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"The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met"

The Jewish Mother in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*

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ABSTRACT

De stereotypa egenskaper som har tillskrivits den judiska modern som syndabock inom judiska kretsar under det senaste seklet, påverkar fortsättningsvis vår uppfattning om judiskt moderskap. Grunden lades av de manliga judiska författare och komiker som under mitten av 1900-talet gjorde smutskastning av den judiska modern till en uppskattad konstform i det amerikanska samhället. Med humor och psykoanalys som berättarverktyg, gav den judiske författaren Philip Roth med sin roman och materialet för denna studie, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), den judiska modern ikonstatus i och med sin karaktärisering av Sophie Portnoy, medierad genom hennes fiktive son Alexander. Denna pro gradu avhandling utreder korrelationen mellan Philip Roths judiska moderskaraktär Sophie, och den stereotypa bilden av den judisk-amerikanska modern som cirkulerade i amerikansk media. Som bakgrund till undersökningen spårades den judiska moderns gradvis förändrade status i Amerika från och med tidigt 1900-tal till tidigt 2000-tal.

Den stereotypa judisk-amerikanska modern (JAM), har presenterats som narcissistisk, överbeskyddande, skuldbeläggande, melodramatisk, martyrlik och manipulativ och hennes kärleksfulla uppfostran har negativt ansetts som kvävande och ett hinder för barnens normala utveckling och individualisering. Resultaten av analysen visar att Sophie är den judisk-amerikanska moderstypen personifierad. Hon är den traditionella värnaren om det judiska arvet i Amerika, därav även hennes syndabockroll; den självömkande martyren och självuppoffrerskan; den auktoritära, falliska och kastrerande matriarken; samt den överbeskyddande och inkräktande modern. En intressant upptäckt är emellertid, den positiva presentation av Sophie som bildar en spricka i fasaden. Hon framställs då som en välmenande, kärleksfull kvinna och moder, vilket strider emot Roths övriga bild av henne. Dock använder Roth sig av sarkasm för att få hennes positiva egenskaper att framstå som närmast magiska och orealistiska. Slutligen fungerar Roths karaktärisering av Sophie som en förstärkning av det judiska moderskapets negativa effekter på barnuppfostran, en föreställning som är verksam än idag.

KEYWORDS: Stereotype, Jewish (American) Mother, Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, Literature

1 INTRODUCTION

The common denominator between the TV characters Fran Fine in *The Nanny*, Jerry Seinfeld in *Seinfeld*, Grace Adler in *Will and Grace*, and the animated cartoon Kyle Broslovski in *South Park* is their ethnicity. They are all Jewish through matrilineal descent and thus, they all have Jewish mothers. In Judaism this has long been the prevailing order of inheritance since traditionally the Jewish legacy is received in two ways: either through a Jewish mother, or through conversion under rabbinic supervision and guidance (Groth 2000: 34).[1] Despite the Jewish woman's historically subordinate position in Jewish religious and cultural life, she in fact has had monopoly on what is considered by many to be the true Jewish birthright. During the past century this has been perceived as both a blessing and a misfortune for the Jews in America. Concerned with maintaining and upholding Jewish values and traditions in the New World, the Jewish mother has been blamed for marking the immigrant Jews as 'others', and the ancient pride in being God's chosen people has instead become a stumbling block for the Jews aspiring for the American Dream. The Jewish mother as a bearer of the Jewish identity has consequently been labelled as the scapegoat for incomplete assimilation and acculturation and she has been exploited and maltreated in literature and the media throughout the past century.

The American entertainment industry of the 20th and 21st centuries with television, stand-up comedy, film, radio and literature has caricaturized the Jewish mother as a comic and melodramatic mother figure. She is misogynistically depicted as over-protective, nagging, manipulative, martyr-like, narcissistic, over-involved, and both as a guilt- and pleasure-inducer messing with her children's lives and especially with her son's psychosexual development and idea of masculinity. She often assumes merely, and deliberately, the role

[1] Today this view is supported by Orthodox and Conservative Jews, the latter being more open-minded, whereas patrilineal descent is also employed by alternative branches of Judaism such as Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism (About.com:judaism).

of a flat character[2] described through the voices of her children who appear as central figures as seen in the TV comedy series mentioned above, and in the primary material of this thesis, Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. Paradoxically, in her article "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture", Martha A. Ravits points out that Jewish humour has in fact been a key factor to successful Americanization and acceptance into American society for the ethnic minority, yet at the cost of negative Jewish autostereotypes (2000: 29). Of all hackneyed depictions of Jews – Jewish men as *schlemiels*,[3] Jewish daughters as JAPs (Jewish American Princesses), Jewish sons as JAPs (Jewish American Princes) – the most prevalent picture is that of the JAM (Jewish American Mother). Since the early 20th century the representation of her character has metamorphosed from nostalgic and affectionate to domineering and atrocious, and finally towards a more progressive and complex portrayal in contemporary times. The 1960s was the tumultuous decade in which she became truly rooted in the American consciousness as a 'monster mother', especially through the literature of the three Jewish authors Dan Greenburg, Bruce Jay Friedman and Philip Roth.

In her article Ravits (2000: 7) explains that "Canonical literature in the United States until the 1960s, in fact, is notable for the virtual absence of the mother figure", and when she entered the American literary scene, she slid in through the backdoor of ethnic literature and emerged as a Jewish mother. In that way she not only came to represent Jewish women, but also the overall American mother, often seen through the lens of humour. Joyce Antler (2007: 6) also recognizes this in that when jokes about the Jewish mother entered the mainstream she became: "a recognizable commodity, the embodiment of the monstrous qualities of all American mothers". Consequently, the picture of the domineering mother in America was specifically labelled as a "Jewish mother" in public consciousness (Ravits 2000: 5). The literary painters of this pejorative portrait were frequently of the opposite sex. The Jewish male writers Greenburg, Friedman and Roth carried on the tradition of mother

[2] Term coined by E.M. Forster describing a character without complexity or depth with a predictable behaviour. Flat characters are often seen in comedy, satire and melodrama. (Abbott 2008: 133) See chapter 4.
[3] Yiddish; a bolt who is a habitual bungler. The Free Dictionary.

bashing in their literature of the 1960s largely influenced by the comedic practice of the time. Greenburg's satiric *How to Be a Jewish Mother: A Lovely Training Manual* published in 1964, offered lessons on Jewish mothering as well as grandmothering and established the negative stereotype of her both nationally and internationally suggesting that anyone could become a Jewish mother. Friedman's *A Mother's Kisses* (1964) comically portrayed a popular topic, namely a Jewish mother's inability to let go of her adult son. But it was Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) that once and for all embedded the caricature in the collective American mind.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of the Jewish mother in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* from 1969. Since the story is narrated in the first person through the voice of the son, his depiction of his mother Sophie is obviously subjective and biased, and she is deliberately placed under the scrutinizing gaze of her fictional son impacting both male and female audiences' view of her. Antler (2000: 143) suggests that "*Portnoy's Complaint* was a cultural event whose social effect may have even outstripped its considerable literary merit.", and this is my belief as well. Roth has employed humour and satire as well as psychoanalysis as narrative strategies to parody Sophie in the novel. The former is used in order to make his stereotypical mother caricature an *icon* following the tradition of Jewish male mother-bashing in the 1960's, whereas psychoanalysis provides the perfect narrative framework with the son as a patient suffering from the imagined Portnoy's Complaint, which mirrors the anxious and antagonistic mother-son relationship in Jewish American history. Relevant for this thesis is that there is not much criticism of the Jewish mother character, Sophie Portnoy, whereas her son Alexander attracts more attention among critics. One critic, who specifically focuses on the stereotypical construction of the JAM, is Martha A. Ravits (2000), who uses Sophie, among others, as an example of a negative construction of Jewish motherhood. Besides her, there are but a few[4]

[4] Gross, Barry. (1983) "Sophie Portnoy and 'The Opossum's Death': American Sexism and Jewish Anti-Gentilism." In *Studies in American Jewish Literature.* Vol. 3. Kapelovitz, Abbey Poze. "Mother Images in American-Jewish Fiction." (1985). Diss. U of Denver.

that have focused exclusively on Sophie's character which in turn makes this thesis a valuable contribution to the criticism already dedicated to *Portnoy's Complaint.*

The acclaimed American Jewish writer Philip Roth published his notorious novel *Portnoy's Complaint* at the end of a decade characterized by cultural and sexual revolution in America. The novel instantly shot to fame and earned prestige and honour in literary circuits, and revealed a promising future career for the author. Mixing ironic witticism with themes of sexual desire and frustration, and the assimilation and integration of the Jews into American society he bravely touched upon controversial and sensitive issues during a time of social reformation and renewal of values. Antler (2007: 134) says that if "the Jewish mother and her suburban daughter became the objects of literary ridicule in the 1950s, it was the pairing of the Jewish mother and her nervously antagonistic son the following decade that was a watershed in Jewish literature". Through the protagonist son Alex, the reader gets a biased picture of the Jewish mother Sophie Portnoy, one that directly corresponds to the negative portrayal of her circulating in popular media at the time.

Roth's fiction almost exclusively involves a first person male narrator as focalizer[5] and *Portnoy's Complaint* is the quintessential tale confirming this implied rule. Set in Dr. Spielvogel's private practice, the protagonist Alexander Portnoy tells his life-story up until the novel's present to his psychotherapist. Dr. Spielvogel diagnoses Alex's disorder as the imaginary *Portnoy's Complaint*: "A disorder in which strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature" (Roth 1994: Epigraph). Here Roth introduces the Jewish mother as the root to her son's problem: "It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship." (1994: Epigraph). With the help of psychoanalysis Roth supports his construction of the 'monster mother' who is so interfering that she forever damages her son's development and idea of masculinity. Described through

[5] The lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative (Abbott 2008: 73).

the voice of the narrator son, mother Sophie never has a voice of her own, and the reader is caught in the manipulative grasp of the male narrator.

In the analysis part of this thesis the intention is to examine Roth's portrayal of Sophie Portnoy as a Jewish Mother, and see how well it correlates with the stereotype circulating in the media at the time. Five specific themes and aspects concerning Sophie and the JAM will be studied. Firstly, Sophie as the guardian of faith, indicating her religious role as a *Jewish* woman, wife and mother in America who persists on conserving Jewish values in the New World and thereby hinders assimilation. Secondly, Sophie as a martyr-like and self-sacrificing mother figure who produces guilt in her children through her melodramatic and suffering behaviour. Thirdly, Sophie's magical mother features which reveal a fracture in Roth's stereotyping of the Jewish mother in that it portrays her in a more charitable, positive and altruistic light. Fourthly, Sophie as a phallic and castrating authority figure in the Portnovian household, where Freud's idea of the dramatic Oedipal mother-son liaison is exemplified through her behaviour towards her son Alex. Finally, the last theme deals with Sophie's intrusiveness and inability to let go of her children, and her continuous influence on her son Alex. This analysis will be done through examining the situational memories, involving the Jewish mother character Sophie, provided the reader by the narrator son Alexander Portnoy.

The theory part of this thesis will trace the transformation of the Jewish Mother figure in different media, and illustrate how her character has metamorphosed over the past century and what part *Portnoy's Complaint* played in that process. Over time, different versions of the Jewish Mother have existed, and the theory part will account for the role of the woman, wife and mother in Judaism, the immigrant Yiddishe Mama in America, the emergence and persistence of the JAM stereotype, the role of Jewish humour and the Jewish mother joke, and finally, Jewish feminists' actions for and against the manifestation of the JAM stereotype. Next follows a presentation of *Portnoy's Complaint*, the cultural and historical background, and the narrative devices used by Roth.

2 PHILIP ROTH'S *PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT*

Given the fact that Philip Roth has been a productive writer for nearly six decades with his recent nomination for the Nobel Prize in literature (2009) testifying to his successful career, it comes as no surprise that his works have been the objects of considerable research and criticism by scholars and students. Roth's third novel and the primary material for this thesis, *Portnoy's Complaint*, is no exception, and the novel instantly put him in the spotlight and "scandalized America's 'puritan' communities, both religious as well as literary" (Royal 2005: 1) when it was published in 1969.

The novel's obscene language and graphical sexual descriptions would label it as pornographic and Roth as a real bad-boy. Nevertheless, it was his representation of Jewish identity in the novel that attracted most criticism. (Brauner 2005: 46) The novel acutely reminded the Jews of their differentness in America and emphasized the idea of the self-annihilating Jew in the form of Alexander Portnoy. Irving Howe, an acclaimed critic who had helped Roth establish a literary career by praising his earlier works, fiercely accused Roth of betraying his Jewish audiences by compromising "the 'authenticity' of Jewish American experience." (Parrish 2007: 1). Others again, such as the Jewish feminist Riv-Ellen Prell (1996: 108, 111), thought that the novel offered a genuine depiction of Jewish family life using humour as its prime medium. The novel thus divided the reader audience and stirred mixed reactions.

Moreover, Roth's use of psychoanalysis and Freudian theories was another popular topic of research,[6] and for Brauner (2005: 46) the novel also displayed a critique of Freud and "the tendency of psychoanalysis to incorporate all events into a phallocentric narrative.", something that is very visible in the novel. Other popular topics of criticism regarding *Portnoy's Complaint* include the role of (ethnic) humour, Jewishness, and the Jewish

[6] See the frequently updated, compiled list of criticism of Roth's works on "The Philip Roth Society" Homepage.

American identity, and the representation of Judaism and Jewish culture. However, as said in the introduction, there is not much criticism on the Jewish mother Sophie alone, which increases the value of this study. Finally, the novel would not have reached such a notorious status would it not have been for the context in which it was published − the 1960s.

