THE PORTRAIT OF THE AMERICAN "ANTI-HERO" IN PHILIP ROTH'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Roth's world, as presented in his novels, is portrayed through the relationship between opposite sexes and a complicated gender relations. On the surface, his world seems to be overwhelmingly masculine. The relationships seem to be determined by the man, but in closer observation, the woman's dominance is very clear. This dominance begins in the family by the dominance of the woman over the man. The man, who as a child has been protected and overpowered by the mother, is unable to act in other situations, by himself. He leaves weak women and strives to find the strong ones. When he finds one, he resumes his role as a son, not an autonomous man. Thus, Roth's protagonist fails to commit himself to the realities of the world outside, to other people, and to the relationships he establishes. This failure of commitment is the result of an intensive lack of self-knowledge. This lack of awareness and recognition of self is a consequence of the female's dominance over the male in Roth's work, for though Roth's is an overwhelmingly masculine world, women control it.

Keywords: Gender relations, dominance, mother, woman, failure of commitment, self-awareness

Introduction

Philip Roth, through his novels, presents modern life "as arid, sterile, even deadly" (Michel 234) in which "the man's essential condition … is that of the victim (McDaniel 102). This victim is usually a rather youngish man, Jewish, who seems to be seeking a way to build a meaningful relationship with the world around him. Through his eyes, we see the world, people, man and woman, and we establish a connection with them. The resemblance of the situation in different novels of Roth helps us to forma somewhat unified association with them all. One novel seems to talk for all, and all talk for each, to the degree that David Monaghan views Roth's fiction "as a unified body" attempting "to express his vision of failure of commitment" (Monaghan 115).

Discussion

Roth's protagonist fails to commit himself to the realities of the world outside, to other people, and to the relationships he establishes. This "failure of commitment" is the result of and is results from an intensive lack of self-knowledge. This lack of awareness and recognition of self is a consequence of the female's dominance over the male in Roth's work, for though Roth's is an overwhelmingly masculine world, women control it. The protagonist in Roth's novels, from an early childhood, is very much under his mother's influence, so when he grows up, he is unable to face the reality of the world by himself. Unable to demand his mother's support at adulthood, he turns to other women to substitute her. His search for such a woman exposes different aspects of his self to the reader, not to himself though, because he is too much lost and confused to be aware of

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his identity. Upon finding a woman as supportive as his mother, he returns to his initial position of a child.

In *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), Roth comments on his characters as those "whose moorings have been cut, and who are swept away from their native lands…." (Roth 65). They are so fatally cut off from their origins that even when they do realize their hopeless and frustrating situations, they cannot do much about it. No matter how bitterly Portnoy, spits out his miserable life, Tarnopol cries aloud, or Kepesh philosophizes, each seem to be a long way from self-fulfillment and achievement of identity. "The pattern seems to be set once and for all: the drive or impulse to free oneself, physically for Kepesh and psychologically for Tarnopol, he is lost and life degenerates into a story in which the force of inertia prevails," (515) Michel says. Though Roth's characters do "turn to the self," he continues, "they may remain just as discontented. In his earlier fiction, the characters' attempt to achieve themselves in social terms and to find their place in society left them wallowing in frustration; so in his later work, they do their endeavors at exploring their own selves. Such an exploration runs in circles and leads nowhere" (Michel 515).

No so! The mere fact that the characters are crying for help is encouraging. Roth explains Portnoy's use of obscenity as an indication ofhis desire "to be saved" (Roth 19). Other characters in his novels show the same need; most of them, at the end of the novels, come to the realization that, "the physical world produces only an eerie sense of a cell" from which they try to "escape"(Michel 514). They have to try hard sine it is very difficult for Rothian characters to break away from their private worlds to face the real world and their own selves; they have been brought up in a world which creates obsession, and a family whose dominance over them does not allow any self-establishment.

