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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

**Beyond Imagining:  
Sex and Sexuality in Philip Roth's Kepesh Novels**

by

**Mike Witcombe**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2015



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

## **ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Modern Languages

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**BEYOND IMAGINING:**

**SEX AND SEXUALITY IN PHILIP ROTH'S KEPESH NOVELS**

Mike Witcombe

This thesis examines three novels written by the Jewish-American author Philip Roth, collectively known as the Kepesh novels: *The Breast* (1972), *The Professor of Desire* (1977) and *The Dying Animal* (2001). Based on a desire to re-evaluate the critical position of these works within Roth's oeuvre, this thesis offers an analysis of each novel based upon a critical methodology supplied by an examination of the role of fetishism in psychoanalytic theory.

Fetishism, an ambiguous theory within psychoanalysis, has been adapted and deployed by a range of post-Freudian theorists for a number of purposes. Utilising fetishism as both a theme found in these novels and a methodology for their interpretation, this thesis attempts to form a new means of analysing these novels that pays heed to the different ways that they combine themes within the trilogy. With this diversity in mind, this thesis explores the reception of the Kepesh novels in periodicals and academic research, as well as using a range of theoretical strategies and comparative readings with other literary works. This supports and influences close readings of each text in turn.

This thesis argues that these novels are dependent upon Roth's subversive attitude towards the protagonists that narrate them. This is enabled by the variety of themes used by Roth in each text, but is most telling in his approach to describing debate and communication within each novel. This thesis incorporates and advocates for the playfulness that these novels demonstrate; they can thus be re-examined as works whose perspectives on sexuality are more nuanced than has previously been acknowledged.



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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, .....[please print name]

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] .....

.....

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
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5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. [Delete as appropriate] None of this work has been published before submission [or] Parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed:.....

Date:.....



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This thesis is dedicated to the Southampton D.I.Y. punk rock community, especially WWR, No. 3 (R.I.P.) and The Rathaus.



# Introduction

If everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations and activities? Or are we meant to act on impulse alone? It is all a darkness.

- Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (19)

At the public celebrations for the Jewish-American author Philip Roth's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday (his first as a retiree), literary celebrities shared cake with camera-wielding journalists and book-wielding academics. Roth himself had earlier given a dynamic and vivid reading from his own work, belying any notions of bodily frailty one may have expected, especially given his long history of ill-health.

It had, nonetheless, been a strange experience. As a reader of Roth's work, my perceptions of his personality had become filtered through the vivid streak of solipsism that runs through many of his novels. Some of the traits displayed by these narrators were in full evidence that day in Newark, but contrasts were inevitable. For example, Roth's performance showed little in common with the reclusive, ascetic disciples of literature that have narrated some of his best-known novels, and have been interpreted by many readers as a collective cipher for Roth's own experiences<sup>1</sup>. For a writer as keen to embrace contradiction as Roth, perhaps this sense of competing selves was inevitable - it certainly accords with the increasingly confusing progress of his post-retirement activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers have been given ample fodder for this perspective by depictions of Roth in works by other authors - such as Janet Hobhouse's roman à clef *The Furies*, in which Roth appears in a thinly-disguised cameo as a "celebrated author" named Jack; a brilliant man with a stringently ascetic devotion to his work (237).

To publicly announce one's retirement is a bold statement in itself, but to stage one's retirement as a gradual series of public renunciations is a tactic that few other authors have attempted. Roth began his retirement-process in 2012 with a casual statement that "*Nemesis* sera mon dernier livre" in the French magazine *Les inRocks*, and his announcement soon went viral in English-speaking media outlets after *Salon* confirmed Roth's retirement with his publisher (Kapriélian) (Daley)<sup>2</sup>. However, this would only be the start of a saga which is still ongoing at the time of writing. Roth, ever-careful of managing his public image and keen to control the means by which his legacy would be constructed, decided to slowly retreat from literary celebrity, with varying degrees of success. According to the *Associated Press*, he would claim to have given his last interview only to change his mind when offered a substantial public platform through an interview on the satirical talk show *The Colbert Report* (Italie). As frustrating as this process may be for those attempting biographical readings of Roth's work, its combination of gamesmanship, playfulness and indecision is characteristically Rothian.

Indecision is a fundamental part of Roth's literary legacy – both within his work and amongst those discussing it. One of the more intriguing attempts to evaluate Roth's career that bears this fact in mind was published in 2013 by *New York* magazine (Literary Caucus: Salman Rushdie, James Franco, and 28 More Notables Assess Philip Roth's Career). Containing data from interviews with a "literary caucus" of 30 contemporary authors, the article attempted to grapple with the issue of Roth's literary legacy; the manner in which it did so was surprising and revealing. Aside from hyperbolic leading questions like "Is Roth the greatest living American writer?" (77% agreed) and "does Roth deserve to win the Nobel Prize?" (97%, all bar one respondent, agreed), the choice of questions is as telling as any of the responses.

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<sup>2</sup> Following on from *Salon*'s hurried announcement, *The Paris Review* formally announced Roth's decision to the Anglophone literary world with a full translation four days later, including the announcement itself: "*Nemesis* will be my last book" (Kaprielien).

Amongst the expected issues of favourite books and favourite passages, some questions stand out – including one in particular, “Is Roth a misogynist?”. Keith Gessen answers with a cautious negative, presumably allying himself with the 53% of respondents that opted for the indeterminate response, “Well...”. Gessen’s response, “if you hated women, why would you spend all your time thinking about fucking them?” is unconvincing (and almost seems satirically faux-misogynistic), but his subsequent claim is more incisive – that Roth’s writing is “less useful in a world[...] where men and women do not stand on opposite sides of the question of sex, but arranged, together, sometimes helplessly, against it; where sex is less of a battlefield and more of a tragedy”. Gessen’s argument that Roth’s portrayal of sex is a historical phenomenon in American letters would presumably be shared by the 17% of respondents who did consider Roth to be a misogynist.

What Gessen elides is the fact that many of Roth’s narrators seem curiously out of step with the contemporary realities they inhabit, that their views on sex are already outdated. This is often most visible in novels set in an era earlier than that of their publication – such as 1979’s *The Ghost Writer*, which is set “more than twenty years ago” (3) – but becomes an explicit theme in the second Zuckerman trilogy, a lauded set of novels published between 1997 and 2000 that comprised *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*. To accuse Roth of having an unnecessarily adversarial approach to depictions of sex, as Gessen does, also ignores the adversarial perspective and narrative distance that Roth often has to his own protagonists. In the case of many of Roth’s narrators, sex is both a battlefield and a tragedy – an act of epistemological desperation. By utilising a telescoping sense of historical distance, Roth can add a veneer of ironic inevitability to his doomed erotic heroes.

This sense of narrative distance is particularly striking in the Kepesh novels, three works whose minor role in journalistic debates about Roth’s legacy suggests a critical and popular uncertainty about their place within Roth’s body of work. Published in 1972, 1977 and 2001, the Kepesh novels remain some of the most perplexing items in Roth’s bibliography. The first of them, *The Breast*, is narrated by a male Professor of Literature, David Kepesh, who finds himself transformed overnight into a 155-pound female breast. The second, *The Professor of Desire*, narrates Kepesh’s travails in love and lust as a



young man. Finally, *The Dying Animal* features an ageing (humanoid) Kepesh's musings on sex and death whilst he describes a failed relationship that he had with one of his students.

In *New York's* literary caucus on Roth, none of the three Kepesh novels feature amongst the 11 books nominated as being Roth's "best", and Kepesh himself is denounced by Kathryn Schulz, who claims that he is "needy, whiny, sexist, smug, solipsistic – a DSM-Roth of all the more noxious qualities in [Roth's] novels". All of these claims may be true to a certain extent, but Schulz's accusations also embody the greatest successes of Roth's most perplexing narrator. It is precisely the "noxious" qualities of Kepesh that place him in the same category of deliberate excess that *Sabbath's Theater* (Roth's best book, according to the authors surveyed by *New York*) would become more celebrated for.

The Kepesh novels are harder to link in the more conventional, linear manner that many of Roth's books utilise. The reader becomes obliged to pursue other means of coherence – following this strategy, two fundamental characteristics emerge. One of these is this sense of excess; the way in which the novels probe boundaries by exploring the fringes of a collective discourse on sex. Unlike Mickey Sabbath, the bullish and unrepentant protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater*, Kepesh's defences against the vagaries of sexual desire remain faltering at best. Secondly, the Kepesh novels are all self-subversive, combining a number of different tropes and themes within a single book and concludes that there is no interpretative scheme that can encapsulate the brazen weirdness of sex. Psychoanalysis may offer a link between these trends, as it is a body of knowledge whose influence on Roth's work is inseparable from broader trends in American intellectual discourse. Roth discusses psychoanalysis more frequently when it is a fundamental part of the American zeitgeist, but he never truly loses his interest in its methodologies and its pieties.

The reason for this is partly biographical. Roth had substantial experience in psychoanalytic practice from the perspective of a patient that he would draw upon in many of his novels. The best-known example of Roth's own psychoanalytic experience mirroring that in his novels is the description of Alexander Portnoy that opens *Portnoy's Complaint*, a pseudo-scientific

description of the ailment that gives the novel its title. This description is itself based on Roth's treatment under Hans Kleinschmidt, who would later publish Roth's case history (under a thinly-veiled pseudonym) as an article entitled "The Angry Act" in the psychoanalytic journal *American Imago*. This in turn caused a rift between the two men that would end their analytic relationship.

In his monograph *The Talking Cure*, Jeffrey Berman discusses the implications of the Roth-Kleinschmidt debate, arguing that it is the reason why Roth's 1974 novel *My Life as a Man* "reads like thinly veiled autobiography" (263). Berman's subsequent analysis considers Roth's work alongside that of Kleinschmidt, concluding that "by using the analyst's own language and by supplying the necessary biographical clues in *My Life as a Man* to locate the existence of the analyst's medical case study, Roth ambivalently invites the reading public to participate variously in his own psychoanalysis" (268). Bernard Avishai substantiates this claim, arguing that "Tarnopol, devastated but brave, answers Spielvogel much like you'd expect Roth to have answered Kleinschmidt" (*Promiscuous* 185). Even though Avishai and Berman's arguments are persuasive, their strategies of biographical inference override theoretical uses of psychoanalytic ideas in Roth's work. There is a need to develop a complementary approach that views Roth's engagement with psychoanalysis as a textual as well as a biographical phenomenon, and one which originates in the work Freud himself.

The history of Roth's personal experiences with psychoanalysis, though fascinating in their own right, are beyond the scope of this thesis. This is partially due to the fact that biographical studies of Roth are in a somewhat nascent state – even if recent works such as Avishai's *Promiscuous* and Claudia Roth Pierpont's *Roth Unbound* have added to biographical understanding of Roth's work. Finding information to develop Berman's ideas, however, is still a difficult task; although there is some correspondence between Kleinschmidt and Roth in the Philip Roth Papers, the material is insufficient to attain any definitive biographical explanation. Even Roth's own pronouncements on the subject of his experiences are currently too disparate and playful to represent a solid basis for research. Future biographies of Roth may be able to illuminate the subject further – and, should they do so, they will represent a parallel text to the research contained herein. Insofar as this thesis explores Roth's interest

in psychoanalysis, it will focus on textual, theoretical and historical phenomena.

The introduction of psychoanalytic ideas to the analysis of Roth's novels allows for a return to Gessen's most basic conceit – that contemporary literature has attained more sophistication in its emphasis on tragic collusion rather than tragic separation when depicting sex. Gessen's approach is certainly more sympathetic to a contemporary literary marketplace that features an increasing diversity in its range of writings on sex, but does not diminish the validity of Roth's general attitude to the topic. Psychoanalysis is no longer at the forefront of the more dynamic and revolutionary writings on sex, nor does it have the cultural resonance that it once had. Nonetheless, it remains an important foundational source for much contemporary study of sexuality – often maligned, but impossible to ignore. Gessen's critique of Roth's work as being stuck in an outdated view of sexuality as a clichéd 'battle of the sexes' ignores the fact that it was the limitations of this model – emergent in part through the explicit gender segregations of Freudian analysis – that Roth was often exploring himself. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Kepesh novels.

The problems associated with using psychoanalysis to interpret these texts relate as much to the biography of the Kepesh novels as they do with any innate problems in psychoanalytic theory itself. In these novels, the use of psychoanalytic tropes is closely tied to their cultural prevalence. For example, Roth published *The Breast* in 1972, when Freudian analysis was a fundamental part of American literary and intellectual discourse. This changes in later novels; psychoanalysis is reduced to a banal plot device in 1977's *The Professor of Desire*, and is near-absent in 2001's *The Dying Animal*. This diminishing role of psychoanalytic ideas is not as glaring as this summary may make it sound – psychoanalysis is a key thematic determinant in all three novels – but wide variations in approach are still evident. Finding thematic connections between these works is a matter of oscillation rather than parallels, making the task of the critic (and the reader) approaching these already strange texts even more difficult. These texts, if they are able to be understood at all, are best seen as a group of works with a linked sense of internal logic.

Interpretative problems extend beyond matters of plot and theme. Metafiction is a hallmark of all three texts - the proliferation of interpretations provided within the texts becomes a form of authorial playfulness. This is not a phenomenon distinct to the Kepesh novels: one of the principal dilemmas faced by critics looking for a coherent critical perspective on Roth's work is that Roth pre-empts many of the more predictable analytical approaches within his work. Textual self-interpretation is a key part of later novels such as *Deception*, but it is a theme found throughout Roth's work - for example, in the rambling, Hawthorne-influenced prologue to *The Great American Novel*, or in the text-within-a-text strategy used in 1974's *My Life as a Man*. This self-reflexive interest in metafiction is perhaps most evident in works in which Roth's sense of experimentation comes closest to a postmodern sense of textual play; this is the case, for example, in novels featuring competing alternative realities (such as *The Counterlife*), shrill bursts of rhetoric (*Operation Shylock*) or a rebuttal supposedly written by another of Roth's narrators (*The Facts*).

Whilst Roth's innovations as an experimental writer remain undervalued, these strategies are too disparate to be bracketed under any one critical approach. A discussion of Roth's stylistic playfulness apparent in the Kepesh novels would be difficult to include alongside one of the kinds of experimentation used in his other novels, especially considering that the Kepesh novels offer a less immediate version of the self-reflexive strategies than other texts. That the novels themselves are often openly derivative, representing a form of in-joke reflective of the purported literary knowledge of their narrators and readers, only adds to the problem.

An incoherent plot prevents sustained character analysis. A thematic skittishness means that no single theme is dominant. Stylistic variation is more extensive in other of Roth's texts. For a critic considering the Kepesh works together, there seems to be no readily apparent and coherent strategy for analysing them. However, this thesis argues that psychoanalysis represents a mode of analysis with enough flexibility to account this. Using psychoanalysis to contend with the indeterminacy of these novels may help expose the variety and complexity of Roth's writing in an area of his work that has been largely neglected. These works - more than any others in Roth's storied career - are

allusive, elusive and illusive. In short: the Kepesh novels may not be Roth's best works, but they are amongst his most interesting.

It is the variety within these novels that lends particular credence to one of the titles that Roth had initially abandoned when writing the text that would become *The Professor of Desire*<sup>3</sup>. It is regrettable, if understandable, that Roth decided against titling his work *Beyond Imagining* – nonetheless, this title could serve as an appropriate subtitle for any of the three Kepesh novels. Had *The Breast* been subtitled *Beyond Imagining*, it would have been a knowing gesture towards its absurd premise. Had the title been used for *The Professor of Desire*, it would have given an added gravitas to the failure of Kepesh's sex life to live up to its billing. For the *Dying Animal*, it would have been an apt reference to the death-haunted narrative meanderings of the ageing Kepesh. It is for these reasons that this thesis has returned Roth's abandoned title to prominence by claiming it for itself.

## II

For all their off-putting weirdness, any analysis focusing on the Kepesh novels has to consider a substantial number of precursors. The best of recent critical work on Roth abandons the pretence of a unified thematic approach in favour of arguing for a more abstract sense of connectivity; and it is this nascent strategy which this project intends to emulate. This project is motivated by a desire to see Roth's trilogy as a series of interactions between overdetermined themes, a network of ideas linked by a process of playful argumentation. As a result, this project has a more ambivalent attitude towards conceptual frameworks, and requires a methodology that accommodates this kind of scepticism. In order to create a mode of analysis tailored to the modes of narrative in these novels, this thesis will base itself in the psychoanalytic context that Roth's trilogy initially emerged from.

Since its inception in the research and practice of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis has been concerned with the problems associated with a desire

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<sup>3</sup> As shown in data found in the Philip Roth Papers (See Figure 7, p142).

to understand human sexuality. As a body of theory, it can be interpreted as means of dealing with our inability to fully understand ourselves – or anyone else. This negatively-oriented view of psychoanalysis is a key concern of theorist Adam Phillips, who introduces his 2014 biography of Sigmund Freud's early career with a reminder of the uncertainty that psychoanalytic knowledge entails:

It was precisely the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, and about other people's lives, that Freud put into question, that Freud allowed us to read differently. Freud helped us, if that is the right word, to see our lives as both ineluctably determined and utterly indeterminate; as driven by repetitions but wholly unpredictable; as inspired by unconscious desire and only intermittently intelligible, and then only in retrospect. (11)

The wilful embrace of incoherence in Freudian psychoanalysis (in Phillips' terms, an ironic scepticism) is part of the reason why its legacy has been so enduring; its ability to ask questions and create discourse, its consciousness of its contingent novelty and its willingness to admit its faults. Phillips' statement is useful insofar as it points to his fundamental sense of psychoanalysis being poised between conflicting terms, a 'cure' that conceals as much as it exposes. The more one pursues self-knowledge, the more one recognises, through psychoanalysis, that the pursuit of self-knowledge is hopeless.

Phillips' work has focused on this paradox, but his extension of this idea in *Intimacies*, a monograph co-written with Leo Bersani, makes clear the distinction between "our lives" and "other people's lives" that his description of Freud in *Becoming Freud* collapses into a single model (Bersani and Phillips). Stating a view of psychoanalysis that their text aims to recalibrate, Bersani and Phillips describe how psychoanalysis has placed emphasis on self-knowledge as a precondition for interpersonal intimacy. Traditional psychoanalysis thus emphasises that "difference is the one thing that we cannot bear", but Bersani and Phillips attempt to construct a new model of intimacy, one which "prefers the possibilities of the future to the determinations of the past" (vii) – a version

of psychoanalysis that is Freudian in its construction but less pessimistic in its views on human relationships.

Critics such as Phillips (along with others such as Sander Gilman and Juliet Mitchell, whose work will be discussed at various points in this thesis) maintain a fascination with Freud's ideas that also contains an innate scepticism and wariness that itself is profoundly Freudian<sup>4</sup>. These writers locate themselves on the fringes of psychoanalysis; involved in its debates without being dogmatically tied to its teachings and precepts, lucid and wide-ranging in their approach. It is writers like these who are best able to withstand the changing fortunes of psychoanalysis as both a medical practice and critical methodology, and, as a result, their work contains the kind of flexibility that best suits an approach to the work of a writer such as Philip Roth. Moreover, the playful, experimental and tentative approach to psychoanalytic methodologies that these critics maintain is one which this thesis aims to emulate.

Rather than analyse the uses of psychoanalysis for a critique of Roth's work, this thesis will use a psychoanalytic basis to develop a network of themes, ideas and interrelations. This thesis will first consider certain psychoanalytic ideas in more detail, and then analyse how these ideas can influence an analysis of Roth's work and how the modes of interrelation that it helps create can enable a more dynamic form of literary analysis. It will thus trace a path from a psychoanalytically-influenced mode of writing in the earlier of the Kepesh novels (*The Breast*), to a mode that rejects its premises but remains fixated on the issues it explores (*The Professor of Desire*), and conclude by showing how a superficially post-analytic novel can revitalise some of the basic psychoanalytic assumptions upon which the trilogy was founded (*The Dying Animal*). It may be possible to develop a fixed set of ideas and notions that the novels may explicitly gesture towards, such as the fallacies of biography and the death-instinct, but this thesis aims to be less bound to specific concepts. As such, it will develop a way of approaching psychoanalysis that shows its historical and theoretical diversity without limiting itself to a core set of ideas, preventing its analyses from being mere recitations of

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<sup>4</sup> Most notably, this encompasses works like Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* and Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose's *Feminine Sexuality*, which are foundational texts within this thesis.

Freudian paradigms. The particular psychoanalytic lens that best fits these stringent requirements is the theory of fetishism.

Fetishism encompasses a miniature history of intellectual discourse, ranging from colonialist rhetoric to Marxism, and being popularised by psychoanalysis through the work of Sigmund Freud. So permeating has Freud's use of the term been that it has become synonymous with perverse sexuality in popular culture, even though its academic interpretations are many and various. This division between popular perception and academic dialogue has been challenged in critical works that use the complex etymology of the word to further a wide range of critical discourses, showing that even a psychoanalytic understanding of the concept is inseparable from the broader range of meanings that it has superficially supplanted.

Fetishism remains a deeply contested space within theoretical discourse, and has been appropriated for a number of different purposes by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, encompassing a huge array of perspectives, preferences and biases. Some of the more innovative approaches to the topic have extended fetishistic ideas far beyond their original contexts. To cite one example, Laura Hengehold discusses how Gilles Deleuze has employed fetishism throughout his writings in order to "put sociologically comprehensible flesh on otherwise allusive statements about sexuality" (127), allowing for a new understanding of how his work can influence that of feminist and queer theorists. Hengehold's description of Deleuze's work is useful for demonstrating how pervasive the concept can become, bridging divides between different areas of study. As this thesis will show, other theorists have employed a similarly dynamic strategy in deploying fetishism within their work.

Fetishism provides a model of interpretative possibility that harnesses the paradoxical power of psychoanalysis whilst allowing the critic to maintain a healthy scepticism towards the field itself. As a literary tool, it can operate both as a theme and a means of enabling new types of analysis. By reading a text through the possibilities of fetishistic discourse, a reader is granted the opportunity to consider both the role of psychoanalysis in literature and the ways that psychoanalysis can gesture towards a host of new interpretative connections and possibilities. Fetishism thus provides a methodology for this



thesis (the seeking of the new within the familiar) as well as being a nexus for themes relating to embodiment which these novels explore and contest.

As a concept rich in possible uses and interpretations, fetishism beckons the reader to consider competing theories simultaneously. It allows for new discussions to emerge through an analysis of the way in which themes converge in any given text. This necessitates a constant sense of shifting foundations; it is only through motion that this form of analysis can maintain its relevance and usefulness as a method. As a result, this thesis will reroute itself constantly through the network of themes that an analysis of fetishism helps establish. In doing so, it will constantly seek new ways of approaching these texts.

### III

Rather than organise each chapter around a single consistent theme found throughout the trilogy, this thesis will discuss each of the Kepesh novels in turn. It will attempt to use different methods – including historical context, close reading and archival analysis – in conjunction with a number of theoretical perspectives that offer related ways of considering the depiction of sex in these novels. The emphasis on tenuous connections and questionable tangents may be less useful for discussions of more linear series of texts like the Zuckerman novels, but it will be pivotal to this project. Taken as a whole, these connections and tangents will provide a means of incorporating a psychoanalytically-influenced form of criticism into a mode of analysis that pays heed to the difficulty of the novels themselves. A study of Roth's Kepesh novels that is initiated through a consideration of fetishism both enables and necessitates a sense of playful variety that comes closest in spirit to the anarchic indecision of the novels themselves.

The first chapter of this thesis will discuss the topic of fetishism in detail, elaborating on the history of the concept and exploring how its psychoanalytic incarnation contains multitudes – it can be applied to a wide range of theoretical discourse. It will attempt to trace some uses of the concept in contemporary theory to show the multivalent capacities of the concept, then

conclude by using these analyses as a means to demonstrate how a fetishistic approach to literature can provide an interpretative network that allows for new means of analysis of the Kepesh novels.

Following this, the second chapter will provide a general overview of critical discussions of the Kepesh novels by tracing their appearances in critical texts analysing Roth's work. It will explore the way that contemporary critical discourse has slowly begun to include the third Kepesh novel, *The Dying Animal*, whilst it has minimised the significance of the two Kepesh novels that preceded it. It will trace the history of work on Roth, and in doing so reveal the Kepesh novels to be a deeply unusual (and valuable) choice for an interpretative cynosure.

The third chapter will analyse Roth's 1972 novel *The Breast* in detail. It will pay particular attention to the historical and literary context of the text, beginning with an exploration of the novel's reception upon its publication and the atmosphere of increasing hostility within which Roth was writing. It will develop this further by means of an extended analysis of several satirical works that were written by Roth just prior to the novel itself, thus framing the text within his engagement with contemporary American culture. It will use psychoanalytic theory around the breast as a mode of analysis comparative to fetishism, returning to concerns initially explored in chapter 1. The chapter will then analyse the redrafting process that *The Breast* was subject to, concluding by analysing illustrations that accompanied a later edition of the novel.

The next Kepesh novel, *The Professor of Desire*, will be discussed in chapter 4, which is split into two sections. The first section will begin with a survey of the kinds of strategies that can be used to explore the text, grappling with the self-reflexive interpretations that are scattered throughout the text. Paying particularly close attention to the liminality suggested by the character of Herbie Bratasky, the chapter will proceed to explore scenes in the novel that have been subject to the most critical attention, suggesting that their subversive potential may operate in a different fashion to that suggested thus far. The second section will continue this re-evaluation of 'canonical' tropes by exploring Roth's engagement with Franz Kafka. It will conclude with an extended comparative analysis of *The Professor of Desire* and Kafka's

unfinished work *Amerika*, comparing the depiction of sexual relationships in the two novels to discuss the construction of gender in Roth's novel.

The final chapter will begin (much like the preceding two analysis chapters) with a contextual overview of *The Dying Animal*, paying particular attention to ideas around critical reception initially explored in chapter 2. This chapter will progress to discuss alternative means of approaching gender relations in the novel, with particular reference to feminist psychoanalytic theory. It will conclude by offering an analysis of many of the subsidiary characters that feature in Roth's novel, but which have rarely been the subject of sustained critical discussion. In doing so, this analysis will reinforce the pursuit of alternative textual perspectives.

Adam Phillips describes psychoanalysis as "a science of storytelling suspicious of narrative coherence", a summary which could also be used to describe the perspective that this thesis has on the Kepesh novels (*Becoming Freud* 67). The discussion of new perspectives and the re-evaluation of existing ones is a necessary step in furthering critical understanding of these complex and irritating novels. Kepesh's relentless obsession with self-presentation constructs his narratives as elaborate shell games which operate on the cusp of outright deceit – even if the principal victim of this deceit is the narrator himself. The fact that Kepesh misunderstands so much does not mean that his perceptions are valueless, or even that they are inaccurate. It is less important to state that Kepesh is wrong on every count than it is to be aware that his elisions, deceptions and quandaries give these texts their value. Kepesh's idealised self-conceptions are brazenly shallow in a way that offers a dramatic (and telling) contrast to his evident skill in aesthetic criticism. His self-constructions are elaborate but unstable facades, liable to collapse at the wrong moment and requiring a metatextual suspension of disbelief.

An analysis of fetishism demonstrates the ability of psychoanalysis to generate connections between different topics whilst rejecting the idea that definitive answers can be found for questions of sex. This thesis thus argues that Roth's metafictional gambits in these novels – self-deprecation, oblique foreshadowing and so on – combine to form a fetishistic approach to literature. Even when Roth is not discussing psychoanalysis in the course of his work, the process of self-inquisition that it entails informs works as seemingly removed

from psychoanalytic ideas as *The Dying Animal*. Fetishism exposes both the value and the limitations of this aspect of the psychoanalytic process. In doing so, it becomes useful as a means of contending with the querulous character of the Kepesh novels.

The idea that Roth's texts merely communicate the impossibility of true self-knowledge may seem reductive or simplistic, but a sense of multivalence gained through fetishism helps prevent the impression that the novels are bleakly nihilist. In these novels, sexual desire cannot be separated from other markers of selfhood, and may in fact expose the network of connections that forms the replacement for a coherent sense of self in Roth's works. Sex denies absolute knowledge, and those seeking to theorise it have only the consolation that it exposes the structures of bias upon which our processes of knowledge are erected. As a narrator, Kepesh seeks coherence through the one medium that is most guaranteed to expose his incoherence – and being as knowledgeable of psychoanalysis as he is, Roth is deeply aware that this approach is doomed to failure from the start<sup>5</sup>.

Through the Kepesh novels, Roth develops the profoundly Freudian idea that trying to gain any coherent sense of selfhood through sex can only enable a further elaboration of the insufficient capacity for self-knowledge. It is all a darkness.

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<sup>5</sup> Even though this thesis has already expressed wariness over making assumptions about Roth's own analytic experiences, the body of psychoanalytic knowledge found throughout his work (and particularly in *Portnoy's Complaint*) demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of its ongoing debates, practices and theories.



# Chapter 1: Fetishism and its Discontents

'Transference', 'repression', 'fetishism', 'narcissism', 'the riddle of femininity' – all these key psychoanalytic concepts confirm the sense that in psychoanalysis love is a problem of knowledge.

- Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (40)

No matter how much you know, no matter how much you think, no matter how much you plot and you connive and you plan, you're not superior to sex. It's a very risky game. A man wouldn't have two-thirds of the problems he has if he didn't venture off to get fucked. It's sex that disorders our normally ordered lives.

- Philip Roth, *The Dying Animal* (33)

## Précis

In the writings of Sigmund Freud, fetishism is a puzzling concept, and as such is one that subsequent generations of psychoanalytic theorists have attempted to understand. Understanding of this topic has expanded to both acknowledge its pivotal role in developing key psychoanalytic concepts – in particular, the castration complex – and to critique the construction of the context within Freud's bibliography. This is part of a general move towards opacity that is internal to the term itself; although most often thought of as a sexual preference, the term is visible in a wide range of critical and theoretical discourse. An attempt to define the term involves negotiating a 'place' for it within critical vocabularies – and for most modern critics, this necessitates a willingness to move between theoretical domains.

Fetishism is internally complex, in a manner that represents a challenge to literary critics. In this chapter, the argument will be made that fetishism can be used to construct a way of reading texts that is attuned to paradox, ambiguity and disavowal. To make this mode of analysis more specific, the intersections generated by an analysis of Freudian fetishism itself can be applied to other writers; it can show the complexities of writings by and about near-contemporaries of Freud, but it also emerges as being particularly useful to Roth's Kepesh novels. The wilful complexities of fetishism provide a network of ideas and concerns that are particularly well-tailored to these novels. Using a 'fetishistic' mode of literary analysis incorporates an internal uncertainty that allows for these novels to be read as a trilogy of works in a manner that pays heed to their striking differences.

## 1.1 (Re)defining Fetishism

“The term fetishism almost has a life of its own” claimed Jean Baudrillard (90) - an argument that a cursory glance at the literature on the topic abundantly confirms. Even Baudrillard’s use of language is telling: the term being said to have a “life of its own” signals the difficulty of coming to a critical consensus on the topic, whilst the use of “almost” indicates certain boundaries. The meaning of the term ‘fetishism’ varies depending on what each individual writer requires it to mean, the act of definition implicating them in a variety of dialogues. Even the initial act of finding a set of terms from which an analysis of the topic can proceed becomes an endeavour fraught with complications. Such is the problem faced by Jay Geller in his attempt to define the term for Macmillan’s *Encyclopaedia of Religion*.

Although its ambiguity has allowed it to become utilised by various schools of thought, fetishism is nonetheless primarily associated in contemporary culture with an interest in non-standard sexual practices<sup>6</sup>. However, even this loose definition of the term remains deeply problematic. The association of fetishism and sex derives in part from an increased use of the term in early sexological and psychoanalytic discourse; especially that of Sigmund Freud, whose work has become pivotal to subsequent discussions of sexual perversion. Geller’s definition helps reveal that there are theories of fetishism that pre-date and influence Freud’s work, as well as a subsequent body of work that takes his ideas in radical new directions.

Tracing the usage of the term in academic discourse, Geller places psychoanalytic definitions of fetishism into a broader framework, arguing that “fetishism has come to delineate a discursive space in which the often misrecognised attempt is made to mediate difference(s) by means of material objects (or persons)” (‘Fetishism’ 3043). Reconfiguring fetishism as a space where relationships and hierarchies are formed, Geller implicitly aligns with

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<sup>6</sup> The assumption of a popular association between fetishism and sexuality is common in fetish theory. For example, Louise Kaplan claims that “most people do not consult dictionaries to tell them what fetishism means. They assume the word ‘fetishism’ has something to do with bizarre sexual practices of some kind or other” (*Cultures of Fetishism* 1).



Baudrillard's notion of the independence of fetishism by taking the term out of the realm of physical manifestation and into the realm of semiotics, developing a claim that "neither fetishism nor the fetish exists as such" ('Fetishism' 3043).

Geller's argument is supported by an analysis of the religious associations of the word, the earliest topic with which the term was associated. In a discussion of fetishism's origins in early colonial anthropology, Geller emphasises the way it was utilised to reinforce "the European assumption of the Africans' allegedly deficient mental abilities" ('Fetishism' 3044). Initially referring to specific items used by religions in African cultures, the concept of 'fetishism' is depicted as emerging in the mid-eighteenth century, when claims about the supposed worship of material objects were used to criticise Roman Catholicism. Fetishism thus became a negatively constructed symbol of a normative society's perceived superiority over an equivalent other.

Following this trend, Geller describes how Auguste Comte depicted fetishism as primordial, a developmental stage which would be supplanted first by polytheism and then by monotheism. Geller describes use of the term changing significantly only in the nineteenth century; initially with the work of Karl Marx, whose notion of commodity fetishism sought to describe "the culmination of the alienation and objectification of human labor" ('Fetishism' 3044). Despite taking fetishism outside of a purely religious context, Geller argues that Marx's theory relies upon a similar sense of a normative system that debases social life.

Only in Freud's work does a major epistemological change emerge, whereby fetishism is described "in analyses of sexuality and not of the genesis of religion" ('Fetishism' 3044). Geller illustrates this point by discussing how Freud describes the fear of castration in male children as a means of coming to terms with difference, and thus being "inserted into the social order" ('Fetishism' 3044). Freud's use of the term is traced through fears of "physical and moral debilitation" in early sexology, which linked fetishism with concerns over degeneration. Freud's move away from social categorisation into medical pathology is traced through works which helped subvert such fears: Geller describes how Alfred Binet's 1887 work *Fetishism in Love* inverts the perceived racial hierarchy of Christian colonial discourse seen in theories of fetishism such as those of Comte. Geller suggests that Binet's normalisation of fetishism

allowed Richard Krafft-Ebing to declare fetishism as “the general form of sexual pathology” ('Fetishism' 3044) in his 1892 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a concept which Freud drew heavily on in describing his own ideas on the subject.

Geller's description of fetishism makes clear the multivalence of the term, and gestures towards the range of discourses it can appear within. Despite this, the necessity of Geller's taking religion as the source material for his analysis of the term serves to lessen the significance of other aspects of fetish theory – he devotes just two paragraphs to post-Freudian analyses of fetishism, viewing the recurrence of the topic in postcolonial theory as the most significant development in ideas of religious fetishism. However, the sense of multiplicity which his description provides does allow for an interweaving of such theories with more contemporary usages of the term. Recent post-Freudian critics echo Geller's claim for the fetish's position of non-existence, even as they employ the term to radically different ends: Emily Apter describes fetishism as an “outlaw strategy of dereification” (3), Alasdair Pettinger refers to it as “everywhere and nowhere” (90) and Anne McClintoch argues that it “embodies the failure of a single narrative of origins” (19). The critic analysing fetishism, like the fetishist, finds themselves in a position of increasing uncertainty. It is this radical instability that allows Jean-Joseph Goux to claim that:

The absurdity, the incongruity, the radical singularity of the fetish oblige one to think of human desire not as a physiological function that finds its own law in organic nature, but as being completely subjected to the absurd mechanism of imagination, and thus open to accidental or fortuitous events. (73)

Such ideas develop and complicate Geller's gestures towards the semiotic capabilities of the fetish. Configured in such terms, fetishism is freed from the constraints of logical physical relationships, subject to rules whose effects become increasingly difficult to trace. These rules, established and followed only by the dictates of imagination, allow for critical flexibility at the same time

as they complicate the task of the critic. Fetishism emerges as not so much a cohesive body of thought as an adaptable set of tools and techniques.

This flexibility is most clearly evident in the sets of definitions that critics employ when discussing fetishism. Geller's article, for example, explores how the colonial origins of the term are recast in Marxist and Freudian theory. More recent post-Freudian critics (unmentioned in Geller's analysis) attempt some form of synthesis between these Marxist and Freudian techniques, and recent scholarship has set out to undermine the distinction between the domains altogether. A 2004 essay collection focused on fetishism through the work of Marx, Freud and Jacques Lacan, whereas Emily Apter introduces the topic (and her monograph) using the work of Marx, Freud and Baudrillard (1). Amanda Fernbach critiques Freudian fetishism in order to "draw attention to the inability of classical psychoanalysis to adequately explain fetishism", favouring a model of "cultural fetishism" in its stead (6). Other theorists merge elements to create distinctive models of fetishism, or employ the work of one or more of the major twentieth century theorists who have attempted an analysis of the topic. These include Homi Bhabha, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, who have all exerted a significant influence on subsequent studies of fetishism.

Homi Bhabha is one of only two post-Freudian fetish-critics (alongside Geller himself and Anne McClintock) that Geller discusses in his definition of the term, describing how he "read the racial stereotype in its multiple and contradictory shapes of colonial discourse in terms of fetishism" (3046). In Bhabha's text, fetishism functions as an analogous process to "the recognition of cultural and racial difference and its disavowal" within "the discourse of colonial power" (26). Bhabha explicitly (and uncritically) employs the Freudian perception of fetishism to accomplish this, associations with metaphor and metonymy that are influenced by the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan. Such techniques afford his analysis the pliability necessary to critique colonial stereotypes. Claiming that "fetishism is always a 'play' or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity", Bhabha utilises the inherent pliability of fetishism for explicitly political purposes, reconsidering the stereotype as "the desire for an originality... threatened by differences of race, colour and culture" (27). Bhabha thus demonstrates that a fetishist approach can be developed which extends the scope of the initial definition,

appropriating its strategies towards new ends. Like many of the best critics writing on fetishism, Bhabha is not dismissive of the Freudian approach as much as he is intrigued by the range of its potential applications.

Jean Baudrillard adopts a similar appropriative strategy in a chapter on fetishism and ideology which predates Bhabha's essay<sup>7</sup>, offering a means of interpreting fetishism which unites several separate 'strands'. Baudrillard's work is heavily influenced by the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism – a theory which, as discussed earlier, utilised the metaphor of fetishism to depict the alienating effects of capitalist exchange. Baudrillard highlights the importance of Marx to an understanding of fetishism, yet appears to be simultaneously bound to psychoanalytic interpretation.

Describing fetishism as “a passion for the code” (92), Baudrillard reconsiders the central categories of the subject by arguing that it represents a “generalized code of signs, an arbitrary code of differences” (91) rather than any innate values. As such, the fetishist creates a sense of unity that denies the complexity and incoherence of lived reality - Freudian fetishism represents another aspect of a desperate semiological struggle to find “possible objects of a security-giving worship” (95). Baudrillard thus synthesizes the three main aspects of fetishism identified thus far; the creation of a “fetishist metaphor” through colonial discourse and the recasting of this metaphor in psychoanalytic and Marxist theory as an ideological function (88). Fetishism becomes a means a means of reconsidering ideology itself, which is portrayed as establishing and continuing power relationships in its prioritizing of homogenisation over differentiation.

Perhaps most significant in the usage of fetishism as an interpretative tool has been the work of Jacques Lacan, whose concepts of fetishism derived directly from Freud's writings on the subject. Lacan's work is as significant for its effect on subsequent scholarship on fetishism as it is valuable in its own right. Much recent work on fetishism has approached the topic from the perspective of female fetishism, a concept which directly contradicts both

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<sup>7</sup> Although Baudrillard's article was not collected in English until 1981, the essay from which the chapter would emerge was published in journal form in 1970 and appeared in a collected volume in 1972, both in French. Similarly, Bhabha's 1983 essay would gain more recognition when it appeared in his monograph *The Location of Culture* in 1994 – making claims for continuous trends in theories of fetishism problematic.

Freud's writings and the Lacanian constructions of female sexuality that derive from them. As late as 1994, Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen discuss how "when [they] started to write this book [they] were surprised that the idea that women do *not* fetishize was still taken for granted" (1). In correcting this perceived imbalance, critics expanded the scope of the term itself. Although Lacan's own work will not be analysed in this thesis, the legacy of his work is highly visible in research into Roth's uses of gender that will feature in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

The work of Slavoj Žižek utilises the ideas of several of these critics; his 1997 monograph *The Plague of Fantasies* includes a substantial chapter on fetishism. Žižek's work is particularly intriguing in that it concerns itself with the limitations of freedom in psychoanalytic practice; a concern that Roth's narrators frequently contend with. Žižek's theories are derived from a desire to forge continuities between Freudian and Marxist conceptions of fetishism, and he often utilises the work of Lacan to forge these connections. For example, in stating that the "Gaze[...] can function as the fetish-object par excellence" (132), Žižek is building upon a critique of Lacan that emerges from feminist interpretations of Lacan's work. Configured in this manner, Žižek's work becomes particularly interested in how, in Lacan's work, the fetish "functions simultaneously as the representative of the Other's inaccessible depth and as its exact opposite, as the stand-in for that which the Other itself lacks" (132). Žižek's use of the term thus hinges on the same sense of unknowability that underpins many theoretical interpretations of the topic, embracing the sense of wilful paradox that many critics, regardless of their particular perspective, have noted as being a key aspect of fetishism.

As Žižek's work suggests, female fetishism represents a large body of work which often derives from a critique of Freudian and Lacanian ideas on the subject. By placing the castration complex at the core of his rereading of Freud, Lacan places a deal of emphasis on the process of fetishism, which is configured as an aspect of the complex in Freud's later writings. As Anne McClintock argues, "the Lacanian fixation on the 'phallus' and the primary scene of castration itself displays a nostalgia for a single, male myth of origins and a fetishistic disavowal of difference" (2). The fetish, rather than being a phallic symbol, is placed "at the crossroads of a crisis in social meaning",

allowing the origins of fetishism to be depicted as a series of separate genealogies rather than the homogenous model proposed by Freud (6).

Theories such as those depicted by McClintock even have their own critical genealogy. Though initiated by Film theorists who analysed the male gaze in fetishistic terms, most critics of female fetishism agree that the concept emerged as a literary-theoretical idea in an essay by Naomi Schor, published in 1985. Schor argues that Sand depicts an “insistent and troubling *bisexuality*” in her work, a blurring of female identities and a playfulness regarding difference which refuses the model of castration (307). Fetishism thus offers a “paradigm of undecidability” which can allow for a review of the gendered limits of the concept (306). However, Schor admits to a “certain unease” over the “constellation of misogynistic connotations” that are conjured by the use of the word ‘fetishism’ (309).

Thus founded in uncertainty, feminist fetish-scholarship has resisted a homogenous interpretation of Lacan’s ideas. Even Schor’s adherence to some aspects of a Lacanian worldview has been criticised by McClintock for retaining the primacy of a logic perceived to be phallogentric. Schor’s work was also influential in Marjorie Garber’s analysis of fetishism in her 1992 monograph *Vested Interests*, which argues that “the concept of “normal” sexuality, that is to say, of heterosexuality, is founded on the naturalisation of the fetish” (119). Seen in these terms, fetishism calls into question basic notions of gender and sexual difference.

A survey of theories of fetishism reveals the difficulty of consensus as well as the multifaceted uses that the term has withstood. As Alisdair Pettinger opines, despite the problems associated with the term, “we will be condemned, at least for the foreseeable future, to remain under its spell” (93). This fate does not have to be negative. With indecipherability comes pliability, and with pliability comes an ever-increasing field of dialogues on the subject. These dialogues have revealed how fetishism can be both a subject (the study of perverse sexual inclinations) and a method (a means of exposing machinations). This perspective affords a pivotal role to the work of Sigmund Freud, whose work remains a necessary juncture in contemporary theories of fetishism. This repeated theme necessitates a re-evaluation of Freud’s own writing on the subject, which has itself been a site of contested interpretation.

The critics listed above by no means represent a complete cross-section of ideas and discussions about fetishism, but they combine to demonstrate the way in which the term has infiltrated different debates. There are some areas of discussion that the preceding analysis has elided or minimised, including the influence of fetishism within queer theory, but these discussions would only reinforce the pivotal idea that fetishism eludes definition, exposes paradoxes and inspires argument. Any critic attempting to come up with a theory of fetishism would be obliged to consider a spectrum of debate that ranges over much of late twentieth century critical theory, not to mention a sphere of subsequent discussions that have deepened analysis without offering a stable definition for the term. However, given the nature of Roth's interest in sex (that is, combative and heterosexual), the theories that remain of most interest for analyses of his work are those most related to the work of Sigmund Freud.

## **1.2 Fetishism in Freudian Psychoanalysis and Early Sexology**

Fetishism is initially described by Freud as an aspect of sexual deviance in *Three Essays on Sexuality* – a major work first published in 1905, with revised editions appearing in 1909, 1914 and 1920. Freud argues that the sexual object (the person from whom attraction proceeds) and the sexual aim (the act itself) represent two separate spheres of study which create the normative model from which deviances emerge. Deviances in terms of sexual aim include those described by Freud's predecessors as 'perversions', yet Freud enlarges this category to include non-procreative practices, such as kissing. These actions function either as an extension of genital anatomy to other parts of the body, or as a lingering over stages in sex that are typically seen as intermediate points leading towards the "final sexual aim" of penetrative intercourse (150). Fetishism is placed in the former domain, the final category of genital overextension.

Freud describes fetishism as a situation in which “the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim” (153). He thus delineates a definition of fetishism in which the phenomenon results in a diminution of conventional sexual aims present in normal love, and becomes pathological when interest in the fetish displaces the normal sexual aim. Following this, Freud describes a second aspect of fetish choice in which connections are unconscious and symbolic, linked to sexual experiences in childhood. Freud offers a few examples in later footnotes added to the *Essays*, particularly focusing on smell and foot fetishism - the latter offering the first link between fetishism and the castration complex.

Discussing the phenomenon, Freud is careful to describe how fetishism is “seldom felt by [its adherents] as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering” (151), placing it on the borders of psychoanalytic practice. Despite his resultant claim that “no other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest” (153), Freud only discusses fetishism as an aspect of anatomical overextension in detail in ‘On Fetishism’, a short essay published in 1927. Freud reconciles the pathological complexities of fetishism into an aspect of the castration complex, noting that it illustrates his concept of disavowal – a means of ‘solving’ the castration complex by assuming that the female penis does exist, but has simply changed form. Freud also develops the idea that fetishism results in a lowered conventional sex drive by arguing that an aversion to female genitals is “never absent in any fetishist” (353).

In her editorial notes for ‘On Fetishism’, Angela Richards argues that the essay is more significant for its exploration of disavowal than it is for its expansion of thought on fetishism itself (348). Freud’s depiction of fetishism combines many aspects of its earlier depiction in *Three Essays*, in particular its masculine character and its deleterious effects upon conventional sexual aims. However, the two texts are far from being perfectly aligned. In depicting castration as the dominant force in determining fetishism, Freud reduces the “convergence of several motive forces” in the sexual instinct to a single concept (*A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works* 76). This allows Jay Geller to summarise Freudian fetishism as an extended form of castration anxiety, yet Freud’s own conclusions are considerably muddled.



An analysis of Freudian fetishism creates as many questions as it seeks to answer - nor are theoretical inconsistencies between Freud's two major writings on fetishism the only instance in which the topic becomes problematic. As feminist critics of Freud have noted, fetishism is primarily focused on male sexuality, denying the existence of the phenomenon in female patients. For example, in *Three Essays* Freud claims that all his claims for anatomical overextension are "best studied in men" and that female equivalents are "still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity" (151). In a footnote to the 1920 edition of *Three Essays* Freud develops this observation by claiming that women do not demonstrate anatomical overextension towards men, but may do so towards their children (151). By means of explanation, Freud argues that female hysteria functions as a counterpart to masculine fetishism, the two being linked by their viewing of genitals as objects of disgust. However, even this model is rendered problematic - between the 1905 and 1920 definitions of gendered fetishism, Freud claimed that "all women are clothes fetishists" ('Freud and Fetishism' 156). Such incongruities are not unusual in Freud's writings. An analysis of the various texts in which Freud mentions fetishism (however briefly) reveals that such incongruities become an integral part of theories on the topic.

In an essay offering a new perspective on Freudian fetishism, Donovan Miyasaki discusses how "the non-pathological fetishist evades the construction of gender in terms of sexual roles and that, consequently, fetishism can serve as a critique of Freud's masculine model of sexual instinct and relation" (289). Miyasaki notes that Freud's construction of gender in fetishism is part of a process of gender construction that is oppositional, with masculine roles as active and feminine roles as passive. The particular importance of castration in fetishism, argues Miyasaki, affords the fetishist a perception that does not merely disavow female difference; "by attributing a phallus to women, the fetishist attributes sexual *subjectivity* to them" (292). Moreover, this can be extended to undermine the essentialist, binary categories of gender that Freud has superficially advocated. As Miyasaki describes, "to the fetishist[...] the anatomical difference of gender is without significance" (293) - a position afforded to the fetishist by the same emphasis on the missing phallus that has been traditionally constructed as misogynist. Miyasaki concludes by discussing how the possibility of non-pathological fetishism within Freud's work allows for

the undermining of the need for dominance that Freud attributes to the masculine role. Miyasaki's argument is useful not only for its suggestion that Freudian fetishism is more complex than it has often been assumed to be, but also for the fact that this complexity is internal to Freud's descriptions of the phenomenon. Using the work of critics like Miyasaki, it becomes possible to view fetishism as reflecting productive inconsistencies within Freud's work. Extending this perspective to Freud's work as a whole, fetishism emerges as a problem whose lack of a solution is its most interesting feature.

Louis Rose includes 14 separate works in a 'Bibliography of Freud's works containing references to fetishism', including 9 written between the publication of *Three Essays* and *On Fetishism*<sup>8</sup>. These references reveal the extent of uses to which Freud employs fetishism, highlighting trends which further complicate the theoretical transition noted earlier. As Freud himself notes in *On Fetishism*, a link between fetishism and castration was first posited in 1910's *A Memory of Leonardo da Vinci and his Childhood* – a passing reference to foot fetishism which was stated "without any reason being given for it" (349). Foot fetishism also occurs briefly in 1907's *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's 'Gradiva'*, in which a narrator's sexual preferences are linked to the "immature erotism of childhood" in the form of a direct connection; positing a direct cause-and-effect relationship with an earlier experience which has no explicit connection to the castration complex (*Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works* 46). Freud echoes his previous work in *Three Essays* in affirming the general conclusions of earlier theorists of fetishism.

In a similar fashion, Freud's post-1927 references to fetishism aim to support the conclusions generated in *On Fetishism*. Rather than critically appraise his material, Freud reaffirms his commitment to a castration-oriented model of fetishism. In 1935's *An Autobiographical Study* Freud critically appraises his recent work, including a frank admission in the essay's postscript:

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<sup>8</sup> This number is itself uncertain. Rose mistakenly labels Freud's 1935 essay 'An Autobiographical Study' as dating from 1925, but also chooses not to include Freud's 1909 paper *On The Genesis of Fetishism*, of which only the minutes of the meeting at which it was presented remain (these minutes are, however, the primary topic of Rose's article).

Threads which in the course of my development had become intertwined have now begun to separate; interests which I acquired in the later part of my life have receded, while the older and original ones become prominent once more. It is true that in this last decade I have carried out some important pieces of analytic work, such as the simple explanation of sexual 'fetishism' which I was able to make in 1927.

(82)

Freud brackets fetishism as an "older and original" interest, whilst simultaneously expressing pride at the manner in which his reconsidering of the topic has proceeded. That the 1927 essay is considered a return to previous analysis is complicated by the fact that Freud makes no reference in 'On Fetishism' (or in any of his subsequent writing on fetishism) to his consideration of the topic in the *Three Essays*. Moreover, Freud's acceptance of his conclusions allow for the development of the topic in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* and *The Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence*, incomplete works published after Freud's death in 1939. From being a multifaceted source of analysis in earlier work, an idea often grounded in coprophilic associations of smell, Freudian fetishism ends as a castration-motivated mechanism for coming to terms with contradictory ideas<sup>9</sup>.

