

1-2013

## The Other In Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*

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The Other In Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*.

Pauline Bleuse

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

M.A. English

English Department

January 2013

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2013

## Abstract

This thesis project focuses on the notion of the Other in Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep*. The novel follows David as his family moves to New York and struggles in poor areas. David's inner world is rendered through a style which is reminiscent of a modernist stream of consciousness while retaining the realism of the 1930s proletarian novel. *Call It Sleep* is a rich text for the study of immigration and multi-culturalism and approaching the novel through the theme of the Other allows for multiple interpretations. The first chapter uses Jacques Lacan's theories on Desire and analyzes David's obsessive behavior toward objects representing purity. Lacanian Desire stems from lack and is transferred to objects that cannot bring satisfaction once attained. Lacan's theories explain David's quests and can be used to understand the 'American Dream' migrants followed as a spatial localization of this unattainable desire. The second chapter looks at Roth's treatment of languages and identification of and with the Other. David is an Other for the two cultures he is in contact with and is either included or excluded by different languages. David's identity as an Other fluctuates depending on which culture he is in contact with. Roth's treatment of language and identities is still relevant as we struggle to find a balance between assimilation and multi-culturalism. The last chapter looks at *Call It Sleep* from a feminist point of view. In her essay 'Women on the Market', Luce Irigaray analyzes our society's treatment of women as commodities and their exchanges. Irigaray's theory allows for a unique perspective on the transition between a patriarchal society to a consumerist American society

where women are objectified. These different approaches allow for a comprehensive study of the Other in the text and inform on the different manifestations of the Other in our world, between the alienation of our desires, fragmentation of the self, the Otherness experienced in a multi-cultural society and the Othering of women. Analyzing *Call It Sleep* under these different lenses allow for a better understanding of the relation of the self and the Other for multi-cultural individuals.

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## **Introduction**

“It was May of the year 1907, the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States.” (9), Henry Roth tells us in his prologue. Indeed, 1,004,756 immigrants would be processed through Ellis Island that year, remembered as a 'peak year' symbolic of turn-of-the-century immigration for the U.S. A large number of these migrants would not go further than New York City, putting an incredible pressure on some areas of the city which quickly turned into slums – if they were not already shanty areas.

The appeal of a better life and the need to flee oppression and poverty pushed so many people to embark on this journey. It is no surprise that Jewish migrants fled Europe en masse under the threat of pogroms and poor living conditions.

Living conditions in the U.S. were not ideal, but migrants would often write home about their luxurious lifestyle so as not to admit they had failed to find the American Dream. Living conditions actually varied a lot from one family to another. Some families found themselves in extreme poverty, with no other choice but to work in the textile industry or in sweatshops while other families managed to build a better life for their children, for instance by giving them access to an education. The Jewish community is hard to define. Jewish migrants would come from different countries, speak different languages – but they all had one thing in common; they came to the U.S. to stay and escape a rising antisemitic feeling in Europe. While other communities would mostly be formed of men who came to the U.S. to work and send money to their families in Europe, Jewish migrants included women, children and entire families.



Each family has a unique story, but we can identify some common trends. Most families would be very isolated and limit themselves to a small Jewish community, for religious reasons but also because of the language and cultural barrier. As time went by, religious leaders lost their influence and children abandoning religion was a common concern. Religion was one of the many sources of conflicts between parents and children as the youngest members of the family became more Americanized, often through public school. The transition from one culture to another was never smooth, and led to familial conflicts as well as personal struggles to reconcile two different worldviews.

This heritage is an important part of U.S. history and has inspired many writers such as Anzia Yezierska, Mary Antin, Mike Gold and of course Henry Roth. These writers, often labeled as 'proletarian' or 'Jewish-American' are actually hard to classify in any given genre. This project does not attempt classifying Roth in a literary genre; its goal is to analyzing the relation of the self to the Other, an experience we can all relate to.

My analysis of *Call It Sleep* aims at taking readers on an outward quest for the Other – which I hope will end with the recognition of experiences and patterns still present in our modern world. I call the progression of this project an outward quest because it begins with a close reading of Roth's novel and an analysis of the main character, David, and his inner struggles and psychoanalytical relation to the Other through the notion of Lacanian desire. In a second chapter David's relation to the Other is studied through the different languages that appear in the text and through his identification as and with the Other. Finally, this project will look at the Othering of women in Roth's text, which is representative of the Othering of women on a societal level in the time-frame studied. The theme of the Other is common in migrant literature, but it is often

approached as inherent to population displacement and the alienation experienced by migrants. Most migrant narratives deal with these feelings of alienation, while migrants are usually represented as the Other in narratives written from a different perspective.

Henry Roth gives readers the possibility to go further by adopting a deeply poetic, personal, domestic and sometimes childish outlook on life in New York at the turn of the century for Jewish migrants. Published in 1934, *Call It Sleep* was at first deemed too mild and poetic in comparison to more radical leftist writers of the time such as Mike Gold or Abraham Cahan. It is true that the social message is hard to identify and narrating everything through the eyes of a young child makes it hard to paint the New York slums in their squalor. The novel was brought to the general attention again in 1956, thanks to B.Rideout, Leslie Fiedler and Alfred Kazin. The novel was published again in 1960 and acknowledged as a classic. The novel generated a series of scholarly essays during the 1960s and 1970s and later in the 2000s as Roth drew attention to his work again by publishing *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

Kazin sees this novel as “a classic of psychological fiction” and yet *Call It Sleep* has not been looked at under any lenses other than Freud's theories from the 1920s. Very little has been written on David's mother, other than to describe her as an over-protective mother. The treatment of different languages has been studied in details by critics such as Naomi Diamant, but little has been said about David's multicultural identity or about the notion of the Other; discussing these topics is important in order to keep Roth's work relevant as a new millennium begins.

The goal of this project is to actualize readings of *Call It Sleep* by introducing Lacanian theories from the 1960s for a detailed psychoanalytical reading, to adopt a new view on the treatment of languages, identity and the notion of the Other and to introduce the text to a feminist

reading through Irigaray's theories from the 1970s. My goal is to answer the question “Where is the Other?” by looking at psychoanalysis, the relation between languages and identities and the alienation of women.

And the answer is, the Other is constantly in motion. With a psychoanalytical reading of the text in Chapter I, we can approach the fleeting nature of the Other through Lacanian desire. Every time David desires an object, the true object of his desire remains hidden – setting David in a constant quest for the object of his desire, the Other. In Chapter II, we will approach the Other as fluid and fluctuating from one group to the next. David's identification of the Other and with the Other depends on his relation to the group he is in contact with. In Chapter III, we will look at the Other in motion through the exchange of women according to a feminist theory developed by Irigaray. As long as these women stay in motion by being exchanged on the market described by Irigaray or by transitioning from a patriarchal society to an American consumerist culture they remain Othered. This Other constantly in motion should inform as there is a lot more to migrant literature – or to our modern world – than identifying the migrant's culture as Other or adopting the migrant's perspective and viewing a mainstream society and culture as Other. Between globalization, new technologies and a constantly increased number of displaced individuals, our entire world is constantly in motion, including our Other. Roth was ahead of his time by conveying incredible dynamics and fluctuating identities and languages in his text. Looking at the Other in his novel is the best way to make the subtle treatment of multi-cultural identities and of the human nature stand out.

## Synopsis

*Call It Sleep* begins with the Schearls, a Jewish Austrian family, re-uniting at Ellis Island. The father, Albert, has been in the U.S. for a few years to pay for the the passage of his wife Genya and his young son David. Roth introduces us to the tense family dynamics right away, by showing a father who is not appreciative of his young son because David looks foreign and by showing a submissive mother. The prologue ends with the the Schearls heading to Bronzeville.

The first part of the novel, the Cellar, starts with a very young David asking his mother for a glass of water. Genya grants his request and asks for a kiss in return – a simple ritual that symbolizes the strong connection between David and his mother. David is introduced to the violent world of his father when Albert sends him to collect his last paycheck after losing his job. Albert's former employer confirms David's fear of his father by mentioning Albert's violent behavior. The Schearls break away from their isolated lifestyle by taking a boarder, Luter. Luter comes from Austria too and immediately takes a liking to Genya. He tries seducing her and thus becomes an Oedipal rival for David. In order to avoid Luter's advances, Genya takes David to the neighbors, the Minks. After playing with his young friend Yussie, David is tricked into playing a sexual game by Yussie's older sister Annie. The game greatly upsets and disgusts David who is too young to fully understand sexuality. This incident is a turning point for David; it seems David's fear of the darkness, cellars and rats is associated with this experience. David remains upset for some time after the incident and is even more upset after seeing a funeral in the streets. He asks his mother about the funeral and is introduced to the concept of mortality, or “eternal years”. David does not really understand this concept but “eternal years” will appear later in the

narrative. David's fear of his father are confirmed when Albert beats him for getting into a violent argument with his friend Yussie. He is teased about the beating by the boys he usually plays in the streets and gets into another fight. He pushes a boy and hides in a cellar for fear of being caught by a policeman. He then heads in an unfamiliar direction and gets lost because passerbys do not understand the name of the street he lives in due to his strong accent. He ends up in a police station where his mother comes get him. After these incidents, David has a hard time socializing with other children in the streets. Tensions intensify at home after Albert loses his job and friendship with Luter – he is however unaware of Luter's attempts at seducing Genya.

In Book II, the Picture, the Schearls move from Brownsville to the East Side and Albert takes a job as a milkman. The Schearls welcome Genya's younger sister Bertha even though Albert does not enjoy living with her. Bertha is described as outspoken, unfeminine and keeps getting into conflicts with Albert. Introducing this character into the narrative allows Roth to give an insight into how Genya and Bertha feel about immigration; while Bertha is overwhelmed with excitement, Genya regrets moving to the U.S. Bertha takes a job in a sweatshop and goes to the dentist's regularly, where she is introduced to Nathan. She ends up marrying him and the couple opens a candy store. Bertha probes into Genya's past by asking questions about a lover Genya had before knowing Albert. David overhears a conversation in Polish between Genya and Bertha and learns that his mother had an affair with this Gentile man. Genya's parents found out and considered that she brought dishonor on the family. She later married Albert and the Schearls' move to the U.S. was apparently a decision taken by Genya's parents.

In Book III, the Coal, David begins his religious education in a cheder where he is introduced to old-fashioned teaching methods and to the Hebrew language. He socializes with

the boys who receive instruction there and demonstrates excellent abilities for learning Hebrew. The students are taught to read but are not learning how to translate Hebrew. David eventually hears the rabbi translates a passage from the Book of Isaiah where an angel touches Isaiah's lips with some coal to purify him. He becomes obsessed with what he refers to as “angel-coal”, an object he believes will bring him purity. Passover comes and David has to burn the family's chumitz according to traditions. He heads to the river where he falls asleep and has a dream filled with religious imagery, an experience some readers would interpret as mystical. He then runs into three boys; he denies being Jewish to avoid trouble and the boys trick him into throwing a piece of zinc on some car-tracks to see an electrical arc. David thinks he saw the “angel-coal” and runs to the cheder – where is laughed at by the rabbi. These experiences cause him extreme joy and he seems to have finally conquered his fears.

In Book IV, the Rail, David goes back to a stressful state after riding on his father's milk wagon. Two thieves take some bottles while David is supposed to guard the wagon. Albert beats the thieves and hurts David in his anger. David also distantiates himself from other young Jewish boys after he finds out his friends saw his mother taking a bath. He seeks refuge on the roof of his building and meets Leo, a young Polish boy with no adult supervision. He is impressed with Leo, envies his freedom and confidence and wants to befriend the boy. David discovers different Christian symbols through Leo and develops an interest in this religion because he believes these symbols will protect him and give him the confidence Leo has. Leo promises to give him a rosary in exchange for being taken to the daughters of the man Bertha married, Esther and Polly. Leo takes advantage of one of the girls and David, in shock, runs to the cheder. He tells a story to the rabbi about his real mother being dead. He identifies Genya as his aunt and says his real

father was a Gentile organist. The rabbi heads out to see David's parents and readers are given an insight into his thoughts about Americanized children. When David gets home, the rabbi is already there and his parents know about the story he made up. His father explodes and expresses his doubts regarding David's paternity. Nathan visits the Schearls too in order to complain about David's actions while Bertha tries to calm him down so Albert will not be violent with David. Albert hears parts of what happened from David and the rosary he got from Leo falls on the floor. David has to flee the apartment and finds himself in the streets at dusk. Roth creates a modernist collage by rendering some dialogues from a nearby bar along with David's thoughts. David heads to the car tracks and tries re-creating the electrical arc he believes is sacred by throwing a metallic object on the tracks. He accidentally electrocutes himself and passes out. Roth's style changes and becomes similar to James Joyce's *Ulysses* or T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. David has a hallucination or a mystical experience. He encounters different religious symbols that have appeared earlier in the book while being chased by his father in an nightmarish industrial landscape. He descends into the darkness where he finds the 'angel-coal' before waking up. A crowd has gathered around him and expresses concerns until David wakes up. David is taken home where his father finally acknowledges him. He is put to bed and reflects on his experience. He decides "he might as well call it sleep" (441) and goes to sleep as he imagines being accepted – and lost – in a multitude, probably a reflection on his hallucination or mystical experience.

## Chapter I : Lacanian Desire, movements and quests in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*.

Published in 1934, Roth's *Call It Sleep* was first approached through the lens of Marxist ideology and deemed as not being a good political or proletarian novel, mainly because Roth chose to narrate his story through the eyes of a child. Rediscovered thirty years later, the novel is now considered as a classic. If there is one thing that should be learned from this, it is that approaching a work of art through a movement or an ideology is not the best way to appreciate it. I chose to look at *Call It Sleep* from a psychoanalytical point of view not because I consider it as a psychoanalytical novel but because I felt it was the best way to analyze the human element of the novel, an aspect that is sometimes hard to grasp since it is where the beauty and the literary quality of the novel dwell. Roth admitted to having a very limited knowledge of Freudian theories: "Of course I knew about Freud, but I had only a smattering of it. I knew only what almost everyone knew of Freud and that wasn't a great deal" (William Freedman, 155) and the Lacanian ideas I use in this chapter were published well after *Call It Sleep*. And yet I find that Jacques Lacan's work on the notion of Desire addresses feelings we all have in common. These theories also bring a new light on immigration and David's fears and Desires as well as his parents' Desires and frustrations and gives us an insight into the notion of the American Dream – that I interpret as a manifestation of Lacanian Desire. For Lacan, Desire is formed because of an original lack but the subject is never able to successfully identify objects that would fulfill these feelings of lack. There are only temporary objects of Desire that Lacan calls "*object a*": these



objects are interesting to the subject as long as he or she is pursuing them. Lacanian Desire is about movement and quests, the same themes that give the novel its dynamic. We will first look at the family dynamics and identify lacks, desires and movements in the home of the Schearls before moving on to David and his personal system of representations that allow him to translate his Desire into a quest. And we will finally look at the idea of immigration and the American Dream as a movement reflecting Lacanian Desire.

### 1. David's bond with his mother

David's relationship to his mother is described by Roth both in touching terms and within the context of an Oedipal relationship. Throughout the novel, we are given insight into private scenes between David and his mother; Roth's dialogues, use of body language and the descriptions of David's feelings make us perceive the strong bond between David and his mother. Critics such as Ruth Wisse or David Seed have focused on the Oedipal or dysfunctional nature of this relationship, but it should be looked at in the context of immigration to better understand how David's estrangement from his father drove him to form this close connection with his mother.

The novel opens with a prologue describing David and his mother arriving at Ellis Island. Even though we do not know anything about the characters yet, the boy and his mother stand out from the crowd and their physical closeness evokes a very strong bond: "All those steerage passengers of the ships that had docked that day who were permitted to enter had already entered – except two, a woman and a young child she carried in her arms." (10). They are reunited with Albert, who has spent some time in the U.S. to pay for their passage (10). David and his mother

have gone through this experience together – and we later learn that Albert left for the U.S. only a few months after he married (392). The Schearls have never really been a family unit until they are reunited in Ellis Island, and David spent the first few years of his life without a father.

In *The World Of Our Mothers*, Sydney Stahl Weinberg describes the Jewish immigrant experience at the turn of the century through interviews: some migrants evoke the difficulties encountered at home after years of separation. “Fathers could also be resented because of the attention they received from mothers who until the reunion had devoted themselves entirely to their children” (87). Families were threatened by these separations: children would feel estranged from fathers they had not seen in years, and sometimes did not even remember. Husbands and wives would also have to get used to living together after spending years apart. This could account for a lot of tensions we observe in the home of the Schearls.

The Oedipus complex as defined by Freud is a triangle, including the father, the mother and the little boy (James Astor, 706). Critics have applied this model to the Schearls, but their separation means that David first developed Oedipal feelings while he was still unchallenged by his absent father.

Roth does not give any more details about David's life in Europe but his relationship to his mother is closely linked to this past – and to the fact that the mother is the only continuity David has. They arrive at Ellis Island with “no sulky wicker baskets, no prized feather beds, no boxes of delicacies” (10). Werner Sollors writes about the mother as being David's only connection to his origins: “The mother's warm and living body, the goal of David's oedipal yearnings, is also the physical space designating his origins, a space all the more important to David since he does not directly know his geographic place of birth.” (142). This brings a new

dimension to David's oedipal feelings. His attachment to his mother is also what allows him to stay in touch with a distant past he does not remember – but still remains an important part of his identity.

For David, the mother is also a companion. Their conversations are touchingly rendered by Roth a few times. Both individuals have something to offer to each other. David explains to his mother what “porridge” is while she tells him stories about gypsies and bears she saw in Europe (39). And David is probably the best conversation partner his mother has in her physical and cultural isolation. When she asks him “Will you knit another dream for me?” (131), it becomes obvious that David is for her a way of escaping her routine and also functions as a link to her past. And even though the cultural and linguistic gap grows between David and his mother, she remains a protective force he always comes back to. When David is afraid of the darkness in the stairway, his mother guards the door (58). And when David gets lost, ends up in a police station and thinks he will never go home again, conjuring his mother is his only option: “Mama? Yes, I'm here she'd call down”(105).

David's attachment to his mother disappears as he grows and it is obvious to the readers that there always will be a gap because David grew up in the U.S. The mother's inability to speak English, David's Yiddish becoming tainted with English and the idea of separation from the mother, hinted at by David receiving “mournfully (...) his mother's parting kiss” (213) suggest David's relation to his mother becomes weaker as time goes by.

## 2. The kiss ritual

The act of kissing becomes central to David's relationship to his mother. He asks for a glass of water and is expected to kiss his mother in return:

'I want a drink, mama,' he repeated (...). 'And is that all?' She asked. Her voice held a faint challenge. 'Yes,' he said hesitantly, meanwhile scanning her face for some clue. 'I thought so,' she drew her head back in droll disappointment. 'What?' 'It is summer.' (...) 'Whom will you refresh with the icy lips the water lent you?' (...) Sinking his fingers in her hair David kissed her brow (...) 'but you've waited too long; the sweet chill has dulled' (...) 'Sometimes I'm going to eat some ice' he said warningly, 'then you'll like it' (18).

This scene illustrates the bond between David and his mother, and the fact that she expects him to remember about the kiss means this is a "ritual" (Ruth Wisse, 63).

The "kiss ritual" can be divided in three steps. David first asks for a drink; he is voicing a physical need and expects his mother to answer it. Jacques Lacan has connected the wish to drink with "an oral instinct" that can have an erotic dimension in certain contexts. The physical experience of thirst, along with other physical sensations of lack or need is linked to the mother: "The eroticized partial instinct refers back to the organic need which founds it, but it also refers back beyond this to a lived experience of radical lack from separation from the maternal body." (Anika Lemaire, 140). Genya gives David a drink, thus recognizing, approving and fulfilling his desire. The kiss Genya asks for is a ritual associated with the fulfillment of David's desires. Genya wishes for the kiss and thus expresses a desire to respond to her son's desires. David's desires are validated, answered and even encouraged. David's desires appear as he experiences lacks, here thirst. By validating her son's desires, Genya is expressing a desire for David to experience lack.

In Lacanian terms, David is faced with the Other's desire and appropriates this desire. Lacan lists primordial objects of Desire as follow: "the breast, excrement, the phallus (as Imaginary object), and the urinary flow" along with "the phoneme, the gaze, the voice, the nothing" (Ellen Sullivan, 22). The oral instinct of drinking seems rather close to the voice – and the theme of the voice is a recurring one in the context of David's relationship to his mother. Their bond is shown through dialogues, David wanting to hear his mother's voice when he is afraid of the dark (58) and their common language, Yiddish, brings them closer in the foreign environment – at least until David's English become more fluent. Approaching the mother as the "primordial pivot of Desire" (Sullivan, 26) also means she becomes objectified (Sullivan, 118) and then repressed (Sullivan, 26).

The objectified mother appears in several instances, at first through the gaze of Luter – or rather through the gaze of David becoming aware of the way Luter looks at his mother: "Luter, his eyes narrowed by a fixed yawn, was staring at his mother, at her hips. For the first time, David was aware of how her flesh, confined by the skirt, formed separate molds against it" (40). The sexualized mother becomes the Other and must be repressed: "The shadow between her breasts, how deep! How far it – No! No! Luter! When he looked! Quick! Look at – look at the linoleum there, how it glistened under a thin film of water" (64). The repressed desire for the mother is quickly replaced by an alternative, here the glistening of the floor, which prefigures David's fascination with shiny things; the sun, the rail, the burning coal and other important symbols throughout the novel. The act of transference is referred to by Lacan as "*object a*" and allows the child access to the Symbolic Order and the unconscious (Sullivan, 289). David learns

to recognize symbols in his environment and becomes frightened of darkness and cellars, which stand for his unconscious, where the forbidden desire for the mother (and the Other) is hidden.

