

Illuminating the Need for Fiction to Love within a Postmodern Reality

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Idealism became a difficult worldview to sustain within a postmodern world. The notions that wars will be final, that innocence can be preserved, and that morality is absolute was deconstructed. The truths of never-ending war, of humanity's depravity, and the advent of modernity's chaos and freedom were realities that converted the romantic view of man as a being to be exalted into a naïve legend. Indeed, tracking history through literature poignantly illustrates this painful dissolution of Romanticism. "Once upon a time," love stories dominated traditional themes: epics such as Homer's *The Odyssey* tested the noble hero Odysseus' "true love" for his wife through gallant adventure. Early poetry such as Geoffrey Chaucer's "Court of Love" (1394) narrates the protagonist's quest to attain his ideal feminine muse, and Elizabeth Browning's eloquent Victorian poem "Sonnet X," espouses love's purity. Following World War II, however, society could no longer uphold with any sincerity such innocent ideals. Abstract sentiments failed to capture the modern desire to understand the magnitude of the changing world. What did it mean to love another human being in a world now awakened to the cruelty humanity was capable of? How could such an intimate and tender emotion exist within a society marked by violence and indifference? How, indeed, would love as it was once defined persist?

Writing with this postmodern awareness in mind, Jonathan Safran Foer in his novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), engages and overturns traditional notions of love. In his work, love, as an exalted feeling, does not exist outside of animalistic desire. Instead, as Foer proposes through the numerous and complex relationships of his characters, love exists in an illusion as the individual defines and creates it. To love is to willfully choose to believe in this idealism. For this idealism, whose existence is impossible within the broken nature of this world, must be sustained in an artifice once-removed from reality. *Everything is Illuminated* thus suggests that without fiction, reality is impossible. Language and fiction become a catalyst, connecting the

love created in one's illusion into a tangible narrative reality may recognize. Without language, illusions go undefined, love is not created, and the modern awareness of one another's depravity is re-exposed, rendering relationships and thus procreation impossible.

Traditional literature had established a precedent: to love was to be under the influence of an emotion so strong it created an unbreakable bond between the lover and the beloved. The emotion did not stem from any willingness of the lover. Instead, this emotion sprang from the imposition of some outside force. The emotion, then, was experienced once in view of (or merely conscious of) the individual who excited these feelings. Such emotion was not directed towards any fallible object. "Love" was focused towards someone seen without error, imagined without parallel, and essential to fulfill a happy life. Emerging in ancient myths and the earliest poetry, even extending through the rigid age of Victorian literature, this definition of the all-consuming power of "love" was incessantly reiterated through the pens of Western writers. Love, in these narratives, was a feeling that seemed to engulf and propel the lives of those whom it blessed. Seen as an external force, love, once found, produced unimaginable happiness with its presence, yet almost unendurable longing in its absence.

Written sometime in the 8th Century B.C.E. (*classics.mit.edu*), Homer's ancient myth *The Odyssey* showcases this traditional definition of love as a feeling so strong it may bind lovers torn apart for over a decade. The narrative follows the life of Odysseus, who, lost at sea for ten years following the Trojan War, encounters numerous adventures. One such adventure involves the goddess Kalypso who offers Odysseus eternal youth, endless prosperity, and sexual intimacy. Odysseus, however, loves another-his wife Penelope-and rejects the goddess' offer. "For long ago the nymph [Kalypso] had ceased to please./Though he fought shy of her and her desire,/he lay with her each night, for she compelled him./But when day came he/broke his own heart

groaning” (5.161-4). Though Kalypso offers Odysseus great rewards, blessed with love, Odysseus can desire nothing else but to be in the presence of the one who ignites this feeling. In response to Kalypso’s question over how his wife, a mortal, could “compare with goddesses in grace and form?” (5.222) Odysseus declares his true love is Penelope, and thus, even confronted by a goddess, he can do nothing to ignore this violence of emotion. “It is true,” he declares, “each day/I long for home, long for the sight of home” (5.228-9) and his wife.

In one of poet Geoffrey Chaucer’s earliest poems, “Court of Love” (1346), he tells of a young man “Philogenet” who, like Odysseus, is similarly struck by love and is propelled in all of his actions towards attaining the tangible object of his desire. Philogenet is summoned to the Court of Love by Mercury, where, he is initially “astonished” at the number of people who “uttered cries of grief” at the feet of the god and goddess of Love for though they “were the sick and dying of love” (*gutenberg.org*), once blessed by love’s feelings, they could desire nothing but to gain it back. Once there, however, Philogenet sees a vision of a woman “Rosial,” who appears to him in a dream. Immediately, he finds himself desirous of nothing else but her. He exclaims that “no terms are dign [worthy] unto her excellence/So is she sprung of noble stirp [stock] and high;/A world of honour and of reverence/There is in her, this I will I testify” (*gutenberg.org*). Now captured by the burgeoning emotion of “love,” though he is well aware of “how that fele [many] for love had suffer'd falls [calamities]” (*gutenberg.org*), Philogenet quickly agrees to swear observance to the “Twenty Statutes of Love” lest he lose the object that had given him such emotion.

Exemplified within these ancient tales is a common definition of “love”: that is, a feeling so strong it is able to last through years of separation, to triumph over the offerings of a goddess, and is worth the unquestioned duty of those who fall under its power. This power given to love is

the key element within these ancient fables that must be understood. For, this power is portrayed as an *external* force; it is not initiated nor sustained through any willful consciousness of the individual. Odysseus can do nothing to ease his longing after his wife, and Philogenet is powerless to resist the subservience the Court of Love requires in order to retain Rosial.

This definition of love, as an inexorable external force imposing upon its object strong passions, necessitates positioning human beings on an almost god-like level. Loving a diminished thing could not inspire the “groaning” of longing Odysseus felt. Nor could a being intrinsic with error stir Philogenet to proclaim that “no terms are [worthy] unto her excellence.” To love, in ancient myths and poems, was thus to place one’s lover on a pedestal. To be blessed by such passion, the beloved must appear as flawless and without err. This exaltation of the human condition was not merely a passing idealism of ancient literature, however. Instead, the adoration of one’s fellow man, and the inspiration of “love” he inspired, was a theme consistent throughout literature, extending even into the Victorian Era (1837-1901). In Victorian poet Elizabeth Browning’s (1806-1861) poem “Sonnet X,” the speaker espouses that “love, mere love, is beautiful indeed/And worthy of acceptance” (ln. 2-3). Further, she decries to her unseen lover that “I love thee—in thy sight/I stand transfigured, glorified aright” (ln. 6-7). Engulfed in the power of love, the speaker finds herself transfixed in the presence of her lover and esteems, even elevates this sensation above any other. She declares that “there’s nothing low/In love” (ln. 9-10). As seen through traditional prose and poetry, love thus becomes a beautiful yet omnipotent force presented to those who are seemingly without flaw, or, at the very least, are seen as flawless through the distorted picture of the individual love has created.

