

Foer's use of  
surrealist techniques  
to convey tone, mood  
and theme



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The year 1924 marked the beginning of the surrealist movement. Aimed at tapping into the subconscious, surrealism became a growing art form that still influences artists and writers to this day. According to Andr Breton, author of "The Surrealist Manifesto", surrealism is "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner the actual functioning of thought."

Building on this idea is the concept of automatic writing, a tool that surrealists were very fond of using to tap into this "actual functioning of thought" that Breton describes. Automatic writing is a method of writing without thinking. Surrealists utilize this method because they view it as a way to break down the mental barrier between the conscious and subconscious, thus providing a clearer vision of the thought process. Many aspects of Jonathan Safran Foer's "Everything Is Illuminated" are undeniably surrealist, suggesting that Foer employed automatic writing in the piece. He seems obsessed with the idea of not only constantly keeping his readers aware that "Everything Is Illuminated" is a written piece, but making them feel as if it is still a work in progress. His book establishes a sense of truth, as though it has not been edited to completion, allowing readers to feel as though they are viewing a first draft. This is reminiscent of the surrealist idea of automatic writing; it is as if Foer simply wrote the entire book as an automatic writing exercise, and did not take the time to go back and edit it. How and why does Foer use automatic writing to convey different tones, moods and themes in his novel? Through several writing methods, including dialogue, the print in the book itself, and Alex's italicized letters to Jonathan, Foer employs the process of automatic writing. He does so for two reasons:

to exemplify the concept of surrealism, and to strengthen the many different

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tones and moods found in "Everything is Illuminated". In turn, using these methods to convey tone and mood reinforces the overall themes of journey and self-discovery. The first way in which Foer's work utilizes the concept of automatic writing is through the dialogue, specifically the parts of the story that are written from Alex's perspective. Much of the Alex's dialogue is written without line breaks: "' They burned the synagogue.' ' They burned the synagogue.' ' That was the first thing they did.' ' That was first.' ' Then they made all of the men in lines'" (185). During this passage, where Alex is translating what the old woman is saying for Jonathan, the exclusion of line breaks gives the reader the impression that the book is a constant stream of thought, as though the author cannot be bothered to even lift his pen from the paper. Furthermore, this helps to convey the mood of the passage. By writing not only what the old woman is saying, but repeating it, as well as excluding the line breaks, Foer emphasizes the importance of this part of the story and creates a somber tone. The mood that Foer expresses here strengthens the theme of journeying because it is so different from Alex's tone earlier in the book, where the mood is more light-hearted and humorous. Towards the end of the novel, when Alex's grandfather is recounting the Nazis' march through Kolki, this writing technique becomes even more pronounced: It was not forever before he was the only Jew remaining outside of the synagogue the General was now in the second row and said to a man because he only asked men I do not know why who is a Jew and the man said they are all in the synagogue because he did not know Herschel or did not know that Herschel was a Jew... (250) Foer does not bother to put quotes or periods between his sentences, turning this section of his work into a stream of thought, suggestive of the automatic writing

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process. This forces the reader to focus on the text, because it is more difficult to distinguish sentences from each another without the usual punctuation. This also conveys a rushed and anxious tone, as if the grandfather can barely get the words out of his mouth before continuing on to his next thought. This may be interpreted as Foer's attempt to stress how tragic yet important this section of the book is. However, Foer does not stop by simply excluding line breaks, quotes and periods from his text. He continues to omit even the spaces between words: I looked at Grandmother and shekissedmeontheforehead and I kissedheronthemouth and our tearsmixedonourlips and then I kissedyourfather many times I secured him from Grandmother's arms and Iheldhimwithmuchforce so much that he started crying I said I love you I love you I love you I love you I loveyou I loveyou I loveyou I loveyou I loveyou..." (251)This conveys a feeling of steady flow, as if Foer is simply writing continuously, without ever stopping to think about what he is writing. It also serves as a reminder for the reader of how quickly these events are happening. Perhaps more important, however, are the places where Foer chooses to exclude the spaces between words. He utilizes this technique towards the end of the book, when Alex's grandfather recalls his experience of the Nazis moving through Kolki. By omitting the spaces between words in this section, Foer conveys even more of a rushed tone than when he simply omitted the periods between his sentences. To the reader, it seems as if the grandfather is tripping over his words because they are so hard to speak in the first place that it is easier for him to jumble them all together. Aside from forcing the reader to think about what the author is writing and enforcing the anxious and heart-wrenching mood that the story takes on at this point, Foer's omission of spaces is reminiscent of surrealist <https://assignbuster.com/foers-use-of-surrealist-techniques-to-convey-tone-mood-and-theme/>