The mother's actual desires are very different from what is shown in the ritual kissing scene and from what David perceives on an unconscious level. David catches a glimpse of this when he comes home right after his parents have engaged in intercourse and he is faced with the decorative horns his father bought, an obvious phallic symbol: "It was as though the horns lying on the wash-tub had bridged them, as though one tip pierced one image and one tip the other – that man outstretched on the sidewalk, that mysterious look of repose in his mother's face when he had come in. Why? (...) He sensed only that in the horns, in the poised power of them lay a threat, a challenge he must answer, he must meet. But he didn't know how." (299). David cannot really appropriate the mother's Desires because he is not fully aware of these Desires – he wants to appropriate what he perceives as his mother's Desires. In spite of his age, David thus inscribes himself within the Freudian Oedipal complex that he perhaps developed after the age of eighteen months because he was deprived of a father figure. Roth hints at the Oedipus myth with David burning his foot (430) and his jealous possession of the mother's body (294, 295).

### 3. The father

David's relation to his parents evolve throughout the novel; David seems to become less attached to his mother as he grows older and spends more time in the streets. On the other hand, his father who is at first absent and fails to become a father figure and an Oedipal rival becomes a more concrete presence in his son's world, mainly through physical violence and the terror he inspires in David. David's relation to his father is not a positive one but the Oedipus complex

awakens the need for identification with the father. When the young boy realizes he cannot fulfill the mother's desire, he finds a way to live his phantasy of possessing the mother in a safe way through identification with the father. This identification occurs on the level of the fable – in other words, the father is idealized (Lacan, 22). Besides, this stage is necessary for the identity formation process: by identifying with the father, the boy “consolidates the masculinity in [his] character” (Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 273). And according to Lemaire:

Secondary identification with the parent of the same sex has in its turn caught the subject up in the quest for an ideal which conforms to the moral verdicts of society, to the desire which the subject senses in the other. At the same time, the necessity for social success has made itself felt and the child has taken the path of the norm, expecting the fruit of his labour in the social recognition which will circumscribe him as being one thing or another. Civil status, profession, titles, membership of social, political or cultural circles are so many forms assumed by the Ego and all demonstrate the symbolic dominance over man” (180). Identifying with the father – and authority figures in general – allows the young boy to access ‘cultural normalization’ (180).

It soon becomes evident to David that his father does not stand for “cultural normalization” – at least not by the standards of mainstream culture David is exposed to at school or in the streets. David first realizes that his father is not well-integrated when he is sent to his father's former employer to pick up his father's last paycheck. He is plainly told that his father is “crazy” (25) and confronted with his father inadequacy: “Your ol' man near brained me wid a hammer” (25). As an immigrant, Albert Schearl is infantilized in numerous instances (Karen Lawrence, 112). He is paranoid and mistrusts everyone because “They look at me crookedly, with mockery in their eyes!” (22). He also feels watched: “And every minute the feeling that he was watching me” (126) and overreacts to the end of his friendship with Luter. In the end, he finally breaks down and recognizes he is not well in an outburst reported by a neighbor in broken English: “En' vee vus listening en' dis man vos crying. Ah'm khrezzy! Ah'm

khrezzy! I dun know vod I do! I dun' know vod I said!' He ses. Ah'm khrezzy!" (436). Later after this incident, David recognizes his father's weaknesses: "he listened to him falter and knew him shaken" (437). Albert's violent outbursts and paranoia belong to the world of fiction, but his own acknowledgment of his failure is something that a lot of migrants and even contemporary workers feel: "I sell my days for a little silver – a little paper – sixteen smirched leaves a week – I'll never buy them back with gold" (266). Albert is wasting his life in an environment where he does not belong: his English remains very hesitant and his love for cattle and land is not compatible with life in New York City.

These feelings of inadequacy and infantilization lead to violent outbursts which strongly mark David. Even though he is aware of his father's weaknesses, the violence is what makes the strongest impression. Borch-Jacobsen writes that Oedipal identification is "shot through with hate and violence that are all the more essential in that they are confounded with love" (271).

Again, the identification with the father is a failure since fear is present instead of love. The most striking instance of this occurs when David goes with his father to deliver milk bottles: some bottles are stolen and Albert chases the thieves. From the beginning, "David knew they were doomed" (280) and Albert is no longer infantilized. Instead, one of the thieves makes an "infantile groan" (281) while "David's father towered above him, rage billowing from him; shimmering in sunlight almost like an aura" (281). This is the only scene where Albert is in a position of power outside of his home. He uses violence to establish his superiority at home through verbal aggression towards his wife and raw anger towards his son. David experiences extreme terror when he becomes the cause of his father's wrath – to the extent that his perception is altered: "Nothing existed any longer except his father's right hand – the hand that hung down



into the electric circle of his vision. Terrific clarity was given him. Terrific leisure! (...) Terrific absorption. The hammer in that hand when he stood! The hammer! (...) The open hand struck him full against the cheek and temple, splintering the brain into fragments of light. Spheres, mercuric, splattered, condensed and roared” (83). This is the beginning of David recognizing symbols and idealizing his father as a violent and powerful godlike figure. By identifying with the father, the young boy accesses the phallus on a symbolic level or the “paternal metaphor” in Lacan's terms. According to Borch-Jacobsen, “In place of the imaginary phallus (understood as the mother’s illusory object of desire) there is a metaphoric substitution of a symbolic identification with the phallus as a signifier of the mother’s desire” (280). Sigmund Freud uses a similar idea, with “the idealization of the father” (Thomas H. Ogden, 396). Albert interferes with David's world through violence, which causes David to associate violence with the paternal metaphor or the phallus – and understands the mother's desire as being directed toward this violence, the only male characteristic he knows of. This leads to David's obsession with brute force, pure white light and electrical power later on.

Albert and his violent behavior start acquiring this symbolic dimension for David when he “no longer could tell where his father was flesh and where dream” (28) and through David’s quiet fascination with his father’s body. David catches glimpses of his father’s body and he remarks that “He was powerful his father, much more powerful than he looked fully dressed” (176). This body occasionally takes on supernatural characteristics: it radiates light or power. For instance, his shirt is “dazzling in the light” (273) and David perceives his father’s anger as emanating from his body: “It was as though his whole body were smouldering, a stark, throbbing, curdling emanation flowed from him, a dark, corrosive haze that was all the more

fearful because David sensed how thin an aura it was of the terrific volcano clamped within” (127). As Bonnie Lyons puts it, “David’s primordial fear magnifies his father into a god of wrath” (191).

#### 4. Oedipal rivals

And yet, it is not obvious that David perceives this “god of wrath” as an Oedipal rival. It is suggested that David and Albert are rivals when Albert’s former employer mentions “David and Goliath” (26) but David experiences rivalry mainly through the character of Luter. Luter seems more able to function in society, has a better job than Albert, and attempts to seduce David’s mother. He perfectly fits the description of the Oedipal rival. As previously stated, his presence allows David to become aware of his mother’s sexuality. But since Luter’s advances are not legitimate, and not accepted by Genya, In the context of the Freudian Oedipal context, the little boy is very possessive of the mother until he is properly challenged by the father – through authority, in other words through a paternal metaphor. The little boy then begins identifying with the father and manages to claim ownership of the mother by identifying with the father who is the legitimate companion of the mother; at this point, the little boy is over his Oedipal feelings. Albert does not challenge David as an Oedipal rival because of his absence during David's early years and because he does not acknowledge David as his son nor displays affection toward Genya. Luter is the only rival David has to face, but Luter's authority is not recognized by Genya since his advances are not legitimate. When Luter tries to get rid of David so he can be alone with Genya, she “gently pressed his thigh” so David would understand she wishes him to stay (44). By letting David know she wishes him to stay, Genya is choosing David as her legitimate

partner and not recognizing the authority of the father figure. Again, David's desire for his mother is approved and reinforced, and Albert's lack of social skills and displays of affection toward Genya makes it impossible for David to understand the role of his father within the family and to acknowledge it.

Even though Albert is not a typical Oedipal protagonist for David, the terror he inspires in his son still functions as what Lacan refers to as the Name-of-the-Father. According to Sullivan, "Insofar as the Real father becomes confused with 'no' during the period of Castration, this effect is embedded in a network of Imaginary associations to establish taboo and Law" (115). The child's Desire opposes this Law or Name of the Father (Sullivan, 139) as it is directed toward the mother and reunification with her "beyond the father's name" (Sullivan, 116). In David's case, this desire is a synonym of a regression to a nostalgic pre-castration stage associated with his life in Europe.

Albert does not stand for the Name of the Father because his speech is not recognize: "the father is present only through his law, which is speech, and only in so far as his speech is recognized by the mother does it take on the value of law. If the position of the father is questioned, then the child remains subjected to the mother" (Lacan, 35). Albert's status as an immigrant places him in an infantilized position; during David's encounter with Albert's former employer, Albert's Law is clearly questioned. Genya takes David's defense in several occasions and undermines Albert's authority mainly when David causes his father to become angry with him. In spite of this, the Name-of-the-Father is present in the text. For Anna Petrov, David experiences this Name-of-the-Father mainly through fear and guilt and eventually develops a neurotic anxiety (142). This neurotic anxiety can be observed through David's acute perception

of loud sounds and how he associates them with his father; a thunderstorm breaks out while David is at the cheder and he believes he is hearing a bed being moved upstairs, an obvious sexual metaphor linked to the father (Stephen J. Adams, 60). The thunder appears again later when Albert becomes irate after hearing about David's mischiefs involving Leo and his cousins: "Speak!" In the shrunken, shadowy room, his father had become all voice, and his voice struck with the brunt of thunder." (399). And yet, in this scene where Albert seems godlike in his fury, his Speech is directly opposed by David's aunt Bertha and his uncle Nathan who call for help (399). David eventually integrates the idea of the Name-of-the-Father later in the novel; the simple repetition of the masculine pronoun is enough to express David's distress at the idea of his father coming home: "-He!(...) –He! See him! No! No! Go down! Quick, before he comes!" (289).

The presence of the Voice of the father associated with thunder directly opposes David's desire for his mother's Voice, associated with his quest for the angel-coal after he hears Isaiah's story. The opposition reflects Lacan's theory about the child's desire and Law being opposites (Sullivan, 139). In this instance, Albert functions as the Law. The other one occurs when he refers to David as a "prayer" (73). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "the father is he who 'recognizes' the child, giving him a personality by means of a Speech which is Law, a link of spiritual kinship and a promise." (Lemaire, 84). Albert does not really believe David is his son until the end of the novel, but the use of the term "prayer" (73) refers to the Judaic belief that a son's prayers open the way for his father's soul into the afterlife. Albert thus recognizes David's religious functions and his role as the heir of the older generations' traditions. David assumes this role by developing an interest in religion.

## 5. The desire for parricide

Why is the relationship between David and his father so dysfunctional? Albert's belief that David is not really his son is only the symptom of a deeper issue. Albert strongly believes that he is responsible for his father's death (389-390) and much like Sophocles' Oedipus, he fears a punishment from his own son. David fantasizes about parricide a few times: he tells a false story about his origins to the rabbi who instructs him at the cheder (368-369) in which his actual father is a Christian, his real mother is dead and Genya is actually his aunt. Even though he kills off his mother, a child's perception of death is limited to the idea of the absence of a person (Jahan Ramazani, 87) – David might wish for Genya to be somewhere else, for instance in Europe. Not mentioning his father at all in his tale of Freudian family romance (Linda Joan Kaplan, 170) is a way of reducing him to nothingness, not to a simple absence. According to Andrew Ryder, parricide is a common phantasy. He refers to Freud's *Totem And Taboo*, in which Freud writes about a "primal horde" in which the brothers unite, "kill and devour their father" as a revenge for taking the women away from them (1). Derrida takes the idea further by associating the murder of the father with the murder of the king "who appeared to exist as guarantor of law and meaning but whose authority was always an appearance" (Ryder, 7). This perfectly corresponds to Albert's undermined authority.

Parricide appears twice in David's dreams. David has a recurrent dream about the dread of his father coming home: "David often dreamed of his father's footsteps booming on the stairs, of the glistening doorknob turning, and of himself clutching at knives he couldn't lift from the table" (22). The idea of parricide is strongly repressed by David since he cannot lift the knives. David has another dream later in the novel after Leo shows him the rosary: "And that funny

dream I had he gave me it. How? Forgetting it already. Roof we were with a ladder And he climbs up on the sun – zip one two three. Round ball. Round ball shining – where did I say, see? Round ball and he busted it off with a cobble and puts it in the pail. And I ate it then. Better than sponge cake. Better than I ever ate” (330). Eating the sun and taking pleasure from it is reminiscent of a strong oral desire through which the child takes possession of something by eating it. The dream is very ambiguous and could probably be interpreted in many different ways, but David and Leo can function as the brothers who “kill and devour” the father in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (Ryder, 1). The word “sun” is also very close to “son”, or “sawn” as Albert pronounces it (437). Perhaps David stands for his father in the dream and is eating the son/sun to prevent the parricide. This theme appears later when Albert is violent toward a pregnant Bertha, and she says: “It’s a child you’ve destroyed!” (399).

But parricide is more than a phantasy in the context of immigration. Tom Samet writes “For Albert Scheral the price of existence in industrial America is nothing less than a total loss of personal identity” (573) and Albert complains about his life as a migrant a few times. He is frustrated with supporting his family: “Woe me, I labor as I labor, for food for the two of you and for a roof over your heads” (80). He wishes he could get the time he spent working in America back: “And you’d really want your days back? (...) What a question!” (266). A few paragraphs later, Roth mentions Albert’s “thinning black hair”(267) as a reminder of his aging. Albert considers he is spending his life working in a hostile environment to support his son – in a way, David is killing him.

David finds himself at the center of a struggle between his displaced parents and must reconcile two visions of the world. For his mother, he is a Jungian “divine child”(Astor, 702).

She calls him a “little God” (109) and he is constantly the center of her attention (119). On the other hand, David is the unwanted son for his father. And yet he is conscious of the bond between his parents and envious of their relationships: after seeing his father shirtless, David feels like “No, he’d never be that strong, and yet he had to be, he had to be. He didn’t know why, but he had to be” (177). In her introduction to *New Essays on Call it Sleep*, Hana Wirth-Nesher writes “maternal and paternal powers are represented in larger systems of desire having to do with the city and with migration” (13). David’s struggle is not only representative of the Oedipus complex but also about cultural conflict, displacement and assimilation. For Jeffrey J. Folks, this issue is associated with “confusion, guilt and self-destruction” (289) while Sidney A. Knowles Jr. sees a possibility for reconciliation as David matures (395). Roth is very ambiguous on this topic and never gives a real answer about whether or not David manages to resolve the familial conflict, assimilate or reconcile his Jewish background and his home life with his American identity and life on the streets. And this indecision is Roth’s way of helping his readers experience and identify with David’s internal divide and his quest for symbols that do not really yield answers but provide him with a mystical experience and a drive that guides him throughout the novel. Readers are about to relate to David’s struggles and quests because they are about desire. David’s desire to get closer to his mother to become indispensable to her leads David to the Other’s desire: “the demand for love can only suffer from a desire whose signifier is alien to it. If the desire of the mother is the phallus, the child wishes to be the phallus in order to satisfy that desire. Thus the division immanent in desire is already felt to be experienced in the desire of the Other” (Lacan, 289). This quest for the Other’s desire takes the child “into a quest for objects which are further and further removed from the initial object of his desire” (Lemaire, 87). In

other words, David's quest for the “angel coal” is not a cryptic element of a roman à clef but rather functions as a step in a long chain of signifiers and incarnations of desire stemming from an original lack, probably connected to David's relation to his mother or to the sense of loss caused by his inability to access his roots.

## 6. Lacanian desire

How is desire defined in Lacanian psychoanalysis? Desire has three main characteristics: it is alienating, it never stops and it is unattainable. Sullivan quotes Lacan: “this ego (...) whose strength our theorists now define by its capacity to bear frustration, is frustration in its essence. Not frustration of a Desire of the subject but frustration by an object in which his Desire is alienated and which the more it is elaborated, the more profound the alienation from his jouissance becomes for the subject” (47). This is how the unconscious is formed; one object is negated and replaced by another in a process referred to as splitting, “or the alienation of the individual's truth” (David Stewart, 67). Ronald Schleifer defines Lacanian desire as “unarrestable” (884) since it is built on a chain of dead signifiers that cannot be traced back to its origin but can keep on moving forward (Sullivan, 217). Desire is thus unattainable: “it is disguised through metaphors and metonymies” (Sullivan, 243) and no resolution is ever possible. And “the space between the moi and the Other (A) is, therefore Desire, a space that widens throughout life” (Sullivan, 76-77). Lacan uses the French term “glissement” to refer to the “endless movement” (Lacan, 303) of desire and uses the term “*objet a*” (308) to refer to the temporary signifiers of desire. These temporary signifiers of desire appear through wishes the



subject experiences, in other words a concrete and conscious manifestation of an unconscious desire.

Even though finding the source of desire is impossible since desire erases its object (Schleifer, 882), the desired object can be defined by going back to the Oedipal stage. Boch-Jacobsen writes: “Lacan admits that properly human desire is a desire of desire, that is, a desire to be desired by the Other” (279). Lacan gives more details about this in his *Écrits*: “desire becomes wound up with the desire of the Other but that in this loop lies the desire to know” (301). The subject’s desire is geared toward the Other, being what the Other wants (Lacan, 312) and knowing the Other.

Desire is also strongly connected to the idea of loss. Stewart talks about a “lost paradise” and a “garden of Eden” (63) which correspond to an early stage in childhood. The desire appears in the space between the moi and the Other (Sullivan, 77) once the child becomes aware of the Other, the motion of presence and absence (Lacan, 286) and first experiences lack (Lacan, 287): “Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting” (Lacan, 287).

Desire can be expressed; it is closely linked to the acquisition of language and the accession of the child to the Symbolic Order. Once the child learns to use signified and signifier, he or she can use the “*object a*” to refer to desire – which is the only link between the unconscious and language (Lemaire, 115). Desire can be expressed through dreams: “dreaming becomes a means through which desire is realized” (Stewart, 19), but desire never made clear in the dream. It is expressed through a “camouflage Freud calls the 'dream distortion'” (Herbert

Silberer, 375). Desire can also be expressed in a more elaborate linguistic form, such as the phantasy (Lemaire, 163).

Even though Lacan's theories were published well after Roth wrote *Call It Sleep*, Roth had a good understanding of what Lacan would later refer to as the desire of the Other and as "*object a*". David has a box filled with miscellaneous items that probably had a meaning for him when he collected them. Roth writes: "Trinkets held in the mortar of desire, the fancy a trowel, the whim the builder" (35) which strongly echoes the need to objectify desire and associate it with a signifier. Yet this object is limited by its very materiality, and the real desire is lost. This is what Roth evokes with the juxtaposition of the desire, fancy and whim with the mortar, the trowel and the act of building. Later we find the idea of the dead signifier through David's nostalgia for these objects: "His mother called them his gems and often asked why he liked things that were worn and old. It would have been hard to tell her. But there was something about the way in which the link of a chain was worn or the thread of a bolt or a castor-wheel that gave him a vague feeling of pain when he ran his fingers over them" (135). The desire of the Other appears with David's fascination for his father's body and the horns he buys, perceived as a challenge (299). Most of the symbols used in the novel become temporary signifiers or "*objects a*" David pursues as he is moved by an unattainable desire.

## 7. A limited understanding

David's desires and fears are much larger than he could possibly comprehend – because he is a child and because he has no way of expressing unconscious desires and fears. One running metaphor illustrates the human tragedy of limited understanding and communication,

which becomes crucial for a migrant family that struggles with language or a generational gap. Roth addresses the theme of human understanding with an object: the tongs Genya uses to show “how wide my brain can stretch” (69). David questions her about death after he saw a “long box” and a “black carriage” (64). He is unable to grasp the concept of death and asks his mother childish questions: “did you ever see anyone dead?” (65) and asks why Genya’s grandmother died (65). His mother can only answer by telling him a story about her grandmother; the story is set in Europe and David is confused by the mention of forests (65), nature and seasons (66) and the narration itself: “David couldn’t quite follow these threads within threads, but nodded” (67) – even though his mother makes sure he is following by repeatedly asking “Do you understand?” (66). The story brings him closer to his mother but he is still unable to understand the concepts of eternity and death. He asks “What do they do when they die?” (68) and “What are eternal years?” (69). This is as far as his mother can go with her tale: she picks up some tongs for a visual aid: “Reaching toward the sugar bowl she lifted out the tongs, carefully pinched a cube of sugar, and held it up before his eyes. 'This is how wide my brain can stretch.' She said banteringly, 'you see? No wider. Would you ask me to pick up a frozen sea with these narrow things? Not even the ice man could do it.’” (69). David is “horrified and bewildered” (69) as he realizes that his mother does not have answers to everything – and does not believe in heaven. And yet she remains focused on her domestic work; as an adult, she has come to terms with her own limited understanding and her fears while David is still unable to understand the concept of mortality.

The tongs appear again with the story of Isaiah. The rabbi translates Isaiah 6:1 to a student: “But just when Isaiah let out this cry – I am unclean – one of the angels flew to the altar

and with tongs, draw out a fiery coal. Understand? With tongs. And with that coal touched his lips” (277). The tongs and the rabbi asking “Understand?” draw a connection with Genya’s story and her metaphor. Isaiah is in presence of forces he cannot quite grasp, except for the fact that he is unclean. The coal – the only object grasped by the tongs of human understanding - stands for purification and truth.

