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THE UNCENSORED REALITY IN *SABBATH THEATER* BY PHILIP ROTH

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ABSTRACT

Philip Roth, a Jewish-American author, rose to prominence in the late 1950s. His writings are generally known for their vulgarity and obscenity. Most of his books, at the time of their publication, angered many for their sexually explicit content. Roth was even called an anti-Semite and a self-hating Jew. Rabbis, back then, ordered the members of their synagogues to refrain from buying or reading his books. This paper entitled "The Uncensored Reality in Sabbath Theater by Philip Roth" through the life of one of his most controversial characters Mickey Sabbath, the protagonist of *Sabbath Theater* (1995) attempts to showcase that Roth's intention was not to write obscenity but reality.

Key words: Reality, Obscenity, Philip Roth

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DISCUSSION

Philip Roth started his writing career in the late 1950s when the Sexual Revolution was in full swing. It was a time when the conservative and traditional views in America were challenged, leading to a drastic shift in attitude, behavior and lifestyle. The institution of marriage was undermined bringing premarital and extramarital sex out of the shadows. The revolutionary breakthrough of The Pill (contraceptive) highly reduced the risk of unwanted pregnancies separating sex from procreation. If one finds that Roth goes on and on about the same subject—sex—in all his books, it is mainly because he so painstakingly explores these uncomfortable cultural issues and attempts to capture the destructive nature of the sex-affirming culture on the society. Roth himself comments on the complexity in documenting the sweeping changes that took place around him, thus: "the 20th century challenged the writer beyond his imagination and left him aloof with more questions than answers, unable to understand, describe, and then make credible much of the social reality".

Roth's creation of Mickey Sabbath and his illusionary life is a perfect example of the late-20th-century America. Considered by many, as one of the most monstrous and loathsome creations in contemporary fiction, the philandering ex-puppeteer, like most of Roth's protagonists, struggles with baser passions with little ability to repress them. A sexual extremist and an erotomaniac, Sabbath is obsessed with woman and their organs and treats them just like his puppets. He is entrapped by the pursuit of sensual pleasures and remains a slave

to the dictates of mental and sensual impulses. Throughout his life, he just does not seem to rise above the temporary attractions of flesh. His drives are so inhuman that he is completely deprived of basic human emotions and feelings. For instance, at a friend's funeral, unable to hold his gonads intact, he ransacks his dead friend's teenage daughter's dresser for her underwear. During another instance, he urinates and masturbates on the grave of his mistress as an act of lovingly saying goodbye. His depravity is so heavy that his entire existence seems to be only about his phallus.

Sabbath is unappealing in ways that are difficult to swallow. Apart from indulging in numerous extra marital activities, he seduces helpless college teenagers. He even risks his dignity for the sake of sexual pleasure—while teaching drama at a local college in Madamaska Falls, he is forced to resign over a phone sex scandal involving one of his students. Although he feels humiliated, he just does not learn from it, instead continues to be a helpless slave to his never-ending sexual desires.

Sabbath's relationship with his equally sexed and manipulative Croatian-born mistress, Drenka Balich, is purely based on lust and not based on love. Although he seems to feel lonely after her death from ovarian cancer, he continues to look out for the next available woman. Sabbath's ultimate purpose in life is to appease his sexual appetite. Unaware that sexual drives are engineered by nature for the sustenance of the human race, he is quite dominated and enslaved by it. He remains in utter darkness and is easily controlled and manipulated by the animal instincts. Regardless of how much sex or how many lovers he has, he ends up feeling empty, incomplete, unfulfilled. Since he happens to live only to have sex, he lives in continued unrest and dissatisfaction. The gratification he feels with each physical encounter never lasts for long. He goes around acting it out, repeating it so many times but at the end, all that he is left with is emptiness, disappointment and loneliness.

Sabbath's sexual escapades leaves him with no energy for self-realization, thus, he fails to think about the things pertaining to the higher realm of life. He is so victimized by his lower self that even when the death of his mistress and close friend make him think about the triviality of life, he just cannot resist his untrammelled sexual needs—on his trip to New York to attend the funeral of Gelman, he tries to seduce the wife of his mutual friend, Norman Cowan and their illiterate Mexican housemaid. Even in the process of abating the anxiety of death, he holds on to his dominant illusion of women as sexual puppets. According to him, he feels that his entire life will crumble down without it which reflects his immature and undeveloped mindset. At the end of the novel, the reader finds him on the verge of a mental breakdown, considering suicide as a way to end his illusionary life.

CONCLUSION

Sabbath is not just representative of America but of the world. He stands as a perfect example of a man with no social boundaries and who is driven by the lower self. His varied sexual obsessions do not give him the gratification he so badly yearns instead propel him to the edge. Although the content of *Sabbath Theater* (1995) might seem unusual, inappropriate and obscene, the psychological struggle of an aging man is the sad plight of many in our society.

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