The world was changing, however. Following atrocities like the Holocaust of World War II, a universal consciousness of the depth of humanity’s depravity began to replace the

perception of man as a being worthy or capable of loving as love was traditionally defined. Man had stepped down from his pedestal. How could the line that “I stand transfigured, glorified aright” (Browning 7) in the sight of her lover be written about an individual born in a time of such horror? How could one, as Chaucer had, truthfully describe one’s lover as being from “a world of honour and of reverence” once knowledgeable of atrocities far from reverential being committed? How could one accept with any credulity the emotions love imposed? For, though all of humanity was not implicit in the crimes of that time, all were painfully aware of what man was capable of exacting upon his fellow human being.

Writing in a post-World War II era, and conscious of the new dissolution of romanticism about mankind centuries of literature had perpetuated, poet Margaret Atwood (1939--) highlights the vacancy of meaning behind what once had filled the word “love” with so much power. In her poem “Variations On the Word Love” (1961), she writes that love has now become simply “a word we use to plug/holes with” (ln.1-2). Aware that humanity *is* in fact full of error and that it *is* capable of evil, society could now only “insert it [love]...in the one empty/space on the printed form” (ln. 8-9). With the vessel (mankind) love had once used to impose its feelings upon no longer exalted and pure, but empty and tainted, the meaning “love” once held is similarly left without significance. With nothing worthy enough to be entitled its meaning, love’s meaning is lost, becoming simply, just another word ungrounded in reality.

Author Jonathan Safran Foer, writing, like Margaret Atwood, with the understanding of individuals in their diminished state, thus breaks down traditional literature’s constructs of love as an imposed feeling with his novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002). Through the numerous and complex relationships of his characters, Foer illustrates that love can no longer exist as an external force conveyed by a romanticized view of mankind. Entering into Foer’s fictionalized

history of the Jewish community of Trachimbrod, the heartbreak of this realization is poignantly demonstrated through the characters of Brod and Yankel. As they attempt to act upon feelings they believe to be “love” as it was traditionally defined, they discover such emotion unsustainable when directed towards real, fallible individuals and objects-far from the exalted muses of ancient love stories.

Wise beyond her years and famous for her intelligence in the small shtetl of Trachimbrod, Brod emerges as Foer’s first character to realize that the real world is void of anything resembling the perfection necessary to warrant an emotion so exalted as “love.” Brod “loved herself in love” (80), however, and thus lives her life in earnest observation “searching for something deserving of the volumes of love she knew she had within her” (80). She longs to experience the feeling she understands love gives: to “stand transfigured, glorified aright” (Browning 7) in its presence, or to break her “own heart groaning” (Homer 5.164) in its absence. Lacking any self-produced reason to live, and void of any such emotion profound enough to exalt, Brod believes it is love that can save her. For love, she believes, can impose feelings with such ferocity she will be rescued from the sadness and loneliness she is constantly immersed. If an individual can be discovered who inspires these feelings, love can eradicate the haunting belief that “she didn’t love life” (81)-or so she thinks.

Finding herself not blessed but cursed with a superior understanding of the physical world and all its imperfections, however, Brod’s wisdom fashions an insurmountable void between what actually is, and the ideal she seeks to love yet is aware will never be. Examining the world around her, Brod looks to music, art, literature, mathematics, and even insignificant tangible objects, searching desperately for something worthy enough to love. Yet, she always arrived at the same unsatisfying conclusion. All of these things “were good and fine, but not

beautiful” she admits. For, if she is honest with herself, “they are only the best of what exists” (79), and what existed in reality is simply not good enough to love as the traditions espoused. She does not, as Chaucer’s protagonist Philogenet, struggle to find terms worthy enough for the excellence of something. Nothing is ever excellent. Instead, to each thing or person she observes, “she would have to say, *I don’t love you*” (80). Brod is thus tortured by the awareness she cannot love any of the things she understands so completely, for her insight illuminates so clearly the world’s insignificance. “Nothing felt like anything more than what it actually was” she mourns. “Everything was just a thing, mired completely in its thingness” (80). Surrounded by these fallible objects of her reality, Brod determines that love is impossible within a world that falls so short of the ideal necessary to create love: “*I am not in love*” (80) she sadly pens into her journal. Brod concludes her observations of the world discovering that love cannot realistically be an external force impressed upon an individual through the admiration of an infallible being. For, infallibility, and thus this notion of love, does not exist.

Like Brod, who concludes that love as a venerable, imposed emotion can never be inspired within the depravity of her reality, Yankel, who emerges as Brod’s adoptive “father,” comes to a similar resolution. He discovers the feelings he directed towards his wife that he once ascribed to the power of “love,” are little more than unfulfilled desire. Yankel, a once highly respected member of Trachimbrod, is deserted by his wife who leaves little explanation for her departure other than a note that reads, simply, “I had to do it for myself” (44). As the narrator reveals this woman to be Yankel’s self-professed “first and only love” (44), Yankel is naturally devastated by her abandonment. Unlike Brod, whose unusual perceptiveness and intelligence allow her to see into humanity’s fallibility and certain disloyalty, preventing her from falling in “love,” Yankel believes in the traditional notion of love. He honestly thinks his wife to be

without err. When he thinks of her, he imagines her much like the love-struck Philogenet imagined his Rosial, as one “sprung of noble” heritage where “no terms” would be worthy of “her excellence” (Chaucer). When the ideal image of Yankel’s wife is torn away to reveal her true depravity in her disloyalty, however, he is distraught. “He couldn’t bear to live, but he couldn’t bear to die. He couldn’t bear the thought of her making love to someone else, but neither could he bear the absence of the thought” (45).