The coal and the tongs become personal symbols for David. He associates the tongs with a blacksmith he saw and with the word – or metallic onomatopoeia “zwank”: “With a zwank, he said it was. Zwank. Where did I see? Zwank some place. Mama? No. Like in blacksmith shop by the rivers. Pincers and horseshoes. Yes must be. With pincers, zwank means pincers. So why with pincers? Coal was hot. That’s why. But he was a angel. Is angels afraid? Afraid to get burned?” (230). Again, David has to deal with his inability to fully understand his world, here religious concepts such as angels. Later, when David is looking for a place to burn his Passover chumitz, he passes by the blacksmith. By that time, the tongs and coal clearly stand for purification, as opposed to the cellar: “-Zwank. Zwank. In a cellar is -” (248). David eventually transcends his limited understanding thanks to his mystical experience. The stream of consciousness used in Chapter XXI or even his dream about eating the sun (330) evoke completeness and present David as being able to grasp the world in its entirety.

The tongs appear again in Chapter XXI, when David is electrocuted and has another mystical experience. David is able to grasp the entire world again: “And he writhed without motion in the clutch of a fatal glory, and his brain swelled and dilated till it dwarfed the galaxies in a bubble of refulgence” (419). Then: “he kicked – once. Terrific rams of darkness collided; out of their shock space toppled into havoc” (419). David is no longer limited by the tongs. While

Genya's brain would not stretch any further (69), David's brain swells to an unimaginable size. Earlier, Genya refers to him as her "little God" (109) and David imagines a revengeful God that would destroy the world (241). These two images are combined with David transcending the limitations of human understanding and gaining the power to kick the world "into havoc" (419). Later in David's mystical delirium, we find a recognizable onomatopoeia: "-Zwank! Zwank! Zwank!" (426). He then becomes aware of his impurity: "David touched his lips. The soot came off on his hand. Unclean" (426). He is trapped in a horrific industrial setting associated with his father – standing for the world he does not understand and the masculine challenge he is not yet able to grasp. The "man in the wires", a Christ-like figure with "his slimy, purple chicken-guts" that David recalls from the picture of the Sacred Heart he saw at Leo's house (322) speaks: "Chadgodya!" moaned the man in the wires. 'One kid one only kid'" (477). The words echo the traditional Chad Gadya song David learned at the cheder but seem to refer to David and single him out as a chosen one. He has been singled out by the tongs and his father: "his father voice thundered. 'You!'" (427). David has become a godlike figure, and must now be grasped by tongs to be understood by the part of himself that remained human, and by others, including the small crowd that has gathered around the electrocuted child. Images of a "cake of ice" (428) and a "cube of sugar" (428) appear, before David falls from his divine pedestal and goes downward via a long flight of stairs in the darkness (429). He eventually finds the angel coal: "Coal! And it was brighter than the pith of lightning and milder than pearl" (430). When faced with the coal, David finally finds peace: "Zwank! Zwank! Nothingness beatified reached out its hand. Not cold the amber was. Not scorching. But as if all eternity's caress were fused and granted in one instant" (430). David has finally found the "*object a*" he was pursuing and stops experiencing lack for an

instant. This experience would not be possible in the material world, but this is what David's mystical experience is about. He can now come back to the real world: he asks the man in the wires to whistle, a sound that woke him up when he was dreaming near the river (431). David's experience could be interpreted as the finding of a unity and the understanding of his own mortality. Confronting the darkness and finding the "angel-coal" he has been looking for bring some closure to David's quest for purity and it seems David finally found the *object a* he had been looking for, even though there is no evidence of him recalling it and no suggestion that finding the "angel-coal" in the darkness will make a difference in David's life.

David now understands what it is to be mortal. He no longer looks at death and "eternal years" as a mere absence like young children do (Ramazani, 87). He also resolved for a brief moment the issue of language. Throughout the novel, David struggles to find a meaning in a world that "had been created without thought of him" (17) by using symbols (Wayne Lesser, 165). In other words, David went back to a pre-language phase where things and objects of desire were not distorted and lost through language, a world that Lacan would refer to as the Real. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "The distance achieved by entrance into a mediating order of symbols is also an unbridgeable gap between the word and the thing. The truth that is available in the immediate realm of experience is lost when it is mediated by the realm of symbols" (Stewart, 57). The coal is no longer a symbol; it becomes a concrete manifestation of David's desire when he finds it in the darkness.

David has also reached the Other by finding purity and truth in the darkness. Lacan writes that the desire for knowledge and truth is "essentially the Desire to know the Other (A)" (Sullivan, 92). Who is David's Other? His migrant parents or the mainstream American society

could correspond to this description. If we are to look at the metaphor of the tongs of human understanding in the context of immigration, we can see how a culture or a worldview could be a serious obstacle for assimilation. This is the case of Genya, who cannot stretch her brain so she can learn a new language, a new culture and gain knowledge of her Other, America. By finding the angel-coal or his “*object a*”, David has purified himself and gained a knowledge of the Other and of himself. By being singled out, chosen like the child from the Chad Gadya litany and having his brain swollen to include the entire universe, David has become able to grasp his American world and his European origins. He understands he is unique and will always stand above a divide – deep down in which lies the darkness, where he knows he can find the coal and his own individual truth. The darkness signifies the Other, and David finding his “*object a*” after exploring the darkness, in other words the Other is a way for David to appropriate the Other and perhaps even appropriate his identity as an Other.

## 8. Isaiah

The regression to a pre-language stage and the finding of David’s “*object a*” would not have been possible without his fascination with the Biblical story of Isaiah. David listens to the rabbi reading the text to an older boy and immediately becomes fascinated, mainly by the notion of purity. Some critics write about this scene as a step in David’s journey as a prophet. Lyons sees David’s encounter with the story of Isaiah as a “prophetic initiation” (195) and Lynn Alternbernd writes that “David recognizes a parallel with the experience of biblical prophets when he overhears Rabbi Pankower explaining the circumstances in which Isaiah saw God” (677). Is David a prophet? It is hard to judge since we are given too much insight into his psyche

and approach this character as a child instead of recognizing divine interventions or fulfillment of his role as a prophet. Besides, David definitely has a very personal interpretation of the Biblical story; as Kerman puts it, the story becomes “the guiding rubric of his mythology” (57) instead of functioning within a broader religious mythology.

We are reading the Biblical story through several buffers: Rabbi Pankower is translating it for a student, Mendel, whom he considers as dull. David is hearing the translation which is interrupted by his own thoughts. Parts of the story are omitted since David does not hear much about the angels or about what God tells Isaiah afterwards. He hears Rabbi Pankower’s dramatic interpretation of the passage: the rabbi crumples his cap and mimes the angel placing the coal on Isaiah’s lips. These visual aids probably influence David’s interpretation of the passage; he is able to relate to Isaiah’s despair and the rabbi acting as the angel helps David perceive him as a symbol of religious authority and approach religion as a way of purifying himself. The last part of the Biblical passage the rabbi is reading from addresses Isaiah's inability to share his experience with other mortals; this echoes David’s inability to explain to Rabbi Pankower that he saw God by the car-tracks (257), as well as Rabbi Pankower’s mission as a religious educator since the rabbi struggles to teach a group of young boys who are not receptive at all.

David appropriates the story and it soon becomes an object of desire for him. At first, he wants the book. In his excitement, he thinks “That blue book, Gee! It’s God” (227). The juxtaposition of these two ideas suggests the book becomes a symbol for God in David’s mind. He then breaks into the cheder to read the book (256). Once he is allowed to read the passage, he no longer desires the book. His interest switches to the coal, which he has appropriated right away by associating it with the cellar, his own symbol for impurity and sin. Right after hearing



the story, David thinks: “You couldn’t do it with regular coal. You’d burn all up. Even hot tea if you drink – ooh! But where could you get angel-coal? Mr. Ice-man, give me a pail of angel-coal. Hee! Hee! In a cellar is coal. But other kind, black coal, not angel coal. Only God has angel-coal. Where is God’s cellar I wonder?” (231). The original story does not give much detail about the coal. David infers it is special and different from the black coal he has seen. He then comes up with the idea that God has a cellar, where he keeps the “angel-coal”. He also inscribes the story within the world he is familiar with; he mentions tea, black coal and the Ice-man. The Ice-man would probably grab the “pail of angel-coal” with some tongs, a reference to the idea of how limited human understanding is, including David’s interpretation of the story he heard translated by Rabbi Pankower.

David’s fascination with the angel-coal seems to bring him closer to his origins. Lacan associates the notion of the Name-of-the-Father with the paternal metaphor; subjects who do not experience the Name-of-the-Father directly turn to a paternal metaphor to replace it (Lemaire, 235). We have seen that Albert’s authority is not always respected and he is infantilized as an immigrant. By desiring the “angel-coal”, David is distancing himself from his desire for his mother and this distance is a form of paternal metaphor (Lemaire, 235). The angel-coal is also associated with God, which functions as a father figure for David (Samet, 578) and with the rabbi, who functions as a “spiritual father” (Wisse, 68). The “angel-coal” also function as a connection to Europe and David's Jewish heritage since it causes David to develop a strong interest in the instruction he receives at the cheder. These religious schools were “conducted strictly on old country methods” (Edmund James, 151) and functioned as an institution through which the older generation could keep their Jewish heritage alive. At the cheder, David is

recognized as a model student. The rabbi appreciates his abilities for the study of religious texts and his interest in the story of Isaiah. The rabbi tells David he has an “iron head” (217), refers to David as “my child” (233) or “my David” (366). David has a “true Yiddish head” (234) and even his mother praises him for being a good student at the cheder (241). Even though he interprets the “angel-coal” in a very personal way, this symbol functions as a connection to his origins and allows him to belong in the cheder.

## 9. Symbolism

The “angel-coal” is one of the many symbols David appropriates and incorporates into his personal mythology. David's interpretation of culturally-charged symbols such as the biblical coal or the Christian cross does not correspond to what these symbols stand for in cultural or religious conventions. The symbolism of *Call It Sleep* is often studied by critics and recurring symbols are usually associated with a vision of the novel as a work of psychological fiction or “roman à clef” but Roth did not want to write that kind of novel. In an interview with Freedman, he reveals that “A lot of people have paid a great deal of attention to the symbolism, but while I was writing the book I had to do just the opposite. I knew I had a yarn to tell. I was mainly a story-teller, and I knew I had to stick to my yarn. I sometimes found myself being taken off in the direction of the symbolism, but I had to resist that” (156). However, David heavily relies on symbols to “encode” his environment (Adams, 45), in an effort to organize a world that often leaves him confused and scared.

Symbols are directly connected to the idea of Lacanian desire. Giving a particular meaning to an apparently arbitrary signifier inscribes it in the chain of dead signifiers used by the

subject to temporarily refer to an “*object a*”. For Lacan, the first images the child is exposed to are complete and usually centered around the mother. These images define the child’s world (Sullivan, 141). Later, the child experiences a sense of castration and loss as these images are no longer available. According to Jan Marta, the lost “fantasized totalization” can be expressed through “the bits and pieces of metaphoric substitution and an unending metonymic displacement” (54). As we have previously seen, David’s association of the angel-coal with purity allows him to go on a quest for his lost origins and the bond he used to have with his mother. For Jung, symbols also function as “the best possible description or formulation of a relatively unknown fact” (Jung, quoted in Astor, 704). This is similar to David’s use of the cellar to refer to sexuality, impurity and perhaps his own Oedipal feelings and the fear of his father.

#### 10. Three types of symbols

David’s personal language and worldview are filled with three types of symbols; some are associated with lights, other with darkness and a third category with power. The symbols associated with the concept of light usually also signify purity, peace of mind and have a religious connotation. We find for instance the snow which is “miraculously clean” and “all about him”, “whiter than anything he knew, whiter than anything, whiter” (159). The color white and the fact that the snow is “all about him” evoke a very peaceful, pure and complete image – in other words, a pre-mirror stage complete connection with the mother. Water itself has a similar purpose, for instance when David looks at the dazzling water of the river. The water is “White. Brighter than day” (247). The purity of snow and water are very similar to the peace and light David finds on the roof. His fascination with heights starts with the telegraph poles he follows.

His fascination with the poles allows him to forget about the trouble he got himself into. They seem to pave the way for a more spiritual world (94). Later, David finds this same concept with the stairs and roof door of his tenement building: “They were inviolable those stairs, guarding the light and the silence” (144). When he finally goes up on the roof, he finds peace and light: “And about were roof-tops, tarred and red and sunlit and red, roof-tops to the scarred horizon. Flocks of pigeons wheeled. Where they flew in lower air, they hung like a poised and ever-raveling smoke; nearer at hand and higher, they glittered like rippling water in the sun. Quiet. Sunlight on brow and far off plating the sides of spires and water-towers and chimney pots and the golden cliffs of the streets. To the east, the bridges, fragile in powdery light” (296). Water is still present but the quiet and airy settings contrast with the busy urban environment David has been surrounded with so far. The telegraph poles, water-towers and chimneys function as phallic symbols but have a positive connotation. They allow David to assert himself in his world and encode the urban buildings he sees – unlike the horns his father brings home, which are more of a threatening phallic symbol.

These symbols of light and purity that empower David also include the “angel-coal” (227), the sun he dreams he is eating (330) and to a certain extent, the picture of the Sacred Heart, crosses and the rosary after his friend Leo exposes him to these Catholic symbols. The second category of symbols is linked to the idea of repression. Repression occurs in two stages according to Freud: at first, “the entrance into consciousness of the psychic representation of the craving is barred” (444). We can see this with David who is repressing desire for his mother: David looks at her breasts and quickly thinks “Mustn’t! Look away!” (64). His dreams about the knives he cannot lift from the table (22) also function as a way of repressing parricide. With the

second stage of repression, “the psychic derivatives and associations of the craving are repulsed” (Freud, 444). David’s fear of darkness, the cellar, rats, the carriage and the general idea of impurity correspond to the second stage of repression. The scene where David is introduced to the idea of sex by Annie is a turning point for his use of symbols. First, Annie’s brother Yussie shows David a rat trap and gives a nightmarish description of these creatures: “Rats on’y come out innuh da’k, w’en yuh can’t see ‘em, and yuh know ‘wea dey comin’ f’on, dey comin’ f’om de cellah” (49). He then reluctantly goes in the dark closet with Annie (53) where she explains how babies are made and mentions David’s sexually connoted role: “Yaw de poppa” (153). The mention of the father probably awakens David’s wish for parricide and his desire for his mother on a subconscious level – he is now even more afraid and disgusted of the dark closet. Because David is too young to fully comprehend sexuality beyond the childish explanation he heard from Annie (David Seed, 50), the fear and disgust he experiences towards the sexual game Annie introduced him to is transferred to the symbols associated with the experience such as the darkness, the rats, the cellar as well as his threatening father.

The cellar appears in multiple instances: there is God’s cellar where the “angel-coal” is (255), the cellar under the building where the Schearls live in Bronzeville and the cellar where Leo tricks David into going to so that Leo can take advantage of David’s cousin. The Bronzeville cellar is a threat but David is safe thanks to his mother listening to him from the top of the stairs (112). The threat is materialized when David hides in the cellar because he believes he has killed one of the boys that were taunting him: “There was no silence here, but if he dared to listen, he could hear tappings and creakings, patterings and whispers, all furtive, all malign. It was

horrible, the dark. The rats lived there, the hordes of nightmare, the wobbly faces. The crawling and misshapen things” (92). David’s mother has failed to protect him from this cellar.

The cellar he takes Leo to is an embodiment of his fear of impurity and sexuality. There is a toilet in this cellar, which leads Fred Roth to interpret sex, death and excretion as being connected in David’s mind (218). The rosary is supposed to protect David in this cellar, but it fails and David has to face his irate father later because he took Leo to his cousin.

The third cellar is imaginary and contains the “angel-coal”. David descends into the third cellar during the mystical experience he has in Chapter XXI. The cellar is a structured symbol that functions in the context of a quest for the angel-coal as an obstacle David has to go through in his quest. God’s cellar is a well-structured symbol within David’s narrative and his mystical experience and allows David to give himself a chance to conquer the darkness he does not understand, in other words mortality.

The third category of symbols is about power. This category includes Albert’s bull horns, his hammer and his whip as well as the metallic tools David uses in the car tracks: the zinc sword (253) and the milk dipper (414). These symbols are connected with mainstream culture: Albert used a hammer, a whip and a milk dipper because of his job, the zinc sword is given to David by three boys of Gentile origins, possibly Irish, and it is associated with the Statue of Liberty and its torch that looks like “the blackened hilt of a broken sword” (14). For David, possessing power means being recognized and accepted. There is an obvious phallic challenge with the objects that belong to the father, but there is also a cultural one with David using the zinc sword in the car tracks because he is pressured into it by the three Gentile boys.

## 11. Inaccessible symbols

Even though David relies on symbols throughout the novel, he sometimes fails at making sense of his world and is unable to process and interpret his surroundings. Being scared or in shock seem to keep David from processing his surroundings. For instance, David questions the reality of the world while he is scared in his hallway: “how could you be sure you were actually there and not dreaming?” (20). He also learns that things are not what they seem to be and despairs at his inability to understand the world: “Trust nothing. Wherever you look, don't believe” (102) and “You had to know everything and suddenly what you knew became something else” (138). After his father hits him, “he felt as though his mind had slackened its grip on reality” (274) and his perceptions are dulled. He also experiences fragmentation and alienation after being introduced to a sexual game by Annie and being unable to relate this experience to his mother: “But she didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself” (55). David realizes that his own symbols and fears belong to himself and he will not be able to share them with his mother or anyone else – for instance, he is aware that he will have to hide his rosary (349) since this object that stands for protection will have a different connotation for his parents.

David's personal symbols are usually taken from someone and appropriated. This is the case of the rosary, the cross and the Sacred Heart Leo introduces him to, and the “angel-coal” is taken from Rabbi Pankower and the Bible. David is able to appropriate these religious symbols both from mainstream Christian culture and the cheder – which stands for a more traditional

Jewish institution, even though it represents a second generation of migrants who are very Americanized.

On the other hand, David is exposed to symbols that are meaningful to his parents but do not really belong to American mainstream culture or to the culture of his Jewish community, such as Genya's picture or Albert's bull horns and the whip. He is unable to recognize the corn in the picture (172) and cannot quite recall a memory he believes is associated with the corn (188). The bull horns are also hard to identify; they vaguely evoke a cow he saw in a movie (298) and he associates them with a 'challenge' he does not understand (299). Later, he hands Albert's whip to him as a sign of submission, as if to acknowledge his father's possession of this phallic symbol (400). David is unable to appropriate these symbols: the “world of his parents is inaccessible” (Sollors, 141). Within the context of immigration, this means David is able to make sense out of a culture in which he is a foreigner and appropriates the symbols from this culture while he is unable to connect with the culture of his parents.

## 12. After Chapter XXI

The symbols that belong to David's personal mythology appear again in Chapter XXI as David gets electrocuted, including the hammer, Christian symbols and the “angel-coal”. He goes through a near-death experience and finds the “angel-coal” after a hallucinatory amalgamation of his fears and personal symbols. After this experience, he is carried home where his parents seem reconciled. His father acknowledges him and David is put to bed. He then lies in bed and reflects on his world – and decides to “call it sleep” (441). This last passage can be interpreted in different ways. For Naomi Diamant, David refers to sleep because he is unable to find words for



his experience. However, the descriptions based on sight and hearing suggest he still has access to his poetic worldview (354). On the other hand, Folks argues that David is headed toward “the dull sleep of adolescence and adulthood” and has lost his artistic sensibility (292). And for Jefferey Saperstein, David is now more mature and able to find meaning to his environment (47-48).

The term “call” is important; it places David within the act of naming and identifying things. According to Lemaire: “Giving a name to a thing in effect presupposes that one can distinguish that thing as not being one's self and that one therefore has at one's disposal a subjectivity and a signifier of that subjectivity” (8). By calling “it” sleep, David is able to put some distance between his self and “it”. The concept of sleep is also strongly desensitizing since it evokes a loss of consciousness, a strong contrast with David's experience in Chapter XXI. In this last passage, David thinks about light, people, sounds and eventually cobbles and shoes: “It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him, and over him and scudding ever toward him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, buniony, pavement-beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers; shoes, over one and through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence” (441). The image of the cobbles and the shoes over David suggest that he is buried. Earlier in the novel, the sight of a funeral and a “box” scared David (60) and his mother tells him about death and “eternal years” (69). David is unable to grasp this concept and death soon becomes associated with his fear of darkness, cellars and sex. In Chapter XXI, David has a near-death experience and descends in the darkness where he finds the angel-coal (430). After this experience, David is able to understand

mortality and decides to disassociate himself from it by simply calling it sleep. He imagines himself buried under the cobbles with the feet of a vibrant and diverse crowd walking over him, not minding him. David feels triumph and acquiescence because he has reached a consensus about his mortality, and the 'eternal years' are merely a loss of consciousness similar to what he experiences when he sleeps. And he also understands that his artistic sensibility helps him perceive beauty that is not eternal either: the “vivid jets of images”, “the dry light on grey stones”, “the tapering glitter of rails” (441) are all a part of David's experience before he goes to sleep. There is also the idea of movement with the repetition of “It was only toward sleep” (441), as if the chain of dead signifiers inherent to Lacanian desire leads to a dull sleep once the subject becomes alienated from their original desire. David understands that remaining in movement and choosing new objects of beauty for his quest is what keeps him alive and also brings him closer to this final sleep. In spite of this knowledge, David is safe and at peace because he managed to name something that belongs to the realm of the Other.

Is there a redemption at the end of the novel? Is David really a messiah? Some critics go as far as comparing David to a Christ figure, because of the Christian references that are rendered through the conversation people are having while David is electrocuting himself. Lyons considers David as a Christ figure, and the novel is “about redemption” (202) since David experiences a “mystical revelation” (201). Alternbernd also compares David to a Christ figure (685) and argues that David has become a messiah and is now ready to teach others (685). Other critics do not see David's mystical experience as positive; Lesser talks about a “failed resurrection” (167) and for Inge, David is mistaken when he sees God in the car tracks (48). For Samet, David is betrayed “by an alien and hostile world” (579).

