

VANDERSTEIN NOÉMI VIKTÓRIA

**“SHATTERED GLASSES” OF THE JEWISH
IDENTITY,**

NAMELY

**ATTEMPTS OF INTERPRETATION TO
CHAIM POTOK’S NOVEL, *THE CHOSEN***

PhD DISSERTATION – ABSTRACT

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American Jewish literature is a complex field containing numerous poems, short stories and novels. In my dissertation, I deal with one of the major representatives of the second generation of American Jewish writers, Chaim Potok. Next to his life, my interests go to his works, especially his first published novel, *The Chosen*.

I examine this literary work from various aspects:

- the meaning and the generations of American Jewish literature,
- the life-stages and the works of the author,
- the after-life of the novel,
- the structure and the language of this novel,
- the spectrum of the culture and of the Other,
- the role of the subject and the identity,
- the double ties and the Theory of the Jonah Complex,
- the importance of the names in the story,
- the title of this literary work focusing on the role of the characters,
- the study of the working title of the novel through historical events,
- father-son relationship, and
- the analysis of the words and of the sentences through grammatical eyes.

The Chosen is about two teenage boys and their fathers living in Williamsburg, New York, in the middle of the 20th century. Reb and Danny Saunders are from the Hassidic community while David and Reuven Malter come from the orthodox group. As time goes on, the reader meets the Holocaust, the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the foundation of Israel in the story. Whilst fathers and their sons have struggles in themselves, the solution of the situation comes at the end of the novel. The main characters face various challenges. Danny and Reuven are friends although they represent two different worlds of the Jewish tradition. Both boys face to the new trends of the outside world while they live in Jewish communities according to strict rules. Their fathers look at the society in different ways. David Malter and Reb Saunders represent the old values but they are ready to choose the new perspectives. By the end of the novel, the oppositions gradually disappear. Fathers and sons also find peace in their hearts which is the consequence of their tiring mental struggles so every main character reaches a development in his thinking.

Silence is a major component that appears in the story – the working title of the novel, the behaviour of Reb Saunders towards his son, and the reaction of the Jews all share this factor. Chaim Potok argues that silence “has as much meaning in a relationship as words.”¹

In *The Chosen*, the author wants to look for the answer to the following elements of ongoing tension: “I don’t need the outside world to solve my problems. It is disgusting and creates only ugliness. Why do I need the noise, the music, the pornography, and the heathenism therein. Using my own inner resources I can solve all my problems from inside my own tradition. There are some really beautiful things in the world beyond us. There are really things that we can learn from the world. Not everything about the outside world is ugly. Let’s borrow the good things, and, by integrating them with our tradition, enrich ourselves as a result.”²

Chaim Potok asks: “How do you relate this kind of a system to a religious world?”³ He gives the answer: “Danny Saunders comes to this realization in ironic fashion in *The Chosen*. Caught in the throes of a strange method by which his father is teaching him compassion for human suffering. Danny finds in Freud the instrumentality for handling this pain and suffering.”⁴

Chaim Potok died in 2002, but he opened a new perspective in American Jewish literature for the 21st century. As Mike Field says: “Potok has chosen to create worlds from words.”⁵

¹ “The Chosen: Themes, Motifs & Symbols,” in *SparkNotes*, available: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/chosen/themes.html>, access: 24 January 2007.

² Chaim Potok, “The Chosen,” *Chaim Potok lecture* (1986), available: <http://www.lasierra.edu/~ballen/potok/Potok.unique.html>, access: 24 January 2007.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mike Field, “Potok Has Chosen to Create Worlds from Words,” Daniel Walden, ed. *Conversations with Chaim Potok* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 100.