

Suffering and Anxiety as the Predominant Themes in the Works of Philip Roth

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Abstract

The lives of Jews have always been a challenging one. Be it history or legends, all carry tales of Jewish suffering and anxiety. Philip Roth is a prominent Jewish writer whose writings are generally pertaining to Jewish anxiety and their longing to assimilate with the larger society. This article shall analyse such struggles of Jews with reference to some of the novels of Philip Roth. The history of Jews and their sensibilities will also be included in the study.

Keywords

Suffering, Jews, Anxiety, Jewishness, and Sensitivity

One of the definitions of "sensibility" in the Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language is "liability to feeling injured or offended." Fundamentally, sensitivity is an emotional trait that can be either refined or vulgar. An object that "emphasize[s] the emotional distresses of the virtuous, either at own sorrows or at those of their companions" is what M. H. Abrams refers to as a novel of sensibility (191). Sensitivity is most displayed when a person is exposed to events containing hardship and associated anguish. Norman Podhoretz claims that "The Jew represents humanity as it is perceived through the lenses of moral ambition and suffering. Thus any individual who experiences enormous suffering and yearns to be better than he is might be referred to as a Jew " (177). Jewish sensibility is inescapably characterized by suffering. Philip Roth has shared his countrymen's fascination with the idea of Jewish hardship as it influences Jewish sensibility. In actuality, Jewish sensitivity has been strongly influenced by this aspect of human nature. One of the defining characteristics of Jewishness is suffering.

Jewish history is characterized by wandering and sorrow. The constant movement of the Jew is accompanied by bodily and spiritual hardship. The name "Jews" is frequently used in the New Testament to refer to Hebrews, who are Eber's descendants and members of the Hebraic branch of the Semitic race. Hebrews are the descendants of Jacob. As a result, these people were referred to as "Hebrews" in the past "in the era of David's kingship. As a logical continuation of the former term "Israelites," Jews began to be referred to as Israelis after the establishment of Israel in 1948 ". The contemporary descendants of this strain refer to themselves as Hebrews in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion, as well as Jews in both senses. Many Jews have experienced suffering since the inception of their people. Jews have endured a great deal of hardship starting with Jacob's (later Israel's) time, when Egyptian pharaohs tortured them and continued during their time in Canaan, where they suffered at the hands of Moabites, Ammonites, and Philistines. Even now, this suffering is still present.

Its deadliest period occurred in the early 1940s of the previous century when Adolph Hitler began a crazed extermination campaign that resulted in the deaths of six million Jews. Although the wandering may have stopped, the anguish has not. Arabs are all around it as it goes on. It suffices to note that the term "Jew" has come to represent hardship and grief. The Jewish people have demonstrated incredible resiliency and perseverance throughout history, enabling them to successfully maintain their ethnic identity in their tough survival struggle. The secret to this achievement lies in the Jewish tradition of reciprocal duty, the responsibility of the Jew for one another, the individual Jew's sense of Jewish community, the fellow Jew's sympathy for the lone Jew in need, and the better-off Jew's empathy for the less fortunate Jew. Jews have grown to respect compassion and generosity as a result of ongoing hardship. Hence, it is clear that the Jews have a unique perspective on suffering. It is not unexpected that the constant display of Jewish sorrow in literature finds an audience among Jews. With it comes a dual source of familial pride. The primary characteristic that sets apart Jews is suffering. Also, it is a component of what distinguishes them as the Chosen People. At the same time that it is localized and global, Judaism. Rituals are rooted in the Jewish people's experience, therefore they cannot simply be adopted by or grafted onto another community without being connected to Jewish history and daily life. The universal truths that Judaism represents, however, cannot infiltrate other cultures without contact.

Anxiety is a certain mood that can strike a person for any reason. Anxiety is a mental condition in which a person will be distressed about either the present or the future. Fear and anxiety are distinct emotions because fear is only a fear of something, whereas anxiety is a driving force that helps a person recognize they have control over the circumstance. The antecedent of choice is anxiety. Shakespeare described anxiety as a state of "to be or not to be." Anxiety arises when one

must make a decision either subjectively or objectively. Anxiety can also be felt in the decision to do what is right or wrong.

