Chapter Six

Old Age isn’t a Battle, it’s a Massacre

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

- Robert Browning

The celebrated poet of optimistic thoughts, Robert Browning presents a glorious picture of old age, exhorting the people to welcome ‘the last of life’ with fortitude as better days are ahead of them. As a contrast to this concept, Philip Roth presents a bleak aspect of old age in his novel Everyman. The novel is a morbid manifestation of the human condition and addresses the realization which plagues all humanity that death is inevitable. But Roth is reluctant to face death, “It’s because life’s most disturbing intensity is death. It’s because death is so unjust. It’s because once one has tasted life, death does not even seem natural. I had thought – secretly I was certain – that life goes on and on” (169).

Philip Roth’s, intention was to tell the story of a man’s life through his illness through the physical threats to his life. The hero is a retired advertising executive turned amateur artist, a swimmer, a serial monogamist who died while undergoing a heart operation. Books about illness are very few. To quote
some examples *Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Tolstoy, and *Cancer Ward* by Solzhenitsyn. *Magic Mountain* records Mann’s experiences during a period when his wife, who was suffering from a lung complaint was confined to Dr. Friedrich Jesse’s sanatorium in Switzerland for several months. The protagonist Hans Castorp has minor bronchial infection with slight fever and is diagnosed by Hofrat, the chief doctor as tuberculosis.

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Tolstoy tells the story of the death of a high court judge in the nineteenth century Russia. Ivan Ilyich develops a strange taste in his mouth and an enduring pain. The doctor could neither explain nor treat his condition. It soon becomes clear that Ivan is dying. Before his death he sees that he has lived well, but he lived for himself. *Cancer Ward* tells the story of a small group of cancer patients who undergo therapy in Tashkent in Post Stalinist Soviet Union. It explores the moral responsibility of those implicated in the suffering of their fellow citizens. Roth’s novel is a clinical history of every man who has to undergo several operations. Roth has stated in an interview:

We experience a lot more illness than people did in the fifteenth century, because now, by and large, people are kept alive for quite a while before an illness finally kills them. Now a days, you call your friend to ask whether his radiation treatment is over or how his biopsy turned out. We’re all very knowledgeable about
medical matters these days. That too may account for how I came to write this book. (Spiegel)

Roth’s depiction of old age becomes significant in the background of the epigraph of the novel taken from Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale* and the morality play of the fifteenth century *Everyman*.

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre – thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow…

This epigraph pays homage to the great quintessential celebrator of aesthetic perception and prepares the reader for a universe of sense and sensibility. Keats describes the world as a place where the uncontrollable movements of illness shake the last gray hairs on a dying man’s head. This gray-haired person affected by palsy is no longer capable of controlling his own body. There seems to be no consolation for his depressing thoughts and worries. Old age does not offer any joy or peace. These reflections find its echo in Roth’s novel *Everyman*.

*Everyman* takes its title from a medieval morality play whose eponymous protagonist is called by death to account for his life on earth before God. Roth’s comment about the play in an interview is worth mentioning:
The classic is called Everyman, it’s from 1485, by an anonymous author. It was right in between the death of Chaucer and the birth of Shakespeare. The moral was always “Work hard and get into heaven”, “Be a good Christian or go to hell”. Everyman is the main character and he gets a visit from Death. He thinks it’s some sort of messenger, but Death says, “I am Death” and Everyman’s answer is the first great line in English drama: “Oh, Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind”. “When I thought of you least”. (Spiegel)

In the play, the ordinary mortal, referred to simply as Everyman, is called to account for his life before the seat of Judgment. There he finds that he has been abandoned by Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods in rapid and rather depressing succession; but he is saved, in the end by the intervention of Good Deeds, knowledge, Confession and Discretion. The drama, unsurprisingly, ennobles the abandonment of material goods and ephemeral ties - friends, family in favour of more abstract, spiritual values.