There definitely is the idea of rebirth in Chapter XXI; David is looking for a “crack” (416) and keeps chanting to himself: “In the crack remember. In the crack be born” (411). He is probably thinking that the flash of white light he saw before is born in the crack if he jams a metallic object in it – but this idea also functions in the context of immigration and extreme poverty since it is arguable David and his family have fallen between the cracks of society, or that David's entire existence is located in the rift or crack between two worlds and two cultures. In the end, the interne writes “Child revived” (438) on his report, the proof that David went through a near-death experience, but there is no mention of David being redeemed. Besides, it is unclear what David would need redemption: he is too young to have really sinned. And the policeman who brings David home says: “he's full o' de devil a'reddy” (439), meaning that David looks like he is starting to recover, but the choice of words suggest that David will sin again.

Analyzing David as a Christ figure or as a messiah means there is a higher power involved. When asked by his mother why he electrocuted himself, he answers: “I don't – I don't know' (...) And the answer was true. He couldn't tell now why he had gone, except that something had forced him, something that was clear and inevitable, but that every passing minute made more inarticulate” (437). Before plunging the milk dipper into the crack, David mentally repeats the taunts he heard from the three Gentile boys earlier: “You're scared” and “Double dare me?” which quickly escalates into “I triple dare you?” (407). He also gives himself “only three waits” (407) before performing the act. He is talking to himself and is extremely stressed. While he reflects on this, some children in the street are playing: one of them is a wolf and the others are taunting him with their “Wolf, are yuh ready?” (407). The juxtaposition of the children playing and David's words make David seem very childish, and there seems to be

nothing messianic or even religious about David's motivations. When David faces the car tracks, he thinks: "Yuh dared me. Now I gotta" (410). It seems that David wants to prove he can be free and boisterous like the three Gentile boys or like Leo. He might be acting out as a response to the stress experienced at home, or as a way of asserting his own culture and identify as an American boy. The pattern of his thoughts evoke obsession. He is repeating things, talks to himself, uses the number three repeatedly with the "three waits" (407) and the triple dare (407) and is obviously under a lot of stress. This could be a sign of obsessive-compulsive behavior, which would bring a new light to his collection of miscellaneous objects in the shoe box, his collection of calendar leaves, his fascination with the telegraph poles, the angel-coal and the idea of purification in general.

### 13. Assimilation

Is the ending of the novel about assimilation? Some critics interpret David's near death experience and his rebirth as David being "reborn as American" (Wirth-Nesher, 7) and belonging instead of being considered as an Other. There is some evidence of this, for instance the excited cries of the children who welcome a wounded David home: "It's Davy! It's Davy" (433) which would be an Americanized version of his name. David is also surrounded by a crowd that seems to accept him at the very end of the novel; he thinks about "outstretched, open palms of legions upon legions of hands hurtling toward him" (441). This image suggests assimilation, but also a loss of identity, associated with the idea of sleep. And yet this is what assimilation would be like in a crowded place like New York City. Roth himself revealed in an interview with Freedman that: "David's problem, as I saw it, would be to reconcile himself to a more ordinary form of

existence from now on. I don't know what he'd do after that, perhaps go off and teach elementary school somewhere. But his special gift was gone” (155). David is no longer special because of his acute perceptions and his artistic sensibilities. Besides, the idea of David teaching elementary school would be a quite typical tale of assimilation, much like Sara Smolinski in Anzia Yeziarska's *The Bread Givers*. David renouncing his artistic gift also functions within the context of the Oedipus complex; according to Sullivan, the young boy must look for acceptance within a public group to get over the Oedipal complex (296), which is what happened when people from very different backgrounds gathered around an electrocuted David.

There are very different definitions of assimilation and it is not clear what Roth thought on this matter. In 1919, social reformer Frances Kellor saw assimilation as “the indistinguishable incorporation of the races into the substance of American life” (Philip Davis, 625) and migrants quickly lose their culture in their new environment (Davis, 625). In his 1920 speech 'Americanism', Theodore Roosevelt acknowledges the existence of “naturalized Americans” and “Americans born abroad”. However, “a hyphenated American is not an American at all” (Davis, 648). The contribution of people of foreign origin was recognized by this time, but cultural diversity, hybridity and children like David who are in between two cultures were not well-perceived and perhaps not well-understood. For assimilation to take place by the early twentieth century standards, David would have to completely reject his Yiddish culture, his religion and his family. This is not the case since after his electrocution, David comes home to a father who finally recognizes him. Albert calls him his “sawn” (437) and acknowledges David's age. He also feels guilty about driving David out of the home: “It – it's my fault you'd say” (440) and David feels triumph at the sight of his father: “David felt a shrill, wild surge of triumph whip within

him, triumph that his father stood slack-mouth, finger-clawing, stooped” (434). Later, Albert has to leave the apartment to get some medicine (44). He is now driven out of the home while Genya takes care of David. David could think he defeated his father in their Oedipal struggle, but it is more likely that David is over his Oedipus complex at this point. He killed his mother in his family romance, which according to Folks symbolizes the end of his Oedipus complex and his desire for assimilation (283). However, his mother is there to take care of him and it is likely that David experiences triumph because he is finally accepted by his father who shows emotions after his son is wounded. Even his mystical experience brings David closer to the city (Wisse, 73) and allows him to be recognized by his community for a brief instant. He is then taken away from the crowd he attracted and the neighbors are chased out of the Schearls' apartment. David's final triumph and acceptance of his mortality occur in the comfort of home, while his mother is taking care of him and his father out for some medicine – a metaphor for his role as a provider. David has found his place within the family unit but not in mainstream American culture.

#### 14. The 'American Dream'

How is David's experience of desire relevant to the migrant experience? If we analyze it in Lacanian terms, the desire of the Other is actually what leads to the idea of the American Dream. Even though economic hardships and threats pushed a lot of migrants to go to the U.S., the promise of a better life and the notion of America as a “Golden Land” are very similar to the role of the “*object*” *a* in Lacanian desire. *Call It Sleep* opens with what looks like a short quote with no source: “(I pray thee ask no questions/ this is that Golden Land)” (9). The expression 'Golden Land' is full of promises but the narrator does not want it to be questioned, as if it would

crumble if he were to give it more consistency, for instance by locating it. Roth starts his novel with this idea of the Golden Land, but the Schearls never find it. Their America is a quest, much like David's quest for the angel-coal. The closest they come to the Golden Land is by transferring their desire to material objects, which become *objects a* for a short period of time. For instance, Genya and Bertha look at an automobile and wish they owned one: "Look, Bertha! That new automobile. What a pretty blue! Wouldn't you like to be rich enough to own one?" (154). This interest in material possessions contrasts vividly with Genya's arrival at Ellis Island; Genya and David are hard to identify as migrants because they do not carry any possessions with them (10). Their destitution makes them alien in this new society and they turn to material possessions as a way of getting what they were looking for when they moved to the U.S.

The Schearls' conception of the Golden Land is not an isolated one. In an 1912 guide distributed to Yiddish-speaking migrants, John Foster Carr describes America as "a country extraordinarily rich in natural resources, and it is so new that many of these are still untouched. It has wonderful mines of coal, iron, copper, silver and gold" (29). Albert has become bitter because his first years in the U.S. have taught him that the wealth of the Golden Land is not accessible to him. However, Genya indulges in this luxury by purchasing more flour than the family needs (128) and Bertha sees her candy store as a way of accessing the riches she has always dreamed about.

Why did America turn into a spatial *object a* for millions of migrants in search of a better life? Jewish migrants were presented with the example of successful Jews who prospered and became Americans (Carr, 9). America is presented as a "refuge from persecution" (Carr, 7), a vision shared by the Schearls who remember the pogroms (154). But more importantly, America

was idealized as a place where migrants would be rewarded: “America is a land of opportunities and if you work faithfully and intelligently you will have many chances for advancement” (Carr, 10). The idea of America as a place where migrants are rewarded brutally contrasts with Bertha's frustrations toward her work in a sweat shop, as well as the experience of the large number of Jewish migrants who worked in the textile industry. The idea of Republic (Carr, 16) is also another golden aspect of the American Dream: it is easy to understand why the promise of democracy attracted a lot of oppressed populations. Even president Woodrow Wilson talks about liberty, justice and the American Dream in a 1915 address:

You have taken an oath of allegiance to a great ideal, to a great body of principles, to a great hope of the human race. You have said, 'We are going to America, not only to earn a living, not only to seek the things which it was more difficult to obtain where we were born, but to help forward the great enterprises of the human spirit' – to let men know that everywhere in the world there are men who will cross strange oceans and go where a speech is spoken which is alien to them if they can but satisfy their quest for what their spirits crave; knowing that whatever the speech there is but one longing and utterance of the human heart, and that is for liberty and justice (Davis, 611-612).

Seeking the "things which it was more difficult to obtain where we were born" suggests the idea of lack – which leads to desire in Lacanian psychoanalysis even though the subject is unable to define this desire precisely and translates it into the search for different "*objects a*". The Schearls' lack of liberty, justice and safety is translated into their relocation to the U.S., and later Albert's longing for a job where he is respected, Genya's desire for a car or Bertha's wonders as she shops for clothes.

Wilson recognizes that the idea of the American Dream is not something that can be found in America – but in the migrants themselves and in their movement: "A man does not go out to seek the thing that is not in him" (Davis, 613). In other words, migrants have internalized



American as their *object a* and it is now an important part of their internal language, in a similar fashion to David and his angel-coal. Wilson saw this from a positive angle and thought the country could benefit from these dreams: "You dreamed dreams of what America was to be, and I hope you brought the dreams with you" (Davis, 613). The ghetto of the East Side tells a different story, but some migrants have held on to these dreams. For instance, Yeziarska's *The Bread Givers* ends on a positive note with Sara getting what she always dreamed of – an education; perhaps what Lacan would call the knowledge of the Other.

Looking at the American Dream from a Lacanian perspective shows us how it was constructed; in a first movement, the Other is located "in time and situated in space" (Sullivan, 82). The world on the other side of the ocean becomes this location. The subject desires the Other and 'The Desire to know or possess the Other(A) has been displaced into the Desire to be, to know or to have' (Sullivan, 83). We can recognize the desire to be American, for instance, with David trying to pass for a Gentile boy when he meets three other Gentile children (25). The desire to know is a recurring theme in Weinberg's *The World Of Our Mothers*, in which she interviews first generation Jewish women migrants who either regret not attending American schools or appreciate the sacrifices their parents made so they could get an education. The desire to know appears in *Call It Sleep* with Genya remarking she should learn to speak English. And the desire to have is definitely a big part of the American Dream and of Western societies in general and is embodied in *Call It Sleep* by Bertha and her excitement at the purchase of her clothes or Genya's desire for a blue automobile.

In a second movement, the American Dream is told as a narrative instead of being experienced as a quest for an "*object a*". A lot of migrants have organized their lives and chosen

the motif of the American Dream, perhaps to make up for their disappointment or to give a strong forward dynamic to their story. According to Hasia R. Diner, the East Side has been reinvented as an "exemplar of the nation's multi-ethnic 'New World Symphony'" (16), in other words idealized as a culturally rich melting pot. We find an echo of this in Roth's depiction of Ellis Island, filled with a loud and joyous multi-ethnic crowd (11). These narratives helped spread the American Dream and fueled the first movement for a lot of migrants. According to Sullivan, Lacanian desire can give birth to ideologies, if it is supported by institutions (272-273). The American Dream is definitely framed with several institutions, including Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, the companies operating the steamers immigrants took, as well as the several Jewish organizations such as the Hebrew Sheltering and the Immigrant Aid Society, created to help out new migrants from their arrival to their financial independence (Carr, 7-8). Even though Roth mentions traditional elements of the American Dream narrative such as Ellis Island, he clearly does not believe in it – which makes *Call It Sleep* a good text to observe the American Dream as a manifestation of Lacanian desire.

#### 15. The American Dream and economic realities

Even though Roth writes from David's point of view, economic and social realities appear in a few instances and give an additional depth to the Schearls' life in America. Roth's treatment of the New York landscape plays an important part in reproducing the utter poverty of the social group the Schearls belong to: "David has been carried into a wasteland where poverty, crowded tenements, stench, and noise, with their consequent pain, fear and guilt, are the realities that belie the promise of "that Golden Land" (Altenbernd, 677). These elements are present as a

background to the narration and are easy to forget since David is so used to them – except in a few instances where David has to deal with crime and poverty more directly. His first encounter with crime occurs when he goes into a poorer district to assist his father and two men steal milk bottles from the wagon David is guarding. The men are "blunt and coarse" (276) and David is afraid of them. He is unable to react and panics at the idea of his father finding out he let them steal the bottles (277). David is more afraid of his father than of the thieves and the theft of the milk bottles seem pale in comparison to the kind of crimes occurring in these poorest districts. Poverty and crime do not appear again until the end of the novel, which opens up toward a more diverse world instead of focusing on the Schearls. After running out of his apartment, David hides and hopes his mother will come look for him. This is the first time he is outside at dusk and he discovers a new world he was not aware of before. He sees two prostitutes, even though he is unable to understand what they are: "two women approached, scanning with dead caressing flutters the dead faces of the men who passed them" (406) and David also observes the clients of a beer-saloon (408), which is probably the first time he witnesses adults drinking since alcoholism was not common in Jewish communities at that time. In Chapter XXI, the different threads give us an insight into the life of a very diverse population, including women who talk about sex, illegal abortions (415) and are probably prostitutes. Violence and murder are mentioned by these women: "It'd do my heart good to see a knife in his lousy guts" (416). The card game mentioned on 418 might be an echo of illegal gambling. In this last chapter, David finds himself plunged into a dangerous world that contrasts with the daylight streets filled with children he is used to. Even though David is aware of poverty, he has been sheltered from a lot of social realities.

Roth is clearly not a supporter of the American Dream but he does not mention a few things that would have been a reality for a family like the Schearls. Carr, in his *Guide to the U.S.* designed for Yiddish-speaking migrants, warns people against swindlers and employment agencies (10), and advises migrants to complain to the Board of Health if they encounter issues with garbage or running water (50). Tenement buildings like the one the Schearls live in were designed to provide better living conditions for migrant families but there were a lot of issues with unsanitary water closets, plumbing and garbage disposal (Deborah Dwork, 10, 24). The Schearls' apartment is always described as clean and they have running water. Carr also mentions tuberculosis (47), a disease that was largely spread in the community where the Schearls live (Dwork, 19). And yet Roth makes no mention of these problems. Is Roth painting a brighter picture or is he avoiding clichés? His omissions can be justified by the fact that he focuses on David and his family and does not attempt to write about a community.

He goes as far as creating a background story for the Schearls, which really gives them an identity instead of singling out a random family and writing about their experience as migrants. We learn that Genya's family used to have servants (65) and that people in her village were well-to-do thanks to natural resources (66). But this did not last: "We were rich while the forests were there. But after they were cut and the lumber camps moved away, we grew poor" (66). Genya's tale is touching because it is a personal tragedy that lead to her migration but it fits into a pattern of communities unable to find their place in a world going through a heavy industrialization. Once the natural resources were gone, the only option for Genya was to go to a place where these resources were still available: an idealized vision of American that appears in Carr's *Guide to the U.S.* and the "mines of coal, iron, copper, silver and gold" (29).

Roth inscribes the American Dream in the pattern of Lacanian desire by retracing the original loss that lead to the apparition of a desire for relocalization. This appears in the scene where David and his aunt Bertha go to a museum, perhaps the Museum of Natural History recommended by Carr for the migrants who wish to assimilate through culture (21). Bertha notices "an enormous marble figure seated on an equally huge horse" (149) and remarks: "'This is how they looked in the old days' she breathed reverently. 'Gigantic they were, Moses and Abraham and Jacob and others in the earth's youth'" (140). It is unclear who the statue actually represents, but Bertha's concept of the "old days" symbolizes a nostalgia for a time when her culture and religious leaders were considered as powerful. The idea of loss also appears to readers through Bertha's amusement at "the spectacle of a stone wolf suckling two infants", which she believes is a dog (149). Bertha does not recognize the Capitoline Wolf with Remus and Romulus, mythic founders of Rome. The reference to the Roman Empire evokes a time where Europe was powerful and united, but this past is not accessible to Bertha and to many migrants, who experience loss as a result of being cut off from their origins. Loss and the threats to certain groups including the Jews (the Schearls remember the pogroms on 154) create a lack which finds an answer in the American Dream.

#### 16. Albert and the American Dream

The Schearls experience America differently. Albert is the first one to move there and we never learn much about his expectations or his first years in America. By the time the novel begins, he is already bitter and disillusioned. There is a real lack of continuity for Albert who is never able to reconcile his life in America with his past. While Genya tells stories about Europe,

all we ever learn about Albert is that he loves cattle and used to eat "corn-meal mush" (209), which is "one of the few facts that David had ever learnt of his father's boyhood" (209). When Albert is reunited with his family, he does not show any joy; he feels "harsh contempt" (11) for David's foreign outfit and is angry about his wife's confusion and the fact she did not recognize him right away (12). His status as a migrant with a few years of experience in America makes it hard for the family to bond: while Albert is already disillusioned, Genya is expecting a "Golden Land" (11). Throughout the novel, Albert expresses frustration about his work and supporting his family. He is clearly unhappy and aware he will never get these days back: "I sell my days for a little silver – a little paper- sixteen smirched leaves a week – I'll never buy them back with gold" (266). As Albert complains about wasting his time for a meager pay, Roth gives us an insight into the tragedy of a first generation migrant who is getting older with Albert starting to lose his hair: "He pushed his plate away, breathed heavily, ran weathered powerful fingers through his thinning black hair, pressed down the ridge in the back of his head where the cap had bitten in" (267). Albert realizes he is getting old and is never going to be successful in the Golden Land. Perhaps Albert has high expectations and considers his life a failure because he did not meet these expectations. He was apparently unable to transfer the object of his desire to anything else. He also experiences a profound sense of estrangement from people. He becomes paranoid and believes his coworkers look at him "crookedly" (22) and believes Luter hates him: "I tell you there's something seething in that skull of his! A hatred for some mad reason!" (124). Albert recognizes his status as an outcast. After losing his job as a printer, he admits "I have no fortune with men" (137). Albert's inability to function in society, his role as the family's "beast of

burden" (401) and infantilized status as a migrant make him hate America, which becomes a "cursed land" (126) for him in contrast to Genya's expectations of a "Golden Land" (11).

## 17. Genya's America

Genya's America is, according to Samet, "a displaced corner of the Old World" (571). If she had any expectations about the "Golden Land" (11), they are neither met nor invalidated since she never ventures into the new world. What we learn about her past suggests she has been rejected by her family and sent to America with her husband. Albert remarks that her life is as "sealed as a nun's" (335) and Genya is aware of her own isolation: "I know there is a church on a certain street to my left, the vegetable market is to my right, behind me are the railroad tracks and the broken rocks, and before me, a few blocks away is a certain store window that has a kind of white-wash on it – and faces in the white-wash, the kind children draw. Within this pale is my America, and if I ventured further I should be lost. In fact,' she laughed, 'were they ever to wash that window, I might never find my way home again'" (33). Genya takes her situation with humor and the expression "my America" suggests she has found her place in this land, the place of a housewife. She does not complain about her life, but this last remark about not finding her way home again evokes her very fragile sense of having a home. Perhaps her housework is a way for her to concretize this home, but in a few instances, Roth gives us an insight into Genya's deep sense of displacement. She says: "I go here and I'm there! I go there and I'm here. And of a sudden I'm nowhere" (119). This refers to her confusion and anxiety caused by Luter, but the fact she expresses her confusion through the inability to locate herself between "here" and "there" echoes her inability to find the spatial "*object a*" migrants pursue with American Dream,

probably because migration was not a choice but something imposed on her by her family. She experiences a sense of displacement just as deep as Albert's translated in her gaze instead of paranoia: "Under the raised brows the intent brown eyes were focused on a distance so vast it returned upon her" (130). The distance reflects the unfinished spatial quest for an "*object a*", which, in spite of Genya's efforts to keep a perfect home was never found in America.

#### 18. Bertha and materialism

Roth approaches the American Dream in a slightly different way with Bertha, who does not have to work as a housewife right away. Bertha seems to like America and does not feel torn apart between this new place and her homeland: she "escaped" (153) the family and the homeland and she is "one who doesn't yearn for the homeland" (153). Bertha has found something she was looking for with "The streets! The cars! High laughter!" (153). She is able to locate herself within the "here" and "there" that Genya was confused about: "I'm better off here than I was there. Anyone is!" (154). She quickly turns to material possessions, which seem to replace the *object a* she had associated with America. She enjoys buying American clothes: "Twenty cents, and I can wear what only a baroness in Austria could wear" (157). But her American Dream soon appears to be an illusion: Albert's hostility toward her and her work cause her to break down: "Why did I ever set foot on this stinking land? (...) Ten hours a day in a smothering shop (...) And now when I've bought with the sweat of my brow a little of what my heart desires that butcher rends it!" (158). Bertha talking about 'what her heart desires' is an indication that she has successfully translated her American Dream and conception of America as an "*object a*" into a consumerist behavior and now approaches apparel and other material



possessions as "*objects a*". She marries Nathan and dreams about earning money for the things she wants (185-186), but she is clearly disappointed with the candy store and lives in an unsanitary home, which symbolizes her failure.

