Asaaf's prescription filled led him (Oren) and Yael to a light-hearted conversation about what a complainer Asaaf is, and then to a more serious conversation about Oren accompanying Yael to the American yoga retreat in Asaaf's stead. After some thought, Yael agrees.

Asaaf' doesn't react well to the morphine, becoming physically ill and psychologically both more depressed and self-isolating. Meanwhile, Yael tells him about the change in plans for the yoga farm, and Asaaf indicates that he's fine with it. Shortly afterwards, Oren and his mother return to work in the tomato fields, where they discover that because they haven't been as attentive as they should have been, the rot that they feared has begun to set in, meaning that the crop won't make them as much money as they'd planned. When he notices the pain in his mother's face and asks what he can do to help, his mother tells him to go home and give Asaaf his medication. This, and other comments from his mother, lead Oren to realize that, in all likelihood, he is never going to be regarded as much more than a failure, either by himself or by others.

Later, Oren takes Asaaf his next round of pills. Conversation leads to Asaaf telling Oren to take all the gear that had been purchased for the trip to the yoga farm; to Oren confessing that he loves Yael, and that will probably try to make "something happen" with her; to Asaaf saying that everybody knows how Oren feels, and that he (Asaaf) doesn't really care if something DOES happen; and to Oren seeing how defeated his brother seems. This, in turn, leads Oren to challenge Asaaf to care: "If you wanted things to be good with her," he says to Asaaf, "maybe you shouldn't have asked for her help in taking a piss." Asaaf reacts first with bewilderment and then with anger, eventually grabbing Oren and hitting him repeatedly about the face and head, a beating that Oren accepts: "for that second," he says in narration, I had my brother back."

Analysis

Early in this section of the story, narration develops its story-specific theme of competitiveness – specifically, the sense of competition that exists between Oren and his brother, a sense that seems to be defined, by Oren at least, by the sense that Asaaf is always going to be more successful, more loved, and perhaps even "more of a man" than he will ever be. This aspect of Oren's character, a manifestation of the collection's overall thematic interest in psychological wounded-ness, recurs later in this section and, arguably, in the story's final moments, as Oren pushes Asaaf into an eruption of anger that Oren seems to believe will help his brother become more himself. Interestingly,

Oren takes this action in spite of its possible result – that he will (again?) be the failing, weaker, younger brother. There is the sense here that Oren's wounded-ness runs so deep and so defines his identity that he doesn't really know how to function outside the status quo – that is to say, outside everything he and the rest of his family has come to believe about who and what he is. This, perhaps, makes the story somewhat tragic: a fundamentally good person (Oren) sabotaging his chances for perceiving himself as such.

Other important elements in this section include Asaaf's decisions around the trip to the yoga retreat (clear manifestations of how psychologically defeated – i.e. wounded – he has become after the accident) and the concurrent sense that here the story is exploring the flipside of its thematic interest in "un-American" – ness: specifically, the desire to BE American, at least temporarily. Also in relation to this particular element, there is the possibility of an intriguing irony associated with Oren's actions: by letting himself be defeated by Asaaf, and therefore by letting himself be placed once again in the position of failure, he in fact becomes a success – at helping heal his brother, getting him back to being more of himself in a way that nobody else seemed able to do. Meanwhile, there are also developments in the theme of parent - child relationships, developments that echo those of the psychological wounded-ness theme - specifically, the very different relationships beloved Asaaf and tolerated Oren have with their strong-willed, hard working mother.

Discussion Question 1

What is ironic about this story's title? What "heroics" does it refer to?

Discussion Question 2

The story never explicitly refers to any sense of guilt on Oren's part for his role in the accident that cost Asaaf his leg. Given the events of the story, what role do you think guilt plays in Oren's choices throughout the story, particularly in relation to its ending?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Oren allows the beating he receives from Asaaf to continue?

Vocabulary

orthopedic, morphine, nonchalance, civilian, ingest, vomitus, callus, specimen

My Grandmother Tells Me This Story

Summary

The elderly female narrator, whose name is eventually revealed to be Raya Moscowitz, defines the story she's about to tell as beginning with a journey she took through a sewer to escape to freedom. Freedom from what is never explicitly defined, but given the descriptions of the circumstances in which Raya was living, there is the clear sense that she is Jewish, and escaping from the Nazis at the beginning of World War II. Raya explains how, when she climbed out of the sewers and made her way into a forest, she encountered a familiar face from home – the man who became her husband, Leon Moscowitz, then a teenager. She described how Leon took her to an encampment of young people who call themselves as The Yiddish Underground, a group of teenaged resistance fighters. Raya is assigned to work in the armory, repairing weapons.

Raya then comments, in narration, on how much the person listening (now revealed to be her granddaughter) always wants to hear about how people fell in love in spite of growing up in a family where her (the girl's) father left and where her mother brought home a lot of boyfriends, all the while triggering arguments with her own mother (Raya). Raya then describes how the relationship with Leon began: first with Leon coming into her tent to protect her, then initiating a sexual relationship that, according to Raya, was "more like a basic physical need that had little to do with me". She refers to their eventual wedding as just being the thing to do, and how she convinced herself for years that her marriage wasn't that bad.

Returning to her story, Raya then describes Leon's dreams of moving to Israel at the end of the war to be with the girl he loved (Chaya); how he invited her (Raya) to come on a raid with him and some of the other rebels; how she resisted the idea but went along because the brigade had become something of a family to her; and how, as preparation for the raid (in which her responsibility was to set some explosives), Leon taught her to shoot and to give a false name in case she was captured.

Raya then describes how she, Leon, and one other started off on their mission; how she sprained her ankle, much to Leon's exasperation; how she continued on in spite of the pain; and how the trio arrived at a bombed out village. Feeling angry and frustrated with herself and desiring to do something impressive, Raya went into what used to be a bakery and found a woman and her young son there. She demanded clean clothes and something to bandage her swelling ankle, becoming angry (as the woman searched) that someone's life could still be relatively normal while hers was so disturbed and without family. Her anger led her, she says, her to pull her gun and demand money. The woman refused, but Raya insisted there must be some, holding her gun to the boy's head. The woman finally pulled out a bit of money hidden underneath a bed, and Raya and the other rebels left.

On their way out of the village, she says, Raya caught a glimpse of herself in an unbroken window, commenting that she still catches glimpses of the ugliness she saw there even today, when she looks in a mirror in the beauty parlor or in the window on the subway. She describes how Leon suffered many of the same things as she did, but aged into a compassionate, loving man; how he found things to enjoy about his life in ways that she never could; and how, on a holiday to Israel, his casual reminiscence about the girl he loved (Chaya) triggered an outrush of fury in her.

This, in turn, leads Raya to describe the eventual success of the mission she and Leon went on; how several other successful attacks followed; and how, after emigrating to America and years of trying, she was never able to find out what happened to the woman and her son. The story closes with Raya berating her granddaughter for always digging up the past. She urges her granddaughter to enjoy what she has rather than "scratching at ugly things that have nothing to do with [her]. These horrible things that happened before [she was] born."

Analysis

Another aspect of the collection's general thematic interest in being Jewish manifests in this story: specifically, the experience of not just surviving the Nazis in World War II, but also the experience of resisting the Nazi genocide of Jews and the years-later repercussions on survivors of both. It's important to note that Jewishness or being Jewish is never mentioned directly, but the narrative drops very clear hints (i.e. the time period, the idea of resistance against oppression) while, at the same time, being placed in a collection in which many of the characters and situations are defined by Jewishness.

There is also exploration here of the collection's second major theme: psychological wounded-ness. Narrator Raya may initially seem tough and/or matter of fact about what happened, but later developments / references suggest she is not: these include the almost in-passing reference she makes to searching for the mother and child that she attacked (which suggests at the very least a substantial degree of guilt), and the defensive attack she makes on her granddaughter, an attack that she suggests would have kept her (Raya) in a comfortable place - having forgotten that she had ever been such a monster. And in its turn, this moment in the story (i.e. the encounter with the mother and child) can be seen as a dark manifestation of the collection's overall thematic interest in emotions inside people "breaking open": in most of the other stories in the collection, this experience is a positive one – healthy, hopeful, and healing. Here, though, the picture is of a darker experience: a veneer of civilization being "broken open" to release anger, hate, and the danger of impending violence.

The one other major point to note about this story is its portrait of the central relationship – specifically, that between Raya and Leon which, like so many of the other relationships portrayed in the collection, is an intensely complicated one – a relationship born out of necessity for survival; corrupted by that necessity transformed into violence (as per the activities of the militia) and sexual exploitation (as per Leon's sexualization

of the too- young Raya); and still in existence because, as narration suggests, neither Leon nor Raya knew any other possibility existed.

One last significant point to note: the glimpse of the “immigrant experience” theme in Raya’s stories about coming to America, which can also be seen as a reference to the collection’s thematic interest in “un-American” – ness. This is the idea that for Raya, whose life since coming to America has been bitter and lonely, America didn’t prove to be the sanctuary/new life – i.e. living the “American Dream” - that Raya seems to have idealized it as: in other words, her disappointment at what America has turned out to be can be considered as being “un-American”.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author makes a point of referring to Raya’s granddaughter’s interest in hearing about loving relationships? What is the author trying to say here?

Discussion Question 2

Which of the story’s main themes is suggested by the brief glimpse of the tender relationship between the mother and child in the bakery?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Leon was able to mature into the kind of man Raya describes while she turned hard, bitter, and angry?

Vocabulary

strewn, labyrinth, infirmary, makeshift, brigade, guerilla, ceramic, defiance, concoct, armory, spastic, condolence

The Quietest Man, Part 1

Summary

Pages 85 – 105 First person narrator Tomas receives word that his daughter Daniela is about to have a play produced – a play, Daniela excitedly says, about her family. After a tense conversation with his estranged wife (and Daniela's mother) Katka, Tomas telephones Daniela, and convinces her (in spite of being busy with rewriting her play) to leave New York and come to Maine to visit him, imagining what her play might include.

Tomas then narrates his history with Katka: how they were both intellectuals in Poland (she more educated than him); how they both worked passionately on an underground socialist newspaper, published with the idea of transforming Poland into a socialist state; how he was caught and interrogated, but never gave out the names of his colleagues (which earned him the nickname "The Quietest Man"); and how, a story written about him by an American journalist caught the attention of an academic in Vermont who got Tomas a job and enabled him and his family to emigrate. He also describes how, in America, Katka (who could not yet speak English) became withdrawn and resentful; how she begged him to move with the family to a larger center where she could be happier, which he refused to do; how she eventually left him, started a cleaning business, and became very successful; and how, after the end of communism, he became suddenly less noteworthy, was refused tenure, and is now reduced to occasional adjunct work.

When Daniela arrives, Tomas notices how much her appearance has changed: less casual, more put together, but still quite plain. Awkward conversation reveals that Daniela has been working on the play "every night after work"; and that Daniela and Katka (much to Tomas' concern) talk about him. After Daniela has gone to bed, and after he's sure she's asleep, Tomas looks through her backpack to find the play: his search, however, is unsuccessful. Afterwards he calls Katka, saying the visit is "a disaster" and asking if Katka knows what the play is about. Katka says that Daniela's been keeping it a secret, leading Tomas to the belief, stated in narration, that the play will ruin his legacy as "The Quietest Man".

Tomas recalls a trip he made to New York, during which Daniela told him how much the theatre meant to her and how he did not respond well. He describes how he thought to himself that it was impossible someone so young should have something with so much meaning in her life.

Analysis

The collection's thematic interest in parent/child relationships receives one of its more significant explorations in this story, a narrative that looks at ways parents and children can become more alike than they imagined: yes, Tomas and Daniela and Katka are all

writers, but more importantly, they are all truth tellers. At least they were: while Daniela is clearly following in what used to be her parents' footsteps and both seeking and telling important truths, Tomas has become, as he himself admits, a liar: Katka, on the other hand, has found other ways to feel successful and important. All that said, the story's portrait of how parents and children need each other, challenge each other, and change each other is a vivid and engaging one, a thematic exploration that transcends the specific circumstances of these particular characters and moves into something archetypal, or universal.

Other noteworthy elements include Tomas' search of his daughter's backpack (which many / most people might find inappropriate, but which nevertheless reveals just how desperate and/or insecure Tomas is); Tomas' concern about his "legacy" (which seems, narration suggests, to be just about the only dignified thing about his life that he has left); and the irony in the last lines of this section.

Finally, in relation to the "un-American" theme that runs through the collection, there are parallels between the exploration of that theme here to the exploration in "My Grandmother …": the idealized hopes of America held by Tomas and Katka, and initially experienced by them, prove to be as false and as frustrating as they did for Raya.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does the first part of this story explore / portray the collection's thematic interest in psychological wounded-ness?

Discussion Question 2

Tomas clearly seems affected by Daniela's revelation that she and her mother talk about him. What do you think is at the core of Tomas' reaction?

Discussion Question 3

What is the irony associated with the closing comments of this section – specifically, Tomas' contemplation of how strange it seems to him that someone as young as Daniela should have something so important to her?

Vocabulary

embolden, mahogany, dissect, fluency, provost, deprivation, crudité, podium, parlay, precarious, envision, irrevocable, celebratory, egomaniac, obnoxious, excruciating, impromptu

The Quietest Man, Part 2

Summary

Pages 105 – 117 The next day, Tomas arranges to take Daniela on a tour of the Maine town (Harpswick) where he has finally settled. The sudden awkwardness that follows her agreement to his plan reminds Tomas of the last visit she had when she was a child which, he says in narration, started well but ended badly over a misunderstanding about some important papers that Daniela was writing on. Tomas further comments that after that visit, he was told by Katka that Daniela will not be allowed to visit him again.

