

# **Portnoy's Complaint Study Guide**

## **Portnoy's Complaint by Philip Roth**

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# Plot Summary

This well-known novel, once-controversial because of its graphic sexual and religious content, is the story of Alexander Portnoy, a profoundly troubled young Jewish man struggling with several disquieting obsessions. Narrated from a passionate, highly articulate and frantic stream of consciousness point of view, the book explores themes relating to the nature and purpose of sexuality, Jewishness, and freedom.

This narrative of one man's tortured explorations of his past and present is told from the first person point of view, unfolding through a complicated, cause-triggering-effect relationship between past and present, idea and feeling, insight and observation. It begins with the narrator's blunt, serio-comic description of his very Jewish, very controlling, and very frustrating parents, and continues with a graphic and uncompromising description of his obsession with sex in general, and masturbation in particular.

Narration reveals that the teller of these often raucous, frequently ranting, occasionally poignant stories, Alex Portnoy, is in his early thirties, Jewish, highly sexed, and working in what he sees as a successful public life. His contentment with that life, however, is as he describes it seriously undermined by his fear that his sexually rapacious private life is going to be exposed. That private life, he says (as he speaks to his silent psychiatrist), is focused on sex with shiksas—with non-Jewish girls that are, according to the orthodoxy of his conservative Jewish faith, forbidden, which in Alex's mind makes them all that more appealing.

As he recounts his stories of humiliation at the hands of his parents, his increasingly desperate adult relationships with women and his increasingly desperate childhood relationships with girls, Alex's long-suppressed feelings erupt in almost orgasmic explosions of rage, frustration, fear ... and eventually loneliness. His resentments of his Jewish-ness, of his parents' controlling natures and failures, and of his failure to feel at home in the freedom-inspiring America of his dreams all, throughout the course of both his life and the narrative of that life, surge to the surface of his psyche.

Specific memories of specific women form key narrative anchors in the midst of the surging emotion and memory. There is: The Monkey, the non-Jewish Southern girl whose nickname comes from her story of a peculiar sexual act with a banana; Lina, the motherly Catholic prostitute with whom Alex and the Monkey had a three-way sexual encounter; Bubbles, the Italian girl with a picture of Jesus over her sink who gave Alex his first, and completely unsuccessful, sexual experience; Kay and Sarah, a pair of very different all-American girls with whom Alex had separate, equally unsuccessful sexual relationships while in college; and finally there is Naomi, a very Jewish liberal with whom Alex is completely unable to be sexual, and who for him (and for the reader) comes to represent Alex's failure to integrate his identity with his desires and, ultimately, his fundamental human truth.



The book's narrative tends to ramble, with stories told in fragments reaching their conclusions only several pages later. Evocative of Alex Portnoy's equally fragmented state of mind, the narrative nevertheless creates a complete picture, a mosaic of tortured desire, regret, frustration and fear (and the occasional glimpse of joy) that ultimately can be seen as portraying not only the life and experience of a unique individual, but the frustrated desire of anyone striving to break free of restriction.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

"The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met" The narrator (Alex) begins this chapter, and the book, with an outright statement of how obsessed he was with his mother when he was a child (see "Quotes", p. 3). Then, at eloquent, angry, ironic and detailed length, he contrasts his two parents. First he focuses on his perpetually constipated, ambitious, disappointed, disappointing, increasingly embittered father (see "Quotes", p. 8), and recalls an incident in which his father utterly failed at baseball as a particular example of his general failure as a parent and as a human being. He then refers to his superficially perfect, image-obsessed, subconsciously racist, socially competitive mother, with his opinion of her summed up in the narrative of how she steam-sterilized the dishes and cutlery used by their black maid while talking about how generous she (mother) was compared to other employers. He also comments on how she would lock him out of the house every time he did something serious that she did not like. As he narrates his story (see "Quotes", p. 15), his words reveal that he is thirty-three years old, and an Orthodox Jew (his family keeps kosher). His words also reveal that he is speaking to a doctor, that he is highly educated with a large vocabulary, and that he is speaking from a deeply ironic well of bitterness, confusion and frustration with his family (see "Quotes", p. 17).

## Chapter 1 Analysis

In every section of this complicated, multi-layered and richly textured novel, there are foreshadowings, revelations of character, hints of meaning, glimpses of relationship between past and present, and vividly defined slashes of powerful feeling. This chapter is no exception. After the undeniably compelling opening lines, the narrative introduces the central relationships (between Alex and his parents) and simultaneously introduces the central conflict (between Alex's needs and beliefs about himself and his parents'). There are also glimpses of explanation here of why the narrator became who he did in his business life (an advocate for the rights and dignity of the kind of people his mother so obviously despised), and of the novel's repeated equating of bodily function with spiritual condition. In this case, his father's physical constipation equates with his emotional and spiritual constipation—as the narrator himself puts it later, in both ways his father is full of shit.

Also, there are manifestations here of the book's key metaphors. The first equates baseball with freedom, while the second likens Alex being kept "outside" of life by his mother and her attitudes (read: her Jewishness) to later-revealed feelings of being kept "outside" of America (by, among other things, his Jewishness). References to both (baseball and outside-ness) foreshadow developments of the metaphor later in the book.



Finally, the narrative's sense flow is developed here—stream of consciousness, with the narrator's focus/memory moving back and forth between the past of his childhood, the past of his adolescence, and the past of his recent adulthood. Particularly noteworthy in this section is the way the narrative slips back and forth between tenses—his memory of the failed attempt at playing baseball with his father at one point lands onto present tense (ie "I am standing in a baseball field"). This suggests, here and when it takes place throughout the book, that the memories being recounted are not only particularly vivid but particularly important—in other words, they play key roles in the way in which the narrator defines, and/or has defined, himself and his situation.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

"Whacking Off" This chapter introduces Alex's principal concern—his obsession with masturbation (see "Quotes", p. 18). He describes in graphic, comic detail the number of times he masturbated as a child and young adolescent (up to four times a day) and the various ways he masturbated (at school into a urinal, between courses at dinner, wearing his sister's soiled panties over his head). He narrates an occasion when his mother interrupted him masturbating while he was in the bathroom, insisting that he come out and explain to her why he has what she thinks is diarrhea. As they are arguing in the living room, Alex says, his father went into the bathroom and desperately tried (again, and futilely) to move his bowels. Eventually he comes out, Alex's mother collapses in what he (Alex) says are guilt-inducing tears, and his father tells him to do just what she asks. In the middle of this memory, however, Alex tells the doctor he also has plenty of wonderful memories of his parents—in particular, of their summer vacations as a family.

The chapter concludes with Alex's tortured comments that he still masturbates frequently, that he still visits his parents and they still manipulate him into feeling guilty, and that he feels like he is "the son in [a] Jewish joke—only it ain't no joke! Please, who crippled us like this?" he cries out. "Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak?" He begs the doctor for help, suggesting that his guilt-triggered masturbation, or his masturbation-triggering guilt, is in fact a manifestation of his Jewishness (see "Quotes", p. 37).

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Here again several key narrative elements are introduced and/or developed. First and foremost is the repeated equation of bodily function with spiritual condition—in this case, Alex's desperate obsession with sex in general and with masturbation in particular serves as an evocation, here and throughout the novel, of his desperate desire to be free of his parents, their control, and their Jewishness. Secondly, and not unrelatedly, this chapter introduces the narrator's obsession with his Jewish identity—its limitations, its restrictions, its habits and idiosyncrasies, its demands and its occasional joys. A particularly noteworthy element here is his claim that he is living a stereotypical Jewish joke—the ethnically proud father, the smothery mother, the weak and manipulated son. The reference here foreshadows the final lines of the book, which are given in the chapter heading "Punch Line" (in other word, the point of a joke) and which lend an ironic, and even deeper, sense of hopeless desperation to the entire proceeding.

For further consideration of the meaning of the quote on p. 37, see "Themes—Sexuality" and "Themes—Shame"





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

"The Jewish Blues" The first part of this chapter is focused on stories about various body-related incidents in Alex's life. The first is of the strange disappearance of Alex's testicles into his body, a situation which makes Alex wonder if he is turning into a girl but which is successfully treated, Alex says, by a series of hormone shots.

The second is of how Alex's mother suffered a sudden and unexpected onset of her period just as she was koshering (removing the blood from) a piece of meat—specifically, how the blood from the meat and the blood issuing from his mother, both staining the floor in the kitchen, have in effect stained Alex's memory. He recalls the humiliation of being sent to the drugstore by his mother for sanitary napkins, how her frequent menstrual troubles "eventually had to be resolved by surgery"—and how, when he was four years old, he was invited into his mother's bedroom to watch her dress after her bath. As she sang lovingly and playfully to him, "I smell the oil with which she has polished the four gleaming posts of the mahogany bedstead," he says, "where she sleeps with a man who lives with us at night and on Sunday afternoons." The third body-related story is of Alex's regular visits to a steam-bath with his father, visits when he saw, as he describes it, his father's wrinkled scrotum, large testicles, and large "shlong", to which he compares his own little "thing" (as his mother calls it, doing so publicly on one embarrassingly recalled occasion).

This recollection leads Alex into a memory of how his parents, just before the outbreak of World War II, moved from New York (where they lived in a non-Jewish neighborhood and were subject to anti-Semitic taunts) to a fully Jewish neighborhood in New Jersey, where they shared a house with Uncle Hymie, Aunt Clara, and their two children. Alex speaks at length of his father's resentment of the more successful Hymie, his own resentment of his athletically successful cousin Heshie, and of the family's resentment that Heshie was dating a shikse (a blond, blue eyed, non-Jewish girl). He (Alex) writes of how Hymie lied to and paid off the girl to leave Heshie alone, how Hymie and Heshie physically fought over what happened, how Heshie capitulated to his father and how he (Heshie) then ran off to join the army, where he was eventually killed. This leads Alex to recall a vicious argument he had with his father shortly after his (Alex's) bar mitzvah (see "Objects/Places") in which he (Alex) shouted that he did not believe in God or in the Jewish religion. Alex explains that the argument arose partly because he was fed up with his father's failures, partly because he did not want to be a weakling like Heshie, and partly over worry over his mother, in hospital for a hysterectomy which everyone thought was the result of cancer, which nobody openly spoke about but everybody feared.

Alex's narrative of a brief, guilt-ridden visit to his mother in the hospital leads to an extended, ecstatic narration of his love of, and joy in playing, baseball (see "Quotes", p. 69). "Oh to be a center fielder," he cries out, "a center fielder—and nothing more!" This



recollection returns Alex to further contemplations of religion, focused here on his negative opinion of the rabbi who came to visit his mother—Rabbi Warshaw, regarded by the people he leads as a great man but who, according to Alex, is pompous, self-important, and stinky with cigarette smoke. This, in turn, leads to an extended rant-like section in which Alex protests the patronizing, discriminatory, hypocritical way Jews treat non-Jews, and cries out that he is more than just Jewish (see "Quotes", p. 76). The chapter concludes with a narration of a tearful conversation Alex has with his sister Hannah about being a Jew, and how lucky he is to be an American Jew rather than a European one who probably would have been exterminated by the Nazis. "She sheds her tears," Alex says, "for six million, or so I think, while I shed mine only for myself. Or so I think."

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The first element to note about this chapter is the way it explores Alex's ongoing metaphorical relationship with the physical. The disappearance of his testicle, for example, could possibly be seen as a manifestation of what he feels throughout the novel is a lack of manhood. His relationship to his father's body can also be interpreted from this perspective. There is the sense throughout the narrative that Alex, in spite of his sexual hunger still sees himself as having a "tiny little thing" that cannot ever measure up to his father's. Meanwhile, Alex's relationship to his mother's body, inappropriately intimate as it may seem to a contemporary reader, can be seen as a symbolic representation of how unbearably intimate and pervasively troubling sexuality, Jewishness, and mother-love can all be.

The second noteworthy element here is the inclusion of references to Alex's cousin Heshie. There are several important points here. The first is the introduction of shiksas and their symbolic representation of freedom and pleasure. The second is the narrative of Heshie's death, which can be seen as directly linked to his father's manipulative insistence that he lead a Jewish life (or at least this seems to be how Alex intends the story to be seen). This interpretation can in turn be seen as adding another layer of meaning to Alex's identification with his cousin (see Chapter 6 Analysis). In deliberately and defiantly not living the kind of "Jewish life" he is evidently expected to live, Alex is defiantly not dying in the way Heshie did—in other words, Heshie was forced to "live Jewish", as it were, and died. Alex is deliberately not "living Jewish", and therefore is in his own mind truly living. This theory is supported by Alex's claim at the end of Chapter 6 that while he lived, he lived big. While there is an element of bravado and over-compensation in this claim, a sense that he is trying to convince everyone (himself, Dr. Spielvogel, the reader, his family, the world) that he has made the right choices, his claim nevertheless evokes his core self-belief that he is bound and determined to live his own life on his own terms.

The third important element in this chapter is the development of the baseball metaphor—that is, baseball as freedom. This image appears throughout the novel, but never more vividly than here and in the beginning of Chapter 6, in which Alex's fond memories of a ritual Sunday baseball game between men of his community suggests that there is



more potential for joy in being Jewish than he thought. The final important element here is Hannah's tearful comments to Alex about American vs. European Jews. This is important because it is virtually the only time that the Jewish Holocaust is even mentioned in the novel, despite the fact that Alex's childhood and youth all take place within the context of the war years. For further consideration of this aspect of the novel see "Style—Setting".



# Chapter 4, Part 1

## Chapter 4, Part 1 Summary

"Cunt Crazy" This chapter opens with Alex's brief but intensely graphic description of how, at the age of fifteen, he masturbated on a commuter bus on the way home from a lobster dinner with friends. He wonders to the doctor what made him do it—his obsession with sex, his obsession with shiksas (one of which he sat next to on the bus) or the gushing sense of freedom he felt (see "Quotes", p. 79) after eating lobster for the first time—lobster being one of the taboo foods according to Orthodox Jewish food laws. Contemplation of the laws leads to another rant-like section (of which there are several in this chapter), this time focused on what he sees as the foolishness of those laws. This rant leads, in turn, to the comment that "such a creature" has never been cooked in his kosher home, which then leads to a recollection of how very little that was not Jewish was even allowed in the home. A vivid exception, Alex says, was the shiksa, Anne McAffery, his father brought home from the office for "a real Jewish meal," as Anne herself called it. Alex's description of that night includes recollections that everything served was pointedly described with the adjective "Jewish," and also includes conjecture on Alex's part about whether his father and Anne were having an affair. He recalls how the evening ended with a huge fight over ... what, he does not exactly recall. He wonders whether it might have been the possible affair (in which case his mother would have been yelling at his father) or whether it was because he (Alex) ate his sister's chocolate pudding (in which case his mother would have been yelling at him). Alex notes that he cannot remember what was the reason for the yelling, only the yelling (and disapproval) itself.

After his angry contemplation of the argument, Alex's attention returns to lobster—specifically, to the story his melodramatic mother told and re-told and re-told of how she was manipulated into eating lobster at a banquet and how she vomited for hours once she was told what she had eaten. He comments on his mother's belief that she is a rebel (see "Quotes", p. 93), on how many grievances and hatreds he has, and recalls the suicide of a young man about his own age (Ronald Nimkin) shortly after the family's arrival in New Jersey. Alex rants about how Nimkin's mother always wondered how her son could have done that to her, without ever asking what she had done to make her son do that to himself. He complains that he, like all other Jewish sons (see "Quotes", p. 118), lives every day cursed by their mothers' high expectations, particularly for raising a family—and then goes off on an extended, near-hysterical rant about the reason why he has not started a family ... his obsession with, as he puts it, "cunt."

## Chapter 4, Part 1 Analysis

The first noteworthy element about this chapter is its title—specifically, the word "cunt," used extensively throughout the narrative to describe female genitalia. "Cunt" is often viewed as a particularly offensive slang word, used not only to describe female genitalia



but also women who are controlling, selfish or just plain mean. For that reason, there is the sense throughout the book that the term is used so frequently and so vividly to express the narrator's essentially misogynistic character—his fundamental disrespect for women. By reducing them to their genitalia, that in the crudest possible common terms, sexual and emotional, he is in essence reducing their value, perceiving them and relating to them solely as a means of selfish, fearful sexual gratification. It is interesting to consider the layers of meaning in the title. On one level it functions to describe the author's sexual attitude—he is, as he himself suggests, crazy when it comes to his pursuit of sex with women. On another level, the title can be seen of his overall state of being—he is crazy because of the "cunts" (the controlling, manipulative women) in his life.

The second noteworthy element here is the metaphoric relationship between lobster and shiksas—both are apparently forbidden, both are indulged in on the side, and both are supposed to make the person who partakes of them at least unwell, at most a bad Jew. This idea is supported by the story of Alex's mother and the lobster, which on a symbolic level might be seen as a retelling of the story of Heshie and the shikse (Chapter 3). According to the Orthodox Jews in the family, both Heshie and Alex's mother are made ill, either literally or metaphorically, by their indulging in something that they are not supposed to. The difference, of course, is that Alex's mother buys into the rules, where Heshie (and eventually Alex) rejects them. The idea might even be developed further in the story of Alex's father and Anne McAfferey, in that family life is, on some level, made unwell by even the suspicion of an extra-marital, shiske-oriented relationship.

The third noteworthy element here is the Ronald Nimkin story which, like the Heshie story, can be seen as an example of the kind of life and death Alex is determined to avoid but which he is afraid he is caught up in. The reference to the story here foreshadows developments later in the chapter, when the pathetic contents of the suicide note are revealed, and also later in the novel, as Alex again and again strives to break free from the influence of his mother, whom he sees as potentially as damaging as Ronald Nimkin's mother.



## Chapter 4 Part 2

### Chapter 4 Part 2 Summary

"Cunt Crazy", continued. Alex describes at length the nature of his obsession, how he experiences his numerous sexual affairs of various lengths, and how much more fair it is to live this way (by responding freely to his sexual desires) rather than putting some poor woman through the torture of an eventually unloving, inevitably unfaithful marriage. "And doctor, your honor, whatever your name is," Alex says, "it seems to make no difference how much the poor bastard actually gets, for he is dreaming about tomorrow's pussy even while pumping away at today's!" He refers specifically to a woman he calls The Monkey ("a nickname that derives from a little perversion she once engaged in shortly before meeting me and going on to grander things ...") and to how The Monkey erupted in wounded fury when he told her he was ending their relationship instead of marrying her.

Alex then returns his attention to his parents, describing his humiliation when he took them out to dinner at a fancy restaurant before a trip to Europe, humiliation that resulted from his mother talking to and about him like he was still a little boy. His narration reveals that he has just been appointed "Assistant Commissioner for the City of New York Commission on Human Opportunity", how frustrated he is that the prestige of his appointment does not seem to be enough for his parents, and how even more frustrated he is that they still want to run his life. He refers to their insistence that he needs to get a new rug for his apartment, warning him that the old one is so worn that he could easily trip and re-injure his knee, a prospect that leads them (and Alex) to remember when he had his leg in a cast all the way up to his hip. Alex speaks of a fight he had with his parents when he was putting them into a cab for home, and how his mother urged him to kiss his father, since "a kiss from you would change the world." Alex describes his infuriated, frustrated response (see "Quotes", p. 111), complains of how his parents are always complaining both about how he is not as successful as Hannah's husband and about the way Hannah's husband is trying to dictate how he (Alex's father) should talk to his grandchildren.

