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Abstract

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* contains a feminist subversion of its dominant male voices: the protagonist Swede Levoy, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman, even author Roth. While reviews treat Swede as a good man punished for his virtues, the novel's women refute his reputation as the world's nicest guy. Swede's major faults are that he accepts the injustices of capitalism, that he never genuinely loves women, and that he does not think for himself. In creating ambiguity about his stance toward Swede, Roth may be admitting he has built a house of fiction that causes women to become bombmakers.

Newark Maid Feminism in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

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Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* contains a feminist subversion of its dominant male voices: the protagonist Swede Levov, the narrator Nathan Zerkow, even author Roth. While reviews treat Swede as a good man punished for his virtues, the novel's women add to his reputation as the world's mess: for Swede's major fault is that he accepts the injustices of capitalism, that he never genuinely loves women, and that he does not think for himself. In creating ambiguity about his stance toward Swede, Roth may be admitting he has built a house of fiction that causes women to become combatants.

I have been interested for some time in gender dialogue in twentieth-century fiction—in other words, the ways in which novels dramatize the differences of opinion among authors, narrators, and characters that result from gender differences. Especially interesting is the work of Philip Roth, often accused of misogyny, as he tries to figure out a way to be fair to his female characters and even learn from them. M. M. Bakhtin theorizes interestingly about the possibility of characters' winning battles with their own authors,¹ and Roth sometimes experiments with ways to leave women room to slow him up.

Roth occasionally tries too hard, playing metafictional games that presume to subvert the author while they actually overwhelm the reader with the author's cleverness. For some examples of experiments in gender dialogue, consider the 1990 novel *Deception*, where Roth writes long sections in the form of dialogue between a man and woman without making it obvious which speaker is male and which female, presumably to insure a level playing field. There is also a passage in which a female character directly attacks Philip the novelist for his early female characters:

Why did you portray Mrs. Portnoy [of *Portnoy's Complaint*] as a hysterical? Why did you portray Tracy Nelson [of *When She Was Good*] as a psychopath? Why did you portray Maureen Turropol [of *My Life as a Man*] as a liar and a cheat?

In addition, toward the end of *Deception*, a woman threatens to tell the truth about Philip by writing her own book, called *Kiss and Tell* (*D*, 205). These devices in

¹ See M. M. Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422.

² Philip Roth, *Deception* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 114. Hereafter cited as *D*.



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