

Exploration Of Self And Society In Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint

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Abstract

This study focuses on Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint subjects the struggle between self and world. Roth's characterization makes a haven of protection and stability, or a placement, from which they may understand the world meaningfully. In this novel, Roth pertains stability and peace in the achievement of selfhood through sees home may be their static, centred self, from which they could get meaning from their surroundings. In the novel Portnoy's Complaint, the protagonist reveals external and internal and over suspicious conflicts. Roth's writing explores Portnoy was artistically adrift, psychologically wrecked and economically weak. He had to overthrow my literary education, once said famously, "I have to overthrow my first three books", to self-liberate and test my boundary in particular, the line between far and too far. It is revealed that Roth while self-edit his manuscripts, favored, an associative monologue, pricked with distinct mix of humor and bitterness, self-justification and self-incrimination. Thus, Portnoy's Complaint is an attempt to self-justify and incriminate in a humor and bitterness fashion and to liberate one's style of writing as an accomplished author.

Key Words: Darfts, Portnoy Complaint, Self, Moral, Dilemma, Individualism.

Introduction

Philip Roth has become a major figure in contemporary American Jewish fiction. Its importance, though, is independent of his level of popularity, the quantity of his works sold, or his performance in award ceremonies. His internal

struggle provides his readers with a thorough understanding of their society. His words capture the anguish and anger that many modern Americans face on a daily basis. He hates the subtleties of diplomacy when it comes to these subjects. His characters capture both the joy and the agony of their situations and encounters.

Roth considers the moral implications of his main character resolving his issues while interacting with external influences.

Although Roth explores many facets of the human experience in his works, his moral compass remains unaltered. Roth is aware that a creative person shouldn't work with the covert intention of propagating moral precepts or ideas. It is his duty to give the reader an accurate description of the circumstances and to argue that it is preferable for him to engage in the surrounding moral process. Upon further inspection, Roth's writings seem to be a documentation of the consequences of the lax society he observed in the US. In his publications, he demonstrates a range of negative outcomes, the most prevalent of which is a decline in respect for marriage and family life. Roth shows that the men of the story have characters who saw sex as the ultimate emancipation and marriage as suffocation.

Philip Roth's language in the novel *Portnoy's Complaint* is charmingly informal, reacting to an archivist's intimacy with his materials. It is odd to think that Roth, interred at Bard College Cemetery on May 28, 2018 was alive at the Library of Congress. And odder still to imagine that the guarded author, moved to countryside after *Portnoy's Complaint*, is a different person amenable and happy. Manuscripts Room of the Library of Congress peruse dark muddled fantasy that Roth committed. As a novelist had birthed *Portnoy's Complaint*, meaningfully as a narcissist "locked up in me. The drama of *Portnoy's* composition at the heart of the most meaningful literary-historical enigma of Roth's career.

He attempted a series of artistic projects that often-generated hundreds of pages, a Chekhovian play about a young couple in crisis; a whimsical novel built around a baby dropped at an elderly Jewish home, a set of stories revolving around the patients of a single psychoanalyst; a serious-minded novel titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Jewish Man* later morphed into a semi-serious novel titled *The Nice Jewish Boy*.

Exploring thousands of pages of "wreckage"

(Roth's term) out of which he salvaged Portnoy, to understand what was there, what had been cut as he hit started on Zuckerman novels, Roth described in his writing process an excruciating struggle, "a book takes two years, if I'm lucky. Eight hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to sit alone in a room with only a tree out the window to talk to. You have to sit there churning out draft after draft of crap, waiting like a neglected baby for one drop of mother's milk."

There was quite a bit of crap. One example, early in the process of drafting his Chekhovian drama of a Jewish-goyishe mismatch, Roth brainstormed a list of titles for the play ranging from cringe-inducing ("The Good Bitch") to unenticingly cryptic ("Alone Is a Stone") to the simply banal ("A Perfect Life," "The Good Friends," "Under Control," "A Middle-Class Romance").

He landed on the title "Chekhov, Now," revised the play, kept cycling through new titles, "The Last Broadway Middle-Class Jewish Family Drama, Or The End of the Nice Jewish Boy," "Show People," "The Lone Ranger", before giving up on the play entirely. The tenderness of young Roth, trying a new medium but attending his spirit with every draft he pounded out, as most of the drafts in Roth's archive are not simply crappy.

Bernard Avishai, in his book devoted to Portnoy, writes, "The act that endures from the art is something of a blur. People may remember characters and vignette, the book's architecture or identify or any big ideas. Trying to remember the plot as its composition of Jackson Pollock canvas." Roth himself, while brainstorming jacket copy for Portnoy in a notebook, suggest that the novel had an "original form, monologue." And indeed, Alexander Portnoy's story does come at us as a series of feverish, "emotional, improvisational rhythms of a spoken voice, which is also necessarily an embodied voice."

McGurl argues, Portnoy's true import, from a narrative angle, is "a symptom of a profoundly phonocentric literary historical moment, when the New Critical ideal of narrative impersonality was rotated into a minor position in relation to a dominant ideal of vocal presence." "Find your voice," composition instructors urged, as did the partisans of liberation movements for the historically oppressed, Portnoy showed powerfully how it could be done.