In the family circle of Roth's world, the mother is the head. She not only has a great influence on the father, but also has a very definite control of her children's lives and future. The protagonist in these novels seems to be tremendously dependent on his mother from the very early childhood;it is to her that he goes when he hasproblems, and he usually spends his free time with her. The father is a stranger as it is very clearly established in the *Portnoy's Complaint*: "a man who lives with us at night and on Sunday afternoons" (45). The relationship between Portnoy and his mother is a very close, sincere, and somewhat curious one. As a child, he adores and worships her and seems to be willing to do anything for her. The most memorable episodes of Portnoy's, in my opinion, are the afternoons he spends with her. It is when "this man, my father, is off somewhere making money" (45), and he is alone with his mother. His memory of this time is formed in these words: "in the meantime, it is spring, and for me and me alone a woman is rolling on her stockings and singing a song of love" (45). The mother calls Portnoy her lover, and he admires her to that degree that he believes, "it was my mother who could accomplish anything" (11). His mother's characteristics have such an impact

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on him that "his conception of her determines his attitude and behavior towards the subsequent women in his life" (Cohen 18).

This strong relationship between the son and mother is present in almost all of the novels. In *Letting Go*, Gabe, who as a child worships his mother, is shocked and startled to hear her confess, "Whatever unhappiness has been in our family springs from me" (2). This realization bears such an impact on his mind that it affects his future life and his relationship with women. Indeed, as Clark asserts, *Letting Go* is "the story of two young men in the late 50s, a writer and a scholar, and how their duty-driven definitions of manhood force them into moral situations they are unequipped to deal with" (http://www.readitforward.com).

In *Useful Fictions* (1970), the first impression of the mother and son is described in this manner: "that day in 1942 Nathan Zuckerman had fallen in love with Betty Zuckerman" (7). Not only do these sons worship their mothers, but the mothers become the womanly ideal for them. They adore their mothers' characteristics as women and wives and search to find a woman like her. This is what really sets Philip Roth's novels into action.

In their search for women and their attempt to establish a workable relationship with them and the world, Philip Roth's characters don't seem to be very successful. They seem to have forgotten the nature of marriage with women like their mothers. In most of the novels, the mother's dominance over the father, and the wife's over the husband, are very destructive and usually leads to serious damage to the father and husband. The men, as a result of marriage with women with strong wills and powerful personalities, seem to grow passive, depressed, and unhappy. The best example of such a marriage is, perhaps, Gabe's parents', in which the mother not only makes a servant of his father while she is alive, but influences his life even after she is gone. In the same novel, Paul and Libbydepict how this kind of marriage goes through different stages; Libby, at last and at the end of the novel, achieves dominance over Paul – and also over Gabe.

The protagonist's search for the right woman is presented as a journey, and interestingly, the same pattern is followed in most of the novels. In their early youth, in most cases, they encounter naïve, dumb, and very sexy women. Though Brenda in *Goodbye Columbus* does not seem to be too naïve and dumb, she is certainly out of touch with Neil's feelings when she deliberately leaves evidence of their sexual relationship for her family to find. "Deep down he realizes," Rodgers says about Neil, "that if agreeing to get the diaphragm was an expression of commitment on her part leaving it at home was a rejection of the commitment" (42).

Neil, indeed, feels out of place in Patimkin'shousehold because they have moved up and progressed finically while Neil refuses to move forward.As McKinstryMicou explicates in *Goodbye, Columbus*, "Neil explains this transformative phenomenon: the neighborhood had changed; the old Jews like my grandparents had struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, toward the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains,

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until they had reached the crest" (40).She further adds: "She [Brenda] condescends to his living in Newark; cruelly, she says, 'My mother still thinks we live in Newark' (*GC* 26). In contrast to the closely aligned houses in Neil's neighborhood, Brenda's family belongs to a country club and owns enough property in the country to accommodate a badminton court" (41). Thus, it seems Neil and Brenda are worlds apart. This estrangement leads to Neil's reluctance to commit to Brenda and her lifestyle.

Elizabeth, the Swedish girl in *TheProfessor of Desire* (1977), would certainly fit in this category with her naïve personality and her blind love for David who carries on relationships with her and her friend Brigitta. Even when frustrated and crushed by the situation she is in, she attempts suicide and leaves for home, she is still faithful and naive enough to write to David and expects him to marry her. Monica, in *Useful Fictions*, is the same type of woman, who is at first impressed by Nathan as a father, and lateron, after her mother's suicide, blindly escapes with him to Greece as his mistress.

