Chapter One

Introduction

Annals of Jewish American Literature

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

The New Colossus

This great hymnal of American immigration by Emma Lazarus is the first voice of Jewish American Literature. The sonnet takes the readers from ancient Greece to Hurricane Sandy, from the United States anti immigration legislation to the crimes committed against Russian Jews at the end of the nineteenth century. Jewish American literature is about a century old beginning with the literature written in Yiddish, by immigrants between 1885 and 1935. Yiddish writers were commonly radicals and secularists and they expressed
themselves in poetry, novels, papers and pamphlets. Their strong interest in radical and secular ideas is also reflected in Jewish American writers.

Very few Jews settled in America before 1881. In the seventeenth century they arrived from Spain and Portugal and in the nineteenth century from Germany and they had rapidly assimilated into the American culture. 1881 marked a major turning point in Jewish history. On March 1, 1881 when the Russian Czar, Alexander II was assassinated, his son Alexander III ascended the Russian throne. During his time, persecution of the Jews became the policy of the Russian government and this led to the prompt immigration of millions of Jews to America. These Jews spoke Yiddish and it is natural that the first American Jewish writers wrote in that language. Thus European Jewishness got transported to America. Among these was Morris Winshevsky who promoted socialism. He was a follower of Jewish enlightenment called Haskalah, a movement with a distinct secular emphasis. Major contributors to Yiddish writing in the United States of America were Morris Rosenfeld and Abraham Cahan.

Morris Rosenfeld, prime representative of the so called ‘sweatshop’ poets reflected the Jewish radicalism of his day. That radicalism was the reaction against the misery of living in immigrant slums, of the exploitation of Jewish workers and the desperation of the Jewish Masses. His radicalism rejected the religion of Europe and sought to rely on the politics of America. Abraham Cahan’s book *The Chosen People and the Rise of David Levinsky* is
hailed the most important novel written by a Jewish immigrant. The hero, David Levinsky became an American millionaire at the cost of his Jewish heritage. Cahan depicts the emptiness of Levinsky’s life despite his rise to money and fame.

Writers of German Jewish immigrants born in the United States also contributed to Jewish American literature. Prominent among them are Sidney Nyburg, Anzela Yezierska, James Oppenham, Samuel Ornitz and Ludwig Lewisohn. They rejected religion and sought to reveal how pragmatism and realism were superior in solving man’s problems than belief in anything supernatural. Their writings dealt with the fate of immigrants.

During the depression of the 1930, American Jewish writers were very much affected by the discontinuity of European Judaism with American Judaism. Except for Isaac Bashevis Singer all other writers wrote in English. They rejected Jewish tradition and leaned towards the political ‘left’ and viewed their Jewishness as a secular condition. Nelson Algren in Somebody in Boots, Albert Harper in The Foundry, Isadore Schneider in From the Kingdom of Necessity and many others viewed socialism as the answer to Jewish problem and disdained religion entirely demanding a future, free of tradition. Writers such as Michael Gold in Jews without Money or Charles Reznikoff in By the Waters of Manhattan, believe that Marxism, not Judaism is the inevitable answer to the degradations and hardships of the immigrant slums.
Paul Goodman whom the historian Irving Howe called a ‘Jewish intellectual alienated to the point of complete reduction’ thought that the fellowship of all humans is enhanced by the Jewish tradition and that the fully Jewish is regarded as the fully human. Judaism as a religion or as a separate experience is hardly credited by Goodman.

In the first part of the twentieth century Jewish theologians strove to distance theology from European tradition. Rabbi Kaufman Kohler and Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan disconnected American Judaism from European Judaism and redefined the God concept. Kaplan presents God as ‘a chronologically variable social idea’ or as a ‘struggling ordering force of nature’. After the Second World War, a vast number of Jewish American writers inundated the literature of the United States and have kept this up until the beginning of twenty first century.

