

Multiple meanings of
illuminated in
everything is
illuminated



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In *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer the theme of illumination is explored by the triple meaning of the word itself. Foer shows how illumination may mean to clarify or explain, to produce actual light, or to embellish something. These multiple meanings of illumination, paired with the book's triple narrative, help to convey that knowledge pertaining to the past is often being sought after, though answers are rarely found. The first meaning of illumination Foer plays with is to clarify. This broad term segues into a narrower path when Foer has one of the main characters, Jonathan, travel back to a small town called Trachimbrod to find himself through his past lineage. His travel guide, Alex, finds this confusing and does not see any point in trying to look at a horrible past to find answers. Jonathan explains to Alex why he wants to go back: " I want to see Trachimbrod...To see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren't for the war." (59) Jonathan tries to place himself out of his actual life and put himself in some fairytale land that he will never know anything about. Jonathan tries to understand the mysteries of his past by searching for a town that is no longer there called Trachimbrod. Stumbling upon the last woman who lived in Trachimbrod, Jonathan thinks he will finally have clarity about his past. Jonathan shows his interest in the woman when he says, " Ask her to tell us everything. I want to know how she met my grandfather, and why she decided to save him, and... if they were in love." (148) In order to find out facts about his grandfather he has to ask more questions about the woman than about his grandfather. Jonathan hangs on every word because according to Jonathan's knowledge, she is why he is alive today. But when Jonathan is finally told the story about his grandfather and about Trachimbrod, he states, " I don't want to hear anymore." (184-186) Foer <https://assignbuster.com/multiple-meanings-of-illuminated-in-everything-is-illuminated/>

shows that when given the illuminated truth about his past Jonathan would rather hide from it than confront it. The use of illumination to clarify the past is refuted by the inability to accept the truth. The second meaning of illumination is to produce actual light. Foer incorporates this when he uses an image of a “sex light” saying, “from space, astronauts can see a person making love as a tiny speck of light...the glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves.” (95) Foer sets this light on Trachim day, a day where “everything is tied with string” in remembrance of the past, that no one knows all the full details about. Having this light tied to a day that is made to commemorate the uncertain past actually ends up bringing people together, sexually, and producing light. This love light is repeated again when Foer writes, “[Brod’s] belly lit up like a firefly’s bulb – brighter than a hundred thousand virgins making love for the first time.” (98) Here Foer weighs all the past love light to Brod’s single love light. In doing this he hints that the present is more important and pressing than the past. By talking about Brod as a firefly, Foer gives way to many different symbols. Butterflies often mimic each other to attract mates, just as Foer has present generations mimicking past generations and each producing a light with their mate. Fireflies also communicate with one another through light, just as the people making love communicate with their light. This light is shown to outer space when the astronaut looks over Trachimbrod, sees the light and says, “There’s definitely something out there.” (99) Again “what” exactly is out there is unclear, and he will never find it. Also, in order to see something in space from the Earth will take time, so whatever was illuminated to the astronaut is actually happening in the past. Lastly, Foer uses illumination as a way of embellishment. Alex toys with exaggerating his past history, which <https://assignbuster.com/multiple-meanings-of-illuminated-in-everything-is-illuminated/>

causes a discrepancy in the past. Trying to justify why he does this Alex says, “ I manufacture non-truths for Little Igor. I desire him to feel as if he has a cool brother, and a brother whose life he would desire to impersonate one day.” (144) Foer, again, makes the future more important than the past by letting it be altered in hopes for a better life. Just like Jonathan, this changing of the past, even if it is to make it better, will rupture the knowledge upon which Little Igor will base his life. This also insinuates that Igor, similar to Jonathan, will choose to base his future on lies rather than the truth shown from the past. During the novel, Jonathan is writing a fictional book and Alex writes letters back to Jonathan critiquing his writing. Once more, Foer shows Alex’s desire for embellishment when he asks Jonathan, “ If I could utter a proposal, please allow Brod to be happy...You would have to alter your story very much...but might it be wonderful in this manner?” (143) Foer asks if truth or deception is better to prove the past. Even though Jonathan’s book is fictional, Alex still insists that changes are made in the book to make the characters seem happy. Foer shows that any work required to change the past would pay off because of the beautiful “ image” of the past it would create. Alex is also writing his own book, the story of how he, Jonathan, and Grandpa were searching for Trachimbrod. Alex sends all of this writing to Jonathan for feedback the same way Jonathan sends his writing to Alex. After knowing Jonathan ignored a fabrication in the story, Alex writes, “ I am glad that you were good-humored about the part I invented about commanding you to drink the coffee until I could see my face in the cup, and how you said it was a clay cup.” (142) Here Foer enhances Alex’s writing with a comedic spin, while still trying to show Alex is a more competent writer than Jonathan. Changing the past to make himself appear

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tougher proves silly for Alex, as it is stated “ it was a clay cup” - not giving Alex the proper answer he was looking for. Here Foer shows that even altering the past doesn't give adequate answers to the posed questions. Foer shows that while most things can “ be illuminated” answers are not guaranteed. Illumination done to clarify may not prove anything. This is illustrated when the men find “ Augustine” and ask her to take them to see Trachimbrod, and she says: “ There is nothing. I already told you. Nothing.” (154) After the men find the closest thing they have to an answer, there is still not evidence of it; they walk away never fully understanding what Trachimbrod was. This is again seen with the “ love light” when the astronaut says, “ There's definitely something out there.” (99) As previously stated, the “ what” is never explained or figured out; Foer leaves this as a mystery. Lastly Foer tells how illumination through embellishment may not be such a great idea when Alex asks, We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes...Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes... why do we not make the story more premium than life? (180)The question finally posed is whether exaggerating stories is acceptable or not. Making the stories more “ premium” than life does not help answering history and it hurts future generations. In Everything is Illuminated, the triple meaning of illumination demonstrates how, though the search for knowledge is constantly in play, the answers are never found. The definitions - to clarify, to produce light, and to embellish - coupled with the book's triple narrative helps deepen the

understanding of how even when multiple aspects of the truth come together, a real answer may never be produced.