This increasingly unstable narrative has been further complicated by the 1988 publication of minutes from a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society which features Freud's paper *On the Genesis of Fetishism*, presented in 1909 and previously assumed to be lost. Whereas Freud's work on fetishism in *Three Essays* and *On Fetishism* posit two separate starting points, Louis Rose (translator of the minutes) describes the material as "[Freud's] first paper on the phenomenon of fetishism" (147), creating another point from which analysis of the topic can commence. The detailed nature of Otto Rank's minutes allows insight into the ideas Freud discussed in his as-yet undiscovered paper, whereas the Society's discussion of the paper reveals that

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<sup>9</sup> Freud's use of fetishism also includes references in a more explicitly anthropological (as opposed to metaphorical) context in 1913's *Totem and Taboo* and 1930's *Civilisation and Its Discontents*; however, neither text makes any reference to his use of the term in the context of sexual perversion.

many of the issues which subsequent critics would raise with regards to Freud's theory of fetishism were anticipated in its nascent stages.

Freud's paper describes the history of sexual fetishism in sexology, making clear where his theory departs from the work of his predecessors. Freud differentiates "cases that genuinely deserve the name fetishism" from instances of more straightforward sexual preference, distinguishing fetishism by its complexity – "something puzzling" rather than "things which we can grasp and distinguish exactly" (153). Pathological fetishism is diagnosed at the point when the fetish cannot be viewed as an act of reminiscence or a prerequisite for love, but where it stems from a repressed memory which becomes subsequently (and unconsciously) idealised.

This model is supported by 3 case studies (a clothes fetishist, a boot fetishist and a hand fetishist) which supposedly exemplify different means by which "we find a lost instinctual pleasure, but the direct object of its complex is separated from the instinct and rises to a fetish" (157). Freud thus maintains the absence of specific references to castration at the same point as he acknowledges the obscuring and duplicitous nature of the fetish itself. This desire to "solve" fetishism through a reliance on complexity was not universally accepted at the meeting itself. Discussion of Freud's paper highlights many issues on which the castration model of fetishism would be attacked: Eduard Hitschmann questioned the gendering of fetishism (160), Paul Federn questioned whether a fetishist is truly capable of standard sexual intercourse (161) and Alfred Adler attacked Freud on the basis that fetishism is a part of every neurotic analysis, and not worthy of specific categorisation (163). The discontent and disagreement that fetishism created in the late twentieth century are particularly visible in the first two criticisms, whereas Adler's argument for the specificity of sexual fetishism itself can be traced in the work of other critics commenting on Freud's work.

Andreas De Block's reading of Freudian fetishism, for example, employs the familiar argument that Freud's use of fetishism to answer a specific problem betrays the inherently multifaceted and universal nature of the phenomenon: Freud's scope, in other words, is too narrow. De Block's essay is particularly important in its discussion of Freud's use of fetishism in *The Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence*, and its desire to expand

fetishism outside the concept of sexuality altogether. De Block's essay states that "fetishes are not always genital constructions", but can be "'indices' or 'markers' of diverse, non-genital qualities" (95). He thus takes Adler's suspicions to the extreme, viewing fetishism as a common feature of all interpersonal relationships, including non-sexual friendship. As "a symbol, but not always a symptom" (96), fetishism becomes a means interpreting signals whose pathological aspects are best explained through other Freudian concepts – rather than reading disavowal and splitting through fetishism, De Block argues that repression and compromise formation are adequate for clinical diagnosis. De Block's position represents a challenge to those who would view fetishism as a distinct phenomenon, and its perpetually liminal position as an incitement to further critical engagement.

Freud reconciles fetishism as a method and as an activity through the castration complex, but accepting this move implies an acceptance of Freud's definition of fetishism, which itself is problematic. De Block is right to question Freud's process, which is complex and contradictory, but may be hasty in citing such discrepancies as grounds for dismissing the phenomenon outright. By reading the origins of fetishism as they were interpreted and developed by Freud, a sense of the clinical importance of fetishism as a diagnostic tool emerges, allowing for the creation of a counter-argument to De Block's scepticism.

In an editorial for a 1993 issue of *New Formations* on the topic of perversity, Judith Squires utilises the terms 'perversity' and 'fetishism' as virtual synonyms, highlighting how definitions of the terms emerged as part of the same critical movement whose definitions are still largely used in contemporary critical discourse (v). Similarly, in *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes fetishism as "the model perversion" in the emergent field of sexology during the late nineteenth century – a claim often assumed by fetish-theorists when discussing pre-Freudian notions of sexual fetishism (154). The relationship between fetishism and perversion is complex, variable depending on the historical context in which the terms are employed. The development of early sexological definitions becomes crucial for understanding how they are utilised in Freud's writing, and hence in the history of theoretical writing on fetishism itself. Freudian fetishism, (particularly in *Three Essays*) helped deconstruct the notion of perversity as an exclusively pathological

phenomenon, but does so by citing the work of earlier authors – raising a number of issues in the process.

Although Jay Geller's argument that Freud broke from religious terminology in his definition of fetishism is viable (despite the fact that Freud did use the term in this context later in his career), his definition stresses relationships to previous works which deserve to be scrutinised. This necessitates a re-evaluation of the two early works of fetishistic sexology mentioned by Geller, Alfred Binet's *Fetishism in Love* and Richard Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. It also requires a re-evaluation of the idea that Freud's work represented a change from "the perception of fetishism as a sign of a crisis in difference, the degeneration feared by the French medical community" ('Fetishism' 3046) – an argument explicitly supported in Freud's own writing, which states that "it may well be asked whether an attribution of 'degeneracy' is of any value or adds anything to our knowledge" (*A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works* 138).

Fetishism may have represented part of a broader movement towards analyses of sexual deviancy, but it is as problematic to view early work on fetishism as directly enabling Freud's theories as it is to view Freud's own work as internally consistent. Expanding analysis of fetishism to pre-Freudian theory is, however, a complex endeavour, entailing engagement with wildly divergent theories of sexuality. As described by Robert Nye, Foucault's construction of a history of fetishism in early sexology begins in 1877, after which fetishism becomes "the guiding thread for analysing all the other deviations" (20). Although Nye is keen to highlight the uncritical manner in which Foucault's 'model perversion' phrase has been critically accepted, he acknowledges that "the medical literature is fully supportive of the general point and the date is adequately approximate" (20). Nor is the issue of date and prominence the only area open to discussion. Daniel Pick has argued that fetishism was not a unified theme in European medical discourse as much as it was a reflection of trends and theories constructed on a national and linguistic basis – French, Italian and English respectively (3-5). Nye develops this idea one step further, arguing that fetishism "first arose in French psychiatry and was only later integrated into other psychiatric nosologies, including that of Sigmund Freud" (14). The genesis of fetishism is rendered even more complicated by the term's

relationship to theories of degeneration – a link only briefly mentioned by Geller, but one which has come to preoccupy historians of sexuality.

Alfred Binet's *Fetishism in Love*, first published in 1887 as *Le Fétichisme Dans L'Amour*<sup>10</sup>, is widely acknowledged to be the first instance in which fetishism was discussed in the context of sexuality. Arguing that “everyone is more or less fetishistic in love”, Binet describes pathological fetishism as “the exaggeration of a normal taste” existing in either a ‘great’ or ‘small’ form; easily recognisable preferences and less visible quirks respectively. His essay also describes the difference between ‘spiritual’ love focused on ineffable qualities and ‘plastic’ love focused on “a body part of the beloved” – thus fetishism, in Binet’s terms, differs by degree and by form. Binet’s theories also have much in common with those found in Freud’s *Three Essays*, including ideas such as the diminution of conventional erotic desire in fetishist individuals and, most importantly, the “association of ideas” that initially produces a fetish<sup>11</sup>.

Although Binet’s conclusions are often accepted by Freud, with minor revisions to his conclusions, the relationship between the two texts is largely adversarial. Robert Nye notes that Binet “set the whole problem of fetishism against the background of cultural crisis and exhaustion”, following a trend established in earlier papers by French writers (20). An 1882 paper by Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin Magnan is described as employing fetishism as a “semiological variation of degeneracy” (Nye 20) – although they refer to the phenomenon by other names<sup>12</sup>. Late nineteenth century French medical research is thus viewed as being burdened by collective fears over a loss of geopolitical prestige and a rapidly declining birth rate, meaning that:

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<sup>10</sup> In the absence of a commonly available English translation of Binet’s essay, all translations are the author’s own.

<sup>11</sup> Though not phrased in terms as explicit as those in Freud’s *Three Essays*, there is ample evidence in Binet’s text to justify this: the text claims that “fetishism, when pushed to the extreme, tends to induce continence” and that “sometimes the perversion of [fetishists] is so charged that it leaves no room for normal sexual intercourse”.

<sup>12</sup> Charcot himself would later mentor first Binet (1883) and then Freud (1885) during his tenure as director of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Freud even translated many of Charcot’s speeches into German.

The medical concept of degeneration was the perfect scientific model for explaining how a kind of retrogression was operating to degrade both the bodies and minds of its victims, spreading its hereditary stain generation after generation until an infected line died out through sterility. (15)

Nye argues that this “atmosphere of crisis” led to a “traditional emphasis on marital sexuality” which Binet remained bound to (19). Binet’s text is described as maintaining a hereditary aspect to fetishism which allows for diagnoses of degeneracy, which Freud was to denounce as being of little use. Nye’s criticism points towards an inconsistency in Binet’s theory, a desire to develop a symptomatic approach that denies the “hereditary madness of degenerates” at the same time as it replicates that logic – an idea supported by Alisdair Pettinger, who views Binet’s essay as part of a eugenic pursuit of classification which viewed perversion as “less what a person does than a reflection of who a person is” (87). Freud is depicted as working himself free from the ideological constraints that hamper Binet’s essay, creating “a powerful analytic matrix of symptoms, disturbances, and neuroses associated with the castration complex” in his later work (Nye 30). Nye valorises the transition to complexity whilst ignoring the problems and contradictions such a transition entails, glossing over the differences between the two ‘domains’ of Freudian fetishism in a similar manner to Freud himself. Nye is thus more successful in complicating the notion of Binet as an origin-point for sexual fetishism than he is in arguing for Freud’s role in rehabilitating the concept.

A wariness over the theoretical distance between Freud and the unsavoury side of early sexology may be well justified. Ideas of degeneration may appear in Freud’s work alongside theories of fetishism borrowed from earlier works, a link which Nye’s essay seems hesitant to draw. Such connections suggest an increasingly complex relationship between Freud and his predecessors; take, for example, the concerns over fetishist impotence mentioned earlier. The idea that fetishist sexuality results in a decrease in conventional erotic desire may be a relatively uncontroversial idea in itself, but in its implicit anxiety over a diminution in procreative intercourse it bears a close relationship with concerns over degeneration. These concerns are highlighted in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a work by Richard Krafft-Ebing first published in 1886 and



continuously revised until the author's death in 1902. Discussing fetishism in a revision to his text which responded to Binet's ideas on fetishism, Krafft-Ebing notes that

the body-fetishist is not to be regarded as a monstrum per excessum, like the sadist or the masochist, but rather as a monstrum per defectum. What stimulates him is not abnormal, but rather what does not affect him – the limitation of sexual interest that has taken place in him. (220)

Krafft-Ebing argues that fetishism becomes pathological when it diminishes conventional erotic interests, which allows him to claim that pathological fetishism is formed “on the basis of a psychopathic constitution that is for the most part hereditary, or on the basis of existent mental disease” (221). Freud's acceptance of the relationship between fetishism and impotence in the *Three Essays* does not extend as far as to make clear the non-hereditary basis of such a link, even if the later integration of fetishism into the castration complex implicitly contends with the issue.

Although Krafft-Ebing is willing to follow many of Binet's ideas, including that of a formative fetish-experience which has since been forgotten, his recasting of Binet's categories of 'great' or 'small' fetishism into pathological diagnoses gestures towards a fundamental ideological split between the two writers. It also suggests a second continuity between Krafft-Ebing's degenerative fetishism and Freud's ideas – a pathological conception of infantile sexuality which influenced both Binet and Krafft-Ebing's work. The split in early fetish-theory is explored in detail by Frank Sulloway, whose biography of Freud gestures towards continuities with degeneration theory. Sulloway describes how theories of fetishism were split into four 'camps' derived from two basic positions; the degenerative, societal diagnostics of Krafft-Ebing versus the symptomatic approach of theorists like Binet. However, as shown by Nye, Binet's work retained some links to degeneration theory – a position Sulloway affirms in stating that Binet's “seeming rejection of congenital degeneration” masks a “passive support” for the idea (286).

Sulloway argues that Krafft-Ebing's links to concerns over degeneration can be traced to his privileging of "clinical zeal" over "psychological clarity", as well as his use of atypical case studies – many of which were garnered from criminal proceedings (284). Sulloway describes how this extreme approach derives from an assumption that precocious sexuality reflects a tainted, innate personality trait. In contrast, Binet believed that "precocious sexuality had provided the morbid mechanism" of fetishism – although both theorists maintain that such precocious sexuality is a "typical sign of neuropathic degeneration" (Sulloway 289). Although Freud was to critique this assumption in a later footnote to *Three Essays*, his reluctance to criticise Binet's assumptions in earlier work is telling – and is not an isolated incident. Sulloway argues that Freud gives "qualified support" to degeneration theory in noting cases of paternal syphilis in severely psychoneurotic patients, a link which he would reaffirm in later work (297).

*Psychopathia Sexualis* may contain aspects of degeneration in its section on fetishism, yet other parts of the text make explicit a degenerative-pathological view of sexuality, providing what Sander Gilman calls "a skeletal framework of mankind according to sexual principles" ('Sexology, Psychoanalysis and Degeneration' 78). Gilman discusses how notions of "savage degeneracy" were seen as part of a broader project to promote the values of Christianity, creating an anthropological judgment-mechanism strikingly similar to that used in definitions of fetishism that emerge from a colonial and Christian context. In early theories of degeneration "perversion is the basic quality of the Other", whereas "Individual perversion is thus seen as proof of the perversion of the group", allowing for individual diagnoses to function as part of a broader social critique ('Sexology, Psychoanalysis and Degeneration' 73).

Gilman provides a brief history of degeneration in order to explore its relation to nascent Freudian psychoanalysis, implicitly expanding upon Sulloway's suggestion that the influence of degeneration theories is detectable in Freud's early work. Gilman's analysis is important for two reasons; it creates a new genealogy of degeneration in Freud's work, and it suggests that Freud's attempt to dismiss theories of degeneration may not have been entirely successful. As Gilman describes, Freud was to employ aspects of degeneration theory in a series of early works published between 1894 and 1896, only

offering an initial critique of the term in an 1897 paper. By 1917, degeneration is described as “a label for the Other, specifically the Other as the essence of pathology”: a view which would be expressed in more strident terms in two 1920 essays, in which degeneration was rejected as “a faulty designation for the sexually pathological, inherent, immutable” (*'Sexology, Psychoanalysis and Degeneration'* 84). Freud thus constructs sexuality as the antithesis of degeneracy, relegating the latter term to the domain of political rhetoric.

Gilman gestures towards a problem in this view of Freud's writing on degeneration, noting that ideas of degeneration feature in *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, dating from 1913 and 1930 respectively – works in which the original, anthropological definition of fetishism also appears. Gilman argues that “the explanation of the dark centre of human history, like the mirage of degeneracy, turns out to be an inner fear of that hidden within us and projected onto the world”, a theory he traces back to Freud being ascribed the qualities of the Other (*'Sexology, Psychoanalysis and Degeneration'* 89). Though Gilman does not elaborate on this link, it suggests an important series of mechanisms which appear fundamentally fetishistic in nature. Using degeneration theory, Freud seeks to disavow his status as Other in a manner that ultimately serves to highlight the very difference he had sought to undermine.

Degeneration does not simply represent the flipside to fetishism, nor is it an anachronism which had been disavowed by the time of Freud's rise to prominence. As a partially concurrent critical trend, degeneration intersects with theories of fetishism in diverse ways. This concurrence is not a purely historical trend. As fetishism rose to prominence as a means of interpreting diverse phenomena in the late twentieth century, so did an interest in theories of degeneration – a movement which saw reprints of many key works of degeneration (including Eugene Talbot's *Degeneration: Its Causes, Signs and Results* and Max Nordau's *Degeneration*) and a large body of critical work (including Daniel Pick's monograph *Faces of Degeneration* and an essay collection edited by Sander Gilman and J. Edgar Chamberlin, from which the essay above was taken).

The link between fetishism and degeneration as interpretative tools may be more profound than many critics have been willing to acknowledge. In

conjuring questions of definition and pathology, the terms enable debate rather than provide concrete conceptual schema, drawing together a range of concerns about gender, sexual and ethnic identities. It is this idea of multivalent meaning that allows Daniel Pick to argue that

Degeneration was never reduced to a fixed axiom or theory in the nineteenth century despite the expressed desire to solve the conceptual questions once and for all in definitive texts. Rather it was a shifting term produced, inflected, refined and re-constituted in the movement between human sciences, fictional narratives and socio-political commentaries. It is not possible to trace it to one ideological conclusion, or to locate its identification with a single political message. (7)

Degeneration theories contain within themselves a range of discourses, an idea reflected by the manner in which individual writers define and appropriate the term - fetishism and degeneration share thematic concerns as well as a similar epistemic history. This curiously open-ended range of applications highlights that exploring parallels and continuities between degeneration and fetishism may not be enough. By inverting the relationship posited by Freud (infantile sexuality as a repudiation of pathological degeneration) to explore how degeneration theories contain within themselves a process of proto-fetishistic disavowal, a new means of textual interpretation may emerge. In analysing texts in fetishistic terms, a means of analysis can be generated which evades dogmatic analysis whilst offering connections between thematic domains – exploring contradiction by allowing ideas to be simultaneously over-determined and hidden. Degeneration theory is a good place for such an analysis to start.

### 1.3 Beyond Freud: Fetishism as Technique

Thus far, analysis has focused on the internal complexities of the concept of fetishism, exploring how it has become embroiled in an array of theoretical debates. This internal multiplicity emerges from Freud's work, in which the looseness of its definition allows for a broad reconsideration of his project as a whole. Fetishism has also been shown to be closely related to ideas of degeneration, which in turn allows for a reconsideration of the evolution of sexological discourse itself to reveal 'hidden' themes in Freud's work. Expanding the scope of this revisionist critique, fetishism may even serve as a mode of analysis. By borrowing its sense of thematic interconnection and its wilful embrace of multiple meanings and inconsistencies, it becomes possible to critique thematic aspects of discourse implicit in theories of fetishism.

Borrowing the inherently paradoxical nature of fetishism and expanding its relentless self-problematising into other areas allows for fetishism to function as both a topic and technique. 'Fetishistic' analysis thus probes the boundaries of accepted definitions to show the internal inconsistencies upon which they are founded. One need not look far within the work of Freud and his contemporaries to find equivalent topics whose internal complexities lead to the exposition of a network of indeterminacies. Take, for example, the theme of Jewish identity, which has increasingly become a key area of research amongst scholars of Freud. To say that Jewish identity is fetishistic in Freud's work is to acknowledge that it represents a sphere of debate rather than an incontrovertible marker of identity. Moreover, this allows for a discussion of historical figures who may figure less prominently in considerations of Freud's work.

Max Nordau's *Degeneration* used degeneration theory to form an extended polemic on fin-de-siècle culture, creating such a furore that it "may well have been one of the most controversial best-sellers of the 1890s" (Maik 607). Unlike Krafft-Ebing, whose *Psychopathia Sexualis* utilised degeneration as the basis for discussing sexuality, Nordau discussed a range of literary, artistic and political trends under the rubric of degeneration. Although both texts were to have a significant impact on discussion of sexual pathology, their

intentions differed wildly: *Psychopathia Sexualis* was written in a manner which aimed to prevent mass appeal<sup>13</sup>, whereas Nordau wrote in an accessible, hyperbolic style and furthered the controversy over his text by publicly responding to criticism<sup>14</sup>.

Although Nordau was ethnically Jewish, there are few mentions of Jewish themes in his text. When Judaism is discussed, it is usually utilised to represent the cognitive deficiencies of those Nordau attacks: hence his dismissal of the “bellowing insanity” of Nietzsche’s work on Jewish slave-morality and his inclusion of anti-Semitism as a manifestation of “German hysteria” - a “derangement” which “made the hearts of Wagner-bigots beat faster in blissful emotion when they were listening to his music” (*Degeneration* 209-210). Nordau defines anti-Semitism as a failure to maintain an intellectual equilibrium, an interference of personal bias which overwhelms the work it features in.

Such techniques did not stop some early critics from reminding their readers of this racial dynamic, citing Nordau’s ethnicity as evidence of personal animosity. In a review of a response to *Degeneration* published in the American literary journal *The Bookman*, H.T. Peck referred to Nordau as “a quick-witted Jew, imbued, like many of his race today, with an impenetrable materialism... Nordau is less an individual than a type, and a type raised to the *n*th degree” (403). Peck justifies such attacks by stating that “it is impossible not to reflect upon his character and temperament as revealed in all his published work” (403), although the majority of his criticisms pertain to Nordau’s training and the ignorance of many of his readers. Peck’s attack on Nordau’s Jewishness is mentioned as an aside, yet as the first criticism of his work it inflects his conclusion that Nordau was “himself simply a stray degenerate, raving with foul words at his environment, all interest in him, save as an abnormal type, at once declined” (405). The connection between Jewishness as a recognisable degenerate type, though not explicitly made in Peck’s review, is implicit in the construction of his argument.

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Sulloway discusses how Krafft-Ebing’s use of Latin and scientific terminology functioned as part of a broader project to diminish the sensational character of his work and prevent it (and him) gaining unwanted notoriety (Freud, *Biologist of the Mind* 281).

<sup>14</sup> See Nordau, Max, “A Reply to My Critics”, *The Century*, 28 (1895).

This conclusion fits with a repeated theme in recent scholarship on Nordau. Linda Maik mentions Peck's aside as part of an analysis of the reception of *Degeneration* in America, noting that it was part of a critical trend towards attacking Nordau's style and his ethnic background whilst ignoring many of his more complex sociological arguments. Maik's suggestion that "the linkage of degeneracy, aesthetics and Jewishness was part of the end-of-the-century milieu" (612) gestures towards a curious contradiction in Nordau's work: *Degeneration* created an embodied notion of degeneration within a cultural epoch increasingly preoccupied with the 'degenerate' embodiment of Jews like Nordau himself.

Utilising a definition of degeneration as "a morbid deviation from an original type" (*Degeneration* 16) which he borrowed from Bénédict Morel, Nordau described contemporary culture as enacting "a practical emancipation from traditional discipline" (*Degeneration* 5). Nordau argues that degeneration, though present throughout history, has been exacerbated into a broader societal problem by trends in European culture at the end of the Nineteenth century. The "fin de siècle mood" is described in corporeal terms, depicted as "the impotent despair of a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently for ever" (*Degeneration* 3). Indeed, much of Nordau's subsequent analysis explores deformities and differences in physiology, which he describes as "anatomical phenomena of degeneracy" (*Degeneration* 17). Such observations allow him to claim that European culture is suffering from "nervous irritability" (*Degeneration* 538), creating a community guided by impulse which undermines the frameworks previous generations had constructed. *Degeneration* is thus fixated on the idea that bodily characteristics can become signifiers of difference, and that this process of separation allows for collective diagnoses to be made.

An effect of this collective illness is the inability to accurately interpret signs; Nordau describes how men "do not express their real idiosyncrasies, but try to present something that they are not" (*Degeneration* 9) – yet a similar inversion of identity and symbol occurs in the process by which Nordau assumes and dismisses aspects of his self-identity. Jewishness was a dominant theme in much of Nordau's work after *Degeneration*, reflective of his increasingly prominent role in the emergent Zionist movement. Critics of Nordau's work have increasingly contended with the bizarre combination of

social polemic and ethnic utopia in Nordau's bibliography: for example, Michael Stanislawski describes Nordau as an "improbable bourgeois", arguing that criticism on Nordau can be broadly divided into those viewing Nordau's two spheres of interest as contradictory, and those viewing them as complementary (21).

Representative of the latter school of thought is George Mosse, who argues that Nordau was "a child of his times" who had "internalised the Jewish stereotype" by viewing social outsiders as "abnormal and sick" (565). Nordau is described by Mosse as implicitly acknowledging stereotypes about Jewish bodies by arguing that they needed to be reshaped if Jews were to escape from stereotypical representations (567). Nordau's increasingly enthusiastic interest in gymnastics functions as a means towards the creation of new forms of Jewishness – the 'Muskelfjuden' or 'Muscle Jew' – yet in doing so he advocates a similar corporeal idealism to that found in conventional middle-class values. Mosse thus argues that the idea of a close association between Jews and degenerates (as expressed by writers like H.P. Peck) is recast as a means of survival for Jews: escaping extinction by escaping degeneration. Nordau's ideal Jew is neither covertly assimilationist nor the vessel for an entirely new bodily idealism:

For all his masculinity and physical robustness, the new Jew was integrated into a liberal universe, and not into that modern nationalism which had by Nordau's time co-opted this masculine stereotype. His was a rather unique combination of the old and the new. (Mosse 576)

Mosse argues that Nordau reconciles bourgeoisie fears with liberal humanist notions of nationalism and masculinity, a position he develops by analysing Nordau's uncertain and liminal social position. As a Jewish physician with a Western European education faced with Eastern European social pressures (such as the valorisation of military prowess), Nordau's position in an increasingly volatile political landscape was subject to a number of external forces. Mosse's argument, though a gesture towards an interpretative framework rather than a complete theory in itself, shows that Nordau's interest



in corporeal degeneracy and the Jewish body can thus be read as a response to a set of personal circumstances: a mode of analysis which, in emphasising complexity, paradox and disavowal, is fetishistic in nature. This analytical method bears distinct similarities to more recent psycho-sexual interpretations of Sigmund Freud, suggesting that there may be methodological continuities between Freud and Nordau that are hidden by their superficial theoretical differences.

Sander Gilman's work on representations of Jewish bodies creates a new history of Jewish identity, which he depicts as being both projected upon and internalised by Jews. Although Gilman's work extends beyond the fin-de-siècle period, the preface to his monograph *The Jew's Body* states that "the centre of these essays is Sigmund Freud" (1). Gilman thus uses Freud's work to help argue that "all aspects of the Jew, whether real or invented, are the locus of difference" (*The Jew's Body* 2). *The Jew's Body* focuses on the experience of male Jews, the "body with the circumcised penis" (5) which becomes the central image through which Jewish difference can be analysed.

*The Jew's Body* analyses Jewish identity by examining a series of over-determined symbols. For example, towards the end of his chapter on the Jewish foot, Gilman discusses how Western European Jewish scientists were complicit in depicting the Jewish foot as a symbol of "atavistic" degeneration. Similarly, Gilman's chapter on the Jewish nose describes the common belief amongst physicians that "the Jew's language, the very mirror of his psyche, was the result of the form of the nose" (*The Jew's Body* 180), and thus describes how the history of rhinoplasty bears a relationship to Jewish patients' desire for cultural assimilation. This desire to change one's nose constitutes a desire to cure "the anxiety of being a Jew", rendered futile by the nose being "a fixed, inherent sign of being Jewish" (*The Jew's Body* 190, 180).

In its emphasis on complexity, *The Jew's Body* gestures towards a fetishistic means of interpreting writing by Jews (and particularly Jewish physicians) in order to uncover complicit strategies of disavowal. Notably, this method has been adopted in order to offer a new comparative textual interpretation of Sigmund Freud, analysing intersections between his published theories and his non-clinical writings to expose hidden complexities and

unexpected connections. Chief amongst these theories may be fetishism itself: some critics, in effect, attempt to read fetishism through a fetishist lens.

Jay Geller, whose work was used earlier to provide a general thematic overview, covers Freud's work in more detail in his monograph *On Freud's Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumcisions*. Geller discusses Freud's essay 'On Fetishism', noting that the inclusion of a clinical case study about a patient with a fetish for "a certain sort of shine on the nose" is "simply not needed" for Freud's subsequent discussion of fetishism (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 95). Geller discusses how "the decision to interpose the story of the nose fetishist seems to be marked by the same caprice that marks the fetish" (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 96) – that Freud employs fetishist techniques in discussing fetishism. Noting that Freud's original text describes the 'shine' as a 'glanz' (glance), Geller is nonetheless wary of interpretations that read the 'Glanz' as comparable to the maternal 'glans', thus reproducing the logic of the castration complex. Geller argues for a disavowal closer to the experiences of Freud himself.

Geller illustrates this disavowal by exploring thematic inconsistencies in Freud's work, noting that Freud's early work on fetishism was based on observations about odour and smell – most case studies being of varieties of foot fetishism. Geller notes that this theme, adapted from earlier work by Binet, is disavowed in *On Fetishism*, which posits a generalised model with limited clinical case studies to support it. Geller argues that the disjunction between Freud's two texts about fetishism (*Three Essays* and *On Fetishism*) becomes representative of more than just the emergent complexity in Freud's thinking on the subject, stating that "what the absence of smell – along with the presence of the nose – points to is a miasma of tropes of Jewish difference" (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 101). A study of how the symbol of the Jewish nose has been analysed in critical interpretations of Freudian fetishism highlights the complex thematic intersections that fetishism brings to the forefront.

Geller argues for Jewish subtexts in the history of writing on fetishism, elaborating on parallels between pre-Freudian work on fetishists and contemporary stereotypes about Jews. Moving "from the general notion of fetishism back to the specificity of the exemplary nose in [*On Fetishism*]"

(*Mitigating Circumcisions* 102), Geller introduces Freud's friendship with Wilhelm Fliess, a rhinolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat specialist).

Fliess is acknowledged to be a key influence on the development of Freud's early psychoanalytic writings. For example, in Adam Phillips' recent monograph *Becoming Freud* Freud's friendship and correspondence with Fliess is partly credited with "chang[ing] Freud from being an aspiring neuroanatomist into a pioneering psychoanalyst with a famous name" (125). As Phillips describes the friendship, the intensity of the bond between the two aspiring physicians allowed Freud to indulge "a more wildly speculative self" (100). It is in this tentative and playful correspondence in which Freud first articulates a series of concerns which are definably psychoanalytic in nature, rather than the more conventional medical writing that Freud had published by that point.

Geller's research on this topic is part of a critical trend whose implications are wide-ranging; analysis of nasal symbolism in correspondence between the two physicians has featured prominently in studies of Jewish corporeality. For example, in *The Jew's Body*, Freud is described as a "collaborator" of Fliess, with both believing that "the nose was the developmental analogy to the genitalia" (188). Gilman posits a similar relationship in the construction of Jewish stereotypes: "the specific shape of the Jew's nose indicated the damaged nature, the shortened form, of his penis" (*The Jew's Body* 189). According to Gilman, Fliess' desire to operate on female patients' noses reflected a contemporary image of the Jewish male, and does so through assumptions about female sexuality.

Concerns about feminisation are not the only aspect of disavowal that has been analysed in correspondence between Freud and Fliess. Daniel Boyarin's monograph *Unheroic Conduct* argues that images of Jewish masculinity can be uncovered by an analysis of this friendship between Freud and Fliess, which reveals that "that Oedipus model itself ought to be interpreted as a repression of homosexual desire" (208). Freud gradually replaced hysteria as a diagnostic tool with a model that sought to incorporate its symptoms into his emergent model of the Family Romance. Boyarin reads Freud's own hysteria into his early case histories - narratives of seduction that result in hysterical trauma were thus "projections of Freud's own fantasies and desires" (199). Boyarin

questions why Freud never developed a “negative Oedipal” model in which a male child may feel desire towards his father. He concludes that Freud’s move towards an Oedipal model was a “heteronormatizing” (208) process that sought to repress discussion of homosexual desire.

Boyarin argues that this process is explained by the pathologising of homosexuality and a radicalising of Jewishness, trends occurring simultaneously in fin-de-siècle Western Europe. Boyarin analyses Freud and Fliess’ correspondence in some detail, expanding upon specific uses of language that suggest a homoeroticism later repressed by Freud. Emphasis is placed on Freud’s use of coprophilic language, part of a language of mutual feeling evocative of love letters. Using the associations between “the anus, anal penetration, shit and birth-giving”, Boyarin argues that Freud’s shift to the Oedipal model represented a “suppression of Freud’s own homoeroticism” (205). Boyarin supports this argument by tracing changes in the “main male protagonist” of Freud’s work, a shift from “what was gendered female, bent and Jewish in his fin-de-siècle world, to what was gendered male, straight and Aryan” (220). Gilman views the Jewish nose as a multivalent symbol in fin-de-siècle culture – Boyarin develops this observation by exploring how Freud’s own theories of nasality mask homoerotic and Jewish associations.

In ‘On Fetishism’, Freud suggests that the confusion created by the castration complex is solved by the male child in a manner that either leads to successful reconciliation, homosexuality or fetishism. Boyarin’s argument suggests that the division between these three categories may be deconstructed by a closer analysis of Freud’s writing. The division between ‘normal’ sexuality and homosexuality becomes increasingly problematic, whereas an emphasis on defecation as symbolising a fantasy of male childbirth suggests the coprophilic pleasure in smell that Geller argues is subsumed in Freud’s writing on fetishism. Indeed, Boyarin’s observations originate in an earlier paper by Geller which explored the link between nasality and homoeroticism in correspondence between Freud and Fliess<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See Geller, Jay. “(G)nos(e)ology: The Cultural Construction of the Other” in *People of The Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed Howard Eilberg-Schwartz. Albany: SUNY, 1992.

Geller's later work explicitly links these trends to fetishism. Returning to the topic in a chapter in *Mitigating Circumcisions*, Geller notes Freud's claim that fetishism "saves the fetishist from becoming homosexual" (quoted in *Mitigating Circumcisions* 104)), arguing that the nose can serve as a substitute for Wilhelm Fliess as well as for the absent maternal phallus. Geller argues that Fliess' interest in the association between the nose and female genitalia allows Freud to "disavow his unmaning" – his own feminisation and homosexualisation (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 104). Freud's discussion of the nose functions as a "fetishized discourse" in itself, which exposes both homosexuality (in the case of Fliess) and issues of ethnic identity (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 103).

Geller depicts fetishism as having close connections with both Jewish identity and the "socially threatening feminine"<sup>16</sup> by arguing that "circumcision, for the uncircumcised, calls forth the castration complex and elicits horror" (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 104). There is thus an inverse relationship between circumcision (which asserts the threat of castration only to deny it) and fetishism (which disavows castration only to affirm it). Geller argues that extending this relationship to bodily representations allows the circumcised Jew to be depicted as "the inverse of the fetishized woman" (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 104). Jewish identity, rather than embodying masculinity, inhabits a border space which questions gender difference. Like Boyarin, Geller concludes that this destabilised normative notions of "male bourgeois identity" (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 105), yet argues that Freud's discussion of the "glance at the nose" functions as means of disavowing conceptions of Jewish perversity at the expense of Jewish identity. Fetishism becomes a "token of triumph over the threat of Jewish difference and a protection against it" (*Mitigating Circumcisions* 109).

Geller and Boyarin's texts reveal fetishism and its related terms to be associated with a series of concerns about Jewish, gender and sexual identities in Freud's own writing. Following such arguments, Freud's attempt to resolve his own form of castration complex by addressing his Jewishness may be

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<sup>16</sup> The idea of a threatening femininity which fetishism helps disavow has been well-discussed in feminist re-interpretations of the topic. Louise J. Kaplan's discussion of Freud's work explores this disavowal as a basis for a rereading of fetishism itself. See Kaplan, Louise J, *Cultures of Fetishism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

doomed to failure. Whether this failure results in the emergence of repressed homosexual desires or makes Freud into a fetishist himself remains unclear, and may even be irrelevant within the scope of this project. This analysis can only gesture towards new types of problems - those that emerge through the desire to find connections between the networks of concerns that an exploration of fetishism highlights. In Freud's work, Jewish bodily identity becomes increasingly associated with a range of discourses which affect the development and internal coherence of psychoanalytic concepts like fetishism.

## **1.4 From Fetish to Text**

The inconsistencies and paradoxes inherent to fetishism mask a range of discourses and inconsistencies. This sense of fundamental interconnection and indeterminacy is difficult to encapsulate within thematic boundaries – following the fetishistic model developed earlier in the chapter in relation to the work of Sigmund Freud to trace developments in early sexology exposes the danger of utilising a single thematic perspective in relation to a vastly complex topic.

Fetishistic analysis does not seek definition, nor does it attempt to resolve the paradoxical claims of competing theories found in the same text. As such, it is inherently metafictional; it encourages the reader to construct alternative perspectives, and analyse how alternative perspectives are constructed within texts. It thus requires readers to pay particular attention to the flaws and problems in a text rather than its successes; it is particularly useful as a means of approaching works whose complexities and paradoxes have arguably prevented them from being considered canonical. This reflects the status of fetishism itself in Freud's work; its meaning is disparate and perhaps unknowable, but it remains tied to a set of pivotal ideas (including, but not limited to, gender identity and Jewish identity). In turn, it can inform analysis of texts like Philip Roth's *Kepesh* novels, whose self-reflexivity is overbearing and whose diffuse character discourages single-theme analyses.

It is not enough simply to suggest that the *Kepesh* novels depict fetishism, although the emphasis on the plasticity of human bodies and the

misogyny of their narrator(s) make such a perspective deeply plausible. The novels recall ideas of fetishism, but they also come to embody the problems and complexities of the concept. Reading these novels, one is obliged not just to think about fetishism, but to think fetishistically, on the same terms as the texts themselves. This encourages readers to find new forms of textual analysis by seeking new connections, by finding or creating unwritten narratives and by having a sceptical attitude to narrative assumptions.

Fetishism serves equally well as an emblem of the diffuseness of psychoanalysis – evidence of its critical longevity – as it does as a topic of analysis. An element of opacity in analyses that follow on from its example is to be expected, but such explorations would remain firmly grounded in psychoanalytic precedent. The Kepesh novels reveal Roth's thematic preoccupations to be pliable, constantly adapting to the requirements of each text and the historical context they emerge from. This pliability is arguably as much a matter of the internal dynamics of psychoanalytic methodology as it is a literary strategy on the part of Roth; the synthesis between Rothian strategy and psychoanalytic ideas is more entrenched, more bizarre and more interesting in these novels than in any other novel Roth would publish. This is not to suggest that these are the only Roth novels in which psychoanalytic ideas are thematically useful, but rather that psychoanalysis has an influence within these works that merits study in its own right. Roth's uses of psychoanalysis in these novels better reflects the disputatiousness and uncertainty that a study of fetishism reveals to be an innate part of psychoanalysis, even when he does not display an explicit interest in the topic. This enables psychoanalytically-influenced study of both a novel that is explicitly psychoanalytic (*The Breast*) and novels in which psychoanalysis is superficially disregarded (*The Professor of Desire* and *The Dying Animal*).

Baudrillard was right to note that fetishism has "a life of its own": it represents an intersection of critical perspectives rooted in psychoanalysis, but it also makes the more general demand that critics pay attention to how an array of themes and ideas co-habit the same textual space. This can necessitate a new means of looking at writing on sex: towards creating a textually-focused analysis of how sex is described, as a means to examine the contradictions, confusion and interpersonal dynamics which it can bring to light. This perspective on sex necessitates a re-appraisal of writers like Philip

Roth, whose narrators and characters repeatedly try to find a form of secular redemption through it. For Roth, as with Freud, this redemption may not only be unattainable, it may expose the complex mechanisms of what it seeks to transcend.

The strategies enabled by a fetishistic approach take an irreverent approach to the notion of biography and narrative truth, suggesting that moments of paradox or conflict often occur in situations where they are least expected or intended. Fetishism is thus a self-subverting concept that allows for a self-subverting form of literary practice to emerge in texts which explore many of its related concepts. Whilst this mode of interpretation would be difficult to apply as a general method of literary critique, it provides a valuable means of contending with the thematic and stylistic slipperiness of the Kepesh novels. This supports broader themes relating to sex and sexuality in Roth's works, in which sex leads neither to redemption nor revelation. This may help explain the unsettled character of these novels, in which Roth suggests that the destabilising impact that can make sex a difficult subject to talk about makes it a particularly important subject for literature to contend with.





## Chapter 2: Sex and Gender in Roth Criticism

It may have its advantages for the species; it may also have advantages for the individual (although, according to what I'm told, these advantages have a very brief duration); but any objective observer must admit that sex has in the first place been a frightful complication and, secondly, a permanent source of dangers and troubles.

- Primo Levi, *The Sixth Day* (117-8)

It began oddly. But how could it have begun otherwise, however it began?

- Philip Roth, *The Breast* (3)

## Précis

Critical work on Philip Roth is being published in increasing volume, a fact perhaps attributable in part to Roth's recent retirement. Recent research has taken a wide range of approaches to Roth's work, to the extent that any summary of criticism will inevitably become dated soon after it has been written. Regardless, that is the intention of this chapter. Roth has been the subject of literary criticism for much of his career, and there is a substantial body of work that any critic seeking a new perspective on Roth's work is obliged to consult. Much like Roth's own work, each theme has a distinct genealogy, and contemporary studies of Roth often reflect ongoing concerns in innovative ways.

The process by which Roth has become a member of the literary establishment has not been without controversy, and his legacy remains hampered by continual concerns about aspects of his fiction – principally, but by no means exclusively, his depictions of sex and women. The Kepesh novels, which emerge from different parts of Roth's career, have received much of the criticism that Roth has received on this topic, and many literary critics writing on Roth almost seem more willing to abandon these novels to their fate, often describing them as being peripheral and flawed. This has changed slightly in some relatively recent studies of Roth's work, most notably Debra Shostak's *Countertexts, Counterlives* – however, the Kepesh novels remain a contested space within Roth studies. The time is ripe for a reconsideration of these works, using a comparative approach enabled by more thematically-oriented studies of Roth's work that have emerged in recent years.

## 2.1 Roth's Uncertain Legacy

A critic tasked with interpreting the work of Philip Roth is faced with the same initial dilemma as many of his would-be readers: where to start. Not only is Roth the author of 31 books, including stand-alone novellas, quadrilogies, essay collections and autobiographies, but many of these books have garnered attention for vastly different reasons.

It is unsurprising, given this variety, that there is a correlation between popular interest and critical attention in Roth's works. *Portnoy's Complaint*, for example, continues to elicit a strong reaction: in 2012 an article in the *Paris Review* claimed that women who see a man reading the novel are apt to judge him negatively, that "*Portnoy's Complaint* may as well be Yiddish for *douche*" (Stein). Later in his career, the plaudits Roth received for widely-acclaimed novels like *The Human Stain* have been accompanied by cinematic adaptations, inclusion on undergraduate syllabi and an increasing critical preference for studies of Roth's 'later' works<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless, opposing voices are rarely hard to find when Roth's work is under discussion – there is a large body of feminist critique of Roth's work which is hostile in tone, summarised in an essay by David Gooblar which traces its history from a monograph by Mary Ellen in 1976 to accusations of "garden-variety sexism" in reviews of Roth's 2009 novella *The Humbling* (7). As Gooblar describes it, this long-established trend in literary criticism lacks the critical depth that more recent (often female-authored) gender-based criticism on Roth has. As will be elaborated upon later in this chapter, this thesis agrees with Gooblar's general premise that denunciation often overrides the complexity of Roth's portrayal of sex and gender - although it does not deny the fact that many of Roth's narrators, especially David Kepesh, have misogynist attitudes.

Regardless of variations in popular reception, recent years have seen a marked increase in critical output on Roth. Aside from studies of 'later' work,

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<sup>17</sup> This is evident even in a glance at the titles of recent works about Roth. See, for example, Elaine B. Safer's *Mocking The Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, Aimee Pozorski's *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works* and the essay collection *Turning Up The Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*.

chronologically-based summaries of Roth's career have proliferated alongside thematic readings of his work; there have also been comparative studies which take a more playful approach when examining connections both within Roth's bibliography and between other authors. These categories are not fixed: David Brauner, for example, selected works dating mostly from 1981 to 2000 and compares these to both each other and contemporaneous novels through a series of approaches linked by a claim that "Roth... is the most paradoxical of writers" (19).

Approaches such as Brauner's are part of a significant change in criticism on Roth, reflective of the difficulty of categorising Roth's work. The opening page of 2011's *Nemesis* offers an interpretative framework, grouped partly by author and partly by format: Roth's works are split into 'Zuckerman Books', 'Roth Books', 'Kepesh Books', 'Nemeses: Short Novels', 'Miscellany' (essays) and 'Other Books' (iii.). This represents a significant change from categorisations in early editions of 2000's *The Human Stain*, in which Roth's books are simply separated by narrator (Zuckerman, Kepesh and Roth) and 'Other' books. The loss of a narrator-focused classification system is emblematic of the complex nature of connections between Roth's works. In attempting to demarcate his novels by multiple classification criteria, Roth (whose rigorous editing process frequently includes changes to marginalia) is implicitly acknowledging this complexity, inviting an intersection of approaches to his bibliography. The increasing schism in categorisation within Roth books has been accompanied by a desire to unsettle the boundaries through which Roth has been interpreted: Brauner, for example, includes Roth's 1974 novel *My Life as Man* as part of a chapter on experimental fiction based around Roth's more explicitly experimental fiction published between 1988 and 1994 (51).

There is a need for studies of Roth which compare thematic connections with narrative continuities which are explicitly suggested by the texts. Under these conditions, an analysis could be bound by either the Zuckerman books, the Roth books, or the Kepesh books. Of these, the Zuckerman novels have received the most consistent critical and popular attention - the Second

Zuckerman Trilogy in particular<sup>18</sup>. Such attention has not exhausted the novels' interpretative possibilities: for example, the poignancy of Roth's exploration of American identities has often overshadowed issues relating to thematic and stylistic variety within the texts. The 'Roth' novels, with their constantly shifting narrative positions, offer little textual continuity. The 'Roth' of these novels is a cipher, more a means to enable a ludic playfulness about the nature of authorial character than a definable character. This may explain why these novels have been most frequently interpreted in terms of their stylistic innovations rather than their thematic continuities.

Concerns about narrative position represent a consistent trend in Roth criticism; early reviewers were often hostile to Roth's texts on the basis that his work was too solipsistic, and that he did not make autobiographical parallels clear to the reader. Narrator-based studies are also constricted by Roth's apparent disregard for narrative continuity. Even Nathan Zuckerman, the most often-used and linear of Roth's narrators, has an uncertain narrative position in novels like *My Life as a Man* and *The Counterlife* – texts in which he is explicitly configured as the creation of another author. Such problems, far from preventing analysis, render it necessary to explore the intertextual complexity of Roth's works in new ways.

Acknowledging the inherent complexity of Roth's narrators shifts attention onto the narrator whose appearances in his novels most bespeaks wilful incoherence. David Kepesh is the narrator and protagonist of *The Breast*, an intertextual farce, a realist bildungsroman entitled *The Professor of Desire* and *The Dying Animal*, a contemplative pseudo-tragedy. The Kepesh novels act as a microcosm for many of the concerns that run through Roth's career, encapsulating not only different formats (long story, novel and novella respectively), but different eras in Roth's career. Unlike Roth's two Zuckerman trilogies, the novels were published non-consecutively, providing an uneven character to the trilogy and an uncertain sense of continuity – even the most imaginative biography of Kepesh which seeks to incorporate the events of all

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<sup>18</sup> Issues about labelling accompany issues about categorisation in Roth criticism. This trilogy, potentially a quadrilogy after the publication of the pseudo-Epilogue *Exit Ghost* in 2001, has also been referred to as the 'Newark Trilogy' (See Michael Kimmage's *In History's Grip: Philip Roth's Newark Trilogy*) and the 'American Trilogy' (Brauner, David, p148).

three novels would depend on frequent extra-textual assumptions<sup>19</sup>. The texts represent the considerable variety and versatility in Roth's literary style, functioning as independent texts linked by their narrator and their predominant theme: the male libido. Roth's claim in an interview for *Le Monde* that the novels function as "erotic variations" rather than a trilogy further supports this argument<sup>20</sup>.

It is the Kepesh novels, rather than the manic energy and explicit sex-obsession of novels like *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sabbath's Theater*, which provide the most telling insights into the nature of Roth's interconnections. Despite a rise in critical interest in the Kepesh novels, including a conference panel on the trilogy in 2010, these novels have not received the attention that their distinctive position in Roth's bibliography merits. Using the trilogy as an entry point can help argue for the richness and complexity of Rothian sex, partly as a means of responding to wariness over Roth's writing on the topic.

Although Roth's pre-eminent position in American letters has developed in recent years, critical opinion has remained polarised. Roth may have won awards as diverse as the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, the Man Booker International Prize and the Sidewise Award for Alternative History, but he has also been nominated for the *Literary Review's* Bad Sex in Fiction award. The 'award', which seeks to "highlight and gently discourage redundant or poorly written depictions of sex in fiction" (Fleming 52), has frequently drawn nominations from otherwise acclaimed literary novels – recently nominated authors have included Tom Wolfe and Sebastian Faulks. Roth's nomination was received for a scene in 2009's *The Humbling*, in which Roth's depiction of group sex came under attack. Justifying the nomination in a later interview, Jonathan Beckman argued that:

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<sup>19</sup> To name the most obvious; there is no explicit mention of Kepesh's transformation in either *The Professor of Desire* or *The Dying Animal*.

<sup>20</sup> An excerpt from this interview is translated and quoted in Velicha Ivanova's article, "My Own Foe From the Other Gender: (Mis)representing women in *The Dying Animal*".

Roth is very anxious about his description of sex... It's the overcompensation that qualifies this passage for the award – the totems and shamans are an attempt to convince us that Roth's leering is actually giving some vital anthropological insight. (Flood)

Roth's description of sex is, Beckman argues, voyeurism masquerading as intellectual discourse, a nefarious set piece which uses a condensed series of metaphors to mask a vicarious authorial thrill. The very existence of the award represents a significant change from the literary expectations common in Roth's early career, where the mere choice of sex (or masturbation) as a topic was often enough to ensure literary infamy. What is notable in Beckman's critique is the continuity of his argument with these early criticisms, particularly the use of "leering" to describe Roth himself, with its connotations of insidious perversity. Rothian sex is portrayed as being vulgar and embarrassing, unbecoming traits in an established and acclaimed author - Roth's venerable literary status may even have aided his nomination.

Not all of Roth's readers concur that Rothian sex is an unnecessary addendum to an otherwise respectable author, nor do all of Roth's readers view the self-conscious connection between "anthropological insight" and "leering" as an aesthetic weakness. In *Foreskin's Lament*, an autobiographical narrative in which the author explores both his Jewish ethnicity and sexuality through the lens of formative adolescent experiences, Shalom Auslander creates a narrative whose frenetic tone and unapologetic lasciviousness is immediately reminiscent of *Portnoy's Complaint*. However, in using Roth as an explicit reference point, Auslander depicts the connection between the two authors as oppositional:

This isn't some Philip-Roth-sexual-obsession-as-a-reflection-of-man's-fear-of-death disgusting. This is not my physical being yearning for higher illumination. There is no greater existential message within my degeneracy. This is not *Sabbath's Theater*, it's *Shalom's Buddy Booth*. I'm gross. I'm icky. I'm wicked. (110)



Auslander depicts his desires as “gross”, a crass overabundance of imagination which is more indicative of mental illness (“degeneracy”) than it is of any intellectual credibility. Rothian sexuality is depicted by Auslander as a matter of course, a rote and predictable element in Roth’s fiction and an easily understandable cultural reference point for his readers. The perceived contrast between Roth’s “greater existential message” in *Sabbath’s Theater* and Auslander’s self-defined vulgarity suggests that Roth has achieved a means of gaining insight through excess. For all Auslander’s insistence, *Portnoy’s Complaint* is arguably a more recognisable and infamous depiction of “Philip-Roth-Sex-Obsession” than *Sabbath’s Theater*. Auslander’s lament for the meaninglessness of his excessive interest in sexuality (he discovers himself to be impotent with his wife) is itself a familiar Rothian trope, with David Kepesh expressing a similar anxiety prior to his metamorphosis in *The Breast*.