The 1950s may be said to mark the start of a golden age of Jewish American Literature, when it evolved from an ethnic sideshow to the mainstream. In 1953 with the publication of The Adventure of Augie March, and its opening lines “I am an American, Chicago born,” Saul Bellow announced that Jews were as much a part of American society as anyone else. That same year Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Gimpel the Fool was translated into English. This marked the ascendance of a very different strand of Jewish literature in America, that which remembered, celebrated, and romanticized old world Judaism, that of Eastern Europe, the shtetl, which had been wiped out
forever by the Nazis. The creative tension between these two strands, Jews as quintessential Americans and Jews as old world cultural icons persist to this day. Popular writers like Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, and Grace Paley, exemplify the tension between tradition and assimilationism in a context of increasing acceptance and material comfort.

The mainstream recognition of Jewish writers may have owed as much to the historical moment, which combined guilt about the Nazi atrocities with a huge opening of opportunity for Jewish Americans. According to Ruth Wisse, “American Jews were not only spared the Holocaust, they unwittingly drew from a moral credit that accrued to its victims” (57). The special circumstances of World War II, followed by an unprecedented economic boom, was responsible for this change. This also contributed to the circle of dominant culture, from those of English descent, to Germans, Irish, Italians, and Jews. As a result there has been the emergence of a literature worthy of study in universities. At the start of the twentieth century, American literature had been considered inferior, unworthy of study alongside the great European classics. By the 1950s American literature was considered its own, serious field of study. The ascent of Jewish American literature may be considered to have marked a threshold, the first of a range of ethnic literatures.

A host of American Jewish writers have contributed to American literature since 1945. Some of the most prominent names among American Jewish fiction writers are Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis,
Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley, Joseph Heller, John Barth and Philip Roth. These writers produced an enormous output of creative works with a stunning range of themes, that forever altered the status of Jews in literature.

Saul Bellow who won the 1976 Nobel Prize, spent his first nine years in his birth place, Canada. His parents were Latvian Jews who emigrated to Chicago in 1924 and Bellow had his education in Chicago and then Northwestern University from where he graduated in anthropology and sociology. Bellow was America’s first major writer to shift, the central concern of his fiction from the social and political to the existential. He is a realist armed with a formidable, vigorous poetry. Bellow is an individualist, a man concerned to demonstrate that, although society has become so gigantic, individual human beings have not become smaller. Bellow sees all his protagonists as ‘victims’ of life in search of a cure in the godless twentieth century.

In his first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), he introduces the first version of his hero, Joseph who is ‘dangling’ because he has given up his job and is waiting to be called up. The novel portrays modern man burdened, bored, by his very liberty, yet alienated from those around him by his passionate concern. *The Victim* (1947) goes more deeply into the question of Jewishness. Asa Leventhal, a journalist is picked up by a mad, drunken anti-semite who accuses him of having once done him a wrong. Leventhal becomes aware, through being persecuted by his creature, that he needs something to hate, that he too
carries within him an anti-human virus. There is a marvellous scene, characteristic of Bellow in which the two men come into physical contact. Leventhal is suddenly aware of his complicity, with his antagonist and torturer, in life itself. The two men thus become brothers. This novel ends on a serene note, and one of the characters makes a remark that might serve for an epigraph to all Bellow’s fiction: ‘Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down’.

In the picaresque, novel *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) Bellow presents what has been called his first ‘above ground’ hero, Augie, who refuses to accept defeat although he recognizes that ‘everyone got bitterness in his chosen thing’. Augie is different from Joseph or Leventhal, although still a victim he affirms rather than questioning everything. He becomes a gangster, a kind of gigolo, a husband and he accepts it all.

The novella *Seize the Day* (1956), which appeared with a play and another shorter story is about a failure as a breadwinner, a husband and a son. The hero knows that he is unworthy and a fool to do it, and yet he must hand his money over to a crooked psychiatrist, Tamkin, to be multiplied on the stock exchange. He can fulfill himself only as the dupe of a confident man, must sit and watch as his money is lost. In the end, he is defeated, stripped of money and turned away by his rich, valetudinarian old father. Tommy Wilhelm bursts into tears in a chapel at the funeral of a complete stranger. The music plays: ‘He
heard it and sank deeper into sorrow, through torn sobs and cries towards the consummation of his heart’s ultimate need’.

