Portnoy's Complaint, published in 1969, is by far the most popular and widely-read book written by Philip Roth and gained him much money, fame and even notoriety. The novel evoked a sharp reaction among the general public, and more particularly, the Jewish community. Philip Roth was charged with anti-Semitism and obscenity. The critics who had frowned upon what they considered as Jewish self-hatred in his earlier short stories and novels claimed to be justified in their scathing attack on this highly successful and controversial novel. Irving Howe found Roth's "creative vision deeply marred by vulgarity" as far as Portnoy's Complaint was concerned.¹ Roth himself does not pretend to be unaffected by this furore and controversy on his work, as is evident in his raking up the issue in his critical essays and even covertly in fictional form in his novel Zuckerman Unbound where the young writer is shown to have offended his Jewish family and community by writing a controversial book Carnovsky. Not surprisingly, in the course of so much emphasis on the ethnic dimensions of the novel, its artistic worth was grossly underrated. But now that the critical dust has settled, the general opinion about the merit of the book is well-established.
Roth's main focus in *Portnoy's Complaint*, despite its Jewish milieu, is on the moral predicament of modern man confounded by the antagonistic forces in the microcosm of American society. Here, the problem of ethical choices faced by the protagonist becomes more complex owing to his inherited Jewish value system. Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr. emphatically contends that *Portnoy's Complaint* is "very much in the American grain in spite of its Jewish specifics" and that in its "essential conflicts, its themes, its characters, its language and comic technique" the novel belongs to the native American tradition.² It will not be inappropriate to assert that the basic issues in *Portnoy's Complaint* are too universal to be confined to any ethnic boundaries.

While discussing the genesis of the novel, Roth discloses in *Reading Myself and Others* that the novel "took shape out of the wreckage of four abandoned projects" on which he worked intensively in the 1960s: "The Jewboy", "The Nice Jewish Boy", "Portrait of the Artist" and "A Jewish Patient Begins His Analysis".³ On close scrutiny of these early drafts, four motifs seem to emerge which form four corresponding dimensions of the moral predicament of the protagonist in the novel. The first is Portnoy's obsession with sexual pleasures, the second is his comprehension of social reality, the third is his problematic ethnicity, and the last dimension of his condition is his symptomatic response to his ethical dilemma. In *Portnoy's Complaint*,
Roth is striving to bring into sharp focus the essential condition of modern man who, confronted with the onslaught of existential reality, manifests his malaise in such varied forms as physical violence, withdrawal into his own self, paranoia and self-destruction. In this novel, it is expressed predominantly in sexual gratification and narcissism. It is another matter that in this instance the individual happens to be a Jew in the American society.

Roth's fiction deals with the universal problem of man's moral dilemma in his society which demands conformity and normalcy and remains insensitive to the individual's demands. In Portnoy's case, however, his Jewishness itself is one of the main causes of his discomfiture and anguish. John N. McDaniel is also of the opinion that "Jewishness itself is partially to blame for Portnoy's crippledness ...."4 Throughout his long uninterrupted 'complaint' Portnoy seems to be haunted by a gnawing sense of guilt and repression at the hands of his parents who doggedly persuade him to cultivate those ethical values which are supposedly the exclusive attributes of 'The Chosen People'.

Nevertheless, on close scrutiny the novel is found to reveal issues and concerns far more serious and universal than what apparently meets the eye. Roth's fiction is thoroughly consistent thematically despite his experimentation with form and technique in some of his books like Our Gang, The Great American Novel and Patrimony. In Portnoy's
Complaint also through his narrative technique of psychological case history, he analyses the contemporary social reality in the tradition of such assimilated Jewish writers in America as Bellow, Mailer and Malamud. In Roth's fiction Jewishness serves as a frame of reference to evaluate and reinforce his experience of social reality. George J. Searles rightly observes that "Roth uses ethnicity as a framework or context within which to portray contemporary reality . . . .\(^5\) The basic conflict in Portnoy's Complaint, like that in his earlier short stories and novels, is between the individual's yearning for personal freedom and spiritual harmony and his ethical compulsions in the surrounding society. What distinguishes it from his earlier novels is that here the protagonist is too confounded by his psychological anguish to realize the true nature of his moral dilemma till the point when the gravity of his condition necessitates for him the support of a psychoanalyst. Secondly, Roth has chosen a strikingly new form to express the dilemma and anguish of his protagonist – the confessional monologue of a patient on the couch of his psychoanalyst.

