Operation Shylock: A Confession Short Guide

Operation Shylock: A Confession by Philip Roth

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Characters

The two principal characters of Operation Shylock both bear the name Philip Roth. The most fascinating of the two, the imposter, the "other" Philip Roth, enters the picture as a crazed anti-Zionist, the self-appointed father of Diasporism who plans to transport the Israelis back to Europe to save them from annihilation by Arabs or from the conflagration created by their own power. He has, also, founded an organization to reform anti-Semites, modeled along the lines of Alcoholics Anonymous. Although dying from cancer, the other Roth, possessed of what Max Apple terms "a prosthetic penis," rallies sufficient manly vigor to satisfy the sexual demands of the buxom Wanda Jane (or "Jinx") Possesski — his devoted and semi-illiterate "shiksa" nurse and a recovering antiSemite. In an effort to help the reader through the labyrinth, Roth confers upon his imposter the Yiddish name of "Moishe Pipik" (Moses Bellybutton). In the end, the real Roth, who battles the imposter at every turn, imagines Pipik dead by way of an equally imaginary letter from Jinx. She recounts a posthumous honeymoon, in which Pipik's erected phallus miraculously outlived its owner for two days and two nights.

The real Roth, as fictional character, has come to Jerusalem in January 1988 to interview his friend, the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld (an interview actually published in The New York Times on 11 March 1988). He also claims to be preparing questions for another writer's novel on the survivors of the Holocaust. Although he tries, at every turn, to disengage himself from his imposter, ". . . THE YOU THAT IS NOT WORDS," the real Roth realizes that Pipik has trapped him. "I felt ready to jump, not from the window but from my own skin."

The secondary characters (with the exception of Jinx Possesski), have agendas rather than functions. George Ziad, a friend of the real Roth while at college, appears as an outspoken PLO loyalist and ends by being stabbed to death by unidentified masked men in the presence of his fifteen-year-old son, Michael. The latter summons adolescent rage, rebellion, and despair to reject all forms of nationalism; instead, he seeks a different birthright, one unhaunted by the ghosts of past misdeeds. Another character, a young Israeli military conscript and an avid admirer of the real Roth's fiction, appears torn between his own reluctance toward patriotism and the nationalistic pride of his father. His problem focuses upon the realization that at some moment during the period of his military service, he will have to kill someone. Apter, the real Roth's Israeli cousin who operates a stall in the old section of Jerusalem, lost his entire family in a Nazi concentration camp at age nine. His fright remains, and thus he never goes anywhere alone. His piteous pleas for protection remind Roth of a child within the body of a middleaged man; "his whole life lies in the hands of the past."

On a slightly lighter (but no less serious) note, we can observe the suave methods of David Supposnik, an Israeli undercover agent in the guise of an antiquarian book dealer, while Louis B. Smilesburger, another master spy, has a name all too closely associated with John Le Carre's persona and agent, George Smiley. Smilesburger's brightest moment comes when he acts as literary critic to the real Roth's work: "The blackest mark against our people is not the eating of pork, it is not even marrying with

the non-Jew; worse than both is the sin of Jewish speech. We talk too much, we say too much, and we do not know when to stop."

Social Concerns

Despite the difficulties encountered by the reader in attempting to separate Roth's delicately thin wall between the real and the fictional, the novel does present a number of sharply defined issues. In earlier works, Roth had created and focused upon Alexander Portnoy and Nathan Zuckerman, for example, as Jewish men; in Operation Shylock, however, the writer concerns himself with an entire Jewish nation, Israel. Thus, beneath Roth's fictional camouflage one finds the 1988 trial of John Demjanjuk, the Cleveland autoworker extradited to Jerusalem and accused of operating the gas chambers at Treblinka; Palestinian Arabs comb the streets of Jerusalem at night for rocks with which to supply young children to hurl the next day at Israeli soldiers on the West Bank. The reader sifts through major and minor characters that have, actually, appeared in newspapers and on television screens: Israeli soldiers at work on the West bank, their rifles close at hand; PLO fanatics and Israeli undercover agents; roaming bands of Jewish and Arab youths who disrupt even the most innocent of daily routines; refugees from the concentration camps who still retain their visions of the ghosts of the Holocaust. The false Philip Roth can, on the basis of his namesake's reputation, obtain an audience with the Lech Walesa at Gdansk, chat with Pope John Paul in Rome, and brief the media on his scheme to resolve the Palestinian question by leading the Jews out of Israel to their rightful, pre-Holocaust homes in Europe. Roth's view of history may appear terribly symbolic and even overdramatic. Nonetheless, he only manipulates history; he knows full well that he cannot create it.

Techniques

In a 1991 conversation with Molly McQuade, Roth stated that during 1956-1958, "I had a little apartment across from Stagg Field. I worked until 11:30 every morning teaching three sections [at the University of Chicago], back to back, of freshman composition.

Then I'd hole up in the little apartment and write until I was written out, and then I'd mark papers with, I must say, the same ferocious energy I had for my writing. I was a very intense fellow. I saw my friends in the evenings. I was intense with them. Great fun, intensity, before it starts wearing you down."

Therein lies the method behind Operation Shylock: intensity. Certainly, the piece goes forward on the traditional techniques of narrative and (considerable) characters' reflections upon what they see, do, and think. But the level upon which they do so can only be described as intense. Public events and public materials become intensely absorbed into his characters' personal obsessions. The real Roth's own quest for his Jewishness finds a distorted parallel in the imposter Roth's intense and urgent Jewish mission. The furious and exhausting argument that goes back and forth between and among characters takes on the appearance of their all being hooked on amphetamines to catapult them out of their collective depression. Roth has those characters awake and up and about during all hours of the day and night, and they rarely seem stop talking!

When they do pause for breath, their imaginations take over, and those prove no less intense than their oral rantings and ravings.

Roth's literary technique may often confuse, but it never ceases to entertain, for within the context of his own Jewishness, he knows the classic connections between laughter and tears.

Themes

In its broadest sense, the theme of Operation Shylock emerges as the struggle of a fictional character who agonizes over retaining his identity against an imposter who has literally torn it from him. That theme relates clearly to Roth's own conflicts with himself and his craft that came forth in Zuckerman Bound trilogy (1984) and The Counterlife (1987), both of which emphasize characters' critical self-examinations and reevaluations of themselves and their priorities. After all, the epigraph to the novel reads, "So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Thus, a critical question relative to its theme develops as the narrative unfolds: Where does the real Philip Roth end and his imagination begin? On a purely political level, however, one can clearly discern Roth's attempt, in what John Updike labels a "Dostoyevskian phantasmagoria," to weave for the public a thematic mosaic of the various and ironic contradictions in the Mideast that resulted from the creation of the State of Israel and the displacement of the Palestinian Arabs.

Key Questions

The very aspects of Operation Shylock that cause problems for the readers and prompt sharp critical reaction from the critical commentators quickly promote lively and stimulating discussions. In general, Roth channels the emotional and moral crises in the life of a Jewish American writer into two characters, both of whom bear his own name.

However, one is "real," the other a mad "imposter." Real Roth has just recovered from a Halcion-induced breakdown; imposter Roth, in Jerusalem, promotes a bizarre, perverse movement dedicated to returning Israeli Jews of European descent to their former homes in Europe. Real Roth rushes off to confront his clone.

Beneath the whirling, confusing flow of the narrative and the violent intensity of the arguments lie the paranoiac subterfuge of Middle East politics that fuses with characters' wrenching recollections of the Holocaust. The reader cannot escape the complexity of contemporary scenes and volatile questions that form the necessary background for Roth's novel: the evolution of Israel and Zionism, the grievances of the displaced Palestinians, the tense choices and decisions between the solidarity of the group and the freedom of the individual. Almost every character, particularly the two Roths, appear preoccupied with history, politics, and religion. In the Middle East, the three cannot be separated, from one another, and Roth's novel cannot be separated from the any or all of the three.

