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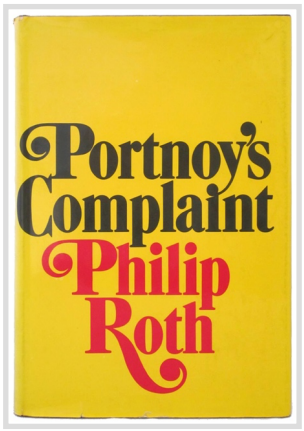
Alex and the Girls

Questioning Roth's use of female characters in his portrayal of Alexander Portnoy's identity crisis



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Introduction

The 1950s marked the 'Jewish decade' in American culture (Harap 133). Saul Bellow was being acclaimed for *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Seize the Day* (1956), Bernard Malamud was writing his well-known short stories *The Assistant* (1957) and *The Magic Barrel* (1958), Isaac B. Singer's work was being translated into English by Irving Howe, Arthur Miller was married to the national *shiksa*[1], and Lenny Bruce's comedy was already inspiring Woody Allen's coming movies.

Most of these artists are second-generation Eastern European Jews whose parents came to America at the beginning of the 20th century. Like millions of others, they had come to the Promised Land in search of a better life. And by the end of the Second World War, many of these second-generation Jewish immigrants had become acculturated and had joined cultural American mainstream. Assimilation was majorly praised by second-generation immigrants at the beginning of the century[2]. 'Jewishness seemed irrelevant to their interests and life among their peers in the larger American world.' (Harap 2) However, this tendency reversed itself in the aftermath of the Holocaust as the post-war period witnessed the decline of anti-Semitism and a rising celebration of Jewish culture in American literature. As Rachel Ertel argues, a new relationship was built between traditional Yiddish literature and mainstream American literature (Ertel 69). Writers such as Isaac B. Singer, who came to America in 1935, bridged the gap between the old country and the new one. He and his contemporaries rose new questions, inherent to the Jewish American community. A recurrent subject which deeply revealed Jewish American issues was the question of identity. It became a crucial theme in Jewish American literature. Due to the emigrational context, Eastern European Jewish culture was separated from its artists who had crossed the Atlantic and developed a new Jewish culture in the new land. However, asserting a common identity as a minority in mainstream America had its challenges, narrated and discussed in many Jewish American writers' works.

It is within this developing Jewish American culture that Philip Roth grew as a writer and took inspiration before publishing, at thirty-six, the most humorous and subversive novel of his career: *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Philip Roth is a third-generation Jewish immigrant, born in

[1] See II. 1. 2. The *shiksa* fantasy
[2] Who also had to face waves of anti-Semitism in America during the 1940s

1933 and raised in Newark, New Jersey. He is considered as one of the most influential novelists of the 20th century and was awarded many literary prizes from the very beginning of his career with his short-story collection *Goodbye, Columbus*, published in 1959. In close relation to his predecessors, Roth also dealt with the questions of assimilation and identity in his novels. *Portnoy's Complaint* might be one of the most representative of the issue. The novel is built within the framework of a therapy session during which Alexander Portnoy, the protagonist and narrator, now thirty-three years old, retraces the most significant events of his life to find answers leading to the resolution of his neuroses.

More than a novel in direct continuity of its predecessors, *Portnoy's Complaint* is a novelty. While the original theme of assimilation and identity is kept, Roth's means of transcribing the issue very much differ from 1950s' traditional bildungsroman. Roth's way of doing so appears progressive through the framework of the novel which creates an innovative, yet Jewish-centered setting where the narrative consists of the protagonist's self-analytic monologue, as well as through the use of sexuality as a means for Alex to explore his identity throughout the novel.

Alex's questioning of his Jewishness as well as the recurring theme of sexuality marked the reception of the novel with a consequent wave of indignation from the Jewish community. However, it also showed how representative of its time's social issues the novel was. The 1960s in America were marked by many social reforms and an empowerment of the youth. Roth's use of sexuality to transcribe Alex's identity empowerment is a direct response to the sexual revolution taking place at the time. And the Jewish community was not the only one troubled by the novel. With the sexual revolution, came another wave of women fighting for their rights in America. The ever-growing status of women in society, even in recent years, saw Roth's work analysed in a different light. His recent death during the peak of the MeToo movement reopened the debate concerning his portrayal of women, often criticised as being most often objectified and sexualised characters devoid of any depth that his male characters benefit from.

Moreover, opposition was enhanced by a connection made between Roth and his protagonist, Alexander Portnoy. Roth is known for playing on a blurred line between fiction and reality. When *Portnoy's Complaint* came out, readers and critics were particularly condemnatory of the novel because they transferred what they disliked about the characters onto their writer. Since the novel's release, Roth has confirmed some autobiographical elements of his work. Therefore, the comparison between the protagonist and its writer is present but remains blurred. In *The Facts:*

A Novelist's Autobiography as well as in interviews, Roth explains how he took inspiration from his own childhood to create Alex's Jewish family (Pierpont 54). He also explains how Maggie Williams and his therapy sessions after their separation inspired the core of the novel with the character of The Monkey and the psychoanalytic frame (Pierpont 162).

However, even though the autobiographical dimension of the novel is important mentioning, it will not be dealt with in this dissertation. We will be exploring Roth's depiction of Alex's issue with assimilation and his double identity which form his identity crisis. 'Identity crisis' is a term which was coined by German-American psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Freud partisan, Erikson also believed that one's personality and identity developed itself during his entire life through eight different stages which represent one's psychosocial development. The fifth stage, named 'Identity vs. Identity Confusion' occurs during adolescence (Erikson 94). In this stage, Erikson focuses on the impact of society and social interactions on one's development: 'the adolescent mind becomes a more explicitly ideological one, by which we mean one searching for some inspiring unification of tradition or anticipated techniques, ideas, and ideals.' (Erikson 130) He explains that one's Ego identity constantly evolves with new social experiences. It introduces a pattern of new and different behaviours which transcribe one's wish to fit into his family, community, or society.

Very much like Erikson's eight stages, the novel presents Alex's identity crisis in stages which correspond to different interactions with different characters. As most of these characters are women, we are going to discuss Roth's use of female characters to portray Alex's identity crisis. Like Erikson's theory, Alex's identity changes with his desires to fit the Jewish community or mainstream American society. As said before, the theme of identity is common in mid-20th century Jewish American literature as it stands for a societal issue of the time. However, we also saw that Roth uses new and sometimes subversive ways of conveying the Jewish American identity issue, such as sexuality and psychoanalysis. These two themes will also be explored to some extent, in close link with the female characters.

To begin the argumentation, we are first going to explore Alex's childhood, focusing on his relationship with his mother, Sophie Portnoy. She is presented as a stereotypical Jewish figure whose function is crucial to the narrative. We will see how Sophie's influence on Alex as a mother stands for the beginning of his identity crisis.

Then, we are going to focus on Alex's twenties and early thirties, determined by his romantic relationships. Each one of his relationships with Gentiles portrays a new stage of his identity odyssey. We will see how Alex's use of sexuality appears to evolve from a rebellious attitude against his parents to a means of empowerment and assimilation.

Lastly, we will analyse Alex's quest's final stage in Israel. Alex's unintentional pilgrimage offers him a chance to start again and focus on himself. However, his experience as part of the majority as well as his encounter with two Israelis will upset him even more. We will explore how Roth portrays Alex's inability to overcome his predicament through the two Israeli characters and Alex's characterisation as a stereotypical Schlemiel.

This study will therefore demonstrate how Roth uses female characters to portray Alex's identity crisis through the analysis of three different stages of Alex's quest, which can be traced to the introduction of different types of female characters.

I- ‘The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Met’[1]

‘The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Met’ is the title of the novel’s first chapter (1) which mainly centers on Alex’s Portnoy’s mother, Sophie Portnoy. The title says it all and already tells the reader about the importance of this character for the protagonist. ‘if something is unforgettable, you cannot forget it, usually because it is so beautiful, interesting, pleasant, etc.’[2] The mother is an extremely significant character in the novel and is at the heart of Alex’s identity crisis. The story can only exist because of her. In this chapter, I will try to present the ways through which Sophie makes herself unforgettable for Alex.

1. A Jewish upbringing

Roth’s novel is characterised by its Jewishness. Alex grows up in typical Jewish American household, carried by traditional values. It is Alex’s identification of himself as a Jew, opposed to his American self that will start the fire and send him on the quest to understand and search for his identity. Therefore, to understand Alex’s actions later on in the novel, as well as his behaviours which hide Jewish values, we should start with his upbringing in a typical Jewish American home.

1.1 History, humour, and lineage

As Lehman, Kanarek, and Bronner have noted, the Jewish mother has always played a predominant role in the Jewish family and community, which moreover is matrilineal ‘Jews have used motherhood across time and place as a way to construct and comprehend their culture.’ (1) Jewish mothers have always been particularly important as founders of community and family in Jewish history. In the matrilineal context of the Jewish tradition, the Jewish mother stood as the guardian of tradition. If today we all have a stereotypical and comical image of the Jewish mother, it is due to the changes that took place in the cosmopolitan American society of the 1950s and

[1] Title of the chapter dedicated to Alex’s mother (1)
[2] Definition from the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary

1960s. It was from the moment when modernity and tradition found themselves at opposite ends of the scale that the Jewish mother was charged with caricature and comedy.

'Never has the figure of the Jewish mother been more widely represented and discussed than it was in the US in the 1960s, where, in the form of a cartoonish, comic stereotype, it propelled massive comedy hits, television debates, and nationally bestselling books. […] Personified, often through her son's vision of her' she stands for 'an American Jewish culture in transition' (Lambert 170). The 1960s saw the rise of the Jewish mother as a comical and stereotyped character. She was most of the time made fun of by second or third-generation immigrants. 'In comparison with other ethnic groups, the rejection of the ethnic religion was a major response of second-generation Jews who found that the conflict and inconsistencies between their parents' religio-culture and American culture were intolerable.' (Sharot 151) The new generation of Jewish Americans thrived in a different background than their elders. After the war, Jewish American mothers, part of the new generation, brought up their children in a distrust of the Gentiles. However, it was a distrust that had no place in a new context of unrestrained modernity that was also shaping the identity of the children as much as the mothers were. Therefore, the children grew up in this opposition between two societies and because of the decrease in antisemitism, did no longer particularly see Gentiles as a danger. The contrast between first, second, and third-generation immigrants is significant and incomprehension rose. Why would their parents live in such recline communities and such fear? It sounded ridiculous to many.

'Mothers absorbed the pertinent issues in Jewish culture of the time in which they lived and thus exposed the complexities of living within both Jewish and general society.' (Lehman, Kanarek and Bronner 8). They '[maintained] a particular vision of the past' (Lehman, Kanarek and Bronner 8) while 'bearing responsibility for the future of the entire Jewish people' (Lehman, Kanarek and Bronner 12). The new generation of Jewish Americans were torn between a stubborn traditionalism embodied by the Jewish mother and the powerful appeal for freedom generated by modernity in the prevailing American culture. Looking at Jewish traditionalism with a modern eye remodels the Jewish mother into a comic figure. The fact is that traditionalism seems to lose its meaning in modern society. That is when the image of the Jewish mother as a misunderstood comical figure appeared. It was not a positive representation anymore, but one to laugh at, to joke about. Indeed, she became 'either a well-intentioned smothered, who transmits a love of Judaism to her children while controlling their lives to such an extent that their sons may find themselves incapable of

forming satisfactory relationships with women, or a misunderstood figure who exhausts herself in caring for those around her while neglecting her own emotional needs.' (Friedman 34) The Jewish mother, then, instantly became a subject of derision which could commonly be found in literature, comedy shows, radio shows, movies, or music. Antler argues that 'the Jewish mother became a vessel into which the cultural contradictions of a society grappling with ethnic, gender, class, and racial tensions were poured. The exaggeration of her traits into a caricature of maternal excess offer one gauge with which we can measure Jews' anxieties about their place in American society.' (9) It introduces the idea that the Jewish mother represented concerns felt by the entire community. In his essay, Josh Lambert goes a bit further and develops that idea, that 'the Jewish mother came to function, in the postwar decades in the US, as a recognisable metonym for the Jewish community, emphasising its traditionalism and parochialism.' (170) which sums up well how crucial her role was, before diving into her comical representation[3], here, in *Portnoy's Complaint.*

1.2 Stereotypes through Sophie Portnoy

Philip Roth's Sophie Portnoy in *Portnoy's Complaint* is an example of the stereotyped Jewish mother of the 1960s. These stereotypes are put in place by the narrator, Alexander Portnoy, her son who offers satirical portrait of his mother. It all starts at home, where Sophie reigns. Alex and his mother have a close relationship during his early childhood, due to the fact that when he's not at school, they are alone at home. Very early on, Alex talks about her devotion to her family and community and how she is the perfect Jewish mother, all the while keeping a humorous tone. According to Alex, 'Devotion is just in her blood' (9) and lists all the things she could do that amazed him as a child. However, these qualities are immediately thrown off by her awareness of her self-sacrifice, which she uses pretty often to make Alex feel guilty or like he owes her

[1]: 'It was my mother who could accomplish anything, who herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good.' (8) As Alex puts it, she was 'the patron of self-sacrifice' (12). It almost seems like her daily good deeds are only executed so she can later recall every one

[3] This point could also be the subject of another study looking at whether Sophie could be considered as representing the Jewish community in the novel

[1] Because of the sacrifices her generation and she personally made to ensure the best future possible for their children

of her goodness and pretense selflessness. Young Alex did not see that of course, but his now 33-year-old self uses it to make fun of her. It instantly tears down the perfect image we had of this perfect Jewish mother and adds a more complex and ironic layer to her character. Sophie Portnoy ends up 'playing the self-sacrifice card' on Alex numerous times throughout the novel[2], like for instance when she accuses him of eating French fries: 'Tell me please what horrible things we have done to you all our lives that this should be our reward?' (21) or when she explains that punishing Alex hurts her 'more than it hurts him. That's the kind of person I am. I can't do it and that's that' (79).

Jewish mothers are immensely proud of their little boy. Outside of his school education, the mother must make a good Jewish man out of her son. Alex does not necessarily comply with his parents' wishes. If we go back to the role of the mother as a metonym for the Jewish community, Sophie wants Alex to marry a Jewish girl, to have a successful profession, and to give her grandchildren. Partner-wise, Alex will not give her what she wishes for. Josh Lambert explains that mothers are 'committed to a particular vision of Jewish community and continuity' because of matrilineal descent and because of the idea that Jewish continuity requires endogamy (170). If the Jewish mother's goal is to bridge the past and the future, she is the guardian of history as well as identity. That is why 'she insists on the maintenance of a cultural connection between the legacy of the old country and the generation yet to be born'. (Lambert 170)

Her wish for her son to be perfect according to her standards brings on another aspect of the stereotype: the Jewish mother is so smothering that she ends up being suffocating. Sophie Portnoy's overprotectiveness is absurd and can only look hilarious. A great example of the negative effects of overprotection is the extract in which Alex explains, according to him, why one of his neighbours committed suicide. His explanation is clear: the boy's mother's 'FUCKING SELFISHNESS AND STUPIDITY!' (90) caused his death. The boy's mother spent a lot of money on piano lessons so she could build him a great future. However, we understand that the boy probably did not care for the piano and only went on with it to please his mother. Alex mocks the women who deplore his death and blindly wonder why he committed suicide. His mother expresses her selflessness which Alex only sees as the opposite. His mother wished him so much success that she implemented her own vision of 'success' on him without even thinking about what he felt. And

[2] See I. 1. 3. Burden of guilt

now, she laments and wonders why a perfect mother like herself should be punished[3] so: 'why did he do this to *us*? To us! Who would have given our arms and legs to make him happy and a famous concert pianist into the bargain!' (89). After mocking the stubborn Jewish mothers, Alex closes this memory with anger towards the women and includes himself as a victim: 'Oh, simple, why did Ronald Nimkin give up his ghost and the piano? BECAUSE WE CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE! BECAUSE YOU FUCKING JEWISH MOTHERS ARE JUST TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR!' (112).

Sophie's overprotection and dedication to Alex do not go as far as her neighbour's. However, she too created a few comic overbearing scenes during Alex's adolescence. One of these first memorable scenes is at the beginning of the novel when Alex spends a day in the toilets masturbating and his mother believes he has diarrhea. Sophie will persecute him for several pages to know if he has eaten French fries after school, saying that SHE would never cause such illnesses to her children because of her food and it will end up as always in a big fight at the end of which everyone cries (19-22). Only a few pages down, Sophie gets so upset at the arrival of polio season that she will in the strangest way possible make herself believe, without any proof, that Alex has caught it (30). This crazy overprotection will last until present time for narrator Alex and can be summed up in Alex's statement later in the novel: 'Good Christ, a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy until they die!' (102). While overprotection and selflessness first appear as something positive, they are completely turned upside down by Alex who portrays a mother who is too much of everything that it becomes suffocating.