2.1 Cultural and Historical Context

The 1960s was a decade of social, cultural and political turbulence in American history. It was the era that came to shake American core values and introduce new ways of thinking, which made *Portnoy's Complaint* appear as a breath of fresh air for some, but not for all. American society that had simmered in the economically prosperous 1950s, now exploded in a cascade of rebellious and revolting flames, catalyzed by the Vietnam War. The generational gap of the 1960s became apparent as the baby-boomers attended college and loudly expressed their opinions regarding injustice and inequality, as they resented their parents' silence and conservative ideas. Campuses and cities across America witnessed student anti-war demonstrations, strikes, protests and riots. Various countercultures emerged, among them one whose members named themselves "hippies" proclaiming an alternative and liberating lifestyle manifested through their use of drugs, practice of alternative religions, music habits and sexual liberty. During this decade Freudian notions were popularized, birth control pills were used frequently, and abortion was a heated topic during what was called the sexual revolution. The Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King as its leader until his assassination in 1963, achieved a significant goal in 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act initiated in 1960 by the assassinated President John F. Kennedy (1963). This legal statement prohibited discrimination based on race, sex, religion and national origin and gave the federal government the right to end segregation (Trueman 2000–2010).

Another important movement at the time was the Second Wave Feminism with the Jewish feminist Betty Friedan as one of its central figures. Her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) triggered the revolution during which Jewish women took an active part in transforming American society and Jewish life in America. Jewesses performed multiple roles as mothers, wives, women and Jews and sought to amalgamate these and develop an understanding of who they were. Friedan's term for what was also called "the housewife's syndrome", was "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 2001: 63). There was a growing dissatisfaction among middle-class American women and among them also Jewish American women, an emptiness that could not be explained. While some found it easier and less painful to quiet down the voice inside of them, others chose to act. Gentile[7] and Jewish American women started arranging so-called "consciousness-raising" groups where they would meet regularly in some member's home or in a women's centre to discuss political aspects of their personal lives, and to understand the roles ascribed to them by society and adopted by themselves. The sense of hybridity was especially tangible among Jewish women who were both women in a patriarchal society, and simultaneously caught between two cultures trying to adapt to American culture without losing their unique ethnic identity. Deena Metzger explains this doubleness:

> When I was young, I thought the enemy was outside. Then I came to understand the concept of an internal enemy. Now, I am bitterly aware that the culture in which we participate and which we perpetuate has made us our own worst enemy and the enemy of the world at large. Harsh and extreme as this may seem as a statement, it is a harsher and more extreme fate. (Jewish Women's Archive)[8]

Metzger's words express the feminist notion of the private becoming political in that women started to question the double bind imprisoning them with the patriarchal gender codes of behaviour imposed on them and subsequently internalised by them, and started demanding their own rights trying to change the system instead of simply adjusting to it.

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[7] A person of a non-Jewish nation or of non-Jewish faith; *especially* **:** a Christian as distinguished from a Jew (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

[8] A national non-profit organization founded in 1995 devoted to uncovering, chronicling, and transmitting to a broad public the rich legacy of North American Jewish Women (Jewish Women's Archive).

The sense of hybridity was also expressed in the literature of the era, and Ravits says that in the post-WWII decades in the United States "satirical portrayal of the Jewish mother became an accepted outlet for the Jews' feelings of pride about their gains through assimilation and also for self-doubts about the resulting erosion of group identity and cohesiveness" (2000: 9). Seeing assimilation as a project, Paula Hyman says that the Jews' intentions were never to vanish as an ethnic group by conforming to the homogenous standards of the American social order, but rather to preserve their sense of Jewish particularism within the larger society but deemphasizing external markers of Jewishness. If this project was completed successfully it would result in a less prejudiced attitude towards the Jews. (1995: 16−17) However, since the Jewish mother so keenly kept the traditions with all their external markers of Jewishness alive, she in fact worked against a successful integration. According to Ravits (2000: 11−12), the popularization of the Jewish mother as "a new culture monster" by male writers in the 1960s, was an immediate reaction against the women's movement and directly reflected the zeitgeist of the radical youth culture. By attacking motherhood, these writers undermined women's political and social credibility in society, and thus diluted women's claims for greater equality, opportunities and a voice of their own.

In the year of the Woodstock Festival, 1969, Philip Roth topped the literary billboard with the *New York Times'* bestseller *Portnoy's Complaint*, a novel that seen from the context of American culture and history proved both shocking and cathartic for American mass audiences, especially for the Jews themselves. The Second World War with the Holocaust had critically reminded the Jews of their otherness in America at a time when they had begun to feel more comfortable with their identity as assimilated Americans. Critics felt that with the publishing of his novel Roth reopened the Jewish wound by emphasizing Jewish stereotypes hence betraying his Jewish audiences (Parrish 2007: 129). Roth's portrayal of the melodrama of the Portnovian household directly corresponds to the generational gap of the age, which highlighted internal familial struggles with children questioning their parents' authority. Ravits (2000: 10) writes that "in the 1960s, the Jewish

mother became the favourite target of the Jewish son, the parent who could be blamed for his own sense of vulnerability, accused of jeopardizing his American male birthright of untrammelled freedom". By using the psychotherapeutical setting as a narrative framework, Roth emphasizes the Jewish son's disturbing and nervous condition and uses psychoanalysis as a scientific method for bashing the mother figure.

Moreover, the novel's crude and sexualized language along with graphical sexual descriptions also resound the manifesting cries of the 1960s sexual revolution. However, the novel did not only prove cathartic to a generation of Jewish men longing to cut the umbilical cord that their mother sustained, but it also made Jewish feminists resent the Jewish mother type presented. Instead of supporting their mothers, these Jewish matrophobic daughters saw their mothers as negative role models and fled her authority (Antler 2007: 150−152). Consequently, the Jewish mother was left on her own, disliked by both sexes and her loving mothering would be both satirized and heavily criticized.

2.2 Alex's Story

Just as patients about a century ago were treated on Sigmund Freud's couch, it is on the couch of the Jewish psychotherapist Dr. Spielvogel that the main character Alexander Portnoy starts complaining about his disturbed state of mind. In this setting the psychotherapist can also be seen to represent the implied reader listening to Alex's story and critically examining it. During the psychotherapeutical session Alex's life-story unfolds through selected glimpses and Dr. Spielvogel is given the task of diagnosing his patient's disorder. Classical psychoanalysis focuses on the patient's own activity and during the therapeutical session the psychotherapist shall take a passive stand and only interrupt if needed, to ask for clarification or to confront the patient with contradictory statements (Cullberg 2003: 426). In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Dr. Spielvogel meets these requirements and listens professionally during Alex's confession until the very end.

The only phrase which Dr. Spielvogel utters verbally, and which Roth has used to serve as the novel's punch line and placed at the end, is: "So [*said the doctor*]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (Roth 1994: 274). This phrase suggests many things: perhaps Alex's story has only been in his own mind and never spoken out aloud; or the doctor has simply not been listening very carefully to his confession; maybe Alex has just been lost in his own thoughts and Dr. Spielvogel reminds him of the fact that the session is about to begin; or the doctor has been listening and is now ready to give his expert opinion of Alex's disorder. Nevertheless, Dr. Spielvogel is the one who diagnoses Alex's disorder as the imaginary Portnoy's Complaint, a name derived from Alexander Portnoy himself, and describes it as follows:

> A disorder in which strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature. Spielvogel says: 'Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient's "morality," however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration.' … It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship. (Roth 1994: Epigraph)

Given the fact that Dr. Spielvogel has made this diagnosis and written a description of it, which indeed required keen attention, means that he must have been listening to some degree to Alex's story, and that Alex must have spoken it out loud. Nevertheless, the punch line flips the coin and Roth succeeds in both amusing and puzzling the reader while he at the same time suggests a new, comic and less serious interpretation of the book.

Narrative is an instrument of power, Porter H. Abbott says (2008: 40), and in *Portnoy's Complaint* Roth gives this instrument to his protagonist Alex. As the son of a Jewish mother, Alex is in command of the only existing version of the story. The reader is thus submitted to his control, to his portrayal and colouring of the Jewish American mother, ultimately decided and portrayed by the man who has supreme power over the course of

action: the author Philip Roth. To the author the narrator serves as: "an instrument, a construction, or a device wielded by the author" (2008: 68), and whatever Roth's purpose with his novel was, he is the creator of the representation of the Jewish American mother Sophie Portnoy, a representation that would become an icon in American popular culture and have an immense social impact.

The most central narrative device of Modernism, the technique of stream-of-consciousness[9] writing, lives on in Roth's novel with Alex providing the narrative discourse; that is, the representation of events (Abbott 2008: 19), in a manner that is sometimes confusing to the reader. By following Alex's train of thought, the reader gets glimpses of selected parts and episodes from Alex's life that have impacted Alex's present mental condition. Alex's mind and story thus serve as the framing narrative[10] of the story embedded in Roth's narrative which comprises of the whole novel. In Alex's narrative there are frequent leaps in time; both analepses (chronological jump backwards in time) and prolepses (chronological jump forward in time, either from a past event, or from the present). Alex's continuous interiour monologue[11] is subjective as each accounted episode has the purpose of viewing Alex and his dysfunction in such a way that it matches the diagnosis formulated by Dr. Spielvogel.

Portnoy's Complaint is divided into six chapters with illustrative and provocative titles[12] where Alex recalls memories from his past, from the age of two to the present age of 33. Apart from the last chapter "In Exile" where Alex embarks on his maiden voyage to his ancestor's native country Israel, his story revolves around his life in America. The time span of the novel is 1933−1966, as Alex is born in 1933 and is 33 years old at the novel's present. A historical event that impacts his story is World War II raging in Europe when he

[9] The term describes "the way we experience consciousness (as a continual stream and flow of associated thoughts, without rational ordering and permeated by changing feelings)." Interiour monologue is then used to describe the subject's stream of consciousness. (Abbott 2008: 78)
[10] A narrative embedded in another narrative. In this case, Alex's narrative is imbedded in Roth's narrative which is the whole novel. (Abbott 2008: 28−30)
[11] The representation of direct thought in fiction (Abbott 2008: 70).
[12] "The Most Unforgettable Character I've met", "Whacking Off", "The Jewish Blues", "Cunt Crazy", "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", "In Exile". (Roth 1994: 3, 17, 37, 78, 184)

grows up, with the outburst of anti-Semitism resulting in the Holocaust and the persecution and hatred of Jews. Anti-Semitism is very visible in American society, in the neighbourhood of Jersey City whence Alex's family has to move due to the hostility towards them as Jews. Furthermore, Alex's family consists of his mother Sophie, his father Jack and his older sister Hannah who is four years his senior. Sophie is a housewife, Jack works as an insurance salesman and Hannah is a student, and later in the novel married. Alex's life is psychologically divided into childhood, adolescence and adulthood where his experiences from his childhood and adolescence are most prominent. According to Freudian and psychoanalytic theory experiences during childhood shape and deeply impact an individual's future identity, and this is a focal point in the novel and significant for the portrayal of the mother-son relationship between Sophie and Alex.

In his examination of Freud's methods Erich Fromm (1979: 68) explains how Freud proved that seemingly unimportant occurrences during childhood had a larger impact on the child than adults thought and could serve as the basis for future symptoms of neurosis. Roth emphasized this fact by having Alex recall his problematic past, and especially his parents' involvement. Considering this, Alex is not responsible for his present condition, but as he argues himself, his parents are and especially his mother whose traditional Jewish mothering seen as atypical attachment between mother and son, has resulted in his present state of mind. It is clearly visible that Alex is aware of Freud's theories in his careful selection of memories. He knows exactly where to look for causes and how to present them: "My right mind is simply that inheritance of terror that I bring with me out of my ridiculous past! That tyrant, my superego, he should be strung up" (Roth 1994: 160−161), and "Doctor, maybe other patients dream – with me, *everything happens*. I have a life *without* latent content. The dream thing *happens!*" (1994: 257). Alex even tries to cure himself by reading Freud's essay "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", which signals his awareness of and interest in Freud's theories.

Throughout the story Alex complains about his sexual obsession and his libidinal desires that are never completely met but result in sporadic sexual encounters. However, he mentions four girlfriends with whom he had more stable relationships. He nicknames them as The Monkey (Mary Jane Reed), The Pumpkin (Kay Campbell), the Pilgrim (Sarah Abbott Maulsby) and the Jewish Pumpkin (Naomi). His last relationship with a Jewess was only temporary but nevertheless very significant. His choice of nicknaming them shows his objectification of women as sexual objects and his descriptions of them always concern their physical appearance. Debra Shostak (2007: 112) remarks on this fact in Roth's fiction saying that because the stories in Roth's novels are majorly mediated through the first-person focalized consciousness of the male protagonist, the women tend to become objects upon whom the male characters project their fears of emasculation. This is especially true regarding the picture Alex paints of his mother Sophie where he misogynistically blames her for wrecking his psychosexual development with her castrating authority, which consequently results in his disorder. As an outsider, Other, in America, Alex's rebellion against her testifies to his desire to enter into the fantastical hegemonic masculine world of the American man, which can only be achieved through sufferance and resistance, Stephen Whitehead writes (2002: 145). Throughout the novel Alex struggles with both his sexual and ethnic identity as a Jew in America, and the theme of castration anxiety is especially significant and greatly impacts his relationship with women.

Alex's relationships place him in different positions. Firstly, the Monkey is an unconfident and poorly educated prostitute who fulfils all of Alex's sexual fantasies but whose threat of exposing and embarrassing Alex in public makes him leave her. The Pumpkin is a sturdy peasant girl through whom Alex gets a real insight into the genuine American life and develops a new understanding of the English language. He ends the relationship because the Pumpkin will not convert into Judaism, and because she has become too attached to him. Finally, the Pilgrim is an educated girl whose boarding school argot language and eloquent manners bother Alex, but in fact, she is his intellectual superior. In conclusion, these relationships ended because Alex was afraid of losing control, of losing his masculine

authority and thus being psychologically castrated. This would be done firstly, through the threat of exposure, secondly, by becoming a target of love, and thirdly, through Alex's experience of inferiority compared to his girlfriend due to her brilliant mind. His unwillingness to commit ultimately results in loneliness as he pities himself: "And so alone! *Oh*, so alone! Nothing but *self*! Locked up in *me*!"(Roth 1994: 248).