Medieval everyman believes in Heaven and Hell, so when Death taps him on his shoulder his immediate thought is for the state of his soul. Roth’s everyman ‘looking hungrily back at the superabundant past’ is distressed about what he is losing. He isn’t expecting a supernatural audit, he is basically unconcerned about whether his books balance. It is not the hurt that he has caused others that upsets him. His misdeeds have left him beached at the end of
his life with no one to comfort him as Death approaches. In a painful fit of self reproach, he recognizes how much he has destroyed of what was good in his life. According to Markovits:

The title of the book is drawn not only from the tradition of morality plays, but from the name of the jewellery store, Everyman’s, owned and run by the protagonist’s father. “It’s a big deal for working people to buy a diamond”, he tells his sons, no matter how small. 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. Beyond the beauty and the status and the value, the diamond is imperishable whereas people are not. (24)

The hero of Everyman is named ‘Everyman’ or ‘he’. In a tour de force, Roth avoids giving him a name while other characters have names. Roth initially had no intention of giving the title Everyman and he says: “I didn’t begin with it. Along the way I had various titles. Only at the end did I remember this play, which I had read in college. I hadn’t read it since 1952, fifty four years ago. I re-read it, and I thought this is the right title. But I wasn’t thinking about the medieval drama when I was writing my book” (1). Roth has not given a name for the hero as he believed that any person can be defined by his relationship to the network of people he knows. The hero of the
novel has to be studied in the light of his relationship to others, to his father and mother, his brother, his wives and his daughter.

Roth has written of mortality before. He addressed the topic with pathos in *Patrimony*, and with hysterical humor in *Sabbath’s Theatre*. The last line of that book read: “How could he leave! How could he go! Everything he hated was here.” *Everyman*, however, has none of these hyperbolic flourishes. “It’s extremely dark,” says the poet Mark Strand, a friend of Roth’s for more than forty years, “and really unalleviated by the usual high jinks and humor that Roth is able to inject into novels.” (Freeman, 148)

Roth is outspoken, about his preoccupation with death. In the *Times* profile he talked at length about the “gigantic shock” of finding himself at an age when his friends are dying. As Mendelsohn has stated:

This book came out of what was all around me, which was something I never expected—that my friends would die”, Mr. Roth said. “If you’re lucky, your grandparents will die when you’re, say, in college. Mine died when I was a schoolboy. If you’re lucky, your parents will live until you’re somewhere in your 50’s; if you’re very lucky, into your 60’s. You won’t ever die, and your children, certainly, will never die before you. That’s the deal, that’s the contract. But in this contract nothing is written about your friends, so when they start dying, it’s a gigantic shock. (3)
This heartfelt sentiment closely echoes a passage from *The Dying Animal*:

The loveliest fairy tale of childhood is that everything happens in order. Your grandparents go long before your parents, and your parents go long before you. If you’re lucky it can work out that way, people aging and dying in order, so that at the funeral you ease your pain by thinking that the person had a long life. It hardly makes extinction less monstrous, that thought, but it’s the trick that we use to keep the metronomic illusion intact and the time torture at bay: “So-and-so lived a long time”. But Consuela had not been lucky … (148-49)

Roth introduces his cast of characters the wives, the children, the brother, the mistresses and nurses. The nameless protagonist becomes progressively aware of the limitations of individual existence as he witnesses his own deterioration and his inability to prevent it. Roth captures the innate tragedy of life and begins the story of the protagonist’s life with his death. This unconventional order symbolizes Roth’s existentialist position. The protagonist is dead from page one, and he cannot escape from his ultimate fate: the inevitable end of life.

