Chapter Three

A Look Back in Anger

I learnt at an early age what it was to be angry – angry and helpless. And I can never forget it.

John Osborne

Jimmy, the hero of Osborne’s play Look Back in Anger, makes this comment while watching his father die. He is angry when he looks back at his past representing the postwar generation which deprives him from any possibility of the future. A similar kind of indignation is also reflected in Philip Roth’s fiction. His novel Indignation is full of over-pitched emotion and blood portraying frustrated sexual desire, suicide attempt, violent death, some broken bones and nervous breakdown. The novel is set in America in 1951, the second year of the Korean War. Philip Roth explains the composition of Indignation:

I wanted to write something different from my last few books, which had been about older men and their problems, so I turned back to an old idea I had, which was writing a book set during the college years of someone that coincided with the Korean War. So it began with, one, wanting to do something different than what I’d been doing and two, wanting to look into the customs and morays of that period as they would have been experienced in a small liberal arts college. (Baker, Interview)
The title of this novel is taken from the Chinese national anthem. The song begins “Indignation fills the hearts of all our countrymen, Arise! Arise! Arise!” This is a nationalist song sung in some American classrooms during World War II as a gesture of solidarity for a people oppressed by the Japanese military. The nineteen year old narrator of *Indignation*, Messner when forced to attend Christian religious services at his rural Ohio College, inwardly sings the most beautiful word in the English language, “Indignation”.

Early in the novel, the narrator Messner explains that he is dead and that he is telling his story from the afterlife. Later it is revealed that the story is narrated in a morphine induced state of unconsciousness. Philip Roth reveals his idea of making the hero narrate from death:

Well, that came to me very early, but he’s strictly speaking not dead … His brain is quite capable of working. There’s two deaths, as it were. One there’s an imaginary death. In a morphine state he imagines himself dead. Two, he does die but he’s given morphine for his injuries. So he’s narrating from a morphine – induced state of consciousness. (Baker, Interview)

In the novels and stories of Philip Roth, some of the characters are in trouble because of their own flaws and mess they have made of their lives, but many of them are either the victims or in some way implicated in the history of their times. *Indignation* is one among them. It seethes with outrage and
heightened awareness of the immanence of death, of how danger and threat lie in wait for the humanity, all the time.

The novel begins with a conflict between a father and son but then turns into something unexpected. The short life of a decent, hardworking and obedient boy who pays with his life for a brief episode of disobedience is narrated in a deeply moving style. This leaves him unprotected and alone to face forces beyond his control in a world in which old men play with the lives of the young as if they were toy soldiers. Indignation despite its funny scenes, moves with the pace and inevitability of a tragedy.

Messner, the narrator of the novel is an anxious Jewish youth from New Jersey, apprenticing in his father’s kosher butcher shop. He is the first one in his family to seek an education. He used to be ‘the nicest boy in the world’. In his high school years, he had been prudent, responsible, diligent and hard working. He wanted to do everything right so that he could justify his father, the expense for his education. His father has risen in the world by becoming a moderately prosperous kosher butcher in the Jewish Weequahic section of Newark where Roth himself grew up. He cannot bear to relinquish his son to the world beyond the protective shield of the family. Messner has spent a great deal of time helping out his father in the butcher shop in the blood and girts and fat of the place. So the story begins and ends in blood. The Blood imagery persists throughout the novel.
Messner finds himself literally and figuratively up to his ankles in blood. The floor of the shop is covered with blood which seeps into his nightmares about being killed in Korea, and its image punctuates nearly all of his childhood memories. It is, in part, the memory of this blood that Messner also seeks to escape by travelling from New Jersey to Ohio for college with the goal of becoming a lawyer. He believes that the profession was “as far as you could get from spending your working life in a stinking apron covered with blood.” He says:

You slit the ass open a little bit and you stick your hand up and you grab the viscera and you pull them out. I hated that part. Nauseating and disgusting, but it had to be done. That’s what I learned from my father and what I loved learning from him: that you do what you have to do. (5)

