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Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 13 (4)

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

Date of reception: 08 Apr 2022

Date of revision: 19 July 2022

Date of acceptance: 22 July 2022

**Aujo Philip J.M, C. Govindaraj (2022). A Conflict between Self and World in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol. 13(4). 193 – 197.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study discerns *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth concerning the struggle between self and world. Roth's protagonists want a haven of protection and stability, or a home, from which they may interpret the world meaningfully. In addition to this, they require stability and repose in the achievement of selfhood. Their home may be their static, centred self, from which they could get meaning from their surroundings. In the novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, the protagonist faces external and internal and self-versus-world conflicts. It is discovered that Portnoy conflicts with his Jewish family, a microcosm of the ethnic group to which he belongs. He incorrectly feels that his ethnicity is the core reason for his alienated feelings. In addition, he is troubled by the contradiction between his moral convictions and his sexual indulgence. His difficulties remain unanswered until the novel's conclusion, even though he begins comprehending the actual nature of his moral issue. In his exploration of the never-ending and, maybe, the insoluble issue between man and his fundamental desires, Roth delves into the simple mind of his species to bring to light the unfathomable, grotesque, and frightening realities of human drives and experiences. This skill lends his compositions a worldwide appeal that transcends ethnic and racial distinctions. All the characters in the narrative are banished from themselves and arrive in the brave new world of choice, America, representing a domestic transgression.

**Keywords:** Self, Moral, Dilemma, Individualism, Sexuality, Memory

### **INTRODUCTION**

The prominence of Philip Roth in modern American-Jewish fiction has become significant. However, the significance does not depend on his popularity, the sales number of his works, or his scores at award ceremonies. His inner conflict offers his readers a comprehensive view of the civilisation in which they reside. His writings depict the hatred and pain that many contemporary Americans experience daily. He detests the diplomatic nuances surrounding such topics. His characters reflect the misery and ecstasy of their circumstances and experiences.

Roth thinks about how morally significant it is for his main character to solve his problems while dealing with outside forces. This process of ethical growth of the Rothian protagonist consists primarily of the following elements: the confrontation of an individual's moral idealism with their identity and selfhood, primarily through interpersonal relationships. Firstly, he attempts to understand the true nature of pessimistic forces outside the psych. Secondly, the development of ways to survive in a chaotic existential reality while keeping one's moral integrity and dignity and, finally, the attainment of spiritual verses. In his novels, Roth investigates other aspects of the human experience, but his moral outlook stays unchanged. Roth is conscious that an artist should not have the hidden aim of preaching moral ideals or doctrines. His responsibility is to describe the situation accurately to the reader and to propose that his participation in the surrounding moral process is desirable.

A careful examination of Roth's writings indicates that they are a record of the effects of the permissive culture he has seen in the United States. He shows various bad results in his works, but the most common is a fall in respect for marriage and family life. Through protagonists who consider marriage as suffocation and sex the ultimate liberation, Roth demonstrates that the males of his society have abandoned civilisation in favour of a more primitive way of life in their pursuit of liberty. He says that children, the future generation, value familial bonds. According to him, redefining or downgrading the institution of marriage is hazardous to their psychological health.

The 1969 publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* represents a turning point in his career as an author. In this funny and sexually explicit story, the protagonist, Portnoyander Portnoy, tells his doctor about his exploits. Thus, the tale corresponds to his life story. Roth is initially charged with obscenity and anti-Semitism for his open commentary on various topics. A Jew is portrayed as a citizen burdened with guilt and cultural restraints. Robert F. Kiernan states in

Jewish Fiction; American Writing Since 1945: A Critical Study that compared to Bellow and Malamud, “Roth is less concerned with the mystique of being Jewish and more concerned with the emotional dynamics of a Jewish upbringing” and “gives voice to the Jewish libido as it fights a losing battle with guilt, sexual confusion, and thralldom to the family” (35).

In this novel, Roth attempts to escape the narrow-minded environment in which he was raised and instead immerses himself in the imaginary realities of Gentile America. Roth recognises that the reason for his previous failures is that he left unfinished business in New Jersey and within himself. The genuine inner tale of his infancy and adolescent rebellion against bourgeois principles, which he revisits before moving on to more significant matters. The result is a novel in which he invents for himself an “outrageous autobiography” whose apparent falsity is the fictitious counterpart of the states of the soul he seeks to depict.

Portnoy’s Complaint does not reject Judaism any more than it rejects Christianity. However, it is more of an accusation against the Jewish mother and the Jewish family. Portnoy’s story is considered a contemporary retelling of the age-old tale of an immigrant seeking acculturation and assimilation in the American milieu and escaping ghetto identity. A notable aspect of the novel is its less spectacular topic: the author’s self. This self gradually becomes his main preoccupation, excluding all else. Roth states, “Please, who has crippled us in this manner? Who created us so gloomy, neurotic, and feeble?” (37). This is the phrase that defines the novel’s primary irony. For the protagonist, every circumstance is a joke, conveyed in a vocabulary of urbane ridicule, stiff with ghetto wit.