## 19. Conclusion

Roth did not manage to write a novel that his contemporaries would identify as relevant to a political ideology or as a work that would inscribe itself in the Depression. Roth wrote a classic psychoanalytical novel – something that can be fully appreciated thanks to a Lacanian reading of the novel. Psychoanalytical concepts such as the Oedipal complex, the family romance or Lacanian desire take on a new meaning in the context of immigrant literature and allows for a better understanding of the conflicts encountered by migrant families as well as the dreams they followed. Roth's novel is not a perfect example of realism but his treatment of the human psyche could be considered as psychoanalytical realism – a form that allows him to put a face on immigration instead of treating this movement as a mass. Psychoanalytical realism also allows Roth to create an Other very similar to the Other experienced by readers, for instance through David's fear of darkness. The Other is fluid to a certain extent, for instance with David's difficult relation to his father between alienation and identification. The Other is also treated as a fluid element through the notion of desire since David is always selecting new "*objects a*" as incarnations of his desire for purity. The fluid nature of the Other leads us to the treatment of the Other in the context of a multi-cultural society and David's struggles to navigate different linguistic and cultural universes while constantly redefining the relation of his self to the Other.

## Chapter II: The Fluctuating Nature Of The Other In Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*.

What is the Other? This notion appears in different disciplines and approaches to literary criticism. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan writes about the Other in his *Écrits* and inscribes this notion in his definition of Desire by designing the Other as holding the key to the subject's desire – while the subject in fact desires to be recognized and desired by this Other. This theory is relevant to Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* through David's quest for symbols and through his relationship to his mother (see Chapter 1).

The notion of the Other differs from one discipline to another but there are some common characteristics such as the idea of the Other as unfamiliar, alien and sometimes threatening. Mikhail Bakhtin explores the notion of the Other in relation to language and the written word: “the 'other' – in effect, a linguistic, cultural and ideological conglomerate that includes various 'others' – informs the text, and also, insofar as the latter expresses the author's 'intentions', orients the virtual reader's response” (Christian Moraru, 210). The presence of the Other in speech is referred to as heteroglossia, defined as “an other's speech, and many others' words, appropriated expressions” (Martin Irvine, 1). The other's speech is definitely present in *Call It Sleep*, through David's bilingualism or through the use of foreign languages such as German or Italian. Languages and speech are fluctuating in *Call It Sleep* because of the multi-cultural and multi-lingual world built by Roth, which means the Other is not a fixed notion and varies from one referent to the next as David navigates between his home and the streets.

Even though the Other has not been associated with Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* in criticism, it is in fact a cornerstone of David's personal mythology. This chapter will look at David's relation to the Other, his designation and identification as an Other and at the fluctuating nature of the Other.

The Other appears in *Call It Sleep* through languages and linguistic groups. Each language Roth introduces into his narrative allows for one group to become inclusive while excluding other groups. Depending on David's position, languages are either inclusive or exclusive, requiring him to constantly redefine his approach to the Other and build an identity while his self is threatened by fragmentation. The Freudian cases of Oedipal feelings and family romance Roth writes about also expose David's intricate relationship to the Other and his identification with what groups he should belong to consider as Other. Finally, David's position as a "product of two cultures" (Hana Wirth-Nesher, 3) will help us analyze how David's relation to the Other keeps fluctuating in function of the situation and the system of references he uses and how he finally defines himself in this constantly shifting and contradictory environment.

#### 1. Where is the audience?

Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* is often studied for its unconventional rendering of a multilingual environment and David's relationship to the different languages he is exposed to. This chapter approaches languages as being inclusive or exclusive and as defining different groups (or "linguistic universes" in Naomi Diamant's words). These different groups define David's status as an Other and also allow him to designate different groups as the Other from his point of view. Language functions as a way of including or excluding thanks to Roth's treatment

of language as an element of communication and as a characteristic of a cultural community rather than as a tool that allows characters to express themselves efficiently. Language has no value without a receptive audience, and in the case of a multilingual novel, a receptive audience refers to an audience fluent in a certain language.

The idea of an audience being necessary to language appears with a young David asking an innocent question to his mother: “Why can't I talk with my mouth in the water?” Genya answers “No one would hear you” (18), suggesting that being heard is a necessary condition for being able to talk. Karen Lawrence writes on the audience and associates it with the mother. She compares the “receptive maternal audience” to the reader (115). The audience is easy to identify in the context of dialogues between characters, but Roth's audience is harder to define. Rendering the majority of the dialogues in English is a way of making his text accessible to an audience – but a mainstream audience is sometimes excluded, for instance with the few lines in German on 16 and the Italian speech on 243.

Roth makes a conscious effort to describe Jewish customs, for instance by having David explain them to Leo and by including his readers in his plays on words that could only be understood by bilingual readers. Bertha makes some jokes based on the similarity between the Yiddish “kockin” and the English “cocaine” and with “mollar” and “molleh”. Readers understand the jokes thanks to David who conveniently remembers what the Yiddish words mean (160). Roth's methods are rather subtle and allow the readers to be included in a linguistic group that would be considered as Other if the language barrier was present, making dialogues and cultural references accessible.

Readers are also included in certain linguistic groups because of the oral quality of Roth's dialogues. The strongly accentuated speech of David's peer group is rendered in a way that requires readers to rely on sounds to understand. The best example is Benny's speech, which can only be deciphered by reading aloud: "In trying to divine Benny's meaning, one could forget all else. 'If I blyibm duh ywully ylyod, den he wonthe hilyt me so moyuch, myaytlybe.'"(359-360). According to Adams, this technique is used to convey the idea that David is having a hard time "extracting meaning from an alien language" (46). It is true that Roth's rendering of the street English spoken by David's peer group shows us how hard it is for David and his peers to progress in this language, but Roth is also engaging his readers in a linguistic game. Reading these dialogues aloud to understand them gets the reader talking like David and his peers and allows readers to temporarily step out of their position as members of mainstream culture and identify with David. David's Othering of and by mainstream culture (associated with "proper" English) does not extend to readers thanks to this linguistic game, which gives readers access to David's speech besides seeing things through his gaze.

## 2. Language as Othering to speakers and listeners

The importance of phonetics underlines the oral quality of the language. Sounds sometimes take over the meaning and stress the problematic aspects of human communication, such as the inability to establish meaningful communication. Communication issues become a daily reality in the context of a multilingual society with different levels of proficiency. For instance, David is introduced to a sexual game by Annie, who stresses the importance of David saying that he wants to play: "'Yuh must ask me,' she said. 'G'wan ask me.' 'Wot?' 'Yuh must say,

Yuh wanna play? Say it” (53). Diamant analyzes this episode as David's introduction to semiotics (341). David's words do not reflect his feelings or intentions but the simple act of repeating what Annie wants him to say is interpreted as consent.

Everything David reads and hears at the cheder is also void of meaning. He is only familiar with the sounds of Hebrew, but will not learn translation or chumish until he is older (220). And later, in Chapter XXI, David's delirium is hard to follow and make sense out of except for a few sounds such as the “th-i-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s.” (428) that probably refer to his electrocution, and the whistle that wakes him up (431).

The separation of sound and meaning is an idea probably inspired by the modernist movement, but its use illustrates how language can be alienating or Othering, especially when a limited proficiency or an emphasis on the spoken word limits a speaker in expressing their ideas or feelings. The separation of sound and meaning becomes an issue for David who seems to find a compromise by remaining very quiet even though Roth's novel is “the noisiest novel ever written according to Stephen Adams.

The different sounds of speech are the only way David can identify different languages. He compares different languages to sounds from the animal kingdom: “A parrot and a canary. Awk! Awk! The first cried. Ee-tee-tee-tweet! the other. A smooth and a rusty pulley. He wondered if they understood each other. Maybe it was like Yiddish and English, or Yiddish and Polish, the way his mother and aunt sometimes spoke” (174). Linguistic groups are in theory as simple as categorizing birds as parrots or canaries – as long as individuals only speak one language or at least when a dominant language can be identified. In David's situation, it is difficult to tell whether English or Yiddish is the dominant language. With the entire novel being

rendered in English, we could imagine that an older David who functions as a narrator uses English as his dominant language but the younger David we follow in the novel might still be in a transitional stage without a dominant language.

In the environment Roth chose to write about, language is not the only characteristic of linguistic groups, except for mainstream culture – which functions as such only because Roth does not give his readers a detailed insight into American culture. Readers only catch a few glimpses of a diverse English-speaking society in Chapter XXI, and the presence of a culture where a proper English is spoken is inferred by Roth's rendering of the street English spoken by David's peer group as strongly accentuated and grammatically incorrect. Mainstream culture is also present with public school, authority figures such as policemen or the passersbys David turns to when he is lost, or the ones who gather around him when he electrocutes himself.

The crowd speaks different languages, including English with different accents. There are different levels of integration for older generations of foreign origin. For instance, while David's mother is very isolated, his father has some contact with the outside world through his work and some members of his generation engage in social activities such as going to a bar according to Chapter XX and XXI. The mainstream English-speaking linguistic group is hard to define. Levels of integration and proficiency vary and individuals speaking different languages could belong to the same group, because of a common understanding of the English language. The confusion is not limited to English language; the Schearls speak Yiddish at home, a language associated with their identity as Jews. Genya and her sister Bertha speak Polish because they lived in a Polish-speaking community, but some other Yiddish-speaking individuals might speak German or Russian. The relation of these individuals to English depends on how integrated they

are, where they work and whether or not they went to an American school. And there are also religious languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, which would be spoken by individuals who received a religious education. From an outsider's perspective, this group can easily be Othered and defined by an ethnicity – but a closer look will reveal a much greater diversity, especially in the case of the Jewish community. It is easy to imagine how individuals could belong to more than one group as they navigate from one language to another.

This is the case of David and his peers, located between the Yiddish-speaking community and mainstream American culture. These children learn English in public schools and in the streets but have not accepted the linguistic codes of mainstream culture. They speak English with an accent that is hard to understand by anyone who does not belong to this peer group and their grammar is not correct. These children are fluent in their version of English and in the language of their parents, Yiddish in this case, but other secondary languages spoken by their parents such as Hebrew or Polish in David's case are not accessible. Each group considers the two other linguistic groups as Other to a certain extent. English-speaking migrant children are closer to mainstream culture than their parents are, but their heritage and bilingualism still makes them Other for mainstream American culture.

With legislation and policies being generated by an English-speaking American mainstream culture, these Othered smaller linguistic groups are not well-perceived. In a 1915 address, President Wilson said: “You cannot become thorough Americans if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist of groups,” followed by President Roosevelt in 1919 who supported the adoption of a single language, English (Aneta Pavlenko, 183-184). These policies are based on a notion of unity that can be found in American society by designing



the most foreign groups as Other. Mainstream culture includes many different subcultures, religions, ethnicities and even different variations of the English language. The illusion of homogeneity is possible thanks to the stronger contrast between this mainstream culture and more recent migrants, such as David's parents. These Othered individuals did not think of themselves as groups as much as they were shaped into groups by mainstream culture and circumstances. For instance, German, Polish or Russian migrants might be considered as part of a same group because they speak Yiddish or have the Jewish religious denomination in common. In retrospective the policies based on unity seem contradictory in including Othered migrants into a nation that maintains the illusion of cultural unity precisely by contrasting with these Othered groups.

This contradiction creates a very ambiguous position for David's generation, which is caught between two worlds because of their bilingualism, the different values at home and at school as well as their unclear status and identity as multicultural individuals in a society that values unity and uniformity. David finds himself in the middle of a crisis because mastering two languages does not allow him to speak them perfectly. His accent is too strong to be understood outside of his neighborhood and his mother complains his Yiddish contains some English words. David is also excluded from his peer group because of his bad social skills – and after being Othered by these different groups, he turns to a group that once was considered as the Other, a Catholic culture represented by Leo. David's speech and his bad social skills cause others to exclude him and designate him as Other. His inner voice, sensibility, quietness and obsession with different symbols of purity could be a manifestation of his struggle to find his self while

facing an extreme fragmentation caused by the incredible pressure he comes under as the different groups he comes in contact with alienate him.

### 3. Criticism on Roth's use of languages

The complexity of Roth's treatment of different linguistic groups and the complexity of the linguistic landscape he chose to write about generated some interesting ideas on language from literary critics. Some critics view languages as being in conflict with one another. Wirth-Nesher writes of a “battleground of languages” (7) and Jeffrey J. Folks approaches David as a character who resists “the cultural 'babel' of the slums” (291). Yiddish and English are direct rivals and the relation between Yiddish and Hebrew echoes the conflict between mother and father for Wirth-Nesher (8). Similarly, languages are not equal in this conflict for Folks: “code-switching does not imply the equal status of all languages and dialects” (290), while Wirth-Nesher argues that English is presented as superior because the mother tongue is missing (309).

On the other hand, some critics approach languages in the novel as part of the stylistic devices used by Roth. There is no conflict between languages but languages are rendered differently because David's relation to them is emphasized. For David Seed, David is introduced to different languages as he grows up and the relation between languages corresponds to a certain stage in his development. For Sarah Kerman, languages are dramatized through strong accents or a literary quality that appear when Roth translates Yiddish to English (53) presumably because this is how David perceives Yiddish after being exposed to the crude English of his peer group. Diamant also stresses the difficulties in analyzing languages in *Call It Sleep* since there are three different levels: “authorial, narrative and experiential” (338). What occurs on the authorial level

with Roth making some languages more accessible to his readers does not reflect how David would perceive these languages on an experiential level.

Even though no critic directly mentions the Other, this idea can be tied to both approaches. In the context of languages being in conflict with one another, the notion of the Other appears with English Othering Yiddish or the Name of the Father associated with Hebrew by Wirth-Nesher (8) Othering the mother and the Yiddish language. Languages become a way for individuals to define who the Other is from their point of view. Since the mother tongue is inferior because it is missing from the text (Wirth-Nesher, 309), David is associated with English and the culture and language of his parents should be his Other. With the second approach, David's relation to these different languages and environments define him as an Other. The rendering of Yiddish as a poetic language means David perceives this language as poetic in contrast with English. David does not consider this language as natural – which makes his parents the Other. His accentuated English make him an Other for mainstream American culture and by reciprocation, makes it impossible for him to identify with mainstream culture. And if we approach *Call It Sleep* through Diamant's theory on Roth's three levels - “authorial, narrative and experiential” (338) – the rendering of Yiddish as poetic, of English as hard to pronounce and understand and of Polish and Hebrew as mysterious mean David and his strong accent is the Other for Roth and a young David who does not understand Hebrew, speaks a bad English, and perceives Yiddish as poetic could be the Other for an older David who is narrating and perceives these languages differently because his English proficiency improved. Each language has a specific place in David's universe. Depending on the context and language used, David is

sometimes part of a group, sometimes excluded. He has no set identity except for others choosing to include or exclude him from their linguistic group.

#### 4. The Yiddish language

The Yiddish language is a characteristic of the Jewish community at the turn of the century. Yiddish-speaking families come from different Eastern-European countries and spoke different languages besides Yiddish, such as German, Polish or Russian, but Yiddish functions as a way of defining the Jewish community, even though Judaism cannot be associated with a single ethnicity. In other words, Yiddish is a characteristic of the Jewish community from an outsider's point of view – an outsider who is probably Othering this community. Roth's readers have to adopt this point of view in the prologue with Genya and Albert's exchange not being translated: “Gehen vir voinen du? In Nev York?' 'Nein. Bronzeville. Ich had dir schoin gescriben.” (16).

The prologue is not as personal as the rest of the novel. The novel opens with general remarks on immigration and Ellis Island before introducing the dysfunctional dynamics of the Schearls. English-speaking readers are given access to Genya's expectations of American with Roth translating her remark: “And this is the Golden Land” (11) but Bronzeville is not accessible to every reader (Wirth-Nesher, 303). “Nev York” and “Bronzeville” are recognizable as locations but Roth is either suggesting this location is accessible only to bilingual readers with a knowledge of German or Yiddish or wants to remind his readers that his main characters do not speak English. With this second possibility, Roth is keeping his readers from identifying with David's parents, perhaps in an effort to present David as a character readers can identify with instead.

David uses Yiddish to communicate with his parents and the other adults of the community but Yiddish is presented negatively in a few instances. David's aunt Bertha wants to go to a museum located in another area, a non-Yiddish speaking neighborhood. Bertha's loud Yiddish embarrasses David: "The further they got away from Third Avenue, the more aloof grew the houses, the more silent the streets. David began to feel uneasy at his aunt's loud voice and Yiddish speech both of which seemed out of place here" (147). In this instance, David has enough sensibility to understand this area is different from his neighborhood while Bertha does not possess the codes necessary to blend into her environment outside of her Yiddish neighborhood. Bertha is the Other for David, mainstream American culture and the readers.

Yiddish appears again as the language of the Other when David's father interrupts the activities of David's peer group in Yiddish. David joins a group of young Jewish boys who communicate in English before his threatening father interrupts them:"a loud, imperious rapping startled them all (...) Poised on the side step of the milk wagon, sleeveless shirt dazzling in the light, his father was rapping the butt-end of the whip against the wagon - 'Come here!' He bit off the Yiddish words" (273). David's father appears as threatening and violent and David's submission to his father causes the other boys to mock him and exclude him. Recognizing the Yiddish speech of his father makes David an Other for his peers. In Ruth Wisse's words, "Yiddish functions (...) as an isolating rather than a socializing tongue" (67).

Yiddish makes David perceive his own family as Other when this language comes in contact with the world outside of the small community David is familiar with. But on a domestic level, Yiddish is inclusive and is an important part of the Schearls' identity. Roth uses a very poetic and sometimes exotic English to make Yiddish dialogues accessible to his readers without

allowing them to relate these dialogues to their own experience because of their overly poetic and exotic nature. The close connection between David and his mother is something the reader is excluded from, as a way of strengthening the connection between David and his mother. Roth shows how powerful Yiddish is by comparing David and Genya's conversation to knitting a dream (131). Yiddish also inspires respect for David's peer group. For these children, tearing a "Jewish noospaper wid Jewish on id, dat's two sins" (239) while tearing an English newspaper is considered as only one sin since tearing is forbidden during the Sabbath.

Yiddish is inclusive in another instance; the interne who brings a wounded David to his parents in the end of the novel uses a few Yiddish (or German) words to communicate with Genya instead of imposing unfamiliar English words (436). Family ties depend on the use of Yiddish and David has integrated the idea that the adults in his community should be addressed in Yiddish. Addressing adults in Yiddish seems more respectful but also more practical since David has no guarantee the adults around him will understand his English. Besides, Yiddish functions as a common characteristic that defines the Schearls and gives them an identity as a group. If David wants to belong, he has to adopt the codes used by the Schearls, including Yiddish. This is why David instinctively uses Yiddish to repeat the instructions his father gave him, even though he is supposed to repeat what his father said to Albert's English-speaking former employer. His father gets frustrated by David's inability to switch from one code to the other: "Say it in English, you fool!" (25). However, for David, the presence of his father indicates he should use Yiddish.

This code is challenged by David's young neighbor Yussie who speaks English in front of Genya. She does not understand what the boys are saying and David reverts "desperately to

Yiddish” (14) to adopt the proper code. Bertha also challenges this code by addressing David in English. Perhaps Bertha wants to show David she is becoming more Americanized but David is not comfortable with challenging linguistic codes like his aunt does: “For some reason he found himself preferring his aunt's native speech to English” (309). Switching from one linguistic code to the other is considered as a “confrontation” by Brian McHale who associates Yiddish with the indoors and English with the outdoors (83) but David is never in conflictual situations until someone else challenges the code he is used to. Wirth-Nesher writes about “the unstable referent of the different languages that make up [David's] world” (394) and approaches David's identity as being “forged in the clash of languages and dialects” (395). For her, David inhabits “indeterminate culture spaces uneasily” (395). The cultural spaces David is exposed to are hard to define but David seems quite comfortable and able to adapt from one code or language to another. David is uneasy about his hybridity when someone intervenes, challenges his codes and brings attention to the plurality of languages and linguistic groups – and designates an Other. This is the case when his father interrupting the gathering of English-speaking young boys or with Bertha intruding in David's English universe by addressing him in her hesitant English instead of using the conventional Yiddish characteristic of the Schearls' home.

David's knowledge of Yiddish then makes him an Other from the point of view of mainstream American culture, but allows him to be included in a smaller community and in his own domestic environment. Yiddish marks other characters as the Other for David when it is used in the wrong environment, mainly outside of the home or when it is not used in interactions between David or his peers and the older generation, in which case the person ignoring David's linguistic codes becomes the Other for David.

## 5. Polish or the language of the mother

Polish functions as inclusive for Genya and her sister Bertha and as exclusive for David who does not understand this language. Polish is introduced in the text by Genya's sister Bertha and allows the two sisters to communicate while excluding David. Polish is a cohesive language for the sisters since they have a common past and had to speak Polish in Europe since they lived in a Polish-speaking community. Albert, David's father, probably comes from this area too but there is no mention of him speaking Polish, which makes Polish a feminine language, especially after Genya uses it to tell her sister about her affair with a Gentile organist as an answer to Bertha's fear before her marriage. However, Genya occasionally switches to Yiddish while she tells the story, which allows David and readers to understand most of the story.

Genya's inability to tell the entire story in Polish suggests that this language is not familiar to her like Yiddish is; she is now estranged from her European past, and readers understand why as she explains that her affair with a Gentile caused her European family to reject her – and sent her away to America once she got married. Genya has become the Other for her family and for David as Genya and Bertha deliberately use Polish so he will not understand what they are saying. David is aware of what his mother and aunt are doing and his frustration gives Roth the opportunity to present Polish as mysterious and powerful. Genya remains calm and submissive through the whole novel, but what Bertha says in Polish makes Genya react in an unusual way: “To David's mystification, the unknown words seemed to sting his mother, for she stiffened and suddenly exclaimed with uncommon sharpness: 'That's nonsense, Bertha!’” (192). David feels 'resentment' when Bertha uses Polish words (166) and is



later aggravated: “The oblique nod of her head seemed to beckon her sister to join her in the realm of another speech. For when she spoke again her words had fused into that alien, aggravating tongue that David could never fathom” (195). Polish becomes a 'screen' used by Genya to keep him from understanding what she is talking about (196).