The fight between Alex and his parents climaxes when Alex does not give his parents any contact information. As his mother and father try to guilt him into giving them that information, Alex recalls how as a child on school mornings he always found his father in the bathroom trying to have a bowel movement, how his father was always comically frank about his blocked bowels, and how his father is literally and figuratively "full of shit". Alex's attention then returns to his present, and in his narration of the fight at the taxi cab he rants about how his father and mother worried about what would happen if his father died while he was in Europe (on holiday with The Monkey, on the trip when they broke up) and no-one could get hold of him. As he comments on his parents' attempts to guilt him, he reveals the contents of Ronald Nimkin's suicide note—a reminder to his mother of what she is supposed to take to a party with her friends. This, in turn, leads him to recall another fight at home between him and his parents, during



which he bit and kicked his mother in a desperate attempt to get her (and his father) to leave him alone. He recalls with derisive irony how she, and her other Jewish-mother friends all described themselves as being "too good" in spite of what they saw as being "kicked in the teeth" for it, and rants that all his psychological problems (including his excessive masturbation) are the result of his having been constrained by her rules and inhibitions all his life. (see "Quotes", p. 124). The final argument in this particular rant is that it could all be much worse—he could be gay. "The mystery," he says, "really is not that I'm not dead like Ronald Nimkin, but that I'm not ... sharing a house at Ocean Beach with somebody in eye makeup named Sheldon." He writes that lots of boys in his situation have grown up to be exactly that kind of man, and that if she thought it was hard keeping down the lobster, imagine how hard it would have been to keep from throwing up Sheldon's béarnaise sauce.

## Chapter 4 Part 2 Analysis

The most important element of this section of Chapter 4 is its interweaving of distant past, more immediate past, and present. The narrative here is more intensely stream-of-consciousness than anywhere else in the book, as not only Alex's memory but his intense feelings all move back and forth, through peaks and valleys of anger and bitterness. In some ways this section is the climax of the book to this point—the passionate force, or the forceful passion of his resentment, frustration and fear is never more vividly, or accessibly present. It is important to note, however, that two new aspects of his experience become apparent. The first is his tendency to rationalization, his explaining away of his feelings and attitudes. This tendency becomes apparent in his explanation to the doctor of why his attitude towards sex is much healthier than the so-called traditional one. It is also important to note the "slip of the tongue" that Alex makes when he refers to the doctor essentially as "your honor". This reveals that on some level, he feels that he is on trial, desperately defending himself and his way of being.

The second new aspect of Alex's experience that becomes apparent in this chapter, particularly as the result of his apparent intensity of emotion, is the sense that for the first time, he can be seen as covering up a much deeper feeling, the true core of all his rants and cries for help—a profound, looming sense of loneliness. He wants to be recognized for who and what he is (a man with his own identity and desires) for who and what he has accomplished (reached a position of considerable status). It is this cry for recognition and respect that gives the character a universal appeal that transcends both Jewishness and his occasionally off-putting obsession with sex. He is, ultimately, the same as everyone else—a lonely human being yearning, scratching and clawing, to be free, independent, and loved.

There are two important instances of foreshadowing in this section. The reference to the broken leg foreshadows the story in Chapter 4, Part 4 of how he broke the leg—coming off a skating rink while asking a shikse for a date. The references to The Monkey foreshadow the important role she plays later in the narrative in bringing Alex's self-struggles to a point of crisis.





The final point to consider about this section of the book is the commentary at the end of the chapter about how awful it would be, worse than anything, if Alex was gay. The first thing to note here is that the novel was written in the late 1960's when, in spite of the recent and ongoing sexual revolution of the time, beliefs about gay men were little more than stereotypical. The second thing to note here is that in the context of Orthodox Jewish beliefs, a man has to father children in order to fulfill his personal and spiritual destiny. Gay men cannot do that, which meant that a gay Jewish man was simply not a man, and definitely not the kind of man that a Jewish mother like Alex's could be proud of (perhaps an awareness of his disappointing homosexuality drove the sensitive and artistic Ronald Nimkin to suicide?) Alex's patronizing and dismissive attitudes towards gay men can be seen as an expression of his determination to really be the kind of man he is supposed to be—the kind of man who not only conquers women sexually and emotionally, but is also strong enough to not be a mama's boy. The irony, of course, is that that's exactly what he is—a heterosexual mama's boy with serious issues, but a mama's boy nevertheless.





## Chapter 4 Part 3

### Chapter 4 Part 3 Summary

"Cunt Crazy", continued. At the beginning of this section Alex's memory (and narration) returns to the masturbation incident on the bus, where he narrates in intimate, aching detail how he covers his lap with his coat, worries about getting caught by the "Polack" bus driver (see "Quotes, p. 127), and describes his two-finger-and-thumb technique. "Who wins an argument with a hard-on?" he asks rhetorically. Recollections of his technique lead to recollections of other public occasions when he has used it, such as his underage visit to a burlesque show in New York. He narrates this visit in equally intimate, equally painful detail, describing the fantasies that play in front of his mind's eye as he masturbates, ejaculates into his baseball glove—and watches another, older man ejaculate into his hat. He writes of his shame after his orgasm, recalling his stellar high-school record and his already burgeoning career as an activist for the disadvantaged. Suddenly, he remembers how his mother taught him "to piss standing up," a story which he says might be the clue to his entire situation—when he was little, he says, she stood him in front of the toilet and tickled the underside of his penis to make him urinate. He says he is unable to urinate if there is another man nearby, and then says while he is confessing his deepest truths, he admits to taking home a prostitute to engage in a threesome with him and The Monkey, and then to masturbating with the aid of a piece of fresh liver, which he later ate. "Now you know the worst thing I have ever done," Alex says. "I fucked my own family's dinner."

A moment later (in narrative terms) Alex suggests that if The Monkey is to be believed, the worst things he has ever done in his life were to her—abandoning her in Greece, and making her indulge in that threesome. Alex describes the circumstances before and after the threesome (with an Italian prostitute named Lina), as well as the activities during the threesome, with described in intimate, frenzied detail—and then describes the angry Monkey's screaming accusations of hypocrisy and manipulation that led them to split up.

His thoughts of The Monkey lead Alex to consider the other shikse's in his life—particularly the ones who first made him become aware of shikse beauty and attractiveness when he was a little boy, learning how to skate at Christmas. He rants about the foolishness of non-Jews about Christmas, and about how he fears he will never get what he wants from them because he is so obviously, thoroughly Jewish. This leads him to an angry, resentful contemplation of the shape and size of his nose, which in turn leads him to the defensive-sounding claim that his desire for shiksas is no different than the desire of other Jewish boys—or, for that matter, of shiksas for those boys. He cites the marriage-minded Monkey as an example.



## Chapter 4 Part 3 Analysis

In this section of the book, more than anywhere else, Alex comes across as almost anti-Semitic—not only self-hating, but Jew-hating. Yes, his resentments of Jewishness in general and his own Jewishness in particular are paralleled with negative commentary on the foolish behaviors of Christians, an example of how the book might in fact be considered anti-religion in general. The fact remains, however, that his resentments of the faith and the ethnicity that have so thoroughly defined who he is are so vividly vitriolic that the question of anti-Semitism can reasonably be raised.

Another noteworthy element of this section is how the cringe-inducing narrative of how Alex's mother taught him to urinate juxtaposes with the reference to the "Polack" bus driver (see "Quotes", p. 127), defining both as examples of how Alex's parents, at least in his own mind, damaged his psyche. Yet another important element here is the narrative of the story of The Monkey, which the author clearly sees as a manifestation of Alex's core problem—his inability to function healthily with women. The author makes this point structurally, in that Alex reveals this deeper layer of what happened with The Monkey late in the novel—in other words, layers of both the truths of what happened and the meanings of those truths are peeled away one by one, like layers of an onion, to reveal the core despair beneath. It is interesting to note in this context that Alex does not reveal The Monkey's real name until later in the narrative—a truth he is not yet ready to reveal because he is still seeing The Monkey as an object and seeing what happened between them in impersonal, "cunt-ish" terms. Only later in the narrative (Chapter 5 Part 1), when he reveals how the relationship between them became something more emotionally intimate, does he give her a name.

Finally, the references to learning to skate with shiksas again foreshadow the story in Chapter 4 Part 4 of how he broke his leg.



## Chapter 4 Part 4

### Chapter 4 Part 4 Summary

"Cunt Crazy", conc. This section begins with a continuation of Alex's narration of The Monkey's life story—how she was raised poor in the southern United States, how she became the mistress of a much older Frenchman, how he bought her expensive gifts and quality dental care, and how she eventually left him when his perversions became too extreme. He also describes her encounter with a married couple who wanted her to watch and eat a banana while they were making love—later, however, The Monkey confesses that it was she who wanted the banana. Alex also describes how subsequent relationships all went bad, until she met him—in her mind, Alex suggests, he was her savior, her future husband and breadwinner. He describes in crude, intimate detail how they picked each other up on the street, had sex right away, and how she eventually started opening her mind (and not just her legs) for him. This recollection leads Alex's memory to return to learning to skate so he could meet young shiksies, and how his efforts to ask one for a date ended up with him breaking a leg and having to wear a cast (a circumstance foreshadowed in Chapter 4, Part 2).

Remembrance of this particular shikse leads Alex to recall another—Bubbles, an Italian girl who, according to Alex's bad boy friends Smolka and Mandel, gave boys like them everything they wanted sexually whenever they wanted it. Alex's stream-of-consciousness memories of the boys' encounter with Bubbles (his first sexual experience with a girl) include comically horrified imaginings of what would happen if he caught syphilis from her and recollections of his adult encounters with the grown Mandel and Smolka (both of whom have successful careers and marriages). He also has a vivid memory of a (to Alex ridiculous) photo of Jesus above Bubbles' sink, a remembrance leading in turn to a comment on how ridiculous and oppressive he finds non-Jewish religion, commentary which leads him to recall how his growing social consciousness found a purpose through the leadership and influence of his future brother-in-law Morty. After these diversions, Alex's narrative returns to the scene with the boys and Bubbles, who at first refuses to have anything to do with any of them but changes her mind and says she will masturbate just one. Alex describes how he wins a coin toss, submits to Bubbles' attempts to masturbate him, and only manages to ejaculate when he takes over and does it himself. His "jizzum," he writes, sprays all over the furniture and into his eye, causing him extreme pain, causing Bubbles to lose her temper, and Mandel and Smolka to laugh hysterically. Later, Alex writes, Mandel told him that Bubbles changed her mind again and performed oral sex on him. Alex writes, with what seems to be increasing hysteria, of his desperation to know the details of what happened. "How does she come," he cries. "What is it like! Before I go out of my head, I have to know what it's like!"



## Chapter 4 Part 4 Analysis

The peeling away of onion-like layers of fact and truth about The Monkey and her relationship with Alex continues in this section, as he reveals some of what made her the lonely, angry human being that she is. A noteworthy element here is the banana story—the narrative never explicitly indicates it, but the story of The Monkey watching the couple and eating a banana could very well be the origin of her name - the little "perversion" referred to in Chapter 4 Part 2.

Meanwhile, the juxtaposition in this chapter between the story of The Monkey, the story of the broken leg, and the story of Bubbles is an interesting one. For a start, all three stories involve shiksas, in all three the female figures are portrayed as objects of desire (as opposed to real human beings), and Alex's experiences with all three end painfully. On one level, these parallels can be seen as manifesting the deeply ingrained belief that for a Jewish boy, relations with a non-Jewish girl are simply wrong. On another level, they can also be seen as manifesting Alex's personal belief that women/girls are simply objects—or, to use his own expression, simply "cunt." It is important to note here, however, the moment at the end of the chapter when Alex cries out that he wants to understand how women's sexuality works. There is the sense that his recollections of these painful incidents in his life are finally leading him to understand how empty his attitudes towards women are, and how much he needs to grow as a human being himself.



# Chapter 5 Part 1

## Chapter 5 Part 1 Summary

"The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" After a brief commentary on how bad, and illiterate, The Monkey's handwriting is, and after a similarly brief commentary on how he is reading Freud (see "Characters"), looking for insight into his condition, Alex narrates a weekend trip he took with The Monkey. He describes how they drove through the beautiful scenery of Vermont with the voices of his parents anxiously shouting in his ears that he should be careful not to roll his car and not to get involved with a shikse. He also describes how they both began to feel something other than their usual raw sexual desire, how he started teaching The Monkey how to understand poetry, and how she responded with intellectualized sexual excitement. "Eat my educated cunt," he describes her as saying.

On their way home, The Monkey starts fantasizing about a life together in the country, but the mood is broken when Alex comments on how nice it has been to not have heard "the hillbilly routine." She takes this as a huge insult and loses her temper, but then says she wants to have a real relationship with her. Alex describes how he was tempted, but adds that that temptation faded when she admitted that she had once (at least once, in Alex's mind) been a prostitute. This leads Alex to worry what his family and his public might say if they found out the truth about his desires (see "Quotes", p. 201), and to imagine a revised bar mitzvah, at which the rabbi praises him for his successes but then berates him for his foul sexual desires. They are, he writes, "the perfect couple. She puts the id back in Yid, I put the oy back in goy."

Alex's doubts about his relationship with The Monkey (whose name is now revealed to be Mary Jane Reed) reach a climax when he arrives to take her to a high-class dinner with the Mayor and discovers that not only has she not read more than three pages of one of the books he has given her—she is dressed completely inappropriately. She senses his disapproval, and on their way to the Mayor's she berates him for his "Hebe" judgmental-ness. At the Mayor's home, Alex says, he strove to reassure her and she strove for comfort, performing oral sex on him in the garden. Alex writes that for the rest of the evening she behaved impeccably, and then describes one of her sexually audacious fantasies from childhood—performing oral sex on a group of soldiers up for promotion, with the soldier who maintained an unemotional face during orgasm being the one who received the honor.

## Chapter 5 Part 1 Analysis

The first thing to note about this section is the continued un-layering of the truth about Alex's relationship with for The Monkey, as his narrative reveals how they started to connect on a non-physical level. Another manifestation of their deepening relationship is the revelation in the narrative of The Monkey's true name—she is, in short, becoming



more of a human being ... and therefore more frightening. The second important element, however, draws a stark contrast to this deepening—The Monkey's reference to her "cunt," with the use of the word suggesting that on some level she feels the same way about herself (she is a mere sexual object) as Alex feels about her. This theory is supported by the chapter's final image, The Monkey's dream/fantasy about sexually servicing a squad of non-reactive soldiers. This suggests that on some level she wants to be seen not only as just a sexual object, but as someone to whom men do not react. There is poignancy here, on two levels. The first is that in spite of her beliefs about herself she does seem to be making at least some effort to improve, to reach out, to grow, to be something more. The second, however, is that her tiptoeing emergence from her objectification, from her "cunt-ness," is exactly what frightens Alex away. For him, she cannot be a human being—this is why he does what he does with Lina, setting her (The Monkey) up as a sexual object and attempting to return her to what she, and he, both see as her true, limited self.

It is important to note the differing chronologies here. In terms of the sequence of events, Alex and The Monkey meet, they develop a sexual relationship, they go to Vermont (where their relationship deepens), and then they go to Europe, where Alex in effect sabotages the relationship by manipulating The Monkey into being a sexual object. However, in terms of narrative chronology, in terms of Alex's journey to the center of the truth about himself, the Vermont story comes last—in other words, the feelings and situations in Vermont are, for him, at the core or the center of his experience, his problem, and his reasons for seeing the doctor.



## Chapter 5 Part 2

### Chapter 5 Part 2 Summary

"The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", continued. This section of Chapter 5 contains narratives of two important relationships Alex had with shiksas during his college years. The first was with a girl named Kay Campbell, with whom Alex campaigned for the Democrats (and was impressed with her tact and intellect) and with whom Alex went to Iowa for Thanksgiving instead of back home to New Jersey. Alex narrates the trip in comic yet tragic detail—how he discovered a whole new way of open, friendly talking when he was with Kay's family (see "Quotes", p. 221), and how he was terrified the entire time that they would ask him to leave because he is so obviously Jewish. He narrates how at first he took extra care to make sure his Jewishness was not contaminated (by, for example, squeezing away toothpaste that might have touched the non-Jewish brush of a Campbell), but how he realized that there was not as much to be afraid of as he thought. He also writes of the angry, fearful, guilt-inducing reaction of his parents when he told them he was not going to New Jersey (telling them he was going with his friend Bill rather than with Kay). He says that sixteen years later, he is still feeling guilty—for hurting his family and for not being what he knows they consider successful (big house, big salary, several children). Alex describes Kay as earthy, common-sense, and unfailingly honest. This latter characteristic, he says, came to the forefront when they planned to marry because they thought Kay was pregnant, and she said outright that she had no reason to consider converting (to Judaism). This, Alex indicates, led him to become disappointed in her and eventually to leave the relationship—surprised, he says, because he thought he was above that kind of thinking.

The second shiksa with whom Alex became involved was Sarah Abbot Mulsby, a blond, aristocratic, conservative graduate from New England. He comments negatively on her "cutesy wootsy" vocabulary and her relative lack of sexual experience before admitting that he was with her because for him she represented America—and therefore his desire to belong (see "Quotes", p 235). He describes this perspective as wanting to have sex with "The cunt in country-tis-of-thee!" and says he "pledge[s] allegiance to the twat of the United States of America ..." and says Sarah Mulsby was the embodiment of the America he wanted to be part of. He says their relationship failed partly because of her inability or unwillingness to perform oral sex on him, and partly because he realized he could never really love her.

### Chapter 5 Part 2 Analysis

This section of the book is, in some ways, a climax. As Alex himself indicates, his narration of his relationships with Kay and Sarah leads him (and, by extension, the reader) to an understanding of himself—his attitudes, his motivations, and his failings. In short, the narrative is drawing close to the core of the onion-layered truth at the heart of Alex's experiences—of being Jewish (he is neither as different nor as free of his



religion's teachings as he thought) but most importantly of wanting sex with non-Jewish women (for further consideration of this aspect of Alex's experience see "Themes—Sexuality"). Ultimately, the symbology of the end of his relationship with Sarah is more telling than the actual event. Given the previously discussed metaphoric link between the freedom of America and the freedom symbolized (for Alex) by sex with non-Jews, Sarah's unwillingness to perform oral sex suggests that America (which, as Alex says, is represented by non-Jewish women in general and Sarah in particular) will, for Alex, never be as free for him as he dreams. This, in turn, leads to his equally painful, and equally telling, realization that he will therefore never really be able to love America in the way he desperately desires to—in the way that, he believes, will ultimately result in freedom from his Jewishness. This discovery of the futility of his dreams is what sends Alex into the exile of the next, and final, chapter in his story.





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

"In Exile" This chapter begins with Alex's joyful, humorous description of a Sunday morning ritual in his neighborhood—several men from the Jewish community would gather to play baseball. Families and friends, Alex writes, and other men (including his father) would gather to watch the game, which Alex describes as simultaneously playful and deadly serious. He says he has fantasies of being part of that life—playing baseball, going home to dinner, spending the evening with family and friends, earning a living during the week. This memory, he adds, suddenly came to him while on a plane on its way to land in Israel (see "Quotes", p. 244) as he fled from his confrontation with The Monkey, terrified that he had contracted a venereal disease from Lina.

Alex then describes the first few days of his visit to Israel—his tours of the large cities, of the holy sites, the mountains—and his constant, and constantly surprising, awareness that he is in a place where everyone is Jewish. He narrates his attempt to have sex with a female Israeli soldier, an attempt that ends in failure—"Doctor," he says, "I couldn't get it up in the State of Israel! How's that for symbolism?" He then describes his second attempt, with a hearty, earthy girl named Naomi, who physically resembles his mother but in her ideological and political beliefs resembles Kay Campbell. She lectures him on the decadence and systemic flaws of American society—"All that is malignant in human character," she says, "is nourished by the system ... your system is basically exploitive, inherently debasing and unjust ... there can never be anything resembling genuine equality in such an environment." Her passion, her Jewish-ness, and her intellect all combine to make Alex blurt out that he loves her, wants to marry her, and wants to have children with her. "Every shtunk with a picture window has children," he says. "Why not me? I carry the family name!"

When Naomi refuses to marry him and tries to leave, Alex blurts out that he wants to have sex with her and attempts to force her into it. Naomi forcefully pushes him away, asking why he hates himself so much and is always making jokes about himself. She talks about how he is the result of the most shameful aspect of being a member of "The Diaspora" (a non-Israeli Jew)—frightened, defensive, corrupt. Alex again tries to have sex with her, this time forcing her to the ground and counting himself lucky that he inherited his cousin Heshie's weight set and had worked out so much. As he recounts this part of the story, he strenuously denies that there is anything Oedipal (see "Characters—Oedipus") about his attempts to have sex with this woman who looks so much like his mother. He also recounts how his forceful efforts eventually lessen Naomi's resistance, but he finds himself again unable to achieve an erection. She says he should go home. He taunts her with her self-righteousness, saying she should take him back to her kibbutz (commune) and teach him how to be both a man and a Jew. She again says he should go back home, and turns to leave. He begs to perform oral sex on her—"I know," he says, "I can still do that." Naomi kicks him in the chest and



goes, leaving him a whimpering pile on the floor, alone with his memories "which [he] won't relinquish—or which won't relinquish him!"

Alex then imagines himself being put on trial and being convicted for the indignities he forced on The Monkey, shouting out in his defense that there are far worse indignities performed everywhere, everyday. "The things that other men do," he cries out, "and get away with! And with never a second thought ... the lying, the scheming, the bribing, the thieving—the larceny, Doctor, conducted without batting an eye ... the total moral indifference!" He angrily suggests that what he did to The Monkey is nothing in the great scheme of things, adding that the "disproportion of guilt" makes him want to scream! He cries out that maybe that is what he needs, "a pure howl" of rage and frustration. He imagines police officers coming after him and himself shouting in defiance that "at least while [he] lived, [he] lived big!

The chapter ends with what is clearly intended to be a long, drawn out howl.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The first element to note about this section is its continuation of two key recurring metaphorical motifs. The first is that of "baseball as freedom," developed here in what might reasonably be defined as a surprising way. In this specific baseball game, Alex sees, unusually, freedom and joy in being Jewish. Freedom from what? From the torturous struggle to be non-Jewish, a struggle manifested in his increasingly desperate sexual activities. Further, here can be seen development of the second metaphorical motif, "bodily function as spiritual metaphor." Not only has his desperate non-Jewish sexuality become a spiritual prison from which community baseball and a "traditional" Jewish life can be seen as freedom. His fear that he has caught a venereal disease can be seen as representing his fear that he has been emotionally and spiritually contaminated by his sexual activities.

The second key element here is the chapter's shift in geographical setting from America to Israel—from a place of spiritual and emotional isolation to a place of core spiritual/emotional community, from a place of rampant sexuality to a place of rampant impotence, from a place of rejection of roots to a place of searching for and embracing of those roots. It is important to note here that Israel, and Alex's experiences there, are not defined as a solution, but rather as a complication and continuation of the core problem—Alex's sexual, emotional, spiritual, and ethnic identity.

The third key element here is the parallels drawn between Alex's sexual experiences with the two women in Israel (the Soldier and Naomi) and the two women in America in the previous chapter (Kay and Sarah). On the most obvious level, the latter relationships are at least in some ways sexually successful, while the former are complete sexual failures. On another level, it is interesting to consider in this light what these two sets of relationships represent. Specifically, the failure of the Jew-to-Jew sexual relationships can be seen as representing Alex's failure to spiritually and emotionally reconcile with his own Jewishness, since he has been so focused on uniting



sexually with what he perceives as non-Jewish, non-threatening, freedom-enhancing America. On a third level, there is the point that Alex himself raises—the looming, sexually and emotionally dominant image of his mother, which to him represents control. Both the Soldier and Naomi are strong, dominant women—could this mean that a core component of Alex's misogynistic sexuality is the desire for women whom he can control? However, consider Kay and Sarah, neither of whom could ultimately be controlled. Here again is a still deeper layer of onion-like truth.

Finally, there is a sharply comic irony in this chapter, in that Alex's story and his search for the emotional and spiritual truth at the core of his experience of life reaches a narrative climax within pages, paragraphs, of his apparent inability to reach a sexual climax with Naomi. In other words, his emotional howl at the end comes across as being the right kind of climax, the sort he has sought all his life ... the ultimate howl of desperate loneliness at the core of everything he is and has been.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

"Punch Line" "'So', said the doctor. "Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Here the narrative plays out its final irony. The doctor's line is, as the chapter heading indicates, the punch line of what Alex has described from the beginning as his "Jewish joke" of a life. Yet, it contains a profound truth—at the core of an individual's onion-like layered truth, the only option is to rebuild, to create new layers of truth and experience (genuine this time) on the individual's core needs. The end of this journey is in fact the beginning, of a layering process that, in an oyster and over a long period of time, constructs a pearl.



# Characters

## Alex Portnoy

Alex is the book's central character and its narrator. He describes himself as being in his early thirties, with dark features and a prominent nose. Publicly he is a successful socio-political advocate for the disadvantaged—blacks, the poor, the ghettoized, for example. Privately, he is obsessed with sex—he masturbates frequently, engages in anonymous sexual encounters, never stays in relationships for longer than a few weeks at a time, and in those relationships he does stay in he becomes, to varying degrees, emotionally abusive. He sees this behavior as self-degrading and contradictory to his public persona and function, and worries over what might happen if word of who he is privately becomes public. Alex is also obsessed, and in a very angry way, with his Jewish-ness, with what being a Jew seems to mean both within and outside of the Jewish socio-spiritual community in which he grew up. He feels isolated from the larger world and conflicted because he knows he is supposed to feel protected by his faith and by the society that arises from that faith, but instead feels stifled, judged, and judgmental. Finally, he is obsessed with his over-protective, too-close-for comfort mother and is aware that many of his problems as an adult (the tension between his public/private lives, his strange sexual/relationship practices, his conflicted Jewish-ness) are related, directly or indirectly, to his intense love/hate relationship with her. The book's narrative consists of Alex's often rant-like stream of consciousness attempts to sort through all these interrelated aspects of his life in order to reconcile these apparently conflicting facets of his personality and live as a relatively whole, relatively contented human being.

## Alex's Mother (Sophie)

Alex's mother is the book's dominant female presence. As a home-maker she is portrayed as house proud, gossipy, domestically competitive, and subtly racist. As a mother she is depicted as over-present, over-protective, and emotionally manipulative—she might, in fact, be perceived, by Jewish and non-Jewish readers alike, as a caricature of "the Jewish mother," over-involved in the life of her son to the extent that her influence is damaging rather than nurturing. This over-involvement runs the gamut from tight control over what he wears and eats and studies in school, to attempted control over what he feels (and particularly what girls he develops feelings for), to an uncomfortable physical intimacy. This last aspect of their relationship is perhaps the most significant, to Alex's character and to the book as a whole. His mother seems to have, for example, no concerns about dressing in front of him, seems to be obsessed with how his bowels function, and in what is perhaps the book's most disconcerting images, manipulates her young son's penis in order to help him urinate. It is certainly clear that in Alex's perception, his mother is the source of most (if not all) of his sexual, emotional, and inter-relational dysfunction. The point must be made, however, that the portrayals of all the non-Alex characters in the book emerge through the perceptions and words of the central character, whose belief systems and troubled history are all



evident, and who therefore cannot be considered a truly objective narrator. In other words, Alex's mother and all the other characters are portrayed subjectively, from the perspective of the narrator's agenda (see "Questions" and "Point of View").

## Alex's Father (Jake)

According to Alex's portrayal of him, his father is a somewhat less damaging and controlling influence than his mother, but from Alex's point of view has inflicted his share of emotional and psychological harm. Physically absent for much of Alex's life (he is described, at one point, as a stranger who came to stay every weekend) and suffering from chronic constipation (see "Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis"), he is seen by Alex as a failure as a father, a husband and a man. According to Alex, his father provided for his family's physical needs, but never provided anything else.