*Henderson the Rain King* (1959) the story of a millionaire who goes to Africa in quest of wisdom, incorporates Bellow’s anthropological interests. *Herzog* (1961) is a successful long study of a middle-aged Jewish intellectual, a kind of Tommy Wilhelm but without the final masochistic need to submit to fate. Herzog is another victim, he is betrayed by his friends and wives and even his doctor, and he is forever writing letters of carefully reasoned complaint. These letters are really to God, the architect of his misery, in whom he continues to believe, though never admitting it. The greatest challenge to Herzog has been the one who makes him suffer most acutely, his second wife, who is unfaithful to him with the repulsive valentine Gersbach. Without her choice treachery and her insane charges that he is insane, he feels nothing, she makes him remarkable. The vigour of this novel is the shrill vigour of nervous exhaustion, and yet Bellow succeeds in portraying an intellectual more convincingly than any other novelist of his time.

*Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) is another exercise in the picaresque and is largely a vehicle for Bellow’s philosophy. His philosophy, ‘old-fashioned’ in terms of today’s youngest university rebels, but in no way reactionary, seems wise and mellow to many of Bellow’s readers. With *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975) Bellow triumphantly returned to his highest level. Loosely based on the life and death of Delmore Schwarz, it movingly tells the story of a gifted but
obstinate man who descends into self-destructive paranoia. Bellow’s insight into abnormal states in this book is almost uncanny in its accuracy. The central character, however, is a successful writer called Citrine, who has been almost destroyed by the results of his success. This is in part a comment on Bellow himself, and on his own weariness with the world that glorifies serious writers.

Bernard Malamud is considered as a part of the triad of defining Jewish American novelists, along with Bellow and Philip Roth. Of the three, Malamud stands most obviously in the tradition of Yiddish literature. Bernard Malamud born in Newyork, is, like Bellow, the son of parents who had emigrated from Russia not long before his birth. It is Malamud who made the famous remark, ‘All men are Jews’, by which he meant that all men are at heart sensitive and alienated. He portrays Jewish suffering as a metaphor for human condition. His first novel, The Natural (1952) was a comic masterpiece, a treatment of baseball in terms of the American hero. This contains the germ of Malamud’s method – a marriage of realism and fable that has been called ‘magic realism’ besides exploiting his pride in being a Brooklyn baseball aficionado. His next novel The Assistant (1957), a work of rare beauty and affirmation, is on his theme of ‘All men are Jews’. The Assistant is about nothing less than goodness. Frankie Alpine is a Gentile hoodlum who robs a poor Jewish shopkeeper. Later he falls in love with the grocer’s daughter, Helen and accepts her criticism of him. In the end he actually becomes the grocer, running the store and grumpingly performing the same acts of charity. He has himself circumcised and becomes a Jew.
A New Life (1961) is a campus novel, tracing the progress of Seymour Levi from rock bottom to a realization that life is holy. This, although occasionally richly comic, is not altogether free from sentimentality. The Fixer (1967) is an attempt to rival Bellow with a ‘big’ novel, and an attempt to write the great ‘All men are Jews’ novel. It is loosely based on the case of Mendel Beiliss, an innocent Jewish workman who was tried in Tsarist Russia for the ‘ritual’ murder of a boy – and acquitted in spite of the conspiracy against him. The Fixer describes the ordeal of Yakov Bok, the result of his trial, however is left open. Pictures of Fidelman (1969) is a picaresque novel set in Italy. Much better are his short stories, collected in The Magic Barrel (1958) and Idiots First (1963). The Jewish stories in the first collection remind one of the Yiddish-American author, Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Isaac Bashevis Singer is commonly thought of as extending the tradition of Yiddish literature, among his contemporary Yiddish writers. He introduced an element of Jewish mysticism. He is the connecting link among assimilating American Jews, to a mythic past including elements of an actual history and culture. Singer’s short stories deal with the human relationship to God. The dilemma of assimilating European Jews is even stronger in America. The relationship of Jews to Christianity is also a recurrent Singer theme, including the temptation to convert. The ultimate assimilation of short stories are perhaps Singer’s most influential form, his output of novels was prodigious. They range from medieval historical tales to sweeping family narratives. In his later novels Singer portrays Jews in America.
Isaac Bashevis Singer is probably the most important of all Yiddish writers, he undoubtedly learned much from Yisroel, who was a leader of the modern school. He has further explored themes of Yisroel’s particularly that of Hasidism which the latter treated in his important novel *The Sinner* (1932). Isaac Singer’s *The Family Moskat* (1945) is dedicated to his brother ‘not only the older brother but a spiritual father and master’.