David's reaction and his “guilty elation” (197) once Genya switches back to Yiddish suggest that he expects to be included in everything his mother does – perhaps because of his Oedipal feelings. David is excluded and becomes the Other for Genya and Bertha because he does not share their European past. He attempts to appropriate what is Other to him by using the fragments he understood from Genya's story in his family romance where he invents a Gentile father, which is both a way to appropriate Genya as an Other and to assert his own Otherness by creating some concrete foreign origins for himself. But he has to invent his own story and create a narrative where his real mother is dead instead of appropriating Genya's story because the Polish language excludes him from Genya's narrative and from her past.

## 6. The Hebrew language

In opposition to Polish as a feminine language, we find Hebrew presented as a masculine and even patriarchal language. Once David is old enough, his father decides it is time to send him to a cheder where he will be instructed by a rabbi along with other boys. David's mother admits her exclusion from this linguistic group; she apparently received some kind of religious education but hopes that David will be “more gifted in the ancient tongue” than she was (211). And David actually turns out to be gifted. Later, he witnesses his father beating two milk thieves and, still under the shock, he reads Hebrew at the cheder and this language becomes associated

with the violent episode, which turns David's father into a powerful biblical figure: “The letters crowded, parted, deployed – lamp-posts, cobbles, graveled lanes, lanterns on mounds of earth. Whips in air” (284). This scene of urban violence echoes David's conception of a vengeful God that could break the streets if he wanted (241).

Hebrew becomes a powerful language for David – but it never becomes an accessible or a familiar language. David first approaches Hebrew with high expectations and believes he will be able to talk to God once he masters this language: “For a while, David listened intently to the sound of the words. It was Hebrew, he knew, the same mysterious language his mother used before the candles, the same his father used when he read from a book during the holidays – and that time before drinking wine. Not Yiddish, Hebrew. God's tongue, the rabbi had said. If you knew it, then you could talk to God” (213). After two months in the cheder, we learn that David “often went to the synagogue on Saturdays” (221) and believes “his increasing nearness to God” is improving his life (221). Hebrew is referred to as “God's syllables” (221), which suggest that the very essence of the language, its sound, is for David a synonym of the sacred.

Kerman analyzes David's approach to Hebrew as “magic” (56) which means David is adopting a superstition instead of following a religious tradition but David's approach to Hebrew might not be as childish as it seems. Boston Public School Superintendent Frank Thompson remarked in 1920 that language and religion were impossible to disassociate in certain cultures – an unfamiliar concept for mainstream American culture: “Many native-born Americans fail to understand the close connection between language and religion in the alien's mind (...) religious devotion and feelings are inextricably bound up with the native language, so that in spite of any lack of intention on our part, when we begin to propose compulsion about language we probably

seem to the foreigner to infringe upon religious rights” (Davis, 584). Hebrew is definitely one of the things that make the Jewish community the Other for a mainstream American culture that does not have a language reserved for religious texts and rituals.

David fully embraces his foreign heritage by applying himself but he cannot fully adopt Hebrew as a part of his identity since he is only able to interpret signs as sounds and does not have access to the meaning of what he reads. Hebrew is not accessible to the readers either; it is reproduced in a phonetic way in a few instances and David even parodies it: “Adonoi elahenoo abababa” (226) and we only learn along with David that a Komitz and an Aleph make the sound “Aw” and Komitz and Bais make “Baw” (217). Roth is actually documenting the language learning process for David. David starts learning Hebrew with the smallest unit of meaning (the signs, Komitz, Aleph and Bais) and starts putting these phonemes together to create syllables.

David more than likely learned English thanks to first-hand experience in the streets and by interacting with English-speaking adults at school. The instructional methods at the cheder seem inefficient and old-fashioned. Hebrew is more than a language; it is an institution and an important part of Jewish identity, even if this language is mostly read or used to recite prayers instead of being used to communicate efficiently. The very notion of the nature and function of language is cultural and widens the gap between mainstream American culture and the Jewish community perceived as Other.

Once again, David manages to appropriate this Other by approaching Hebrew in a very personal and emotional way (Diamant, 350). Going to the cheder and learning Hebrew help him develop an interest in religion and he believes he will get a “sign” once he can understand the meaning of Hebrew (221). Hebrew is not accessible for David because of the old-fashioned

instruction and the fact that David is only learning how to read texts without understanding the meaning. He eventually catches fragments of a story the rabbi translates for an older student (227), in a similar way to the story he gets from Genya's Polish narrative about her past. The rabbi translates and interprets the story of Isaiah, how he saw God, felt impure and how an angel touched his lips with coal to purify him. There is more to the original story, but these are the fragments David gets and they immediately become an important part of his personal mythology. David becomes obsessed with the purifying coal and this transforms the way he approaches Hebrew. He reads the passage the rabbi translated and a meaning appears: "Not as a drone this time, like syllables pulled from a drab and tedious reel, but again as it was at first, a chant, a hymn as though a soaring presence behind the words pulsed and stressed a meaning. A cadence like a flock of pigeons, vast, heaven – filling, swept and wheeled, glittered, darkened, kindled again, like wind over prairies (...) The words, forms of immense grandeur behind a cloudy screen, overwhelmed him" (367). The "flock of pigeons" is an echo of another episode where David finally pushes the door that leads to the roof of his building and finds a peaceful landscape that bring him relief from his inner fears (296). David is the only one who can witness the beauty of the landscape on the roof and of the Hebrew words.

Hebrew is not inclusive for David since he is unable to share his interest for the story and the coal with the rabbi. This language is at first associated with the older Jewish generation and holds the potential of giving David access to knowledge and to his European origins. Hebrew remains associated with the Other and is not accessible until David appropriates it through his own interpretation of the story of Isaiah. David's personal symbols and emotional approach to

Hebrew cannot be shared, which makes him the Other for his rabbi, his parents, his peer group and for mainstream American culture.

## 7. The English language

For David's parents and their generation, learning English is a real challenge. The English language threatens the very unity of their families since the knowledge of English puts their children in a position of power. Migrants were advised to learn English as quickly as possible so they would have access to good jobs and be the equal of natives (Carr, 12). Learning English is even presented as a duty that will help migrants become good citizens (Carr, 15). There is however an emotional dimension to learning English that is hard to understand for mainstream culture. Migrants would feel infantilized and frustrated by their hesitant English, and Sydney Stahl Weinberg even found that some women were “too proud to speak broken English” (106). Roth illustrates this emotional dimension through Genya's vulnerability and Albert's constant anger and frustration.

Genya never learns more than a few words of English but she expresses her desire to learn this language (“Isn't it time I learned to speak English?” 334). Because of Genya's isolated lifestyle, her inability to speak English is not obvious until she has to step out of the domestic environment, to go to the market or look for David when he gets lost. In these instances, Genya is the Other and the language barrier makes it impossible for her to function outside of her domestic environment. As David's English improves, he introduces new words into his conversations with his mother and gradually distantiate himself from his mother because of this language she does not have access to. For instance, David mentions “porridge” (39) while Genya

tells him a story about bears. Genya does not know the meaning of the word and does not think bears eat porridge but she concedes David might be right because he got this information from his teacher: "Still if your teacher -" (39). Readers understand the reference to the traditional children story and realize Genya does not have access to the English language and to the culture her son is exposed to in public school. Later, Genya remarks: "Your Yiddish is more than one half English now. I'm being left behind" (120) when David uses an English word in a conversation. David uses an English word again on 206, "drick" (trick), but Genya finds humor in it because it resembles the Yiddish word for kick, a joke she can appreciate because her sister Bertha is there to share it instead of feeling Othered by her son's English words. Wirth-Nesher analyzes these English words as Other (305). In these instances, David and Genya are drifting apart in spite of their close connection in the domestic space. Bertha and Genya laughing at David's English words make him the Other while Genya feeling "left behind" make her the Other for her own son.

Genya's exposure to English through her son David is uncomfortable and alien but there is no violent conflict associated with this language unlike with her husband Albert. He explains how he learned English in beer-salons: "And one day I grew bold enough to answer one who was drunk. And he thought I was too. Then I knew I had made a beginning" (336). In the only instance Albert speaks English, he is threatening two milk thieves before beating them: "Yuhv'll take my milk!" (281). Albert uses English in the workplace too, where he keeps encountering conflicts. In Albert's case, English is associated with the same violent behavior that makes him an Other for David.

Violence appears again with the rabbi who resents his young students for speaking English, a language he associates with Gentile culture: “don't speak to me in goyim” (228). With the rabbi, we find violence and the idea that English is a source of conflict with the younger generation. This also appears with David's young neighbor Yussie who speaks English in front of Genya. She is excluded and gets frustrated (81 and 139). Another young character, Polly, investigates a conflict with her mother-in-law, Bertha, by using English to tell her: “You ain' my moddeh” (381). The use of English designates children as Other for the older generation and in David's case, his English make him an Other for his mother. However, David is able to reduce conflicts by adopting the proper linguistic codes and addressing adults from his community in Yiddish.

For David and his peer group, English functions as a link to mainstream culture but these children are not really considered as Americans. This function of English is carried on by public schools; David and his neighbor Annie talk about school and Annie takes pride in her academic abilities (50). But regardless of how educated these children are, communicating with individuals outside of their familiar environment is hard. David gets lost because he is unable to pronounce the name of his street in a recognizable way (97). David asks a woman for directions and she calls him a “silly child” (99) and “trying” (100) because they cannot communicate efficiently. This woman takes David to a police station where he can talk with the policemen but David's accent is a real barrier even though the policemen make an effort to understand David: “Be gob, he'll be havin' me talk like a Jew” (101). In this instance, David and his mother are the Other for the policemen because they do not possess the codes of mainstream American culture.

The English David speaks in the street is a factor of cohesion between the young boys of his neighborhood and becomes an important part of David's socialization with his peer group. All the boys David interacts with speak in a similar fashion; you is always rendered as “yuh”, a lot of [t]s become [d]s, some sounds disappear completely; “and” becomes “an”, “come on” becomes “c'mon” and their speech is filled with playful expressions. The boys refer to each other as “hey guys” (220) or “hey geng” (291) and negative expressions are limited to “fraid-cat” (232) or “greenhunn” (292). These boys are described as playing most of the time but fights sometimes occur. However, conflicts are often playful, bad words can be taken back and grudges quickly forgiven – unlike the more serious conflicts adults engage in. David socializes with these boys and is able to communicate with them, but becomes withdrawn later in the novel and does not always take part in the activities of the other boys. David also finds that his English allows him to communicate with children outside of his peer group such as the three Gentile boys he meets on 249 or Leo (300). This peer group is the Other for their parents and for mainstream American culture, but David's socialization does not seem to be a complete success as he drifts apart from the boys who live in his area or who go to cheder with him.

English is the common language of mainstream American culture and any group that does not master this language is the Other. Efforts were made to stress the importance and advantages of learning English but in the end, only time is needed for linguistic assimilation to take place. According to Weinberg, “once a family had been here as long as ten years, almost half adopted the language of America” (112). David is closer to mainstream culture than his parents are, but his accent keeps him from communicating efficiently with speakers of English outside of his community (101). Mainstream American society is not really represented until the end of the



novel with different dialogues from a bar rendered in a modernist collage. However, Roth's mainstream American society is quite diverse. Some of these characters have different accents and Irish names appear. English is the only thing these people have in common, and it is suggested that only a few people really have an American identity when Roth mentions a “kindly faced American woman” (415), probably the only character whose English is not distorted with an accent or missing any sounds.

Language is a way of identifying the Other but language proficiency is a fluctuating characteristic as we have seen previously with the English language. David's English gets better as he spends more time in the streets with his peer group and gets an education in public school. David's nature as an Other is fluctuating; in the beginning of the novel, he belongs to the same linguistic group as his mother and slowly becomes an Other as Yiddish loses its status as his primary language and he improves his English.

This phenomenon is connected to assimilation; David is becoming more Americanized by gradually transforming into an Other from the point of view of his family. We also have to keep in mind that the young David is not the narrator of this novel. His thoughts and emotions are rendered in details but the distance and the elaborate style suggest an older David might be reflecting on his past and narrating a story. Some languages might not be accessible to this older narrator, which would explain why Hebrew or Yiddish are not directly represented. David evolves as an Other and his relationship to these different linguistic groups change along with his socialization and assimilation process. These changes correspond to David's negotiation of his self and relation to the Other; the novel takes place at a time where David is still struggling to

find his place in a multi-cultural world while the older David who is perhaps narrating seems to be further along in the negotiation process and fully masters the English language.

## 8. Two worlds

Linguistic groups either exclude or include David, but his status as an Other is not a fixed characteristic since his relation to different languages is fluctuating, for instance with David improving his English as he grows older. David is not only an Other because of his knowledge of Yiddish or English; he also becomes an Other and identifies an Other in the psychoanalytical sense because of his Oedipal feelings and his family romance in which he distantiates himself from his family. The Oedipus and the family romance are both Freudian ideas that have been analyzed in *Call It Sleep* before, but seldom in relation to the notion of the Other.

In 1909, the Census revealed that 72% of children in New York were born of foreign parents. David arrives in 1907 and Roth's narrative is misleading because it portrays David and the Schearls as very isolated and does not give an accurate idea of the demographics of the time. David's situation is in fact not an uncommon one. David's sensibility and Roth's approach to his identity as an Other give us a fascinating insight into his psyche and into how Freudian mechanisms are developed in this particular situation as a response to feelings of alienation. David's sensibility has caused some critics to analyze him as a dysfunctional child, but his reactions to feelings of alienation might actually be based on Roth's own experience and be shared to a certain extent by 72% of young New Yorkers at the turn of the century.

Roth steps away from his domestic focus as David gets older and readers are introduced to a second world; David's activities in the streets. These two worlds are distinct and David's

status as an Other switches from one referent to the other while he navigates between these two worlds. At home, he is an Americanized child while in the streets, his Jewish identity is what stands out and makes him a foreigner. Paradoxically, the identity that is adapted to each environment is not the one emphasized; at home, David becomes the Other for his mother because of the English words he uses in his Yiddish speech. On the other hand, David's strong foreign accent stands out when he is in the streets.

These two worlds cannot meet without causing David to react strongly. He is thrilled by the sight of his mother in the streets: "Catching sight of her accidentally this way always gave him an intense thrill of pleasure. It was as though the street's shifting intricacy had flowered into the simple steadiness of her presence, as though days not hours had passed since he has seen her before, because days not hours had passed since he had last seen her in the street" (171). David is thrilled to share his second world with his mother but feelings of alienation seem stronger. The image of these two worlds colliding remains with David: "He wondered why it was that one could be half in the street and half out and yet never be able to picture the street and the inside of the house together. He could picture the street and the yellow wall of an old wooden house. You could see the inside from the street – the wall paper and the chandelier, the black thickness between floors, windows, open doors. It was strange. Everything looked shrunken. Everything looked frightened" (132). The domestic environment is safe and enclosed but cannot survive exposure to the outside world. Navigating between these two worlds causes David to feel alienated because he is not well-integrated in any of these universes.

## 9. David as the Other in different groups and environments

Davis is Othered in these different groups and environments, including his own home. Roth begins his novel with a prologue that allows readers to plunge into the Yiddish world of David's parents: 'The movement of the prologue is inward, from English to Yiddish, from the general depiction of immigration with the image of the Statue of Liberty and the synoptic view of the couple to the individual characters and their specific plans' (Wirth-Nesher, 303-304). This device allows readers to identify with David's parents in spite of them being Othered once readers are given an insight into David's thoughts. But in the prologue, readers are given an insight into the dynamic between the parents while David functions as an object of conflict for them and is Othered because of his foreign costume: "Only the small child in her arms wore a distinctly foreign costume, an impression one got chiefly from the odd, outlandish, blue straw hat on his head with its polka dot ribbons of the same color dangling over each shoulder" (10). In this instance, David is the Other because of his European identity – and because his father rejects him right away.

David is designated as an Other later in the novel but readers are viewing his parents as the Other by then. David is an Other for his parents because of his American identity. Bertha is openly critical of an American custom referred to as "Election Wood"; she asks if he takes part in the burning of the Election Wood and David responds "self-defensively" and lies (194). Bertha is clearly Othering David with this exchange but the same phenomenon occurs without any clear intentions from David's parents. For instance, Genya is mistaken about her son's relationship to his American identity and assumes he will be excited at the idea of Bertha marrying an

American: “David regarded her silently, wondering why that should excite anyone” (173). David is not well-understood by his own mother and becomes an Other because his family is unable to relate to his experience as a Jewish child growing up in New York.

David being perceived as an Other by his family is not an isolated case. Roth gives us an insight into Reb. Pankower's thoughts on the younger generation: “What was going to become of Yiddish youth? What would become of this new breed? These Americans? This sidewalk-and-gutter generation? He knew them all and they were all alike – brazen, selfish, unbridled. Where was piety and observance? Where was learning, veneration of parents, deference to the old? In the earth!” (374). The rabbi does not relate to the younger generation because they do not share the same values and these children are perceived in a negative way.

David is not only an Other for his family. He spends a lot of time outside with boys of his age but his socialization is limited. He is well-integrated within his peer group at times but he is often excluded or even avoids some of these boys, for instance, after Yussie witnesses David being beaten by his father and tells the other boys about it. He is rejected from the group, a boy starts a fight with him and he is called a “cry baby” (90). Later, David tells his friends that his mother will be coming by soon and will get them some Chinese nuts, a rare delicacy for David and his friends. They quickly become impatient and David has to admit his mother is not coming. The boys leave David and remark: “‘Wadda boob!’ said Izzy vehemently. ‘He neveh henges oud wid nobody.’”(176). In a few instances, the narrator describes the interactions between young boys at the cheder (218-219 and 363) and in the streets (291-292). But David is not participating in these activities or discussions; he is only an observer. He actually decides to stop spending time with the boys he usually sees in the street after they see his mother taking a bath

(294). David seems to be excluding himself in most of these instances by adopting the role of an observer instead of being an active participant. The insight we get into his psyche also informs us of the trauma and stressful episodes David goes through and dwells on instead of participating in discussions and activities with his peers. He might be Othered because of his sensibility, his attachment to his mother and his natural shyness.

Public school is not an important part of Roth's narrative and the only instance in which public school is depicted, David is inattentive and his teacher gets upset (222). This echoes Pavlenko's findings on public schools causing immigrant children to “develop feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem and embarrassment about their immigrant origins and native language” (190). David's socialization is not entirely a failure since he maintains acquaintances with boys his age on the streets or at the cheder and gets good grades in school but he is not perfectly integrated within his peer group. He becomes an Other when his anxiety and fears keep him from interacting in a social setting with his peers, which suggests a sensitive and artistic nature would be a cause of exclusion, regardless of linguistic groups or culture.

#### 10. David identifies the Other and identifies with the Other

David's fluctuating nature as an Other for different groups he is in contact with eventually causes him to embrace his feelings of alienation and identify with what once was the Other for him. The family romance he invents connects him with a Gentile man from Europe, which should be an Other because David has no memories of Europe and very little knowledge of Gentile culture and religion. The foreignness of Genya's European lover does not keep David from identifying with this man because being rejected and Othered by his own father cause him

to identify with Genya's Gentile lover who functions as a rival to his father in the context of his Oedipal complex.

David's identification with the Other begins when he runs into three boys, Pedey, Sweeney and Weasel (249). These boys are described as such: "Two were taller than David, wiry, blue-eyed, up-turned noses freckled. The other, dark-skinned and runty, looked older than the rest" (249). Their faces are "tough and hostile: (249) and David finds himself trapped. David is anxious and immediately lies to conceal his Jewish identity; the boys ask him why he is not in school and he says his brother has the measles instead of mentioning that he is out of school because his family celebrates the Passover (249). The boys suspect David of being Jewish because of the block he lives on, which causes David to tell another lie: "I'm a Hungarian. My mudder 'n' fodder's Hungarian. We're de janitors" (250). David then pretends to talk Hungarian: "Abashishishisha bababyo tomama wawa" (250), which does not really convince the boys. Two of them want to beat David but Pedey decides to let David come with them. The four boys head to the car tracks and David is tricked into dropping a zinc sword on the tracks to create an electrical arc (253).

David adopts the identity of the Other because he feels unsafe with displaying his Jewish identity in this instance. The boys would probably have a violent reaction if they found David was Jewish, but David has no way of knowing this since this is the first time he finds himself in this situation. Pavlenko writes that immigrant children would internalize "xenophobic attitudes" as an effect of the "intolerant climate of the era" (186). David's identification with the Other is more of a performance in this case; he does not really relate to the Hungarian janitor who lives in his building, he is performing this identity to avoid a conflict with the three boys he runs into by

pretending to speak Hungarian. In this instance, his identification with the Other occurs on a linguistic level and allows him to avoid conflict by adopting a linguistic code and an identity he believes will not be perceived as negative by the three boys.