It had all come to nothing . . . It was as though painting had been an exorcism. But designed to expel what malignancy? The oldest of his self-delusions? Or had he run to painting to attempt to
deliver himself from knowledge that you are born to live but die
instead? Suddenly he was lost in nothing, in the sound of the two
syllables “nothing” no less than in nothingness, lost and drifting,
and the dread began to seep in. Nothing comes without risk, he
thought, nothing–nothing – there’s nothing that doesn’t backfire,
not even painting stupid pictures. (103)

The repetition of “nothing” echoes the existentialist perspective of Roth,
the protagonist, and all humanity. It captures the fear that life is nothing more
than preparation of death, that life is absurd and nothing is transcendent, that
nothingness consumes the void between birth and death. His everyman has his
first inkling of death at his father’s funeral. As the mourners, according to
Jewish tradition, begin to pack the grave with earth, “all at once he saw his
father’s mouth as if there were no coffin, as if the dirt they were throwing into
the grave was being deposited straight down on him, filling up his mouth”. (59)

Roth drives home the idea that the violent upsurge of carnal desire in the
face of old age is the enemy of man to his own creation, death. Everyman is
simple in structure, opening at the hero’s funeral, starting from his youth,
delineating each health and marital crisis until he is found ‘entering into
nowhere without even knowing it’ (182). Loss in all of its disappointing forms
is the sole subject of the novel. Roth presents happiness as not a blessing or
even the reward of good living, but rather as a rare cosmic accident. Death is
an event that will blot out the individuality and place him in a crucial dilemma.
Every page in the book is an account of an ordinary man’s physical disintegration and his eventual death bears witness to a bitter outrage, constantly reiterated against the simple but devastating fact that the body, eventually, fails.

In the words of Nicholas Spice Everyman presents “the progressive deterioration of the body, the miseries of illness, the humiliation of old age and, at the end of it all, death’s unrefusable invitation to oblivion” (1). Roth presents his central figure as reasonable, kindly, an amicable, moderate industrious man who took on a moneymaking career to support his family. But by the end of the novel, the protagonist has morphed into an anti-hero – the man of appetite, a charming pig, cheating on his wives. Everyman is not so much deserted as he is deserter. He abandons his first wife and their resentful sons Randy and Lonny, and then cheats his second wife and loving daughter. He pulls away from his brother, envious of his health. Only the forgiving child of his second marriage, Nancy sticks by him. The book traces the protagonist’s feelings as he gets increasingly old and sick, and his reflections of his own past, which has included his share of misdeeds and mistakes, as he ponders his impending death.

Roth begins with a graphic description of the funeral scene, as the death of his friends affected him, he has stated in an interview with Spiegel: “I had lost about three or four friends over a period of year. Your friend falls ill, he dies, and then you go to the funeral”. (2)
The worst of the blows suffered by Roth was the death of his old friend and mentor, Saul Bellow. The author disclosed that it was on the day after Bellow’s burial that he sat down to write something that would, more directly confront the spectre of death itself. The book’s title, with its allusion to the medieval morality play about a visit by Death to a nameless “everyman”, makes this clear. Roth recalls “I’d just come from a cemetery,” Roth said, “and that got me going”. Saul Bellow was the last and he was the person I was closest to. I have been looking into so many graves of late, I thought, well, it’s time to write about it” (2). He describes Saul Bellow’s:

There were probably 120 people in a little cemetery in a little town in Vermont. It was pretty strong stuff for everybody. This man’s greatness added another dimension to one’s response. A great man had died. There are very few great ones in our midst. That adds a certain twist to the grief”. He explains “The plan goes like this. Your grandparents die. And then in time your parents die. The truly startling thing is that your friends start to die. That’s not in the plan. (Spiegel, Interview)

Roth says this experience prompted him to write Everyman. The action opens at the funeral of its unnamed hero and then backtracks to give us the man’s life story. Roth says I wanted a man who was in the mainstream so (this guy) attempts to lead a life within the conventions, and the conventions fail him, as they do conventionally” (Spiegel, Interview).
Everyman was not true to his partners in marriage yet he is given a royal burial by his family members. He is the lonely ex-husband of three different women with whom he made a mess of marriage. The great regret of his life is the break-up of his second marriage, to Phoebe, the mother of his favourite child. The great failure, for example, of his third marriage lies in the fact that his wife – a much younger woman, a Danish model named Merete who had been hired for one of his advertising campaigns – isn’t up to the role of comforter. “The woman is basically an absence and not a presence”, his doctor warns him, requiring him to get professional help. The relatives, ex-wife and friends in the grave side share their memories of him. Apart from the people invited by Nancy for her father’s funeral arrangements, there was Maureen the private duty nurse who looked after him following his heart surgery years back.