Philip Roth has given a brief description about the butcher shop in this novel from his own experience in the store of his closest friend who was the son of kosher butcher. Roth devotes his attention on the subject of ritual to occasions wherein his protagonist problematically maps Jewish religious ritual onto secular events. He also turns a critical eye on those rituals that have become more broadly institutionalized and used as methods for asserting authority. That is, in one sense, Messner relies on specific principles of Jewish Kosher ritual. This would help him to understand the unfamiliar environment at Winesburg College. At the same time, the Winesburg administration’s strict
adherence to both secular and religious rituals develops in him a negative attitude towards that administration. He feels that the administration is an agent of surveillance that is represented in part as a condition of the era. Messner perceives this to be specifically targeting his otherness as a Jew at a predominantly Christian College.

Messner becomes indignant at his father’s love and concern that turns into an overprotective embrace which in fact threatens to suffocate Messner. His father begins to be haunted by fear for the boy’s safety, whether fear of the draft where thousands of American conscripts are dying in Korea or generally fear for his son’s stability in an adult and not comfortably Jewish world. He bugs him day and night about his whereabouts, fearing that he may be hanging out with a bad crowd, doing something reckless and getting himself in trouble. “You are a boy with a magnificent future before you, how do I know you’re not going to places where you can get yourself killed?” (8). This seems ludicrous to the boy who has been a devoted son. Messner is determined to escape from his ancestral inheritance, from the claustrophobia of family life, the shop, the stink of blood and uncooked meat. Above all, he wants to escape from his father’s oppressive love, his protection and his anxiety. Messner’s father tells him, “It’s about life, where the tiniest misstep can have tragic consequences” (12).

In the event, the father was correct to have been abnormally concerned about his son, because it turns out that Messner does not have a future beyond the age of nineteen, the age at which he was killed in action in Korea. After
death, he experiences a peculiar kind of afterlife, existing everywhere and nowhere, condemned endlessly to shuffle through the events of his life. Messner’s fate is an illustration of the incomprehensible way that one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result. Roth comments on the irony of the novel:

That’s the lesson his father has been trying to teach him. And as comical as the father may be from time to time in his exaggerated concern, the fact is the lesson that he sets out to teach him, life teaches Messner. So that’s the large comic-tragic irony of the book. (Siegel, Interview)

The Jewish Messner family practises religious kosher ritual, the Christian administration at Winesburg enforces ritual chapel attendance. At the same time the student body at Winesburg College engages in a rebellious but familiar “panty raid” ritual. All the while, in the backdrop of the novel, the country is engaged in the ritual of war. Messner has series of doubts regarding what it means to “act ritually” and what might happen when sacred ritual and secular ritualization converge. He attempts to evoke links with the past and translate the significance of his family’s Jewish cultural rituals to his present situation. But Winesburg administration relies on tradition.

Messner’s sense of ease at home is interrupted by the onset of his father’s mysterious breakdown, a shift that sets Messner’s ultimately tragic narrative in motion. The father is convinced that something terrible is going to
happen to his son. Thereafter the older Messner’s overprotectiveness escalates into seemingly irrational behaviour that appears disconnected from his original concern for Messner’s well being. For example, he locks Messner out of the house all night for missing his curfew—a confusing punishment that would seem to further compromise rather than guarantee Messner’s safety. Messner is dismayed by the inexplicable change in his father’s personality and frustrated by the way he has complicated his life and disrupted the comfort of ritual at home.

