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1 Introduction

Philip Roth was born in 1933 in Newark, New Jersey; his career spanned over sixty years and more than 30 books, when he passed away in 2018, at the age of eighty-five. His work excels in diversity of form and content and, nevertheless, all his novels have one thing in common: Roth's unique voice. It is "irreverent yet earnest, questioning yet authoritative, subtle and nuanced yet powerful and passionate; above all, obsessive, compulsive, driven" (Brauner 2), and so, it seems, has been his career.

From the very beginning of his career, Roth has frequently been compared with Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow as the three writers have a similar background: they are second or third generation Jewish-Americans. Since Roth has repeatedly pointed out that he is first and foremost an American writer who happens to be Jewish, this paper will do like McDaniel (1974), Rodgers (1978) and others, and focus on his work as a realist writer in terms of style, humor and reader response rather than the context of Jewishness or religion. Of course, for a novel like *Portnoy's Complaint* (1972), the religious aspect cannot be left out, but it will not constitute the center of my analysis. However, I agree with McDaniel, who argues that "we can best assess Roth's artistry by viewing him, rather broadly, as a writer whose artistic intentions are 'moral', whose method is realistic, and whose subject is the self in society" (McDaniel 202).

In the second chapter of this thesis I provide an introduction to the origins of American literary realism, which flourished between 1865, the end of the Civil War, and 1914, the beginning of World War I. It was "a call for men and women to attend to the actualities of life as it is lived, not as it is dreamed or feared" (Quirk viii). This could also be seen by the fact, that many writers worked in fiction as well as in journalism, e.g. Mark Twain, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. This was further encouraged by William Dean Howells, Realist writer himself, and editor of some of the most influential magazines at the time (Singley 334).

Roth can be considered a neo-realist writer; neo-realism developed in the post war era of the 1960s due to great social changes all over America which called for a new way of writing. "Within the contours of an ordinary world the author has to implant something extraordinary, avoiding thinness of texture. In (neo-)realism sophistication is manifested in simplicity. Or better, simplicity is but the mask for underlying sophistication"

(Versluys 8). Nevertheless, it was considerably overshadowed by the emergence of postmodernism which, ever since, has been an all-time favorite in the academic circles, according to Shechner (30): “Who pays attention these days when we are being modest, careful, subtle, and discriminating, speaking earnestly about the morality of daily conduct or simply about the cares and routines of common life?” Philip Roth and his readers most certainly do, but this also caused him a barrage of surprisingly emotional criticism, notably in the first decade of his career. In his non-fiction book *Reading Myself And Others*, Roth comments that “fiction frees us from the circumscriptions that society places upon feeling” and “allows both the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways not always available in day-to-day conduct” (qtd. in Halio 7).

In my thesis, I am analyzing narrative techniques and will attempt to answer the question what it is about Roth’s style and choice of language that makes for a highly emotional reader response. To demonstrate his great diversity in style and setting, I look at three novels that are inherently different in structure, voice, and story—two of his early novels, *When She Was Good* (1967) and *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1972), and one of his more recent short novels, *Everyman* (2006).

As a background for my analysis, I examine the history and stylistic features of American literary neo-realism, with a strong focus on Kristiaan Versluis’s collection of essays *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*. Having this as a theoretical background, I would like to tap into a fairly new research field, which is concerned with the conveying of emotions in works of fiction—what Patrick Colm Hogan (2011) calls *Affective Narratology*. For this purpose, I will also consult the book *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction* by Howard Sklar (2013), who has also published important work in this field. One goal is to show that neo-realism offers many possibilities to apply affective narratology and to analyze Roth’s work according to various stylistic features in order to explain what it is in particular, that makes for a highly emotional, often uncomfortable reader response.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Historical and Literary Context

2.1.1 American Literary Realism

As with most literary eras, there is no set date at which realism came to see the light; It gradually worked its way into the novels and short stories of its time. Nonetheless, there are two historic events which are popularly used by scholars, such as Quirk, to bracket its glory days: realism started to thrive around 1865, the year in which the American Civil War came to an end at a farmhouse in Virginia, with general Lee signing the peace treaty. It allegedly ended around 1919, the year in which the Treaty of Versailles was signed in a castle near Paris, France which is considered to manifest the end of World War I. Quirk (vii) pointed out that the locations of those two events are just as different and far apart as “the distance (cultural, political, and other) that America had traveled in so brief a time”.

The labels for this period were as plentiful as the changes it brought. Mark Twain called it the “Gilded Age”, literary historian Vernon Parrington referred to it as the “Great Barbecue”. Some considered it a “mauve decade” while other thought of it as “a time in ‘ferment’” (Quirk vii). No matter what one may call it, four years of Civil War have left their marks on the people of America and they found themselves in an exceptional situation and a time of great change. The defeat of the South and the abolition of slavery under president Lincoln was one of the most important events in the history of America and changed its way forever. Recuperating from the repercussions of war, dealing with substantial changes of the social order and adapting to drastically new technologies was a difficult task for many and there was a need for American culture to adapt accordingly (Quirk vii).

American literary realism represents those changes in America and reminded people to “attend to the actualities of life as it is lived, not as it is dreamed or feared” (Quirk viii). One of the pioneers of realism, William Dean Howells, suggested that “novelists might do a real service to the moral life [...] ‘if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation’” (Quirk viii). This, of course, was in strong contrast to the American Renaissance or the Romantic Period which flourished in the country before the Civil War; afterwards it seemed rather out of place. New social

questions and the political situation called for a new way of writing which was provided by the Realists and Naturalists of the time. Nevertheless, what became apparent quite quickly was that the new complexity of life could not be discussed in merely one book, or, as William Dean Howells phrased it: “the attempt to capture American life in a single work was much like trying to put ‘a bushel measure in a pint cup’” (qtd. in Quirk xv). This gave rise to a great variety of realist writers, their different approaches and most of all very localized styles.

It was also the age of naturalism which shares some characteristics with realism as they both focus on empirics and refuse sentiments. They differ significantly because Realists will not grant science to have the final say about the human condition and are generally critical towards scientists whereas naturalists strongly rely on them. A development towards rationality also took place amongst the philosophers of the time. For example, Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel believed that “the law of matter were the highest laws, and chief among them for Spencer was the law of evolution—the passage of matter from an ‘indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity to a definite, coherent, heterogeneity’” (Quirk x). This newfound complexity of life was quite challenging for people to adapt to and later also led to Van Wyck Brooks’ dichotomies in his book *America’s Coming of Age* where he distinguishes between *Highbrows* who he describes as “principled and virtuous, but inept and condescending” and *Lowbrows* who are said to be “likeable but coarse and vulgar” (Quirk xi). Brooks went on to thoroughly investigate American culture and came to the result that especially American literature at the time suffered from a lack of vitality and authenticity and ought to find a middle ground to cater to the average American, which was found in realism. The Romantic period spawned many masterpieces, but often in the extent of 800 pages epics such as Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. In contrast to that, realist writers usually embraced brevity as well as simple language and relatable topics (Quirk xi). This is also a continuous pattern in the works of Philip Roth whose novels are around 300 to 400 pages long and based around everyday life of lower- or middle-class people. However, there are exceptions, such as Dreiser, who’s realistic novels are quite lengthy.

Some popular themes for literature that emerged during this period were “unmasking the falsehood of conventionally understood and rather fixed ideas about the separate roles of the sexes, the nature of heroism, the sanctioned privileges of class, and so forth” as stated by Quirk (xii). Quite often this was achieved using irony as, for example,

in William Dean Howell's story *Editha*, which can also be considered an early piece of Realist writing which coined its period. The character George Gearson surrendered to his spouse and involuntarily went to war where he eventually and by chance becomes a war hero, while in truth, it was his cowardice to speak up to Editha which got him there. This is very reminiscent of Roth's style of writing and the themes are to a certain degree still relevant many decades after the emergence of traditional realism. In a later chapter, I will discuss how Roth draws attention to and questions some social standards and prejudice as well as the roles of the sexes. Apart from using irony, Realist writers were also quite fond of using other techniques or genres "to render the truths of experience or to disclose to the reader the falseness of certain piously held notions. Fables, parables, burlesque, parodies, ghost stories, satires, utopian novels, fantasy, science fiction, and other fictive forms might participate in the realist cultural agenda by awakening readers to the truths of life as they knew it" (Quirk xiii).

Since many soldiers have travelled long distances to other counties during the war there was a newfound curiosity in learning about those places. This was the case not only for the soldiers themselves but also for their families who wanted to learn about the places their beloved had fought in. In addition to that, there was also a strong increase of immigration to the United States which led to great cultural diversity but also nervousness of the unknown or xenophobia. This opened the door for regionalist writing which was mainly concerned with the ordinary, focused on character rather than plot, and often used local dialects, which were all also characteristics of literary realism. In addition, relatable characters were often used in a humorous manner which allowed for "a mockery of the social superiority of the sophisticated characters and language of the romantic tradition, puncturing the inflated concerns of transcendental philosophy" (Nagel xxii). Those features can also be found in Philip Roth's novels, which, to a great extent, are set in New Jersey, where Roth was born and raised. For example, the protagonist of *Everyman* is from Elizabeth, which is only a few kilometers away from Roth's hometown Newark. Arguably even more relatable is the location of *When She Was Good*, which is in the heartland of America and described so generically that it could apply to myriad small towns.

This tendency toward "the local-color tradition of regional stories" (Nagel xxii) led to a significant increase in the popularity, and consequently, the number of magazines and newspapers and editors filled them with realistic short stories. This interconnectedness

of cultural, social and political factors also encouraged many writers “such as Twain, Crane and Dreiser” to work “as reporters as well as novelists (Singley 333). William Dean Howells played a significant role in the interworking of Realist writers and journalism because he was the editor of several important magazines, such as *Harper's Monthly* and *Cosmopolitan*. Thus, he was able to further the writings of many of his fellow friends and colleagues, Henry James and Mark Twain, amongst others. His mindset for the everyday life and common people shaped realism and allowed Howells to spread his belief that “moral was essential to good art” (Singley 334). Both, Howells and Twain, wrote a character into a moral predicament where they had to make a fundamental decision. In William Dean Howells' case, it is the protagonist of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, who must decide on his principles or money. Whereas Huck in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* must choose between human decency and setting free a slave and the legal system which would require him to relinquish his companion. Arguably, at the time of publication around 1840 this was “the most dramatic decision in American literature, one illustrative of the kinds of issues that served as conflicts in realistic fiction” (Nagel xxv). Moral is also a continuous topic in Roth's novels and particularly in *Portnoy's Complaint* it is ever-present since the novel evolves around Alexander's self-deprecating struggle with his compulsive masturbation. Roth's short-novel *Everyman* is not only named after the fifteenth century morality play, but also concerned with the protagonist reminiscing about what would have been the right thing to do.

Another advocate of realism was Hamlin Garland, who criticized authors who wrote about locations they have never been to themselves and thus he promoted the tendency for regionalism. He was joined by Theodore Dreiser, who also believed that every facet of life must be recognized and appreciated, even the grotesque and unpleasant ones, which many of his characters had to face in his novels, such as *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier* (Singley 334). Nevertheless, its authenticity and closeness to life was perceived as pessimism by some readers, who found it questionable. I would suggest, that this is also the case with the work of Philip Roth, because he does not shy away from addressing uncomfortable or taboo topics such as domestic violence, masturbation, infidelity or the fear of old age and death.

The term *Realism* itself originated in France where it was used to describe a new style of painting around 1850. However, the term was soon also applied to describe literature

and within a decade, it has made its way to America (Nagel xxiv). Not only the term has its origins in Europe but also some of the subjects and characteristics. Immigrants from Scandinavia have already been exposed to the works of Henry Ibsen for many years, in France Gustave Flaubert published *Madame Bovary*, which is 200 years later still sometimes considered as the best novel ever written, and Tolstoy wrote the *Sevastopol Sketches* about social class and justice in Russia. Exposed to the work of such great minds it is no surprise that European settlers brought some of the culture with them and thus helped influence the new era in America.

Fundamentally, the underlying assumption of the Realists was not that their fiction constituted 'reality' itself but rather that reality could be understood and made the basis of art by capturing the 'common vision'. The physical world was sufficiently stable and available to empirical scrutiny to depict in literature, the concept of 'mimetic representation'. This thinking led to a variety of approaches, one of them being slice-of-life fiction, a mode close to journalism, in which the story rendered a moment of experience for a character. More often, however, the central character was placed in a position of ethical crisis. Since reality was physical, stable, and comprehensible, the conflicts focused on the responsibility of characters for choices they were free to make, giving protagonists 'agency' to act in accord with their own moral values. (Nagel xxv)

In her article, Singley suggests that realism is "the result of viewing the world neither with the rose-tinted spectacles of romanticism nor with the dark shades of naturalism, but with the clear lenses of scientific objectivity and photographic accuracy" and works with a "single pointed perspective that produces the illusion of neutrality" (Singley 331). As has been established above, it is much rather naturalists who draw their approaches from science than realists do. Furthermore, I would argue that "a single coordinated system or single-point perspective" as Singley (331) is paraphrasing Paul Schellinger does not lead to photographic accuracy. Instead, it gives the reader a highly personal and thus subjective insight into a social context. It is presented as neutral or true but is emotionally biased to some degree as in the nature of personal renderings.

Nevertheless, Singley does point out that realism was an important vehicle for social change. Literature was used to depict "the pressure of everyday reality", as a "vehicle for social reform and social awareness" and "to investigate the workings of society" (Singley 333).

2.1.2 Neo-Realism

For my own experience as a consumer of books I can agree with Versluys (7), who points out that, as readers, we have learned to constantly anticipate the extraordinary, unimaginable plot twists, beginnings being ambiguous and endings erratic. Those expectations could not be any more remote from our real-life experiences, where sometimes communication even fails when we do say what we mean. Certainly, escaping reality and diving into another world is one of the appeals of literature for many readers and they have a large range of authors to choose from, who will provide them with postmodernism, science-fiction, fantasy literature or anything their heart desires. “Nonetheless, we all know, in those moments we stop being intellectuals and return to life as ordinary human beings, that the real IS real and that, if one kicks a stone, it hurts” (Versluys 7) and it lies in the tradition of neo-realist fiction to capture those moments and feelings and “assume a meaningful connection between the individual and the common phenomenal world” (Lodge 16). One of the authors who has excelled in the “reality-effect” (Versluys 8) for over five decades is Philip Roth.

To obtain the so-called ‘reality-effect’ one has to construct a fictional universe in which all the structures of the experiential world apply. Within the contours of an ordinary world the author has to implant something extraordinary, avoiding thinness of texture. Or better, simplicity is but the mask of underlying sophistication. (Versluys 8)

By doing so, the author is enabled to question social and political concepts and possibly also the metanarrative density of postmodernism as well as the lengthy sentimentality of romanticism. The author is much rather focused on reaching the reader through captivating dialogue about everyday life. The simplicity of the topic makes it highly relatable, but its broadness ensures a great variety of subjects because the experiences and perspectives of the human condition are infinite.

Neo-realism developed in the post-war period of the 1950’s alongside postmodernism, which is an all-time favorite amongst scholars and has caused the former to not always receive the attention it would have deserved. It did have many advocates who were in favor of traditional writers such as Twain, James and Dickens and promoted the “narrative strategies in which the implicit contract between writer and reader is not broken on purpose and in which social reality is probed rather than that again and again questions are raised about the ‘meaning of meaning’ and related philosophical conundrums” (Versluys 10). Nevertheless, neo-realism appeared to have lived in the shadows of

postmodernism and Mark Shechner (27) summarized the problem with an example from his private life: he once went to the movies to see *My Left Foot* with a colleague, who is a scholar, and his wife, who is not. The film moved his wife to tears and she enjoyed it very much, whereas his colleague did acknowledge, that it was overall a well-executed movie but that it lacked “the problematics of a great film” and “didn’t raise any interesting issues”. Shechner saw the validity of both reactions, but, in the end, he had to conclude that his wife’s response was heartfelt and genuine, whereas his colleague, even in her spare time, analyzed the movie by the standards of academic fashion and rather detached from her own emotions. He argues that the danger of living in such a scholarly bubble is that eventually one loses touch with mainstream culture and possibly one’s own emotions. This long-standing neglect of emotions in academia is also going to be an important issue in the following chapter, where I discuss the fairly new approach of affective narratology. After dominating academic circles for many decades now, Shechner predicts that postmodernism is past its prime and that, when looking for extraordinary, contemporary writers, we find many of them writing in the tradition of realism. Among the authors that he mentions are Tom Wolfe, John Casey, Robert Stone. John Updike, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, on the other hand, had already been around for many decades and can be considered as staples of neo-realist writing. He argues that the traditions of realism have passed the test of time because what has worked for Mark Twain, Henry James or F. Scott Fitzgerald can seamlessly be continued by contemporary writers with merely slight adjustments and it still creates “a new awareness of voice and of language as the echo chamber of history and tradition, a consciousness of region and place, a revived ethnic and regional sensitivity, a new awareness of traditional folk narrative, a distinct political animus” (Shechner 31).

Its applicability is a crucial aspect of neo-realism because it enabled many marginalized social groups to voice their point of view in a very effective manner. Similar to how there used to be a great interest in regionalism when realism first emerged, there now was the possibility for “Chinese-American writers, Native-American writers, and Black or Afro-American writers” (Shechner 32) as well as Jewish-Americans and female writers to tell their stories and be heard. Philip Roth has always shared the pedestal of great Jewish-American writers with Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow although Roth has repeatedly pointed out that, first and foremost he is an American writer, who happens to be Jewish: “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew. The biggest

concern and passion in my life is to write fiction, not to be a Jew” (qtd. in Rodgers, Jr. Preface)

Nevertheless, it is writing like his that filled the cultural void left by master narratives and helped created consciousness of ethnic communities (Shechner 32). In his essay, Shechner continues by posing the question what marginality implies within a society and, reminiscent of Philip Roth’s stance, he considers all those writers with different ethnical background to really constitute the new voice of America, representing the awareness for regionalism and diversity:

Theirs is a fiction of man alone, who is a figure of minimal interest, to him or herself as well as to us. It is to the second and third-generations ethnics [sic]—Afro-Americans, Native-Americans (500th generation though they may be), Chinese-Americans, and Jewish-Americans—that we turn for that full range of human meanings and possibilities that only culture can produce. The writers who have not wholly assimilated to America are the ones to whom we look for a literature of life-in-culture. (Shechner 50)

He later seizes the opportunity to point out that postmodernism, on the other hand, is still largely based on European culture and even in America mainly situated in New York City. He appears to be suggesting that it may be a less American art form.

Looking at the market of fiction, it is important to note, that after its high point of commercialization, postmodernism soon retreated to mainly flourish in the academy. To a certain degree, universities affect literary taste insofar as they cater their students with a certain canon that is considered standard literature. Beyond that, Shechner (34) points out, that they also have the function “to ordain and protect forms of expression that cannot meet the test of the market. It is and ought to be a refuge. But in being one it also relieves art of the need to meet the tests of entertainment and popular approval”. Thus, it was distinctly different to realism, which actually and successfully met the popular demand of America’s readership outside of the academy.

Having a large audience, highly relatable content about everyday America and strong dialogues, neo-realist writing also makes for great film adaptations which, economically speaking, is an important factor. On one hand, the nature of neo-realism presents a good foundation for a screenplay adaption which, nowadays, is amongst the best financial opportunities for a writer. On the other hand, I would argue that a commercial success like that also affects the genre as a whole, because fans of a novel are likely to have an appetite for more literature that is akin. Of course, this is also the case for

several other genres and especially fantasy and science-fiction adaptations, such as *Game of Thrones* or *Blade Runner*, have proven to draw an incredible fanbase in the last decades. There are also the rather seldom cases of a postmodern work being adapted into a movie, as it was the case with Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*. Nevertheless, ten of his novels were adapted into movies or TV-shows. To name only a few examples, in 2003 *The Human Stain* was filmed starring Anthony Hopkins and Nicole Kidman, 2008 the movie *Elegy* was based on Roth's *The Dying Animal* and starred Ben Kingsley and Penélope Cruz, 2014 *The Humbling* was filmed with Al Pacino and in 2016 Ewan McGregor directed and starred in *American Pastoral*, alongside Dakota Fanning.