Later in the novel, David encounters a Gentile boy, Leo. According to Wisse, David's encounter with Leo is an echo of “Genya's infatuation with a Christian lover and Albert's hungry reach for a male friend” (72). There are similarities between David and his parents, but David goes further than his parents by adopting symbols from Leo's culture. David meets Leo on the roof of his building, away from the codes used in the streets. David is immediately interested in Leo: “Watching him, David felt a bond of kinship growing up between them. They were both alone on the roof, both inhabitants of the same realm. That was a bond between them” (300). David envies Leo because he is 'carefree, confident' (300), but he still recognizes Leo as an Other: “that blond hair, those blue eyes didn't belong to Ninth Street” (300). The two boys bond when a group of Irish boys tries stealing Leo's kite (301). Leo identifies himself as “Polish-American” and recognizes David as being Jewish – which David does not deny this time (303). The boys then start talking about their different lifestyles and David envies Leo because he has no adult supervision and because he presents his religion as a form of protection (304-305). When the two boys meet again, David discovers the unfamiliar foods Leo eats and learns more about Catholic symbols (320-321). David desires something Leo has; freedom and safety. Leo symbolizes freedom with his lack of parental supervision, consumerism with his kite and his skates, sex with his interest in David's cousin and safety with his crucifix that protects him. David is drawn to the promise of safety because of his anxieties and the other things Leo stands for are reminiscent of mainstream American culture, which David has been exposed to before but



has never been accepted into until he met Leo. Leo is the Other because he possess something David desires, and David eventually appropriates Leo's sense of security by identifying with him and by adopting his Christian symbols.

These Catholic symbols include Leo's crucifix (303), a picture of Jesus and the Sacred Heart (322), and a rosary (327). David is not aware of the signification these symbols have for an individual with a Catholic heritage and must negotiate his own meaning by integrating these symbols in his own mythology. He is drawn to these symbols and identifies with the Catholic Other because he desires the purity, safety and confidence these symbols signify for Leo. Some critics see David as a Christ figure because of his interest in these symbols and of the symbolism in Chapter XXI. David is not drawn to Catholic symbols because of what they stand for in American society but because of what they represent for him. The same thing is true of Judaism; David becomes obsessed with the story of Isaiah and the “angel-coal” because it evokes the purity he has been looking for.

For David, appropriating the Other also means appropriating its power. This idea appears with a dream David has about himself and Leo eating the sun (33), with the act of eating standing for the appropriating and the sun representing power, as a reference to the power of David's father or of mainstream culture. This happens again toward the end of the novel with David making power come out of the car tracks with a metallic object just like the three Catholic boys showed him earlier. He was tricked by the boys into creating a short circuit but he later appropriates this power and the Other symbolized by these three boys when he repeats the action by himself and knows what to expect.

By adopting symbols and reproducing behaviors he observed in the Other, David is conquering the alien and looking for a way to appease his anxieties. Because of his status as a product of two cultures, the Other actually covers mainstream American culture and the world of his parents. David can only appropriate and identify with what is made accessible to him; Catholic symbols and mainstream American culture rather than the word of his parents which remains hidden behind the language barrier of Polish and Hebrew and by the physical distance between New York and Austria.

#### 11. Identity crisis and identity formation

Appropriating symbols and behaviors from the Other is a part of David's identity formation process. David is facing a real challenge; he has to create an identity for himself without having access to his past. David seems to have some vague memories of Europe when he hears children singing about Walter Wildflower: "Their words obscure at first, emerged at last, gathered meaning. The song troubled David strangely. Walter Wildflower was a little boy. David knew him. He lived in Europe, far away, where David's mother said he was born. He had seen him standing on a hill, far away. Filled with a warm, nostalgic mournfulness, he shut his eyes. Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids, dusty roads, fathomless curve of trees, a branch in a window under flawless light. A world somewhere, somewhere else" (23). David is remembering river roads and trees but only envisions Europe as a place his mother mentioned. The memory of Walter Wildflower is a false one but it triggers the connection between the song and David's actual memories of Europe even though it seems more precise than the vague memories of the rivers, roads and trees. Later, his mother tells him a story about Europe and

mentions forests – to which David answers “What forests?” (65). The connection between Europe and David's memories of forests is not strong enough to be triggered by his mother's story. Austria is evoked again in a few instances; David looks at a geography book in which he can see a “pink Austria” (63) and his mother purchases a picture of a corn field because it reminds her of Austria. But David does not recognize the blue flowers (172). David's memories of Austria are associated with nature and the color green but in the different accounts he is exposed to, the color green is missing. In his mother's stories, the forest is gone (165) or it is autumn (66) and in the picture she chooses, blue flowers stand out while Austria is colored in pink in David's book (63). David might still have some memories of Europe but they are not shared by anyone else and he is not exposed to elements that would trigger the memories in this urban environment. There seem to be a memory evoked by the picture his mother purchases because David thinks of the colors “green and blue” (207) but the memory does not take form.

David's personal memories do not allow him to form his identity because they do not allow him to create a continuity between Europe and the United States. The common memories of his community are not helpful either because they lack meaning. Celebrations and customs are an important part of any cultural identity, but they can also signify a sense of alienation if they appear out of context. Jewish celebrations do not really mean anything to David. He does not observe the Sabbath after an old lady asks him to light a stove (237) and Wisse analyzes the Passover as void of meaning for David since he “has no knowledge of pleasure that might have compensated him for being a Jew” (71). David likes the Passover only because there is no school: 'One was lucky in being a Jew to-day. There was no school' (242). David describes Jewish customs to his friend Leo and is not offended by Leo finding these customs humorous: “if

Leo thought it was funny, then it was funny and it didn't matter” (306), which means David does not identify strongly with these customs.

American customs and traditions also appear in the text and do not seem to mean much to David either. He sings the patriotic song “My Country 'Tis Of Thee' to make some noise so the cellar door is not as scary: 'My country 'tis of dee! (...) Of dee I sing (...) Land where our foddors died!’” (62). David more than likely learned this song in school but in this context, it is unclear to what or whom “my country” or “our foddors” refer to. Besides, David is not singing this song in a context where it would be interpreted as a way of honoring his American identity, but to make some noise because he is scared of the cellar door. The Fourth of July is evoked by David's friend Yussie – but it is only an occasion to tell a story about a boy who injured himself with firecrackers (138). Yussie also mentions Christmas but this holiday does not really mean anything to the boys beyond the fact they are celebrating it in school: “Didja ask yuh medder fuh a nickel fuh de Xmas poddy in school?' 'No, I fuhgod.' 'My ticher calls id Xmas, bod de kids call id Chrizmas. Id's a goyish holiday anyways. Wunst I hanged op a stockin' in Brooklyn. Boyd mine fodder pud in a eggshells wid terlit paper an' leffed w'en he seen me. Id ain' no Sandy Klaus, didja know?’” (141). In this instance, Yussie is facing contradictory values from his parents and his education; he has been taught about Christmas in school and this celebration seems important to the people he is in contact with at school but his parents will not acknowledge the celebration. His teacher referring to the holiday as Xmas might be an attempt at making it more accessible for the diverse student body by downplaying the religious connotation of the holiday.

David finds himself in between two sets of values and customs and because there is no continuity between these two worlds, none of the customs or traditions he participates in has a meaning for him or allows him to form an identity. Ethnicity could function as a way for David to find his identity, in a similar way to Leo identifying himself as a “Polish-American” (303). But ethnicity is not important to David until he finds himself in contact with the Other. In the first instance, he meets three boys who seem hostile and lies about his ethnicity and religion (25). He then meets Leo, who seems friendly and directly asks David if he is Jewish instead of letting David identify himself as such (303). Derogatory terms are used against Jews but there are never directed at David; his father is insulted by the milk thieves (281) and the boys who try stealing Leo's kite insult him because they believe he is Jewish (301). And when two of David's friends talk of how alien and unfamiliar a Chinese man is, David becomes an observer and does not say anything about the Chinese man (175).

Religious differences do not get in the way of David and Leo interacting with each other. Ethnic identities are taken very lightly too, for instance with Leo pretending to be Jewish to gain the confidence of David's cousins. He learns a few Yiddish words (341-342) and turns ethnic identity into a performance. In the end, ethnicity or religion do not function as a satisfactory way to establish an identity – or identify the Other – for David.

David's anxieties regarding his identity and the Other eventually build up to a crisis. After Leo takes advantage of his cousin, David goes back to the cheder and tells the rabbi his family romance. After this, he is afraid of going home. While David goes through this crisis, he seems to go through a fragmentation of his self: “I'm somebody else – else – ELSE!” (371). His internal speech becomes profuse, hard to follow and based on sounds rather than meaningful ideas. David

goes home, his parents find out about everything and his father becomes violent. David then runs away and denies his identity: “BE nobody” (379). The crisis then leads David to the car tracks where he electrocutes himself and goes through a mystical experience. In the end of the novel, conflicts seem to be resolved and David is no longer in a state of stress and agitation but his identity crisis is not resolved by Roth.

Because Leo tricked David into bringing him to his cousins and helping him pretend to be Jewish, David has to worry about being blamed for Leo's actions. It seems the two boys are exchanging their identities; Leo envies David's position because he knows Esther and Polly and David envies Leo's confidence and the protection Catholic symbols confer him. When Leo finally gives him a rosary, David appropriates Leo's identity, he is “somebody else” (371). Once David goes home, his father discovers the rosary and rejects his son: “The truth! Another! A goy's!” (402). David has to flee his home and is denied his identity as a Catholic – or as an American. At this point, he is “nobody” (379). His only solution is to turn to the Other again, not to Leo since he failed to appropriate this particular Other when the rosary failed to protect him. David turns to his previous encounter with the three boys who tricked him into dropping the zinc sword on the car tracks and appropriates the power of this Other by reproducing this behavior.

The different symbols David has come across throughout the novel such as the “angel-coal”, the tongs or Christian imagery appear in Chapter XXI while David experiences a mystical hallucination. He finds the coal he has been obsessed with since he heard the story of Isaiah, which might be an indication that David found his Jewish identity, but his electrocution and the raw power he is exposed to belong to the industrial and modern world of mainstream American society. There is however an idea of fusion with David coming in contact with the electric

current, his important symbols appearing one after the other and the diverse crowd gathering around him. David has fused with his Other and seems comfortable when he goes back home and his final reflection includes the “open palms of legions upon legions of hands hurtling toward him” (441), which suggests he is accepted into mainstream culture. David seems to have conquered and appropriated the two Others he has been dealing with throughout the novel but he may have lost his individuality and artistic sensibility in the process.

## 12. Conclusion

Roth is not clear on which identity David chooses because of the ambiguous ending of the novel. Some critics interpret David's electrocution, his final reflections and his decision to “call it sleep” (441) as an identification with an American hegemonic culture (Folks, 298). David is back home with his Yiddish-speaking parents who are still the Other but cannot be negated from David's life. Wirth-Nesher uses Homi Bhabha's theory on diasporic identities to explain David's situation: “In Homi Bhabha's terms, 'The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tables of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize culture hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformations” (10). By the end of the novel, David has only begun this “on-going negotiation” for the construction of his identity since he now seems to be accepted by his family but still has to integrate American society and becomes the older narrator who fully masters the English language. He has become conscious of the Other, appropriated the Other and identified with the Other. And more importantly, he has come to terms with the fact that he is identified as

Other by different groups. At the end of the novel, David's Jewish identity is finally recognized by American society since an American intern and an American policeman, symbols of authority, bring him home to his parents – the intern even uses a few German words to communicate with Genya (436). David is briefly accepted by American society when a crowd gathers around his unconscious body next to the car-tracks (431) and he is also accepted by his worried parents (437). David's fluctuating status as an Other is briefly put aside after he goes through these two experiences that signify acceptance by the two groups that identified him as Other earlier. But there is no telling whether or not he will be accepted by his Jewish family and community or by mainstream American culture later in life. Roth's fluid treatment of David's relation to different languages, groups and to his own self offers a surprisingly modern and accurate take on hybridity and the experiences of individuals who find themselves between two cultures.



### Chapter III: Luce Irigaray's 'Women on the Market' and Othered women in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*.

It is hard to identify positive women characters in *Call It Sleep*, which is problematic because we are seeing things through David's eyes and it is difficult to believe a boy of his age would already have integrated strong patriarchal values, especially with the close relationship he has with his mother. If we approach the narrator as an older David who looks back on his childhood, David's negative view of women could be the product of years of exposure to patriarchal values and to a society where women are objectified.

In spite of his Americanization, the older narrator retains negative feelings toward the women and girls he came across in his childhood; this leads us to interpreting assimilation as depriving women of any kind of empowerment, in spite of the narratives written by women writers such as Anzia Yezierska or Mary Antin.

Luce Irigaray's theories in 'Women on the Market' support the idea of non-empowered women: "women have been excluded as 'the other' and reduced to a means for smoothing transactions among men" (Yoshinaga, 1). Immigration from Europe to the U.S. represents women moving from one market to another – with the first market being subjected to patriarchal values while the second market is governed by the sexual objectification of women inherent to capitalism and consumerism. These women are switching from one form of Othering to another as they integrate American society – and should they fail to enter the consumerist market as goods, they would not become Americanized, which is what happened with a lot of migrant women who were already married mothers when they moved to the U.S.

David's position on this market is very ambiguous because of his young age, but we cannot ignore the fact that there are no positive women in his life. Is this an accurate reflection of Roth's own childhood in a Jewish community? Or is this the symptom of a community in transition that adopted negative values toward women and ignored their anti-patriarchal narratives such as the stories written by Anzia Yeziarska?

We will analyze David's relation to women in this chapter in the light of Irigaray's theories and identify David's position between two cultures that view women differently but share their objectification and Othering through exchanges.

#### 1. A lack of positive women characters

It is difficult for Roth's readers to recognize a positive female character in his novel. Genya is probably the most positive female character but she stills comes across as overprotective (Karen Lawrence, 110) and the idea of her sexuality becomes a synonym for corruption in David's mind (Bonnie Lyons, 190). Annie, David's young neighbor, introduces him to a sexual game. The fact that she is crippled puts David ill-at-ease (Lyons, 188). She clearly scares and disgusts him and becomes "a lousy mut" (138) for David. The other young girls David intracts with, Esther and Polly, are lazy, untidy and are referred to as "sows" (310) by Bertha. The neighbor, Mrs.Mink is described as a very talkative lady whose tongue "spun like a bobbin on a sewing machine – and she sewed nothing" (55). David's schoolteacher is mentioned once; she gets angry at David for not paying attention in class. This is an occasion to mention "the heavy fuzz" on her lips and the fact that she belches after becoming angry (222). David finds women cannot be trusted; he gets lost and asks a women for directions. She is "old, dwarfish" and "bird-like" (99). After

exclaiming “Oh dear! How trying you are!” (100), she takes David to the police-station where he realizes: “The old woman had tricked him” (100). The other women David encounters are associated with corruption; an old lady asks him to commit a sin by lighting her stove on the Sabbath (237), he sees two prostitutes after finding himself outside late at night (406) and the women who appear in the final collage of Chapter XXI are probably prostitutes too (416).

The lack of positive women characters can be traced back to how women were actually viewed in Jewish communities at the turn of the century. We are looking at a resolutely patriarchal society where women are considered as “frivolous”; the complexity of this relationship originates in the significantly different roles assigned to men and women in traditional Jewish culture. The position is perhaps best reflected in the words of the morning prayer for men and boys: “Blessed art thou, O God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.” Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, in *The Jewish Woman in America* (1976), explain that ‘it was a rare Jewish sage in fact who did not view women as frivolous, ignorant beings, performing vital tasks in the home and endowed with a simple spirituality, but otherwise regarded as diverting their husbands from their obligation to study sacred texts’ (Jeraldine Kraver, 26).

This position is clearly recognizable in migrant literature. Gay Wilentz writes about Chametzky's 'Immigrant Fiction as Cultural Meditation' and says: “Unequivocally, Chametzky reads immigrant discourse as male, and along with other Jewish [male] critics, has set up a male paradigm for immigrant experience (...) Using female-centered discourse to expose Jewish immigrant experience, we can discern how intricately that experience was tied to the immigrant's

gender” (33). *Call It Sleep* is undeniably a male discourse and women’s voices are missing from the narrative.

## 2. Luce Irigaray on exchanges

Looking at *Call It Sleep* under the lens created by Irigaray in her 1978 essay 'Women on the Market' allows us to identify the Othering of women in the context of immigration and the transition from one culture to another.

For Irigaray, our society is centered solely around men: “The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men’s needs/desires, of exchanges among men” (Irigaray, 171). The valorization of men’s needs and desires toward women and other objects relegates women to the status of Other: “heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth working of man’s relations with himself, of relations among men. Whose 'sociocultural endogamy' excludes the participation of that other, so foreign to the social order: woman” (Irigaray, 172).

Women have no value by themselves. They only gain value within the context of exchanges: “The value of a woman always escapes: black continent, hole in the symbolic, breach in discourse...It is only in the operation of exchange among women that something of this – something enigmatic to be sure – can be felt. *Women thus has value only in that she can be exchanged*” (Irigaray, 176).

Irigaray’s theory on women on the market takes roots in Claude Levi-Strauss’s ideas on the exchange of women. Levi-Strauss lists the types of exchanges between groups and identifies valuable gifts passed on, including “foods, spells, rituals, words, names, ornaments, tools and powers” (Janet Wirth-Cauchon, 81) as well as women within the context of marriage. However,

“a woman in this exchange assumes the status of gift, object exchanged, and not that of subject who exchanges. Women, with no gift to give, no 'right of bestowal' of other women, 'are in no position to give themselves away'. Thus women are located in the interstices of social exchange, off-center from subjecthood, serving as the medium of exchange between subjects” (Wirth-Cauchon, 81).

Marxism also influences Irigaray with the notion of commodities. Marx approaches commodities as such: “The commodity is first an external object, a thing which satisfies through its qualities human needs of one kind or another” (Albert Dragstedt, 7) And “It is the utility of a thing for human life that turns it into a *use-value*” (Dragstedt, 7). Karl Marx did not associate women with commodities but the idea of the commodity as an external object corresponds to the notion of women as images and the use-value of the commodity echoes the types of marriages that were occurring in Jewish communities at the turn of the century, with wives becoming workers in the family business or housewives.

According to Irigaray, the exchange of women occurs in patriarchal societies. They have “been excluded as ‘the other’ and reduced to a means for smoothing transactions among men” (Yoshinaga, 1). This means women are split into two different bodies; their biological body and another abstract and exchangeable body – which is a form of alienation. The only way for women to gain value is to become exchangeable objects, which suggests a woman loses her value if she is no longer available as an object of exchange.

Irigaray developed this theory in the late 1970s and benefited from an increasing awareness of the objectification of women. Literary critics have not identified this issue in *Call It Sleep* or at least have not developed it any further than commenting on the role of Genya as an

Oedipal, protective and passive mother. But Irigaray's theory on the exchange of women is relevant to the community Roth is writing about and even strikes some interesting chords in relation to David's interactions with women and girls. The lack of positive women characters in the novel makes women an unsuitable object of desire for David in his quest for purity and clearly marks women as the Other.

### 3. Annie and the sealing of the exchange

David is introduced to the idea of sex and exchanges by his young neighbor Annie. He is left alone with the young girl and she initiates a sexual game which scares and disgusts David. At first, David is not playing an active role in the exchange because he is not aware of what Annie is initiating.

Critic Naomi Diamant analyzes this scene as David's introduction to "sex and semiotics" (341) as Annie tricks David into saying a performative utterance without realizing the power of his words. According to J.L. Austin, a performative utterance does not describe, constate or refer to anything as true or false. The performative utterance is an action in itself. For instance, saying "I do" during a marriage ceremony counts as a performative utterance (137). The presence of a performative utterance brings legitimacy to the exchange between David and Annie. David is not aware of what he is doing but he is adhering to a semiotic structure inherent to the market Irigaray talks about. Here is the exchange between David and Annie, with the performative utterance in bold – note that the context and the questions asked by Annie define David's answer as performative utterance:

'Wot?'  
'Wotcha want.'

'I don't know wot.'  
'Wot?'  
'Yuh know,' she said mysteriously.  
That was the game then. David congratulated himself on having discovered its rules so quickly.  
'Yea, I know' he answered in the same tone of mystery.  
'Yea?' she peered at him eagerly.  
'Yeah!' he peered at her in the same way.  
'Yuh wanna?'  
'Yea!' (52)

In this first stage, David is actually mimicking Annie's behavior, the “tone of mystery” and the peering. The children then step inside a closet and David has to utter the speech act that seals the exchange.

'Yuh must ask me,' she said. 'G'wan ask me.'  
'Wot?'  
'Yuh must say, Yuh wanna play bad? Say it!'  
He trembled. **'Yuh wanna play bad?'**  
'Now *you* said it,' she whispered. 'Don' forget you said it.' By the emphasis of her words, David knew he had crossed some awful threshold.' (53).

Annie's utterance “Yuh wanna play bad” does not function as a performative utterance because it is established that only the man – here David – can perform the exchange. Annie then proceeds to tell David how babies are made and the children kiss and touch, to David's disgust. In the first part of the game, David is repeating some words and imitating Annie's behavior. In the second part of the exchange, David's words gain the power of a performative utterance. By repeating what Annie is urging him to say, he seals a pact and apparently takes responsibility too. Even though Annie initiates the game, she understands she has to get David to ask her – so the young boy actually initiates the game from a semiotic point of view. The exchange between the two children has the form of a ritual, with the initiation of David, the questions and the performative utterance.

The exchange does not entirely correspond to Irigaray's theories. There is no evidence that David considers Annie as a commodity – although she is othered in his mind because the leg brace she has to wear makes him uneasy (50). This exchange could be interpreted as two children practicing for the roles they will assume later in life. Annie knows she cannot seal the exchange through a speech act like David can, and she loses her value after the exchange as she becomes a “lousy mut” (138) for David. Annie probably wants David to initiate the game and the exchange because she has integrated the structure of the market and understands David has to initiate the exchange and be responsible; she has integrated gender roles and the idea of structured exchanges.

The exchange leads to a game that shocks and disgusts David and becomes repressed. The horror and disgust become replaced by a fear of darkness, cellars and rats which will haunt David throughout most of the book. David's early initiation to sexuality and structured exchanges becomes an important part of his personal mythology and probably causes him to develop a strong interest in the idea of purity. Women and girls are Othered by being designated as the opposite of the purity David seeks.