With the overturning of his former notion of love, Yankel, like Brod, soon discovers the falsity in how it was traditionally defined. Initially, he attempts to explain away his wife’s choice to leave him. He hopes, somehow, to sustain her worthiness and thus justify the existence of his “love” for her by offering reasonable explanations for her decision. Perhaps, he theorizes, the man she ran off with “could promise to provide for her future” better than he ever could. Or, perhaps the bureaucrat could “move her to someplace quieter” (45). Yankel quickly concedes, however, that the love he once believed in never truly existed. The bureaucrat she ran off with cannot offer her anything better; she simply “wanted to be without Yankel” (45) and acts accordingly. Whatever feelings for his wife Yankel formerly ascribed to a foolish notion of “love,” are thus shown to be nothing more than unfulfilled desire. After she leaves, the thought that haunts him the most is not a memory about her lost character or being that he might have loved, but is instead the thought that she will make “noises” for the bureaucrat that “she never made for him [Yankel],” and that she will be “feeling pleasures he could never provide” (45). Yankel’s failed relationship with his wife thus transforms the traditional, noble idea that feelings of “love” directed towards another individual are an externally imposed, pure emotion. In reality, these feelings are merely the natural expression of intrinsic, animalistic lust, unsustainable and ultimately unsatisfying to an individual’s longings to be cherished.

Subconsciously, Yankel does in fact recognize the naivety of his former idealism. He has allowed his trust in traditional notions of love to redefine his unfulfilled desire into the belief in a one “true love,” who will be steadfast and infallible. After his wife leaves him, Yankel awakens to reality: his former belief in the purity of his marriage is a foolish worldview, one blind to the possibility that individuals are capable of hurting one another. If this love is simply desire, not the omnipotent power he once imagined it to be, than why should he be surprised when this desire faded, or shifted, to another human being altogether? His wife is not under the power of the unbreakable force of “love,” he at last understands. She merely once desired him, and now, finding another object for her desire, she simply “wanted to be without Yankel” (45). Following his wife’s desertion, Yankel changes his name to “Safran” and attempts to adopt a new profession as he desperately tries to abandon all associations with his former life and its painful disillusionments. Trying different vocations, during one “stint as the world’s worst fortuneteller,” Yankel (now Safran) exemplifies the utter transformation of his former naivety into a mature realistic awareness: “*I’m not going to lie and tell you that the future is full of promise*” (47) he declares.

Though the breakdown of Yankel’s former exalted notions of love bring him to a more realistic worldview, Foer uses the desperation Yankel endures following this collapse to show the danger inherent in the traditional definition of love. This idealistic definition, if attempted to be lived out within a corrupted world, must inevitably produce despair. Yankel has long lived under, and found great joy and comfort in, the belief that individuals can be loved purely. When his wife shatters this illusion with her disloyalty, Yankel’s calibration out of his former notions of exalted humanity into the reality of their fallibility is acutely painful. “He awoke each morning with the desire to do right, to be a good and meaningful person, to be, as simple as it

sounded and as impossible as it actually was, happy” (47). However, once confronted with the degeneracy of his new reality, he can do nothing but retreat into depression. “During the course of each day his heart would descend from his chest into his stomach. By early afternoon he was overcome by the feeling that nothing was right, or nothing was right for him” (47). With his former definition of love disrupted, Yankel is ignorant of how to interact with the world around him now reduced to its raw depravity. His only option is thus to completely withdraw until he is “alone in the magnitude of his grief, alone in his aimless guilt, alone even in his loneliness” (47). Through Yankel, Foer thus shows that the notion of romantic love as it was traditionally defined is not only impossible with a modern consciousness of the world’s depravity, but is also dangerously detrimental to the individual who harbors this notion. Inevitably, humanity’s fallibility must shatter such beautiful façades, rendering the individual who believes in it paralyzed in his disillusionment. Showing that traditional literature’s notion of love as an imposed emotion is rendered impossible by the evil and unworthiness of reality, *Everything is Illuminated* paints a seemingly dark future for “love,” for what emotion remained, turned out to be little more than lust.

Emerging in the second half of the novel, however, “Safran,” the character Jonathan Safran Foer’s fictional grandfather, introduces a way to transcend the depravity of this world as he defines love in a new way. Through juxtaposing the way he “loves” his numerous partners to the commitment he shows to the Gypsy girl, Safran develops as a character aware of the difference between lustful desires (once defined as true love’s imposition) and the conscious act of creating a devotion necessary for lasting relationships. Beginning at an early age, Safran discovers he is the object of attraction for numerous women. Contrasting Brod, who, earlier in the narrative mourns that she finds nothing of this world worthy of her attention, Safran has “132

mistresses” (168) during his lifetime. Similar to her, however, he understands “that there was an inflationary aspect to love” (170). Tradition, he learns, has hyperbolized and purified feelings of lust to become an impossible notion of “love” to which individuals would aspire. Once the individual is confronted by the awareness that the ideal, enduring attraction of love is only fleeting lustful desire, however, this aspiration inevitably turns to desperation over love’s unattainability. Wise in this awareness, Safran saves himself from the pain Yankel endured. Safran is able to declare that “he never loved any of his lovers. He never confused anything he felt for love” (168). Safran cannot so easily be drawn into the tantalizing appeal of “true love” as Yankel had been swept away. Where Yankel’s belief in love was perpetuated under the bonds of marriage, Safran’s lustful flings have no such façade of legitimacy.

Indeed, Safran is well aware the numerous women with whom he is involved care little for him. Due to malnutrition as a child, Safran suffers from the handicap of a lifeless right arm. Curiously, it is this arm he discovers is the source for all of his mistresses’ attraction. The narrator declares that “it was because of his arm...that he had the power to make any woman who crossed his path fall in hopeless love with him” (166). His lovers make no pretense of loving *him*. They love, simply, his arm. While once attempting to enter a theater to watch a movie, Safran finds a woman already seated in his seat and who appears to possess the same ticket. Showing no signs of attraction to Safran, the woman, “Lista P,” is initially irritated and flustered at the mix-up. “She began to mutter about the absurdity of the theater, the mediocrity of its actors, the foolishness of its playwrights, the inherent silliness of drama itself, and how it was no surprise to her that those morons should botch up something” (171). Soon, however, her mood changes, as “she noticed his arm, and was overcome” (171). Fully aware, then, that it is not his estimable character that inspires any exalted feelings of love, Safran is able to avoid the

danger of glorified illusions and accept his reality. Love, as much as he knows, is lustful attraction, nothing more.