Tomas' tour of Harpswick takes less time than he planned, and after a tense conversation at a gift store, he and Daniela find themselves looking out at the sea, Tomas having asked Daniela to not write about the family and Daniela commenting that he of all people should not be telling her what to write. This leads Tomas to pressure her to tell him what's in the play. Just as Tomas is convincing himself that she's writing about all the ways he failed as a father, Daniela reveals that she's actually writing about the interrogation that earned him the nickname "The Quietest Man". Tomas listens with intense relief as Daniela asks the question that's been on her mind the whole time she's been there, but has been unable to ask: what was it actually like to do the writing he did in Poland?

This leads Tomas to describe, in both narration and to his daughter, the quiet, intense afternoons of work with his friends and colleagues on the communist paper; and how he believed there was something beautiful and important about what he and his fellow writers were doing. He comments in narration, that he feels now that his life in Poland was his true and real life, and that his life in America was false and empty. When he's finished, Daniela asks whether she was in the room with Tomas, Katka, and the other writers. Tomas contemplates telling the truth: that when he was writing, Daniela was too young to be trusted to be completely quiet (any noise would draw potentially dangerous attention to what the group was doing), and also contemplates telling her a lie - that all her life, she was more important to him than his work. He realizes, however, that it's important to her that she was there: "…I knew that with her play, Daniela was giving me the chance to feel relevant in the world again, and all she seemed to want in return was to hear she'd once been relevant in mine." So he lies, and tells her that she was there.

Tomas then notes in narration that Daniela seemed to believe him; that once Katka saw the play (presumably with Daniela's references to her presence) "it would all be over"; and that because he and Daniela suddenly seem both emotionally and physically close, he began to wonder "if anything of what [he]was saying would begin to feel like the truth." The story closes with his comment that "it didn't yet", but then, Tomas adds, he was "just getting started."

Analysis

This section continues the story's exploration of one of the key themes in the collection – parent / child relationships. More specifically, the complications and tensions between Tomas and his daughter are eased, somewhat, when she finally feels the freedom to be honest about herself and what she's doing. What's interesting to note, however, is that while Daniela is telling the truth, Tomas is essentially lying; knows it; and, as indicated by the last few paragraphs of the piece, is at risk of being challenged about it / called on it by Katka, when she finds out the truth about what the play contains (which, narration implies, she almost certainly will). To look at it another way: for him, lying seems to bring him what he wants (a closer relationship with his daughter) while for Daniela, the opposite is true: telling the truth seems to bring HER what SHE wants.

Meanwhile, in a story rich with a number of ironies, the first in this section is particularly notable – specifically, the fact that both Tomas and Daniela are writers, and that the strains in their relationship came about at least partly because they were just both just BEING writers (i.e. themselves) at the time of the confrontation that resulted in their virtual separation. Another irony: the fact that "The Quietest Man" is, in fact, unable to stay quiet when confronted with an opportunity to approve his relationship with his daughter, compelled by his desire to be close with her again to speak, as noted above, a collection of falsehoods. Another irony: the fact that Daniela is experiencing "the American Dream" (i.e. fulfilling of her own goals, hopes and potentials) in a way that her father and mother did not. Finally, there is the irony of Tomas' comment on what it feels like, for him, to be in America: specifically, the idea that in what is often regarded as a land of freedom in which an individual can be himself (i.e. America), Tomas has in fact become LESS than himself. Perhaps this is why he tells Daniela what he does: that he somehow wants to feel, once again, that he is being the best of himself and doing what he believes to be the right thing.

Discussion Question 1

In what way is the collection's theme relating to the immigrant experience explored and/or developed in this story?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think it means when the narrative suggests that Tomas is just "getting started"?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Tomas was right or wrong to tell the lies he does? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

interminable, residual, dissident, canister, nautical, transcribe

Duck and Cover

Summary

In first person, present tense narration, teen protagonist Judy sets the time of the story as the mid-1950's; describes how her father has been an active member of the Communist Party and labor movements ever since she was a girl; how her family home in the Bronx (New York City) always seemed to be hosting meetings between her father and his comrades; and how the group moved together to California in the aftermath of her father, and his best friend Lou, being arrested. She also describes her mother's death when she (Judy) was five, and how frustrated she gets with her father's constant job losses (related to his party affiliation and union organizing), and also describes the bombing drills that take place at her school (how she and the other students are instructed to "duck and cover"). Finally, she narrates a chance encounter on the street with an attractive young man coming out of the hardware store next to the restaurant, saying that she "can sense a tiny bit of [her] life beginning to happen".

Shortly afterwards, Judy's father starts spending time with the glamorous Gladys who, according to Judy's teenaged co-worker, is an active, and organizing, member of the Communist Party. A few days later, Judy talks with the young man again, discovering that he goes to a different school (other students from that school, Judy comments, taunted her co-worker a few weeks ago by calling him a Commie and a Jew). She also discovers that the boy and his family are building a fallout shelter and goes with him when he asks her to come home and see it, describing in narration how the neighborhood changes along the way. As she's touring the shelter, the young man's mother comes out. Judy describes how she (the mother) refers to him as Hal (the first time Judy reveals his name); and how she (Judy) imagines she must look to Hal's mother (i.e. a teenaged girl spending time with her son in a dark, unfinished hole in the ground without an adult). Hal and Judy quickly leave, Hal offering to walk Judy home, but Judy refusing.

When she gets home, her father's apparent absence makes Judy worried that he has been arrested again, but then he comes in from outside, asking where she's been, saying she's been acting strange, and wondering if it's because of Gladys. The question leads to Judy asking whether her father loves Gladys (no, but he likes her); whether he loved her (Judy's) mother (he did); and why (because she had so much presence and power, particularly at Communist Party meetings). This last answer leads Judy to ask whether her father believes that all the trouble he's had since being in the Party is worth it. Her father tells her that it's only because of the help and support of everyone in the Party after her mother died that he and Judy have a life at all. "You can't question the party," he says. "The moment you do – you fall apart." This leads to a moment of unexpected tenderness and intimacy between father and daughter. "…There's a moment before I go into my room," Judy says in narration, "that his hands stay on my shoulders … the heaviest, warmest coat."

The next day, however, when her father and Lou come into the diner and essentially ignore her, Judy is so hurt that she walks off her shift and goes straight to Hal's. He greets her happily and takes her out into the yard to show her the fallout shelter, which is almost complete, and reveals that his parents have been fighting a lot. Judy senses Hal's vulnerability and need, and he seems to sense hers: hidden in the shelter they kiss and begin to have sex. Before they get very far, however, Hal ejaculates. As Judy wonders about doing it again, and perhaps actually feeling something, Hal offers to take her out somewhere. Judy thinks of her father, and comments in narration that she knows what she has to do. She says she knows "a nice place".

Judy takes Hal to the diner, where she defiantly walks in and orders drinks. She imagines confronting her father, but then he walks past her towards the door without even noticing her. She watches as he meets Lou outside, the two of them going to talk with a pair of police officers. She watches as the officers argue with Lou and her father, eventually pushing them both into the back of a police car and driving off. She then watches as everyone else in the restaurant gathers around Gladys, making plans for what's to happen next. She comments on how "some choices are made for you", and then leaves Hal and goes to join the group gathered around Gladys.

Analysis

The first point to note about this story is its setting in time. "Duck and Cover", like "The Unknown Solder" later in the collection, is set in America in the 1950's, a time when one of the more infamous events in American history took place. This was the so-called McCarthy Era, a period of around six years (approximately 1950 – 1956) in which a Republican (conservative) senator named Joseph McCarthy took on a detailed, often vicious, often slanderous, often falsified investigation into Communist activities and practices in America. This investigation is primarily known in contemporary society for two things. The first is the name given to the government committee assigned to investigate such activities and practices: the House Un-American Affairs Committee. The connection between the title, the book's thematic interest in un-American-ness, and the repeated motif of Communist activity that threads through the collection (but is particularly notable here) is never clearer. The second way in which the government's investigation is primarily known in contemporary society is that it focused on Communist activities in Hollywood. Several important figures in the motion picture industry were blacklisted from working because of what the McCarthy hearings into Communism found, claimed to find, or pretended to fine. What "Duck and Cover" suggests is that McCarthy's investigations also affected so-called "normal" people, non-Hollywood types who believed, as Judy's father does, that Communism is the way of the future in America.

Judy's story combines that of what might be described as a typical state of affairs for a teenaged young woman (i.e. every teenager, to one degree or another, rebels against the parental figures in his/her life – note that her father is never referred to by name) with layers of danger (i.e. associated with being a Communist, or at least being perceived as one) and implications of both being Jewish (i.e. racist attitudes

encountered by those at the time who were Jewish, Communist, or both), and of young love / coming of age (i.e. first sexual experiences). This last is particularly significant, in that Judy also faces the sort of clear choice that those "coming of age" (i.e. arriving at a place of maturity, transitioning out of childhood) almost always face: to whom does one owe primary loyalty … family? the self? a new beloved? At this story's conclusion, Judy makes a very clear choice about her priorities, choosing her father (and his affiliation to the party) over the possibly for a new life as represented by the non-Jewish, non-Communist Hal.

Meanwhile, of all the stories in the collection, "Duck and Cover" contains the most telling, detailed, and vulnerable exploration of the "parent / child relationship". As noted above, that relationship has a great deal of tension about it (i.e. in the same way that many / most experiences of parenting a teenager such as Judy have tension). At the same time, however, this story contains easily the collection's most vivid example of tenderness and openness in a parent/child relationship. The conversation between Judy and her father about love, about Judy's dead mother, and about priorities gives a glimpse of honest, compassionate feeling in this otherwise tempestuous relationship – a glimpse of intimacy that can be seen as being the primary, if not only, factor in Judy making the choice she does at the story's conclusion.

One final point: Judy's reference in narration to feeling like her life is beginning to happen can be seen as a paraphrase / reiteration of the collection's repeated references to characters' lives being "broken open". In the same way as other characters in the collection experience inner transformative experiences, often as the result of some external shift, or transformation, Judy also begins to feel an opening, a shift in her as her life "begins" to happen.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the reason that the narration doesn't ever include a reference to the name of Judy's father?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that the narrative makes a clear point of suggesting that Hal goes to a school where some students have participated in anti-Semitic taunting of Jews?

Discussion Question 3

What is the metaphoric relationship between the title, the reference to the drill at the school, and Judy's relationship with Hal?

Vocabulary

pistachio, ancestor, elegant, fink (n.), malarkey, remnant, seersucker, backhoe, saunter, flimsy, eucalyptus, tricot

A Difficult Phase, Part 1

Summary

Pages 141 – 167. Third-person narration describes how mid-thirties journalist Talia, living in Tel Aviv and working at an unimpressive, poorly paying job, flirts with an attractive man in a coffee shop. After she leaves, the man follows her. Talia feels “the day breaking open” as she and the man walk together to the nearby school where he is scheduled to have a meeting about his daughter. He introduces himself as Tomer, and he and Talia agree that he can call her, which he does, and they arrange to have dinner.

Narration then sums up Talia’s adult life to that point: her lifelong ambition to be a journalist, in spite of her traditional parents’ belief that she should get married and raise a family; her finding a job in Kiev (Russia), where she worked her way up from researcher to reporter; how she was let go from that job when the owner company downsized; and how she ended up having to return to Tel Aviv and her parents’ apartment, finding the only job that was available. Narration then reveals that she has given all this information to Tomer over dinner. Further conversation, prompted by Talia’s uncharacteristic directness, reveals that Tomer’s wife Efrat died of a brain aneurysm, and that he’s having trouble with their teenaged daughter Gali (who, according to her teachers, is going through “a difficult phase”). As a result of his opening up, Talia realizes that her ability to be an empathic and effective listener has both professional and personal value. She agrees to return with Tomer to his home, sex very much on her mind.

It turns out that Gali, whom Tomer had believed was out with friends, is actually at home. As Gali and Tomer have an awkward conversation, Talia notices that Gali is high on some kind of drug. Tali is tempted to leave, but Tomer asks her to stay, later saying how much he regrets how badly he handled both Gali and Talia. When Talia starts to go, Tomer apologizes, and then says he’ll call her again. As Talia leaves, she has a brief conversation with Gali, the two connecting over a shared interest in music. Talia surprises herself by inviting Gali over to listen to some music, and immediately regrets it.

The next day when Tomer calls to apologize, Talia does her best to not get drawn into seeing him again, but can’t help herself. She goes over for dinner and the two of them end up having sex, which feels mostly awkward but at moments also really good. The night together turns into a couple of days, during which Talia finds herself deeply enjoying herself. On their second morning together, a news story written by a younger and less qualified former colleague from the Kiev paper triggers a wave of bitter resentment and self-questioning in Talia. Then, that same day, a conversation about how uncomfortable Talia is with her parents leads to Talia recalling occasional escapes from home with her sisters, journeys into a nearby kibbutz (farm / work camp) where they would climb the palm trees there and accidentally hurt themselves on the tree’s sharp spines, pain “that always made her sisters cry but that Talia would give herself

over to." Eventually, a feeling of awkwardness resulting from Tomer's being so recently a widower overwhelms them both, and by mutual, respectful agreement, they break up. They have great breakup sex, and Talia leaves. On her way home, Tomer calls Talia to say he misses her: mentions to the prostitute and customer she is watching from the bus window, and then then hangs up. At home with her parents, Talia responds to their inquiries by saying it's "weird talking about something that turned out to be nothing" and later, by saying it's good to be home, surprised by how tiny and girl-like her mother feels when they embrace.