On the book's form, Roth sheared away both the most conventional and the most unconventional sections of his drafts. Gone was the most avant-garde section of Portnoy as well as the section that read like second-hand Roth. In handling of character, he deleted many sections that might have made the adult Alexander Portnoy more sympathetic, more a victim of circumstance, while leaving in the sections where Portnoy acted in accordance with his desires — which is to say, horribly.

Titled "The Jewish Patient Dreams of His Own Salvation," the opening scene seems to have been a variation on a pre-Portnoy prose experiment, in which a lecturer other running commentary on the private parts of the famous an experiment that Roth described later as "mean, bizarre, scatological, tasteless." The slideshow moves from an opening photo of Portnoy's bris to an extended close-up. Speaking before an enthusiastic crowd, Portnoy rhapsodizes over its shaft ("veined and strong as marble") and the "masterpiece" of its "crown", "manly as a spade, charming as a mushroom cap," with the "texture of velvet, the springiness of rubber, and the impact of a plow."

Roth was wise to strike out this opening. It would have broken with what became the central narrative conceit of Portnoy — that we were eavesdropping on a marathon therapy session between Portnoy and Spielvogel. They also build, from the start, our sympathy for Portnoy, we are introduced to him as a child trapped by his parents' "fearful sense of life." If he rebels against their taboos, well, this seems to draw him, at first, onto a comic path of liberation and, even, moral growth.

We'll see, by the end of the novel, how Portnoy is defeated by his own rebellion, how his taboo-busting fails him when it's taken as an end in itself. The rug is pulled out from under any readers who were expecting simply a ribald literary version of a Jewish joke. Unlike the slideshow scene, the great mass of what Roth discarded, chapters bearing titles like "Shikshas, Abie's Irish Rose, Oedipus the King," and "I'm Pregnant!" — was more formally conventional than Portnoy became, and more conventionally misogynistic as well. Whereas the final version of Portnoy bounces between Alex's past and his current tortured relationship with Mary Jane

Reed, the West Virginian-bred woman he calls “The Monkey,” this early version of Portnoy moves in a straight line through the various scenes of his life (undergrad years at a small college in Pennsylvania, a stint in the Army in D.C., an attempt to be an actor in Chicago) and his relationships with women along.

This early draft of Portnoy might be thought of as the “Playboy philosophy” version: with little irony, it suggests that marriage is a horrible arrangement for men in America. Compare this to Alex’s relationships in the published novel. He breaks up with his college girlfriend, the stolid and right-minded Kay Campbell (nicknamed “The Pumpkin”), after she wonders why she should convert to Judaism if they marry; calling Portnoy on secularism shuts him down emotion-ally.

Jerk-Off Artists of The World Unite! You Have Nothing to Lose but Your Brains! The Freak I Am! Lover of No One and Nothing! Unloved And Unloving!”. The Ugly last scene of the novel, in which Alex assaults and nearly rapes Naomi, an idealistic Israeli ex-soldier, in a hotel room in Haifa, drives home the truth of Alex’s verdict on himself. We as readers continue to listen to him — do we have a choice? but it’s hard to stomach his lack of a sense of proportion.

The question lingers, was Philip Roth exposing the inner workings of misogyny in Portnoy, or was he excusing it by giving it an elaborate back story? The silence of Portnoy’s early (male) reviewers on this question suggests that his critique, such as it was, landed largely on deaf ears. I wonder if, by caring about the perspectives of Mary Jane and Naomi, I am reading with or against the grain of the text.

The experience of completing Portnoy seems to have drawn Roth out of himself and into two separate consciousness - the consciousness of Alex Portnoy and the consciousness of Roth the editor of his own work. Asked what he looked for in the act of reading, Roth once said, “I read action to be freed from my own suffocating boring and narrow perspective on life and to be lured into imaginative sympathy with a fully developed narrative point of view not my own. It’s the same reason I write.

For all his limitations, Portnoy does have the double consciousness to see that he is both the storyteller spinning out an elaborate joke and the

protagonist laid low by its various punchlines. His most productive editorial intervention, arguably, was a formal one: to keep Alex bouncing between his present and his past, so as to imitate the one of a mind that, in its hysterical pain, can't help but retreat back into its memories.

Conclusion:

The novel marked in literary technique and commercial success that set the possibilities for Roth's life as a writer. By scrambling the chronology of Alex's story once he becomes an adult, Roth conveys the complex endlessness of that "endless childhood." In 1984, Roth was asked what he did with the hundreds of pages he drafted and discarded on the way to writing novels. Did he save them up? Roth answered peremptorily, "I generally prefer never to see them again." And yet he did save them up, donating them to the Library of Congress, where they could be seen again and again by people like myself. His papers were opened to the public in 2006, at which point he was still alive — in his mid-'70s and still to publish his last set of novels (*Exit Ghost*, *Indignation*, *The Humbling*, and *Nemesis*).

More than he cherished his privacy, it seems, Roth cherished how the novel, through its contrivances, allowed access to an imagined private life. He wanted scholars to be able to trace the history of his own contriving. So we need to listen to Alex, yes, but we also need to speak up and challenge him, much more than Dr. Spielvogel does, if we want to untangle the problem he presents. Likewise with Roth's larger archive: it sits there, magnetic and taunting the enigma of authorship, and ultimately demanding a more intense engagement.

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