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The Road Trip in EII Allows Characters to Take on New Identities

*Everything is illuminated* is a film adapted by the novel written by Jonathan published in 2002 (Schreiber). The film switches between two stories, both of which are in an autobiographical manner. One of the stories is about a fictional history of the eradicated town of Trachimbrod where the grandfather of the narrator was born while the other was about a trip to Ukraine in search of memories of Trachimbrod and its remnants. Jonathan, along with Alex and his grandfather, is on his way to Ukraine in search of Augustine, a woman who saved the life of Jonathan’s grandfather during Nazi liquidation of Trachimbrod. The film depicts the love Jonathan had for his grandfather and how they met Alex who without thinking about money, helped them in their entire journey. This essay will focus on how the journey to Ukraine impacted all the characters differently and how it facilitated in reshaping their identities.

While discussing the character named Jonathan, he was portrayed as a Jewish-American young boy who loves to collect antiques especially family’s memorabilia. He places most of the items he collected from his family members under their picture. He was able to take a picture from his grandmother on her deathbed as well. The picture was of his grandfather during a war in Ukraine, with a woman named Augustine. After learning that Augustine saved the life of his grandfather, he decided to go on a quest to find Augustine and the background of the story. In terms of his appearance, the other narrator in the film, Alex, defines Jonathan as a common man who is afraid of dogs and is vegetarian. He always admired his grandfather as he thought that his grandfather was a brave man who survived the war. He was always dressed in a formal attire with big glasses that made him look more sophisticated. His passion to know more about his Jewish roots made him search for Augustine.

In contrast, Alex was a young man who enjoyed listening to pop music and loved to be around girls. Unlike Jonathan, Alex is not interested in searching for his roots or connecting with the past. He is also fond of speaking the English language even though he is not fluent in speaking. As a Ukrainian, he was expected to be masculine and therefore, he misunderstood the interpretations of masculinity in other cultures as well. Initially, he had the impression that all Jewish people were foolish for spending lot of money just to connect with their roots. Moreover, unlike Jonathan, Alex used to dress in a casual way like the people around him and also in a hip hop style. As he loves America and got good grades in university in the English language course, his father hired him to be a translator for the tourist who was unable to speak the Ukrainian language (Schreiber).

While discussing Jonathan’s grandfather, he was a “non-blind, blind man” (Foer). He was responsible for taking care of Alex while he pick tourists. He also had a dog named Sammy Davis who was Alex’s “Seeing-Eye Dog” (Foer). All three characters have different personalities and identities, however, during their journey, they all changed as they were illuminated by the journey to find Jonathan’s grandfather’s hometown.

At the start of the film, Alex was shown as a guy who is only interested in girls, cars, and America. He also never liked Jewish-American people. However, after being friends with Jonathan, he realized the importance of culture. The contrast between Jonathan and Alex is starkly illuminated by the movie. Jonathan is static, sentimental, and overly obsessed with the past while Alex is optimistic and naive. Although Alex had a troubled childhood as his father was abusive, still he did not burden himself from the past and is therefore fixated on new things. Also, Alex emphasized the importance of happy ending however Jonathan fictionalizes the past.

During the journey, Jonathan came to know about his grandfather’s past that changed the way he used to think about the wartime. Although was unable to find Augustine yet he met a woman named Lista who was pretending to be Augustine. Lista told Jonathan how Nazis bombed the town and how they even killed the survivors. Although Jonathan was not able to meet Augustine yet he became friends with Alex who promised to search Augustine on his behalf as well. Initially, he never liked Alex but later he became friends with him and they both bonded over their past. While discussing Grandfather, he never told anyone about the truth and never accepted his flaws. Although he was protective of Alex despite all, he never stood for Alex and saved him from his abusive father. However, during the journey, he accepted his flaws and told Alex that when Nazis came to kill Jews, rather than being brave he hide his religion and pointed out at his friend Herschel. As a result, the Nazis killed his friend by burning him alive. Later, in the film grandfather killed himself while accepting that he was unable to protect Alex and is responsible for the abuse Alex faced. In the film, Alex was the one whose personality changed a lot as he never accepted his past and always wanted to run away from it. He always wanted happy endings and therefore took responsibility for his young brother to save him from his abusive father. He also thought that being masculine means that one had to be around girls or have money in the end, he realized that masculinity is not defined by the stereotypical criteria that people associate with it rather it means to be protective of one’s family. His opinion regarding Jewish-American people also changed.

In conclusion, the quest to find Augustine did not only impacted Jonathan but Alex and his grandfather as well. They all had different opinions about life and each other. However, after their journey, they all accepted their flaws and tried to cope up with their past incidents.

# **Works Cited:**

*Everything Is Illuminated*. Dir. Liev Schreiber. Liev Schreiber. Warner Independent Pictures, 2005.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything is illuminated*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.