Analysis

The first part of this story introduces its exploration of four of the collection's main themes. The first manifests in its setting: the story is "un-American", in that it takes place outside the American borders (i.e. in Israel). The second theme appears in almost the first lines of the story, with narration's reference to Talia feeling the day "breaking open", an evocation of an experience common to many characters in many of the collection's stories: a change is either experienced as, or foreshadowed as, a powerful opening of spirt, mind, or heart. The third theme introduced and developed in this section is the "psychological wounded-ness" theme, which manifests in the lives and experiences of all three of the story's principal characters – Tomer, Talia, and Gali. Finally, there is the theme of parent/child relationships, developed not only in the difficult relationship between Tomer and Gali, but also in the tense, complex relationship between Talia and her parents, whose expectations seem to irritate Talia and inspire her to think in terms of doing the opposite of what they expect. Here, there is a sense of parallel between Talia and Gali, who also seems to be in a place of rebelliousness – and there is also a further sense that this unspoken commonality between them is one reason that they feel drawn to each other.

Other important elements in this section include the references to sex (sex being something of a sub-theme in this collection, with many characters and relationships defined, at least glancingly, by a healthy and active sexuality in the same way as Talia and Tomer experience it here); and reference to the spines on the palm tree, an important symbol. The references here foreshadow a later event in the story that repeats Talia's experience, but in a slightly different way, and develops a theme unique in the collection to this particular story.

Discussion Question 1

What are the psychological wounds experienced by each of the three main characters?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the metaphoric relationship between Talia's situation and her taking particular note of the prostitute and her customer?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Talia remains silent about her perception that Gali is on some kind of drug during her (Gali's) conversation with Tomer?

Vocabulary

alluring, buoyant, requisite, fluent, garner, implicit, flimsy, anecdote, sallow, pallor, grovel, accessible, indeterminate, divulge, spontaneity, confiscate, gelato, embolden, perfunctory

A Difficult Phase, Part 2

Summary

Pages 167 – 182. The next day, Talia is surprised (at home, where she lives with her parents) by a visit from Gali, who has taken her up on her invitation to come and listen to music. Gali is followed shortly by Tomer, who has come after her to take her home but instead stays for dinner, along with Gali. Talia listens as Tomer tells the story of what happened to Efrat, becoming somewhat upset at how emotionally her parents are responding. Eventually, the unusually polite Gali eventually excuses herself, Talia goes looking for her, finding her texting her boyfriend. The two of them again bond, this time over a borrowed blouse. Eventually, Tomer and Gali leave, but not before Talia again realizes how right it is that the she and Tomer are broken up. After they've gone, her parents suggest to the surprised and somewhat resentful Talia that she should be more compassionate towards him, and she goes into her room, searching online for news of former colleagues and eventually hiding under her childhood quilt: she feels "like the world's youngest relic".

Later that night, Gali calls, asking Talia to call Tomer and let him know she's staying at a friend's. At first Talia agrees, but then senses the situation is not what Gali told her it was. She calls back, discovers that Gali had been using her boyfriend's cell phone, and gets the reluctant Gali to reveal where she is. Talia takes her parents' car and goes in search of Gali, eventually finding her at a beach with her boyfriend (again feeling very old in the process) and taking her out of the group of friends she's with. Instead of taking Gali home, however, and instead of going back to her parents' house (which is what Gali wants), Talia takes her out to the kibbutz she (Talia) went to with her sisters. There they climb one of the palm trees (in the way Talia and her sisters did), and they talk – about Gali's first sexual experience (with the current boyfriend), about Talia's (which was awful), and about Gali's struggles to recover from her mother's death. This leads Talia to wonder whether it would be easier to accept what seems to be both the good and the difficult things about a relationship with Tomer, and about how the dreams of her younger self now seem awkward and empty.

Talia is taken by surprise when Gali moves closer to her. Gali says that when she's with Talia she doesn't feel so alone, and Talia suddenly imagines all the difficulties she must be going through. At that point, Gali leans in to hug her, almost loses her balance, and pricks herself on one of the thorns on the palm tree. Gali cries out loudly, and Talia holds her close, saying "the only thing she knew for certain: that any moment the poison [from the thorn] would kick in, numbing the places that hurt the most."

Analysis

The primary point to note about this section is the development of its primary theme. In the middle of its development of the main themes of the collection (parent/child

relationships, psychological wounded-ness) as well as the sub-theme of sex, this story uses the metaphor of the palm tree spines to suggest that for Talia, Gali, and Tomer, transformation is painful. The incidents with the spines, both in the past (i.e. between Talia and her sisters) and in the present (i.e. with Talia and Gali – note the similarity between the two names) make the metaphoric suggestion that maturing, or coming of age, has the potential to be painful.

Here it's important to note that for Talia, the pain is both metaphoric and literal in the first reference to the spines (which took place when she was Gali's age), and more metaphorical in the second reference – specifically, the reference in this section. Here the coming of age is less physically oriented (i.e. tied to adolescence) and more psychologically oriented (i.e. coming to a new maturity about relationships and identity) – although, in the two characters' common experiences of sex, there is the sense that there is a physical / sexual aspect to their deepening friendship and their individual comings of age. In short, there is the clear sense here, as the result of developments in this metaphor, that the story, on some level, is about Talia growing up and getting past her impulses and beliefs about sex, her self-entitlement (i.e. in relationship to her work), and the failed dreams of her youth.

In this context, it's also important to note the reference in the story's final lines: that the poison of the spines might not in fact be a bad thing, but has positive benefits – specifically, the possibility that it will numb the physical pain which the spine itself caused. The image is one of simultaneous suffering and healing, the kind of pain that comes when (for example) a boil is lanced to release the poison it contains. The lancing itself is painful, but the release it triggers is healing. There is the sense here that the brief, new, entwining of the lives of the three main characters (Talia, Tomer, Gali) is triggering painful realizations in them all, but realizations that will ultimately prove freeing and healthy.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think listening to music is the real reason Gali has come to see Talia? If so, why? If not, what do you think is the real reason?

Discussion Question 2

Do you agree with Talia's belief that her being broken up with Tomer is a good thing? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Talia takes Gali to climb the trees instead of taking her to either Tomer's house or Talia's parents' house?

Vocabulary

delirious, sullen, docile, equivalent, frond, intrinsic

The Unknown Soldier, Part 1

Summary

Pages 183 – 205. In 1950's San Francisco, protagonist Alexi, newly released after a year in prison, takes temporary custody of his son Benny from his (Alexi's) resentful wife Katherine. After confirming arrangements for Alexi to return Benny, Alexi leaves with Benny in a borrowed car, heading to the house of a friend of a friend for the weekend.

When they arrive, Benny seems very happy, and at first Alexi (who is, narration reveals, an actor) is as well. But then the views from the house's many windows seem upsetting and Alexi, reveling in his first opportunity to be spontaneous in a long time, tells Benny they're going to take off for another part of the state. They head for the Napa Valley, where Alexi spent time with the producers of a film that he was convinced was going to be a success. His first attempt at finding a hotel results in his being shocked by how much money it costs, so he and Benny head off in search of another motel, with Benny pointing out every motel they pass and Alexi, eventually, snapping at him to stop. Benny immediately withdraws, and Alexi immediately apologizes.

The search through Napa leads Alexi, and narration, to recollections of what happened that led Alexi into prison: the success he had playing the part of a peasant turned war hero in a film called "The Unknown Soldier"; how people thought his physicality and name indicated that he was a kind of Russian peasant, when in fact he was a kid from New York; how he pretended to be a communist (even to the point of joining the party) to the producers of the follow up film in order to make sure he got the part; how he and the producers eventually got caught up in an investigation of communism in Hollywood that cost several others their careers; how one member of the production team (Julia) betrayed members of the group to the investigators so she could hold onto her career; and how, as a result, Alexi and several others lost their livelihoods and went to prison.

Finally, Alexi and Benny find a motel, cheap but clean, and settle in. Alexi finds them a makeshift meal from a gas station. Tentative conversation about Katherine (in which Benny admits "she's okay") leads Alexi (and narration) to recall their relationship, which began when they were both young, both newly arrived in Los Angeles, and both ambitious – him an actor, her an interior designer. Simultaneously, he recalls his affair with Julia which, narration comments, was based partly on their shared interest in film and partly on their shared background, both being Jewish refugees from poorer areas of New York. Alexi (and narration) recall fantasizing about Julia and Katherine becoming friends; how he believed his affair made him a better husband (i.e. he didn't bore Katherine by talking about things she didn't know about or understand, which he could do with Julia); how Katherine was finally starting to become successful in her field just when Alexi went to trial; and how she is now living in a dingy flat working in a dress shop serving people she was on her way towards designing for.

Analysis

The initial point to note about this story is its similarity in setting and context to “Duck and Cover”: the action of both narratives takes place in the early 1950’s, during the investigations into alleged Communist activity in America. The setting here is somewhat different, in that the story takes place after the worst of the inquiry is over, and also in that the aspect of the inquiry relevant here was one of its most publicly known, and historically notorious: the investigation of Hollywood. Actors, writers, producers, directors, and other movie-making professionals lost their jobs and were imprisoned in much the same way as Alexi was, and for much the same reason: real-life versions of Julia, who gave names of their colleagues to the inquiry in exchange for freedom from prosecution … in other words, freedom to pursue their careers, a freedom that was the direct result of a betrayal.

But where “Duck and Cover” focuses on experiences around and before a character’s imprisonment for being a communist, “The Unknown Soldier” focuses on the experiences of a character (Alexi) in the aftermath of such an imprisonment. The irony, of course, is that where Judy’s father truly believed in what he was doing and was a martyr for his cause, Alexi lied, essentially exhibiting the same lack of personal integrity that Julia did: making choices that were geared towards advancing a professional career.

Other important elements to note include the portrayal of the layers of lies at work in Alexi’s life before prison; the self-justifications Alexi uses to convince himself that his affair with Julia was a good thing; and, perhaps more notably than any other point, how this story once again explores the collection’s thematic investigations of parent/child relationships. The full depth of the facet of such relationships explored here is revealed in the following section, but even here, it’s important to note that when it comes to common themes, there are even further parallels between this story and “Duck and Cover”.

Discussion Question 1

What is the most likely reason that Alexi finds the expansive view from the borrowed beach house unnerving?

Discussion Question 2

In what way might Alexi’s decision to abandon the beach house be seen as a manifestation of the collection’s thematic interest in “breaking open”?

Discussion Question 3

If you were faced with a similar choice to that faced by Julia (i.e. lose your livelihood but keep your friends and ideals; sell out your friends and ideals, but keep your livelihood), which choice would you make, and why?

Vocabulary

coif (v.), derelict, dilapidated, inherent, relent, predictable, vintner, taxidermy, envision, hardscrabble, leverage (n.), rakish, virtuoso, mesmerize, flagrant, snitch (n.), meticulous, unscathed, affiliation, lackluster, intonation, pogrom, exacerbate, borough, vacillate, paranoia, rescind, adamant, rejuvenate, diorama

The Unknown Soldier, Part 2

Summary

Pages 205 – 217. In the hotel room as they're getting ready to go to sleep, Alexi and Benny talk about Katherine, conversation revealing that Katherine knows she's being watched by the FBI (keeping tabs on her the same way they kept tabs on Alexi before his arrest and imprisonment) Conversation also reveals that Benny is relieved to be spending time away from his mother, and that he's curious about Alexi's life in prison. But when he asks what it was like, Alexi shuts him down in exactly the way his father shut HIM down. This leads Alexi (and narration) to recall how hard he worked to gain his father's affection and approval, but never felt like he succeeded.

The next day, Alexi wakes up with a feeling of optimism, taking Benny on a drive through wine country – the same area, narration reveals, that Alexi toured once with a producer friend of Julia's. As they drive, narration comments, Alexi "felt something opening inside him". They eventually end up in a winery that Alexi remembers from that tour, and asks for a bottle of a favorite wine remembered from that time (a Private Reserve) that, he is surprised to discover, is very expensive. He sees Benny notice his distress, and is upset when Benny offers to help pay for it with money that Katherine gave him for emergencies. Alexi refuses the offer, and then leaves with Benny.

When Alexi and Benny get to the car, Alexi tries to stop himself from crying but doesn't succeed. Conversation reveals that Alexi feels guilty for not answering Benny's questions about prison the night before, and then explains that nothing violent or terribly exciting happened there: most people, he says, "had done their craziness out in the world and were pretty beaten down by the time they came in." He then explains that while he was inside, he heard the conversations of people who really were communists kept their faith in the system even though it was proving to be an unsuccessful enterprise. Benny says he thinks he understands, and then looks at him with "an expression of pure, unbridled adoration, and he thought how much he would have killed for a moment like that with his own father". He reflects on how this kind of confession makes his son love him; how every decision he could potentially make in this situation could make Benny's life worse; and how it would be a good idea to leave. When Benny asks what's wrong, what he did, Alexi says it was nothing, and that it's time to go.

Benny, upset at his father's behavior, asks to go to the bathroom. Alexi lets him go, and then watches as, when Benny is returning to the car when the wine bar attendant is distracted, Benny steals a bottle of the expensive wine, eventually "thrusting it at his father: terrified, astonished, ready for his love."