In another essay from Versluys book, Winfried Fluck largely agrees with Shechner's criticism of the glorification of postmodernism and the discrepancy between the literature that is discussed in classrooms and literature that is read for recreational purposes. Fluck (65) states some possible reason for what helped the popularity of realism. On the one hand, it was the excessive exhaustion of everything that made postmodernism appealing in the beginning, to a degree that its playfulness turned into predictability. On the other hand, there was Tom Wolfe, a well-respected person of public interest as well as one of the pioneers of new journalism, who took a stance for the new social novel and promoted it. Apart from this, Fluck contemplates what has influenced neo-realism and, interestingly, states postmodernism as a point of reference alongside traditional nineteenth century realism. He sees the nature of (neo-)realism to be constantly evolving based on the reality in which it exists and uses Roland Barthes' terminology of the 'reality effect' to describe to describe the common denominator:

In this sense, realism is no more (and no less) than a system of rhetorical strategies in order to claim special authority for one's own interpretation of reality. It does not simply reflect or mirror reality, but offers a version of it, based on certain assumptions about the nature of the real and the best way of gaining knowledge about it. (Fluck 67)

He praises postmodernism for its variety of modes and playfulness with meanings and suggests differentiating the two styles of writing on an aesthetic level. In this case, it will not come as a surprise, that what we find in the semantics of realism oftentimes appears rather simple or monotonous, especially in comparison to postmodernism, because it focuses strongly on common people and dialogue, as we have heard in the

previous chapter. It may even appear anticlimactic or surprisingly sobering when “crisis and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth but accidental occurrences in a dehierarchized sequence of daily events” (73). For example, the part in Philip Roth’s *Everyman* when Millicent Kramer confesses her enormous suffering from physical pain to the protagonist, is not the beginning of a romance, nor the protagonist’s chance to be a hero. Instead, it is the last conversation they have before she commits suicide.

Like many neo-realists, Roth’s novels are usually set in a simple environment and it is the emotions and reactions of his characters that are thrilling and unusual but at the same time seem very familiar. The characters are no heroes and easily triggered by minor instances. Sometimes, the reader will get clues as to why a certain situation was so intense and possibly even be provided with different points of view. At other times, bizarre overreactions of a character may serve as hints to his or her narrative reliability, as I would argue, is the case with *When She Was Good*. Lucy has been frustrated with her father for many years and it is suggested that he also abuses her mother. Nevertheless, the scene which is told from several different points of view, where the father tips over the mother’s footbath which in turn causes Lucy to burst out in aggression and call the police on her father, against the advice of everybody else, appears out of place. Such behavior, I would argue, makes it so relatable because it is in the nature of human beings to sometimes act in incomprehensible ways. In this novel, this scene can also be an indication of Lucy’s pathological need to control other people but, once again, it does not serve as an epiphany or moral.

In his essay, Fluck discusses the work of another Realist, Raymond Carver, but his analysis is also applicable to Philip Roth. He describes this mode of representation as follows: “What is lost in context, is gained in intensity and aesthetic effect. It is an effect generated by a realistic surface that promises to represent and thus to become meaningful, yet fails to do so, but which is, at the same time, nevertheless constantly recharged with the suggestion of meaning [...]” (Fluck 73). The reader is trained to expect such intense scenes to eventually end with a dramatic relief and I would argue that the sobering realization that there is none leads to heightened emotions. This is further discussed in the following chapters with in-depth examples of Philip Roth’s work as well as the insights of affective narratology (Hogan 1) and the concept of “Feeling of Body” (Gallese, Wojciehowski 3).

2.2 Feeling of Body

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in emotions in the academy, which, amongst others, correlates with some new technologies, such as the MRI, that provide us with new ways to study the (human) brain and how it reacts in specific situations. This has led neuroscience to merge over into many other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics and also literary studies—Gallese and Wojciehowski call this neurohumanism (3). For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on the emergence of cognitive literary studies and some of its findings, which have been particularly relevant for the reader response theory.

While reader responses to texts are by nature subjective, the way in which we meet fictional characters is, to a certain degree, navigated by the information provided by the author. Thus, he or she controls to a certain extent whether a character will be perceived as likeable or not. Just as in real life, first impressions are not always accurate and sometimes we will have to admit that we have misjudged a character based on preliminary information that the author has carefully shaped for this purpose. Roth's novels provide a broad range of examples for this emotional development, as I would argue, rather of the reader than of the fictional character itself. For example, in *When She Was Good*, the protagonist Lucy seems very sympathetic in the beginning. When turbulences start to occur, one thus tends to blame her husband first but towards the end, it is Lucy who spirals out of control and becomes absolutely grotesque. Alexander, the protagonist of *Portnoy's Complaint*, is a rather grotesque character throughout the novel, but once we learn more about his constant inner struggle and his intense mother, we tend to feel more sympathetic towards his actions. In the short novel *Everyman*, the unnamed protagonist is presented as an unsympathetic character, but I would argue that through Roth's narrative techniques, such as the narrative frame, the reader tends to feel empathy for him.

For now, I would like to further investigate the nature of emotional responses to fiction. Generally, we can distinguish between the ethical aspects (Sklar 2) which are discussed in Howard Sklar's book *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction* by looking at the nature of feelings; and the cognitive aspect, which is the topic of the article "How Stories Make Us Feel: Toward an Embodied Narratology" by Gallese and Wojciehowski and look at the brain activities stimulated by emotions. Both works are based on the research of

Patrick Colm Hogan and his book *Affective Narratology*, the basis for the concept of “Feeling of Body” developed by Gallese and Wojciehowski.

In his book, Sklar ultimately suggests that empathy and sympathy caused in a person by reading a novel has a positive impact on the persons’ moral development, which is sometimes referred to as the *empathy-altruism* theory. While this is an interesting idea, and there are indeed studies that show those people who read are more likely “to perform volunteer and charity work, to visit art museums, and to attend and participate in performing art and sports events” (Keen xvii), I agree with Keen’s understanding that novels do not necessarily produce good citizens. She raised the essential question: “do empathetic people make good readers, or do good readers become empathetic people?”, and her answer is: “Both may be true without guaranteeing that novels routinely do more than entertain, inform, soothe, or excite their readers” (Keen xv). Nevertheless, Sklar’s discussion of the believability of fiction and how this affects the emotional response of the readers is very interesting and useful for this thesis. His hypothesis is the following: “I believe that characters that are rendered realistically can be considered similar to people we might encounter in life—indeed, *life-like*—and that readers frequently regard them and respond to them as such” (Sklar 10). While he does point out that there are important distinctions between the two realms of emotions, they do share interesting properties.

According to Sklar, the problem lies in what he calls, the “real-fictional-dichotomy”. This is described as the notion that fictional characters have *unreal* properties and real-life human beings have *real* properties. At first sight, this seems hard to challenge but Sklar’s arguments are intriguing and give a new perspective on fiction. In particular, it is the way in which the reader learns about a character, or becomes acquainted with him or her, that is quite similar to how we encounter people in real life.

The reader typically receives particularly personal and fragmented information about a character over a short time span and this is one of the reasons why fictional characters are intuitively perceived as being different. It is argued that, on the contrary, this is actually a parallel. Sklar explains that, apart from our family and friends, we get to know people fragmentarily and are so used to it that our brain has learned to fill in missing information with our experience, very similar to when we are reading fiction.

That which allows us to form a mental image of a 'complete' human being out of fictional fragments that are provided is precisely our own prior experience with people. We fill in largely with information provided by our experience in 'real life'. In this respect, we respond to characters that are primarily 'real' in their essences, however much the object of our reflection has been 'made up' by an author. (Sklar 11)

He further supports his argument with the idea of *gestalt* (Iser 121), which suggests a similar concept of how readers manifest linguistic signs and several theories of reading were based on it. In this manner, the reader connects the fragments he or she is provided with, with experience from the real world. Thus, characters will seem and feel life-like. This theory is not limited to certain genres and applies to e.g. fantastic or utopian novels as well as to non-fiction (Sklar 12). I would like to suggest, that Philip Roth's writing, due to its nature as neo-realism which has been discussed in the previous chapter, is particularly prone to this reality-effect. That would be in unison with Sklar's theory because one of the examples he analyzes in a later chapter is the short-story "Eli, the Fanatic" by Roth.

The most important factor in this equation is nevertheless the attitude of the reader towards fiction and what Sklar calls the "generation of temporary belief":

On the one hand, a reader approaches a fictional work as – in other words, with the intention of inducing an (aesthetic) experience. On the other hand, a reader who engages deeply with a work of fiction—who becomes absorbed, for instance, on an emotional level—may simultaneously disengage his awareness of the work's fictionality. He may have the fictionality at the back of his mind, but the front of his mind, so to speak, is occupied with the sensation of realism, that the work produces. (Sklar 14)

In other words, the more the reader becomes absorbed in a novel, the stronger they are going to feel about the fictional characters. However, if reader constantly remind themselves of the fictionality of what they are reading, it will not affect them as much, or on another level. This is slightly reminiscent of the question put by Keen, whether empathic people make good readers or whether reading makes empathic people. I do not attempt to distinguish between a "right" or "wrong" way of reading, but for the purpose of my thesis I assume that, typically, temporary belief is generated while reading works of fiction.

Furthermore, I work with the stance that emotions felt while reading are to be considered real emotions and are of the same value as emotions felt in real-life. There are

some theories that suggest that what we feel while reading are “quasi-emotions” and are of a simulated nature. Kendall Walton (38), for example, compared them to children playing make-believe and suggests that reading novels is the equivalent to children pretending to be cops and robbers. While this comparison holds true to a certain degree, because the reader is using his imagination, it does become problematic when applied to emotions. That is to say, the reader does not imagine feeling sad, angry, happy, surprised, disgusted or scared. (Sklar 17)

Over the last two decades, there has been a considerable new interest in the study of the human mind due to new technology such as the MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging). The new ways in which scientists are now able to study the human brain was also of large interest to other disciplines such as cultural studies, psychology, social sciences and literary studies. The new field of cognitive literary studies has enabled scholars to find new approaches to narratology and reader responses.

In their article “How Stories Make Us Feel: Toward an Embodied Narratology”, Gallese and Wojciehowski elaborate on this topic and ultimately propose their own concept, called Feeling of Body (FoB). It is based on a discovery made in the 1990s, when scientists found mirror neurons in the brain of macaque monkeys. They were able to observe that the motor neurons were not only active when the monkey executed an activity but also when the monkey watched someone else performing the same activity. Or, in other words “observing an action causes in the observer the automatic activation of the same neural mechanism that is triggered by executing that action oneself” (Gallese, Wojciehowski 13). This has further led to extensive research and the discovery of the phenomenon known as mirror mechanism in the human brain. It is similar to what has been observed in the monkey’s brain but it

is also involved in processing action-related words and sentences, suggesting that mirror neurons, together with other parts of the sensory-motor system, could play a relevant role in the semantics of language. [...] This perspective, if complemented with the recent discoveries of neuroscience on the relationship between body and language, corroborate the potentialities of applying the Feeling of Body to narrative theory. (Gallese, Wojciehowski 14)

It is suggested that to some extent the mirror mechanism also takes place with our emotions, which makes it highly interesting for narratology and the study of reader responses, and thus for my thesis:

Our capacity to empathize with others [...] is most likely mediated by the embodied simulation mechanism [...]—that is, by the activation of the same neural circuits underpinning our own actions, emotional and sensory experiences. Our interpersonal relations—both in daily life as well as with fictional characters—are marked by our bodily involvement (the FoB) with the actions, emotions and sensations acted and expressed by others. (Gallese, Wojciewowski 15)

Following this argumentation, the Feeling of Body is of great interest for how we perceive novels because of the mirroring mechanisms that are at work while reading a narrative. Those mechanisms might even be heightened while consuming art, such as literature, because we are free from the distractions of our daily life, are typically in a comfortable and quiet place and can experience what we read to a full extent. We are able to contemplate our emotions fully and to indulge in our feelings toward the fictional characters.

Among the emotions that receive most attention to readers' response theories are empathy and sympathy—in her book *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen is exploring the triangle-relationship between author, reader and text in terms of empathy in every facet. As has been mentioned above, she does not believe in the empathy-altruism theory and also approaches the problematic aspects of empathy in fiction.

Keen touches upon the aspects of the mirror mechanism, the influence of the MRI, as well as the problematic discrepancy of status between popular fiction and “great literature” (Keen ix), which I have already elaborated on above. Ultimately, she takes all of this into consideration and presents a practical proposal of aspects that are likely to influence the reader's empathy.

It is suggested that one of the main factors that has an influence on the readers' empathy could be a certain degree of character identification:

[...] [It] often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways, but empathy for fictional characters appears to require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization. [...] Not all feeling states of characters evoke empathy; indeed, empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions, whether or not a match in details of experience exists. (Keen xii)

These are going to be essential points for my analysis for the novels of Philip Roth because most of them, and certainly the three works I chose for this thesis, address highly uncomfortable topics. I will argue that this, possibly, leads to a more intense

emotional relation between reader and fiction, even if they may not be able to fully identify with the actions of Lucy, Alexander, and the unnamed protagonist of *Everyman*.

Keen (xii) further argues that the “timing and context” will influence the feeling of empathy and depends on chance to some degree. On the one hand, for example, some Millennial-readers may not enjoy *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist* very much because they might not be able to relate to the novels or the plot of the mistreated child. On the other hand, an author could write and publish a novel, which, coincidentally, predicts “particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances” (Keen xii) and therefore may become tremendously relevant years or decades after the first publication. Even though some of Philip Roth’s novels have been published over fifty years ago and therefore lived through many social changes, I would argue that this factor does only partly apply to his work but is interesting in general. He is known for his controversial work and has received a good share of criticism for his novels, especially in the 60s when he published *When She Was Good* and later *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The former was criticized for being misogynistic and would probably be perceived as even more problematic in the light of today’s feminism. The latter was tremendously criticized for being anti-Jewish because of the compromising portrayal of Portnoy and seemed to have lost its shock value by today. Roth himself commented on the decrease of criticism he received from the Jewish community by suggesting that, maybe, the generation of people who cared so much has passed away by now.

This leads us to another factor, which is very applicable to the work of Roth: “Authors’ empathy can be devoted to socially undesirable ends that may be rejected by a disapproving reader. Indeed, empathic distress at feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a readers’ moral code may be a result of successfully exercised authorial empathy” (Keen xiii). I concur with this suggestion and discuss this phenomenon in detail in the following chapters of my thesis.

3 When She Was Good

Published in 1967, *When She Was Good* (*WSWG*) was Roth's second full-length novel and, with a break of five years after *Letting Go*, it was the longest it ever took him to finish a book in the entirety of his sixty years as a writer. At the time, the novel was often considered "the book without Jews" (Rodgers 60) because his work was notoriously analyzed in terms of Jewishness. It has long lived in the shadows of its successor, *Portnoy's Complaint*, which is concerned with the peculiar sexual practices of Alexander Portnoy, who is Jewish, which was not perceived too at the time of publication, in the late 60s. Generally, it is considered *the* novel by Philip Roth and will be discussed in the next chapter. *WSWG*, however, differs to his other works in terms of its setting, which is Liberty Center in the heartland of America. The majority of his other novels are set in or around New Jersey, Roth's home state. It could be argued that the time he spent at the Iowa Writers' Workshop between 1960 and 1962 could have had an influence on *WSWG*. Furthermore, it appears that in the novel he implemented some of his contemplations of what he wanted to achieve with his writing: "[...] through fiction, a writer can touch the moral consciousness of his reader—can cause him to ask questions he might not otherwise ask or might not be willing to ask aloud—can alter his perception of the world around him and heighten his awareness of everyday reality" (Roth qtd. in Rodgers 61). This is reminiscent of Keen's approach—Roth did not believe that fiction would have any "direct social or political consequences" (qtd. in Rodgers 61) but he did see the possibility to broaden horizons and enjoyed experimenting with literary techniques in doing so.

In his book on Philip Roth's work, Bernhard F. Rodgers, Jr. notes that *WSWG* is certainly not a stereotypical melodrama, even though Roth is borrowing some stylistic features of the genre. They are, however, used to mirror Lucy's perception of life, where everything and everyone must do morally good, according to her ideas. Beyond that, melodramatic narratives are known to cater to popular taste; thus, they can be used as a device to reach a larger audience than with a typical socio-critical work. At the same time, it is increasing the sobering effect by breaking with readers' expectations "to alter their perceptions and challenge their predispositions" (Rodgers 63).

According to his drafts, Roth considered several titles for the novel but ultimately decided to name it after a line from a poem from the nineteenth century—"There was a little Girl" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

There was a little girl,
Who had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good,
She was very good indeed,
But when she was bad she was horrid.

The simple language, the sweet and innocent description of the girl and the unexpected break of rhyme and content in the last line perfectly mirror the protagonist and the suddenness and intensity of her final and fatal breakdown.

The novel takes place in the 50s, approximately the same time as when it was written and published. It is a multigenerational narrative that touches on the history of five generations of a lower-class American family. Even though the narrative perspective changes throughout the novel, a great majority of the novel is presented through Lucy's eyes (Rodgers 68). This technique ultimately increases the antipathy towards her, since the reader witnesses many of her horrific thoughts and reasonings first-hand. Hence, the narrative appears more convincing, i.e. more shocking than through a second-hand account. This argument is supported by Keen, who pointed out that "[i]ndeed, sometimes the potential for character identification and readers' empathy decreases with sustained exposure to a particular figure's thoughts or voice" (Keen 96). In order to make his characters feel authentic, and also following the tradition of (neo)realism, Roth is using simple language to tell the tale of Lucy Nelson. This choice, however, should by no means imply that the language would be of lesser importance in this novel. Frank Kermode, for example, argues, that there "was a peculiar thinness of characterization in the book" (qtd. in Raban 160); Raban already points out that this was a stylistic choice to portray the simplicity of minds. This "restricted perspective" (Rodgers 66) also continues in the narrative itself which only takes up around 40 pages and afterwards the same events are repeated from various points of view over 260 pages. Raban compares the tone of *WSWG* to the plays of Albee and absurd theatre, whereas Husband (25) points out that it may appear dull to fans of Roth's previous work because of its simplicity in dialogue and language. The most obvious comparison, mentioned by the author himself as well as many scholars, is to *Madame Bovary* by

Gustave Flaubert. Husband (35) provides evidence: “Both are tales of women striving for an ill-defined, dimly senses ‘something more.’ Both project their ambitions onto well-meaning but weak husbands who fail to satisfy them. Both lack the self-consciousness to understand the injustice of their demands and seem inevitably to meet tragic ends”. However, Flaubert’s protagonist Emma is mainly focused on her status and wealth, whereas Lucy is described by Husband (35) as “a problematic feminist, a stereotypical man-hater.” I would like to mention at this point, that Roth has received a myriad of criticism for this novel and the character Lucy Nelson. The main argument therefore is that, allegedly, Lucy is based on his ex-wife Margaret Williams and that Roth is a misogynist (Peeler 31). I find an excessive comparison to the personal life of an author somewhat problematic and would further argue that Lucy is an extreme character, or even “more caricature than character” (Husband 40), by no means meant to represent a general image of women. Nevertheless, since this discussion exceeds the scope of my thesis, I will not further investigate this issue here. Instead, I would like to follow the path of Peeler, who also distanced herself from attempting yet another autobiographical reading of *WSWG*. She analyses the novel in terms of the concept of “ressentiment” developed by Friedrich Nietzsche and suggested that:

[...] it is a novel about goodness—about what being ‘good’ really means and how individuals conceive of and perform ‘goodness’. In the same vein as Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864), it satirically plays with the genre of the ‘good life’, searching for what underpins people’s ideas about goodness and finding unexpected ulterior motives. In other words, *When She Was Good* is a text that deliberately draws upon and reconfigures certain classical philosophical tropes about what sort of life should be lived to live well. (Peeler 33-34)

Such analysis is also supported by the first sentence of the novel which is: “Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized—that was the dream of his life” (*WSWG* 3)—the motto of Willard Carroll, Lucy Nelson’s grandfather, and the focal point of the first part of the novel.

3.1 Part One

The novel “begins in an omniscient, third-person voice, gradually shades into the voice of Willard Carroll” (Rodgers 71) by telling the reader about Willard’s upbringing in a town called Iron City around the 1900s which has led him to this motto. Swiftly the reader is informed about Willard’s cold-hearted father and the tragic story of his sister

Ginny, who remained mentally challenged after suffering from scarlet fever at the age of one. She was dismissed by their father and taken care of by Willard and his young family in his new home of Liberty Center. Such a dense supply of information of hardship surely alludes to the reader's emotions and establishes a certain degree of sympathy for Willard. If not the rescue of his disabled sister, it should be the confession of his progressing feebleness due to old age and his everlasting urge to provide comfort and be civil that is pleading for the readers' empathy:

Indeed, to this very day, when his famous agility, or jumpiness, has all but disappeared; when several times in an afternoon he finds himself in a chair which he cannot remember having settled into, awakening from a sleep he cannot remember needing; when at night to undo his laces produces a groan he does not even hear; when in his bed he tries for minutes on end to roll his fingers into a fist, and sometimes must go off to sleep having failed in the attempt; when at the end of each month he looks at the fresh new calendar page and understands that there on the pantry door is the month and the year in which he will most assuredly die, that one of those big black numerals over which his eye is slowly moving is the date upon which he is to disappear forever from the world – he nevertheless continues to attend as quickly as he is able to a weak porch rail, or the dripping of a spigot in the bathroom, or a tack come loose from the runner in the hall—and all this to maintain not only comfort of those who live with him yet, but the dignity of all too, such as it is. (*WSWG* 7)

The instances mentioned here are situations that most people will be able to imagine. Even a young reader might think of unknown struggles their parents or grandparents might have experienced. According to Keen's research, it has been established "that a character's negative affective states, such as those provoked by undergoing persecution, suffering, grieving, and experiencing painful obstacles, make a reader's empathizing more likely" and she added the following hypothesis: "Empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details of experience exists" (Keen 71-72). This is the first of numerous such instances throughout the novel; the intensity of which increases rapidly in the second half of the book.

Roth's choice of location is quite interesting; firstly, as has been mentioned above, his novels are typically set in and around New Jersey, whereas *WSWG* takes place in the middle of America. Secondly, the names he created are so generic that they appear almost comical: they live in Liberty Center, Willard is from Iron City and Roy grew up in Boys Town. Using a generic location is a popular technique to increase the relatability. Nowadays this might be most commonly known from the TV-show *The*

Simpsons. They live in a town called Springfield (there are about thirty-six townships with that name in the U.S.) and the exact location has remained up to speculation for three decades. Raban arrives at a similar conclusion and states that “[...] Liberty Center is deliberately inexplicit; it has the inclusive vagueness of a semi-allegorical landscape” (161).

The narrative’s chronology is disrupted quite a bit which becomes apparent by going from early childhood to approaching death in less than 10 pages, which Raban (157) described as the memory of “the patchwork of decline”. Roth created a third-person narrator which can give the reader the illusion of objectivity. However, the reader is following the memories of seventy-year-old Willard, who is contemplating his life choices by Ginny’s and Lucy’s gravestone. Nevertheless, the narrative situation changes several times, sometimes seamlessly, sometimes abruptly and Roth provides an “authorial narration that moves omnisciently inside many characters’ minds [...]” which allows the reader an insight that could increase “the chance of character identification” and thus empathy (Keen 96).

In terms of creating readerly empathy, I would like to emphasize Roth’s technique to introduce the protagonist herself. Firstly, the reader learns about her through the eyes of her grandfather, who is enamored and describes her as rather angelic, as “the tiny, spirited, golden-haired child that Lucy had been—how lively and bright and sweet” (*WSWG* 10). Secondly, she is portrayed as the confidante of her mentally challenged grand aunt Ginny, which makes her appear gentle and congenial. Thirdly, introducing a likeable protagonist while simultaneously foretelling his or her death appeals strongly to the readers’ empathy. A remotely similar instance can be found in *Everyman*, which will be discussed in a later chapter. My reasoning goes along the lines of the saying “don’t speak ill of the dead” and how, typically, many problematic issues of a person are forgiven or forgotten after their passing. Roth hints at this phenomenon in *WSWG*, when Willard’s father dies and Willard attempts to justify his cold-hearted nature: “At the small funeral he arranged for his father up in Iron City, Willard found himself at the graveside suddenly and inexplicably stricken with that sense of things that can descend upon the tender-hearted, even at the death of an enemy—that surely the spirit had been deeper, the life more tragic, than he had ever imagined” (*WSWG* 13). By placing Willard at Lucy’s grave, Roth sets out the novel by creating suspense as to what could have possibly happened to his dear granddaughter.

It is the return of Whitey, his son-in-law, to Liberty Center, respectively his daughter Myra, respectively his house, which has led to Willard's contemplation by the graveside in the first place. When the narration is in the present, the reader also hears him remember a dialogue he had with his wife, Berta, who was dreading Whitey's return:

“Only for a while” was the guarantee he had made to Berta; because she was right, this just could not be a repetition of 1934, with someone in need coming for a short stay and managing somehow to stretch it out to sixteen years of living off the fat of another fellow's land, which wasn't so fat either. But of course, said Willard, that other fellow did happen to be the father of the man's wife—And just what does that mean, Berta asked, that is going to be sixteen years again this time too? (*WSWG* 9)

It is the first, or chronologically speaking, the last, of several instances in which Willard fails to apply drastic measures, or any measures at all. Whereas at first the reader might have sympathy for Willard's generosity, it becomes upsetting rather quickly. Over five pages Roth has the reader follow the old man's memories from when Whitey stole medals from his personal cabinet, pawning them to get drunk. His attempted reasoning, Whitey blatantly lying to him and Willard ultimately not acting at all create a frustrating sense of injustice for the reader. The chronology is disrupted, and this memory is quickly followed by the even more detailed recollection of the footbath instance, which could be considered the climatic scene in the novel and the first time Lucy is actively involved. The mother, Myra, was taking a footbath in the living room when Whitey came home drunk and was harassing her because she did not “at least pull the shades down so that everybody who walked by didn't have to see what a suffering martyr she was” and subsequently he “picked up the dishpan full of warm water and Epsom salts, and for no rational reason in the world, poured it out on the rug” (*WSWG* 21).

I would argue that it is actions and reasonings like this, so utterly incomprehensible but simultaneously so conceivable for the reader, that create the Feeling of Body. It is further enhanced by Myra, who maintains to defend Whitey even if it appears that she has given up hope about his empty promises herself. It is here that Roth briefly takes the focus off Whitey and makes a transition to the fifteen-year-old Lucy. She was the one who called the police on her father, against her mother's will, which is perceived as a misdeed by her family and leads to this discussion between her and Willard:

“But what you did think of, young lady—look at me!”
“I wanted him to stop!”
“But calling the jail, Lucy—“
“I called for somebody to make him stop!”
“But why didn’t you call me? I want you to answer that question.”
“Because.”
“Because why?”
“Because you can’t.”
“I what?”
“Well,” she said, backing away, “you don’t...” (WSWG 23)

This emphasizes Willard’s inability to take appropriate actions against Whitey. Furthermore, this passage implies that this was the pinnacle of events and that Lucy has already suffered from her father’s behavior for a long time. This scene will be referenced several times throughout the novel; and Peeler suggests:

Calling the police becomes for Lucy, the defining act of her childhood. In her own imagination, and in the imagination of many of the worn, she has become the girl who had her own father arrested. As if to justify this act to herself and to her community, Lucy becomes increasingly obsessed with her own virtue. She sees herself as morally superior to the rest of Liberty Center, a sense of superiority that is vague but indomitable. (Peeler 35-36)

However, Roth only reveals this side of Lucy at a much later point in the novel. Jump to Lucy’s first semester in college. She returns to Liberty Center to inform her family that she is engaged to Roy Bassart. After only two lines, no more word is spoken about the exciting news. Instead, the reader is told how great Whitey had been doing lately and how “there could no longer by any doubt that at long last something had happened to penetrate his heart” (WSWG 29). The narration through Williard is listing numerous excuses for Whitey’s failure, among them the Depression (“as it turns out, Whitey took the Great Depression very personally” and his rejection by the Army (“But instead he had to walk the street of Liberty Center all those years while other men were risking their lives [...]” (WSWG 30-31). This tone of absurdity leads to another instance of domestic violence. Myra passed on an offer, whether he would be interested to take over an electrical company from an acquaintance who was retiring:

Here Whitey swung at her with his trousers and nearly took her eye out with the buckle of his belt. But he hadn’t meant to—he was only warning her not to tease him again about something that wasn’t his fault! Why did she go shooting her mouth off about plans that weren’t finalized? Didn’t she know what business world was all about? (WSWG 34)

Only then, after sixteen years, Willard, still hesitantly and only temporarily, expels his son-in-law from his house, while Myra is blaming herself. Only a few days later, it coincided with eighteen-year-old Lucy's visit to announce her pregnancy, when Whitey attempts to return, is locked out by his daughter and only returns after her death.

I find it noteworthy that during part one, Lucy's age is the only point of reference as to how many years have passed because the other characters as well as their living situation remains bizarrely unchanged over several decades. Raban describes this as Willard's "Peter Pan quality" which "confirms the absolute stasis of Liberty Center, where people grow old, the houses undergo alteration and improvement, the population swells around the focal town of Winnisaw, but where the idea of a new life is an empty joke, sapped of its force by the blight of circumstances" (Raban 158).

As Raban (156) describes it, "*When She Was Good* is Roth's attempt to embody the deterioration and disappointment inherent in American civil life: it sustains the tragic atrophy of Liberty Center at both rhetorical and structural levels". It is the American Nightmare—while Willard is busy trying to make his family appear civil—first by taking in Ginny, which almost results in Lucy's expulsion from school (because Ginny "would follow Lucy all the way [to school], and then stand outside the first floor [...] and call for the child" (*WSWG* 11)), and later by bending to Myra's wish to stay with the abusive Whitey. They seemingly forget about the actual child in the family. However, his obsession with civility is something that he shares with his granddaughter to some extent: "This belief that the good deeds of good people are rewarded with a good life is really a form of self-preservation rather than genuine altruism. But Lucy, Willard's granddaughter, represents a far more extreme moral vision of life, one that is purely reactive and revels in its will to power" (Peeler 34). Peeler elaborates that:

Like Willard, [Lucy] lives a life according to pre-established generic rules and conventions but, unlike Willard, her only rule is to work against Liberty Center and her family. Furthermore, *When She Was Good* implicates goodness as being an ideological home for violence. To Lucy, being 'good' means having the right, the responsibility even, to impose herself on others. (Peeler 39)

Further evidence for Lucy's and Willard's parallel construction can be found when part one comes to an end and Whitey's return is imminent. Willard contemplates to pretend senility in order to resolve the situation but concludes: "But why? Why should I be senile? Why be off my head when that is not the case!" He jumped to his feet. 'Why be

getting pneumonia and worrying myself sick—when all I did was good!” (WSWG 41). This is the first of many scenes that demonstrate eerie similarities between him and Lucy. However, most often Lucy is interpreted as having strong parallels to Ginny, her grand aunt. One argument against this view is when Willard’s wording changes from *civil* to *good*, which is often mentioned by Lucy in the later parts of the novel and is in the book’s title. Though, particularly striking is the graveyard scene where he fled to and is stalling to return home, despite the cold weather and snow. This is eerily like Lucy’s death at Passion Paradise, where she was found frozen to death. In addition to that, Willard’s inability to intervene despite his plans to take action are strongly reminiscent of Lucy planning to leave Roy early on but never finding a convenient time she marries him. Ginny, on the other hand, rather shows parallels to Whitey Nelson: they both are nominal adults who, however, require the full attention of the family and it appears as if Whitey is missing the conscience of his actions just like the mentally challenged Ginny does. This suggestion is further supported by a thought from Willard after Whitey hit Myra: “There is nothing the man can do. He is afflicted with himself. Like Ginny” (WSWG 34). Part one ends with Willard repressing his wrath towards Whitey and welcoming him back into his house, which perfectly highlights his passivity: “You dumb cluck! You scheming, lying, thieving ignoramus! You weak, washed-out lushhead, sucking the life’s blood from every human heart there is! You no-good low-life weakling! So what if you can’t help it! So what if you don’t mean it— ‘—Duane,’ said Willard, stepping forward, ‘How you doing, [Whitey]?’” (WSWG 43) By juxtaposing Willard’s thoughts and action so closely, Roth emphasizes the character’s failure to take much needed measures against his son-in-law.

3.2 Part Two

Part two of the novel is divided into three chapters. Chapter one is narrated through Roy Bassart’s perspective. It begins with his return from the army, his contemplations about his future and the wish to possibly become a professional artist: “He realized it was no easy row to hoe, but maybe the time had come in life for him to tackle something hard instead of settling for the easiest thing at hand” (WSWG 48). It is a decision most parents will stereotypically argue against, and so do Llyod and Alice Bassart. Roy’s naivety is suggested by the narrator’s statement that “you would have thought he was a kid returning home from Camp Gitche Cumne instead of the Aleutian Islands”

as well as his sense of maturity and independence: “Roy had matured, and plenty, too. But it wasn’t discipline that had done it; it was, to put it bluntly, being away from them” (WSWG 49). It is the turning point of an adolescent, the rebellious ways against his parents and the great ambitions of an aspiring artist that are discussed in great length and seem rather anticlimactic after the poignant events of part one. The implied narrator records his thought when considering different paths for his future, highlighting that “his taste was adventure, something to test himself against, some way to discover just how much of an individual he really was” (WSWG 51) and possibly leaving the country. Roy complains about his parents urging him to secure an apprenticeship instead of applying for Art School until he concludes that “after his discharges, Roy made it his business to first catch up on his sleep, and second to catch up on his food” (WSWG 55). This change of pace is part of the characterization and further highlights his naivety as well as quiet manner—“Moderation in all things, that was his motto” (WSWG 73); and it happens to also be the motto of Benjamin Franklin. After listing several common struggles of a twenty-year-old man, he becomes sidetracked rather quickly by indulging in his mother’s opulent breakfasts, reminiscing about high school and where to get a good “grilled cheese and bacon and tomato” (WSWG 57). By this digression, it is suggested that Roy may not follow up on his ambitions and rests on his oars from having been in the Army, since he is mainly interested in food and girls. The reader is informed about a failed attempt to have sex with a girl before he went to the Army and the questionable advice he receives from another soldier to “Tell them you love them and tell them to trust you” (WSWG 68) in order to be successful in the future. Over all, Roy is characterized as a likable, simple man, whose tribulations are as moderate as his ambitions—a striking contrast to the narrative of Willard. Jay L. Halio pointed out the “overt humor” that is brought to the novel with Roy Bassart and his family: “he becomes entangled in a number of broadly comic situations that to him appear to be serious predicaments but to the reader can only be regarded as funny” (Halio 59). It is a lightheartedness that further increases sympathy for Roy’s character and his unwieldiness. The chapter is as uneventful as Roy’s life and ends with the highlight of him buying a “two-tone, second-hand 1946 Hudson” after his Uncle Julian ensured him to “[...] live it up a little, have a good time, get off your own back” (WSWG 76). Now he only needed to find a woman “with a little maturity in her attitudes” (WSWG 66) for his fulfillment.

“Enter Lucy Nelson—and eventually, problems of much larger magnitude than Roy could ever imagine” (Halio 59). She is only properly introduced in the second chapter of part two, hitherto, the reader has received only partial information about the novel’s protagonist. This is an important strategy to delay her introduction for almost eighty pages; the reader will have created some sort of idea about her character, which will most likely be somewhat sympathetic. In part one, Roth elaborated on her abusive, alcoholic father who seemingly required and received more attention and parenting than Lucy herself, which will appeal to the readers’ empathy. Until then, she has been mostly characterized, if sparingly, by her loving grandfather Willard, who presented her from a positively biased point of view. Most importantly, assuming a first-time-reader of the novel, one will be compelled to have at the back of the head the knowledge of Lucy’s untimely death. As has been mentioned above, I suggest that this increases the sympathy as well as empathy for a character drastically and may bias the readers’ expectations as to how the novel unfolds. For example, when I read *WSWG* for the first time, I anticipated one of the male characters to have caused Lucy’s death; even if that was not the case directly, one could argue that it was the repercussions of their (Willard, Whitey, Roy) combined actions which have led to her demise.

Lucy is introduced while observing Roy working on his car at the Sowerby’s. It is the house of his Uncle Julian and Lucy is friends with his daughter, Ellie Sowerby, until

she disappeared from her life as unexpectedly as she had come into it, and the person responsible was Irene Sowerby, Lucy was sure. Because of what she knew about Lucy’s family, or because of whatever she had heard about Lucy herself, Mrs. Sowerby had decided that she was not the kind of girl she wanted Ellie bringing home in the afternoons. (*WSGW* 78)

It is the first of numerous instances in which Lucy’s inferences seem highly biased and display paranoia about her family history. This becomes even more apparent when “a new girl named Mary Beckley [...] began to giggle at the story, and Lucy knew that somebody had already cornered Mary Beckley and told her Lucy’s secrets. This so angered Lucy that tears came popping out of her eyes [...]” (*WSWG* 81). Even though Roth continues in an overall simple style, it has turned surprisingly aggressive and particularly angry with Lucy’s point of view, especially considering her being a teenage girl. The reader might nevertheless be inclined to overlook these signs of paranoia and general unpleasantness due to his or her previously conceived positive notion. After Ellie, she befriends Kitty, who introduced her to Catholicism and Saint Teresa. It

appears as if Lucy gains a sense of superiority because Kitty's family "was the most wretched und unhappy family Lucy had ever seen, heard of, or imagined; if possible, it was worse even than her own" which becomes more apparent when Lucy notices Kitty's reading problem "who suddenly seemed to her so hopelessly, so disgustingly, ignorant" (*WSWG* 85). Just when an inevitable notion of antipathy may arise, the reader is reminded of her hardship with the climactic scene of the footbath: "After calling upon Saint Teresa of Lisieux and Our Lord—and getting no reply—she called the police" (*WSWG* 86). Again, I would argue that one might be inclined to side with her due to her abusive father. Even when she states, what could be interpreted as her motto; "And they are not going to ruin it for me! I will not let them! I am their superior in every single way! People can call me all the names they want—I don't care! I have nothing to confess, because I am right and they are wrong and I will not be destroyed!" (*WSWG* 90), one may argue that she reacts in a defensive manner because she is traumatized.

Lucy then enrolls in Mr. Valerio's music appreciation class, which she enjoys tremendously and considers to be her second family until she decides that the other girls participating were "freaks" because one had a wall-eye, one a stammer and the other one was overweight (*WSWG* 95). It is here where her sense of morality becomes utterly questionable since she chooses to disappoint Mr. Valerio and refrain from what she enjoyed because "they were freaks. And she wasn't! And nobody was going to say she was either" (*WSWG* 95). She displays a condescending manner which by itself is appalling in its severity. In addition, one may realize her hypocrisy since she has not tolerated condescension herself as she later even utters verbatim: "but one thing that was unforgiveable was being condescended to" (*WSWG* 100).

Thus, it is astounding that she starts to fancy Roy Bassart, despite Ellie's ridicule of his idleness and warning that he is fixated on having sex. As a reader, one can already be suspenseful of the impending doom this "comical union between an ordinary, easy-going young man and a woman extraordinarily convinced of her essential superiority to everyone around her" (Halio 60) will bring. In terms of superiority, Peeler made an interesting observation in her Nietzschean reading of *WSWG*: "Crucially, this claim to superior morality also allows 'the man or woman of resentment' to malign his or her enemies as corrupt, evil and dishonest. The implication here is that this 'lease of virtue' can become a lease of violence." She further specifies that Lucy, interpreted as a

woman of “ressentiment”, therefore is doomed to bring unhappiness unto others as well as herself (Peeler 33). It is interesting to observe that the emerging romance with Roy appears to soothe her temper momentarily as, in the beginning, she behaves comparatively modestly in his company.

For the remainder of the chapter, Roth turns to a strongly dialogue driven narrative which surfaces the developing dynamics of their relationship. For example, he carefully records the lengthy dialogue of their intermezzo at Passion Paradise. Halio remarks that “the banality of the situation—Lucy’s resistance, Roy’s persistence” (Halio 61) create a comic effect. Indeed, the dialogue is so redundant and bizarre that it has striking resemblance to the theatre of the absurd and plays such as *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett or *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee, as can be seen in the following example:

“Roy, I want to leave now. Really.”

“Why?”

“I want to go home, please.”

“I sort of love you, you know that.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t.”

“Angel,” he said, touching her face.”

“Stop. You almost put your finger in my eye.”

[...]

“Roy, I’m not going to do anything. So let’s go now.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything. I’m only asking you to trust me. Just trust me,” he said, trying once again to put his fingers between the buttons of her uniform.

“Roy, you’re going to tear something.”

“I’m not. Not if you don’t fight. Just trust me.”

“I don’t know what that means. You say that, and when I do, then you only start going further. I don’t want that, Roy.”

But he was singing into her ear. (*WSWG* 108-9)

Halio (61) suggests that “the banality of language and situation both camouflage the comedy and contribute to it”. Lucy appears to remain relatively calm, which defuses the impression of the situation and may allow for some comic effect to surface. Nevertheless, Roy is uncomfortably pressing her to have intercourse by all available means and that should not be taken too lightheartedly. It is a grey area that Roth depicts here, which is most likely uncomfortably relatable to many readers and highlights the thin line between persuasion and force. This is an instance in which the chance of invoking empathy has changed its meaning over the decades (Keen 74) as it may have been perceived less problematic when the novel was first published in 1967. However, the

comedy then surfaces fully justifiable when Lucy discovers soon afterwards that “truthfully, there were a lot of important ways in which she was discovering that she didn’t like Roy that much” (*WSWG* 122), followed by the final decision to end the relationship:

From that afternoon on she knew for sure that Roy wasn’t for her. That very night she would not drive up with him to Passion Paradise. When instantly he grew sulky and morose, and seemed about ready to break into tears again, she told him it was because she was not well. It happened to be the truth, but then at home with a thick black crayon she would make it altogether clear their romance was over [...]. (*WSWG* 126)

Despite developing a strong antipathy towards Roy and losing faith in his potential, she is considerate of their previous engagements and is trying to schedule a convenient time for the separation by marking it in the calendar. She postpones the date continuously. It is especially this aspect of her personality that connects her strongly to her grandfather Willard, who displayed a very similar strategy of postponing (i.e. avoiding) necessary action, for which Lucy has persistently blamed him. Lucy’s postponing has a similarly catastrophic outcome as Willard’s (e.g. Whitey’s physical abuse of Myra): she is now expecting Roy’s child.

Ironically, before she finds out, she suspects Ellie to be pregnant and describes it as “the worst trouble there could possibly be for a girl” (*WSWG* 136). Lucy appears to have an odd fascination with the hardship of others. For example, when Ellie confesses to her that the source of her troubles was her father Julian being unfaithful to her mother Irene, she firstly “[...] had to work out in her head the significance of all that Ellie had just said—that is, the significance to herself” (139) and suddenly sympathizing with Irene Sowerby: “To understand that Mrs. Sowerby suffered was somehow to understand that she existed, had a life, had motives and reasons having nothing to do with frustrating and opposing Lucy Nelson” (*WSWG* 145). It is a brief and seldom moment of reflection for Lucy, which only emerged from her immense pity for Mrs. Sowerby. Additionally, she is greatly indulging in her friend’s predicament and the sense of superiority it provides for herself. The chapter closes with the girls leaving Liberty Center to attend college. Lucy is greatly disappointed that Ellie chose not to expose her father, against her explicit recommendation.

The last chapter of part two fully reveals Lucy’s constitution and may cause the reader some discomfort of *Feeling of Body* to witness. Despite missing her periods, the possibility of a pregnancy does not occur to her and she further insists that “Only, this was

what happened to farm girls, to girls who didn't study, who quit school, who ran away from home. To Babs Egan, but not to her. Hadn't enough happened to her already?" (WSWG 152). Roth records the full dialogue between her and a rather suspicious Doctor who ultimately refuses her plea for an abortion. It is important to note here that the novel was written and set in the 1950/60s, a time in which abortion was illegal in the U.S. Thus, people had various methods to attempt an abortion or miscarriage themselves, which could have fatal consequences. However, some people illegally provided "safe" abortions. This was the best option available but could be difficult to obtain, as can be seen in the example of Lucy. She tries to convince him that she deserves an abortion and ensures "'But I'm not bad!' She couldn't help herself, it was the truth: 'I'm good!'" (WSWG 154). After briefly inquiring about her living situation, the doctor, however, seems to find her capable of becoming a mother and rejects her wish to abort the pregnancy. For a doctor to be able to decide over a woman's body in such manner might be shocking on its own for a 21st century-reader. Lucy loses her temper and refrains from visiting other doctors due to her fear of being "humiliated, ignored and abused" (WSWG 157). Soon afterwards her arbitrary behavior unfolds to its full extent. The young couple decides to marry due to the circumstances and Lucy is pressing Roy to inform his family about the wedding, but not the pregnancy. First, she herself notifies her family about the marriage and becomes utterly upset about them respecting her decision: "'They don't even *know*,' she said aloud, 'and still they're letting me do it!' If only they'd say no. NO, LUCY, YOU CANNOT. NO, LUCY, WE FORBID IT. But it seemed that none of them had the conviction any longer, or the endurance, to go against a choice of hers" (WSWG 164). Furious about her family, she surprises Roy in his dorm to interrogate him about his family visit. Once again, Roth records the whole dialogue of her badgering him about informing his parents. This is the pinnacle of absurdity and the point when Roy emotionally surrenders to her caprice.

"Shhhhh!" He shot up on the bed. "We're getting married!" he whispered hoarsely. "So shut up."

She was suddenly and completely baffled. She was getting married. "When?"

"Christmas! *Okay?* Now will you *stop?*"

"And your family?"

"Well, what about them?"

"You have to tell them."

"I will, I will. Bust just lay *off* for a while."

"Roy ... it has to be now."

"*Now?*"

"Yes!"

“But my mother is in bed [...].”

“But you must make this official. You just can’t keep me living this way. It’s a nightmare!”

[...]

“But I am pregnant with a human baby!” she cried. “I’m going to have your baby, Roy! And you won’t even do your duty!”

“I will! I am!”

“*When?*”

“Now! Okay? Now! But don’t scream, Lucy, don’t throw a stupid fit!”

[...]

In a few minutes he returned, paler than she had ever seen him. Where the hair was clipped short at his neck, she could see his white skin. “I did it,” he said. (WSWG 175-176)

After this extortion-like engagement, Roy appears to have changed significantly and sounds astonishingly like Lucy when complaining about his family.

Once again, she is fighting with her family because her mother told her father about the pregnancy. Lucy impulsively confesses to them that she despises Roy which causes them to have serious concerns about her future. This appears to be Whitey’s first attempt at being a father: “But my concern is with you, Lucy, and what is uppermost to you. Do you understand that? My concern is your going to college, which has always been your dream, right? Now, the question is this, do you still want your dream, or don’t you?” (WSWG 192) He is approaching her in a surprisingly mindful manner and ultimately suggests that he could help her if she would like an abortion, which is followed by another episode of Lucy’s paranoia:

“But is he clean?” she asked.

“A hundred percent,” her father said. “Spotless, Lucy. Like a hospital.”

“And how old?” she asked. “How old is he?”

“Oh,” her father said, “middle-aged, I’d say.”

A moment passed. Then, “That’s the catch, isn’t it?”

“What kind of catch?”

“He’s too old.”

“Now what do you mean ‘too old’? If anything, he’s real experienced.”

“But is this all he does?”

“Lucy, he’s a regular doctor ... who does this as a special favor, that’s all.”

“But he charges, you said.”

“Well, sure he charges.”

“Then it’s not a special favor. He does it for money.”

“Well, everybody has got bills to meet. Everybody has got to be paid for what they do.”

But she saw herself dead. The doctor would be no good and she would die.

“How do you know about him?” (WSWG 197)

While previously merely being suspicious about the offer but seemingly still considering the abortion, things take a dramatic turn when her mother confesses that she had an abortion when Lucy was younger. She interprets this as another torment Whitey imposed on Myra and hence an abortion for Lucy herself is beyond debate. For the reader, this could be rather frustrating to witness: On one hand, Lucy has desperately tried to receive an abortion beforehand, with the same reasoning as her fathers' and "as the only means by which she can escape her small town and her family" (Husband 37). On the other hand, her final point is that she refuses to live her mother's life again, which is arbitrary, since it appears that is exactly what she will do by declining the abortion. It seems as if Lucy's actions are not motivated by her moral convictions about right and wrong, but rather by a need to argue and disagree with everyone, without exception. Furthermore, it was noted by Julie Husband that this is a crucial point for the readers' perception of Lucy: "Up until this point in the novel, Lucy appeared as much victim as victimizer" (37). Her self-righteous actions are starting to quickly overshadow any previously established compassion and empathy.

3.3 Part Three

Her contentiousness continuous in the third part of the novel, when Lucy momentarily appears like a different person due to her lack of protest: "And she did not argue. Could it be she had actually argued her last? She had fought and fought to get him to do his duty, but in the end he had done it. So what more was there to fight about? She simply could not find the strength to raise her voice" (*WSWG* 210). This passage appears to show Lucy in a moment of exhaustion, physically and mentally, during her pregnancy. Briefly, she can reflect on her self-assertion towards Roy and that he actually did everything she asked of him. Rodgers (65) has also remarked that: "at first she tries to be a submissive and attentive wife, to act out the role she has been taught to assume by her society." However, this is soon forgotten after the birth of their son Edward, when Lucy steadily regains the strength to argue, or at least to say no:

Would she go up to Liberty Center?

No.

Just for the month of August?

No.

"Lucy, but we're arguing because of living in this one room in all this hot weather, while up in Liberty Center that whole upstairs is just sitting there going to waste."

No. (*WSWG* 216-17)

Even if the dialogue here is not as fully sketched out as it was previously the case, the reader can imagine the excessive resistance to Roy's efforts. Throughout the chapter she continues to diminish every action and idea brought up by her husband, who tried to provide for his family. It was noted by Peeler that "within the intimacy of marriage, her inability to compromise, her steely determination to tell 'the truth,' and her refusal to see her own flaws become increasingly destructive" (Peeler 36). After finding out that Julian recommended the couple's separation, Lucy finds confirmation of her suspicion and further elaborates her conspiracy about how the Sowerbys, as everyone else, are sabotaging her life. After a few years passed Lucy allows Roy to visit his family, she immediately regrets her decision: "The war was never over with people you could not trust or depend upon. Why, why had she relaxed her vigilance?" (WSWG 261).

Previously, Lucy imagines that having another child would be the solution to all their problems after her husband romanticized about the idea of having a daughter. She reasons with herself that: "it would be different this time; there would be no one they would have to plead with, or argue with, nor would they have to argue with each other" (WSWG 251); "Oh she could love him, at last: she had made him a good man." (WSWG 270); "This time she would be pregnant as a woman is supposed to be" (WSWG 271); "The sensation she began to have was that the awful past had finally fallen away, and that she was living suddenly in her own future" (WSWG 233).

Roth seems to record the train of thought which leads her to this belief, as well as her secret decision that "it was no longer necessary to continue to use protection (WSWG 251) which leaves the reader flabbergasted by her delusional thinking. Halio (64) describes it as "the crux of Lucy's predicament, and Roth's wit conveys the deep irony of her illusion, that she will be condemned to live forever in the world she had made and never have the chance 'not just to be right, but to be happy.'" Her decision to have another child illustrates that she, technically, has good intentions (i.e. saving her marriage) but executes them catastrophically (without consulting with her husband). Therefore, I agree with Halio's statement about her predicament lying within herself, to a certain degree.

Back at Willard's house, Myra receives a proposal from a man she has been dating for some time and is stalling to give an answer. To her own surprise, Lucy appears

indifferent to “the prospect of her mother’s marital happiness” (Halio 64) which displays the arbitrariness of her behavior. If she was concerned with the well-being of her mother, she would most likely be supportive of this possibility. The events unfold, and Myra declines the proposal because of Whitey: she confesses that she remained in sporadic contact with her husband via a post-office box and recently informed him that “after serious consideration she had decided to divorce him and marry Blanshard Muller” (WSWG 277). As Willard tells the story, this led Whitey to fall into old patterns: he robbed his employer on impulse and was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. This causes Myra great despair and subsequently to cancel the engagement to Muller. Instantaneously Lucy is interested in her mother’s well-being and lectured her while she was crying on the sofa: “Why? To throw twenty more years away? To be humiliated again? Abused again? To be deprived? Mother, what do you think you are doing? Who do you think you are saving? Mother, what does it possibly do or mean to tell Mr. Muller to go, when that idiot, that moron, that useless, hopeless—” (WSWG 280). This is another indication, that Lucy is mainly interested in people when they are suffering, and she can lecture them as to what misdeeds they have done, since she was impartial to the engagement until it was cancelled.

She continues her spree when her husband Roy picks her up. Unbeknownst of the cancelled engagement, Roy is screamed at and lectured by Lucy, while he is trying to comfort her:

“Lucy, what did I do wrong now?”

“You idiot! You dolt! All *you* can show him [Edward] is the carburetor in the car—and probably you get that wrong too! [...]

“You worm! Don’t you have any guts at all? Can’t you stand on your own feet, *ever*? You sponge! You leech! You weak, hopeless, spineless, coward! You’ll never change—you don’t even *want* to change! You don’t even know what I *mean* by change! You stand there with your dumb mouth open! Because you have no backbone! [...]

“Oh,” she said, breathing hard, “how I despise you, Roy. Every word you speak, everything you do, or try to do, it’s awful. You’re nothing, and I will never forgive you—”

He put his hands over his eyes and wept. (WSWG 284-285)

As has been established throughout the narrative, Roy is a caring, if not perfect, husband who loves and thinks highly of his wife. Until then, Roth has created a good amount of discomfort by recording Lucy’s patronizing thoughts about her husband. Her rage towards Roy reaches its peak here, when she, without rhyme or reason,

annihilates him verbally in front of their son, while she is possibly carrying his child again. Peeler suggested, that “in Lucy’s mind, the figures of her husband and father become confused, and she punishes Roy in Whitey’s stead” (37). While this is an interesting reading, I rather had the impression that the fight merely unleashed her anger which caused her to tell Roy her honest, unfiltered opinion about him.

Subsequently (and understandably), Roy leaves the house with Edward which only increases Lucy’s fury. When he calls to inform her about their whereabouts, “she made clear to him what he was to do, and instantly” (*WSWG* 287) but he refuses to remain submissive to her commands. He insisted not to return his three-and-a-half-year-old son to a home inhabited by a person with a mental constitution such as Lucy’s: “NO, Lucy, because of you! Because of your screaming, hateful, bossy, hateful, heartless guts! Because he [Edward] never wants to see your ugly, heartless face again, and neither do I! Never!” (*WSWG* 288). Husband remarks that “by this point, Lucy is depicted as such a monster of selfishness and Roy such a model of compassion that it becomes difficult to have any sympathy for Lucy’s plight” (38).

In the remainder of the novel, i.e. the second chapter of part three, Roth sketches out Lucy’s train of thought while taking the bus to Liberty Center to reclaim her husband and son—in the middle of the night. Interestingly, many of the accusations she makes while planning her operation much rather seem fitting to Roy’s situation, which, once again, highlights her frustrating inability for self-reflection. This is most noticeable when she wonders: “[...] for who but a monster could have said on the phone those terrible things he had said to her?” (*WSWG* 291) Whereas it was Lucy who annihilated Roy personally and in front of their son, which led to their unpleasant phone call. Once she arrived at the Sowerby’s house, she is greatly surprised to be granted entry without resistance and suspects Julian to have taken her side because “Roy had now been revealed in such a way that even the most hard-hearted and unthinking of his supporters had lost all sympathy” (*WSWG* 293). This could be interpreted as a comic meta-element because it reflects Lucy’s character development throughout the novel. There is no more reader’s empathy to spare, even while the question of her cause of death is still pending. Julian, “the only character in the novel who is able to stand up to Lucy’s onslaughts” (Peeler 38), did not take her side, but attempts to reason with her and de-escalate the situation. Subsequently, Lucy unsuccessfully threatens him until everyone has gathered from their bedrooms—Julian, Irene, Ellie and Roy. She then proceeds to

insult and threaten everyone, reveals Julian's affairs (to her surprise and contempt, Irene was aware of them already), who later must physically hold her back from storming upstairs to take Edward. Since Roy refuses to leave with her, she then makes a revelation to them: "I'll tell you why it so happens you can't take your uncle's advice, Roy—and I'll tell your uncle too. It so happens, Roy, and Julian, and Eleanor, and Irene, it so happens that I am pregnant" (WSWG 304). This leaves the family completely stunned and, in another attempt to take Edward, Lucy punches Roy in the face. Shortly after she is picked up by her grandfather Willard. This is followed by a detailed recollection, possibly a dream, of her time as a Catholic and how it ended abruptly with the footbath instance. Once she regained energy, she repeatedly called Roy's father Lloyd at three-thirty in the morning. It is a familiar sequence of events: everyone is trying to reason with her calmly, whereas she aggressively proceeds to threaten and insult everyone and concludes: "Oh, how absurd this all was! How unnecessary! Why must they force her always to the extreme? Why must they bring this down upon themselves when the simple and honorable solution was always and forever at hand? If only they did their duty!" (WSWG 320). It clearly displays what has been stated in Peeler's reading—that her superior morality is doomed to become "an ideological home for violence" because she thinks, she has the responsibility to "impose herself on others" (Peeler 39). She then decided to run away to retrieve her son herself. On her way out, she finds a letter in Myra's room which she takes, and her grandparents chase her through the house, trying to prevent events from escalating even more. On her rescue mission, she found shelter in Blanshad Muller's garage, which gave her an opportunity to read the letter. The last thoughts the reader hears from her, embrace her motto of self-righteousness one last time "Fearlessly, Lucy! Against all odds, but fearlessly nonetheless! For they are wrong, and there is no choice: the good must triumph in the end! The good and the just and the true *must*—" (WSWG 330).

In the letter, Whitey covertly asked her mother to become his sponsor to be released from prison and attached a Valentine's poem he wrote. Lucy was found three nights after her disappearance, frozen to death in Passion Paradise, with the letter frozen to her cheek. There were no signs of abuse, rape, or violence—she died from exposure.

Overall, it can be said, that Roth is strongly appealing to the readers' emotions in WSWG. Keen listed several stylistic choices which could increase readers' empathy—all of which can be found in the novel: "control of timing (pace), order (anachronies),

the use of nested levels of narrative subsidiary (supplementary, satellite) plot events, repetition, and gaps (Keen 94). The distorted chronology and the delayed introduction of the protagonist fool the reader into sympathizing with Lucy but “ultimately be forced to disassociate himself from her most hysterical excesses and recognize them as just that excesses” (Rodgers 68). Whereas one most likely felt empathetic with Lucy for the first half of the novel, ultimately “the narrator leads the reader to feel relief in the humiliating and improbable demise of Roth’s rebellious heroine” (Husband 26). Apart from the ending, I find the reading experience of WSWG to resemble a car accident: it is painful to observe, but impossible to look away. “[...] there lies the syndrome of American failure. The dream has turned to ashes [...]” (Raban 156).

4 Portnoy's Complaint

Two years after *When She Was Good*, Philip Roth published the novel which “earned him a new notoriety” (Brauner 43): *Portnoy's Complaint*. It is strikingly different in style and tone, but what the novel does have in common with its predecessor, is its particular narrative technique which can be attributed to its process of formation as well as Roth's urge to create “something freewheeling and funny” (*Reading Myself and Others* 22) after the demise of Lucy Nelson. Quickly, Alexander Portnoy made its way into the realm of “permanent characters of American popular lore” and found his place amongst Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield being “one of the decades milestones as well” (Rodgers 80). Finding Alexander's unique voice was a long and tedious process for Roth, as he aimed to find “a voice and a treatment which would allow him the imaginative freedom to combine realistic detail and comic fantasy [...] in an effort to capture the tenor of contemporary American life in a way that his first two, strictly controlled, novels could not” (Rodgers 81). Since the novel caused such upheaval with its idiosyncratic style, form and subject, Philip Roth published an essay called “In Response to Those Correspondents, Students and Interviewers Who Have Asked me: ‘How Did You Come to Write That Book Anyway?’” in which he describes how the novel was created. Roth reveals that *Portnoy's Complaint* was shaped by merging four formerly abandoned projects, in all of which he was not utterly satisfied with the voice and could not create what he intended to its full extent. The process began with “a humorous manuscript of about two hundred pages titled *The Jewboy*” (Rodgers 83) which he wrote parallel to *When She Was Good*. It had “the graphic starkness” and “the jokey comedy and dialogues” which he aspired, but he found it to lack depth. This was followed by the play *The Nice Jewish Boy*, which “lacked precisely the kind of inventive flair and emotional exuberance that had given *The Jewboy* whatever quality it had” (*Reading Myself and Others* 35). The third project was written after the publication of *When She Was Good*, a time when Roth had a strong urge to write something funny. It manifested in form of a “lecture accompanied by a slideshow” and was concerned with “adolescent masturbation” (Rodgers 85). Roth was able to come closer to the rawness that he aspired and explains that

[...] it had required all the wildness and roughhousing—the merriment, which is how I experienced it—for me to even get to the subject. Knowing what I was writing about ... was simply unpublishable—a writer's hijinks that might just as

well not see the light of day—is precisely what allowed me to relax my guard and go on at some length about the solitary activity that is so difficult to talk about and yet so near at hand. (*Reading Myself and Other* 36-37)

The final project was called *Portrait of the Artist* and “this manuscript of several hundred pages was a strongly autobiographical piece based on the experiences of his own Newark boyhood” (Rodgers 85). However, this fact is not to confirm several autobiographical readings of *Portnoy’s Complaint*; what ultimately inspired him were not the main characters of *Portrait of the Artist* (based on his family) but their neighbors, “a family named Portnoy—a composite portrait, Roth tells us, loosely based on the families in his neighborhood” (Rodgers 85). Realizing that the Portnoy’s were his final missing puzzle piece, he dismissed this project as well “but dialogue, scenes and characters from all four of these projects became a part of *Portnoy’s Complaint*” (Rodgers 86). Combined with the setting of the psychoanalytical monologue, Roth created a new, unique voice which enabled him to explore Alexander’s neurosis to the fullest and rawest extent possible—to make the reader empathize with him. Rodgers summarizes the advantages of this narrative situation:

The psychoanalytic setting provides a realistic justification for Portnoy’s vehement soul-baring and finger-pointing, for his use of words and images which would be unacceptable in a more public context, and also for his emphasis on sexual memories. It also provides him with an audience, essential since Portnoy is both analysand and performer, character and author in his own serio-comic tale. The dramatic monologue which this setting provokes has the effect of locking us into Portnoy’s vision of the world; and his viewpoint is unqualified by any other (until the punch line), reveals as no other could *his* interpretation of the burden of his reality. Through the monologue we learn what reality feels like to him and, in the process, we are forced (as he is) constantly to question where the line between objective reality and his pathological fantasies lies. We are, in other words, forced to consider the interpretation of reality and fantasy in a life, and are, by extension, made conscious of the same interpretation in *our* lives. (Rodgers 87-88)

Furthermore, “first-person self-narration” (Keen 96) is known to highly influence the reader’s empathy towards the character; even more so if the narration is inwardly. Although Portnoy does narrate to his psychoanalyst, the setting of the therapy leads to an almost unfiltered narration, coming close to inside views, which “is thought to invite an especially close relationship between reader and narrative voice.” (Keen 97). Wayne Booth points out that “If an author wants intense sympathy for characters, who

do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged inside views will help him" (qtd. in Keen 96).

In this chapter, I will show how the narrative techniques used in *Portnoy's Complaint*, in addition to the narrative situation, are creating a strong Feeling of Body in the reader, particularly of discomfort and empathy, and how the narration is forcing us to experience Alexander's suffering vicariously.

The novel consists of six chapters in which Alex Portnoy is talking to his psychoanalyst Dr. Spielvogel, who remains silent until the "PUNCH LINE" in the very end "So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (*PC* 253), suggesting that not even the surfaces of his problems had been addressed with his elaborate observations over two-hundred and fifty pages. In addition to this unusual setting as well as the theatrical form of its end, Roth also provides an epigraph which is worth investigating. Reminiscent of a dictionary entry, he defines Portnoy's Complaint as a disorder

in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature. Spielvogel says: "Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient's 'morality,' however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration." [...] It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship. (*PC* Epigraph)

Thereby Roth is setting the tone for the narrative and draws attention to the emphasis on morality. Often, and for obvious reasons, the novel has been analyzed in terms of psychoanalysis whereas I would suggest that Roth or, respectively, Portnoy openly provide the answer to many questions themselves. On the one hand, the character appears to have a great knowledge of Freudian theories and thereby assigns meaning to his fantasies himself. On the other hand, Roth created a textbook patient for psychoanalysis, who wears his id on his sleeve and does not leave much space for imagination. In addition, "one of the chapters of the novel takes its title from one of Freud's essays ('The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life')" (Brauner 46). Therefore, I will refrain from a further Freudian analysis unless explicitly suggested in the text. Instead, I focus on the prevailing theme—Portnoy's inherent struggle with morality which cannot be satisfied by any means, as is mentioned in the epigraph. In this respect, despite its great differences in form and content, the novel shows underlying

similarities with *When She Was Good*. Both protagonists are obsessively striving to be good which leads to Lucy Nelson's demise and Alexander Portnoy's ultimate primal scream when fantasizing about illegally removing the tag of his mattress:

Blaze, you bastard cop, what do I give a shit? I tore the tag off my mattress—
[...]-But at least while I lived, I *lived big!*
Aaa
aa
aaahhhh!!!! (PC 253)

4.1 “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Met”

Alexander's obsession with his mother, which has already been mentioned in the epigraph, further manifests in the first of six chapters, titled “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Met”. The protagonist starts his monologue by stating “She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise” (PC 1) and thereby Roth immediately establishes the unhealthy relationship between mother and son. A tone of hilarity is set quickly, when Alex talks about his father's drinking; “not whiskey like a goy, but mineral oil and milk of magnesia”, his suffering “-from constipation” and how he “awaits the miracle” (PC 2) of release in the bathroom. This exaggeration creates a comic effect but also conveys a notion of how Alexander perceives life. This passage allows him to clarify that “among his other misfortunes, I was his wife's favorite” (PC 3). By finding himself competing for the love of his mother, not with his sibling Hannah but with his father, Roth ensures that the theme of the Oedipus complex will remain at the back of the reader's mind. Nevertheless, when talking about his father's hard work and vulnerability, the tone becomes more serious and a sense of empathy is established before switching his focus to his mother: “It was my mother who could accomplish anything, who herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good” (PC 8). It is the form of the monologue, which “permits digression, exaggerations, repetitions, descriptions, and oversimplifications which, while vital to our understanding of Portnoy's character and psychology, would be less acceptable in another narrative context” (Rodgers 88). Thus, one cannot help but smirk when Alexander raves about his mother:

What a radar on that woman! And this is before radar! The energy on her! The thoroughness! For mistakes she checked my sums; for holes, my socks; for dirt, my nails, my neck, every seam and crease of my body. [...]

She lights candles for the dead—other invariably forget, she religiously remembers, and without even the aid of a notation on the calendar. Devotion is just in her blood. (PC 9)

Whereas initially, his admiration for his mother seems intense but appears lighthearted and comical, the narration takes a more serious tone when Alexander talks about his punishments. Roth's timing here is of great importance, because he has characterized his protagonist as an empathetic, loving mother's boy which emphasizes his suffering in the following tales:

When I am bad I am locked out of the apartment. [...] But what is it I have done? [...] But what could it possibly be? [...] Ma, I am the smartest and neatest little boy in the history of my school! Teachers (as you know, as they have *told* you) go home happy to their husbands because of me. So what is it I have done? Will someone with the answer to that questions please stand up! I am so awful she will not have me in her house *a minute longer*. When I once called my sister a cocky-doodly, my mouth was immediately washed with a cake of brown laundry soap; this I understand. But banishment? What can I possibly have done! [...]

I drop to the doormat to beg for forgiveness for my sin (which is what again?) and promise her nothing but perfection for the rest of our lives, which at that time I believe will be endless. (PC 11-12)

By telling the story through the eyes of Alexander, Roth can perfectly capture the absurd world view that he so internalized: e.g. he finds it adequate punishment that his mother washes his mouth with soap when he uses an undesirable word. Thereby, and despite the overt humor in the narration, Portnoy's suffering becomes apparent, which could lead to the reader feeling sympathetic for the protagonist. The chapter closes with one of the key scenes, which is referenced several times throughout the novel: at the age of seven, his mother threatens him with a knife because he is not hungry and does not finish his dinner. In this instance even Portnoy does realize the absurdity of her action and still suffers from it twenty-five years later: "Doctor, *why*, why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son? I am six, seven years old, how do I know she really wouldn't use it? [...] And why doesn't my father stop her? (PC 13-14).

4.2 “Whacking Off”

The pace of the novel picks up drastically in the following chapter, titled “Whacking Off”, and thereby the feeling of uneasiness and awkwardness increases in the reader: Between elaborate accounts of his masturbation techniques and fantasies, his guilt surfaces quickly: “It was at the end of my freshman year of high school—and freshman year of masturbation—that I discovered on the underside of my penis, just where the shaft meets the head, a little discolored dot that has since been diagnosed as a freckle. Cancer. I had given myself cancer” (*PC* 16). He is so utterly embarrassed about pleasuring himself that to him it is the logic conclusion that it must have caused him cancer. The feeling of uneasiness increases first when he gives a detailed account about masturbating to his sister’s brassiere. It becomes hard to bear when his mother becomes part of his sexual fantasy while shaking on the door and reaches its pinnacle when his sexual fantasy and his mother’s question merge until he climaxes. In addition to the juxtaposition of sexual pleasure and the interaction with family members, his mother also insists on inspecting his feces. Ironically, she does not suspect her son to indulge in adolescent experimentation but rather ascribes his frequent bathroom breaks to him eating junk food:

“Alex, answer me something. You’re so smart, you know all the answers now, answer me this: how do you think Melvin Weiner gave himself colitis? Why has that child spent half his life in hospitals?”

“Because he eats chazerai.”

“Don’t you dare make fun of me!”

“All right,” I scream, “how did he get colitis?”

“Because he eats chazerai! But it’s not a joke! [...]”

“Is it just French fries, darling, or is it more? ... Tell me, please, what other kind of garbage you’re putting into your mouth so we can get to the bottom of this diarrhea! I want a straight answer from you, Alex. Are you eating hamburgers out? Answer me, please, is that why you flushed the toilet—was there hamburger in it?” (*PC* 20-21)

Roth is creating a comic effect by merging the seemingly innocent act of eating French fries, with an interrogation so serious, it much rather appears to be about a drug addiction. Simultaneously, the reader might be left wondering, how his mother would react, if she would find out that her son considers himself “the Raskolnikov of jerking off” (*PC* 17). The form of the psychoanalytical monologue heightens the emotions as well as the comedy in this type of recorded dialogue because it creates a reality effect. When fully committing to the fictionality, one will realize, that Portnoy is in a serious

setting (therapy session) in which he will most likely not attempt to be humorous but merely recalls his experiences. Therefore, his recollections may appear more authentic than, for example, the dialogue in an Edward Albee play, despite the fact, that both instances are equally artificial. In other words, the “reality effect” is increased by the narrative situation chosen by Roth. Keen also pointed out that “the use of first-person narration and their interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states” are going to contribute “to empathetic experiences.” (Keen x) In addition, these dialogues perfectly capture how his mother is planting the seeds of guilt in his mind which will haunt him throughout the novel in various situations. His therapy session could be an attempt to escape; Rodgers (90) states that “Alexander Portnoy wants most of all to be free—from his past and its burden, of the weight of a culturally formed conscience and consciousness”. He describes it as “the American hero’s worst nightmare—conditioning. And he can find no escape from it except obscenity and the psychiatrist’s couch—and even *there* he is not really free” (Rodgers 91). His mental repression is emphasized when Portnoy returns to the topic of French fries shortly after, when his mother concludes: “With a sensitive stomach like yours, do you know how it finally ends? *Wearing a plastic bag to do your business in!*” (PC 28). After another lecture about the dangers of junk food and hamburgers which “she says bitterly, just as she might say *Hitler*” (PC 29), Alex surrenders and retreats to the bathroom: “I tear off my pants, furiously I grab that battered battering ram to freedom, my adolescent cock, even as my mother begins to call from the other side of the bathroom door. ‘Now this time don’t flush. Do you hear me, Alex? I have to see what’s in that bowl!’” (PC 29). In the monologue, he is perfectly able to reflect on the repercussions and is even surprised that he is only in therapy and not in a mental institution: “Look, am I exaggerating to think it’s practically miraculous that I’m ambulatory? The hysteria and the superstition! The watch-its and the be-carefuls! You mustn’t do this, you can’t do that—hold it! don’t! you’re breaking an important law! *What law? Whose law?*” (PC 30). Nevertheless, quite often he does lack the ability to reflect that „he is more his parents’ son than even he realizes. Considering his antipathies, the ultimate irony of his monologue is how often he sounds and acts exactly like the mother he attacks with such verbal gusto” (Rodgers 92). Even though he considers himself to be an atheist, it will later surface that his parents’ religious values are greatly ingrained in his psyche. In certain aspects, Portnoy shares similar traits with Lucy Nelson, insofar that both protagonists blame their suffering on their parents; at the same time, they are unable to escape from

their past: "Doctor Spievogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke—*only it ain't no joke!*" (PC 32) Although, when crying for help to his doctor, Alexander sounds remarkably similar to his over-protective, hypochondriac mother when inquiring: "Doctor, what do you call this sickness I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about?" (PC 33), whereas otherwise he does provide a great amount of answers to his questions himself.

4.3 "Jewish Blues"

The third chapter, "The Jewish Blues", is concerned with Alex's ambivalent relationship to his father. Roth provides the reader with a textbook Oedipus complex by describing the son's strong wish to murder his own father and his disrespect for him due to the imagined lack of defense. Interestingly, this bloodlust is not merely based on the competition for the mother. The awkwardness is taken to the next level, when Alex reveals his envy for his father's genitals: "he was constructed like a man of consequence, two big healthy balls such as a king would be proud to put on display, and a *shlong* of magisterial length and girth. And they were *his*: yes, of this I am absolutely certain, they hung down off of, they were connected on to, they could not be taken away from, *him!*" (PC 37). In many aspects, Alex displays strong signs of fragile masculinity, which he unsuccessfully attempts to cure with having intercourse, preferably with "shiskes" (non-Jewish women) (PC 49). While this may not be the most likeable trait in a man, Roth turns the table of sympathy again: first Alex recalls an instance in which his mother sent her eleven-year-old son to the store in order to buy tampons for her. From a woman's perspective, I do not find this to be the most traumatizing exploit, nevertheless, Alex's point of view is comprehensible, and it appears to have been quite traumatizing for him: "Where was my sister, for Christ's sake? Where was her own emergency supply? Why was this woman so grossly insensitive to the vulnerability of her own little boy—on one hand so insensitive to my shame, and yet on the other, so attuned to my deepest desires?" (PC 39). Thus, the reader is quickly distracted from his essential penis envy and bloodlust towards his father and drawn back into other rather disturbing aspects of his upbringing. They may invoke more sympathy in the reader, since a child is at the mercy of its parents' actions, as Keen suggests according to her survey's findings: "Many readers report that novels which child characters are

subjected to cruel or unfair treatment evoke empathy” (Keen 69). One of Alex’ “deepest desires” since he was four years old, appears to be observing his mother while “rolling on her stockings and singing a song of love. Who is going to stay with Mommy forever and ever? *Me*. Who is it who does with Mommy wherever in the whole world Mommy goes? *Why me, of course. What a silly question—but don’t get me wrong, I’ll play the game!*” (PC 41), followed by his mother holding “my stiff fingers against the swell of her hips” and Alex declaring that they “aren’t bad” (PC 41). Throughout the novel, Roth provides the reader with detailed accounts of Alex’ exposure to inappropriate parental conduct from an earlier age. This is a technique to challenge the reader’s sympathy towards Alex, especially in later parts of the novel, when he treats women condescendingly. By providing the deepest abysses of his thoughts, the reader can evaluate the full range of his emotions and motives as opposed to just witnessing the outcome—which, arguably, could be perceived as misogyny.

In this chapter, Roth further establishes Alexander’s strong sense of Jewishness which appears to be his only trait he is unable to reflect upon himself. Whereas he is perfectly capable to reflect upon disturbing occurrences in his childhood as well as his highly developed sense of guilt and shame, it does not strike him as peculiar when he recounts a high school football game in such manner:

So what if we had lost? It turned out we had other things to be proud of. We ate no ham. We kept matzohs in our lockers. Not really, of course, but if we wanted to *we could, and we weren’t ashamed to say that we actually did!* We were Jews—and we weren’t ashamed to say it! We were Jews—and not only were we not inferior to the goyim who beat us at football, but the chances were that because we could not commit our hearts to victory in such a thuggish game, we were superior! We were Jews—and *we were superior!* (PC 51)

Despite his usual disposition to criticize his parents, he even goes so far as to admit the following: “The outrage, the disgust inspired in my parents by the gentiles, was beginning to make some sense: the goyim pretended to be something special, while we were actually their moral superiors. And what made us superior was precisely the hatred and the disrespect they lavished so willingly upon us!” (PC 51) This strong sense of Jewish pride is particularly interesting, considering the fact, that only three pages afterwards he states, “I don’t have a religion” (PC 54) when refusing his father’s wish to attend the synagogue on a Jewish holiday, as well as shortly after he wonders “But I am something more, or so they tell me. A Jew. No! No! An atheist, I cry. I am a

nothing where religion is concerned, and will not pretend to be anything that I am not!" (PC 66). One may argue that his statement in regards of the sports event was an anomaly due to certain circumstance; since examples like that appear throughout the novel, it is evidence for his inherent sense of Jewishness as well as his unawareness of it. Further evidence can be found in his moral discourse about his mother's belittling attitude towards the cleaning lady, in which he strongly complains about a symptom he shows himself:

We all haven't been lucky enough to have been born Jews, you know. So a little *rachmones* on the less fortunate, okay? Because I am sick and tired of *goyische* this and *goyische* that! If it's bad it's the goyim, if it's good it's the Jews! Can't you see, my dear parents, from whose loins I somehow leaped, that such thinking is a trifle barbaric? That all you are expressing is your *fear*? The very first distinction I learned from you, I'm sure, was not night and day, or hot and cold, but *goyische* and Jewish." (PC 69)

In an attempt to put his teenage rage against his religion into perspective and telling him "You are a Jewish boy, more than you know, and all you're doing is making yourself miserable, all you're doing is hollering into the wind..." his sister may be on the right path, but misses the mark when she continues her argument "Do you know, she asks me, where you would be now if you had been born in Europe instead of America? [...] Dead, she says." (PC 70) By drawing this comparison she steps into their mother's footsteps and fuels Alexander's contempt for the "saga of the suffering Jews": "Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I *happen also to be a human being!*" (PC 70)

4.4 "Cunt Crazy"

Due to its title "Cunt Crazy" the reader may be surprised to find that the following chapter is still very much concerned Alex's relationship to his parents. He continues to describe several humorous instances of his mother fostering his sense of guilt, to which he concludes: "And as for the hollering, the cowering, the crying, even that had vividness and excitement to recommend it; moreover, that nothing was ever simply nothing but always SOMETHING, that the most ordinary kind of occurrence could explode without warning into A TERRIBLE CRISIS, this was to me *the way life is*" (PC 88). Halio points out that the intensity of Portnoy's monologue increases drastically "as his plea continues" and "suggests the way in which excess is a dominant theme in the novel

and controls much of its form. Roth here takes everything to extremes—deliberately” (Halio 67). Since this tone has been thoroughly established in the novel after ninety pages, it barely comes as a surprise, that Alex recalls her mother asking him “Well, how’s my lover?” (PC 89) in front of her husband. As previously pointed out, Roth made Alex not only into a text book patient for psychoanalysis, but also quick to analyze himself. Thus, he is able to reflect upon the incident: “No, you don’t have to go digging where these people are concerned—they wear the old unconscious on their *sleeves!*” (PC 89) Nevertheless, it is outrageousness like this, which Halio refers to when stating “[it] can be and often is funny. It shocks us out of the ordinary complacency or easy acquiescence in accepted norms of behavior, and the surprise can be salutary” (Halio 68). Thereby, Roth takes the reader out of his comfort zone, time and time again, by confronting him or her with most disturbing subjects such as the sexualization of the mother-son relationship, explicit descriptions of masturbation, as well as his ongoing inner conflict, which continuously cause a *Feeling of Body* in the reader. In contrast to *When She Was Good*, “*Portnoy’s Complaint* does not deal with life-and-death problems; however serious and threatening they may appear to Alexander Portnoy [...]” (Halio 68). The reader is able to follow his life of suffering because of Roth’s choice to “depart from a conventional lineal development and interweave incidents from various points in his subject’s life” (Halio 68).

Periodically, Roth provides comic relief from Alexander’s complaints which presents certain similarities to stand-up comedy. This may partly be due to the monologue-form of the novel but is further highlighted by the devices of exaggeration and especially non-sequitur which are staples in stand-up comedy. In the following example, Alexander’s mother is rambling about the success of one of his former schoolmates. The excerpt shows how Roth is heightening the comic effect by taking exaggerations to an extreme, adding random information concerning his Jewishness and finishes with the non-sequitur ending of making Alexander feel guilty for not being this fantastical creature:

‘Well, I met his mother on the street today, and she told me that Seymour is now the biggest brain surgeon in the entire Western Hemisphere. He owns six different split-level ranch-type house made all of fieldstone in Livingston, and belongs to the boards of eleven synagogues, all brand-new and designed by Marc Kugel, and last year with his wife and his two little daughters, who are so beautiful that they are already under contract to Metro, and so brilliant that they should be in college—he took them all to Europe for an eighty-million-dollar tour

of seven thousand countries, some of them you never even heard of, that they made them just to honor Seymour,

and on top of that, he's so important, Seymour, that in every single city in Europe that they visited he was asked by the mayor himself to stop and do an impossible operation on a brain in hospitals that they also built for him right on the spot, and—listen to this—where they pumped into the operating room during the operation the theme song from *Exodus* so everybody should know what religion he is—and that's how big your friend Seymour is today! *And how happy he makes his parents!*' (PC 91-92)

In this aspect, the tone of *Portnoy's Complaint* is strikingly different from *When She Was Good* as well as *Everyman*, which are concerned with topics of a greater magnitude and do seldomly grant a comic relief.

As he feels pressured by his mother to step into marriage, he ponders about the necessity to determinate his current, promiscuous lifestyle for the sake of a wife:

But why must I explain myself! Excuse myself! Why must I justify with my Honesty and Compassion my desires! So I have desires—only they're endless. Endless! And that, that may not be such a blessing, taking for the moment a psychoanalytic point of view... But then all the unconscious can do anyway, so Freud tells us, is *want*. *And want! And WANT!* Oh, Freud, do I know! (PC 95)

Even if he strives against the notion of marrying “to please a father and mother” or “to conform to the norm” (PC 94) once again, Alexander has answered part of his question himself by mentioning, that his current lifestyle of indulging in his desires “may not be such a blessing” (PC 95). It appears as if he actually suffers from his compulsive sexual behavior. “The making of a ‘respectable’ person is what Alex has in mind to do—not the ‘perfect little gentleman’ that Sophie Portnoy wants, nor the sexually aggressive man that he apparently is—but an integrated human being for whom the id is within the yid”, as Cohen (162) has stated. This discrepancy could be interpreted as one of the sources for Portnoy's consultation of a therapist and his ongoing struggle with relationships and women. In his Foucauldian reading of the novel, Dan Colson attempts to explain Alex's seeming misogyny accordingly:

Alex has been justifiably accused of being a misogynist, but as Foucault notes, ‘Power comes from below [...] there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations’ (qtd in Colson 136). Therefore, one cannot simply claim that Alex uses, abuses, and dominates women. He is also controlled by them. They both form the emotional core of the novel (the angst and impotence that drives Alex to Dr. Spielvogel's office) and serve as the clearest indicator in the novel of the effect of a continued deployment of sexuality on Alex and others during the 1960s. (Colson 136)

This cannot be considered as a justification for said behavior but merely as speculation about its origins. By drawing attention to this duality, Roth is challenging the reader's sympathy. Through "the associative movement of memory" (Brauner 45), the reader is introduced to the depths of Alexander's mind, as well as a myriad of empathic (and disturbing) instances, before Roth reveals many of his more off-putting actions. One may argue that Portnoy's partners, such as The Monkey, have had their share of issues themselves, and therefore only partly justify his behavior and sudden determination of long-term relationships. However, there is clear evidence that "he treats women in his life like objects": he "goes so far as to deprive them of their names and refer to them as The Pilgrim, The Pumpkin, The Monkey, and The Jewish Pumpkin" (Rodgers 93). This is further supported by Brauner's detailed and sound commentary on the frequent criticism of misogyny in *Portnoy's Complaint*:

The sexual aggression (sex as aggression, one might say) here is characteristic of Portnoy's relationship with women throughout the novel, and, like Roth's representation of Jews, his representation of women in the novel has been the subject of heated debate. On the face of it, there is much evidence in *Portnoy's Complaint* to support the view that Roth is at best a sexist, at worst a misogynist. Certainly, Portnoy's objectification of his girlfriends, as manifested most clearly in the nicknames he gives each one [...] is patronizing and demeaning. Portnoy's callous treatment of Mary Jane [...], attempted rape of Naomi, and rejection of Kay and Sarah when they fail to sustain his sexual interest only seem to confirm this charge. Yet to condemn the novel in these terms is rather parochial, and possibly tendentious. First of all, Portnoy's contempt for women is arguably no greater than his contempt for men (and indeed perhaps milder than his contempt for himself). If Portnoy is a misogynist, then it might be argued that his misogyny is simply part of a larger misanthropy. (Brauner 51)

Whether this misanthropy is caused by his sense of "the futility of his attempts at rebellion" (Rodgers 93) or his "need for liberation"—"his obscenity is both a product and a symptom of his awareness of his condition" (Rodgers 93). Thus, Alexander appears to be stuck in a vicious circle that happens to be his life. Over the course of the chapter "Cunt Crazy" it remains apparent, that most of his oppression stems from his family since he returns to them as a topic consistently, even in a chapter with said title. During the recollection of various of his excesses, Alexander also confesses, what he considers "the worst thing I have ever done" (PC 123) and interestingly, the victim of this deed was his family and not a girlfriend. This self-assessment is a further indicator, that his family is at the center of the novel. While defending himself from deserting The Monkey

in Greece, Alexander argues that this was not “the most heinous crime of my career” (PC 123) but instead masturbating into a piece of animal liver, on two occasions:

I believe that I have already confessed to the piece of liver that I bought in a butcher shop and banged behind a billboard on the way to a bar mitzvah lesson. [...] My first piece I had in the privacy of my own home, rolled round my cock in the bathroom at three-thirty—and then had again on the end of a fork, at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of mine. [...] I fucked my own family’s dinner. (PC 123)

Once again, Roth is juxtaposing sexuality, family and disgust and creates an event, which is going to take the reader far out of his comfort zones and thus generating a Feeling of Body.

Towards the end of the chapter, Alexander ultimately manages to focus on his sexual escapades without shifting to his family constantly. It appears, that, apart from his mother, his second biggest obsession are catholic girls, or *shiksés*. Beginning in his teenage days, when he chases after them on the ice rank. At first, he contemplates to change his name to “Al Parson” or “Porte-Noir” in order to seem less Jewish, until he comes to realize “[...] I can lie about my name, I can lie about my school, but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose?” (PC 137) and “Porte-Noir and Parsons my ass, kid, you have got J-E-W written right across the middle of that face [...]” (PC 138), which could be interpreted as a futile attempt to escape or deny his Jewishness.

However, Alexander eventually comes to terms with his type : “[...] what we have before us, ladies and gentlemen, direct from a long record breaking engagement with his own family, is a Jewish boy just dying in his every cell to be Good, Responsible, & Dutiful to a family of his own [...] If you liked Arthur Miller as a savior of *shiksés*, you’ll just love Alex!” (PC 141). This self-assessment is proof that Alexander is not fully enjoying his promiscuity and unsuccessfully is wishing for a life of moderation, but he is stuck in a vicious circle of excesses. This behavior is strongly surfacing in his sexual relations with The Monkey; arguably the most noteworthy woman in the novel. She caters to both of his fantasies: his perversion and his restrained wish to settle down. A detailed account of many of their sexual adventures is provided and the protagonist even realizes that she is all that he has prayed for:

Who like The Monkey had ever happened to me before—or will again? Not that I had not prayed, of course. No, you pray and you pray and you pray, you lift your impassioned prayers to God on the altar of the toilet seat, throughout your adolescence you deliver up to Him the living sacrifice of your spermatozoa by the *gallon*—and then one night, around midnight, on the corner of Lexington and Fifty-second, when you have come really to the point of losing faith in the existence of such a creature as you have been imagining for yourself even unto your thirty-second year, there she is, wearing a tan pants suit, and trying to hail a cab [...]. (PC 144-45)

She fulfills all his sexual fantasies and more, and that is the exact reason why he finds her character to be dubious and wonders “Who and what can this person be!” (PC 146) which is a further example of Alexander’s perpetual plight. This specific case is interestingly one of the seldom instances in the monologue, in which Alexander does not seem to have exaggerated tremendously when wondering “what catastrophe would follow” (PC 147), but it truly appears, according to his recollections, that The Monkey is “a little erratic psychologically” (PC 147). This is established quite early when the reader is informed about her suicide-threat in Greece: “Then in Athens she threatens to jump from the balcony unless I marry her. So I leave” (PC 131). A similarly odd dichotomy can be found in his opinion of *shiksés*, whom he is chasing after on the ice rank, and continuously through his adulthood, but simultaneously points out: “My contempt for what they believe in is more than neutralized by my adoration for what they look, the way they move and laugh and speak [...]” (PC 133). Another example for his contradicting behavior is his relationship with The Pumpkin, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Roth continues to increase the arbitrariness of Portnoy’s behavior and thought process in the vivid recollection of his encounter with Bubbles Girardi and two friends during High School. His classmate Smolka met Bubbles at “the swimming pool at Olympic Park” (PC 152) and lost his virginity to her. Portnoy makes clear, “I wouldn’t go near that pool if you paid me—it is a breeding ground for polio and spinal meningitis, not to mention diseases of the skin, the scalp, and the asshole [...]” (PC 152), by which he sounds strikingly like his mother. Nevertheless, “That is the place to find the kinds of *shiksés* Who Will Do Anything!” (PC 152) and he is intrigued, when Smolka suggests to help him have sex with Bubbles as well. That is, despite the fact, that he is afraid that the girl could have syphilis and he hypothesizes about a scenario in which his penis would fall off in the kitchen in front of his mother and he would have to example

himself: "I caught the syph from an eighteen-year-old Italian girl in Hillside, and now, now, I have no more p-p-p-penis!" (*PC* 154). This is reminiscent of his relationship to *The Monkey* insofar that he has concerns about the involvement with the woman and speaks condescending about her. However, this does not keep him from receiving sexual pleasure from them. This moral ambiguity is challenging the reader's sympathy towards Alexander, since he is starting to shed his role as a victim (of his mother) and begins to appear as the victimizer (of other women) due to his disdainful opinions about them.

His disdainfulness is especially interesting in the light of his work as a Commissioner for Human Opportunity in New York for which he declares: "I swear that I will dedicate my life to the righting of wrongs, to the elevation of the downtrodden and the underprivileged, to the liberation of the unjustly imprisoned" (*PC* 157). Whereas it appears that he is successful in his job, a twisted sense of justice can be found in the character of Portnoy. Roth fully surfaces this, when his protagonist, as an adult, encounters his old classmate Mandel on the street, and briefly catches up with him. He is in utter disbelief when he is informed about the lives of his old friends: "Mandel, who drank 'six-packs' of beer" is married with children and a "salesman for his wife's father, who has a surgical supply house on Market Street in Newark" (*PC* 160). Smolka, who "swam in the pool at Olympic Park" (*PC* 162), to his horror, has become a professor at Princeton. It appears, that Alexander can only fathom the fate of Bubbles Girardi, who got murdered in a bar:

Why, they're supposed to be in jail—or the gutter. They didn't do their homework, damn it! Smolka used to cheat off me in Spanish, and Mandel didn't even give enough of a shit to bother to do that, and as for washing their hands before eating ... Don't you understand, these two boys are supposed to be dead! Like Bubbles. Now there at least is a career that makes some sense. There's a case of cause and effect that confirms my ideas about human consequence! Bad enough, rotten enough, and you get your cock-sucking head blown off by boogies. Now that's the way the world's supposed to be run! (*PC* 162)

Due to his extreme and motiveless disdain of wishing death upon acquaintances because they have not behaved as properly as he did, this could be considered an ultimate turning point for the reader's sympathy. While previously Alexander emphasized his urge to be good, and occasionally even went so far as to portray himself as a savior, one will now be forced to question the sincerity of his moral and what his idea of "righting of wrongs" implies; if apparently, he feels that Bubbles' murder was the appropriate

consequence for her performing oral sex on occasion in her youth. In addition, the absurdity of his reasoning is, once again, reminiscent of his mother's lectures.

4.5 "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life"

The fifth chapter is titled after an essay by Freud, "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", which Alexander references while further elaborating and reflecting on his relationship with The Monkey. As he has done frequently throughout the novel, he attempts to find answers for his calamity and finds it in this essay: "for a fully normal attitude in love, says he, it is necessary that two currents of feeling be united: the tender, affectionate feelings, and the sensuous feelings. And in many instances this just doesn't happen, say to say. 'Where such men love they have no desire, and where they desire they cannot love'" (PC 171). This appears to be a sound analysis of Portnoy, even though in his case, he is not only unable to love women he desires sexually but displays "something close to contempt" (PC 170) towards them; He is barely able see them as humans: "What screwing I am getting! What a deal! And yet it turns out that she is also a human being—yes, she gives every indication that this may be so! *A human being!*" (PC 179). As in a previous instance with Bubbles, the reader will find it difficult to empathize with Portnoy in the last third of the novel, due to his bizarre sense of superiority and pretentious behavior towards his sexual partners, especially The Monkey:

So go ahead, love her! Be brave! Here is fantasy begging you to make it real! [...] Ah, but there is (let us bow our heads), there is 'my dignity' to consider, my good name. What will people think. What *I* will think. (PC 183)

What else is wrong with her, while we're at it? (PC 191)

Being with such a person is for me all *wrong!* Meaning-less! A waste of everybody's energy and character and time! (PC 194)

'Why continue with this person? This brutalized woman! This coarse, tormented, self-loathing, bewildered, lost, identityless—' and so on. (PC 197)

This relationship is in strong contrast to his college girlfriend Kay Campbell, also known as The Pumpkin. She was "a thoroughly commendable and worthy human being", but, nonetheless, "didn't satisfy, either" (PC 198). During this recollection, Roth returns to a more comical tone after the rather depressing passages about The Monkey, which is especially notable in Alexander's account of Thanksgiving with her family. As he

appears to feel utterly alienated but also infatuated by her wholesome, Christian family, he recounts that “during my first twenty-four hours in Iowa, I answer ‘Thank you.’ Even to inanimate objects. I walk into a chair, promptly I say to it, ‘Excuse me, thank you.’” (PC 203) Alexander then proceeds to be fascinated when he discovers the meaning of “Good morning” and humorously analyzes it: “He wants the hours between eight and twelve to be good, which is to say, enjoyable, pleasurable, beneficial! We are all of us wishing each other four hours of pleasure and accomplishment” (PC 204) and ends with his epiphany: “My God! The English language is a *form of communication!* Conversation isn’t just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at! Where you’ve got to duck for your life and aim to kill! Words aren’t only bombs and bullets—no, they’re little gifts, containing *meanings!*” (PC 205). Hereby Roth draws attention to the ways in which Alexander was shaped by his family. He is portrayed as being utterly clueless of how to use the simplest courtesies such as “Thank you” and “Good morning”, which magnify the cultural differences in humorous way. In the context of this novel, the Kay’s family seems surprisingly wholesome, particularly when Alexander mentions a possible pregnancy: “[...] Kay missed a period, and so we began, and with a certain eager delight—and wholly without panic, interestingly—to make plans to be married” (PC 212). Nonetheless, as if the protagonist was self-sabotaging himself, he did ultimately find a reason to break up with her, when, in jest, he asked her whether she would convert to Judaism. Her utterly reasonable response was “Why would I want to do a thing like that?” (PC 213), since neither of them care much for religion on principle. Regardless, he points out that “it would seem that I never forgave her [...]”. In Contrast to *The Monkey*, the tone of this narration presents itself a lot more romanticizing as well as less remorseful, but he is quick to regain his focus to “the dream of the women to come” and “wondering how I could ever have been so captivated by someone so ordinary and so fat” (PC 214).

4.6 “In Exile”

In the sixth and final chapter “In Exile” Portnoy reports about his spontaneous trip to Israel after his breakup with *The Monkey* in Europe. Driven by “the impulse that had me sent running aboard the El Al flight” (PC 232) it appears as if he is ultimately on the run, not only from his girlfriend but also from his family. In this respect, his choice of destination seems odd, although the character proofed his talent for unfortunate

decisions and tendency for self-sabotage throughout the novel. In Israel, he meets a twenty-one-year-old lieutenant; her name is Naomi who has resemblance with his mother: "in physical type she is, of course, my mother. Coloring, size, even temperament, it turned out—a real fault-finder, a professional critic of me." (PC 239) Once again, Portnoy's repressed urge for stability surfaces when he is quickly infatuated with her and says "I don't want movie stars and mannequins and whores, or any combination thereof. I don't want a sexual extravaganza for a life, or a continuation of this masochistic extravaganza I've been living, either. No, I want simplicity, I want health, I want her!" (PC 239) Due to her strong resemblance to his mother, his infatuation is based on his hope for the fulfillment of his Oedipal phantasies. To his despair, he loses his erection when they undress (PC 237). Upon their second meeting, Naomi criticizes Portnoy's job as well the system which she describes as "inherently exploitive and unjust, inherently cruel and inhumane, heedless of human values, and your job is to make such a system appear legitimate and moral [...]" (PC 242). His reply to this, "Naomi, I love you" (PC 242), appears out of place and when he continues his persuasion, the woman asks him to leave. Instead, he attempts to rape her; "But what a battle she gave me, this big farm cunt! This ex-G.I.! This mother-substitute! [...]" (PC 246) It remains unclear whether she was physically superior to him, however what Portnoy states as the reason for his "defeat" was that "he can't get a hard-on in this place" (PC 248). Whereas the act of attempted rape is not to be taken lightly, Portnoy appears very pathetic in this passage, where he is so uncontrollably trying to fulfill his Oedipus complex. This is mirrored in Naomi's stark statements: "You are the most unhappy person I have ever known. You are like a baby." (PC 244), and "Mr. Portnoy [...] you are nothing but a self-hating Jew." (PC 245) In the remainder of the chapter, Portnoy fully gives in to his neurosis and hypothesizes that his impotence must have been "The Monkey's Revenge. Of course." (PC 251). He continues to emphasize his good morality in comparison to other people, complains about "the ridiculous disproportion of the guilt" (PC 252). The novel concludes with Portnoy's primal scream when he imagines being sentenced to death for removing the tag on a mattress.

