



---

# Finding An Authentic Self In The Later Writing Of Philip Roth

Omar Ra'oof Marzah Al-Muthanna University – College of Education for Humanities  
omar.marzah@mu.edu.iq 00964 7814661791

---

## Abstract

This research paper examines on authenticity in the later works of acclaimed American writer Philip Roth. It examines how Roth's characters' battle with themes of identity, societal expectations, and the search for meaning in a confusing world. The examination demonstrates how Roth uses literary devices to illustrate the complexities of authenticity and how it affects people's lives.

The definition of authenticity and its importance in literature—particularly in the representation of characters and stories—are covered in the first section of the article. After that, it uses authenticity to examine Roth's writings, including "American Pastoral," "The Human Stain," and "The Plot Against America." The examination looks at how identity, social expectations, and the pursuit of meaning in a complicated world are dealt with by Roth's characters.

The study also examines how Roth's depiction of authenticity has been viewed critically, pointing out both favorable and unfavorable viewpoints. The researcher concludes by outlining their thoughts on Roth's writings and how they help us comprehend authenticity in both literature and daily life.

**Keywords:** Philip Roth, critical reception, authenticity, individual lives,

## Chapter One

### 1.1 Introduction

This study, which tackles the issue of the true self, is titled Finding a true Self in Philip Roth's Later Writing.

The idea of authenticity is covered in Chapter One along with a variety of meanings and interpretations. It looks at how people show authenticity and how it can be developed. It also examines the function of authenticity in literature, with a particular emphasis on how important it is for illustrating characters and stories.

Philip Roth's latter works are examined through authenticity in Chapter Two. It looks at how Roth uses literary devices to illustrate the intricacies of authenticity and its effects on people's lives, as well as how his characters struggle with identity, social expectations, and the pursuit of meaning in a confusing world.

Includes both good and negative viewpoints from a range of commentators regarding Roth's depiction of authenticity. The researcher concludes by sharing their personal thoughts on Roth's writings and how they help us grasp authenticity in both literature and daily life.

## 1.2 Biography

Philip Roth, a literary giant of the 20th century, crafted a nuanced and prolific body of work that explored the complexities of American identity, sexuality, and the human condition. Born on March 19, 1933, in Newark, New Jersey, Roth's upbringing in a Jewish neighborhood significantly influenced his perspective on identity and cultural dynamics (Bailey, 2005, p. 17). His life unfolded against the backdrop of post-war America, and his literary contributions became a reflective mirror to the evolving social landscape.

Roth's journey as a writer commenced with the publication of his first collection of short stories, "Goodbye, Columbus," in 1959, which earned him the National Book Award (Bailey, 2005, p. 29). This early success marked the beginning of a career marked by both acclaim and controversy.

According to (Singh, 2001,p.34), Philip Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1933 and grew up in a Jewish family. He attended Rutgers University and later pursued graduate studies at the University of Chicago. Roth's literary career began in the late 1950s with the publication of his first book, "Goodbye, Columbus," which won the National Book Award. He continued to gain critical acclaim with novels such as "Portnoy's Complaint" and "American Pastoral," which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1998. Despite his success, Roth was not immune to controversy and criticism, particularly for his frank and provocative portrayal of sexuality and Jewish identity. (Singh, 2001,p.34) "Roth's frankness about sex and the Jewish experience has often made him a target of criticism and controversy." This brief mention of Roth's controversial reputation highlights the challenges he faced as a writer exploring taboo subjects.

Rand explores the theme of invisibility in Roth's works, emphasizing the artistry of being unseen. This likely involves an analysis of characters in "Ceremony," "The Ghost Writer," and "Beloved" as they grapple with societal expectations, offering a lens into Roth's exploration of identity and societal norms (Rand, 1995, p. 21-32).

In "The Ghost: A Link between Two Worlds," Rand focuses on Nathan Zuckerman as a character bridging fiction and reality. This analysis provides insights into Roth's use of metafiction, where fictional characters become conduits for exploring the complexities of the author's life and the blurred lines between reality and fiction (Rand, 1999, p. 93-108).