Alex is an unreliable narrator[13]. He knows exactly which bits and pieces to give his doctor, and the reader, so that the symptoms are clearly visible for a diagnosis, and to show that his mother is the source of his problem. His accounts are subjective and every character the reader encounters in the story is described by Alex. Sophie Portnoy's character is completely constructed from his descriptions of her and he frequently quotes her both directly and indirectly. The story is homodiegetic[14] which makes it more intimate and allows the reader to enter into the narrator Alex's mind, however, this also requires a critical eye from the reader.[15] Although Alex is the protagonist of his own story, he often takes a seemingly objective viewpoint and analyses his own actions as if he were himself a doctor. This increases the illusion of his honesty and the story's credibility. Added to this, Alex often admits that he is making everything up: "Now, whether the words I hear are the words spoken is something else" (Roth 1994: 120), he says when quoting his father, and he often confuses things when the leaps in time are often very long, and as different episodes frequently overlap. Sometimes he mentions his sister Hannah as a witness to the action, but even then *he* is telling the story, quoting her indirectly.

Furthermore, what demonstrates his unreliability as a narrator is the fact that he accounts for events from a very early age which often only serves the purpose of getting the wanted diagnosis of his disorder. This is especially visible in his descriptions of the Portnovian family life. Finally, the focus of Alex's narration is on his mother Sophie, and his

[13] A term coined by Wayne C. Booth referring to a narrator who is not speaking nor acting according to the norms of the work, that is, the implied author's norms (Abbott, 2008: 76).
[14] A narration that comes from a character within the storyworld (Abbott, 2008: 75).
[15] Compare with Humber Humbert's persuasive narrative style in *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov.

description of her witnesses of the dilemma the Jewish son was caught in; between tradition and family morals and the New World; between being a nice Jewish boy pleasing his parents, or an “all-American” Jewboy making his own fortune and fame in America.

3 THE JEWISH MOTHER

When the house was full with the sound of children's voices
And the kitchen smelled of roast and dumplings.
You can be sure our house did not lack poverty,
But there was always enough for the children.
She used to voluntarily give us bread from her mouth
And she would have given up her life for her children as well.
Millions of dollars, diamonds, big beautiful houses—
But one thing in the world you get only one of from God:
A yiddishe mama, she makes the world sweet
A yiddishe mama, oh how bitter when she's missing.
You should thank God that you still have her with you—
You don't know how you'll grieve when she passes away.
She would have leaped into fire and water for her children.
Not cherishing her is certainly the greatest sin.
Oh, how lucky and rich is the person who has such a beautiful gift from God:
Just a little old, yiddishe mama, my mama.

--*"My Yiddishe Mama", sung by Sophie Tucker,*
(*translation of Yiddish version)*

(Antler 2007:14)

This well-known Yiddish poem and song reflects the sentimentality and nostalgia that was attributed to the Jewish mother as an affectionate and loving mother at the beginning of the 20th century, during the mass immigration of Jews into America. The picture of the Jewish mother would, however, come to change dramatically as the Jews faced the challenges and pressures of assimilation and integration into American society. Her affectionate self-sacrificing mothering would be used against her as a new generation of Jews blamed her for preventing their complete Americanization. Her character would change during the century, and she would become stigmatized and stereotyped and the nostalgia that once surrounded her at the turn of the century would be a long-forgotten memory deliberately suppressed in post-immigrant Jews' minds.

This chapter will trace the metamorphosis that the Jewish mother character surpassed during the 20th century, and look for reasons why her features that were originally

perceived as positive, instead became portrayed as negative. The last subchapter will present and discuss the Jewish Feminist Revolution during Second Wave Feminism in the 1960−1970s in America, and how the Jewish women contributed to both emphasizing the negative picture of her, but also to restoring and challenging a new and more complex interpretation of her character. Since she is a *Jewish* mother, the natural starting point is a discussion of her role as woman, wife and mother according to Judaic prescriptions.

3.1 The Jewish Woman, Wife and Mother in Judaism

Traditionally, the religious centre of Judaism is the home, Bente Groth explains. When rabbis wanted to shape a system that would enable the Jewish people and culture to survive without a temple and a temple cult, the result was a separation between the official and the private spheres. The Jewish woman's place became the home, whereas her husband became responsible for the official practice of faith in society and the synagogue. This division was grounded in the belief that the two sexes are created differently regarding gifts, interests and needs. They are equal before God, but have dissimilar tasks on earth. As a consequence, the Jewish woman was excluded from the official life, which would consequently undermine her status in society. Keeping the woman at home was also considered important in order to distance her from other men and thereby prevent temptation. If she attends the synagogue, she is separated from the men and sits in a designated section for women: on a balcony or at the back of the room. According to Talmud rabbis, her primary role is to support and encourage her husband to lead a spiritual life with prayer and religious studies. The husband, in turn, shall respect and love his wife and treat her as an equal. While Jewish boys follow their fathers and study the Torah in-depth, for Jewish girls, religious issues concerning the domestic sphere is considered sufficient knowledge. (Groth 2000: 246−247)

Groth further says that with the gradual development of this system and division, the Jewish woman earned new important responsibilities in the home. As the cornerstone of the sanctity of the Jewish family life, her mission became to instill the home with rituals and create a holy and pure atmosphere. Her awareness of the Jewish calendar with its seasons was therefore obligatory, as was her observance of the Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*) in her cooking. Food is very important in the Jewish culture, and by keeping *kosher* the preparation of every meal becomes a religious ritual in itself. Her Hebrew name *akeret habayit*, meaning the "homemaker" (Goodman 1995−2007), indicates her supreme role in the household. She is also exempted from certain religious obligations due to her domestic role, since rituals that are time-bound can intervene with her domestic duties. This further reveals the high value that is placed on family life in Jewish culture. There are specifically three commandments (*mitzvot*) that are reserved for women according to traditional Judaic law: *nerot* (ushering in the Sabbath by kindling the candles on Friday night); *challah* (separating a portion of dough from the bread before baking it, as a symbolic offering to the priests); *niddah* (observing the Jewish purity rules regarding menstruation and childbirth, and take a ritual bath to cleanse herself, a *mikvah*). The Jewish woman shall also take care of the elderly, which is seen as a ritual. As a mother, the Jewish woman is responsible for raising her children and for teaching her daughters about the plights and rights of the Jewish woman. Moreover, she is expected to participate in religious family discussions and engage in her children's religious education. (Groth 2000: 247)

Furthermore, the family in Judaism is also the nucleus of the whole Jewish community. Chaim Halevi Donin (1972: 91) explains the importance of a home that is built on Jewish values for the survival of Jewish life and its institutions. With the public being the Jewish man's religious realm and the home and the private the Jewish woman's religious sphere, the hidden nature of the latter has caused negligence and undervaluation of its importance. Since the Jewish inheritance traditionally is passed on through the Jewish mother, her function in building up the Jewish community as the guardian of faith and the keeper of the domestic flame of Judaism clearly highlights her importance. This directly contradicts the

statement that Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (2001: Foreword) make in saying that “in Jewish law women are marginal creatures, excluded from mainstream social and religious life, like children and slaves”. Contrary to this statement, Jewish women are pulling all the right threads to ensure the survival of Judaism, the Jewish identity, life, culture and traditions. Nevertheless, their confinement to domesticity has had consequences, and Groth (2000: 247) explains that since the Jewish culture emphasized studies of the Torah and the recitation of prayer as the way to spiritual and intellectual wholeness, the Jewish woman’s exclusion from these practices has diluted her status in the official life.

Groth describes the relationship between a man and a woman in Judaism as being one of equality, and marriage and family are perceived as the natural frameworks for a human being’s life. Having children is the most important aim of the marriage, but the sexual life between husband and wife is highly valued in Judaism. Sexual life is, in fact, based on the Jewish woman’s premises, anchored in the purity laws regarding her periods of impurity, and the Jewish husband’s duty is to respect these and not take advantage of his wife. When it comes to raising children, it is considered a religious obligation for men, while it is a social obligation for women. (2000: 248−249) The tradition of male-domination and sexual segregation in Jewish religious life has later been disputed, and in non-Orthodox communities women can participate in public rites, study the Torah and other scriptures more comprehensively, and a few have even been ordained as rabbis (Keele 2000). Jewish feminists have challenged the status quo and demanded more rights for women, and questioned the roles that women play in society and in Jewish life. The impact of Jewish feminism on Judaism and Jewish women’s identity will be further discussed in chapter 3.5.

New challenges awaited Jewish women, wives and mothers as tradition-keepers, when they entered the New World of America and abandoned the harsh conditions in the Old World of Europe. During the large wave of immigration at the turn of the 19th century, the Jews hoped to find a more promising future in America. Maintaining Jewish customs and

traditions as a minority within a majority culture would gradually be considered an obstacle for complete assimilation and Americanization, especially by post-immigrant Jews. As a consequence, the Jewish mother as guardian of faith would become the black sheep of the family. The next chapter focuses on the early stage of this transfiguration of the mother character, namely the nostalgic and sentimental picture of the immigrant Jewish mother – the Yiddishe Mama – and the various representations of her.

3.2 The Jewish Immigrant Mother – The Yiddishe Mama

During the 19th century a majority of Jews, called Ashkenazi Jews, were settled in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland which had long been a great power in terms of politics and due to its geographical location. However, as a result of the many wars that Poland engaged in during the 18th century, the nation was split into three parts divided between Russia, Peruse and Austria. Russian emperors that had long strived for keeping the Jews outside their borders were now faced with a large Jewish population on their expanded Russian territory. Harsh conditions awaited the Jews in the Russian part of Poland, and they were increasingly considered hostile and a threat to the Russian population. The latter part of the 19th century witnessed the birth of modern anti-Semitism with racist pogroms and persecution of the Jews. The Jews' attempts to either integrate and assimilate, or maintain their own lifestyle, failed to achieve acceptance and the disbelief among the non-Jews grew stronger. Despite all restrictions imposed upon the Jews they managed to keep their own culture alive in small Jewish communities − the Jewish *shetlach*[16]. But the conditions eventually became unbearable as new laws were enacted expelling the Jews from the cities and forcing them back to their old areas of settlement. Migration became the solution for many Jews, and America as the land of opportunity attracted the majority of emigrating Jews. America witnessed the first migration wave with a majority of German Jews between

[16] Sing. *Shetl*, Plur. *Shetlach.*

1881−1884, and between 1903−1906 migration reached its climax bringing increasing numbers of Jews from Eastern Europe onto American soil. (Groth 2000: 222−226)

The transition from the Old World to the New World meant a radical break for the Jews as the process and pressure of assimilation demanded an adjustment to the values of the non-Jewish community. The Jewish woman's role in building up the Jewish community by transmitting Jewish values to her children in the home became crucial for the survival of Jewish life. Paula Hyman explains that women were "the primary factor in the formation of their children's Jewish identity. The conservative role of maternal keeper of the domestic flame of Judaism became a fundamental aspect of the project of assimilation" (1997: 27). Whereas her public role did increase and she engaged more in communal life, the Jewish man was still the person who mirrored his family's values in official life. Bearing this in mind, Hyman further maintains that assimilation was dependent on gender, and that Jewish men adapted faster than women due to their public position in society: "In the nineteenth century in western and central Europe and in the United States […] Jewish women's gender limited their assimilation by confining them, like other middle-class women, to the domestic scene" (1997: 18). This meant that Jewish women had less contact with non-Jews, and to a larger degree avoided external challenges posed by mainstream American society on their traditional Jewish behaviour.

The picture of the Yiddishe Mama as a self-sacrificing and affectionate mother figure would, as a result of the ambiguous process of integration and acculturation, be drawn in darker colours as second-generation Jews grew up in a totally different world than what their mother upheld in miniature form in the home. Joyce Antler writes that in the 1920s and 1930s, a new and vibrant series of images of Jewish mothers began to circulate in American entertainment industry, in the popular press, fiction, films, music, and memoirs: "While historians generally speak of these images as sentimental and endearing, the period in fact bore witness to a vigorous debate among multiple representations of the immigrant Jewish mother" (2007: 16). Instead of regarding the Jewish mother as the beacon in, and

shelter from the storm, her American-born children were torn between either staying loyal to their inheritance or adapting to American standards. This dilemma harboured anxiety about appearing "too Jewish", and produced guilt in the sons and daughters of immigrant parents. Antler confirms this by saying that at this time "stories of generational conflict, lament, and forgiveness occupied a prime space in the Jewish imagination" (2007: 16). The dilemma of separation beckoned them, and songs like *My Yiddishe Mama*, and an earlier popular song *A brivele der mamen* (A Letter to Mama), like other ethnic nostalgia songs that emphasized the warmth of the Old World and the pain of leaving, now focused increasingly on the abandoned mother who would come to symbolize a world of the past that was vanishing (Antler 2007: 17−18). Instead of turning against the mainstream American population, the Jews sought among themselves for a suitable scapegoat.

In his discussion of Jewish anti-Semitism and Otherness, Sander L. Gilman says that self-hatred results from the mirage and illusion of Otherness created by the dominating group. If outsiders, in this case the Jews, accept this definition they are, in fact, fulfilling and realizing their own difference, and thus the myth of Otherness. (1990: 3) Gilman points to the polar oppositional nature of this statement in that by trying to adjust and conform to the standards of the supposedly homogenous reference group, these attempts will not lead to acceptance, but leave the aspirants stranded somewhere in between, in fact acknowledging the Otherness ascribed to them by trying to resist their particularity in mainstream society. (1990: 3) The true message of the majority becomes: "The more you are like me, the more I know the true value of my power, which you wish to share, and the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeit, an outsider" (1990: 2). In reality, outsiders are not permitted to share the power of the dominant group. The dilemma of identity is expressed by the Jews in that by "subconsciously integrating their rejection into their definition of themselves, they, too, proceed to project their sense of the unresolvable dichotomy of the double bind, but they project it onto an extension of themselves" (1990: 3). The Jewish mother became a welcome target for externalizing and projecting the status anxiety experienced by the Jews who were trying to assimilate to the new culture. She stood as the

emblem of difference, directly marking them as outsiders with her conservative Jewish behaviour. Ravits (2000: 6) remarks on this by saying that "the mother, by virtue of gender and generation, functioned as a scapegoat for self-directed Jewish resentment about minority status in mainstream culture". The Jewish mother thus came to bear the burden of double oppression; by the dominant culture as a Jew, and by the Jews as a mother and woman constantly sustaining and conserving Jewish traditions.