If interpreted in psychological terms, as critics like Bruno Bettelheim have tried to do, Portnoy's Complaint is comparatively easy to analyse.\(^6\) Portnoy is a typical case of Oedipal complex, having excessive attachment with his mother – "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met" – so much so that he attributes his sexual failure
with Naomi to her resemblance with his mother. The taboos and repressions let loose upon him by his mother to make him "a nice Jewish boy" cause a severe sense of guilt in him which leads him to excessive indulgence in masturbation in adolescence and heterosexual pleasures in youth (120). Due to the ethnic impressions of his past familial life he compulsively chooses shikses for his sexual gratification. Instead of providing any respite to his tortured mind, his carnal orgies again intensify his self-loathing and guilt plunging him in severe mortification and agony. In this way, he is entrapped in a vicious circle and unable to tolerate his torments any more seeks the help of his psychoanalyst.

But the evaluation of Portnoy's predicament in purely psychological terms is grossly inadequate as well as misleading. As a matter of fact, the moral and social issues form the thematic core of the novel, which also link it to Roth's previous novels. As Roth himself explains in Reading Myself and Others, the earlier draft of the novel entitled "The Jewboy" was mainly concerned with sexual fantasy of the hero, the second draft titled "The Nice Jewish Boy" dealt with moral dimension of his problems, and the other draft titled "Portrait of the Artist" depicted the social reality of the hero. In Portnoy's Complaint he successfully synthesizes all these elements to bring into sharp focus the predicament of his protagonist in its totality and complexity. Portnoy's Oedipal
attachment with his mother, his obsession with his Jewishness and his dissolute life combine to exclude the possibility of any meaningful reconciliation with his surrounding society. Consequently, he fails to achieve self-fulfilment and harmony like his predecessors, Neil, Gabe and Lucy. After their encounter with the social reality, these characters react differently in accordance with the level of their ethical evolution. Neil withdraws from social interactions for a short time for introspection, Gabe flees to Europe for a temporary respite and recuperation, and Lucy, unable to reach any kind of reconciliation with the social forces, destroys herself. Portnoy, with his blurred moral vision, is unable to extricate himself from his labyrinthine state of mind and desperately seeks the counselling of Dr. Spielvogel to relieve himself of his mental pain. Though Portnoy begins to perceive his actual condition at the end of the novel, it can be safely assumed that his conflicts remain unresolved.

As in When She Was Good, Roth explores the idea of goodness from different perspectives in Portnoy’s Complaint. The genesis of Portnoy’s problems can be traced back to his early childhood when his parents, especially his mother, exert their authority to inculcate in him the good traits of character traditionally associated with the Jewish culture, in other words, to make him a “nice Jewish boy”(120). Sophie Portnoy, like Gabe’s mother in Letting Go, is obsessed with the idea of
goodness. She "herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good"(11). In the manner of Willard Carroll in *When She Was Good*, she inadvertently interferes in the lives of all those around her and never misses the slightest opportunity to castigate whosoever deviates from the sacred Jewish code of conduct, especially Portnoy, who is the central figure of her affections and expectations.

For instance, he is haunted by the sight of his mother brandishing a knife over him for not eating his food. He laments, "When I am bad I am locked out of the apartment. I stand at the door hammering and hammering until I swear I will turn over a new leaf. But what is it I have done?"(13). Though he resents his parents' exhortations to be good, it is paradoxically true that he himself is obsessed with the desirability of ideal conduct in his childhood as well as in youth. When Arnold Mandel asks him about his vocation he reflects, "Doesn't everyone know I am now the most moral man in all of New York, all pure motives and humane and compassionate ideals? Doesn't he know that what I do for a living is I'm good?"(174). He is shocked to learn that Smolka who is an epitome of immorality in his eyes is a professor in Princeton University. According to his moral standards Smolka and Mandel, the "two bad boys", should be "in jail – or the gutter" for their immoral behaviour (176). On the other hand, he feels satisfied at the fate of Bubbles Girardi who has been deservedly murdered in a bar.
In fact, the root cause of his guilt and the resultant mental torments is his high ethical ideals. In the tragedy of Portnoy the tragic flaw is his conviction of the desirability of good and his pathetic failure to achieve it. The temptation of hedonistic pleasures is too much for him, and he invariably succumbs to the yearnings of the flesh. He is torn by the conflict between his ethical impulses and his libidinous desires, to use the psychological jargon, between ego and superego. Roth says in *Reading Myself and Others*: "In Portnoy the disapproving moralist who says 'I am horrified' will not disappear when the libidinous slob shows up screaming 'I want!'"9 It is ironical that his ethical ideals are so lofty and sublime that to attain them seems a herculean task to him. He himself admits that he is "torn by desires that are repugnant to my conscience, and a conscience repugnant to my desires"(132).