Mary Jane Reed, Kay Campbell in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Sharon in *Useful Fiction* represent this kind of woman, though of slightly different nature. They are not so naïve, but they are as dumb, and possess a remarkable sexualappetite. They can satisfy the protagonist's sexual desires but are too dumb to satisfy their intelligence. Being brought up by intelligent mothers, the protagonist cannot bear living with ignorant women. McKinstryMicou (41) explores Roth language in relation to his personality:

> Roth's language in *Portnoy's Complaint* consists of typographical flourishes like all-uppercase letters, exclamation points, italics, and newspaper-headline font. His chapter headings are set in type that resembles graffiti. To communicate his sexual needs, he possesses as tools only wildly comic and obscene language. The figure of his overprotective mother so overwhelms him with emotion and anger that he has no recourse but to rant. His language is a 'raw response to a way of life that was specific to his American place during his childhood' (Gray) in New Jersey. When he visits a gentile girlfriend, he discovers to his shock and surprise that the English language is actually a form of communication, not 'just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at.' (*PC* 221)

At the opposite extreme from these women are those who are very aggressive, demanding, and yet unable to enjoy sex. Perhaps Libby in *Letting Go* is a somewhat inaccurate example of these women because her personality goes through so many considerable changes. At the beginning of the courtship with Paul, she is naïve and dumb, but as their married life goes on, she changes to an aggressive wife, demanding, but really unable to make love with Paul. Lydia in *Useful Fictions* and Maureen in *My True Story* can best represent this type of woman. Lydia who has been raped by her father when she was 12, is a very bitter woman with a very strong personality. The question of why Nathan is attracted to her is not answered in the novel. It seems that the bravery and the strength of her character have fascinated him and drawn him to her, but her coldness and lack of love and emotion have driven him away.

Maureen in *My True Story* and Helen in *The Professor of Desire* are undoubtedly in this category. They are aggressive and demanding to a degree that they nearly drive the protagonist mad. One thing that all the women in this group have in common is their unstable nervous condition which drives most of them to suicide. They are bitter towards

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men, nervous, suicidal, accusing, and, with the exception of Helen, unable to make love. And curiously, most of them are older than the protagonist. Peter, in *My True Story,* in an attempt to explain this, says of Maureen, "she was twenty-nine years of age, the tempting unknown creature of a young man's eroto-heroic imaginings, an older woman" (175). Considering his childhood, these women could very well remind the protagonist of his mother. However, they are too unloving and uncaring to substitute for the mother figure he is looking for, and that is why he leaves this type of woman.

But Roth's protagonist is uncomfortable in his relationship with strong-willed, masculine women too. Such women threaten his personality and power as a man. In contrast with such women, he is passive, bitter and helpless. When faced with his father's fiancé, Gabe immediately develops a dislike for her although this woman seems to be very effective in improving his father's depression. This husky and masculine woman who has attracted his father and is depriving Gabe of his live terrifies him. In his own contact with such women, like Brigitta in *The Professor of Desire*, the Israeli Lieutenant, and Noami, the Jewish idealist in *Portnoy's Complaint*, he is unable to function as a man, and leaves them. Again, strong and influential as these women are, they do not offer him the love, understanding, and the care he had received from the first woman in his life: his mother.

The protagonist's quest for women is resolved in *My True Story*, *The Professor of Desire*, and *The Breast*. Interestingly, as Clarks declares, "*The Breast* is about a man who overnight turns into a giant breast. The result is a fun, if slight, Rothian romp on sex, the body, and the delusions we create to face the absurdities of reality" (http://www.readitforward.com/).

Conclusion

In these novels, Roth's protagonist seems to have found the woman he had been looking for. She is Susan and Claire. This woman is very feminine, gentle, well-shaped, sexy, and very responsive to his sexual demands. And this ideal woman bears some other significant characteristics. She is very orderly, a very good housewife, very loving, caring, and understanding, one who will serve the man submissively and to some degree blindly. The resemblance of this woman to the protagonist's mother would not be so surprising if we study his childhood and its effects on him carefully. With such a woman he feels comfortable and very much at home. He lets her take care of him and mother him. The best example of such a mother-son relationship can be seen in *The Professor of Desire*. Claire meets David after he is mentally crushed by his marriage with Helen, and she takes care of him and literally mothers him and brings him a new life. In his contact with Claire, David achieves a rebirth.