Isaac Bashevis Singer’s books were originally written in Yiddish, although not all are available in that language. He has lived in America since 1935, and has translated much of his own fiction either alone or in collaboration. The essence of Singer’s greatness as a writer is that, as the American critic Irving Howe has put it, he can write of a vanished past as if it still existed. The power of his writing in this respect is uncanny. He has written novels, short stories and memoirs. He has an unmatched knowledge and understanding of Jewish – polish folklore. His work has a special appeal to writers of the sixties, perhaps mainly because of the religious needs of a secular age. Singer believes in ‘Higher powers’ as his books make clear, but he is not a dogmatist. Apart from *The Family Moskat*, a Jewish Budden brooks’ set in Poland in the first half of this century and chronicling the decay of a Jewish family, he has written *The Magician of Lublin* (1960). The novel is concerned with a womanizing circus - magician and acrobat in late nineteenth century Poland. *The Slave* (1967) is about a young seventeenth century Jewish scholar sold into slavery. *The Manor* (1953) is set in late nineteenth century Poland. *Satan in Goray* (1953) is about religious fervour and the birth of Hasidism
again in seventeenth century Poland. Short story collections in English are: ‘Gimpel the Fool’ (1957), ‘The Spinoza of Market Street’ (1961), ‘Short Friday’ (1967), ‘The Séance’ (1968) and collected stories. ‘In My Father’s Court’ (1956), is a collection of memories of a rabbinical court in Lublin, and an invaluable description of a way of life now vanished. Singer writes without sentimentality and his themes are often terrible, but no major modern writer’s work has so rich and so affirmative a glow to it. Many of the short stories are classics. ‘Gimpel the Fool’ which takes its place amongst the best of all stories is about the simple man exploited by his neighbours. ‘The Séance’, is about a sick old man living in New York who deliberately allows himself to be exploited by a crooked and sadistic medium, so that he can somehow keep contact with his European Jewish past. For all his achievements, Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1978.

Cynthia Ozick is overtly Jewish. The writings of Jewish American renaissance are exuberant, sometimes comic and sometimes satiric. These experimental performances have no female authored counterparts. It is Cynthia Ozick who draws on the same font of Yiddish literature reconstituted in America and themes of Jewish identity in contact with an assimilationist society, as do the males. Early in her career she declared that nothing thought or written in diaspora has lasting value unless it has been centrally Jewish. She later backed away from that claim and the obvious influence of European modernism on her work belies it. Henry James, an American ensconced in British culture is a strange role model for Ozick, given his critique of the alien
influence of Jews in New York. This modernist forefather illuminates a paradox at the heart of Ozick’s career that she is herself a hybrid, hyphenated product. She has been described as the voice of the New York intellectual brought to bear on the composing of fiction. Her early short story ‘The Pagan Rabbi’ reveals religious questioning and angst in a new world that has jarred the historical continuity of the Jewish people. Like ‘The Pagan Rabbi’ many of Ozick’s short stories mix Jewish themes, modern day America and a touch of magic realism. Ozick is the modern feminist, single woman, adrift, perhaps a warning of what America means to those who have forgotten their Jewish identity.

An icon of feminist critics although less studied by Jewish Americanists, is Grace Paley. With her profusion of New York Jewish voices and Yiddish inflected language, Paley can easily be placed among major Jewish American authors of the latter half of the twentieth century. Although Paley published only three volumes of short stories and some poetry collections during her long life, she is something of a literary icon, an American original. An overt radical, a heir of Jewish socialism, Paley claimed to be too busy with her activism protesting against nuclear arms and the Vietnam war among other issues for a prodigious literary output. Ozick disapproves of rootless America, but Paley celebrates its multiculture community the rich interconnections of Jews, Irish, Italian and Black. With their multiplicity of voices, Paley’s stories despite a concern with left wing themes, with old socialists, war protests and radical interactions and female solidarity, create a vivid portrait of a complex and
contradictory America. As with Bellow, although from a very different political perspective, Paley’s works exemplify how literature resists easy ideology.