In addition to adequately capturing the public and private experiences of the United States, Roth portrays his creations as cautionary flags for the men of his generation who favour quick pleasure through his dedication and relentless exploration. In addition, he alludes, through his protagonists’ spiritual decline and mental deterioration, to the negative impact of the laid-back culture on society’s spiritual and mental health. Despite having all the sexual freedom possible in life, Portnoy cannot supply himself with a lasting sense of self-worth. His life is impasse because his many enchantments and fascinations for unappealing sensual pleasures are in direct contrast to the fundamental human yearning for love and devotion. He is constantly confronted with shame, anxiety, and isolation. Even his regular masturbation sessions represent mechanical functionalism suppressing ordinary sexual love and incurable self-centeredness that has replaced the psychological force of attachment. His ludicrous sexual behaviour and the ensuing remorse place him in a position where he is entirely destitute and condemned. His ineffectiveness non-Israel is a natural consequence of his lifelong dissoluteness, selfishness, and rascality.

Regarding the character in the novel, Kepesh, his intensified sexual desires trap him in an organ he desires lustfully. After his metamorphosis back into a human, he satisfies his pre-transformation erotic desires while feeling distressed by his dire circumstances. He is unaware of the consequences of his lifelong escape from his responsibilities and his insatiable hunger for the new, the young, and the beautiful girls, which is an irredeemable and repulsive sexual desire that rejects marriage, children, and all those social reasons, those loving and self-ennobling ties to one’s fellow man. Kepesh departs from his daily existence to learn that it is precisely what he has been missing. With all of his deviations, he finds neither contentment nor fulfilment. Feelings of isolation and despair perpetually plague him.

The protagonist is a sort of oddity, a respectable and clever sexually tormented neurotic. While his Jewish mother is possessive of cannibalism, his father is a constipated insurance salesman perpetually on the receiving end at home and in the office. Portnoy is troubled by the illogical and nonsensical Jewish dietary regulations he was taught at home. Portnoy yearns for a unique identity. Masturbation provides a way to fight against the oppressive moral standards learned at home. Though it affords him the exhilaration of prohibited freedom, he lacks the necessary privacy to enjoy it, making it suffocating.

Portnoy’s anger is manifestly directed outward. His work defies the current state of affairs, the iniquities and tragedies of the human condition, the necessity for analysis, and the ultimate impossibility of analysis. Portnoy is a victim of his past and a prisoner of his inability to be satisfied. His magnificent wrath stems from his inability to shape others into what he desires. His affliction is also his achievement, his anger, the opponent of resignation. Portnoy, unable to accept either Shikse or Jew, refuses to compromise. His impotence in Israel shows that he cannot be satisfied with a superficial facade of ideal femininity. Portnoy finds Israel to be a liability as well. There, he is much more of an outcast than in the United States, where such Portnoys are abundant. He is in exile in Israel. In Israel, he learns his impotence, typical for sexual athletes like him. The oedipal drama with Naomi concludes with Portnoy getting kicked for impotence. Portnoy spends the entirety of the novel on the couch of his therapist: Another martyr - a decent Jewish child for the cause of sexual liberty. On his way to the Promised Land, Portnoy fantasises about his ideal Jewish country and the Weequahic neighbourhood park, where he sees Jews play baseball on Sunday mornings. There were Jews of every class, and he believed he would always be there, even as an adult, to spend Sundays with his wife and children after participating in such sports. He envisions his weekends finishing with traditional Jewish family meals and radio programmes in a Jewish home where he would feel “completely at home.”

Portnoy decides to claim what he has previously gained and move on with his life. As a man, an American, and a Jew, Portnoy is a more passive figure than his dreams, which stay unfulfilled eternally. He escapes to Israel in an attempt to reclaim two of the three but recognises that he cannot succeed as either a man or a Jew. Portnoy recoils, feeling equally out of place in Israel and New York. The fear-cultivated Jew within him keeps him from genuinely entering America. The American within him had nearly exterminated the Jew. Portnoy cannot exert himself, so he appears to be unmanned.

The immorality of his circumstances forces him to the couch, where he unpacks his heart with foul language. Despite his apparent ignorance of this fact, Portnoy's social and psychological difficulties are another of his glaring intellectual deficiencies. He inhabits a world with decreased possibilities and expects it to provide him with significance. His experiences illustrate the constraints inherent to such a world. For him, sexuality is the one sphere of action where individual control remains. There are no new worlds to conquer in his universe, only women. Portnoy's fantasies are real. Because others are merely projections of himself, he is incapable of closeness. As soon as her fantasy comes true, she gets rejected. The women assume magical proportions and simplicity. Portnoy emits a generational cry that requires a response. He is suited for achievement but not for existence. His responses to his physician are entangled with his parents. According to him, the "most memorable character" (3) he has ever met is his mother, who is horrible and vile. Memory is a perpetually severing capacity that inextricably links Portnoy to his mother. Portnoy fears abandonment and castration at the hands of his mother. The fact that she locked him out and threatened him with a bread knife made her memorable.