Beckman and Auslander represent two perspectives on Rothian sex which, despite varying in terms of relative approval, are united by their proclaiming an inadequately fixed meaning for the theme itself. Beckman’s description of Roth’s writing on sex as “anxious” belies the theme of anxiety in the text itself, and does a disservice to the repeated theme of ‘bad sex’ in Roth’s work. Auslander, in contrast, belies his masturbatory precursor Alex Portnoy by proclaiming that Rothian sex-obsession is the opposite of his own. Both writers suggest that Philip Roth’s reputation as an author who writes about sex has led to assumptions which succeed only in revealing the complexity of the topic in his work.

## 2.2 Shop Talk: Roth Criticism 1959-2014

Discussion of sex in Roth’s works necessitates a reconsideration of gender relations, and thus of the accusations of misogyny which have often featured in reviews and criticism. Roth’s depiction of women has been an area of continual interest since the unflattering depiction of Brenda Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus*, a satire on Jewish-American assimilation and aspiration. The importance of gender identity in Roth’s work has rarely been the focal point of

critical analysis, implicitly condoning the popular perception that Roth is a misogynist. An awareness of this problem was the impetus for a special edition of *Philip Roth Studies*, which was introduced with the claim that “sexism or flat-out accusations of misogyny is often presented as a *fait accompli* when dealing with Roth” (Gooblar, “Introduction: Roth and Women” 7).

Derek Parker Royal argues that criticism of Roth’s depiction of women represented a key strand of interpretation prior to the publication of a number of monographs on Roth in the mid-1990s: the other strands being questions over Roth’s use of Jewish themes and accusations of excessive solipsism (5). Royal argues that only accusations of gender bias remain of these modes of moralistic critique, an argument developed by David Gooblar. As he argues, most writing about Roth’s early depictions of women discussed how insufficient characterisation or misogyny led his novels to view women either as unattainable or monstrous. Gooblar describes, for example, an article by Julia Keller which argues that the technical ability evident in Roth’s depictions of men has not been employed in his female characters. Gooblar’s argument that there is an emergent strain in Roth criticism which subverts such dogmatic approaches, involving “treatment of the subject of women in Roth that doesn’t simplify or downplay the subject” (13), is convincing, yet the concise nature of Gooblar’s article invites a broader consideration of the topic in Roth scholarship.

The essays in the ‘Roth and Women’ edition of *Philip Roth Studies* prove that Gooblar’s claim for an emergent strain of gender-based criticism of Roth’s work is well-founded. Although focused on later Roth works, the essays suggest the increasing variety of approaches with which critics are analysing his work. Moreover, the essays confirm the important and problematic role filled by *The Dying Animal*, the subject of two of the journal’s six essays. Of these, Velicha Ivanova’s claim that the novel is based on “the struggle of a masculine self to preserve its wholeness against a female other perceived as a threat” (31) seems the most direct descendant of the innovative re-thinking Gooblar describes in his introduction. Viewing masculinity as a problem rather than a rigidly defined and static aspect of selfhood, Ivanova argues that Roth’s text “contains within itself its contrary strand”, supporting the idea that Roth’s narrators are not to be trusted (34). Kepesh attempts to enforce an inflexible model of gender identity in which his lover (Consuela) is reduced to an

aesthetic, consumable and largely speechless object. Ivanova claims that this condition of speechlessness eventually extends to the narrator himself, who becomes symptomatic of a 'type' who is

unable to get in touch with their own genuine feelings, obsessed with the wiles of women whose authentic emotions they cannot hear, they too are caught in a code without communication and trapped in misrecognition. Hedonism and misogyny compose their perverted ethics. (38)

The argument that Roth reveals the fluidity of gender and sexual relationships stands in contrast to the opinion that Kepesh, for whom gender equality in sex is unattainable, is reflecting the prejudices of his author. Ivanova's essay, though occasionally relying on isolated textual incidents (Consuela's biting in Kepesh's direction after rough sex as evidence of "the struggle for domination", for example), is representative of modes of criticism which show Roth as more dynamic and critical of gender dynamics than had been previously considered. Her conclusion, that Kepesh's interest in his lover's slowly dying body is emblematic of his inability to reconcile masculine and feminine identities, adds potency to the sexual-obsession-as-a-reflection-of-man's-fear-of-death theme that Auslander claims for Roth.

Concluding the journal issue, sexual-obsession-as-a-reflection-of-man's-fear-of-death is reconfigured by Zoë Roth as a means of exploring how "the mimesis of art does not afford any protection against the eventual realities of living and dying" (96). These topics are familiar themes in the rapidly expanding number of essays published on *The Dying Animal* – in the 2005 essay collection *Turning Up The Flame*, Jay Halio reconsiders the relationship between sex and death in Roth's later fiction, and Ellen Gerstle explores the use of visual art in the novel. Zoë Roth's essay develops these strands to argue that Consuela, in being described through metaphors taken from fine art and with her sexual desirability represented by music, gains personality and agency in the novel through the same breast cancer that threatens to both alter her body and endanger her life.

Zoë Roth's argument that Kepesh's photographing of Consuela's breasts represents the "irruption of the 'bloody animal' into the careful constructed aesthetics of the nude" (99) is reminiscent of Ivanova's claim that Consuela's decaying body forces a gendered crisis in Kepesh, which he remains unable to resolve at the novel's close. Moreover, both essays explicitly invoke the "reductionist gender stereotypes" (Z. Roth 96) that prevented more nuanced studies of Roth's women from gaining prominence. The issue of women in Roth's works has been an aspect of critical study for as long as monographs have been written about them. It is only recently, however, that studies have emerged which do justice to the complexity of Roth's female characters – and hence, of his depictions of sex.

Although the vast body of critical material on Roth consists of journal articles, it has been the monographs written on Roth which have most clearly influenced the future study of his work: hence, perhaps, David Gooblar's plea that "the time is right for someone brilliant to write a monograph on women in Roth" (13). The lines of inquiry followed by monographs have varied in approach but remained relatively consistent in terms of core themes. A major change between early and late Roth criticism has been seen in a move away from the defensive tone that characterised many initial studies. Aware of the perception of Roth as a literary renegade, many of Roth's early critics explicitly challenged the limited and uncreative analyses that such a reputation often provoked. In one of the earliest monographs on Roth<sup>21</sup>, published in 1974, John McDaniel describes how:

When I first became involved in writing a critical work on Philip Roth's fiction, some of my friends and colleagues displayed reactions ranging from amusement to surprise. One such friend summarised a not uncommon reaction when he asked quizzically, "What's a nice Protestant boy like you doing in a neighbourhood like *that?*". (ix.)

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<sup>21</sup> Although Glen Meeter's long essay *Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth: A Critical Essay* was published in 1968, McDaniel's was the first full-length monograph on Roth.

McDaniel's subsequent argument for the universality of Roth's themes aims to deny both accusations of ethnic parochialism ('Protestant') and feckless vulgarity ('nice') which had been frequently levelled against Roth. Aware of the contemporary perception of Roth as a parochially Jewish-American writer, a contemporary of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, McDaniel's book argues that Roth is most distinctive in his "assault on the American experience" (214). Unlike many recent critics of Roth, McDaniel's book downplays the Jewish aspects of Roth's novels. However, prevalent Jewish themes in Roth's subsequent work makes McDaniel's claim that *Portnoy's Complaint* represents "the impossibility of a fully-realised self-assertion in American public life" (147) difficult to justify without reference to Jewish identity.

Although willing to discuss some of the more graphic elements of *Portnoy's Complaint*, McDaniel's interpretation is often as 'nice' as his nameless friend accused him of being. McDaniel argues that *The Breast* was "a logical, if extreme, extension of Roth's most essential literary concerns" (168), but he does not discuss the perverse sexual fantasies which render Kepesh's life as a breast truly bleak. For McDaniel, the Kepesh of *The Breast* is another Rothian hero experiencing a quandary of selfhood, a quasi-heroic figure whose final self-acceptance is an act of epistemological clarity. The approach of McDaniel's monograph glosses over moral quandaries by downplaying their narrative significance, without suggesting that the themes which produce such quandaries could have literary merit in their own right. Bernard Rodgers, whose 1978 monograph would engage more fully with the importance of the erotic in Roth's work, follows McDaniel's lead in arguing that "as an artist Roth has placed his faith in Realism, not Judaism" (9).

Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance's monograph *Philip Roth*, although largely focused on issues of power and intertextuality, offers a telling critique of feminist denunciations of Roth. Concluding their introduction by discussing Roth's puzzlement at being considered "antifeminist" (7), Jones and Nance introduce their conclusion by discussing how "in many ways, the feminist criticism of Roth has been as one-sided as much of the Jewish criticism" (161). Incorporating the universalist aspects of critics like McDaniel with their own interest in power dynamics, Jones and Nance claim that "for Roth, men and women are caught together in a trap of social conditioning that

makes it impossible for either sex to escape the interchangeable roles of victim and victimizer” (161).

Jones and Nance’s argument functions as a rebuttal to Mary Allen, who chided Roth for his “enormous rage and disappointment with womankind” (96). Although their subsequent claim for a constantly shifting power dynamic would recur as a theme in the interpretations of *The Dying Animal*, the need to defend Roth is the primary purpose of their argument, and the observation is not developed further. Critics like Ivanova and Zoë Roth implicitly use this argument as their starting point; as does Bruce Gentry, who argues that *American Pastoral* “is a beautiful novel, in part because of its feminist subversion of male authority” (162). Although early criticism displayed an increasing willingness to discuss erotic themes in Roth, responding in part to earlier attacks, Roth’s interest in ethnicity would not attract the same level of critical attention.

Although strident defences of Roth’s Jewish themes had appeared (for example, Theodor Solotaroff’s defence of *Goodbye, Columbus* in an article entitled ‘Philip Roth and the Jewish Moralists’), the debate had subsided by the time monographs on Roth started to appear. Amongst early critical works on Roth, only Hermione Lee’s 1982 short monograph *Philip Roth* would have a focus on Jewish-American identity; the overwhelming majority of subsequent monographs on Roth would incorporate an examination of Jewish tropes as a matter of course. Lee’s argument that Roth “sets [his] ideas, over and over again, in the context of the middle-class urban Jewish-American family, and it is with this context that a more specific account of Philip Roth’s work needs to begin” is an important landmark in Roth criticism (22). Her subsequent suggestion that Roth’s dismissal of his being read in purely Jewish terms became a theme within his work also makes an important point. Whilst these arguments are prefaced by an awareness of the sensationalist reputation of Roth, the tone of the analysis is less defensive, and the conclusions more tailored to the playfulness of Roth’s prose itself.

Critical monographs on Roth, much like Roth’s own books, are hard to categorise. The Philip Roth Society lists only one monograph published on Roth between 1982 and 1992: John Searle’s comparative study of the work of Philip Roth and John Updike. Although less widely-available texts were published, as

well as a number of journal articles, the period is sufficiently bare to justify the splitting of Roth criticism into 'early' and 'late' categories<sup>22</sup>. The rise in critical work on Roth that began in the early 1990s has provided a vast range of interpretative methods which have been explored and contested in subsequent work.

Gooblar's argument that the three main strands of Roth criticism (ethnic, gender-based and solipsistic) dissipated in the 1990s is substantiated by the range and inventiveness of the interpretative schema which have been applied to Roth's work. Critics have also had to adapt to Roth's authorial fecundity; in the twenty years since the publication of Jay Halio's *Philip Roth Revisited* in 1992, Roth published 12 novels – not to mention an essay collection, *Shop Talk*. Monographs on Roth in this era are thus continually shifting their interpretative criteria as Roth's writing undergoes dramatic changes. Arguments such as those made by John McDaniel offer an innovative take on Roth's work, but contain arguments which are difficult to apply to much of Roth's later material. The scale of Roth's bibliography has also forced critics to make difficult choices; even Halio's text, which offers full chapters on the majority of Roth's books, offers an apology for the absence of "uncollected stories and fugitive magazine articles" (12) in his analysis.

Analysis of the role of the Kepesh novels in three monographs which take a largely chronological and exhaustive approach proves the difficulty of this approach, as well as revealing the shifting critical preferences that these texts are subject to. Halio's monograph follows the plea for complexity and innovation in Roth studies made a decade earlier by Lee, stating that "like any good writer, Roth will not stand pidgeonholing" (*Philip Roth Revisited* 1). Further echoing Lee's work, Halio views the role of intertextuality and Eastern European themes as key to understanding *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*. Lee, who argued that Kepesh demonstrated "a kind of wistfulness, even envy, for the writer who has more to sink his teeth into than books and relationships" (69), subsumes Kepesh's sexual experiences into a longing for

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<sup>22</sup> David Brauner's summary of criticism on Roth in his monograph *Philip Roth* is particularly useful, and this thesis often arrives at similar conclusions to it. Discussing this period, Brauner notes that this period was a "relatively quiet period in Roth criticism, broadly coinciding with the nadir of his critical reputation" (6).

an immediate political reality. Halio develops this into a more general argument that

“Wholeness” seems unreal, illusory, radically incomplete, or (what amounts to the same thing) radically unattainable. But Kepesh is wrong too. He *is* a breast. Roth leaves no doubt about that, physiologically, biologically and anatomically “impossible” though it may seem. (154).

Halio’s argument in favour of Kepesh being representative of unattainability is powerful, and demonstrates an increasing willingness to expand the scope of criticism on these novels; it also serves as a rebuttal to critics like McDaniel, for whom Kepesh is another in Roth’s long line of tragic heroes. In turning the focus onto comic indeterminacy and bodily fixation, Halio’s monograph challenged the limited range of responses which had characterised early studies of these novels. It also allowed for a more detailed analysis of the significance and variety of comedy in Roth’s works.

Stephen Wade’s 1996 monograph *The Imagination in Transit* offers another critical variation, containing an argument heavily based in intertextual parallels that attempts to find broader themes underlying Roth’s stylistic variation. Wade combines solipsistic and Jewish concerns; such as his idea that internal dialogue within texts is important for determining Roth’s literary aspirations. Reading, in Wade’s terms, becomes configured by Roth as a domestic act which enables conversation without the possibility of definitive answer. He thus explores the two Kepesh novels as representative of the narrator-author’s engagement with his predecessors – focusing on Franz Kafka (56). Wade highlights a popular means of interpreting the Kepesh novels, viewing them as an exploration of the relationship between life and art. Though an important theme in these novels (as well as the later *The Dying Animal*), this also suggests the emergence of critical preferences that overshadow the internal textual logic of Roth’s novels.

More explicitly evaluative than other works on Roth, Mark Shechner’s 2003 monograph *Up Society’s Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth* begins its overview of Roth’s career by denouncing the “depressive” quality of *The Breast*



(14). Despite this, Shechner explicitly rates libidinal concerns as one of the main points of interest in Roth's books, noting that his later work would continue to employ sexual themes, but would change direction to prevent "the terror of going stale, routine and predictable with age" (16).

Shechner spends little time on *The Breast*, which he largely views as being a regrettable nadir in a stellar literary career. Similarly, *The Professor of Desire* is portrayed as almost simpering in its tenderness, its narrator's conviction in "the medicinal properties of simple love" as inadequately vivid (62). For Shechner, the novel lacks "enough aggression or despair or irony or perversity or sheer lunacy or Judaism or masochism" to succeed at what Roth does best (64). Shechner does, however, rate *The Dying Animal* as one of Roth's best books, even if, upon reviewing his comments, Shechner would find fault with Roth's portrayal of women in the text. Proclaiming that "Sex is Roth's home territory" (198), Shechner lauds this final portrayal of Kepesh as "the walking handbook of libertinism" (199).

The significance of Shechner's writing on *The Dying Animal* lies not in his initial enthusiasm but in subsequent comments which were included as an afterword, in which he launches an extended defence of Roth's depictions of sex. Shechner lauds Roth for refusing to continue writing grandiose epics about American life, instead employing a more subtle inquisition into changing sexual mores. This emerges from a continuing interest in those whose sexual ethics can be traced directly back to the "pornotopia of sexual liberation" (204) – namely the 1960s, in which Alexander Portnoy attempted to solve his own libidinal issues. Such arguments allow Shechner to claim *The Dying Animal* as the true successor to the Second Zuckerman Trilogy: an argument perhaps supported by the ageing yet priapic narrator of *Exit Ghost*, the last of Roth's novels to be narrated by Zuckerman.

Shechner's views on the Kepesh novels are unashamedly tied to his thematic preferences, but they are reflective of a general critical uncertainty about the novels themselves. Whilst *The Dying Animal* has received more attention than any other of Roth's post-Zuckerman works, it has enabled a return to the defensiveness employed by earlier critics who wrote on Roth's interest in sex and gender. Similarly, the other two Kepesh novels remain bound to critical perspectives which limit interest to a few chapters or scenes.

Even works which offer penetrating analyses of the embodied nature of these narratives may rest on a generalised concept of indeterminacy which ignores the specificity of Kepesh's sexual desires.

Aside from bibliographic-style monographs, there has been a marked trend towards thematically-driven studies of Roth's work which take a more self-limiting view towards Roth's work. Although some monographs (such as Aimee Pozorski's *Roth and Trauma*) limit themselves to specific periods within Roth's career, others pick liberally across chronology and style to create more dynamic summaries of Roth's literary project. These studies, which have proliferated rapidly in later Roth criticism, are often highly divergent in aim, approach and style. Cumulatively, they prove the diversity of interpretative possibilities contained within Roth's fiction.

Alan Cooper's *Philip Roth and the Jews*, a monograph first published in 1996, follows other critics in expressing dismay at the fixed positions which many readers of Roth had taken. Cooper's desire to uncover consistent Jewish themes in Roth's work allows him to interpret *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* as being strongly influenced by Jewish themes. He discusses *The Professor of Desire*, arguably the first of the Kepesh novels in terms of plot (although the second to be published) as a means of analysing changes to character and theme in *The Breast*. *The Breast* (unlike its 'predecessor') contains few explicit references to Judaism, but Cooper is able to trace interconnections between the novels to argue that "just as Kepesh's responses are idiomatically Jewish, so is his predicament vaguely sensed as situationally and ethically Jewish" (130). Cooper's conclusion offers a new perspective on the common assumption that Kepesh's self-acceptance at the end of *The Breast* is a heroic means of extracting meaning from his suffering – a striking argument, given the misery in which Roth frequently leaves his narrator-protagonists<sup>23</sup>. Cooper's depiction of *The Breast* as enacting an existential crisis implicated in Jewish tropes is rooted in the shifting nature of Kepesh's sexual fantasies; deprived of the ability to orgasm, Kepesh implicitly reconsiders the nature and origins of his previous libertinism.

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<sup>23</sup> Recall Alex Portnoy's primal scream at the end of Portnoy's Complaint and Zuckerman's despair in Exit Ghost.

Cooper's imaginative rereading of the Kepesh novels is representative of the importance placed by more recent critics on the expressly Jewish content in Roth's work. For example, Stephen Milowitz's *Philip Roth Considered: The Concentrationary Universe of the American Writer* offers the more specific claim that Roth's books have been deeply influenced by the Shoah. Milowitz's monograph justifies its approach by interpreting the importance of ambiguity and uncertainty in Roth as a deliberately anti-authoritarian approach originating in opposition to Nazi ideology:

Roth does not renounce his Judaism, nor does he turn away from its disconcerting realities. On the contrary, Roth's emphasis on the Jew as a man, on the Jew as wilful and complex, springs forth from a painful need to remember and delve into the Jewish past. (13)

Milowitz's analysis necessitates reading Roth's career in an innovative fashion, including a study of some of Roth's works which are currently uncollected. However, when faced with the Kepesh novels, even Milowitz's perspective on Roth becomes similar to that of his critical predecessors. Like Cooper, Milowitz claims that Kepesh's final position in *The Breast* is largely positive, a promise of future potential enacted through "a language beyond the pulpit of interpretation" (139). However, Milowitz expands this idea by claiming that *The Breast* "can be seen as an oblique concentration-camp commentary, the words of a man experiencing a very real, unanticipated and unusual change, and trying to understand that experience" (159). This position links *The Breast* firmly to his opening argument that Roth's textual complexity masks an awareness of traumatic experience. Even if Milowitz's interest in the two Kepesh novels tends to invoke similar ground to other critics (connections to Kafka, the issue of Kepesh's pseudo-epiphany), his placing of *The Breast* in a key position in his analysis suggests that the novel may be more nuanced than critics like Shechner are willing to acknowledge.

The possibilities suggested by Cooper and Milowitz's analyses, which analyse Jewish themes in the first two Kepesh novels, have not prevented later critics from paying little attention to them. In depending on the more generally

acclaimed and gleefully excessive *Sabbath's Theater* for their analyses of sex in Roth, they may be giving inadequate attention to the theme of sex in Roth as a general trend. David Brauner's monograph *Philip Roth*, which combines several strands of criticism to offer innovative readings of Roth's work, breaks with even the mitigating praise for *The Dying Animal* that many critics are willing to offer, stating that "*The Dying Animal* is, along with the other Kepesh novels, among [Roth's] weaker work" (223). Brauner appears to be more interested in works like *Sabbath's Theater*, which he distinguishes from other sex-obsessed works like *Portnoy's Complaint*. Arguing that there is nothing "novel, let alone revolutionary, in [Portnoy's] sex scenes", Brauner distinguishes them from the explicit, anti-literary pornography found in an extended dialogue in *Sabbath's Theater* (125). Brauner's interest in the boundaries between pornography and high art offer a rereading of Rothian sexuality that depicts *Sabbath's Theater* as a novel whose wilful excess enables the creation of Roth's most startling libidinal hero. Though convincing in arguing for the literary merit in Mickey Sabbath's misogyny, Brauner's focus on the novel is difficult to extend to other of Roth's works; *Sabbath's Theater*, much like Sabbath himself, stands alone.

A similar perspective can be found in Ross Posnock's *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*, which utilises the Kepesh novels only to support arguments that explore other of Roth's works; Posnock discusses isolated scenes in the Kepesh novels rather than offering sustained analysis. Posnock finds literary merit in the character of Mickey Sabbath by reading his character alongside those in other texts. In Mickey Sabbath, Posnock argues, Roth has depicted an "existential nakedness" - enacting an "empathetic creativity" which can help place the novel within a distinctively American literary tradition (182). As opposed to Brauner, for whom Sabbath's sexuality is the key to his literary merit, Posnock's analysis depicts Sabbath's libidinal energy as part of a process of "abundant flowing", an aspect of his character rather than the precondition for it (170). The result is an analysis which proves the radical scope and intertextual possibility of *Sabbath's Theater*, yet one which can seem insufficiently grounded in the rhetoric of lasciviousness that gives the novel its rhetorical energy. Brauner's attention to the minutiae of Sabbath's innumerable copulations would seem closer to the spirit of the novel, yet neither approach to Roth's depictions of sex (reliance on evidence from a

single text or incorporation of the theme into broader literary dynamics) do justice to the variety and range of sex found in the pages of Roth's books. *Sabbath's Theater*, much like *Portnoy's Complaint*, is an essential text for creating an analysis of this theme - but it cannot tell the whole story. In its sheer variety and self-conscious uncertainty, the oft-ignored Kepesh trilogy may offer more unusual insights. At the very least, they can offer a different starting point.

Brauner's assertion that Debra Shostak's *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* is "the most important of the later books on Roth" is supported by his making continual reference to the monograph throughout his own study (7). Acknowledging the difficulty of forging a completely original reading of an author who has been the subject of a great deal of popular and critical scrutiny, Brauner nonetheless highlights the novelty of Shostak's approach, which argues that "[Roth's] work is much more open-ended and diverse than has generally been acknowledged" (*Philip Roth* 7). Shostak's monograph is not only the most critically versatile work on Roth published thus far, but it is often dependent upon observations derived from Roth's depictions of sex, and the gender dynamics that it both shapes and unsettles.

Shostak's conception of Roth as a dialogic writer encompasses a number of different perspectives on Roth's work: it allows her monograph to explore topics as diverse as Roth's engagement with critical dialogues on his work and his refusal to offer definitive solutions for problems generated within his novels. Most significant is the means by which Shostak incorporates Roth's contrarian take on Jewish identity within a broader stylistic framework in which specific usages of language are given a central position:

The other conditions the self, just as the meaning of words condition the meaning of other words. The self becomes visible to itself through the dialogic process, which filters the perspective of the other through the self at the same time as it emphasizes the oppositional nature of the I/other dialogue. (12)

Shostak's conception of Roth is both the most ambitious and most comprehensive to date, and her willingness to give evidence for her arguments by making connections between Roth's works is an approach other critics would do well to emulate. The relationship between self and other in Shostak's monograph is the catalyst for an analysis which comes the closest of any recent critic to explaining the precise nature of Roth's indeterminacies, rather than simply lauding Roth for refusing to be construed as a type. The Rothian self, configured in these terms, is not a confined individual but a member of a series of communities which afford it the ability for self-expression. In the act of writing, Roth's narrators enact of process of visibility which can never be completed.

The first two chapters of Shostak's monograph are particularly notable in that they explore the embodiment of subjectivity through the lenses of masculinity and Jewishness respectively. Central to the development of these arguments is a recurring interest in Roth's construction of gender and sexuality, creating a radical new means of approaching a topic whose boundaries had, by 2004 (when *Countertexts, Counterlives* was published), come to be seen as a somewhat minor or hackneyed theme. Shostak develops her arguments about masculine embodiment through the lens of the Kepesh novels, only later expanding her analysis to include *The Anatomy Lesson* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Arguing that these novels collectively represent "an ongoing exploration of gender as simultaneously process, act and physical product", Shostak adds nuance to the idea that Roth's work is compatible with certain strains of feminist thought (15).

Shostak's resultant arguments are heavily dependent on a rereading of Roth's relationship with psychoanalysis, which features in numerous ways throughout her monograph. Although Shostak's interest in embodiment does not limit itself to depictions of and themes about sex, it invokes them in a manner that few other critics attempt: for example, a scene at the end of *The Professor of Desire* in which Kepesh visits a prostitute who had slept with Franz Kafka is described as "almost a textbook example of the Lacanian narrative whereby the law of the father, the code according to which desires are renounced, is instituted by the castration complex" (27). Even as Shostak explores familiar critical territory (critics like Stephen Wade had already explored this scene in terms of Roth's interest in Kafka), her analysis combines

psychoanalytic themes with intertextual dialogue to offer a new critical perspective. Her analysis of *The Breast* in terms of its exploration of the embodied relationship between subjectivity and objectivity is a similarly valuable perspective on a long-established trend in Roth criticism, reminiscent of the tactics employed in Jay Halio's *Philip Roth Revisited*.

The fact that it takes Shostak until her second chapter to explore embodied sexuality in *Portnoy's Complaint* is an encouraging sign of her willingness to reconstruct the way themes associated with Roth's texts are interpreted. The focus on the circumcised penis in this second chapter is closely related to the theme of embodied masculinity, with Shostak declaring in her introduction that the topics are, to a certain extent, inextricable from one another. Exploring a range of Roth's texts, from the effusive phallic aggressiveness of *Portnoy's Complaint* to the frenetic long story *On The Air* (dubbed "the most offensive piece Roth ever wrote" by Alan Cooper) (140), Shostak's analysis arrives at *Operation Shylock*.

In depicting the relationship between a Jewish double of Philip Roth nicknamed 'Pipik' and a Gentile woman named Jinx, the penile implant of the male character "emphasizes his powerlessness to rewrite his identity and exposes its bodily constructedness" (97). Jinx's mounting of Pipik's mechanically erect penis thus "ironically exposes the mythic potency of the hypermale goy", undercutting the assimilationist aspirations of Pipik himself (98). In doing so, Shostak links a single isolated scene in a non-canonical novel to Roth's broader themes of ethnic identity through the medium of sex. Her willingness to put sexual dynamics and gender subversion at the core of her analysis is an important move, one which combines critical 'schools' at the same time as it combines different examples from Roth's career. She concludes her analysis of *Operation Shylock* by arguing that a playfulness regarding identity in Roth is circumscribed by the ethnic particularity of the circumcised penis.

Shostak's willingness to analyse texts like *Operation Shylock* in pursuit of such an approach, a novel in which sexual themes are relatively minor, is representative of the ingenuity and inclusiveness of her approach. Any analysis of Roth's depictions of sex should be cognisant of the changes which have been wrought by recent scholarly developments: the incitement towards a

reconsideration of gender, combined with a need to discover intersections within Roth's work. Shostak's monograph may lack the specificity of studies like Steven Milowitz's, but its strength lies in the diversity of its approaches, and the rigor and skill with which they are applied to an unusual array of Roth's work.

Although there have been a number of excellent studies of Roth published recently, and many more currently being written at the time of writing, many of these are derived from approaches which, for all their undoubted innovation, do not place sex or gender at the forefront of their analysis. For example, the emphasis on Roth's political themes that critics like Claudia Franziska Brühwiler and Lee Trepanier have explored provides a useful means of approaching his work that is nonetheless tangential to this thesis. There have also been a number of evaluative works produced following Roth's retirement, including several biographical films about Roth's career - the best of which was 2013's *Philip Roth: Unmasked*, released as part of PBS' *American Masters* series. Two writers, Bernard Avishai and Claudia Roth Pierpont (the latter of whom is a principal interviewee in *Philip Roth: Unmasked*), have also written books on Roth designed to be read by both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Avishai's monograph *Promiscuous* is focused on *Portnoy's Complaint*, and offers a good analysis of the novel's merging of Jewish, sexual, psychoanalytic and solipsistic themes. It is particularly notable for its inclusion of documentary evidence that had not been utilised before, but remains most useful as a critical introduction to the novel itself rather than Roth's work as a whole. Roth Pierpont's *Roth Unbound*, conversely, offers a detailed reading of Roth's bibliography that (like Shechner's *Up Society's Ass*, *Copper*) is unafraid to criticise novels that she views as being less significant. These minor novels include *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*, the latter of which is described as having a narrator who is "petulant and small" (106). Although both of these studies feature astute criticism, their focus on biography gives them perspectives that are rife for alternative interpretation. Taken together with recent televisual documentaries they do, however, provide evidence of a healthy public interest in the legacy of Roth's work.



The sheer volume of writing about Roth, some of which has been cited by or expressly written by the author himself, makes any study of Roth or Roth criticism selective in nature. An increasing trend towards examining the cultural position of Roth may result in a clearer conception of Roth's public personae, but will involve a similar limiting of secondary source material<sup>24</sup>. There is also a large amount of critical work on Roth which is essay-length, some of which deals with expressly sexual topics: Kevin R. West and Judith Yaross Lee, for example, have written essays on the Kepesh novels which show an appreciation for Roth's erotic oeuvre. Such material has helped keep critical attention focused on Roth, and provided insights which subsequent monographs and essay collections have developed. However, the major landmarks in Roth criticism, with the possible exception of Roth's own essays and Irving Howe's polemic *Philip Roth Reconsidered*, have been monographs - and their simplification or neglect of both the Kepesh novels and erotic themes has established an unfortunate trend which has only recently started to be challenged. It is the intention of this thesis to continue this subtle but important shift in perspective.

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<sup>24</sup> This may be next major trend in Roth criticism, following on from Timothy Moran's 2000 monograph *Star Authors*, which included a section on Roth's literary celebrity. Aimee Pozorski, for example, has a monograph forthcoming entitled *Roth and Celebrity*.

## Chapter 3: Embodying Sex:

### *The Breast*

Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence; tragic in its fate, and comic in its existence.

- George Santayana (420)

Sometimes I think God was not entirely serious when he gave man the sexual instinct.

- Graham Greene, *A Burnt-Out Case* (191)

## Précis

*The Breast* depends on a willingness on the part of its reader to reject narrative stability. David Kepesh is at once proud, manipulative, angry and resigned – perhaps forgivable, considering his transformation into “an organism with the general shape of a football, or a dirigible” (12). The manic energy of the text is clearly influenced by a confluence of contributing factors that make Kepesh himself an index of values and approaches contemporary to the novel’s publication. *Portnoy’s Complaint* may have caught the mood of the zeitgeist in terms of its themes, but *The Breast* is more concerned with showing how external events can expose the shallowness of contemporary modes of thinking that offer too-ready explanations for inexplicable phenomenon. Roth’s novella is thus as much a metafictional musing on the nature of knowledge as it is a flippant and ridiculous farce.

The premise of the novel can seem, in this respect, like a somewhat crass joke at the expense of psychoanalytic ideas that attach a symbolic (fetishising) significance to parts of the human body. Roth’s novel does function as a critique of psychoanalytic discourse, but it is also highly susceptible to psychoanalytic interpretation. It is for this reason that within the Kepesh trilogy, *The Breast* remains the novel that most explicitly uses fetishistic methods to aid character development and construct many of its dialogues and debates: thematic networks and interpretative uncertainties are key to its success. It is the ‘layering’ of psychoanalytic discourse – the different ways in which it recurs throughout the text – that this chapter will focus on, exploring the context it was written within and developing this by means of close readings of the text in its various incarnations.

### 3.1 *The Breast* in context

*The Breast*, like many of Roth's novels, derives much of its comedy from bodily excess. Nonetheless, it remains difficult to categorise; the humour is complex yet blunt, the narrative at once repetitive and brusque. It is a novel that explores shame, failure and self-deception; its comedy is bitter and its tragedy is shorn of pathos. However, the novel is also pivotal to understanding Roth's depictions of sexuality in both the Kepesh trilogy and his work as a whole. This emerges as a result of its ceaseless textual energy – more than any other Roth novel, *The Breast* enacts a series of debates with other texts and ideas. Its range of would-be targets and half-considered debates prevent the novel from having the immediate appeal of other Roth works that focus on sexuality, but it arguably emerges as a more complex text as a result.

The relative obscurity of texts like *The Breast* is partially due to the enduring popularity of certain of Roth's other erotically-charged novels. For example, Jonathan Franzen declares that he is "happy to hold up the savage hilarity of *Sabbath's Theater* as a correction and reproach of the sentimentality of certain young American writers and not-so-young critics who seem to believe, in defiance of Kafka, that literature is about being nice" (*Farther Away* 125)<sup>25</sup>. Franzen's lauding of *Sabbath's Theater* is intriguing in part because it directs the reader's attention away from more subtle parallels that may exist between his fiction and Roth's. The markers of literary merit he describes (a scepticism towards niceness, skill and bravado in depicting sex) are the hallmarks of many of Roth's works, and are particularly prominent in *The Breast*.

Franzen's novels yield useful comparisons to *The Breast*; his novel *The Corrections* even features a humiliated academic, Chip Lambert, as one of its primary characters. Chip is reminiscent of Mickey Sabbath in that his downfall is predicated on reactions to his seduction of a student, yet direct comparisons between the two characters beyond this superficial similarity are difficult. Chip

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<sup>25</sup> This claim follows an argument that Franzen had outlined in a previous text, in which he declares that Philip Roth is "one of a few geniuses [that has] the skill or bravado to get away with explicit sex" (*How to Be Alone* 283).

is depicted as being monomaniacal in his pursuit of conventional academic success and struggles to frame himself outside the boundaries of that lifestyle, whereas Sabbath's 'humiliation' is merely one in an established pattern of self-initiated controversies. In this manner, Chip's fascination with sexual transgression is more reminiscent of David Kepesh, a character whose background is similar to that given to Chip.

Franzen depicts Chip attempting to reconcile himself to his academic exile by means of creative writing – he pens a script for a film entitled “The Academy Purple”, a thinly-veiled parody of his disgrace which would serve as a form of revenge upon those who he perceives to have wronged him. Although initial feedback is enthusiastic, Chip's lover (Julia) chides him for his depiction of the female lead. For Julia, the overuse of breast imagery is “a little creepy” (29) – a judgement which Franzen appears to prove accurate when he lists the 23 instances of the word ‘breast’ that supposedly occur in Chip's 124-page script<sup>26</sup>.

The list itself is full of repetitions, the phrase “eyeing her breasts” occurs four times in six pages in the script's beginning, interspersed with praises of “perfect breasts” and “perfect adolescent breasts” (31). Yet Franzen is using these instances as more than isolated examples; taken as a group, the use of the word ‘breasts’ serves as a miniaturised version of Chip's narrative. The “perfect adolescent” breasts become “subversive” and “sweat-drenched” through the consummation of desire, a desire which is impeded by the arrival of the “twin Gestapo bullets” of the narrator's nemesis, after which “her guileless breasts shrouded now in militaristic [sic.]”; the lover becomes estranged (32). Franzen deliberately leaves many of these phrases incomplete, separating them from their supposed context. Despite this, the abrupt end to this last ‘quote’ could also be interpreted as being reflective of the abrupt destruction of an erotic ideal, and its replacement by persecutory imagery such as “twin Gestapo bullets”. As the narrative progresses and the narrator experiences an increased distance from his former lover, the recurrence of descriptions of breasts in the script declines dramatically, and resignation replaces anger as the dominant tone.

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<sup>26</sup> As Chapter 5 will discuss, this sense of wariness about mentions of breasts was part of the initial critical scepticism that *The Dying Animal* (justifiably) attracted.

Franzen appears to go to considerable lengths within *The Corrections* to justify Julia's complaint, but his 'evidence' serves an almost contrary point; these instances serve a dynamic function in Franzen's text, illustrating the vindictive misogyny at the heart of Chip's post-redundancy worldview. Franzen is complicit in this process, going as far as to mark quotes of the word "breast" with bold type, making clear that the quotes are taken from the "nearly photographic mental concordance" of the script in Chip's brain (31). *The Corrections* thus uses a displaced aspect of the female body in order to prove the failed sexual idealism and resultant identity crisis of its protagonist.

Chip Lambert's resorting to fetishistic perspectives on the female body is a useful storytelling mechanism, but its utilitarian basis masks the internal complexities that fetishism entails. Roth channels the uncertainties and follies of a male academic similar to Chip, but probes their limits by turning the vessel of these ambiguities into the manner of his existence; breasts represent a narrative predicament as well as being emblematic of a libidinal conflict. Commenting on Franzen's novel, Elaine Showalter argues that Chip's downfall "followed the standard formula for academic novels of sexual harassment" (140), placing it in a historical category alongside novels like Roth's *The Human Stain*. Franzen's depiction of Chip is more complex than a mere repeated trope (Showalter's text is repeatedly let down by its enthusiasm for categorisation), and a closer analysis of the text reveals that Franzen has a more critical attitude to his protagonist than Showalter seems willing to admit. In both Franzen's and Roth's texts, fetishistic breast-obsession illuminates a character's weaknesses.

Fetishism is an important theme in *The Breast*, as it helps Roth demonstrate how his narrator masks discourses. In an earlier chapter, it has been demonstrated that this concept has evolved to incorporate a range of related but distinct theoretical debates. Expanding on these ideas, this chapter will argue that *The Breast* can be used to show how fetishism can serve both as a theme (the displacement of sexual energies onto a distinct anatomical part) and a mode of writing (a form of writing that uses specific themes in an attempt to hide other discourses). The interrelation between these two domains of fetishism is the critical nexus of *The Breast* – and as such, its depiction of fetishism differs from that in *The Corrections*, in which fetishism is a symptom of a broader malaise.

Chip appears to lose his sexual monomania in the course of Franzen's novel, even entering into a happy (albeit mildly unconventional) marriage by the novel's end. Kepesh, in contrast, is forced to explore the relationship between sex and selfhood to the point of exhaustion, and is denied a lasting resurgence. The key difference between the two characters lies in the very fascination with embodied identity that Franzen gestures towards, but refuses to explore in detail. Placed at the centre of Roth's text, fetishism prevents any stable knowledge of identity (be it of oneself or another person) from emerging through sex.

An exploration of bodily identity in *The Breast* is contiguous with developments in the study of the Kepesh novels in scholarly criticism of Roth's work. Debra Shostak's monograph *Countertexts, Counterlives* is one of the few books on Roth to consider the Kepesh novels as a trilogy, and her emphasis on the role of psychoanalysis in constructing bodily identity is particularly convincing. This chapter will take many of Shostak's observations as foundational, developing their ideas in different directions in pursuit of a form of close reading which pays heed to the diffuse nature of Roth's text.

Shostak claims that "by representing the very fleshliness of gendering, Roth forces a confrontation with the manifold meanings of the gendered body" (30) – with the conclusion that "selfhood is inextricable from embodiment" (21). This confrontation is rooted in the "psychosexual territory a child crosses before encountering the desire for the symbolic power of the phallus", a claim which allows Shostak to explore the symbolic particularity of the breast, which comes to stand for the unattainability of knowledge (35). Sexuality, as configured through the person of David Kepesh, becomes a process of perpetual displacement. Replacing the subjective associations of sexuality with a more objective state (in which the breast becomes the subject of a given gaze) provides Shostak with the basis for considering how Kepesh's transformation "effectively renders the body a corpse, the epitome of lack" (37). In its corpse-like reduced form, the breast-body becomes abject, placed in the borderlands of identity crisis. Shostak develops this argument by utilising the work of Julia Kristeva, quoting Kristeva's theory that "the abject is the violence of mourning for an 'object' that has already been lost" – an unattainable, Oedipal desire for a lost maternal origin (38).

Shostak's analysis of *The Breast* concludes with an analysis of the transvestite aspects of the text. She uses the work of Marjorie Garber to argue that Roth's undermining of binaristic conceptions of gender goes as far as to question

the dominant fiction of male/female bipolarity that undergirds our experience and understanding of gender and sexuality as well as the fictions of mind/body, inside/outside, and subject/object, the oppositions that likewise inform our notions of self. (39)

This itself recalls the work of Judith Butler – a theorist not mentioned in Shostak's text, but one whose notion of gender performance in works like *Gender Trouble* closely mirrors that in Shostak's text. For example, Butler argues that the repetition of heterosexual paradigms “may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories” (31).

Seen in this light, Kepesh's admitting that his homophobic repugnance at the idea of being sexually stimulated by a man whilst living as a female breast is inherently ridiculous, (“I realize that the conjunction of male mouth and female nipple can hardly be described as a homosexual act”) seems almost prescient (*The Breast* 40). Whilst Kepesh acknowledges the power of “the homosexual taboo” over his actions, he still requires himself to be “temporarily anesthetized” (40) whilst being washed by his male nurse; all part of his ploy to control the lust that being washed by a woman induces. As usual, Kepesh attempts elaborate methods to control his desires, and ends up only exposing their elusiveness. To put this another way, Kepesh is placed between categories that he had previously viewed as being subjectively absolute – heterosexual and homosexual categories thus function as another of the binaries that Shostak argues are deconstructed by Roth's depiction of gender identity in *The Breast*. Roth complicates the idea that subjective individuals have an understandable relationship to their bodies. This process, as Shostak illustrates with a reading of a passage from an unpublished sequel to *The Breast*, dooms Kepesh to an endless process of rationalisation without the clarity of incontrovertible knowledge (40-1). Shostak's exposition of binary



deconstruction in *The Breast* thus exposes a range of discussions which in their turn allow her to elaborate on further processes of debate and analysis.

Shostak's ideas are frequently persuasive, although her search for intertextual themes in Roth's work precludes her dwelling too long on any given novel. Additionally, Roth's interest in embodied identity does not emerge anew with *The Breast*. Shostak's incorporation of mid/late-career Roth novels like *The Anatomy Lesson* and *Sabbath's Theater* elides the significance of the construction of embodiment in the works that lead up to *The Breast*. Similarly, Shostak's discussion of Melanie Klein provides a tantalising glimpse of psychoanalytic parallels in Roth's text, but the necessity of brevity (given the scope of her research) prevents a fuller consideration of the relationship between Kleinian ideas and Roth's own work.

These criticisms can be partly answered by a further consideration of Shostak's work; many of the observations concerning *The Breast* in *Countertext*, *Counterlives* are derived in part from an extended essay Shostak wrote on *The Breast* five years earlier. This essay, which elaborates on many of the themes that the monograph goes into less detail on, represents a significant step towards the rehabilitation of the novel in critical discourse. This essay includes a claim pivotal to this chapter, namely that:

Kepesh offers paradoxes. His presence as the fulfilling object of desire seems to suppress the order of language even as he is only present in language, in the first-person narration of his predicament that is the novel, a narration that constructs his subjectivity in discourse. As a breast, too, he represents the fetishized feminine object as a contradictory sign simultaneously of wholeness, dismemberment, and difference, and, of course, brings to the fore the very fact that the breast is fetishized, the primary object in several senses of the term. ('Return to the Breast' 329)

Shostak's essay thus offers a means of reconsidering the importance of the embodied subject in Roth's work through an examination of themes relating to transvestitism. In this passage, Shostak highlights the paradoxical nature of Kepesh as a character and as a narrator whilst drawing attention to the primary source of thematic inquiry in the text: Kepesh's breast-body. In particular, Shostak's emphasis on fetishism as a key site through which competing themes can be explored in the text without offering a single interpretative lens is of vital importance. In combining the problem of language (part of Roth's construction of the problem of knowledge) with the problem of embodied subjectivity, Shostak provides an interpretative framework that this chapter will seek to expand upon. The use of psychoanalytic concepts in her analysis suggests that interpretation of *The Breast* should be expanded by a broader consideration of the psychoanalytic context it emerges from. Read as such, the novel forms part of an ongoing critical conversation.

This is not to suggest that Shostak is the only literary critic to have taken this novel seriously, rather that her perspectives take the novel further outside of the sphere of judgement than the majority of other critics – some of whom, as Chapter 2 described, are open in their hostility towards the novel. Developing the literary and psychoanalytic context of this novel, this chapter will expand Shostak's network of theoretical nexus-points in order to group them under the rubric of fetishism. This may necessitate a reconsideration of Shostak's ideas, in that the transvestite potential that she identifies provides a method of contending with Kepesh's gender confusion that fetishism modifies and arguably supplants. Nonetheless, Shostak's observations have irrevocably changed the criteria upon which *The Breast* (and the other Kepesh novels) can be judged and interpreted. In the mode of interpretation that this chapter proposes, the disputatious character of *The Breast* is not representative of a flaw in Roth's technique, but part of a vivid and dynamic process of constructed ambiguity.

The forms of rereading gestured towards by Shostak and developed in this chapter are contrarian insofar as they give attention to a novel that attracted a deal of initial scepticism. Indeed, 1972 (the year of *The Breast*'s publication) was an annus horribilis for Philip Roth. Despite consistently high sales of his novels following the runaway success of 1969's *Portnoy's Complaint*, critical reaction to his subsequent works was mixed, and the

resentment that Roth's work had always courted was beginning to seep into unfamiliar quarters<sup>27</sup>. As sceptical as some these reviews were, they gave only the vaguest indications of the vitriol that would follow in the December issue of *Commentary*, a literary-minded periodical which had published works by many of the leading Jewish intellectuals of its day, and amongst whose writers Roth could number many of his earliest champions.

Featuring what Mark Shechner has dubbed a "double-barreled attack" (*Up Society's Ass, Copper* 6) on Roth's entire body of work (Norman Podhoretz's elegiac essay 'Laureate of the New Class' and Irving Howe's jeremiad 'Philip Roth Reconsidered'), the impact of the December 1972 issue of *Commentary* on Roth's work would be as lasting as it was infamous. Jay Halio has discussed how, in creating the character Milton Appel in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth was "obviously having a good time at Howe's expense" (*Philip Roth Revisited* 173). This was not the first time this claim had been made: Harold Bloom discusses how Roth's depiction of Appel was a thinly-veiled counter-attack on Howe<sup>28</sup>. Bloom describes Appel as "a deliberate self-parody of Roth's more-than-ironic reaction to how badly he has been read", which at least acknowledges Roth's suspicion of subject-positions. Tellingly, Bloom also refers to *The Breast* as being Roth's "major esthetic disaster" ('His Long Ordeal by Laughter'). Bloom may be able to justify Roth's grievances against a fellow critic by reference to Roth's self-reflexivity, but is not willing to extend this leniency to a novel like *The Breast*, whose poor reception is the most enduring critical consensus on Roth emerging from the critical furore directed at him in 1972<sup>29</sup>.

One of the most direct rebuttals to the accusations levelled by Howe and Podhoretz was written by a young academic named Mark Shechner and published in *Partisan Review* in 1974. Shechner would later claim that his article was "denatured" by his editing out a section which accused Howe's

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<sup>27</sup> Debra Shostak's essay on *The Breast* offers a good cross-section of the varied responses to the novel in contemporary print media – including harsh denunciations in *The National Review* and *The Hudson Review*, an ambivalent response in *The New Statesman* and highly positive reviews in *Time* and *Life*. ('Return to the Breast' 330)

<sup>28</sup> Howe and Roth would eventually overcome their differences. The Philip Roth Papers include irregular correspondence between the two which includes "a peace treaty and a truce" called by Howe in 1986 – even though he claims that Roth "got in the last shot" – given the otherwise peaceable tone of the correspondence, this may be a reference to the portrayal of Appel in *Zuckerman Unbound*.

<sup>29</sup> Bloom's impartiality may be critiqued in light of his general dislike of twentieth century fiction, but the representative nature of his critique makes his review useful regardless.

criticisms of Roth of bearing similarities to an autobiographical essay Howe published in 1946. This section would reappear in Shechner's 2003 essay collection *Up Society's Ass, Copper*, with the caveat that Howe was simply using Roth as "another rivet to hold tight [Howe's] grandiose polemical boilerplate" (50).

This disclaimer seems to do a disservice both to the quality of Shechner's earlier argument and to the questioning of historical categorisation it carried within it, not to mention the importance of Howe's tirade against the evolution of Shechner's own interest in Roth. The title of Shechner's collection may itself be a subtle tribute to Howe - not only in regards to its subtitle (*Rereading Philip Roth*) being similar to Howe's title (*Reconsidering Philip Roth*), but as an active refutation of Howe's claim that "the cruellest thing anyone can do with *Portnoy's Complaint* is to read it twice" (74). By titling his collection after a line from *Portnoy's Complaint* (and one near the end of the book, at that), Shechner gestures towards his flagrant defiance of Howe's advice; reading twice, as his subtitle clarifies, is the very strategy that Shechner's book depends upon.

Shechner's strategy of cross-generational comparison in the section of his rebuttal excised from his later monograph stands at odds with Podhoretz's claim that Roth is a representative member of "The New Class", an elitist group "motivated only by ideas and ideals" in whose work "others are represented as altogether blind to things of the spirit" (7). There may be a gap between the Jewish intellectuals who rose to prominence in post-war New York and Roth's generation, but many of the concerns common to the earlier group would be transposed into and altered by the later generation. This becomes particularly visible when Shechner's cross-generational strategy is put to use in 'The Conversion of the Jews', an extended essay which introduces a collection with the same title published in 1990.

Shechner's essay describes the evolution of Jewish-American fiction in the immediately post-war period as being characterised by stories about (usually male) characters seeking to "transform themselves through ordeals of conversion and redemption" (6). Curiously, Shechner discusses *Portnoy's Complaint* as reflecting a similar idea also common to several of Saul Bellow's novels: that "man must be reborn again" (6). An interest in psychoanalysis is depicted as a form of escape from a post-revolutionary malaise experienced by

post-war Jewish-American authors such as Isaac Rosenfeld and Lionel Trilling – as Marxism lost its allure, the individualistic emphasis of Freudian ideas became the main currency of intellectual exchange (6).

Shechner is willing to afford Saul Bellow the benefit of the doubt when it comes to his dalliance with the cultic psychoanalytic movement led by Wilhelm Reich; he describes Bellow's post-Reichian play *The Last Analysis* as "readable, amusing and good story-telling, if not always good theater" (10). In Shechner's terms, Bellow's escape from psychoanalysis functions as part of a broader trope in Jewish conversion narratives, an occasionally frenetic working-through in search of a new selfhood – a rebirth. It is unsurprising, given his literary interest in unsatisfying conclusions to psychoanalytic therapy, that Shechner later describes how he moved from a Freudian literary perspective to a more historically-grounded approach himself. Indeed, Wilhelm Reich is one of the theorists, alongside Melanie Klein and feminists such as Juliet Mitchell, who Shechner describes as competing to lead the literary establishment out of its Freudian preoccupations. Shechner argues that this competition was won by identity theory, whose tenets he claims to be as "few, simple and boring" (*Up Society's Ass, Copper* 9) as those of Freudian psychoanalysis itself.