Yet, he does not seem to be happy in his relationship with such a woman either. David, in *The Professor of Desire*, is uncomfortable in mind and unable to sleep at night. He is becoming sexually impotent. It deserves notice that, in most of the novels of Roth, the protagonist becomes sexually passive at the end. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel which Clark calls, "a tour-de-force monologue from one Alexander Portnoy, a neurotic young

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Jew obsessed with his own sexual perversions and their relation to his feelings about his mother" (http://www.readitforward.com/), the protagonist comes into contact with self-possessed and strong-willed women like the Israeli Lieutenant and Noami and is, thus, unable to have a healthy sexual relationship with them. In*The Professor of Desire*, the strong personality, benevolence, care, and love in the woman make him passive. He is so overwhelmed by the power and strength of personality of these women that he is unable to perform his role as a man. *The Professor of Desire* ends with his excessive love for Claire: he loves her emotionally and passionately, yet he is unable to take her as a woman. Now, that she has fully replaced his mother, he cannot have sex with her though he dearly loves her.

Indeed, *The Professor of Desire* seems to best represent Roth's world and the man's role in it. Although we do not have a detailed account of David's childhood and a clear understanding of his relationship with his mother then, the little which is said indicates a strong attachment. Living at "The Hungarian Royale" in the Catskill Mountains, in a warm family circle, David spends a childhood out of touch with the world outside and under his mother's protection.

No wonder, then, that he is lost in college, cannot decide what he wants to do with his life, chooses to live by himself in a rooming house, and hides behind books. Unable to stay away from the world outside, and forced to face it after his years in college, he sets out to experience life abroad and goes to London. And that is where he encounters the first women of his life, aside from his mother, and is severely damaged by them to the degree that even when he leaves London, the memories of that time are so fresh in his mind that they cast a shadow over his future life.

In his relationship with Elizabeth and Brigitta, he is familiarized with two types of women. Elizabeth is naïve, submissive, simple, and faithful. Lacking intelligence, energy, and strength, she is unable to satisfy David. Brigitta, on the other hand, is aggressive, bold, strong, and has strange sexual desires.

Although attracted to her, David is overwhelmed by her strength and energy. He cannot cope with her and, in a state of confusion, he leaves her: "My God she is bolder even than I imagined! How many such girls can there be in the world? She dare to do everything, I've always wanted. Why am I running away then?" (*PD* 49). Having been detested by the women he had contact with, unable to understand them or his own reaction towards them and, as a result, the world around him, David leaves London and goes back to his homeland, frustrated and helpless.

After a period of trying to avoid women, David meets Helen; attracted by her unusual past, interesting character, and strength of personality, he marries her. Yet, his lack of understanding of Helen's nature, demands, and character drives him to misery. The vision of failure, confusion, and lack of understanding between man and woman as husband complicate their relationships. Unable to relate to each other, they turn hostile and bitter. David loses his role as a husband and man of the house and suffers helplessly in consequence. Flying to Hong Kong to meet his run-away wife, in frustration he

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theorizes about his marriage: "oh, this voyage / is the marriage itself – traversing four thousand miles of exotic globe twice over, and for no good reason at all!" (*PD*92-93). Unable to function in this world properly and to play his role appropriately, he condemns the marriage, gets a divorce from Helen, and in a state of mental collapse, promises himself he will never associate with women again.

The damage done to him by these women is so critical that he feels he cannot establish any relationship with the opposite sex any more: "I invariably feel as though I have not simply been through a bad marriage but in fact through all the female sex, and that I am so constructed as to live harmoniously with no one" (*PD*151). Lacking the ability toadjust himself to the situation, to take his role strongly, and to face the world courageously, he retreats and rejects all women.

At this stage of his life, David's mother gets sick and is on the brink of death. Terrified, and scared of being left alone and helpless, he wants to capture the last moments of his mother's protection and longs to act as when he was a child, "and then, when they are smiling, I will take off my robe and crawl into the bed between them. And before she dies, well we all hold each other though one last night and morning" (*PD*110). This feeling of insecurity increases when his mother dies, and it then that he meets Claire.

Given his state of mind, it is not surprising at all to see David literally worshipping Claire. In her, he sees the love, care, attention, and concern that he has missed in his adult life. The picture that David draws of Claire is one of a tender, kind, loving, and caring woman who takes care of him to excess – a mother figure, indeed. Trying to place her somewhere among his women, David says of Claire:

> She is to steadiness what Helen was to indiscretion. I have never seen such devotion to the ordinary business of daily life. It is awesome, really, the way she deals with each day as it comes, the attention she pays minute by minute. There is no dreaming going on – just steady- dedicated living. (*PD*158)

Awed, amazed, and fascinated by her care and attention, he worships her as a child worships his mother.