Messner transfers to Winesburg from Robert Treat College in Newark to escape from his father’s overprotectiveness, a neurosis probably exacerbated by the rumors of a dreadful war in Korea. He thereby tries not only to flee the daily conflicts, but also to discover an unknown part of America: the non-jewish, goyish reality of the Midwest. Such places are not easy to adjust to, if one has grown up in a big-city, lower-middle-class, ethnic neighborhood. At Winesburg, Messner is unable to reconcile his own views with those of the school’s Christian administration. He feels that he is being persecuted by students and administration alike for failing to participate in the school’s various traditions. He feels like an outcast on campus. Messner is placed in an environment so distinctly different from the close-knit family life that he has left behind. Messner’s sense of responsibility to tradition and idea of ritual become distorted. The class disparities and the regional, cultural, and religious differences which our society pretends are not a cause of serious friction. This is revealed more in the claustrophobic world of a small college than they do in
an urban university. Though Messner was a smart, straight student, he was not cultured. He had never heard of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and is a city boy who is unable to identify a rose. The college was not an ideal fit for Messner.

A Gentile setting, reminiscent of Roth’s own college years at Bucknell university, the small liberal arts college in Winesburg, Ohio offers a distinct counter world to Messner’s past environments. It is a counter world with twelve fraternities and only two of which admit Jews. The remaining ten fraternities were reserved for white Christian males. Messner was not the only Jewish student there, but he does feel rather alien. At the same time, he was not willing to work to fit in: he makes a point of emphasizing that he has no interest in being part of a fraternity. The same reference has also been depicted in Philip Roth’s autobiographical novel *The Facts* where Roth revealed his own experiences with fraternities during his college:

AN ATTRACTIVE WHITE Christian male entering Bucknell in the early fifties could expect to be officially courted by about half the thirteen fraternities. A promising athlete, the graduate of a prestigious prep school, the son of rich parents or of a distinguished alumnus, might wind up with bids from as many as ten fraternities. A Jewish freshman-or Jewish transfer student, like me-could expect to be rushed by two fraternities utmost, the exclusively Jewish fraternity, Sigma Alpha Mu, which, like the Christian fraternities, was the local chapter of a national body,
and Phi Lambda Theta, a local fraternity without religious affiliations, which did not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or colour. (47-48)

Messner was assigned to a dormitory where he has to share a room with three other Jewish boys and that was a disappointment to him since he had hoped to find out what living among non-Jews was like. Nevertheless, he was determined and focused only on his studies and his weekend job. Having lost two cousins to infantry fighting in the second world war, he knows that grunts have much less chance of survival than junior officers. So he enrolled in the Reserve officers Training corporation. Philip Roth in an interview says that:

His adventures are totally unlike mine. He was smarter than I was and he stayed in ROTC. I was a principled young man, and I quit ROTC because I disapproved of military on the campus. So that meant that when, I was drafted after college; I went in as a private rather than as an officer – so much for principles.

(Siegel, Interview)

Messner shows his outrage when he was criticized at a local inn where he worked as a waiter in a beer joint frequented by students. The urban Jewish boy’s existence in such a bucolic white Anglo Saxon protestant world is occasionally fraught with anxiety:
More than a few times during the first weeks, I thought I heard myself being summoned to one of the rowdier tables with the words “Hey Jew! Over here!” But preferring to believe the words spoken had been simply “Hey, you! Over here!” I persisted with my duties, determined to abide by the butcher – shop lesson learned from my father. (27-28)

Messner doesn’t quite have the knack of making things easy on himself. He then quarrels with the Jewish boys, his roommates who prevented him from getting his rest by playing records late into the night. Within days of arriving at the campus, Messner looked around the dormitory for someone with an empty bunk. His new roommate was a local Ohio boy, but another loner, laconic and not very friendly who spends his time studying and who as a senior is allowed to have a car. Living with Elwyn was much like living alone. This clearly shows that Messner was unable to adjust with anyone.

All these small annoyances are insignificant compared to being in the Korean War. But Messner apprehends what may befall him if the war continues, so he works hard refusing to join a fraternity or to play sports, often stay till late night to finish his next day’s homework. Messner wasn’t completely under control though he does remind himself repeatedly that he can’t afford to get kicked out of school, because that would mean getting shipped off to Korea.
Messner gets distracted from his studies when he catches sight of a pretty girl Olivia one night in the library and immediately falls for her. She is an ex-teenager drunk and inmate of a psychiatric sanitarium who’d failed at suicide with a razor blade, a daughter of divorced parents, and a Gentile to boot. He borrows his roommate’s car and takes her out on a date. Typically for a Roth creation, Messner was especially interested in the mystery of his first serious sexual encounter, when as a freshman he received a blow job in a car while on a first date with a fellow student, Olivia.