#### 4. Luter and Genya on the market

David is exposed to the idea of exchanges and impurity again when Luter tries seducing his mother. We have discussed David's Oedipal feelings for Genya in a previous chapter; David has feelings of ownership for his mother and is closely connected to her, probably because he spent the first years of his life without a father. The young boys who experience Oedipal feelings



typically get over these feelings by being challenged by a father and eventually owning the mother through identifying with the father.

David's father Albert never challenges his son as an Oedipal rival by showing affection for his wife and does not recognize David as his son during David's early years, which means David cannot adopt the role of the young son and identify with his father. David is not challenged by an Oedipal rival until Luter tries seducing his mother. Genya rejects his advances and gets David to stay with her so she does not find herself alone with Luter, which in a way reinforces David in his Oedipal feelings: "With troubled eyes David looked first at Luter, then at the coin. Beneath the table a hand gently pressed his thigh. His mother! What did she want?" (44).

Later, David sees Luter on the streets near his home and assumes he visited his mother and seduced her: "But – Wide shoulders, grey coat. That derby. That was – he struggled against the ineluctable recognition. No! No! Not him! But he walked like...His hands in his pockets. It was! It was! –" (89). After recognizing Luter, he assumes he is on his way to seeing his mother: "That game! He was going to make her play now, like Annie. In the closet!..." (89).

Luter is transgressing the rules of the market. According to Irigaray, "mothers, reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private properties, excluded from exchange"(185). Mothers are "threatening the very existence of the social order" (185) if they remain on the market. Luter has no regards for Genya's marriage and her attempts at pushing him away and Albert does not function as the paternal authority or Oedipal rival. It seems the community described by Roth is losing its social unity as migrants are effecting a difficult transition between their old world values and the more liberated

American society. Mothers are no longer sacred and forbidden objects; they become sexualized in the male gaze.

Roth gives his readers a very sexualized view of Genya as David becomes aware of the way Luter looks at her: “Luter, his eyes narrowed by a fixed yawn, was staring at his mother, at her hips. For the first time, David was aware of how her flesh, confined by the skirt, formed separate molds against it” (40), and later David adopts this same gaze (64). Genya is reduced to a sexual object and her feelings or desires are entirely dismissed by Luter as she is commodified through the lens of a materialistic society represented by Luter.

Since Genya refused Luter's advances the first time, there is no evidence that she accepted the second time. In fact, there is no evidence that Luter actually visited her when David sees him in the streets. David assumes an exchange took place because he is applying the structure he integrated after learning it from Annie. Annie did not resist him and in fact coerced David into becoming the active agent in the exchange, a role he only adopted on a semiotic level. In fact, David even compares the two exchanges by assuming Luter is going to make his mother play like Annie (89).

David recognized these semiotic marks in Luter's speech the first time he tried seducing his mother. He assumes he was the only thing keeping the exchange from being sealed. Genya is denied active agency since David assumes she was seduced by Luter. He has integrated the idea of women as commodities and even looks at his mother in a sexual way before quickly repressing these feelings: “The shadow between her breasts, how deep! How far it – No! No! Luter! When he looked! That night! Mustn't! Mustn't!” (64).

David's understanding of these exchanges is limited because he is still young and his knowledge is based on his experience with Annie. In spite of his limited understanding, he integrates the idea that his mother is a commodity with this episode, something that is reflected throughout the entire novel as Genya's voice is never rendered by the narrator.

## 5. Genya's European past

We learn more about Genya's past through her conversations with her sister Bertha and stories she tells David. We learn that she was a valuable commodity for her family because she worked in the family store (151). She had an affair with a Gentile man, something she hid from her family. The relationship could not lead to an acceptable exchange because it seems the Jewish community Genya originated from wishes to protect its unity by only allowing exchanges within the community. Genya transgressed this rule and brought dishonor to her family: "Not only is she herself ruined, said father, let her be! Let her die! But me! Me!" (202).

Her Gentile lover found a richer woman to marry; he performed an exchange that gave him access to a more valuable woman. Genya lost her value on the market after being rejected by this man. We are given an insight into the patriarchal structure of her community as she evokes her father's dishonor and how she had to beg: "Mother led me over to him. From her apron's pocket she drew out Ludwig's picture. (...) She thrust it between my fingers and she said, lift your eyes, Benjamin. See, she tears it to bits. She will never sin again" (203).

Another exchange was then performed as Genya married Albert. Genya is conscious that she had lost her value on the market at this point and she also realizes there is pressure on her

and her family because she has young sisters who have to be married off too. Her father laments: “And my poor, young daughters and the daughters to come. How shall I marry them?” (202).

We also learn that her parents sent Albert to the U.S. so he could earn enough money for Genya and David's passage, yet another exchange, this time made concrete by a monetary transaction as Albert pays to have his wife join him. Genya's value appears in the novel; she is always described as performing household chores, which echoes Irigaray's approach of women as “utilitarian objects” (175).

The rigid European patriarchal system Genya comes from is a perfect example for Irigaray's theory on the exchange of women. Challenging these values by choosing her own lover turned Genya into an outcast – and love did not prove stronger than the rules that regulate the market since her lover chose the riches and status he could gain from marrying a rich woman.

Critic Wirth-Nesher interprets Genya's marriage to Albert as a “penance” (392) for her affair, but if we adopt Irigaray's theory, we can interpret this marriage as a union by default between two outcasts who do not have access to better options on the market. Albert presumably killed his father – or thinks he did – and his mother might have told this story to Genya and perhaps to other potential brides (390), getting in the way of Albert sealing an exchange with a valuable woman. The Schearls were then sent away by Genya's parents, because they both broke important taboos (parricide and transgressing the structured exchanges of women) and have become outcasts for their community.

## 6. David and the market

In spite of his original disgust, David fully enters this system of exchanges after meeting Leo. Leo is a Catholic Polish-American who introduces David to a series of Catholic symbols, which quickly become associated with Leo's confidence, freedom and independence in David's mind. David is envious of Leo's confidence and is desperate to befriend the boy.

Leo is a few years older than David and has no adult supervision. After learning that David has two female cousins, he tricks David into taking him to the girls and tricks one of the girls into having sex with him. An exchange takes place between the boys; David wants one of the religious objects Leo showed him – a rosary. Leo agrees to give this object once David takes him to his cousins: “An’ yuh’ll gib me id?’ ‘Sure I will – fer keeps! If you take me over witchuh t’morrer it’s all yourn” (328).

The exchange between the boys corresponds to Irigaray's theories; since David knows where to find the two girls, Leo considers David owns the girls and is in a position to realize the exchange. By performing this exchange, David is taking an important step toward assuming his place in a patriarchal society: “The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo” (Irigaray, 170). David agrees to the exchange because he perceives the rosary as valuable. To David, the object represents safety, confidence and the end of his irrational fears; he refers to the rosary as “them lucky beads” and thinks he will “never have to be scared” once he gets the rosary ( 349).

The exchange is made possible because David perceives a value in this object and Leo sees David's cousins as valuable. David does not perceive the girls as valuable but they acquire

value because they make the possession of the object he desires a possibility: “The price of the articles, in fact, no longer comes from *their* natural form, from *their* bodies, *their* language, but from the fact that they mirror the need/desires for exchanges among men. To do this, the commodity obviously cannot exist alone, but there is no such thing as a commodity, either, so long as there are not *at least two men* to make an exchange. In order for a product – a woman? – to have value, two men, at least have to invest (in) her”(Irigaray, 181).

David hesitates because he is afraid to go back to his aunt's shop, mostly because he had to go in the cellar the first time he was there. At no point does he think about his cousins, or possible repercussions of the exchange, and the idea of owning the object he desires is much stronger than his fears. David thinks: “Don’t care! Ain’t scared! If I can make it! Ooh, if I can make it! Never be scared!” (353).

Technically, David agrees to take Leo to the girls but Leo waits until he is sure he has seduced David's cousins before giving him the rosary, in spite of David frequently asking for the objects: “w’en yuh gonna gimme it?” (339), “Yuh gonna gimme id now?” (341) and “An’ nen yuh’ll gimme it?” (342). Since Leo waits until he has the girl before performing the exchange, the exchange is really about trading the girl against the object David considers as valuable – and not merely about taking Leo to the location where David's cousins can be found.

David is afraid and in shock as he hears Leo and his cousin, which suggests he did not fully understand what he agreed to. But once the exchange is over, David is afraid and still in shock because of the sexual nature of what he witnessed and because his violent father might find out. David is under so much stress that his inner thoughts appear as nonsensical and his identity seems to disappear: “I’m somebody else –else – ELSE!” (371). David's commodification

and Othering of his cousin and his initiation into this system of structured exchanges represent a serious identity crisis for David – who associates the Other with himself, perhaps because he adopted a patriarchal role without having access to a father figure he can identify with.

At no point does he think about his cousins or feel guilty for exchanging her. The girl's father, the man David's aunt Bertha married, is concerned his daughter lost her virginity – and her value in the contest of exchanges to come; according to Irigaray, “Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men” (186).

David's cousin is here treated as a commodity and David fully integrates the exchange system by performing this exchange without taking his cousin in consideration. Besides, David transgressed the rules of the strict patriarchal Jewish society he grew up in by performing this exchange. Technically, the girls' father is the one who has ownership in Irigaray's system. David transgresses patriarchy and disregards a father figure. He is conquering his fear of his own father while transgressing his heritage, adopting more liberal American values and entering a society where women are available on the market regardless of their status because of their extreme objectification after being introduced to this system by Annie and witnessing the way Luter objectifies his mother.

## 7. Bertha on the market

Bertha is introduced in *Call It Sleep* as Genya's rebellious and outspoken sister. She is the only woman character who stands up to patriarchy by opposing David's father Albert and by making fun of her old father: "But my father, the good Reb. Benjamin Krollman, was this way.' And she began to mumble rapidly and look furtively around and draw closer to herself a figment praying shawl. 'His praying was an excuse for his laziness. As long as he prayed he didn't have anything else. Let Genya or his wife take care of the store, he had to take care of God'" (151-152). She opposes Albert because she considers him as insane but she actually identifies patriarchy and denounces it by imitating her father and denouncing how he put more work on the women of his family (151) and did not share fairly (153). Genya is identified as a victim of this system – but there is no evidence of Bertha's father owning or exchanging her as readers are given very few details regarding the context of her immigration.

Bertha does not enter the exchange market immediately. Actually, she is denied feminine characteristics by Roth or by David. She is described as a very unattractive woman; she is a "gross, ill-favored wench with her red hair and green teeth" (145). Her loud speech strongly contrasts with her soft-spoken sister Genya: Bertha is "merry, tart and ready-tongued" as well as "rebellious and scatter-brained" while Genya 'grave, attentive, mild in her speech' and "infinitely patient, careful about everything she did" (146). And she does not buy into the cult of appearances that was used by Jewish women to integrate mainstream American culture; according to Barbara Schreier, "turn-of-the-century immigrants reported that American clothing and appearance were among the first symbols they adopted as a sign of cultural intermingling" (25).



Bertha finds a job in a sweatshop – she apparently makes paper flowers. She enjoys being able to spend her money on clothes but she reveals that she works like an animal: “True I work like a horse and I stink like one with my own sweat” (153). The comparison to a horse suggests the relation she has to her employer turned into ownership because of the deplorable working conditions and low wages.

These feelings actually reflect the type of working conditions a lot of New Yorkers had to put up with. The textile industry was famous for its exploitation of Jewish migrants according to Suzanne Model but these conditions were not limited to this industry or to the Jewish community.

Bertha finally enters the market when she begins going to the dentist's regularly to get some work done on her teeth – the first sign of a shift toward the cult of appearances. Her behavior changes and David notices she feels differently about her appearances after meeting Nathan (162). Even though Bertha functions as a comic relief, she is entering a consumerist society and fully embraces the objectification of women. Readers finally learn Bertha has a suitor, or a “kippin-company man” (163) as they call him, in an attempt to convey the idea this relationship corresponds to American social constructs – Bertha is not really exchanged by anyone but she admits there is no love between her and Nathan: “Do you love him? 'Woe is me, no! And he doesn't love me either, so don't ask me'” (168).

Her union is presented as an economic partnership, which seems empowering at first sight when Bertha explains how opening a candy store will allow the two of them to acquire wealth (178). But Bertha seems aware of Nathan's intentions of having her working hard: “He's like all men. He thinks first of how he can use you, then in good time when he's going to marry

you. You can't have the one without the other with me” (184). Bertha is here recognizing what makes her valuable on the market – her ability to work.

David later visits the candy store Nathan and Bertha opened and sees his pregnant aunt at work. Bertha’s pregnancy fits within Irigaray’s system: “It is because women’s bodies – through their use, consumption, and circulation – provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown 'infrastructure' of the elaboration of that social life and culture” (Irigaray, 171). Because she can procreate, Bertha is making “social life and culture possible” and is doing her part in reproducing the societal structure she lives in by bringing a child into the world and raising him or her to adopt the values of her community.

Her husband is never depicted as working and it seems that Bertha minds the store while Nathan's young daughters have to take care of the housekeeping. Earlier, Bertha vehemently dismissed housekeeping: “To the devil with it! I hate housekeeping” (170). Only to have younger girls fall into this pattern of women working at home. The frustrations and disappointment and bad living conditions do not suggest there is equality between Bertha and her husband or any kind of independence and empowerment for Bertha. Even though she does not fit the typical image of a woman when compared to her sister Genya, she eventually adopts the values of a culture that objectifies women and enters a marriage that leads her to a life filled with disappointments and hard work. Bertha has the potential of escaping structured exchanges because Roth first presents her as an outspoken and rebellious woman. But she falls right into American consumerism, the cult of appearances and to a certain extent patriarchy after marrying Nathan and working in his store.

Bertha was Othered from the beginning by David because of her lack of feminine characteristics. Roth is taking a risk by creating a non-traditional woman character – but he cannot go too far and has to clearly indicate her status as a comic relief by denying her femininity. She is the exact opposite of her sister Genya and yet cannot escape Othering and structured exchanges. The character sends a powerful message regarding the inability to find an alternative to structured exchanges and objectification for women. It is unclear what kind of message Roth wanted to convey with this character but his inability to conciliate femininity, freedom of expression and the role of the comic relief is representative of his treatment of women as the Other and as commodities.

#### 8. Society and the exchange of women

Bertha cannot escape structured exchanges because society as a whole is based on this structure – which is hard to perceive in *Call It Sleep* because Roth focuses on a small domestic world until the end of the novel. After David flees from his home, he finds himself in the street at a time when he is usually home. He spots two women:

With precious, mincing gait, two women approached, scanning with dead caressing flutter the dead faces of the men who passed them. Their cheeks in the vitriolic glare of the photography-shop window were flinty yet sagging; green light glazed the velvet powder, scummed the hectic rouge, livid over lurid. One, the nearest, swelling her bosom to the figment strand she lifted from it, sent a glancing beam at David from casual polished, putrescent eyes. They sauntered on trailing a languid wake of flesh and perfume, redolent for all the ten foot gap between them, emphasizing by denying their corruption (406).

Readers identify these women as prostitutes, but there is no evidence the young David does. Perhaps the older David who is narrating does and deliberately places clues for readers – or Roth might be the voice behind these clues. There is another possible mention of prostitution in

Chapter XX and XXI. We are taken beyond David's world for the first time and dialogues coming from a bar are transcribed in a modernist collage. Two women are talking about things such as illegal abortions and murdering a lover (416). They are not identified as prostitutes but their presence in the bar, their speech and the topic of their conversation are compelling clues.

Irigaray includes prostitution in her system of exchanges:

The *prostitute* remains to be considered. Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. No doubt because the break between usage and exchange is, in her case, less clear-cut? In her case, the qualities of woman's body are 'useful'. However, these qualities have 'value' only because they have already been appropriated by man, and because they serve as the locus of relations – hidden ones – between men. Prostitution amounts to *usage that is exchanged*. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The woman's body is valuable because it has already been used. In the extreme case, the more it has served, the more it is worth. Not because its natural assets have been put to use this way, but, on the contrary, because its nature has been 'used up,' and has become once again no more than a vehicle for relations among men (186).

The two women represent a different world of poverty and give the reader a chilling reality check regarding the environment David is growing up in – it is a society where women are driven to merciless objectification and alienation. Actually, prostitution was common in the area and time-frame in which the novel is set. Reena Sigman Friedman links prostitution with husband desertion. In other words, once the original exchange is broken, women have no choice but to enter the market again but must do so as commodities with a lower value.

During the daytime, David describes streets filled with children, talks about games, childish arguments or seeks refuge in his inner world. The presence of these prostitutes suggests David will grow up as a product of his environment – like these women did. David is still young but he definitely took a step toward the market described by Irigaray by trading his cousins against a rosary with Leo.

His mother is actually comforting him in this behavior by transmitting patriarchal values to her son and conforming to one of Irigaray's rules regarding the system of exchange; mothers have to "maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it" (185). Genya is frustrated in a few instances and cannot fulfill her housekeeping tasks. David notices this and his mother remarks: "You can learn what kind of a woman not to marry" (117). She expects David to reproduce the model his parents live by. Between a society that considers women as commodities and a heritage fostering patriarchal values, David's chances to escape the patterns of exchange described by Irigaray seem rather slim – and this is an issue his artistic sensibility does not pick up. His personal mythology actually feeds from this with the horror he feels toward Annie, impure women and sexuality in general.

Irigaray classifies women in three categories: "Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women" (Irigaray, 186). We find these three figures in *Call It Sleep*, but the mother and the virgin are transgressed in David's world, making purity an unattainable state. David's mother status as an outsider to the market is not respected by Luter. She is later seen naked by David's friends and even David begins seeing her in a sexualized way. Virgins turn out to be corrupted –with David's cousins- and corrupting with Annie. Women seem to be drawn onto the market by men's desires, regardless of their role as mothers or status as virgins. Roth actually presents these mothers and virgins in a corrupt way. Genya is probably the noblest female character in the novel, and yet we learn she engaged in an affair with a Gentile back in Europe. She rejects Luter but she already sinned and lost her purity. Virgins, who are supposed to be a symbol for purity become negative. Annie corrupts David by initiating him to a sexual game and is referred to as a "mut" (138) while David's cousins are described as unruly, dirty and

referred to as “sows” (310) by Bertha. Bertha herself should belong to the category of virgins before her marriage but Roth does not confer her any kind of feminine or pure characteristics and focuses on her repulsing appearance instead.

This tendency reflects the transition between the Jewish patriarchal society imported from Europe and American society. Because of their condition as destitute migrants and efforts to assimilate and adopt more liberal American values, women who should adopt the roles of mother or virgins cannot attain the purity inherent to either status. They are ruthlessly Othered, alienated and objectified in a system that closely resembles Irigaray’s market, except there is no opting out of this system of exchange in Roth’s novel and in the time-frame he writes about.

## 9. Conclusion

The absence of a pure woman figure in *Call It Sleep* functions as an efficient reminder of the corrupted environment David is growing up in and of the toll of these living conditions on women and children who do not have the option to enter the competitive capitalist society that allows social ascension for migrant men, if the American Dream is to be trusted. Applying Irigaray’s theories to *Call It Sleep* allows us to see how women are Othered and objectified by society – and by David, once he is initiated into this system. However, after David realizes an exchange of the sort with Leo, he seems to lose his identity. Instead of becoming an accomplished patriarch, David is in fear of his father punishing him for his actions and thinks he is “somebody else” (371). Later, in Chapter XXI, David gets electrocuted and is chased by an angry father in a mystical experience or a hallucination, depending on interpretations. Is David driven away by an angry father because he was not able to perform the exchange successfully

and adopt an identity as a patriarch – or is to be punished for assuming the role of the father in giving away his cousin to Leo? David exchanges his cousin for the rosary, a Christian symbol he associates with safety, independence and freedom. In other words, exchanging his cousin to obtain the rosary is an attempt at accessing mainstream American culture. David seems to turn to exchanging women because his desire for purity is not met by the negative women characters created by Roth but the object he got from the exchange fails at protecting him or representing purity. David is not adopting traditional patriarchal values but learns to take advantage of the objectification and sexualization of women in American society. His artistic sensibility allows him to find beauty in his surroundings and focus on a quest for purity, symbolized with his obsession for Isaiah's coal and later the Christian symbols Leo exposes him to, but he eventually decides to "call it sleep" (441) and these perceptions are numbed as he is accepted into the multitude in the last paragraph of the novel. All the women characters around David have been Othered and exchanged because of their lack of purity, which means they have no value for David. David is finally othered and alienated by abandoning his quest for purity and becoming a part of the multitude and system of structured exchanges.

### **In the end...**

These different approaches to *Call It Sleep* allow for a better understanding of immigration and multi-culturalism as well as the notion of the Other. The Other can be found on a psychoanalytical level, in linguistic groups, the fragmentation of the self David experiences and through his negative image of women.

The psychoanalytical Other is expressed through the horror David experiences, his Oedipal feelings and his Desire for different objects. David chooses different objects and symbols as he is introduced to new potential “*objects a*”. The notion of the Other is ever-changing too. The Other is fluid and varies from one cultural group to the next; since David belongs to more than one culture, he must constantly adapt to different codes and identify a different Other in function of his cultural environment. David has a hard time developing his own identity and the fragmentation of his self leads to him identifying with the Other. His fragmented self is unable to relate to women – who are Othered and commodified as David adopts the rules of exchange defined by Luce Irigaray in 'Women on the Market'.

The depth of Roth's text and the mix between poetry and realism make it still relevant today. Our society is in a constant state of transition, struggles and desperately tries to put a face or a name on the Other, this fluctuating, intangible and universal presence. By not adopting a radical leftist tone and focusing on the naïve yet beautiful gaze of a child, Roth gave us a timeless classic on immigration and on human nature by addressing this dark presence we are all familiar with in one way or another, the Other.



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