On a deeper level, his moral predicament is similar to that of Christopher Marlowe's hero Dr. Faustus who, while seeing the glimpse of heaven, himself brings about his perdition. Fully conscious of the desirability of good, he perilously and pitifully succumbs to the temptations of evil. Searles also confirms this view when he observes that Portnoy "is intended as a tragic figure."10 What justifies him in the end is his scorching sense of loss, regret and repentance for the unfulfilled possibilities of his life and his genuine intention to transcend the weakness of the flesh. Naomi, in fact, echoes his own feelings when
she contemptuously rejects him saying, "And you are a highly intelligent man – that is what makes it even more disagreeable. The contribution you could make! Such stupid self-deprecation!" (265). The wide gap between his potentialities and his actual achievements, whether he realizes it or not, is one of the major causes of his affliction.

To bring into sharp focus the ethical choices of Portnoy, Roth intentionally selects for him the job of Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the City of New York which is commensurate with his lofty moral ideals and drastically opposed to his dissolute way of life. It seems ironical that such a morally depraved debauch is entrusted with the noble and philanthropic duty of protecting the interests and rights of the underprivileged and exploited people of society. But it is paradoxically true that he is, on one level, morbidly conscious of his role in his immediate society. Actually, this leads us to one of his major conflicts – between his private life and his role in public life. Emphasizing the social aspect of Portnoy's predicament, McDaniel rightly points out that he is "torn between conflicting loyalties to the public self and the private self." Like Lou Epstein, he is dangling precariously between the expectations of the community and the temptations of physical pleasures. While his sufferings are strikingly similar to those of the typical schlemiel found in Jewish fiction – Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day*, Joseph of *Dangling Man* and Frank Alpine
of *The Assistant* – Portnoy is never seen to sever his ties with his family and society. Like Paul in *Letting Go*, he is always haunted by a sense of duty towards his family. Comparing Portnoy with Herzog in respect of the affliction of the self outside the orbit of the immediate society, Tony Tanner observes that "at last Roth's interest in the social scene and his feeling for the obsessed self coalesced in the writing."\(^1^2\)

In the role of a responsible member of the community, Portnoy has a tendency to efface that part of his personality which drags him into the mire of sexual lust, but he is unable to muster up enough strength to overcome his temptations. Tortured by his plight after his encounter with Naomi in Israel, he longs for extinction and to be converted into a beast. On various occasions he metaphorically changes his identity; in the hotel in Vermont with Mary Jane Reed, he literally changes his name. This shows his desperate attempt to evade his present situation. Comparing Herzog and Portnoy Tony Tanner remarks:

> In company with most American protagonists of the last decade, their [Herzog's and Portnoy's] main desire is to gain a measure of freedom from the conditioning forces, and some release (even immunity) from those behavioural and intellectual versions of reality which have helped to bring them to their present state of immobility."\(^1^3\)
What Portnoy so desperately wants to shed comprises mainly the reminiscences of the repressions and inhibitions let loose upon him by his parents in his early childhood and youth. Sophie Portnoy, a stereotypical Jewish mother, forces her authority over her son little bothering about his individual freedom. He is constantly reminded of the exhortations offered by his ineffectual father, a chronic patient of constipation, desperately trying to sell insurance for Boston and Northeastern Life without any prospects of promotion. Jack Portnoy is the typical father-figure found in Roth's fiction — civilized, hardworking and self-sacrificing. He works hard to provide for his family what he calls "an umbrella for a rainy day" (7). He cherishes high aspirations for his son and strives to ensure his freedom from the economic and social constrictions he himself has faced in a Gentile society in the postwar America. Portnoy's attitude towards his father is ambivalent. On the one hand, he fully appreciates his father's sacrifice and aspirations for him: "Where he had been imprisoned, I would fly: that was his dream. Mine was its corollary: in my liberation would be his — from ignorance, from exploitation, from anonymity" (8-9). On the other hand, he feels contempt for "this schmuck, this moron, this Philistine father of mine!" (9). This may be due to the fact that he unconsciously compares his own Jewish culture with the pervasive American culture he has imbibed from the media.
In Portnoy's case the issue of ethical choices is inextricably linked with the moral values traditionally associated with Jewish culture. His deep sense of frustration and loss over the plight of his Jewish parents in the materialistic American society dominated by the Gentiles is not much different from that of the typical schlemiel found in contemporary Jewish-American fiction. The fear of social and economic insecurity suffered by the Jewish immigrants in the affluent American society seems to have percolated in one form or the other to their offsprings and has left an indelible mark on their psyche. In a way, this sense of loss and exploitation may be considered a common heritage of the Jewish immigrants in America. Portnoy laments, "Who filled these parents of mine with such a fearful sense of life?" (35). In fact, the victimized and alienated Jew in American society is a recurrent figure in Jewish-American fiction from as early as Isaac Rosenfield's *Passage from Home* and Bellow's *The Victim*. What distinguishes Portnoy from such characters is that instead of being victimized directly by the Gentiles in America he is persecuted by the feelings of repression and guilt induced by his parents (ironically, he suffers defeat and humiliation at the hands of a Jewish girl, Naomi, in Israel - the sanctuary of the Jews).