As long as Alex was too young to comprehend the reverse of his mother's gifts, he felt happy when left alone at home with his mother, having her to himself every day. He remembers a time when he would almost venerate her and cherish their time together. But these happy moments would always be supplemented by punishments. Judith Stora-Sandor has addressed love in the Jewish family regarding the punishments given in the novel:

> 'C'est que dans une famille juive l'amour est obligatoire. Il est dans toutes les bouches, dans toutes les phrases qui sont déversées à cent à l'heure […] Sophie, cette mère si dévouée, connaît le prix de la perfection qui doit présider à l'éducation de son fils

[3] Once again, self-pity and sacrifice are satirised and turned into comical tools

> précieux. Il faut qu'il obéisse à toutes les règles puisqu'elles ne sont faites que pour mieux le protéger contre tous les dangers du monde extérieur qui guettent les enfants juifs. Et pour cela elle ne s'effraie d'aucun acte. S'il n'obéit pas, le chantage à l'amour se met en marche, avec une efficacité incomparable.' (215)

Two important punishments exemplify that in the novel: when he gets locked out of the apartment (10) and the time Sophie threatens him with a kitchen knife. The thing is that Alex does not always understand why he is being punished, what awful thing he has done, but also when he knows why he finds the punishment way out of proportion. 'Banishment? What can I possibly have done!' (12). Alex will then begin by keeping his head high and acting melodramatically, like his mother, but will end up crying and banging at the door promising he will behave. When Alex refuses to eat, Sophie must act quickly and in consequence because it is for his good. So, she will pull the kitchen knife: 'Doctor, *why*, why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son? I am six, seven years old, how do I know she really wouldn't use it?' (13), 'I believe there is an intention lurking somewhere to draw my blood! Only *why*? What could she possibly be thinking *in her brain*? […] when only the day before she set down her iron on the ironing board and *applauded* as I stormed around the kitchen rehearsing my role as Christopher Columbus' (14). Sophie Portnoy only acts for her son's own good, but Alex is scarred and does not understand why his mother would threaten his life only to make him eat his diner.

With time he progressively understands her motives for certain things but still disagrees with her way of handling issues: mainly by always playing the self-sacrifice/guilt card. During his adolescence, Alex starts to question things more: his religion, his sexuality, his relationship with his family… and their beliefs. He, for instance starts to realise that his mother's traditional Jewish way of educating him and the traditional things she instilled, lose their meaning and truthfulness. This shows why the traditionalist role of the Jewish mother does not necessarily work in a modern world. It creates deep misunderstandings for Alex who begins to question his identity, starts to disagree with his parents, and resents his Jewishness. Because of the traditional values and vision of life Sophie wants to pass on to Alex, he believes things that he later questions and blames his mother for making him this way through his education. For instance, he feels so guilty for masturbating that when he finds a freckle under his penis he believes he has given himself cancer from all the masturbating (16). Because he knows his mother would disapprove, he instantly thinks he is going to die. And because he is eaten alive by this guilt and overdramatic mother, everything

'bad' he does must necessarily lead to his death (16). Several times in the novel he believes he has an incurable disease. His irrational fears of getting an illness are very much the legacy of his mother, warning him about everything: 'I couldn't even contemplate drinking a glass of milk with my salami sandwich without giving serious offense to God Almighty. Imagine then what my conscience gave me for all that jerking off! The guilt, the fears—the terror bred into my bones! […] Who filled these parents of mine with such a fearful sense of life?' (31). To mark his comic point, Alex even tells us about the time he asked: '« Momma, do we believe in winter? » Do you get what I'm *saying*?' (31). Both his parents continue to live by rules which only they can follow. They also make him believe that if he leaves the country, one of them will die while he is travelling. Sophie explains to Alex that practical jokes are dangerous because she was once tricked into eating lobster and almost died because of it (84) and 'As other children hear the story of Scrooge every year, or are read to nightly from some favorite book, I am continually *shtupped*[4] full of the suspense-filled chapters of her perilous life. This in fact is the literature of my childhood, these stories of my mother's' (85). Unlike other children, Alex could not even escape and discover another world through fiction because she was his fiction too. Her influence on him is undeniable and very strong. She is the first woman of his life and the most important one. Because she raised him, her influence is omnipresent. He was raised with his mother's stories and opinions on anything and everything and erasing her imprint on him is impossible.

The character of the Jewish mother in post-war American culture is built on stereotypes. This image of a complex maternal figure with contradictions and attachments to old beliefs must be put back in the perspective of its creator: the son. Alex offers an image of his mother through a double perspective: that of himself as a young character throughout the process of growing into adulthood, and that of himself as an adult narrator. Moving throughout the novel, and therefore Alex's life up to present time in the novel, his description of his mother appears more and more negative. The more he grows up the more his guilt and resentment grows. He even compares his situation to his dead neighbour's: 'So if I kicked you in the shins, Ma-má, if I sunk my teeth into your wrist clear through the *bone*, count your blessings! For had I kept it *all* inside me, believe me, you too might have arrived home to find a pimply adolescent corpse swinging over the bathtub by his father's belt' (116).

[4] Yiddish slang for intercourse, push, shove

1.3 The burden of guilt

'What's Jewish Alzheimer's disease? It's when you forget everything but the guilt.' This Jewish saying exemplifies how rooted guilt is in Jewish culture. 'As Rabbi Harlan Wechsler (1990) asserted, deep in the Jewish tradition, deep in the Jewish Psyche of the Bible, is a human being who can experience guilt. More than guilt being a problem is that it is second nature to the Jews.' (Dein 39). Guilt is an important aspect of the Jewish stereotype, often represented through the guilt-inflicting Jewish mother stereotype (Dein 39).

It is not clear whether Sophie Portnoy is a first or second-generation immigrant. Nevertheless, she implemented guilt upon Alex through the idea of sacrifice. She and her husband, like many first and second-generation immigrants were not able to take advantage of what the United States had to offer. Therefore, these parents live through their children, through their children's social ascension and achievements. Sophie wants to offer Alex the best education possible, is always intellectually challenging him, supporting him, and is immensely proud of how well he does in school: '« He doesn't even have to open a book- 'A' in everything. Albert Einstein the Second! » (2)

Sophie's use of guilt on Alex is perceived as over-dramatic and almost like a game. Through Alex's description of events, she seems to be enhancing it to put pressure on him, but it is so over-dramatic that it becomes hilariously funny. She seems to play on her sacrifice for her children, and it eats Alex alive up to present time in the novel: '"Tell me please what horrible things we have done to you all our lives that this should be our reward?" I believe the question strikes her as original. I believe she considers the question unanswerable. And worst of all, so do I. What have they done for me all their lives, but sacrifice? Yet that this is precisely the horrible thing is beyond my understanding- and still, Doctor! To this day!' (20) and 'She has me where she wants me, and she knows it.' (22). Therefore, Sophie's own conscience of guilt and sacrifice does not simply allow her to expect the best from Alex but allows her to use it against him daily. She ultimately uses it against him to make a good and decent boy out of him, but her game is so obvious because of its dramatic aspect that it almost loses its well-meant meaning, and only the twisted meaning stays, ingrained in Alex's conscious.

Sophie Portnoy does not stop guilt-tripping Alex after his adolescence and continuously bothers him, which Alex experiences like harassment:

> '"And, Alex" - and I'm nodding away, you know-it doesn't cost anything, and it may even get me through- "next week is his birthday. That Mother's Day came and went without a card, *plus* my birthday, those things don't bother me. But he'll be sixty-six, Alex. That's not a baby, Alex-that's a landmark in a life. So you'll send a card. It wouldn't kill you."
>
> Doctor, these people are incredible! These people are unbelievable! These two are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time! They render it from me like fat from a chicken! "Call, Alex. Visit, Alex. Alex, keep us informed. Don't go away without telling us, please, not again. Last time you went away you didn't tell us, your father was ready to phone the police. You know how many times a day he called and got no answer? Take a guess, how many?"' (32).

Guilt induced by the over-protective mother becomes a burden, a nightmare which scars Alex: 'Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke- *only it ain't no joke!* Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak?' (33).

'WHEN IS ALEXANDER PORTNOY GOING TO STOP BEING SELFISH AND GIVE HIS PARENTS, WHO ARE SUCH WONDERFUL PEOPLE, GRANDCHILDREN?' (92). One last aspect of Jewish guilt as a means of pressure on the child is matrilineality. On pages 91 and 92, Sophie tries to make Alex feel guilty for not being married and not having children yet. Even though Alex does not believe in Judaism, Sophie wants him to marry a Jewish woman to keep lineage within the Jewish community. However, Alex does not care for marriage nor having children. But all of Alex's old classmates are making their parents proud: 'Yes, shame, shame, on Alex P., the only member of his graduating class who hasn't made grandparents of his Mommy and his Daddy. While everybody else has been marrying nice Jewish girls, and having children, and buying houses, and (my father's phrase) *putting down roots*, while all the other sons have been carrying forward the family name' (92). Alex's parents act as if he owes them grandchildren and that his not giving them any is an act of rebellion, which is comical because they interpret the fact that Alex might not want to have children as revenge. They are so focused on family and having

Jewish grandchildren that they do not seem to think about Alex maybe not wanting children because he does not want to have a family. It is unthinkable. Thus, it can only be for revenge.

Roth was inspired by Kafka while writing the novel. At that time, he was actually teaching a course on Kafka at the University of Pennsylvania and said years laters 'When I look back now on the reading I assigned that year, I realize that the course might have been called « Studies in Guilt and Persecution »' (Roth 19). Roth was amazed by Kafka's writing and sense of humour. He was fascinated by the fact that from the morbid and the tragic stemmed the comic. 'I thought of writing a story about Kafka writing a story. I had read somewhere that he used to giggle to himself while he worked. Of course! It was all so *funny*, this morbid preoccupation with punishment and guilt. Hideous but funny' (Roth 19). In the interview previously quoted from, Roth explains that the comic through guilt is the core of the novel which is why we can find several kinds of guilt elements coming from different people, institutions, or situations: 'not until I had got hold of guilt, you see, as a comic idea, did I begin to feel myself lifting free and clear of my last book and my old concerns.' (Roth 20)[1]

2. The Oedipal complex

As said earlier, *Portnoy's Complaint* is a monologue: Alex's telling of his life to his psychanalyst. Therefore, his narrative must be put back in its peculiar context. Dr. Spielvogel is looking for explanations to Alex's current issues or neuroses in his retelling of his past. Early childhood is an interesting time period psychoanalysts often focus on. It is when the child develops itself the most and therefore where most secrets hide. Alex is not a stranger to Freud's theories and refers to his writings on multiple occasions in the novel. He even mentions the infamous Oedipal complex (246). And because this chapter focuses on his relationship with his mother, Sophie, it is only natural to look at the complex a little closer.

[1] Further explored in III. 3. 1. Alex as a Schlemiel

2.1. The complex

It is clear from the beginning of the novel that one of Alex's most important neuroses has to do with his Oedipus complex. Before the novel begins, Roth offers the reader a definition of Portnoy's Complaint as 'a disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature […] It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship'. (0) We saw earlier that Alex blames his mother several times for his neuroses and way of being and this definition of the complex also draws a similarity with the Oedipus complex.

The Oedipus complex was coined by Freud at the very beginning of the 20th century. He used the well-known myth of Oedipus, whose destiny is to kill his father and marry his mother, to illustrate his point that at some point in their early childhood, children will somewhat go through the same thing. It is manifested through the child's attraction to the parent of the opposite sex and competition with the same-sex parent. Lacan adds another layer to it by stating that

> 'because the child's own desire is strutted by its relationship with its nurturer (the mother here), it is thus the desire of the mother that is the decisive stake in what transpires with the Oedipus complex and its resolution. The child will then go through what is called castration, which basically means that it will try to be what the mother desires, so it can become the mother's fully satisfying love object: the phallus. The child's acceptance of its castration marks the resolution of its Oedipal complex.'[1]

Narrator Alex is fully aware of the complex and tries to analyse it himself by referring to Freud and seeking meaning. He also does not hesitate through his constant wit and satiricism to show us how aware he is of the irony of his predicament.

Alex's Oedipal complex manifests itself early on. One of the first instances where he fantasises about his mother is while watching her putting on stockings: 'Who is Mommy's good little boy? Who is the best little boy a mommy ever had? Who does Mommy love more than anything in the whole wide world? I am absolutely punchy with delight, and meanwhile follow in their tight, slow, agonizingly delicious journey up her legs the transparent stockings that give her

[1] Taken from M. Vernadakis' course on *Seize the Day* by Saul Bellow

flesh a hue of stirring dimensions.' (40) and goes on: 'On my fingertips, even though she has washed each one of those little piggies with a warm wet cloth, I smell my lunch, my tuna fish salad. Ah, it might be cunt I'm sniffing. Maybe it is! Oh, I want to growl with pleasure. Four years old, and yet I sense in my blood- uh-huh, again with the blood- how rich with passion is the moment, how dense with possibility.' (40). Another important episode which Alex refers to as 'the key to what determined [his] character, what causes [him] to be living in this predicament, torn by desires that are repugnant to [his] conscience, and a conscience repugnant to [his] desires.' (122) is when his mother taught him how to pee standing up:

> 'I stand over the circle of water, my baby's weeny jutting cutely forth, while my momma sits beside the toilet on the rim of the bathtub, one hand controlling the tap of the tub (from which a trickle runs that I am supposed to imitate) and her other hand tickling the underside of my prick. I repeat: *tickling my prickling*! I guess she thinks that's how to get stuff to come out of the front of that thing, and let me tell you, the lady is right. « Make a nice sis, *bubala*[2], make a nice little sissy for Mommy, » sings Mommy to me, while in actuality what I am standing there making with her hand on my prong is in all probability my future! Imagine! The *ludicrousness*! A man's character is being forged, a destiny is being shaped' (122).

Roth created his protagonist as a stereotype of the young Jewish American of the 1960s. Humour is frequently used to transcribe serious issues. The opposition between the dark context and Alex's humourous tone has a strong impact on the reader. Roth uses a comical tone to deal with Alex's pulsions and sexual tendencies. He makes him mock the Jewish stereotype that is his mother[3], self-depricate himself and dwell on his fantasies with a dark comical tone. Now thirty-three years old, he is still hunted and stunned by the impact his fantasies about his mother still have on him. His use of humour also participates to indicate that his Oedipus complex is probably still yet to be resolved.

> 'Society demands that sexual and aggressive instincts be repressed or pushed from conscious awareness. Freud argued that what is repressed returns to haunt us in disguise.

[2] Yiddish term of endearment such as 'sweety' or 'darling'
[3] Ironically, Alex too is a stereotype, but we will see that later, see III. 3. 1. Alex as a Schlemiel

> Jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, bear the traces of repressed desires. Sexual and aggressive thoughts, which are forbidden in polite society, can be shared as if they are not serious. Humour then becomes a way of rebelling against the demands of social order.' (Billig, 452)

Because Roth makes Alex a character knowledgeable in psychoanalysis, it could be that Alex's retelling of his sexual development through humour transpires repression. The context of his life's storytelling also adds to it because it appears that Alex, while talking to his shrink, searches by himself what caused his neuroses. As said earlier, his narrative shows that. Therefore, Alex seems to be emphasising some marking events to induce the shrink to agree with what could be his very own self-diagnosis. Thus, if according to Freud, humour is a way of exteriorising repressed elements, Roth's use of humour with Alex could emphasise that he is talking about his neuroses.

2.2. The castrating mother and homosexuality

Alex's Oedipus complex is further complicated by his mother's emasculating behaviour. The best example is the knife scene we saw earlier:

> 'Do I want people to look down on a skinny little boy all my life, or to look up to a man?
>
> Do I want to be pushed around and made fun of, do I want to be skin and bones that people can knock over with a sneeze, or do I want to command respect?
>
> Which do I want to be when I grow up, weak or strong, a success or a failure, a man or a mouse?
>
> I just don't want to eat, I answer.
>
> So my mother sits down in a chair beside me with a long bread knife in her hand. It is made of stainless steel, and has little sawlike teeth. Which do I want to be, weak or strong, a man or a mouse?' (13)

Sophie is supposed to be acting for Alex's own good, but her discourse appears like a kind of figurative castration. The oppositions between a boy and a man, weak or strong are very effective in this context.