Rankine's work, "Passing as Tragedy," interprets Roth's "The Human Stain" through the lens of the Oedipus myth and the self-made man. This analysis likely dissects how Roth engages with themes of identity, tragedy, and the intricate construction of the self within societal frameworks (Rankine, 2005, p. 101-12).

As Roth approached the conclusion of his literary career, he produced his final novel, "Nemesis" (2010), which explored themes of guilt, responsibility, and the impact of unforeseen circumstances on the individual (Bailey, 2005, p. 221). This poignant novel served as a fitting conclusion to Roth's literary odyssey, showcasing his ability to grapple with existential questions through the prism of intimate human stories.

Roth's impact extended beyond the literary sphere. His intricate narratives, unflinching exploration of taboo subjects, and profound engagement with the human psyche contributed to a redefinition of American literature. Despite facing accusations of misogyny and controversies

surrounding the portrayal of women in his works, Roth's legacy endures as a testament to the power of literature to provoke, challenge, and illuminate the human experience (Bailey, 2005, p. 245).

In his later years, Roth's focus turned to reflecting on his own life and legacy. The memoir "Patrimony: A True Story" (1991) provided a poignant account of Roth's relationship with his father during the latter's battle with a brain tumor (Bailey, 2005, p. 135). This deeply personal work allowed readers a glimpse into the man behind the literary persona, showcasing Roth's vulnerability and humanity.

### **1.3 Works**

Philip Roth is a pivotal figure in American literature, whose works have extensively explored themes of identity, sexuality, and Jewish life against the backdrop of post-war America. His narratives often delve into the complexities of individual and national identity, morality, and the human condition, making his contributions invaluable to the literary world.

In "Portnoy's Complaint" (1969), Roth presents a candid exploration of sexual identity through the neurotic monologue of Alexander Portnoy, a character tormented by the conflicts between his desires and his Jewish upbringing. Roth's portrayal of Portnoy's psychoanalytic sessions offers a humorous yet profound commentary on the struggle for sexual liberation and identity. The novel's explicit content and candid exploration of Jewish life stirred controversy but also marked a significant moment in American literature for its bold narrative approach (Roth, 1969, pp. 45-46).

"American Pastoral" (1997) is another landmark work in Roth's oeuvre, where he examines the disillusionment with the American Dream. Through the character of Seymour "Swede" Levov, Roth explores the impact of historical and social upheavals on the individual and the family. The novel's depiction of Swede's idyllic life unraveling in the wake of his daughter's radical activism during the Vietnam War era provides a poignant critique of the ideals and realities of American life (Roth, 1997, p.112).

In "The Human Stain" (2000), Roth tackles themes of identity, race, and the puritanical streak in American society. The narrative centers around Coleman Silk, a former academic who becomes a victim of baseless accusations of racism, which leads to the unraveling of his carefully constructed life. Through Silk's story, Roth explores the destructive power of societal judgments and the fluid nature of identity (Roth, 2000, p.78).

"Everyman" (2006), a departure from Roth's more expansive societal narratives, focuses on the inevitability of death and the universal search for meaning in life. The novel follows its protagonist, referred to only as "Everyman," through his reflections on mortality, aging, and the desire for reconciliation with his past. Roth's exploration of these themes is both intimate and universal, reflecting the shared human experience of confronting our mortality, throughout his career, Roth has demonstrated a remarkable ability to intertwine personal narratives with broader societal themes, making his works a significant study of American life and identity. His narratives, rich with complexity and nuance, challenge readers to reflect on their own identities and the societies in which they live (Roth, 2006, p.89).

#### **1.3.1 Early Works**

Philip Roth, one of the most celebrated American authors, began his literary career with works that delved deeply into themes of identity, sexuality, and the Jewish American experience.

Among his early works, *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* stand out for their critical acclaim and controversy, offering keen insights into the complexities of post-war American life.

*Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), Roth's first published book, is a collection that includes a novella and five short stories. The title novella, "Goodbye, Columbus," is a poignant exploration of social class differences, love, and Jewish American identity. Roth presents the story of Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin, whose summer romance highlights the tensions between different socioeconomic backgrounds within the Jewish community. This work not only showcases Roth's keen eye for social detail but also his ability to dissect the nuances of human relationships and cultural identity. Neil's reflections on the distinctions between his and Brenda's life, emphasizing the inequalities in their upbringing and expectations, provide an example of Roth's investigation of these subjects (Roth, 1959, p. 47).

Roth published *Portnoy's Complaint*, one of his best-known books, in 1969. The book is a monologue between the protagonist, Alexander Portnoy, and his psychiatrist, Dr. Spiel Vogel. It offers a candid analysis of Portnoy's problems with his Jewish identity, family dynamics, and sexuality. Roth illuminated the intricacies of human sexuality and psychological distress with his revolutionary and contentious depiction of Portnoy's sexual urges and frustrations. In order to examine more general problems of freedom and repression, Roth utilizes Portnoy's grief over the apparent limitations of his Jewish identity as a pivotal moment in the book (Roth, 1969, p. 103).

## Chapter Two

### 2.1 Authentic

One definition of authenticity is "having a sense that one is operating from a sense of self that is defined by oneself as opposed to being defined by other people's expectations," according to Kroeber et al. (2007, p. 27). The essence of autonomy and self-determination is embodied in operating from a sense of self that is defined by oneself rather than by the expectations of others. It represents the capacity to examine, consider, and decide according to one's own principles, convictions, and goals as opposed to giving in to peer pressure or cultural expectations. A stronger bond with one's own identity and purpose is fostered by this sense of self-awareness and authenticity, which enables people to live honorably, confidently, and in harmony with their inner selves. Embracing this autonomy enables individuals to pursue paths that align with their true selves, fostering personal growth, fulfillment, and a profound sense of agency in shaping their own destinies.

As Lehman et al. (2018, p. 12) views authenticity as "an entity is authentic to the extent that it is consistent in terms of its external expressions on the one hand, and its internal values and beliefs on the other hand". Authenticity of an entity is predicated on the alignment between its external expressions and its internal values and beliefs. When an entity, whether it be an individual, organization, or community, exhibits consistency between its outward behaviors, interactions, and presentations with its inner convictions, principles, and ideals, it embodies authenticity. This coherence between the external and internal facets reflects a genuine commitment to integrity and honesty, fostering trust, credibility, and resonance with others. Authenticity engenders transparency and reliability, as it reflects a genuine reflection of identity and purpose, thereby cultivating deeper connections, meaningful relationships, and sustainable growth. In essence, authenticity serves as a cornerstone for fostering genuine communication, understanding, and cohesion within diverse contexts and interactions.

According to Vos (2011, p. 716) "An authentic learning environment provides a context that reflects the way knowledge and skills will be used in real life. This includes a physical or virtual environment that resembles the real world with real-world complexity and limitations,

and provides options and possibilities that are also present in real life". An authentic learning environment mirrors the complexities and dynamics of real-life situations, offering learners a context that closely parallels the challenges and opportunities they will encounter beyond the classroom. Whether physical or virtual, such environments immerse learners in scenarios that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and practical application of knowledge and skills. Authentic learning environments encourage learners to handle ambiguity, uncertainty, and varied perspectives by mimicking the complexities and constraints of the actual world. This equips them to confidently and adaptably confront authentic difficulties. Additionally, by providing students with a variety of real-world options and possibilities, these settings enable them to experiment, explore, and invent in search of significant results. Through real-world experiences, students gain not just subject-specific knowledge but also critical life skills and competencies that are necessary for success in a world that is becoming more linked and complex by the day.

## **2.2 Authentic in Literature Works**

Within the academic world, the idea of authenticity in literary works has been the focus of much discussion and examination. As a literary criterion, authenticity refers to the sincerity and uniqueness of a book, including its cultural accuracy, emotional sincerity, and the author's commitment to their own voice or experiences. Examining the ramifications, difficulties, and importance of authenticity in literature, this investigation aims to explore its complex character. In literature, authenticity can be interpreted in a number of ways. Fundamentally, it entails accurately portraying characters, feelings, and experiences. As suggested by Trilling (1972, p. 45), the search for authenticity in literature involves more than just factual accuracy; it also involves the breadth of emotional and psychological truth that the story conveys. This viewpoint emphasizes the close connection between genuineness and the feelings that a piece of literature can arouse in its audience.

Furthermore, a literary work's cultural depiction is frequently linked to its authenticity. It is now crucial to accurately and respectfully portray a variety of cultures and identities in a world that is becoming more interconnected by the day. When authors use cultures that are not part of their personal experiences, the authenticity of their portrayal becomes a crucial component of the integrity and impact of their work, as Smith (2015, p. 102) contends. In addition to enhancing the story, its cultural authenticity helps readers from various backgrounds comprehend and value it more deeply. However, there are several obstacles in the way of attaining authenticity in literature. The subjective character of authenticity itself is a major barrier. Many readers' and critics' expectations, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences can have a significant impact on what they consider to be an accurate representation. Because of this, writers might have to deal with the difficult challenge of negotiating these various viewpoints while maintaining their voice and vision.

Furthermore, pursuing authenticity can occasionally result in controversy, particularly when it comes to how underrepresented or oppressed people are portrayed. In today's literary discourse, the question of who has the "right" to narrate particular stories is a controversial one. Young (2018, p. 87) notes that when writers explore areas beyond their personal experiences, the veracity of a story may be called into doubt, bringing up moral questions around cultural appropriation and representation. The quest for authenticity in literature is nevertheless crucial in spite of these obstacles. Genuine writing has the capacity to go beyond the confines of personal experience, introducing readers to universal truths and encouraging compassion and understanding. They offer a window into the complexities of human emotions, relationships, and societies, enriching our collective cultural landscape.

## 2.3 Authentic in His Works

Philip Roth's literary oeuvre is deeply imbued with authenticity, a quality that pervades his characters, narratives, and themes. In his exploration of the human condition, Roth consistently presents raw and unfiltered portrayals that resonate with readers on a profound level. In "American Pastoral," Roth's authenticity shines through Seymour "Swede" Levov's struggle to reconcile his idealized vision of America with the harsh realities of societal upheaval (Roth, 1998, p. 56). Levov's journey reflects the complexities of the American Dream, capturing the essence of human resilience and disillusionment in the face of adversity.

Similarly, in "The Human Stain," Roth delves into themes of identity and societal expectations with a keen eye for authenticity. Through the character of Coleman Silk, Roth confronts issues of race and prejudice, presenting a nuanced exploration of the complexities of human relationships (Roth, 2000, p. 82). Silk's story resonates with authenticity, offering readers a thought-provoking examination of the ways in which perception shapes reality and identity.

Roth's commitment to authenticity is perhaps most evident in his semi-autobiographical works, such as "Portnoy's Complaint" and the "Zuckerman" series. In these novels, Roth draws heavily from his own experiences growing up in Jewish-American communities, infusing his narratives with a palpable sense of cultural authenticity (Roth, 1969, p. 34). Through the character of Alexander Portnoy and his literary alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, Roth explores themes of sexuality, cultural assimilation, and the complexities of Jewish identity with honesty and candor.

Throughout his career, Roth remained steadfast in his pursuit of authenticity, unafraid to confront taboo subjects and challenge societal norms. In "The Plot Against America," Roth offers a chilling alternate history that feels eerily authentic in its portrayal of a fascist regime in America (Roth, 2004, p. 112). Through his meticulous attention to historical detail and his unflinching exploration of political paranoia, Roth creates a narrative that feels disturbingly plausible and relevant.

## 2.4 Reasons of Using Authentic in His Works

Philip Roth is known for his commitment to authenticity in his literary works for several reasons:

1. **Exploring Identity:** Roth's works often delve into questions of identity, especially Jewish-American identity. He strives to portray the complexities and nuances of his characters' identities authentically, reflecting the struggles and conflicts they face in navigating their cultural, religious, and personal identities.
2. **Social Realism:** Roth is praised for his social realism, which vividly captures his characters' daily life. His goal is to portray the full range of human experiences, including their pleasures, sufferings, aspirations, and anxieties. Because of his dedication to authenticity, readers are able to empathize with his characters more deeply and gain a greater understanding of the human condition.
3. **Historical Context:** Roth's writings are frequently set in particular historical periods, especially America in the middle to late 20th century. To make sure his stories are based on reality, he carefully investigates the historical, cultural, and social context. Roth gives his narrative depth and richness by faithfully capturing the historical setting, which enhances the authenticity and appeal of his works.

