

## Abstract

This thesis sets to examine three major works by the contemporary American novelist Philip Roth (1933- ); *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967), *Sabbath's Theatre* (1995), and *The Plot against America* (2004). It attempts to apply a psycho-cultural approach to these canonical works. The study investigates the possibilities of blending some psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and D.W. Winnicott with the cultural concepts of Homi K. Bhabha and others. It subsequently uses such psycho-cultural synthesis in examining the literary technique and thematic concerns of the works under discussion.

This study seeks to point out the distinctive narrative features of the novels which combine both fictional and non-fictional elements in a hybridizing mix that blurs the boundaries between cultural, religious and psychological borders. In so doing, it focuses on the ambivalent position of the ethnically-determined self in historically tumultuous phases. The thesis further discusses the failure of the American Dream for ethnic groups while relating it to the nightmare theory as postulated by Freud. Hence, the present thesis is an attempt to

underscore the interplay between psychology, culture, and literature, between fact and fiction, and also between the present and the past.

The introduction thoroughly explains the theoretical frame of the thesis, elaborating on the thematic preoccupations of Roth and his attitude towards Jewishness.

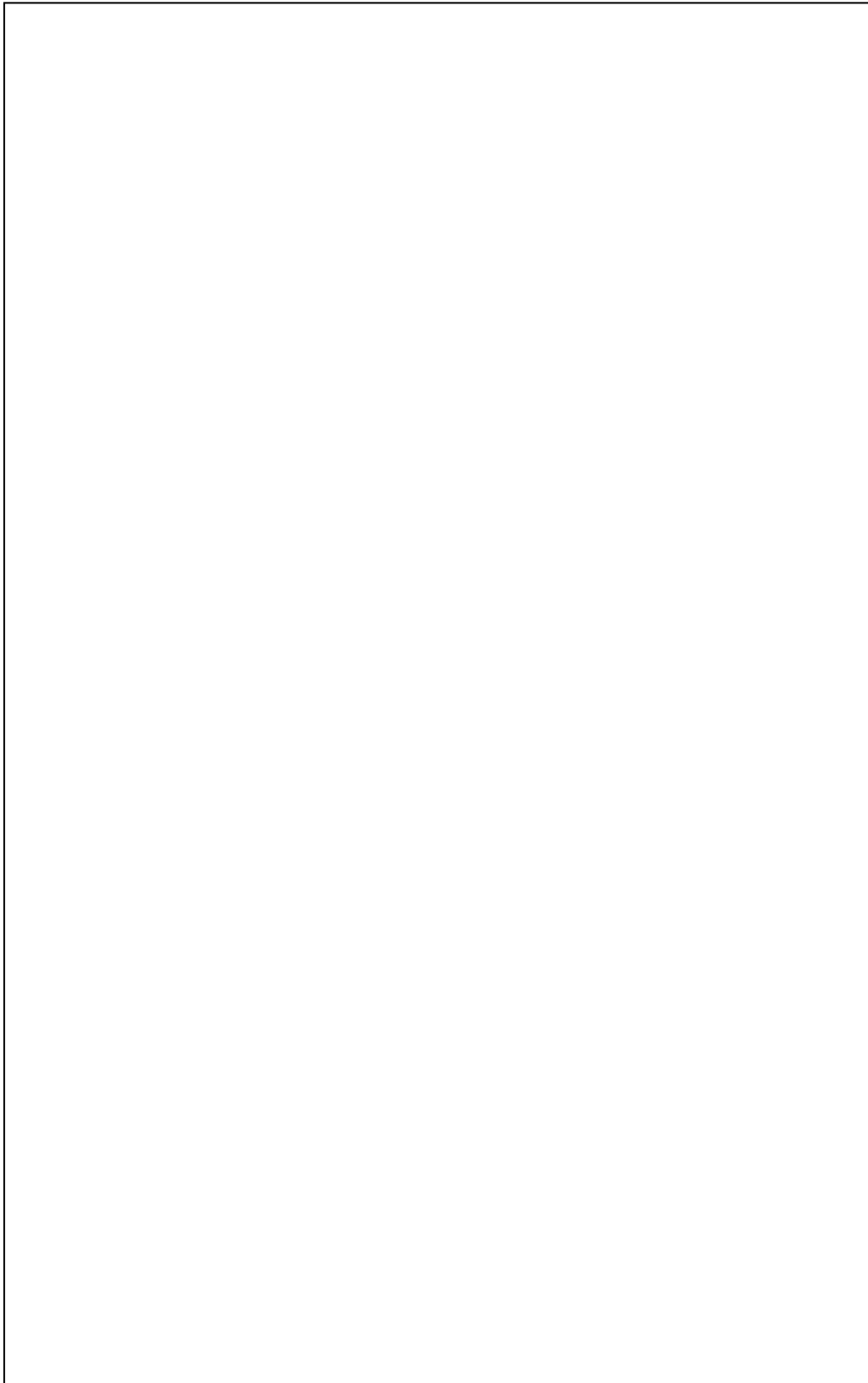
The first chapter tackles *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967). It sheds light on the identity crisis of American Jews who find the American Dream an evasive illusion rather than an accessible reality where the price to be paid is repressing their ethnic heritage as represented by their first-generation parents and the state of Israel. The in-between state that American Jewry is trapped in is handled through Bhabha's notions of ambivalence and hybridity as well as Freud's concept of the nightmare as an anxiety dream emanating from an unconscious conflict.