The proponents of assimilation and xenophobia have been unable to reach a consensus within Judaism itself. The construction of the self is a significant topic, especially in the American setting, and is connected to the alienation idea. The Jews and Negroes have been the most impacted of all the other ethnic and subcultural groups, blending into the melting pot that is America. Jews have been successful in gaining ground in the social culture of America. But the sense of estrangement is still there psychologically.

Jews naturally believe that pain is a gift from God. Pain has been considered as an essential component of the Jew's chosenness in his difficult assignment. The agony endured by European Jewry during the Middle Ages and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was remarkable. But many Jewish American novelists have turned to overly sentimental writing in order to elevate their adversity to the level of ethical suffering. Thankfully, Philip Roth avoided fictionalizing thoughts while not seeing the tale of the Chosen People with sympathy. Roth makes the same claim as Malamud that all men experience similar calamities as the Jews. Jews don't tend to experience pain, suffering, grief, or misfortune on their own. Roth, who transcends the strict definitions of what it means to be a "Jewish writer," sees pain as a path to ennoblement and enlightenment for all people. With the rise and development of materialism, man has transformed into a depersonalized creature who is lonely in a crowd and a victim of contemporary technology whose unique identity is obscured in the image of a mob. Philip Roth's fiction, particularly his early fiction, has explored this idea of a solitary man and his sensibility. The characters aimlessly walk in the dark while seeking redemption. They eventually succeed and maintain their uniqueness in the process.

The message is clear: Loyalty, respect, and responsibility—the pillars of healthy families—seem to be eroded by self-indulgence. Malamud's assertion that "all men are Jews" has been enlarged by Philip Roth to mean "all Jews are destined to suffer" and "any sufferer is a Jew" in its connotative sense. Jews are all victims and vice versa. Everyone on earth is doomed to suffer, and everyone has absorbed the Jewish quality of suffering. Roth asserts that pain is not a Jewish-only right or privilege. The idea of the Jew has evolved into a metaphor. The condition of American Jewry in the 1950s had a lot to do with Philip Roth's emergence on the literary scene, particularly as a fiction writer, and his ascent to fame. Jews in the post-war era, still reeling from the horror of the Holocaust, were captivated with *Night* by Elie Wiesel, the dramatic adaptation of Anne Frank's diary, and *Exodus* by Leon Uris. The Jews in America feared a rerun of Hitler's Germany even as they worked to put the past behind them.

The American Jewry at the time of the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Five Short Stories* in 1959 was inclined toward the idea that Jews could be liberal, open to opportunity, loving and lovable, and mentally strong enough to resist the allure of American materialism that would lead to the loss of Jewish identity. The issue brought on by an overwhelming desire for acculturation and assimilation was described as posing a threat to Jewish ideals. These principles are the only way to support Jewish identity and communal existence, which the Jewish community actually views as being of utmost importance. Assimilation has also changed the essence of Jewish sensitivity in America, much like suffering. Roth's fictional works, especially the first ones, reflect this transition. After the response to *Farewell, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth's focus on the issue of Jewish struggle in America was heightened by his need to cope with an unexpected rejection of himself. As a means of escape, he assembled a panel of witnesses, including himself and many writers, who set out on a quest to defend his opinions and the things he had written.