Another significant issue related to the moral dilemma of Portnoy is the question of authority over one's life. In his fiction, Roth is very
much concerned with the issue of personal freedom of the individual in society. He points out in *Reading Myself and Others* that in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *When She Was Good* the protagonists are bent upon opposing the parental authority:

Though not necessarily 'typical', Alexander Portnoy and Lucy Nelson seem to me, in their extreme resentment and disappointment, like the legendary unhappy children out of two familiar American family myths. In one book it is the Jewish son railing against the seductive mother, in the other the Gentile daughter railing against the alcoholic father .... \(^{14}\)

The past memories of his childhood with his parents cling to his psyche inextricably. He feels so crippled and unmanned by his parental authority that he cries in pain, "A Jewish man with his parents alive is half the time a helpless *infant*! ... Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke!" (111). In his blurred and distorted vision, he tries to generalize his Jewish predicament and attributes the plight of all the Jewish children to their parents.

What was it with these Jewish parents -- because I am not in this boat alone, oh no, I am on the biggest troop ship afloat ... only look in through the portholes and see us there,
stacked to the bulkheads in our bunks, moaning and
groaning with such pity for ourselves, the sad and watery-
eyed sons of Jewish parents, sick to the gills from rolling
through these heavy seas of guilt .... (118)

Because of his confused state of mind, Portnoy sees his troubles as
the product of his Jewishness. But Roth, and for that matter the reader,
does not have to agree with him. Here he is exaggerating the comic
and painful situation of Portnoy to explore the predicament of modern
man in moral and social perspectives. In fact, the parallelism in the
typical predicament of modern man and that of the Jewish protagonist
may be commonly found in the postwar Jewish-American fiction. Mark
Shechner refers to this similarity when he says, "The disarray into which
the Jewish intellectual was thrown has all the earmarks of a modern
dilemma .... 15

In Portnoy's case, however, his ethnicity is a guiding principle of
all his motives and actions. Even in his relationships with women he is
mainly guided by his ethnic considerations. Characteristically, the girls
he chooses for his lecherous pleasures in America are invariably Gentile
and not Jewish. By sleeping with the Gentile girls, he tries, though
unsuccessfully, to pacify the gnawing feelings of not belonging to the
Gentile majority community of America. Somehow he feels
"disenfranchised in a country where a Jew does not fit the media image
of an American". For him "America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!" (146). Through sexual intercourse with the Gentile girls he intends to "discover" and "conquer" America (235). The natural corollary of his obsession with the lust of the flesh is that he is incapable of feeling any genuine emotions of love for them. Women are merely objects of physical enjoyment for him. Thereal McCoy is the name he attaches to the idealized version of his adolescent dreams. This imaginary shikse indulges with him in all the possible sexual fantasies.

Aside from the sexual pleasures he derives from them, these Gentile girls are totally meaningless for him: so much so that he calls them by fictitious names. Mary Jane Reed, nicknamed by him "The Monkey", is the most suitable girl for the fulfilment of his adolescent sexual fantasies. With a rare abandon, he enjoys all kinds of sexual orgies with this semiliterate, glamorous model. His moral depravity can be seen in "leading her into that triumverate in Rome" with a whore Lina feeling, at the same time, a sense of guilt and abhorrence for his action (134). Among all of his girls, she at least seems to love him sincerely. But when she expresses her love for him and insists on marriage he cruelly abandons her in a hotel room in Athens. She threatens to commit suicide if he does not marry her, but Portnoy is determined that "I simply cannot, I simply will not, enter into a contract
to sleep with just one woman for the rest of my days" (104). He metes out the same treatment to Kay Campbell, "The Pumpkin", who was his "girl friend at Antioch" (215). Though he admires her good qualities — "a thoroughly commendable and worthy human being" — he refuses to marry her on the trivial pretext that she does not agree to convert to Judaism (216). With Sarah Abbott, nicknamed by him "The Pilgrim", he is even more harsh. He admits frankly that "despite all her many qualities and charms — her devotion, her beauty, her deerlike grace, her place in American history — there could never be any 'love' in me for The Pilgrim" (240). In her case at least he articulates his real reasons for not marrying her:

No, Sally Maulsby was just something nice a son once did for his dad. A little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the colored district. A little bonus extracted from Boston & Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation. (240-41)