Analysis

The story's exploration of parent/child relationships deepens in this section in a number of ways. First, there is the reference to Alexi's history with his own father, a suggestion that difficulties in such relationships can be carried on from one generation to the next to the next. Then there is what seems to be a first time revelation: that what Benny is doing with him is exactly what he dreamed of doing with his own father – again, another sense of the inter-generational nature of complexities in parent/child relationships. Here it's important to note that in spite of his discoveries about himself and his relationship with his father (which can be seen as a glancing manifestation of the collection's thematic interest in - or emphasis on - psychological woundedness), Alexi remains unable to act on them. While he seems clearly able to realize the possibility of improving his relationship with Benny, his actions suggest, with similar clarity, that he is not yet able to act on those insights. But perhaps the most telling aspect of the exploration of this theme in both the story and the collection as a whole is the moving final moments, in which Benny's choice to steal the wine not only exemplifies what he has been trying to do all along, but also can be seen as what Alexi was trying to do with his own father: win affection, respect, or approval. Here again, there are parallels between this story and "Duck and Cover".

Also in this section: yet another manifestation of the theme of "opening up"; Alexi's raw expression of frustrated emotion (which suggests that there's much more going on with him than just the struggle to be a good father to Benny in their short time together); and his very intriguing comments about people in jail. In his first (the reference to people being "pretty beaten down"), there is the sense that he is talking much more about himself than he is about other inmates; in his second, there is a sense that as he speaks of people who were both genuine Communists and able to keep the faith even in prison, he is thinking admiringly of their integrity, honesty, and commitment, aspects of his own life that he is arguably lacking and, just as arguably, trying to gain through developing his relationship with Benny. The ending then brings the story to a close both on a powerful image, but without answering a key question: what is Alexi likely to do with the bottle of wine?

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is "opening up" inside Alexi in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Who is the "Unknown Soldier" referenced in the title – Alexi? Benny? Explain your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Given that their fathers were both imprisoned for being involved in Communist activities, what would you say are the similarities in the final choices made by Judy in “Duck and Cover” and Benny in “The Unknown Soldier”?

Vocabulary

frayed, innocuous, regale, anecdote, grimace, ruminate, balmy, tranquility, impeccable, sully, gazebo, subsequent, tentative, ideology

Retrospective, Part 1

Summary

Pages 219 – 242 The story begins with a description of how Eva Kaplan, in the decades before her death, gained a reputation for being an eclectic and unpredictable art collector, having smuggled works of art both professional and amateur, primarily Russian Jewish art, out of the Soviet Union. Narration describes how, in the aftermath of her death, her middle-aged daughter Wendy anticipated the collection coming to her, and how instead, Wendy and her family are surprised and dismayed to learn that Eva has left everything, worth millions, to charity.

As the family gathers to decide how to handle yet another invitation to yet another memorial, narration describes how everyone seems to be busy – except for Boaz, the husband of Wendy's daughter Mira who, a few months into her pregnancy, left him. Boaz has, narration describes, become obsessed with Eva: the family assures him that no matter what, he is both family and the best person to make the trip to this latest tribute, commenting that Mira will return when she got "this last tantrum out of her system". That night, when he returns to the home he used to share with Mira, Boaz feels her absence more keenly than ever, and recalls how, when they were students together in Israel, Mira took him to meet Eva. He recollects the apparent physical similarities between the two of them; how the confident Mira suddenly seemed more insecure when face-to-face with her grandmother; how Eva's husband Sy doted on her; and how he (Boaz) saw himself doting on Mira the same way when they were the same age (seventies or so) as Eva and Sy.

When Boaz arrives in Israel after a long and sleepless flight, he is met by the director of the Israel Museum hosting the showing of Eva's collection ("It's a complete retrospective", she says) and who tries to figure out which member of the family he is. Boaz explains that he's Mira's husband, adding that Mira is a translator (narration indicating that he is as well).

Narration describes how he also reflects on Mira's relationship with Eva, which leads him to contemplation of what he knows of Eva's life story: her becoming interested in art; her relationship with a famous, government sanctioned artist (Mikhail Borovsky) who enabled her to smuggle art supplies to more rebellious painters; how she kept doing it even after Wendy was born, leaving Sy (who wrote articles critical of the McCarthy investigations) to raise Wendy; and how, as a result of all her efforts, Eva amassed both a huge collection and a huge reputation. He also reflects on his relationship with Mira: how her intolerance for injustice and pain seemed second hand (i.e. based on the suffering of other people, rather than her own); how she reacted with anger, on his behalf, to the suffering he experienced as a child (i.e. the early deaths of both his parents); how she insisted that they find another word for "love", believing that the word itself was used too casually; how Wendy children's art covered the walls of her home;

how Mira eventually became pregnant after years of holding off; and how, in retrospect, he should have suspected the presence of another man in Mira's life.

Analysis

Four of the collection's primary themes are clearly and vividly developed in this section. The first is the collection's interest in psychological wounded-ness, which manifests in a few different ways. The first relates to Boaz, and the sense of his being psychologically (and emotionally) wounded by Mira; the second relates to the sense that Mira has been somehow psychologically wounded by her family (although there is the sense that Wendy, at least, has been a good parent, meaning that Mira's wounded-ness seems to come from another source); and the third relates to both Mira and Boaz, in that the latter seems to have been psychologically wounded as the result of events in his childhood, experiences that seem to matter more to Mira than they do to Boaz himself. In all these instances, there is the sense that the characters involved are struggling, to one degree or another, to improve their lives in spite of their being so damaged: what's interesting here, and throughout the collection, is to consider the ways in which they do, or do not succeed. The second major theme is presented more contextually than narratively: the fact that much of the key part of the story (more in the section section) is set in the "un-American" country of Israel, which establishes both the themes of "un-American-ness" and Jewishness, the third theme introduced here.

The fourth, and perhaps most significant, theme introduced in this section is the parent/child relationship theme, developed in several ways: the sketch of the difficult relationship between Wendy and Mira; the similarly sketched-in relationship between Eva and Wendy; and the fact that Mira is pregnant (which suggests that somehow, in some way, the history of parent child relationships in this family, for good or bad, is about to be carried on). Finally, there is the relationship between Eva and Mira, the portrait of that relationship suggesting that while Eva is Mira's biological grandparent, there are enough similarities about who they are and how they interact with the world and the people around them that Eva might be considered a sort of spiritual and/or psychological parent. Here it's important to note the etymology (history) of Boaz' name. "Boaz" is a man in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible and in the Hebrew Torah, a man of wealth and integrity whose marriage to the compassionate, pious Ruth was believed to lead to the eventual birth of their grandson, the renowned King David. While the parallels between this Boaz and that Boaz don't seem to be literally intended (that is: it doesn't seem that Mira is destined to give birth to a great leader of the Jewish people), there are inescapable echoes of the first Boaz (a good, loyal husband) in the story of the second.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to painter Mikhail Borovski (the reference foreshadowing climactic events in the latter part of the story); the reference to Mira seeing another man (which similarly foreshadows revelations about Mira's behavior latter in this piece); the reference to Mira's suggestion of finding another word for love (which foreshadows a similar experience in Boaz at the story's climax); and the reference to the work done by Sy, Eva's husband. The latter is yet

another reference to that key moment in the history of the Communist party in America, the McCarthy investigations. Here again, the reference is another manifestation of the collection's thematic emphasis on "un-American-ness".

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the significance of Boaz' recollection of the kind of art Wendy had in her home? What other aspect of the story is echoed here? What is the symbolism?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the literal and/or metaphoric value of the story's suggestion that Eva and Mira are physically so similar?

Discussion Question 3

The references to both Boaz and Mira being translators, along with Mira's reference to her need for a new word for "love", suggest that the meaning of words plays a key role in both their lives. What do you think this interest in words and their meanings has to do with other questions / aspects of their identities and lives?

Vocabulary

obituary, heyday, philanthropist, amass, pittance, ambitious, surreptitious, sanction, succinct, executor, minutiae, decadent, tacit, obligatory, monstrosity, linguist, vantage, finagle, clandestine, vehement, scrupulous, modicum, precarious, superfluous

Retrospective, Part 2

Summary

Pages 242 – 256. As he and the director drive to Eva's house from the airport, Boaz finds himself revealing what happened between him and Mira - specifically, what Mira had told him about how the relationship with the other man in her life (Eric) developed. In particular, he refers to how Mira got pregnant in an effort to cement her marriage and deny her feelings for Eric. Narration then describes how Boaz looks out the window of the limousine he's in and sees how dirty and messy Jerusalem seems to have become: but then he sees a couple of boys joyfully playing soccer in the street, and has a sudden experience of happiness and possibility. A short time later, he arrives at Eva's, where he unexpectedly finds Mira.

As he and Mira talk, Boaz is vividly aware of how empty the house is, now that so many of Eva and Sy's things have already been sold: there are, narration comments, outlines of furniture on the walls where the furniture had prevented sunlight from bleaching the paint. Conversation in Hebrew (in which they're both fluent) reveals that Mira couldn't stand the thought of him being on his own while dealing with the retrospective; that she feels negatively about many aspects of how Boaz lives his life; and, switching to English, how she feels that he's always expecting everything to compensate for his sad childhood. She also says, however, that she loves him anyway, and that she'll give up Eric if he (Boaz) promises to be the kind of husband (open, vulnerable) that she needs. Even though Boaz isn't clear what exactly she wants, he agrees to try.

In the aftermath of their conversation, Mira and Boaz spend the night together, and Boaz discovers how much her body has changed, even in the few weeks since her pregnancy began. Their conversation the following morning is full of Mira's happy memories of Eva, but as much as Boaz wants to spend the day alone with her, and as his constantly ringing phone reminds him, there are things to do in relation to the estate. So Boaz and Mira get to work on dealing with all those things, ending up at a storage locker set up in Eva's name – which, the storage facility's manager says, Eva frequently visited on her own: he had, he says, no idea she had a husband. When the locker is opened, Mira and Boaz are shocked to see that it's lined with about fifty portraits: all of Eva, all painted by Borovsky (see Part 1), and all revealing that Eva adored him. As they look at the paintings, Boaz finds himself overwhelmed by the realization that Mira, like Eva, loves someone else besides her husband. He realizes that he's probably known this ever since he learned about Eric, and almost crumples with emotion. As Mira asks him what's wrong, Boaz realizes that "for the first time, [he can't] think of a single word to describe this kind of loneliness, so scary and real it required an entirely different language, new and strange and yet to be invented."

Analysis

This section of the story is rich in a variety of metaphors: what Boaz sees from the window of the limo (which can be seen as representing his own inner state of mind); the outlines of art on the walls of Eva's empty house (which can be seen as representing either the temporary nature of life or the empty outlines of Boaz' hope for Mira, or both); Mira's switching of languages; and, most significantly, the paintings in the locker. While they are clearly an overt manifestation of feelings kept deeply secret by Eva for much of her life, they are just as clearly a metaphoric representation / evocation of both the secrets kept by Mira and Eva. The opening of the locker, in fact, can be seen as a similarly metaphoric representation of the collection's thematic interest in things "breaking open" – in this case, truths about the past. Here it's important to note the irony – on his trip through Jerusalem, Boaz experienced a kind of "breaking open" himself, a possibility of hope: here, though, the breaking open leads to a realization of hopelessness, and of loss.

Also in this section, it begins to become even clearer, more so than in the first section, that Mira's attitude towards Boaz and his past is more about projecting her feelings about having what she believes to have been an unhappy past onto him. He seems to have at least a beginning sense of relative peace with what happened to him: Mira's response seems to be much more about the way she believes he SHOULD be reacting / feeling than how he is ACTUALLY reacting and feeling. In other words, it seems to be all about her, rather than him – in the same way that Eva's life and relationships were all about HER.

Meanwhile, there are two further references to Boaz' and Mira's use of language: the shifting between Hebrew and English, perhaps a manifestation of the book's thematic interest in being Jewish; and the reference at the end of the story to a need for new words / language to describe feelings. This time, the need is Boaz's, emerging as a result of his experience of a new kind of despair (as opposed to Mira's need, in the previous section, for a new word for love). The use of language, or rather the characters' relationship with language (that is, the language of words, as opposed to Eva's connection with the language of art) is the central theme of this particular story, not occurring anywhere else in the collection: there is the sense here that words are simply not enough to express feeling, and that at least in Eva's case, true meaning, in life and relationship and feeling, is revealed through art, which in turn can perhaps be seen as an echo of an aspect of "The Quietest Man" which is, on some level, also about truth in art – the ironic mirror of "Unknown Soldier", in which Alexi's success in the art of films comes about as a result of lies.

Discussion Question 1

What is the parallel between the physical resemblance between Mira and Eva, as described in Part One of the story, and the discovery of the paintings in the storage locker in Part 2?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the metaphorical significance of Mira switching languages in the middle of her conversation with Boaz?

Discussion Question 3

Consider “Quote 19”. In what ways might it be seen as metaphorically reflecting the situation between Mira and Boaz?

Vocabulary

flirtatious, prudish, invariable, intrusive, incessant, infuriate, reminisce, myriad

Characters

Howard Siegel (The Old World)

Howard is the central character and first person narrator of “The Old World”. In his early sixties, his story begins in the aftermath of the relatively recent departure of his wife from their marriage. He takes himself by surprise when he begins a relationship with Svetlana, a decades-younger woman with whom he experiences an emotional and sexual re-awakening. Narration portrays Howard as being somewhat bewildered by what is happening to him, but more than willing to enjoy the situation, since Svetlana also seems to be enjoying herself – at least for a while. Once they marry, and even more so when they go on their honeymoon (to Kiev in Ukraine, from which their families both emigrated), Howard becomes increasingly bewildered and saddened by Svetlana’s deepening, and increasingly apparent, grief: she is frequently in tears, but never fully explains why. Howard is left to make assumptions and to react with compassion to the evident but mysterious pain his new wife is experiencing.