From this point on, David's regression to childhood starts. He allows Claire to take care of him, decide for him, and take his life in her tender hands:

> For now, now I am positively exultant, thrilled, astonished – grateful for everything about her, for the executive dispatch with which she orders her life as for the patience that she brings to our love making, that canniness of hers that seems to sense exactly how much raw carnality and how much tender solicitude is going to require to subdue my tenacious anxiety and renew my faith in coupling and all that may come in its wake. (*PD*142)

In the security of this regained shelter and protection, David finds peace and happiness and functions exactly as if he were a child living with his family. A complete retreat to his childhood occurs when, very much at home inhis relationship with Claire, he rents an apartment in the Catskill Mountains, where he had spent his childhood in peace,

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quiet, and tranquility with his mother. It is there that he utterly goes back to his childhood and replaces his mother with Claire:

> I am certain that in only a matter of time – that's all it seems to take, just time- what we have together will gradually disappear, and the man now holding in his hand a spoonful of her orange custard will give way to Herbie's pupil, Brigitta's accomplice, Helen's suitor, yes, to Baumgarten's sidekick and defender, to would-be wayward son and all he hungers for. (*PD*252)

Claire is becoming fully his mother; David loves her, but he cannot make himself touch her as a woman.

Under such circumstances, we see David Kepesh metamorphosing to a huge breast: "indeed for the regressive Roth hero such a transformation has decided advantages. He does not have to be the aggressive male, straining to be successful in the competitive world, Sarah B. Cohen observes (18). By transforming to a breast, he frees himself from all the commitments which relationships with others and the world demand him to establish. "David is reborn as a breast and his development in this stage satirizes the Freudian theory on infantile pleasure and sexuality. His identity, his 'condition poitrine,' is initially explained to him in absurdly technical terminology. As an infant breast, David is composed only of the Freudian essentials. Genital and breast areas are conveniently telescoped into one in David's mutation, providing more intense pleasure, but David is also sterile and blind. His first frustration quite clearly evokes the initial protests of a normal newborn infant, quite unhappy about being removed from the womb to which he had so completely adapted (Rice 11).

This is a complete regressionbywhich "he is reduces to a world of pure sensation of passiveness, ofa communication breakdown" (Sabiston 29). Yet, even in this situation, we see Kepesh trying to understand himself and the world around him, and this is the only glimpse of hope we get from Roth's novels. Though it is very convenient for Kepesh to hide behind his metamorphosis, he is still struggling to understand the outer world, the nature of things, and establish a relationship with them. By questioning his stand in the world, Kepesh wants to say for all Rothian characters that "one must still – even under these trying circumstances – find a strategy for getting on with his life (Dervin 107).

Roth's world, as presented in his novels, is portrayed in the relationship between man and woman. On the surface, his world seems to be overwhelmingly masculine. The relationships seem to be determined by the man, but in closer consideration, the woman's dominance is very clear. This dominance begins in the family by the wife's or mistress's over the man. The man, overpowered by the mother, is unable to act in other situations. He leaves weak women and strives to find the strong ones. When he finds one, he resumes his role as a son.

The theme of *Portnoy's Complaint*, and other Rothian novels as well, Lois G. Gordon believes to be a "dichotomy and tension between the public and private man, between the adult ideal one strives for and the childhood fantasy on cannot relinquish, between abstract mortality with its noble dictates and the unconscious, parental, superego

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precipitates that are the source of mortality" (Gordon 59). Having been brought up in a sheltered world, these characters create private worlds and public realities, self and the world, and strive to resolve their problems of lack of adjustment and commitment to the world. They are all in search for a way "to learn how to live in the world – a task which cannot be accomplished until they learn how to live with themselves" (Donaldson 22).

Philip Roth's treatment of characters, his way of presenting their conflicts, and the tangibility and credibility of the situations in which his characters operate show a unique effort on his part to present the male's role in modern American society, to describe the destructive element of experience in American life- the absurdities and banalities that impinge upon self-realization in the "Land of Opportunity and the Age of Self-fulfillment" (Hassan 118).

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