Portnoy's ethical dilemma is to be seen in the context of his ethnic background. As a result of the clash of his ethical values with those of the society, he tries to escape in sexual gratifications which further blurs his vision. He meets his nemesis in Naomi, the sturdy military officer in Israel, who rejects him contemptuously. The myth of Jewishness
which he uses as a cover in the Gentile-dominated American society is exploded in Israel where there are few chances of his victimization. And still, he miserably fails to maintain an erection with Naomi in his native land. Though he attributes his impotence to the resemblance between Naomi and his mother, his explanation does not seem to be acceptable. Bettelheim's argument seems to be more plausible when he says that it is "really his oral attachment, his wish to remain the suckling infant forever" which is the cause of his impotence in Israel.17 Naomi feels pity on his despicable condition and articulates the truth he had been avoiding for such a long time: "You are the most unhappy person I have ever known. You are like a baby"(264). In his utter humiliation at the hands of a Jewish girl, his childhood fears of castration come true and he finds his most potential weapon, his sexuality, to fail him in a land exclusively inhabited by the Jews. Disgustedly and contemptuously, Naomi expresses the reality of his condition, "Mr. Portnoy, you are nothing but a self-hating Jew"(265). In this final hour of revelation, the truth begins to dawn upon him and unable to find his way from his mental maze he desperately seeks the help of his psychoanalyst.

McDaniel is of the opinion that "a central concern of the novel is the absurd state of helplessness, crippledness and victimization in which Portnoy finds himself", but he hastens to add that his present
condition is due to "social, communal values that are hypocritical and duplicitous." It would not be gratuitous to affirm that he is a victim of the ethical values of his immediate society which insists on banality and normalcy. Seen in this perspective, the novel appears to be a study in guilt and persecution in the tradition of Kafka and Dostoevsky. Roth himself admits in *Reading Myself and Others* that at the time when he was planning *Portnoy's Complaint* he was "teaching a lot of Kafka" at the University of Pennsylvania. "It was all so funny", he says, "this morbid preoccupation with punishment and guilt. Hideous, but funny." Owing to his moral conflict Portnoy suffers terrible mental pain. Like *When She Was Good*, *Portnoy's Complaint* borders on tragedy though here the medium chosen by Roth is comic. The critics who have been praising the novel only for its humour and fun to the exclusion of its vital and serious issues are oblivious to the real intentions of the writer. In the manner of the great masters of guilt and persecution Kafka and Dostoevsky, he presents his protagonist in the suffocating labyrinthine of guilt and fear of retribution searching desperately for any redeeming light. Instead of finding any solace and salvation he plunges into the mire of sexual excesses which further enhances his despondency. Repressed by his parents from his early childhood, he asserts his manliness in masturbation which brings about in him a horrifying dread of revelation and retribution. He confesses, "I am the Raskolnikov of
jerking off – the sticky evidence is everywhere!"(20). When his mother remarks that Hannah has told her about what he has been doing in the bathroom he at once reaches the conclusion, "She's missed the underpants! I've been caught! Oh, let me be dead! I'd just as soon!"(23).

Of course the main source of Portnoy's guilt, in his own opinion, seems to be his ethnicity. In his family everything is clearly divided between what is Jewish and what is goyische: "If it's bad it's the goyim, if it's good it's the Jews!"(75). This hypocritical and misconceived association of goodness with ethnicity is the source of his moral confusion and misconceptions. His parents remind him "three times a day that life is boundaries and restrictions if it's anything."(79). Quite naturally, he envies the Gentile boys for the freedom they seem to enjoy in the matters of food and sex. He is filled with pity on the sad plight of his Jewish parents when he compares them with the Gentile "grammatical fathers and the composed mothers and the self-assured brothers who all live with them in harmony and bliss behind their goyische curtains"(147). He laments in agony: "What have they done for me all their lives, but sacrifice?"(25). When he leaves for Vermont his father cautions him, "DON'T RUN FIRST THING TO A BLONDIE, PLEASE! BECAUSE SHE'LL TAKE YOU FOR ALL YOU'RE WORTH AND THEN LEAVE YOU BLEEDING IN THE GUTTER!"(189). Such
admonitions and repressions constitute the weight of the dead past which he wishes to shed from his mind, and he cries in exasperation:

Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke! Because it's beginning to pall a little, at thirty-three! And also it hoits, you know, there is pain involved, a little human suffering is being felt....(111)

But the book is, obviously, more than the suffering of a Jewish boy. Portnoy himself is aware of the universality of his predicament. That is exactly why he vehemently insists on his essential humanity before Dr. Spielvogel, "I happen also to be a human being!" (76). Thus it can be safely concluded that Portnoy's predicament transcends the narrow boundaries of ethnicity and assumes a universal dimension. His cry of pain at his helplessness is genuine: "How have I come to be such an enemy and flayer of myself? And so alone! Oh, so alone! Nothing but self! Locked up in me!"(248). This might be the voice of any hero of modern fiction crying in anguish over his alienation and isolation. In fact, one of the dominant features of the contemporary literature is a sense of helplessness and victimization felt by the individual amidst the existential forces. In this way, Jewish-American fiction, broadly speaking, describes the universal predicament of man.