Regardless of the merits of his later conclusions, in 'The Conversion of the Jews' Shechner fails to link the theme of rebirth to a novel in which it becomes manifest to the point of overdetermination – *The Breast*. Shechner links the damning reviews of *The Breast* to the more general attack of Howe only in passing, when acknowledging his own disappointment with the novel. Shechner's rebuttal to Howe in *Partisan Review* discusses *The Breast* in terms of its being "an experiment in controlled regression with an old-fashioned stoical message" ('Philip Roth' 414). He describes the novel as being a rote Freudian parable whose blend of theory and fiction was too direct to occupy a status of ambiguity - the ultimate measure of good fiction writing. Describing Kepesh's transition as an act of dreamlike regression, Shechner concludes that the novel functions as "a conservative moral fable about holding on" (421), with Kepesh as the still centre of a chaotic novel. Later, Shechner would dismiss the novel even more brusquely, describing it as a "depressive" text which reflected Roth's own perilous mental state, which would only be resolved by his publishing the openly combative *My Life as a Man* in 1974. Shechner thus judges *The Breast* by the analytic standards he accuses it of senselessly

adopting, and in doing so his argument can seem circular. Furthermore, though aware of Roth's tendency to misleadingly signpost in the course of his fiction, Shechner's writings on *The Breast* seem keen to take Roth at its word.

Shechner claims that the dream of primal merger is envisaged as "self-contained, androgynous and pleasantly autoerotic", but is cast into the nightmarish form of "total helplessness" at the point of its being realised (421). This analysis is problematic. Kepesh is not self-contained - his rejection of different forms of human company belies his need for it on a general level (he even needs a hammock to be able to sleep, and is connected to a number of tubes to control basic bodily functions). Kepesh may achieve a state of androgyny, but he attempts to recast this androgyny in terms of competing masculinities. As for autoeroticism, even if one acknowledges the ease and vigour of Kepesh's states of arousal, his fate is far from pleasant, deprived even of the lonely solace of Alexander Portnoy by being unable to sexually gratify himself through masturbation.

Shechner's dutifully psychoanalytic reading in *Partisan Review* falters only in claiming that Kepesh "never throws a tantrum" (422) - it is possible to interpret Kepesh as doing little else in the course of the novel. Even if Kepesh has enough self-awareness to cast these tantrums in terms of scholarly epistemologies, he never succeeds fully in containing his rage within such familiar forms. In writing, for example, many drafts of a letter chiding his former mentor, Kepesh searches through his cultural repertoire and emerges with a brief, sardonic note whose assumption of youthful slang is not only a rejection of the composed diction of academia, but a childish (yet, in its self-consciousness, peculiarly scholarly) temper tantrum. He writes, through his amanuensis, Claire: "Dear Debbie and Arthur S. Thanx mucho for the groovy sides. Dave 'The Breast' K.", yet he is careful to check that Claire has used the precise slang spellings he requires (48).

Kepesh is not simply a regression-fantasy, but is a rounded character in his own right, an academic with a detailed and complex personal history - his nightmarish experiences are as much a comment on the orthodoxies of his scholarly pretensions as they are a translation of Freudian commonplaces. There may not be any tantrums of an explicitly childlike nature, but the central conflicts of *The Breast* are inherent in the supposedly denatured character of

scholarly adulthood. Freudianism is, in part, simply another orthodoxy which, as he does with academia, Roth discredits. As Shechner describes in 'The Conversion of the Jews', the position of Freudian thought as the mainstay of North American intellectual culture was on the verge of collapse when Roth penned *The Breast*. The inadequacy of rigidly Freudian readings is, in some ways, the central premise of the novel. This inadequacy becomes emblematic of the denial of ambiguity which is at the heart of Kepesh's ultimate failure. This necessitates a final disagreement with Shechner's reading; an assumption that the novel "comes out foursquare for repression" is accurate, but he is wrong to accuse Roth rather than Kepesh (*Up Society's Ass, Copper* 42).

Frederick Crews' review of *The Breast* takes a similar angle to that of Shechner in *Up Society's Ass, Copper*, whose summary of the novel as "depressive" (14) stands at odds both with his own previous description of the text as well as his claim that his views differed from those of Crews<sup>30</sup>. The review touches on many of the foremost narrative techniques of the novel whilst arguing that the conclusions they generate are inadequate. Crews claims that "Roth, having chosen a story line that looks ideally suited to his taste for outrageous sexual farce, has side-stepped the opportunity and instead written a work of high seriousness" ('Uplift'). Acknowledging the "sarcasm and ambiguity" of the Rilke passage, argues Crews, does not sufficiently diminish the seriousness of the message itself. Similarly, the denial of interpretative models is depicted by Crews as being a mere vehicle for the reader to be able to "grasp Kepesh's humanity without any overlay of ideas".

It seems strange that a writer so ludic in his textual approach, so willing to skewer the interpretative pieties of academia as Crews was and still is (his 1963 satire on literary convention, *The Pooh Perplex*, even featured a send-up of Freudian literary methodologies) would reject a similar approach which is at work in Roth's text, preferring to acknowledge the novel's playfulness only up to a point. Much of the remainder of Crews' review is familiarly Freudian, returning to the primary scene of an infant powerlessness cast alongside adult knowledge. The transition from analytical practice to existential stoicism is

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<sup>30</sup> As Shechner himself willingly acknowledges, his studying under Crews at Berkeley would have a profound effect on his work. Shechner's rebuttal to Howe would be published in the same issue of *Partisan Review* as an article by Crews on anxiety – placed immediately before Shechner's own article.

thus identified as being the principle failure of the novel, and there is a noticeable tone of pique in Crews' observation that "even the psychoanalyst vetoes Kepesh's tentative efforts at self-awareness" ('Uplift'). Crews' insights are often persuasive, but his conclusions can seem unsubstantiated by Roth's text. The point at which his interpretation struggles is the move from narrative observation to general conclusion – taking the novel's unconvincing finale as evidence of a failure of literary nerve, rather than as part of the logic of a perpetually failing literary character.

*The Breast* is neither too neat a Freudian daydream nor too grandiose a "conservative fable about the virtues of holding on" (Shechner, 'Philip Roth'). For example, there is something vividly pathetic about Kepesh using his final lines to quote a poem by Rilke. Kepesh, at the moment of what is supposedly his highest moment of self-knowledge and stoic endurance, can only express his 'triumph' over his profoundly individual situation by adopting the voice of another author. Kepesh's lapse into the stentorious mode of the literature professor is a flimsy defence, an adjustment to his situation which offers only a pale imitation of his previous selfhood, one that refuses to acknowledge how he himself has systematically deconstructed its reassurances. Roth thus leaves himself as the ultimate close-reader whose deconstructions give the text its structure; to take Kepesh's assumptions for his denies the novel of much of its parodic thrust. The ultimate force behind this, as Shechner argues in 'The Conversion of the Jews', is the enduring and characteristically Jewish-American appeal of the theme of rebirth, incorporating the ultimate impossibility of a 'clean break'.

### **3.2 Weird Bodies: Satire and Parody in post-*Portnoy* Roth**

*The Breast* was as much a continuation of themes Roth had introduced in other works as it was a distinctive moment in Roth's literary career. In introducing Kepesh to the literary public, Roth was maintaining an interest in surreal, topical comedy that he had been developing in shorter works. The influence of these works in Roth's career has generally gone underappreciated in critical discourse on Roth, yet the inventiveness and cynicism that are the hallmarks of



*The Breast* are as much indebted to them as they are to any other factor in Roth's life or career.

These texts influenced theme as much as they influenced style. The notion of rebirth, for example, is recurrent in Roth's work following *Portnoy's Complaint*. Later in his career, the notion of 'counterlives' would become a key theme for Roth, tracing the potential lives of many of his characters in the course of a single novel. Counterlife, though a superficially useful paradigm for analysing *The Breast*, is different in form as well as in context from Roth's earlier literary transformations - even if its deconstruction of self-creation can be read as the obverse of Kepeshian entrapment. To view such early texts as a prelude to Roth's later, more postmodern stylistic experimentation belies the confluence of preoccupations in these vastly different texts. Psychoanalysis is the central concern lurking behind many of Roth's novels, and knowledge of the history and subversive potential of psychoanalysis is as essential to an understanding of *The Breast* as knowledge of the history and arcana of baseball is to the text that would follow it, *The Great American Novel*. Roth's interest in psychoanalysis is not, however, that of a dogmatic acolyte. Roth, to use the polarities he claims for himself in *Reading Myself and Others*, employs sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness in his treatment of psychoanalysis, using it for his own ends as much as he does to inform the structure of his narratives (P. Roth, 'After Eight Books').

Psychoanalysis is not the only factor at work in the novel; Freud's writings may be the dominant influence on *The Breast*, but the narrative mechanics of Roth's text are not reducible to that alone. Shechner expands his definition of thematic rebirth to focus on a point of explicit crisis; the moment when previously assumed notions of selfhood becomes exposed as inadequate. The insufficiency of self-definition is a central theme in much of Roth's early work, especially in the melodramatic realism of texts like *When She Was Good*. Less obvious is the way in which this theme is enacted in the texts that follow *Portnoy's Complaint* - a farce about anti-Semitism named *On the Air* and a volatile political satire, *Our Gang*. More than many of Roth's other works, these texts are concerned with the intersection of identity and embodiment, both within and outside of an explicitly Jewish context. Taken together, they help construct the theoretical basis for the enforced bodily transmogrification of David Kepesh - in these earlier texts, bodies are constantly violated, and self-

conceptions are consistently exposed as shallow and liable to comic subversion. They thus offer a reformulation of Shechner's concept of thematic rebirth; that it is our very bodies that can prevent full self-determination.

In an early critical monograph on Roth first published in 1981, Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevere A. Nance conduct a thorough analysis of Roth's works, albeit one already constrained by the scale of Roth's body of writing. Jones and Nance include brief discussions of *Our Gang* and 'On the Air' in a chapter exploring Roth's satire. In this manner Roth is depicted as a literary technician rather than a political idealist, attempting to uncover a "way to make an imaginative assault upon social and political acts" (157). Roth's use of satire is a means of contending with his relationship to America, an attempt to expose "the grotesqueries of the American political scene" (130). In a revealing but unsubstantiated aside, Jones and Nance include *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Breast* in a list of Roth's fictional experiments which have been influenced by his uncertainty about the role of fiction in American culture. Exploring the implications of this idea, it becomes possible to interpret *The Breast* as a subject-specific satire on American literary academia, in the same manner that *Our Gang* satirises American politics and 'On The Air' satirises American radio broadcasting. This idea remains reductive (Roth rarely limits himself to a single satiric target), but it nonetheless highlights the potential for textual continuity. The importance of connections between these texts lies not only in their 'American' character, but in the extremity of bodily manipulations that a satiric American context allows Roth to depict.

*Our Gang* transposes the sense of powerless indignation from the self to society-at-large, targeting the political manoeuvrings of Richard Nixon for satiric attack. Taking as its starting point a speech made by Nixon himself, in which abortion is described as "an unacceptable form of population control" (2), Roth portrays the downfall and eventual murder of a character named Trick E. Dixon. Dixon allows Roth to target many public figures and attitudes, with each of the novel's six sections tackling perceived hypocrisies or inadequacies in both the Nixon administration and the society which elected him to power. For example, the first section, "Tricky Comforts a Troubled Citizen", shows Tricky simultaneously defending his opposition to abortion and his intensifying of the Vietnam War in bursts of brilliantly circuitous rhetoric.

The bulk of the novel's narrative concerns an extended plotting session, in which Dixon's chiefs of staff counter an accusation that by opposing abortion Dixon has endorsed procreation - and thus sex itself. They settle on accusing an absconded baseball player of hiring boy scouts to destroy Dixon's reputation, a process which eventually leads to the United States waging war on the "pro-pornography government" of Denmark (120). This allows Roth to further satirise the American role in Vietnam through implicit comparison with Dixon's increasingly preposterous reasoning and actions.

Roth's narrative depends as much on notions of violated bodies as it does upon the political excesses that it satirises. Dixon aims to correct a nervous tic wherein sweat forms on his upper lip (signifying, in the eyes of his enemies, a deceitful character) by means of surgery on his tear ducts, but in doing so becomes the victim of a bizarre assassination. There is an element of vindictive glee in Roth's description of the event, which is nonetheless depicted in such a way that the agent of the murder can remain undetected. In freeing his narrative from the grievances of a single murderer, Roth makes the murder itself an act of collective catharsis - but in doing so, reinforces his own role as the chief narrative agent. Dixon's death thus becomes a fantasy of vengeful regression, a jibe at Nixon's self-projected naivety:

The cause of death was drowning. He was found at seven A.M., unclothed and bent into the fetal position, inside a large transparent baggie filled with a clear fluid presumed to be water, and tied at the top. (147)

The description of the death itself is representative of Roth's willingness to adopt different registers; in this case, that of the coroner's report. The assumption and parody of different styles of speech helps Roth to argue for their intrinsic weaknesses and complicity in Dixon's rise to power. However, the murder represents a point of cumulative narrative crisis that has emerged from a sustained theme in the preceding text. Dixon's desperation to avoid any association with sexuality is one of the novel's central comic themes; in some

of the novel's more brazen attacks, Dixon's advisors assure him that a claim for his complete sexual inexperience would be believed by his electorate. The assassination allows Roth to combine Dixon's anti-sexual approach with his perspective on abortion in a single event. Dixon's doomed desire to live free of sex – free of the complications of adult desire – is mocked by showing the sheer impossibility of successful repression. A depiction of a boy scout protesting Dixon with a sign reading "REPRESSION – LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT" represents a lightly satirical psychoanalytic gesture on the part of Roth, as well as the chance for him to mock those protesting the anti-war movement<sup>31</sup>. Dixon's willingness to obscure his own sexuality in the name of political expediency directly contributes to his downfall, in an exaggerated but similar manner to how static and unyielding views on sexuality contribute to the plight of many of Roth's protagonists.

In discussing the murder, one of Dixon's advisors claims that "it's an act of violence and disrespect, utterly without rhyme or reason, and cannot but arouse the righteous indignation of reasonable and sensible men everywhere" (160) - a claim which could stand as a summary of the text as a whole. In refusing to 'solve' the murder, Roth draws attention to his own authorial role as the "cruel assassin with a macabre sense of humour" (149), as well as calling into question the issue of culpability. Roth's targets are not as simplistic as they may seem: as Congressman Fraud puts it, Tricky "had the mandate of the people here, lunatics included" (158). The multiplicity of targets for Roth's satire gives the text an aura of despair, a hopelessness that even the death of Dixon cannot fully ameliorate. The target for Roth's satire is not Richard Nixon as much as it is America itself.

In this respect, it may be significant that Roth opens his narrative by quoting Jonathan Swift's *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*, characters whose extreme rationalism is compared favourably by Swift to the human penchant for lying. Roth may be acknowledging his satiric precursors, but in doing so he reinforces the general human tendency towards the deception of both self and

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<sup>31</sup> In a *Huffington Post* article on the peculiar permanence of the phrase 'America: Love it or Leave It', Michael Sigman discusses how the phrase gained particular prominence during the Vietnam War, but was initially popularised by the radio broadcaster Walter Winchell - himself a pivotal character in Roth's later novel *The Plot Against America* and a frequent subject of childhood veneration for Roth himself. (Sigman)

others. In *The Breast*, David Kepesh would accuse his fantasised enemies of being “sleek, self-satisfied houyhnhnms”, mocking their claims to moral authority. In calling to mind the disparity between human fallibility and houyhnhnm rationality that opens *Our Gang*, Roth reinforces the prevalence of processes of delusion, deceit and fantasy in human life – and thus ironically exposes the stable self-conception of David Kepesh as little more than a houyhnhnm pretention. Kepesh may be more self-knowing than Trick E. Dixon, but the process of wilful self-delusion is much the same.

Wilful self-delusion on an individual level which becomes representative of broader trends is also a theme in ‘On The Air’, a text with an obscure status in the Roth oeuvre – the story was published in a 1970 issue of the *New American Review*, and does not feature in any of the various collections of Roth’s work (although it is featured in a 1998 edited anthology of American Jewish writing)<sup>32</sup>. The vivid prose style of the piece makes it as distinctive as it is ambitious, although its reliance on the reader’s knowledge of broadcast media tropes can, as in the later *Our Gang*, make it err towards subject-specific satire. The two texts, though vastly different in subject matter and style, are united by their desire to subvert American cultural tropes; in the opening page of *On the Air*, Roth elides sections of radio dialogue with the repeated phrase “blah”, much as he would do with sections of television political commentary in *Our Gang* (7). In ‘On the Air’, Roth’s targets are more theoretical and abstract than the subjects of lampoon in the later text, exhibiting a more characteristically Rothian mode of indeterminacy.

Nothing is as it seems in ‘On The Air’, least of all its characters – a store owner poisons a child then shows compassion towards the child’s father, a police chief holds citizens hostage and a “mentally defective” cashier eloquently laments his plight (39). *On the Air* depicts a community ruled by the dictates of commercial radio, within a narrative frame itself reflective of the process of listening to a radio broadcast. This explains the constant switching of registers, in the manner of competing programmes – as well as the concluding lines which wish “sweet dreams” to its listeners (49). ‘On the Air’ is so rambunctious that it can be difficult to trace a distinct narrative arc; the impression the reader is left with is one of ceaseless escalation.

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<sup>32</sup> See *American Jewish Fiction: A Century of Stories* (Shapiro).

The plot: Milton Lippman finds himself trapped in a small town in New Jersey on his way to try and enlist Albert Einstein's talents for a radio show which would compete with and transcend the "goyische" banality of most entertainment radio (9). Lippman counters stereotype with stereotype, all in the service of an entrepreneurial streak at once strikingly American and profoundly Jewish. Forced between cultural boundaries, human bodies in this text are seen as inseparably linked to perceptions of individual (and usually ethnic) identity. Lippman may be terrified by the police chief's demanding him at gunpoint to compare the weight of their respective scrotum, but he has himself envisaged Christian penises as pieces of plumbing that only function to aid the consumption of whisky. Equally, the police chief's crass observations about the penises of African-American men are countered by Lippman's reduction of his African-American employees to tap dancing minstrel stereotypes. Stereotypes and the alternative reality they may mask are often difficult to separate, as characters adopt and discard expected and subversive character traits.

Many of the characters in 'On the Air' are disabled in striking and metaphorically overloaded ways. The bartender who reacts furiously to Lippman's deliberately stereotypical Jewish accent is no straightforward anti-Semite; his ears have become "bulbous, red, melted-looking, like the wattles of a turkey" from the sheer effort of trying to understand the accented English of the Chinese cooks he works with (25). Similarly, a cashier has his hand replaced by a metal ice-cream scoop, supposedly so that he "can be of value to society despite [his] handicap" (28), and Lippman himself even fends off a bullet by deflecting it off his nose. Such extreme bodies are representative of a text in which the desire for a rational explanation is akin to a physical disability, and the only possible stable truths are those found through the very stereotypes that circumscribe the actions of the characters.

One of the most telling scenes in Roth's text comes when an anti-Semitic police chief describes a fellow character's inability to differentiate his own acquaintances from fictional characters:

Because of his narrow literalism, I should be punished? I will not be held responsible for the inability of some mental nitwit to open himself out to the simplest God damn playfulness. He has absolutely no feeling for ambiguity whatsoever – and as for a genuine work of art, he wouldn't know one if he fell over it! (41)

This scene exposes the recurrent theme in 'On the Air' that the only way to undermine stereotypes is to wallow in them, to uncover their structures. The police chief, who later claims to be going "stark raving literal" (46), is a surprising advocate for the virtues of art – but it is a typical tactic of Roth's to place arguments and ideas outside of their expected context to see how well they thrive. Most arguments are undermined by this strategy, and the reader is forced to choose between taking the argument on its own merits or condemning it based on what they know of the character who uttered it. The text's reliance on the "ambiguity" of art is pivotal for its success, as, for Roth, art best exemplifies the interpretative variation which all cultural signifiers should be subject to. The statement is perilously close to many of Roth's own proclamations on the subject ("sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness") – so it is little surprise that Roth's text seems to advocate ambiguity, couching its claims about art by placing them in the mouth of a violent anti-Semite – whilst his Jewish captive looks on in a state of terrified confusion.

These two texts include many of the themes which would come to function as key aspects of *The Breast*. Most significantly, they show how self-knowledge is mired in an array of interpretative models, and that self-creation is always limited by the perceptions of others – all through an examination of 'weird' bodies. The protagonists of *Our Gang* and *On The Air* are created primarily to satirise a given topic – the Nixon administration and radio broadcasting respectively – yet the texts also refuse the didacticism of satire by expanding to a general critique of misapplied methodologies and unseen hypocrisies. It is this general mode of suspicion, twinned with the self-assurance of their protagonists, that helps Roth to begin a deconstruction of the mythology of self-creation. This is an explicit narrative strategy in *Our Gang*, but one which emerges more subtly in 'On The Air', with its implicit

suggestion of the power of stereotype to prevent an individual from fully reconstructing themselves in their own image.

### 3.3 The Breast in Psychoanalytic theory

The relentless narrative pace of the *The Breast* stem from an interest in embodied excess that Roth had been developing since *Portnoy's Complaint*, but *The Breast* is primarily dependent on psychoanalytic ideas for much of its comedy. As noted earlier, psychoanalytic ideas were beginning to lose their prominent role in American academic discourse in this era - Freudian theories lost many of their adherents and much of their cultural influence in the following years. The theme of impossible rebirth in Roth's satirical works becomes reconfigured by Roth as an exploration of the role of psychoanalytic influences in his fiction. *The Breast* can be interpreted as an exemplification of a point of crisis in American culture: what happens after Freudian theories lose their appeal? The resultant text is fundamentally unsettled and profoundly confused; the deliberations of its narrator become emblematic of a general sense of ambivalence.

The fluctuation in academic prestige afforded to Freudian theories is too large a topic to be fully covered by this chapter. However, there is enough evidence from critics who have both a Freudian background and a contemporaneous uncertainty about its function to suggest that *The Breast* represents a point of indecision that later texts such as *My Life as a Man* would clarify in greater detail. Alan Cooper is the best representative of this school of thought, claiming that the later novel is "the most authentic novel yet of the psychoanalytic process" (131). His perspective is shared (and influenced by) the work of Jeffrey Berman, for whom the novel "signifies Roth's movement away from psychoanalysis" (268). Such perspectives are useful, but incomplete: Roth's uncertainties about psychoanalysis are initiated and enacted simultaneously through the indeterminacy of *The Breast*. To put it another way, *The Breast* shows psychoanalysis in its death-throes whereas *My Life as a Man* is a post-mortem. The latter novel is more direct in its explorations, but it lacks the internal complexity of its predecessor.



In *The Memory Wars*, Frederick Crews describes his own disenchantment with psychoanalysis as a “painful realisation that Freudianism in its self-authenticating approach to knowledge constitutes not an exemplification of the rational-empirical ethos to which I felt loyal, and to which Freud himself had professed allegiance, but a seductively mythic alternative to it” (8)<sup>33</sup>. This sense that psychoanalysis is a totalising discourse is part of the narrative structure of *The Breast*, in which it represents one amongst many modes of explanation that Kepesh deliberates between. This sense of dawning scepticism is reiterated in the work of Mark Shechner, who had been taught psychoanalysis by Crews between 1967 and 1968. Shechner describes psychoanalysis as “the available radicalism”, an intellectual trend in which Freud’s work was treated “as though it were nothing less than a voice out of the burning bush itself” (*Up Society’s Ass, Copper* 7-8). Shechner describes how he came to view psychoanalysis as being “a system of thought that was so clearly a patchwork of cultural prejudice, guesswork, daring and blunder” (12), and how internal conflicts over psychoanalytic concepts were being abandoned in favour of collective musings as to what would replace psychoanalysis as the foremost concern of American literary academia.

In Shechner’s description, amongst those competing over the embers of Freudian theory are Kleinian psychoanalysts and feminist theorists: two schools of thought which take oppositional (but not adversarial) attitudes towards the writings of Freud himself. Kepesh, like Portnoy before him, is well acquainted with Freud’s work - yet Kepesh is a specialist in comparative literature whose knowledge of psychoanalysis is mainly derived from the benign platitudes of Dr. Klinger, his former analyst. Klinger is more vocal and less cryptic than most of Roth’s other psychoanalysts (at least in *The Breast*), but in being so he becomes a mouthpiece for a process of self-determination that seems wilfully defiant of the devastating nature of Kepesh’s transformation.

Roth’s transition from the phallic Freudianism of *Portnoy’s Complaint* to the mammarian indeterminacy of *The Breast* is representative of changes in the intellectual currents of the time. Whether Roth was aware of the specific

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<sup>33</sup> Crews describes this process as being gradual, although by 1975 he claims to have been researching in order to “see what [he] could retain of the Freudian heritage” after his scepticism was already well established (*The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute* 4).

nature of changes in psychoanalytic theory is immaterial insofar as *The Breast* is a novel whose exasperation seems to represent a general loss of faith in received modes of thinking. The post-Freudian schools that Shechner discusses (especially Kleinians and feminists) are thus as good a place as any to start considering the theoretical ramifications of *The Breast*.

*The Breast*, as a title, suggests 'The Breast' as a psychoanalytic entity, inviting an acknowledgement of the history of theory written on the topic at the same time as it forces an acknowledgement of the personality of Kepesh<sup>34</sup>. In the Freudian model of sexual development, emphasis is placed upon the penis as the earliest primary locus of meaning, a fact which has created considerable unease amongst Freud's commentators from an early stage in the development of psychoanalysis. Freud himself acknowledged this problem insofar as he encouraged "women to become analysts to work with children and to explore the development of female sexuality in greater depth" (Segal 7) – a challenge that Klein accepted. Writing on the role of Melanie Klein's work in the context of feminism, Janet Sayers notes that most of Klein's shifts in emphasis were part of broader movements in psychoanalysis, of which she was only a constituent part – nonetheless, her contributions have had lasting consequences for psychoanalytic theory (23). In changing the primary moment of parental identification from the paternal penis to the maternal breast, Klein furthered the development of a matriarchalist perspective begun by "feminist-minded analysts in the 1920s and 1930s" and popularised by Karen Horney and Ernest Jones (Sayers 27).

For Sayers, Klein's chief feminist achievement was the analytical models she developed for the treatment of aggression, rather than her success in the male-dominated environment of early psychoanalysis (or her views on the nature and role of mothering, which Sayers argues continued the Freudian tradition of refusing to engage with "the social fact of women's subjugation") (35). Klein's work in this area is certainly difficult to incorporate into a rigidly emancipatory theoretical approach, but it has nonetheless been considered and developed by a number of theorists influenced by feminist ideas – for example, Sayers discusses the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein, who uses Klein's

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<sup>34</sup> Julia Segal gestures towards this tension in acknowledging that "with adults, [Melanie] Klein seems to have used expressions such as 'the breast' to refer to certain phantasies" (60).

work on mothering to argue for the psychiatric benefits of shared parenting. Although Sayers complains that Dinnerstein's work lacks a methodology for practical implementation (30), the ability to construct such arguments suggests the pliability of Klein's ideas on mothering, and her theories relating to the maternal breast.

It is the emphasis placed by Klein on the symbolism of the female breast that makes her work strikingly relevant to a consideration of *The Breast* – especially considering Shechner's claim that her work was garnering increased attention during the early 1970s. In her essay on *The Breast*, Debra Shostak discusses Klein's work, arguing that it helps further Roth's argument that "subjectivity is inextricable from the gendering of the body" (323). Shostak's essay includes three basic claims about Klein's relevance to Roth. She first argues that Klein's configuration of the breast as the object that initiates a child's desire to understand interpersonal differentiation, and that, as such, Kepesh's transformation is evocative of a process of differentiation that he is still embroiled in (324). She then highlights the maternal theme that can be detected throughout *The Breast*, concluding that Klein's notion of the breast as representing an initial lack for a child relates to Kepesh's "longing for the lost mother" (324). Finally, Shostak argues that the maternal theme suggests the breaking of an Oedipal taboo which is evocative of a castration anxiety that Roth develops in order to suggest Kepesh's fears of losing his masculine subjectivity (325). These arguments combine to offer a nuanced Kleinian reading of Roth's text that demonstrates the diversity of its potential psychoanalytic interpretations. A reconsideration of Klein's ideas in a Rothian context thus becomes necessary as a means of finding additional methods of interpretation that complement those initially suggested by Shostak.

Juliet Mitchell's introduction to *The Selected Melanie Klein* discusses the origins of many of Klein's major ideas, placing particular importance on the role of the breast for infantile development in Klein's work. Like Sayers, Mitchell introduces Klein's theories through reference to their development of Freudian ideas. These developments are traced through four object mechanisms which help to construct the neonate's internal defences, and thus their psychic development – splitting, projection, introjection and projective identification (the last of which was predominantly developed by later theorists influenced by Klein's work). These processes are a pivotal part of childhood,

and Mitchell describes how the level of their use is itself an indicator of mental health:

Every infant introjects, projects, splits its objects and hence its ego – excessive use of these defences is psychotic. In the normal course of events, every child does its best to repudiate undesirable parts of reality; severe repudiation is at the heart of psychosis. A difference of degree can become a difference of kind. (21)

Mitchell calls to mind the polarity of childhood identification processes, in which the child's first impulses are towards love and hatred within a world it constructs as both frustrating and satisfying. The child is forced to resolve fundamental ambiguities through a process of compromise, a series of strategies whose extreme manifestations can result in psychoses later in life. These strategic processes stem not from the castration complex (in which the infant's psychic development can be traced back to the primary moment of encounter with the father's penis) but with the mother's breast, in relation to which the child initially develops these mechanisms. However, the success of these processes may negatively affect the child's development if the methods used to secure love and satisfaction are too extreme (Klein 84-94). The nature of the child's identification with the maternal breast is thus an extremely fraught and pivotal moment in the development of self-identity.

The subject of the maternal breast features prominently in Klein's work, and Mitchell's editing of her writings shows the topic to be an area of continuous interest throughout her career. Introducing her own work in the opening essay of the collection, Klein discusses how her study of infant behaviour allowed her to conclude that "the internalization of an injured and therefore dreaded breast on one hand and of a satisfying and helpful breast on the other, is the core of the super-ego" (50), later discussed as a key element in the formation of her notion of splitting (the process whereby either a good part is separated from a bad one, or part of the self is disowned). The split between a 'good' nurturing breast and a 'bad' persecuting breast as a means of

reconciling the limitations of pleasure becomes one of the primary dilemmas faced by all children – the primary stage of what Klein dubbed the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ stage in infant psychic development. In an essay first published four years prior to the essay discussed above, Klein discusses how the infant gains security by creating the breast into an idealised object, to protect it against a “persecutory anxiety” derived from a fear of annihilation (202). This idealisation is a short-term solution, but one which (as Mitchell illustrates) has a significant effect on the child’s subsequent development.

Discussing the topic in her introduction to an earlier essay by Klein, Mitchell notes the child’s identification with “part-objects”, chief amongst which is the mother’s breast, gives way after about six months to an understanding of the mother as an individual person, the “whole mother” (115). At this point, the child moves from a paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive position, in which it attempts to come to terms with the radical singularity of the whole mother, and the feelings of guilt and confusion at its previous attempts at rationalisation. As Klein explains:

The child’s libidinal fixation to the breast develops into feelings towards [the mother] as a person. Thus feelings both of a destructive and of a loving nature are experiences towards one and the same object and this gives rise to deep and disturbing conflict in the child’s mind. (140)

The depressive position represents the moment of crisis in a child whereby the distinctiveness of the mother (herself representative of the ‘other’) becomes a fundamental problem. The radical otherness of the mother causes a crisis for the child, for which they have to muster as many defence mechanisms as possible to reconcile. This moment of crisis is effectively the point at which self-identity begins to form in earnest, the point at which the state of neonatal passivity becomes a reciprocal dialogue between individuals (Klein 140-5). The depressive condition thus encompasses a moment where the recognition of contradictory emotions becomes central to the process of identity formation. Shostak’s gesture towards the breast as a Kleinian symbol of interpersonal

communicative failure emerges from this branch of Klein's research, but it is possible to extend the idea further ('Return to the Breast' 324). Knowingly or unwittingly, Kepesh engages with a series of crises whose structures can appear Kleinian – at the very least, the principal thematic concerns of Kepesh's dialogues, be they with other characters or an imagined reader (perhaps a similar style of confidant to the one who makes a brief appearance at the end of *The Dying Animal*) are evocative of Kleinian tropes.

Klein argues for a "femininity complex" as a predecessor and counterpart to the castration complex in her early writings. She uses this concept to explore the idea of the male child envying the maternal "organs of conception, pregnancy and parturition" which are "coveted as organs of receptivity and bounty" (74). Envy is certainly present in *The Breast* (Kepesh frequently cites breast-envy as a potential explanation for his predicament), but the emphasis on bodily identity also functions on a more subtle textual level. Kepesh's dismissal of self-imagined charges of over-identification belies aspects of his transformation which suggest a more general sense of developmental inadequacy. Klein's conception of the breast may not be directly transferable to *The Breast*, but the areas of conflict that she describes help illuminate why Kepesh's transformation is so symbolically rich. Kepesh himself explores the developmental associations of his newfound form later in the text, in a frantic outpouring of hypotheses derived from his asking "what whirling chaos of desire and fear had erupted in this primitive identification with *the* object of infantile veneration?" (60). Like Alexander Portnoy, Kepesh is knowledgeable about psychoanalysis – and like Portnoy, theoretical knowledge does not help him understand his predicament. By this stage in the text, Kepesh has decided that his transformation is a figment of his imagination, a literary 'problem' upon which he can bring his considerable powers of close reading to bear. His hypotheses thus gradually fade from more general questions to specific hypothesis, concluding with ideas phrased not as questions but as interpretations. In this manner, Roth demonstrates how Kepesh has lost the potential for active engagement with the issues he is debating.

Kepesh may be recounting his experiences in the sardonic manner of someone disparaging a long-abandoned belief, mocking his enthusiastic and non-evaluative embrace of a set of arguments, but there is a notable progression in his explanations. Beginning with rhetorical questions, Kepesh

blames first his adolescent auto-eroticism (“raised on a diet too rich in centrefolds”), then his desire for neonatal passivity (“acted upon rather than acting”), gestational nurturing (“a long winter’s sleep”), the amniotic sac itself (“my cocoon”) and perhaps even the moment of conception (“or, or, or”) (61). Kepesh regresses even in his accounts of regression, trying to fix the moment at which his libidinal connection with the breast was first formed. Read as a logical sequence, the absence of a stage between neonatal passivity and pubescent desire implicitly reinforces the connection between “infantile veneration” and his own sexual history that he has so strenuously denied. Moreover, it is the realisation of the insufficiency of passive desire which, in Kleinian terms, sparks the moment when otherness is recognised. Kepesh’s mammarian form is itself a part-object, a symbol of how the character’s quest for ultimate satisfaction (through sex) is doomed by his tendency to reduce other people to utilitarian roles. This explains why Kepesh often reacts with temper tantrums when people in his life do not obey the script he has imagined for them – see, for example, the way Kepesh seems to bully his father into providing confirmation of his analyses (62). Unable or unwilling to see the partial object as a whole person, Kepesh only has a limited understanding of desires – both those of himself and other people. He has internalised the logic of breast-identification in the process of his transformation.

This sense of interpersonal misidentification is not unique to Klein; concerns about the relationship between the self and the other in early parental communication has been a continuing preoccupation of many psychoanalytic theorists. For example, Jean Laplanche argues for a different mode of misidentification in which a lack of knowledge intersects with the fundamentally alien character of another person. He declares that “internal alien-ness [is] maintained, held in place by external alien-ness; external alien-ness, in turn, [is] held in place by the enigmatic relation of the other to his own internal alien”, positing an interrelated mode of misidentification (*Essays on Otherness* 80). In Laplanche’s work, this argument stems in part from the problem of communication between parent and child, and in doing so it offers a countercontext to a Kleinian reading of Kepesh’s predicament (79).

Laplanche also notes that the breast functions “not only as a feeding mechanism but as a sexual organ”, a fact which he claims has been ignored

both by Freud and subsequent psychoanalytic theorists (78). In light of this, argues Laplanche, the breast is not just a symbol of infantile desire, but a carrier of conscious and unconscious sexual desire on the part of the parent. The sexual component of breast-feeding is transposed from the realm of metaphor (unveiled through analysis) to become proto-sexual interaction (78). Laplanche's claim invites a consideration of analytical strategies in which the breast (and male perceptions of the breast) can function within a process that acknowledges its erogenous potential as considered from the perspective of someone, like Kepesh, for whom the experience of such potential must be lived out through fantasy. Although scientists claim that, in theory, Kepesh would be able to produce milk, he lacks the innate ability to do so in his present form (13). Kepesh's primary stimulation remains sexual; he thus serves to exemplify Laplanche's theory of a jarringly direct sexual component to the breast that functions alongside more traditional analytic symbolism. Kepesh, being of a more traditional psychoanalytic mindset than Laplanche, insists on viewing the non-symbolic sexual component of breasthood as secondary: hence why he exclaims to his father "If I am a breast I would make milk! Hold milk! Swell with milk!" (67). Kepesh, for all his love of breasts prior to his transformation, is hampered after it by his insistence on a traditional psychoanalytic interpretation of what such desires mean.

It is this sense of embodied uncertainty that allows for a re-introduction of the concept of fetishism, and the desire for a fetishistic mode of textual interpretation described in Chapter 1. For example, a process of compartmentalising aspects of the human body as a means of dealing with fundamental sexual and gender differences, as Klein describes, brings to mind the processes associated with fetishism - a topic with which Klein's work shares a number of common interests. Though imbued with a sense of male privilege by being conceived of as an extension of the castration complex, Klein's work shows how a fetishistic depiction of embodiment can serve to destabilise categories of gender identity. There is not a perfect continuity between Freudian fetishism as a concept and the ideas of Klein and Laplanche, but there is enough destabilising power in the work of all three critics to create new ways of analysing *The Breast*.

For the simple reason that *The Breast* constructs itself in opposition to totalising readings, none of the theories discussed offer definitive



interpretations of Roth's text. In the case of David Kepesh, a diagnosis of fetishism is as liable to deconstruction as any other set of theoretical models one can apply to the text. The chief benefits of employing fetishistic methods in an interpretation of *The Breast* emerge from the ambiguity and pliability which are internal to fetishism itself. Afforded this sense of experimentation, forms of critical investigation that explore Freudian ideas with a sense of playfulness and benign disputation are given pre-eminence. Fetishism invites a reconsideration of gender binaries in psychoanalysis, and in doing so enables the use of other psychoanalytic theories of embodiment.

Freud, Klein and Laplanche all analyse overdetermined symbols in a profoundly individual setting – exposing a world of unexpected links, a realm where sexual desire is rendered ambiguous and connections between bodies are bound up in hierarchies of power and knowledge. What these theories reinforce about *The Breast* is that the text hinges upon a crisis of confusion resulting from the rapid onslaught of competing and often contradictory ideas about the relationships between human bodies.

### **3.4 Self and Other in *The Breast***

Analysing the work of Klein and Laplanche allows for a more nuanced consideration of the symbolic potential of Kepesh's transformation. Alan Cooper argues that "*The Breast* has been accused of lacking subtlety, its symbolism of being as obvious as it is heavy: a man regresses beyond the suckling stage to become the dug itself", declaring that the novel's transformative symbolism is "less obvious" than this reductive perspective suggests (*Philip Roth and the Jews* 130). Cooper's claim is important in that it reinforces the need for studies of Roth's novel which view Kepesh's transformation as a source of thematic richness. Kleinian analysis of Roth's novel has already shown that a simple diagnosis of regression involves the critic in a series of dialogues about the nature and context of psychoanalytic discourse, and analysis of Laplanche's work helps to highlight the problem of communication. Roth's use of the breast as the dominant symbol in his text is

deeply indebted to psychoanalysis, but it cannot be contained within a particular psychoanalytic concept. Reading the novel fetishistically – that is to say, with a psychoanalytic basis but a playful sense of thematic intersection – allows for the insights of contextual and theoretical approaches to the text (as sections 3.2 and 3.3 have analysed respectively) to enable a more traditional textual analysis of the novella itself. Taking a belief in the text’s inherent complexity as its basis allows for a new form of close reading to emerge that pays heed to the variable nature of Roth’s use of symbolism and theme, whilst retaining a fundamental concern with Roth’s narrative mechanics. In particular, it is important to note that Roth’s thematic variance in this text emerges through the delusions of his narrator.

David Kepesh conceives of himself (albeit ironically) as a “citadel of sanity” (23), a phrase which encapsulates his desire to be embattled, as well as suggesting the ‘ivory tower’ environment in which Kepesh (some brief dalliances with London prostitutes and Swedish exchange students aside) (39) has spent most of his adult life. Kepesh, in employing the rhetoric of elitist isolation and heroic defence, is subverting his own narrative. There may be an awareness of the overblown character of the phrase “citadel of sanity”, but by repeating it the words nonetheless become a kind of placebo against the outrageousness of the reality he inhabits. Moreover, the ironic tone of Kepesh’s use of the phrase both foreshadows and undermines his later turn towards quasi-stoicism; if, that is, one is willing to credit the sincerity of Kepesh’s self-acceptance in the first place.

Irony inflects Roth’s text consistently after Kepesh’s description of the transformative process itself (a section of the text that legitimises the psychodrama of the rest of the text by rendering the transformation itself narratively – if not scientifically – plausible). Kepesh thus never fully ascribes to the stoic mode that critics such as Crews and Shechner accuse him of adopting<sup>35</sup>, but the irony with which he uses the therapeutic platitudes of Klinger becomes less playful as the narrative progresses. Writing from a position supposed by Crews and Shechner to be that of self-acceptance, Kepesh frequently censors and reshapes his memories in light of his

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<sup>35</sup> Such critics may have taken Roth without the requisite pinch of salt when he declared in an interview that Kepesh is “the first heroic character I’ve been able to portray” (P. Roth, ‘On The Breast’ 57).

subsequent self-identity; for example, he cuts out “incoherent conversation” leading up to the pivotal textual moment when Claire suggests that she perform fellatio on Kepesh’s five inch-long nipple (31)<sup>36</sup>. Kepesh’s narrative control emerges as being as flimsy a conceit as his purported self-control. Roth creates ambiguity in *The Breast* through contradictions which he ruthlessly exposes, bringing the structures of Kepesh’s interpretative repertoire to light.

Klein and Laplanche’s theories show that a child’s negotiation with the maternal breast represents a moment when they are forced to reckon with the fact of independent self-identity. This involves recognition of maternal sexuality on either a symbolic (Klein) or a non-symbolic (Laplanche) level, but for both theorists this process is fundamentally concerned with a crisis in gender identity, particularly for the male child. As such, constructions of gender in Roth’s text should be foregrounded as a space of debate and misrecognition.

Roth argues that “whatever Kepesh thinks, whether about women, art, reality or his father, hasn’t to do with his being a man, but with the fact that he *isn’t* one any longer”, after which he suggests that “women[...] will feel a certain *kinship* with my narrator and his predicament” as a result (P. Roth, ‘On The Breast’ 63). Roth is certainly being at least somewhat playful in this passage, but the argument that Kepesh’s masculinity represents a moment of empathetic crisis is pivotal to the text. Moreover, it allows for a reconsideration of characters in Roth’s text who have been largely ignored in studies of the novel: Kepesh’s father, Abe, and Kepesh’s girlfriend, Claire.

Abe Kepesh is one of Kepesh’s primary masculine role models, which makes Kepesh’s condescending mythologizing of him all the more jarring. The banal updates on the lives of former hotel guests given by Abe Kepesh become a source of endless interpretation for Kepesh, who attempts to uncover the motivations for the unexpected appearance of the quotidian by asking “is he a god or is he a simpleton, or is he just numb?” (26). As with much of Kepesh’s proclamations, his words contain within themselves the genesis of their own destruction. Abe’s heroism is conditional on the fundamental meaninglessness of the information he imparts, a stream of updates about the lives, loves and

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<sup>36</sup> Recall the “or, or or” summary of psychoanalytic interpretation discussed earlier.

losses of his former hotel guests. Abe Kepesh is a character constructed through alternate lenses of cultural cliché; he is first introduced as an archetypal self-made man, whose dogged work ethic saw him rise from being a “short order cook” to become “the innkeeper himself” (26), then as a chronicler of the disparate (yet, from their stereotypical names, presumably Jewish) community for which he once acted as de facto leader.

Abe’s information-stream about the ethnic community based around the hotel he ran in the Catskill Mountains, located in the ‘Borscht Belt’ town of South Fallsburg (which, as of 2014, still boasts a hotel catering to a Jewish community - albeit Hasidic) is more than just a phatic smokescreen covering his anxiety about his son’s health. The repetition of quotidian Jewish life serves to remind the reader as well as David himself about the deracinated aspirations which he has tied to a pursuit of comparative literature. Abe is a Jewish American without a hyphen, a character equally bound to two linked but separate cultural spheres which are ascribed equal value; hence the majority of his anecdotes serve to illustrate a suburban banality, exemplifying an identifiably American set of cultural values. Even Abe’s name contains within it the evidence of the reconciliation he has undergone – Abraham being both a biblical patriarch who became the patron saint of the hospitality industry and the first name of one of America’s most revered leaders (a man who would himself, for practical reasons, become preoccupied with cultural difference within America)<sup>37</sup>. Names are deliberately overdetermined in *The Breast*, and as such the decision to name Abe Kepesh should be considered in the light of the more explicitly psychoanalytic influences detectable in the naming of other characters.

Kepesh, for example, accuses himself of “clinging” to Klinger, his psychoanalyst. A similar process of interpretation can also be seen in Claire’s surname, ‘Ovington’, a conjunction of a prefix associated with reproduction and a stereotypically aristocratic, Anglophone suffix. This technique is

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<sup>37</sup> Steven Spielberg’s recent film *Lincoln* is particularly interesting in this regard, as Lincoln (portrayed by Daniel Day-Lewis) often appears disconnected from the increasingly fractious society that he putatively leads, which Day-Lewis demonstrates through the careful slowness of his speech and his willingness to indulge conversational tangents. Like Abe Kepesh, his position as a role model emerges through conversational quirks rather than in spite of it – although Lincoln’s leadership is depicted as being considerably more effective.

indebted to the naming strategy in *Our Gang* and *On the Air*, whose names are deliberately parodic – relating to the endless kvetching of Lippman (lip-man) as well as the villainous Trick E. Dixon.

Kepesh uses sexuality to attempt to mask his origins, in pursuit of an anodyne humanism derived from the polycultural approach of comparative literature. Abe Kepesh offers another approach, a means of exploring self-identity that Kepesh spurns as a therapeutic performance, affording Roth's text an almost Butlerian sense of gender subversion, one in which "the variable construction of identity [is] both a methodological and normative prerequisite" (*Gender Trouble* 5). Stemming from this rejection, masculinity itself becomes envisaged as a series of performances, in which Kepesh plays the part of a passive yet critically astute audience member. This explains the somewhat bland characterisation of Dr. Klinger, whose conception of mental health as a matter of personal will is itself portrayed as a performance emulating a particularly benign school of self-help psychoanalysis. It also helps when considering Kepesh's later infatuation with Laurence Olivier, which he describes by stating that "I have fallen somewhat in love with him, in the manner of a schoolgirl with a movie star" (71).

The love for Olivier is comparable to the love for the father, the 'real-life' model of performative masculinity which acts as a counterpart to the fantasised 'performance' of Abe. In some respects, the two figures serve as representative models for their respective areas of influence; Abe for the ties of family and ethnicity, and Olivier for the more abstract ties of art and beauty. Though it may seem reductive to cite this contrast as a battle between father-figures, the two characters represent two polarities which Kepesh fails to integrate; ultimately, Olivier's rendition of human success and tragedy wins out over that of Abe. In accepting this uncritically, Kepesh also regresses to a state of idealisation of literature, which makes the illusion of his self-control all the more tragic. Deprived of a normative process of gender identity in which his father is the primary male role model, Roth's text suggests that Kepesh is seeking any kind of stable absolute from which to reframe his masculinity. Olivier's Shakespearean recordings represent a stable, unchanging view of masculine identity which, with its literary gravitas, offers another straw for Kepesh to clutch at. The fictive and distancing quality of this form of engagement with masculinity further substantiates a claim that Kepesh's

regression to a breast-form enacts a crisis of identification that is both profoundly psychoanalytic and deeply complex.

Amongst the other competing father-figures in *The Breast* is Arthur Schonbrunn, who has been Kepesh's mentor throughout his academic career. Schonbrunn is representative of an ideal which Kepesh has long aspired to; that of an overachieving, career-minded academic, with the tailored suits and beautiful wife that reflect a success both scholarly and materialistic. The American suburban lifestyle which Abe Kepesh constructs through anecdote is one aspect of normative American culture, representing a set of expectations for which the academic environment represented by Schonbrunn is a counterpart<sup>38</sup>. These two domains are interdependent in their microcosmic conception of American values – insular suburbia versus insular academia. Kepesh is more aesthete than revolutionary by temperament. He arguably has more in common with the domestic deliberations of the graduate students in *Letting Go* (in which the metaphorical isolation of the university from cosmopolitan trends is made literal by Roth's setting much of his novel in a Midwestern campus university) than with the more zeitgeist-oriented troubles of Alexander Portnoy. The aesthetic-materialist aspirations of Roth's narrator are in full force during Roth's introduction of his partner, Claire, of whom the reader gets to know little more than a summary of middle-class credentials:

Claire... teaches fourth grade at the Bank Street School here in New York. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Cornell; her mother is principal of a school in Schenectady, divorced, now, from her father, an engineer with Western Electric; her older sister, the more conservative of the two Ovington daughters, is married to an economist in the Commerce Department, and lives with him and four tow-headed children in Alexandria, Virginia. (32)

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<sup>38</sup> Draft manuscripts of *The Breast* found in The Philip Roth Papers shows that Schonbrunn was written into Roth's text at a relatively late stage in the production of the novella. This stands in contrast to Roth's early notes, which make particular mention of "visits from colleagues". This reflects the paradoxical role of Schonbrunn in the published text, in which he is essential mostly insofar as he serves as a countercontext to Kepesh.

The identification of characters with place of residence and place of employment seems curiously antiquated, almost insecure; Kepesh attempting to prove the aspirational merit of his choice in sexual partner. As a result, Claire emerges as an amorphous character, defined by arbitrary biographical points rather than fundamental character traits. The extraneous information about Claire's family seems to highlight her status as a representative figure of American privilege; principals, engineers and economists. The mentioning of Claire's membership in an academic honour society seems particularly cynical, calculated to bolster the intellectual credentials of a woman whose textual role is largely based around her being the audience for the various crises and whims of her boyfriend.

This is a calculated ploy on the part of Roth to demonstrate the extent to which Kepesh struggles in engaging fully with others in the process of forming his post-transformation identity. This 'list' superficially reads like a poor attempt to add substance to the largely passive character of Claire, and instead serves to remind the reader of the complexity of Kepesh's own troubles. Alan Cooper and Debra Shostak suggest that Kepesh's quandaries are partly the result of his craving for his recently-deceased mother – Cooper argues that Roth is playing with the trope of the "full-breasted Jewess" (130), and Shostak that Kepesh's transformation is itself an act of mourning ('Return to the Breast' 324). The argument that Claire is a figure of normative America writ large complements these perspectives, suggesting that Kepesh is in denial of the assimilationist aspect of his aspirations and in flight from a family relationship which – despite his best efforts and his psychoanalytic knowledge – he has yet to come to term with.

A discussion of embodiment in *The Breast* should also include a more detailed analysis of the specific nature of Kepesh's transformation, including the limitations it has placed on his sensory capabilities (and the thematic importance of these limitations). Early in the text, Kepesh describes being touched for the first time as a breast: "the sensation was unexpected, soothing and pleasant, but of an undifferentiated kind" (15), an unfamiliarity which soon becomes integrated into familiarly phallic libidinal urges. Kepesh's reduction of human contact to primal sexual urges may not be the result of erogenous stimuli over which he has little control, but a reaction to the increasing distance between his newly-reconstituted body and that of the other people in

his life. Kepesh is deprived of all of his active sensory capacity except hearing, and even that becomes flawed when his internal “volume control” goes awry (62).