It has been the decision of his most loved child Nancy to bury him in a half abandoned Jewish cemetery where her great grandmother was one of its founders in 1888. She wanted him to be buried there although she knows he was an atheist, he loved his parents and he will be close to them in their graves. This shows how she loved her father that she didn’t want him to be alone somewhere. It is Nancy and Howie who deliver the graveside orations. Their voices are hardly distinguishable from each other’s or, indeed, from the voice of the third person general narrator. Howie’s task is to do that narrator’s job of filling us in on Everyman’s childhood and youth in the humble home of his
watchmaker father in Depression-times New Jersey. Howie remembers his childhood memories with his brother.

The younger son Lonny was overcome with a feeling for his father. When he started to speak few words of his father, nothing emerged from his mouth. He was in a desperate state that his older brother, Randy rescued him. When Randy spoke of his father, any note of grief, love or loss was absent from his voice. Maureen, the private duty nurse was the last to approach the coffin. With a smile, she let the dirt on to the coffin of a man to whom she had once given much thought.

Philip Roth also gives a flashback of the eventful life of Everyman. *Everyman* is a saga of bodily decay of its protagonist, it is the story of the man from medical point of view. It is kind of portrait of the hero as hospital patient from the hernia operation to heart surgery that ultimately kills him. Personal biographies thus become identical with medical biographies. Right from the beginning of his life till his old age, he had to undergo several operations. Everyman had his first treatment when he was a small child to get his tonsils removed. Then in 1942 when he was a sensible boy of nine, he had his hernia operation where he had to stay in the hospital for four days and four nights alone. In those days the parents were not permitted to stay overnight with their children. He had to witness the death of a boy next to his bed who had stomach surgery. This incident gave him the memories of a drowned body that had been washed on the beach that summer. Years later, walking at night under
the stars with Phoebe, the love of his life, he is oppressed by thoughts of death. Phoebe is rapturous at the beauty of the night, but for him, as for Matthew Arnold on Dover Beach, the ‘dark sea rolling in with its momentous thud and the sky lavish with stars’, speaks of eternal nothingness. The profusion of stars told him unambiguously that he was doomed to die, and the thunder of the sea only yards away – and the nightmare of the blackest blackness beneath the frenzy of the water-made him want to run from the menace of oblivion to their cosy, lighted, under furnished home.

He mysteriously fell ill for the third time at the age of thirty four when he and his second wife Phoebe returned to Manhattan. He lost his appetite and his energy and found himself nauseated throughout the day. At a later stage he felt like dying. The surgeon who had been called by his physician examined it as appendix. As it went to a worse level, it was operated immediately. He remembered that his father had also suffered in 1943 from undiagnosed appendicitis and severe peritonitis. His uncle Sammy had died of the same reason. So he was worried whether he would meet Sammy’s fate or his father’s.

After a long gap of twenty two years in 1989 at the age of fifty six, everyman wound up breathlessness while swimming. He met a doctor where he was told to take an angiogram which determined that surgery was essential. He was then hospitalized for the fourth time and the operation went on for seven hours. When he got back his consciousness in the recovery room, he noticed a
tube down his throat that felt choking him to death. This time his third and last wife Merete bore no resemblance to Phoebe and was not much helpful in an emergency.

His health remained stable for the next nine years. In 1998, because of an obstruction of his renal artery, he entered the hospital for a renal artery angioplasty. By the time he was sixty five, he was divorced for the third time. He missed nothing except his child Nancy whose presence had never ceased to delight him.

After a year, he again had to undergo another surgery for major obstruction in his left carotid artery. By this time he had no one for his assistance. He went alone to the hospital to get operated. There was not even a year he was not hospitalized. After a year of his carotid artery surgery, he had a silent heart attack. The doctor then performed an angioplasty and inserted a stent in his left anterior descending artery. A year later he had another stent installed in one of the grafts. The following year he had to install three stents to repair arterial obstruction. Later a defibrillator was permanently lodged beneath the skin of his upper chest with its wire leads attached to his vulnerable heart. It is to safeguard him against the new development that endangered his life.