*Indignation* is set long before the social and political convulsions of the sixties. For the virginal Messner to receive a blow job is an unexpected pleasure but a huge surprise without any encouragement from him. He says: “Despite the trammels of convention still rigidly holding sway on the campus of a middling little Midwestern college in the years immediately after World War II, I was determined to have intercourse before I died” (52).

The above sentence clearly reveals that Messner was also a boy of carnal desire. Messner even shows his anger when there were restrictions for girls and boys to mingle with each other. He says that Winesburg campus would seem to be a single buzzing hive of pent-up lust. He was even punched in the face for the first time in his life by Elwyn for defending Olivia’s honour. He realized the big theme of his life: “I didn’t understand Elwyn, didn’t understand Flusser didn’t understand my father, didn’t understand Olivia – I understood no one and nothing” (74).
Olivia had a history of alcoholism and a scarred wrist from an attempted suicide. She appeared as the kind of woman Messner’s father was afraid his estranged son would fall in with. For Olivia, her dating with Messner carries little significance. She casually sits next to him as if nothing had happened. He doesn’t ask her out on a date again, but they exchange a series of heated letters in which he demands to know what made her do it and how many others were there before him. Messner saw Olivia less as an object of sexual fantasy than as a complicated and disturbed young woman, with her own poignant needs and longings.

After discovering that Olivia once attempted suicide, Messner becomes obsessed, with this fact and absorbed in the process of envisioning how she might have gone about trying to kill herself. His fixation on her scars, triggers memories of trips to the slaughterhouse as a child. As he tries to make sense of the unfamiliar series of events that might have comprised Olivia’s suicide attempt, he recalls the blood flowing copiously from the animals and pooling around him, as though someone had dumped several buckets on the floor at once. The description of Olivia’s suicide attempt in the same terms as a Kosher Slaughter effectively makes a parody of ritual, undermining the sacred aspects of the long-standing traditional ritual. Messner attempts to lend a sacred meaning to Olivia’s wholly secular form of bloodletting. Messner’s earnest comparison comes across as a distortion of kosher slaughter. This reveals a characteristically wry profaning of the sacred which Roth addresses as life’s
absurdities and misfortunes. Roth invests his protagonist with a belief in the value and purpose of his own comparison. As Messner reflects:

My point is this: that is what Olivia had tried to do, to kill herself according to kosher specifications by emptying her body of blood. Had she been successful, had she expertly completed the job with a single perfect slice of the blade, she would have rendered herself Kosher in accordance with rabbinical law. Olivia’s tell tale scar came from attempting to perform her own ritual slaughter. (160-61)

Messner was enraged when his roommate Elwyn, in whose company Messner spent hours studying and sleeping, called Olivia a cunt. He determined then and there to find a new room and a new roommate:

I hadn’t realized how much I had disliked him even before he had called Olivia a cunt. The unbroken silences would make me think that he disapproved of me for some lesson – because I was a Jew, because I wasn’t an engineering student, because I wasn’t a fraternity boy …. Or that he just didn’t care if I existed. (73)

This clearly reveals that Messner was unable to adjust with anyone because of his anger. Messner moved out to a room in another dormitory where he was finally alone. To his surprise, he receives a letter from the Dean wondering about his need to move so frequently and requested Messner to meet
him. The meeting with Dean Caudwell turns out to be the onset of his ruin. The
meeting was scheduled just after chapel where the attendance is mandatory for
all students. It was a complete shock to Messner to learn that chapel attendance
is mandatory and that he must listen to sermons and hymns. As Roth explains,
the religious content of the sermons was camouflaged as talk on high moral
topics and the speakers were not always clergymen. Messner objects strongly
when forced to attend, not because he is an observant Jew but because he is a
convinced and passionate atheist. He reacts:

I do not need the sermons of professional moralists to tell me
how I should act. I certainly don’t need any God to tell me how. I
am altogether capable of leading a moral existence without
crediting beliefs that are impossible to substantiate and beyond
credulity, that, to my mind, are nothing more than fairy tales for
children held by adults. (100)

Messner engages in warfare against the compulsory Christianity of the
college. Messner’s disillusionment with his previously idealized notions, of
Winesburg, is explicated in a number of scenes. In his heated argument with
the Dean, he summarizes Bertrand Russell’s lecture “Why I Am Not a
Christian”, to his assertion that he spent the required hours in chapel services
“trying how not to learn to lead a good life in accordance with biblical
teachings” (118). In fact, in the tradition of retrospective narrators like Nathan
Zuckerman, Messner’s recollections about the butcher shop and its role in
shaping his identity are tinged with a wry self-judgement and a certain level of remorse over his stubbornness. Bertrand Russell is one of the world’s foremost logicians as well as a philosopher and a mathematician whose logic is beyond the moral arguments for a deity and the argument for the remedying of injustice. Roth quotes:

Religion, he declares, is based primarily and mainly on fear- fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, and fear of death. Fear, Bertrand Russell says, is the parent of cruelty and it is therefore no wonder that cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand throughout the centuries. Conquer the world by intelligence, Russell says, and not by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from living in it. The whole conception of God, he concludes, is a conception unworthy of free men. (103)

Dean comments on Messner’s academic record and then queries him about the trouble he was having adjusting to dormitory life. When Messner tries to explain that he was not able to get adequate sleep with records being played all night long, the Dean accused him of being incapable of compromising with a fellow student. Messner silently cried ‘Indignation’. This outrage of Messner gives the book’s title.

Messner is humiliated and irritated that he was being grilled for moving from one dormitory room to another in order to find peace so that he was able to do his homework. He says “exactly what is the crime I’ve committed? So
I’ve moved a couple of times, I’ve moved from one dorm room to another— is that considered a crime at Winesburg College? That makes me into a culprit?” (96).

Dean Caudwell saw Messner as an intellectually precocious youngster, a perpetual malcontent, a self-appointed member of elite who needs to elevate himself and feel superior to his fellow students. He rejects long standing traditions like chapel attendance and is therefore poorly fit to be a member of the Winesburg college community. Instead of just shutting up or apologizing, Messner responds by scolding the Dean. The climax passes beyond language into action and the whole body of the protestor gets involved. Messner vomits luckily not on the man, but over the Dean’s desk. He reveals his irritation and helplessness:

First there’s Flusser, then there’s Elwyn, then there’s Caudwell. And whose fault is it, theirs or mine? How had I gotten myself in trouble so fast, I who’d never before been in trouble in my life? And why was I looking for more trouble by writing fawning letters to a girl who only a year before had attempted suicide by slitting a wrist? (113)

Messner asked himself knowing well that the Messners are a family of shouters and screamers, a family of putting their foot down and banging their heads against the wall. Later that night Messner was taken to the hospital where he was operated on and his appendix was removed.
Messner’s mother who visited him in the hospital, was worried by her husband’s progressively odd behaviour. Messner’s father was very much worried about his son’s life that even in night he shouts. “How do I know where he is at this hour? How do I know he’s not in some whore house? .... How do I know, he asks me, that he’s not out at this hour ruining his life?”(150).