Alex's self-esteem and manliness are also questioned early on in his adolescence:

> 'Doctor lzzie rolled the scrotal sac between his fingers as though it were the material of a suit he was considering buying, and then told my father that I would have to be given a series of male hormone shots. One of my testicles had never fully descended-unusual, not unheard of . . . But if the shots don't work, asks my father in alarm. What then- ! Here I am sent out into the waiting room to look at a magazine.
>
> The shots work. I am spared the knife. (Once again!)' (35)

This misfortune seems to have gotten into Alex's head and ridiculously went out of proportion[1]. Even though it is a current enough instance, he fears growing female parts:

> 'What if breasts began to grow on me, too? What if my penis went dry and brittle, and one day, while I was urinating, snapped off in my hand? Was I being transformed into a girl? Or worse, into a boy such as I understood (from the playground grapevine) that Robert Ripley of *Believe It or Not* would pay a "reward" of a hundred thousand dollars for? Believe it or not, there is a nine-year-old boy in New Jersey who is a boy in every way, *except he can have babies*.' (34)

Once again, this scene illustrates how Kafka's work inspired Roth in the writing process of the novel. Here, Roth mixes Freud's dream theory and Kafka's concept of metamorphosis and combines them to create a very Jewish like comic scene. Only a few pages into the novel, we can clearly see that Alex's sex and masculinity are two obsessive subjects that cause him a lot of anxiety.

Jung's theory of the anima, closely linked to Freud and Lacan's reflection on the Oedipus complex, also offers another layer to the complex relationship between a child and his parent of the opposite sex. Jung writes that during puberty, a child will go through a period in which he will represent his repressed sexual fantasies onto his parent of the opposite sex, which is the first person of the opposite sex he encounters and loves. Every man has a feminine side called the anima. According to Jung, the boy will successfully develop himself by repressing his anima, which will

[1] This scene is presented as horrific and plays on the idea of Alex's sacrifice of what, according to him, only seems to define his masculinity. It plays on the reader's attraction to horror and to comic

become a shadow. However, this undeveloped and repressed part of himself represents a lack, an absence which he will try to fulfill through his romantic relationships. He will try to find a woman who corresponds to his perception of his anima. Now, going back to Alex: this unconscious projection has both positive and negative aspects and the mother plays an important part in it. There are several instances, but one that can be interesting regarding Alex's statements and Jewish mothers is the fact that if the mother and son maintain what Jung calls a positive relationship the son will become emasculated, and his anima will lead him towards sterile intellectual games (Callot). So, when Alex wonders 'how I made it into the world of pussy at all, *that's* the mystery.' (115) he might be talking about how Jewish mother's particular wish for a close relationship with their son and controlling attitude might be a cause for homosexuality. Once again, Roth uses a comic tone to transcribe a very serious issue for Alex. While he wonders how he manages to avoid it, Alex goes on and imagines his life and how his parents would have reacted if he had been homosexual. His parents are not particularly acceptant of it, which seems understandable given the time of the novel. But it also emphasises in a twisted way how his mother is blind to the effects her vision of a perfect mother-son relationship can have on her Alex.

Another allusion to homosexuality appears on page 112, where Alex mentions having read 'Freud on Leonardo'. It is a reference to Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood*, a psychoanalytic study of Leonardo's life based on his paintings and writings. In one of his notebooks, da Vinci recounts being attacked by a bird when he was only an infant: 'when I was still in the cradle, a vulture came down to me, he opened my mouth with his tail and struck me a few times with his tail against my lips' (Freud 13). Freud explains that it could be a childhood fantasy inspired by his memories of sucking on his mother's nipple. He took this even further and shows that in Egyptian hieroglyphs the mother is represented through a vulture because Egyptians believed there were no male vultures. Egyptians often represented the vulture-headed maternal deity in a phallic manner with breasts and a penis in erection. 'Le grand Léonard, qui était sexuellement inactif ou homosexuel, était également un tel homme, qui a tôt converti sa sexualité en pulsion de savoir, et qui est resté accroché à l'exemplarité [*Vorbildlichkeit*] de l'inachèvement' (Freud 336). Now, Alex takes this analysis and uses it to show that the real issue comes from how smothering Jewish mothers are:

> ‘my fantasies exactly: this big smothering bird beating frantic wings about my face and mouth *so that I cannot even get my breath*. What do we want, me and Ronald[2] and Leonardo? T*o be left alone*! If only for half an hour at a time! Stop already *hocking* us to be *good*! *hocking* us to be *nice*! Just leave us alone, God damn it, to pull our little dongs in peace and think our little selfish thoughts- stop already with the respectabilizing of our hands and our tushies and our mouths! Fuck the vitamins and the cod liver oil! Just give us each day our daily flesh! And forgive us our trespasses- which aren't even trespasses to begin with!’ (112-113).

This can be seen as the result of the smothering attitude of an overly possessive mother who wants to control all that concerns her son’s life. The frustration expressed by the narrator could be interpreted as a symbolic castration because through her control, Sophie restricts Alex’s free will. This extract seems to be addressed to both the reader and God, holding the reader witness of his mother’s unbearable smothering.

2.3. Death of the father

One final aspect of the Oedipal complex not yet analysed is the symbolic death of the father. Like Alex, Jack[1] is symbolically castrated by Sophie. The traditional gender roles in society are reversed at home. His father is quiet, setback and submissive while Sophie is controlling and domineering. This gender subversion[2] in the setting of the family already contributes to Alex’s exploration of his sexuality: ‘if my father had only been my mother! and my mother my father! But what a mix-up of the sexes in our house!’ (37). Alex grows up in a family where his mother undermines his father’s masculinity and dominant role. So, when his desires for his mother emerge, it is not too difficult for him to undermine, too, his father’s status and rebel, as we are about to see.

Jack’s life seems a bit sad. Alex makes the description of a poor, emasculated father, who kills himself at work for little or no recognition because of his Jewishness, and who spends hours

[2] Ronald is the young Jewish neighbour talked about earlier who killed himself, see I. 1. 2. Stereotypes through Sophie Portnoy
[1] Jack Portnoy is Sophie’s husband and Alex’s father
[2] Within the traditional norms of the Jewish family in the 1960s

on the toilet because of constipation. The image is pretty ludicrous. The sex inversion can only be sad and hilarious at the same time. It contributes largely to the comical tone of the novel.

It all begins when Alex wonders what his father would do if he ever walked on him and his mother during intercourse: 'If there in the living room their grown-up little boy were to tumble all at once onto the rug with his mommy, what would Daddy do? Pour a bucket of boiling water on the raging, maddened couple? Would he draw his knife- or would he go off to the other room and watch television until they were finished?' (41-42) This fantasy is followed by Alex's indifference regarding his father before leading to ideas of actual murder. Alex enjoys his time alone with Sophie after school and wishes his father and sister would never come back (41). Alex's objection to his father's right to sleep with his mother makes him disappear from the family nest. It transcribes a symbolic elimination of the father according to the principles of the Oedipus complex: 'where she sleeps with a man who lives with us at night and on Sunday afternoons. My father they say he is' (40). Alex longs for physical confrontation and seems frustrated that his father will not be more violent when he misbehaves. Alex constantly provokes Jack and appears to be waiting for him prove his masculinity by arguing and being violent:

> 'How I wanted to send him howling from the land of the living when he ate from the serving bowl with his own fork, or sucked the soup from his spoon instead of politely waiting for it to cool, or attempted, God forbid, to express an opinion on any subject whatsoever . . . And what was especially terrifying about the murderous wish was this: if I tried, chances were I'd succeed! *Chances were he would help me along*! I would have only to leap across the dinner dishes, my fingers aimed at his windpipe, for him instantaneously to sink down beneath the table with his tongue hanging out. Shout he could shout, squabble he could squabble, and oh *nudjh*[3], could he *nudjh*! But defend himself? against *me*?' (36-37)

However, narrator Alex sees things a bit differently now. His opinion of his father evolves following his opinion of his mother. He becomes embarrassed by his complex relationship with his mother. When she now puts on her stockings in front of him, he turns away: 'I look away not for me but for the sake of that poor man, my father!' (41). He is even ashamed of hurting his father's

[3] Yiddish for 'nag' which means 'to keep complaining to somebody about their behaviour or keep asking them to do something' according to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary

feelings '« Well, how's my lover? » Her *lover* she calls me, while her husband is listening on the other extension! And it never occurs to her, if I'm her lover, who is he'? (89).

One last example of Alex's rebellion against his father is the poor opinion he has of his job. Alex's father 'collects premium payments on life insurance policies' (Franco 87) in black neighbourhoods and 'berates his clients for their supposed irresponsibility and lack of foresight' (Franco 88). However, Jack, as an employee of Boston & Northeastern Life has a complex social status. He is part of a minority but gets paid white wages by harassing another minority for money. Also, even though he is employed by a successful white American company, his daily job is to spend his days in black neighbourhoods, only interacting with black people. So even though it is quite a success that he managed, as a Jew, to get such a job in such a white company, his daily occupation does not reflect such prestige, according to the social climate of the time. Jack tries to impress Alex with his job and patronises the black community:

> 'the *children*, he says in disgust, so tell me, what hope is there for these niggers' ever improving their lot? How will they ever lift themselves if they ain't even able to grasp the importance of life insurance? Don't they give a single crap for the loved ones they leave behind? Because « they's all » going to die too, you know- « oh », he says angrily, « they sho' is! » Please, what kind of man is it, who can think to leave children out in the rain without even a decent umbrella for protection!' (7-8).

As Alex grows and rebels, he stops being impressed and becomes aware of the double-edged sword that is his father's position. He starts to criticise his father regarding his behaviour towards the black community. His reaction to his father's attitude could also be seen as the starting point of his wish to become a defender of civil rights. Social and political ideas evoked in Alex's speech appear here for the first time in the novel. One could say that Alex's job aspiration might have stemmed from these extracts.

> '*Religion is the opiate of the people*! And if believing that makes me a fourteen-year-old Communist, then that's what I am, *and I'm proud of it*! I would rather be a Communist in Russia than a Jew in a synagogue any day-so I tell my father right to his face, too. Another grenade to the gut is what it turns out to be (I suspected as much), but I'm

> sorry, I happen to believe in the rights of man, rights such as are extended in the Soviet Union to *all* people, regardless of race, religion, or color.' (68)

These extracts illustrate how Alex's symbolic killing of his father does not only translate as a sexual behaviour but also as a starting point to question his identity and values, through rejecting his father's own.

3. The mother as God

The Jewish mother is so important and highly valued in the Jewish home sphere that one could say she takes on God's role. Alex's description of his mother in the first chapter is not without admiration. It is, of course, from a child's perspective but as the title indicates, she left an indelible impression on Alex, who still, at thirty-three, cannot seem to minimise her status.

3.1. In the novel

'God could not be everywhere, so He created mothers' (Antler 123). This Yiddish proverb perfectly illustrates the importance of the mother in the Jewish family. She is the core, the head of the familial institution. Like I said before, in Jewish culture, the mother is the most important parent. For instance, a child is Jewish through his mother and not his father. Thus, the father does not need to be Jewish for the child to be so. This shows how important matrilineality is in the Jewish sphere. The first pages of the novel are devoted to a description of Alex's mother. Beginning with her reveals how important she is in his life and how everything starts and stems from her. It works in the family and community context but it could also mean that she is also the starting point of his issues, as the novel is meant to go back through Alex's life to maybe find out where his neuroses come from. Therefore, beginning with a strong description of his mother might be an element to consider here. However, this analysis has not to be taken as a whole because Alex does not only criticise his mother or her parenting. The novel offers mixed views on it, for Alex's confusion and two opposite opinions depending on his 'mood'. And when Alex does negatively comment on his mother, he always does so with wit, humour and most of all in hindsight.

The incipit's title puts Sophie Portnoy on a pedestal: 'The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met' (1). It already balances with Alex's coming negative comments. Alex begins with a disparaging image of his mother:

> 'She was so deeply embedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise. As soon as the last bell had sounded, I would rush off for home, wondering as I ran if I could possibly make it to our apartment before she had succeeded in transforming herself. Invariably she was already in the kitchen by the time I arrived, and setting out my milk and cookies. Instead of causing me to give up my delusions, however, the feat merely intensified my respect for her powers. And then it was always a relief not to have caught her between incarnations anyway—even if I never stopped trying; I knew that my father and sister were innocent of my mother's real nature' (1).

In this extract, Alex fantasies about his mother having powers: she can transform herself and incarnate other characters. This idea is only present in the first few pages during Alex's first description of Sophie. Alex seems to believe that his mother can transform herself into anyone to be able to watch him all day long to see if he behaves well outside the home. Sophie is described as endowed with supernatural powers that allow her to watch her son at all times. Here, the connection to God could be made. Just like the idea of God, she can watch him and reward or punish him according to his actions. However, because of Sophie's ability to metamorphose herself, we could also argue that she appears more like a witch or even the devil than God. This section aims at linking Alex's description of his mother with the Jewish proverb and if we consider God as 'the Being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness who is worshipped (as in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism) as creator and ruler of the universe'[1], it seems to coincide with Alex's description of his mother in the extract.

This text goes well with the saying that because 'God could not be everywhere, He created mothers'. There is a comic aspect to it. Because Alex thinks his mother spies on him all day, he acts like a good boy. Finding out her secret is like a game to him because every day after school, he thinks he tells her what she already knows, and through that becomes incapable of lying.

[1] According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary

> ‘Far from the denigrated « Jewish mother » stereotype that she is sometimes said to represent, Mrs. Portnoy evinces all of the power, jealousy, wrath and founding imperatives of the God of Israel. She is the source of infinite demands that Alex cannot shake from his consciousness. She is the beginning of responsibility, of ought. Indeed, his primordial sense of her omniscience provokes his earliest moral anxiety: knowing somehow she was watching he was compelled to be honest’ (Israel 251).

Aside from her permanent staring powers, Sophie is also able to do anything, she is a witch who defies physical laws. This way of looking at one’s mother as a supernatural being pertains to the narrated ‘I’, to the narrator as a character. Narrator Alex admits that: ‘could a small child with my intelligence, with my powers of observation, doubt that this was so?’ (8). Nevertheless, ‘She could make jello, for instance, with sliced peaches *hanging* in it, peaches just *suspended* there, in defiance of the laws of gravity.’ (8) These two examples just show how high in his esteem Alex placed his mother. She was so high there that she became a higher power to him, his own God and religion.

3.2. Cancer

During Alex’s childhood, Sophie was diagnosed with uterus cancer and went through surgery to get it removed (59). Alex is stunned. He cannot believe that his almighty mother can get ill. The thought that she could die is more than unbearable, it is unthinkable. Sophie’s uterus cancer changes the course of the novel in the way we perceive the mother. Sophie loses her godlike status. Alex finally finds out that she is not immortal and she, therefore, loses credibility to his eyes. Her entire character crumbles and Alex will begin to second guess her words and actions. Alex’s fantasy seems to come to an end from that point on. Sophie’s cancer could in itself act as a breaking point for that. It is specifically a uterus cancer and therefore enhances the consequences because a God who becomes infertile, too, loses credibility and power. Because Alex appeared to believe his mother to represent a higher power, her cancer could therefore act as a revelation.

However, this shift in Alex’s opinion of his mother does not only come from that event. The structure of the novel with a growing protagonist and the same character, now 33 years old as a narrator implies that points of view will change according to Alex’s age and distance from the

events. Therefore, when Sophie gets ill, it appears Alex is now an adolescent and as we saw in the previous section, rebels and answers back against his parents.

It could also have an impact on Alex's Oedipal complex. He wanted to take his father's place in his parents' bed. However, when the mother becomes vulnerable, she also becomes unattractive. This too creates a shift in Alex's Oedipal complex. From this point on, his mother will no longer be the focus of his desires, but rather the memory of herself when she was desirable. In the same extract in the hospital room, when Alex visits his mother right after the operation, we can see how his perception of her changes:

> 'where there is also a half-empty glass of flat ginger ale. It's hot and I'm thirsty and my mother, my mind reader, says I should go ahead and drink what's left in her glass, I need it more than she does. But dry as I am, I don't want to drink from any glass to which she has put her lips-for the first time in my life the idea fills me with revulsion! « Take. » « I'm not thirsty. » « Look how you're perspiring. » « I'm not thirsty. » « Don't be polite all of a sudden. » « But I don't like ginger ale. » « You? Don't like ginger ale? » « No. » « Since when? » Oh, God! She's alive, and so we are at it again-she's alive, and right off the bat we're starting in' (60)

For the first time, Sophie is passive, weak, and has lost control and power over Alex, and he finds himself free from her hand—whether it is from her Godlike rules or her sexual empowerment. Alex refers once again to the knife scene: 'the doctors stuck right up her dress (so I imagined, before my mother reminded me of « the knife », our knife) (62). In the end, it is Sophie who ended up being physically castrated and this physical removal seems to free Alex from her influence.

From that point in the novel, Alex's behaviour will change. He will question everything his parents teach him and question Judaism. It will be his breaking point from the Jewish sphere and he will try to explore the world outside the community.