Next surgery was on his right carotid artery. The routine was same as he had it for left carotid. He requested the masked anesthetic for the general anesthesia so as to make the surgery easier. But he had cardiac arrest and his
tale of physical suffering met with an abrupt end. At last Everyman became “a
one-time serial husband distinguished no less by his devotion than by his
misdeeds and mistakes” (160). The novel tells us much of pain and illustrates
much grieving: Nancy’s migraines, Phoebe’s stroke, Millicent Kramer’s
agonizing back pain, Gerald Kramer’s brain tumour and Brad Karr’s suicidal
depression, everybody’s sympathy and solidarity with everyone else.

Authorial over determination persists in the novel. From the hernia
operation in 1942, when he is nine to his final cardiac arrest, Roth’s everyman
strikes the reader as a person who seems, if anything, to have enjoyed bizarrely
poor health throughout his life. First the childhood surgery, then, in his thirties,
a near-fatal brush with peritonitis following a ruptured appendix; then the onset
of heart ailments, the quintuple bypass surgery, followed by the arterial
cleanings, the stent, the defibrillators, and so on. A typical passage looks like
this:

The year after the three stents he was briefly knocked out on an
operating table while a defibrillator was permanently inserted as a
safeguard against the new development that endangered his life
and that along with the scarring at the posterior wall of his heart
and his borderline ejection fraction made him a candidate for a
fatal cardiac arrhythmia. The defibrillator was a thin metal box
about the size of a cigarette lighter; it was lodged beneath the
skin of his upper chest, a few inches from his left shoulder, with
its wire leads attached to his vulnerable heart, ready to administer a shock to correct his heartbeat-and confuse death-if it became perilously irregular. (74 – 75)

Such per sages hammer home his theme that each of us is, ultimately, nothing more than a body that fails, the author has abused this one fictional body to unlikely extremes. Extremes of physical failure as debilitating, that is to say, as are the extremes of the emotional failure to which we are told this supposedly “average” man has doomed himself. Even the good daughter, with whom at the end of his life he dreams of living, ends up living with her mother instead. At the end of his life, this man is utterly, if improbably, alone.

All the while his body clock is ticking away. In fact, the novel, which Roth once called “The Medical history,” could be read like a fleshed-out physician’s chart. “As people advance in age.” Says Roth, who turned seventy three in March, “their biography narrows down to their medical biography. They spend time in the care of doctors and hospitals and pharmacies, and eventually they become almost identical to their medical biography.”

Roth has hit upon a winning conceit. The population of America is getting older, and questions of health and mortality are on their minds. Jerome Groopman , a professor at Harvard medical school, says “Roth clearly did his homework when it came to many of the clinical aspects.” Several operating scenes are described in detail, as are the technicalities of procedures. But Groopman believes there’s much more to the novel than that. “The meat of the
book, the heart of it, is the story of his man and the human condition, and the mistakes we make through life how these then come back and are shown to fail to protect us from the fear and loneliness of facing mortality.” His loneliness is self-appointed. As a young man the main character finds immediate happiness in his decisions but suffers long term pain:

Following their speedy progress with his gaze was a pleasure, but a difficult pleasure, and at bottom the mental caress was a source of biting sadness that only intensified an unbearable loneliness. True, he had chosen to live alone, but not unbearably alone. The worst of being unbearably alone was that you had to bear it – either that or you were sunk. You had to work hard to prevent your mind from sabotaging you by its looking hungrily back at the superabundant past. (102)

In accordance with existentialist philosophy, Roth asserts that it is one’s decisions in life which determine the condition and value of one’s life. The protagonist, after having acted according to physical desires and acquiring transitory happiness, had to endure the consequential loneliness which followed.