Through these relationships, however, Safran's lovers illuminate to him that there is much more to their attraction than sheer desire; they define love in a new way, through illusions they themselves create and willfully believe. Wholly different from the traditional, impossible notion of love, these illusions do not require a venerated, worthy subject as the object to inspire their affections. Instead, the illusions only require a void, or absence of identity, that the women can adopt and fashion their own love story about. Though Safran does not confuse *his* desire for love, he is well aware that his mistresses feel more for him than pure lust. They have, in fact, fallen in love with his arm—a lifeless limb. How, indeed, can such a thing be lovable? Safran soon learns it is not the actual arm his mistresses find so attractive, but the absence of life (and thus identity) his arm possesses. Each of his lovers can be placed into two categories: they are either widows or virgins. They have either lost their loves, or have never been loved. Rose W. pines after her husband, killed during the First World War, by re-reading letters he sent during his time on a naval ship (166). Lista P meticulously cares for the memory of a husband who would never be, killed in a freak accident the morning before their marriage (171). And Brandil W., afflicted with a “weak heart,” a “hobble and...thick spectacles” (195), dies before the war, and, before she could ever be married. These women are in no danger of becoming lost in longings for ideal love. They knew the sorrow of their harsh reality. They saw their husbands killed at the hands of another, or, simply, had themselves been shunned by the men who cannot see beyond their unfortunate externalities.

Foiled, then, by the loves of their reality, each of these women see in Safran's lifeless arm an absence they can fill with memories and desires impossible to attain outside of fiction.

His arm thus serves as a catalyst for the women to create, or re-create, stories about the love they wish they had had. Following his weekly affair with the widow Rose W., Safran declares that “he was happy to let his dead arm serve as the missing limb for which the widow longed, for which she reread yellowing letters, and lived outside herself, and outside her life” (168). Safran’s arm is the new vessel for love, and the key to understanding how to love fallible human beings existing in a fallible world.

By finding a void around which they could create stories, Safran’s lovers are thus enabled to transcend their reality by willfully believing in their fiction. Only in this realm of their created illusions can they love truly and find a way to endure their reality. The idea of loving the absence of something, or, loving the presence one is able to easily inject into an absence, is not an idea foreign to the Sloucher congregation of Trachimbrod of which Safran is a member. In “*The Book of Recurrent Dreams*” (37) the congregation creates to record their obsession with dreams and memory, Safran’s lovers’ habit of fashioning stories and emotions superior to their reality is an idea evident, yet, veiled more obscurely within its pages. Under the dream entitled “*The dream of disembodied birds,*” the book discusses a curious dream about a bird crashing through a window and leaving behind a “negative bird” in the cracked glass. It states that “the shadow” is in fact “better proof of the bird’s existence than the bird ever was” (38). This dream foreshadows the understanding Safran later gleans from his lovers’ actions, who physically enact the idea behind this dream. Instructed by their life’s sorrows, Safran’s lovers understand that the feeling of love cannot be relied upon, controlled, nor, at times, even found in reality. They cannot, however, give up upon love’s existence, for they do feel *something*. The widows feel grief and agonized remembrances; the virgins, feel longing and loneliness for a yet unfulfilled emotion. Love, in reality, has fallen short or has not emerged at all. Thus, as foretold by the

“dream of disembodied birds,” to better prove love’s existence, they create an illusion of it- a “shadow” that becomes “better proof” of its presence than their reality’s relationships have ever been.

Safran’s lover Rose W. is a prime example of how her reality is improved by transcending into a world of fictionalized love she creates. Entrapped within the memories of her husband and obsessing over the sheets of his yellowing letters as the only proof of his existence and their love, Rose is lost in grief. When she is with Safran, however, she adopts his arm as a vessel for her imagined love story that her long-dead husband will return to her. Lacking any life of its own, the arm is a concrete absence of identity Rose may easily fictionalize into the presence, or hope for the presence, of her husband. The narrator declares that Safran’s arm is indeed “the only part of his body that Rose paid any real attention to” (168) when they are together. With it, she can pretend it is not Safran she is loving in her “canopy bed,” but is “a lighthouse out on some windy jetty” which illuminates “their silhouettes” across “the black waters...and summon[ed] her husband back to her” (168). This story, only the shadow of the life she once had with her husband, is, however, better proof of the existence of their love. The story actively reenacts what can otherwise only statically remain in her memory. In this way, Rose W., and Safran’s numerous other lovers, can transcend their reality through willfully believing in a love story they define for themselves.

Through his lovers’ example, Safran thus learns of a new way to love. This love is not the empty lust he placidly experienced with his numerous affairs, nor is it the unattainable notion he understood to be an “inflationary” construct of traditional love. Instead, he learns that to love, one must choose to believe in an illusion he himself defines and creates. The widow Lista P., like Rose W., similarly expresses what she finds so attractive in Safran’s lifeless arm. “It was not the

death that had so attracted her to it, but the unknowability,” she admits, for “he could never completely love her, not with all of himself. He could never be completely owned, and he could never own completely” (237). The void his arm creates, between what can and cannot be known, and what can and cannot be loved, is a void essential to Lista’s life. Losing her betrothed in a tragic accident before they can consummate their marriage, or even utter the wedding vows, Lista never experiences “love” in her reality. She never has the opportunity to feel lust. Nor has she been able to build up a naïve definition of love as an estimable and permanently imposed emotion. Her awareness of love is one born out of the realities of war, death, and longing without satisfaction. Her husband dies before he can ever be known. Thus, Safran’s arm, unknowable and unattainable, provides a tangible object she can define with her own imagined notion of love. Love is an absence in her life, and when Lista discovers another absence of life in Safran’s arm, she imagines into it the foundation for a relationship (love) she has never, and will never otherwise enjoy.

Faced with these examples, Safran becomes aware that where he feels only pity and mild desire for these women, the women experience something much more: something they do not exactly *feel*, but *believe* in as an illusion of what is otherwise impossible in reality. Rose and Lista’s husbands are not coming back. Yet, in their stories, they can live again and love truly. Safran, then, needs his own void within which he can imagine a love he has yet to feel.

The “Gypsy girl,” whose youth, exoticism, and unattainability are something entirely different from the rest of Safran’s mistresses, provides him the absence of knowability necessary to create his own love story. Like Safran’s relationship with Lista P., which began with the confusion over matching theater seats, Safran finds himself sitting next to “a young Gypsy girl” in another visit to the theater (172). In Trachimbrod, there exists a “Jewish/Human fault line”

(236) that requires the separation of Jewish believers from the rest of the non-Jewish, or “human,” outsiders. Thus, Safran is initially unable to “believe her audacity” (172) to show up in a shtetl theater. Here, though, is a woman quite unlike Lista and all his former mistresses. The Gypsy girl represents unknowability for Safran: an absence, unattainability, attraction. Safran, a Jew, will never be allowed to love, or have a recognized relationship with this woman. Her presence is thus a void Safran recognizes he can fill with a narrative about a love of his own creation. He only has to believe. Indeed, the Gypsy “had been the only one” of his mistresses “he returned to without having to be asked” (229). Watching her at the bazaar where she works, Safran is entranced by how “she coaxed snakes from woven baskets” (229), as he begins to imagine a love story for this foreign being so unlike the other women of Trachimbrod. Mostly, however, they meet in “Radziwell Forest...making love-which might or might not have been love” (229). The truth does not exactly matter though. As his mistresses before him, Safran wills himself to believe that it is love.