Howard also has a daughter: Beth, recently converted to Orthodox Judaism. Narration describes Howard as having been close to her for much of her life, but since her conversion (which came about as the result of her meeting, falling in love with, and marrying an Orthodox Jewish man), he has felt that for her, he is not only less of a priority: he is less understood. Nevertheless, he finds himself taking some of Beth’s words, new values, and perspectives to heart, particularly in the aftermath of what seems to be the breakdown of his relationship with Svetlana, finding himself longing for the same sorts of comfort from his faith as Beth says she has found in hers.

Ultimately, the portrait of Howard in this story is one of a grieving, lonely man whose experience of hope and unlikely joy is sadly, achingly transient, leaving him longing for something (faith) that he didn’t know he was missing.

Oren (Minor Heroics)

Oren is the central character and first person narrator of “Minor Heroics”. In his mid-late twenties, he is portrayed as being the unhappy, somewhat hapless and/or ineffectual younger son of a strong-willed, hard-working mother who favors his more overtly successful older brother, Asaaf. Where Asaaf is a successful soldier, Oren is merely the driver for an officer. Where Asaaf is successful in love, Oren merely watches in sad frustration as Asaaf deepens his commitment to the girl (Yael) that Oren loves. Where Asaaf is doted on by their mother, Oren is ordered around and taken for granted. Nevertheless, Oren loves and hero-worships his brother, which is one of the reasons why Oren is so determined to make sure that Asaaf is well taken care of in the aftermath of a farming accident that Oren inadvertently triggered.

Oren experiences a sense of pride and accomplishment when Asaaf's life is saved because Oren acted so quickly, so decisively, and without mistakes: he (Oren) enjoys the brief wave of success, recognition, and affection that washes over him as the result of having been so instrumental in his brother's survival. That wave soon washes back out, however, as Asaaf struggles to recover from the accident both physically and psychologically, the attentions of family and friends moving away from Oren and back to the brother that everyone seems to feel deserves that attention more. Oren makes an attempt to claim / reclaim a degree of success and self-worth as he pursues the increasingly lonely Yael, but as the story progresses, can't help but feel that it's more important for him that the increasingly bitter, increasingly isolated Asaaf get back to normal. To that end, Oren manipulates the situation with his brother so that Asaaf, in a fit of violent temper, takes out his many frustrations on him, again restoring the power dynamic in the family and putting Oren back in the place that he seems accustomed to filling in spite of its being an essentially unhappy one.

Raya Moscowitz (My Grandmother …)

The elderly Raya is the protagonist and first person narrator of "My Grandmother Tells Me This Story". Sharp-tongued, bitter, and resentful, Raya's story is of both her past and her present: there is the sense, never explicitly outlined but implied, that she is telling the story to explain to her granddaughter (who is identified as the listener) why she (Raya) is so angry. The story is primarily focused on Raya's childhood and teenaged years, at which time she fought as a member of a youthful resistance movement against the policies and practices of the Nazis in 1930's – 40's Germany, a movement she joined almost by accident in the aftermath of an attempt by her mother to send her to safety. The story describes how Raya's relationship with her husband (a marriage that she repeatedly suggests was based on aspects of their relationship that had nothing to do with love, affection, respect, or emotional need) was entwined with their both being involved with that resistance movement, and with the struggle they fought for power within their particular group, a struggle that continued (she suggests) throughout their marriage.

Raya's story suggests that she had no choice but to become hard, determined, and forceful, not only because those personal qualities became necessary in the fight against Nazi oppression, but because they also became necessary in the fight for recognition within the group of rebels to which she and the boy / man who became her husband belonged. Her story emphasizes a particular encounter (with a frightened woman and her child) in which Raya, to prove she wasn't the weak young female that her fellow resistance fighters seemed to believe she was, behaved with cruel insensitivity that gave her a sense of power that, as she tells the story, she simultaneously celebrates and regrets. The latter resonance of this experience seems to be more significant, in that she describes herself as having spent years after her escape from the war looking for the woman and her child: but then, almost in the same narrative breath, she angrily berates her daughter for bringing up the past, an expression of harshness that, at this relatively late time in her life, she still seems unable to resolve and/or move past.

Tomas Nowak (The Quietest Man)

Tomas is the protagonist and first person narrator of “The Quietest Man”. Middle-aged and living a life of quiet frustration as an adjunct (half-time) professor in a small university as the story begins, Tomas is surprised and worried to learn that his daughter Daniela is writing a play that he believes will reveal his shortcomings as a father. While there is a sense that his narrative self-portrait is somewhat exaggerated and over-emphasizes what he believes to be his failings (as a father, husband, teacher, and one-time activist), beneath the surface of his somewhat neurotic agonizing is a sense of profound grief and loss. In his descriptions of the man he was in the country where he was born (Poland), of his passion to act on what he believed in, and of his commitment to integrity and courage, there is a sense that he deeply grieves the loss of his self-respect, his capacity to follow his principles, and his courage to do what he needed to do in order to help realize the better world he believed was possible. Now, it seems, he sees himself has having abandoned himself, his principles, and his family, becoming neurotic, distant from both the best of himself and the people he loved, and a failure.

Over the course of the narrative, as it becomes increasingly apparent that Daniela is searching for truths in her father’s life that she can integrate into her play, Tomas discovers that what truths he remembers are not enough. He also discovers what he believes to be the real reasons for Daniela’s exploration of his past: her need for the same kind of self-validation that he has lost, a validation that he discovers he is able to find by telling her lies about himself. In other words, her search for the truth is rewarded with lies from her father, lies that he sees as introducing her to new possibilities for a positive self-image for her that simultaneously create the illusion, for both father and daughter, that she had / has as much value for him as he and his values once had for himself. The quietest man speaks up, but his voice is full of lies that both speaker and hearer want (need?) to hear as truth.

Judy (Duck and Cover)

Teenaged Judy is the protagonist and first-person narrator of “Duck and Cover”. She and her unnamed father live in Los Angeles, having moved there from New York to escape possible legal action: her father is an active, vocal member of the Communist party at a time in America (the 1950’s) when such activities are illegal. Motherless, Judy works part-time in the diner-style restaurant where her father and his fellow party members meet, plan, and keep each other intent on the party’s goals. Judy resents her father’s extended and time-consuming attentions to the party, and nurses growing feelings of resentment and jealousy, particularly in relationship to her father’s relationship with the glamorous Gladys, a party organizer. In what seems like an act of attention-seeking, and almost revenge, the Jewish Judy starts spending time with a non-Jewish boy named Hal, who she meets in a chance encounter on the street.

That encounter results in a surge of excitement, energy, and freedom in Judy, to the point where, in spite of a moment of affirming, emotionally vulnerable connection with

her father, at one point she rebelliously chooses to suddenly take off from work and go to visit Hal, where she discovers that in some ways, he has parent-related experiences of vulnerability and need that echo hers. This sense of something shared leads them into a sexual encounter, the success of which is not shared: Hal experiences orgasm almost before the event begins, whereas Judy remains completely unengaged and completely unsatisfied. This is part of the reason why, at the story's conclusion and in spite of her lingering resentments of her father, she chooses to side with his allies in the party rather than continue to build her relationship with Hal: after her father is arrested, it seems she has come to realize that the party is the only real home she has, or might ever have.

Talia (A Difficult Phase)

Talia is the protagonist of "A Difficult Phase". Her story, told in third-person narration, is that of someone who experienced a significant degree of professional and personal success (not to mention freedom), but because of circumstances beyond her control, was forced to return home and take both a job at a much lower level of status, use of her abilities, and pay. Simmering with resentment, frustrated at having to live at home with her parents (who, in spite of their best intentions, continue to make her feel like she is still a child), and lonely for both intellectual and emotional companionship, she moves perhaps more quickly than she intends into a physically and emotionally intimate relationship with recently widowed Tomer. Their connection is strong and immediate, and Talia finds it enjoyable – until, that is, Tomer's unresolved grief over the death of his wife overwhelms both him and the positive aspects of his new relationship. Talia resolves to break it off, but not before she experiences a surprising, and similarly powerful, connection with Tomer's teenaged daughter, Gali.

As narration reveals, Talia's relationship with Gali resembles the relationship she (Talia) had with her sister – open, frank, and as the story concludes, somewhat adventurous. More specifically, as Talia struggles to fully and thoroughly move away from her relationship with Tomer, she finds her emotional needs for connection, honesty, and respect being met by the relationship with Gali. There is the strong sense that for Talia, while she enjoys (and is grateful for) the physical relationship with Tomer, it's the relationship with Gali that really gives her what she wants … a sense that even though life has moments of pain, genuine human vulnerability and connection (such as she has with Gali, as opposed to the nursemaiding side of things that she has with Tomer), make the suffering if not worthwhile, at least bearable.

Alexi (The Unknown Soldier)

Thirty-ish Alexi is the protagonist of "The Unknown Soldier". Third-person narration reveals at the beginning of the story that he has just been released from jail where he was serving a prison sentence for being active in the Communist party, something of which he wasn't actually guilty: as narration reveals, he was only pretending to be interest in Communist activities and ideas in order to advance his film career. Alexi's

story is primarily one of good intentions meeting bad choices: his history is one of simply wanting to make a good living but telling lies (about being a Communist), having affairs (with a film producer and Communist, who eventually turned him in to the authorities), and rationalizing both to himself by saying he was doing it all to provide for his son and now ex-wife. Meanwhile, his present is similarly one of bad choices for good reasons: desperate to re-connect with his estranged son Benny, Alexi makes bad choices related to money, accommodation, spontaneous action, and expressions of anger that instead emotionally hurt Benny and make him, in turn, desperate in his own way to connect with Alexi.

This sense of a son driven to extreme actions in order to win his father's love, narration reveals, is parallel to Alexi's own experience of trying to win his own father's approval. In the same way as Benny repeatedly makes the effort to connect with his dad, Alexi (narration suggests) did exactly the same thing with HIS dad. The narrative is therefore as much about Alexi's relationship with his father as it is about Alexi's relationship with his son, the cross-generational effects of bad parenting choices and childhood alienation (or, in Benny's case, the potential for such alienation) manifesting in Alexi's pained, but earnest and well-intentioned struggle simply to do the right thing … which, unfortunately, he seems haplessly unable to do.

Boaz (Retrospective)

Mid-thirties Boaz is the central character of the final story in this collection, "Retrospective". It's interesting to note how the character doesn't take narrative focus until almost a third of the way into the story: it's an element of narrative structure that, in some ways, reflects what's going on with the character, whose story is one of being on the periphery of his own life (in the same way as Boaz is on the periphery of the action in its earliest stages) and who, as the result of circumstances, finds himself moving more closely (or being pushed more closely) into its center.

Quiet and thoughtful, there is a sense that Boaz might be perceived by the other characters and the reader alike, as being somewhat ineffectual. He is certainly a more RE-active protagonist than a PRO-active one, but this is perhaps a result of the situation in which he finds himself: essentially abandoned by his pregnant wife with no real explanation. He finds himself caught up in circumstances and events that his wife's family (with whom he has become close) suggest that he, with his sensitivity and need to keep busy in the aftermath of his wife's departure) might be perfectly suited to handle. As he does his best to live up to their hopes for him in his dealings with the estate of recently deceased matriarch Eva, Boaz finds himself face to face with his wife, her choices to give her attention and affection to another man, his beliefs about their relationship, and eventually, his beliefs about them as individuals. All of these are sharply and vividly put into clear perspective when, at the story's climax, he discovers that the matriarch of the family and his wife are, essentially, in the same situation: loving one man while married to another. The associated sense of loss is devastating to Boaz – all of which is ironic because Boaz was the Biblical name given to a wise, good man

who was a very good husband to a similarly good wife. In other words, Boaz' essential identity is ironic, as is his story in general.

(The Old World) – Svetlana

Svetlana is the new girlfriend, and eventual wife, of this story's protagonist, Howard. She is about a decade younger than he is, a recent immigrant from Kiev, the same city from which Howard's grandfather emigrated. She believes this shared origin is, at first, an important commonality between herself and Howard, and seemingly one of the reasons she agrees to marry him. Later, however, when she and Howard arrive in Kiev for their honeymoon, she seems to become increasingly uncomfortable with what has happened, a discomfort Howard attributes, in part, to Kiev having changed in ways she doesn't like, a change that seems to echo / trigger a change in her feelings about Howard. The narrative ends without the reader knowing whether Svetlana is going to stay with him or leave the relationship.

Beth

Beth is Howard's daughter. Newly married, newly converted to conservative Judaism, she is a practical but affectionate sounding board for her father.

Ya'akov

Ya'akov is the new husband of Beth, conservatively Jewish and, at times, outspokenly opinionated. Howard refers to him as "the fool" because of his (Ya'akov's) tendency to state the obvious as a profound insight.

(Minor Heroics) Asaaf

In "Minor Heroics", Asaaf is the brother of protagonist Oren. A successful soldier where Oren is something of a failure; in a happy relationship where Oren is unhappily single; beloved of their mother where Oren seems to be barely tolerated - Asaaf is a vivid contrast to Oren, and resented for it by his brother. When Asaaf is severely injured in an accident, however, Oren briefly takes over as the favored son: he supports and facilitates Asaaf's recovery in very significant ways. Eventually, however, Oren realizes that he cannot stand Asaaf being less than the man he was, so he allows Asaaf to express his power and strength in the hopes that he (Asaaf) will become more himself.

Yael

Yael is Asaaf's girlfriend. She is portrayed as being sensitive but practical, affectionate yet slightly fickle: after only a very short consideration, she agrees that Oren should accompany her on a trip that had been planned for her and Asaaf.