3.3. Racial issues

Dean Franco's article 'It's about Race, Not Sex (Even the Sex Is about Race)' offers another interesting piece to the puzzle that is Sophie Portnoy. Franco analyses the question of race hidden behind the sex in the novel[1]. 'Portnoy pinpoints the origin of his sexual and social transgression in his mother, whose own Jewish body Portnoy both fears and longs to protect. But even here, between the mother and the son is the specter of race. The "primal scene" of the novel comes as a moment of discovery not of gender but of color, when Portnoy spies Sophie, his mother, washing utensils previously used by their black maid' (Franco 91). Like we saw earlier with Alex's father, Sophie too has a racist behaviour towards people from other minorities:

> 'Maybe I'm too good, she whispers to me », meanwhile running scalding water over the dish from which the cleaning lady has just eaten her lunch, alone like a leper, « but I couldn't do a thing like that ». Once Dorothy chanced to come back into the kitchen while my mother was still standing over the faucet marked H, sending torrents down upon the knife and fork that had passed between the *schvartze's* thick pink lips. « Oh, you know how hard it is to get mayonnaise off silverware these days, Dorothy, » says my nimble-tongued mother—and thus, she tells me later, by her quick thinking, has managed to spare the colored woman's feelings.' (10)

At the beginning of his rebellion, Alex blames his mother for her shocking attitude towards the maid. One again she believes she is 'too good' (10) when she undermines the maid on racial grounds but lies to her so she will not hurt her feelings. The fact that she lies to the maid makes Sophie feel good and caring but it does not change the fact that deep down, she believes herself to be superior.

> 'My communism, in fact, is why I now insist on eating with the cleaning lady when I come home for my lunch on Mondays and see that she is there-I will eat with her. Mother, at the same table, *and the same food*. Is that clear? If I get leftover pot roast warmed-up, then she gets leftover pot roast warmed-up, and not creamy Muenster or tuna either, served on a special glass plate that doesn't absorb her germs! But no, no. Mother doesn't get the

[1] Sex about race will be further analysed as new characters are introduced throughout this essay

> idea, apparently. Too bizarre, apparently. Eat with the *shvartze*[2]? What could I be talking about? She whispers to me in the hallway, the instant I come in from school, « Wait, the girl will be finished in a few minutes . . . » But *I will not treat any human being* (outside my family) *as inferior*! Can't you grasp something of the principle of equality, God damn it! [and now referring to his father] And I tell you, if he ever uses the word nigger in my presence again, I will drive a real dagger into his fucking bigoted heart! *Is that clear to everyone*? I don't care that his clothes stink so bad after he comes home from collecting the colored debit that they have to be hung in the cellar to air out. I don't care that they drive him nearly crazy letting their insurance lapse. That is only another reason to be compassionate, God damn it, to be sympathetic and understanding and to stop treating the cleaning lady as though she were some kind of mule, without the same passion for dignity that other people have!' (68)

Alex is outraged and wants to change his mother's mind and demonstrate his belief in equality. It already foresees Alex's job as Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity and his dedication to civil rights and the protection of minorities from discrimination. This extract also focuses on a knife that Sophie washes, which reminds us of the one she used to threaten Alex with. According to Franco, here, the knife, which refers to his castration complex is also what establishes 'Jewish racialization' through circumcision (Franco 92). 'Circumcision thus supplements matrilineal genetic descent with cultural descent, with the mother ambiguously poised between race and culture. Portnoy's obsession with his mother-desire and repulsion-is analogous to his obsession with racial Jewishness-affirmation and rejection'. (Franco 92) It therefore seems to illustrate Alex's questioning around the concept of race which he does not understand in the same way as his parents: 'the second generation, which understood itself as more or less a "race," clashes with the third generation, which has not only freed itself from the binding logic of race, but has so mastered its politics as to fluidly participate in race discourse.' (Franco, 92)

[2] Yiddish word for a black person

II-'The Girl of my Dreams'[1]

The present chapter will discuss Alex's growth: from his adolescence to almost present-time in the narrative. It bridges the gap between Alex as a character and Alex as a narrator. As we saw in the previous chapter, Roth has Sophie Portnoy play a part in Alex's confusion regarding his identity. This following chapter will try to analyse how the other women in his life appear to, as well, take part in Roth's structure of Alex's quest for identity and how they reflect the different stages of the process.

1. Acting out

The aim of the present section is to introduce Alex's sexuality as a means of rebellion and liberation from his mother's oppression. It also introduces the stereotypical Jewish character of the *shiksa* with Alex's encounter with Bubbles.

1.1. Masturbation as rebellion

While the Tanakh[2] does not explicitly prohibit masturbation, the story of Onan (Gen. 38, 7-10) was interpreted by many as a prohibition on masturbation. Onan was married to his brother's widow and did not want to give her a child because it would not be considered as his but as his brother's. Therefore, when he and his wife had intercourse, Onan would withdraw and spill his semen on the ground. The story tells that God punished Onan with death for this action, but it is not explicit whether it was because he was denying a child to his wife or because he was ejaculating outside the context of reproduction.

[1] 'The Girl of my Dreams' is the title of the chapter dedicated to a character close to The Monkey in Roth's memoir *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (see II. 2. 3. The Monkey) Even though the title is directed at The Monkey, in a broader sense, it could also apply to this chapter dedicated to Alex's search for the woman (II. 2. 3. The Monkey)
[2] Also known to Christians as the Old Testament, the Tanakh represents the entire Jewish Bible. It is a collection of religious writings made of 24 books, the first 5 being the Torah

> '8. And Judah said unto Onan: 'Go in unto thy brother's wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her, and raise up seed to thy brother.' 9. And Onan knew that the seed would not be his; and went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. 10. And the thing which he did was evil in the sight of the LORD; and He slew him also.' (Gen. 38, 8-10).

'The sin of wasting seed – male masturbation – has an aspect of the sin of adultery, which is so grave that it is one of the Ten Commandments. On the verse, "You shall not commit adultery" (Shemot 20:13), the Sages comment: "There should be no adultery in you – not even your hand or foot"; in other words, a man must not masturbate with his hands or feet (Nidda 13b).' (Melamed par. 4). Therefore, in the Torah, masturbation is reprehensible and considered as an offence like committing adultery.

These biblical texts could be considered as a means for Roth to convey an aspect of Alex's guilt regarding his masturbation. Because of his Jewish education, it could make sense that Alex feels guilty. However, if we look at this identity wise, Alex's masturbation could also be considered as an act of freedom, of liberation, and revolt against the Torah and his mother. Sophie is the character who represents Judaism in the novel[3]. Thus, Roth's portrayal of Alex rebelling against his mother could also hide Alex's conflicts with religion as well. 'Doctor, do you understand what I was up against? My wang was all I really had that I could call my own.' (29) Sophie appears to control every aspect of her son's life and Roth could be using masturbation as a symbol of Alex's aspiration for escape. As put by Antler, 'Because of her constant interference, Portnoy rebels against his family's values—including Jewish dietary laws and sexual propriety. In his search for liberation, the adolescent Alexander takes refuge in masturbation' (Antler 141). As said earlier, Alex presents himself as a victim of the Jewish mother. In this light, masturbation seems to represent his liberation. At the beginning of the chapter entitled 'Whacking Off' (14), Alex says 'Then came adolescence-half my waking life spent locked behind the bathroom door, firing my wad down the toilet bowl, or into the soiled clothes in the laundry hamper, or *splat*, up against the medicine-chest mirror, before which I stood in my dropped drawers so I could see how it looked coming out.' (14). Alex's impulses and fantasies do not seem to be satisfied, which would illustrate how smothering his mother is. Comic emerges from these scenes opposing the controlling Jewish

[3] As we saw earlier in I. 3. 1. In the novel

mother and the never tiring masturbating son. Kafka's influence regarding the morbid as comic through guilt appears to manifest itself here[4]: Sophie overwhelms Alex who escapes from it through masturbation but feels immensely guilty about it at the same time and wants to punish himself. 'Cancer. I had given myself cancer. All that pulling and tugging at my own flesh, all that friction, had given me an incurable disease. And not yet fourteen!' (16). Alex's exaggeration portrays the irony of his predicament.

Coming back to the idea of revenge, Alex uses used socks, his sister Hannah's underwear, or an empty milk bottle as means of masturbation (15). However, it appears to take a turn when at the beginning of the narrative Alex mentions having once used a liver (16), and then comes back to it later in more detail:

> 'Well, I wish to make a clean breast of it, Your Holiness. That-she-it-wasn't my first piece. My first piece I had in the privacy of my own home, rolled round my cock in the bathroom at three-thirty-and then had again on the end of a fork, at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of mine.
>
> So. Now you know the worst thing I have ever done. I fucked my own family's dinner.' (123)[5]

Alex confesses here and his actions could be interpreted as an act of rebellion against his family for the oppression, the abusive control, the dos, and don'ts. Alfred Kazin wrote: 'All this reaches its right voice and pitch and end (though there is no end) in the comic situation of Portnoy who at thirty-three, no matter where he goes and how many girls he can have at one time in his bed, is still a masturbator at heart, still rebelling against the undefeatable, still seething against MaMa.' (Kazin par. 5) According to Kazin, Alex remains the same at heart and even though Roth portrays his growth and development, narrator Alex uses sexuality as means to express his anger[6] and desire for freedom, as Alex as character does[7].

[4] See I. 1. 3. The burden of guilt
[5] This quote creates humour from the narrator's achievement of turning what reads like a metaphorical expression into a literal image, which further pertains to his rebellion
[6] The objects of Alex's anger will be explored later in this chapter
[7] See III. 3. 3. Psychoanalysis regarding Roth's transposition of his own frustration in his protagonist as well as the metafictional interpretation of masturbation

Masturbation always seems to come with guilt for Alex. Outside of the religious prohibition, he is afraid of being caught, but more than that feels like he should be punished for his behaviour. We already saw for instance that Sophie's haunting voice has been so internalized by Alex that he believes having given himself cancer from all the jerking off (16) and tries to control himself: 'If only I could cut down to one hand-job a day, or hold the line at two, or even three! But with the prospect of oblivion before me, I actually began to set new records for myself. Before meals. After meals. During meals. Jumping up from the dinner table, I tragically clutch at my belly-diarrhea! I cry, I have been stricken with diarrhea!' (16). Alex's reaction to his pulsion is hilarious. As seen before, the guilt and fear of dying because of transgressing the rules[8] becomes comical and pertains to Jewish humour[9].

1.2. The *shiksa*[1] fantasy

'The *shiksa* obsesses many Jews: rabbis see her as an inter-marital threat to the survival of Judaism; parents fear that she will lure their sons away from family and faith; and Jewish men fantasise about her sexual and social desirability[2].' (Jaher 518). '*Shiksa*' is a Yiddish word which refers to a non-Jewish girl or woman. It is an interesting character to analyse in the Jewish-American culture of the 20th century. She appears as a prominent character in movies and written works of the second half of the 20th century. Even though it is predominantly a fictive figure, a few well-known women were seen as embodiments of this character and were also sometimes married to artists who portrayed them. Marilyn Monroe for instance corresponds to the *shiksa* stereotype. She was a Gentile 'American sex goddess' (Jaher 518) who was married to Arthur Miller, a Jewish writer. More than a 'simple' *shiksa*, mid-20th century Jewish American culture also portrays a sexy *shiksa* who becomes an exotic sexual goddess in the eyes of the Jewish protagonists.

In line with the issues of 20th-century Jewish immigrants to the United States, *shiksas* stood for a Jewish aspiration for assimilation. 'Fictional depictions of Jewish male-Christian female

[8] Even though Alex manifests that he does not believe in religion, Roth built him in a Jewish family. Therefore, Alex's attempts towards Americanism appear difficult because as we will see later, Alex continues to live according to Jewish principles he cannot replace.
[9] See III. 3. 2. A Jewish joke
[1] '*often disparaging* **:** a non-Jewish girl or woman' from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary
[2] Frederic Cople Jaher's *The Quest for the Ultimate Shiksa* is the main source of reference in this section

liaisons become microcosmic representations of momentous issues of group and self-survival and betrayal, of balancing anxieties and ambitions, of reconciling religious and national loyalties, and of bridging the past and present.' (Jaher 519). These exotic sirens are 'tickets of admission into American society' for Jewish men (Jaher 521).

Now, why would these femmes fatales be interested in relationships with Jewish men? Jaher writes that 'during the mass migration of Eastern Europeans to the United States, fascination with the seductive outsider was domesticated into the image of the ideal husband' (Jaher 522). Women looking for family life were drawn to Jewish men because they believed they would make better husbands due to the stereotypical view of Jewish devotion to family.

However, this image of the perfect Jewish husband could be opposed to male novel characters such as Alex Portnoy, who participated in developing the figure of the sexy *shiksa*. In the novel, Alex's rebellion against his family during his adolescence manifests itself in several ways. We talked about masturbation earlier, but another means Roth uses seems to be Alex's attraction to *shiksa*s. While masturbating, 'the teenager dreams of gentile girls as blonde, aggressive, dirty sluts' (Jaher 540). Early on he fantasises about these girls: he masturbates on the bus next to a young *shiksa* (71) and cannot stop looking and sexualising his father's colleague who came one night for dinner (76).

In any case, this objectifying and sexualising of the *shiksa* figure offers a tragically comic contradiction between what both genders look for. In novels such as *Portnoy's Complaint*, *shiksa*s can only achieve the status of lust objects or at times of sadistic characters who seek men's fall. But the character of the *shiksa* as an evil goddess could also come from this opposition between male and female characters' aspirations in partners in the novel. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the Monkey seems to only rebel after realising that Alex will never settle with her. This is even more clear in *The Facts* when Josie fakes being pregnant in order to pressure Roth's character into marrying her.

In his essay, Jaher explores the main different depictions and uses of the *shiksa* in mid-20th century Jewish American literature and even though there are common characteristics, authors such as Roth seem to use her, like the Jewish mother, to convey social issues in the context of immigration. *Portnoy's Complaint* offers several figures of the *shiksa* which we will look at in the following pages.

1.3. Bubbles

Bubbles is a young *shiksa* who represents Alex's first sexual experience. Rita Giraldi is her real name[1]. She is a young teenager, known for being quite loose and for giving hand jobs to Smolka, Alex's high school friend. One day, Smolka, Alex and a few friends go to her house for that reason. However, Bubbles changes her mind and 'doesn't want to do it' (162). One of the friends yells that it is unacceptable, and Alex tries to get everyone to leave her alone. He interrupts his friends a couple times to ask them to quit: 'if she doesn't want to do it, who needs her, let's go' (162). He appears like the stereotypical nice Jewish boy here, in comparison to the other characters who pressure Bubbles. However, Bubbles agrees but only for one person. Alex is randomly chosen by the coin and goes into Bubbles' room. 'She sits in her slip on the sofa at the other end of the linoleum floor, weighing a hundred and seventy pounds and growing a moustache.' (163) Ironically, her description is different from Alex's fantasies. Alex is nervous but determined. However, nothing works as planned and what was supposed to be Alex's much awaited experience ends up in a fiasco. Bubbles does not fully satisfy Alex who ends up getting the job done himself. Alas, 'right in my eye' (165). Bubbles gets upset and insults him 'Son of a bitch kike[2]! You got gissum[3] all over the couch! And the walls! And the lamp!' (166).

A revelation comes to Alex: 'It's just as my parents have warned me—comes the first disagreement, no matter how small, and the only thing a *shikse* knows to call you is a dirty Jew. What an awful discovery—my parents who are always wrong . . . are right!' (166) However, Alex's bad luck does not end there. Once again, he becomes guilt-ridden, which produces absurd elements: 'how am I going to explain my blindness to my parents! My mother virtually spends half her life up my ass as it is, checking on the manufacture of my stool—how am I possibly going to hide the fact that I no longer have my sight?' (167). Even though Roth makes Alex go through numerous misfortunes and predicaments, which in themselves bring a ludicrous aspect to the narrative, Alex's thought process after the events is where most of the comical seems to come from. It lies in Alex's Jewish guilt, turned out of proportion, and in the opposition between the tragic misfortune and Alex's reaction to it.

[1] The nickname 'Bubbles' could refer to Rita Giraldi's fellatios: 'When she was down there blowing, Ba-ba-lu' (169)
[2] Offensive term referring to a Jewish person
[3] Slang for semen

2. The Pumpkin, The Pilgrim, and The Monkey

The aim of the present section is to introduce Alex's most significant relationships. It bridges the gap between childhood and adulthood and allows us to witness Alex's behaviour during his twenties and early thirties regarding romantic relationships. This part of the novel traces Alex's escape from his Jewish environment as well as his attempts to integrate in American society. Roth's depiction of Alex's wish for American assimilation is prominent and appears closely linked to the three romantic relationships presented in the novel.

2.1. The Pumpkin

Leaving the Jewish community in which he grew up behind, Alex moves away to college where he discovers life outside his family's sphere. This is the first time in the novel that Alex goes through a break from what Roth portrayed as an oppressive home and culture. It seems to stand as a breaking point in the personal construction of the protagonist. College is where Alex experiences his first real relationship: with The Pumpkin, a Gentile. Alex first meets Kay Campbell at Antioch. He nicknamed her 'The Pumpkin' 'in commemoration of her pigmentation and the size of her can. Also, her solidity: hard as a gourd on matters of moral principle, beautifully stubborn in a way I couldn't but envy and adore.' (200).