These Jewish immigrant mothers were strong individuals who not only longed to preserve their unique identity, but also to help their children achieve successful careers in America. One of Joyce Antler's main arguments in her book *You Never Call! You Never Write!* (2007) is that the mother's role in fostering and raising successful children through emphasizing the importance of education and a culturally active life, has often been neglected and her mothering has instead been seen as excessive and obsessively dominating instead of regarding it as a sign of love and affection (2007: 1−13). Dual images of the Jewish mother existed at the beginning of the past century; one negative and one positive. On one hand, her deep commitment to her children's and family's success often labelled her as a materialist social climber aspiring for economic welfare through her children. On the other hand, films such as the silent movies *Humoresque* (1920) and *Hungry Eyes* (1922) portrayed the mother as a positive force devoting herself to her children's talents, and offered the prototype of the warm-hearted, self-sacrificing immigrant mother (Antler 2007: 29−30). As Jewish fathers struggled to achieve status in society and many times failed, the mother became the supreme authority of the family, the new matriarch, which changed the power relation and family dynamics between husband and wife, resulting in a reversal of traditional Jewish gender roles. As a new generation of Jewish American mothers looked for models of maternal behaviour, the Jewish immigrant mother's child-rearing would be both questioned and criticized.

3.3 The Birth of the Jewish American Mother Stereotype

The gender role reversal and changing dynamics in the Jewish American household would be brutishly dramatized in what critics recognize as the work of drama that initiated the manifestation of the Jewish mother type in America, namely Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* (1935). Mother character Bessie Berger appears as the domineering matriarch of the Berger family: a nagging, manipulative and infantilizing woman who clearly assumes the role as the authoritarian head of the family instead of her husband. The drama was a "psychological construction of gender systems" (Antler 2007: 44), that emphasized the profound impact of the Great Depression in 1929, where the Jewish American mother's capitalist desires rendered a more negative image of her than that of her immigrant predecessor. And this was just the beginning. Throughout the 20th century, the Jewish American mother would be negatively stereotyped as both a caricature and a despicable mother type by comedians, writers, psychiatrists, anthropologists, sociologists and historians of both sexes. In an interview Joyce Antler explains that the Jewish mother was born of the dialectic between "blaming the mother and admiring her, between mother-love that overpowers and crushes and that which nurtures" (Rothman 2007). Anthropologists found the origin and explanation to her intense mothering style in Eastern Europe, in the Jewish *shetl*.

The *shetlach* were Jewish communities upheld in small towns or villages in Eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th century. These *shetlach* were bound together by a strong sense of shared heritage, religion and culture between Eastern European Jews, where they formed their own rules. Jewish values permeated these communities in which men were encouraged to lead a religious and spiritual life whereas women were domestic keepers and economic supporters in the secular world. Sydney Stahl Weinberg (1988: 6) says that "although the great majority of men worked, helping to earn a livelihood was frequently considered a woman's job and an extension of her work in the home". Since their husbands were occupied with studying, their wives often ran businesses and were active in the

marketplace selling products that she and her children had made. A Jewish woman who had a sense for business was often considered a good bargain for a Jewish man. Weinberg (1988: 6) further explains that "working for money was not a source of shame for Jewish women as it would be among cultures where a man's status depended on his ability to support his family". Many of the values maintained in these societies were brought to America as a means of keeping the Jewish culture alive and together, as was the sense of the Jewish woman's active part in community life, and her way of mothering (Weinberg 1988: 3−18).

In the late 1940s, a team of social scientists directed by anthropologists Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict conducted a comparative cross-cultural study of Jewish life in the East European *shetlach*. The research resulted in multiple publications which identified and promulgated a stereotype of the Jewish mother, such as the pioneering study *Life Is With People: The Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe* (1952) by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog (Antler 2007: 74). The publishing of the study's results compromised the American Jews' relationship with their European past. Even though Mead's aim had been to shed a light on and challenge existing stereotypical perceptions of the Jewish mother, her attempt failed and instead she and her team produced a popularized European Jewish mother "type". One stereotypical aspect of the Yiddishe mama was her unconditional love for her family and children. The other aspect was that her love was expressed through self-sacrifice and infinite suffering which was intimately connected with worrying (Antler 2007: 80). Weinberg (1988: 27) confirms that self-sacrifice and altruism are profound lessons to be learnt in most ethnic societies, and that a mother could endure a bad relationship simply for the love of her children, and that she should always be ready to help others in need. Antler explains that the Jewish mother's love also manifested itself in overfeeding, and she constantly offered food as a sign of love. If the child refused to eat, it caused great anxiety in the mother, which in turn produced guilt in the child. The elements emphasized as stereotypical by the anthropologists were thus: love, suffering, worrying and food. (2007: 73−86)

The Jewish *shetl* mother type would be transferred to America through the creation of the JAM (Jewish American Mother) stereotype. On the basis of the anthropological studies conducted, the European Jewish mother was described as nagging, complaining, whining, over-protective, worrying, guilt-tripping, self-sacrificing, martyr-like, infantilizing, interfering and ever-present. The Jewish American mother would, however, be less melodramatic, authoritarian and suffering due to the American context, and her mothering style would be psychologically more sound than that of her European counterpart. (Antler 2007: 96−97) Those who retained the European child-rearing methods were said to create dysfunctional families. The research teams also revealed the Jewish family plot in which fathers and daughters bonded, and mothers and sons bonded. Especially the symbiotic mother-son liaison was seen as an intense libidinal relationship that persisted throughout the son's whole life. Hence the image of the Jewish mother as ever-present, and interfering in her adult son's life. Ravits (2000: 24−25) writes that "insistent variations on the Oedipal theme connect the stereotype of the Jewish mother to the misogyny of psychoanalytic theories which […] continue to blame socio-sexual maladjustment, Oedipal 'wreckage', on the mother". Antler means that one explanation to the mother's obsessive attachment to her son was grounded in the Jewish tradition that the son followed the father to study the scriptures and the mother would often be distanced from him. Neither did the son pose any threat to her feminine authority, as did the daughter, who would one day assume the domestic territory as a wife and mother. Their relationship would, however, be criticized according to psychoanalytic and Freudian theory, and be seen as preventing the son's psychosexual development. (Antler 2007: 80−99)

Prior to the *shetl*-study the Jewish family plot had been dramatized in radio, and later as the first family TV sitcom, in the popular show *Molly Goldberg* with Gertrude Berg as its scriptwriter and embodiment of the prototypical Jewish mother in American entertainment industry in the 20th century. The show debuted on radio in 1929, moved over to television in 1949 and ran until 1956. Three days after The Black Friday of the Wall Street Crash,

Molly Goldberg set up an exemplary Jewish American family at a time of great trouble, and the TV show guided American families through both the Depression and World War II. (Antler 2007: 47) Andrew R. Heinze says that "Molly Goldberg became the mythic Jewish mother for two generations of Americans. She combined Old World charm and moral compass with a passion for democratic values and secular progress" (2004: 304). Remarkable was that during times of anti-Semitism, she publicly expressed Jewish values on television, with a heavy Yiddish accent. She modelled the behaviour for American suburban families and became an all-American Jewish mother. Heinze (2004: 305) further says that she was a moral guide who challenged psychological notions at a time when psychology and psychoanalysis were popular subjects of study, expressing the superiority of common sense over academic knowledge. Through the show, Gertrude Berg viewed the rising middle-class Jewish family in positive terms, and with child-rearing as one of her biggest concerns she hoped to educate parents and transmit the changing standards of parenting of second-generation Jews, which signalled acculturation and modernization. Antler writes that within her Jewish family "Molly was a mediating force, aiding her offspring's transition to modern culture. In her belief that children had to make their own decisions, she expressed a new, more progressive, democratic view of family relationships, one unlike earlier immigrant models" (2007: 68). Molly thus stood as a positive force amidst all negative depictions of the Jewish mother that circulated around her, but unfortunately Gertrude Berg's efforts were undermined by the counterportrait produced by the social scientific study of the Jewish life in the *shetl*.

Teresa E. Perkins (quoted in Kitch 2001: 141) names three factors that in combination fortify a stereotype: "its 'simplicity'; its immediate recognisability […]; and its implicit reference to an assumed consensus about some attribute or complex social relationships. Stereotypes are in this respect prototypes of 'shared cultural meanings'". When asked why the JAM stereotype was and is so persistent and versatile, Antler responds that it is "because it came to stand in for all American mothers of a certain kind: the overprotective mother, the 'maternal tyrant' in extremis. The image gained power precisely because it

came to represent this universal type" (Rothman 2007). Through the images provided by American mass industry, the Jewish mother became a recognizable icon, and in the mid-20th century also scientific disciplines, such as anthropology and psychology, offered proof for her negative style of mothering and revealed the kernel of truth that was embedded within the stereotype. On the nature of stereotypes, Perry R. Hinton says that stereotypes are generalisations about people that are often false, yet once they are automatized in our brains they are difficult to alter (2003: 14). He remarks that negative stereotypes describing the Jews and the black people became more positive in the 1950s due to societal conditions and historical events. However, as mentioned before, male writers of the late 1950s and 1960s reactivated the negative stereotypes that had been suppressed in American consciousness to a certain degree, and through the process of priming put the Jewish mother on the American cultural stage once more, emphasizing her unfavourable features. (2003: 67−73) Comedy was the prime medium through which stereotypes were transmitted, to a large degree by the Jews themselves who constantly reinforced them, especially through stand-up comedy. The next chapter will explore the function of comedy and humour as a self-defence mechanism and a device for expressing the ambiguity and anxiety felt by assimilating Jews and their successors.

3.4 The Jewish Mother Joke

> A man calls his mother in Florida. "Mom, how are you?"
> "Not too good," says the mother. "I've been very weak."
> The son says, "Why are you so weak?"
> She says, "Because I haven't eaten in 38 days."
> The man says, "That's terrible. Why haven't you eaten in 38 days?"
> The mother answers, "Because I didn't want my mouth filled with food if you called." (About.com: Judaism)

> Q: What's the difference between a Rottweiler and a Jewish mother?
> A: Eventually the Rottweiler lets go. (About.com: Judaism)

> A woman takes her son to the doctor. At the end of the appointment the doctor calls the mother into his office and says, "Mrs. Goldstein, I'm afraid that your son Barry has an Oedipus complex." To which Mrs. Goldstein replies, "Oediups, Shmedipus, just as long as he loves his mother."
>
> (quoted in Antler 2007: 100)

Jewish humour has had important social and psychological functions for the Jews throughout history. In her discussion of the nature of Jewish humour, Sarah Blacher Cohen explains that in addition to the masochistic nature of Jewish self-critical jokes, they have also been a prime source of salvation: "By laughing at their dire circumstances, the Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humour has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness" (1987: 4). She further maintains that Yiddish humour was what primarily defined the East European Jews in the late nineteenth century, in the *shetl*. Thus, for the Jews, humour also became a natural means of coping with the New World environment, where they were strangers and outsiders. (1987: 4) Ravits (2000: 24) claims that "Jewish humour, like much ethnic humour, depends upon the burdens of dual consciousness" and that "the unresolved tension between ethnicity and assimilation produces a mental discord that reinforces a sense of Otherness". For the Jews, their self-ridiculing sense of humour became a way of dealing with this dual anxiety through humorous displacement. Simon Critchley says that humour can function as a form of linguistic defence mechanism that expresses cultural insider-knowledge – a shared secret code. Through self-mockery "the subject looks at itself like an abject object and instead of weeping bitter tears, it laughs at itself and finds consolation therein. Humour is an anti-depressant that does not work by deadening the ego […], but is rather a relation of self-knowledge" (2002: 102). Ethnic jokes are often understood as one culture laughing at another or a majority making puns about a minority. But Jewish humour is about the Jews making fun of themselves. This would have consequences for the non-Jewish world's perception of them, especially in the Jews' comic scapegoating of the Jewish mother.

The three jokes listed at the beginning of this chapter all express certain stereotypical qualities of the Jewish mother: (1) suffering and martyrdom; (2) interference, ever-

presence, overprotection; and (3) obsessive attachment to her son psychologically damaging him. Even though the Jews joked about Jewish men, wives, daughters and sons, the Jewish mother joke was the most persistent of these comic depictions. In her survey, Gladys Rothbell noted that in the 1920s and 1930s, there were few jokes about Jewish mothers and that these were generally positive and that the negative stereotype of the JAM was not created until the 1950s (quoted in Antler 2007: 107−108). During the years of WWII which were characterized by de-Semitization in American culture, Jewish entertainers either practiced American-style comedy with Yiddish allusions that were only understood by their Jewish peers, or they worked at the Jewish resort hotels in the so-called "Jewish Alps" in the Catskill Mountains northwest of New York City. The region provided a Jewish haven for suburban middle-class Jewish families who went on vacation to relax and to be entertained by rising Jewish comedian stars. The larger Jewish resorts situated in the Catskills such as Grossinger's, Kutsher's and Brown's, became commonly named the Borscht Belt. Antler says that mother-bashing was a particular variety of Jewish satire expressed in the Catskills, with the Jewish wife/mother functioning as a "staple of Catskill comedy circuit", and that its "legacy would be to propel the Jewish wife and mother into the mainstream of American comedy; and once she arrived, she never left" (2007: 110). Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* followed this Jewish comedic tradition of mother-bashing by making the Jewish mother in the form of Sophie, an icon through exaggerating and criticizing her behaviour, and the novel's impact is still visible to this day.

Jewish American stand-up comedy was practically formed in the Catskills, with comedians such as Woody Allen, Henny Youngman, Alan King and Sid Caesar among others. On the nature of stand-up comedy, David Marc (1989: 24) says that they often depended on the "shocking violation of normative taboos" including "[f]rank, intimate, first-person accounts of sex and sexuality, unabashed toilet talk, brutal self-depreciation, critical commentary on consumerist culture, and the relatively uninhibited airing of racial and ethnic stereotypes". Marc (1989: 43) defines the practice as an obvious directness between artist and audience, and through monologues stand-up comedians produce self-conscious jokes about their

particular outgroup subculture in their reappearance after the more or less silent period during WWII. Humour united the Jews and was an outright expression of inherent Jewish culture at a time when both the Jews and the Gentiles were acutely aware of the Jews' assumed distinctiveness and particularity. Cohen (1987: 8) says that when Jewish comedians made it into mainstream entertainment industry, they influenced and "infected their own people as well as the Gentile public with fits of philo-Semitic laughter". Ravits (2000: 8) writes that disapproving features of both the Jews and the Gentiles were often attributed to females, and this "[r]idicule through female stereotypes emphasized the Jews' desire for upward mobility and acculturation along with their worry about prevailing attitudes of the non-Jewish community towards them". Through comedic practice the Jewish woman did not bear her burden alone, but it also came to include Gentile American women. The maltreatment of the Jewish mother made Jewish women react, by both distancing themselves from the stereotype and by working to transform Jewish life in America. Comedy was also used by feminists as a weapon to restore the Jewish woman's dignity.