Mother

The mother of Asaaf and Oren is portrayed as a hard-working, long suffering woman who dominates Oren's life but much more supportive, loving, and affectionate towards Asaaf. This, it seems, causes some tension, stress, and resentment in Oren.

(My Grandmother …) Leon Moscowitz

Leon is the husband of the story's narrator, Raya. They have shared decades of life together, life that Raya says in her narration has been essentially without love: their relationship began virtually out of necessity, continued because it was "the thing to do" (in spite of Leon being in love with another woman, and Raya knowing about it), and at the time the story is set, seems to be barely functional. Leon is portrayed (admittedly through his wife's perceptions) as arrogant, selfish, and judgmental, qualities which, she implies, have made him a very bad husband.

The Mother and Child

A key element of the story told by Raya in "My Grandmother ..." is her description of an encounter she and Leon had, while fighting in the resistance during World War II, with an unnamed mother and her child. Innocent and simply struggling to survive, the mother and child are victimized / robbed by Raya in an action that, narration suggests, she still regrets decades after it happened. The mother and child are, in effect, the triggers for the development of her conscience.

(The Quietest Man) Daniela

In "The Quietest Man", Daniela is the playwright daughter of protagonist Tomas Nowak. Shy, thoughtful, sensitive, and insecure, the play she is writing / developing is, it seems, her way into a world and way of living that she loves. As such, she is desperately vulnerable, but at the same time desperately needy of both support and information from her father. Her relief when she receives both (even though both are, in some way, lies) seems to inspire her with the courage to at least continue realizing her dreams.

Katka

Katka is mother to Daniela and ex-wife of Tomas, bitter and resentful of him, his academic success, the choices he forced her into when they first came to America, and of what she sees as his selfish, insensitive treatment of both her and Daniela. A respected and outspoken activist in their home country (Poland) before their emigration, there is the sense that she resented being brought into a life in America that is less, rather than more, a situation that fueled / propelled the breakdown, and eventual end, of her marriage.

(Duck and Cover) Judy’s Father

In "Duck and Cover", the unnamed father of protagonist Judy is portrayed as being passionate to the point of near obsession about the Communist Party. He is devoted when it comes to the good the party can do, and the good that he can do for the party: he is so single minded that even his relationship with his daughter is defined almost entirely by what, and how, he feels about his comrades. While there is a strong sense of integrity about him and his choices, there is also a strong sense that those choices tend towards the misguided and unloving, particularly when it comes to his daughter.

Lou Mandelbaum

Lou is Judy's father's best friend, a similarly passionate member of the Communist party. There is the sense that Lou is the person with whom Judy's father has the most significant and/or prioritized relationship of his life, a fact that Judy's narration is barely able to conceal.

Gladys

The glamorous Gladys is a visitor to the lives of Judy, her father, and Lou. She is a high-up member of the Communist Party, an organizer and leader. Her arrival in the community upsets Judy: without the narration actually saying so, there is nevertheless the strong sense that she considers the charismatic Gladys to be a powerful rival for her (Judy's) father's affection and attention.

Hal

Hal is the seemingly non-Jewish boy that Judy makes friends with and eventually has her first sexual experience with. He is open, friendly, vulnerable, and compassionate: nevertheless, Judy chooses her family and the loyalties they practice / act on over him.

(A Difficult Phase) Tomer

The attractive but somewhat hapless Tomer is the love interest for protagonist Talia in "A Difficult Phase". A single dad and recent widower, there is the clear sense that Tomer, as affectionate and well-intentioned as he is, is either too grief-stricken or too basically scattered to be an effective romantic partner for Talia, in spite of what her parents clearly think. He is a decent man: just having a very difficult time in his life.

Gali

Gali is Tomer's teenaged daughter. In many ways, she is portrayed as what might be described as a "typical" teenager: uncommunicative, uncooperative, self-isolating, and

underneath it all, somewhat lost. Her seemingly impulsive relationship with Talia is unexpected for all the characters, both in terms of it actually happening and the benefits it brings everyone. There is the sense, at the end of the story, that a big part of Gali's struggle is that she is deeply, frighteningly vulnerable.

(The Unknown Solder) Katherine

Katherine is the ex-wife of protagonist Alexi. In the aftermath of Alexi's arrest and imprisonment, she is angry, resentful, and extremely protective of their son Benny. She is a potent source of conflict and/or tension in the story.

Benny

Benny is the young, pre-adolescent son of Katherine and Alexi. From the beginning of the story, he is portrayed as being devoted and/or worshipful of at least the idea of his father. Even though Alexi loses his temper with Benny at times, and even though Benny is portrayed as being somewhat (sad? dismayed? hurt?) by his father's actions, Benny's choices at the end of the story indicate that not only has his need for his father's attention / affection not changed: it has become even more desperate.

Julia

Julia is a woman with whom Alexi had an affair in "The Unknown Soldier", a film producer with whom he slept, at least in part, in order to ensure his continuing with the film series that she produces. She is very different from Katherine - educated, open minded, warm. At one point, Alexi feels good about being involved with them both, since they each give him something different that he thinks he needs.

(Retrospective) Mira

Mira is the wife of protagonist Boaz, portrayed as selfish, flighty, and melodramatic. She has moments of what appears to be genuine compassion and/or sensitivity, but those are repeatedly contrasted with moments of insensitivity and self-righteousness that, ultimately, cause the hapless Boaz to lose track of himself and devote himself more to her, in spite of the fact that she damaged their relationship irreparably by having an affair.

Eva

Eva is Mira's eccentric, egocentric grandmother. An outspoken, self-glamorizing art collector, she is portrayed in the narrative as being very much like her granddaughter in a number of ways, not all of them terribly attractive. By the conclusion of the story, she

is portrayed as having kept the love of her life (someone not her husband) alive in her heart in an unusual way.

Wendy

Wendy is Eva's practical, exasperated daughter, and the similarly exasperated mother of Mira. She is earthy, honest, and compassionate in ways that neither her mother nor daughter are, which makes her particularly attractive, as a surrogate parent, to the motherless Boaz.

Eric

Eric is the man with whom Mira had an affair. Although he never actually appears in the story, his presence has a significant impact on all the characters and on the narrative. There is the sense that Mira was attracted to him because, among other reasons, he was stable and calm in ways that she didn't feel Boaz could be.

Sy

Sy was Eva's long-suffering, gentle, quiet husband. There is the sense that in the same way as Boaz is being positioned to be the caregiver in his relationship with the tempestuous Mira, Sy played a similar, often neglected and taken-for-granted role in his relationship with Eva.

Symbols and Symbolism

Communism

Communism is an economic, cultural, and political philosophy that emphasizes the value and role of the community. For several decades, it was the governing philosophy of much of Eastern Europe, most notably the Soviet Union. For much of that time, American culture and politicians regarded communism and its practitioners as a threat to the American way of life: investigations let by Senator Joseph McCarthy, among others, dug hard and deep into the lives and beliefs of large numbers of individuals, severely damaging (if not crippling) the professional careers of many. Communism, and McCarthy, are referred to in several of the stories in the collection, both having relative degrees of significance on the plot and/or characters. In each of these cases, Communism is portrayed / experienced as a primarily destructive force - of families, of individual lives, and in some cases, of cultures and societies.

Nazism

Nazism is a political system of government and social engineering that came out of Germany in the 1930's and led to the Second World War in the 1940's. In the same way as Communism is referred to several times in the collection and affects elements of the various narratives to different degrees, the same is true of Nazism here. It appears in fewer stories, but is nonetheless a powerful and defining presence in those pieces in which it appears and even in those in which it doesn't: because one of the targets of Nazism's drive towards racial purity was the Jewish race, and because millions of Jews died as a result of falling victim to that drive, the specter of Nazism and the suffering it brought infuses, through implication, virtually every piece in the collection.

The Matryoshka Doll

In "The Old Country", protagonist Howard purchases a matryoshka doll to take home as a souvenir. The doll, which consists of a series increasingly smaller, often identical dolls stacked one within the other, metaphorically represents the layers of personality and/or identity in the story's characters, particularly (because the dolls are usually female figures) female characters Beth and Svetlana.

Asaaf's Wound

In "Minor Heroics", the serious wound experienced by Asaaf, the popular and successful soldier brother of protagonist Oren, leads not only to physical disability but to what becomes emotional disability as well. There is the sense throughout the narrative that in some ways (particularly his faith in the military system in which he serves), Asaaf does

not believe in his life: the wound can be seen as representing and/or manifesting the self-defeating, debilitating qualities of this belief, or lack thereof.

The Rotted Tomatoes

Also in "Minor Heroics", protagonist Oren and his mother (along with a number of other workers) tend a farm that grows industrial amounts of tomatoes. At the beginning of the story, there are fears that an initially successful crop will rot: at the end of the story, those fears have come true. The rotted tomatoes can be seen as metaphorically representing the "rot" in Asaaf's self-image.

The Yiddish Underground

In "My Grandmother Tells Me This Story", narrator Raya tells a story of her involvement with a youthful resistance group fighting against the anti-Jewish Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler. That group named itself "The Yiddish Underground", "Yiddish" being the language spoken by European Jews of the time, and "Underground" being the term used to describe secret or covert actions of sabotage and rebellion employed by such resistance groups throughout history.

Guns

Also in "My Grandmother .,..", guns become an important, almost essential symbol of power and status. Young Raya feels that she is given a demeaning job when she first joins the Underground and is assigned to clean them: later, however, when she is actually given a gun of her own and taught to shoot, she feels and accepts its power. The story portrays that kind of power as being corruptive, Raya experiencing the thrill of having such power and manifesting it in ways that come across, in the narrative, as being insensitive and cruel.

Daniela's Play

In "The Quietest Man", the daughter of protagonist Tomas (Daniela) is working on a play based on the life of her father, once known as "The Quietest Man". For Daniela, the play represents the best of herself, her identity-defining love for the theatre: for her father, however, the play first represents the possibility that unhappy truths about himself and his life are about to be revealed. Later, however, when he discovers Daniela's true intention (which is to present him in a positive light), Tomas manipulates what he says to her so that he comes across as even better than she perhaps intended. In other words, what starts out as a representation of truth becomes a representation of lies.

"The Chronicle"

Also in "Quietest Man", there are frequent references to a newspaper that Tomas and his fellow Communists wrote to promote that philosophy's particular political, economic, and cultural agenda. For Tomas and the others, in the past and in the present for Tomas, "The Chronicle" represents hope, possibility, and the best parts of themselves.

The Fallout Shelter

In "Duck and Cover", protagonist Judy has a couple of encounters with a young man named Hal in a fallout shelter. In the 1950's (the period in which this story is set), such structures were covered and lined holes in the ground stocked with provisions and living quarters for families or small groups, taking refuge from the "fallout" (leftover particles and/or radiation) from the explosion of a nuclear bomb. This particular shelter also metaphorically represents the "shelter" from her father and his devotion to Communism that, Judy suggests in her narration, have ruined her life.

The Kibbutz

In "A Difficult Phase", Israeli protagonist Talia recalls childhood experiences of escaping with her sisters to a nearby kibbutz, or communal farm. Meanwhile, in the story's present day narrative, Talia repeats her childhood experience, first on her own and later in the company of Gali, the troubled daughter of Tomer, a man that Talia has become involved with. In both cases, the kibbutz represents freedom and escape.

The Thorns on the Palm Trees

Also in "A Difficult Phase", Talia climbs the palm trees on the kibbutz, and in both the past and present, experiences minor but painful injury as a result of being pricked by the tree's thorns. These thorns represent the experiences of being painfully "pricked" by life and of having the poison in the spines (i.e. the "poison" associated with life) eventually numbing the initial pain.

The Bottle of Private Reserve Wine

In "The Unknown Soldier", protagonist Alexi wants to buy a bottle of expensive wine, but is embarrassed to discover, in front of his son Benny, that he can't afford it. Later, however, Benny steals the wine, which can then be seen as representing Benny's desire to impress and/or gain love from his father, a situation that, as narration reveals, Alexi was also driven to do in relationship to his own father.

Eva's Art

In "Retrospective", the character of Eva is a collector of all types of Russian art , that painted by well-known and/or established artists as well as that painted by amateurs and/or regular people. Over the many years of Eva's life, her collection deepened and expanded, giving her international fame and notoriety. The art represents Eva's intense sense of connection to the land and art of her people, and therefore to aspects of herself.

Translation and Language

Also in "Retrospective", protagonist Boaz and his estranged wife Mira are both translators, an interesting and ironic occupation given that they have difficulty communicating with each other. Translation and language can therefore be seen as representing aspects of a key problem in their relationship, a potential solution (i.e taking care to translate accurately), and their attempts to realize that solution.

The Portraits in the Locker

Again in "Retrospective", Boaz and Mira discover a storage locker full of paintings of Eva, all painted by the same artist and all revealing the love artist and subject had for one another. The portraits represent the power of secrets in general; the power and dominating nature of secret love in particular; and the way such secrets can either carry on in a successful marriage (such as that of Eva and her long-time husband Sy) or destroy it (such as that of Boaz and Mira)

Settings

America

The United States of America, with all its implied possibility, opportunity, and dreams, is the primary setting for many of the stories. "Quietest Man" "Duck and Cover" are set entirely in America (although "Quietest Man" does contain some flashbacks to the characters' lives in Europe - see below). Meanwhile, "The Old World" and "Retrospective" are set partially in America, that country's reputation as a "land of opportunity" playing a significant but frequently just implied role in narrative, theme, and character.