Alex describes Kay as a wonderful girl: 'could there have been a more exemplary person? Artless, sweet-tempered, without a trace of morbidity or egoism—a thoroughly commendable and worthy human being' (199). She also excelled academically: 'Edited the literary magazine, walked off with all the honors in English literature' (199). Alex and Kay's cultural differences are very striking and surprise him. For instance, Kay '*never raised her voice in an argument*' and never 'ridiculed her opponent' (200). This is a direct criticism against Sophie. No matter the circumstance, Kay was always 'ladylike' (201). Then, halfway through his first semester at Antioch, Alex performs 'the most openly defiant act of [his] life' (203).

> 'Instead of going home for my first college vacation, I travel by train to Iowa, to spend Thanksgiving with The Pumpkin and her parents. Till September I had never been farther west than Lake Hopatcong in New Jersey—now I am off to Ioway! And with a

> blondie[1]! Of the Christian religion! Who is more stunned by this desertion, my family or me?' (203).

A whole new world unravels itself before Alex in The Pumpkin's family home. Everything makes him feel like a stranger and he is so nervous and polite that he over-thanks everyone, even the furniture (203). Once again, Roth seems to use Jewish stereotypes to add ridicule to Alex's behaviour. He is amazed by everything. What might appear like insignificant things for the reader such as saying 'Good morning' or talking to the dog stand out to Alex who analyses every unfamiliar element during his stay. He comically describes this weekend as 'equivalent in human history, I would say, to mankind's passage through the entire Stone Age.' (206) There, in a non-Jewish home, Alex feels like his identity only relies on his religious background, and because of his parents' stories about Gentiles, cannot help but wonder why Kay's parents are so nice to him. It upsets him. He cannot imagine that Kay's family will not persecute him because of his Jewishness. This weekend is a milestone in Alex's discovery of America.

Not long after that memorable weekend, Kay misses a period and she and Alex make plans to get married and work for a fellow professor couple. However, Kay will not convert for Alex which upsets him (213). This shows that Alex is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, because while he appeared to be dating a Gentile to manifest his Americanisation, asking her to convert to Judaism comes as a surprise. It only seems to show that Alex cannot set his Jewish education aside. A few weeks later the relationship ends when Kay brings him the news that she was not pregnant after all. Seeing how crushed Kay is makes Alex realise that she loved him and that he did not love her, even though he thought he did.

Alex's description of The Pumpkin comes, like the rest of the narrative, years after the facts. Alex as narrator seems to now romanticise their failed relationship and to regret ever leaving her. Even though she does not appear to fit the sexy *shiksa* stereotype, Alex objectified and sexualized Kay. And even with hindsight and perspective on the events, Alex continues doing so:

> 'The very best of the Middle West, *so why did I let her go*? Oh, I'll get to that, no worry, self-laceration is never more than a memory away, we know that by now. In the meantime, let me miss her substantiality a little. That buttery skin! That unattended streaming hair!

[1] We can notice the pejorative *shiksa* connotation of the word 'blondie'

> And this is back in the early fifties, before streaming hair became the style! This was just *naturalness*. Doctor. Round and ample, sun-colored Kay!' (200).

Alex goes on to picture Kay's current life now, fat, with a lot of kids, in a safe and quiet neighbourhood, feeling fulfilled and making her husband proud and happy (201). He pictures what his life with her could have looked like: fertile, prosperous, and abundant like pumpkins[2].

2.2. The Pilgrim

A few years later, Alex breaks another Gentile's heart: The Pilgrim's, aka Sarah Abbott Maulsby. Alex is now twenty-six years old and moved to Washington D.C. to work 'on the staff of the House subcommittee investigating the television quiz scandals' (214). That is where he meets Sarah, an upper-class twenty-two-year-old, who after successful studies got a job as a Senator's assistant. Her nickname comes from her family background: she could trace her heritage back to the earliest Protestant settlers (215).

Why did it no work with the Pilgrim? Alex could not bear her 'cutesy-wootsy boarding school argot' (215) and she could not stand his argot: 'The first time I said fuck in her presence […] such a look of agony passed over The Pilgrim's face, you would have thought I had just branded the four letters on her flesh.' (216) While she would give cute nicknames to her friends and say 'di*vine*', Alex would say 'fuck' (215-216).

Roth seems to build Sarah as a precious character[1], which creates a contrast with Alex. Because Alex does not particularly seem to like Sarah's personality, she is mainly transcribed as his sexual object[2].

> 'In bed? Nothing fancy, no acrobatics or feats of daring and skill; as we screwed our first time, so we continued—I assaulted and she surrendered, and the heat generated on her

[2] Pumpkins can replenish themselves and are symbols of fertility, prosperity, growth, and abundance in American culture. Pumpkins also represent change and transition between seasons. In that regard, Kay could represent Alex's transition from boyhood to manhood

[1] Which is enhanced by her name. In the Torah, Sarah is the first Jewish mother, Abraham's wife. Her name means 'princess' or 'noblewoman' in Hebrew and refers to the idea of power (here through her social status)

[2] Which enhances the opposition between the characters. Sarah appears innocent and behaved compared to Alex who in this light seems more barbarous

> mahogany fourposter (a Maulsby family heirloom) was considerable. Our one peripheral delight was the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. There, standing thigh to thigh, I would whisper, « Look, Sarah, look. » At first she was shy, left the looking to me, at first she was modest and submitted only because I wished her to, but in time she developed something of a passion for the looking glass, too' (216)[3].

And even then, Alex complains while seemingly assuring dominance over her.

'What Sally couldn't do was eat me. To shoot a gun at a little quack-quack is fine, to suck my cock is beyond her.' (220) Alex is outraged and is persuaded that the reason why Sarah will not do it is because he is Jewish. Once again, Roth appears to be enhancing Alex's stereotypical behaviour through the constant persecution he feels. However, in the narrative, Sarah does not seem to be trying to hurt Alex which would then bring an ironic view on Alex's own persecution[4].

Alex cannot take no for an answer: 'Three months I spent applying pressure to the back of her skull (pressure met by a surprising counterforce, an impressive, even moving display of stubbornness from such a mild and uncontentious person), for three months I assaulted her in argument' (220). Alex's character now portrays as controlling and abusive because he took Sarah's refusal as a personal statement. This episode concludes with Sarah trying to do it but ending up crying because she cannot breathe (222). At the end of the scene, Alex reassures Sarah and tells her he loves her even though he does not. This is the second time Roth portrays Alex as an impostor and a controlling partner.

As with The Pumpkin, Alex is too envious of The Pilgrim's social status to love her. It is now narrator Alex, who, in hindsight seems to realise that 'There could never be any « love » in me for The Pilgrim. Intolerant of her frailties. Jealous of her accomplishments. Resentful of her family. No, not much room there for love.' (222)

2.3. The Monkey

According to Claudia Roth Pierpont, who looked at the autobiographical dimension of Roth's writings, Alex's next conquest is inspired by Roth's relationship with Maggie Williams. In

[3] This extract shows how Alex physically dominated the Pilgrim, see II. 3. 3. Asserting dominance
[4] Which corresponds to the stereotype of the self-deprecating Jew, see III. 3. 1. Alex as a Schlemiel

Roth Unbound, Pierpont explains that Maggie 'imaginatively paralyzed' Roth for several years, referring to the five-year gap between *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good* (Pierpont 44). Roth wanted to write about their affair but 'didn't know how to use it'[1] [2] (Pierpont 44). Maggie's traits were first present in *When She Was Good*'s Lucy Nelson but can also be found in The Monkey and Josie's characters.

Alex meets the Monkey in his early thirties by picking her up on the street one evening (145). The Monkey had a tragic childhood with an abusive father and received little school education. At eighteen she moved to New York on her own and became a model. During a modeling show in Italy, she was courted by a fifty-year-old rich French industrialist whom she married only a few days later. Their marriage did not last, she came back to New York, jumped from failed relationship to failed relationship and attempted to commit suicide. Now, The Monkey is looking for a husband. She longs for a successful marriage and children. We saw earlier[3] that in the 20th century, Gentile attraction towards Jewish men was common because they believed Jewish men would make better husbands. It seems that Roth transcribed that idea in The Monkey's character. She appears to fit the stereotype mentioned earlier and sees that in Alex: a nice educated Jewish man who has an honourable job, defending minorities. Jaher writes

> 'Jewish males and Christian females are often drawn together because they have stereotyped views or fantasies about romantic partners from the other faith. Accordingly, Jewish men appeal to Christian women as mysterious outsiders, domestic messiahs, and modern heroes or antiheroes. The former are attracted to the latter as exotic sirens, femmes fatales, humble servants, Christian saints, victims, and American goddesses.' (Jaher 520)

While Alex is presented as The Monkey's 'breakthrough'[4] (144), he only sees 'the monkey' in The Monkey: a nickname derived from 'a little perversion she once engaged in shortly before meeting me and going on to grander things'[5] (97). As said before, both characters are opposed by what they

[1] See III. 3. 3. Psychoanalysis regarding Roth's life's elements in the novel
[2] Maggie's traits were first present in *When She Was Good*'s Lucy Nelson but can also be found in The Monkey and Josie's characters. Josie is a character from *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988)
[3] Refer to II. 1. 2. The *shiksa* fantasy
[4] Which only enhances Alex's portrayal as the Messiah
[5] On their first night together, The Monkey told him about the time a friend couple came to her place and asked her to watch them have intercourse while eating a banana (146). The nickname dehumanises her and brings her to an animal state which would show Alex's lack of respect for her

are looking for. The Monkey's search for a saviour will not be met by Alex and her wish to settle down will push him away. As with The Pumpkin and The Pilgrim, The Monkey is another powerful Gentile conquest which according to Alex will enable him to feel more American.

The Monkey's real name is Mary Jane Reed. If we consider her name's signification, referencing to Mary in the Bible, Mary Jane Reed would stand for her opposite. She would be the anti-Mary and therefore the anti-mother. Mary is associated with faithfulness, devotion, purity, and motherhood, while The Monkey is depicted as bearing none of these qualities. She would also represent the anti-mother in comparison to Sophie Portnoy. They are opposite women who do not share the same values. The Monkey would be Sophie's nightmare as a daughter-in-law as she would break the Jewish lineage of the family. The Monkey therefore stands for everything Alex's parents would not wish for him: the opposite figure to the stereotypical Jewish mother, the anti-mother.

The relationship does not last long in the novel, unlike in the memoir[6] where it accounts for most of the book. There is a decisive scene common to both works which alters the course of the two narratives. Alex and Roth take The Monkey (230) and Josie (Roth 100) to Rome with them where she throws a tantrum and blackmails the protagonists of killing herself if they do not marry her. Alex leaves but Roth stays. This is where the relationship ends in *Portnoy's Complaint*. Alex liked The Monkey because she reminded him of his adolescent fantasies. However, with time, he realised that they did not want the same things and that he could never keep the relationship going because it made him paranoid and guilt-ridden.

'The Girl of my Dreams' leads back to Jung's anima theory. This quote is not from *Portnoy's Complaint*, however, Portnoy says The Monkey is 'the fulfillment of [his] most lascivious adolescent dreams' (97), which seems to sensibly transcribe the same idea. As said earlier[7], according to Jung, a man's repressed anima transforms itself into something missing. And because of that, a man will most likely try to fill this absence through romantic relationships. More precisely, the man involved will attempt to find a woman who corresponds to his idea of his anima (Callot). Regarding Alex, adding the non-resolution of his Oedipal complex to Jung's theory makes

[6] *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988)
[7] See I. 2. 2 The castrating mother and homosexuality

him picture the girl of his dreams as very sexual. His anima is supposed to represent his fantasies, his dreams. Therefore, The Monkey appears to represent the woman of his dreams. She is his anima: the ideal woman hidden in his subconscious, or what he thinks is his ideal woman. However, such a woman, first, cannot exist, because she is only a fantasy, and secondly, is not what he wants. Jung's theory mentions the fact that the person will go from deception to deception trying to find that ideal woman who does not exist because ultimately, fantasies are not real. It is only an image which he projected onto The Monkey (Jung 148). With time the projection disappears, and Alex must face The Monkey's real self.

Therefore, we could characterise The Monkey as imbedded in Alex's aim towards Americanisation, through his relationships with Gentiles, as the anti-mother when compared to Sophie Portnoy, as well as Alex's adolescent anima, the woman of his fantasies.

3. Alex's American assimilation

This last section will discuss Roth's use of *shiksas* and sexuality as a means for Alex to both attempt to feel more American and reverse stereotypical power roles between Jews and Gentiles.

3.1. 'stick it up their backgrounds' (217)

Alex uses his relationships with Gentiles and sexuality to free himself from his position as part of a minority and to, therefore, assimilate in mainstream America. 'What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America. Conquer Governor Winthrop, General Washington—now Portnoy. As though my manifest destiny is to seduce a girl from each of the forty-eight states.' (217) Alex pictures his sexuality in close relation with religion and his identity. The exploration of his identity seems now limited and only made through the exploration of his sexuality. It would appear as a reducing view of one's identity but because of Roth's way of making Alex connect identity, religion, and sexuality together, it also adds wit to Alex's fundamental issue: his identity.

Franco argues that Alex's battle for freedom lies, to some extent, in his sexuality (88): 'I tear off my pants, furiously I grab that battered battering ram to freedom, my adolescent cock' (29). This excerpt could therefore show that by taking power over his sexuality, as well as by behaving against his mother's wishes, Alex is aiming towards freedom in the American sense of the term. According to Jewish tradition, Sophie would want Alex to settle down early in life. However, here, Alex is acting against that and his actions lean towards sexual freedom. The 1960s were of important social reforms, such as the sexual revolution. This historic event could have influenced Roth to depict his character, confined within Jewish traditions, to long for that American movement of sexual freedom. This yearning towards sexual liberation could then represent a small aspect of Alex's greater longing for Americanisation, as we saw earlier through his attraction for Gentiles[1]. 'In this context fictional depictions of Jewish male/Christian female liaisons become microcosmic representations of momentous issues of group and self-survival and betrayal, of balancing anxieties and ambitions, of reconciling religious and national loyalties, and of bridging the past and present.' (Jaher 519) This shows how Roth might be using Alex and his romantic relationships to portray generational issues with double identity.

However, this 'method' creates a reverse effect on Alex. While Alex seems to be attempting American assimilation in his early adulthood, Roth appears to reveal that his first two relationships with Gentiles might have made him feel more like a stranger: 'Among Jews, Portnoy feels predictably on the margins, but upon "conquering"[2] non-Jewish white women he finds himself in the alien corn of WASP America.' (Franco 99) Within the Gentile community Alex's perception of his Jewishness becomes amplified[3]. It is through the contrast that he seems to become more conscious of what makes him Jewish. Jealous of the two girls' backgrounds, he ultimately breaks up with them. As Alex said about The Pilgrim, he envied them too much to love them. 'Portnoy is not so much "hating" others as using them for his own social gain, though he does garner shame and self-loathing for his efforts.' (Franco 97) Alex's attempt towards Americanisation seems to produce a reverse effect on him. Ironically, by trying to repress his Jewishness, he goes in for it even more, and in a Gentile world, only defines himself as Jewish.

[1] See II. 1. 2. The *shiksa* fantasy
[2] This refers to his name, that of the first world-conqueror, Alexander the Great
[3] As we saw during his stay with The Pumpkin's family

3.2. Revenge and hate of the powerful

From his first two relationships, we discover that Alex becomes more impatient, vengeful, and even aggressive to some extent[1]. Alex closes the chapter on The Pilgrim by saying 'Sally Maulsby was just something nice a son did for his dad. A little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the coloured district. A little bonus extracted from Boston & Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation.' (222) It shows that Alex gives new meaning to The Pilgrim's refusal. It becomes a gender, social and racial issue. Alex appears to be feeling part of a persecuted social group and seeks revenge for it.

> 'Portnoy's sexual episodes can be understood, thus, not as erotic in themselves but as occasions of and for resignification. The novel's offense or humor (depending on how a reader regards these) is the result of the preposterous reversal of racial positions. This is evident in Portnoy's relationship with Sally Maulsby, the daughter of an aristocratic Connecticut family and for Portnoy precisely the embodiment of gentile privilege and beauty against which he estimates his own Jewish outsider status. Portnoy becomes particularly offended when Sally, who is otherwise sexually willing, is reluctant to perform oral sex on him. He imagines that it is her Protestant aversion to his Jewishness that inhibits her, and he links her resistance to his father's failure to gain promotion after decades as a life insurance salesman for a Boston-based company […] Portnoy's attempt to coerce Sally to perform oral sex is consequently tinged with aggression and vengeance' (Franco 102).

Alex does not only manipulate the two women but also the meaning behind their relationships, which is apparent through his use of his father's story as a means to seek revenge and change the ending (Franco 103). Therefore 'stick it up their backgrounds' (217) does not only allow Alex to try and become more American but also to take power back from the Gentiles and assert himself as the avenger of Gentile persecution of Jews.