To perpetuate their own story, Safran and the Gypsy girl each tell one another stories of their pasts-real or imagined-and their present love-real or imagined. The differences between reality and their illusions do not really matter. What matters is that the illusion is sustained, for their reality, the impossibility of their love, is too painful to believe. “She told him of ship voyages she had taken...and stories he knew were all untrue, were bad not-truths, even, but he nodded and tried to convince himself to be convinced, tried to believe her, because he knew that the origin of a story is always an absence” (230). In turn, he composes notes to her out of letters collaged from newsprint, “each note a collage of love that could never be” (233). Moving through the forest, a fantasy-like environment which mirrors the fantasy Safran and the Gypsy are creating, the Gypsy girl carves into the trees love letters for Safran. “She was composing a

new list of commandments, commandments they could share, that would govern a life together, and not apart” (233). This life together is only an illusion, however, for in reality, Safran is promised to Zosha, a Jewish girl, whom he does not love. For the moment, though, reality is suspended through their willingness to believe in a story they define and fight to sustain.

Safran, and his mistresses, thus finding a new way to love through loving unknowable or unattainable things, have seemingly defined a new future for an emotion the reality of human fallibility made archaic. Humanity can be loved, for it is not humanity that is being loved, but the story created about it. The basis of their definition, however, contains one fatal flaw: both Safran and his mistresses, though they base their love stories upon an absence, this absence is still connected to a tangible, real (and thus fallible) thing. Safran’s mistresses love Safran’s lifeless arm, but this arm is still *his*. Safran loves the Gypsy girl for her foreignness, but this foreignness is only a creation of what Jewish law insists. For Safran’s mistresses, though they succeed in fashioning an identity for their love upon the lifeless limb his arm is, making his arm stand for what they cannot have, the arm is still connected to Safran. Safran himself is not a willing participant in their love story. He is human, he is fallible, he has his own desires and ambitions that they cannot control, and thus, inevitably, he must fail them.

Similarly, Safran loves the Gypsy for the foreignness and unattainability Jewish law has defined her to be. She is just a girl, but Jewish law defined her as an “other,” a human outside the Jewish/Human fault line, and Safran loves her for it. He loves her mysticism, the braid that falls across her shoulder he imagines to look like a serpent (172), and the fact that she is forbidden. Later, as he prepares for his wedding with Zosha, his promised Jewish bride, he realizes, however, the flaw in his illusions of love. Pondering his imminent marriage to Zosha, “what struck him...was not...how much he wished the Gypsy girl could be with him now...but that he

was no longer a boy” (120). With this marriage, he will be accepting his responsibility to fulfill his role as an obedient Jew. This role promises “certain assurances of being and permanence, but also a burdensome restriction of movement” (121). The absence the Gypsy girl’s unattainability symbolizes that he has once filled with “love” is not *his* absence then, but is an absence created by Jewish law. His love is based upon a desire to abstain from the laws he fears will impose upon him a “burdensome restriction of movement.” It is the laws that make divisiveness and foreignness out of similarity and potential unity. For in reality, the Gypsy’s braid “looked the same” (172) as any other braid, and she is a girl just like any of his other mistresses. Had the laws not made the Gypsy girl unattainable, Safran would not have looked at her twice.

With his love still based upon the creation of fallible men’s laws then, Safran’s ideal must inevitably break down. The Gypsy girl herself is conscious of this fact. Recognizing “his efforts to conceal her from the rest of his world,” (232) she knows that their love story is based upon enchantment born out of what Safran cannot legally have. “She knew that even if he thought he loved her, he did not love her” (232). She knew, and he will inevitably discover that he does not love *her*; he merely loves that she cannot be *his*- based upon a law his heritage imposes.

Through the example of his mistresses, Safran believes he has found a new way to love beyond base feelings of lustful desire. Through this same example, however, he learns to base his definition of love on something still of this world, and thus culpable to its impermanence and depravity. Disillusioned, then, that the prejudices of the broken world are still powerful enough to destroy the idealistic love of his illusions, he reverts back to believing love as merely an “inflationary” construct of tradition and ultimately unattainable in this world. Following his first night with his wife Zosha, however, as the bombs of World War II explode around their home,

he finds himself “filled with a coital energy of such force” (257) he has never felt before. Exhausted from the power of this new desire, Safran immediately believes himself “in love” (257). Is love the external force that propelled Odysseus through ten years of adventure, causing him to resist the enchantment of the goddess Kalypso for the attentions of his wife Penelope? Is this feeling worth the unquestioned subservience Philogenet promised for its gain? Safran, for the first time experiencing feelings he has never before felt in his reality, those of lust, longing, and pain, naturally ascribes such emotions to what tradition has espoused love to be. The unsolicited, uncontrollable feeling of lust, he believes, *must* be love! The love his mistresses have shown him, the love of illusions, does not have the power to resist reality. Once believing the Gypsy girl to be “his true love” (120), the realities of his obligation to his Jewish heritage have easily undermined this “love.” But here is a new emotion, one that renders him “bedridden” (262) and trembling in its wake. Here is a feeling with power, imposed upon him through no willful act of imagination.

Upon closer reflection, however, Safran soon rediscovers his former awareness of the difference between man’s natural feelings of lust, and the love of a deeper devotion made possible only through willfully defining a presence into a void. Safran at last discovers that the fatal flaw in his former definition of love is defining it based upon an absence created by laws still connected to the fallible world. Going to the “Dial,” Trachimbrod’s self-created, god-like symbol of luck (263), Safran voices his new realization of a love so true it causes him unimaginable pain. “*Now I am in love*” (263) Safran declares. He is *not* in love with the Gypsy girl, for that love is rendered false by the unsustainability of their illusions. He is *not* in love with his wife, for that love, though extreme, is only lustful desire. He has, however, discovered a new void. This void, wholly set apart from the material world and all of its inherent depravity, can be

filled with a love story that will be immune to the desecration by the laws of this world. This void is his future his unborn child represents. He discovers he is in love with his unborn child, for in her he recognizes the life that will fill his future and “the child who would fulfill him” (264). “*It’s not her [the Gypsy girl] that I love*” Safran tells the Dial, “*it’s my girl*” (263).