Why should being Jewish prevent me from experiencing the American dream? was the key question posed in magazines, newspapers, and surveys following the release of Roth's initial few novels. One might live the American ideal while still staying a Jew. Many of Roth's protagonists—his testifiers—are guys his own age who were born in the 1930s and whose lives now vindicate those of their author. Wallach, Kepesh, Tarnopol, Zuckerman, Klugman, and "Philip Roth" are the majority of them; they are men of letters who instruct literature. Through literature, the main characters of Philip Roth's novel absorb both themselves and America into their Jewish selves. In the end, it's only a matter of fending against the younger generation's parental supervision and the organized Jewry's influence, which threaten the elder generation's artistic individuality. Those who survived the Holocaust had to live with the shame of their actions. These are all contributing elements that have influenced Jewish sensibility in America and continue to do so. In order to claim his identity as a Jewish author, Philip Roth has struggled. Probably no other contemporary American author has done as much as Roth to dispel outdated gender norms and stereotypes. About acquiring independence, power, and maturity as an artist and man in America, Roth has written in an almost obsessive manner. The heroes of Roth are different incarnations of the mythic consciousness of the contemporary metropolitan Jew. His fiction and conception of American culture are both made more complex and richer by this truth.

The characters in Philip Roth's books find themselves confined to a mental ghetto. The majority of Roth's literature is characterized by the idea of discovering oneself unable to escape the past or get past a persistent perspective from a psychic ghetto. Philip Roth has written extensively about the duties of the writer to examine the American idea and explain contemporary American

culture. Like Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, Roth is of the opinion that Jewish writers in America should create new literary styles and tastes as a reaction to their situation as Jews in America and as a means of realizing their potential as artists and writers. The Jewish author and thinker is a linguistic pioneer who advances the rhetorical and narrative frameworks of the American myth and ideology while keeping the position of the contemporary American thinking hero. According to Philip Roth, American authors cannot escape the issue of capturing American reality because it may be unsolvable. Roth's dismay at the difficulty of doing so finally turns into a defense of the writer's position. The American literary canon is directly related to Philip Roth. Jewish writers tend to be more spontaneous and vernacular, and Roth is attempting to bridge the gap between them and serious writers. Jewish writers and intellectuals experience intense conflict as a result of the mismatch between refined sensibilities and the spontaneous reality of their ethnicity as Jews as well as their social status.

In terms of experience and ideas, Philip Roth recognizes himself as a Jew. He saw it as a blessing that he was born a Jew. He viewed being Jewish as a complex, fascinating, morally challenging, and incredibly singular experience, which he appreciated. He discovered himself in the complicated historical situation of being a Jew. Roth has always held the view that his comprehension and perception of the moral and psychological concerns that permeate his writing are greatly influenced by his own experience as a Jew. From a psychological perspective, Roth's comment—which is extensively discussed in *Goodbye, Columbus*—seems more analogous to the Lower East Side's former ghetto. In an effort to fictionalize his adolescent experiences, Roth has recognized that the ethos of his extremely self-conscious Jewish neighborhood, whose residents were proud, ambitious, and equally thrilled by the feeling of being fused in a melting pot, served as inspiration for his early fiction.

When Roth first started writing, he immediately looked to his Jewish heritage and ancestry for inspiration. Later in 1969, Roth drew inspiration from his Jewish upbringing to create the fictitious, legendary family he named the Portnoys. Although Roth's detractors claim he uses Jewish sources, he counters that they are victims in a society where they need not be victims if they have the willpower. According to Roth, some other reviewers choose self-pitying portrayals of the "eternal suffering" for more sober and sincere depictions of Jewish-American life.

His unique standing as a writer is a result of Roth's insights into the styles associated with several cultural orientations, including literary modernism, Americanism, and Judaism. His work has received a great deal of social and cultural criticism, which may be attributed to a happy mingling of the tensions and contradictions associated with these perspectives. Different mental processes and lifestyles are reflected in the various styles. Inevitably, as Jew versus American

and middle-class conformist against modernist rebel, they function as balances and critical viewpoints on one another. They are combined by Roth into a single cohesive style and take on the sardonic consciousness and varied perspectives of the contemporary metropolitan Jew.