3.5 Jewish Feminism

In the aftermath of WWII America prospered experiencing an economic boom and the 1950s saw an enormous suburban expansion with middle-class families leading comfortable post war-lives. The automobile enhanced working possibilities for men who could commute and work at a longer distance from home. Meanwhile, suburban women were encouraged and instructed through magazines and journals[17] to be exemplary housewives, raise children and reign the domestic sphere. Homogeneity and "keeping up with the Joneses" was the goal and motto of American conformist middle-class suburbia. In her work that would catalyze the resurgence of Second Wave Feminism, *The Feminine*

[17] The four major women's magazines at the beginning of the 1950s were *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Home Companion* (Friedan 1963:34).

Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan explores the question of identity for women. No longer satisfied leading a supposedly fulfilling life as a suburban housewife and mother, this Jewish feminist tried to reach the core of the "problem that has no name", and challenge the gender division in society. She argued:

> It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity – a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique. It is my thesis that as the Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role. (Friedan 2001: 133)

Friedan explains how women felt like prisoners in their own homes, unable to pinpoint what was missing (2001: 63). The policy of "domestic containment" was not only apparent in foreign affairs, but also on the home front. The emptiness these women experienced could not be explained, but they sensed they were not alone, other women felt the same way. Friedan brought the problem that could neither be solved by psychoanalysts, nor medical treatment, into the air with her book by interviewing 200 women. She challenged women to act, to fulfil themselves as human beings, and not only as women, to seek their identity. She said that a woman "who has no purpose of her own in society, a woman who cannot let herself think about the future because she is doing nothing to give herself a real identity in it, will continue to feel a desperation in the present – no matter how many 'hours off' she takes" (1982: 299). The 1960s witnessed a new Feminist Movement in America which for Jewesses provided the opportunity to bridge the internal divide between their Jewish identity and their gender identity (Jewish Women's Archive). However, the movement caused divided feelings and thoughts about woman's role as a mother, and many expressed matrophobia, afraid of becoming like their Jewish mothers that were so negatively portrayed in mainstream culture.

Nancy Chodorow argues that the maternal role has almost exclusively been ascribed to the woman, because of a social and cultural interpretation of her ability to give birth and breast-feed. These qualities, however, do not guarantee or convey the mothering function. In her view, mothering is not dependent on our biological knowledge, but rather springs from our definition of a natural situation that develops through our participation in social role-plays. (1978: 47) Since motherhood was a natural part of a housewife's life, and thus a part of the socially constructed patriarchal world, Antler explains that many feminists rejected both their mothers, and their roles as mothers at the beginning of the movement. Jewish feminists such as Shulamith Firestone, Robin Morgan and Jane Alpert rebuked their Jewish mothers' influence and perceived their mothers' strength and will as negative and oppressive. Other Jewish feminists, on the other hand, such as Alix Kates Schulman, Jane Lazarre and Phyllis Chesler tried to combine mothering and the movement. (2007: 152–161) Antler (2007: 160−161) explains that: "[s]truggling to find role models, second-wave feminists had to pioneer ways to reconcile their ambitions to become independent women within patriarchal social structures". Thus, while some actively distanced themselves from their Jewish mothers' influence, others tried to challenge the stereotype and develop a more progressive picture of the mother figure and model for themselves. Since the Jewish mother figure had come to represent all mothers in America, changing the stereotypical depiction of her would simultaneously apply to the universal American mother character, and her status in society at large.

Both Critchley and Ravits acknowledge the fact that humour implies social change and may have a deep impact on society. Ravits (2000: 29) says that theories of comedy "postulate that laughter can subvert, disrupt, and critique the prevailing social order, revealing pressure points in the collective consciousness". Critchley (2002: 10−11) emphasizes the "great importance that humour has played in social movements that have set out to criticize the established order, such as radical feminist humour". The Jewish mother stereotype had already crossed into mainstream culture as Jewish comedians gained success through portraying her misogynistically. In the post-war decades when the Jews'

feelings of vulnerability about their otherness in America were reactivated the mother became caricaturized and was blamed for "both the outside world's misunderstanding of the Jewish male and for his own anxieties about a lack of requisite masculine toughness" (Ravits 2000: 11). As stated before, once stereotypes are imbedded in our minds, they are difficult to alter. *Portnoy's Complaint* enhanced the embedment of the JAM stereotype in the American consciousness, and directed any negative attention from the outside world to the mother. Feminists were caught in a troublesome situation: either they defended the mother and were as a result not taken seriously as feminists; or they chose to abandon the mother and consequently had to develop their own maternal role models.

Feminist Erica Jong stepped in on Jewish male territory when she published her comedy *Fear of Flying* in 1973. It was an attempt to "complicate and revise the reductive image of the Jewish mother crafted by male writers" (Ravits 2000: 17). She gave life to a Jewish American mother that both represented the demanding, directive ethnic mother, and the idealized, companionable mainstream mother. However, she missed her goal and failed to restore the Jewish mother's reputation. But Jong would have successors, and the following decades would see works that challenged and sought to offer refreshing alternatives to the prevailing image of the Jewish mother. One of these was the Jewish actor and comedienne Roseanne Barr who in her TV sitcom *Roseanne* played the 'Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess' starting in the late 1980's. She deliberately broke the conventional tropes of femininity in her rebellious acting, and her behaviour was seen as uncontrollable by her producer who instead wanted her to tell "castration jokes […] recasting it from the point of view of the little boy" (Mellencamp 1997: 79), which had long been a recurring theme in male Jewish comedic practice. Her show allowed her to 'write herself' as a Jewish woman and through her excessive bodily behaviour she portrayed a Jewish female who was a far cry from the traditional view of the 'good self-sacrificing mother' figure. The reactions to the show were ambivalent, but *Roseanne* topped the ratings in the United States and was listed as the favourite female television star by readers of *People Weekly*. (Mellencamp

1997: 74−79) This clearly reveals the desire to break old notions of the JAM stereotype and welcome new interpretations of her character.

Considering the portrayal of the Jewish mother in contemporary media, such as the different comedic television series mentioned in the introduction,[18] changing the stereotype has been a difficult task. Apart from the long-lasting impact of humour as a reason for the persistence of the stereotype, Ravits explains that in the 1960s and 70s the stereotype "dovetailed so effectively with archetypes of the dangerous female, usurper of patriarchal power, just when women seemed on the verge of becoming newly dangerous and politicized through the women's movement" (2000: 7). The women's movement coincided with the Jewish male comedic practice of the 1960s, which quieted women's voices in favour of male ones. The political arena was a male domain and by demanding equality and working against discrimination, women were not looked keenly upon. Jewish feminists' critique of the traditional gender division in Jewish practice, and the exclusion from communal life, only heated the flame more. (Jewish Women's Archive) Haddad and Esposito (2001: 42) argue that "the Jewish feminist struggle of our time centers around eradicating the deeply rooted historical Jewish notion that woman is "other", thereby restoring women's full humanity". The Jewish mother was brutishly exploited by her literary sons, and especially by Philip Roth. The following analysis chapter will explore his notorious novel *Portnoy's Complaint* which manifested the negative portrayal of the Jewish mother, in the form of Sophie Portnoy.

[18] *The Nanny*, *Seinfeld*, *Will and Grace*, and *South Park.*

4 SOPHIE PORTNOY'S MOTHER CHARACTER IN THE PORTNOVIAN FAMILY PLOT

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Sophie Portnoy is a *flat* character. Abbott explains that a flat character, a term coined by E.M. Forster, is often seen in comedy, satire, and melodrama, and has a predictable behaviour without any hidden complexity or depth. Flat characters are often funny figures who frequently represent certain *types* that exist in various cultures and subcultures, and are often mere generalisations of people, as opposed to *round* characters who are complex and often offer more realistic depictions of human characteristics. (2008: 133−136) In fact, Abbott (2008: 136) argues that "compressing people into types, denies them their full humanity". As explained in chapter three, the Jewish American Mother developed into and was branded as a specific 'mother type' through the course of the 20th century in American mass media. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, this mother type reaches her equilibrium in the character Sophie Portnoy, a portrayal that would have an immense social impact on America's perception of the Jewish mother. Narrated through the voice of her son Alex, the description of her is coloured by the typical Jewish male tradition of mother-bashing in comedy and literature.

This chapter will explore the Jewish American mother type represented by Sophie Portnoy in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*. This will be done through looking at Alex's memories and accountings of his family life seen in the monologue he leads in the psychotherapist's office. Each subchapter focuses on a specific aspect of the stereotype, starting with Sophie's religious role as a Jewish mother in "Guardian of Faith". The second subchapter, "Sophie the Martyr", focuses on the Jewish mother as a self-sacrificing figure who produces guilt in her children through her melodramatic suffering, especially through food. The third subchapter, "The Magical Sophie", will discuss Sophie's magical features, implying her omnipresence in her children's lives as all-knowing and all-seeing. In the fourth subchapter, the discussion will revolve around her relationship to her son, the

protagonist Alex Portnoy. This subchapter, named "The Phallic and Castrating Sophie", will look at how she is portrayed as a phallic authority figure and a 'mother-castrator', and how Roth has used psychoanalysis and Freudian theories to present an atypical attachment between mother and child. This chapter will also explore the role-reversal in the Portnovian household between the Jewish husband Jack and his wife Sophie. The last subchapter, "Sophie Never Lets Go", looks at Sophie's role in her adult son's life, her inability to cut the umbilical chord and encourage independency.

4.1 Sophie – Guardian of Faith

In this subchapter I will look at Sophie's role as a traditionalist and keeper of the domestic flame of Judaism. There are five themes that become apparent in the novel as markers of Judaism and which deal with the Jewish woman's role in the community and the household. Firstly, *appearance* in form of physical appearance, language and behaviour serve as external markers of Judaism that Alex experiences as an inheritance from his Jewish parents. Secondly, the *religious duties* that Sophie performs according to Judaic prescriptions. Thirdly, *food* is, as stated before, very important in Jewish tradition, and Sophie is portrayed as a food-fetishist obsessively trying to feed her children. Fourthly, the Judaic sense of *morality* prescribing the lifestyle of a Jew is maintained by Sophie and her husband. And finally, the theme of *community* among Jewish women in America emphasizes the importance of a forum where they can discuss childrearing and private issues with other like-minded, Jewish middle-class suburban women.

Sophie is the descendant of Polish Jews, meaning that she originates from the Eastern European *shetl* whence her ancestors immigrated into America. One inevitable trace of ethnicity is her physical *appearance*, which is evidently also passed on to her children. In America this becomes one of the most crucial markers of 'white otherness' and inferiority, an inescapable trace impossible to hide and which triggers Jewish self consciousness and

anxiety about appearing "too Jewish" in a non-Jewish dominated society. Alex expresses this physically motivated complex in the following conversation with his parents:

> "Please, will you stop playing with your nose", my mother says. "I'm not interested, Alex, in what's growing up inside there, not at dinner." "But it's too *big*." "What? What's too big?" says my father. "My *nose*!" I scream. "Please, it gives you character," my mother says, "so leave it alone!" (Roth 2006: 151)

Sander L. Gilman explains that over the past two centuries the Jew's body has been compared to black people's bodies as a sign of inferiority and has been subjected to racist prejudices. The Jews were considered impure and diseased, with their skin colour and prominent nose working as markers of difference. Gilman says that "it is the nose that makes the Jewish face, and it is this quality that is closest to that of the face of the African. It is the nose that relates the image of the Jew to the image of the black." (Gilman 1991: 371). (1991: 371) Sophie neglects Alex's dilemma, and thinks that the nose gives Alex a Jewish "character", an identity to take pride in, while Alex sees it as outward awkwardness and the ultimate obstacle for Americanization.

Gilman (1991: 381, 388) further states that the nose represents the hidden sign of the Jewish male's sexual difference; his circumcised penis, and that the nose is "one of the central loci of difference in seeing the Jew". Throughout the novel Alex is acutely aware of his physical traits inscribed in his genetic code inherited from his parents, marking him as deviant from the normative model of masculinity and viewing him in a feminized and emasculated way. Shostak (2007: 112) writes that "Roth's male characters project their fears upon women who seem to threaten their performance of masculinity". Sophie's role in Alex's psychosexual development, especially seen as the mother-castrator, will be further discussed in chapter 4.2. Alex's world is black-and-white; Jewish and Gentile, and his fascination with Gentiles often leads him to imagine the possibility of escaping his ethnic traits, but his physical appearance, and most prominently his nose, as a bearer of identity always exposes him.

> Oh, what's the difference anyway, I can lie about my name, I can lie about my school, but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose? "You seem like a very nice person, Mr. Porte-Noir, but why do you go around covering the middle of your face like that?" Because suddenly it has taken off, the middle of my face! Because gone is the button of my childhood years, that pretty little thing that people used to look at in my carriage, and lo and behold, the middle of my face has begun to reach out toward God! Porte-Noir and Parsons my ass, kid you have got J-E-W written right across the middle of that face – look at the shnoz on him, for God's sakes! That ain't a nose, it's a hose! Screw off, Jewboy!" (Roth 1994: 149−150)

Alex expresses his physical inheritance from his mother as he sees himself as the "heir to her long Egyptian nose" (Roth 1994: 4), a legacy which he despises. As discussed in chapter 3.4 and 3.5 on the role of Jewish humour and male Jewish comedians' tendency to project their own fears and anxieties onto the woman and mother, the Jew's body surfaces as yet one negative factor to be internalized. Gilman (1991: 392) says that "[t]he internalization of the negative image of the Jew, the desire not to be seen as a Jew while retaining one's own identity as a Jew was one model of response to sense of being seen as "too Jewish" or, indeed, being seen as Jewish at all". This quote also mirrors the anxiety experienced by Alex as both an ethnic member of the minority, and as an aspirant for the dominant masculine ideal in America. In his love-hate relationship with his mother, Sophie is simultaneously his mother (carer and nurturer) and his antagonist (raising him according to Jewish conventions).

Furthermore, the *Yiddish language* of the Jews is also a marker of otherness and in the novel Alex uses it to discuss kosher and non-kosher food: *milchiks* (milky) and *matzoh brei* (a sort of bread)[19]; the division between the Jews and the Gentiles: non-Jews are referred to as *goys*[20] and *shikses*[21]; and when he is angry or disgusted: *meshuggeneh* (crazy one)[22],

[19] Source: The Jewish Federations of North America.
[20] Used as a disparaging term for one who is not a Jew. The Free Dictionary.
[21] Derogatory Yiddish term for the Gentile woman (Shostak in Parrish 2007: 117).
[22] Source : The Jewish Federations of North America.

shmegeggy (disorganized one)[23] and *shmutzig* (dirty, soiled).[24] When he approaches a non-Jewish girl he is very much aware of his language as a sign of difference: "Because I have to speak absolutely perfect English. Not a word of Jew in it" (Roth 1996: 164). Sophie can be seen as the primary person who has taught Alex Yiddish and hence she is maintaining the Jewish identity and culture by speaking Yiddish to her children at home. Similarly, as Jewish physical appearance, Yiddish has also been viewed infamously, and Gilman (1991: 20) says that "[t]he ancient Western tradition labels the language of the Jew as corrupt and corrupting, as the sign of the inherent difference of the Jew". Alex's abusive use of Yiddish expresses his strivings for masculinity (Shostak 2007: 117), and implicitly portrays his negative relationship with his origins, American society and his love-hate relationship with his mother.

Jewish male and female *behaviour* is viewed negatively in the novel through the comparison with Gentile men and women: "Their fathers are men with white hair and deep voices who never use double negatives, and their mothers the ladies with the kindly smiles and wonderful manners … These people are the *Americans*" (Roth 1996: 145). Alex describes Sophie as having a "clever babbling mouth" (1996: 4) and considers her to be God's mouthpiece on earth (1996: 90). The Jewish mother is thus viewed as a boisterous woman who has an opinion on everything. Echoing Smilesburger's words, Josh Cohen comments that for the Jewish people language is their primary tool for mediating their sense of duality and "Always suspended between the lures of acceptance and rejection, segregation and assimilation, tradition and modernity, doubling is integral to the Jew's historical wiring" (quoted in Parrish 2007: 85). Alex describes Jewish women and talking as them having "opinions on every subject under the sun. It isn't their fault they were given a gift like speech – look, if cows could talk, they would say things just as idiotic" (Roth 1996: 98), clearly defaming their verbal habits. Crying is also another thing which characterizes Jewish behaviour in the novel, and which emphasizes the melodrama in the

[23] Source : The Jewish Federations of North America. "Glossary of terms"
[24] Source : The Jewish Federations of North America. "Glossary of terms"

Jewish family plot: "The way it usually works, my mother cries in the kitchen, my father cries in the living room … Hannah cries in the bathroom, and I cry on the run between our house and the pinball machine at the corner" (1996: 63). This clearly points to the stereotypical depiction of the Jewish mother as a sentimental, melodramatic and suffering persona.

The discussion on the *religious duties* of a Jewish woman, wife and mother in chapter 3.1, emphasizes the home as the cornerstone of the Jewish family, and the Jewish woman's domestic responsibilities are to make the home a sanctified and holy place through different rituals. Her religious role includes firstly, being aware of the Jewish calendar and different seasons and holidays. Alex says that Sophie "lights candles for the dead – others invariably forget, and without even the aid of a notation on the calendar" (Roth 1996: 12) Sophie is portrayed as an unscrupulous Jewish woman who has everything under control, which also involves her religious duties. Alex also mentions that his father was "saying prayers for F.D.R. on the High Holidays, and my mother blessing him over the Friday night candles." (1996: 237), thus referring to the Jewish woman's responsibility of ushering in the Sabbath candles. Sophie's observance of the Jewish dietary laws keeping the food kosher[25] (*kashrut*), is one of the most outstanding features of her personality; it is what most strongly connects her with Judaism. Her observance of other purity laws is not explicitly mentioned, only menstruation is mentioned when she asks Alex to run to the store to buy her tampons, a vivid memory that still haunts him. Since the dietary laws play an important role for Roth's characterization of Sophie, I will discuss that next.

Food was mentioned as one of the main elements and features of the Jewish American Mother stereotype (JAM) in subchapter 3.3. The focal point when discussing Sophie's religious role is the religious constraints pertaining to food and followed by Sophie. Alex says that when Sophie went grocery shopping she "watched the butcher, as she put it, like a

[25] Rules regarding what is allowed, and not allowed to eat. The most general rules are: certain animals are forbidden for consumption; all blood must be drained out of meat before eating; meat must not come in contact with dairy products or milk. (Rich, Tracey R. 1995–2007).

"hawk", to be certain that he did not forget to put her chopped meat through the kosher grinder" (Roth 1996: 11). Another memory of her is when she is draining the blood from the meat and salting it to rid it of its blood (1996: 42−43). She is also very concerned with Alex's eating habits, and at one point accuses him of eating hamburgers and even wants to check his faeces to see the evidence for her accusation. This confirms the overprotective and over-involved aspect of the stereotypical behaviour of the JAM. Alex expresses his frustration with all these dietary laws and rules he has to succumb to: "What else, I ask you, were all those prohibitive dietary rules and regulations all about to begin with, what else but to give us little Jewish children practice in being repressed" (Roth 1996: 79). Many memories that Alex has of his mother, is of her standing in the kitchen cooking or baking something. Food is also a recurrent topic among Jewish women and they frequently refer to their children as "bad eaters" or "good eaters". Alex remembers: "From my bed I hear her babbling about her problems to the women around the mah-jongg game: *My Alex is suddenly such a bad eater I have to stand over him with a knife.* And none of them [Sophie's female friends] apparently finds this tactics of hers at all excessive" (1996: 43). According to Mead's cross-cultural study, food is a sign of love for Jewish women, and they keep on offering food to show their love for their children, with overfeeding as one consequence. The anxiety and guilt connected with food and overfeeding will be discussed in chapter 4.2.

The Jewish sense of *morality* is another issue that illustrates Sophie's role as maintaining Jewish values and making them a natural part of her children's lives. Alex feels constrained by all the taboos and regulations imposed on him to function as a framework for his life.

> The hysteria and the superstition! The watch-its and be-carefuls! You mustn't do this, you can't do that – hold it! don't! You're breaking an important law! *What* law? *Whose* law? … Oh, and the *milchiks* and *flaishiks* besides, all those *meshuggeneh* rules and regulations on top of their own private craziness! … "Momma, do we believe in winter?" … I couldn't even contemplate drinking a glass of milk with my salami sandwich without giving serious offense to God Almighty … The guilt, the fears – the terror bred into my bones! What in their world was not charged with danger, dripping with germs, fraught with peril? Oh,

> where was the gusto, where was the boldness and courage? Who filled these parents of mine with such a fearful sense of life? (Roth 1996: 34−35)

In the quote Alex asks Sophie "do we believe in winter?", and *expects* her to dictate the rules and constraints that the surrounding world is made up of. Thus, as a Jewish woman Sophie teaches her children about faith and Judaism which signals her position as the domestic guardian of faith.

Alex satirically mimics Sophie to his psychotherapist explaining the mechanisms of learning how to lead a Jewish lifestyle:

> Practice darling, practice, practice, practice. 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.

The dilemma Alex is caught in is between being a "nice Jewish boy" or a naughty "Jewboy" who is transgressing boundaries and breaking taboos to demonstrate his masculine power. Alex fits Shostak's definition of the Jewboy who "does not concern himself with moral nicety" (2007: 112), compared to the nice Jewish boy who tries to melt into American society by: "erasing himself […] in irreproachable behaviour" (2007: 112) unwilling to stand out from the crowd and awaken anti-Semitist feelings, and as a result also appears more feminized and emasculated. Alex says that "[b]ecause why not be good, and good and good and good – right? Live only according to principle! Without compromise! … A grueling and gratifying ethical life, opulent with self-sacrifice, voluptuous with restraint!" (Roth 1996: 269). He directly blames Sophie for instilling this normative lifestyle on him, and the stereotypical picture of the Jewish Mother as a nagging and whining character immediately appears in her conventional Jewish child-rearing. "Shit, Sophie, just *try*, why don't you? Why don't we *all* try! Because to be *bad*, Mother, that is the real struggle: to be bad – and enjoy it! That is what makes men of us boys, Mother" (Roth 1996: 123−124). The implication in this quote is also that Sophie as a Jewish mother

is preventing her son to grow up, that she is unwilling to let him go and continues to control him by employing her religion as a strategy.

As previously mentioned in this subchapter, Sophie is described as "babbling" with her fellow Jewish women, and the sense of *community* is another evident element of the Jewish woman and mother's persona in the novel. The housewives of the 1950s and 60s felt trapped in and dissatisfied with their domesticated lifestyles, as Betty Friedan described in her novel *The Feminine Mystique* (see chapter 3.5). She highlighted the importance of meeting up with other women in the same situation to speak their minds concerning their situation. Ravits (2000: 10) writes that when the Jews were able to move out of their ghettos and into the suburbs this resulted in "increasing isolation and a narrowing of gender roles for a woman". While Jack is out selling insurances every day, Sophie never leaves the home except for when she meets her friends and when the Portnoy family is on vacation or out on a Sunday trip. Sophie meets her friends every Tuesday night to play mah-jongg, and the topic of discussion is mostly their children, their eating habits and careers.

Sophie is also described as a social climber, which is yet another feature of the JAM. This is seen both in terms of material fortune, and the education and careers of Jewish children. Alex remembers how highly Sophie values the new-bought blinds in their windows:

> What a rise in social class we have made with those blinds! Headlong, my mother seems to feel, we have been catapulted into high society. A good part of her life is now given up to the dusting and polishing of the slats of the blinds; she is behind them wiping away during the day, and at dusk (Roth 1996: 148)

The Jewish mother has further been criticized for using her children to rise in society, and a frequent theme in jokes about Jewish mothers has been their maternal pride expressed through boasting about their children's careers. However, this was something that the Gentile American mother was also accused of. Ogden (1986: 174) says that one reason for women in the 1950s having many children, was that they saw them as a medium of gaining job satisfaction and success. Sophie and Jack encourage Alex to take piano lessons as that

is a highly valued cultural activity. Alex remembers: "those Bela Lugosi hands that my mother would tell me – and tell me – *and tell me* – because nothing is ever said once – nothing! – were "the hands of a born pianist." Pianist! Oh, that's one of the words they just love, almost as much as *doctor*" (1996: 99). This is a good example that shows how Roth has portrayed Sophie as a nagging and comical mother figure who tries to control her child's future. Another instrument of power which Jewish mothers are described as using is manipulation through self-sacrifice and martyr-like behaviour, and Sophie is no exception.

4.2 Sophie the Martyr

> She used to voluntarily give us bread from her mouth
> And she would have given up her life for her children as well.
> […] Not cherishing her is certainly the greatest sin.
> (Antler 2007: 14)

These verses from *My Yiddishe Mama* (2007: 14) express a significant aspect of the Jewish American Mother stereotype, and it is one of the most outstanding features of Sophie Portnoy's character, namely, self-sacrifice. Roth employs Sophie with a language which radiates self-pity and suffering often targeted at her own family. In Alex's accounts of Sophie she stands out as the melodramatic, martyr-like mother figure directly corresponding to the comic portrayal so popular among Jewish comedians. In the novel, Sophie's suffering can be seen as manipulative behaviour through which she induces guilt in the people around her. As love equals food and vice versa to a Jewish mother, food is often connected to her behaviour, and through what she sees as unconditional love she holds her son in a tight grasp preventing him from freeing himself of her authority. Sophie as a martyr will be discussed in this subchapter by looking at her characterization and use of language for controlling purposes.

In her book with the same name, Susan Forward defines 'emotional blackmail' as an effective form of manipulation where people who are close to us threaten us, directly or indirectly, with punishment if we refuse to do what they desire. This kind of manipulation

often takes place in the home and because the blackmailers often are people we know well, they use our weak spots and cravings for love and confirmation in subtle ways to control us. If we refuse to obey, we are often plagued with a guilty conscience until we have submitted to the other one's will. Eventually, if we allow ourselves to be manipulated, we are soon caught in a vicious circle always following the same destructive pattern designed by our extortioner. What drives blackmailers is often fear: of loss, of change, of rejection or of losing power and their anxiety level is often very high. (1999: 11−12, 14) Sophie Portnoy is the fulfilment of this definition. Roth has skilfully made Sophie an emotional blackmailer with the parodical aspects of the JAM blazing through her behaviour. Alex himself describes her as "a master really at phrasing things just the right way to kill you" (Roth 1996: 15). Forward (1999: 39) distinguishes between four types of blackmailers: 'the punisher', 'the self-punisher', 'the sufferer', and 'the tantalizer'. Two of them are especially true for Sophie: the 'self-punisher' and 'the sufferer'.[26]

The 'self-punisher' is extremely demanding and dependent, and often causes big dramas, hysteria and an atmosphere of crisis, where the victim of the blackmail is often the guilty one and therefore also the one to comfort and sort everything out (Forward 1999: 50). Alex says that "not everybody quite senses my mother's life to be the high drama she herself experiences" (Roth 1996: 92) and describes the ambience at home as follows:

> And as for the hollering, the cowering, the crying, even that had vividness and excitement to recommend it; moreover, that nothing was ever simply nothing but always SOMETHING, that the most ordinary kind of occurrence could explode without warning into A TERRIBLE CRISIS, this was to me *the way life is*. (Roth 1996: 95−96)

Even though Sophie never uses the ultimate threat for a self-punisher, that of suicide, she is very melodramatic in her suffering, putting herself in the centre while simultaneously claiming that her priority is her children's welfare. Paradoxically, this is understood as contradictive by Alex who describes her character as overwhelming and exaggerating. He

[26] In this subchapter I will use 'the martyr' instead of 'the sufferer' as they are interchangeable in this context.

knows that he has fallen into her trap and he tells his psychotherapist that as a child he always tried to behave and live up to her expectations not wanting to disappoint her. He is aware of her manipulative comportment by acknowledging: “Success. I am crying. … Yes, she has me where she wants me, and she knows it” (1996: 25). Sophie is the star of her own show where she plays the martyr, or the “patron saint of self-sacrifice” (1996: 15) as Alex puts it.

‘The sufferer’ or ‘the martyr’, is often preoccupied with the miserable condition he or she is found in and the victim is expected to solve the problem by interpreting the martyr’s wish that is expressed either implicitly or explicitly. A ‘martyr’ may be perceived as fragile and weak, but is in reality a real tyrant. (Forward 1999: 55) Sophie is indeed portrayed as a martyr and does not hesitate to let her closest family and friends know what she has done for her family, how much she has sacrificed for them. “Wouldn’t she give me the food out of her own mouth, don’t I know that by now?” (Roth 1996: 16), Alex says almost exactly echoing the lyrics in the nostalgic ethnic song, *My Yiddishe Mama*. Sophie sees his rebellious and protesting behaviour as incomprehensible, looking at everything through her own eyes, through her own desires. Worryingly she asks him: “Alex, why are you getting like this, give me some clue? Tell me please what horrible things we have done to you all our lives that this should be our reward?” (1996: 25). And through her expression: “when I am really wicked, so evil that she can only raise her arms to God Almighty to ask Him what she has done to deserve such a child” (1996: 86) she self-blamingly focuses all the attention on her persona. Sophie also talks about punishment and reward, which are both tools used by a blackmailer − punishment for disobedience, and reward for compliance.

Forward says that one of the most frequent instruments of power used by a blackmailer, is fear. They pose ultimatums for their victims which directly play on the victim’s secret fears. (1999: 64−65) As a mother, Sophie knows about Alex’s prime fear of rejection and she uses this as punishment to get her will through: “I don’t love you any more, not a little boy who behaves like you do. I’ll live alone here with Daddy and Hannah, says my mother

[…] We won't be needing you any more" (1996: 15). Sometimes she even locks him out of the house and he bangs on the door begging for her forgiveness for a crime he does not even know he committed. This cruel depiction of Sophie as a mother who threatens her child with desertion when he refuses to dress warmly before going out, draws on the stereotype of the JAM as a monster mother. Sophie also often reminds Alex of how grateful he should be indicating that he is somehow in debt for the life she has given him.

> I believe the question strikes her as original. I believe she considers the question unanswerable. And worst of all, so do I. What *have* they done for me all their lives, but sacrifice? Yet that this is precisely the horrible thing is beyond my understanding – and still, Doctor! To this day! (1996: 25)

Sophie's use of fear as a tool for manipulating Alex is rooted in her own fear of losing him, in her fear of *him* rejecting *her*. Her fear of loss is so consuming that she is unable to see the damage she is causing him by controlling him. Seen from this perspective, Sophie becomes a more complex character than the usual caricature. She becomes a woman of flesh and blood who suffers from her own historical past, and who sees how the winds of change threaten to sweep her son away from her. Ironically, she is doing the exact opposite thing; by keeping him close, she runs a higher risk of losing him.

Furthermore, martyrs often glorify themselves and have a distorted self-perception. They often make people around them appear as bad as opposed to them as good. (Forward 1999: 87) This is an evident feature of Sophie's. Alex often recalls her talking about her good qualities which in turn reduces his sense of worth.

> On the phone she is perpetually telling whosoever isn't listening on the other end about her biggest fault being that she's too good… "You know what my biggest fault is, Rose? I hate to say it about myself, but I'm too good." These are actual words, Doctor, tape-recorded these many years in my brain. And killing me still! (Roth 1996: 123)

There are countless examples of Sophie's self-exaltation provided to the reader through Alex's voice. Martyrs are experts on putting a halo over their heads confirming their good intentions while putting dark shadows of doubt over their counterparts and their motives, Forward (1999: 87) writes. Jack and Sophie remind Alex of his obligation to succeed in life as a result of their nothing but loving upbringing "All they have sacrificed for me and done for me and how they boast about me and are the best public relations firm (they tell me) any child could have, and it turns out that I still won't be perfect" (Roth 1996: 108). This puts a pressure on Alex and strengthens the sense of guilt he feels towards them.

Guilt is a major theme in the novel, and one of the prime weapons Sophie uses to get her will through. She exploits the trust and loyalty of her children to manipulate them in her favour. On the nature of shame, Gershen Kaufman (1985: 7) writes that "shame originates interpersonally, primarily in significant relationships, but later can become internalized so that the self is able to activate shame without an inducing interpersonal event", and that "shame can spread throughout the self, ultimately shaping our emerging identity". By inducing guilt in Alex through her martyr-like behaviour, Sophie affects Alex's identity-forging process in a negative way. Alex describes this: "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. See, I am too good too, Mother, I too am moral to the bursting point – just like you!" (Roth 1996: 124). Guilt is also often connected with food, and Antler (2007: 80) says in her book that since feeding meant giving love, the mother could experience the child's refusal to eat as a rejection of her love, which in turn caused great anxiety in the mother, and consequently burdened the child with a guilty conscience. Sophie says that "I stand on my feet all day in this kitchen, and you eat like there's a fire somewhere, and this one – this one has decided that the food I cook isn't good enough for him. He'd rather be sick and scare the living daylights out of me" (Roth 1996: 31), and she tells her friends that she even has to threaten Alex with a knife to make him eat. Roth exaggerates Sophie's role as nurturer to the extreme making her appear as a violent monster who is almost forcing the food down her children's throats.

As Forward (1999: 11) said, once we have started following the destructive pattern of a blackmailer, we are caught in a vicious circle confirming the blackmailer's control. This is true of Alex who, even though he is trying his best to refuse his mother's influence and dominance, cannot free himself of her control, and is caught in the dilemma between being loyal to his ethnic past, or creating an *American* identity. Alex exclaims: "Poor Mother! How can I rush to leave her like this, after what she has just gone through? After all she has given me – my very life! – how can I be so cruel? "Will you leave me, my baby-boy, will you ever leave Mommy?" Never, I would answer, never, never" (Roth 1996: 68). Emotional blackmailers know that by establishing strong emotional bonds with their victim, even though they consist of mostly negative feelings, they have their attention which is what they want. Negligence and indifference on the part of the victim is a deathblow for the blackmailer. (Forward 1999: 126−127) Alex always complies and returns to his mother to sooth his guilty conscience and to please her. He often says that he is unaware of the crime he has obviously committed, but he asks for forgiveness anyway. This only increases Sophie's power over him, and shows that he has given up trying to flee her authority. In subchapter 4.4 we will see how Sophie fulfils one of the descriptions of the JAM in that she never lets go of her children.

Furthermore, Roth uses sarcasm as a tool for portraying Sophie as a guilt-inducer and dominating matriarch. He often lets her fire off sharp criticism of Alex's manners and even her husband Jack remarks on her scornful comments: "Oh, you got a wonderful way of expressing yourself sometimes, do you know that?" "I'm only speaking the truth," she says" (1996: 31). She often makes razor-sharp remarks on Alex's behaviour and takes him down to earth when she senses that he is being too obstinate or defiant: "Oh, oh, oh – thirteen years old and the mouth on him! To someone who is asking a question about *his* health, *his* welfare!" (Roth 1996: 25). She nicknames him: "Mr. Smart Guy, Mr. Adult" (1996: 25), "Mr. Hot-Under-The Collar! Mr. Hit-The-Ceiling! Mr. Fly-Off-The Handle! […] Mr. Always-Right-And-Never-Wrong" (1996: 229−230), and thereby takes the edge off his resistance. Another example is when Sophie is clearly afraid of Alex growing up

and hence slipping out of her control, which makes her even more protective and overbearing. The following quote illustrates her tendency to belittle and humiliate him.

> You know what your son does after school, the A student, who his own mother can't say poopie to any more, he's such a *grown-up?* What do you think your grown-up son does when nobody is watching him?" […] "Just wait till your father hears what you do, in defiance of every health habit there could possibly be. Alex, answer me something. You're so smart, you know all the answers now" (1996: 23)

Sophie corresponds accurately to the view of the Jewish mother as a suffering, complaining and martyr-like mother type. Ironically, the novel's name *Portnoy's Complaint* is actually about *Alex* complaining, and not Sophie, to Dr. Spielvogel about his family issues that have kept on influencing him throughout his life. Mother Portnoy is portrayed as nothing but a flat and overbearing character who dominates her family through her nearly tyrannical behaviour. Her way of signalling love and affection is painted in dark colours by Roth, and her good intentions are often neglected in favour of serving the stereotype. Next, I will look at Sophie's *positive* features, and see how Alex has described her in favourable and even magical terms.

4.3 The Magical Sophie

At the beginning of the novel, Alex pictures his mother as having magical capabilities with an ability to transform into whichever person she wants. This is connected to the influence Sophie has, and continues to have, on Alex's life, even though she is physically absent. The 'Magical Sophie' here refers to her qualities as a mother, and to her omnipresence; her all-seeing, and seemingly all-knowing character, experienced as such by Alex. Roth has deliberately used the magical reference to Sophie as an implication that her positive features can only be viewed as positive in a supernatural and imaginary way − in a distorted reality. Whenever Alex describes Sophie in positive terms, it comes with a hint of irony, as if Roth were unable to escape the JAM conventions. This reveals a fracture in the

narrative where the picture of Sophie is more generous only to be repressed later by the author. Furthermore, Sophie can also be seen as an American Supermother, following the expert opinions on housekeeping and childcare of her time, and is thus portrayed as magical with her attempts to live up to the general expectations of a housewife in the mid 20th century. In this chapter I will focus on the positive description of Sophie, and see how her behaviour in fact is a sign of ardent devotion rather than of clinging over-attachment.

The time span of the novel ranges from 1933-1966 in America, with the Portnoy family settled first in Jersey City, and later in the Jewish neighbourhood of Newark. Sophie's occupation is spelled 'Housewife', similarly as many other American women at the time. As discussed earlier, the Jewish woman took great pride in reining the domestic sphere, and so does Sophie. A multitude of advice on how to be a good mother and wife flourished in different journals and magazines helping women to "fulfil themselves" through their daily duties (Friedan 2001: 58). Sophie is described as a devoted woman who in every sense fulfils the image of the perfect housewife. The first aspect to be analysed is that of cleanliness and hygiene, and Alex remembers her excellent skills at keeping the house tidy:

> The first bright day of spring, and she has mothproofed everything wool in the house, rolled and bound the rugs, and dragged them off to my father's trophy room. She is never ashamed of her house: a stranger could walk in and open any closet, any drawer, and she would have nothing to be ashamed of. You could even eat off her bathroom floor, if that should ever become necessary. (Roth 1996: 12)

This quote testifies to Alex's tendency to take everything to its extreme exaggerating Sophie's demand for an almost sterile environment. However, this does reflect the reality of many home-bound women in the mid 20th century. Through the interviews that Friedan conducted with suburban housewives, she revealed that many housewives filled their days with cleaning the house into an unscrupulous state even changing the sheets in the beds twice a week and keeping the new washing machines running all day long (2001: 61). Trying to live up to the widespread standard of a housewife as prescribed by various experts, women in the mid 20th century were living under a considerable pressure of

constant performance. Sophie is a prime example of this, which makes her character appear in a more charitable light.

Sophie's ubiquity is inescapable since taking care of the home and the family largely defines her life. Alex ironically compares his mother with the strict discipline of a military and says that she "patrols the six rooms of our apartment the way a guerrilla army moves across its own countryside – there's not a single closet or drawer of mine whose contents she hasn't got a photographic sense of" (Roth 1996: 173). Sophie's 'compulsive controlling disorder' highlights her supposedly manic mother features. This includes not only the house, but also Alex as she teaches him about cleanliness and hygiene: "Alex, you must wash everything, is that clear? Everything! God only knows who touched it before you did" (1996: 34), and "[f]or mistakes she checks my sums; for holes, my socks; for dirt, my nails, my neck, every seam and crease of my body […] but where health and cleanliness are concerned, germs and bodily secretions, she will not spare herself and sacrifice others" (1996: 12). Antler (2000: 4) argues that the flat and narrow stereotype failed at conveying the "deep and abiding concern for their children" which Jewish mothers showed. Instead, her commitment is illustrated by Roth as overbearing and suffocating where her good intentions are overshadowed by critical voices. Trying to be a good mother, Sophie sees it as both her obligation and her pleasure to secure her family's welfare and happiness, with the heaviness of the expert opinions on child-rearing of the time looming above her head.

On the topic of food and nurturing, John Coveney confirms the problematic complexity in his book *Food, Morals and Meaning: The pleasure and anxiety of eating* (2006). He explains that feeding children is problematic, and can become a "battleground in which the major stakes are love and pleasure" (2006: 114). By offering food, the mother makes an emotional investment aware of the risk of rejection through the child's refusal of eating, and thus also the mother's love (2006: 114). Food is one of Sophie's main concerns, and is also an inseparable part of her ethnic legacy and identity. Alex repeatedly recalls his mother standing in the kitchen, in the heart of the home, cooking and baking: "She could

make jello, for instance, with sliced peaches *hanging* in it, peaches just *suspended* there, in defiance of the law of gravity. She could bake a cake that tasted like a banana" (Roth 1996: 11). When Sophie's in the hospital Alex realizes the risk of losing her, and he mentions her cooking skills: "Wasn't the unthinkable thing life without her to cook for us, to clean for us, to …to *everything* for us!" (1996: 67). Many Jewish daughters over the past decades have gathered their mothers' recipes and published cooking books in remembrance of their mothers, and as a bridge reaching over generations. This has been a way of restoring the Jewish mother and housewife's reputation, and gaining a new understanding of their Jewish ancestors' pasts. (Antler 2000: 203−205) Sophie is carrying on the tradition of cooking that she has inherited from her predecessors and as the good housewife that she is, her goal is to make food that will ensure the wellbeing of her own family.