Lacking identity, his unborn child represents, as his arm had done for his mistresses, something he could build a love story upon. He can fill the absence of his future with a story of love for his daughter that she will live out. Yet, unlike his arm, his future is something unconnected with anything of the present reality. It is not yet entirely of this world and thus unable to be corrupted by fallibility, for existence and the reality of man’s cruelty has yet to catch up to it. Through imagining his future, Safran sustains an imagined artifice once-removed from reality. Only there does he discover a love he once doubted to exist. Contemplating this new love, Safran sees “the images of his...infinite futures,” as the possibilities for them “washed over him...he waited, paralyzed, in the present” (264).

Safran has at last discovered how to love with a purity equal to traditional literature’s definition of love as a feeling born out of the admiration for an infallible being. Unlike Philogenet’s unsolicited emotions of “true love” directed towards the seemingly flawless Rosial (flawlessness impossible outside of the literary tradition and within the depraved world of reality), Safran has uncovered a way to love truly in a modern, realistic way. Indeed, modern humanity can no longer be exalted. Safran is aware that fallible men and their laws can infect and destroy even illusionary stories of lasting love. These laws have disrupted his love story with the Gypsy girl, and the reality of war has reduced his widowed mistresses to loving a man incapable of sustaining their narratives of eternalized love as imagined through his lifeless limb. By discovering his love for the absence of his future his unborn child represented, Safran has solved

the postmodern love problem: by creating an illusion not directly connected with this world, the lover may disengage from the depravity that must, by its nature, destroy an emotion as pure as love. The modern lover, then, cannot love another *individual*, but must love the *idea* of this individual and the feeling that idea produces in the mind of the creator. To be in love, the lover himself must simply fashion and then willfully choose to believe in his ideal. In Brod's words, to love truly in a modern world, the lover must simply love "loving love" (80).

This modern worldview thus utterly transforms traditional relationships, allowing for the reality of humanity's depravity. The object of love is no longer the "other" person traditionally required to inspire the external force of love's powerful emotion. The other individual does not matter. Love itself becomes the object of love. And it is the lover himself who imagines and creates his own definition. An exalted other is not required. Man, modern, depraved man, can be loved, for under this definition the reality of his condition can be transcended in an illusion.

In Virginia Blum's essay "Love Studies: Or, Liberating Love," she explains the phenomenon of loving not an "other," but the idea of love itself, is necessitated by the depraved state of the modern world, and the individuals who comprise it. Traditionally, relationships require each member of the relationship to voluntarily submit to the other. This mutual dependence is a semblance of one's devotion to the love that individuals are confident will be inspired between them (as Philogenet willing submits to Rosial). Modern lovers, however, doubting this love can even be created between two fallible human beings, fear making this commitment. Wasn't "love" just "a word we use to plug/holes with"? (Atwood ln. 1-2) That word has become "far too short.../to fill those deep bare/vacuums" (Atwood ln. 25-8) that the fears, cruelty, and disloyalty modernity has burdened the human consciousness with. Quoting from Niklas Luhmann's study "Love as Passion" (1986), Blum's essay declares "that members

of contemporary Western culture overcome...’the paradox of voluntary submission, of wanting to stay in chains’ through the ‘lover himself [becoming] the source of his love,’ thus strategically freeing up love from its origin in and dependence on its object” (347). Thus, Blum reiterates what Jonathan Safran Foer’s character Brod resolves that the modern lover must “satisfy [him]self with the *idea* of love” (Foer 80). He cannot depend upon an other to be the origin of a binding, powerful love, for modern man is too depraved to inspire such an emotion. Blum continues in her essay to state clearly this notion:

With the origin of love now located squarely in the self while the aim of love is in the self’s emergent authenticity, the internal conflicts of love miraculously dissipate as each individual becomes both author and object of his or her personal “love story.” (347)

The problem postmodern lovers find, of discovering man cruelly thrown from his former exalted pedestal and seemingly unlovable, is thus overcome. Dissatisfied with the world, the individual need not despair over the lack of objects worthy of love, he must simply become “both author and object of his...personal ‘love story.’”

This philosophy of modern love suggests, however, an additional requirement for the longevity of successful relationships and the creation of love: the use of fiction and language. Implicit within the notion that the modern lover is an “author” of his own “love story,” is the idea that every individual, to love successfully, must thus become a writer. Language is essential in order for the love stories of one’s illusions to become tangible narrative’s reality may recognize. In *Everything is Illuminated*, Safran’s relationship with the Gypsy girl becomes a cruel example of the consequences of the absence of language as the catalyst it must necessarily be for the success of modern love. Safran loves the Gypsy girl-or so he thinks. She tells him

stories of her past (230) and carves notes of her love into trees (231) in order to create this love, but he-outside of a note he creates not with his own handwriting, but collaged out of newsprint (233)-has kept his illusions of their love story silent:

Not one of his friends...knew about the Gypsy girl, and none of his other women knew about the Gypsy girl, and his parents, of course, didn't know about the Gypsy girl. She was such a tightly kept secret that sometimes he felt that not even he was privy to his relationship with her. She knew of his efforts to conceal her from the rest of his world, to keep her cloistered in a private chamber reachable only by a secret passage, to put her behind a wall. She knew that even if he thought he loved her, he did not love her. (232)

Safran, hiding his relationship with the Gypsy girl, does not voice his love for her. Lacking any tangible language, this love story is unrecognizable by reality which must reject it. The language of Safran's Jewish elders (the Jewish/Human anti-interaction laws) is thus easily able to absolve his voiceless love. As fiction writers require reality as a basis for the success of their fiction, the example of Safran and the Gypsy girl's failed relationship illustrates that so reality relies upon fiction and language. Without fiction, the reality of humanity's depravity becomes unlovable, and without language, illusions go undefined, and love is not created.

This philosophy of modern love, and the necessity of fiction and language for its perpetuation, finds its best representative within Yankel's relationship with his adoptive daughter Brod. After Yankel is deserted by his wife and loses not only his job, but his respect, becoming disparagingly known as the "disgraced usurer" (43) within Trachimbrod, Yankel is in despair. When he learns he has been drawn to be the young girl Brod's adoptive parent, however, Yankel is overjoyed. Here is "a chance to live without shame...a chance to be again innocent, simply

and impossibly happy” (47) he declares. As Safran has fallen in love with his own unborn daughter, so Yankel falls in love with this new baby. Unconnected with his past, Brod represents a void uncorrupted by Yankel’s painful memories. Around the unknowability of Brod’s own heritage, Yankel can build a love story about his illusions of an ideal family. Reality gave him a wife who is not loyal, and stole his chances of a biological daughter, but fiction can transcend this pain. All Yankel has to do is verbalize his illusions.