Touch becomes a passive sense for Kepesh, and he attempts to reconfigure an active role for himself through the one area in which he has come to consider himself an active agent – sexual gratification. Kepesh declares that he “did not care at all about touching [Claire] or being touched” until he experiences a surge in tactile erotic desire prior to his transformation (10). Touch is initially associated with erotic fervour, and erotic fervour that combines a stereotypically masculine lust with a stereotypically female theatricality - he depicts himself “clawing at the sheets” in a manner he associates with women, and with “women more imaginary than real” at that (10). The reconstituted sensory range of Kepesh exposes his construction of male sexuality to be a wilful simplicity; the loss of definable selfhood is foreshadowed by the same hypersensitivity to touch that Kepesh initially constructs as an androgynous vision of libidinal idealism.

An emphasis on sensory change can also be used to demonstrate that the obverse of Kepesh’s academic aspirations is not the exaggerated Gentile world which he depicts Claire as being a part of, but the world of laughter itself; this is most clearly seen when Schonbrunn bursts into laughter upon meeting the mammarian Kepesh. The funniest passages in *The Breast* are arguably not those in which the narrator tries hardest to get a reaction from his audience, but moments of grandiose pompousness on the part of Kepesh. As such, Roth deconstructs the comic boundary between farce and high seriousness by showing the former to have the potential for abasement, and the latter to have the potential for comic excess.

Kepesh, the “citadel of sanity” who styles his predicament “beyond comedy” still yearns for the release inherent in a laugh free from bitterness, anger or self-recrimination - sarcastically exclaiming: “Oh, for a good, deep belly laugh then, at my own expense! A Laugh starting way down at my watermelon end and swelling til it joyously trickles forth from the apertures in my nipple” (49). The progression of this sentence shows that Kepesh cannot maintain the view of himself as fundamentally farcical; the exclamation mark that introduces the initial fantasy ends abruptly (and bitterly) with a full stop



when he focuses the humour on the specificity of his transmogrified body. Laughter is akin to an orgasm for Kepesh in that both are equally unattainable for him, but Kepesh cannot even envisage a “belly laugh” without him being the subject of ridicule<sup>39</sup>. The model for the vicious humour Kepesh fears is the mocking laughter that Roth had come to specialise in through his earlier satirical experiments; humour as a form of attack, as a means of creating community and excluding an Other that threatens it. Kepesh’s fears are perhaps well-placed, but the foundations for a form of humour that confronts the conventional with the ridiculous are laid by the character himself when he exposes the structures of his value systems.

A consideration of Kepesh as a representative figure of academic materialism necessitates a closer analysis of the paradoxical desire for sexual naivety and sexual excess. Kepesh declares that “the calm harbour and its clear, placid waters was more to my liking than the foaming drama of the high seas” – the latter being the “deceptions, placations and dominance” that he depicts as being prevalent in the relationships of his friends and colleagues, as well as in his previous marriage (8). Later in *The Breast*, Kepesh envisages himself as Poseidon, continuing the maritime metaphor of “placid waters” and “high seas” to imagine the possibility of control over sexual desire itself.

As mentioned earlier, Kepesh’s transformation itself is preceded by a sudden and inexplicable resurgence of his erotic interest in Claire. His decision to wean himself off the pleasures of excessive desire that he experiences as a breast later on in the narrative recreates this process of perceived control leading to an exposition of latent desire; a constant oscillation whose logical traps Kepesh seems to keep falling into. A sense of wilful ignorance is also detectable in his rationale for abandoning the “grotesque yearning” which may lead to a “peak of disorientation” – a descent into madness from which he would never be able to recover his equilibrium (39). The argument seems curiously weak, based on a process of an assumed heightening of desire; a ‘slippery slope’ argument by any other name. As Kepesh’s self-aware stoicism belies his epistemological uncertainties, so his quest for knowledge through

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<sup>39</sup> A character in the television series *Freaks and Geeks* once declared “I don’t like jokes. I don’t find them funny.”. Post-transformation, Kepesh’s perception of comedy appears to be similarly quixotic.

abstinence belies the failure of his quest for knowledge through sexual experience.

There is a fundamental sense of sexual naivety about David Kepesh that even the most brazen of his encounters with women cannot fully surmount. This is not to say that his naivety is intended as an explicit return to a moment prior to the recognition of sexual difference – yet there is a definite sense of metaphorical rebirth in Kepesh's being able to reconstitute and explore his sexuality from a point of pubescent possibility. This is suggested by Roth early in the text, when David first notices the changes that would start his transformative process: "I looked stained, as though a small raspberry, or maybe a cherry, had been crushed against my pubes, the juices running down onto my member, coloring the root of it raggedly but unmistakably *red*" (5). The symbolism of a crushing of a cherry represents the simultaneous dawning of (female) virginal possibility and its destruction at the hands of a third party – a riff on the slang phrase 'popping a woman's cherry', referring to the tearing of the hymen. The redness of David's crotch, envisaged in this metaphor as the blood of a violent penetration, serves to do more than just reinforce the dawning feminisation of Kepesh's physical form. It also neatly demarcates the point of new sexual experience, a passive yet invasive lasciviousness that, for all his "grotesque yearning", he never manages to adapt to – only to repress. Denied the moment of pre-pubescent inexperience, Kepesh lacks a context for his newfound desires.

Kepesh's ideas about the extremities of sexual possibility change greatly during the course of his life as a breast. What seems boundlessly perverse, almost unspeakable during the early stages of lascivious indulgence quickly become rote. Unsurprisingly, but with a great deal of cruelty, Kepesh accuses Claire of indulging in "some well-bred, well-behaved schoolteacher's idea of hot sex" (74) – particularly galling when it is Kepesh himself who cannot work up the courage to propose his ultimate fantasy of nipple-vaginal penetration. Still envisaging an alternate life trajectory, Kepesh imagines himself as a circus attraction with the raw power and sex appeal of a rock star. The appeal of contemporary American popular culture, what Kepesh dubs "the land of opportunity in the age of self-fulfilment" depends upon an increased diversity

of sexual possibility and a process of self-determination (75)<sup>40</sup>. That Kepesh soon realises that the pubescent girls and sensual housewives he imagines gratifying themselves on his erect nipple are part of an unrealisable fantasy - a last spurt of lyrical bombast - serves only to highlight the prevalence of rebirth fantasies in the construction of his self-image. As with much else in the life story of David Kepesh, there are so many processes of subversion occurring simultaneously that there is little stable ground left for a reader to form their own interpretation.

Stephen Wade argues that “in *The Breast*, Roth is writing a pastiche on that version of a writer’s analysis of him or herself in terms of quasi-Freudian elucidation”, a useful perspective that is most revealing in its description of “quasi-Freudian” strategies (*The Imagination in Transit* 61). Roth takes an almost gleeful interest in the downfall of his protagonist in *The Breast*, and it is telling that he combines both a failure of internal logic on the part of Kepesh and a confluence of psychoanalytic symbolism in doing so. An analysis of embodiment in Roth’s text reveals that psychoanalytic tropes intersect with a range of thematic concerns, affording Roth the ability to construct his more telling paradoxes. Psychoanalysis, as an interpretative tool, is best seen as a means of exposing complications and ambiguity rather than a definitive ‘cure’ in itself. This perspective may come closest in tone to that of Freudian psychoanalysis itself, which the post-Freudian psychoanalytic study of fetishism in Chapter 1 has shown to be rooted in an uncertainty that extends even to key terms in analytic discourse.

The sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that characterises *The Breast* is part of a textual strategy of causing absolute confusion, a fetishist compounding of meanings that aims for profound exhaustion on the part of the reader. This is particularly evident in the material on the novel collected in the Philip Roth Papers, which helps to reinforce the liminal and complex position of the novel, both within what would become the Kepesh trilogy and Roth’s work as a whole. Expanding the scope of analysis to consider these

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<sup>40</sup> The disavowal of academia as a partially self-determined and partially externally-forced moment is reminiscent of that which Jim Dixon faces at the end of Kingsley Amis’ novel *Lucky Jim*. Although *The Breast* is more frequently read in terms of its indebtedness to Franz Kafka, *Lucky Jim* - with its misogynistic protagonist, narrative viciousness and physical comedy - arguably renders it a more potent intertext.

drafts is consistent with fetishist analysis insofar as it demonstrates the intersectional variety of Roth's text, extending the discussion of textual ambiguity within the novel to include extra-textual material that helped inform it. Moreover, it shows an uncertainty in Roth's own attitude towards the text, a sense of incompleteness that accords well with themes in the text itself.

### 3.5 A Life Less Ordinary: Re-envisioning *The Breast*

*The Breast* did not remain a static text in Roth's bibliography. Evidence from both The Philip Roth Papers and subsequent published versions of the text reveal the novella to be in a consistently uncertain position; whilst this chapter has argued that it represents a definable cultural moment, it is also demonstrably a work that Roth agonised over as his career progressed. This instability casts a new light on themes explored in this chapter as it deepens the sense of fundamental unease that is detectable on a contextual, theoretical and narrative level within the novel. In particular, an analysis of a sequel that Roth abandoned soon after writing *The Breast* proves that Roth (who had not written any sequels prior to this point, and for whom *The Professor of Desire* would be the first) has an interest in utilising Kepesh as a means to explore a more experimental side of his fiction<sup>41</sup>. The later versions of the novel suggest a similar enduring fascination with Kepesh as a figure whose liminality is so extreme that he eludes even the limited certainty of having a fixed text to emerge from. This offers a final recasting of the theme of impossible rebirth suggested as a motivating factor for preceding sections of this chapter; the untitled sequel (along with several others that continue the Kepesh-breast plot) are abandoned, and editions of Roth's novella published in his late career would use the original 1972 text.

The sequels themselves reveal Roth's uncertainties over how he would deploy Kepesh in future works. Roth's notes for *The Professor of Desire*, for

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<sup>41</sup> Full references for each draft used in this thesis can be found in the bibliography of this thesis. Due to the errant pagination in Roth's draft manuscripts, precise textual references will not be provided for individual quotes.

example, include complete manuscripts for novels that continue Kepesh's story, many of which (such as one entitled *What's It To Me?*) feature a wide range of characters, dilemmas and plotlines which are entirely distinct to them. There is evidence to suggest that this was a continuous uncertainty on the part of Roth that would only be settled several years later, when Roth opted to use only elements of his drafts that described Kepesh's life prior to his assumed transformation. In Roth's papers relating to *The Breast*, for example, an abandoned and incomplete sequel begins with a 50 page-section describing Kepesh's life up to the events of *The Breast*, serving as the earliest version of what would become the plot structure of *The Professor of Desire*<sup>42</sup>.

Roth did, however, initially envisage the Kepesh novels as a trilogy, according to material found in his preliminary notes for *The Breast*; amongst working pages for *The Breast*, there are brief notes which plan for novels referred to as "Kepesh II" and "Kepesh III" respectively. However, Roth's conception of the trilogy would change vastly as his writing progressed, incorporating a number of drafts with wildly divergent approaches to continuing Kepesh's role as a narrator. The initial plan for the trilogy portrays it as a continuous sequential narrative which makes texts interdependent and emphasises character development. That Roth opted not to continue this strategy cannot be blamed entirely on the ambivalent reception given to *The Breast*, but should be interpreted as part of a broader move towards realist fiction in Roth's work. That Kepesh's role in Roth's work became more dynamic and uncertain was a consequence of this decision to abandon a direct continuation of his life-story, but the emergence of Kepesh as a pliable narrator accords with the sense of authorial control inherent to satire. It also allows for a more nuanced consideration of Roth's role as a fetishist writer in the Kepesh novels; fetishist writing incorporates both a high degree of authorial awareness and an acknowledgement of ambiguity.

This fetishist trope was developed both in Roth's pursuit of metafictional fantasy in his abandoned drafts and in his later treatment of *The Breast* itself. Although Roth opted not to publish any of the several novels that continue Kepesh's post-transformation narrative, *The Breast* remains the only work of fiction which Roth would substantially rework in different published editions.

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<sup>42</sup> The significance of this draft manuscript will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

Roth published *The Breast* three times; initially in 1972, followed by a revised version in 1980 and an illustrated version in 1989<sup>43</sup>. Few scholars have questioned why Roth kept returning to *The Breast* - and what the different iterations can reveal about Roth's enduring interest in the novella.

When Roth reworked *The Breast* in 1980, he did not make substantial alterations to the text's plot, which remained virtually identical. His changes are best summarised as being subtle modifications to narrative style that alter the portrayal of some of the novella's main characters. Even the first page of Roth's rewritten draft starts a trend which he will continue throughout - rewording elliptical phrasing and cutting chunks of text, all in the service of greater narrative immediacy:

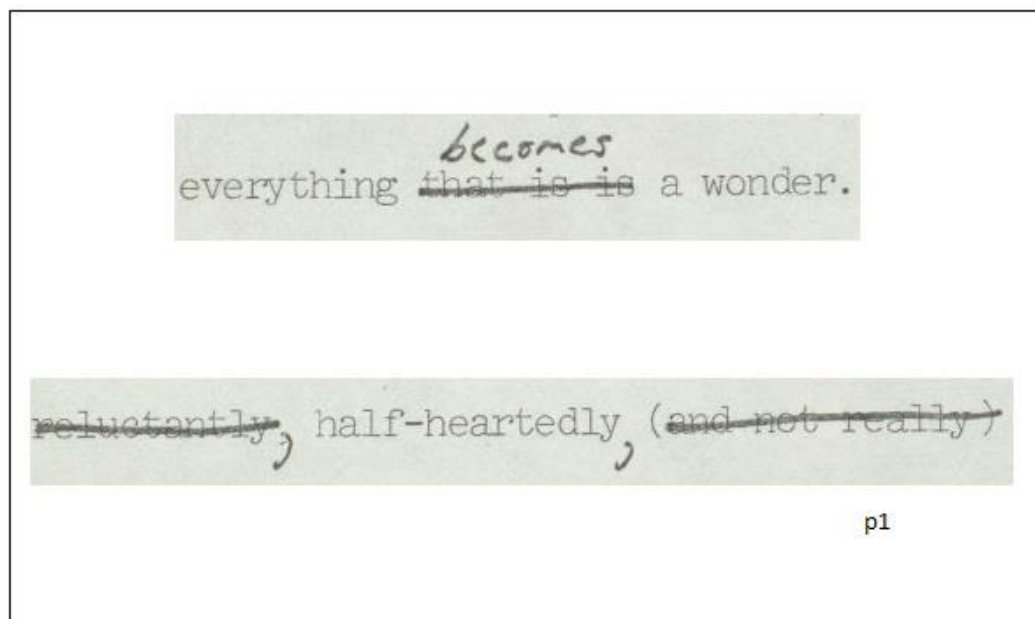


Figure 1: Changes to the 1980 Version of *The Breast*, p1

In the opening paragraph of the revised version, Roth opts to remove several instances in which Kepesh's style becomes overly dense, making the text itself

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<sup>43</sup> Roth's interest would change throughout the era in which these different versions were published; whilst Roth maintained an interest in psychoanalytic themes in 1972, he would be writing conventionally realist fiction by 1980 and briefly experiment with postmodern tropes by 1989. These categories may be detectable in the various versions of the text, but such an analysis would require a more general consideration of Roth's bibliography that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

considerably more fluid. In doing so, Roth undermines the thematic significance of Kepesh's self-indulgent prose, removing the tacit critique of academic discourse that it signified. Stylistic techniques such as the confusing (if grammatically accurate) use of "is is" and the removal of qualifying clauses that are decorative rather than functional impoverishes Roth's text at the same time as it makes it more accessible to the reader. Techniques such as these function in Roth's original text as a gesture towards Kepesh's academic origins, and in the pedantry of its stylistic excess it also attempts to diminish any empathy that Kepesh may otherwise have garnered.

Although more elegant and unhindered as a result, Roth's 1980 edition is less prone to gleeful excess. Although Roth does not remove any scenes of sexual excess within the novel, he is careful to reframe the existing scenes in terms that fit with his new, more empathetic version of Kepesh:

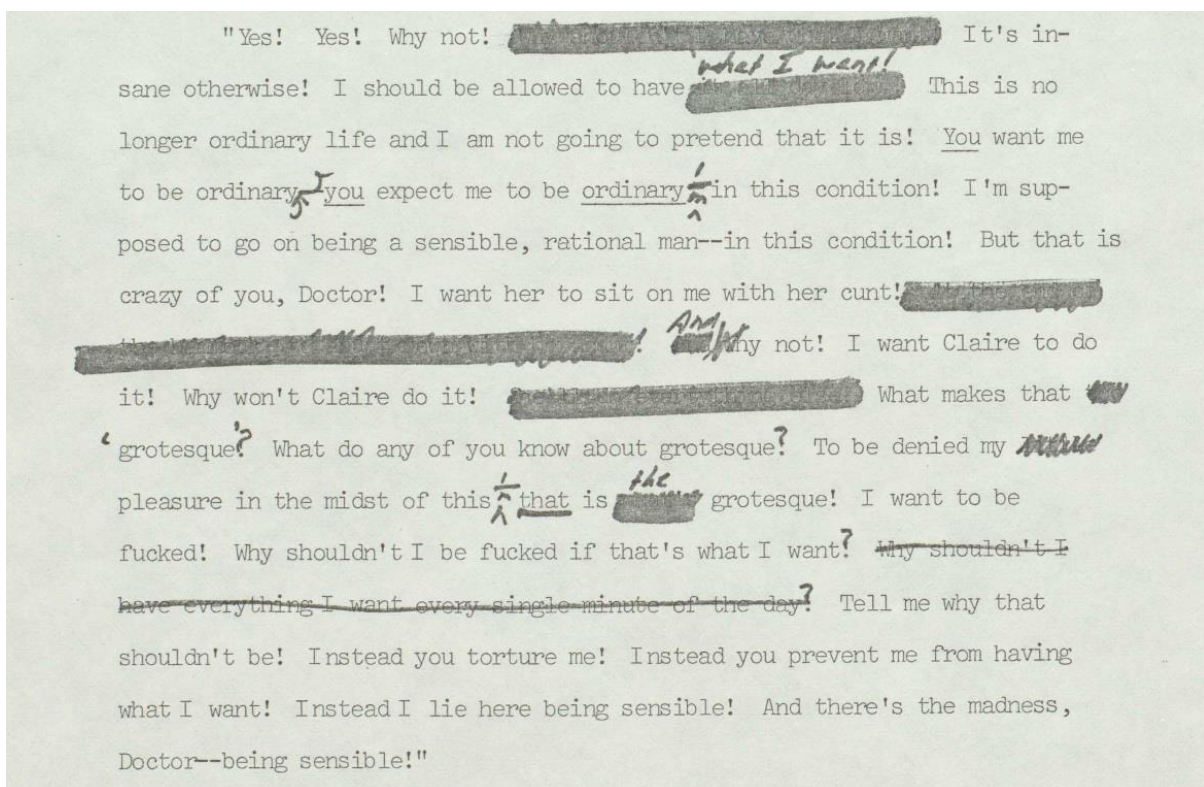


Figure 2: Changes to the 1980 Version of *The Breast*, p21

In the original version, Kepesh's fantasies are described to his analyst as a series of exclamations. The sentences are short, communicating the frustration

of the narrator by means of numerous exclamation marks. At this late point in the text, shortly before its ending, the 1972 edition of Roth's work represents a culmination of the narrator's sense of helplessness and anger. Roth's changes to the 1980 version attempt a fusion between frustration and coherence, adding rhetorical questions and quotation marks - editing the section to make the text more articulate and its narrator less frantic. Roth's depiction of Kepesh's stylistic sophistication suggests a greater level of equilibrium than his original text, his revisions are less interested in ironic subversion of its narrator and more willing to lend credence to his arguments.

The conception of Kepesh as a more tragic, sympathetic figure in Roth's 1980 edition of the novel even has consequences for other characters within the text. As changes to Kepesh's narrative style come to reflect a change in his narrative role, Roth edits the language of other characters to embody some of the flaws he had initially attributed to Kepesh:

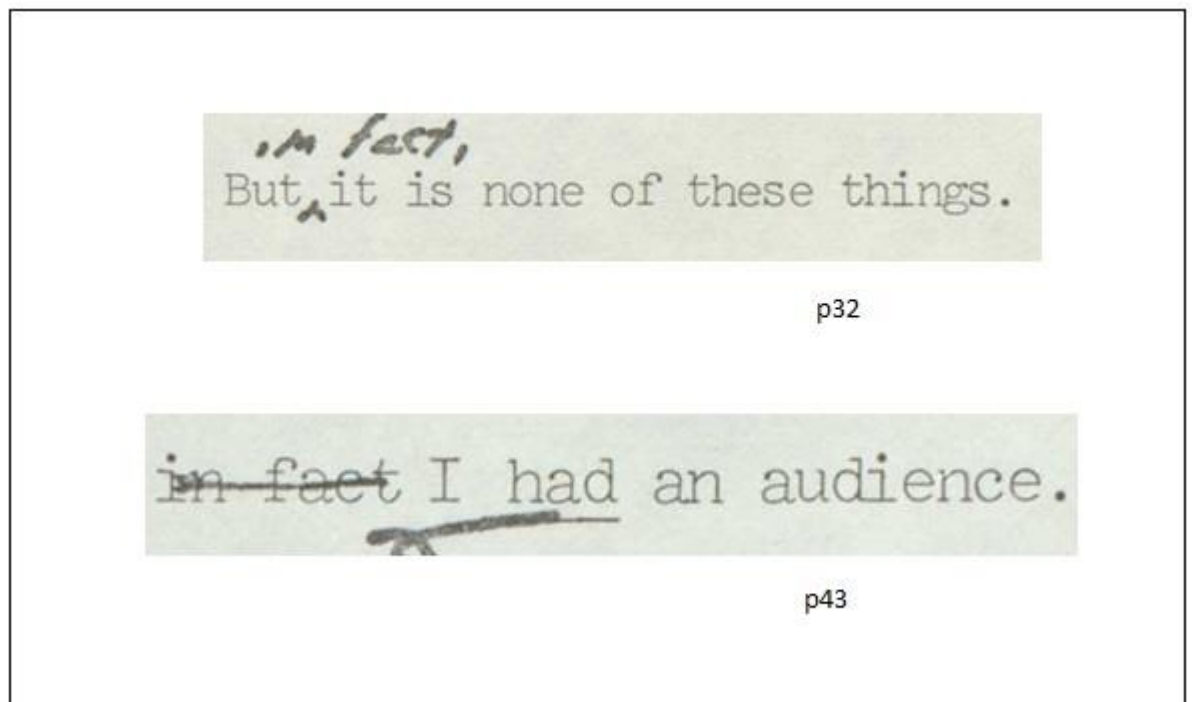


Figure 3: Changes to the 1980 version of *The Breast*, p32 and p43

As these quotes demonstrate, Roth was willing to change perceptions of his characters by transposing symbolic stylistic quirks onto other characters. In



the first quote, Klinger has the phrase “in fact” added to his dialogue, whereas in the second quote, the phrase “in fact” is removed from Kepesh’s speech. It remains unclear whether this direct substitution was intended by Roth, but it nonetheless demonstrates a fundamental change in his narrative sympathies; as Kepesh gets more coherent, his analyst assumes the obfuscating language that he has abandoned. Roth reverses the hierarchy established in his original version, creating the illusion that Kepesh has some control over his narrative. The choice of the phrase “in fact” is itself significant, in that it serves mainly to portray the speaker as the holder of knowledge rather than to develop the argument being made; it thus serves as a pedagogic tool emblematic of the excesses of academic discourse. Given the satiric basis of Roth’s text, in which forms of totalising knowledge are repeatedly shown to be dangerous delusions, the change places Klinger as a less reliable, more pompous character. Roth thus reconfigures his text, turning the ambivalence towards psychoanalysis that the 1972 original thrives on into a more openly hostile attack on it.

The 1972 version of *The Breast* succeeds more fully in showing how sexual fantasies can be exaggerated, and how the destabilizing effects reverberate around the text. This is less visible in the 1980 text, in which, rather than clinging to verbosity, Roth’s revamped narrator aims to induce pathos through eloquence. His is a voice attempting (and occasionally finding) reason in a world unsettled by sex, whereas the 1972 narrator is simply another aspect of the chaos. The importance of context to an understanding of *The Breast* may explain why the earlier edition has proven more lasting in reprints of the novel. The 1972 version better reflects the ambivalence of psychoanalytic themes within the novel, remaining more attuned to the flaws of the narrator that it shows trying to find his way amongst them.

Although Roth has not published a new edition of *The Breast* since 1980, he did publish another version in 1989 – a limited edition illustrated by the painter Philip Guston and prefaced by an introduction which describes the friendship between the two men. Ross Posnock suggests that this relationship was a productive one for both men, that “they helped shape one another’s aesthetic investment in immaturity, in the unbalanced and inappropriate” (237). Posnock develops this idea in a brief discussion of the Guston’s sketches, from which he notes a similarity in notions of detached body parts

that Roth and Guston share: a similar interest in body parts as “detritus”, as “a dismantling of respectability as bodily integrity – in a larger process of artistic renewal” (246). Posnock’s argument that reaffirms that the potential of renewal is a pivotal theme in *The Breast*; however, the sketches themselves suggest more than simply a continuity in artistic thinking; they comprise a ‘reading’ of Roth’s text that exists in a more playful relationship to their source material.

The sketches that are placed throughout Roth’s 1989 edition support Posnock’s argument for artistic continuity insofar as they celebrate the rampant silliness and vulgarity of the novella in a manner that is also respectful of its complexities<sup>44</sup>. The illustrations, described by Roth in his introduction as “a spontaneous rejoinder to something Guston had liked” (‘Pictures by Guston’ 137) are highly responsive to the playfulness and symbolic richness of Roth’s text. Unsophisticated and caring little for verisimilitude, Guston’s illustrative sketches are nonetheless heavily based on Roth’s textual descriptions<sup>45</sup>:

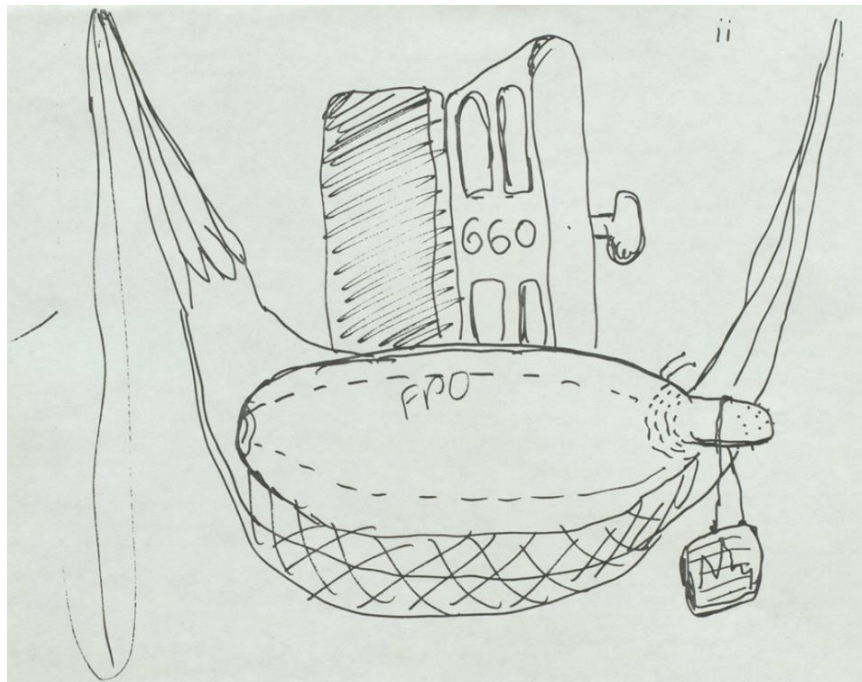


Figure 4: Philip Guston's Illustrations for *The Breast* I

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<sup>44</sup> Roth’s introduction to this edition of *The Breast* was reprinted under the title ‘Pictures By Guston’ in his 2001 anthology *Shop Talk*.

<sup>45</sup> The illustrations featured in this thesis are taken from proofs of the 1989 edition of *The Breast* found in the Philip Roth Papers.

Guston includes the small openings around the nipple that allow Kepesh to speak, the hammock whose sway allows him to sleep, and even the two hairs which are described in the text as being “antennae” (14). Although minimalist, the points of reference in Guston’s work are entirely Roth’s, with only small comic details such as the medical clipboard hanging off Kepesh’s nipple being entirely new. The clipboard is a continuation of the playfulness initially developed by Roth in the ludicrous image of Kepesh’s hammock. The unprofessional placing of the clipboard on the nipple (Kepesh could hardly have placed it there himself) draws the viewer’s eye, suggesting that the care Kepesh is receiving may not be as stringent as he demands. The mordant detail of the declining trend in the chart on the clipboard itself is both a playful and a tragic gesture – in one addition to Roth’s description, Guston supports Roth’s main theme whilst encouraging a reader’s scepticism.

The usage of the clipboard highlights the fact that, although Guston’s illustrations are generally best interpreted as direct translations of textual precedents, he is willing to interpret the text in more abstract ways:

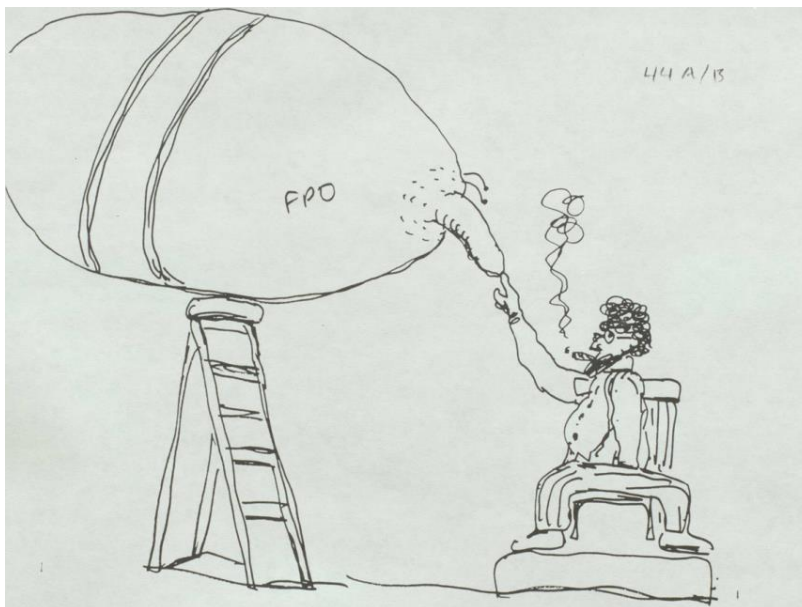


Figure 5: Philip Guston's Illustrations for *The Breast II*

Guston depicts Kepesh’s analyst, Klinger, as a parodic caricature of Sigmund Freud, with his finger touching the tip of Kepesh’s nipple. The nature of this

gesture is ambiguous; it is unclear whether the analyst is admonishing the breast, expressing tenderness, or is simply curious – all of which are unclear in the text itself. The sketch may also function as a parody of Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam*, playing with the implicit hierarchies in the doctor-patient relationship. This notion of hierarchy is part of a broader interpretative gesture on the part of Guston in this illustration. For example, the respective height of each character appears to be artificially engineered; Klinger is both raised on a platform and lowered by his sitting on a chair, whereas Kepesh is positioned on a ladder from which he has to angle his nipple downwards to connect with Klinger. The paradoxical depiction of height in this illustration thus reflects the curious imbalance of the analyst-analysand relationship, and the dependence it can generate. The single finger touching Kepesh's nipple is an oblique reference to Kepesh's susceptibility to touch, and the desire of the analyst to offer the analysand an element of understanding regarding their desires. The overall effect is to portray Klinger as exerting a control over Kepesh akin to that seen between pets and their owners.

The illustrations also encompass aspects of the text that demonstrate more interpretation on the part of Guston, departing entirely from events described in the body of the text itself. In one of his sketches, Guston depicts Kepesh and a woman (who may or may not be his lover) touching nipples.

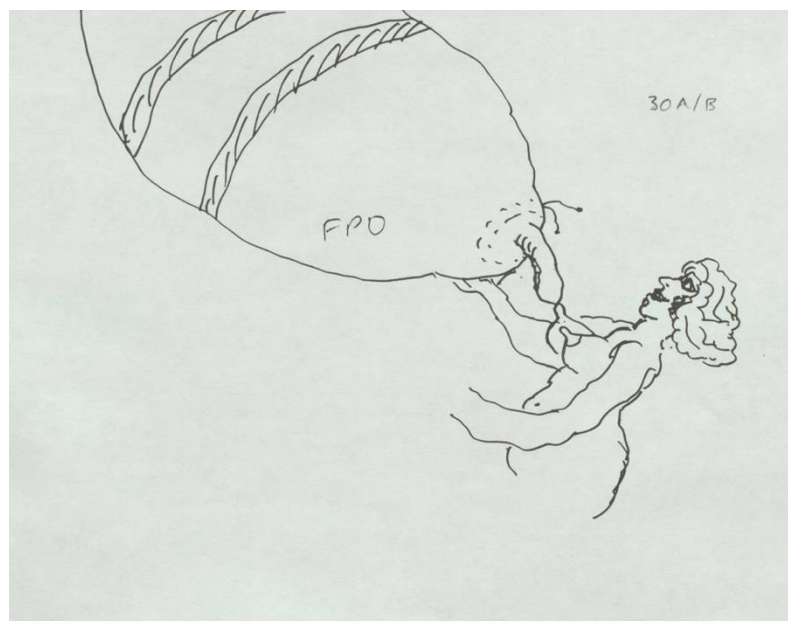


Figure 6: Philip Guston's Illustrations for *The Breast III*

Unlike the sketch of the analysis shown previously, this sketch is almost idealised – the lover either supporting or caressing Kepesh with her palm, staring directly at him whilst smiling. The downward-facing nipple is still in evidence, but the image is less hierarchical. For example, neither Kepesh nor ‘Claire’ are shown to have any supporting mechanisms, but are positioning their bodies in a manner suggestive of free choice. The image is thus surprisingly tender, offering a corrective to Roth’s text, in which Kepesh’s descriptions of and behaviour towards his partner tends towards misogyny. The connection between the phallic nipple and the smaller nipple of the lover suggests a complicity which undermines the submissive role played by Claire and the extremity of Kepesh’s penetrative fantasies; in doing so, it also offers a countercontext to the negative power and dependency associated with a similar gesture in the previous sketch.

Rather than viewing these fantasies as an incitement to normative gender expectations, these sketches (particularly the last one) expose the mechanisms of control and render them indeterminate. Roth’s technique is most effective and most expressive of fundamental displacement, when his narrator is most explicitly destabilized. This sense of a loss of control within a space where imagination forges new sexual possibilities is also the greatest success of Guston’s illustrations.

Guston’s illustrations reaffirm the dysfunctional quality of Roth’s text. Guston acknowledges the unrepresentable aspect of Kepesh’s sexual fantasies, which in turn may represent a tacit engagement with Kafka on the part of Roth. Kafka declared in a private letter that Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*, should not be depicted pictorially: “The insect itself cannot be drawn. It cannot even be shown from a distance.” (Brady and Hughes 229). Roth’s decision to publish an illustrated version of the novel thus seems like an intertextual challenge to the most evident of his textual influences; whilst it does not disprove Kafka’s fears of reducing the more abstract components of his narrative, it does demonstrate a characteristically Rothian wish to both acknowledge his precursors and playfully rewrite the ‘rules’ under which they had wished their work to be interpreted. As such, it accords with the playful approach that Roth would later take towards Kafka in *The Professor of Desire*.

Roth's secondary editions of *The Breast* demonstrate that the ambiguities inherent to the text were creating difficulties in interpretation even for the text's author. These anxieties prove the unusual and unstable position of the novel, and result in changes to the text that can have varying levels of success. Roth's 1980 changes, for example, alter the text in a way that attempts to mitigate the text's ambiguities and its narrator's flaws; Guston's 1989 illustrations, however, offer an interpretation of Roth's text that is attuned to Kepesh's paradoxes and yet still willing to empathise with him. The original text itself, however, remains enigmatic. There are enough contextual and textual indicators to warrant a psychoanalytically-oriented mode of analysis that helps to justify this mode of indecision, but this cannot account for the novella in its entirety; analysing *The Breast* is still a task that requires adaptability in any framework used. In Roth's next Kepesh novel, *The Professor of Desire*, this fetishistic sense of critical adaptability needs to be extended to an even wider range of theoretical approaches.



## Chapter 4: Locating Sex:

### *The Professor of Desire*

No sooner had the marvellous befallen him than he grasped it with the violence of a man who was not certain of having seen it, lived it, and who wanted to reassure himself of its palpability. Everything which befell him would be ripped apart, analyzed, commented. As if he felt that behind all his possessions, some diabolical substitution was being offered him, as if he knew that what he desired did not lie in all the treasures that might be offered him.

- Anaïs Nin, *Under a Glass Bell* (78)

Our inheritance is compiled of a few modest geographical markers and a great bookshelf.

- Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (113)



## Précis

The interest in brazen satire that Roth explored in the 1970s would not be sustained – at least not in the forms that it had taken thus far. If *The Breast* satirises academic methodologies, then *The Professor of Desire* targets the relationship between place and identity in a comparable but more resigned fashion. This is not to say that Roth's early work is 'placeless', merely that there is a greater sense of geographical anxiety in the work that would emerge after these experiments. As with most of Roth's key themes, sexuality is inextricable from other concerns. In this instance, among these related concerns are matters of Jewish identity, narrative development and literary history. With this in mind, it becomes worth asking what 'America' and 'Europe' represent for Roth in this novel. Through the arrogant, condescending and oblivious figure of David Kepesh, Roth probes cultural boundaries in pursuit of a form of self-knowledge that is doomed to be perpetually elusive.

Such ideas necessitate a more detailed examination of the kind of narratives that are suppressed within Kepesh's description of his erotic history (and erotic pre-history). By examining archival and intertextual sources, a keener sense of that which is left unsaid in Roth's work can emerge. Early drafts of the novel suggest new textual cynosures, and Roth's interest in the work of Franz Kafka can be used to illuminate how Kepesh's erotic narrative works to suppress the narratives of his lovers. Extending this discussion of Kafka to a text not explicitly mentioned in the course of Roth's novel (*Amerika*) may help to further demonstrate the ways in which place and identity become confused. This ambiguity renders sexuality as a theme which can expose hidden narratives that work to undermine the conceits of Roth's protagonist.

## 4.1 – ‘Hidden’ Narratives in *The Professor of Desire*

### 4.1.1: Textual Transitions

Although met with a moderate level of acclaim upon its release<sup>46</sup>, *The Professor of Desire* has not been discussed in critical work on Roth to the extent that *The Breast* has. *The Professor of Desire* was published shortly after Roth had released a series of playful and bizarre fictions - including its immediate predecessor, *My Life as a Man*, which has been described by David Brauner as being one of Roth’s “most experimental works” (51). In comparison, Roth’s second Kepesh novel can seem to lack vigour, repeating material covered more extensively in previous novels.

For Claudia Roth Pierpont, this sense of familiarity makes the novel’s descriptions of sexual awakening seem “rehashed and formulaic”, part of a general failing in which “Roth seems to be struggling to import the larger meanings of his recent European experiences into the larger frame and focus of an unreconstructed Portnoyan hero’s life” (102) (106). The significance of Roth’s own experiences in Eastern Europe during this period should not be discounted, but describing Kepesh as a combination of biographical surrogate and Portnoy-substitute does a disservice to the peculiarities of Kepesh as a narrator. Roth Pierpont’s objections to the novel’s staleness are, however, emblematic of a general sense of unease regarding the novel in recent critical work on Roth. In a similar vein to Roth Pierpont, Mark Shechner re-evaluates his initial scepticism of the novel (“stumbl[ing] over its own gratitude”) only so far as to state that it “did not grow any more compelling to me with age” (65). Although most other critics have tended to refrain from explicit condemnation, the novel remains a peripheral text: less notable than even *The Breast*, whose flamboyance at least incites debate.

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<sup>46</sup> Writing for *The New York Times*, Vance Bourjaily gave the novel a representative review: generally positive in tone and laudatory of its “fine display of literary skills”, but without being openly exuberant.

*The Professor of Desire* certainly lacks the élan of its predecessor. Shechner's suspicion of the novel's purported tenderness seems borne out by the fact that the least convincing scenes in *The Professor of Desire* are those in which Roth's protagonist is most immersed in his newfound domestic harmony. In this latter third of the novel, Roth seems to slip into the mechanistic, cliché-ridden rhetoric of romantic bliss – midway through a gondola ride through the canals of Venice, Kepesh remarks "are you sure we didn't die... and go to heaven?" (160). The self-defeating vanity of clichés like these will help form the aphoristic pseudo-profundities with which Kepesh characterises his speech in *The Dying Animal*, but in this instance their self-deflating character works on a more nuanced, intertextual level.

This is not this the only moment of faux-revelation in the text – a few pages earlier, Kepesh exclaims "how easy life is when it's easy, and how hard when it's hard!" (155). Shechner's suspicions may seem to be borne out in these sections, but even these mundane exclamations are complex in the interrelations of their unoriginality: the account of the gondola ride is conditioned (and perhaps partially explained) by an account of the virtues of gondola travel given by Thomas Mann (154). The mentioning of Mann's name seems curiously tactless, given the associations the city holds in works like *Death in Venice*, from which the quote is taken: Mann's novella being a description of the doomed and inappropriate infatuation of an ageing, self-deluding writer for a younger person<sup>47</sup>. The spectre of disease, incipient tragedy and sexual unfulfilment that are hallmarks of Mann's novella casts a pall over the use of his words in Roth's novel, and thus renders Kepesh's exuberance doubly naïve. This may seem a troublingly ignorant gesture from a scholar of Comparative Literature, but the elision helps prove how close Kepesh can come to instances of genuine self-knowledge, and demonstrates Roth's skills in narrative subversion.

These subtle gestures are not the only way that these deliberately banal instances of "gratitude" are subverted in the course of the text. Kepesh's flat depictions of his happiness are twinned with an equally melodramatic lexicon

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<sup>47</sup> Roth's joke does not take the form of pure satire, insofar as the muse in Mann's text is male. This may itself, however, be Roth's way of poking further fun at the prissy homophobia that can be found throughout both *The Professor of Desire* and the Kepesh trilogy as a whole.

of maudlin excess, often masquerading as a form of self-knowledge. These outbursts are more common in the early stages of the novel, although their tone can be ambiguous. The undergraduate Kepesh is depicted musing over his increasing isolation in the university community: "No, nobody understands me – not even I myself" (26). This sense of pseudo-philosophical overstatement is perhaps attributable to an adult Kepesh mocking his youthful penchant for melodrama, but the narrative control this implies is belied by similar moments later in the text. Near the end of the novel, when Kepesh learns that his lover Claire has had an abortion, he describes his thoughts: "hard as I have tried, I have seemed never quite able to be one thing or another, and probably never will be..." (222). Regardless of the narrative position of the narrator, the acute sense of instability and vulnerability is consistent throughout the novel, subverting any belief that the character's moments of joyous contentment should be taken at their word.

These two modes of self-representation (the maudlin versus the joyous) occupy similar textual positions – they usually conclude a paragraph, adding a moment of narrative commentary into a preceding section that is often purely descriptive. This similarity may suggest a fatal flaw in Kepesh's process of self-interpretation: his desire to reduce complex issues into Manichean dualities is undercut by the manner in which he relates them. The sections of domestic bliss with Claire make for unconvincing and occasionally turgid reading (a counterpart to the unconvincing and occasionally silly sections featuring Kepesh's first wife, Helen), but this is a fault of Kepesh as a character rather than Roth as an author. Roth thus crystallises Kepesh's reliance on absolutes in a realm of human experience – human sexuality – in which they are rarely, if ever, to be found. This is a key difference in the presentation of Kepesh in *The Breast* and of that in *The Professor of Desire*: in the latter text, Kepesh is serially monolithic, looking for answers in a frantic sequence of explanations for his transformation. In this later text, the need for placing himself on a particular side of self-constructed divisions almost takes the form of a Shakespearian 'tragic flaw'.

Unlike in *The Breast*, psychoanalysis is not explicitly coded as a mechanism that encourages unresolvable debates. However, despite its brief and banally positive (and hence, ultimately deceptive) depiction of psychoanalysis, *The Professor of Desire* remains a novel deeply immersed in

psychoanalytic tropes. The obsession with repetition, the importance of dreams, the emphasis on unsettledness and migration are all deeply tied to psychoanalytic processes, albeit described by Roth in a reflective fashion and with a sense of rueful nostalgia<sup>48</sup>.

Despite these cues, the uses of psychoanalysis for interpreting this novel may be more opaque than expected. As with *The Breast*, the sheer weight of psychoanalytic precedent in this novel, however subtle, would make the mere clinical analysis of Kepesh (as Bruno Bettelheim semi-seriously attempted to do with Alexander Portnoy)<sup>49</sup> seem overly tempting, too heavily gestured towards by Roth to escape suspicion. Instead, this chapter will borrow these tropes on an implicit, ad-hoc basis to probe connections and continuities that offer new modes of interpretation – with one notable exception. As well as the tropes already mentioned, this psychoanalytic influence encompasses a sense of hidden narratives in Roth's novel that can seem familiar to readers of Freud. As Adam Phillips describes: "This makes, in the psychoanalytic way, the omissions and speculations in a biography as telling as the inclusions and the facts. And it makes biography a kind of double life" (*Becoming Freud* 27). The scepticism over the merits of biography (and especially autobiography) that Phillips describes as being a key aspect of Freud's writing is particularly resonant in Roth's work, which often expressing scepticism as to the truth-value of biographical narrative<sup>50</sup>. This enables more unusual interpretative frameworks to be applied to *The Professor of Desire*.

*The Professor of Desire* is easy to criticise for both its narrative excess and its occasional banality. It not only visibly suffers from Freudian notions of biographical insufficiency, but the sense of reader frustration that this engenders. As such, psychoanalytically-influenced ideas may help to

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<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey Berman argues that the success of Klinger's strategies in surmounting the trauma of Kepesh's first marriage encode him as a "moving valediction to Philip Roth's psychoanalysts" (269). Whilst it could be argued that Kepesh's later regression to indeterminacy is a result of the termination of his analysis, it could equally be argued that the approach to sexuality generated by Klinger's treatment is partly to blame.

<sup>49</sup> Bernard Avishai's *Promiscuous* and Mark Shechner's *Up Society's Ass, Copper* discuss this bizarre essay at length. See "Portnoy Psychoanalyzed: Therapy Notes Found in the Files of Dr. O. Spielvogel, a New York Psychoanalyst." *Midstream*, June-July 1969: 3-10.

<sup>50</sup> This is most visible in Roth's more explicitly experimental works, in which the truth of autobiography is questioned by characters within a novel. This is an especially pivotal trope in *Operation Shylock* and *Deception* – not to mention *The Facts*, whose subtitle "A Novelist's Autobiography" is rendered ironic by its being 'interrupted' by one of Roth's protagonists, Nathan Zuckerman, in the text's final section.

rehabilitate the novel, to account for some of its more vivid problems. Freudian biographical scepticism is based on a belief that the individual's attempt to provide a definitive life-story is doomed to failure. The resultant "omissions and speculations" that Freud redirects our attention to are central to the interests of this chapter, and motivate the diversity of techniques and subject matter employed in it.

Kepesh's tendency towards binary categorisation functions in a number of different ways throughout *The Professor of Desire*, and the very neatness of many of its divisions are cause for suspicion. The most explicit instance of this is the separation between conventional, procreative sexuality as personified by Claire Ovington (Kepesh's second wife) and the vivid, theatrical sexuality personified by Helen (his first wife), which can seem reflective of misogynist stereotypes. Roth is aware of this danger, and he demonstrates this by indulging in an infrequent but telling habit of creating overloaded, almost punning names for his characters; a counterpart to the naming strategies in *The Breast* noted earlier in Chapter 3.

'Abe' Kepesh may be reminiscent of 'honest Abe', an elder statesman, but 'Helen' is explicitly linked to Helen of Troy, whose beauty is associated with violence, warfare and death (211). Towards the end of *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh refers to Claire as 'Clarissa', evoking English novelist Samuel Richardson's novel of the same name – and thus its tragically dutiful protagonist. That this tragic notion of sexual duty is hidden by the more commonly-used shortened version of her name ('Claire') and revealed only towards the end of the novel enacts in microcosmic form the gradual shift from constructed ideal to tragic loss that the text exacts in its final paragraphs.

The intertextual links shown here are only some instances of the novel's broader willingness to reference and engage with other texts. This strategy allows Roth to incorporate a huge corpus of authors, creating a virtual syllabus that the reader is expected to be familiar with<sup>51</sup>. This is often made plain to the

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<sup>51</sup> A letter sent from Robert Brown to Roth in response to *Portnoy's Complaint* describes Roth's own "World Lit" course at the University of Pennsylvania, which included "Kleist, Mann, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nabakov [sic], Genet. And of course Kafka.". The parallels with Kepesh's planned course, nicknamed

reader by explicit citations, which are then subverted by analyses which help to reconfigure these moments of knowledge-flaunting as moments of eluded revelation. As is the case with *The Breast*, knowledge of literature is depicted as being detached from knowledge of lived experience, and may actively work to hinder perceptions if it.

A model of 'hidden' knowledge masked by superficial reference may help to construct new ways of analysing the *Professor of Desire*. Whilst *The Breast* invites comparison with Kafka (amongst other writers), its strategy is not to hide analysis but bring all potential analyses to the surface in as vivid a manner as possible. The body of textual reference in *The Professor of Desire* ranges from explicit textual engagement (a biographical analysis of Kafka's *The Castle*) to the casual allusion (such as Tolstoy's famous claim that all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way). Taken as a textual theme, literary reference can be interpreted as a counterpart to the self-referential fabric that Roth weaves throughout the novel.

Judith Still and Michael Worton use Julia Kristeva's work in *Sèmèiotikè* to argue that the process of quotation has a substantial effect upon the manner in which a reader approaches a text. They argue that, in reading a quotation, "the reader thus seeks to read the borrowing not only for its semantic content but also for its tropological or metaphorical function and significance" (11). No quote is an island: in the case of the Rilke poem in *The Breast*, a quote is asked to carry a burden of metaphorical interpretation whose demands are clearly ludicrous. This gets significantly more complicated in *The Professor of Desire*, where emphasis is placed on subtle influence between texts rather than the comically direct relationships that readers are asked to construct during *The Breast*.

*The Breast* functions as an intertextual narrative insofar as literature provides false solace and misleading precedents for its narrator: in quoting Rilke, Kepesh lets a secondary text stand in for his experience, encouraging his reader towards a specific interpretation. In *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh is less in thrall to literary precedent, but still struggles to frame his experiences outside of a literary context. The effect is more subtle than that of the earlier

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'Desire 351', may not be absolute, but a Eurocentric interest in the literature of desire is telling – as is the special emphasis given to Kafka.

text: *The Professor of Desire* is easily Roth's most self-consciously 'well-read' novel. Roth's text thus calls into question relationships between texts, evoking Julia Kristeva's basic intertextual gambit: that every text is "a mosaic of quotations", that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Orr 21).

Intertextuality is a concept that encompasses a wide variety of frequently conflicting theoretical perspectives: even the familiar and received definition of the term may expose basic assumptions about intertextuality to be fractious. As Mary Orr points out, Kristeva's contribution to theoretical discussions of intertextuality have been overshadowed by the emergence of Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin as pre-eminent theorists of intertextuality prior to the translation into English of much of her own work on the subject in 1980. In Kristeva's work *Séméiotikè* the phrase "mosaic of quotations" is misleading in that it functions as "a gloss and transposition of Bakhtin's thought" (26) rather than an independent contribution to the study of intertextuality itself. Kristeva is thus transposing Bakhtin's work within a tradition of linguistic theory – "translinguistic dialogue between two intercultural situations", in Orr's phrasing – more than she is enacting an independent body of theory (27). Kristeva's own notion of intertextuality is first mentioned in different terms: "The text is therefore productivity, meaning that... it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of one text, many utterances taken from other texts intersect with each other and neutralise one another" (27).

Orr is keen to note that "neutralise", in a Kristevan context, is "not so much a cancelling out as an interactive levelling" (28). There is a democratic sense of playfulness enabled by this perspective, in which texts intersect as part of a process that diminishes any sense of intrinsic hierarchy. Kristevan intertextuality thus allows a combination of internal mechanisms and external factors to emerge as part of the same intertextual process. This has particular importance for texts like *The Professor of Desire*, in which the limitations of 'pure' textuality are continually called into question.