Throughout the novel, Alex is presented as both the sufferer and the avenger. As we will see later[2], Roth seems to be playing on his representation of Alex as both a Jewish and a Christian

[1] See II. 3. 3. Asserting dominance
[2] See III. 3. 1. Alex as a Schlemiel

Messiah. His depiction switches from saviour to sufferer. In the first chapter, Alex suffered from his mother's hold on him through Judaism. Judaism was therefore considered as the oppressor and Alex could be connected to the Christian Messiah. However, through his attempts for assimilation, his rebellion, his speeches equality and liberty, Alex appears more like a Jewish Messiah, who will save the poor and right the wrongs in society[3]. However, this representation once again shifts when Alex appears consumed by revenge against Gentiles in order to set himself free. His attitude towards The Pumpkin and The Pilgrim shows none of the qualities his job represents. He is not open to differences and appears superficial through his objectifying of the three Gentiles. What stands out is what he seems to be doing out of personal revenge. He tries to turn the situation around and oppress mainstream Americans as revenge for their oppression on the Jewish community, and more specifically on his father[4]. What first appeared like a journey towards freedom, which was depicted through repression of his Jewishness, is now depicted through an inversion of the power roles in American society.

The two women therefore do not only stand for Alex's attempts at assimilation through their 'conquest' but also through their persecution. Alex's representation as a symbolic Messiah crumbles and what stands out is anger and revenge as Alex tries to reverse traditional roles and be the persecutor. While in the first part of the book the oppressor was Judaism, now it is Christianity. Thus, discovering the Gentile world also makes Alex more Jewish through his defense of his Jewishness.

3.3. Asserting dominance

Alex's power relations with women are complex. Roth seems to be using Alex's attempts to dominate his partners as a way of portraying how he is no longer the Messiah, but an avenger for personal satisfaction[1]. And to do so, Alex is depicted as asserting his power on both physical and intellectual aspects. At home, we saw that Alex had the sentiment of being emasculated by his mother[2]. It looks like Alex wants to overcome that with his partners. He is depicted as wanting to

[3] Which is further exemplified through his job as Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity
[4] Who was not offered the same job opportunities as his Gentile colleagues at the insurance company he works at
[1] As we saw when Alex makes his relationship with The Pilgrim an affair of personal vendetta, see II. 3. 1. 'stick it up their backgrounds' (217)
[2] See I. 2. 2. The castrating mother and homosexuality

make sure he is the powerful figure in the couple by reversing traditional American standards: as the Jewish oppressor

The first instance of dominance is through Alex's nicknaming of his partners. When, in the book of Genesis, Adam was given the animals by God to name, it was a great honour because naming something is a symbolic act of ownership and therefore dominance of the named being. Naming somebody has a sense of owning him or her. But even more than naming them, Alex appears to be nicknaming his partners according to what he sees in them. It only reinforces his power because he is presented as rebranding them and redefining their identity according to his own opinion of their character.

However, The Pumpkin and The Pilgrim stand their ground: they are both strong-minded and passionate about expressing their values. Roth seems to be creating an atmosphere where Alex would only appear as patronizing if he were to say something: 'I'm always telling these girls how to talk right, me with my five-hundred-word New Jersey vocabulary.' (215). It is ironic because here Alex's representation as the Messiah does not work, and it discredits him. It only makes him look too controlling and discriminating. Roth creates comedy with the stereotypical figure of the Jewish man as a Messiah. 'Thus a persecuted people turns the table on its oppressors, on those who hold power and rank, by deprecating Christian intellect, family life, and purity.' (Jaher 528). It illustrates that Alex's commentaries on his partners as well as his general behaviour towards them represents a more consequent purpose for revenge through an inversion of traditional positions. Ultimately, his jealousy regarding their social backgrounds makes it impossible for Alex to love them. Alex does not manage to control his mistresses with his words and it is turned to ridicule.

The Monkey is different to dominate in that regard because of her lack of education. At first, it makes The Monkey believe every word Alex says and thus, gives him control over her. She is intimidated by his knowledge and Alex's figure as her Messiah remains for a longer time. As we saw earlier, she already sees him as his saviour[3]. In *The Facts*, Roth gives lessons to Josie, buys her books, pushes her to go back to university, and helps her find a job in publishing. This, considered with Alex's career defending minorities pictures a moralising portrait of himself: as the symbolic Messiah, The Monkey's saviour. The stereotypical figure of the Jewish know-all type of guy is dominant here at the beginning of their relationship.

[3] See II. 2. 3. The Monkey

However, power balance on the physical aspect of their relationship appears more nuanced. At first, from their meeting scene, The Monkey seems like a character who stands her ground and does as she pleases. It speaks for her strong-mindedness (145). She appears like an engaging character, but Alex finds a way to show he has power over her when he hires an Italian prostitute to engage in a sexual intercourse with them (125). The Monkey later explains to Alex that she forced herself to do it: 'I did it for you, *yes*—and now you hate me for it!' (127) The Monkey feels betrayed because Alex tried to give her higher education as well as a job but then treats her as a prostitute:

> 'The one whose *job* it is to protect the poor poor people against their landlords! You, who gave me that U.S.A. to read! *You're* why I got that application blank to Hunter! *You're* why I'm killing myself to be something more than just somebody's dumb and stupid piece of ass! And now you want to treat me like I'm nothing but some hump, to *use*-use for every kinky weirdo thing you want to do-and like *you're* supposed to be the superior intellectual! Who goes on educational fucking *television*!' (123-124)

Ultimately, what appears as Alex's hold on The Monkey fades as he questions his being with her and as she realises he will never settle down with her. Her picture of Alex as her 'domestic Messiah' (141) crumbles, and so does his influence and control on her:

> 'But-what, what was I supposed to be but *her* Jewish savior? The Knight on the Big White Steed, the fellow in the Shining Armor the little girls used to dream would come to rescue them from the castles in which they were always imagining themselves to be imprisoned, well, as far as a certain school of *shikse* is concerned (of whom The Monkey is a gorgeous example), this knight turns out to be none other than a brainy, balding, beaky Jew, with a strong social conscience and black hair on his balls, who neither drinks nor gambles nor keeps show girls on the side; a man guaranteed to give them kiddies to rear and Kafka to read- a regular domestic Messiah!' (141)

This extract shows Alex does not wish to take on the role of The Monkey's saviour and that, in retrospect, the guilt induced by their relationship drove him mad. He criticises his choice of partner and compares himself to a well-known American Jewish writer: 'The Alexander Portnoy Show! If you liked Arthur Miller as a savior of shikses, you'll just love Alex! You see, my

background was in every way that was crucial to The Monkey the very opposite of what she had had to endure eighteen miles south of Wheeling, in a coal town called Moundsville' (141). Alex becomes aware of The Monkey's motives. While she wanted to use him to build a family and escape from her misery, he tried to use her to free himself and become more American. It creates an ironic situation where both characters seem to have wished for something the other had or could have had. They both used each other for their social backgrounds but it did not work out.

> 'Because these women are for them exotic insiders and tickets of admission into American society. All these relationships fail because they derive from severe character flaws and are based on stereotypes. For the females, the romantic appeal of the Jew as alien cannot be sustained in extended contact and reveals their inability to love in a way that nurtures their partners or fulfills themselves. The males are equally inauthentic, manipulative, and misguided because they use the shiksas as a vehicle to deny their own origins and, therefore, diminish both themselves and their romantic companions.' (Jaher 521)

This quote conveys what seems to be what characterises Alex's relationships the most: the use of the other as a vehicle to deny his own origins. However, Roth did not appear to stop here and introduced comedy through the fact that even through his use of others to deny his Jewishness, Alex manages to feel more Jewish than ever. Humour is furthermore intensified through Alex's passage from the sufferer to the saviour, then back to the sufferer. Therefore, his attempts to dominate his partners for revenge and freedom fail.

III- 'In Exile'[1]

This chapter will focus on the novel's last chapter and Alex's final stage of his identity journey. Alex is now in Israel where he seems to think he will find answers regarding his quest. While the chapter stands for Alex's pilgrimage, it also represents his guilt and neurosis climax.

1. The motherland

This section will discuss Alex's identity odyssey. As Alex flies to Israel, the reader assumes this is where he will find peace. However, Alex will in fact appear more confused than before and find himself in both mental and geographical exile. Dreams and reality are intertwined as Alex dwells on the reason of his coming pilgrimage.

1.1. Jewish Portnoy

Alex escapes from marrying The Monkey by hopping on the first flight for Israel. He does not know why he chose this destination yet, but the reader understands it is the only possible place for his journey's end. Alex's quest naturally leads him back to the motherland, the place of all answers. 'Although Portnoy's stay in Israel takes up only a small portion of the novel, it is a turning point for the protagonist's sense of self. Israel serves as a catalyst, triggering a change in Portnoy's awareness of his own identity.' (Görg 59) This chapter represents the climax of his identity quest. After depicting Alex's conflicted behaviour between Judaism and Americanism, Roth portrays Alex's destination as the only possible final step. It is presented as the place where he, supposedly, will not feel like an outsider.' (Krauss 15)

Alex longs for a feeling of belonging, as when he was a child and wished to someday be like the Jewish men he watched playing softball on Sunday mornings (222). While looking at the window of the plane and staring at the motherland from high up in the sky, what comes to Alex's mind is the memory of those Sunday mornings. Setting eyes for the first time on the country brings what seems to be his most cherished memory. 'I look down from two thousand feet in the air upon

[1] Title of the novel's final chapter (222)

the Land of Israel, where the Jewish people first came into being, and am impaled upon a memory of Sunday morning softball games in Newark.' (225) It is to be noted that, in describing his emotion as a young Jew discovering the land of his ancestors, Alex uses a verb that inevitably evokes a Christian background through an episode linked to the passion of Christ on the cross. Alex's arrival in Israel could represent his trial[2]. In the New Testament, Jesus is arrested in Jerusalem and found guilty of various offenses, such as claiming to be the Messiah, the future redeemer of the Jewish people (St. Luke. 23). Once again, Roth draws a parallel between Alex's quest and Christ's Passion[3].

What seems to have stricken Alex about these men at the time is that they were free, and especially free from their Jewish mothers: 'Nobody has to tell them to stop mumbling and speak up, never! And the outrageous things they say!' (223). Alex was also admirative of their sense of camaraderie. Even though they had different jobs and social statuses, one could find them laughing and playing together on Sundays. They seemed to have defied Alex's vision of social barriers[4] and looked happily free. 'I tell you, they are an endearing lot!' (224) This extract is the first time Alex is portrayed as proud to be Jewish. 'I cannot imagine myself living out my life any other place but here. […] How I am going to love growing up to be a Jewish man!' (225) It deeply contrasts with the rest of the novel when Alex could not 'see any positive aspect in his Jewish upbringing' and 'claim[ed] that his awareness of his Jewish heritage [was] a burden' (Görg 59). Then, Alex describes what his Sundays would have been like or maybe what they still could be like:

> 'meanwhile my kids are riffling through the Sunday papers (reading with eyes the exact color of my own), giggling away on the living-room rug; and my wife, Mrs. Alexander Portnoy, is setting the table in the dining room-we will be having my mother and father as guests, they will be walking over any minute, as they do every Sunday. A future, see! A simple and satisfying future! […] I kiss good night my pretty sleepy daughter and my clever sleepy son, and in the arms of Mrs. A. Portnoy, that kind and gentle (and in my sugary but modest fantasy, faceless) woman, I bank the fires of my abounding pleasure. In the morning I am off to downtown Newark, to the Essex County Court House, where I spend my workdays seeking justice for the poor and the oppressed.' (227-228)

[2] See III. 3. 3. Psychoanalysis
[3] See I. 1. 3. The burden of guilt
[4] To some extent because they are all Jewish men from the same neighbourhood

Here, Alex fantasises about what other Jewish men have. He fantasises about the life his former school friends now have, or the life his parents wish for him to lead. This extract portrays Alex as free from his neuroses[5], accepting simplicity and even willingly inviting his parents for dinner. Once again, the Jewish men he watched playing on Sunday mornings and this dream picture Alex as envious of liberation from his predicaments: from his identity crisis and his feeling of not belonging.

1.2. A stranger on both sides

> 'Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967) focuses on the problem of the double identity of American Jews. In search of a new perspective on his Jewish-American identity, the protagonist, Alexander Portnoy, who is also the narrator, travels to Israel. […] Israel serves as a catalyst, triggering a change in Portnoy's awareness of his own identity.' (Görg 59)

Alex is a stranger to himself. He is trapped in a limbo between Americanness and Jewishness and his stay in Israel represents the climax of his predicament. However, the beginning of the chapter does not necessarily focus on his search of himself. 'Portnoy's visit to Israel is not a religious quest, but is mere tourism—albeit with a self-consciously psychological bent.' (Görg 60) As Alex does not know why he chose Israel as a destination and once there, attempts to give it meaning by exploring the country:

> 'to make some *sense* out of the impulse that had sent me running aboard the El Al flight to begin with, to convert myself from this bewildered runaway into a man once again—in control of my will, conscious of my intentions, doing as I wished, not as I must—I set off traveling about the country as through the trip had been undertaken deliberately, with forethought, desire, and for praiseworthy, if conventional, reasons. I would have (now that I was unaccountably here) what is called an educational experience. I would improve myself, which is my way, after all.' (232-233)

[5] Which is ironic because Alex is not looking forward a life of this kind and the extract depicts stereotypes which he tries to evade

Alex wants to take control back of his life. He therefore sees his trip to Israel as an opportunity to make a clean slate and focus on learning about his ancestors' land. This extract represents the double culture which tears him apart. While Alex visits the country through its touristic spots: 'Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Beer-She'va, the Dead Sea, Sedom, 'Ein Gedi, then north to Caesarea, Haifa, Akko, Tiberias, Safed, the upper Lalilee…' (232), he also studies the country in his room. This, according to Görg, illustrates Alex's appreciation for learning and self-improvement which are results of his Jewish education (Görg 61). However, she also argues that Alex's studying of historical facts instead of The Torah or the Talmud illustrates parts of his American assimilation: 'shift away from religious studies is symptomatic of his American upbringing as a secular Jew' (Görg 61) Thus, his educational approach stands for his Jewishness but the secular point of view also introduces a more American behaviour. The beginning of his adventures in Israel already establishes his double culture.

During his travels, what strikes Alex the most in the Promised Land is that it is a Jewish country, mainly populated by Jews: 'what gave my entire sojourn the air of the preposterous was one simple but wholly (to me) implausible fact: I am in a Jewish country. In this country, everybody is Jewish.' (233) Alex is incredibly surprised to be surrounded by Jews and describes his arrival among the Jewish population as a 'dream' which 'begins as soon as [he] disembark[s]' (234). 'This is where it all began! Just been away on a long vacation, that's all! Hey, here *we're* the WASPs! *My taxi passes through a big square surrounded by sidewalk cafés such as one might see in Paris or Rome. Only the cafés are crowded with Jews. The taxi overtakes a bus. I look inside its windows. More Jews. Including the driver. Including the policemen up ahead directing traffic!*' (234) Alex cannot get over the fact that here, he is part of the majority. In this extract, he no longer seems to identify as an outcast, or as being part of a minority.

However, a few hours later, Alex is stopped on his night stroll along the sea by a group of Israelis who ask him for the time. Alex gets scarred and thinks they are going to attack him: '*I look at my watch and realize that they are not going to permit me to pass. They are going to assault me! But how can that be? If they are Jewish and I am Jewish, what motive can there be for them to do me any harm?*' (235). Once again, the frightening becomes amusing: Alex is so used to being a 'victim' that he seems to believe that anyone who stops him in the street will attack him. While realising he fits in Israel, he wonders why any Jew would attack him. He seems so used to being

oppressed for his ethnicity that it can be the only motive for someone's attack. This change in perspective unsettles him and

> 'his old conception of the world starts to fail him. In America, the division between Jews and non-Jews was one of the most important points of reference in his life. Now that he is deprived of this distinction, he does not know how to view his own identity. In America, being Jewish means being different; in Israel, being Jewish means being like everybody else. Inevitably, the narrator has to change the way he sees himself. Part of his identity was the awareness of belonging to a minority. Now, in Israel, he is forced to redefine the meaning of his Jewish identity.' (Görg 62)

It is Alex's entire perception of social standards that is shattered here. He must unlearn what his mother taught him about society's conception and discover its workings by himself. It unsettles him even more. Alex's newly revealed 'normality' loses its appeal and has the reverse effect: he feels alone and on the margin of society, in a place where he was supposed to belong to. Once again, he feels like a stranger: not as a Jew in America but as an American in Israel. For once, he is part of the majority but still cannot define who he is. The identity issue is turned upside down in a Jewish country where he still does not feel like he belongs to it.