Joseph Heller gained world fame with his satirical, anti-war novel *Catch-22* (1961), set in the World War Two Italy. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, the son of poor Jewish parents. His Russian-born father, Isaac Daniel Heller, was a bakery truck driver. In 1949 Heller received his M.A. from Columbia University. His first stories were published in such magazines as ‘Atlantic Monthly’ and ‘Esquire’. Heller also expressed the emerging rebelliousness of the Vietnam generation and criticism of mass society. *Catch-22* has enjoyed a steady sale since its publication. Heller’s novel *Something Happened* (1974) portrays a corporation man Bob Slocum, who suffers from insomnia and almost smells the disaster mounting towards him. Vonnegut, Heller’s friend, reviewed the novel for ‘The New York Times’. Heller knew that Vonnegut would not undertake the task unless he would write favourably about it. Some reviewers were disappointed but Vonnegut praised the novel as “clear and hard-edged as a cut diamond”. ‘We Bombed in New Haven’ (1968), Heller’s play-within-a-play, was written in part to express his protest against the Vietnam War. Heller’s later works include *Good as Gold* (1979), where the protagonist Bruce Gold tries to regain the Jewishness he has lost. Readers hailed the work as a return to puns and verbal games familiar from Heller’s first novel.
God Knows (1984) is a modern version of the story of King David and an allegory of what it is like for a Jew to survive in a hostile world. No Laughing Matter (1986), is a cheerful account of Heller’s experience as a victim of Guillain-Barre syndrome. During his recuperation, Heller was visited among others by Mario Puzo, Dustin Hoffman and Mel Brooks. Closing Time (1994) is a sequel to Catch-22, depicting the current lives of its heroes. Now and Then (1998) Heller’s autobiographical work, is an evocation of his boyhood home, Brooklyn’s Coney Island in the 1920s and 30s. Heller had two children by his first marriage, Erica and Ted. His divorce was recounted in No Laughing Matter. Erica’s own book about her father, Yossarian Sleph Here, came out in 2011. In 1989 Heller married Valerie Humphries, a nurse he met while ill. Heller died of a heart attack at his home on long Island on December 13, 1999. His last novel, Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man (2000), is about a successful novelist who seeks an inspiration for his book.

John Barth, like Philip Roth has gained commercial success. He is an academic and has been one, ever since he graduated from Johns Hopkins. His novels, however, are as anti-academic as they are academic. He is amusing, inventive of situations, a trained philosopher and a polymath. He relies on puns, slang of all sorts, pastiche and parody. His own ability to write prose has so far been concealed by these intellectual pyrotechnics.

Giles Goat-Boy (1967) the ultimate in the Bildungsroman, like Barth’s preceding three novels – The Floating Opera (1956), The End of the Road
(1958) and *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), deals in education. Here the universe is a university, into which are launched a false Messiah and a counter-claimant, Giles Goat-Boy, a horned human student. *Giles Goat-Boy* is a prototype for a certain kind of book, the new, scholastic, inturned Joycean epic. Barth is a comedian, a man with marvellous ideas – but his own language offers no clue to the presence of a creative imagination. *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is simply a decline into a sort of literary criticism, and its bright moments are lost in tedium.

The works of Philip Roth are undoubtedly excellent examples for the rejection of traditional Judaism already exhibited by the Yiddish writers a generation earlier. Like their non-Jewish contemporaries and predecessors, Jewish writers in the last half of the twentieth century contributed a great deal to the secularization of America and Jewish life. They created a distinction between Judaism and Jewishness which their grandparents never knew and which has become the Great Divide within the Jewish community in the twenty-first century.

In 1933, when Philip Roth was born, mass immigration to the United States had come to an end. Jewish immigration, mostly from Germany, was small and involved many newcomers already secularized by their German environment. Numerous Yiddish writers and the philosophical, scientific and literary world in America had secularized at least the academic world and in
Like thousands of other Jews who came of age in the 1930s, Roth entered into the world of higher education where the challenges to Judaism or any religion were already embedded in the curriculum. Over eighty percent of Jews of college age attended an institution of higher education and like Roth, they found every reason to divorce Judaism from Jewishness and discard the faith of their fathers.