The second chapter examines *Sabbath's Theatre* (1995). It seeks to highlight the intermediate state that a nightmarish existence represents through employing Winnicott's notion of the intermediate or transitional space of experience. The chapter investigates the

possibility of applying the Winnicottian notion of transitional objects and phenomena (1971) in reverse. In other words, the experience of the infant in the process of maturation is compared to the experience of the senile hero -Mickey Sabbath as he marches towards death at the end of his life. The chapter ultimately mourns the unattainable nature of the American Dream which is, in reality, nothing but a living nightmare for ethnic groups.

The third chapter discusses *The Plot against America* (2004). It focuses on the fictional traumatic return of the holocaust memory in the light of Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction and the psychological notion of the post-traumatic nightmare. The chapter examines the psycho-cultural significance of re-writing the historical events of 1940-1942, envisaging a possible living nightmare on the flipside of the American Dream.

The conclusion sums up the major findings of the thesis and relates them to possible wider significations.



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# ERRATA

Page	Line	Error	Correction
9	20	Henderson the Rain King	<i>Henderson the Rain King</i>
12	22	1969	1967
16	20	literacy	literally
22	14	other	Other
24	21	Holocaust wilfully	Holocaust is wilfully
33	13	real	Other
36	3	Real; 1982)	Real" (1982)
40	5	grips or overcome	grips with or overcome
40	10	The holocaust	the holocaust
49	12	other	Other
57	8	virgin	version
69	18- 22	"next week...(Portnoy's <i>Complaint</i> 36).	The long quotation should be indented two tabs.
91	8	form	from
92	15	oppressed	the repressed
95	19	defy	defies
96	3&5	Heimlich	heimlich
96	12	unHeimlich	unheimlich
100	14	world	World
100	18	heimisch	heimlich
100	20	Wake 1967	Wake of 1967
101	18	discrimination,	discrimination
121	21	girl friends	girl-friends
133	20- 21	not me	not-me
134	15	opposite the gates	opposite to the gates
143	18	god like	god-like
146	15	Sabbath says	Sabbath says,
172	13	Sketch	sketch
181	1	Sardonic and Critical	Sardonic and critical

185	16	Midnight's children	<i>Midnight's Children</i>
197	16	unassimilated	inassimilable
199	13-19	,the horror of gas chambers... years later" ( <i>Plot</i> 18).	The long quotation starting "the horror" should be indented two tabs.
199	18	1903	1930
200	9	Naomi's	Naomi
W.C p.1	9	Holquist. Trans.	Holquist.Trans. (Tran. should not be moved down).
W.C p.2	5-6	http://...339.	URL should be between < >.
W.C p.16	12	...pdf>---. "The Tragicomic...	A new entry should begin with ---. "The Tragicomic...

*I've not only pursued the American dream, I've achieved it. I suppose we could say ... I've also achieved the American nightmare (Kenneth Lay).*

The American dream is an ideal that encompasses almost every dream from religious freedom to a home in the suburbs, and “it has inspired emotions ranging from deep satisfaction to disillusioned fury” (Hochschild 15). However, the phrase evokes the fantasy of a whole new world where prosperity is achievable for anyone willing to work hard. Millions of immigrants and internal migrants have moved to America in pursuit of a “better, richer, and happier life for fellow citizens of every rank” (Cullen 4). They hoped to enjoy liberty in every sense of the word in a classless society where the class barriers were permeable to those who educate themselves. All these bright prospects made America seem like a wonderland:

that all men are held to be created equal in the Declaration of Independence has encouraged those who have suffered from cultural and racial scorn to hope that they, too could make good. To young immigrants hoping for jobs, America is also the land of pop culture they adore, a land of leisure, jeans, athletic shoes,



and rock music. America can seem the land of romantic quest or fairytale reward. (Hume 3-4)

During the 1960s, American fiction has witnessed enormous diversity, addressing different racial, ethnic, gender, and sexually oriented issues. Amongst the flashy energetic carnival of narrative voices, it was hard to discern the bleak voice of disillusionment with the American Dream resonating from them. Many critics tended to ignore the bitterness and anger of ethnic groups over America's growing racism and cultural imperialism expressed by many modern American writers. Many American novelists such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Philip Roth exhibit in their fiction an overwhelming sense of estrangement from their country and disillusionment at the failure of the American Dream for ethnic and gender groups. *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* defines the American Dream as:

[a]phrase connoting hope for prosperity and happiness, symbolized particularly by having a house of one's own. Possibly applied at first to the hopes of immigrants, the phrase now applies to all except the very rich and suggests

a confident hope that one's children's economic and social condition will be better than one's own. (331)