In Reading Myself and Others, Roth says of Malamud, "What it is to be human, and to be humane, is his deepest concern."21 The statement
applies to his own fiction also. Through his desires and sufferings, Portnoy is actually expressing the aspirations and frustrations of the common humanity.

Under the intolerable burden of his past, there are a few situations which provide a sense of pure harmonious joy to Portnoy. One such occasion is when he plays centre field for a softball team and the other is when he goes with his father to the Turkish baths which he significantly describes as a "place without goyim and women" (49). Barring such scattered experiences of pure happiness in his childhood, Portnoy lives a life of sensual gratification and guilt. His gnawing sense of guilt induces in him a morbid desire to take revenge on the Gentiles, and for lack of a better weapon he uses his male sexuality to spoil the shikses deriving a perverse pleasure and satisfaction. On several occasions, he gives vent to his desire to escape his wretched and disintegrated life, "to be Good, Responsible, & Dutiful to a family of his own" (153). Fed up with his wretched condition, he sometimes plays with the idea of running off to a new place to reform his life like Henry Zuckerman of The Counterlife, who flees to Israel to start a new life.

For all his moral depravity, Portnoy's ethical choice is similar to that of his predecessors, Neil, Gabe and Lucy. Whereas the ethical conflict in Goodbye, Columbus, Letting Go and When She was Good is mainly external, between the individual and the society, in Portnoy's Complaint
it is both external and internal. In his moral and psychological crippledness, Portnoy is unable to act decisively in accordance with his ethical tenets. His idealistic and humanistic instincts dominate his baser and carnal desires and that is precisely the reason that to regain wholesomeness and spiritual vigour he is on the couch of Dr. Spielvogel. His earnest and passionate entreaties testify his wish to be emancipated:

Oh my secrets, my shame, my palpitations, my flushes, my sweats! The way I respond to the simple vicissitudes of human life! Doctor, I can't stand any more being frightened like this over nothing! Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me whole!(37)

He wishes for strength so that he can overcome his temptations for sensual lust and lead a virtuous life in accordance with his ethical ideals. In fact, this is the ultimate goal of all the protagonists in Roth's fiction. Portnoy is definitely on a higher stage of ethical evolution than Neil, Gabe and Lucy, though he also does not succeed in achieving his aim of self-fulfilment and spiritual harmony. It is in *The Professor of Desire* that the protagonist resolves his ethical conflict and attains harmony and peace.

In fact, a certain kind of dualism can be discerned in Portnoy's attitude towards his condition whether it is viewed from psychological, social or moral perspective. What lies at the core of his problem is
that he finds it difficult to wriggle out of his torturing conflict. His aim is
to be good but he wants to enjoy his badness. Commenting on the
predicament of David Kepesh (of The Breast) and Portnoy, Roth says
in Reading Myself and Others:

Speaking broadly, it's the struggle to accommodate warring
(or, at least, contending) impulses and desires, to
negotiate some kind of inner peace or balance of power,
or perhaps just to maintain hostilities at a low destructive
level, between the ethical and social yearnings and the
implacable, singular lusts for the flesh and its pleasures.
The measured self vs. the insatiable self. The
accommodating self vs. the ravenous self.

A similar kind of ambivalence is found in Portnoy's attitude towards
his parents. He feels regard as well as contempt for his father.

This ambivalence in his temperament is most evidently clear in
case of his mother and in his relationships with women in general. He
himself admits, though, that due to his Oedipal attachment with his
mother he fails to maintain wholesome and lasting relationships with
the women he manages to seduce (This is not surprising given his IQ
of 158 and his familiarity with the works of such great men of letters as
Freud, Keats, Miller and Dostoevsky). Sanford Pinsker rightly
compares the book to D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* in this respect and asserts that like Paul Morel, Portnoy suffers from Oedipal complex. On one occasion, he virtually imagines being caught red-handed by his father in an objectionable posture with his mother. As far as his relations with other women are concerned, he fails to advance beyond his sensual pleasures and unhesitatingly displays a deep-rooted contempt and cynicism for them. Naomi, at least, has the courage to reveal the truth in his face:

The way you disapprove of your life! ... You seem to take some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor. I don't believe you actually want to improve your life.(264)

