

# The Breast Short Guide

## The Breast by Philip Roth

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# Characters

The main protagonist in *The Breast*, David Kepesh, investigates all possibilities of the cause of his bizarre metamorphosis. He intellectually agonizes over his grotesque situation and feels imprisoned by it. He consults with Dr.

Gordon, his physician, whose scientific explanations depict it as an irregular occurrence of nature. Kepesh turns to Dr. Klinger, a psychiatrist, just as Portnoy did. However, Dr. Klinger is an anti-apocalyptic listener, a rational realist who objectively clings to the facts of reality and sees the possibility of salvation for Kepesh in the acceptance of his grotesque self. Similarly, Claire Ovington, his mistress, accepts him as he is and offers him a relatively stable life after his ordeal of a broken marriage and five years of painful psychoanalysis. Arthur Schonbrunn, a stodgy and pedantic colleague of Kepesh, also insists on exact adherence to rules of reality.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Like Portnoy's Complaint, *The Breast* is an arresting tour de force. David Kepesh, a thirty-eight-year-old professor of comparative literature, awakens on the morning of February 18, 1971, and finds himself changed into a sixfoot female breast. He feels victimized by his glands and calls the metamorphosis "a massive hormonal influx" as well as "an endocrinopathic catastrophe" and "a hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes." The exploration of the frustrations suffered by the protagonist as a victimized individual is camouflaged as a search for a scientific explanation of his metamorphosis.

Kepesh has to face up to the fact that his middle-class Jewish American upbringing did not prepare him to accept his embarrassing predicament. His hopelessness and alienation are realities of modern existence.

# Techniques

The Breast is a most innovative brilliant novel. The narrative fiction focuses on a human character's acceptance of a bizarre surprise; the result is a keen character study of modern man caught in an existential anguish enhanced by metaphysical images. The events, based on an erotic fantasy, are farcical rather than tragic. According to Roth, the novel is a description of a nightmarish dream envisioned in a Dali painting.



## Key Questions

for *The Professor of Desire* 1. Is Roth able to rise above the erotic to create a realistic novel of human emotion and experience. Why or why not? If he does, than how does he accomplish his task?

2. Why is Kepesh embarrassed by love? Does he ever confront that embarrassment in an attempt to overcome it? Does he succeed? Why or why not?

3. How does Herbert Bratsky differ from such characters as Claire Ovington and Mr. Barbatnik? Does Roth really attempt to develop those characters, or do they function merely as superficial stereotypes? What, if anything, do they contribute to the maturity of David Kepesh?

4. How does the erotic literature taught by Kepesh, "Desire 341," relate to his actual and vivid sexual experiences with the likes of Elizabeth, Birgitta, and Helen? How does that course, as well as the title of the novel, serve as a bridge between the erotic and the intellectual?

5. Is Kepesh a hero in the classical sense of that term? Why or why not?

Are his adventures epic? Why or why not?

6. Claire Ovington appears in both *The Breast* and *Professor of Desire*. Is she the same person/character? Why or why not? Does her function change from one novel to the next?

Ideas for Group Discussions for *The Breast* The story of a man who turns into a giant breast may be described both as comic and grotesque. But whatever one wishes to label the piece, few can argue that it does focus upon change. Of course, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in which a character becomes a cockroach, predated Professor David Kepesh's transformation by some fiftysix years, but the comparison ends there, since influence and imitation exist on two totally different levels.

For Kepesh, there arises the need to reconcile his intellectual and sexual natures, but whether or not he actually succeeds remains a serious critical question. Perhaps the answer lies not in *The Breast*, but in a later novel, *The Professor of Desire*, where the same (presumably) Kepesh moves from the alternate gratification of his mental and physical selves to the achievement of a more integrated means of existence.

1. How does Kepesh cope with his transformation? Does he ever gain any insight into his own self-image?

2. Can the reader possibly consider Kepesh as "heroic"? Why or why not?



How does Kepesh transcend his own identity and individualism or manage to step outside his world of experience and inhibition?