## Hannah and Morty

Hannah is Alex's sister, essentially portrayed by him as an overweight non-entity. Occasionally she makes an important appearance in the narrative (or rather Alex's memory), but for the most part she is a background character in the drama of his childhood and adulthood. Morty is the man Hannah grew up to marry, a liberal whose politics and views on social activism infuriate Alex and Hannah's father but inspire Alex to follow through on his own socially liberal beliefs.

## Dr. Spielvogel

This is the character to whom Alex's narrative is addressed, the character to whom Alex cries out (at times literally) for guidance, support, and explanations. Spielvogel never actually speaks and is never actually described in any way—he can be seen, however, as symbolizing the kind of relationship with a listening, concerned, mature, reasonable Jew that Alex never had in his life growing up (see "Questions—The Book's Final Line...").

## Cousin Harold (Heshie)

This character functions as an inspiration to Alex, in terms of his desire for dating non-Jewish girls, his success at doing so, and his initial defiance of his father's determination that he not do so (for a further analysis of this relationship see Chapter 3 Analysis and Chapter 6 Analysis).



## Shikses

"Shikse" is a Yiddish term used to describe a non-Jewish woman. Sex, and to a lesser degree relationships, with shikses are an obsession with Alex. For him (and possibly for other Jewish men, like his father) they represent freedom, defiance, and independence.

## Anne McCaffery

Anne is a non-Jewish shikse colleague of Alex's father who comes to dinner one night for a real "Jewish" meal. Alex wonders whether the mousey Anne and his father were having an affair, a suspicion that his mother (given her angry reaction to Anne's presence) evidently shared. The question is never explicitly answered.

## Ronald Nimkin

Ronald, like Alex, is portrayed as a talented, intelligent young man completely under the controlling, manipulative thumb of his Jewish mother. According to Alex's narrative, Ronald commits suicide, a fate that Alex escapes (the narrative suggests) because of his defiant determination to get away from the stifling influences around him—his mother, his father, his religion.

## The Monkey (Mary Jane Reed)

The Monkey is the nickname Alex gives to a woman with whom he has an intense, and at times almost romantic, sexual relationship (for a possible explanation of how she got her nickname see Chapter 4 Part 4 Analysis). She is lower class, crude and uneducated, expresses her feelings with raw passion, and confronts Alex with uncomfortable truths about himself and his behavior—truths which the reader can see as such, but Alex apparently cannot.

## Lina

The maternal, easy-going Lina is the prostitute with whom Alex and The Monkey have a three-person sexual encounter. Her presence in their relationship is the catalyst for the final argument that sends Alex and The Monkey into their breakup.

## Smolka, Mandel and Bubbles

These three individuals were, according to Alex, present at the occasion of his first sexual experience—Smolka and Mandel were his friends, Bubbles was the grudgingly available teenage girl with whom Alex had that experience. Alex portrays Smolka and Mandel as being "bad boys", and is later surprised to learn that they have both become very successful businessmen and husbands.



## Freud and Oedipus

Sigmund Freud was a pioneering psychoanalyst whose writings define many of the grounds upon which psycho-therapeutic perspectives and treatments now in common usage are based. Many of his theories are grounded in consideration of sexuality, both individual and relational. One of his principal theories is based on the classical Greek myth of Oedipus, the ancient king who killed his father and married his mother. Freud suggested that on some level and to varying degrees every man wants to do what Oedipus did—the mother is, after all, the primary and primal source of love in a man's life. On several occasions throughout the narrative, Alex clearly and deliberately insists that his actions are not Oedipal.

## Kay Campbell and Sarah Maulsby

Kay and Sarah are two shiksas (see above) whom Alex dated while in university. Kay is portrayed as being earthy and practical, while Sarah is portrayed as being sophisticated and superficial. Through contemplation of his relationships with both women, Alex comes to at least a degree of understanding of why his sexual attitudes are what they are.

## The Female Israeli Soldier and Naomi

Both The Soldier and Naomi, in contrast to the shiksas identified above, are very Jewish. Both live in Israel, both live austere Jewish lives, and both have strong beliefs about the way Jews do, and should, function in the world and in relationship to other people. Both, ironically enough, prove to be impossible for Alex to make love to. For further consideration of this aspect of Alex's story, see "Questions."





## Objects/Places

### The Apartment in New York City

This is the home of Alex and his family in his early life. It is the setting for several of the book's key scenes—specifically, the narratives of his often confrontational relationships with his parents and of his initial sexual experiences. A key factor in the relative importance of this setting is the fact that the apartment is in a non-Jewish community—in other words, Alex and his family live an isolated life within a crowd of people.

### The House in New Jersey

In contrast to their apartment in New York, the home to which Alex and his family move when he is a teenager is in the heart of a crowded, thriving Jewish community. Even here, however, he feels alone in a crowd—because of his growing resentment of and discomfort with the emotional/spiritual/sexual confines imposed by that community.

### The Boston and Northeastern Life Insurance Company

This is the company Alex's father works for, the company that takes him both physically and morally away from his family and his home.

### The Bathroom

The bathrooms in both the New York City apartment and the house New Jersey are the setting for many of Alex's most intense experiences—his desperation-fueled masturbating, his embarrassment-fueled encounters with his own and his mother's sexuality, his pity-fueled encounters with his father's chronic constipation.

### Bar Mitzvah

A bar mitzvah is a centuries old Jewish coming of age ritual for young men. A similar ritual for young women of more recent vintage is a bat mitzvah.

### Alex's Penis

Alex's sexual organ is the focus of his sexual obsession. Alex uses his penis and the pleasure that manipulating it can give him as a distraction and a way of venting his anger and frustration.



## Iowa and Vermont

Alex visits these two states at different points of his sexual and emotional maturation process in the company of two different shiksas, each of whom contributes in a different way to that process. He visits Iowa with Kay Campbell, where he discovers that his childhood-bred fear of various forms of contamination by non-Jews is not necessary, while in Vermont (which he visits with The Monkey), he discovers that it is possible to feel something other than raging sexual desire with a woman with whom he is having a sexual experience.

## Baseball

Throughout the book Alex makes references to how important baseball is to him. At one point he focuses at specific length on the joy and freedom he feels when he plays center field—his favorite position when playing. Late in the narrative he comments longingly on the feeling of community that seems to flourish among a group of Jewish men that gather weekly in his home community in New Jersey to play baseball. In short, baseball seems to represent for him a sense of rightness, a sense of connection to others missing from his life and experience.

## Venice

This Italian city is the setting for one of the narrative's most important confrontations—between Alex and The Monkey after he manipulates her into having a three-way sexual experience with Lina. Venice has a history of being one of the most sexually decadent cities in Italy, and indeed of all Europe, making it a fitting setting for this incident, and therefore for this part of the narrative.

## Israel

Israel is the Jewish nation, established after a centuries old conflict with non-Jews that continues in the Israel of today. It is a place of pilgrimage for many Jews, a place where they feel their identity more strongly and more thoroughly than anywhere else in the world. It is the setting for the novel's climax, Alex's long-simmering confrontation with questions and beliefs at the core of his sense of identity.



## Social Concerns And Themes

Portnoy's Complaint is a tour de force novel of the 1960s containing flashbacks to the 1930s. Portnoy, the main protagonist, is plagued by masturbation problems and by a possessive Jewish mother. He rejects conventional morality but is overwhelmed with a guilt complex, from which he cannot free himself. He is guided by social and psychological forces beyond his control; he tries to assert himself boldly but at the same time is held back by his own defense mechanism. He is tormented because he cannot justify his role in society. Portnoy's actions expose the stratum of the stereotyped American-Jewish middle-class suburbia where obscenity represents a violation of what his Jewish past stands for: strict social laws and a high respect for moral behavior.

The novel frankly exposes the unsatisfactory sexual life of a constantly masturbating immature adolescence and the neurotic experience of a menage a trois by a guilt-ridden young man for whom sex is not a pleasure but a self-torturing necessity. This desperate young protagonist rebels in a rage against his Jewish heritage. The novel is hilarious saga exposing a mother-son confrontation as well as the tension between public and private life. Portnoy's persistent self-examination of consciousness and unconsciousness lead nowhere. His story is an endless confession to Dr. Spielvogel, a New York psychiatrist, who is able only at the end of the novel to give a glimmer of hope to Portnoy.

## Techniques

Portnoy's Complaint combines fact and fiction to expose occurrences of everyday life in great detail. A brilliant exploitation of the new freedom in language as the voice of the 1960s, the novel is a lively, articulate, often hilariously funny American bildungsroman; a confessional and self-explanatory monologue; an obscene book but not pornographic; a satirical farce but not ironic; an intelligent mixture of black comedy and pathos; a harsh view of middleclass experience combined with a rebellion toward freedom expressed sexually by a young man.



# Themes

## Sexuality

Sexual expression—its necessity, its many variations, the appropriateness of those variations, and its meaning—is the key thematic element at the core of Portnoy's Complaint, and manifests in several ways. On one level, it is the main concern of its central character and narrator, who seems to have become almost frantically worried about his obsessions with masturbation, casual sexual encounters, and relationships that he feels he has to leave once their sexuality evolves in ways that do not agree with his ideas of what sexuality should be. On another level, boundaries-free sexuality becomes the primary means of his rebellion against the socio-spiritual-cultural values and customs of the conservative, relatively closed Jewish community in which he lives. On yet another level, the narrative clearly suggests that Alex sees the inappropriate sexualization of his relationship with his mother as a manifestation of those values, of the overly intimate, uncomfortably universal and inescapably pervasive control.

The final level of thematic meaning to be found in the novel's expression of sexuality is revealed in the quote on p. 235. "What I'm saying, doctor," Alex points out, "is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America." In other words, sex for the troubled, confused and obsessive central character is a claim of humanity, a defiant act of union with an ideal that some might liken to the very settling of America itself. The novel suggests that Alex, like the pilgrims who sailed on the Mayflower, is seeking freedom from what he sees as religious persecution. In penetrating these very American (non-Jewish) women, he is seeking to "penetrate" the invisible but powerfully potent barrier between oppression and freedom—a barrier that, he feels, his Jewishness has constructed and kept in place his entire life.

## Jewishness

In many ways, the novel comes across as at best ambivalent and at worst extremely negative about what it means and feels like to be a Jew. Yes, there are instances in which the central character seems to celebrate Jewish community—the description in the final chapter of the regular Sunday baseball game, for example, or the sense of safety he feels when his family moves from a non-Jewish neighborhood in New York City to a mostly Jewish one in New Jersey. On the other hand, however, the novel contains a great many more of what might be best described as rants against uniquely Jewish faith, customs and attitudes, with insularity (the fear and mistrust of anything and/or anyone not Jewish), coming across as the main source of irritation. As mentioned above, the character's (and the novel's) expression of sexuality seem to originate in a deeply ingrained desire for freedom from constrictions imposed by Jewish morality. Some might argue that if its creator was a non-Jew, the novel could be interpreted as anti-Semitic—it certainly primarily targets Jews. The point must also be



made, however, that the novel also contains (admittedly far fewer) rants against Christianity and its foolishness. These explosions of frustration and contempt are, for the most part, juxtaposed with similar condemnations of Jewish attitudes—they come across as suggesting that Christians are no more foolish, or no better, than Jews, and vice versa. This suggests, in turn, that the real thematic focus of the novel is not anti-Jew but anti-religion—and, by extension, anti any institution that seeks to impose morality, rules and restrictions on the individual's freedom of expression and experience. This, therefore, leads to the novel's third main thematic point—the joy and value of being American.

## America

America, both as a place and as a concept, is referenced far less frequently throughout Portnoy's Complaint than either sexuality or Jewishness. It is nevertheless perhaps the novel's key thematic focus, particularly given that late in the novel the author ties both his other themes (sexuality and Jewishness) to his theme of America—specifically, that America is a manifestation of pure freedom. This tying together takes place when his central character undertakes journeys that simultaneously introduce him to broader socio-geographical experiences of America and broader experiences of emotional-spiritual liberty. One journey he takes to Iowa, where he discovers that he does not need to be as purely physically Jewish as he once believed—in other words, he becomes free of ideology and fear. Another journey he takes to Vermont, where he discovers that he does not need to be as emotionally restricted as he once insisted he had to be—in other words, he becomes free of emotional limitation. Yes, this last freedom is frightening to him and he runs away from it, but that does not mean he does not desire it. There is the sense, in fact, that the experience was the catalyst for his visit to the doctor—in other words, in Vermont Alex discovered the need to change, and his need to vent his anger about what he is changing from in order for the change to something else to become possible.

When he journeys outside of America to Israel, he is in effect much less free than he was when he was Jewish in New Jersey. If, as discussed above, sexuality for the central character means freedom, then the fact that he is sexually dysfunctional in Israel (where, as he himself admits, he is more Jewish than he ever was at home) suggests that the more Jewish he is, the less free he is. However, as described above (albeit crudely), when having sex with non-Jewish women outside of all Jewish moral code he feels free—he is engaging in a defiant act of rebellion of the sort that defined, and continues to define, America as both a country and a concept.

## Shame

A point of concern for Alex throughout the narrative's exploration of the above three themes is why he feels ashamed to be free, and therefore unable to fully rejoice in that freedom. In this concern can be found a key irony—as portrayed here, America, for all its claims of freedom, is still in many ways a conservative, sexually repressive and



oppressive country. This is stated obliquely through Alex's concern about how his high social status might be challenged or damaged if the truth of his sexual tastes and perspectives came out. In other words, America values freedom, but in Alex's experience, only certain types of freedom—Alex strives to escape one kind of oppression (his Jewish-ness) through a form of expression (sexuality) that unfortunately exposes him to another kind of oppression (America's prudishness). Thus his layers of shame deepen—he is ashamed of his childhood intimacies with his mother, ashamed of his ineffectual father, ashamed of his non-assimilating community, ashamed of his expression of his high-sex drive, ashamed of his desire for freedom, and quite possibly ashamed of his desire to be free from shame. Where, under those circumstances, can true freedom come from? The novel's suggestion seems to be that it cannot, that those who strive for true freedom from shame, like Alex, can only end their journey in one of three ways. The first is with a primal howl of frustration (as suggested by the final moments of the novel's penultimate chapter). The second is at the beginning of a new search (as suggested by the content of the novel's final line). The third is with the realization that one is living some kind of universal existential joke (as suggested by the tone of the novel's final line, and by the narrator's repeated contention that he is a living Jewish joke).



# Style

## Point of View

There are two key elements of point of view to consider about Portnoy's Complaint. The first is essentially technical, relating to narrative viewpoint. The novel is written in first person subjective, sometimes in present tense (when the author relives a particularly vivid or important memory, or when he refers to his current situation) and sometimes in past tense (when his memories are simply recalled or narrated). An important aspect of this point of view is its stream-of-consciousness sensibility—the narrative gives the very clear sense that the narrator's mind is moving almost randomly from thought to memory back to thought back to memory and suddenly to insight. This chain reaction of idea, recalled sensations and spewed surges of emotion simultaneously intrigues the reader and creates a vivid portrait of an individual with a powerful, questioning mind.

The second key element of point of view to consider here is the social, emotional, and spiritual context in which the narrator speaks. There is the very clear sense that the above-described volatility and stream of consciousness sensibility of the narrative would not exist if the narrator had not been who he is—an urban, American, highly intelligent, extremely articulate, deeply troubled Jew. In other words, point of view in Portnoy's Complaint is much more than simply the perspective from which the story is told—it is part of the story, functioning alongside language, theme and setting to define character, situation, and meaning

## Setting

In terms of the novel's literal setting (in time and place), there are two important points to note. The first is the time and place from which the narrator is speaking—the late 1960's in America, a point at which sexuality (of the sort the narrator believes he needs) was being explored more freely and openly than ever. There is an element of irony here, in that the narrator feels fearful that he would be unwelcome in society-at-large because of his relatively unfettered sexual expression. The second noteworthy level of time and place is the way the action moves back and forth across temporal and geographical boundaries. In other words, setting is linked closely with point of view here, in that the unpredictability of the various shifts between past and present, between childhood (in New York before World War II), adolescence (after World War II in New Jersey) and adulthood (the Fifties and Sixties in America and Europe) is evocative of the character's overall state of being.

Worthy of particular note here is the incorporation, or more appropriately the relative lack of incorporation, of World War II, during which countless numbers of Jews were massacred by Hitler. The narrative gives the sense that the narrator's awareness of events at the time was limited—or, at the very least, his reactions and experiences were so self-focused that these events had relatively little effect. This sense emerges most





vividly at the end of Chapter 3, in which the narrator comments on the difference between his feelings and those of his more world-aware sister. It is an interesting example of how relationship between setting and character illuminates character.

## Language and Meaning

Several extended passages are written in an almost ranting style, as though the narrator is speaking from a place of raw, surging emotion (usually anger or frustration). The narrator's expansive vocabulary creates the sense not only of powerful intelligence and memory, but also on some level the sense that the narrator is desperately trying to control those surging emotions by intellectualizing them, disguising raw feeling with cleverness. There is also the incorporation of a great many Yiddish words and terms. Shikse, pisher, pisk, meshuggener, kvell, kishka, goy—the list is expansive, and undeniably evocative of character, atmosphere, and culturally defined personality. Additionally there is the sense of crudity, almost cruelty, with which the narrator describes his experiences of sexuality. It is almost as though he is striving to make the doctor (and therefore the reader) feel as disgusted with him as he is himself. Finally, language throughout the novel creates and defines a powerful sense of immediacy and urgency, of intimacy and rawness, of the continuous, torturous presence of feelings barely restrained beneath a surface veneer of civilized behavior. In short, language functions in the same way as all the elements of style explored here, vividly evoking the narrator's essential identity, state of being, and dilemma.

## Structure

Structure in Portnoy's Complaint is closely tied to point of view, in that for the most part the narrative is free of form, emerging in a stream of consciousness that at times flows smoothly and at other times jumps back and forth between memories, places, people and events in an angrily erratic, or erratically angry, way. There is the sense that the author has made some attempt to organize and subdivide some sections of the narrative—there are, for example, seven chapters, and within each of those chapters there are occasional on-the-page divisions between sections. There is also a rough and broadly defined sense of chronological order—recollections of childhood are to some extent clustered at the beginning of the narrative, while recollections of the more immediate past and of the present are clustered at the end. That said, however, even the so-called "past" and "present" sections jump back and forth in focus over time and place, with the result that there is the strong sense that past and present exist, in the narrator's mind and experience, simultaneously.

Overall, there is the sense that the novel's opening words are the first steps on a journey towards the ultimate scream of frustration that ends the novel's main action. In fact, it might not be going too far to suggest that in spite of the chapter and intra-chapter divisions, the whole novel is one long scream, a crying out for help, for guidance, for recognition, for understanding, and for freedom. Here again, style echoes substance, and substance informs style.



## Quotes

"[My mother] was so deeply embedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise," p. 3.