The last stage of his amorous career displays his abysmal degradation. He reflects, "Maybe the wisest solution for me is to live on all fours!"(270). Thus, instead of achieving his lofty moral ideals he has reduced himself to the level of a beast. At the same time this is his final hour of revelation of the truth about himself. In his last howl of pain there appears some hope of affirmation and regeneration as is shown by Dr. Spielvogel's punch line, "Now vee may perhaps to begin"(274). The word 'begin' itself suggests a new beginning in Portnoy's life.
Portnoy's Complaint, perhaps more than any other novel of Roth, demonstrates his comic genius. The humorous effect seems more pronounced here, since the novel was published after such serious and sombre books as Letting Go and When She Was Good. Nevertheless, as Jay L. Halio pertinently suggests, "Moral imperatives, such as those found in Letting Go or When She Was Good, are not abandoned in this novel; on the contrary, they become if anything even more pronounced." Nevertheless, as Jay L. Halio pertinently suggests, "Moral imperatives, such as those found in Letting Go or When She Was Good, are not abandoned in this novel; on the contrary, they become if anything even more pronounced."24 Here he presents such outrageous and extravagant situations which seem funny and comic to the reader, albeit not necessarily to the protagonist. Sometimes even Portnoy, like the heroes of Kafka, seems to chuckle at his grotesque predicament, though his is a grim and absurd laughter. He realizes that he is living his life "in the middle of a Jewish joke"(36). In the tradition of his contemporary Jewish-American writers like Bellow and Malamud, Roth presents a typical modern hero who, despite his victimization in the existential society, is capable of laughing at himself though the pain and torture are too apparent to be missed.

Roth's flair for comedy, so successfully exhibited in his later books, first found expression in Portnoy's Complaint. But humour in the book is entirely different from that in many of his later short stories and novels. For example, humour in The Great American Novel is markedly different from that in Portnoy's Complaint. About the former Roth says:
"The comedy in *The Great American Novel* exists for the sake of no higher value than comedy itself; the redeeming value is not social or cultural reform, or moral instruction, but *comic inventiveness.*\(^{25}\) In *Our Gang* the comedy is qualified by a pungent satire on the misuse of political power. In its sexual fantasy *Portnoy's Complaint* is more akin to *The Breast* where the protagonist is baffled by his metamorphosis into a huge breast. *The Breast,* however, lacks the moral and ethical implications of the protagonist's experience of social reality. In *Portnoy's Complaint,* the comedy is "the means by which the character synthesized and articulated his sense of himself and his predicament."\(^{26}\) Here Roth has organically synthesized the elements of humour and pain in accordance with his literary tenets. He says in *Reading Myself and Others:* "Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends ...."\(^{27}\) In a characteristic manner, the pangs of anguish are made to co-exist with uproarious laughter in the narrative, creating what Shechner calls "comically grim" situations.\(^{28}\)

Portnoy frequently imagines himself in fantastical situations creating humour at the expense of his agonized condition. One instance of his mixing of absurd comedy with pain can be seen when unable to get an erection with Bubbles Girardi he masturbates himself and ejaculates into his own eyes. His morbid imagination is at once fired
and he fancies himself blind going home with a dog and a stick. Even
his verbal and linguistic skills are matched with his fancy to evoke
laughter in the midst of grim – in his morbid imagination – situations.
When the whore in the hotel room in Rome asks in Italian where "the
signore" would like her to begin he answers, "The signore wishes her
to begin at the beginning ...(137). Similarly, he describes to his
psychoanalyst the sight of "a fellow-addict fifty years my senior ...
dropping his load in his hat"(132). Portnoy recognizes the comic
aspect of his situation even as he struggles to free himself from it. The
wide gap between his high ethical ideals and the present grotesque
condition evokes an awkward kind of laughter which might be the result
of his psychological strategy to offset the pain or to tolerate it with more
ease. Halio rightly observes: "Portnoy's fantasies reveal the fear
underlying his adventuresomeness."29 The dread of catching syphilis
from Bubbles Girardi conjures up before him the ghastly and funny sight
of his penis lying on the floor and his parents calling the "Humane
Society" as if he were "a rabies dog" (167). Portnoy has a penchant
for articulating his fears and anguish through the witty and absurd use
of language as if he hopes to be free of them through his linguistic
skill. As often as not the dread of public exposure of his profligacy
finds expression through linguistic exaggeration in newspaper
headlines: "ASST HUMAN OPP'Y COMMISH FLOGS DUMMY"(175),
"JEW SMOTHERS DEB WITH COCK"(240). These serio-comic instances amply demonstrate Roth's proficiency in fusing comic and grave elements to achieve the rare balance of opposites in his fiction.