As noted earlier, directly superimposing psychoanalytic models onto *The Professor of Desire* is also difficult, as the text has a much less fractured relationship with the field than any preceding Roth text in which it is described. Even if Kepesh's perception of his being 'cured' is to be interpreted



as hopelessly naïve, as a character in this novel, Klinger is too bland to form the basis of a substantial interpretation. Indeed, the character of the text calls for an approach more comparative than analytical in nature: there are too many ‘voices’ suffusing Roth’s text. Mary Orr makes the point that schools of thought like psychoanalysis often thrive on the “prioritization of what was absent” (4) rather than the inherent modes of polyphony more common to intertextual approaches (a polyphony reflected even in the range of approaches that ‘intertextuality’ encompasses, which can make the very act of definition difficult). Psychoanalysis and intertextuality need not be competing modes of interpretation: Séan Hand uses Freudian notions of transference as a comparator to intertextuality, noting that both “hermeneutic codes are built on lost origins, involving language as a general network (langue) and any particular instance of it (parole) in a relation of infinite regression” (82). As with intertextuality’s emphasis on reading as a locus of indeterminacy, rather than the subject-positions of the reader or author, transference is more about process than about hierarchical interpretation. Despite the fruitfulness of such lines of inquiry, Roth’s text is fundamentally about reading, and it remains of critical importance to pay heed to the kinds of intertextual, comparative relationships that his subversive strategies can enable a critic to employ.

What Kepesh fails in enacting and what Roth succeeds in during *The Professor of Desire* is what Germain Brée describes as “the power of the written text to impose a reorganisation of the texts that preceded its appearance, creating a modification in the manner in which they are read” (Orr 10). Roth subverts Kepesh, but in doing so he subverts Kafka – a democratic form of playfulness that invites the reader to read ‘against’ both texts. To return to Still and Worton’s ideas on the subject, reading through the lenses of multiple authors enables the act of reading to become multivalent. In reading a novel as referential as *The Professor of Desire*, we are asked to consider not just the limitations of quotation, but the mechanics of comparative literary perspective itself.

This is not to say that Kepesh’s case-history is worth abandoning in its entirety. If Roth’s use of intertextuality provides the novel with a self-subverting narrative voice, then his self-referentiality may mask a similar subversive mechanism. Constructing this argument necessitates an exploration of the links between the first two Kepesh novels, both those which are

explicitly referenced in the course of the latter novel and those which are exposed by analysing draft manuscripts in the Philip Roth Papers. Hidden, subversive traits are exposed by a reading of these drafts, complicating issues of Jewish identity which can appear simplified or underexplored in the texts themselves.

A notion of intertextual dialogue should first pay heed to that which takes place within the 'series' that *The Professor of Desire* is written as part of. Characters and their individual biographies are 'carried over' between *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* in a manner that suggests coherence. Although Kepesh's 'later' life as a breast is not referenced explicitly in *The Professor of Desire*, the text's final lines strive to enact parallels with Kepesh's fate in *The Breast* in a way that can seem to imply continuity between the two texts. Roth includes a number of references which are blunt to the point of invitation: Kepesh compares the loss of his libido to Gogol's protagonist in *The Nose*, a text which is explicitly referenced as a comparator in *The Breast*. Furthermore, in one of the novel's final scenes, Kepesh is depicted sucking on Claire's nipple, and expresses foreboding about his "fear of transformations yet to come" (263) ('transformation' being Kepesh's chosen term to describe his subsequent predicament). These forceful gestures to this other text, both prequel and sequel, seem to develop the case for these novels being read inversely as a conventional narrative sequence. To critique this claim, a consideration of Roth's body of work as a whole is required.

As in *The Breast*, Kepesh's tendency in *The Professor of Desire* to render Europe as a mythic 'other' has a totalising effect that reverberates in his own explorations of selfhood. Place and identity are closely linked in many of Roth's novels, but usually in the service of a destabilising ambiguity – this is why Roth depicts Mickey Sabbath masturbating over his mistress' grave in *Sabbath's Theater* or recreates suburban dentist Henry Zuckerman as a militant settler in *The Counterlife*. *The Professor of Desire* is distinctive in this respect as this destabilising becomes a continual textual mechanism rather than arising at a point of explicit crisis. In this sense, Kepesh is depicted as being in a permanent mode of locational identity-crisis, torn between totalising foundational myths. This modifies a similar theme in *The Breast*, which describes foundational myths originating in different intellectual approaches: in *The Professor of Desire*, this identity-crisis becomes more explicitly linked to

questions of Jewish identity. These two critiques of foundational myth – intellectual and locational – are key themes in *Portnoy's Complaint*, but have been detangled or distilled in these later novels to form more self-contained themes.

Roth has been keen throughout his oeuvre, and particularly in novels like *My Life as a Man*, to cast doubt on the virtues of consistent narrative. Roth's invitation to read the Kepesh novels as being part of a mutually coherent trilogy is a temptation that should be avoided: these novels should be viewed as being on the same experimental continuum as the layered narratives of *My Life as a Man* or the intersecting narratives in *The Counterlife*, albeit constructed in a less aggressive manner than either. The hidden narratives that help construct *The Professor of Desire* differ from these texts in that they depend on a more explicitly psychoanalytic methodology, placing the reader in a quasi-analytical role as they attempt to uncover the stories hidden behind the narratives presented to them. Roth thus questions the boundaries of identity and selfhood, and in doing so he incorporates ethnic, gendered and sexual tropes under the broad theme of location.

#### **4.1.2: The Strange Case of Herbie Bratasky**

A consideration of intertextuality allows for the discussion of a wide range of texts under the rubric of an analysis of *The Professor of Desire*, but it may have the effect of minimising the complexity of the transition Roth was attempting to make. A consideration of manuscripts found in Philip Roth's papers complicates the connection between *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*, further highlighting the importance of constructing analytical strategies tailored to the character of Roth's novel. By paying attention to Roth's drafting process, it becomes possible to add another layer of nuance to an understanding of the kinds of textual relationships Roth was transitioning between.

Roth's psychoanalytically-based scepticism towards the ability of an individual to construct a coherent narrative of their own life is partly justified

by the sheer variety of directions into which he considered taking the writings that would eventually become *The Professor of Desire*. Moreover, an analysis of these drafts reveals that certain sections of text reappear as component parts of several divergent narratives.

Several drafts of the many intended sequels to *The Breast* in the Philip Roth Papers that have been completed (or partially completed) stand out as being suggestive of significant points in the development of *The Professor of Desire*. As discussed in Chapter 3, the earliest of these is an undated, unfinished and untitled narrative consisting of a series of largely disconnected events which follow on from those in *The Breast*. Despite the lack of a composition date, the fact of its being included amongst papers associated with *The Breast* suggests that the text represents the earliest part of the overall drafting process for *The Professor of Desire*. The draft includes a substantial section which would form the core story arc of *The Professor of Desire*, narrating Kepesh's 'autobiography' from his childhood in the Hungarian Royale Hotel to his European misadventures, and finally the domestic tranquillity attained with (and through) Claire Ovington. This section is nonetheless part of a main narrative which continues the story of Kepesh's life as a breast – although the first 55 pages of the narrative are missing, the fragments that follow the missing section indicate a continuation of the scenes, characters and predicaments of *The Breast*.

This framing narrative pushes the Kepesh story into increasingly fantastic territory, with Roth constantly blurring textual distinctions between the imagination of its narrator-protagonist and the events occurring to him in the quotidian realm he inhabits. Nonetheless, a plot can be traced: Kepesh, still in breast form, has his predicament broadcast to the world at large and ends up, much against his will, being venerated as a God. In the latter stages of the narrative, Kepesh is able to 'imagine' himself out of his transformed state, giving himself a family but ultimately losing Claire, who decides to leave him.

Assuming the drafts in the archive to be comprehensive, and for the accuracy of their dating, the majority of the editing process for *The Professor*

of *Desire* would take place several years later<sup>52</sup>. This later process would mostly involve changes to minor stylistic details and an uncertainty about the novel's title:

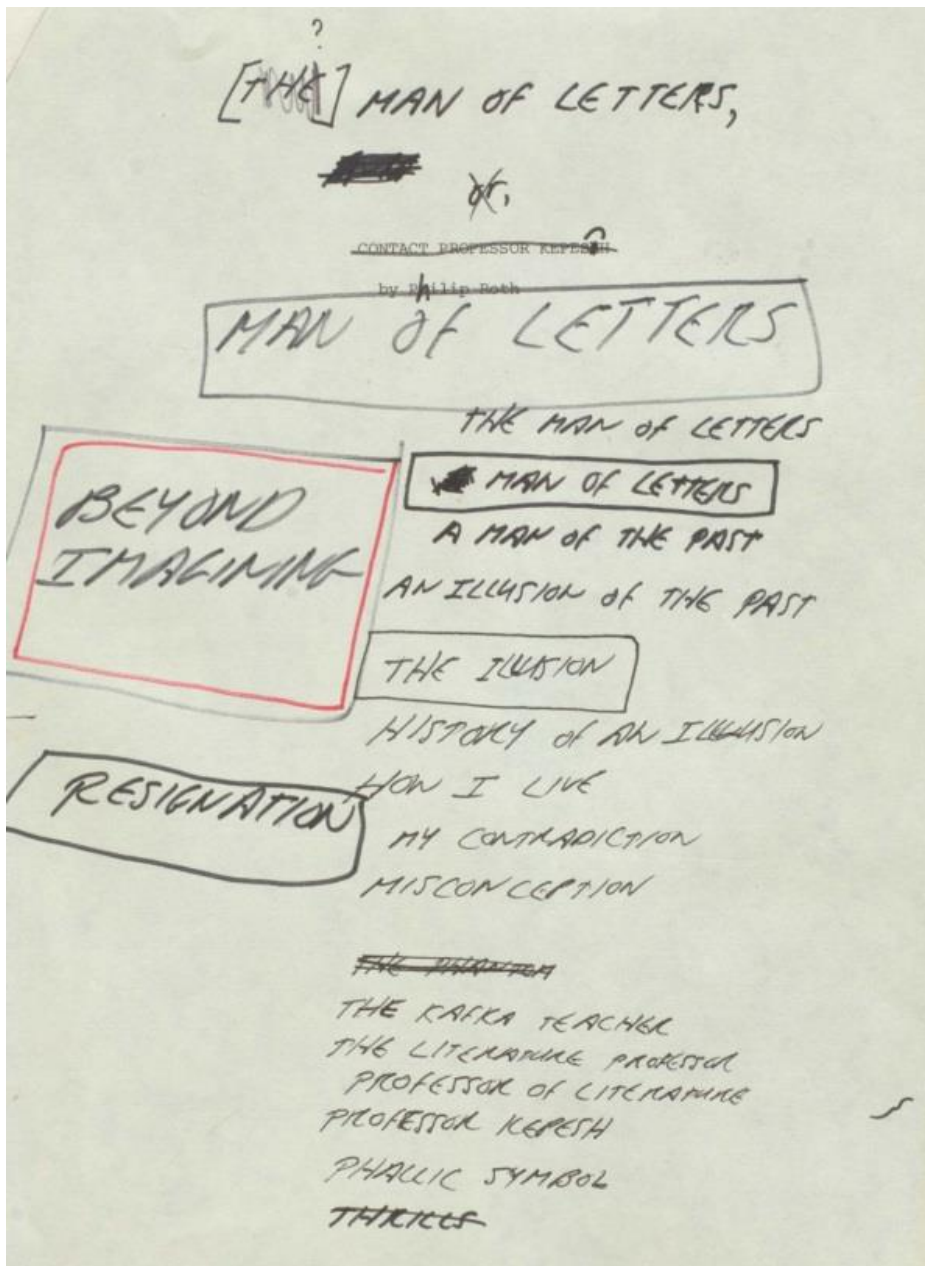


Figure 7: Abandoned titles for a draft of *The Professor of Desire*

<sup>52</sup> The Philip Roth Papers at the Library of Congress are thoroughly catalogued and well-maintained. Although there are some minor discrepancies in dating and citations (for example, some drafts are undated and a short story is attributed to *Cavalcade* rather than *Cavalier*), they can be assumed to be relatively comprehensive. The inclusion of a vast number of corrections and notes, combined with Roth's own curatorial prowess, allows for the assumption of accuracy that the observations in this chapter depend upon.

The range of rejected names for this early draft exposes an uncertainty over the nature of the relationship between *The Breast* and the second Kepesh novel. Some titles seem to refer more to the transmogrification that Kepesh would be subject to (*Misconception*, *Beyond Imagining*), whereas others refer more to the life Kepesh enjoyed beforehand (*Man of Letters*, *Professor of Literature*), whereas others occupy an ambiguous middle ground (*A Man of the Past*, *Phallic Symbol* – and, most notably, *The Kafka Teacher*). Such indecision is representative of the texts that these phrases seek to title: Roth would trial several versions which continue the Kepesh-as-breast narrative in some form before abandoning it altogether.

Whilst it is possible to trace the evolution of *The Professor of Desire* in changes to Kepesh's pre-transformation biography, such a method would exclude the bulk of drafts like the unpublished sequel found amongst the papers of *The Breast*, which are more concerned with continuing and expanding the narrative started by the latter text. *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* share an interest in a desperate search for definitive meaning: in the latter text, this theme differs only insofar as Kepesh's self-assertions are constructed on a grander scale. The draft versions of *The Professor of Desire* demonstrate how Roth would move away from the surreal and fantastic and towards the familiar and quotidian in constructing this theme.

In the unpublished sequel, Roth's continuation of the surreal strategies employed in *The Breast* is most explicitly undertaken through the character of Herbie Bratasky, Kepesh's brash and exuberant childhood idol, who is placed at the centre of the text's plot. In this extension of the Kepesh story, Kepesh agrees to swap places with Herbie, whose exuberance has morphed into the cynical posturing of a hustler<sup>53</sup>. Kepesh's freedom to abandon his life as a breast comes as the result of his recognising that he is a "product of the Projector's imagination", an author-God to whom he attributes his distress. The Projector itself is described as "sadistic, vengeful, frivolous, cruel, infantile, vicious and ultimately crazy".

By the end of the text, Kepesh has freed himself from his plight as a breast, a freedom which is accompanied by a loss of narrative coherence.

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<sup>53</sup> Known as Herbie Weinstock in this draft, rather than Herbie Bratasky.

Kepesh thus becomes the “Counter-Projection”, a competing author-God with the power to change his biography. Notably, even this attempt at providing himself with domestic normalcy fails: Kepesh cannot make himself content even when he has absolute narrative power, hence the text’s final lines:

If this has not been my real life that I have imagined, then it hasn’t; yet it has surely felt like it. I could mean I haven’t been pretending: or rather, of course I have been pretending – but that was out of vigilance, and sometimes I have pretended so effectively that even I didn’t know I was pretending any longer. In fact, years back, though I did not relax my diligence, I nonetheless came to believe... that I had safely made it through. That the Counter-Projection had worked and I was in the clear. But now I wonder?

The language used here is reminiscent of the often confusing style of *The Breast* – the repetition of “pretending”, the surge in self-belief and the self-doubt that immediately follows it. Where it has more in common with *The Professor of Desire* is in the narrative gambit of the conclusion itself: a resolution complicated by a glimmer of doubt. Inverting the sequence found in the final, published version of the novel (in which this glimmer of doubt may indicate a future transmogrification), Roth nonetheless displays a similar sense of foreboding – a suggestion that Kepesh’s quandaries are more epistemological than physical. Nor is this the only important link between this text and its final version: the metatextual games in evidence here (Kepesh’s writing himself out of his own narrative) derive in part from Kepesh’s claim in *The Breast* that his predicament is attributable to his literary interests. Already granted the ability to interpret himself in the manner of a literary critic by his university training, Kepesh gains the abilities of a literary author.

Roth’s own annotations of the draft express an unease not with the secondary (authorial) transformation itself, which can be interpreted as observably ‘Kepeshian’, but with the manner in which it was initiated. In his final annotation, Roth draws attention to Herbie, Kepesh’s would-be replacement:

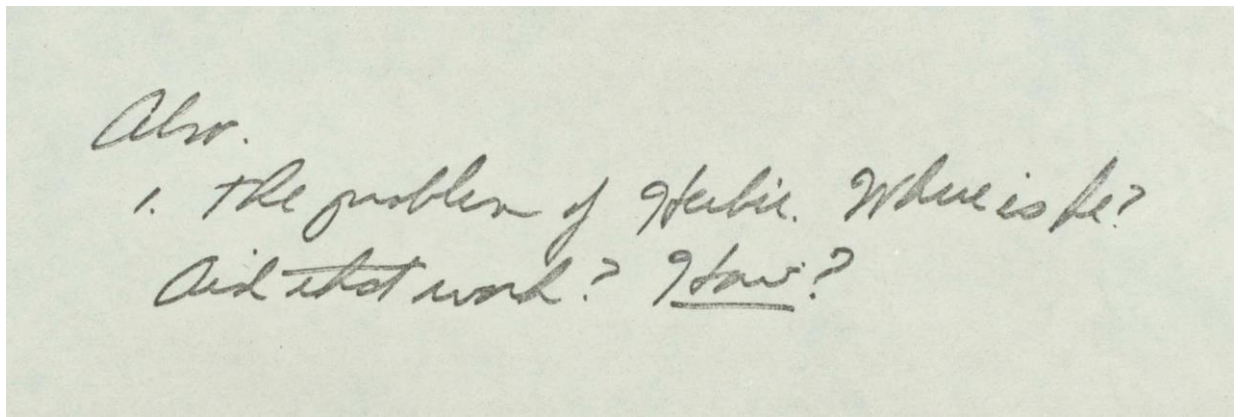


Figure 8: The final page of an unfinished sequel to *The Breast*

[“Also. 1. The problem of Herbie. Where is he? Did that work? How?”]

In his annotations to this draft, Roth consistently expresses hesitation about the character of Herbie, whose reappearance represents an unfinished aspect of the Kepesh story. At one point, Roth includes a bracketed aside mid-paragraph, which could come equally from Kepesh or Roth himself, asking “Meanwhile: Where is Herbie? Don’t get this entirely. Must work it out. Oh, so much to work out.”. Kepesh’s own narrative uncertainty is virtually indistinguishable from Roth’s own, but more significance lies in the problem that both seem uneasy about: the role of Herbie. At the conclusion of the draft, Roth questions the parameters of his own text, and in doing so effectively gives Herbie the last word.

Roth’s sequel remained unfinished, but the only substantial evidence of narrative progression beyond the typed manuscript is an enigmatic question: “How?”. Roth is referencing the specific textual issue of the body-swap, yet the “problem of Herbie” is not a simple matter of plot resolution. The brash, swaggering Herbie that reappears in this unfinished sequel is a figure whose childlike playfulness has morphed into contempt for the social mores he was discouraged from satirising in his young adulthood. Ignoring Kepesh’s ad-hoc lectures on “Kafka, Gogol, Rilke et al” during his visits, Herbie turns the conversation to Kepesh’s erotic history, at one point asking “what kinda knockers does your wife have” - a question that Kepesh judges “bizarre” given the nature of his own transformation. Herbie’s interest in breasts mirrors Kepesh’s own pre-transformation lust for the breasts of his lover, Claire,



exposing similarities between the two characters: however, this is not the only problem generated by Herbie's reappearance. By failing to provide a resolution regarding what happens to Herbie when he is afforded power over worshippers ("Where is he? Did that work?"), Roth forgoes the opportunity to explore a version of brotherhood separated from Kepesh's anxieties: a brotherhood placed in the realm of unmitigated lasciviousness.

Herbie is provided an opportunity to swap places with Kepesh, and it is little surprise that Herbie himself would represent a lingering textual dilemma as a result. Herbie Bratasky becomes, to use the terminology of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, a character constructed in the interstices of cultural boundaries. As a perpetual 'outsider', Herbie is granted a unique perspective to comment on the culture(s) he inhabits. Bhabha describes how "the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (3). Applying this configuration to the changing nature of Jewish identity in mid to late twentieth century America places characters like Herbie in a position of equal anxiety and potency. Herbie "authorises" the hybridities that form the central paradox of Kepesh's own self-identity; his battles with self-expression function as a warning of the perpetual sense of ambiguity that Kepesh seems determined to avoid.

In the unfinished sequel as well as in *The Professor of Desire*, Herbie becomes Kepesh's transgressive role model, initiating a series of appearances by characters whose assertive masculinity holds a bewildered fascination. In the final published version of the novel, this series would continue with Kepesh's befriending of the purportedly homosexual Louis Jelinek during college and the poet-seducer Ralph Baumgarten during his early academic career. As with many aspects of *The Professor of Desire*, these obscure role models are one side of a binary, allied to a sequence of conventional-dutiful role models that include Abe Kepesh, Arthur Schonbrunn and Dr. Klinger, the psychoanalyst whose secularised 'blessing' would allow Kepesh to feel truly redeemed in initiating a relationship with Claire.

In the published version of Roth's novel, several transgressive role models recur later in the text in deflating ways. Ralph Baumgarten, the amoral

philanderer, applies to become “poet-in-residence” at Texas Christian University, who ask Kepesh for an assessment of Baumgarten’s “moral character” (248). A few paragraphs before this, Abe discusses Herbie Bratasky, revealing that he is working as “the sole Long Island distributor” for a Japanese electronics company, and will shortly be getting married (246). Despite the effusiveness of Abe’s praise, Roth’s language indicates an interpretative plasticity in the character of Herbie which can be seen as a remnant of the false identity he assumed in the unpublished sequel. Herbie’s hair is so luxurious that Abe “thought maybe it was a rug”, and his tan is so dark that Abe assumes that he “must use a lamp”. Even Herbie’s daughter is described as a “doll” – making Herbie’s mundane fatherly pride seem like an uncanny imitation of a conventional paternal role (247).

Roth thus uses the character of Herbie to construct another of the Manichean binaries that provide *The Professor of Desire* with much of its moments of anxiety and revelation. Herbie is, after all, the focus of the novel’s opening pages, and even the opening line itself: “Temptation comes to me first in the conspicuous figure of Herbie Bratasky, social director, bandleader, crooner, comic, and m.c. of my family’s mountainside resort hotel” (3).

It may be unclear to a reader unfamiliar with the text just what kind of “temptation” Herbie does represent. Even if he can be placed amongst the ranks of the novel’s iconoclasts, Herbie’s position appears curiously qualified by the manner of how he is initially described. Kepesh names the hotel guests discussing Herbie as “A-Owitz”, “B-Owitz” and “C-Owitz”; interchangeable and anonymous characters. By providing Herbie’s name in full within the first sentence, Roth may be suggesting that Kepesh views Herbie as being more fully-realised in his given environment. Herbie is a transitional figure, a cultural dilettante whose mastery of a range of roles reaches its ultimate manifestation in a talent for mimicry, which itself reaches its ultimate manifestation in an ability to depict the full range of sounds associated with defecation, a performance which David is the only hotel resident to bear witness to. In choosing this topic to entertain a young boy, Herbie may be guilty of playing to his audience somewhat (toilet habits being a traditional mainstay of pre-adolescent humour). Despite this, Kepesh refuses to interpret Herbie’s motivations, maintaining instead the pose of childish naivety that characterised his early experiences as Herbie’s “awestruck acolyte” (6).

Herbie's interest in defecation is not restricted to zany conversations with the text's narrator. Lambasting Herbie after his request to perform some of his more controversial "imitations" ("But," protests Herbie, "My fart is perfect!"), Abe proclaims that "the Shofar is for the high holidays and the other stuff is for the toilet" (6). That Abe bans Herbie from both religious impersonation and scatological forthrightness in a single, aphoristic blow suggests a simultaneous continuity and disconnect between notions of transgression. Herbie's rebellion is at once composed of high seriousness and the hidden fact of bodily frailty; the lack of control over our bodies evinced by farting and diarrhoea (the "full Wagnerian strains of fecal *Sturm und Drang*", as Kepesh portrays it)(7)<sup>54</sup>.

Bodily frailty is an understandable concern for a character like Herbie, whose pivotal role in the resort hotel is partially explained by the "damaged eardrum" that prevents his enlisting in the Second World War<sup>55</sup>. Unable to gain verifiable evidence of his adherence to the dictates of American masculinity through military service, Herbie is reduced to imitating the sound of "a fighter plane nose-diving over Berchtesgaden" (6). Configured at one remove from the generation of young men fighting for the Allied forces, Herbie's imitation becomes a plaintive gesture of his own anxieties. These anxieties call to mind stereotypes surrounding Jewish physical capabilities and military service. Discussing representations of the Jewish foot in the fin-de-siècle, Sander Gilman notes that discrimination extended beyond a reluctance to award Jews promotions: "the status associated with the role of the Jew as soldier was paralleled by the increasingly intense anti-Semitic critique of the Jewish body as inherently unfit for military service" (42). The lack of explanation for Herbie's injury places him as part of a historical dialogue in which Jewish men were assumed to be incapable of matching the military feats of their Gentile peers. His role in the Hungarian Royale has, in this respect, an element of exile; a tension between the dominant American culture and the Jewish community. Herbie's role as a salesman during the off-season merely confirms this liminal

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<sup>54</sup> Roth's choice of comparator is intriguing, given the association of Wagner with anti-Semitic views. This may offer a further complication to the notion of taboo constructed by Abe, who dictates to Herbie the boundaries of acceptability within the microcosmic Jewish world of the Hungarian Royale.

<sup>55</sup> Roth would later use a reformulation of this non-combatant guilt as the basis for his final novel, *Nemesis*. The intersection between the physical requirements of the military and unexpected disability is also a key theme in an early short story, *Novotny's Pain*.

position, a sense of unease permeating his roles in either a cosmopolitan or a more homogenously Jewish environment.

As a role model, it is not only Herbie's military rejection that marks him as a peripheral figure – nor, as will be discussed later, is this rejection unconnected from the more explicit conflicts he contends with in the narrative. Roth's construction of Herbie's Jewishness is a significant, if understated, part of Herbie's qualifications for being a figure of temptation: he is constructed communally through a series of cultural references which consistently emphasise the contrast between a traditional religious conception of Jewish identity and the more frenetic claims of popular culture. Discussing his paradoxical self-construction, some hotel guests debate whether Herbie's playfulness is preventing him from success; one guest claims that, if he shed his clownish antics, Herbie could be "in the Metropolitan Opera", another that he could become a cantor in a synagogue (5).

Such contrasts represent, in part, a generational change. The guests at the Hungarian Royale still have a vivid connection to the immigrant generation that preceded them, and their speech belies an uncertain alliance between the cultural affiliations of Judaism and the materialist mythologies of American capitalism: references to Jewish religious practices can be found alongside a deep knowledge of "the annals of show business" (5). Such concerns are irrelevant to Herbie, whose iconoclasm and scatological obsessions allow for an element of demystification. Torn from hidden narratives of an internalised religious culture and a puritanical, repressive suspicion of the human body, Herbie becomes a perpetually peripheral figure – seemingly able to comment on the worlds he exists between with a proto-authorial detachment.

Homi K. Bhabha may also help provide a framework through which to interpret the forms of humour that Herbie utilises. Discussing mimicry as an alternate voice within colonial discourse, Bhabha argues that mimicry places the speaking subject in a position of appropriation. Mimicry is thus constructed as "the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (122), a dialogic practice based on subversive interpretation. Herbie's position may be more assured than that of the colonised peoples that provide Bhabha with much of the evidence for his claims, but the discourse of the other within power structures provides a useful point of reference. Herbie

is a doubly excluded figure; mimicry affords him the ability to transgress his position as 'other' within the Jewish community of the Hungarian Royale, but it also reflects his position as a non-combatant in an increasingly militarised country.

In Bhabha's terms, the effectiveness of mimicry is dependent upon ambivalence: it must "continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (122). Herbie's mimicry is not merely scatological, but a continual act of self-creation in the face of a power structure that seeks to define him within known categories: for example, as "our Jewish Cugat", "a second Danny Kaye" or "another Tony Martin" in the brochures for the Hungarian Royale (3-4). These representations are part of a broader sphere of representation in which Herbie continually eludes categorisation. Impersonation and mimicry afford the opportunity for subversion, and this may explain why David's own supposed abandonment of his "penchant for mimicry", perfected during his time at college, is depicted as being a formative stage in the creation of his identity (9).

Kepesh's mimicries are not quotations as much as they are imaginings, and even Herbie himself is used as a figure of fun. Kepesh's mimicries, transposed to a university campus, become problematic, playing on Jewish tropes for a Gentile audience for comic effect. They offer a contrast to the more genuine ambivalence of Herbie's mimicries, which allow him to carve his own space for self-creation. Kepesh disavows the strictures of his upbringing (both familial and the alternative 'upbringing' provided by Herbie), but his mimicries become less subversive as a result. It seems little wonder that Kepesh decides that "At twenty I must stop impersonating others and Become Myself, or at least begin to impersonate the self I believe I ought to be" (12). The capitalisations suggest the irony of an older voice, but the failure of Kepesh to abandon impersonation in its less direct forms recurs as an unacknowledged yet pivotal theme throughout the text.

Herbie's anxieties about his masculinity place him within another hidden narrative, one obscured by his flamboyant subversion of community values. As a result, he ends up emulating the unease underlying many of the hotel's guests; an abiding faith in American culture, twinned with an acute awareness of their status as outsiders in that same culture. In other words, it is Herbie's

status as an outsider that allows him his power as a commentator, but, paradoxically, this position also places him most thoroughly amongst Jewish cultural tropes and anxieties. Herbie is thus constructed as the prototype for the irreverent shamelessness that Kepesh aspires to, but also reveals a hidden narrative of cultural anxiety which is translated in different forms in Kepesh's account of his own sexual history.

#### 4.1.3: The Other Europe

Herbie Bratasky is a figure whose explicitly liminal position is contrasted to that of David Kepesh, who seems continually in denial about his position between different realms of experience and discourse. Analysis of the role of Herbie in unpublished and unfinished sequels to *The Professor of Desire* show that Roth was cognisant of the position he had put his character in, and was tempted to use him for more extravagant purposes than he ended up doing in the published version of the novel. This awareness of the power of Herbie as a character is further supported by his recurrence in the published text, in which he is portrayed in a manner that challenges many of the assumptions made by Roth's narrator. Herbie's reappearance invites discussion of the role of place and community in the novel, and in doing so questions the notion of 'home' itself.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, sexual anxiety and place are inseparably linked in the image of the family home; in depicting Portnoy using his family's dinner as a masturbation aid and the awkwardness of the subsequent meal, Roth offers a bawdy countertext to his more gentle satire of the suburban Patimkin family's dinner-table antics in *Goodbye, Columbus*. The family home is the centre of both of these texts, with other locations (Israel in *Portnoy's Complaint*, for example), merely offering further commentary upon the warped dynamics of the familial home. *The Professor of Desire* differs from these in that the family home depicted in the early stages of the text (the Hungarian Royale Hotel) is inseparable from the broader community that it serves; as a home space, it is remarkably liminal. Kepesh, like Neil Klugman and Alexander Portnoy, is part

of a largely self-contained Jewish community - but one based on hierarchy, impermanence and commerce rather than an organic sense of community. Its fragility is seen not merely in its seasonal fluctuations, but in the repurposing of the hotel as a ski lodge (painted in “tumescent pink”) shortly after it leaves the ownership of the Kepesh family (244).

A conception of Jewish place as impermanent need not be negative: Erich S. Gruen, for example, claims that “diaspora, in short, is no burden; indeed, it is a virtue in the spread of the word. This justifies a primary attachment to the land of one’s residence, rather than the home of the fathers.” (18). Gruen’s positive construction of an ethnicity grounded in liminal textuality is seductive, and is supported in part by theorists like Barbara Mann, whose chapter on home (*‘Bayit’*) in her monograph *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* extends this emphasis on transition into more explicitly theological territory by arguing that “both the *mishkan* and the *sukkah* are prototypes of a kind of mobile sacredness that echo profoundly to this day in Jewish cultures.” (84). Quoting Jean Amery, Mann lauds the ingenuity of Jewish communities who have perfected the art of building “domiciles within exile” (95): a sense of home which builds within itself the expectation of upheaval, consciously constructing a community within the framework of a dominant culture.

In a later chapter on the superficially contrary notion of exile, Mann notes that “the idea of travel asserts another form of ownership (nativeness) over space, even if that space is only an imagined geography with a tenuous relationship to actual terrain”. This is part of an argument in which the act of movement itself may entail the creation of a Jewish space, with Jews becoming “place-makers par excellence” (101) (100). This inverse notion of a form of place-knowledge gained through the very rootlessness that formed the basis of much anti-Semitic prejudice (Mann develops her argument in opposition to the stereotype of the ‘wandering Jew’) allows for a new perspective on the meanderings of David Kepesh. Kepesh’s travels – from South Fallsburg to Syracuse in New York State, then from Europe to California to New York City, and finally from New York City to Europe to rural New England – involve his manoeuvring through spaces in which Jewish identity is constructed in a number of different ways, and he thus constructs Jewish identity anew as he travels. Most important amongst these is the sense of Jewish identity that Kepesh gains as a result of his later travels in Europe, an experience which

adds a comparative element to Kepesh's perceptions of Jewish place. These processes are at their most complex in Kepesh's discussions of the Czech writer Franz Kafka.

*The Professor of Desire* does not offer a definitive statement about Kafka - Roth 'uses' Kafka to represent how literary criticism may place unwanted limitations on the interpretation of literature. In analysing this material, it becomes difficult to view the novel as a statement of Roth's views on Eastern European politics, as Claudia Roth Pierpont suggests in her reference to "the larger meanings of [Roth's] recent European experiences" (106). Roth Pierpont is not alone, however, in favouring biographical interpretations of this part of Roth's novel. Alan Cooper's discussion of *The Professor of Desire* tentatively suggests that Prague "now stood for the emptiness of Eastern European culture under communism" (135), a reference to Roth's extensive visits to Prague whilst editing the *Writers From the Other Europe* collection for Penguin between 1974 and 1989<sup>56</sup>. Roth's vision of Prague in *The Professor of Desire* certainly reflects his increasing interest in Eastern Europe, yet readers attuned to Kepesh's self-subversion should be wary of the projected synthesis of Kafka's vision of nightmarish bureaucracy and political realities under communism.

One of the pivotal scenes in which Eastern Europe is imagined in *The Professor of Desire* occurs when Kepesh, after visiting Kafka's grave in Prague, dreams of meeting an ageing prostitute who claims to have had Kafka as one of her clients. This scene stands apart from the rest of the novel, even if it is placed within realist boundaries by being encoded within the framework of a dream-sequence. The dream is left uninterpreted by Kepesh, who merely describes his unease upon waking. The dream serves as a coda to the description of a trip to Europe, concluding one of the novel's untitled chapter-sections.

Mark Shechner has been keen to place this sequence in *The Professor of Desire* amongst Roth's writings on Czech culture, discussing it independently from the rest of the novel. The broader issue of Roth's engagement with

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<sup>56</sup> Roth Pierpont's discussion of Philip Roth's experiences in Prague offers a particularly detailed account of these visits – however, like Cooper, her readiness to read *The Professor of Desire* in terms of these visits may override the more specific and nuanced textual role of Prague within the novel itself.



Eastern Europe is a significant area of current research, but an emphasis on the role of the scene within the text it emerges from may yield value in its own right. Functioning as a reminder of the bodily realities underlying the aesthetics of desire, this scene satirises Kepesh's conventional whims and his constant reference to biography as a means of literary interpretation.

Several other critics have discussed this scene in depth. Debra Shostak, for example, reads the dream sequence as an example of Roth's manipulation of the castration complex in his depiction of male embodiment, making an implicit connection to fetishism easier to conjure (24). Other critics interpret the role of Kafka as an invitation to comparative discussions: David Gooblar uses the Prague section of *The Professor of Desire* to discuss how Roth utilises the mythology of Kafka in order to address "problems of powerlessness and bewilderment in the face of a personal reality" (74). Gooblar's argument is convincing in that it suggests the problem of ambiguity that constructs the novel's central predicament, although, like Shechner, his use of the Prague scene forms part of a more comparative discussion of Roth's interest in Kafka and Eastern Europe rather than offering a consideration of *The Professor of Desire* as an independent text. Shostak and Gooblar offer wide-ranging comparative approaches that signal a fundamental change in recent critical approaches to Roth's work, yet in doing so they disregard earlier critical work which was more receptive to *The Professor of Desire* as a complete text.

One of these works is Stephen Wade's *The Imagination in Transit*, which describes *The Professor of Desire* as "one of Roth's most integrated and cohesive successes in the favourite territory of his writing" (63), and in doing so comes closest to placing the Prague section of *The Professor of Desire* within an analysis of the novel proper. Although he emphasises the importance of explicit intertextual links in the novel, Wade's work suggests a certain irony and playfulness in Roth's use of other authors. In viewing the Kafka scene as emblematic of "the paradox of the Jewish identity that refuses to go away" (68), Wade suggests that Roth's inclusion of the scene is tied to earlier sections of the novel that explore Jewish themes. The perceptions of Kafka that Wade gains through this strategy (for example, he links the physical description of the holocaust survivor Mr. Barbatnik to Kafka's own appearance) dominate his analysis of *The Professor of Desire*.

A focus on the Prague section is justified not only by the critical attention that it has received, but by how determined Roth appears to have been to include it. This section can be found in all existing drafts of what would become *The Professor of Desire*, despite substantial variations in the style and plots of these drafts. For example, this sequence appears in substantial length in the unfinished sequel, even whilst the depiction of Kepesh's life-story that surrounds it is cursory and sparing of details (at least when compared to the published version). Moreover, the section is significant for reasons other than those already discussed in critical work on Roth: the dream-sequence that concludes the Prague section of the novel features the only reappearance of Herbie Bratasky, other than a reference to his wedding near the end of the novel.

Kafka (like Herbie) haunts the margins of Roth's text, and Kepesh's visit to Prague takes the form of a pilgrimage, part of a series of visits to cities which have strongly influenced Kepesh's version of the European literary canon. Even as Kepesh introduces Prague as a living city, he constructs it in literary terms by describing an exam paper on Kafka that he had set his students (166). Kepesh then tours Prague with a former professor of literature (Professor Soska), who at once seems to debunk Kepesh's aesthetic projections by describing political realities such as his own dismissal from an academic post and new job as "a typist in a meat-packing plant" (168), and reaffirms them by claiming that "many of us survive on Kafka. Including those who have never read a word of his" (169).

Professor Soska supports this claim by referring to the fact that many of his compatriots utter the phrase "it's Kafka" when faced with events that seem emblematic of certain of Kafka's repeated tropes<sup>57</sup>. Kepesh's aesthetic projections appear justified; the city has internalised Kafka's literary rules as a general manner of existence, with literary and cultural identities merging seamlessly. Motivated by this seeming justification of his own internalisation of

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<sup>57</sup> Arguably, Soska manifests 'Kafkan' traits himself in working on an "utterly useless" translation of Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (170). In a draft of *Professor of Desire* entitled *What's it to Me?*, Kepesh becomes resigned to his plight when he similarly resolves to rewrite the novels of Anthony Trollope. In both instances, literary endeavour is depicted as being at once comforting and pointless. Although these situations are generated by the removal of characters from their academic careers, they come to function for Roth as a critique of the insular academic communities they have left.

literary culture, Kepesh becomes inspired to write a Kafka-inspired 'confession' to his students, outlining his difficult romantic past and thus glorifying his present romantic happiness.

Predictably, this sense of comfort and synthesis is exposed as being deeply problematic. For one, Kepesh's visit to Kafka's grave is beset by an exploitative guide, who offers to show Kepesh the grave of Kafka's barber (presumably in the pursuit of further monetary recompense). Secondly, Kafka's grave is located in a Jewish cemetery whose roster of Jewish names is familiar to him: Kepesh "might be thumbing through my own address book, or at the front desk looking over my mother's shoulder at the roster of registered guests at the Hungarian Royale" (175). Kepesh thus manages to construct a miniaturised genealogy of Jewish history that moves from pre-Nazi Prague through to post-immigrant America, and finally to the cosmopolitan milieu in which Kepesh has based himself. That this connection between the 'two Europes' of literature and ethnicity is made as an aside to the comic excesses of his would be guide (who offers to show Kepesh the grave of Kafka's barber) reinforces the simultaneous recognition and disavowal that is at the core of Kepesh's own sense of Jewish identity.

These themes work together to help construct the dream sequence, which uses Kepesh's memories of Herbie Bratasky to satirise the narratives hidden and obscured by Kepesh's literary pilgrimage: these include, for example, the relationship between ethnicity and sexuality. Different forms of language are spliced together, enacting a sense of mutual misunderstanding co-ordinated by Herbie, whose cynical pimping of the prostitute is seen as a logical extension of his hotel clowning: "You haven't changed, Bratasky, not a bit." (193). Herbie escorts Kepesh to the room of the prostitute, who responds to Kepesh's exam-paper pedagogy with banal details of Kafka's predilection for fellatio, then offers him a glimpse of her vagina. Upon Kepesh's refusal to accede to this viewing (even without paying for the privilege), the prostitute becomes upset, demanding that Herbie grope her as a form of consolation.

In concluding this scene with a striking instance of sexual degradation in which all three characters are implicated, Roth calls to mind the initial subversions of Herbie, mixing them with the manipulative machinations of Ralph Baumgarten and the wanton indulgence of a Swedish exchange student,

Birgitta. In doing so, Roth further highlights the perceived continuities in his roster of transgressive characters. Baumgarten is perceived by Kepesh to be the 'ur-text' of transgression; his actions become a model in which everything becomes filtered through an explicitly sexual lens. This dream-sequence attempts to encode Herbie within a sequential rhetoric of transgression influenced principally by Baumgarten's excesses, but in doing so it reduces Herbie to an instrumental role that denies the performative and liminal qualities of the character. Kepesh's dream ends up revealing not his uncertainty about a conventional sex life, but his uncertainty about the fundamental inability to understand the motivations of others.

Kepesh projects a confidence in his knowledge of the sexual motivations that both he and Claire are subject to, but this confidence will be shattered later in the text by knowledge of the abortion which Claire undergoes shortly after the couple's return from Europe (Claire presumably having conceived during the largely idyllic trip to Europe). Herbie is the pivotal symbol indicating this denial of knowledge, and a reminder of the limitations of making assumptions based on location: in *The Professor of Desire*, individuals are shown never to be merely symbolic manifestations of their home environments. Herbie's reappearance serves to remind Kepesh that the temptation to form neat generalisations about Prague ("It's Kafka") is equally limiting.

Kafka may be the central muse of Kepesh in this novel, but he appears more as a Great Author than he does as a textual influence - hence why critical work on Roth has tended to view Herbie as instrumental in exploring the figure of Kafka, rather than vice versa. In upturning the implied textual hierarchy used by such approaches, intertextual relationships need to be recalibrated, but not abandoned altogether. Kafka's own interest in ambiguity and uncertainty (what Daniel Medin calls his "interpretative elusiveness") (12) is one of *The Professor of Desire*'s hidden narratives, suggesting a fundamental incomprehensibility regarding selfhood and place which Kepesh seems unable to employ in the narrative of his own life. Kafka's fictions themselves often seem to suggest substantial issues of place and identity which are masked by a superficial 'placelessness'. This is particularly visible in the unfinished novel *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*, in which a mythicized and fantastic

American culture offers telling parallels with Kepesh's own tendency to categorise locationally-derived identities as singular absolutes.

## 4.2: Reinterpreting Place and Identity

### 4.2.1: The Kafka Teacher

Intertextuality and theories of place have already been put forward as potential ways in which to understand the thematic combinations in Roth's work, but so far intertextuality has functioned more as a metaphor or trope than it has as an active component of *The Professor of Desire*. In bringing attention to bear upon the relationship between Roth's text and the work of another author (Franz Kafka), a broader sense of Roth's literary strategies in the novel may emerge.

Kafka and Roth wrote from vastly different historical contexts, but Roth's use of Kafka's work asks for a reconsideration of the possible continuities between the two. Biography may be less significant in this respect than literary methodologies themselves: despite substantial differences in style between the two writers, both are concerned with what Harold Bloom dubs "the evasion of interpretation as being unbearable" ('His Long Ordeal by Laughter'). Both Bloom and Theodore Weinberger focus on the use of Kafkan tropes in Roth's trilogy *Zuckerman Bound*, works that were published immediately subsequent to *The Professor of Desire*. Weinberger describes how Roth "uses Kafka to position himself on an alternative branch of Jewish identity", but views this process as originating in Roth's short story 'Looking At Kafka' rather than the first two Kepesh novels (248). Roth's interest in Kafka would certainly become a more subtly ingrained feature of his writing given time, but the more impetuous and referential uses of Kafka in *The Professor of Desire* merit study – and may enable new means of comparative analysis. Before considering this, however, a survey of how other critics have interpreted Roth's writings on Kafka will allow

the distinctive mechanics of place and identity in Roth's text to become clearer.

Philip Roth's reading of Franz Kafka would merit study in its own right, and has, indeed, occupied an important role in scholarly work on Roth. For Roth, Kafka represents the intersection of many themes pivotal to his work, and the relationship between the two authors has proved to be fertile. Discussions of the nature of this influence feature heavily in a wide range of otherwise divergent critical approaches – from a focus on Roth's Jewish tropes to explicitly comparative approaches.

Alan Cooper describes how Kepesh views his experiences of Prague as a "vague metaphor for Kafka's Jewish problem" (135), an analysis which contends with the relentless interpretative strategies ascribed to Kepesh in this part of the novel. Prague, Kafka and Kafka's work are domains subject to the same kind of analysis by the narrator. For example, Kafka's ambivalent relationship with his Jewish identity is configured by Kepesh as a question of filial obedience; he describes setting an exam paper based on Kafka's description of his "intentionally long-drawn-out leave-taking" from his father, as expressed in his 'Letter to His Father' (166). Kepesh invites his students to imagine themselves in the position of Kafka's friend and literary executor Max Brod, asking them to write a letter to Kafka's father.

In asking his students to imaginatively recast Kafka's legacy and ideas through a further interpretative lens, Kepesh suggests the increasingly complex series of interpretations that structure the Prague scene; these include those of Max Brod, Professor Soska and, most significantly, Kepesh himself. Kepesh muses to Soska that *The Castle* is "linked to Kafka's own erotic blockage – a book engaged at every level with not reaching a climax" (173). With remarks such as this, Kepesh is trying (successfully) to amuse his host, but this pseudo-joking approach seems intentionally mundane on the part of Roth. Kepesh's analysis is making a joke at the expense of a kind of rote psychobiography that ends up gesturing towards Kepesh's inability to explain his own erotic blockages.

Kepesh's interest (successful or otherwise) in interpreting Kafka's work through biographical research is twinned with his sense that he is becoming a more astute psychobiographical critic of his own life-story. The dismantling of

Kepesh's idolisation of Kafka in the dream sequence thus parallels the dismantling of his autobiographical lecture by events that follow later in the novel. The subject of Kepesh's experiences in Prague is no more Kafka than it is Communism; these topics are simply means to an end. Prague becomes a double of Kepesh's America, representative of an attempt to imaginatively mediate lived experience of place and community: in other words, to placate questions about identity construction established during his childhood in the Hungarian Royale.

Roth depicts Kepesh as being aware of the problems of interpretation generated by the differences between his upbringing and those he learns about in Prague. Kepesh is shown exploring this theme in his narrative through blunt associations - such as the link between Kepesh's address book, the hotel roster and the names on gravestones in the cemetery where Kafka is buried. This link is complicated by a reference to a memorial plaque for victims of the Shoah, a point of divergence that illustrates the differences between Jewish diasporic experience in Eastern Europe and that in America. Unmentioned is the contiguous history of Prague's Jews who were killed during World War Two and those watching Herbie Bratasky's imitations in the secluded rural idyll of the Hungarian Royale Hotel in South Fallsburg. Unlike other of Roth's narrators (such as Nathan Zuckerman), Kepesh does not dwell on the horrors of the Shoah, nor does he seem to feel moral guilt about his survival. The connection that he comes tantalising close to making between these two radically different groups of Jews is left to the reader to fill in: the similarities between the names on the register and the names on the gravestones are described by Kepesh almost in terms of a historical quirk.

Roth had explored and problematized the issue of divergent Jewish experiences in his 1973 short story 'Looking at Kafka', in which he imagined Kafka surviving tuberculosis and emigrating from Prague to New Jersey. The story, which has been revisited in recent critical work on Roth, contains a vivid comparative reading of Kafka's experiences. Kafka represents a form of diasporic Jewish experience that Roth explicitly compares to that of the Jewish community of Newark. The tragic incompatibility between Kafka's Jewishness and that of his American hosts provides Roth with the structure of his short story.

‘Looing at Kafka’ is not, as David Gooblar suggests in his monograph *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, a means of reinforcing the differences between Newark and Prague in order to reaffirm the divide between Kafka and Roth’s biographies (67). Kafka’s failure to find a place in American culture situates him in the same kind of liminal space that Roth and his narrators frequently find themselves in; Kafka is not an outsider so much as the Jewish-American writer *par excellence*<sup>58</sup>. Whereas *The Professor of Desire* is limited in its imaginative scope by the flaws of its narrator-protagonist, Roth’s earlier piece is able to take the gambit of trans-historical connection and explore it more rigorously. This is not to say that the earlier piece trumps its counterpart: *The Professor of Desire* explores place and selfhood on a more nuanced theoretical level than its more explicitly counterfactual precursor, and in doing so enacts a more complex interweaving of identity tropes than Roth had managed thus far. Unambiguously universal ideas are precisely what Kepesh seeks, and precisely what Roth (and Kafka) deny.

In his monograph *Three Sons*, which attempts to unpack various authors’ intertextual relationships with Kafka, Daniel Medin discusses Roth’s work in considerable detail. Building on a critique of Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (summarised in Medin’s claim that “Bloom’s fixation upon rivalry and competition fails to account for subtler, even reverent, effects of influence”) (10), Medin examines the role of Kafka in a more flexible and ameliorative fashion than many other critics writing on Roth. Medin’s interpretative strategy thrives on the kind of ambivalences and uncertainties that characterise much of Roth’s own writing on the subject of literary influence. This also allows for a perspective more sympathetic to a democratic version of intertextuality, one in which the relationship between texts is more playful and reciprocal.

Despite this, of the three authors studied by Medin, Roth’s writings are described as being closest in spirit to the competitive anxieties posited by Bloom. For Medin, the geneology of Roth’s interest in Kafka is a trajectory from the explicitly Kafka-indebted (*Portnoy’s Complaint*, *The Breast*) to the “complex historical understanding” embodying a “deeper understanding of the conflict

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<sup>58</sup> The effect produced by this odd combination is similar to that of Jonathan Lethem and Carter Scholz’s short story collection *Kafka Americana*, in which a sense of Kafka’s universalism emerges from the superficially jarring combination of Kafka’s own writings and American popular culture.



faced by Kafka's generation of German-speaking Jews" (11), a trend that he argues (alongside Weinberg and, fittingly, Bloom) is most visible in the *Zuckerman Bound* novels that Roth published between 1979 and 1985. Medin describes this conflict as paternal in nature, depicting German-Jewish writers like Kafka as "hover[ing] above, apart from yet invariably tethered to, [their] family, culture, and age" (33); a reading Medin supports with examples from Kafka's writings (mostly from his written correspondence).

Medin's monograph is unusual in that it elides any substantial discussion of the dream-sequence in *The Professor of Desire* that has intrigued many of Roth's other recent critics. Although Medin is persuasive in, for example, arguing that *The Anatomy Lesson* "transposes the dilemma illustrated in Kafka's letters to a postwar American setting" (78), his suggestion to divide Roth's work into two separate 'camps' – in those having direct textual influence and those having subtle thematic influence – arguably places *The Professor of Desire* in an oddly indeterminate position between the two. Medin's approach manages to combine Jewish historiography with literary analysis in an innovative fashion, but he dismisses this novel from his schematic:

*The Professor of Desire*, a major transitional work in Roth's corpus, also contains outrageous inventions drawn from the author's extensive readings (the most prominent of which is surely "Kafka's whore"). But this later novel draws analogical parallels with Kafka's paradoxes to invoke more expansive themes of authority and desire, while the earlier texts read like "explosions", opportunistic moments of self-fashioning. (46-7)

Medin's discussion of the novel as "transitional" highlights its indefinability in order to shun discussion of it. *The Professor of Desire* enacts a transition in Roth's oeuvre towards a more nuanced use of Kafka's work, but the precise means by which it does this constructs a tantalising absence in Medin's argument. Taking Medin's notion of "hovering" and applying it to *The Professor of Desire* in a more sustained fashion than he does himself may allow for an

expansion (and, potentially, a problematisation) of Medin's ideas. As discussed earlier, many critics have been interested in the extent to which Kafka has influenced Roth: Medin's work represents the apogee of this 'school' of criticism. Fewer critics have been willing to discuss Roth's use of Kafka as a constituent element within the thematic framework of a particular novel<sup>59</sup>. Medin gestures towards this sense of thematic variance within individual novels in his dismissal of *The Professor of Desire's* relevance to his own study, focusing on the "more expansive themes of authority and desire" found in the later novels (46). The supposed opportunism of earlier texts like *The Professor of Desire* is contentious: arguably, Roth is exploring broader issues relating to place and identity by means of a more brazen, quotation-oriented approach.