All these hospitalizations had made him a decidedly lonelier and less confident man. Even his cherished peace has turned into a self-generated form of solitary confinement and he was hounded by the sense that he was moving towards his death. There was no woman in his life other than his daughter. The
affection of the sons of his first marriage no longer pursued. The combativeness had been replaced by a huge sadness. “When he took his mother’s hand and held it to his lips, he realized that in a matter of hours he had lost the two women whose devotion had been the underpinning of his strength’” (119). Roth’s Everyman leads a life of impeccable ordinariness. The only remarkable thing about him is the numerousness of the health mishaps that befall him and the number of intricate operations he must undergo to right them. Millicent Kramer, “a lean, tall, gray haired woman, within a year or two of his age”, who joins the art class he runs for the residents of the retirement home, suffers from chronic back pain. The woman and her plight are portrayed with economy, tenderness and empathy, looking at her.

Everyman reflects, “When you are young it is the outside of the body that matters, how you look externally. “When you get older, it’s what’s inside that matters and people stop caring how you look” (85). He had not been aware of the mortal suffering of every man and woman he knew during all his years of professional life, of each one’s painful story of regret and loss and stoicism, of fear, panic, isolation and dread. Though he had grown accustomed to being on his own and fending for himself since his last divorce ten years back, in his bed the night before the surgery he worked at remembering as exactly as he could each of the women who had been there waiting for him to rise out of the anaesthetic in the recovery room.
When he next went for his annual checkup on his carotids, the sonogram revealed that the second carotid was now seriously obstructed and required surgery. At this point he realized that his character had destroyed the last link to the dearest people he had known. At the humiliating realization of all he had wiped out on his own for no good reason, he said aloud “Without even Howie! To wind up like this, without even him!” (158). He gives vent to his pent up mind. Roth describes his condition very powerfully: “The aimless days and the uncertain nights and the impotently putting up with the physical deterioration and the terminal sadness and the waiting and waiting for nothing” (161).

Like the medieval model, this tale begins with the demise of its hero—in this case, a thrice-divorced retired advertising executive—and thereafter Roth seeks to account for his life in a series of scenes from the dead man’s past, episodically presented. But because of its relentless rejection of spiritual abstractions and its compensatory emphasis on the failure of the corporeal self, these vignettes, in Roth’s Everyman, are in every case connected to either a medical crisis or a funeral. Hence, for instance, a narrative of the hero’s early childhood is pinned to a description of a hernia operation he had at the age of nine, the collapse of his second marriage is pegged to his mother’s death and so on.

The structural relationship between everything that happens in the book and scenes of illness, hospital stays, medical procedures, and deaths is meant to underscore a glumly reductive theme. “Up and down the state that day, there’d
been five hundred funerals like his….It’s the commonness that’s most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything” (Spiegel, Interview).

In Roth’s book the hero is someone who “put no stock in an afterlife and knew without a doubt that God was a fiction and this was the only life he’d have,” and so is left, at the end, with nothing but bones, which as he sees it is all that survives of us in the end. “The flesh melts away but the bones endure,” he thinks during a final visit to the graves of his parents, with whom he carries on a moving silent conversation.

A closing and climactic confrontation with a gravedigger places great emphasis on the hero’s desire for the comfort not of intangible abstractions but of “concreteness”: knowing how a grave is dug, knowing what happens down there. The opposition between concreteness and abstraction the man explains his craft, how the sides of the grave must be straight and the depth just so and how the bottom has to be flat enough to lay a bed on it. The material and the spiritual, the body and the soul, the profane and the sacred informs a suggestive if underdeveloped subplot, a passage of a few pages that hints at how interesting this book might have been if it had told us more.

Discovering that this is the man who dug his parents’ grave Everyman offers a tip, to which the gravedigger replies that he has already had his fee. Everyman insists:
Yes, but I’d like to give you something … My father always said, “it’s best to give while your hand is still warm.” He slipped him two fifties, and as the gravedigger’s large, roughened palm closed around the bills, he looked at him closely, at the genial, creased face and the pitted skin of the mustached black man who might someday soon be digging a hole for him that was flat enough at the bottom to lay a bed on. (180)

The scene is so deft, and this figure of friendly Death is described with such a mixture of lightness and somber gravity, that the narrative draws to a close in an atmosphere that is almost Shakespearean in its magical softness and mysterious simplicity.