1.3. Alex in Wonderland

In her article entitled *Alex in Wonderland, or "Portnoy's Complaint"*[1], Eileen Z. Cohen compares Roth's novel to *Alice in Wonderland*. Cohen suggests that 'Alex's life […] is one in which he can find no truth consistent with the conventions of his particular situation, just as Alice can find no logic in Wonderland in terms of the conventions of the world above ground.' (161-162) At the beginning of 'In Exile' (222), Alex talks about his childhood aspiration to a simple middle-class life in a Jewish neighbourhood in America[2]. According to Cohen, this extract shows that 'Alex is indeed in Wonderland; his literal world is topsy-turvy. His real world is what other men fantasize, and his fantasies are of marrying and having children, playing softball, and eating

[1] This article will be my main reference in this section
[2] See III. 1. 1. Jewish Portnoy

dinner.' (161) It could stand for Roth's depiction of Alex's figurative and literal wandering. 'Dreams? If only they had been! But I don't need dreams, Doctor, that's why I hardly have them- because I have this life instead. With me it all happens in broad daylight! The disproportionate and the melodramatic, this is my daily bread!' (237) Alex shows he is aware of the irony of his situation. Cohen continues:

> 'Alice's adventures offer meaning to the lawless and chaotic world of the reader's unconscious. As such, *Alice in Wonderland* can be seen as dream vision literature. So too with *Portnoy's Complaint*, except that in Roth's novel, the experiences both underground and above ground are revealed. Alex lives his grotesque comic vision and contemplates a reverie of middle-class conventions. Like Alice, Portnoy cannot free himself from his traditions […] Alex is tied to the standards that his mother and his Jewishness impose.' (162)

Cohen argues that Alex lives in a reversed world compared to traditional conventions. He lives his fantasies and fantasizes about a more conventional life. It implies that if he does not free himself from his mother's teachings, he will not be able to find himself, which makes us come back to the idea of the Jewish mother as the main reason for Alex's identity crisis. He is his own mother and community's victim, and that even after having left home.

According to Cohen, Alex must go through katabasis to get to truly know himself. Alex is therefore not portrayed as the stereotypical figure of the Jewish Messiah[3] anymore but as the victim. Once again, his representation switches from saviour to victim, thus creating connections between Jewish and Christian perspectives. This combination of cultural outlook may mean that ultimately, only he himself can save himself and Alex would thus stand for both a victim and a saviour.

2. The Lieutenant and The Jewish Pumpkin

This section will focus on Alex's encounter with two Jewish women who highlight the final step of Alex's identity odyssey. As with the *shiksas*, Alex will try to use them to feel empowered.

[3] In a Jewish context

However, power relations with Jewish women will differ here and Alex's chance of overcoming his neuroses will appear even more intricate.

2.1. The Lieutenant

Once again, in Israel, Alex attempts to make himself feel in control, in power through intercourse with women. He soon befriends '*a young woman with tawny skin who is a lieutenant in the Jewish Army*.' (236) She takes him out for a beer, after which Alex invites her back to his hotel room (237).

> 'In the room we struggle, we kiss, we begin to undress, and promptly I lose my erection. "See," says The Lieutenant, as though confirmed now in her suspicion, "you don't like me. Not at all." "Yes, oh yes," I answer, "since I saw you in the sea, I do, I do, you are sleek as a little seal—" but then, in my shame, baffled and undone by my detumescence, I burst out— "but I may have a disease, you see. It wouldn't be fair." "Do you think that is funny too?" she hisses, and angrily puts her uniform back on and leaves.' (237)

Segal argues that because Alex's independence 'resides in the act of intercourse with the powerful […] his attempts with Israeli women are complete failures.' (Segal 267) As we will see later[1], because The Lieutenant is a Jewish woman, Alex does not consider her powerful and therefore cannot engage in intercourse with her because he will not gain power from the relationship.

2.2. Naomi, The Jewish Pumpkin

Finally comes Alex's 'final downfall and humiliation', 'Naomi, The Jewish Pumpkin, The Heroine, that hardy, red-headed, freckled, ideological hunk of a girl!' (238) Alex picks up Naomi hitchhiking and they spend the day together, visiting the city of Akko. Naomi is a tall, twenty-one-year-old Zionist whose parents moved from Philadelphia to Israel before the outbreak of World

[1] See III. 2. 3. The Schlemiel and the Sabra

War II. 'After completing her army service, Naomi had decided not to return to the kibbutz[1] where she had been born and raised, but instead to join a commune of young native-born Israelis clearing boulders of black volcanic rock from a barren settlement in the mountains overlooking the boundary with Syria.' (238) Alex's first reaction is that he is '*being given a second chance*' (238) and that he should therefore marry her: 'Here's how unhinged and hysterical I was in Israel. Within minutes of picking her up on the road, I was seriously asking myself, "Why don't I marry her and stay? Why don't I go up the mountain and start a new life?"' (239) He realises he does not want 'movie stars and mannequins and whores, or any combination thereof. I don't want a sexual extravaganza for a life, or a continuation of this masochistic extravaganza I've been living, either. No, I want simplicity, I want health, I want her!' (239)

Throughout their day out together, the conversation is serious. Naomi seems to monopolise it by talking about her values as well as the corruption that is the American society (241). She discredits Alex for his work as Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity because she believes he, too, is part of the system and therefore is not able to rebel against it, even though he feels likes he does. Alex does not seem to be attentive. He is too focused on his potential infection and on his new feelings for Naomi. In the evening, Alex invites Naomi back to his hotel room, where he confesses his love for her: 'Naomi, I love you […] I want to marry you' (242). Naomi is bewildered and thinks it is a joke. Alex goes on and gives her a speech on love, which he supposedly feels for her: 'told this girl I hardly knew, and didn't even like, how deeply in love with her I was' (243) Alex's confession is followed by a physical altercation. Naomi goes for the door, Alex stops her, reaches for her breast and says 'I'm not trying to turn you into a bourgeois, Naomi. If the bed is too luxurious, we can do it on the floor' which prompts her into knocking him (243). Alex seems to have lost his mind. The conflict continues for a while: Alex moans and laments while Naomi insults him. After fighting off Alex's attempts at rapping her, she finally manages to leave the room, leaving Alex lying on the floor, bleeding, and complaining.[2]

[1] A kibbutz is a rural community whose societal values are based on equality and social justice. The first ones were created at the beginning of the 20th century by young Jewish pioneers who 'came not only to reclaim the soil of their ancient homeland, but also to forge a new way of life'. Their socioeconomic system is based on 'the principle of joint ownership of property, equality and cooperation of production, consumption and education.' (The Kibbutz & Moshav: History and Overview)

[2] This scene could remind us of young Alex's conflicts at home with his mother. He acts like a child here, screaming and rolling of the floor (247-249)

2.3. The Schlemiel[1] and the Sabra[2]

Alex sees Naomi as The Jewish Pumpkin. Like Kay, she is 'an admirable and brave girl', which pushes Alex to draw a comparison between the two women (238). He associates 'her instantly with [his] lost Pumpkin' and pictures it as '*a second chance'* (238-239). However, the more Alex seems to think about it, the more he begins to see his mother in Naomi: 'when in physical type she is, of course, my mother. Coloring, size, even temperament, it turned out—a real fault-finder, a professional critic of me. Must have perfection in her men. But all this I am blind to: the resemblance between this girl and the picture of my mother in her high school yearbook is something I do not even see.' (239)

The comeback of the mother figure in the motherland, where Alex is impotent could symbolise, once again, a figurative castration or emasculation. Naomi gains power through her speech and through the fact that she is a native born. It is through her accusations of his powerlessness that she seems to be symbolically emasculating Alex. The fact that Alex sees his mother in her only accentuates that because it is a scene already known to the reader, a kind of flashback to Alex's early years. Moreover, Naomi also gains physical empowerment through their altercation because ultimately, she was able to stop Alex and leave the room.

Once again, Alex tries to gain a personal feeling of power through the act of intercourse with women. However, here 'his attempts with Israeli women are complete failures' (Segal 267). Segal argues that 'it is not through some process of identification between his castrating mother and Jewish women in general that they induce impotence in him. It is because they do not fit in with the definitional scheme of things. Portnoy is impotent with them because he sees them as members of the socially powerless Jewish community.' (Segal 267) Alex's impotence does not seem to solely stand for his Oedipal complex but also for the link he creates between freedom, power, and ethnicity.

Alex's impotence with Jewish women shows the irony of his predicament. His independence is only fulfilled through his relations with the powerful. However, the people regarded to as powerful by Alex, and therefore symbols of his freedom, are only defined powerful

[1] See III. 3. 1. Alex as a Schlemiel
[2] A native Israeli born

by his Jewish point of view[3]. It all comes back to Alex's Jewish vision of a world with Jews on the one side and Gentiles on the other (Segal, 267). Therefore, even Alex's method to assert himself free is pointless because it is trapped in Jewish thinking. Alex is portrayed as a static character who is not able to escape his exile state: '"You should go home." "Sure, that's what I need, back into exile."' (248).

3. The Schlemiel

This last section will discuss how Roth manages to portray Alex's identity crisis through his characterisation as a modern Schlemiel, as well as through the use of Jewish humour, and the psychoanalytic frame of the novel. These three writing choices all enhance the parody of tragedy that is Alex's impossibility to overcome his predicament.

3.1. Alex as a Schlemiel

The issue of assimilation is common while depicting a Schlemiel protagonist. The Schlemiel is a Yiddish type of character whose definition and characteristics have evolved through time. The Schlemiel became generally known in the 19th century through Adalbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl*. It tells the story of a young man whose pacts with the Devil cause his misfortune. In the 20th century, it is Singer's Gimpel from his short-story *Gimpel the Fool* who embodies the concept of the Schlemiel at its best. Gimpel relentlessly believes in Judaism as well as in the good of humanity and because of that becomes the joke of the town. As with Peter Schlemihl, the character of the Devil appears. This time, the Devil attempts to lure Gimpel into urinating in the bread intended for the town's inhabitants to obtain revenge[4]. Gimpel does so but ends up throwing away the bread, in remorse. These two major representations of the Schlemiel exemplify the close relationship between the Schlemiel and religion. Humour, in this instance lies on that fact that 'faith displaces reason' (Field 1).

[3] It could be linked with Naomi's discourse on Alex's unsuccessful rebellion against the American system because he is part of it. Here, it shows that his rebellion against his Jewishness will never be possible because he is ultimately part of the Jewish community and was raised as such.

[4] Which could be linked to the liver episode and Alex's 'fucking [his] family dinner' (123), refer to II. 1. 1. Masturbation as rebellion

Jewish immigration from Germany and Eastern Europe to America in the 20th century leads to a change in the Schlemiel's characteristics. He remains an unlucky and gullible character but his relationship with religion diminishes. The center of his issues will no longer relate to religion but to his self. 'Neurotic obsessions and the inability to accept oneself became primary characteristics; however, the older ironies remained.' (Slings 7) In his essay, Slings compares Gimpel to Woody Allen's character in *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer. He argues that while Gimpel is fooled by the village, his faith and morals remained strong. However, when Alvy talks about his life there is no mention of his faith and his principal interest is himself and his pessimistic vision of life: 'Now, that's essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it is all over much too quickly.' (*Annie Hall*) In *The Schlemiel as a Modern Hero*, Wisse writes that like Jewish humour[5], the modern Schlemiel embodies 'the most outstanding folly of his culture—its weakness[6]' (X). This type of Jewish anti-hero who experiences failure after failure embodies his society and culture's frailties. He therefore appears as a product of its time and as a direct reaction to Jewish struggles in America.

Alex, like many other modern Schlemiel figures conveys the identity conflict between Jewishness and Americanness: 'Portnoy is effectively struggling with two commitments, to Jewish and to mainstream American culture. Instead of embracing them both, he resents both' (Slings 15). He also bears a rebellious attitude and induces comical reactions from the reader through his reaction to failure: 'What he remembers most, however, about these masturbatory binges are his darkly comic failures' (Pinsker 149). Alex basically is portrayed as a marginal character, who has desires to rebel and is made of contradictions.

However, Alex also bears various characteristics which differ from the more traditional Schlemiel. The issue of the self is increased by the novel's structure: Alex's self-analysis monologue to his therapist. In the context of a therapy session, Alex can only concentrate on himself and tells his life's story in order to find the origin of his neuroses. Moreover, Alex is portrayed as aware of his schlemielkeit condition and comments on it. He therefore appears, to some extent, as an active Schlemiel through his ability to self-reflect on what makes him the parody of the stereotypical Jewish fictional Schlemiel.

[5] See III. 3. 2. A Jewish joke
[6] Here, we could consider assimilation and the question of identity as a weakness

Roth also seems to take inspiration from Kafka's tragic turned into comic with Alex's representation as a tragic oriented Schlemiel. Alex blames his parents for the schlemielkeit condition he tries to escape from: 'Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke! Because it's beginning to pall a little, at thirty-three!' (102). However, the fact that he cannot escape from this condition enforces even more his position as a caricatural Schlemiel. Every single attempt he makes to either repress his Jewishness or integrate American society fails and brings him more despair and guilt, than satisfaction. It portrays Alex as a static character because ultimately, he will never be able to find a balance between being Jewish and being American. Alex's Jewishness is too far rooted in him: he will never be able to detach himself from it.

Furthermore, narrator Alex is thirthy-three years old, which is reminiscent of the Christ's age. This enhances Alex's representation as a tragic-oriented character, as well as Roth's open inspiration from Kafka's tragic turned into comic while writing the novel. Alex's attempts to shift from victim to saviour fail and his way of freeing himself further prevents him from succeeding. Alex, thus, remains a victim and his situation does not seem to evolve from the beginning of the narrative to its end. As we saw earlier, Alex's attempt to both assimilate and become a kind of saviour fail when his desire for revenge arises. Trapped in his Jewishness, Alex seems to ironically be represented as a Christian Messiah. Therefore, Alex's odyssey of failed attempts makes him a static character, and even more, a tragic-oriented Schlemiel.

3.2. A Jewish joke

Our current conception of Jewish humour originated with Freud. He noted that self-criticism was at the core of Jewish jokes and that one did not only laugh with the joke teller but did also laugh at himself. Irving Howe wrote: 'though a joke usually involves a thrust at someone else, Jewish humor is often a thrust at the Jews themselves[1] The plight that is ridiculed is often that of the narrator, with whom the audience can so easily identify itself' (qtd. in Ben-Amos 114) This conception is deeply rooted in modern Jewish culture which is proved when Alex refers to it himself: 'self-deprecation is, after all, a classical form of Jewish humor' (244) Maurice Samuel explains that this self-mockery allowed for the survival of Jewish culture: 'why did they not

[1] The monologue which constitutes the novel could also remind us of stand-up comedy. Alex as a narrator would then participate in the comical aspect of the novel.

disintegrate intellectually and morally? How were they able, under hideous oppression and corroding privation, under continuous starvation […] to keep alive against a better day the spirit originally breathed into man? The answer lies in the self-mockery by which they rose above their condition to see afar off the hope of the future.' (qtd. in Ben-Amos 115)

Bergson explained that laughter portrays one's belonging to a particular society (Bergson 6) which can be illustrated through this Jewish joke:

> When you tell a joke to a peasant, he laughs three times, once when you tell it to him, the second time when you explain it to him, and the third time when he understands it.
>
> The landowner laughs twice. Once when you tell it to him and again when you explain it, because he never understands it.
>
> The policeman laughs only once when you tell it to him, because he doesn't let you explain it so he never understands it.
>
> When you tell a Jew a joke, he says "I've heard it before. And I can tell it better". (Wisse 17)

This joke shows that Jewish humour belongs to the Jewish community and can mostly be understood by Jewish people. Jewish jokes often use the same Jewish characteristics as the butt of the joke. As we saw earlier, the Jewish mother became a vessel for laughter in the second half of the 20th century, but guilt is often found and exaggerated in jokes, as well as anxiety, and bad luck. *Portnoy's Complaint* plays on these joke materials. Alex's schlemielkeit makes him a character who constantly attracts bad luck[2]. Roth constantly plays on that with Alex. Every time something positive[3] is about to happen to Alex, an unexpected and unpredictable catastrophe occurs[4]. Alex also comments on his parents and his people's constant anxiety:

> 'Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke- *only it ain't no joke!* Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak? Why, why are they screaming still, "Watch out! Don't do it! Alex- *no*!" and why, alone on my bed in New York, why am I still hopelessly beating my meat? Doctor, what do you call this sickness I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about?' (33)

[2] We could also consider his unsuccessful romantic relationships
[3] According to Alex
[4] For instance, his meeting with Bubbles did not go as planned, see II. 1. 3. Bubbles

This same idea is also transcribed in this well-known joke where the interpretation of words in a semantic field out of step with the context is used to mock Jewish anxiety:

> 'Four Europeans go hiking together and get terribly lost. First they run out of food, then out of water.
> "I'm so thirsty," says the Englishman. "I must have tea!"
> "I'm so thirsty," says the Frenchman. "I must have wine."
> "I'm so thirsty," says the German. "I must have beer."
> "I'm so thirsty," says the Jew. "I must have diabetes." (Wisse 1)

The modern Schlemiel corresponds to what Freud notes on Jewish humor: '[it] points to the ability of Jewish people to engage in a thorough self-criticism, advocate a democratic way of life, emphasize the moral and social principles of the Jewish religion, and criticize the excessive requirements of it' (Freud 13). The Schlemiel would then represent, as said previously[5], his society's weaknesses, through the humor expressed through his failure caused by society.