America's North East

New York City, with its history of welcoming / becoming home to significant numbers of Jews and other immigrants, is an important setting in many of the narratives. "Old World" has significant amounts of narrative action taking place there, while there are references in "Unknown Soldier" and in Duck and Cover" to the characters' origins in both the city as a whole and its large Jewish communities in particular. There are also references in "My Grandmother ..." to the narrator living in the city colloquially known as "The Big Apple". Meanwhile, "Quietest Man" is set in Maine, a more rural / less sophisticated community than New York, its relative small town-ness and/or distance from centers of culture like New York or Europe playing an important, defining role in character, situation, and story. Finally, the first part of "Retrospective" is set in Vermont, another mostly rural state in the North-East part of the country.

California

Communities in California (on the opposite coast of America from New York and the other communities referred to above) are the settings for the entire action of "Duck and Cover" (set in Los Angeles) and for much of the action of "Unknown Soldier" (set in San Francisco and the Napa Valley). In contrast to the collection-relevant qualities implied by the New York setting (i.e. welcoming to Jews; familiar, busy and friendly), there is a sense that the characters in "Duck and Cover" and "Unknown Soldier" are in a kind of exile. This is also true, to some extent, of the character living in Maine in "Quietest Man".

Israel

Israel, the ancient land of the Jewish people, is the primary setting for "Minor Heroics" and "A Difficult Phase"; is one of two principle settings for "Retrospective", and is referred to, with varying degrees of attention and/or significance, throughout almost all the other stories in the collection. In all these references, and again to varying degrees,

there is a sense of "home", about Israel, a sense of safety and belonging associated with being there even though, for characters like Talia ("Difficult Phase"), Oren and Asaaf ("Minor Heroics") and Mira ("Retrospective), there is also a sense of restlessness and discontent associated with being there.

Europe

A number of countries in continental Europe (that is - excluding the United Kingdom) are the setting for important moments in several of the stories. In "The Old World", a good half of the action takes place in the Ukraine; the reminiscent narrative of "My Grandmother ..." takes place in an unspecified European country that might be Poland, Belarus, or Lituania; and similar reminiscent narrative in "Quietest Man" refers to the characters' politically active lives in Poland. In the same way as New York City (referenced above) had/has a reputation for welcoming Jewish immigrants, so too does/did Central and/or continental Europe. Here again, there is the usual dichotomy of characters in the collection's stories feeling both at home and in exile in the lands where they are making their lives.

Themes and Motifs

Being “Un-American”

The book’s title can be seen as referring to several aspects of being, seeming, or living “un-American”. One fairly straightforward aspect is the fact that several of the stories take place, in whole or in part, in parts of the world that are not America: “A Difficult Phase” and “Minor Heroics”, for example, both take place entirely in Israel, although a key component of the latter’s plot relates to the intention of some of the characters to travel to America for work. “The Old Country” and “Retrospective” take place partly in America (that is: the characters start their personal journeys in America but arguably come closer to the truths of themselves and their lives in places that are un-American); the framing narrative of “My Grandmother” is set in America, but tells a story that relates to the reasons why the characters came to America (that is: the life in America discovered by narrator / protagonist Raya enables her to escape a life in Europe that was arguably quite un-American). Finally, “The Quietest Man”, “Duck and Cover”, and “The Unknown Soldier” all take place entirely in America, but the story/characters in “Quietest Man” have their roots in an un-American experience (that is, in Poland) while the story and characters in the latter two stories are tied to an aspect of the American experience that, in turn, relates to the second level of thematic meaning in the title.

As referenced elsewhere in this analysis, in 1950’s America (the setting for both “Duck and Cover” and “Unknown Soldier”, there was an aggressive, politically and morally violent searching out of members and/or influences of the Communist Party. One of the agencies of that investigation was a government body called “The House Un-American Activities Committee”, the term “un-American” in that context referring to the activities and philosophies of the Communist Party. The title, therefore, can be seen as referring to the anti-communist experiences that are the focus of those two particular stories.

Finally, the title can also be seen as referring to the second of the collection’s major themes: the immigrant experience.

The Immigrant Experience

Several of the stories and the characters that play them out have experiences of immigration that take place before the story begins. The details of those experiences vary, but they seem to all be connected to one thing: the feeling of being disconnected from the characters’ country of origin. In “The Old Country”, protagonist / narrator Howard is a third generation immigrant: the woman he falls in love with, Svetlana, is a new immigrant herself. Because Howard is so far removed from an experience of his so-called “home country”, Svetlana’s longing to return there seems strange to him, as does her intensely emotional reaction when they actually do go back: Howard’s is perhaps one side of the immigrant experience that sees descendants of immigrants

becoming as psychologically distant from their homeland as their ancestors became physically distant.

Meanwhile, the protagonist and narrator of “My Grandmother” has somewhat of the opposite experience. She is arguably of a similar generational perspective to that of Howard’s grandfather: her perspective on the Old Country is similar to his (the grandfather’s), in that the emotional and psychological ties are still very active and present, although in Raya’s case those ties are bound in with anger, bitterness, and grief. Her immigrant experience is very fresh, also akin to Svetlana’s. In contrast to both these experiences are those of Tomas (protagonist of “Quietest Man” and his wife Katka, both of whom were actively successful, or successfully active, in an intellectually-based resistance movement in Poland, but who experienced a downgrading in both their outwardly-based success and inwardly-defined self-esteem after immigrating to America. For Katka, that downgrading was almost immediate: for Tomas it took some time, but for both of them the outcome was the same: for them, the immigrant experience started full of hope, but ended with a quiet despair. Ultimately, there is the sense that on some level, the various experiences of being an immigrant played out directly or referred to indirectly are connected with the fourth major theme of the collection: the experience of “breaking open”.

“Breaking Open”

The third of the collection’s major themes has to do with the idea or experience of a soul, a mind, a life “breaking open”. While it’s important to note that the concept is repeated more than the actual words, there is still the sense in almost all of the stories that, one way or another, an experience of being closed is transformed into an experience of being open; an experience of despair transforms into an experience of hope; an experience of frustrated and frightened transforms into an experience of having opportunity and/or courage. There is a feeling of discovery about these experiences, but in most manifestations there is also the sense that the feeling is temporary, and/or experienced in passing, a surge of optimism and joy that fades when confronted with truth, reality, or the needs and/or drives of other characters.

Overt expressions of this theme show up in “A Difficult Phase” (in which protagonist Talia, as she walks with her new acquaintance Tomer) feels the day “breaking open”, and, in a slightly less direct way, Judy in “Duck and Cover” senses part of her life beginning as she walks with Hal into a neighborhood that is, by implication, less connected with the Jewish and/or Communist sides of her life by which she feels overwhelmed. Echoes and/or variations of this theme manifest in “The Old Country” (in which protagonist Howard feels an emotional “breaking open” as the result of both his relationship with Svetlana and a faith-based “breaking open” as the result of his contemplations of his daughter Beth’s fierce engagement with faith). Meanwhile, there are positive or affirming variations on this theme in “Minor Heroics” and “The Unknown Soldier”, contrasted with more negative and destructive variations on the theme in “My Grandmother” and “Retrospective”, in which revelations of painful past truths and secrets trigger openings into darker feelings of despair, loss, and frustration.

Being Jewish

Almost every story in the collection is connected, in varying ways or in varying degrees, to an experience of being Jewish. Sometimes that experience is defined by setting as much as by the identity of the characters: both “A Difficult Phase” and “Minor Heroics” are set entirely in Israel, which to Jews (and others) is the homeland of that particular people. Experiences of being Jewish in Israel that play out in the narrative include the references to a kibbutz in “Difficult Phase” (kibbutz being the term for a uniquely Jewish, uniquely Israeli form of communal farming) and to military service in “Minor Heroics” (in that young Jews in Israel are required by law to serve in that country’s military).

In other cases, a story’s connection with being Jewish is directly faith related (as in “The Old Country”, in which protagonist Howard is confronted with new attitudes about faith as a result of his daughter Beth’s conversion to Orthodox Judaism) or is directly connected to the persecution experienced by many Jews in and around the Second World War (as in “My Grandmother”). There is also the sense that in a couple of stories, the experience of being Jewish is entwined with the relationships characters have with the Communist Party, as in “Duck and Cover” and “The Quietest Man”. Finally, experiences of Judaism are in the background of the characters and situations of “Retrospective”, in which the attitudes and actions of the extended family of protagonist Boaz, along with the particular focus of central character Eva’s art collection, are both defined by Jewishness.

The only story in the collection in which being Jewish does not appear to play a role of any significance is “The Unknown Soldier”, in which Alexi’s religious or spiritual beliefs are less of an issue than his falsified relationship with the Communist Party.

Psychological Wounded-ness

Almost all of the principal characters in these stories, and several of the minor ones, are affected by psychological wounds of one kind or another. Many of these wounds have an emotional basis; most create challenges for the individual characters as they struggle to move forward with their lives and relationships; and while there are varying degrees of wounded-ness (i.e. some characters have more severe wounds than others), there is the overall sense about the collection that, in general, moving forward in life is in fact ultimately impossible, or at the very least extremely challenging, if those wounds are not dealt with.

The collection begins with one of the most vividly and powerfully developed examples of this theme: the characters and experiences of protagonist Howard and his new beloved Svetlana in “The Old Country”. Another vivid example of this theme manifests in the story immediately following, “Minor Heroics”, in which protagonist Oren suffers from a long-term, slow-burning psychological wounded-ness, in contrast to his revered older brother Asaaf, whose mental and emotional wounds occur with the same shocking suddenness, and seem to have the same enduring effects, as the physical wounds caused by the accident that takes place at the beginning of the story.

Meanwhile, the character at the center of “My Grandmother” tells her story, and communicates with her listening grand-daughter, from a place of having been severely psychologically wounded as the result of her experiences in World War II; the central characters in “The Quietest Man” are dealing with psychological wounds caused by a number of difficult relationships and situations; and the psychological wounds of both Tomer and Gali in “A Difficult Phase” play defining roles in the relationships between those characters and protagonist Talia. Long-term psychological wounds are behind the attitudes and actions of Alexi in “The Unknown Soldier” who, in his actions, seems to be helpless to NOT cause similar wounds in his beloved son Benny. The final story in the collection also features several psychologically wounded characters (i.e. protagonist Boaz), a character who melodramatically over-empathizes with those characters (i.e. Boaz’ wife Mira), and a character (Eva) whose blithe insensitivity and selfishness, it seems, has a great deal of potential to cause psychological wounds in others.

Parent / Child Relationships

Several of the stories in the collection focus on parent-child relationships. In the same way as several of the other themes are developed to differing degrees in the different stories, so too is this theme. In “The Old Country”, the relationship between protagonist Howard and his sometimes prickly daughter Beth (not to mention his somewhat pompous son-in-law Ya’akov) is sometimes tense, but as Howard’s story reaches its conclusion, the relationship (even though at this point it’s at a distance) is both affirming and inspiring. There is a similar father/daughter relationship in “Quietest Man”, although the shift in relationship has more to do with shifts in perceptions of / needs for truth in both characters. In “Duck and Cover” there is yet another father / daughter relationship, this time between rebellious teenager Judy and her politically active Communist father who, interestingly, is never given a name. One last father daughter relationship: in ‘A Difficult Phase” both father Tomer and daughter Gali, whose relationship is troubled in the aftermath of the sudden death of the woman who was Tomer’s wife and Gali’s mother, find a substitute for the missing woman / feelings in their lives in the reluctant, but similarly lonely Talia, who becomes something of a surrogate mother for Gali.

Mother / son relationships appear in “Minor Heroics”, in which the tension between the needy, vulnerable Boaz and his determined mother defines, to some degree, Boaz’ determination to support his beloved older brother Asaaf in his recovery from a serious accident. There is also a glimpse of a mother / son relationship in “The Unknown Soldier” in which minor character Katherine temporarily releases control of her young son Benny to his estranged father (and Katherine’s estranged husband), protagonist Alexi. Alexi and Benny’s relationship, meanwhile is the only father / son relationship played out in the collection – unless the reader counts the similarly troubled relationship between Alexi and his own father in that same story. Finally, there is the complex family relationship in “Retrospective”, in which the troubled Boaz, whose parents died when he was a child, finds himself absorbed into the extended family of his wife Mira, a pseudo-family relationship that has its own difficulties.

Styles

Point of View

Most of the stories in this collection are written from the first person, past tense point of view: in fact, it's only the last three – "A Difficult Phase", "The Unknown Soldier", and "Retrospective" that aren't. The first two of these focus tightly and clearly on the experiences and perspectives of their central characters and protagonists, dissatisfied journalist Talia in the case of the first story, and troubled ex-convict Alexi in the second – the third person limited point of view. The last of these third-person narratives shifts point of few twice before it settles on the experiences and perspectives of the character who turns out to be its actual protagonist: that is to say, before it lands on Boaz, the focus is aimed first at recently dead art patron Eva, and then at some of the members of Eva's family as they cope with the aftermath of her death. "Retrospective" can therefore be described as something of a hybrid of third person omnipotent in its first two sections, and third person limited in the section focusing on Boaz.

In contrast, the first five stories in the collection, as noted, are all written from the first person point of view, communicating the story and perspectives from the limited, tightly focused points of view of their protagonist. The reader is brought closely and vividly into the worlds of these characters and their stories, wondering (for example) the same thing that Howard wonders about the increasingly weepy Svetlana in "The Old Country"; feeling the same shock and surprise that the unnamed granddaughter must feel about what her grandmother reveals about the violence in her past in "My Grandmother …"; and the somewhat disturbing need to blur truth and lies in "The Quietest Man". These three stories, along with "Minor Heroics" are all written in the past tense: one story in the collection is written from the first person, present tense point of view: the events in "Duck and Cover" are narrated by protagonist Judy as though they are actually happening in the moment. More so than even the other four first person stories, and much more so than the three third person stories, this first person, present tense narration brings the reader virtually into the room with the narration, making the action and Judy's perspectives on it even more present and immediate.