Like Medin, certain of Roth's critics have skirted forms of analysis without pursuing them in detail. David Gooblar, for example, introduces a discussion of 'Looking at Kafka' as a prelude to his consideration of *The Professor of Desire*, a method which allows him to trace the co-mingling of textual reference and selfhood in Roth's career. Roth's short story opens with a discussion of Kafka's literary career and his reasoning behind writing an imaginative reworking of Kafka's biography. Gooblar's analysis makes reference to a statement of Roth's which provides the counterfactual momentum for the story as a whole, the 'what if?' moment: "Still, there is Karl Rossman, [Kafka's] American greenhorn. Having imagined Karl's escape to America and his mixed luck there, could not Kafka have found a way to execute an escape for himself?" ('Looking at Kafka' 282). Gooblar suggests that in rejecting the idea of placing Kafka in a university setting, Roth abandons the kind of "greenhorn" experience that Karl Rossman represents. However, Roth's reference to Kafka's novel *Amerika* may provide another means of approaching the relationship between the two writers. It does not merely help configure Kafka's experience as a Newark teacher in 'Looking at Kafka', but functions as an intertext that helps illuminate the construction of ambiguity in *The Professor of Desire*.

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen Wade is a rare exception to this rule.

#### 4.2.2: Reading Kafka, Reading Roth

Previous sections in this chapter have suggested various modes of constructing ethnic selfhood that acknowledge the liminal positions that a confluence of identity markers can enact. These have ranged in tone from the democratic levelling of textual reference developed by Julia Kristeva in her theory of intertextuality, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of interstitial identities that are constructed between identity markers and Daniel Medin's notion of "hovering", gathered from his reading of Kafka. *The Professor of Desire* contains elements of all of these processes, without being fully explained by any particular one. The novel enacts a form of intertextual, interstitial hovering, a combination of collision and alienation tied to specific strains of self-identity. This is enabled by the mythology of self-creation in American culture, a mythology that itself emerges as filtered through the imaginative lenses of European Jews like Kafka.

Roth makes reference to a number of Kafka's works in the course of *The Professor of Desire*, especially *The Castle* and 'Letter to His Father'. One of the more obscure references to Kafka comes during Kepesh's visit to Prague, when he decides to write a lecture discussing his erotic history 'inspired by Kafka's "Report to an Academy"' – a short story in which an ape gives a lecture describing his capture, imprisonment and gradual acquisition of human language and social skills. The choice of this short story is a strange one, and the lecture that Roth imagines has little in common stylistically with the text that inspired it. This difference is explained by Kepesh as a conscious authorial decision: an abandonment of his planned "donnish satire" in favour of a relatively straightforward account of his experiences. Regarding the resultant text, Kepesh merely notes that its style was "not uninfluenced by the ape's impeccable, professorial prose" in Kafka's original (181).

A concluding reference to "the life I formerly led as a human being" emulates the opening line of Kafka's story, but this is the only instance of direct reference to be found in the imagined lecture (185). Kepesh's text is constructed as an abandonment of the hierarchy of academic education, a replacement of highbrow playfulness with quotidian honesty. As with many of

Roth's suggested interpretations, the reader should be sceptical of the claims towards self-understanding that this strategy implies. As J.M. Coetzee questions regarding Red Peter, the vaudeville ape in Kafka's story: "In return for the prodigious overdevelopment of the intellect he has received, in return for his command of lecture-hall etiquette and academic rhetoric, what has he had to give up?" (39). One could just as easily ask the same question of Kepesh: there are, however, key differences between the approaches of the two characters to their respective environments.

Kepesh's confession is misleading in that it posits a clear narrative that will be destabilised by later events in the text. Much like the confidence implied by his dismissal of his psychoanalyst, Kepesh believes himself to be 'cured'. Red Peter is thus a curious choice for literary inspiration; a character whose emergence from captivity to conditional freedom masks his increasing isolation and the absence of any potential for self-understanding. Red Peter's 'decision' to emulate his human captors is itself expressed, paradoxically, in terms of escape: "There's an excellent German expression, *sich in die Büsche schlagen*, to steal away secretly. That's what I did, I stole away secretly. I had no other way, always presupposing that I couldn't choose freedom." (88). In framing his own narrative through that of Kafka's Red Peter, Kepesh undermines his claims for stability and happiness. Unlike Red Peter, who acknowledges the paradox of conditional freedom that his attaining of "the educational level of an average European" affords him, Kepesh views his quandaries as being resolved (88). Crucially, sex is one of the few areas in which Red Peter maintains a vivid connection to his apish existence: he is provided with a "half-trained" female ape after his performances, whom he "[has] a good time with, ape fashion" (88). Red Peter is a character for whom performance has displaced stable identity, and his inability to reconcile human sexual mores with his animal nature offers a further warning to Kepesh.

An analysis of Kafka's texts may thus enable commentary on Roth's work, reinforcing many of its key themes and subverting the illusions harboured by its narrator. There is, however, no evidence that Roth paid particular attention to *Amerika* during the writing of *The Professor of Desire* - although references to its protagonist during 'Looking at Kafka' demonstrate that he was at least familiar with the work. Comparing the two texts thus has little grounding in archival or textual precedent: rather, it serves to extend the kinds of analyses

generated by these more conventional approaches. The comparative analysis that this allows is a fetishistic interpretation of the strategies employed by Roth during the course of his novel. Moreover, in utilising these comparative strategies, new perspectives on the construction of place and identity in both texts can emerge. Kepesh may not discuss *Amerika* in his narrative, but the absence may be as telling as its presence would have been.

*Amerika* (also known by its working title, *The Man Who Disappeared*) was written without Kafka having visited the United States, and the text reflects this sense of incomplete knowledge. Kafka's combination of geographical specificity and imaginatively reconstructed textual spaces lends his novel a dreamlike familiarity that can have an uncanny effect on a contemporary reader familiar with American culture and American geography. Many of Kafka's locations are either familiar to the point of seeming like a stage set (such as the tenements of New York City) or placeless to an extent that negates geography.

This confusion between accuracy and fantasy is a key aspect of the text's success, helping to reveal many of Kafka's modes of playfulness. Oliver Simons notes that the opening of Kafka's text – the protagonist's observation of the Statue of Liberty – is “a repetition of a quintessential scene of the American novel gleaned from numerous sources” (197). However, the scene also subverts this trope by depicting the protagonist “quite forgetting to disembark” as a result of his admiration (3).

Roth's use of place reflects a similar destabilising intent, playing with notions of familiar and expected place in a comparable manner. The Hungarian Royale, for example, is constructed as a familiar setting, its guests reflecting tropes and prejudices common to a specific generation (and a specific class) of Jewish Americans. Through the character of Herbie Bratasky, Roth reveals these stereotypes to be emblematic of ambiguity rather than of a fixed set of cultural signifiers. In both Kafka and Roth's novel, location is a pliable concept, skewed in different ways in order to demonstrate the insufficiency of associations made between place and identity.

Karl Rossman, the protagonist of *Amerika*, is particularly susceptible to dogmatically logical analysis. He frequently finds himself to be the subject of schemes by other characters, his naivety at once creating his susceptibility and

protecting him from serious consequences. Karl's travels through the novel's 'American' landscape are directionless, his actions those of a man intent on reason in an environment in which it is no longer relevant. Moreover, Kafka establishes in the first sentence of the novel that Karl's entrance into America itself is the result of sexual misadventure: "a maid had seduced him and had a child by him" (3). Like *The Professor of Desire* and its opening gambit which served to highlight (and then suppress) the character of Herbie Bratasky, this seduction is the pivotal moment of ambiguity in the text. In both texts, these initial moments of identity crisis signal a location-oriented perception of sexuality. The women that the protagonists meet in the course of their adventures come to embody the perceptual weaknesses that the male characters consistently fail to acknowledge.

In an early essay on *Amerika*, Richard E. Ruland describes how Kafka's only known reference to America is a second-hand reference by Gustav Janouch, who described how he took Kafka "photographs of constructivist pictures", to which Kafka responded by saying that "they are merely dreams of a marvellous America, of a wonderland of unlimited possibilities. This is perfectly understandable, because Europe is becoming more and more a land of impossible limitations" (33). Subsequent analyses of Kafka's correspondence may cast Ruland's claim for the status of this statement into doubt, but would not dull the significance of the quotation itself. Kafka's having framed his perceptions of America prior to encountering these photographs does not imply a substantial body of knowledge, but rather a general awareness of the mythology of self-creation associated with American culture. This previous knowledge has itself been the subject of critical scrutiny: as John Zilcosky points out, there is evidence that "Kafka gained much of the empirical data for [*Amerika*] from Arthur Holitscher's *America: Today and Tomorrow*" – although Zilcosky is keen to mention that Kafka's text, unlike Holitscher's, is conducted from a street-level perspective that prevents the protagonist from forming a panoramic perception of the city (55). Zilcosky's point reaffirms the indifference towards accuracy and objectivity that Kafka utilises to portray the vertiginous confusion of his protagonist. The quotation used by Ruland is a second-hand account of a moment when Kafka encounters American culture at second hand - the layers of distance in this quotation are significant in

themselves, reflecting a general uncertainty over Kafka's interest in American culture.

Ruland's use of this quote seems particularly apt in that it appears to synchronise with the depiction of America in Kafka's novel. America is indeed representative of "unlimited possibilities", but in a more circumscribed manner than Ruland suggests in his argument that the novel "captures the spirit of the immigrant struggling with an unknown continent" (33). Ruland's lauding of Kafka's anthropological insight does a disservice to the novel's implicit suggestion that America's projected ideal of self-creation is circumscribed by a more universal sense of "impossible limitations".

Karl's naivety is not that of an archetypal Jewish immigrant – of the type seen, for example, in broadly contemporaneous works like Anzia Yeziarska's 1920 short story collection *Hungry Hearts* – but that of a Jewish man confronted with a society that defies understanding. Whilst biographical readings of Kafka (like that undertaken by Medin) may shed light on why he would opt for this theme, there are internal textual mechanisms which are telling in their own right. As Ronald Speirs and Beatrice Sandberg discuss, Kafka's text owes a great deal to literary conventions, and can even be read as "a parody of the classic Bildungsroman" (32). Much like Roth's text, this simple narrative structure is subverted by a combination of character frailties and external pressures; try as he might, Kepesh cannot contain his experiences into a neat pattern in which confusion leads to resolution.

In Kafka's text, this sense of subversion is considerably more brazen, with external pressures preventing its protagonist from asserting any sense of selfhood whatsoever. Speirs and Sandberg qualify their argument by discussing the malevolent, inverted Providence at work in the novel's many coincidences and "implausible patterns of repetition" – for these critics, the source of the malevolence in the version of America created by Kafka lies in Karl's exile from his family, the abusive, coerced sexual encounter between Karl and Johanna that motivates the novel's action (34). Indeed, it is possible to analyse Karl's journey through his experiences of adult sexuality.

Kafka uses his female characters in order to accomplish his protagonist's destabilisation, a similar strategy to that employed later by Roth in *The Professor of Desire*. In Kafka's novel, many characters are afforded an

inscrutability which is gained predominantly through sexuality. Sexual assertiveness is portrayed as a key part of American culture, deeply connected to a pursuit of material gain. Depiction of sexual coupledness in Kafka's novel encodes it as a mutually beneficial arrangement that at once seems sensually indulgent and wilfully pragmatic. Men as well as women exhibit sexual menace, but homoerotic subtexts are not granted the same public space; Karl's encounters with characters like his Uncle Jakob and the corpulent Mr Pollunder are of a different character, albeit constructed within the same rubric of sexualised aggression.

Karl himself is seldom granted sexual autonomy, his experience of sexual attraction entirely mediated through the experiences and opinions of other characters he meets. This process of distancing is a quasi-repressive gesture that stems from Karl's own abortive induction into sexual selfhood; his seduction at the hands of "a maidservant, one Johanna Brummer, a woman of some thirty-five years of age" (20). This seduction is the impetus behind Karl's travels to America, although the novel makes clear that Karl "had been sent" to New York, further establishing a pattern wherein Karl is denied the capacity for self-determination.

Sex is not a laughing matter in Kafka's New York. Upon meeting a group of men that includes his Uncle Jakob, Karl's predicament is explained in a matter that elicits grave attention rather than hilarity. Uncle Jakob's explanation of the events leading to Karl's departure is legalistic and undertaken without commentary, a single sentence that occupies the bulk of a substantial paragraph. Karl's induction to America proper is undertaken by an exposition of his (admittedly limited) sexual history; the narration of his departure becomes a form of immigration interview, a means of establishing his admittance into the country in a manner that affirms his fundamental difference from its inhabitants.

Jakob's explanation of the seduction of Karl elides a letter from Johanna herself, correspondence which "would certainly make a hit, written as it is with a certain low, but always well-intentioned, cunning and with a good deal of affection for the father of the child" (21). Johanna's letter further demonstrates the complete social rejection of Karl's agency by mediating his experiences through a different subjective lens; Johanna informs Jakob who informs the



assembled notables, who grant Karl a position that Jakob has determined for him. Kafka's America thus emerges as a realm in which knowledge of self and others is conditioned through a series of social structures and perspectives, a hierarchy which categorises those subject to it – a perspective which is affirmed in the final fragments of the novel, in which the grand theatre of Oklahoma categorises applicants for jobs under broad employment types irrespective of the individual skillsets of those applying.

Johanna's narrative is an emblematic but obscure artefact whose combination of "cunning" and "affection" blurs the boundaries of both terms. This letter, though only presented filtered through the perspectives of other characters, sets the precedent for the kind of couplings that will take place later in the novel. Similarly, David Kepesh's first experiences with women who combine cunning and affection in ambiguous ways inspires the couplings that provide *The Professor of Desire* with its structure. When Kepesh encounters two Swedish exchange students whilst undertaking postgraduate study in London, he attempts to use them in order to bifurcate female sexual desire under broad categories of cunning (Birgitta) and affection (Elisabeth). Kepesh's willingness to categorise aspects of desire in order to study them is a reference to his academic methodologies, a means of extending his 'reading' to include his sexual partners.

The reader is granted little perspective on the opinions and perspectives of Birgitta and Elisabeth, who are thus allowed to become encoded as pivotal tropes; Elisabeth's attempted suicide and Birgitta's carefree indulgence being the pivotal moments in this process of characterisation. Unlike Kafka's text, in which a pivotal letter is referenced but not presented to the reader, a letter from Elisabeth to Kepesh is displayed in the course of the novel; a fragment from a longer letter in which Elisabeth claims that "I was in love with someone and what I did had nothing to do with love. It was like I no more was human being." (33). Kepesh's subsequent attempt at a reply shows him contending with matters of conscience, during which deliberations he contemplates shifting some of the blame for Elisabeth's suicide attempt to Birgitta. Kepesh's musings over guilt display a desire to maintain his perceptions of his lovers in a way that diminishes his claims for having some sort of empathetic epiphany.

In the same manner that Johanna's unexposed letter provides a means of configuring Karl's narrative in an 'American' culture, Elisabeth's partially-exposed letter provides a means of substantiating Kepesh's essentialist view of European sexual otherness (particularly "the mythology of the Swedish girl and her sexual freedom") (29). Otherness is incorporated as a means to place it within an Americanised framework in a manner that draws attention to the narratives it hides rather than the flawed narrative that is put in its place. Both Johanna and Elisabeth's narrative voices are dismissed for superficially aesthetic reasons – Johanna's for her flamboyance and Elisabeth's for her "primary-school sentences" (33) – that serve to reinforce a dominant sexuality that in turn prevents the protagonists of both novels from forming a coherent view of sexual selfhood. That neither Karl nor Kepesh are able to determine their own perspective following these events ("Actually, Karl had no feelings for the girl.") is a result of this process of mystification (21).

Karl's sense of bewilderment is substantially developed in Kafka's depiction of Klara, an affluent woman prone to childlike flirtatiousness. Karl is not depicted as being attracted to Klara, but her willingness to destabilise boundaries between public and private places him in a quasi-gothic position of sexualised terror. Klara's enigmatic presence is initially established through her description by Mr. Pollunder, whose "stories" (37) Karl half-hears through a sleep-muddled daze. Her introduction itself is at once upfront and unfathomable; she claims that she "didn't want to introduce [herself] in the darkness", yet meets the visiting party at the gate of her house, showing her profile only in "a little differentiating light from the house" (39). The confusion is revealing. Klara, established through the narratives of others (much like Karl himself) subverts the claims of others by presenting herself in as ambiguous a manner as possible.

Kafka relates this sense of projected ambiguity to sexuality in depicting play-fighting between Karl and Klara later in the chapter. Karl is shown reacting in self-defence to a violence perceived to be purely malicious. Kafka depicts much of this play-violence as a form of sibling roughhousing, afforded sexual undertones by a framework of seduction. Karl's projected naivety reaches the border of comic innuendo in places, such as the observation that "it was so easy to hold on to [Klara] in her tight dress" and Karl's wondering "why is she sighing like that... it can't be hurting her, I'm not pressing at all" (46). The

would-be seduction descends into open violence, placing the sexual dynamic within a broader power structure. As an aristocrat and a potent symbol of American sexual selfhood, Klara is a deeply liminal character, both innocent and corrupt.

Klara is engaged to Mack<sup>60</sup>, possessor of a virile, forceful masculinity and riding partner of Karl. When Karl attempts to bid Klara goodnight later in the chapter, he is asked to play music - and is shocked to find himself lauded from an adjoining room by her fiancée. Mack is described in similar terms of light and darkness to his partner; the novel describes how “the bedlinen and Mack’s shirt were so white that light reflected off them in a dazzle”, and that “behind Mack the bed and everything else was lost in complete darkness” (61). The control of light is representative of the combination of revelation and hidden narrative that the couple thrive on. The exaggerated politeness with which Mack lauds Karl’s playing enacts an odd synthesis between superficial mannerisms and the intimate realm of the bedroom. It is little surprise that Karl is unable to describe the situation in a similarly elevated tone, struggling to find a tone of politeness which pays heed to the fact that “Mack and Klara were obviously already sleeping together” (61).

Klara is, to a certain extent, part of the general pattern of sexualised ambiguity that runs through the opening chapters of Kafka’s work. She, along with Mack, has at once mastered the coded mannerisms appropriate to her class (hence her demure responses to the lascivious Mr. Green) and expresses an unburdened sense of sexual power that is both naïve and cunning. Klara emerges as a more vivid character than Johanna, but is subject to a similar sense of competing desires which make her unfathomable to the novel’s male protagonist. In Roth’s work this sense of unfathomability is denied, and the ability of women to switch social codes and elude stable representation is continually called into question by David Kepesh. Helen is a character at once dependent on men for the course of her own biography and constrained by this obligation. Her attempts at ‘freeing’ herself from David reflects this hopeless dependence; she waits in airport lounges for affluent men to offer to buy her a drink, and finally flees to Hong Kong in an attempt to resurrect a long-extinguished relationship with a melodramatic and violent lover.

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<sup>60</sup> Kafka uses the names ‘Mak’ and ‘Mack’ interchangeably.

Kepesh claims that his attraction to Helen is rooted in “the capacity for pain-filled renunciation joined to the gift for sensual abandon” (64), a contrast which recalls the twinned melodramatic realms represented earlier by Elisabeth and Birgitta. Helen’s characterisation also recalls the abusive relationship of Peter and Maureen Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man* (as well as Roth’s own relationship with Margaret Martinson), but stands on its own terms as a means of extending Kepesh’s tendency to categorise and define women. Helen’s experiences amongst the sexually ambiguous, pseudo-Imperial expat aristocrats in South-East Asia expose Kepesh’s desire to exoticise female otherness as a means of studying and categorising it, as well as a faint homophobia underlying his superficially benign humanism. This impression is supported by Kepesh himself earlier in his narrative, when he ruminates on his shock at discovering that a college friend is homosexual (19).

Helen serves as a reminder that projected narrative is not the sum total of human experience, her dependence and melodrama evocative of a fundamental ambiguity that resists categorisation and struggles under the strictures of masculine control. Helen’s superficial glamour is akin to Klara’s mastery of class mannerisms; a self-projected narrative that becomes filtered through the narratives of others, a means of preserving ambiguity as a limited but crucial realm of textual control. Klara’s infantile play-fighting is more successful as a means of self-articulation than Helen’s hysterics as it better acknowledges the destabilising power that male narrative voices are keen to categorise and control. Both Kafka and Roth place this destabilising power at the core of their respective narratives.

The last sexual coupling described in detail by Kafka is between a conniving itinerant worker named Delamarche and an obese opera singer named Brunelda. Delamarche is introduced shortly after Karl flees Klara’s bedroom, a character whose petty criminality takes advantage of (but only infrequently diminishes) Karl’s gullibility. Delamarche, accompanied by his friend and sidekick Robinson, is an immigrant himself, and is depicted as the orchestrator of the minor scams Karl falls victim to. In describing how Karl is pressured into paying for a communal meal, Kafka describes how “Delamarche, and Robinson too, had occasionally let drop that the last of their money had gone on the previous night’s lodgings” (76). Robinson’s own capacity for manipulation is an addendum to that of Delamarche (Kafka mentions his

manipulations as a subsidiary to the more strident machinations of Delamarche).

By the end of the main text of the novel, Delamarche has transferred his manipulations to the domain of sex. The subject of his duplicity is his newfound lover, Brunelda. Delamarche meets Brunelda whilst soliciting alms, and promptly assumes the trappings of her aristocratic lifestyle – bankrupting her in the process. Despite this, the power dynamic between the two characters is not as straightforward as Delamarche’s manipulative skill would otherwise make it seem – nor is the relationship purely transgressive. As with Uncle Jakob’s description of Karl’s flight from Europe and the social mannerisms of Klara and Mack, a veneer of propriety ends up enunciating sexual intrigue.

Brunelda inspires a similar kind of wanton subservience to that of her paramour: even Karl is subject to what Zilcosky refers to as “extreme scopophilic desire” (62). Her ex-husband has lavish gifts continually spurned, yet he nonetheless “waits for [Robinson] down on the corner every day” in order to stay updated on her life (158). Even this suggestion of independence on Robinson’s part is constrained by Delamarche, who insists on taking the money that Brunelda’s ex-husband pays Robinson for information. In this manner two processes of hierarchy merge, exerting an irresistible pull on those subject to them: money and sex. Kafka’s vision of America is dominated by these topics, and the combination of Delamarche and Brunelda become powerfully symbolic of the excesses to which these emphases can lead.

Brunelda’s ability to render men subservient to her will functions in a different form in the case of Karl, who is promptly enrolled as a household servant, then exiled to the balcony of Brunelda’s apartment. Discussing this scene, Henry Sussman notes that:

Apart from the ur-scene of Karl’s adult sexual life in the first chapter, the women attracted to Karl seem to become increasingly deformed in the course of the novel until he arrives at Brunelda, who repeats the original degradation. Karl’s hopes for freedom become increasingly remote... his prospects for an autonomous life are less, say, than when he first sets out from Pollunder’s house. (73)

Sussman elaborates this to develop his claims for the novel's theatrical underpinnings: the novel depends upon "imprisonment within a relentlessly self-repeating scene" (74). This sense of both sequence ("increasingly deformed") and repetition ("self-repeating") is part of the subversive, quasi-Bildungsroman structure of Kafka's text, in which Karl's movement is both self-generated and enforced. Sussman's idea that Brunelda's exile of Karl repeats that of his original transatlantic move links Johanna to Brunelda in an intriguing way; in both cases, the women suffer material consequences from sexual impulse, but mediate their minor exiles by transferring them (intentionally or otherwise) onto Karl. This may support Sussman's tentative suggestion earlier in his monograph that "Karl may have died on the balcony" – Brunelda concluding a cycle that began with Karl's sexual encounter with Johanna (51).

Imprisonment and sexuality are linked elsewhere in this section of the book: Delamarche's willingness to act as a combination of live-in lover and domestic servant blurs the boundaries between the two domains. In his bathing Brunelda, for example, it is unclear whether Delamarche's manipulations are subsidiary or dominant. Whilst being washed by Delamarche, Brunelda invites Robinson to come in and assist, a ruse which suggests the permeability of the domestic arrangement as a means of reinforcing its boundaries. Robinson describes how when he responded to Brunelda's beckoning, both she and Delamarche "grabbed hold of me and held me down in the bath" (185). Sexual propriety is created anew from transgressive beginnings and enforced immediately.

Few characters in Roth's text come close to the character synthesis of Brunelda and Delamarche, the brazenness of whose manipulations serve as a stark contrast to the seeming absence of a coherent strategy by Klara and Mack. Kafka's depiction of 'successful' couples stands in contrast to the ideals of coupledness valued by Kepesh, whose superficial disdain for academic 'power couples' like Arthur and Debbie Schonbrunn masks an abiding faith in conventional relationship dynamics. Money and sex are united under the rubric of aspiration in both Kafka's and Roth's texts, but only in Kafka's text does a sense of playfulness emerge which distorts and mocks simplistic relationship-categories. Roth's form of attack is less attuned to exaggerated farce – Kepesh's 'downfall' has more of the character of self-inflicted tragedy.

Roth exposes the narratives hidden by this categorical approach to sexuality by consistently jolting his protagonist out of a self-induced interpretative torpor that never fully succeeds in granting him genuine self-knowledge. In a similar manner, Karl Rossman is rarely afforded the power of self-determination within the various sexualised situations that he finds himself in. In both texts, an emphasis on the sexual mechanics of self-creation results only in the exposure of more complications. America represents a misinterpreted promise, a “wonderland of unlimited possibilities” which ends up being so vast in its range of permutations that it defies understanding completely.

*Amerika*’s indifference to an ethnic component in identity creation is highlighted by the fact that immigrants are defined by their country of origin. Kafka may be playing with national stereotypes in his depiction of a cynical and sex-obsessed Frenchman (Delamarche) and an alcoholic Irishman (Robinson), but in defining the characters in this manner he highlights a simultaneous continuity and contrast between European culture and the American culture that attempts to condition, hyphenate and supplant it. The privileging of nationality over ethnicity in *Amerika* functions as a marked contrast to *The Professor of Desire*, in which Jewishness is seen as both a complement and a contrast to American culture. Neither novel, however, is keen to define Jewish identity as a textual marker. Kafka’s seeming indifference to the topic masks a hidden narrative in a similar manner to how Kepesh’s inability to contain Jewish identity in pre-established cultural boundaries creates Roth’s hidden narrative of ambiguity.

This territory has been ably explored by biographically-minded critics such as Daniel Medin, whose work represents a countercontext to the kind of inquiry undertaken here. Nationality and ethnicity compete as arbiters of identity within set geographical spaces. For Kafka, this would result in an increasing reluctance to set his novels and short stories in identifiable places. Roth, in contrast, would go in the other direction entirely - in later novels like *The Counterlife*, place and identity are so tightly enmeshed within one another that notions of location and self are placed beyond the level of understanding afforded to any one character.

#### 4.2.3: Beyond Kafka, Beyond Roth

A comparative analysis of Kafka's *Amerika* and Roth's *The Professor of Desire* shows that the kind of mythic imagination utilised by the two writers bears distinct thematic similarities, namely the depiction of a form of sexual selfhood that pays heed to modes of ambiguity created by historically specific modes of Jewish experience. In both texts, Jewish identity functions as a background narrative, although in the case of Kafka's novel this may be more implicit; a sense of continual exile and uncertainty reflecting the tenuous position of Jews in Kafka's Europe. The metaphorical value of this kind of analysis is supported by monographs such as Noah Isenberg's *Between Redemption and Doom*, which pays close attention to the status of Kafka's perceived Jewish identity during the writing and subsequent abandonment of *Amerika*. Whilst this remains fruitful ground for study – a hidden narrative – the absence of a direct discussion of Jewish identity in the novel itself is a significant omission in its own right<sup>61</sup>. This does not negate the kinds of biographical analysis undertaken by critics like Isenberg and Medin, but suggests that a textually-focused strategy can serve as a counterpart that yields more unexpected results.

If any one point can be taken from the various interpretative strategies discussed in this chapter, it is that discourse masks discourse. The uncertainties about identity described by Medin offer a means of approaching the kind of narratives that can be masked by literary style. As with Kafka, uncovering many of Roth's hidden narratives necessitates a reappraisal of tropes already explored in texts themselves. Roth's own construction of Jewishness may reveal more about his conception of American identity than a more general view of Jewish identity, but this is not the only theme in Roth's text undervalued by its oblivious narrator. In Roth's novel, the discourses masked by Kepesh are often those of the very women which provide the novel with its subject matter. The fault is Kepesh's, not Roth's – part of a general process of suppressed narrative that actively invites criticism of the narrator. To accuse critics of whitewashing, of ignoring "[Roth's] treatment of women in

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<sup>61</sup> This may explain why Karl's talismanic possession, the most potent symbol of his European prehistory, is a decidedly unkosher Verona salami (7).



the Kepesh books when by then he was really old enough to know better” (sic), as one reviewer of Claudia Roth Pierpont’s biography on the book community website Goodreads does, neglects the fact that the real target of Roth’s disdain is Kepesh himself (Malloy).

David Kepesh masks the discourses of his lovers by categorising and analysing them in the manner of literary-minded academics. Women capable of self-articulation, such as Debbie Schonnbrunn, have their interpretations framed by male interpreters. Following a revelation that his love life was the subject of Debbie’s dinner table gossip, a light-hearted apology letter from her is dismissed by Kepesh for “the spirit in which [it] was written” (128). Kepesh’s prissy pride and pedantic pique is critiqued by her husband Arthur Schonnbrunn, who offers his own interpretation: that Debbie “made an effort, stopping short of abject prostration before you, to apologise for what she considered a just complaint.” (129). Kepesh is astute enough to argue that Arthur’s asking for “a little documentation” (131) is a peevish reference to the supervisor-student relationship they formerly had, but fails to acknowledge that his own treatment of Debbie’s letter is based upon the training in close-reading that he underwent as Arthur’s protégée.

Roth’s text refrains from an abrupt comparison of Kafka’s life with that of his alliterative disciple Kepesh, but in scenes such as the dream sequence and characters such as Herbie Bratasky (and Kepesh’s lovers), a sense of continuity through contrast is developed. Kafka may develop similar themes by omitting to directly discuss Jewish themes in his fiction, but with Roth everything is present (albeit subsumed) in the fiction itself. This distinguishes the Kepesh novels from those of Roth’s works which explicitly place Jewish identity at their core. This also includes Roth’s non-fiction, which is often more forthcoming on matters of Jewish identity than his fiction.

For all his undoubted skill as an essayist, Roth’s non-fiction is best seen as an extension or explication of the kinds of playfulness that is more fully (and more engagingly) explored in his novels; in his non-fiction his tone is less defensive and he is more willing to actively subvert. Nonetheless, there are telling continuities between the models of ambiguity suggested in *The Professor of Desire* and those proffered by Roth himself in a 1974 essay about Jewish-American fiction, in which Roth concludes that

The task for the Jewish novelist has not been to go forth and forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race, but to find inspiration in a conscience that has been created and undone a hundred times over in this century alone. Similarly, out of this myriad of prototypes, the solitary being to whom history or circumstance has assigned the appellation “Jew” has had, as it were, to imagine what *he* is and is not, must and must not do. (280)

In this way, Roth goes a step beyond the cynicism and pessimism of Kafka, for whom identity remains cyclical and immutable. For Roth, the immutability of Jewishness is also a liminal space full of imaginative potential; in *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh’s inability to interpret ethnicity in comprehensive terms masks Roth’s willingness to ask his readers to undertake critical comparison themselves by leaving potent suggestions and absences. To be Jewish, suggests Roth, is to be afforded the opportunity for self-creation in a manner that the self-reconstructing mythologies of America can only add another layer of complication to: hence, perhaps, Kepesh’s skittishness around the topic of American Judaism.

Roth is not the only Jew to insist on the inherent pliability of Jewishness – Michael Chabon, for example, has forged a novelistic career by placing Jewish characters in unexpected and fantastic environments<sup>62</sup> – but the combination of factors present in novels like *The Professor of Desire* necessitate a peculiar critical playfulness. American Jews may face distinct pressures, but such pressure are manifested democratically by Roth, who demands that it be negotiated on its own terms by every individual Jew. In novels like *The Professor of Desire*, this negotiation is undertaken in full view of the reader. The end product is a deeply unsettled and aesthetically challenging work of art.

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<sup>62</sup> In an afterword to his fantasy novel *Gentlemen of the Road*, Chabon reveals that he had originally planned to title the novel *Jews With Swords*, to make the point that fiction writers should challenge and subvert commonly held stereotypes and familiar tropes about Jewish characters (197).



## Chapter 5: Controlling Sex: *The Dying Animal*

It's only those who glimpse the awful, endless corridor of death, too gross to contemplate, that need to lose themselves in love or art.

- Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (37)

'Sex is a wonderful thing' I said. 'When you don't want to answer questions'

- Raymond Chandler, *The Little Sister* (232)

## Précis

Although controversial upon publication in 2001, *The Dying Animal* has already been afforded a more substantial critical legacy than either of the preceding novels narrated by David Kepesh. It seems significant that critical interest in the Kepesh novels proceeds from a position of general disinterest (*The Breast*) to selective interest (*The Professor of Desire*) before achieving this level of acclaim. This difference in critical attention was only partially mitigated by considerations of these novels in reviews and critical work on the *The Dying Animal*, which functions as a partial synthesis of the other texts - mitigated by vast differences in their context and narrative position. Much like the other Kepesh novels, *The Dying Animal* develops a network of debates and themes whose paradoxes Roth reveals in.

As a conclusion to the Kepesh trilogy, *The Dying Animal* ends on a characteristically downbeat note by introducing a more explicitly cynical presentation of its narrator. *The Dying Animal* is a novel about the inevitable ambiguities of sex, and the difficulty of maintaining any kind of purity in the sexual realm - be it censorious or decadent. Kepesh is a baffled idealist, persisting in maintaining an ideology of sex despite its increasingly being seen as ridiculous, tawdry or manipulative by the society he inhabits. By tracing Kepesh's doomed rebellion and exposing how his narrative undermines itself, a better sense of the novel's subversive qualities emerges. Depictions of gender are inseparable from their modes of representation in Roth's text, offering unexpected but useful connections to theoretical domains that it superficially shows disdain towards. An analysis of *The Dying Animal* thus depends upon the willingness of the critic to attempt what could be called 'counter-readings' - means of analysis that offer interpretations which compete with those of the novel's narrator.

## 5.1 – Counter-Reading Kepesh

With the publication of *The Dying Animal* in 2001, Philip Roth re-initiated a series of critical controversies. The choice to return to a protagonist that had been infrequently discussed since 1977 was greeted by bemusement by some reviewers of the novel, who argued that the narrator's desperate (and doomed) desire for sexual fulfilment was unconvincing. In *The New York Times*, for example, A.O. Scott describes Kepesh as being a "melancholy hedonist with a knack for pre-emptive self-forgiveness" - contrasting him negatively with Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's most prominent narrator, whom he describes as "a hero of only half-ironically Promethean stature" ('Alter Alter Ego'). Scott's suspicion of Kepesh's flaws as a narrator are telling, insofar as he notes that Kepesh fails to refute many of the criticisms levelled at him in the course of the text. Writing as Kepesh, Roth invited criticism of his narrator: reviewers like Scott were only too keen to take him up on the offer.

Opening an essay on *The Dying Animal* with an overview of the novel's immediate reception, Ellen Gerstle notes that "the primary offence of the book basically seems to be about Roth's treatment of sex" (195). Gerstle cites several negative reviews of the novel that continue this theme, including a review in *The New York Times* that derided Roth's sexual obsessions for their theatricality and a review in *The New Republic* that chided Roth for a cartoonish depiction of women (194). Gerstle offers a representative sample of one side of what had become a bifurcated debate; Claudia Roth Pierpont similarly noted that critics "were infuriated with Kepesh, with his attitude toward women, and especially with his emphasis on Consuela's breasts" (264). Critical disdain was far from unanimous; praise for the novel was as, if not more visible in initial reviews. Gerald Shapiro, writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, went as far as to refer to the novel as being "sorrowful, sexy [and] elegant" ('Philip Roth disavows the sexual revolution?'). Many reviewers found Kepesh to be an unabashed misogynist, whereas some, like Shapiro, seemed to find the elegiac tone of the novel's depiction of sexuality more significant.

It is this simultaneous sense of bullish disputation and unacknowledged vulnerability that most directly links *The Dying Animal* to Roth's previous two

Kepesh novels. Although written in a similar style to that of *The Professor of Desire*, the themes and symbolism in the text most explicitly hark back to *The Breast*. This explains the importance of breasts as a dominant symbol in the text (as noted by Roth Pierpont). *The Dying Animal* makes 35 total references to breasts ('breast', 'breasts' and 'tits') in the novel, substantially more than the 12 that recur in *The Professor of Desire* and closer in spirit to the mammary-obsession in *The Breast* (80 references). Likewise, the symbolism of Consuela's breast cancer in *The Dying Animal* is overdetermined in a manner that harks back to the use of the breast as a symbol and a trope in *The Breast*. Like the earlier novel, *The Dying Animal* is engaged in a debate both historically grounded and broadly contemporary. The key subject matter of the novel is not psychoanalysis, however, but feminism.

Like its predecessors, *The Dying Animal* is a fetishistic novel, probing debates in a manner that exposes the intersection of themes and ideas, revealing the increase in complexities that emerge through the desire for totalising explanations. It is a novel invested in the same kind of self-subverting narrative grandstanding that characterises *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*, although its thematic and theoretical intersections necessitate different critical perspectives. Most notably, Roth depicts Kepesh attacking the rise of a feminist critical discourse that he argues attempts to "control the male impulse and report it" (*The Dying Animal* 57). Through arguments like these, *The Dying Animal* enacts the most significant discussion of gender and misogyny in Roth's fiction. Two interlinked textual themes relating to social change can be used to create an initial framework for Kepesh's combative approach to gender relations: attitudes towards sex in American culture and the role of the university. Kepesh turns to American history to justify his attitudes towards sexuality, in turn gesturing towards the highly internalised academic environment in which he has undoubtedly thrived.

"But then, what is more American than sex?" asks Mark Shechner in response to criticism of Roth's return to what Shechner facetiously dubs "the merely personal" in *The Dying Animal* (203). Shechner answers his rhetorical question by describing *The Dying Animal* as both a rebuttal to the overarching historical consciousness of the second Zuckerman trilogy and a continuation of its interest in social change in American culture. Following Shechner's example, it is possible to construct a framework of rhetorical bias that inflects

much of Kepesh's narration. Kepesh styles himself as a theorist of sexuality whose attitudes towards sexuality have been conditioned as much by American history as they have by literature, art or music. In this historically-conditioned and American-oriented model of sexual desire, sex and prurience stand on opposite ends of a cultural divide. Sanford Pinsker argues that this theme is part of "Roth's ongoing sense that puritanical America pits unbridled sexual freedom against forces of restraint" ('Roth Feels Bad About Bine Bad: So What Else is New?'). Whilst the prevalence of this theme in Roth's later work is undeniable, it is framed in a distinctively historicised manner in the course of *The Dying Animal*.

The model of sexual history constructed by Kepesh is more speculative than analytical, placing emphasis on the 1960's 'sexual revolution' as a flashpoint in an ongoing conflict within American culture. Kepesh, whose academic position in New York City has placed him in continuous contact with youth culture throughout the second half of the twentieth century, acknowledges generational trends through changes in modes of sexual gratification. He thus traces a lineage that extends from the miscegenation of Puritan-era Merry Mount to an acknowledgement that "this is a generation of astonishing fellators. There's been nothing like them ever before among their class of young women" (9).

Kepesh's language masks uncertainty through eloquence. Roth's use of "class" when discussing contemporary women is multivalent, encompassing both the origin of Kepesh's purported conquests (the classroom), as well as the affluent background that many of his students come from (their social class). In informal speech, the term also implies a sense of discernment that reaffirms the narrator's preferences as a cultural standard ('classy'). Roth thus reminds the reader that Kepesh's sexual prowess is enabled by a confluence of external factors, all of which involve preconceptions relating to power dynamics. At the same moment Kepesh makes generalisations about generational trends, the reader is reminded of the conditions of power under which Kepesh has achieved his ability to do so.

Kepesh's claim that he has attempted to "follow the logic of this revolution to its conclusion" (63) again employs ambiguous language, gesturing towards the two revolutions ('American' and 'sexual') that Kepesh is



attempting to portray as aspects of the same sense of historical process. Kepesh thus elucidates the history of American sexuality, a digression initiated by the phrase “sidelight” and segmented into its own section (58). Kepesh discusses Thomas Morton, a “charismatic privileged character” (59) whose leadership of an embattled community of open licentiousness is depicted as a metaphor for the experiences of the narrator himself. The persecution of Morton by the Puritan leadership (“Age-old American story: save the young from sex”) (60) places him on a separate but interwoven course of American history, bypassing the majority of American history and literature<sup>63</sup>. From Morton, uninhibited American sex reappears in the figure of Henry Miller, is taken up anew by Janie Wyatt, and (the narrative implies) becomes manifest anew in the figure of David Allen Kepesh.

Kepesh’s grandiose historical vision of American sex seems deliberately weak. His timeline does not function in the manner of an academic thesis, but rather as a speculative hypothesis that lacks analytical depth. The faux-conversational style of the novel may be partly to blame for the malformed nature of Kepesh’s arguments, but it cannot excuse their flaws entirely. However, viewing these arguments from the academic framework suggested by Kepesh’s own background may be disingenuous; the history Kepesh posits does not stand up to critical analysis, but nor should it be viewed from the proto-academic context that it gestures towards. Roth’s microcosmic history of American sex is largely unconvincing when taken out of its narrative context, but it does serve as a useful index to the ironizing and overwrought self-construction of Kepesh himself.

This emphasis on American sexual identity adds nuance to the intercultural meanderings of *The Professor of Desire*, and bears distinct similarities to *The Breast*’s implicit engagement with then-contemporary trends in psychoanalysis; these texts use these themes to expose the flaws of a narrator who attempts to understand sex. *The Dying Animal* contains moments of sexual polemic that chide both historical and contemporary sexual attitudes – Kepesh describes childbearing as “the standard unthinking” (109) and later chides “the trajectory of [his] upbringing” (65) that enabled his disastrous first

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<sup>63</sup> Including the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose short story ‘The Maypole of Merry Mount’ Kepesh bases much of his historical understanding on.

marriage. These claims are nonetheless tempered by the self-consciously contrarian attitudes of the novel's narrator, and the reader is invited to view them sceptically.

What distinguishes the Kepesh trilogy within this overarching framework of a desire for sexual understanding is the deployment of biographical narrative. In analysing his own sexual history in *The Dying Animal*, Kepesh is keen to remind the reader that the sense of collective unburdening initiated by the sexual revolution was part of his own history. He thus implicates himself in a countercultural movement, yet views himself as observing the fracas from a distance: half-participant and half-voyeur. This perspective aligns with many of Kepesh's other statements on the paradoxical nature of viewership as it relates to sexual subjectivity, such as his claim that the process of ageing encourages one to be "jauntily independent" from the decay of one's own body (35).

Roth depicts Kepesh as being able to gain this perspective by virtue of his academic background, explicitly developing the suspicion of the normative potential of university environments that Roth had first developed as an implicit theme in *The Breast*. Setting is an essential aspect of Roth's text, but only because it is so strikingly limited – the majority of the text's action takes place in various rooms in Kepesh's apartment. Other locations in the text are described briefly, giving the impression of their being almost theatrical backdrops, incidental to the human melodrama that is Roth's primary subject matter. One of these locations is the campus of the New York university that Kepesh works in for 15 weeks a year. It is an important but seldom-mentioned point that all three of Roth's Kepesh novels take academic ideologies as their core area of debate without using a university campus as anything other than a peripheral setting. Following this trend, *The Dying Animal* only utilises a classroom setting in the context of descriptions of Kepesh's seduction routine, developing his characterisation of Consuela. Academia, rather than university life itself, is Roth's satiric target.

Jesse Kavadlo includes *The Dying Animal* as one of several novels that he believes "have examined what might be called *post-post-sexual* revolution relationships between male professors and female students" ('Blue Angels Meet Dying Animals' 11). Kavadlo offers a useful insight into the use of the university setting by analysing a letter written from Kenny Kepesh (David's son)

about the application of “ordinary standards of decency” that David is gleefully flouting by having sex with some of his students (*The Dying Animal* 89). As Kavadlo argues, “Kepesh embodies the need for sexuality codes, even as Castillo[...] embod[ies] his desire to complete the taboo by breaking it” (18). As Kavadlo describes Roth’s text, Kepesh leaves “gaps” which other characters are allowed to fill, affording the novel an awareness of the morally ambiguous position that Kepesh occupies, for all his fervent protestations of propriety and consent (18).

Kavadlo’s essay offers an example of how Roth maintains a textual ambiguity that subverts the bombastic declarations of his narrators. This approach can be used to generate a number of counter-readings of Roth’s novels, methods of subversion internal to the text itself. This will be used first to discuss the continuity between Kepesh’s modes of narrative address and the ethics of seduction, and then to conclude by considering alternative voices within the text through close reading of Roth’s subsidiary characters. As Kavadlo’s essay makes clear, however, Roth’s text is primarily motivated by Kepesh’s belief that “the contemporary academy is overtly dominated by sexual theory, sexual politics, sexual poetics, and sexualised texts, yet recoils from physical, embodied sexuality.” (12). Whether (as Kavadlo argues) this is a common trope is less relevant to this thesis than the specific use of this idea in the context of the Kepesh trilogy. The symbiotic relationship between the bodily reality of sex and the contemplation of sex as an academic pursuit reaffirms the links between Kepesh’s perspectives on sex and those generated through psychoanalytic inquiry.

This represents a shift from other depictions of academic pieties in Roth’s writings, which employ a similar critique of high-handed moralising with a more direct involvement with the bureaucratic conceits that Roth depicts as being pivotal to contemporary university environments. To cite two well-known examples: in 1994’s *Sabbath’s Theater*, Athena College exiles Mickey Sabbath for his sexual dalliances with a student, whereas in 2000’s *The Human Stain*, an elderly professor is exiled from his workplace in part due to a vendetta held as the result of a colleague’s misplaced sense of sexual propriety.

Any attempt to place Roth as a critic of university life is hampered by the sheer variety of settings within which Roth and his characters function -

although Eric Solomon made a convincing attempt in 1989, in an essay which placed an emphasis on *The Professor of Desire*. The two examples above indict the university as a source of normative behavioural expectations. This makes Solomon's claim that "Philip Roth now appears to be free of the academy, free to live the examined life in that world of reality where the writer fantasizes for himself, not for his students in a university" (87) seem somewhat dated, and the trajectory of his essay would need to be re-evaluated in light of Roth's later novels.

The topic is worthy of a more detailed re-examination, especially given Roth's 2008 novel *Indignation*, a novel which re-imagines Roth's undergraduate experiences at Bucknell to enact a more general musing on the subject of choice and consequence. The "panty raid" that gives the novel its most vivid and unexpectedly elegant scene is more multivalent than it may seem. It functions both as a cross between a crassly Freudian return of the repressed and a pithy gesture towards both the restrictive college culture of the era - and the changes that would soon be wrought upon them. In this manner, *Indignation* has more in common with the fretful obsession with convention displayed by characters in Roth's earlier fiction than it does with the bureaucratic extravagances of Athena College, the setting for the academic downfalls in *Sabbath's Theater* and *The Human Stain*.

Whilst Sabbath's downfall is part of a broader tragic arc of self-sabotage, Coleman Silk is subject to remorseless persecution by Delphine Roux, a character that personifies many of the supposed ills that Kepesh outlines in *The Dying Animal*. A perusal of her C.V. extends a list of her qualifications into an elongated and visceral diatribe, in which she is shown perplexed at the behaviour of American undergraduates: "completely shocked at their having fun" (*The Human Stain* 188). Roux demonstrates Kavadlo's trope that American universities in this era had expanded the boundaries of sexual discourse whilst becoming an arbiter of acceptable sexual behaviour. As Elaine Showalter argues, implicitly concurring with Kavadlo's conception of the anti-sex academic trope, Roux is a "politically correct ideologue" (144) whose feminist beliefs result in Silk's downfall becoming symbolically akin to "the matter of classical tragedy" (129).

As Showalter's summary shows, Roux's pursuit of a reappraisal of power dynamics is easy enough to critique; her credentials as an academic feminist are readily misunderstood as being representative of Roth's own cynicism about the kinds of feminist activism that have taken root in academic environments. However, the America of *The Human Stain* is also a realm of near-universal alienation mitigated only by the brief and doomed connections generated by sex: the novel features some of the tenderest writing on sex in Roth's fiction.

Placing Kepesh's quandaries both inside and outside of a university framework allows Roth to explore similar topics to those in *The Human Stain* without the risk of reiterating Zuckerman's social polemic – and, conversely, without the novel's occasional erotic tenderness<sup>64</sup>. *The Dying Animal* may gesture towards a similar sense of sadness at the lost potential of the 'sexual revolution', but does so through a narrative lens that more explicitly denies the reader a cheap sense of nostalgia – Roth does not expect (or even desire) his readers to take Kepesh's side. David Kepesh is most convincing as a character in this novel at exactly the same moments that he is most unconvincing as a rhetorician; he exposes the flaws in anti-feminist diatribes.

Kepesh is pathetic in both the literary and colloquial sense of the word – reduced by his doomed attraction to an ambiguous position of powerlessness. The abrupt ending to his narrative suggests the fragility of his composure. Beneath a veneer of high-minded eloquence is animalistic desperation; even the process of seduction that mitigated this has become somewhat of a routine for Kepesh by the start of his narrative. Given such pressures, Roth's novel thrives on "the comedy of creating a connection that is not a connection" (16), denying that any kind of understanding or definitive knowledge can be gained through sex. The sense of gender confusion in Roth's novel necessitates a new range of critical perspectives that playfully expand on elements in Roth's text to take analysis of his work in new directions.

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<sup>64</sup> Whilst it could be argued that the death of George O'Hearn in *The Dying Animal* features a similar sense of doomed but tender eroticism, it is of a more ironic, less purely tragic nature than that found in *The Human Stain*.

## 5.2 – Narrative Perspective and Seduction

*The Dying Animal* is fundamentally concerned with the intersection of power and language; Kepesh's musings on sex function as part of a pedagogical rhetoric that inflects much of the text. Reading the novel demands a certain caution on the part of the reader, as Kepesh is so keen to entice a reaction out of his imagined audience. Even this perspective, however, fails to account for the sense of argumentation in the text. In *The Breast*, Kepesh changes interlocutors on a regular basis, allowing Roth a huge stylistic variety – the relatively homogenous style of *The Professor of Desire* is indebted to a sense of assumed audience that the Kepesh of *The Breast* never manages to be entirely convinced about. *The Dying Animal* is much more explicitly framed in terms of its dialogic character, but this entails new forms of narrative complexity.

Ambiguities in Roth's style come to represent uncertainties underlying Kepesh's superficial composure. This pedagogic impulse in Roth's text is as distracting as it is brilliant - for instance, Kepesh's tendency to lecture can minimise the internal complexities of his rhetorical style. Kepesh's language frequently blurs the boundaries between rhetorical question and direct inquisition. At one point in the text, Kepesh asks "Can you imagine old age?", immediately replying with "Of course you can't" (35). Roth makes clear that the narrative is framed, but the nature of this framing is largely irrelevant prior to the final lines. Throughout the text, the "you" that occupies the place of Kepesh's interlocutor blends seamlessly into a general assumed audience-figure, an over-determined presence whose characteristics are left open to interpretation. Velicha Ivanova has argued that this indeterminacy is generally and justifiably ignored by Roth's readers, a question which is not intended to be answered (42). This argument may understate the role that this uncertainty plays at key points in Kepesh's narrative.