Many of the Jewish writers, with Roth in the forefront, now opposed their Jewish heritage and treated it with contempt, disdain and calumny. Roth, of course, did to the Jewish world what non-Jewish writers had already done to the Christian world for a century. He secularized the sacred. He ridiculed the divine. He insulted the tradition and he vulgarized his “in-group”. Thus, Roth, and so many other Jewish-American writers, contributed mightily, not only to the secularization of Judaism and America in general, but also to the de-mystification of the Jewish tradition. Both for non-Jews and for Americans of Jewish origins who had left the tradition behind, Roth provides insight into twentieth century Jewish life as it is lived each day. He explains what is important to contemporary American Jews. He shows that Judaism is not one of the important ideas in the lives of American Jews but that Jews have substituted membership in clubs and organizations for membership in synagogues. Roth further claims that synagogues and rabbis are themselves
secular institutions at the end of the twentieth century. Jewish ritual emphasizes financial display as in Bar Mitzvahs and weddings. The Jewish community in America is governed by the same type of business interests which Sinclair Lewis described governing the Christian community.

Roth’s first book *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) a novella and five stories with wit, irony, and humour depicts Jewish life in post-war America. The book won him critical recognition, including the National Book Award for fiction, and along with that, condemnation from some for depicting what they saw as the unflattering side of contemporary Jewish American experience. His first full-length novel *Letting Go* (1962), a Jamesian realistic work explores and examines many of the societal and ethical issues of the 1950s. This was followed in 1967 by *When She was Good*, in the realistic mode that takes as its focus a rare narrative voice in Roth’s fiction, a young Midwestern female.

He is perhaps best known for his third novel, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), a wildly comic representation of his middle class New York Jewish world in the portrait of Alexander Portnoy, whose possessive mother makes him so guilty and insecure that he can seek relief only in elaborate masturbation and sex with forbidden Shiksas. *Portnoy’s Complaint* was not only the New York Time’s best seller for the year 1969, it also made a celebrity out of Roth, an uncomfortable position that he would later fictionalize in such novels as *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) and *Operation Shylock* (1993). Following the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth experimented with
different comic modes, as illustrated in the works Our Gang (1971), a parodic attack on Richard Nixon; The Breast (1972), a Kafkaesque rendering of sexual desire; The Great American Novel (1973), a wild satire of both Frank Norris’s novelistic quest and the great American pastime, baseball.

In My Life As A Man (1974), Roth not only introduces his most developed protagonist Nathan Zuckerman, but for the first time his fiction becomes highly self-reflexive and post-modern. One of his most significant literary efforts is the Zuckerman trilogy: beginning with The Ghost Writer (1979), Zuckerman Unbound, and The Anatomy Lesson (1983) and wrapped up with a novella epilogue, The Prague Orgy (1985). These novels trace the development of Roth’s alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, from an aspiring young writer to a socially compromised, and psychologically besieged, literary celebrity. In The Counter life (1986) perhaps his most ambitious and meticulously structured novel, Roth brings a temporary end of his Zuckerman writings. It is also the first time that the author engages in a sustained examination of the relationship between American and Israeli Jews.

His next four books – The Facts (1988), Deception (1990), Patrimony (1991) and Operation Shylock (1993) – explore the relationship between the lived world and the written world, between fact and fiction. Through his protagonist in these works, the author questions the genres of autobiography and fiction. The other three are subtitled as either an autobiography (The Facts), a memoir or true story (Patrimony), or a confession (Operation
Shylock). The most elaborate of these, *Operation Shylock*, is arguably Roth’s finest work, leading fellow writer Cynthia Ozick to call it in one of the interviews, “the Great American Jewish Novel” and Roth “the boldest American Writer alive”.

Roth’s next novel, *Sabbath’s Theatre* (1995), is a return to the outrageous psycho-sexual form that entertained and outraged so many in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Its hero Mickey Sabbath, is a character portrait of transgressive behaviour. In his next three novels, what is called his American Trilogy, Roth relies once again on Nathan Zuckerman as his agent of focus. *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000) can be read as novels that reflect key moments in late twentieth century, American experience in the 1960s, 1950s and 1990s, respectively and each is chronicled by an older Zuckerman. In this later trilogy, the aged writer has become somewhat of a recluse who devotes himself exclusively to his writing. This writing reveals the stories of memorable individuals who represent the social, political, and psychological conflicts that define post-war America.