The reason behind his father’s inexplicable transformation is that he can’t help feeling that something bad is about to happen to his son. Simic Charles opines that father is justifiable:

An innocent boy who dies in a war has been such a common occurrence in the history of the world that calling it a tragedy doesn’t carry much conviction. We keep sacrificing the young supposedly for the noblest of causes, and expect their grief-stricken parents to accept that and be proud of their sacrifice, so the rest of us can sleep well at night. With that in mind, the most moving figure in Roth’s book for me is the father, a soul in agony, who like some blind prophet of old, a portly, chain-smoking Tiresias, sees doom coming where others see only a fine young fellow leaving home for college. (8)

Messner’s mother had already seen a lawyer and was preparing to divorce his father. This was a great shock to Messner. He says, “Divorce was unknown in our Jewish neighbourhood. I was led to believe it was all but
unknown in the Jewish world. Divorce was shameful. Divorce was scandalous. Breaking up a family with a divorce was virtually a criminal act” (154).

The above statement clearly reveals the Jewish tradition. Messner’s mother decided not to divorce his father for his sake and in return she tells Messner to stop his relationship with Olivia. She was sure that a person so unstable as to slit her wrists will be a menace to Messner. She says:

… you are here to be a student and to study the Supreme Court and to study Jefferson and to prepare to go to law school. You are here so someday you will become a person in the community that other people look up to and that they come to for help. You are here so you don’t have to be a Messner like your grandfather and your father and your cousins and work in a butcher shop for the rest of your life. You are not here to look for trouble with a girl who has taken a razor and slit her wrists. (171-172)

Despite his mother’s words, Messner searched for Olivia as soon as he returned to Winesburg. Olivia was nowhere to be found. She appeared to have left school under mysterious circumstances. In the mean time, Messner was outraged when he saw his room was destroyed by Flusser.

Messner was enraged when he was falsely accused of making Olivia pregnant. He was then expelled from the college for bribing another boy to sign for him at the chapel. Messner, who like other Roth characters gets in trouble
because of his big mouth, explodes and tells the Dean to fuck himself. A blizzard and a riot occurred on the campus which started as a snowball fight among a few students and an attack on girls’ residence hall. In this episode, later deemed “The Great White Panty Raid”, the male students at Winesburg dismiss all restrictive codes of behaviour endorsed by the administration. They raid the women’s dormitories, demonstrate generally obscene behaviour, and fight violently among each other. This scene is notably marked by what Messner describes as “flecks of red blood in the clean snow”.

This episode also serves to demonstrate an intensified example of the chaotic clashing of rituals. Roth has depicted throughout the novel, the restrictive codes of tradition enforced by Winesburg that combine with the rebellious “panty-raid” ritual enacted by the students. The president of the college warns the students for involving in panty raid:

   Beyond your dormitories, a world is on fire and you are kindled by underwear. Beyond your fraternities, history unfolds daily – warfare, bombings, wholesale slaughter and you are oblivious of it all. Well, you won’t be oblivious for long! You can be as stupid as you like …. But history will catch you in the end. Because history is not the background – history is the stage! And you are on the stage! (222)

President Lentz describes the situation as ‘rebellious insolence’. This menace undermines not just Winesburg, Ohio, but the great republic itself.
Finally, the Great White Panty Raid also triggers Messner’s own act of defiance against Winesburg’s traditional rituals. Messner, though uninvolved in the Great White Panty Raid himself, finally seems to be punished much more harshly for his disobedience. He adamantly refuses to follow the mandatory chapel attendance rule – a seemingly small rebellion that sets in motion an ultimately tragic series of events.

He fails to graduate, is drafted to Korea, fatally wounded, and this is recounted in the narrative itself as the title of part 1 indicates “Under Morphine”. The final section of the novel is then recounted by a new narrator, who effectively ritualizes Messner’s death by bayonet by observing:

[Messner] had not been encircled by so much blood since his days as a boy at the slaughterhouse, watching the ritual killing of animals in accordance with Jewish law. And the steel blade that sliced him up was as sharp and efficient as any knife they used in the shop to cut and prepare meat for their customers. (226)