Language and Meaning

In general, the language used in the collection's various stories has certain common characteristics. Perhaps the most overtly notable is each story's sense of relationship to Jewish history and culture: in each story, there are references to how the characters' experience, perspectives, and attitudes are shaped, one way or another, by their being Jewish. Sometimes the references are overt and direct, particularly in the stories set in Israel ("Minor Heroics" and "A Difficult Phase", as well as much of "Retrospective"): sometimes the references are subtler ("The Unknown Soldier"); and sometimes they come at the reader through implications that a reader not familiar with Jewish culture or

history might miss (“My Grandmother …”). In this sense, the type of language creates a feeling of cultural and social context.

Another common characteristic throughout the stories has to do with a certain quality of tonal coolness. In many cases, the feelings experienced by the characters run quite deep, but are described in a way that keeps the reader at a degree of distance. As noted in “Point of View” above, many of the stories are written in a first person point of view that pulls the reader into moment-by-moment development of the story, but the relative coolness of the narrative voice doesn’t quite draw the reader into its emotion-by-emotion development in the same way. There are glimpses of vivid emotional color: Asaaf’s violence in “Minor Heroics”; Raya’s bitterness and anger in “My Grandmother…”; Alexi’s shock at his son’s behavior in “The Unknown Soldier” (perhaps the most emotionally accessible of the stories”; and the deepening despair of Boaz in “Retrospective” are some examples of occasional interjections of deep feeling into narratives that, for the most part and in spite of efforts of present tense narration, tend to portray situations rather than fully engage the reader in them.

Finally, language is used to create a sense of thematic unity between stories: the variations on characters feeling “broken open”, or expanded, are the most vivid example of this.

Structure

Many of the stories follow a similar structural pattern. They start in a present day situation; an event or incident in the present triggers a flashback and/or recollection of an event in the past; and then there are several pages of exploration of the past, exposition about who a character was and/or how an important event in the lives of the characters plays out. At some point, the narrative returns to the present and moves forward towards its climax, during which time the pattern might be repeated, as recollections of the past are again triggered by present-day circumstances. This movement backwards and forwards in time creates a strong sense of linkage between past and present, between memory and experience, that in many cases has thematic resonance as well.

One example of this plays out in “The Unknown Soldier”. In his present day life, Protagonist Alexi makes a determined effort to connect with his son Benny who, in his turn, is also trying to reach out to his father. Benny’s efforts tend to meet with impulsive rejection from Alexi who, in spite of his best intentions, reacts to those efforts in the way his own father reacted to his (Alexi’s) efforts when he was Benny’s age … a situation revealed in brief flashbacks to, and narration of, Alexi’s childhood. All this plays into / manifests the collection’s overall thematic interest in parent/child relationships. Similar movements between past and present in “The Quietest Man”, “Duck and Cover”, and, to a lesser degree, “A Difficult Phase” manifest the theme of psychological wounded-ness. In contrast, the past/present relationship in “My Grandmother…”, also an exploration of psychological wounded-ness, is reversed: the story focuses almost entirely on the past, with only occasional detours into the present.

One other characteristic common to some of the stories is that in spite of reaching a climax of emotional, narrative, and/or thematic intensity, as they conclude they leave the reader without knowledge of a truth about the central situation (for example: neither Howard nor the reader ever finds out, at the end of “The Old Country”, what exactly has made Svetlana so upset) or without knowledge of a truth about how the climactic situation is going to resolve. For example: the reader doesn’t know what is going to happen between Alexi and Benny after Benny steals the bottle of wine that Alexi was unable to afford to buy. The endings of other stories are less ambiguous: the ending of “Retrospective”, for example, suggests pretty clearly that the relationship between Boaz and Mira is essentially over. Likewise, the ending of “Duck and Cover” suggests that from this point on, Judy is going to follow her father’s footsteps into the Communist Party.

Quotes

...there was always a moment ... when they'd share a look across the bar, a silent understanding it was time to leave, to be alone again. That was a look I knew well, one Gail and I would notice between other couples ... a look that always made us feel defensive and exposed. After those evenings, we'd find ourselves dissecting the relationship of our friends ...standing beside one another at our twin sinks, brushing our teeth."
-- Narration (Howard) (The Old World, Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, taken from the moment at which Svetlana is discussing the history of her marriage, the history she reveals about her relationship with her husband Nikolai trigger thoughts in Howard about his relationship with his ex-wife Gail.

It felt like the fakest thing in the world and at first I didn't know what to say, or even who to say it to, but then I closed my eyes and tried. I prayed for calm in the world, and for joy, I prayed for Beth and Ya'akov and the baby, for Sveta and even for Gail, but inside I knew I was praying mostly for myself. I was praying for a way out of this sadness.
-- Narration (Howard) (The Old World, Part 2)

Importance: In this quote, which manifests the collection's thematic interest in the power and nature of faith, Howard prays with feeling and intention, perhaps even connecting with the same sort of faith and comfort that his daughter has discovered.

I wondered if I was the only one on earth who knew his other, judgmental side: repeating their words under his breath as we walked away, twisting their compliments into something crass and idiotic.
-- Narration (Oren) (Minor Heroics, Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, Oren reveals the layers of personal truth beneath the loyal, soldierly facade of his brother Asaaf.

I could feel her gaze on me the whole ride down to the pharmacy but knew not to turn around, not even once - a move I'd seen my brother make on a hundred occasions but was only now, for the first time, pulling off perfectly myself."
-- Narration (Oren) (Minor Heroics, Part 2)

Importance: Here Oren reveals another aspect of his self-imposed competition with his brother Asaaf; finds something about himself that feels successful (as opposed to most of what he feels about himself, which seems much less so); and sees himself as progressing in his quest to become closer to Yael.

There would be no more praise, no bravery medal engraved in my honor to hang from the living room shelf. Mine were minor heroics, at best ... no one was thinking about my drive anymore, and in a week we wouldn't even be thinking about the tomatoes: there would be something else to deal with, and something after that - the way it had been

since I could remember, and sensed it always would be."
-- Narration (Oren) (Minor Heroics, Part 2)

Importance: In the aftermath of being asked by his mother to do the dishes, Oren comes to the realization that his life is always going to be something secondary to the life of other, more successful people around him.

I know how you see your grandfather, sweet and smiling, always insisting that we put on a movie after dinner and then dozing off on the sofa halfway through ... the man who checks out the minute your mother and I start up. You wouldn't have recognized him. His long, bony face splotchy from the sun, his light brown beard growing in sparse, threadbare patches - he was only fifteen - and his straight hair obviously hacked off with a knife. But even with that terrible haircut, even with a rifle over one shoulder and paper sacks swinging from the other, he still looked like the same Leon Moscowitz I'd grown up with.
-- 63 (My Grandmother ... - Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, narration sets up this story's thematic consideration of what's perceived or believed vs. what is - in this case, contrasting the perceptions of what the granddaughter believes about her grandfather with what actually was about him.

My hair was greasy and knotted and so beaten by the elements it was a shade lighter. Black circles rimmed my eyes, scabs dotted my chin and forehead and lips, my teeth had gone as rotten and brown as tree roots. In only a couple of months I had become a Medusa, a monster, a creature from the forests of a fairy tale.
-- Narration (Raya) (My Grandmother ... - Part 2)

Importance: As she catches a glimpse of herself reflected in a window, Raya sees how unpleasant and messy her physical appearance has become. There is a clear sense, given the juxtaposition of this image with what has just happened (the robbery of the innocent family) of a portrait of the physical echoing the psychological or internal.

Under the spotlight sat a girl on her stoop, pudgy and pale with with dark brown bangs cut straight across. She was waiting for her father. It was his weekend; she should have arrived an hour ago. She waited and waited ... when the mother returned from the third house she'd cleaned that day, she took one look at her daughter and led her inside ... and when the father told the truth, that somehow the Saturday pickup had become Sunday in his mind, the whole strained story of their relationship was revealed in the way the mother drew in a breath to stop from yelling ...
-- Narration ((The Quietest Man, Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, the narrator conflates what he imagines about his daughter's play with what he imagines was her experience while growing up - experiences that he was a part of, meaning that he not only imagines it, but remembers.

... it hadn't yet occurred to me that it was different to be an artist or writer or thinker here in America. That one didn't need to be a persuasive speaker, or have a charismatic

presence, as so many of my colleagues had back in Prague. Daniela simply needed to live as an observer, sitting discreetly in a corner, quietly cataloging the foibles of those around her.
-- Narration (Tomas) (The Quietest Man, Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, Tomas realizes important differences between the life he left behind and the life that has come into being for himself and his daughter after their immigration.

I loved it because I got it. I knew that feeling of wanting more than anything to stay uninterrupted in your head, because there your thoughts came out with confidence and ease, as if, in that moment, a little bit of your life was lining perfectly into place.
-- Narration (Tomas) (The Quietest Man, Part 2)

Importance: Here the narrator describes one of the few moments of connection he's ever had with his daughter, a moment from her childhood when they were both doing something they loved doing, which happened to be the same thing - writing.

...the more I talked, the farther I felt from the bench where we were sitting. Far from Harpwsick and all the other towns on this side of the Atlantic that I had tried so unsuccessfully t make my home ... as I talked, these places started to look like nothing more than spots on a map I had marked with pushpins, and my memories of those afternoons in Ivan's flat felt so clear it was almost as if I were back inside ... involved in the single most important project of my life.
-- Narration (Tomas) (The Quietest Man, Part 2)

Importance: Here Tomas reveals just how important his work in Prague actually was; how much of his life to this point was actually lived there; and, through connecting with himself, how much he now feels connected to his daughter.

After a few blocks, the lawns and houses begin to expand. Wooden fences appear, protecting swing sets and rosebushes. Even the smell here is different: like newly mown lawn, laced with honeysuckle. The boy's house is a the end of a cul-de-sac and has a red fence, dark red like the booths at Menick's. He unlatches it and leads me into the backyard.
-- Narration (Judy) (Duck and Cover, Part 1)

Importance: Here Judy's description of the neighborhood in which her new boyfriend seems to live foreshadows the opening up of her mind and heart that takes place as their relationship develops.

Getting Tomer to sidestep the terrible first-date small talk and move straight to the core of things was making Talia feel, for the first time since she'd lost her job, like a journalist. THIS was what she was good at: being the blank, understanding face across the table; putting people so at ease they revealed the things they didn't want to share with anyone, the things they wished didn't exist at all.
-- Narration (Difficult Phase, Part 1)

Importance: In the aftermath of Tomer's extended, unguarded revelations about the death of his wife and the state of his family, Talia notices an aspect of herself that she hadn't been aware of before: how her capacity for empathy, and for being a good listener, has both personal and professional value.

That was how people grew to be unhappy, she thought - by not making choices, by just letting what was warm and wonderful in one moment dictate the next, until one day they were living a life completely unsuited to their dreams.
-- Narration (A Difficult Phase, Part 2)

Importance: Here Talia has an insight into her situation with Tomer, and perhaps into life in general, that once again leads her to end her relationship with him.

THIS was what it meant to be out in the world again. To change plans on a whim, to speed down that narrow one way street with his son beside him, leaving the city behind as he steered onto the bridge, the windows down, the possibilities flying everywhere.
-- Narration (The Unknown Soldier, Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, and as he impulsively changes plans for the weekend he is spending with his son, newly released prisoner Benny has a sudden insight into what freedom really means for him.

It was so unfair, he thought. Fatherhood was like one giant free pass. The crying, the rambling, the admission of weakness: all of it seemed to be making his son admire him more ... he hated himself right then. Benny was the only person he had left, and Alexi didn't trust himself not to set this relationship on fire along with all the others.
-- Narration (The Unknown Soldier - Part 2.)

Importance: Here, in a clear evocation of the collection's thematic interest in parent/child relationships, Alexi considers the concept of fatherhood in general (i.e. being a father gained a man the need and longing of his son) and his own fatherhood in particular (i.e. his potential for failing Benny in his need).

Jerusalem had seemed to him a city where people didn't simply love on top of each other, they lived right ON you, sitting on your stomach .... so you had no choice but to smell the soup on their breath ... And yet here were old stone homes with rosebushes and sculpted citrus trees and gleaming cars visible only through electric gates - not apartments but actual houses, perched so high above the city that even the garbage fumes no longer existed, as if the mayor had allotted these people better air.
-- Narration (Retrospective, Part 1)

Importance: In this quote, Boaz recalls his first impression of Eva's home, a reflection that defines Jerusalem according to its apparent class and economic hierarchies - another facet of the collection's interest in aspects of being Jewish.

All at once it felt so simple to let go of his problems for just a minute and feel grateful to be a part of something as big and basic as that morning, that city, that street, he felt a lightness inside him, opening wider and wider as they drove through the hills up to Eva's house ...
-- Narration (Retrospective, Part 2)

Importance: In another evocation of the collection's general thematic interest in "opening up", narration here describes Boaz's sudden feeling of openness and possibility in the aftermath of his confession to Roni.

...it struck him as how depressing it was that Eva and Sy had transformed this empty space into such an interesting and beautiful life, and now a realtor was going to lead a new couple inside and apologize for [the holes in the walls were art had hung] and then some workman would come in and in twenty minutes all of it, the entire history of that room, would be spackled over.
-- Narration (Retrospective, Part 2)

Importance: On one level, this quote is a stark commentary on how, in the aftermath of death, obliteration of a previous life is almost inevitable. On another level, the quote can be seen as metaphorically symbolizing the situation between Boaz and Mira.