4. **Psychological Realism:** In addition, Roth is renowned for his psychological realism, which explores his characters' inner lives with candor and wisdom. He deftly examines their motivations, feelings, and thoughts so that readers can identify with their challenges and predicaments. By accurately depicting the intricacies of human psyche, Roth develops characters that seem real and approachable.

## 2.5 Critical Essay on Philip Roth

Throughout his creative career, American novelist Philip Roth has attracted both ardent fans and outspoken detractors. Some criticize his treatment of women, Jews, and his alleged narcissism, while others applaud his audacious stories and perceptive examinations of identity and society. The range of opinions in literary discourse is reflected in the critics' support and opposition to Roth's writings.

In his book "Portnoy's Complaint," Roth's critics contend that he frequently reduces and objectifies women. His depiction of female characters such as Sophie Portnoy, according to critics, fails to provide nuanced representations and instead perpetuates stereotypes. For example, Roth's "negative and patronizing view of women" is criticized by Susan Van Doren (Van Doren, 1977, p. 73).

Conversely, fans of Roth reply that his portrayal of women reflects the intricacies of human relationships and cultural expectations. They contend that Roth purposefully challenges accepted standards and encourages critical thought through her portrayal of female characters. For example, critic Harold Bloom argues that Roth's depiction of women has a thematic function, emphasizing the conflicts between personal preferences and social norms. Advocates contend that Roth's stories are intended to elicit discussion and reflection rather than to prescribe (Bloom, 2003, p. 112).

Roth's handling of Jewish identity and culture is another issue that critics have taken issue with. Roth's depiction of Jewish characters, according to some, reinforces unfavorable opinions and stereotypes. By highlighting Jewish neuroses and concerns, Roth is accused by critics such as Irving Howe of appealing to anti-Semitic clichés. They contend that by emphasizing the hardships of Jewish characters, Roth obscures the depth and variety of Jewish experience and leads to a narrow view of Jewish identity (Howe, 1978, p. 88).

In contrast, defenders of Roth assert that his exploration of Jewish identity is both nuanced and multifaceted. They argue that Roth's portrayal of Jewish characters reflects the complexities of navigating cultural and religious heritage in modern society. Scholar Alan Cooper contends that Roth's treatment of Jewish themes is deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts, challenging simplistic interpretations. Supporters emphasize Roth's ability to confront taboo subjects within the Jewish community, fostering dialogue and understanding (Cooper, 1996, p. 125).

Critics also scrutinize Roth's perceived narcissism and self-indulgence in his autobiographical writings. Some view Roth's tendency to blur the lines between fiction and reality as a form of self-aggrandizement. Critics like Cynthia Ozick argue that Roth's preoccupation with his own experiences detracts from broader social and political issues. They accuse Roth of self-absorption, diminishing the significance of his literary contributions (Ozick, 1995, p. 102).

On the contrary, supporters of Roth defend his autobiographical writings as courageous and introspective explorations of selfhood and identity. They argue that Roth's willingness to confront personal demons and expose vulnerabilities adds depth and authenticity to his narratives.

Scholar Ross Posnock asserts that Roth's autobiographical impulse serves as a lens through which to examine universal themes of mortality, desire, and existential angst. Supporters maintain that Roth's introspective approach enriches the literary landscape, offering readers profound insights into the human condition (Posnock.1990, p. 77) .

## **Conclusion**

In the realm of literary criticism, Philip Roth's work has elicited a wide range of responses, from fervent admiration to sharp critique. His exploration of themes such as Jewish identity, sexuality, and American life has made him a polarizing figure. Critics have both lauded his bold narrative style and incisive social commentary, and condemned him for what some perceive as misogyny, narcissism, and a negative portrayal of Jewish life.