3. What roles do ethical restraint, conformity, and outright personal fear play in this novel? Does Kepesh ever confront directly the moral and psychological unknown?

4. Despite the influence of Kafka, *The Breast* contains elements that may be considered unique to Roth. Identify and explain those elements. How do they add substance to the work as a novel?

5. Does the novel ever rise above the level of a literary exercise? Why or why not?

6. Upon awaking to discover his transformation from English professor to breast, Kepesh is horrified, desperate to regain his former state. Yet, as the piece proceeds, he comes to explore the advantages of that transformation.

What are those advantages? To what, in the end, does Kepesh reconcile himself?

# Literary Precedents

The novel is strongly indebted to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Gogol's *The Nose* and shows the frustrations suffered by the protagonist. In addition, Rilke's literary influence can be detected as well as a reminiscence to Swift's style.





## Related Titles

The hilarious fantasies of Portnoy's Complaint are more realistically and painfully examined in *The Breast*. The imbued characteristics of a traditional Jewish home life are exposed more frankly; Kepesh de-mystifies his past with the help of Dr. Klinger, a rational realist. Through the ordeal of this almost surrealistic metamorphosis the seeds of the immature Rothian adolescence ripen to a sexually mature professor who daringly exposes his encounters in *The Professor of Desire* (1977).

Although David Kepesh of *The Breast* returns as *The Professor of Desire* (1977), critics have engaged in a debate as to whether he does so in name only. In other words, does Roth simply transfer Kepesh from one novel to another, or does he create an entirely new character? Although possessed of a strong spirit of adventure, Kepesh appears smart enough to understand that his sex drive functions as the instrument for his right to pursue his own individual happiness. Thus, the conflict emerges between his reckless erotic ambitions and his conscious intellectual devotion. Kepesh may be another of Roth's sex-hungry Jewish stereotypes, but he also has achieved status as a professional academic. He has a mind, as well as a male drive. More important, he has maturity.

Professor Kepesh is basically an egotist who is indifferent to the needs and feelings of others. In his vivid sexual encounters with Elizabeth, Birgitta, Helen, and others, the paradox of male desire becomes apparent. This is intellectually reenforced via the erotic literature course he teaches called "Desire 341." Only towards the end of the novel does Kepesh show sincere feelings toward Claire Ovington, a likable and orderly woman with whom he is able to enjoy domestic pleasures.

The novel ends with a deeply moving idyllic scene describing a reunion with his parents and tenderly portraying Mr. Barbatnik, a dying older Jew. The characters are human beings, not caricatures. Only Herbert Bratsky is depicted as a vulgar comedian.

Kepesh is an adventurous but also intelligent man who sees sex as exemplifying his right to the pursuit of happiness. Nevertheless, he is torn between reckless erotic ambitions and conscientious intellectual devotion.

Here too, the social mimicry is exposed as embarrassing the Jewish stereotype but is combined with a realistic rendering of the exposure of a professional academic teacher. The novel is observant; it is an honest explication of human feelings; it is erotic but also serious in intent.

Again, Kepesh confronts the embarrassment of love. The protagonist makes an honest attempt to cope with life by letting his sexual desires mature to human feelings. The result is a modern tale of the age old struggle between body and spirit, depicted in striking mental images that expose the hero who tries to put order to his life. The maturing of Kepesh is recounted with feeling and with an awareness that somebody else's feelings can be respected, too.



Kepesh teaches Chekhov and makes references to Flaubert but most often alludes to Kafka. These three writers share a similar brooding, introspective voice as Kepesh's. Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (see the entry) is the story of a remarkable transformation told as an interior monolog that ironically, and perhaps satirically, resembles Kepesh's view of his own life. The Professor of Desire also follows the ethical Jewish traditionalism of Saul Bellow.

# Copyright Information

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