Portnoy's identification of his issue borders on deterministic acceptance of the very stereotypes he vehemently opposes. He accepts his Jewish frailty not merely as a phase that may be conquered but also as an irreversible historical fact. Portnoy teeters on the razor's edge between his sense of helplessness and his desire to overcome the limitations that his history threatens to impose on him. However, he also demonstrates the influence of his birth through the dichotomy between his self-loathing and his pride as a member of the Chosen People.

Portnoy's Complaint may be viewed as a comedic monologue in which the fury of recollection and the voracious intricacies of infantile rejections and resentments are depicted with near-perfect accuracy. The mindset of a generation is simultaneously rooted in family and resentful of it. The planned profanation of the mother, father and even the most private offices of the body is viewed as a cure for the therapeutic members of the professional middle class for whom everything anatomical has become "dinner conversation."

Personal sorrow, the social insatiability of an entire generation, and the global social repercussions of this insatiability are all addressed with sincerity in the novel. The contrast between innocence and experience shapes Portnoy's Complaint. The roles continue to alter. The protagonist alternately exemplifies inherent virtue and natural vice. The Jewish mother has a robust and essential faith. Portnoy experiences the difficulties of adolescence. Sophie's confidence in his virtue only heightens his knowledge of his tangled and essential depravity. Portnoy perceives himself to be a victim. His therapist, however, determines that his self-hatred compels him to despise everyone who loves him. The psychoanalyst does not diagnose his patient's conscious endeavour to free himself from his past. Portnoy, though, makes the best of the situation. Because acknowledging his parents' affection would obligate him to reciprocate, he refuses to do so. He can only engage in forbidden sex, not permitted sex. His only reason for submitting to psychoanalysis is to rid himself of the pangs of conscience caused by his selfishness. He is unaware that the Jewishness he denigrates is also the source of the intelligence he admires in himself.

It is impossible to identify Portnoy's Complaint as anti-Semitic. The book expresses a desire to alter the course of one's birth. Portnoy desires to be left alone, free from the claims of uniqueness and the responsibilities of the past, so that he can develop as a person from nothing.

The novel's conclusion makes it evident that the protagonist has a long way to go before he can be cured. Portnoy, who is 33 years old, is still a masturbator at heart and is incapable of forming a mature relationship with another person. He is constrained by shrinking and demeaning taboos. Portnoy jokes that the taboo for him turns out to be not knowing about it. The American Jew is doomed regardless of whether or not he respects his parents and their teachings.

The novel's central struggle is between American individualism and the Jewish family structure. Portnoy is torn between two opposing ideologies: American individualism with its credo "every man for himself" and Jewish moral law emphasising restraint, suppression, renunciation, and obligation to others. Portnoy enjoys the unrestricted sexual freedom that his age affords him, and he opposes the moral and societal authority that Sophie embodies. Portnoy, however, is unaware that he, like his mother, is a product of his civilisation and that his attempts to eradicate the moral aspect of his nature are doomed to fail. In addition to repressing one's physical nature, neurosis also stems from denying one's spiritual essence. Portnoy's emphasis on understanding why he is in such excruciating agony, together with his willingness and capacity to inspect every irritated nerve ending, distinguishes him from the typical victim of a black comedy. His education was not primarily Jewish. During the 1920s and 1930s, many immigrants

and first-generation Americans viewed their boys as Columbuses who would lead their families to security and prominence in the New World. The weight of these desires causes numerous Columbuses to develop painful kinks. Thus, Portnoy's *Complaint* is a passionate, sincere, and thorough depiction of an agonised man and his generation. Roth depicts this predicament in all its sorrow, not only for everything he has experienced thus far but also for everything he and Judaism will suffer in the future in America. The end outcome is not just the identity crisis of one person but the terrible awakening of an entire generation. Roth is primarily a writer of contemporary Jewish life who writes with exceptional colour, vigour, and sincerity. Both the Jewish-American scene and himself are on his mind. The vitality and colour of his stories derive directly from his wit, emotions, and observations. His Jewish experience is presented with intense sincerity. Roth handles circumstances and characters without piety, remorse, or vengeance. Portnoy's *Complaint* is an enduring work of art with something significant to say about Jewish life in America. It is a state in which one loses their identity, sense of belonging, and nation. As represented by Portnoy in *Portnoy's Complaint*, living in Diaspora is a highly unpleasant experience. He is depicted as a wandering Jew who is unsure about his existence. The book's final chapter portrays the feelings of a Jew who does not belong to the country in which he resides and the country to which he belongs. It explores more topics regarding Jewish nationalism and identity. There is an ongoing search for self and community.

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