Roth portrays a hero who had no belief in God and death or obsolete fantasies of heaven. His non-acceptance and disbelief in God is presented very powerfully: “The bones were the only solace there was to one who put no stock in an afterlife and knew without a doubt that God was a fiction and this was the only life he would have” (170). The temple of flesh is presented as the one holy thing in the world. It was too late for him to repent for all his misdeeds.

Roth’s reflections on death are presented through post modern narrative techniques. His novels of the past decade has been distinguished by a powerfully propulsive energy. His great interest has been in states of extreme mental and emotional excitation notably rage and lust and his writing has found a way to embody these states, whether in impassioned speech or wild interior
monologue, with an intensity unrivalled in modern fiction. The style of his prose in *Everyman* is oratorical. The rhythms of his sentences, the phrasing of his paragraphs, the pacing of episode and scene, derive their force from the control of emphasis and accent, what we might think of as the gesticulatory aspect of writing. Roth’s mastery of this technique allows him to develop long wave form riffs that build and break and build and break again. It is a funerary portrait, a short account of a man’s life cast in the bias of a preoccupation with bodily decay. The story is told in retrospect, the mood is valedictory and morose. Most stories we read or listen to be told in the past tense, but we forget this and experience them as though they were happening now. In Everyman nothing happens next, not just because the protagonist is buried in the opening scene, but because what we learn of his life comes to us mainly through what he remembers.

The circularity in the narrative is an expressive feature of the book. The novel’s governing tense is the pluperfect, the past tense of the past tense, the tense that declares everything to be unchangeable and finished with: The style of Everyman is measured, understated, withholding – in a word, plain. So plain, indeed, that one reads the degree-zero opening pages in the expectation of an imminent outburst of passion and vituperation.

In Everyman, the enemy of the incarnate world is Death itself, the ultimate ideologue of the one pure idea. Heaven is once again located in a Jewish childhood in prewar New Jersey ‘the world as it innocently existed
before the invention of death’. But where in American Pastoral and The Plot against American the battle of good and evil is enacted in the course of the novel, in Everyman the battle is already lost: there can be no arguing with Death in the way that Swede Levov can argue with his daughter Merry, or Mr. Roth with Rabbi Bengelsdorf. The two late period novels that dealt with death head on, Sabbath’s Theater (1995) and The Dying Animal (2001), were infused with an unrelenting fury at the simple unfairness of the fact of mortality.

His mother had died at eighty, his father at ninety. Aloud he said to them, “I’m seventy one. Your boy is seventy one.” “Good. You lived,” his mother replied and his father said, “Look back and atone for what you can atone for, and make the best of what you have left.”

Everyman self-consciously seeks to rewrite the pre-modern dramatization of a stark and terrifying confrontation with Death but without the moralizing and Christianizing – which is to say, the comforting and redeeming-elements. “It’s told from the Christian perspective, which I don’t share”, Roth remarked while explaining how he came to write the book; “it’s an allegory, a genre I find unpalatable; it’s didactic in tone, which I can’t stand”:

But now it appeared that like any number of the elderly, he was in the process of becoming less and less and would have to see his aimless days through to the end as no more than what he was – the aimless days and the uncertain nights and the impotently
putting up with the physical deterioration and the terminal sadness and the waiting and waiting for nothing. (161)

As seen previously, Roth uses repetition, along with polysyndeton in order to emphasize the enormity of the protagonist’s realization: his existence is absurd. The addition of conjunctions captures the “everyman’s” near hysteria at his rapidly approaching fate. The structure of the sentence mirrors how the protagonist views his existence; it progresses, gains momentum, builds upon itself, and amounts to anticlimactic nothingness. Roth asserts that all individuals, because they all face the same end and cannot control the proximity or nature of it, must seize that which they can control and create their life from their actions. The tragedy of the protagonist lies in his defeatist attitude; he is destroyed by his unremitting physical ailments, as well as his actions which ultimately result in his agonizing solitude. In presenting these two opposing forces, the controllable and the uncontrollable, Roth illustrates the dichotomy of existence. By creating a character who essentially lives the quintessential absurd existence, ridden with pending physical destruction and mistakes, Roth successfully captures characteristics of humanity which his readers can identify in themselves and perhaps rectify.