Messner who had nothing to do with any of it becomes subject to the draft and without a college degree, fodder for combat. After being repeatedly stabbed with a bayonet until he has had one leg severed from his torso and his intestines and genitals hacked to bits, Messner has been given morphine. This has put him in a state of deepest unconsciousness without suppressing his mental process. Messner under the state of morphine says that:
But there is no one to speak to; there is only myself to address about my innocence, my explosions, my candor, and the extreme brevity of bliss in the first true year of my young manhood and the last year of my life. The urge to be heard, and nobody to hear me! I am dead. The unprounceable sentence pronounced “Ma! Dad! Olivia! I am thinking of you!” (211-212)

This most heart breaking scene in the novel presents a twenty year old Messner’s brain which shuts down and his morphine induced recollections comes to an end. Messner is another of Roth’s good boys turned into a defiant young man. He resists both his father’s and his college Dean’s definition of himself and that admirable act of independence leads to lethal consequences.

Amid his frequent reflections on Korea, Messner makes several references to the blood he witnessed in the family butcher shop. His connections signal a flawed association between a willing responsibility to one’s family, and an unwilling or forced responsibility to one’s country. For instance, as he confesses his deep fear of being drafted to Korea, Messner says:

I envisioned my father’s knives and cleavers whenever I read about the bayonet combat against the Chinese in Korea. I knew how murderously sharp could be. And I knew what blood looked like, encrusted around the necks of chickens where they had been ritually slaughtered, dripping out of the beef onto my hands when I was cutting a rib steak along the bone, seeping through the
brown paper bags despite the wax paper wrappings within, settling into the grooves crosshatched into the chopping block by the force of the cleaver crashing down. (35)

This blood, Messner remembers, was the first thing he smelled every time he walked into the family butcher shop, and he recalls his father and mother and uncles as being “always bloody”. This memory leads directly into his recollection that as he and his family worked, the sons and heirs of local Jewish families were being killed in the Korean War, and as a result, “the Messners who lived on were steeped in their blood” (37).

The gruesome and blood imagery in his memories of the butcher’s shop of his youth allude to the slaughter occurring daily in Korea. Messner fears that his every mistake will lead to expulsion, being drafted and his inevitable death in Korea. His steadfast attempts to stay focused on his studies lead to conflict with his roommates, campus fraternities, his parents and the Dean. This portrays the classical struggle of a young man coming of age, straining against the authorities that would destroy him in at every turn.

Unlike the unnamed protagonist of Everyman, death does not free Messner, it imprisons him in an endless nothing. Messner has entered in to nowhere but his misfortune is to know everything about it. Death for him offers no escape from life. That is what he believes in his ultimate fate, though Roth, who is an atheist, slyly opens up the possibility in the closing pages that
oblivion is what awaits him, and his brethren. *Indignation* is the inevitable culmination of the death obsession.

The novel recognizes both the value of Jewish remains in Messner’s life and the consequences of his secular ritualization, its narrative tone neither glorifies Jewish religious ritual nor condemns ritualization’s undermining of the sacred. Instead, the criticisms throughout appear aimed towards an overextension and misuse of ritual generally. It is not directed at a particular category of ritual activity. It becomes evident as the novel progresses that Messner’s personal sense of anxiety represents only a fraction of the cultural and national turmoil that shapes the novel. The resultant chaos can be attributed in part to the collision of religious, secular, historical, and institutional ritual.

The novel seems to suggest that Messner’s stubbornness is what ultimately kills him, yet there is much evidence to suggest that this death is not necessarily a condemnation of Messner’s indignation. In fact, in several interviews following the publication of *Indignation*, Roth emphasized the fact that Messner is unfairly criminalized in the novel. He stressed, for instance, that Messner was a good kid; he didn’t do anything wrong. Yet he is repeatedly focused on illuminating the apparent unfairness and incongruity of his death. Roth has stated:

> Marcus, had he been to stomach chapel and keep his mouth shut, would have received his undergraduate degree from Winesburg College…and thus have postponed learning what his uneducated
father had been trying so hard to teach him all along: of the incomprehensible way one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result. (231)

_Indignation_ is a strange, troubling and occasionally ridiculous book. The themes are very familiar: the role of a stern, overbearing father in the life of his restlessly rebellious son, the evocation of a lower middle class boyhood in what is now a vanished neighbourhood of Newark; the Jewish immigrant experience in America, the way all become caught up in and destroyed forces beyond control.