Creating a fictionalized persona of his ideal wife, Yankel, unlike Safran, does not hide his love but gives language to it. He writes love letters to his “wife,” and returns them by writing left-handed (48). Further, he shows these letters to Brod, and puts “her to bed with stories of their romance” (48). With these stories, Yankel not only gives presence to the absence that was once Brod’s origins, but he also alleviates the pain of his own reality by transcending it through his fiction. He finds himself falling “in love with his never-wife” (48), so earnestly does he believe in his ideals. “He had repeated the details so many times,” in fact, “that it was nearly impossible” for him “to distinguish them from the facts” (49). In this way, the man once lost in despair with memories of his reality, and disillusioned by the impossibility of love, finds himself able to build a life for him and his daughter through telling “stories so fantastic,” they both “had to believe” (77). Through fiction, “they had made for themselves a sanctuary from Trachimbrod, a habitat completely unlike the rest of the world” within which “everything was held up as another small piece of proof that it can be this way, it doesn’t have to be that way.” The pain of reality does not have to be unquestionably accepted, Yankel discovers. “If there is no love in the world” that is sustainable and satisfactory, one must simply “make a new world” (82) where it is possible, and then choose to believe.

This worldview is not a return to the naïve idealism perpetuated in traditional literature (that this love is possible *in* reality), for both Brod and Yankel are still keenly aware of the difference in their illusion *to* reality. It is based upon reality, in fact, that they find it necessary to create their fiction. Observing the world, they are both dissatisfied. Yankel has tried to love in the traditional way. He has tried to love the being of his wife, hoping that this being can inspire the lasting and powerful force of loving devotion he desires. But she has not; she cannot, because she is human. Thus turning inward, Brod and Yankel look first to themselves to determine what they wish to define as love, and become the authors of their own love stories. They are one another's perfect match, for both represent for the other the void necessary to build these stories. No one knows the truth of her past, and she cannot know the truth of his. "In reality she hardly knew him. And he hardly knew her" (82), but this unknowability is merely the perfect absence to fill with the language of their love. They are not returning humanity to its pedestal. They are simply enduring their reality by loving being in love and somehow reconciling themselves "with a world that fell so short of what [they] would have hoped for" (80). They are not being foolish or blind, but are, in short, "willfully playing the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life" (83).

Growing up within this worldview, Brod is conscious of its essentiality in her father's life, and easily adopts it as her own. Like Yankel, Brod "repeats things until they are true, or until she can't tell whether they are true or not" (87). Because also like her father, Brod has looked at reality, and, disappointed by what she does (or does not) find there, concludes that "she didn't love life. There was no convincing reason to live" (81). Thus, she has resolved "to make it [the world] beautiful and fair, to live a once-removed life, in a world once-removed from the one in which everyone else seemed to exist" (80). Through Yankel's stories, he has painted an

attractive portrait of what is possible with fiction. He can create origins once unknowable, and can fashion the persona of a loving wife out of one once disloyal. With this example always before her, Brod naturally falls into the same use of fiction.

However, when Brod meets the Kolker, she initially rejects her father's model of loving through illusions, as she falsely believes, or perhaps hopes, she has at last found someone whom she can love not only the *story* of, but the person himself. Descending from the "once-removed" world of her fiction and illusions, Brod thus attempts to engage the primary world. The Kolker, chancing upon her as she reels in grief on the night of Yankel's death and her own rape, refuses to obey her shouts to "*Go away!*" (98). Instead, he vows to never leave without Brod. Weary from grief and now abandoned with Yankel's death of the only one who has defined her life and has fulfilled the other side of her love story, Brod breaks down and allows the Kolker in to shatter her illusions. In the beginning, Brod is almost relieved at her new awareness of emotion. "She loved what it felt like to wait for the Kolker, to be entirely dependent on him for her happiness" she decides. Tired of sustaining stories she knew were not reality, for once, "she loved...simply loving something more than she loved her love for that thing" (122).

Thus completely rejecting the modern philosophy of love which instructed to love not the object, but the love story about the object through a sustained illusion, Brod completely opens herself to the fallible existence of the Kolker. She refuses to find an absence to fill with an ideal language of love. Instead, Brod loves his presence, "and the vulnerability that went along with living in the primary world" (122). In fact, the Kolker's knowability is something that attracts Brod. With her uncommon insight and wisdom, Brod "always felt that she knew everything about him...that he was knowable" (122). Where this knowledge of earthly things, "mired completely in [their] thingness" (80) once frustrated her, causing her to mourn that she cannot

love them, she does not want the Kolker to be anything more than he is. “Smart was the last thing she ever wanted” him to be she declares. “She wanted nothing more than someone to miss” and “with whom to be a child. He was very good for that. And she was in love” (123). At least, she *thinks* she is in love.

Though Brod enjoys the novelty of living outside of her illusions, and within the primary world, she subconsciously refuses to completely descend into reality. Not wanting to be disappointed by reality, she chooses to maintain a superficial interaction with it. This is the chief reason why she does not want the Kolker to be smart, for “that, she knew, would ruin everything” (123). If the Kolker can see through her as she him, he will see through her foolish attempt at loving the things she is well aware are impossible to love because of their imperfectability. She has not suddenly become naïve; she has simply chosen to exchange her all-seeing wisdom for a time of partial blindness. She only sees what she wishes to see. With the Kolker, she does not want a mature relationship that she knows will force her into confronting hard truths. She wants only “to be a child” with her husband, and perpetuate her play with reality.

The Kolker, though not as introspective as Brod, recognizes that even through her attempt to fully engage reality, she is holding something back. As the Gypsy girl grew frustrated with Safran when she realizes “his efforts to conceal her” by not mentioning their love story, and knew, in her heart, that “he did not love her” (232), so the Kolker becomes suspicious over Brod’s silence. “*We’ve only had six conversations*” in nearly three years of marriage, he declares, confronting Brod. Continuing, the Kolker accuses Brod that “*you never take me seriously...you always joke or cut our talking short before we ever say anything*” (124). It is true, and Brod knows it. Aware of her own disbelief even in her best attempts to love an individual for

himself, she shrinks from any conversations that will force her into a reawakening to the true state of fallibility of every human's existence. To shield herself from this awareness, she does not want to talk, "all she wanted from him was cuddling and high voices. Whispers. Assurances. Promises of fidelity and truth... that he would never leave her alone" (125).