As Nicholas, Spice Everyman is preoccupied with time and transience, and much of what it has to say on the subject is thrown up at the fault line where the chronology of the text—the order in which we read the words—and the chronology of the story meet. For example, the construction of the sentence just
quoted entirely disorganizes the historical sequence of the events it recalls. The historical order is as follows: He has quintuple bypass surgery; he comes round from the anaesthetic; he recovers with the ‘last wife’; he divorces the last wife; he spends ten years getting used to being on his own and fending for himself; he lies in bed the night before his next operation; he has the operation. The sentence rearranges this sequence in the order he spends ten years getting used to being on his own and fending for himself; he divorces the last wife; he lies in bed the night before his next operation; he has the operation; he comes round from the anaesthetic; he recovers with the ‘last wife’; He has quintuple bypass surgery.

There are many sentences like this in Everyman: like sperm that can only swim in circles, they are incapable of fertilizing the page. Their effect is to disorientate our sense of temporal flow and draw us into the desultory movements of an individual mind as it weaves to and fro across the past. Often, what is recalled will itself be a state of mind suspended between past and future, such as regret or hope, guilt or anxiety, loss or apprehension, disappointment or expectation? Memories are nested within memories, tense within tense: ‘A lifetime later, he remembered the trip to the hospital with his mother for his hernia operation in the fall of 1942, a bus ride lasting no more than ten minutes’; ‘her words soothed him as no woman’s had since his mother sat and talked to him in the hospital after the hernia operation’; ‘suddenly he was remembering the rush of emotion that carried him down and down into the
layers of his life when, at the hospital, his father had picked up each of the three infant grandchildren for the first time'; ‘For the first time since she’d begun the class he could see unmistakably how attractive she must have been before the degeneration of an ageing spine took charge of her life’. Where the text settles into third – person narrative and gives us direct speech, our awareness that this is the memory of a memory doesn’t leave us. ‘Do the work, finish the job, and by tomorrow the whole thing will be over’. His father says to the nine-year old boy to encourage him before his first serious operation, but the energy of the imperatives, and the uplift of the happy prospect of it all being over tomorrow, are inactive – they are fossil matter, the tensions of a present moment embalmed in the past.

The analysis of the novel has helped the investigator to highlight the tale of physical ailments of its protagonist. The epigraph from Keats’ poem thus attains its significance that ‘we sit and hear each other’s groan’ in the journey of our lives. At the same time men are very cautious about their physical well being. Hence everyman takes proper care of his health by taking treatment at the right time. He is unmindful of his responsibilities as a husband and father and lived a life of carnal pleasures. Roth in this novel raises another fundamental question whether people take any step to safeguard the soul.

So as an investigator, the apprehension is whether his soul would attain spirituality or would it be damned. Everyman conveys the message that ‘Old age isn’t a battle; but it is a massacre’. This is the most quoted sentence in the
novel. In an interview with Spiegel Roth confesses his experience while watching TV: “I was watching television news about the floods in New Orleans while they were evacuating the old people’s homes – and I did say aloud to the person I was with, “Old age is a massacre”. It looked as though they were removing people from a battlefield”. In the case of Roth’s hero everyman, it is a massacre as it refers to his emotional turbulence in the face of death.

The final chapter Summation is entitled Acclimatization or Acceptance presents a recapitulation of the previous chapters and arrives at the findings of the study undertaken. The title is a pointer at the fate of the Jews in America whether to get submerged in the main stream or stay emotionally apart in the adopted land or accept the diasporic scenario as their own.
Works Cited

Benjamin Markovits. ‘Philip Roth’s arguments with life’. Published 5 May 2006. Print