The main character in *Zuckerman Unbound*, Zuckerman, is Philip Roth's autobiographical alter ego. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, which was released in 1981, Zuckerman's aspirations to be a writer who can transform the consciousness of his times are dashed by the dramatic friction between his middle-class Jewish upbringing and the combination of creativity and nihilism implied by his goal. As a son, Roth had firsthand knowledge of the "protective love of parents who will even interpret sons' rebelliousness as something admirable. In contrast, parents' unwavering love successfully negated the influence of that defiance. The reality of the "broken heart" overcame the worry of retribution. The difficulties Zuckerman has in separating from such devoted parents and being truly independent from them represents the schlemiel's protracted adolescence, which undermines any attempt to suppress this rebellion. The parents who were foiled will be waiting for Zuckerman and Alex Portnoy, they are aware of this fact.

The protagonists remain close to home due to guilt and the corresponding conscience sting, yet living as Jews in America brings about the kinds of uncertainties and concerns that naturally cause one to return to their ancestors. The protagonists' backgrounds cannot be erased from their brains, not even by surrogate parents. In place of his adoptive literary father figure, Zuckerman disowns his Jewish father and replaces him with an older, well-known writer named E.I.Lanoff. Nevertheless, Zuckerman discovers his own origins in Lanoff's books! Zuckerman is reminded of his own and his family's Jewish heritage by Lanoff's books. Zuckerman is able to relate to the stresses of exclusion and confinement that his parents had to deal with through Lanoff's novels. Dramatizing his childhood insecurities carried over into his adult life is Zuckerman's contempt for his true father and his frantic hunt for a new father figure.

In spite of appearing to be successful, intelligent young Jewish men, Roth's heroes, such as Portnoy, Gabe Wallach, and Klugman, are in reality, underground guys. They illustrate what it means to be both Jewish, modern, and American. These unsung heroes are constantly looking for their identity and manhood. In the same way that Roth's characters seek a sense of identity, his narrative develops as a never-ending search for a center. A common example of this style of fusing fiction with a concept is *My Life As A Man*, which explores the theme of the loss of an unreliable self. This book's third section, *My Real Story*, is autobiographical. The imaginary process of developing a true self continues.

In "My Real Story," Zuckerman can be seen lecturing a disinterested class. Joseph Conrad's Introduction to the Nigger of Narcissus is quoted by him. The quotation's first few words express the author's perspective on the subject. Roth's heroes display what Alex's psychotherapist, Dr. Otto Spielvogel, refers to as the narcissism of the artist in addition to wanting new identities and dads.

The distinction between mimicry and confession is imperceptible, and Roth consistently walks this line in his writing. His heroes have been elevated to the status of a cultural myth as a result of his success in creating the conflict between fiction and the ego. Roth's literary self and public self-help to define this figure. He builds heroes that exist in both literature and public life by adding so many brilliant internal variations of a single fictional personality that resembles himself to his most recent fiction. In the end, Philip Roth succeeds in building a bridge between the contemporary Roth of the public sphere and the literary Roth who looks for a firm center in his novels. Both a Jew and a modernist, Roth projects a mythic self onto American culture that, in its departure from the traditional image of the hero in American literature and culture, looks nothing less than revolutionary. The general public's acceptance of such a heroic character also speaks to the cultural transformation that has occurred over the previous few decades in terms of morals, interests, and fashion.

With all its facets, including worry, freedom, responsibility, and choice, Roth gives a detailed examination of the human being. As a result of watching Roth write Sabbath's Theater, Remnick cites the author directly: "While I was writing Sabbath's Theater... Because I felt free." Now that I feel in control (Remnick 88). The purpose of Shabbat is to obtain enjoyment right now. In the start of the book, he is having an affair with a woman who is 52 years old. The two have had a wonderful relationship for the past thirteen years. She goes by the name of Drenka Bailich and is the spouse of an innkeeper who makes the least effort to attract guests by wooing them. She happily had sex with a lot of males. Without putting any demands on one another, Sabbath and Drenka continue to live in perfect harmony. In that Sabbath fits into the existential framework and experiences all of its phases, including anxiety, choice, and liberation, Roth has created a compelling figure.