This superficiality cannot last, however, for when the Kolker's accident at his saw-mill shatters the couples' child's play with reality, Brod is forced to reexamine how they interact. The accident, in which a disk saw enters the Kolker's head and cannot be removed, causes him, for the remainder of his life, to vacillate between moments of tenderness and clarity, and violent, hateful wrath enacted towards his own wife. Because of this, their relationship of "cuddling and high voices," and of simple, whispered assurances that they will never leave one another, is forever changed. Now, to avoid the Kolker's involuntary bouts of violence, they spend each night in separate rooms and then meet to "explain their dreams to each other over bread and coffee the next morning." With this new situation, they are able to have "their seventh, eighth, and ninth conversations" (129). He is keeping his promise of "fidelity and truth." He hates himself for his uncontrollable spasms of violence towards the woman whom he loves most. Yet, wanting desperately to make the relationship work, the Kolker insists they must separate themselves into different rooms. Despite all of Brod's reluctance to engage in deep conversation, wanting to love the Kolker's simple being and his presence-not the idea of him or his absence-with the accident, she is forced into her former ways of interaction with the world. She must observe and then articulate her own conclusions of its unworthiness by the truths she witnesses.

With this new absence between Brod and the Kolker, forced by their unnatural circumstances, their relationship seemingly appears to be ideal under the modern philosophy of love's definition. Here is an absence the two lovers can fill with the language of their love,

becoming the authors of their own love story. There is one thing lacking, however, that prevents Brod and the Kolker from finding the peace Yankel and Safran found through loving an absence unconnected with their reality, and through their stories loving truly in a modern way. Brod still depends on the Kolker as the origin of her love, as she waits and hopes to be inspired by his worthiness. There is no illusion or choice to believe in an illusion she has created, and the reality of his depravity is slowly creeping in. Initially, as the Kolker's injury begins to enact towards Brod curses and comments of her inadequacy, "Brod was able to overlook it, could even find it endearing" (128). For Brod knows that these moods of cruelty "were not him. They were the other Kolker, born of the metal teeth in his brain. And she was in love, which gave her a reason to live" (128). In a moment of clarity, however, as the Kolker-fully himself, fully the object she believes she loves-gives her a birthday present, her awareness of her inability to love him floods over her with heartrending intensity. "*I don't love you*" (131) she manages to breathe through her tears.

Relying upon the individual, not the idea about the individual and the feeling that idea produces, Brod is heartbroken that here, again, reality has not lived up to her expectations. She tries to abandon illusions and live in the primary world. She tries to forget absences and love his presence. However, his presence, she realizes, is no different from everything else in her world she has grown up to apprehend she does not love. She thought that the Kolker will be able to be loved, for he is safe, knowable. She can love him and her reality, if only superficially, for that is what she is capable.

When the Kolker offers her a surprise gift hidden in blue vellum and wrapping, he confronts Brod with the possibility that there are still absences about him of which she remains ignorant. And absences, without language to fill and define them, create fear. The only other

time Brod has cried, she realizes, is on the night of her rape when “the mad Sofiowka N” (131) tore her from the sanctuary her father Yankel created with his stories into the undefined world of sexuality. Wishing to live in the primary world, Brod believes that she can leave behind this fear of absences merely by refusing to define them. However, confronted by the fact that even the Kolker, whom she thought she knew completely, is capable of deceit (even at the most foolish level of a surprise birthday gift), she agonizes over her reawakening into the necessity of illusions. “*Did you ever love me?*” the Kolker asks her. “*No. Never*” (131), Brod replies. Not because the Kolker is not good enough, or smart enough, but, she declares, “*because I couldn’t love you*” (132). The Kolker is human, fallible, capable of deceit and unable to be known completely. To love him, absences have to be defined, and illusions have to be believed. Brod, however, not wanting to believe this is the only way to love—to love the idea of a person, to love loving love, and not simply look to the individual to inspire these feelings—threatens to allow the awareness of the Kolker’s fallibility to end their relationship. Realizing, without a doubt that loving in the traditional way is truly impossible, Brod nearly concedes defeat to the postmodern problem of how to love.

The Kolker, however, reintroduces Brod to the possibilities of loving how Yankel has shown her: to love by creating illusions they agreed to believe in, and defining these illusions through language. “*I wonder if you could just pretend for a while, if we could pretend to love each other*” (133) the Kolker asks her. Conjuring her former worldview, when she was once marked with the wisdom and “truthful[ness] enough to lie” (83), Brod agrees to build a love story with her husband. “*We can do that*” (134) she agrees. With the Kolker’s condition worsening to the point where he becomes a real danger to Brod, the Kolker exiles himself to his own bedroom. Now forced to be protected from her own husband, Brod and the Kolker’s only

interaction is through a small hole cut into the wall. The wall, erecting a tangible division between the lovers, offers them a void about which they must create stories upon in order to build their relationship and overcome this new absence. They can no longer cuddle or whisper. To love truly they have to define this absence between them, and believe in the definitions they produce. "They lived with the hole. The absence that defined it became a presence that defined them. Life was a small negative space cut out of the eternal solidity, and for the first time, it felt precious-not like all of the words that had come to mean nothing" (135). Words, like "love," they discover, are just words. But this should not, as it had formerly done to Brod, throw one into despair. The power of love is not in the term, but in the definition, the illusions, and the language behind the word. Through this hole, Brod and the Kolker manage to conceive a child (139)-an intimacy Brod once believes will be unachievable following her realization she does not love the Kolker. Through language, however, Brod and the Kolker choose to define their love in an illusion once-removed from this world of fallibility. Around the hole in the wall they voice their love for one another, speak their ideals, and transform their once failing relationship into a cherished symbol of devotion capable of procreation.

No longer dreading her inability to love presences, and no longer fearing absences she merely has to define, Brod has come to understand what love means. It means whatever the individual desires it to mean, for every individual is an author, and thus one's love story can be written in whatever way he chooses. The only restriction is to willfully believe, and to understand that "the hole...is not the exception in life, but the rule. The hole is no void; the void exists around it" (139). How you define that void is up to you. For Brod, she chooses to fill her void with love. With this decision, Brod is free to express to her husband "*I love you,*" as she

confidently trusts “for the first time in her life,” that “the words had meaning” (139), because it is she who has defined them.

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