As already indicated, Roth firmly believes in family and society as the essential matrix for the individual to grow and mature. Despite his sexual degradation and the resultant anguish and pain, Portnoy resists the temptation of plunging in nihilistic and absurd void. But the humour created by his absurd fantasies of sexual pleasure and the consequent guilt and fear seems to alleviate his pain to some extent. Fantasies appear to be such an essential part of his existence that whatever he perceives through them is considered by him as real. In this way, Roth is able to examine the ethical choices of his protagonist through the comic medium.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth has achieved a rare combination of theme and technique. The narrative technique employed by him in this book is as startling and novel as his frank treatment of sexual matters. Roth has used the psychoanalytic setting in his earlier story "Psychanalytic Special" and has realized its potential and efficacy to portray the innermost yearnings and tensions of the protagonist. "The psychoanalytic monologue", as he calls this technique, further provides him with justifiable opportunity to use a frank and uninhibited language which would have seemed objectionable in any conventional mode of
narrative.\textsuperscript{30} The technique enabled him to blend organically the fantastical and realistic elements to achieve his artistic purpose. Still, critics like Howe blatantly labelled the novel as "vulgar".\textsuperscript{31} Without going into the intricate and confusing distinction between pornographical literature and realistic portrayal of psychological motives and conflicts, suffice it to say that Roth's intentions in \textit{Portnoy's Complaint} are definitely not prurient. The language used by the author to narrate the experiences of the protagonist serves only to lay bare his guilt-ridden and anguished soul. Realizing the difficulty of communication with society, Portnoy gives vent to his mental agony in front of the doctor to save himself. He uses all the means available to him to express his anger and resentment against the inhuman and unmanning social forces around him because of his vehement desire to wriggle out of his grotesquely painful situation. The "'confessional' strategy" employed by Roth in \textit{Portnoy's Complaint} enabled him to present to the reader his protagonist's burden of reality as he sees it and the actuality of his predicament as seen by the reader.\textsuperscript{32}

The novel is divided into six sections corresponding to the different phases of Portnoy's life. But instead of following any chronological order in his confessions, Portnoy recalls the various incidents apparently at random, though actually according to a highly complex design devised by the writer. Pinsker praises this narrative skill of Roth by
observing that the writer has painstakingly revised and refined his language "until it achieved the illusion of colloquial speech." Ultimately, the novel takes the shape of an uninterrupted and unbroken utterance of a troubled patient who is bent upon unburdening himself of his past "which won't relinquish" him(271). Roth himself emphasizes this aspect of the book when he says in *Reading Myself and Others* that he had to work hard to create "the illusion of intimacy and spontaneity", and that "'naturalness' happens not to grow on trees." It can be safely concluded that in no other novel of his Roth has been able to blend his narrative technique and subject matter so harmoniously and organically as in *Portnoy's Complaint*.

The tremendous success of the novel may be ascribed to the universality of its theme. The novel with the basic conflict between good and evil in human soul though in the context of a highly materialistic society of postwar era. Portnoy enacts the drama of common man with common aspirations and frailties. He is torn apart by his hedonistic impulses on the one hand and his wish to attain the sublime humane ideals on the other. What intensifies his dilemma is his reluctance to compromise with the normative values imposed on him by the society. His ethical ideals definitely incapacitates him from reaching any reconciliation with the outer forces of banality and normalcy. The ethnic element serves only to reinforce the feelings of
claustrophobic suffocation and helplessness caused by the limitations and boundaries imposed upon his psyche yearning for freedom and self-fulfilment. Portnoy's faith in his ethical ideals is firm and immovable. He may be the victim of his family, community and the larger society or his own baser instincts, yet he does not compromise with his basic human values. In his exploration of social reality, Roth is mainly concerned with those basic human values which originate in the heart and are not based upon any artificial and hypothetical moral principles.

Portnoy's acute awareness of his 'sins' is a measurement of his humanitarianism. Though his conflict remains unresolved at the end of the book and he fails deplorably to achieve integration of personality, he justifies himself by his desperate wish to attain his cherished ideals. As the punchline of Dr. Spielvogel shows, he has ample hope of Portnoy's recovery. Portnoy's last cry of pain itself testifies his affirmation of faith in the potentialities of man amidst the adverse forces of social reality. Though Portnoy does not succeed in achieving his ideals, he has entered into the process of comprehending and resolving his ethical dilemma. It is in The Professor of Desire that the Rothian protagonist would be able to resolve the conflict between the opposing impulses of base desires and noble aims and achieve, though tentatively, peace and harmony.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 Philip Roth, Reading Myself and Others (New York: Farrar, 1975) 33.


7 Philip Roth, Portnoy's Complaint (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969) 3. All subsequent citations will be to the text as given in this edition and the page numbers will be indicated in parentheses appearing immediately after the quotation.

8 Roth, Reading Myself 33.

9 Roth, Reading Myself 243.
10 Searles 14.

11 McDaniel 133.


13 Tanner 297.


17 Bettelheim 33.

18 McDaniel 143.


20 Roth, *Reading Myself* 22.

21 Roth, *Reading Myself* 127.

22 Roth, *Reading Myself* 70.


25 Roth, Reading Myself 76.
26 Roth, Reading Myself 75.
27 Roth, Reading Myself 111.
28 Shechner 236.
29 Halio 71.
30 Roth, Reading Myself 41.
31 Howe 244.
32 Roth, Reading Myself 99.
33 Pinsker 58.
34 Roth, Reading Myself 219.