Humour is also caused by Alex's failures as a typical Schlemiel. Léon Dumont writes that we laugh when someone fails at something he thought he could do. It is the opposition between the person's wish or belief and reality which induces laughter (Dumont 52). This happens quite often with a stereotypical Schlemiel character as most of his actions lead to negative repercussions[6].

Humour in the novel seems to be mainly present through the stereotypical portrayal of the Schlemiel protagonist, through the use of common Jewish joke butts, and through the overexaggerating guilt presented through Alex's parents.

3.3. Psychoanalysis

The end of the novel comes back to the narrative's structure and the idea of psychanalysis[1]. Even though *Portnoy's Complaint* covers many subjects, it remains an 'enigma of the self' (Avershai 156). As Alex recounts his last moments in Israel and insults Dr. Spielvogel, the latter

[5] See III. 3. 1. Alex as a Schlemiel: Wisse's note on its symbolism
[6] Masturbation causes him more guilt than pleasure for instance
[1] Which largely contributes to Roth's representation of Alex's identity crisis

remains silent. Spielvogel only appears twice in the novel. He is mentioned in the epitaph as the author of "The Puzzled Penis"[2] from which is extracted the definition of the disorder named after Portnoy.

According to Pierpont, Roth took inspiration from his life-experiences when he decided to frame the narrative in a therapy monologue (Pierpont 50). After his separation with Maggie, Roth hired a psychiatrist, Doctor Hans Kleinschmidt, a German Jew. Kleinschmidt 'tended to invoke broad Freudian constructs (the "phallic threatening mother", the weak father), and Roth was certain that these abstractions did not apply to his family.' (Pierpont 49) However, Dr. Kleinschmidt managed to 'rouse feeling of anger in Roth toward his mother and to draw up memories that justified them. The anger served a purpose, in both an emotional and a literary sense. […] It wasn't long before Roth came to believe that this anger was unwarranted and wholly unfair, but by then the feelings and memories had done their work.' (Pierpont 50) Roth later said: 'Kleinschmidt, inadvertently, gave me *Portnoy's Complaint*. The book was not a simple satire, really, but a playful rendering of the American Jewish family that came out of this folklore. Kleinschmidt would say, 'Maggie, does she remind you of your mother?' and I would say, 'Not in the least'' (Avershai 178).

By creating a character who has read Freud and who is so self-centered that he analyses himself, mainly through episodes which threaten his masculinity, Roth may be criticising or mocking psychoanalysis solely based on Freudian phallic theories. Roth's own experience with Kleinschmidt, according to the former extract, shows that Kleinschmidt tried to connect every aspect of Roth's life to his parents and his Oedipal complex. The link between Alex and Freudian theories is obvious. 'By offering an orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis of his behaviour, Portnoy deconstructs such possible interpretations and renders them reductive and redundant.' (El-Shimy 15). On several occasions, Alex warns Spielvogel of these orthodox Freudian readings: 'No! There's more than just adolescent resentment and oedipal rage' (58). One chapter is even named after one of Freud's essays 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life' (169). The chapter discusses Freud's theory that 'where such men love they have no desire, and where they desire they cannot love' (171). This accounts for Alex's behaviour with *shikses* and more precisely with The Monkey:

[2] The fact that Spielvogel gives the penis human traits enhances the comic. Sampson established a theory in link with this and considers Alex's penis as the protagonist (Sampson 60). It leads to the idea that Alex could be a kind of 'puzzled penis' through his use of sexuality as a means of emancipation.

> ‘Question: Am I to consider myself one of the fragmented multitude? In language plain and simple, are Alexander Portnoy's sensual feelings fixated to his incestuous fantasies? What do you think, Doc? Has a restriction so pathetic been laid upon my object choice? Is it true that only if the sexual object fulfills for me the condition of being degraded, that sensual feeling can have free play? Listen, does that explain the preoccupation with shikses?’ (171)

This extract could be interpreted as Alex provoking Spielvogel by discussing and challenging Freudian theories. The exaggeration would stand for Roth’s way of comically addressing some psychoanalysts’ predominant use of Freud’s theories on the Oedipal complex.

Coming back to the narrative, Portnoy’s last words are presented in a rant against himself. This is where the analogy to Christ ends: ‘Ow, my heart! And in Israel! Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes! Where other Jews flourish, I now expire!’ (250) The only logical following is the final trial[3]:

> ‘ALEXANDER PORTNOY, FOR DEGRADING THE HUMANITY OF MARY JANE REED TWO NIGHTS RUNNING IN ROME, AND FOR OTHER CRIMES TOO NUMEROUS TO MENTION INVOLVING THE EXPLOITATION OF HER CUNT, YOU ARE SENTENCED TO A TERRIBLE CASE OF IMPOTENCE. ENJOY YOURSELF. But, Your Honor, she is of age, after all, a consenting adult-' DON'T BULLSHIT ME WITH LEGALISMS, PORTNOY. YOU KNEW RIGHT FROM WRONG. YOU KNEW YOU WERE DEGRADING ANOTHER HUMAN BEING. AND FOR THAT, WHAT YOU DID AND HOW YOU DID IT, YOU ARE JUSTLY SENTENCED TO A LIMP DICK. GO FIND ANOTHER WAY TO HURT A PERSON. But if I may, Your Honor, she was perhaps somewhat degraded before I met her. Need I say more than 'Las Vegas'? OH, WONDERFUL DEFENSE, JUST WONDERFUL. GUARANTEED TO SOFTEN THE COURT'S JUDGMENT. THAT'S HOW WE TREAT UNFORTUNATES, EH, COMMISSIONER? THAT'S GIVING A PERSON THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE DIGNIFIED AND HUMAN ACCORDING TO YOUR

[3] See III. 1. 1. Jewish Portnoy

DEFINITION? SON OF A BITCH! Your Honor, please, if I may approach the bench-what after all was I doing but just trying to have . . . well, what? . . . a little fun, that's all. OH, YOU SON OF A BITCH!' (251)

This extract portrays Alex's guilt to its paroxysm. Alex is now so guilt-ridden that he imagines a fictive trial where he witnesses himself being inflicted with impotence as a sentence for his degrading crimes with women, and more particularly with The Monkey. Alex's only explanation is that he was trying to have good time, but that because of his Jewishness, he cannot enjoy himself without inducing guilt.

While the monologue continues, Alex seems more and more incoherent. The trial nightmare is succeeded by a new one in which Alex imagines himself tearing a tag off a mattress that says 'Do Not remove Under Penalty of Law' while police officers approach him: 'what would they give me for that, the chair? It makes me want to *scream*, the ridiculous disproportion of the guilt!' (252) This extract comically suggests 'the act of removing the stamp of his heritage of sin and retribution off his libido which seeks to be unleashed.' (El-Shimy 28) The presence of police officers comically suggests the transgressive aspect of such an act, and thus how impossible it is for Portnoy to let go of it.

The monologue ends with Alex's final complaint, his final scream: 'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh !!!!!'[4] (253) which is followed by Roth's addition: the 'PUNCH LINE': 'So [*said the doctor*]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?' (253) This punch line allows Roth to joke on Portnoy's never-ending self-analysis. It also implies that now that Portnoy has said it all that he had to say, the real work, which might contradict what he has just said, will begin. It portrays 'Roth's comic suggestion that his eponymous hero's embattled psychoanalytic odyssey is only beginning' (Berman 94) and changes the reader's point of view on the narrative because it inevitably pushes him to question the trust of the narrative contract.[5]

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[4] This cry which brings to mind Munch's painting can also justify the novel's comic parody of the tragic Schlemiel

[5] According to Gerald Prince's definition of the narrative contract: 'The agreement between the narrator and the narratee, the teller and his or her audience, underlying the very existence of a narrative and affecting its very shape' (61)

Conclusion

Portnoy's Complaint is a novel deeply imbedded in its Jewishness. The stereotypical character of the Jewish mother immediately attests for that. Her crucial role in the education of her children as well as in the passing on Jewish values and traditions already frames the Jewish frame of Alex's home. This aspect of her character is further enhanced by the context of immigration. Sophie becomes the guardian of the Portnoy family's Jewish descendance. However, Alex, who was proud of being a Jew during his childhood, begins to question his belonging to a certain community as he grows up. This reflection on himself as part of society seems to coincide with his passage from childhood to adolescence, a time characterised by numerous questionings. Alex is attracted by modern America, a society which often contrasts with his parents' views. Common adolescent rebellion against parents is here characterised by Alex's disbelief in Judaism and attraction towards mainstream America.

This aspiration for assimilation only grows with time. As Alex leaves home for university, he focuses on integrating with Gentiles. This is when sexuality, religion, and identity become intertwined. Alex dates three Gentiles and uses them to assimilate himself. They each serve a point in his identity conquest. Through her refusal to convert, The Pumpkin makes Alex realise that he has not let go of his Jewish education. The Pilgrim stands for Alex's wish to take revenge on Jewish persecution by Gentiles. He also tries to reverse American social standards by being the powerful person in the relationship with both women. Later, Alex's relationship with The Monkey illustrates the Jewish guilt which eats him alive. Alex finds himself unable to transgress Jewish standards without blaming himself.

Finally, Alex's pilgrimage in Israel does not bring him any relief. While he was at first relieved to finally fit in somewhere, he realises that he does not know how to behave as part of the majority. His American social standards are reversed, which confuses him even more. He has trouble identifying himself outside of a minority and his encounters with two Israelis symbolise the last stages of his identity odyssey. With Naomi, Alex must confront the fact that he will never be able to let go of his Jewish identity which is so imbedded in him that even his ways of trying to repress it illustrate just how Jewish he is.

It could therefore be argued that Alex's relationships with the girls stand for the evolution of his identity quest and thus largely participate in Roth's representation of the protagonist's

identity crisis. However, this reading of the novel is focused on a specific interpretation, which could be part of an even larger analysis of the narrative, questioning Roth's contemporary interpretation of the question of Jewish American identity. As we saw earlier, Roth was inspired by an entire generation of Jewish American writers who also dealt with identity in their work. With *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth is openly inspired by their works but adjusts their concerns to the new realities of the society of his own generation. One of the most representative innovations the novel presents is its modernisation of the stereotypical Schlemiel. With Alexander Portnoy, the Schlemiel's stereotypical representation shifts. He becomes a product of his time, focused on self-analysis and whose failures now put forward his society's frailties. Alex's neuroses, thus, do not only point to the character's new interest in himself through psychoanalysis, but also stand as a direct reaction to Jewish struggles in America.

Roth's writings on the issue of Jewish heritage in mainstream America also paved the way for a new generation of Jewish American artists who saw his modernisation and contribution to the genre as inspiration. Even though Philip Roth did not appreciate being compared to Woody Allen, their works both display several common aspects. Their self-lacerating humour, as well as their psychoanalytic and sex-oriented Schlemiels are common elements which participate in their discussions on what Jewish heritage means in 20thcentury mainstream America. In works such as *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *Play It Again, Sam* (1972), both Schlemiels are presented as motivated by their eagerness for feminine conquests (Astruc 146). While Alex cannot succeed because of his persuasive Jewish guilt, Sam's schlemielkeit focuses on his shyness which ultimately prevents him from conquering any girl. Both reasons of failure add to the comic of the failure in itself and display particular Jewish stereotypes.

Roth and Allen both portray the pejorative effects the incompatibility of the two cultures provoke on one's conception of his own identity. Their participation to the genre is even interpreted as their own re-invention of a new culture, adapting traditional Jewish values to fit mainstream America's daily life (Astruc 144). However, Woody Allen's work also raises new questions and ideas regarding the evolution of the genre. On a broader scale, Allen's success in Europe questions the geographical evolution of Jewish American culture. While the New York scene is where Jewish American culture stemmed from and evolved in the 1950s the change in audience may induce a progressive comeback to Europe. It could be interesting to investigate this on a larger scale and see if this European comeback only applies to Woody Allen's work or not, and why.

Coming back to the evolution of the stereotypical Schlemiel, Roth and Allen both largely participated to it with characters such as Alex and Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall* (1977), two of the most popular representations. However, paradoxically, *Annie Hall* transformed the stereotypical Jewish character into an American icon. Daniel Itzkovitz argues that *Annie Hall* marks the americanisation of the Jewish Schlemiel (Feuer). It could, therefore, be interesting to take the reflection even further and explore the evolution of the Schlemiel from its arrival on the East Coast at the beginning of the 20th century, to its americanisation in the late 1970s.

Philip Roth and Woody Allen both used the Schlemiel to redefine Jewish American culture through their constant questioning and exploration of its identity. While here, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the depiction of Alex's inner conflict and identity crisis through the female characters participates in Roth's appropriation of the genre, it could be relevant to explore how Woody Allen does so in the representation of his most symbolic Schlemiel protagonist: Alvy Singer.

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire s'intéresse à la manière dont Philip Roth, romancier juif-américain, traite la question d'identité juive-américaine dans son roman le plus controversé : *La Plainte de Portnoy* (1969). Inscrit dans le contexte d'émigration de Juifs d'Europe de l'Est aux États-Unis, le roman présente la tentative d'un jeune homme à réprimer son identité juive afin de s'intégrer dans la culture dominante Américaine. Ce développement se concentre sur la façon dont Roth utilise les personnages féminins afin d'illustrer la crise identitaire du protagoniste, Alexandre Portnoy. Ancré dans le cadre d'une séance de psychanalyse, le narrateur et protagoniste, maintenant âgé de 33 ans retrace les événements les plus marquants de sa vie dans un monologue ayant pour but de trouver l'origine de ses névroses. Le roman présente trois différents types de personnages féminins : la mère juive, les trois femmes non-juives, et les deux Israéliennes. Chaque type de personnage illustre une nouvelle étape de l'odyssée identitaire d'Alex. La symbolique juive de la mère ainsi que son rôle crucial dans l'éducation de ses enfants semble représenter le point de départ de la quête identitaire d'Alex. Sa rebellion adolescente contre ses parents se traduit par une répression de sa judéité ainsi que par une aspiration à intégrer la société américaine. Désormais dans la vingtaine, Alex tente d'étouffer son identité juive à travers des relations sexuelles avec des femmes non-juives. Cependant, ses trois différentes relations ne font qu'affirmer son appartenance à la communauté juive à travers son inhabilité à transgresser les valeurs et principes de son éducation juive. Finalement, la quête d'Alex se termine en Israel, sur la terre mère, où il se retrouve encore plus confus qu'avant, dans un exile à la fois mental et géographique. Ses deux dernières relations avec des Israéliennes le confrontent au fait qu'il ne sera jamais capable de laisser de côté son identité juive et qu'il en est tellement imprégné que même sa façon d'essayer de la réprimer témoigne de son appartenance à la communauté juive.

mots-clés : littérature ; juive ; américaine ; Philip Roth ; Portnoy ; identité ; mère juive ; psychanalyse ; personnages féminins ; sexualité ; société

ABSTRACT

This dissertation takes interest in Philip Roth's discussion on Jewish American identity in his most subversive novel*: Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Imbedded in the context of Eastern European Jewish immigration to America, the novel presents a young Jewish man's wish to repress his Jewishness to fit in mainstream American society. The present argumentation focuses on Roth's use of female characters to portray the protagonist's identity crisis. Built within the framework of a psychoanalytic therapy session, the now 33-year-old protagonist and narrator, Alexander Portnoy retraces the most significant events of his life, in a monologue, to find answers leading to the resolution of his neuroses. The novel portrays three different types of female characters: the Jewish mother, the three Gentiles, and the two Israelis, which each portray a different stage of Alex's identity odyssey. The Jewish mother's symbolism for Judaism as well as her crucial role in the education of her children appears as the starting point of Alex's predicament. Adolescent rebellion against his parents transcribes itself in rebellion against Judaism and aspiration towards American assimilation. Now in his twenties, Alex attempts to repress his Jewishness by having intercourse with Gentiles. However, the three relationships only further assert Alex's Jewishness through his general inability to transgress Jewish standards. Finally, Alex's quest ends in Israel, back to the motherland, where he feels even more confused than before and finds himself in both mental and geographical exile. His last two encounters with Israelis confront him to the fact that he will never be able to let go of his Jewish identity which is so imbedded in him that even his ways of trying to repress it illustrate how Jewish he is.

keywords : literature; Jewish; American; Philip Roth; Portnoy; identity; Jewish mother; psychoanalysis; female characters; sexuality; society

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