"In that ferocious and self-annihilating way in which so many Jewish men of his generation served their families, my father served my mother, my sister Hannah, but particularly me," p. 8.

"...let's face it, Ma, I am the smartest and neatest little boy in the history of my school! Teachers ... go home happy to their husbands because of me ..." p. 15.

"...how can she rise with me on the crest of my genius during those dusky beautiful hours after school, and then at night, because I will not eat some string beans and a baked potato, point a bread knife at my heart? And why doesn't my father stop her?" p. 17.

"...I was wholly incapable of keeping my paws from my dong once it started the climb up my belly," p. 18.

"... no money, no schooling, no language, no learning, curiosity without culture, drive without opportunity, experience without wisdom ... how easily [my father's] inadequacies can move me to tears. As easily as they move me to anger!" p. 26.

"Oh my secrets, my shame, my palpitations, my flushes, my sweats ... 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! Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!" p. 37.

"Shame and shame and shame and shame—every place I turn something else to be ashamed of," p. 50.

"Do you know baseball at all? Because center field is like some observation post, a kind of control tower, where you are able to see everything and everyone, to understand what's happening the instant it happens ... 'It's mine', you call, 'it's mine', and then after it you go ... oh how unlike my home it is to be in center field, where no-one will appropriate unto himself anything that I say is mine!" p. 69.

"...weep for your own pathetic selves, why don't you, sucking and sucking on that sour grape of a religion! Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I happen also to be a human being!" p. 76.

"Inhibition doesn't grow on trees, you know—takes patience, takes concentration, takes a dedicated and self-sacrificing parent and a hard-working attentive little child to create in only a few years' time a really constrained and tight-ass human being. Why else the



two sets of dishes? Why else the kosher soap and salt? Why else ... but to remind us three times a day that life is boundaries and restrictions if its anything ... rules laid down by none other than None Other..." pp. 79-80.

"She actually seems to think of herself as a woman at the very frontiers of experience, some doomed dazzling combination of Marie Curie, Anna Karenina, and Amelia Earhart," p. 93.

"Do I really experience this restlessness, this horniness, as an affliction—or as an accomplishment? Both? Could be. Or is it only a means of evasion ... of course you can't have everything, or so I understand—but the question I am willing to face is: have I anything?" p. 102.

"A kiss from me would change the world! Doctor! Doctor! Did I say fifteen? Excuse me, I meant ten! I meant five! I meant zero! 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! Because it's beginning to pall a little, at thirty three!" p. 111.

"... 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..." p. 118.

"I am marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear ... sure I say fuck a lot, but I assure you, that's about the sum of my success with transgressing," p. 124.

"A Polack's day, my father has suggested to me, isn't complete until he has dragged his big dumb feet across the bones of a Jew," p.127.

"...America ... may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me ... America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!" p. 146.

"Know what I did when I was fifteen? Sent a lock of my snatch-hair off in an envelope to Marlon Brando. Prick didn't even have the courtesy to acknowledge receipt," The Monkey to Alex, p. 193.

"Take her fully for my own, you see, and the whole neighborhood will know at last the truth about my dirty little mind ... the bathroom door will swing open ... and behold, there sits the savior of mankind, drool running down his chin ... his prick firing salvos at the light bulb. A laughingstock, at last! A bad boy! A shande to his family forever!" p. 201.

"If I could be somehow sprung from this obsession with fellatio and fornication, from romance and fantasy and revenge—from the settling of scores! The pursuit of dreams! From this hopeless, senseless loyalty to the long ago!" p. 219.



"My God! The English language is a form of communication! Conversation isn't just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at! Where you've got to duck for your life and aim to kill! Words aren't only bombs and bullets—no, they're little gifts, containing meanings!" p. 222.

"Why then can't I believe I am eating my dinner in America, that America is where I am, instead of some other place to which I will one day travel, as my father and I must travel every November out to ... Union New Jersey ... for real Thanksgiving apple cider," p. 227.

"...I look down from two thousand feet in the air upon the Land of Israel, where the Jewish people first came into being, and am impaled upon a memory of Sunday morning softball games in Newark," p. 244.

# Adaptations

Portnoy's Complaint was made into a motion picture in 1972. The film was produced by Ernest Lehman, directed by Philip Lathrop, released in Technicolor and Panavision by Warner Brothers. It starred Richard Benjamin, Karen Black, Lee Black, Jack Somack, Jill Clayburgh, and Jeannie Berlin. It was a disappointing adaptation of the novel.



## Key Questions

Although conflict and repression underscore Roth's principal theses in *Portnoy's Complaint*, a critical debate may arise as to the theme and plot of the novel standing in the way of bringing to light its fascinating characters.

Thus, one may argue that it matters not whether Sophie Portnoy or her son Alex deserve to be linked to such undesirable epithets as "pornography," "masturbation," "castration," or "pornography," they emerge as essentially real human beings — at times very funny, and at times exceedingly tragic.

Although Roth creates them as Jews to represent Jews, they also represent human beings — human strengths and human weaknesses. Thus, Alexander Portnoy's infatuation with girls (even gentile girls), his intense desire for freedom and independence, and his conflicts with Sophie cannot be restricted to Jewish boys or American boys, or to Jewish-American boys. Alexander Portnoy reflects human conditions, and thus Roth's novel transcends ethnic and religious restrictions.

1. Upon what elements or instruments of fiction does Roth rely both to shock and to attract his reader? Does he ever go so far (consciously or unconsciously) to alienate that reader?

2. Does Sophie Portnoy have anything to do with Alexander's infatuation with gentile girls? Does Alex, himself, ever explain his reasons? What price does Alex pay for his mother's domination?

3. What are the essential differences between Alex Portnoy before he enters Columbia Law School and after he leaves? Does he mature? Do the Jewish women whom he meets in Israel have any bearing on Alex's maturity (or lack of it)?

4. Is *Portnoy's Complaint* a pornographic or "dirty" book? Why or why not? Is it satire? Why or why not?

5. There are those who would argue that *Portnoy's Complaint* exists as little more than a series of character sketches. Thus, the novel stands only as loosely woven fabric of episodes, seriously lacking in plot and theme.

Do you agree or disagree? Why?

6. The issue of guilt often enters the discussion of *Portnoy's Complaint*. What characters appear as "guilty"? What are the reasons behind that guilt? Is the guilt ever expunged? If so, how?



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the meaning of the title of the first chapter. Who is "The Most Unforgettable Character" Alex ever met—his mother? his father? his penis? himself? Explain your answer.

In what ways are Alex's core concerns—his attitudes towards sex, his preoccupation with his career, his troubled relationships with the opposite sex and his parents, his questioning of faith—typical not only of young men, but of young people in general? In what ways are they atypical? Take into account Alex's age—are his attitudes and concerns typical or appropriate for someone in his early thirties?

As previously discussed, the book's secondary characters (Alex's mother and father, The Monkey, Kay and Sarah, Naomi, etc) are all portrayed from Alex's perspective—that is, from a point of view with an agenda. What might that agenda be? Why does Alex have that agenda—what is his goal in speaking of the people in his life in the way he does? What is he trying to accomplish in striving so intently to portray them in the way he does? Keep in mind that he is speaking to a psychiatrist—what does he want the psychiatrist to think or understand?

The book's final line, written under the chapter heading "Punch Line" can be seen as functioning on a number of levels. Is it intended to be an accurate recounting of what Dr. Spielvogel actually says? If so, what that might mean in terms of how the doctor feels about Alex's psycho-emotional spew? Or is the final line the author's ironic joke? If so, what might that mean in terms of how the author feels about his character? Is it some combination of the two? Or does it have a different meaning altogether?

What is the metaphoric value of the fact that Alex is able to have sex with shiksas but not with the two Jewish women (the Soldier and Naomi) he encounters at the end of his narrative?

Is Portnoy's Complaint anti-Semitic? Why or why not?

In what ways does your ethnic/spiritual/family background feel restrictive? In what ways does that background feel uniquely joyful? How does frustration with that background manifest? Do you ever feel like rejecting it? Why or why not?

Discuss the use of the word "cunt" throughout the book. Is there a word with similar emotional connotations used to describe both the male sexual organ and a particular sort of male attitude? Consider the use of crude sexual slang in general—how and why such words have both pleasurable and negative meanings. What do those negative meanings and usages reveal about society's attitudes towards sex in general and individuals who participate in sexual activity in particular?



In what ways is the story of The Monkey's sexual history similar to Alex's? In what ways have the similarities in their stories brought them to similar points in their lives? In what ways are their reactions to their lives different?

Discuss what is meant by the title of Chapter 5, "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life"—the objectification of the desired? The debasing of an individual's feelings in the name of pursuing sex?



## Literary Precedents

The main character of Portnoy's Complaint follows the footsteps of Joyce's Dedalus. In this novel of consciousness and subconsciousness, however, the Rothian hero does not grow up as an artist. Portnoy tries to mature but basically remains a complaining Jewish hero. Roth follows the path of Bellow, Malamud and others who write of American-Jewish moralists and traditionalists. However, Roth dares to demythologize the belief in tradition and faith. Portnoy is alienated by the pressures of pleasing his family and maintaining sexual relationships. The ineffectuality of liberalism disillusioned and further alienates him.



## Related Titles

The Rothian characters are basically of the same ethnic background so they relate to each other easily. For instance Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), is caught between conflicting life styles as is Alexander Portnoy.

Klugman demonstrates psychological insight as well as comic revelation, as does his girlfriend Brenda Patimkin. As the archetypical Jewish-American-Princess, Brenda characterizes the nouveau riche of the American suburbs. Like Roth's other characters, these two are strongly attached to their Jewish roots and have to learn how to cope with their past.



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