However, for minor racial, ethnic, and gender groups the American dream verges on a living nightmare. The American nightmare concept as posited by the present thesis is not only confined to the psychological definition for it encompasses deeper cultural implications. This thesis examines the living nightmare of one of the American ethnic minorities - the American Jews. The Jewish American nightmare is the limbo American Jewry has found itself trapped in between the elusive dream of freedom and equality and the haunting ghost of its suppressed ethnicity. The inner struggle between the guiltless liberty of the American dream and the guilt-laden Jewish conscience emblemizes the first approach in the nightmare theory adopted by the present thesis. American Jewry is torn between

a homogenized mythical reconstruction of a Yiddish folkloristic world that has no manifestation in contemporary life and a Zionist socialist homeland that elicits allegiance at some level but also remains alien

in language, terrain, climate, and to some extent ideology. (Glachinsky 219)

Philip Roth has expressed the American Jewish nightmare as the flipside of the American Dream in a most vivid and dramatic way. His plots have portrayed the inner conflict between both the old European Jewish identity and the new American Jewish one. The Rothian characters are mostly of the Jewish second generation of immigrants to America among the middle-class. They fearlessly pursue the American Dream for the sake of their children while, anticipating, at the same time, the looming American nightmare. There is always the moral personal theme of the inner conflict splitting the American Jewish subject in his attempt to assimilate into the American society. Many of Roth's characters are men like himself, born in the pre-WWII era from 1959 to the mid-nineties, often in or near Newark, New Jersey. The lives of his heroes bear suffering that resembles his own in their attempts to

assimilate America into their Jewish selves and themselves into America and the wider world beyond. The younger protagonists fight off the control of Jewish parents threatening their personal independence; the older

protagonists, largely writers, fight off the control of organized Jewry threatening their artistic independence and the guilt of having escaped the Holocaust; the protagonist of *Operation Shylock* strives for balance between the Diaspora that nurtured him and the Zionism that would pull all Jews into the modern vortex of their ancient culture. (Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* 21)

The tri-fold conflict at the heart of American Jewish identity is the essential constituent of the American nightmare. First, the modern American Jewry is torn between their familiar secular partial stability in America, and the more alien ancient Jewish culture as represented by their first-generation parents and the state of Israel. Second, they are torn by the persistent question of

Why should my being Jewish keep me from sharing in the American dream? Or conversely, how, being Jewish, is it that I *do* seem to be sharing in that dream? Sometimes "being Jewish" meant a word on a medical or army record, but mostly it meant something in the gut that said no to participation or

pleasure in unfamiliar pursuits. (Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* 21)

And third, the American Jewry has come to realize the disparity between the ideals of security, equality, and liberty preached by the American Dream and the persistent sense of insecurity, apprehension, fear, and frustration as actually experienced by the modern American Jewish ethnic minority.

Philip Roth is usually identified with many acclaimed literary predecessors such as Saul Bellow, Bruce Jay Friedman, and Bernard Malamud who have addressed in their work the conflict and alienation engendered by the pursuit of their modern American Jewish identity. However, Philip Roth is considered among the first literary voices that seemed to keep the balance between the ethnic and universal, he seemed to ground the Jewish-American fiction in the realm of popular culture.

Many critics believe that the widespread appeal of his works goes back to the authenticity of their tone; he masters the dialect of lower and middle-class Jewish immigrants. He depicts

the anxiety of the fathers and the ferocity of the mothers nurturing and guiding their young [which] bore the mark of [their] hard-won experience. These people had known poverty when it meant hunger, disease, homelessness, fear. They knew anti-Semitism as a threat to existence, not just to social acceptance. (Wisse, "In Nazi Newark: *The Plot against America*" 68)

The parents of the second generation immigrants, after working their own way to safety, pressed that their children follow their own instructions to make this bounty of hard won stability last. However, children of such generation took such stability for granted, as "a condition of being, a natural birth right rather than a value or ideal" (Wisse, "In Nazi Newark: *The Plot against America*" 68). Hence, they dismissed their parents ideals as old fashioned myths of struggle and achievement. They further saw their parents mindset as an obstacle to their pursuit of liberty and independence as promised by the American Dream. As the urge to assimilate into the 'melting pot' was paramount, many post-WWII American Jews, especially the well-educated and well-established segment, sought to shed their Jewishness in favour of the

more familiar, more appealing Americanness. However, what makes Philip Roth's attitude different is that he has maintained a middle ground between secular humanitarian Americanness and ethnic orthodox Jewishness;

Although one strength of Roth's stories about Jewish Americans is that they engage both Jewish and non-Jewish (and, for that matter, both American and international) audiences, their ethnic grounding and rootedness in place contribute to their longevity. (Rabin 9)

He holds an in-between status that combines the mythological with the popular; Roth has departed from the so-called ethnic novels of Orthodox Jewishness whose prominent practitioners are Henry Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow. He realized that the traditionality and ethnicity of such novels had made them confined to a certain minor group of audience. Hence, he declared such independence from the tradition of Jewish fiction early in his career: "I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew" (qtd in Strandberg 18). Roth later went on to explain that such declaration of independence is a quest of his which is not easy to attain for his generation at large: