

**TEAM PLAYERS TO SPIRITUAL WARRIORS: THE IMAGES OF THE  
JEWISH MALE IN SELECTED NOVELS OF PHILIP ROTH**

**by**

**AMY MARIE LOPEZ**

A Capstone Project submitted to the Graduate School-Camden  
Rutgers-The State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

under the direction of  
Professor Lauren Grodstein

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_

Capstone Adviser

Date

Camden, New Jersey

May 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE CAPSTONE

Team Players to Spiritual Warriors: The images of the  
Jewish male in selected novels of Philip Roth

By AMY MARIE LOPEZ

Capstone Director:

Lauren Grodstein

Researchers have filled volumes on changing images of women in the past fifty years. Less research has been conducted on the evolving images and ideals of masculinity in modern times. This capstone examined the masculine images constructed by arguably one of the most important American writers living today, Philip Roth. The goal was to determine whether Roth created men who stuck to traditional images of masculinity, or if he crafted men who blended and stretched those commonly accepted roles. Integral to this study was a careful examination of how each character's Jewishness affected their masculinity (both internally and externally perceived). Research involved close readings of five Roth selections, 2 short stories and 3 novels. These writings spanned his career. Additional research included readings on masculinity and criticisms of Roth's work.

Results indicated that Roth's characters do not simply fit one stereo-type or another. They form a range of masculinities, sometimes embracing the American-myth and at others blending that type in with qualities often considered feminine. Roth's concern with the struggle to be both a good Jewish man and American, runs throughout his novels.

**Team Players to Spiritual Warriors: The images of the  
Jewish male in selected novels of Philip Roth**

Introduction

During the past forty years substantial scholarship has been written concerning the changing images of women throughout history. This research has been inspired by the woman's liberation movement and the ever-changing roles of women in the family, workforce, the arts and political landscape. Less research has been conducted on the evolving images/ideals of masculinity (Mihailescu, 87). Not all images of masculinity are created equal. Race, age and sexuality are variables that surely affect whether or not a man fits into the traditional ideal images. Considered by some to be the "greatest living novelist," writer Philip Roth has built a career focused on investigating the American male experience<sup>1</sup>.

This paper will examine various images of masculinity created by author Philip Roth in his fiction. Selections to be examined include: *The Ghost Writer*, *Eli the Fanatic*, *Defender of the Faith*, *The Dying Animal* and *American Pastoral*. These works represent both the early and later

---

<sup>1</sup> Recently writer Joseph O'Neill's *the Atlantic* article entitled "Roth v. Roth v. Roth" touted such a cover headline. Inside the article O'Neill refers to the "stubborn masculinity of Roth's fiction" highlighting that even though Roth's stories include a myriad of female characters, the focus has been on life as seen through the eyes of a man.

stages in Roth's career. As such, these works will serve to provide a broader perspective for exploring Roth's leading men. In order to get a comprehensive grasp on the different versions of masculinity offered up by Roth, some understanding of past and current definitions of masculinity will first be explored. Specific attention will be given to theories about the images of Jewish-American masculinity and images of masculinity in general. In the final analysis, this paper will look at whether the male characters of Roth labor to fit into the American masculine ideal or, whether these characters are able to utilize their "otherness" as Jews to create a new brand of masculinity for themselves.

#### Definitions of Masculinity

Dana Mihailescu offers a three-part definition of traditional masculinity as men who: possess physical vigor (aggressiveness), tangible achievements, and rely more on rationality versus emotions (88). According to Mihailescu in days of old physicality and achievements of men were often based on their skills as warriors, hunters or, defenders (88). However, as the demands on men transitioned away from the actual violence of a warrior, Mihailescu says that masculinity took on a more performative aspect.

Athletic skill, often at the college level, replaced actual killing as a means of demonstrating masculinity (88, 90). Mihailescu claims that this alteration, in conjunction with a growing inclusion of Jewish males in the pressures of American-masculine ideals, allows a greater number of Jewish men to "more easily adopt the American masculine norm"<sup>2</sup> (92). Philip Roth's leading male characters challenge the implied ease of Mihailescu's position, as readers observe men like Eli Peck struggle to live up to ideals of both Jewish masculinity and American masculinity.

Daniel Boyarin has spent a great deal of time focusing on the relationship between Jewish men and traditional expectations of masculinity. In his book entitled, *Unheroic Conduct*, Boyarin examines the ways in which the invention of heterosexuality (and the expectations of masculinity that flow from the invention) impact how Jewish men have been conceived in Jewish minds and in the minds of others. According to Boyarin, there is a disconnect that results because of the clash between hegemonic concepts of masculinity and the culturally traditional images of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Mihailescu seems to be arguing a couple of different points in this passage. First, the alteration of the performative scene from battlefield to college sports arena opened up ideas about American masculinity. Secondly, Mihailescu believes that through experience and literature Jewish men and women were able to realize that the hegemonic ideals about masculinity were not built upon concrete truths (88). Even if the basic American code of masculinity is founded upon athletic performance and not primitive violence, the affects for marginalized men are the same: they continue to react to the pressure by wanting to conform to the ideal (91-92).

Jewish male as being "gentle, studious and sweet." (Boyarin, 2) Boyarin insists that this dissonance creates a gender dysphoria for Jewish boys like himself (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 2). Boyarin suggests that beginning in Europe, in particularly during the fin de siècle; the Talmudic traditional images of Jewish men were utilized as a way of constructing a feminized Jewish male.<sup>3</sup> These feminized images could then be used to contrast Jewish and European men, fueling anti-Semitism. Boyarin criticizes concepts of masculinity that persist in emphasizing the performative aspects of masculinity. He believes that the "dominant strain within European culture, in contrast continues to this day to interpret activity, domination and aggressiveness as 'manly' and gentleness and passivity as emasculate or effeminate" (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 2) It will become clear as the novels of Philip Roth are examined that such an emphasis on action and domination is also considered as manly behavior in the United States as well. A struggle between Jewish concepts of masculinity and those of the larger culture characterize

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Boyarin states in his book that Jewish men who embodied characteristics such as kindness, wisdom and modesty were seen as either sexually perverse or impotent. Throughout Roth's novels there is a tension found in the characters that arises from this dichotomy between traditional Jewish ideals of manhood and the hegemonic ideals.

the tension-filled journeys of Roth's male characters as they seek to navigate these two very different expectations. As the characters fail to easily, or completely, assimilate they are reminded of their otherness.

Herb Goldberg states that the current definition of masculinity involves a "compulsion to perform, to prove himself, to dominate, to live up to the masculine ideal" (5). Goldberg believes that it is more important that a man be constantly striving towards the ideal rather than actually attaining the goal (6). Goldberg also states that in the American landscape, man's domain is that of work (7). The male domain itself implies action compared to the protected sphere of the home, a woman's traditional domain. Goldberg's conceptualization of masculinity implies a level of intentionality that is lacking in some of the other perspectives. Each of Roth's male characters spends time internally focused on their identities in relation to their careers. Seymour Levov takes great pride in giving tours of Newark Maid, the business he has helped build (Roth, *American Pastoral* , 119). Eli Peck knows that the reason the townspeople of Woodenton have asked him to handle their Yeshiva problem is because of his role as a lawyer (Roth,



Goodbye, Columbus , 251, 253). In later sections, this compulsion to act, and strive towards an ideal, which animates the men of Roth's novels will be discussed in greater detail.

What these definitions have in common is the focus on masculinity as being achieved through action. If dominance, action, athleticism/aggression, and rationality are the key characteristics of masculinity, the implication is that men who are more submissive, passive, intellectual (vs. physical) and emotional are thus viewed as less masculine. Mihailescu discusses the idea of disqualifying characteristics in her essay. If rational thought is a characteristic of masculinity then men who exhibit overly emotional behavior are to be considered less than masculine (89). Andrea Freud Loewenstein addresses the issue of Jewish masculinity to the writings of William Gerhardt and George Orwell. Loewenstein states that the characteristics of Jewish men are closely linked to the same characteristics used to describe a woman's behavior (147). These behaviors include: childishness, cruelty, hysteria, cowardice and either sexual impotence or voracity (147). This paper will look at what degree these feminine characteristics can be said to define Roth's men.

Goldberg believes that the characteristics that are commonly perceived today as being masculine are not natural states for men. Instead, Goldberg states that they are really psychological defenses that have developed as a result of societal pressures and expectations (6). Goldberg supports his position by further stating that the masculine behaviors that people witness are actually the energy men expend and that this is done in order to defend against charges of passivity, femininity, and emotionality (6). In *Eli, the Fanatic*, Eli Peck is clearly concerned about this perceived mental/emotional weakness. When his wife and friends begin to question his actions, he is quick to tell them that he is not having another nervous breakdown. We can see the main characters in Roth's novels attempting to live up to the criteria of the mythic-American male. Each man sets out to fulfill their obligations to their families and communities. When they fail to achieve perfection these men express confusion, frustration or resignation that they have not succeeded. Such accusations would be tantamount to threats against a man's masculine worth according to Goldberg (7). This idea that all men who do not naturally fulfill masculine ideals will struggle to conform or attain such characteristics complements Mihailescu's work.

Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood* reinforces the idea that American male identities are largely shaped by the corporations for which they work. According to Rotundo the corporations accomplish this task by making "elaborate demands on the individual" without offering much in the way of security. These corporations are hierarchical in nature and lack the ability to provide connectivity to other people (284). Rotundo supports other definitions of masculinity that state the contemporary male identity is not prescribed at birth but linked to personal achievements (285). Once again, with Rotundo, is the image of man as a character of action. He states that their lives/identities are shaped because they "earn approval, win love, attain power, make friendships, mold an identity" (285).

Rotundo also offers up four basic masculine "types" operating as outlets for the true nature of man (286). First type is the team player. Team players balance aggression and cooperation. The team player is a person seeking to take advantage of the mythic individualism embraced in America along with fulfilling the needs of the corporation by being able to work with other individuals. The second type is the existential hero who is suspicious of authority, wary of women and disgusted with the

corruption of modern society. This type of man "lives in the margins of society" (286). The third type is the pleasure seeker. Pleasure seekers work hard during the week to have fun on the weekends. Finally, there is the spiritual warrior focused on internal battles (287). Rotundo leaves the door open for the further evolution of additional types. These types appear to operate from within the hegemonic culture and do not provide much information in the way of non-hegemonic groups. Roth's leading male figures do not always clearly line up with one basic type. In fact these complex characters often offer up a hybrid combination of types. Nathan Zuckerman's character (as it transforms over the course of time) is most supportive of this potential. Nathan blends aspects of the existential hero and the pleasure seeker. These aspects are seen as Nathan ruminates over both the current tensions with his father and his recent romantic difficulties.

So, what do all of these multiple theories about masculinity mean for Jewish men? The traditional treatment of Jewish men as something other than manly males may be leading to an alternative image for Jewish masculine identity. Zionist figure Max Nordau called for the creation of a "muscular Jewry" (Hoberman 175). This vision of a more

active, athletic, militaristic Jewish man sends the message that Jewish men need to embrace Western ideals of masculinity in order to overcome racial stereotypes (Hoberman 175). Daniel Boyarin believes that the image of Jewish masculinity promoted by Nordau was incorrect. Boyarin believes that historically the more scholarly and passive character traits are in reality more natural for Jewish men (Boyarin). Boyarin links such ideas back to Talmudic traditions and stories where men behaving in ways typically assigned to wives are viewed as positive behaviors (Boyarin 47). Are these two extremes, that of the hyper male and the Talmudic scholar, the only possibilities that exist for contemporary Jewish men?

Mihailescu offers up the idea that because Jewish men have not traditionally been viewed as part of the larger hegemonic society, that because of their otherness, today Jewish men have an ability to create an image of masculinity that is more malleable than the ideal that restricts White American males. She believes that it is possible for writers in particular to create a masculine image of the "impassioned intellectual" who would not be relegated to a less than masculine position (100). The passionate intellectual could be an additional type that

further opens the door for non-conforming men. The passionate intellectual would encourage mental pursuits as the achievements of men (instead of athleticism or violence). It would allow for a greater level of emotionality, as linked to their creative outlets. By taking intellect and emotionality out of the sphere of women, the passionate intellectual would allow for a Jewish man to be both true to his nature and be viewed as wholly male.<sup>4</sup> How do the leading male characters in Philip Roth's novels embrace, reject or modify traditional concepts of masculinity?

Eli Peck from *Eli, the fanatic*

Sander Gilman writes about the penalties of sounding too Jewish in his book *The Jew's Body*.<sup>5</sup> Gilman says, "Jews sound different because they are represented as *being* different" (Gilman ,11). Gilman goes on to argue that for Jewish authors language is an auditory marker of Jewish corruption. Gilman suggests that these authors respond to this concept by intentionally creating characters who sound Jewish (Gilman ,11). Eli Peck may not have expressed any

---

<sup>4</sup> This idea that the impassioned intellectual is closer to the true nature of Jewish men draws upon statements made by Daniel Boyarin in his book *Unheroic Conduct*.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Gilman begins his Chapter; *The Jewish Voice*, by describing what he sees as Philip Roth's fear of "sounding too Jewish" as being a quality of Roth's characters that is found throughout Roth's writing (Gilman).

concerns about sounding Jewish in *Eli, the fanatic*, but his concerns about being able to blend in with the larger society reveal the same fears. In particular Eli highlights the difficulties facing Jewish people attempting to assimilate in Post World War II America. In this story Eli has been preoccupied with the possible fallout from the arrival of Leo Turzef and his group of Hasidic orphans. He worries about the Yeshiva occupants being too visibly Jewish. Ironically, by the end of the story Eli has run all over town dressed in the Yeshiva teacher's clothing thus shedding his worries and embracing his otherness.

In a few specific ways Eli is perhaps the character who least fits in with contemporary definitions of masculinity. He does have the tangible achievement of being a lawyer. He certainly attempts to be a man of action through his struggles to resolve the Jewish townspeople's concerns about the Yeshiva students. However, these masculine behaviors are often overshadowed by Eli's more feminine behaviors. Eli represents a much more stereotypical image of Jewish men as overly emotional, psychologically weak, and impotent<sup>6</sup>. Sander Gilman locates

---

<sup>6</sup> Eli's past mental instability is revealed over the course of the story. As his wife grows more concerned about the nature of his behavior, Eli compares his behavior now to his former breakdown when he says "I'm not flipping... Last time I sat in the bottom of the closet and chewed on my bedroom slippers. That's

the beginnings of the idea of Jewish hysteria in the fin de siècle. Gilman asserts that Jews were viewed in that time period as having 'flawed psyches' which created anti-Semitic stereotypes about weak, nervous and hysterical Jewish men (Gilman , 129).

In *Eli, the fanatic* Eli's impotence does not arise from his sexuality, but from being unable to navigate the intra-cultural pressures of being Jewish and being American. His physical virility has been established by the presence of Eli's pregnant wife, Miriam. Throughout the story Miriam is clearly concerned about her husband's mental stability. As Eli frenetically searches for a solution to the town's problem with the Hasidim, Miriam urges her husband to see his doctor (259). She struggles to get him to focus on the baby they are having instead of his obsession (260). Eli seems unable to let go of his obsession with smoothing things over between the town's Jews and the Hassid. Eli's compulsion to find a solution harkens back to Goldberg's concept of masculinity as being focused on what men do. He is driven to find reconciliation. He appears to believe that the only way to

---

what I did" (271). Eli views his current behavior as being action-oriented. He is attempting to find a resolution between what the town Jews want and what the Hasidic orphans and their teacher need.



have the peaceful life he wants with his wife and expected baby is through the success of his mission (280).

If it weren't for the last two paragraphs of the story the image of the feminized-Eli would stick in readers' minds. If one accepts Anthony Rotundo's idea that there are a minimal four alternatives to the traditional definitions of masculinity, and look to his image of the spiritual warrior then perhaps Eli isn't being completely feminized through his struggles. Rotundo imagines the spiritual warrior as a character focused on waging and winning internal battles (287). Throughout this story Eli is focused on not only finding a solution to the town's dilemma but also spends a great deal of time thinking about his own place in the situation. Eli grapples to understand his connection the significance of his own Jewishness and his relationship to the European Jewish experience. In the end, as Eli internally asserts his identity as a father, and even as the orderlies have shot him full of a sedative, Eli has been transformed by the experience of wearing the suit (298). He has come to acknowledge his otherness. When he donned the Hassidic costume Eli symbolically accepts the mantle of his Jewishness. The reader is left with the idea

that Eli now possesses a stronger sense of himself than ever before.

Nathan Marx from *Defender of the Faith*

If Eli Peck lacks the markers of traditional-American masculinity, then Nathan Marx can be considered their representative. He is a war hero, taking the performative aspect of masculinity and returning it back to actual physical aggression. Nathan is also athletic. Another officer refers to his ability to pitch a baseball during a phone call (198). He is action and duty oriented. Marx closely resembles Rotundo's conceptualization of the team player. Readers can see Marx struggle with the aggression he feels towards Grossbart throughout the story as Grossbart attempts his many manipulations of Marx. Marx makes a concerted effort to control his temper when agitated, the exception when Sheldon Grossbart uses Marx's Jewish background to get a free evening off of the base (196). Marx is caught between doing his duty to all of his men and taking care of these three Jewish recruits, who look to him as a surrogate family member. Readers can also see how Marx embodies the team player persona through his commitment to the army way of life. Tensions escalate when Grossbart attempts to get stationed stateside instead of

being sent off to the Pacific with the rest of the platoon. As a man of action who believes in fulfilling community obligations, Marx cannot allow Grossbart to get away with his manipulations. Marx pulls his own strings and has the orders changed back to the original assignment (197-198).

At the beginning of the story he is blindsided by the attachment and attention of Grossbart, Fishbein and Halpern. They view him as a connection to their own Jewish upbringings. However, Nathan's war experiences have removed from his sentimental memories and personal emotions. Marx clearly sees himself as just another soldier until that time. It takes being back in the United States, away from imminent danger, in order for Nathan to reconnect with his fellow man. Nathan describes this phenomenon as "a hand reaching down inside me" (170). He says that this hand had to go past the horrors of the war and "past the endless stretches when I had shut off all softness I might feel for my fellows" (170). At the end of the story Marx is portrayed as being the epitome of American masculinity when he controls his impulse to ask Grossbart's forgiveness. Instead he calmly accepts his fate of continued isolation for his actions (200).

Nathan Zuckerman and E.I. Lonoff from *The Ghost Writer*

Nathan Zuckerman is the central figure and narrator in Philip Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer*. Nathan is an educated young man with a talent for writing. Nathan portrays himself as bursting with lust, imagination and creativity. These characteristics might make Nathan appear as if he were a good candidate for Rotundo's role of the pleasure seeker. However, Nathan's pleasure seeking does not jeopardize his writing. According to Elaine B. Safer, Nathan's view of himself as the grand hero of a Bildungsroman is inaccurate. Safer believes that Nathan is the hero instead of a comedy. She describes *The Ghost Writer* as a "comic novel of an artist's education" (Safer , 21). Instead of reveling in the hedonistic role of the pleasure seeker, Nathan reveals his true nature to be more that of the impassioned intellectual.

At the start of the novel Nathan demonstrates his tendency towards imaginative day dreaming when he first spies Amy Belle in the house of idol E.I. Lonoff. Immediately he begins to imagine her role as the author's daughter and himself as her fiancé (17). He also has a head full of fantasies about Lonoff acting as his foster father. Nathan has no tangible experiences with death or anti-Semitism. It is easy to see from his reminiscences about

his family that Nathan has lived a sheltered life<sup>7</sup>. Nathan is passionate about writing, women and the work of fantasy writer E. I. Lonoff, whom he views as a spiritual father-figure. During a weekend visit to Lonoff's house, Nathan is forced to confront the reality of Lonoff's existence, as well as wrestle with his relationship with his real father. Nathan is a careful blending of the masculine and feminine characteristics. He does not embody the performative athletic aspects of masculinity<sup>8</sup>. He is clearly not struggling with the physical or mental impotence that impacts Eli Peck's experiences. While Nathan clearly sees himself as a romantic character, his youthful lust does not seem so disproportionate that he should be regarded as an outsider<sup>9</sup>. In the end, Roth creates a character that represents masculinity caught in an early stage of life

---

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the novel Nathan reveals the nearly idyllic childhood complete with indulgent parents and a loud noisy family. When visiting the Lonoff's Nathan relives a current disagreement he and his father are having about the latest story he has written for publication. Nathan expects his father to be supportive of this work, as he has always been of his son. However, at a recent family gathering Mr. Zuckerman reveals his belief that Nathan's story could potentially hurt the Jewish people because Nathan portrays characters who act with greed (91-92). Nathan's father expresses himself more of an expert in dealing with everyday anti-Semitism than his son (92-93).

<sup>8</sup> In later Zuckerman-related novels such as *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* readers are made aware of Nathan's love of sports, especially baseball. But there are few references to Nathan's athleticism in *The Ghost Writer* (aside from a brief nostalgic look at his old stomping grounds during a walk with his father).

<sup>9</sup> While many traditional racial stereotypes about Jewish men paints them as being feminized to a point of sexually impotency, other portraits describe an almost animal-like hyper sexuality. Nathan is not sex obsessed. His sexual and romantic behavior in this story is meant to serve as a comparison to that of the older Lonoff.

when one is striving, and dreaming for all of life's possibilities.

E. I. Lonoff by comparison represents a man who is paying the price for having embraced the scholarly ideal of Jewish masculinity. Lonoff has led, and continues to lead, a life of seclusion. This life revolves entirely around his writing. Lonoff and his wife live in the New York state countryside far from the hustle and bustle of New York City or Boston. Their children are all grown. The only distractions for the couple are the presence of Amy Bellette, Lonoff's mistress, and fan Nathan Zuckerman. The isolation Lonoff experience is revealed when he and Nathan first sit down to chat. Instead of Nathan being the one who excitedly asks questions of his hero, it is Lonoff who is questioning Nathan all about his life in New York and his job selling magazine subscriptions. Lonoff's wife Hope reveals that their seclusion extends to all but a very few when she says; "We don't have visitors unless they're people Manny respects. He has no tolerance for people without substance" (39).

Lonoff is a man split between the life he has made with his wife and the life his mistress offers. It is clear from the scene between Amy and Lonoff, which Nathan

accidentally eavesdrops on that their relationship is coming to a conclusion. Lonoff demands that Amy stop dreaming of a life together (112). With Lonoff we see a man who once again only partially embodies the traditional definition of masculinity. Lonoff has his novels as his tangible achievements. He actively pursues a life of art. While it is true that he has been unfaithful to his wife, the audience is also made aware that the women in Lonoff's life are much more passionate than he is. Amy begs him to leave Hope and create a life with her in Florence. Hope in turn packs her bags, performs a doozy of a scene in front of Amy and Nathan, dramatically announcing that Amy may have her husband and trudges off through the snow to leave their home (179). Thus Lonoff straddles an ideal which requires that men be more logical than women and one which allows a man to experience the joys of companionship.

For Nathan, Lonoff represents an ideal image of a writer who sacrifices life for the sake of work. As such, Lonoff represents the image of the passionate intellectual. This person is so wrapped up in their creative and mental pursuits that the rest of life pales in comparison. Even as Hope feebly attempts her escape she makes the cutting observation that Lonoff's writing has seen more action than

she has in 35 years of marriage (173). It is evident throughout the novel that such dedication and reclusivity is appealing to Nathan. Later Zuckerman novels bare witness to the transition Nathan makes from worldly wunderkind to reclusive author.<sup>10</sup>

Seymour "The Swede" Levov from *American Pastoral*

No character examined thus far embodies the ideal of American masculinity to the extent that the Swede does in Roth's novel *American Pastoral*. This novel presents the story of a man who became an iconic figure in the Newark, New Jersey Jewish community during the late 1930s and early 1940s. He was admired because he was so effortlessly able to step past Jewish stereotypes and become the model American man. It is also a story about a man who loses his daughter to terrorism and insanity because of his dedication to fitting into his adopted role. At a class reunion, narrator Nathan Zuckerman learns about the Swede's attempt to overcome the devastation his daughter's actions caused for such an upright man. Jerry Levov refers to his brother as "the best you're going to get in this country" (66). It is ultimately the story of a narrator attempting

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Human Stain* a novel not discussed here reveals the extent of Nathan's later isolation. In that novel readers discover that Nathan has retired to the woods to devote himself solely and completely to the task of writing. He hardly allows himself much in the way of interaction with other humans (save Coleman Silk and even that is done rather grudgingly).



to get past the surface of his childhood icon in order to understand who The Swede truly was as a man, son, husband, and father.

From the opening sentences of this story it is apparent that Seymour is set apart from the other Jewish boys in school for three basic reasons. First, his ability to excel at multiple sports made him special in the eyes of his community. Being strong and athletic made him the poster child of what all the boys could do if they wanted it. The Swede's athletic ability provided an outlet for rebellion for the neighborhood boys who wished to rebel against the emphasis on academics their parents possessed (4). Second, his Nordic looks gave him an entry into a world untouched by racism. The narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, likens his light skin, blond hair and blue eyes to an "anomalous" mask (3). Finally, it is his natural charm and affability that make everyone love The Swede (5). The ease with which The Swede navigates through life prior to the bombing highlights his later internal debates.

Seymour "The Swede" Levov demonstrates all three parts of Dana Mihailescu's definition of traditional masculinity. His physical vigor is present for all to admire in his athleticism (both in high school and later as a soldier).

His tangible achievements include successfully running his father's company Newark Maid. His attempt to rely on rationality forms the crux of his dilemma. He cannot logically understand how his daughter Merry could become a murderer. He struggles to find a rational explanation (i.e., older and more experienced revolutionaries used her to bomb the general store). Throughout his attempts to reconcile the daughter he raised with the criminal she became, Levov is overwhelmed by his emotions. However, as has previously been discussed through Goldberg and Mihailescu, men who fail to completely embody the masculine ideal continue to attempt to fit that mold and achieve their goal. Seymour rebuilds his life after Merry's betrayal, divorce from Dawn and the transformations of Newark Maid demonstrating how ingrained into his character are those masculine pressures. He remarries another all-American blonde and has three athletic and academically-gifted sons (22-23). When Nathan Zuckerman first meets up for dinner with Seymour, Nathan is confronted by Seymour's carefully constructed façade. He is surface and more surface (23). This is the price Seymour pays for being able to walk away so easily from his otherness; he is cut off from the reality of life.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> At the dinner with Nathan Seymour knows he is dying of prostate cancer but does not acknowledge this

David Kepesh from *The Dying Animal*

David Kepesh is the oldest of the male characters explored in this paper. He, like Nathan Zuckerman in *American Pastoral*, occupies part of his time as a college professor. Kepesh's remaining time is spent wooing coeds and working as a cultural critic. If the rest of Roth's characters studied all possess an inclination to "do the right thing" in their lives and for their communities David does not appear to be compelled by the same need. Instead it appears that David is compelled by two things: art and women. David isn't even all that concerned that he isn't well liked because of his womanizing ways. He says, "It's safe to say that I don't universally compel admiration" (115). The reader must be reminded that as David Kepesh is narrating his own story, he can't be considered an entirely reliable source. It isn't until the end of the novel that David and readers are allowed to see that he is in fact compelled to do the right thing where his ex-lover Consuela is concerned.

*The Dying Animal* is a story which revolves around the past relationship of the aging professor and the young ingénue. According to Elaine B. Safer *The Dying Animal* is

---

fact. At the reunion Seymour's brother Jerry is the one to reveal both Merry's crime and her father's secretive nature regarding her existence.

the story of a man who found himself caught up in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and has been unable to escape that mindset since. Safer suggests that Kepesh continues to use sex, not only as a reminder of youth, but as a tangible means of connecting to other human beings, especially in light of the fact that he mistrusts love (Safer, 134). It is the story of how age can strip you of all your confidence, create jealousies/insecurities where none existed before, and ultimately remind you that you aren't dead yet. It is also the story of how in part our bodies tell our life stories.

For three quarters of the novel David Kepesh comes off as an egotistical man haunted by the one that got away. Of all his past lovers, and David lets readers know that there were quite a few, it is only Consuela who remains in his thoughts. However, even as tender as David's feelings towards Consuela seem to be, he looks down upon her as he has his other conquests. During her initial seduction, David relied on his manuscript of Kafka to lure Consuela to his bed. Safer concludes that David thinks his superior understanding of culture is the thing Consuela desires (Safer, 138). When discussing his seduction of Consuela David illustrates the differences in their mutual

perspectives by claiming that Consuela is enchanted by his cultural talk and attention. On the other hand David claims he doesn't need any of the conversation, he just wants to fuck her (16). This claim is surely a lie. He reveals repeatedly through the novel how much she delights him in her comportment, her cultural roots, and her attentions.

The final portion of the novel is not characterized by fond reminiscences of past sex. Instead its tone is serious and darkly ironic. Consuela tells David that she has been diagnosed with breast cancer. She the much younger woman is likely to die before the old man. Her fragility and need reveal the depth of David's feeling for Consuela. He begins to obsess now not about the many ways they had sex, but how to be there for Consuela even if the task is difficult, even if it means committing to another human being (156).

### Conclusions

Traditional concepts of masculinity revolve around images of action, athleticism, and rationality. Contemporary critics offer hope that the traditional expectations of masculinity can be transformed through both changing times and cultural variety. In the three novels and two short stories examined in this paper it is clear that Roth's characters reveal the complexities Jewish-

American men experience as they attempt to live up to both ethnic and societal expectations of masculinity. Roth's characters display a degree of flexibility to their masculinity. They conform completely, neither to the hegemonic ideal, nor traditional Jewish stereotypes. Instead, they offer a blending and stretching of masculine types. Nathan Marx and Seymour Levov most clearly resemble an attempt to embrace the hegemonic masculine ideal. As has been discussed both Nathan Marx and Seymour embrace the American ideal of athleticism and patriotism as athletes and soldiers. Both characters pay a price for their adoption of this archetype. Nathan Marx is disconnected from his Jewish identity and community. Seymour Levov is forced to occupy a self-made prison in which he is forever isolated from revealing his emotions about Merry's betrayal to the people he loves. Emotional instability, or the expression of passionate emotions in general, has been viewed as a traditionally feminine trait. Daniel Boyarin suggested that when Jewish men possess and display feminine traits they are viewed as non-men (Boyarin 43). Eli possesses the disqualifiers of emotional/mental instability and impotency that excludes him from the hegemonic standard. However, his emotionality seems to spring up from his desire to find a solution. This intentionality could

then act as an exception to the standard emotional exclusion.

In *The Ghost Writer* Nathan Zuckerman does not fit neatly into any one type suggested by Rotundo or Mihailescu. He is neither pleasure seeker nor impassioned intellectual. His youth and lust seems to preclude him from entirely fitting into the mold of the impassioned intellectual. Later in life, as the narrator in *American Pastoral* Zuckerman more fully embodies the role of the impassioned intellectual. He has become a well-known author now focusing his attentions on retelling the story of his childhood hero. His achievements all spring from the employment of creative mental pursuits (Porter, 34).

David Kepesh would like to view himself as the impassioned intellectual. The fact that he has lived his life in an academic setting and continuously worked as an art critic fits the mold. However, David utilizes his knowledge to get sex. Sex is nearly everything to him. Therefore, he is in reality a sort of hybrid of the pleasure seeker/intellectual.