The varied themes in the novel when visualized through post modern rendering will truly heighten the impact of Roth’s reflections on life. The most prominent feature of Post-modernism, Intertextuality is aptly incorporated within the framework of the narrative. Interspersed into the narrative structure, there are references to Gibbon’s _Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire_, Shakespeare’s _Twelfth Night_ and _Julius Caesar_, Bertrand Russell’s ‘Why I am Not a Christian’ and Thomas Jefferson’s ‘The Growth of the American Republic’. E.E. Cummings’ memorable lines from the poem ‘I sing of Olaf glad and big’ serve as the epigraph for the novel, Olaf (upon what were once knees)/ does almost ceaselessly repeat/ “there is some shit I will not eat”.

The entire story revolves around a situation similar to Olaf, the hero of Cummings’ poem. Olaf, a soldier in France is a conscientious objector of war. For his antiwar stance, he was beaten severely yet he replied with bitterest
scorn for the tormentors. As he believed that, war was vulgar, cowardly and disgusting. Olaf met his death in prison. Cummings pays tribute to Olaf’s belief that Christ’s infinite mercy shall be showered upon him. The novel also highlights Messner’s anxiety, indifference, apprehension of the war and finally portrays him as a victim of the cruelty, the violence and indignation of war. The epigraph brings out the thematic rendering of the novel in a poignant manner.

Roth uses a different technique of narration. The entire story is narrated under three heads: ‘Under Morphine’, ‘Out from Under’, ‘Historical Note’. The narrator recalls:

What happened next I had to puzzle over for weeks afterward. And even dead, as I am and have been for I don’t know how long, I try to reconstruct the mores that reigned over that campus and to recapitulate the troubled efforts to elude those mores that fostered the series of mishaps ending in my death at the age of nineteen. (54)

With this breathless narration, Messner goes on to enlighten us by revealing that eternity is a constant hashing over of the details of former existence. Certain sections of the story are driven home to readers through letters. For example, letters written by Marcus, Olivia, Dean Caudwell. This epistolary method also adds a flavour to narration. The rhythm of the sentences especially the run-on sentences and the stream of consciousness rendering are
unique features of this novel which is indeed a fascinating and passionate master piece.

Roth is a master magician who takes delight in his own skill of presentation and narration. The gentle light hearted tone is revealed in certain sections of the novel. The theme of butchering is at once original and natural. According to Franklin:

This short novel has the rushed feeling of being hastened to the finish line. Moments of tension are left unresolved, forgotten. A *deux ex machina* delivers Marcus from a wrenching promise extracted by his mother - the novel’s only true moral conflict. A dramatic turn in the plot is pitched early in the novel as a genuine epiphany. (Review)

The characters according to E.M.Forster ‘live and breathe, they are beautiful’. They contrive relationship between the local and the cosmic or the local and the global. In short, Roth reasserts his mastery with a fine taut narrative about the frustrations of youth. Every part of it is dovetailed into this twentieth century tale of nemesis.

An explication of the novel has helped the investigator to understand the dangerous whirlpool of indignation. The hero is irritated at the restrictions placed on him by his family, college and society at large. The father is consumed with the fear about the danger and the uncertainty that await his
son’s life. Indignation has crept into the psyche of the hero and finally he is thrown to the war front where he is face to face with the danger and threat to his existence. The adolescent hero of this chapter can certainly be linked with the professor Coleman Silk of *The Human Stain*. Roth is superb at presenting a variety of heroes who are torn by evil impulses. *The Human Stain* presents a hero who is caught in the dilemma of existence. The next chapter is an in depth study of secrecy which often becomes a survival strategy as it happens in the case of the protagonist of *The Human Stain*. 
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