In *The Dying Animal* (2001), Roth revisits the life of David Kapesh, the protagonist of *The Breast* (1972) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977). As in the earlier novels, Kapesh is concerned with the erotic side of experience and as he puts it, “emancipated manhood”. Yet even though its focus is explicitly sexual, this novel, like almost all of Roth’s other works, has as its theme the
ways in which men live with desire in the larger sense of the word. One of the hallmarks of Roth’s fiction is the ways in which sexual, communal, familial, ethnic, artistic, and political freedoms play themselves out on the field to contemporary existence.

His most recent novel *The Plot Against America* (2004), takes Roth into fresh literary territory. It is an alternative history whose premise is the 1940 election of Charles A. Lindbergh who defeating F.D. Roosevelt, reached a cordial understanding with Adolf Hitler, and kept the United States out of the Second World War. The novel appears to continue the author’s exploration of American identities and American psyche, national as well as individual, within the context of its history.

In addition to his novels and short stories, Roth has also proved to be an accomplished essayist. In collections such as *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) and the more recent *Shop Talk* (2001), his focus is on the act of writing, both his own and that of other authors. The pieces themselves are testament to Roth’s unwavering and ongoing admiration of some of the most significant writers in the last half of the twentieth century. Until 1989 he was the General Editor of the Penguin book service “Writers from the other Europe”, which he inaugurated in 1974. Roth has demonstrated a unique ability not only to sustain his literary output, but even surpass the scope and talent inherent in his previous writings. His later fiction is his best work, as demonstrated by the
succession of awards he received in the 1990s. He has lived in Rome, London, Chicago, and New York. He currently lives in Connecticut.

Roth is the recipient of an array of accolades – Two National Book Awards, Two National Book Critics Circle awards, Three Pen/Faulkner Awards, The Pulitzer Prize, the Inaugural Franz Kafka Prize, the Man Booker Prize, the French Legion of Honour, and the National Humanities Medal.

Philip Roth has earned a permanent position by creating an alter ego Nathan Zuckerman. Alter ego is a Latin term meaning ‘the other I’ or ‘second self’. Alter ego is not a new invention of Roth. Hemingway wrote about his life through the eyes of the alter ego Nick Adams. John Updike’s alter ego is Janus -faced, Rabbit Angstrom and Henry Bech. Stephen Elliott’s novel Happy Baby presents the alter ego, Theo. Willa Cather’s masterpiece My Antonia portrays Jim Burden and Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath’s alter ego.

Nathan Zuckerman is a fictional character created by the writer Philip Roth, who uses him as his protagonist and narrator in many of his novels. By creating parallels between Zuckerman’s life as a novelist and his own, Roth expressed his interest in the relationship between an author and his work. In a series of highly self-referential novels and novellas that followed between 1979 and 1986, Zuckerman appeared as either the main character or an interlocutor. He is Philip Roth’s longest serving literary alter ego.
The salient feature of Jewish novelists in America since Second World War is their sheer numerical presence and their persistent upward mobility. Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth have taken their place among the most distinguished Jewish American writers and to bracket them together is to be aware of both their place in American Literature and the vastly varied gamut they occupy collectively. For these novelists, it is the clash of psychological forces at the pressure points of character which is crucial and which determines their stance toward sex, love and wedded life. Their fiction deals with the erotic longings, taboos and inhibitions. Philip Roth turns them into the very topics of his investigation.