For example, in arguing that "No matter how much you know, no matter how much you think, no matter how much you plot and you connive and you plan, you're not superior to sex" (33), Kepesh is demonstrating not only the structure of his sexual ideology, but the complexity of his rhetoric. Roth's

phrase is built on two mirrored sets of repetitive structures, sets of three phrases linked by the repetition of “you”. The “you” in this sentence could be both individual and collective, suggesting both a direct conversation and the assumed distance and conversational hierarchy of academic pedagogy. This ambiguous repetition of “you” comes to dominate a sentence in which Kepesh’s eloquence is attempting to assert its dominance.

The “you” of Kepesh’s question becomes a major textual absence, an unexplained narrative that stands in marked contrast to the overt narrative framing of novels like *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *The Human Stain*. Placed between the power dynamic afforded to a teacher and the assumed absence of power suggested by the sudden incursion of a dialogue-format akin to psychoanalysis, Kepesh is left only with an ambiguous rhetoric whose very liminality lessens the effectiveness of his eloquence. Beauty is evanescent and frequently subverted in *The Dying Animal*, and this includes the very language used by its protagonist. In Kepesh’s postlapsarian and death-haunted narrative, even the brilliant potential of language itself is marred by the confusion it seeks to contain and control.

Roth may seem to revel unnecessarily in a playful approach to manners of address, but such techniques inform interactions between characters in which assumed power and a subversive counter-narrative are both in full evidence. This is most visible in Roth’s depiction of Kepesh’s courting of Consuela Castillo, in which Kepesh goes to considerable lengths to establish the consensual boundaries of the burgeoning relationship - declaring that “These are the veils of the dance. Don’t confuse it with seduction. This is not seduction. What you’re disguising is the thing that got you there, the pure lust. The veils veil the blind drive.” (15). The narrative strategies of *The Dying Animal* do not constitute a vessel for confusion, instead (as Kepesh himself signals) acting as a veil. That the novel’s narrator is superficially self-assured serves as a logical extension of themes of self-knowledge developed in *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*.

In the quote above, Kepesh claims that there is no intrinsic core to sexual desire, that the willingness to interpret his actions as the machinations of an overtly villainous seducer would do an injustice to the “blind drive” of his libido. However, Kepesh’s claims are still based on his self-conceptions;

Consuela's agency is, whilst not denied outright, afforded only the character of an enigma. The "pure lust" is explicitly configured as being that of Kepesh. Consuela, for all her visible sex appeal ("she has a D cup, this duchess, really big beautiful breasts, and skin of a very white colour, skin that, the moment you see it, makes you want to lick it.") (18), is curiously indifferent as a lover. Inevitably, Kepesh is irresistibly drawn towards this "seeming absence...of any erotic intention" (18), and fills this absence with his own perceptions of Consuela's sexual power. This is demonstrated by later claims by Kepesh that "I am the author of her mastery of me" (32) and that "I was Consuela's awareness of herself" (38). Kepesh thus attempts to encode even his own downfall as an act of personal agency.

Aristie Trendel argues that the teacher-student relationship in *The Dying Animal* is characterised by "subversion, destruction and exchange", which accurately summarises the paradoxical nature of Kepesh's relationship with Consuela whilst minimising the way that Roth's text functions specifically as a meditation on the power dynamics associated with seduction (56). The determination to avoid the cliché of a teacher-seducer is part of a reluctant sop to changes in American sexual conventions on the part of Roth's narrator. Kepesh's fussy assurances of sexual propriety on campus - "I don't any longer get in touch with them on a private basis until they've completed their final exam and received their grade and I am no longer officially in loco parentis" (5) - are partly motivated by his sense of unjust persecution. For all his self-satisfaction at his "trick" (5), the technique merely trades one misogynist cliché for another; rather than use his position of teacher to seduce students on campus, he leaves an 'acceptable' gap and then uses alcohol to lower his students' inhibitions.

Although Kepesh makes clear that his machinations never stoop to being merely predatory, his claim that he is following the errant dictates of a "blind drive" are difficult to accept. Kepesh's views on sex describe it both as both a futile arena of confusion and a sublime challenge to bodily limitations (sex as a "revenge upon death") (69), but the former tends to emerge as a consequence of belief in the latter. The eloquence of Roth's prose disguises the flaws of his central character, but this should not lead to accusations of superficiality on Roth's part; Kepesh's denial of seduction may be instructive even if it is difficult to accept it on face value.



Limited to speculation by Consuela's initial restraint, Kepesh is reduced to superficial aesthetics, imposing his 'readings' onto Consuela's body. This reaches its culmination at the moment of the seduction itself, when Kepesh observes Consuela's body whilst she reads. The angling of her body is interpreted by Kepesh as a "whopping invitation" (24) intended to elicit a lascivious reaction – which it succeeds in gaining when Kepesh strokes her angled buttocks. This tentative initial intimacy foreshadows later moments of physical uncertainty in the text; most notably, the physical distance between the characters in a pivotal scene later in the novel when Kepesh photographs Consuela's breasts<sup>65</sup>.

In Consuela's angled body, facing away from Kepesh and towards a book, an image of aesthetic absorption becomes re-encoded into an image of sexual display. Consuela's position, (looking not at Kepesh but at one of his books) exposes the distance already inherent in their relationship; this is heightened by Consuela's reminding Kepesh of the social difference between the two whilst he strokes her. Kepesh blames this paradoxical moment for the "terrible jealousy" (26) that would become the hallmark of the resultant relationship, and he may have due cause. Whilst the would-be couple negotiate their erotic boundaries, they do so as caricatures of themselves: the earnest student and the lecherous professor. The wheels of Kepesh's (and Consuela's) later discontent have already been set in motion.

Even at this early stage in the novel, Kepesh has established the processes of bodily interpretation that will come to dominate and warp his perceptions of Consuela. Observing her in his classroom, Kepesh commences a study of her body that extends from her choice in clothing ("like an attractive secretary in a prestigious legal firm") (3) to describe her face, her hair and her background. Only then does Kepesh extend his blandly objective description to cover the potency her of sexual display:

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<sup>65</sup> Isabel Coixet's 2008 cinematic adaptation of *The Dying Animal*, entitled *Elegy*, is particularly adept at portraying this scene. Coixet's film, in constantly alternating camera perspective between Kepesh and Consuela, reflects the alternations of perspective and power in an innovative and powerful manner.

The silk blouse is unbuttoned to the third button, and so you see she has powerful, beautiful breasts. You see the cleavage immediately. And you see she knows it. You see, despite the decorum, the meticulousness, the cautiously *soigné* style – or because of them – that she’s aware of herself (3)

As discussed earlier, Kepesh’s interlocutor remains a vague presence, not afforded a specific role or relationship to the narrator. In scenes like this, however, the “you” is more concerned with the nature of observation rather than being a rhetorical interjection. Kepesh switches to a second-person narrative, a technique that he employs frequently throughout the text – although never again in as abrupt and brazen a fashion. In this instance, it affords the description of Consuela’s body an oddly intimate atmosphere, placing the listener/reader as the voyeur rather than the professor himself.

The listener/reader is implicated in the dilemma of teacher-student attraction most explicitly when Kepesh notes that the whiteness of Consuela’s skin “makes you want to lick it” (18), as well as providing an excuse for the otherwise incongruous observation that Consuela’s cleavage is seen “immediately”. Kepesh’s transferral of erotic responsibility onto the reader is further reflective of his defensiveness, but it also reaffirms the importance of the layering of perspective in Roth’s text. The blurring of perspective between first, second and third person narration is indicative of the fact that Kepesh’s pursuit of sex has enabled a simultaneous loss of self-identity. This is particularly ironic as Kepesh is using these same techniques to laud Consuela’s unconscious sexual assertiveness.

### 5.3 – *The Dying Animal*, Psychoanalysis and Feminism

The importance placed on Consuela's breasts mean that the symbolism of the breast itself may seem somewhat artificial, but such a perspective would minimise the playfulness with which Roth conjures intertextual relationships with the other Kepesh novels throughout *The Dying Animal*. Kepesh's claim that he has "out-Polonius'd Polonius" when discussing sexual responsibility with his son, for example, functions as a parody of Kepesh's claim in *The Breast* that he has "out Kafka'd Kafka". In *The Dying Animal*, Kafka's writing becomes a seduction tool when Kepesh displays the manuscript of "a speech [Kafka had] given at a retirement party for the chief of the insurance office where he was working" (10) to help him seduce Consuela. Kafka has, by this point, become merely another tool enabling the transaction of sex – even the manuscript itself was a gift to Kepesh from a wealthy ex-lover.

Similarly, psychoanalysis is conceptualised in *The Breast* as a phenomenon which has a pivotal role in American culture, but its role in Kepesh's later worldview in *The Dying Animal* is ambiguously minor. Feminism is depicted as the dominant mode of cultural-academic discourse that has, to a certain extent, supplanted the position held by psychoanalysis in *The Breast*. Utilising intersections between these schools of thought, however, may enable a new perspective on *The Dying Animal*. One of the most notable changes in psychoanalytic and feminist thought since the events of *The Professor of Desire* is an increasing sense of collusion between these cultural forces – intellectual trends which had often construed as mutually incompatible<sup>66</sup>. That these two pivotal and strongly intertwined fields of critical discourse should fail to become linked in the course of Roth's narrative is an absence that critical work on Roth is beginning to address - with fascinating results.

The transposal of feminist strategies onto Roth's work is not without controversy. Discussing some of the more negative of the reviews of the novel,

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<sup>66</sup> Evaluating the legacy of her seminal work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (first published in 1974) Juliet Mitchell argues that the confluence between the two domains, which had begun in the late 1960s, "came out of the exigency of the political situation" a demand to evaluate gender difference in more unconventional ways ('Twenty Years On' 123).

Mark Shechner observes that *The Dying Animal* “seems designed to elicit” (201) negative interpretations based on stereotypes long associated with Roth’s work. Shechner discusses critics that noted the novel’s awkward empathy, authorial solipsism and interest in American history, but suspected misogyny could be easily be added to the list. Although suspicious of the depiction of Consuela Castillo as “little more than a pair of sensational breasts” (201), Shechner’s own argument develops to incorporate a familiar view of Kepesh as a tragic remnant of an era of collective sexual experimentation. He thus pays heed to the reductive misogyny that characterises much of Kepesh’s narrative, whilst using these same flaws to celebrate the novel’s eloquent bleakness.

Debra Shostak, in contrast, argues against accusations that Roth’s text is misogynistic in her monograph *Countertexts, Counterlives*. She thus describes how the texts in the Kepesh trilogy “explore the consequences for sexuality and self-concept when the gendered perspective of a consciousness shifts position” (7). Shostak’s position is closely connected to her later claim that Roth’s depictions of masculine sexual subjectivity are based in “the logic that misogyny emerges from a perceived threat to symbolic masculine power” (22) - Shostak’s argument thus offers a more detailed critique of the novel’s reception than Shechner. Noting that Kepesh “seems almost to beg for feminist contempt” (61), Shostak argues that Roth’s novel subverts a misogynist paradigm by enacting a reconstruction of bodily agency through the same female character that is subject to the worst of Kepesh’s misogynist excesses – his beautiful young lover, Consuela.

Shostak’s analysis of *The Dying Animal*, first published only three years after Roth’s novel (and a year after Shechner’s monograph), is overburdened by a desire to refute some of the more strident of the critical attacks on the novel. Nonetheless, it succeeds in reconstructing the novel within a theoretical framework that unites Roth’s interest in psychoanalytic methodology with more interdisciplinary theoretical studies – particularly those of Julia Kristeva<sup>67</sup>. Shostak’s conclusion that “the breast is revealed at last as the locus of the abject” (65) offers a refinement of more simplistic metaphorical analyses of

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<sup>67</sup> Although Shostak uses Kristeva’s work frequently in her monograph, her focus is on Kristeva’s use of the abject rather than her descriptions of intertextuality (the topic explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis in relation to *The Professor of Desire*).

Consuela's final disrobing, but does so by offering a sense of reconciliation with Kepesh's own sexual outlook – sex as a “revenge upon death” (69).

Shostak ascribes moments of rhetorical excess in the novel to Kepesh rather than Roth himself, but nonetheless appears to perceive a synthesis between Kepesh's rhetoric and the self-deconstructing anti-misogynist arc that she ascribes to the novel as a whole. As such, Shostak minimises the satiric effect of Roth's depiction of stentorian academic pedagogy. Reviewers of Roth's novel may have been too readily willing to denigrate the protagonist of *The Dying Animal*, but the perception of Kepesh as a fundamentally ridiculous figure need not stand as a criticism of the novel itself. An analysis that interprets Kepesh as a satiric, comic figure can emerge through the critical methodologies that Shostak utilises. Chief amongst these is psychoanalysis, a body of thought whose applicability to *The Dying Animal* is not immediately obvious. Using such ideas necessitates a rejection of Kepesh's own logic, concurring with the self-subverting narrative strategies noted earlier in this chapter.

As stated earlier, *The Dying Animal* is based on a psychoanalytic premise to the extent that it is constructed in the manner of a confession to a largely silent third party. As such, the novel's ‘punchline’, a warning given by an anonymous listener to the narrator, can be viewed as a parodic reconstruction of the final lines of *Portnoy's Complaint*, in which an analyst intervenes to ask “Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” (274). In concluding with the oblique warning “Think about it. Think. Because if you go, you're finished”, *The Dying Animal* offers a comparable subversion. Kepesh has, after all, been doing little else other than thinking during the course of the novel; his is a narrative punctuated by elaborate digressions on the nature of sexual attraction and the hypocrisies of sexual piety. Spielvogel's denial of narrative hierarchy in *Portnoy's Complaint* functions in a similar way, subverting the claims to psychoanalytic knowledge that Alexander Portnoy makes throughout his extended monologue. In *The Dying Animal*, the effect is to make the reader reconsider the value of Kepesh's “thinking”.

This is familiar territory for Roth: the limitations of language, especially literary English, have been a regular concern throughout the Kepesh trilogy – the links between *The Dying Animal* and *The Breast*, illuminated by critics like

Shostak, extend beyond the oblique symbolism of the breast itself. Kepesh may be a self-consciously 'sophisticated' critic, but he is still subject to the same desire for narrative power that was shown in the previous novels he featured in.

Velicha Ivanova explains this desire for narrative power as a means for Roth to criticise and expose the structures of misogynist logic, a perspective which serves to complicate reductive analyses of the novel as an apologia for self-serving libertinism. Ivanova constructs a form of counter-reading, arguing that "[Kepesh's] misogyny springs from his vulnerable manhood" (35). She uses this sense of vulnerability to generate perspectives that the text superficially rejects, arguing that the novel "contains within itself its contrary strand" (34).

Ivanova's essay discusses how Kepesh constructs his lifestyle through processes of attempted control, using "objectification, emotional detachment, and homosocial bonding" to gain the level of separation that he believes is necessary to form a convincing version of masculine selfhood (36). This focus on selfhood distorts Kepesh's perceptions of the women in his life, affording them a role rather than a personality. Consuela is thus "shaped by [Kepesh's] fear", exposing the structures of Kepesh's desperation for erotic power (40). Ivanova's conclusion - that Roth's text affords the reader a choice over whether to resist the "dominant male narrative" - is persuasive, although the possibility remains that the reader may validly choose to read the text as an endorsement of these same "dominant" narrative traits" (43). Ivanova's dichotomy gives too much credit to Kepesh's rhetorical efforts: subversion built in to Kepesh's narrative undermines the potential for a misogynist reading.

Ivanova's close reading complements Debra Shostak's theoretically-inclined perspective, although the narrative role of Kepesh himself can become lost in analysis of the processes of gender subversion that he helps enact as a character. The emphasis on rhetorical indeterminacy in Ivanova's essay is, however, a notable advance in critical understanding of the character. Roth's text does not advocate the virtues of the lifestyle it depicts, but neither does it offer a censorious attack on the kind of values that Kepesh aims to personify. Roth's perspective is ambivalent; his narrator is destabilised by desire for a coherence which sexual attraction fundamentally denies.

Such ideas allow for an extension of the role of psychoanalytic strategies in analysing *The Dying Animal*. The text is framed along psychoanalytic lines (admittedly in a nostalgic and ironic manner); the relative dearth of psychoanalytic vocabulary and ideas from Kepesh's narrative does not preclude their usefulness as means of interpretation. As with much of Roth's writing in the Kepesh novels, absence does not imply irrelevance.

Psychoanalysis is given little space in the course of Roth's novel, with Kepesh's transition from husband to raconteur depicted as a mere matter of unburdening repressions. Psychoanalysis is not so much an unwritten sphere of influence so much as an oppositional force whose rejection, though unmentioned, is crucial to the text's construction of sexuality. When Kepesh insists that "this is not seduction", he is developing his argument against a body of psychoanalytic thought as much as he is against a cultural trope.

Themes of seduction gesture not only towards the process of power manipulation in sexual communication, but also to one of the foundational concepts in Freud's work. In *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud re-evaluates his early work to discuss how seduction "treats a child as a sexual object prematurely, and teaches him, in highly emotional circumstances, how to obtain satisfaction from his genital zones, a satisfaction which he is obliged to repeat again by masturbation", a process which can originate from both adults and other children (190). Although seduction "is not required to stimulate a child's sexual life", its position between internal biological factors and external position places it in a liminal position (190-1). Moreover, this position differs according to the child's gender – unlike boys, whose sexual interest remains genitally oriented on his penis, girls are depicted by Freud as moving from a clitoral to a vaginal model of sexuality upon the onset of puberty. This moment of gender differentiation is, Freud claims, a "chief determinant of the greater proneness of women to neurosis and especially to hysteria", one which is thus "intimately related to the essence of femininity" (221).

This construction of gender difference can lead to a reappraisal of Kepesh's own description of his emergent masculinity. Kepesh constructs his sexual 'awakening' as a post-marital lover as an emergence from a form of arrested development whose idiosyncrasies are common enough to be uninteresting. Read in this way, Janie Wyatt (a personification of the sexual

revolution) becomes reconfigured as a seducer-figure whose “101 Ways to be Perverse in the Library” becomes the ur-text for Kepesh’s own transgressions. Significance lies not only in the inversion of the expected power dynamic (the seducer-role that Kepesh is keen to deny), but in the implicit feminisation that this enacts. Kepesh’s loss of composure, with its suggestion of a hysteric loss of control and the gradual exposure of the neuroses at the core of his sexual self-conception, completes the Freudian pattern of seduction enacted by Janie.

Seduction belongs to the same sphere of post-Freudian debate that Roth was gesturing towards in *The Breast*. The importance of concepts like seduction within psychoanalytic debate would be radically reconstructed in the years between *The Professor of Desire* and *The Dying Animal*, as some critics sought to develop Freud’s ideas to be more conducive to explicitly feminist modes of investigation.

Chief amongst this body of texts is the work of Jacques Lacan, whose translated essay collection *Feminine Sexuality*, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, would offer a conciliatory approach to the ongoing debate on the role of women in psychoanalysis (a debate partially initiated by Mitchell herself in her 1974 monograph *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*). Mitchell and Rose use their intertwined introductions to *Feminine Sexuality* to trace the origins of Lacan’s thought through a Freudian framework provided newfound coherence by linguistics. Central to Lacan’s work, Mitchell argues, is a discussion of the way that Freud’s style has led others to assume the idiom of humanism, with psychoanalysis depicted as a means for enacting self-determination. Taking issue with those who have read in Freud’s work a normative, heterosexual matrix, Mitchell discusses Lacan’s reading of Freud’s *Three Essays*- describing Lacan’s view of the sexual drive as “polymorphous; its aim variable, its object contingent” (10). Developing these initial theories to potentially contradictory ends, Freud’s reworking of the family romance is described as insisting that “there can be no natural or automatic heterosexual desire” (12). Lacan is depicted as insisting not on obedience to Freudian dogma, but on a return to the concepts which motivated Freud’s initial discoveries – in particular, the castration complex. Previous analysis has already suggested that fetishism contains the genesis of a deconstruction of the castration complex, and Lacan’s work adds to this critique.



Juliet Mitchell's essay contains relatively little exposition of a coherent feminist agenda, opting instead to explicate Lacan's ideas through a description of some of his reformulations of Freudian ideas. Mitchell discusses the importance of Freud's *Three Essays* to Lacan, and in doing so provides a route into a discussion of the normative constraints some have argued to be inherent in Freud's account of the Oedipal complex. Mitchell discusses, for example, the accusations levelled by early critics of Freud that Oedipal interpretations are phallogocentric (19). In Mitchell's description, *Three Essays* opposes normative sexuality by arguing that without preordained heterosexuality, there can be no gendered 'sex' as such.

Mitchell discusses earlier in her essay that Lacan aims not to produce justice, but to explain difference through the central symbol of the phallus. The "patrocentric" quality of Lacan's readings thus become defensible from a feminist perspective- the phallus acting as a "stand-in for the necessarily *missing* object of desire at the level of sexual division" (24). Lacan's increasing sense of the sexual subject is described by Mitchell as "the analysand's unconscious reveal(ing) a fragmented subject of shifting and uncertain sexual identity" (26) - paving the way for Jacqueline Rose's close analysis of Lacanian concepts.

Jacqueline Rose's essay focuses on the castration complex, creating links between Lacan's interpretations of Freud and a broader feminist political project. For Rose, the castration complex stands for "the moment when prohibition must function", creating the phallus itself as indicating "the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a *seeming* value" (40, 42). Lacan, argues Rose, probes the limits of the relationship between sexuality and the unconscious by creating a model of sexuality with difference at its core. In describing this, Rose elaborates upon the linguistic theory, the mechanism through which Lacan aims to resolve the apparent contradictions in Freud's psychoanalytic project. Arguing that "for Lacan, men and women are only ever in language" (49), Rose introduces a number of terms with which Lacan's project is focused- for example, equating 'jouissance' (what escapes in sexuality) with 'significance' (what shifts within language) to reaffirm the direction and application of Lacan's ideas. Critical to both concerns, as Rose describes it, is the castration complex, which is reconfigured from being an expression of paternal anxiety to a model of gendered difference (53).

Lacan's conception of the unconscious thus undermines the certainty of self-knowledge as well as revealing the fictiveness of sexuality. Such ideas lead Rose to introduce Lacan through both the terms employed in his work and his engagements with previous theorists and critics of Freud. Rose is particularly useful in placing the terms used by Lacan within a critical framework recognisable to those to whom they are unfamiliar. Many themes established in Mitchell's essay are further developed, leading to, for example, an analysis of Lacan's use of 'desire' to help explicate the fracturing of the sexual subject. The intersection of linguistic theory with the theory of the unconscious established by Freud provides a framework through which to understand Lacan's ideas. In Lacan's work, argues Rose, "representation determines the limits within which we experience our sexual life" (35).

What emerges as being a dominant theme for both critics is the sense that a phallogentric perspective need not have entirely negative consequences for a broadly feminist project- that recognising the pivotal role of the phallus should not entail an emancipatory rejection of Lacanian (or Freudian) ideas. Particularly in Rose's explications of ideas such as *jouissance*, desire and the Other, a mode of sexuality emerges which lends itself well to Roth's depictions of Kepesh in *The Dying Animal*: a process of mystification whereby "in relation to the man, woman comes to stand for difference and loss" (Rose 49).

In Jesse Kavadlo's essay on academic novels, he discusses how the work of feminist theorists can impact on an analysis of the seductions contained within in them. He discusses the work of Jane Gallop as embodying a view that "language and learning speak the codes of sexuality" (22-3), an analysis whose impact for novels like *The Dying Animal* remains underexplored within his essay<sup>68</sup>. Jane Gallop's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* provides a useful continuation of many of the themes established by Mitchell and Rose, and in doing so offers a new means of interpreting *The Dying Animal*. Gallop seeks to find mediating exchanges between opposed theories; exploring feminism and psychoanalysis without dogmatically endorsing either. Gallop starts by

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<sup>68</sup> Debra Shostak's *Countertexts, Counterlives* discusses Lacan's work at length, but mostly in connection with *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*. As noted earlier in this chapter, the primary point of reference for her work on *The Dying Animal* is Julia Kristeva.

critiquing Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, questioning its place within an Anglophone feminist tradition.

Whilst previous analysis in this chapter has limited itself to Mitchell's work in *Feminine Sexuality*, Gallop's reading of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* is still instructive in that it returns debate to the basic question of the validity of intersecting feminism with psychoanalysis. Gallop lauds the conciliatory approach Mitchell employs, noting her exploration of the feminist reticence towards Freud and psychoanalysis in general (2). Gallop's claim that Mitchell "shows how the post-Freudian has been but a repeated return to the pre-Freudian" (3) echoes Mitchell's own suspicion of reductively biological readings of Freud in *Feminine Sexuality*. Developing this, Gallop discusses how Mitchell denounces readings of psychoanalysis which take Freud's life as a guiding text. Mitchell's central weakness, according to Gallop, is her being "locked into an exchange with those whom she is trying to transcend" (5)- failing to offer a cohesive, distinct model to replace those of her opponents. Gallop seems to echo Rose in her suspicion of viewing feminists as "observer in some sort of floating position outside the structure, a position of omniscience" (12). For Gallop, this is a betrayal of the liberating potential of a Lacanian perspective that views signification systems as being prior to gender.

As critics like Shostak and Ivanova have indicated, there is a process of gender subversion operating in *The Dying Animal* that surmounts its superficial misogyny. The textual prompts provided by Roth help to provide a psychoanalytic context in a novel whose narrator is determined to avoid psychoanalytic methodologies.

The process of gender subversion detectable in Roth's style is substantiated by a willingness to follow lines of interpretation that Kepesh refuses to consider. The effect of this theoretical input is not just to offer a rebuttal to negative readings of Roth's novel, but to account for the processes of gender identity enacted within it. Gallop's criticisms of Mitchell, as well as Mitchell and Rose's cautious synthesis of gender and psychoanalysis, show that intersections between the two domains are fraught with debate. Regardless, Mitchell, Rose and Gallop all exemplify the value of an approach to gender that seeks to find a feminist mode of debate in texts traditionally considered to be opposed to the feminist project as a whole. Their

methodologies are thus as important as their conclusions; they demonstrate the value of an approach to novels such as *The Dying Animal* that reclaims them from a feminist perspective.

The work of Mitchell, Rose and Gallop demonstrates that seduction is a process rich in symbolic implication, with the power to destabilise superficial power dynamics. Roth's novel is afforded complexity by its willingness to create debate, to subvert the proclamations of its narrator in as many ways as it can. What these psychoanalytic theorists demonstrate is that subversion is often built into arguments that seem otherwise rigid in their attitudes. Roth demonstrates this in *The Dying Animal* by reframing Kepesh's seduction of Consuela as a means of exposing the tawdriness of a misogynistic attitude towards seduction itself: the feminist strategies discussed above thus complement the stylistic subversion analysed earlier in this chapter. This approach not only expands the scope of analysis for Roth's work, but harks back to the basic premise of fetishistic writing; self-subversive discourse that exposes a network of related themes and ideas.

Discussion of psychoanalysis may indicate the value of considering other discourses which have been sublimated in Kepesh's narrative. For example, the novel contains only one mention of ethnic identity, a description of Kepesh's paternal upbringing under "the kindly Jewish father of that generation"; Kepesh's father, a pivotal figure in the preceding novels, is recast as a mere trope: "My parents? They were parents" (67). Like psychoanalysis, Jewish identity is cast as an incidental historical phenomenon. There is, however, little evidence that Jewish identity has left as vivid a mark on the narrative as elements of psychoanalytic thought - although an ethnicized masculinity crisis may influence Kepesh's frequent body anxieties, displacing the feared 'otherness' of ethnicity onto the experienced 'otherness' of the ageing body. Jewish identity remains a textual theme in *The Dying Animal* that, although beyond the scope of this thesis, requires further critical work.

Few characters in Kepesh's narrative are afforded any kind of individual agency, to the extent that they emerge as competing narrative forces rather than partners in equal interaction. Such fundamental unease foreshadows the narrative intervention at the novel's close. This interjection is not a sudden change so much as it is a reflection of Roth's structural complexities; Kepesh

finally lets someone speak, and the entirety of his preceding narrative is undermined. The ending of the novel thus suggests the value of considering the importance of other characters within Roth's text. The 'voices' of subsidiary characters work alongside the subversive potential of Kepesh's own speech to gesture towards further modes of counter-reading.

## **5.4 – The Others: Subsidiary Characters in *The Dying Animal***

The focus of Kepesh's narration in *The Dying Animal* is on his relationship with Consuela Castillo, a topic which provides the novel with most of its pivotal scenes. The relative dearth of other characters (and their largely instrumental role in Kepesh's narrative when they do appear) can tempt the reader into downplaying their significance. This perspective limits even the most perceptive of Roth's critics to competing with Kepesh, reading against him or reconstructing his views to defend the novel's construction of gender. Other characters may not exert the same level of textual significance, nor do they necessarily reflect Roth's best writing – regardless, any critical perspective on Kepesh as a character and narrator requires a consideration of the impact these characters have upon Roth's text.

An accusation that Kepesh utilises other characters to develop his own narrative allows for a further critique of Kepesh's narrative style. For example, few critics or reviewers have spent much time considering one of the first of Roth's incidental characters – a student of Kepesh's named Miranda. Miranda is discussed only briefly in Roth's text, but appears at a crucial textual juncture, just prior to the full introduction of Consuela (indeed, the very next paragraph after the Miranda scene begins with the simple sentence "Consuela Castillo") (9). Miranda thus serves to foreshadow the complexities that Kepesh will be subject to upon commencing his doomed relationship.

Miranda's appearance concludes a more general discussion of Kepesh's would-be seductions, adding a 'case study' to support his general argument.

The language Kepesh uses to describe Miranda at once encodes her as a representative lover and an oppositional force to Consuela. Kepesh describes himself asking her fellow students at his traditional end-of-course party if they have seen “Prospero’s daughter”, a Shakespearean reference which also recalls (and subverts) the wariness of *loco parentis* seduction that Kepesh described earlier (7). This is developed further by her being described in terms of childhood playfulness; she bounds down Kepesh’s stairs with “goofy abandon”, and after Kepesh notes that she is a “little thing”, he watches her disrobe to reveal “the adolescent torso of an incipiently transgressive Balthus virgin” (7). These descriptions contain within themselves stylistic devices that will recur throughout Kepesh’s narrative: literary allusions, condescending description and allusions to fine art, respectively. They also help to demonstrate to the reader that Kepesh’s narrative is at once strikingly eloquent and self-defeating; he encodes the terms by which he may be judged into his description by using metaphors relating to innocence. Miranda’s introduction helps to foreshadow Consuela’s proto-seduction, but it also gestures towards the way that Kepesh’s narrative claims are subverted by his narrative choices.

The search for male role models is a theme in all three Kepesh novels; *The Breast*’s subsidiary characters function either as sexualised objects of fear and uncertainty (women) or figures which offer the narrator different interpretative focus (men). Similarly, *The Professor of Desire* is arguably as focused on exploring relationships between men as it is in exploring sexual relationships. Masculinity reappears as a pivotal theme in *The Dying Animal*, bringing with it a series of anxieties tied to a perceived loss of self-identity. These anxieties are often related to paternal influence and homosexuality, personified in the characters of Kenny Kepesh and George O’Hearn respectively.

Writing on Roth’s autobiographical narrative *Patrimony*, Adam Phillips argues that “in Roth’s novels, the sons can never take the fathers on their own terms” (170). It is this sense of mutual misunderstanding, combined with what Phillips describes as a refusal to be constrained by a singular interpretation, which becomes the hallmark of Roth’s depictions of Jewish-American families. Phillip’s insights provide a useful context for Roth’s description of the strained relationship between David Kepesh and his son, Kenny. Kenny Kepesh is a cosmopolitan figure, a New York art dealer whose anxieties over infidelity

become the occasion for David to launch a diatribe against conventional American attitudes to sex. Kenny's estrangement from his father predominantly reflects his revulsion at his father's lifestyle choices, but this revulsion is also afforded a new dimension by the familial framework it is constructed within. Following Phillips, it is possible to observe how the use of a father-son relationship in *The Dying Animal* is rooted in a sense of unwanted continuity.

Kenny's biography bears striking similarities to that of his father. Like David, Kenny's initially conventional approach to sexuality is thrown into crisis by the potential for extra-marital sex with a vastly younger (and subordinate) woman. Like David, he pursues an academically-oriented career based on aesthetic observation – with a doctorate from New York University and a career in restoring and valuing works of art. Kenny is described as “a big, good-looking man” who “dresses impeccably, speaks authoritatively, writes intelligently, converses easily in French and German” (77) – a description which calls to mind David Kepesh's intercultural self-conception in *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*.

Kenny himself may encompass ethnic stereotypes that subvert the thoroughly 'American' way in which he is described by his father. Tamar Garb, for example, describes how in pre-war Europe “the figure of the art dealer... became the archetypal modern male Jew, parasitically existing on the margins of culture without being one of its practitioners” (26). Whilst this connection may be tenuous, it would fit as an inversion of the father-son relationship used in *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*, in which Abe Kepesh comes to represent a connection to Jewish history and culture. Roth's exploration of ethnic identity is explicitly configured in the other Kepesh novels as a matter of patrimony, and it is thus telling that Kepesh does not discuss his own father in any detail in the course of his final narrative.

This sense of inversion is also visible in terms of characterisation. In the early Kepesh novels, David's relationship with his father is rarely strained, but his characterisation of Abe Kepesh remains bound to stereotypes and generalisations. This becomes manifest anew in David's attempt to depict Kenny as a man constrained by “his idea of himself as a punctiliously upright person” (79). Kenny's characterisation thus reaffirms David's refusal to

consider other perspectives as having equal value to his own – David displays a dogged adherence to a self-construction that is at best flawed and at worst openly contradictory. David fails to realise that his description of Kenny as a man whose moral code blinds him to the complexities of sexuality may indict his own sexual philosophy; he may reject Kenny’s criticisms of him as being outdated and sleazy, but he does not succeed in refuting them. Roth thus adds a generational twist to the associations of paternal relationships in the Kepesh novels.

George O’Hearn, David Kepesh’s best friend, is in many ways the obverse of Kenny Kepesh. He is shown having a deep affinity with the kinds of sexual transgression lionized by David, maintaining both a conventional marriage and gratuitous infidelity. The sudden illness and resultant death of George provides Roth’s novel with its key moment of pseudo-pathos. On his deathbed, George attempts first to kiss David, and then to fondle his wife’s breasts. The symbolism is deliberately heavy-handed, anticipating both Kepesh’s loss of self-control and the last-gasp appreciation of breasts that will form the key moment of the novel’s other instance of pseudo-pathos, when Consuela visits Kepesh prior to her mastectomy. Unlike other instances in the novel (such as the introduction of Miranda), this foreshadowing is attributable to narrative choices made by Roth rather than those presumed to have been made by Kepesh himself. Roth’s foreshadowing complements that of Kepesh in that both serve to expose the fragility of Kepesh’s ideal of sexual selfhood.

The deathbed scene is seemingly rich in pathos, but is possessed of a peculiarly dark humour. The procession of family and friends which the dying man has tend to him is superficially evocative of the mawkish symbolism traditionally used in fictional deathbed scenes. Jay Haio argues that this scene demonstrates Roth’s skill in depicting the “pornography of death”, a counterpart to the sexual pornography in his text (*'Eros and Death in Roth's Later Fiction'* 204). A closer analysis of the scene shows that Roth’s text partially conflates these two domains; if this scene does not quite merit being labelled as either pornography of sex or of death, it utilises a sense of transgressive voyeurism common to both. Roth’s novel is afforded a comic bleakness by an emphasis on miscommunication and the exposure of the permeability of the boundaries supposedly set so rigorously by George himself. When Kepesh meets the dying George, the resultant kiss clearly catches him



off guard, even though George had already kissed his daughter in a similar fashion:

Then George was pointing at me. "Hello, George", I said. "Hello, friend. It's David, George." And when I got close to him, he grabbed me the way he'd grabbed Betty and kissed me on the mouth. (120)

The act of George kissing his daughter on the lips raises little interest for Kepesh, for whom it concludes the sentimental reinscription of George as "the best father, the very best" (120). If the daughterly kiss is transgressive, it is excusable. The same applies to George's kissing and subsequent fondling of his wife – even though it is done in full view of his family, it provides a symmetry between the two sexual lifestyles he has been leading. The "weary smile" with which Kate muses "I wonder who it is he thought I was" (123) is both an acknowledgement of George's previous marital failings and a forgiveness of them. The poignancy of her observation is not dimmed by its cynicism, but reminds the reader that the lifestyle created by George was mutually (if not explicitly) constructed with his wife. This sense of perverse equilibrium is not evident in the kiss between George and David, which is interpreted by Kepesh only with an observation of the "warm, odourless breath" of George and the observation that "it was the first time George and I had ever kissed in our lives" (121).

George's kisses with Betty and Kate enhance the claims for pathos that the scene is making; George's last truly transgressive act is to break the unspoken boundaries between homosocial friendship and homoerotic attraction. David's surprise, represented by the italicised "*me*", does not lead to revelation – the reader is assumed to be as shocked as the narrator at this sudden outburst of sentimental affection from a man whose sexual attitudes tend to reflect a cynical perspective on traditional monogamy. Kepesh observes earlier that George "feels pure only in his transgressions" (75), and there is purity in this particular transgression that Kepesh is unable or unwilling to admit.

This is not to suggest that Kepesh has any repressed homosexual inclinations himself. In discussing the political movement for equal marriage rights, Kepesh sardonically notes that “I expected more from those guys” (68), viewing them as equal partners in the transgressive nature of their sexuality. Queer characters feature visibly in Kepesh’s narrative landscape, although Kepesh always maintains an ironic distance from their particular struggles; gay men feature in his classroom and in Consuela’s post-Kepesh acquaintanceships. There is none of the vivid unease seen in *The Professor of Desire* when Kepesh realises that his best friend, Louis Jelinek, is homosexual, or the unbreakable taboo of male sexual stimulation in *The Breast*. This makes Kepesh’s confusion in the deathbed kiss scene all the more potent; George’s kiss exposes the fragility of Kepesh’s masculinity, giving a potent suggestion of the kind of vulnerabilities that Consuela’s later revelations will expose in full.

In an early discussion of the emotional damage wrought by his breaking up with Consuela, Kepesh discusses how George “talked me through many an evening when I found myself getting too low” (92), affirming the closeness of their friendship. This follows on from a previous discussion of Carolyn Lyons, one of Kepesh’s infrequent lovers whose “calming influence” (92) is similarly lauded as a means of helping him surmount his distress. Carolyn, like George, represents a transgressive equilibrium. Her relationship with David is based on an extension of the teacher-student sexual arrangement that Kepesh claims to have perfected into a “trick”, although it is afforded the characteristics of “ease”, “calm” and “physical trust” by their resuming sex after a prolonged gap in time (70).

The relationship that emerges is affectionate and caring, but the use of “calm” by Kepesh suggests that it stands at odds with his preferred mode of frenetic uncertainty – not to mention necessitating a reappraisal of his manipulative power dynamics<sup>69</sup>. When Carolyn discovers a used tampon in Kepesh’s bathroom, she confronts him; Kepesh is able to placate her only by creating an elaborate lie based around the sexual meanderings of his friend George. Although Kepesh is self-aware enough to denounce his fiction as “the

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<sup>69</sup> Kepesh deploys the word “calm” as a virtual synonym for “conventional” in the rest of the text, often using the word to refer to an unattainable ideal of domestic sexuality.

endurable lie of the run-of-the-mill roué" (75), the scene gives a startling insight into Kepesh's sexual attitudes. The scene is farcical, even if it exposes the callously manipulative lengths to which Kepesh will go to maintain control of his erotic relationships. Kepesh's manipulations are all the more surprising given that Carolyn seems to represent an intermediate option between seduction and emotional trauma – what she calls "harmonious hedonism" (73). The discovery of the tampon gives Kepesh few options, but in deciding to deceive Carolyn he disrupts the trust and calm that were the hallmarks of their relationship.

Carolyn offers a willingness to combine the transgressive energies of the 1960s with an ambivalent and unconventional approach to monogamy itself (Carolyn was formerly friends with Janie Wyatt, who represents the extreme that both she and Kepesh would measure themselves against). Carolyn has a great deal in common with Kepesh, but he nonetheless manipulates her even whilst expressing appreciation for her friendship. Carolyn's discovery is the farcical bookend to a scene in which Consuela pulls out a tampon and Kepesh licks menstrual blood off her thighs. The association of these two scenes suggests a comparison between the two female characters – Consuela as a vision of excess, Carolyn as a lover in whom "pleasure and equilibrium [are] combined" (71).

The character of Carolyn also bears comparison to Elena Hrabovsky, another of Kepesh's lovers. Elena is at first evocative of characters like Kenny in that she is depicted as desperate to form a conventionally monogamous marriage. Elena represents a recurrence of the instrumental approach that Kepesh takes to those around him, using her as a 'case study' in a similar way to his discussion of Miranda. Carolyn, in contrast, complicates this instrumental approach by exposing Kepesh's tawdry self-destructiveness. In her assured and almost legalistic response to finding the used tampon, Carolyn transcends the assumptions about her fear of being hurt that Kepesh imposes onto her as he discusses her reaction. Kepesh's conclusion to the Carolyn interlude ("She did not leave me when I needed her most. She left only later, and at my request.") (76) may seem to be a triumph for misogynist manipulation, but the implied self-assurance seems hollow. Kepesh gains power, but of a limited and illusory kind; he loses the only relationship he

takes part in that contains any real parity. As such, Carolyn becomes emblematic of the inherent flaws in Kepesh's treatment of women.

Subsidiary characters provide Roth's novel with foreshadowing that renders the novel's central relationship more complex, more tragic and more inevitable. They accomplish this partly by exploiting the internal textual logic of the novel itself, and (especially in the context of masculinity) by gesturing towards ideas and debates that have taken place in earlier novels in the Kepesh trilogy. Rather than being instrumental, such characters may help to expose the desperation underlying much of Kepesh's actions in the novel, and further rebut any accusations that either Roth or Kepesh unimaginatively reinforce a misogynistic view of male sexual selfhood. Carolyn's "harmonious hedonism" is as elegant, self-aware and coherent a philosophy as anything expressed by Kepesh, but is prevented from being placed on an equal footing – even the traditional pedagogue, Kepesh does not like his students to talk back.

*The Dying Animal* has a familiar air of futility about it that immediately marks it as a Kepesh novel. This sense of futility is developed through a process of textual subversion that encompasses everything from the use of pronouns to the use of secondary characters. The novel is primarily concerned with a perception of sexuality that it knows to be outdated and flawed; in this respect, the Kepesh of *The Dying Animal* is allied to those of the previous two Kepesh novels. Like these other texts, the novel eludes the sentimental triggers that it gestures towards, and demands that the reader engage in a process of debate that changes the way that the novel is read. Roth thus uses his final incarnation of Kepesh to bring together a network of concerns that have featured throughout the trilogy, creating a distinctive mode of textual ambiguity. *The Dying Animal*, like its predecessors, asks questions which neither Kepesh nor Roth has any coherent answers for. The pivotal difference between narrator and author, perhaps, is that Roth has enough self-awareness to place this incoherence at the centre of his aesthetic worldview without its becoming a dogma in itself.



# Conclusion

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong.

- J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (150-1)

I

Janet Malcolm refers to psychoanalysis as “the impossible profession”, borrowing a quote from a late essay by Sigmund Freud (and using the phrase to title her resultant monograph). Malcolm’s use of the phrase encompasses many of the arguments she deploys throughout her work, but the basic concept remains as simple as it is powerful: psychoanalysis does not offer answers, it can only expose complexities. Malcolm explores the difficulties of psychoanalysis by framing her text in the manner of a dialogue between a fictional psychoanalyst and a sceptical listener. Towards the end of her argument, Malcolm discusses the difficulty of deploying psychoanalytic tropes to literary texts, asking how analysis can account for “the profound effect that people can have on each other, the fateful difference that a meeting between two people can make on the outcome of their lives” (147).

Describing his own combination of literary and psychoanalytic training some 19 years later in a collection of essays entitled *Promises Promises*, Adam Phillips sets out to reconstruct psychoanalysis as a discipline that better incorporates the variable needs of its patients. Unlike in *Intimacies*, a monograph in which Phillips sought to reappraise the insistence on interpersonal difference in psychoanalytic thought, this earlier collection views literature as a means of expanding the scope of analysis: “psychoanalytic writing will need to be a place – as indeed, literature has always been – where people can voice enthusiasms with comparable vigour, where neither the pragmatist nor the dreamer can become a refugee from one another.” (xviii).

The flaws that Phillips notes in the psychoanalytic process in these two works – a tendency towards emphasising difference and an uncertainty as to the aims of the analytic process – cast Malcolm’s observations in a new light. Psychoanalysis, as configured by Phillips, seeks to analyse interpersonal connections in a manner in which potential outcomes are variable and contextual. He places literature and psychoanalysis on an equal footing, viewing them as both as means to “inspire us to live more justly pleasurable, more morally intriguing lives” (xviii). In short, using Phillips’ work allows a reader to analyse the “fateful difference” that a meeting between two people can generate whilst using psychoanalysis in more creative, less predetermined ways.

So what of David Kepesh, Roth’s hapless hero? Psychoanalytic tropes are of relatively little use for interpreting his narratives, insofar as the narratives themselves are wearied with conventional psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, the complexity of these texts affords Roth an unparalleled sense of authorial freedom – psychoanalysis has been used as a primary reference point in this thesis, but often as much for its internal flexibility as its intrinsic relevance. One would struggle to read texts like *The Breast* outside of a psychoanalytic context, but this should not bind a critic to use the same interpretative toolset for novels as different as *The Professor of Desire* and *The Dying Animal*.

The Kepesh novels afford Philip Roth an element of flexibility in his fiction that his other narrators fail to provide in quite the same way. Archival evidence suggests that Roth devoted more time to Kepesh as a narrator than may otherwise be indicated: in the event of material relating to *The Dying Animal* being released, this perception of the novels may be rendered even more complex. Roth’s legacy remains unsettled, and critical perspectives on his work are incorporating an increasingly wide variety of debates and themes. In light of this, it may be worth asking what the value is in studying an aspect of Roth’s work (sexuality) that has long been associated with him, with regards to a group of novels in which the theme, for all its visibility, is less celebrated.

Whilst critical interest in the trilogy has increased with each addition to Kepesh’s story, culminating in a collective fascination with *The Dying Animal*, few studies have taken the novels as a body of work that follows its own set of narrative rules. Even those that have, such as Debra Shostak’s *Countertexts*,

*Counterlives*, provide insights into these works that are more tantalising than they are conclusive. Shostak's work has nonetheless informed this thesis greatly, offering it some of the primary modes of theoretical discourse that it has used to further analysis of all three primary texts. As well as providing some initial theoretical approaches, her work has suggested the value of viewing Roth's texts as points of intersection rather than expositions of a given theme.

There are themes common to all three of these novels which recur in different ways and for different purposes, but all of which are dependent on sexuality for their coherence. There are primary-level themes that are detectable in all three works as core areas of debate, but there are also secondary themes that are visible in all three novels to variable extents. For example, the significance of academic practice, the role of social convention in American culture and perceptions of masculinity are themes that inform all the Kepesh novels, and frequently determine events within them. Other themes, such as changes in psychoanalytic theory (*The Breast*), Jewish identity (*The Professor of Desire*) and bodily decay (*The Dying Animal*) are explicit themes contingent on the individual approaches that each text takes – although these themes are detectable to some extent in all three works.

Roth's claim that the Kepesh novels function as "erotic variations" is thus worth returning to in more detail. Connections between these works are difficult to predicate on any specific grounding that each provides. Equally, the focus on themes that unite the novels can serve to disassociate them from each other; in the Kepesh novels, everything is related to everything else. Roth's playfulness is in full evidence, as the construction of the trilogy calls into question the nature of their grouping. These are novels about heterosexual male desire, certainly, but they are also novels about the limitations of certain perspectives and expectations associated with such desires. The Kepesh novels are wilfully paradoxical, calculatedly subversive and flagrantly infuriating.

Psychoanalysis, especially when reconstructed in the manner that Phillips suggests, offers a means of approach that can contend with many of these issues simultaneously. However, one should also be aware of Phillips' scepticism towards the rules and dogma that can be attached to psychoanalytic



approaches to literature. Fetishism provides an approach that contends with multiplicity without affording a critic a code through which to understand a novel. Fetishism is a theme in Roth's work which encompasses a broad range of discourses, both within Freud's work and beyond it. It invites a critic to consider the coding of gender and the extremities of lust, but in its internal inconsistencies it also invites the reader to pay closer attention to the subversive operations within a text.

Fetishistic modes of textual interpretation recall the division initially proposed by Janet Malcolm, whose narrator tentatively casts literature and psychoanalysis on opposing sides by their attitudes to selfhood. It offers a means of access that is by no means suitable for all texts, but helps frame the "variations" that Roth deploys in the Kepesh novels. It proposes a network of intersections along psychoanalytic lines, a willingness to incorporate connections provided both by context and by comparison. It allows for an approach to these novels that takes the model of multiple discourse engendered by fetishism, and applies it in search of analyses that reframe existing approaches. In doing so, it depicts the Kepesh novels as an unexpected source of textual richness within Roth's body of work.

Despite this, it would be difficult to argue that this approach is free from the taint of defensiveness that has characterised much recent debate on Philip Roth - this thesis partly stems from a conviction that Roth is not a misogynistic writer (although Kepesh is). It is also based on a fundamental attitude that the Kepesh novels are underappreciated, both by Roth's critics and his readers as a whole. In some ways, the latter idea informs the former; the Kepesh novels should be more widely regarded precisely because they reframe Roth's writings on sex and sexuality. The immediacy of Roth's prose makes it tempting to view the novels as banally solipsistic, but they may instead exemplify his willingness to indict himself in order to represent these themes honestly. One need not agree with Roth's playful argument that *The Breast* is an act of empathy towards his female readers in order to believe that he is an innovative writer on the subject of sexual intimacy.

In her 2014 satiric novel *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, Adelle Waldman describes the sexual and textual meanderings of a romantically skittish male protagonist, who ponders: “Did romance reveal some truth, a fundamental lack, a coldness, that made him shrink back at just the point when reciprocity was called for?” (186). The trials of Waldman’s titular hero are often evocative of the trials of David Kepesh, and no more so than at this moment when fretfulness appears at a moment when intimacy is expected. Waldman’s novel, like Roth’s Kepesh novels, reminds readers that sex is always overinvested, that it represents a point of crisis with regards to self-perception. Nathaniel Piven fails to learn the lesson of these crises, making the superficially happy ending to Waldman’s novel (Piven’s entering into a new relationship) seem shrouded in foreboding and cynicism. Had he read *The Professor of Desire*, he might have been more cautious.

Kepesh, like Piven, is constrained by his failures of reciprocity – and like Piven, he is overly ready to believe that sex exposes a fundamental truth about oneself and one’s relation to others. Psychoanalysis, as well as literature itself, reveals that sex can never be fully isolated from the myriad concerns it inevitably brings with it. Although Kepesh is portrayed as being aware of this, his approach to human relationships is nonetheless predicated on a desire for absolutes, affording him an interpretative alienation that functions to deny intimacy. It is not enough to suggest that the Kepesh novels view intimacy as an impossible ideal; intimacy is rendered impossible by the self-subverting strategies deployed by their narrators.

Sexual intimacy is always contingent, always variable. Roth’s Kepesh novels are novels about the failures of intimacy, what happens when characters evince a “fundamental lack” through sex that is rooted in a desperate desire for knowledge. This is all the more ironic given the academic background that Roth affords his protagonist; Roth satirises the desire to ‘know’ sex, rather than bask in its contradictions and its complexities. In paying heed to these paradoxes and ambiguities, Roth constructs his own perspective as deeply attuned to the flaws of his narrators. It is this aspect of Roth’s fiction - his subversive playfulness - that this thesis has attempted to emulate



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