techniques, in that it causes the reader to think outside the box. When Foer pushes together phrases such as “ Iloveyou” and “ tearsmixedonourlips”, readers must focus on these phrases more than on the rest of the text; it is as if Foer has created these new words to reflect on the fact that there are no words in the English language capable of describing the tragedy that occurred during the Holocaust (251). A second way Foer uses the idea of automatic writing to express tone in his book is through the presentation of the text itself. There are several examples of this in “ Everything Is Illuminated”. One of the most noticeable instances in which Foer uses text to prompt his readers to recall the fact that the book is a written piece is during the lengthy excerpt from “ The Book of Antecedents”. After the last entry on Brod's 613 Sadnesses, the book continues: “ We are writing...We are writing...We are writing...” (212). This goes on for the next page and a half. While the reader can view this as a humorous addition to the story, because Foer takes the time and space in his book to insert this section, it also forces the reader to examine Foer's rationale. The readers recognize the fact that “ Everything Is Illuminated” is a written work, and that the author is consciously putting forth effort to make sure his audience remembers this. Just as Foer uses dialogue to convey moods of anxiety and somberness, Foer presents this particular segment of text in order to express a mood, this time a monotonous one. Another example of Foer's use of text occurs towards the end of the book, in between the description of Trachimday and “ the dream of the end of the world” (272): This was celebration, unmitigated by imminent death. This was imminent death, unmitigated by celebration. She threw them high into the

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They stayed

there.....

.....(270)These periods continue for a page and a half. They are interspersed with three more small snippets of words, the last of which reads, " There is still time" (271). From the text before and after this section, it can be inferred that this portion of the story occurs during the bombing of Trachimbrod. Foer uses these ellipses to indicate the passing of time. By placing such a large amount of periods in this part of the text, it is as if Foer is using this text to represent the time that the citizens of Trachimbrod spent preparing for the bombing and fleeing the city. Because of this technique, it is not necessary for the author to recount the bombing itself; his method conveys just as much, if not more, of the emptiness and loss of the tragedy. In this way, Foer makes it seem as if the bombing is occurring in slow motion. This causes the reader to feel a sense of anticipation, which increases the suspense of the passage. Furthermore, this mood ties into Foer's journey theme, because the book itself has matured from the story of a few characters setting out on a small quest into something far larger and more significant. In literature, the purpose of multiple ellipses is to leave something out of a story. In this instance, the ellipses create the illusion of an interruption in Foer's thoughts, further indicating that " Everything Is Illuminated" is a work in progress. It seems as if during Foer's automatic writing exercise, he could not find the words to describe the bombing, and simply inserted these ellipses as a temporary measure. A third way in which Foer conveys tone in the automatic writing exercise is through Alex's letters to Jonathan. All of these letters are typed in

italics: 17 November 1997Dear Jonathan, Humph. I feel as if I have so many  
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things to inform you. Beginning is very rigid, yes? I will begin with the less rigid matter, which is the writing. I could not perceive if you were appeased by the last section. I do not understand, to where did it move you? (142)The italicization reminds readers of hand-written letters. This is another cue that helps readers to remember that "Everything Is Illuminated" is a written piece. By typing Alex's letters in italics, Foer forces his readers to think about why he is doing this. Also, the fact that Alex's English is not very good reminds the reader of the fact that the book is a written piece. Alex remarks that he has a thesaurus next to him as he writes his letters. This is evident throughout the book, as he consistently replaces his words with similar-meaning words, but ones that do not exactly fit into his statements: I have girdled in the envelope the items you inquired, not withholding postcards of Lutsk, the census ledgers of the six villages from before the war, and the photographs you had me keep for cautious purposes. It was a very, very, very good thing, no? I must eat a slice of humble pie for what occurred to you on the train. I know how momentous the box was for you, for both of us, and how its ingredients were not exchangeable. (23)Phrases such as "I must eat a slice of humble pie" and words such as "girdled," "momentous" and "ingredients" are just a few examples of how Alex misuses words (23).

Technically, these words mean essentially what Alex intends them to, but he uses slightly inappropriate words in an effort to sound more knowledgeable about the English language. This serves as a subtle reminder to readers that the book is in the process of being written, because the author has purposely not taken the time to correct the letters to reflect proper English language and grammar. Leaving Alex's letters unedited not only invokes certain

emotions in readers, but also suggests that this is a rough draft of the novel.  
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It is as if Foer is still in the process of writing and revising his work. Overall, the tone of Alex's letters reveal increasing maturity as they progress and Alex develops a better grasp of the English language. Throughout the novel, and particularly towards the end, Alex comments on how he now realizes he has misused some of these words: " This made me very wrathful (not splenened or on nerves, as you have informed me that these are not befitting words how often I use them)" (100). As the book progresses, Foer's blatant attempts at ensuring that his readers realize that " Everything Is Illuminated" is a written piece also reveals how Alex matures as a person, strengthening the theme of self-discovery. Throughout " Everything Is Illuminated", Foer drops numerous hints (both obvious and subtle) to remind his readers that this is a piece that has been written and, perhaps, may still be in the process of being revised. He does so to invoke certain emotions in his readers, such as anxiety, anticipation and emptiness, which echo the moods of different sections of his story. In what may be considered an automatic writing exercise, Foer echoes Breton's definition of surrealist works as unplanned and purely creative productions. Through his dialogue, the type in the book itself, and the letters from Alex to Jonathan, Foer shows true psychological impulsiveness, reminiscent of the concept of surrealism and the process of automatic writing. By using this method, Foer strengthens the tone and mood of different sections of his books, and reinforces the overall themes of journey and self-discovery.