In conclusion, one can say that by merging features of four different projects, Roth was able to create the distinct voice of Alexander Portnoy. By telling the story through a first-person narrator in the setting of a therapy session, he achieves a high degree of

authenticity and it enables the author to address delicate topics such as explicit sexuality or incestuous thoughts. Thereby the reader's sympathy is challenged; on the one hand the reader will be able to empathize with the protagonist because he is presented as vulnerable and likeable; on the other hand, the reader will find him or herself confronted with actions that may object to their sense of morality and thus take them out of their comfort zone. Reminiscent of the theme in *WSWG*, Portnoy is torn between his sense of moral, which was greatly coined by his parents, and his urges, which developed as a mechanism to escape these restrictions.

5 Everyman

Published in 2006, almost 40 years after *When She Was Good* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Everyman* may not have caused as much commotion as some of Roth's other publications. This, and it being a relatively new publication, are the reason, why there was considerably less secondary literature available than for the previous two chapters. Nevertheless, the novel should not be underestimated, and it was Roth's third novel to be awarded the PEN/Faulkner price. Despite his long-standing career and numerous publications over six decades, I found it interesting that, on closer inspection, the protagonist shared some similarities in his motives with Portnoy and some of Roth's previous characters. This has also been pointed out by Rodgers; the protagonist "will be familiar to readers of Philip Roth: he has the Newark-area boyhood; [...] he has the good boy background of many of Roth's other characters; he struggles between sex and morality throughout his life [...]" (Rodgers 4). Furthermore, there are parallels to narrative techniques which were employed in *When She Was Good* in terms of reader's empathy and sympathy for the protagonist which I will discuss in the course of my analysis. Following the example of Scherbrucker and Aarons the unnamed protagonist will be referred to as "Everyman" in this thesis.

One of the first questions that will inevitably arise with this publication, is its relation to the Medieval morality play *Everyman*. This question has also been raised in the round-table discussion between five experts on Roth: Debra Shostak, Mark Shechner, David Brauner, Derek Parker Royal, and Bernhard Rodgers. Whereas one may not find a striking correlation in these two literary works on first sight, David Brauner did provide an interesting approach to this question:

The trajectory that the Medieval play follows is that, one by one, the Everyman figure is abandoned by all his worldly allies and friends. I think that Roth does translate that very effectively into a secular framework where that abandonment is not about being left alone to face your spiritual day or reckoning. He takes that allegorical narrative and translates it into a realistic framework whereby in old age people do find themselves increasingly isolated because their friends start to die, their parents have died, and often, as in this case, their family is estranged or divorced, not close either geographically or emotionally (Rodgers 23).

It is compelling that Roth has chosen a title, which would raise such a comparison in the first place, especially, when even in a detailed inspection, the parallels are not overwhelming. In addition, after one third of the novel, it is revealed, that his father's business was not called by his name "but rather Everyman's Jewelry Store, which was how it was known throughout Union City to the swarms of ordinary people who were his faithful costumers [...]" (*Everyman* 56-57). This points towards the use of "Everyman" in terms of the meaning "ordinary human being" and not so much to a connection to the Medieval play.

Nevertheless, Brauner's analysis does point to one of the major themes of the novel, which is Roth's sobering account of death. This tone is already set in the epigraph that was chosen:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow...
–John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale" (*Everyman* Epigraph)

It has been suggested by Schermbrucker that "there is something unsatisfactory and one-dimensional in the bird's complete joy, and that, by implication, it is our capacity to suffer and fatefully reflect upon our morality that ennobles our consciousness" (41). I would argue that by choosing a particularly dark excerpt, Roth is subtly preparing the reader for his counterpart to "the myth of the Shakespearian figure" (Schermbrucker 45), in which "there is no humanizing of death, no attempt to turn it into an integral part of life, [...]: death is simply the bitter, unjust end" (Schermbrucker 41-42). In this manner, Roth is conquering yet another uncomfortable topic: similar to the theme of domestic violence in *When She Was Good* and sexual compulsion in *Portnoy's Complaint*, "it is not simply the case that youth is favored, rather, images of old age are willfully hidden" (Hobbs 7) and "dying is a taboo subject" (Rodgers 14). The author himself has referred to the novel as "a medical autobiography" (qtd. in Rodgers 5) and pointed out that "the moments when he's well and healthy, I pass over in a paragraph. I think I say, twenty-two years passed and he felt great. And I'm not interested in that" (qtd. in Hobbs 11). Thereby Roth is magnifying the negative aspects of old age in his protagonist, such as "health problems, body changes, depression, loss of friends and family, and care-giving issues" (Hobbs 11), instead of granting him revelations or serenity. Over the course of my analysis, I will demonstrate this in detail and point towards

several techniques that are employed to affect the reader's emotions and empathy towards the protagonist.

The novel starts at the funeral of the unnamed protagonist (in this thesis: "Everyman") and afterwards present the medical as well as personal history leading up to this meek ceremony. By establishing this narrative situation, there is a great similarity to *When She Was Good*, in which Roth also introduced the protagonist at her graveside. I would argue that this technique highly influences the reader's sympathy for the protagonist by appealing to his or her emotions. For the sake of completion, I would like to repeat the argument made in chapter two, pointing out that the decease of a person will often lead to a repression of their negative traits or even to a glorification of character. By introducing the protagonist at his or her funeral, the reader will instantaneously and continuously be more sympathetic towards Everyman than otherwise. Keen formulated a similar approach in a more general theory: "if the very start of a narrative can evoke empathy at the mere gesture of naming and quick situation, then readers may be primed by the story-receiving circumstance to get ready to empathize" (Keen 69).

The effect is further increased by narrating his shattered family relations in this manner, for example when the reader is informed about "his two sons, Randy and Lonny, middle-aged men from his turbulent first marriage, very much their mother's children, who as a consequence know little of him that was praiseworthy and much that was beastly and who were present out of duty and nothing more" (*Everyman* 1), as well as that "they'd been irreconcilably alienated from the dead father" (*Everyman* 13). The emotions are especially heightened in this outset because of the high degree of relatability: Firstly, this effect is created by leaving the character unnamed and thus having many scholars, as well as myself, refer to him as Everyman, which is commonly an expression for an ordinary human being. Secondly, Roth "has taken as a protagonist a person that is not all that interesting" which has been pointed out by Shostak in the round-table discussion of the book (Rodgers 13). Thirdly, *Everyman's* exact age is only revealed later in the novel—nevertheless, the reader can guess from his family relations (e.g. age of children, three marriages) that he was an older man, which, arguably, makes the setting less shocking than in *When She Was Good*, where the deceased person was a young woman. By creating such an unspectacular character, Roth enables a high degree of relatability and thus allows us as readers to project our emotions

into him” (Rodgers 14). This argumentation is supported by Keen’s analysis of reader’s empathy, she explains that

Merely naming a character may set readers’ empathy in motion; indeed information leading to precise placement of a character in terms of species, race, age, gender and other aspects of status often appears after an emotional hook has connected reader and character. Thus I propose that empathy for fictional characters only require minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization. (Keen 69)

In their discussion, Rodgers comments, that this was “the only Roth novel that has ever made me cry. It is a personal response: I had a heart attack recently, so reading this thing really hit home” (Rodgers 14). Whereas, the majority of the readership will not have suffered from a heart attack themselves, most people will have witnessed old age and/or illnesses in their parents, grandparents, or elsewhere and are therefore being able to relate to the suffering of *Everyman*. Another interesting effect of this framing is that it leaves the reader in anticipation throughout the novel, which of his operations and/or illnesses will be the fatal one, i.e. will be anticipating his death towards the last pages.

Over the course of the ceremony, the reader also hears a lengthy speech given by his older brother Howie, which is crucial for two reasons: On the one hand, Roth is indicating a problem, which is going to unfold and gain momentum throughout the novel by stating that his brother “never had been hospitalized for anything and, though a sibling bred of the same stock, had remained triumphantly healthy all his life” (*Everyman* 5) and that “near the end of his life he cut himself off from me for reasons that were never clear” (*Everyman* 6). Thereby one may foresee, that the protagonist envies his brother’s health and that this may have been the reason for their alienation. On the other hand, Howie’s speech is providing meticulous details about their childhood with a focus on *Everyman*’s love for watches, i.e. his father’s business, i.e. his father. Over almost ten pages the reader receives detailed childhood memories about the brothers who used to be close, ending with their father’s passing and the inheritance of his watch. Howie recalls that “when my brother said he’d like to own it, I couldn’t be happier” (*Everyman* 11). In addition to the already highly emotional recollection of a formerly happy family, the watch is assigned further significance by connecting it to his death: “my brother wore it day and night. He took it off for good only forty-eight hours ago he handed it to the nurse to lock away for safekeeping while he was having the

surgery that killed him" (*Everyman* 12). Aarons suggests that his "childhood fascination with the watches in his father's jewelry store [...] frame his phobic response to the passing of time and his desire to control time; the watch is his to wind every morning (11)" (Aarons 122). In consideration of this reading, Howie's closing of the speech appears even more touching when he points out that it is now Everyman's daughter Nancy "who's wearing the Hamilton to tell time by" (*Everyman* 13) and thus metaphorically carrying on the family legacy.

However, after the sentimental narration of the ceremony the reader is suddenly taken back into the sobering Rothian reality:

That was the end. No special point had been made. Did they all say what they had to say? No, they didn't, and of course they did. Up and down the state that day, there'd been five hundred funerals like his, routine, ordinary, and except for the thirty wayward seconds furnished by the sons—and Howie's resurrecting with such painstaking precision the world as it innocently existed before the invention of death, life perpetual in their father-created Eden, a paradise just fifteen feet wide by forty feet deep disguised as an old-style jewelry store—no more or less interesting than any of the others. But then it's the commonness that's most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything.

In a matter of minutes, everybody had walked away—wearily and tearfully walked away from our species' least favorite activity—and he was left behind." (*Everyman* 14-15)

Thereby Roth is establishing a juxtaposition of narration which can be found throughout the novel and has also been noted by Shostak. On the one hand "[...] you have this interesting interweaving of the present narrative, which is about bodily decay" (Shostak qtd. in Rodgers 17), or in this ultimate instance, about the body unromantically being "left behind" (15). On the other hand, you have the "narrative where he is still alive, where all the memories are taking him back to the times when there is some sort of vitality, or connection or something that is not happening in the present" (Shostak qtd. in Rodgers 17), or in this instance, the sentimental memories provided by his daughter and brother.

With this setting, Roth is "working backwards from the grave" (Aarons 119) and takes the reader from Everyman's funeral back to when he was nine years old and had his first operation (hernia). Hereby he provides one of the fewer comic instances in an otherwise earnest novel, when the young boy is anxious about his operation and "in that moment of terror when they lowered the ether mask over his face as though to

smother him, he could have sworn that the surgeon, whoever he was, had whispered, 'Now I'm going to turn you into a girl'" (*Everyman* 29). At this point, the fear of misconduct by a doctor appears lighthearted and humorous, whereas in later parts his accounts "show the lack of care afforded the elderly; on separate occasions, he finds EKG pads and IV needles still affixed after his release from the hospital (74) (Hobbs 12) which emphasizes a certain "helplessness and disregard" (Hobbs 12) towards the patient who is already suffering.

The novel then proceeds by telling the story of his appendix operation, interweaved with the divorce from his first wife, Cecilia, and his new relationship with Phoebe, his second wife. Thereby Roth skips two decades in which *Everyman* was supposedly healthy and thus are not relevant to this "medical autobiography" (qtd. in Rodgers 5). This passage reveals three important aspects about the character: Firstly, the reader is confronted with *Everyman's* omnipresent fear of death and "thoughts of dying" (*Everyman* 30) when on vacation with Phoebe, at an age of only thirty-four. Secondly, while arguing that there is no apparent reason for his fear due to his moderate life, it is highlighted that "he never thought of himself as anything more than an average human being" (*Everyman* 31) and that "he was reasonable and kindly, an amicable, moderate, industrious man, as everyone who knew him well would probably agree" (*Everyman* 30). Roth is affirming the ordinariness of his character, which, as I have argued before, is essential for his relatability. Simultaneously, and actually in the same sentence, the reader is provided with the answer as to why he is estranged from his two sons, when the narration continues "except, of course, for the wife and two boys whose household he'd left and who, understandably, could not equate reasonableness and kindness with his finally giving up on a failed marriage and looking elsewhere for the intimacy with a woman that he craved" (*Everyman* 30-31). This is an interesting sequence in which the reader is presented with the information, that *Everyman* has left his wife and two children for another woman. Typically, this would cause some degree of discontent towards the regarding character, whereas in this case it is presented in a moment of vulnerability and thus one may rather be able to empathize with the situation. This is further achieved in the following passage:

He never thought of himself as anything more than an average human being, and one who would have given anything for his marriage to have lasted a lifetime. He had married with just that expectation. But instead marriage became his prison cell, and so, after much tortuous thinking that preoccupied him while he worked and

when he should have been sleeping, he began fitfully, agonizingly, to tunnel his way out. Isn't that what an average human being would do? Isn't that what average human beings do every day? Contrary to what his wife told everyone, he hadn't hungered after the wanton freedom to do anything and everything. Far from it. He hungered for something stable all the while he detested what he had (*Everyman* 31-32).

Roth provides an interesting perspective for the reader, by giving a voice to the person, who is made out to be the scapegoat by his first wife. By showing his struggles and his side of the story, one may be able to empathize with his actions, despite his status as an adulterer. Keen provides support for this argument:

The phenomenon of empathy for unattractive characters strengthens the case for the idea of minimal requirements for identification: a name (or pronoun), a situation, and an implicit feeling might be all that is required to spark empathy. The characters need not be admirable. The characterization may indeed be quite sketchy" (Keen 76).

In this context, I would like to highlight certain parallels to *Portnoy's Complaint*, in which Roth also narrates the story of a character who may not be the most appealing figure on first or second sight. Nevertheless, due to the narrative techniques employed by Roth, the reader will probably find him- or herself sympathizing for their situation to a certain extent. This could arguably lead to a feeling of uneasiness, because one may object to some of their actions, but one still feels empathy towards them, which is also addressed by Keen: "Author's empathy can be devoted to socially undesirable ends that may be rejected by a disapproving reader. Indeed, empathic distress at feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a reader's moral code may be a result of successfully exercised authorial empathy" (Keen xiii).

Furthermore, one will notice similarities in the characters' contradicting urges: it becomes apparent in the passage above that *Everyman* is striving for stability, yet his marriage feels like a "prison cell" to him (*Everyman* 31). This is reminiscent of *Portnoy's* wish for a sexually adventurous girlfriend, but he thinks condescendingly of *The Monkey*, because of her/their sexual adventures. Just like *Portnoy*, *Everyman's* behavior forms to become a pattern because "even when married to his devoted and resourceful second wife Phoebe, he is uneasy, as if his comfort is a sign of failure [...]" (Aarons 120) even though "he was never more determined to keep anyone" (*Everyman* 41).

In addition to the parallels in motive, the novels have a similar pace, which Aarons points out: "the narrative seems to begin with a sharp intake of breath that keeps going

until the air is expelled at the novel's close, reinforcing the overlap of character and author through a generic self-allusion" (Aarons 19). I also agree with Aarons' analysis of his sexual behavior. She states that "Without any real ambition, all his life he has given in to fleeting yet uncontrollably seductive sexual temptation without much thought to the consequence" (Aarons 120). This is most apparent on his first encounter with his third wife, Merete, a young Danish model whom he works with: "Only moments after the car took off his thumb was in her mouth, and without him knowing it, his marriage had come under assault" (*Everyman* 111); and while already being unfaithful with her: "This was the wildest venture of his life, the one, as he was only faintly beginning to understand, that could wipe out everything" (*Everyman* 113).

Returning to the sobering reality of *Everyman's* appendectomy, the reader is informed that "he was in the hospital for thirty days" (*Everyman* 40) and when complaining as to when he will finally be released because he is "missing the fall of 1967", the surgeon said "Don't you get it yet? You almost missed everything" (*Everyman* 41). Thus, his previously expressed fear of death becomes shockingly tangible and it is a reminder, that even a thirty-four-year-old person with a moderate lifestyle is not safe from dying. This moment of fear is contrasted by the following paragraph which is an example of what Roth referred to when stating that "[...] the moments in which he's well I pass over in a paragraph" (qtd in Schermbrucker 42):

Twenty-two years passed. Twenty-two years of excellent health and the boundless self-assurance that flows from being fit—twenty-two years spared the adversary that is illness and the calamity that waits in the wings. As head assured himself while walking under the stars on the Vineyard with Phoebe, he would worry about oblivion when he was seventy-five (*Everyman* 41).

The novel continues twenty-two years later, when *Everyman*, at an age of fifty-six, is taking care of his dying father and meanwhile his own "EKG showed radical changes that indicated severe occlusion of his major coronary arteries" (*Everyman* 42) and his doctors "determined that surgery was essential" (*Everyman* 43). In this context, his third wife is introduced "when she followed beside the gurney weeping and wringing her hands and finally uncontrollably, cried out 'What about me?'" (*Everyman* 44). She is further described as "nothing short of a hazard in an emergency" (*Everyman* 43) to a point that "he could not be released from the hospital if his home care was to be provided by his wife" (*Everyman* 45) which puts her in great contrast to his second wife Phoebe, whom he left for the young model. Nevertheless, her character provides a

comic relief to the tragic situation when Everyman tries to soothe her by saying: “First let me die. Then I’ll come help you bear up” (*Everyman* 44). In addition to this hazard, which Everyman has chosen himself, this sequence also reinforces the differences between him and his older brother Howie, who’s “father was dying in a hospital in New Jersey and his brother recovering from open-heart surgery in a hospital in New York—and though he spent the week traveling from the one bedside to the other—Howie’s vigor never lapsed, nor did his capacity to inspire confidence” (*Everyman* 46). The tragedy of Everyman’s case is at least twofold: On the one hand, his brother, despite his thriving career and residence in California, has devoted himself to caring for his father and brother on the East Coast. However, the reader has already been informed at the beginning of the novel that the brothers part ways in later years, arguably due to Everyman’s envy of Howie’s health and therefore sacrificing his last remaining relationship. On the other hand, Everyman is kept from the opportunity to take care of his dying father because he himself is confined to bed and almost as helpless as his parent, who must be around twenty years his senior. Yet he barely escapes death for the second time already: “It turned out that they’d caught him just in time: when he was admitted to the hospital, his coronary arteries were anywhere from ninety to ninety-five percent occluded and he’d been on the verge of a massive and probably fatal heart attack” (*Everyman* 48).

The feeling of uneasiness for Everyman is further heightened by a continuously increased use of medical terms, as can be seen in quotes above, as well as several descriptions of his physical pain:

On the nights when he was too uncomfortable to sleep [...] (*Everyman* 47).

The postsurgical exhaustion was so severe that merely shaving—and not even shaving standing up but while in a chair, tired him out [...] (*Everyman* 48).

After dinner he had to go back to bed for the evening simply from the effort of eating sitting up in a chair, and in the morning he had to remain seated on a plastic stool to wash himself in the shower (*Everyman* 49).

Merely standing there absorbing the blow that is the death of a father proved to be a surprising challenge to his physical strength—it was a good thing Howie was beside him on the left, one arm holding him firmly around his waist, to prevent anything untoward from happening (*Everyman* 54-55).

The last quote is in reference to his father’s funeral, where the protagonist is barely able to stand without his brother’s help which further highlights his physical as well as

emotional suffering. The narration continues with memories of the father, but mostly about “Everyman’s Jewelry Store” (*Everyman* 56). Noteworthy here is the elaboration on the romance and prestige of owning a diamond:

The wife can wear it for the beauty and she can wear it for the status. And when she does, this guy is not just a plumber—he’s a man with a wife with a diamond. His wife owns something that is imperishable. Because beyond the beauty and the status and the value, the diamond is imperishable. A piece of the earth that is imperishable, and a mere mortal is wearing it on her hand! (*Everyman* 57).

Whereas Roth or neo-realism are not necessarily known for deep, meaningful metaphors, in the context of a novel about ageing and death, the imperishable diamond could be interpreted as a contrast to life, which is everchanging and ultimately ends in the grave. However, this awareness as well as “Everyman’s proximity to death does not result in any inwardness or subjective thought” (Schernbrucker 42). In other words, neither his appendectomy, nor his heart surgery, nor the death of his father is a reason for him to make amends (e.g. fully appreciate his loving wife Phoebe; overcome his envy towards his brother; or approach his estranged sons). Thus, he is unable to take his father’s advice who pleaded: “Look back and atone for what you can atone for, and make the best of what you have left” (*Everyman* 171), which has also been stated by Aarons (125). This resistance further highlights “Roth’s skepticism towards the idea that life resembles a Bildungsroman, in which old age can be compared to a serene pinnacle from which the self can calmly survey its life with the wisdom of experience and hindsight” as has been pointed out by Schernbrucker (46).

After another nine years in which “his health remained stable” (*Everyman* 62), at the age of sixty-five, he receives “a stent that was transported on a catheter maneuvered up through a puncture in the femoral artery and through the aorta to the occlusion” (*Everyman* 62). I argue that the increasing use of medical terms signifies the characters’ increasing familiarity with his heart problems as well as the hospital environment in general. He then “moved from Manhattan to the Starfish Beach retirement village at the Jersey Shore” (*Everyman* 63), after the attacks of 9/11, which shows vulnerability and fear in the character and further adds to the reader’s empathy. His vulnerability is further supported by his statement to his daughter Nancy: “I’ve got a deep-rooted fondness for survival. I’m getting out of here” (*Everyman* 66). In addition, his rather early retreat to a retirement home could be interpreted as another indicator for his moderate, almost cautious lifestyle, which has been established throughout the novel.

Nevertheless, one year later he needs another surgery “for another major obstruction, this one in his left carotid artery, one of the two main arteries that stretch from the aorta to the base of the skull and supply blood to the brain and that if left obstructed could cause a disabling stroke or even sudden death” (*Everyman* 67). In this context, the reader is provided with an example of the patient’s helplessness in terms of his medical care, when, only in the waiting room before the surgery, he is asked whether he would prefer “a general or a local anesthetic the way a waiter might have asked if he preferred red or white wine” (*Everyman* 70). Provided with insufficient information by the doctor, he chose local anesthesia, thinking that it would be safer, causing him excruciating discomfort during the surgery:

It was a mistake, a barely endurable mistake, because the operation lasted two hours and his head was claustrophobically draped with a cloth and the cutting scarping took place so close to his ear, he could hear every move their instruments made as though he were inside an echo chamber. But there was nothing to be done. No fight to put up. You take it and endure it. Just give yourself over to it for as long as it lasts (*Everyman* 70).

This pointed description of his sensations will cause a Feeling of Body in most readers and will thus heighten the empathy for this situation. Furthermore, it emphasizes the helplessness of the patient even more; in this case, by literally being exposed to his ordeal on the operating-table. In this context, I would like to mention the results of a student survey which was conducted by Keen, who reports: “the students were at liberty to mention any text that came to mind, but they did not choose upbeat novels and short stories with joyful or comical characters. [Thus] empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details of experience exists” (Keen 72). Therefore, one could say that the intense description of *Everyman*’s suffering on the operating table is quite likely to generate an emotional response due to its negative connotation, even if the readers may not have experienced surgery themselves.

Shortly afterwards, it is narrated that “he was briefly knocked out on an operating table while a defibrillator was permanently inserted as a safeguard against [...] a fatal cardiac arrhythmia” (*Everyman* 74). Considering the apparent severity of this procedure, the wording appears disarming, and the narration of barely one page rather swift, which may also suggest an increasing familiarity and a desensitization with hospital visits. Roth ceases the opportunity to focus on *Everyman*’s relationship with his daughter

Nancy, who is taking care of her father but “had to turn away” from the sight of “visible bulge that was the embedded defibrillator” (*Everyman* 75). This reaction could be assigned to the pain of seeing her parent age. This is a highly relatable situation, as most readers will have some sort of parental figure and thus will be able to empathize with the pain of seeing him or her age and becoming increasingly dependent. This feeling is heightened by the narrator’s elaboration on Everyman’s love and admiration for his daughter: “Sometimes it seemed that everything was a mistake except Nancy. So he worried about her, and he still never passed a women’s clothing shop without thinking of her and going in to find something she’d like, and he thought, I’m very lucky [...]” (*Everyman* 76-77). In this sobering novel, or in Everyman’s “life, ultimately, of regret” (Aarons 120), this is a sole example of a healthy relationship, notwithstanding that he has left her mother Phoebe, when Nancy was a teenager. It almost serves as a relief between all the suffering and questionable decisions, that he still has his daughter.

In order to battle the everyday loneliness of his new residence on the Jersey Shore, he decides to pursue his long-standing passion for painting, “by organizing two weekly painting classes for the village residents” (*Everyman* 79). Whereas this proves to be a successful way to help his loneliness, it also magnifies his fear of the invariable bodily decay: the conversations between the residents quickly turn to “swapping medical data” and “their personal biographies having by this time become identical with their medical biographies” (*Everyman* 80). However, his favorite student, Millicent Kramer, “reminded him of Phoebe” (*Everyman* 81). When she takes a break in his bedroom, due to severe backpain, it does not lead to sex, as one may expect (Brauner qtd. in Rodgers 9) but to a highly emotional revelation by Millicent. She meticulously describes the manifold struggles of an elderly person, such as losing her husband Gerald and her backpain, over ten pages and comes to a meek conclusion: “The sound of that voice that’s disappeared. The sound of the exceptional man I loved. I think I could take all this if he were here. But I can’t without him. I never saw him weaken once in his life—then came cancer and it crushed him” (*Everyman* 89). Furthermore, she is asserting that “mentality cannot bifurcate from the pain of the body” and that “the pain of her body is all that she temporarily is” (Schernbrucker (44-45), when saying that “Either you’re in charge or it’s in charge—the choice is yours! I repeat this to myself a million times a day, as though I’m Gerald speaking, and then suddenly it’s so awful I have to lie down on the floor in the middle of the supermarket and all the words are

meaningless. Oh, I'm sorry, truly. I abhor tears" (*Everyman* 89). I find this to be one of the most emotional passages in the book; it gives a voice to someone, who is not typically heard by society and demonstrates serious and touching issues that may not occur to anyone under sixty. Nevertheless, it easily stirs up emotions, because most readers will have or had an elder person in their lives (e.g. grandparents) to which those issues could apply. Furthermore, Keen's research findings can be applied here, which show that "a character's negative state, such as those provoked by undergoing persecution, suffering, grieving, and experiencing painful obstacles, make a reader's empathizing more likely" (Keen 71).

As a reader, one may hope that *Everyman* and Millicent become great friends, or partners and help each other happily ever after; however, one is immediately taken back into the sobering reality of Roth's novel, in which she commits suicide: "Ten days later she killed herself with an overdose of sleeping pills" (*Everyman* 92). This is the last mention of her until the closing of the novel and thus, the new character, with whom one empathized over ten pages, is removed again immediately in a shockingly sudden manner. The suicide retrospectively increases her pain that was previously described because it amplifies her hopelessness.

Towards the end of the novel, one finds a moral discourse about his estrangement with his two sons from his first marriage and how "suffering his wrongdoing was all he could ever do to please them, to pay his bill, to indulge like the best of dads their maddening opposition" (*Everyman* 97). This underpins his resignation towards the topic but also appears as if he wants to justify as to why he resigned. He concludes, what seems like the last thoughts he is able to invest in this gridlocked situation: "But this is what I did! I am seventy-one. This is the man I have made. This is what I did to get here, and there's nothing more to be said" (*Everyman* 98).

Whereas this issue appears to be finalized, the discourse continues with his relationship to Howie. An idea that was planted in the beginning of the novel, is confirmed when he admits: "Now, though, when they spoke, an unwarranted coldness came over him, and to his brother's joviality his response was silence. The reason was ridiculous. He hated Howie because of his robust good health. He hated Howie because he'd never in his life been a patient in a hospital, because disease was unknown to him [...]" (*Everyman* 99). The protagonist can reflect on how ridiculous this reasoning is,

nevertheless, he is not able to change his feelings. Thus, he is unable to obtain the relationship to his brother, who has always greatly cared for him. This could be analyzed as a manifestation of *Everyman's* self-destructing tendency, which led him to leave his second wife. As suggested by Aarons, "the real adversary here is not death but the protagonist himself" (Aarons 117).

This behavior does become more apparent towards the end of the novel, when his affair with Merete is narrated in more detail. One may be baffled by his oblivion towards possible consequences and that "only in passing did it occur to him that it might be somewhat delusional at the age of fifty to think that he could find a hole that would substitute for everything else" (*Everyman* 113). Whereas his first divorce may have generated some sympathy in the reader, his second divorce does quite the contrary, especially when Phoebe confronted him after a trip to Paris with his Merete. Apparently taken by surprise, *Everyman* denied everything and thus lost everything, including the reader's sympathy, because Phoebe's stance is that

You can weather anything [...] even if the trust is violated, if it's owned up to. Then you become life partners in a different way, but it's still possible to remain partners. But lying—lying is cheap, contemptible control over the other person. It's watching the other person acting on incomplete information—in other words humiliating herself (*Everyman* 121).

Despite his constant affairs, it was ultimately his futile lies that proof of an utter disregard for his loving wife, who even would have condoned his unfaithfulness if he had not lied again. Whereas this may already leave the reader feeling uneasy, Roth proceeds to worsen this effect when the protagonist had the idea that "Since he had broken everything up because of this person half his age, it seemed only logical to go ahead and tidy everything up again by making her his third wife" (*Everyman* 124), only to quickly realize that "He had replaced the most helpful wife imaginable with a wife who went to pieces under the slightest pressure" (*Everyman* 124). However, those decisions have a broader importance than merely in terms of sympathy: "Of course, this means more than the obvious fact that old people, like young people, can be sexual buffoons. Above all else, desire's incursion means that age alone does not protect the self from emotional disarray and consequent regression in maturity" (Schermbucker 48). When viewed from this perspective, it could possibly even induce compassion in the reader because his actions appear rather paltry and inept. This analysis underpins

the unromanized depiction of ageing in *Everyman* and could lightheartedly be described with the German saying “Alter schützt vor Torheit nicht”.

Towards the last twenty pages of the novel, one will be able to foresee the protagonist's death approaching, because the book started out with his funeral. In addition to the narrative frame, Roth is also strongly supporting this premonition with the tone becoming drastically more nostalgic. When preparing for yet another surgery “he tried so hard to convince himself from the experience of the first carotid surgery that there was nothing to worry about, he did not bother to tell Nancy about the pending operation, especially while she still had her mother to tend to” (*Everyman* 156). Because the death of the protagonist is already certain, Roth is in a unique position to build up a highly sentimental tone over twenty pages. In other words, everything narrated in the closing part of the novel appears drastically more wistful and sad, because the reader can anticipate the protagonist's death.

It is only in this last passage that *Everyman* fully acknowledges his most regrettable decisions, such as losing contact to his brother “He'd made a mess of all his marriages, but throughout their adult lives he and his brother had been truly constant. Howie never had to be asked for anything. And now he'd lost him, and in the same way he'd lost Phoebe—by doing it to himself” (*Everyman* 157). This sudden epiphany appears to be out of character for *Everyman* because he always justified his stoic behavior, but it certainly adds to the sentimentality of the closing; especially when “he picked up the phone and dialed Howie” (*Everyman* 159) for the first time in many years. However, his brother is on vacation in Tibet and unavailable; *Everyman* does not leave a message. In addition to him not informing his daughter, this is the second of three events, which are used by Roth to dramatically build up to his passing. The third event is when he intends to visit his daughter and ex-wife in New York, but, already en route, decides to go to the cemetery in New Jersey instead, to visit his parents' graves (*Everyman* 165). With the novel quickly running out of pages, these three events are strong indicators, that he will die alone, without anyone knowing he needed another surgery, unable to make amends with his brother, and unable to see his daughter one last time—which is what happens: “He went under feeling far from felled, anything but doomed, eager yet again to be fulfilled but nonetheless, he never woke up. Cardiac arrest. He was no more, freed from being, entering into nowhere without even knowing it. Just as he'd feared from the start” (*Everyman* 182).

In conclusion, one can say that the narrative frame of the novel will automatically prime the reader to empathize with the protagonist (Keen 69), even if one may object to some of his character traits that are revealed throughout the narration. In this manner, *Everyman* combines narrative techniques that Roth has previously employed: on the one hand it shares similarities with *WSWG* insofar that the protagonists are introduced at their funeral which could influence the reader's perception and expectations of the characters. On the other hand, the reader is led to follow the thought process of a protagonist, who's actions may be conflicting with social norms. This could lead to an uncomfortable reading experience through a Feeling of Body in the reader, which is also the case in *Portnoy's Complaint*. *Everyman*, however, stands out, with its protagonist who is remarkably unremarkable which Roth highlights throughout the novel. By creating an ordinary character, the author increases the degree of relatability and further shows the universality of his struggle. The novel exemplifies the German saying "Alter schützt vor Torheit nicht" when the protagonist still makes unfavorable decisions in his forties (i.e. betraying Phoebe) and awkwardly attempts to flirt with a twenty-year old at the age of seventy. Simultaneously, the life of *Everyman* demonstrates what the mental repercussions that physical pain may cause.

6 Conclusion

In the three novels analyzed in this thesis (*When She Was Good*, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Everyman*) one can see what multitude of new layers were opened to literary theory with the emergence of Affective Narratology. Thanks to the invention of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), scientists were able to prove that while reading the same areas as from real-life-experiences were activated. Thus, emotional reader response became more tangible for scholars since they were able to provide scientific evidence for their hypotheses. By providing the theoretical background of realism as well as neo-realism, one will notice that many of their characteristics are prone to appeal to the reader's empathy and sympathy and thereby makes it an ideal genre to pay closer attention to in terms of emotional responses.

One can say that Roth combined several different narrative techniques in order to achieve an emotional reader response in *When She Was Good*. Starting with borrowing elements from the melodramatic genre he broadens the range of readership, whereas simultaneously increasing the shock-value when the narrative unfolds into the American nightmare as opposed to the American dream, which one may expect due to the soap-opera like style. By introducing his protagonist through the eyes of her grandfather Willard, and by her graveside, Roth ensures that the reader will empathize with the character of Lucy Nelson. Hereby, a sympathy is established in part one, which will then be challenged for the remainder of the novel. In addition, the foretelling of the protagonist's death creates suspense as to what could have happened to this young woman. The novel is greatly concerned with standards of morality and "pre-established generic rules" (Peeler 39) and may alert the reader to the dangers of them, since, in *WSWG*, they are the "ideological home for violence" (Peeler 39) and ultimately Lucy's demise. In addition, Lucy's fate could also be interpreted as the repercussions of the patriarchy on women in the 50s and 60s.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth decided on the narrative situation of the psychoanalytical monologue in order to achieve an effect that is reminiscent of inner thoughts. Thereby he was able to narrate the inscrutable thoughts of his protagonist authentically (e.g. incestuous wishes, condescension towards women, double-standards). By showing Alexander's problematic family situation and his suffering of it, the reader will be primed

to empathize with the character. Similar to the situation of *WSWG*, a conflict of sympathy may occur, once the morally ambiguous behavior of the protagonist unfolds throughout the novel, and the empathy may decrease drastically. Typical of Roth's work, Alexander is not granted relief from his struggles and rather suggests that his inner conflict worsened when he seemingly loses his temper while contemplating the consequences of illegally removing a tag of a mattress. When his psychoanalyst Doctor Spielvogel finally has the floor, it is the last sentence of the book and he suggests "Now vee may perhaps begin" (*PC* 253). It implies that, after complaining over 250 pages, not even the surface of his issues has been touched. In general, the novel could be interpreted as a comical approach towards excessive mothering, or the immense consequences of parenting.

Everyman combines some of the elements of *PC* and *WSWG*; it is reminiscent of the narrative technique employed in the latter, insofar, that the protagonist is introduced at his funeral. In addition, Roth increased the degree of relatability in these novels by using generalizations, such as generic city names and an unspecific location in *WSWG* or leaving *Everyman's* protagonist unnamed. Furthermore, the ordinariness of the character is emphasized throughout the novel. Since the reader is aware of the protagonist's impending death, they may be rather primed to empathize with him because the passing of a person tends to trigger sentimentalities. Similarities to *Portnoy's Complaint* can be found in the questionable choices and moral as well as the incapacity of the characters to change for the better.

In conclusion, what all three protagonists seem to have in common is an unsatisfied urge for change, whereas it appears to be their own inner conflict that they are fighting.

7 Bibliography

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8 Appendix

8.1 Abstract English

This thesis starts by exploring the historical background and development of neo-realism. By looking at its origins in the nineteenth century, one will see how traditional realism has survived the test of time and evolved into neo-realism. Due to the characteristics of the genre and the intended reality-effect, it presents ideal material to apply the rather new approach of Affective Narratology (coined by Patrick Colm Hogan) and the Feeling of Body (developed by Gallese and Wojciehowski); therefore, an introduction to these concepts will be provided. Subsequently, three of Roth's novels are analyzed—*When She Was Good* (1967), *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *Everyman* (2006)—accordingly and it is shown which narrative techniques were used by the author in order to create a, sometimes, uncomfortable reading experience. This effect is enhanced through narrative situations, infringing social conventions and may even create a conflict of moral as a reader's response.

8.2 Abstract German

Diese Diplomarbeit beginnt mit einer Einführung in die geschichtliche Entwicklung des Neo-Realismus. Unter Einbezug der Wurzeln des Genres im neunzehnten Jahrhundert wird veranschaulicht, dass der traditionelle Realismus sich bewährt und im Laufe des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts zum Neo-Realismus hin weiterentwickelt hat. Literatur dieser Kategorie eignet sich durch ihre Eigenschaften sowie dem angestrebten „Reality-Effect“ besonders gut zur Analyse von „Affective Narratology“ (Patrick Colm Hogan) und dem „Feeling of Body“ (Gallese und Wojciehowski), weshalb sich eine Zusammenfassung dieser Konzepte im Kapitel 2 findet. Anschließend werden drei Romane von Philip Roth im Detail betrachtet: *When She Was Good* (1967), *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) und *Everyman* (2006). Die Arbeit zeigt auf welche Techniken der Erzähltheorie der Autor verwendet hat, um eine zu Weilen ungemütliche Leseerfahrung zu provozieren. Verstärkt wird dieser Effekt durch die Form der Erzählung, der den Leser mit dem Übertreten von sozialen Normen oder sogar moralischen Konflikten konfrontiert.