Elaine B. Safer suggests that one common theme presented throughout Roth's work is that of the loss of Jewish self in order to assimilate into the larger culture

(27). Readers clearly see this theme present in each of the works examined here. From Nathan Marx's realization of his alienation, to Eli's attempt to keep everyone happy, and all the way through to David Kepesh's struggle to live up to the ideals of a sexual revolution long gone, each of these men reveal the pressures Jewish men are put upon to live up to societal expectations. Is Roth trying to make the claim that Jewish-American men are doomed to a life of suffering if they attempt to embrace mythic masculine ideals? Maybe yes, maybe no. What is clear from examining these different characters is that if by accepting this mantle of manliness, you are also required to deny your Jewishness; you should be cautioned that heartache is sure to follow.

Elaine B. Safer makes several assertions about Roth's work as a postmodern author. First, she states that he is a writer exploring the transformation and the decline of American in the Twentieth Century (164). He is a writer focusing his attentions on examining how society's failures impact people on a personal level. Second, a core focus of his work has included Jewish identity and deracination (the loss of community). Each of the works examined here highlight the centrality of this theme in Roth's work.



Finally, Roth examines the idea that fear can cause frenzied violence (167). The frenetic energy of Eli Peck and the devastating violence of Merry Levov both illustrate the transformative power of fear to cause destruction, to communities and to individuals. I would go one step further to say that Roth examines each of these themes from the perspective of the Jewish-American male, utilizing masculinity as the vehicle with which to explore moral questions and themes. In *American Pastoral* Roth personalizes the impact of the Vietnam War and Nixon's policies on the American dream through Seymour Levov, a man dedicated to that dream. Roth shows us how Levov's concept of himself is stretched taught by the decline of the world in which he has grown up. In *Eli, the fanatic and Defender of the faith*, and to a lesser extent *Ghost Writer* deracination and the reclaiming of one's tribe is explored through Eli, Marx and Nathan's very different life experiences. Fear in many shapes is present in each of these works. Fear of commitment, fear of death, fear of visibility, and fear of failure are topics which each of these stories confront.

This paper looked at how each of these men sought to live up to a mythic-American male image. What was revealed

was that their desire to assimilate into the greater culture initially led to a disconnect from their Jewishness. However, in each work the characters were forced to acknowledge (in various ways and to varying degrees) their otherness as Jews. This awareness then informs who they are, transforming their life experiences and broadening their adaptability as men. I am not sure that Roth's leading men support Daniel Boyarin's claim that the true nature of Jewish men is gentler, kinder, and more studious than accepted ideals of manhood. I think Roth would argue that Jewish men, like men from other ethnic groups, can't be pigeon-holed by such narrow descriptors. Instead, his characters reveal that Jewish-American men, driven by that same intentionality proposed by Goldberg, are compelled to strive towards being the best versions of themselves that they can be. In his book, *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth says of the men in *Goodbye, Columbus* that they are each "seen making a conscious, deliberate, even willful choice beyond the boundary lines of his life, and just so as to give expression to what in his spirit will not be grimly determined, by others, or even what he had himself taken to be his own nature" (Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 28). In the end what Roth offers is a group of men who each find themselves, due in large part to their

need to juggle being both Jewish men and American men, stretching and pushing the boundaries of those stereotypical images of masculinity.

## Bibliography

- Boyarin, Daniel. "Homotopia: The feminized Jewish man and the lives of women in late antiquity." Differences; A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies (1995): 41-79.
- . Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Brod, Harry & Michael Kaufman. "Some Thoughts on Some Histories of Some Masculinities." Brod, Harry. Theorizing Masculinities. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1994. 82-96.
- Gilman, Sander. The Jew's Body. n.d.
- Goldberg, Herb. The New Male. New York: Signet, 1979.
- Hoberman, John. "Legacy of Rage: Jewish Masculinity, Violence, and Culture by Warren Rosenberg." Shofar (2005): 175-177.
- McDaniel, John N. "Distinctive Features of Roth's Artistic Vision." Bloom, Harold. Modern Critical Views: Philip Roth. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 107-118.
- Mihailescu, Dana. "Jewish Men and the Early Twentieth Century American Code of Masculinity Through Ethnic Lens." ATENEA (June 2008): 87-100.
- O'Neill, Joseph. "Roth v. Roth v. Roth." the Atlantic April 2012: 86-92.
- Porter, Jack Nusan. The Jew As Outsider. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981.
- Roth, Philip. American Pastoral. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- . Goodbye, Columbus. New York: Vintage International, 1959.
- . The Dying Animal. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
- . The Ghost Writer . New York: Vintage International, 1979.
- . Reading Myself and Others. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975
- Rotundo, Anthony E. American Manhood. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

Safer, Elaine B. Mocking the Age. Albany: State University of NY Press, 2006.

Steinberg, Gillian. "Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith": a modern midrash." Philip Roth Studies (Spring 2005): 7.