Roth has been influenced by various authors and his novels bear testimony to this. His novel *The Professor of Desire* abounds with references to a variety of literary touchstones including Sophocles, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Strindberg, O’Neill, the Bloomsbury group, Joyce, Maupassant, Mark Twain, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Henry James, Hemingway, Chekhov, Freud, Kafka, Yeats, Faulkner, Genet, Synge, Hardy, Bronte, Bellow, Melville, Updike, Henry Miller and Hawthorne. In the novel, young David Kepesh places on the bulletin board in his room two quotes which reflect the students dual nature. Lord Byron’s dictum “Studious by day dissolute by night” and Thomas B Macaulay’s remarks on Sir Richard Steele “He was a rake among scholars and a scholar among rakes”. *Letting Go* opens with a nine page tribute to Herbe Bratasky, the social director, band leader at kepesh’s Hungarian
Royale. Kepesh is fascinated with Herbie’s comic antics, especially his repertoire of fart sounds.

Roth’s works can be approached through a postmodern lens, which rejects traditional, two-dimensional and linear notions of literary influence and instead resorts to two different narrative strategies, intertextuality and metafiction. The work of Julia Kristeva, is a good critical starting point for intertextuality. She envisions a three-dimensional textual space in which three “coordinates of dialogue” are the writing subject (or author), the addressee (or ideal reader), and texts exterior to the work in question. This textual space is comprised of intersecting planes that have horizontal and vertical axes. According to her:

The word’s status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus) … each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one another word (text) can be read … any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. (66)

Kirsteva defines the literary word as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a fixed meaning, as a dialogue among several writings. The meaning of a text – or the relationship of the text to its author as well as to other texts, anterior or contemporaneous – is both contingent in its dependence
upon other texts. Intertextuality emphasizes the relationship between one text and any knowledge of other texts that the writer or the reader brings to the narrative in question. In other words, an understanding of any one text is necessarily informed by a reader’s encounter with previous texts. However, it is not necessary for the reader to accurately pinpoint a specific exterior text, or intertext. According to Michael Riffaterre, all one needs to do sufficiently interpret a text is to assume that some intertext is being transformed by the text in question. As he states:

Intertextual reading is the perception of similar comparabilities from text to text; or it is the assumption that such comparing must be done if there is no intertext at hand wherein to find comparabilities. As Riffaterre puts it, intertextuality “is the web of functions that constitutes and regulates the relationship between text and intertext”. (qtd. in Parrish 25)

The interconnections of Roth’s texts forms a solid narrative network. Examples of intertextuality occur throughout Roth’s fiction. There are references to Portrait of a Lady in the opening pages of Letting Go, the undercurrent of Lewis’s Main Street in When She Was Good, the Freudian intertexts sprinkled throughout Portnoy’s Complaint, the allusions to 1930s radio programming that frame the plot of “On the Air,” the brief echo of Salinger’s Franny and Zooey in My Life as a Man, the presence of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in The Ghost Writer. The confessional narratives of

There are the innumerable examples of intertextuality within Roth’s corpus, where characters and events in earlier Roth text are cited in later volumes. The various series of the Zuckerman works the “Philip Roth” books and the Kepesh novels are the most obvious examples of this strategy. Such intertextual self-referentiality can be narratively consistent. What distinguished this intertextual play from more conventional notions of literary inheritance, is that Roth integrates both “high” and “low” textual references. This draws attention to the ways in which texts are constructed. Hence the critical lens has to be readjusted from a focus on influence to one on intertextuality.

Many examples of metafiction are found throughout Roth’s oeuvre. Metafiction is a narrative form that is highly self-reflective, a mode of writing wherein texts are aware of and refer to themselves as constructed narratives.
They are usually considered an expression of postmodern writing. Patricia Waugh, defines metafiction as:

… fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

The postmodern implications of metafiction are quite significant and indeed underscore the fictionality of the world, reader expectations are shattered, traditional narrative modes of understanding are ruptured, boundaries between reader and text become more fluid, totality and unity are thrown into question, and linguistic contingency displaces metaphysical determinacy as an arbiter of meaning. All of these effects, in one form or another, can be felt throughout of Roth’s writings.

With this foreground knowledge of Jewish American Literature and the important writers who contributed to this genre, an attempt is made in the following chapters to delve deep into the American and Jewish scenario in terms of political, racial and cultural conflicts. The theoretical framework for discussing these concerns is post-modernism. The study is based on five novels of Philip Roth. The objective of the next chapter is to analyse instances of anti-
Semitism that unravel through the pages of Roth’s novel of political psychology *The Plot Against America*.
Works Cited