1. How does the epigraph of the novel — "So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" — apply first to the real Roth, and second to Moishe Pipik? How does that same epigraph apply to conflict between the two Roths? Does it apply to any other character?

2. The real Roth accuses his imposter of breaking the law. "The law says that a person's identity is his private property and can't be appropriated by someone else." What, exactly, has Moishe Pipik appropriated from Philip Roth? What is it about Pipik that so upsets Roth?

3. In a brief "Note to the Reader" following the conclusion of the novel, Roth states, "Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. This confession is false." Do the two sentences relate to each other? Why or why not is the confession false?

4. Under pressures from Pipik, the Mossad, George Ziad, and his own personal sense of history, real Roth finally confronts the issue of his Jewishness. Is anything resolved from that confrontation? Can he as a writer, do anything for the Jews to negate what Pipik wants do for the Jews and for Israel? What has Jewishness come to mean for Philip Roth and his characters?

5. There are those who maintain that, within the confines of a novel, the need to distinguish between fact and fiction is meaningless. The novelist has written, and we are

reading, fiction — that which does not claim to be true. Can that reasoning hold for Operation Shylock? Why or why not? If we, as readers, choose to ignore Roth's historical and contemporary references, what remains for serious consideration?

6. Explain the reasoning behind imposter Roth's scheme "to rebuild everything, not in an alien Middle East, but in those very lands where everything once flourished, while, at the same time, it [the scheme] seeks to avert the catastrophe of a second Holocaust brought about by the exhaustion of Zionism as political and ideological force." Does real Roth actually believe that statement? Why or why not?

7. In his actual interview with Aharon Appelfeld, Roth asked the Israeli writer a series of questions about the relationship between the daily political turbulence in Israel and his fiction.

"What does this turbulence mean to a novelist like yourself? How does being a citizen of this self-revealing, selfasserting, self-challenging, self-legendizing society affect your writing life?

Does the news-producing reality ever tempt your imagination?" Do any of those questions apply to Roth and to Operation Shylock? Respond to those that do.

Literary Precedents

Operation Shylock may appear unique in that Roth has manufactured two versions of himself for the principal characters, as well as concocted a broad and liberal blend of fact and fiction. Nonetheless, the method proves a variation — although a highly imaginative one — on older methods. One might argue that Chaucer's host represented the poet as narrator, and that his Canterbury-bound pilgrims combined liberal doses of fact and fiction in their prologues and tales. Closer to Roth's home, however, Marcel Proust (1871-1922) relied heavily upon his knowledge of French social history, particularly during the 1890s when he moved in the most fashionable of Parisian circles and involved himself in the Alfred Dreyfus case. His circularly constructed novel, A le recherche du temps perdu (Remembrance of Things Past, 1913-1927), ends with the narrator, Marcel, discovering his true artistic vocation; that, in turn, leads to the writing of the novel that the reader has just experienced. One may find almost equal precedent in the autobiographical narratives of Henry Miller (18911980), where the first-person narrator goes by the name of "Henry." His Tropic of Cancer (1934), especially, intensely portrays the emotional and intellectual life of the American expatriate in Paris. And, as did Roth a generation later, Miller kept a sharp eye upon the lower portions of the human anatomy.

Related Titles

Critics generally agree that since Portnoy's Complaint (1969), Roth's novels have been a series of autobiographical confessions. The full title, Operation Shylock: A Confession has added strength that contention and caused them to declare that to understand fully Roth's most recent novel, one must re-read the ordeal of Alexander Portnoy, the Nathan Zuckerman trilogy, The Facts (1988), and Patrimony (1991). "Everything that he has written since then [Portnoy]," states Hilary Spurling, "could be seen as in some sense a training program, part of the preparation for this rich, complex, and strenuously ambitious book [Shylock]."

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