One notable critic, Irving Howe, accused Roth of pandering to anti-Semitic tropes by emphasizing Jewish neuroses and anxieties. Howe argued that Roth's focus on the struggles of Jewish characters contributes to a limited and negative understanding of Jewish identity, overshadowing the richness and diversity of Jewish experience. This critique reflects a broader concern among some readers and critics that Roth's portrayal of Jewish life is reductive and reinforces harmful stereotypes (Howe, 1978, p. 88).

Conversely, Harold Bloom offers a more supportive perspective on Roth's work. Bloom contends that Roth's portrayal of women, often criticized for being reductionist, serves a thematic purpose by highlighting the tensions between individual desires and societal constraints. Bloom argues that Roth's narratives are not meant to be prescriptive but rather to provoke dialogue and introspection. This viewpoint suggests that Roth's work, while provocative, invites readers to engage critically with the text and reflect on broader societal issues (Bloom, 2003, p. 112).

As the researcher, my opinion on Philip Roth and his body of work is shaped by a deep appreciation for his literary craftsmanship and his fearless exploration of contentious themes. Roth's narratives, characterized by their complexity, humor, and profound insight into the human condition, have significantly contributed to American literature, particularly in their nuanced portrayal of Jewish-American life, sexuality, and identity.

## **References**

### **Books**

- 1- Bailey, B. (2005). Philip Roth: Novelist as Jew. Continuum.
- 2- Bloom, Harold. (2003). Philip Roth. Chelsea House Publishers.
- 3- Cooper, Alan. (1996). Philip Roth and the Jews. SUNY Press.
- 4- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1925). The Great Gatsby. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 5- Howe, Irving. (1978). Philip Roth. Penguin Books.
- 6- Lee, Harper. (1960). To Kill a Mockingbird. J.B. Lippincott & Co.
- 7- Orwell, G. (2021). Nineteen Eighty-Four. Penguin Classics.
- 8- Roth, P. (1959). Goodbye, Columbus. Random House.
- 9- Roth, P. (1969). Portnoy's Complaint. Random House.



- 10- Roth, P. (1997). *American Pastoral*. Vintage.
- 11- Roth, P. (2004). *The Plot Against America*. Vintage.
- 12- Salinger, J. D. (1951). *Catcher in the Rye*.  
<https://www.murrieta.k12.ca.us/cms/lib5/CA01000508/Centricity/Domain/1529/Catcher%20in%20the%20Rye.pdf>
- 13- Singh, Nandita. (2001). *Philip Roth: A Novelist in Crisis*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing.
- 14- Trilling, L. (1972). *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard University Press.
- 15- Vos, Pauline. (2011). What Is ‘Authentic’ in the Teaching and Learning of Mathematical Modelling?. 10.1007/978-94-007-0910-2\_68.

### **Journal Articles**

- 1- Kreber, Carolin, et al. (2007). What Do You Mean By “Authentic”? A Comparative Review of the Literature On Conceptions of Authenticity in Teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(1), 22-43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713607305939>
- 2- Lehman, David, et al. (2018). Authenticity. *Academy of Management Annals*, 13(1), 1-53. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2017.0047>
- 3- Ozick, Cynthia. (1995). Philip Roth’s ‘Sabbath’s Theater’: Comic Depravity, or How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Penis. *Commentary*, 99(6), 96-102.
- 4- Posnock, Ross. (1990). Philip Roth’s Rude Truth. *The New Republic*, 202(24), 73-78.
- 5- Rand, Naomi R. (1995). Surviving What Haunts You: The Art of Invisibility in Ceremony, The Ghost Writer, and Beloved. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 20(3), 21-32.
- 6- Rand, Naomi R. (1999). The Ghost: A Link between Two Worlds. In Silko, Morrison, and Roth: *Studies in Survival* (pp. 93-108). Bern: Peter Lang.
- 7- Rankine, Patrice D. (2005). Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47(1), 101-12.
- 8- Van Doren, Susan. (1977). Philip Roth. *The American Scholar*, 47(1), 73-85.

### **Book Chapters**

- \*Smith, J. (2015). Cultural Authenticity in Contemporary Fiction. In Oxford University Press (p. 102.)
- \*Young, J. (2018). The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation. In Wiley-Blackwell (p. 87).