The Human Stain's protagonist is Coleman Silk. Athena College's classics instructor is Coleman. He is the dean and the first Jewish dean. Coleman's next-door neighbor is Nathan Zuckerman. Coleman is anxious to reveal the truth about his use of the phrase "spooks," which is slang for negroes and actually refers to ghosts. Under the direction of French Classics Professor Delphin Roux, his colleagues raised a stink about it and forced the two black students to file a formal complaint against him. While lecturing, Coleman referred to the students by this name because

they had missed class. He questions the other pupils as to whether the absentees are real students or ghosts. He does not intend to imply that they are Black people. When asked to elaborate, he responds that he does not mean anything similar. He is also furious that they failed to show up for class. He claims that he is not to blame for this without even the slightest regret.

That is a component from the two students who haven't shown up for class. Coleman is a really straightforward person. Coleman had spent practically his entire academic career at Athena, and was described by Roth as being "hardly the classic stuffy professor of Latin and Greek," as well as "an outgoing, sharp-witted, powerfully suave big city charmer, something of a warrior, something of an operator." (THS 4). Coleman provides a clever justification for his use of the word "spooks," as he does not use it in a metaphorical sense. Coleman's inner self is aware that he is not intentionally trying to offend anyone and that he has merely used the word "spooks" in its literal sense. When Coleman is accused of using a word that refers to Black people, his anxiety level increases. As a result of his conviction in his usage, he confidently offers an explanation. He makes every effort to persuade the officials, but he is unsuccessful.

Coleman's anxiety-related individualism is what gives him his personality. I was referring to a spectre or a ghost when I used the word "spook" in its conventional and fundamental sense. I was unaware of the potential color of these students (THS 6). A Kierkegaard quotation makes it obvious that there are two outcomes of suffering. The first is "doubt," and the second is "believe." According to Kierkegaard, a person lives in a positive state when they believe. Coleman goes through this kind of pain. He considers himself to be Jewish. He has the unwavering faith in which he will persevere. Kierkegaard says,

This negative is present in all consciousness. Doubt accentuates the negative; Belief chooses to cancel the negative. Every mental act is composed of doubt and belief, but it is belief that is positive, it is sustains thought and holds the world together. Nevertheless, belief understands itself as uncertain, as not justified by any objective fact. (Palmer 54)

Coleman's relationship with Faunia Farley, an illiterate woman, is brought up in conversation. Athena College, where Coleman is the department's dean of Classics, she works as a janitor and is 34 years old. Coleman is quite willing to have an affair with this woman, so when he receives an anonymous letter, he becomes anxious. He talks about his covert liaison. In addition to their employment situation, their age difference is a notable aspect of their relationship. Faunia is in her forties, while Coleman is in his seventies. As he ages, he consumes Viagra pills while lying

in bed with Faunia. Coleman has no fear of facing any challenge, not even age. Many people fear becoming older, but Coleman avoids boredom or ridiculousness by facing his fear and making active decisions. Coleman experiences his independence as a result of his anxiousness since it causes him to be obstinate in his judgments. He tells Nathan, the story's narrator, about his relationship. I am not this daughter's father; that is not my position in this situation, he tells Nathan. I'm not her professor; instead, I'm a 71-year-old man with a 34-year-old mistress (THS 33). He expresses to Nathan in a clear state of mind and takes a clear decision regarding his relationship with Faunia. Coleman claims that he is not Faunia's father or professor, as the outside world would anticipate him to be with the 30-year-old woman, and that he is not having an affair with her to escape his worry.

The protagonists remain close to home due to guilt and the corresponding conscience sting, yet living as Jews in America brings about the kinds of uncertainties and concerns that naturally cause one to return to their ancestors. The protagonists' backgrounds cannot be erased from their brains, not even by surrogate parents. While appearing to be wealthy, intelligent young Jewish men, Roth's protagonists, such as Portnoy, Gabe Wallach, and Klugman, are actually men living underground. They illustrate what it means to be both Jewish, modern, and American.

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