Furthermore, Coveney says that there are certain principles that govern the choice of food according to its beneficiary effects on the family's health. These include: scientific, rational, nutri-centric and ethical recommendations. (2006: 128) Apart from the Judaic dietary laws as the ethical principles regulating Sophie's cooking, counsels circulating in women's magazines of the time supported by scientific evidence also impacts Sophie's view of food. She is especially critical of Alex eating fast food: "Alex, I want an answer from you. Did you eat French fries after school? Is that why you're sick like this? […] If all you ate was what you were fed at home, you wouldn't be running to the bathroom fifty times a day" (Roth 1996: 23). By being disciplined and not taking the 'easy option' when it comes to food, Sophie becomes "a good parent, and indeed, a good citizen", according to Coveney's description (2006: 129). Sophie often maintains that she knows what is best for her children, and one reason why Alex only remembers her as a nagging and anxious mother figure is because he is unable to see beyond her worrying comportment, and understand what is driving her: the love for her children.

Another characteristic of Sophie's, that Roth serves the reader only a few glimpses of, is her helpfulness. To Alex this only bears witness of overprotectiveness, worrying and

intrusion. Therefore the positive side of it is easily overlooked by the reader as impacted by the narrator's voice. One example of pure thoughtfulness is when she warns her neighbours about the rain falling on their laundry:

> She would telephone all the other women in the building drying clothes on the back lines – called even the divorced *goy* on the top floor one magnanimous day – to tell them rush, take in the laundry, a drop of rain had fallen on our windowpane. What radar on that woman! And this is *before* radar! The energy on her! The thouroughness! (Roth 1996: 11−12)

Once more Sophie's omnipresent features become visible, as Alex imagines her as having an in-built radar. Sophie's honest concern for her family's and her neighbours' welfare is a far cry from Alex's description of her as a selfish and egocentric monster mother. As mentioned in subchapter 4.1, the sense of community is important for Jewish mothers and women, and one of the housewife's primary tasks was to make and keep peace both within the family and also with the outer world (Ogden 1986: 181). Sophie's will to maintain an ambient atmosphere with her surroundings is evident, as seen from the quote. By keeping a strong sense of community with other Jewish households in the Jewish neighbourhood of Newark, it also becomes easier for Sophie to resist the impact of American ideals and instead maintain Jewish tradition and values. However, she cannot entirely escape the influence of the outer world as the Jews did in the European *shetl* where they lived in isolation. Judging from the discussions that Alex remembers her having with other Jewish women about childrearing and housekeeping, she is not left untouched by the experts' advice on how to be a Supermother.

By being aware of the social and historical context in which the novel's plot is set, the reader is introduced to a broader understanding of Sophie's character with the result that Sophie becomes a strong character in the reader's eyes, whereas Alex's scornful and sarcastic complaints are met by deaf ears and he is perceived as ungrateful, selfish and childish. Dr. Spielvogel's utterance in the novel's punch line: "So [*said the doctor*]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (Roth 1996: 274), also insinuates that it is time to start

looking for the real reason to Alex's condition; himself. Ogden (1986: 174) says that the domestic science of the mid 20th century provided American housewives advice on how to produce "scientifically programmed children", and as a result of good management and mothering "the well-managed child promised to grow up into a punctual, time-motion-conscious adult well suited for the industrial environment". The mother was the one who had the full responsibility for managing her children, for raising them into good citizens. This further explains and justifies Sophie's worrying attitude. It becomes evident that Alex does not understand the reason to her anxiety and looks down on his mother for nagging on him, and thus emphasizes the stereotype:

> You should have watched her at work during polio season! She should have gotten medals from the March of Dimes! Open your mouth. Why is your throat red? Do you have a headache you're not telling me about? You're not going to any baseball game, Alex, until I see you move your neck. Is your neck stiff? Then why are you moving it that way? You ate like you were nauseous, are you nauseous? Well, you ate like you were nauseous. (Roth 1996: 32−33)

It is easy to imagine the scene with Sophie worryingly asking Alex about his health, and Alex has selectively made her behaviour very vivid by making her comments look like rifle fire. Ironically, what he despises in her, he adopts himself. Whenever he is in a new place he is worried that he will get sick from touching things that other people have touched before him: "Am I crazy to be going in there? God only knows what kind of disease I am going to pick up off those seats!" (Roth 1996: 138). He is also afraid of catching syphilis from the girls he has sexual encounters with: "What if the girl has the syph!" (1996: 166), "I am icy with fear. Of the girl and her syph!" (1996: 171). Sophie's influence on Alex when it comes to health and hygiene is obvious and, surprisingly, he often also takes pride in remembering his mother's advice.

Seeing Sophie in the light of her time invites a more complex understanding of her character and reveals a fracture in the flatness and in the stereotypical description provided by Alex, and indeed, Roth. Her Supermother qualities appear as magical precisely because

of the heavy burden of performance that was laid upon women, wives and mothers by mostly male expert voices. One of these voices belonged to the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, whose theories on early childhood development and the mother's influence on her children, were taken as a role model for raising children (Ogden 1986: 174). The mother-son relationship was one of the most popular themes in Jewish comedic practice, and in the novel Roth makes Sophie and Alex appear as a prime example of an Oedipal liaison. In the following chapter I will analyse the psychological indication Sophie's influence has on Alex's psychosexual development and idea of masculinity.

4.4 The Phallic and Castrating Sophie

"It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship" (Roth 1996: Epigraph).

This professional diagnosis of Alex's disorder "Portnoy's Complaint", made by Alex's psychotherapist Dr. Spielvogel, echoes the expert voices on child-rearing in the mid 20th century. Ogden explains how professional advice on upbringing was heavily relied upon by women and mothers, and as Freudian theories were popularized, women were naturally made aware of psychoanalytical techniques and their children's psychosexual development and how they could enable this successfully. Consequently, if the child suffered failures, it was the mother's fault since she had the knowledge but could not adapt it to her situation. The burden on women was overwhelming, and they balanced between being either overprotective or inattentive with their actions constantly monitored by their social context. (1986: 174−175) The Freudian influence is easily recognized in the novel, where Roth has used psychoanalysis as a method of portraying Sophie in an unfavourable manner; as a failed mother. This subchapter will revolve around the mother-son relationship between Sophie and Alex between whom Roth implies an Oedipal liaison, and I will look at how Sophie stands out as a phallic and castrating mother figure. I will begin by focusing on the

role-reversal in the home between Sophie and Jack and see how Jack's absence as a role model of masculinity allows Sophie to step in and take on the authoritative role. To enhance the understanding of my analysis, I will first discuss some Freudian concepts that are critical to a boy's psychosexual development, namely 'The Oedipus Complex', 'Castration Anxiety' and 'The Castration Complex', and relate them to Alex's own development.

Sigmund Freud introduced 'The Oedipus Complex' and derived its name from a comparison of dream themes with a Greek myth (Hamilton 2004: 273). The myth was the Greek trilogy about *King Oedipus* who, according to a prophecy, killed his father and married his mother without knowing that they were his parents. The same idea Freud then applied to a child's psychosexual development. The complex arises when the child's first sexual ambitions blossom, which according to Freud is between the ages of three and five. (Freud 2002: 114) What happens in the Oedipus Complex with a boy child is that the son and his father become rivals and compete for the mother's/wife's interest and admiration, for her desire, with the consequence that "The father's punishment for his son's interest in the mother/wife, or the implied threat of punishment, is the major source of castration anxiety" (Monick 1991: 43). Thus, Fromm says that the father's task is to reinforce his authoritative role as the husband and his wife's lover and thereby contribute to the boy's resolution of the problematic incestuous attraction to his mother and make him focus on other women. Freud explains that the unsuccessful resolution of the conflict lies at the basis of every neurosis. (1979: 33) In the novel, Alex recalls several memories from this period, and his parents' impact on him, especially Sophie's is clearly visible. According to Monick (1991: 44), the Oedipal drama is the "core dynamism in Freud's understanding of a boy's psychosexual relationship both to his mother and to females generally […] determining and qualifying a boy's sexual identity as well as establishing the foundation of his later psychological development". The unsuccessful resolution of Alex's Oedipus Complex is later seen in his problematic relationships, especially when he finds his mother-substitute in the Jewish Pumpkin: "This then is the culmination of the Oedipal drama, Doctor? More

farce, my friend! Too much to swallow, I'm afraid!" (Roth 1996: 266). He becomes impotent since he experiences that she is his mother, which would be incest and thus taboo.

An important result of the Oedipal Complex, is the development of the Superego. The Superego will help the child to resolve the conflict and will from now on function as an alarm against all the incestuous Oedipal and taboo wishes that the child nourishes within. (Mangs & Martell 1982: 128) The Superego then shapes a person's sense of morality in enabling for example the feeling of guilt. This sense of morality is largely based on the experiences the child learns in childhood from its parents. (1982: 128) In Alex's diagnosis it reads: "As a consequence of the patient's 'morality', however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame…" (Roth 1996: Epigraph). The Superego in the novel can be seen as Alex's Jewish conscience imposed on him primarily by his mother who, according to Judaic prescriptions, is the keeper of the faith in the domestic sphere. Ravits (2000: 24), acknowledges this by saying that "[t]he Jewish mother personifies the return of the repressed, a voice of inner conscience that refuses to be hidden." Alex struggles much with shame as a consequence of the Jewish morality taught by his parents. He says: "But don't you see – my right mind is just another name for my fears! My right mind is simply that inheritance of terror that I bring with me out of my ridiculous past! That tyrant, my superego, he should be strung up" (Roth 1996: 121−122), and is once more emphasizing his awareness of Freud's theories.

As stated castration anxiety develops in the Oedipus complex when the boy is afraid that his father will castrate him because of his forbidden love for his mother. Thus, the father's reinforcement of his authoritative role is a threat to the boy's masculinity as the father makes him submit to his phallic (masculine) authority. Values associated with the phallus are for example: power and strength, absolute freedom and invulnerability, which are often linked with masculinity. (Mangs & Martell 1982: 102) Castration anxiety is then not the direct fear of physical castration, but psychologically the fear of losing what makes a man masculine, such as the values mentioned above. The symbolic representation of masculinity

is *phallus* according to psychoanalysis, and to Lacan phallus is a signifier with symbolic and ancient value (Bowie 1991: 123−124). The loss of phallus (masculinity) would then result in feminization (Monick 1987: 44). In Dr. Spielvogel's diagnosis of *Portnoy's Complaint*, he specifically mentions castration anxiety as a major symptom of the disorder:

> Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient's "morality", however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of *castration.* (my italics, Roth 1996: Epigraph)

Throughout the novel Alex suffers from this psychological fear imposed on him especially by his mother Sophie: "Who else was so lucky as to have the threat of castration so straight-forwardly put by his momma?" (Roth 1996: 157).

Finally, the Freudian 'Castration Complex' "forms in a male's unconscious when an event or events take place causing a boy inwardly to perceive that something essential to his being as a male actually has been taken from him" (Monick 1991: 49). Thus, all men bear castration anxieties within themselves but when this omnipresent threat is catalyzed by some outer situation it hits the surface of consciousness and develops into a castration complex. Monick (1991: 50) further explains that "[t]he eruption of affect makes a man ashamed; a weakness is exposed … and men who suffer from unrepaired castration and its complex bear within themselves the secret suspicion that the essence of their masculinity is weak, that they have been irreparably injured". A constantly recurring theme in the novel is that of exposure which Alex is relentlessly anxious of: "only what about my picture in the *Newark Evening News!* When the cops turn on the lights and cry, 'Ok, freaks, this is a raid!' – what if the flashbulbs go off! And get me – *me*" (Roth 1996: 129−130). The source of this fear of exposure, and hence the emergence of the castration complex, is the shame Alex has come to experience as a part of him especially due to his mother's influence on his self-image: "who had the most castrating mother, who the most benighted father, I can match you bastard, humiliation for humiliation, shame for shame" (1996: 118). On the

nature of shame Fromm (1979: 57), says that "[e]xcessive parental control combined with a parental climate in which a child feels powerless and trapped together are a seedbed for shame". The successfulness of handling a situation in which a man's weakness is threatened to be exposed depends largely on how the boy has been brought up, how his parents have led him through the process of maturing.

4.4.1 The Phallic Sophie

The role of the father is crucial as he stands for the model of masculinity and phallic power to his son. Fromm says that "[a] boy learns what it means to be a man from his father and a girl learns what it means to be a woman from her mother. These are the principal models for the development of the gender component of identity, masculinity and femininity" (1979: 52). Further, Monick (1991: 80) explains that "Freud's general principle is the psychological necessity for a male to repress his femininity, his passive attitude toward other men". Thus, it is the father's task to lead his son into manhood by reinforcing masculine behaviour and by refusing feminization. This task falls on Alex's father Jack Portnoy. Jack tries so hard to be: "a hero in the eyes of his wife and children" (Roth 1996: 8), but according to Alex he is a disappointment. He suffers from chronic constipation and sells life-insurances to other minority groups in the city to support his family following his life motto: "a man has got to have an umbrella for a rainy day" (Roth 1996: 7). However, he is ridiculed and laughed at by people and Alex soon realizes that his father does not measure up to the image of the 'perfect male'. When Jack tries to maintain a father-son relationship by introducing Alex to the all-male American sport of baseball, he just embarrasses himself by not knowing the technique. Jack's failure to be the masculine role model for Alex, makes Alex realize that his father cannot provide him with what he needs to fully become a man: "[b]ut what he had to offer I didn't want – and what I wanted he didn't have to offer" (1996: 27). Alex's subjective narration affects his disapproving

portrayal of his father which can be seen as an attempt to belittle his father since classically, he is his rival in the Oedipal conflict.

Jack's absence as the role model of masculinity Alex so desperately needs, makes Alex search for other male models such as his uncle Hymie whom he describes as "[t]he potent man in the family" (Roth 1996: 51), and his cousin Heshie who is an excellent athlete fulfilling Alex's picture of the American myth of masculinity. In the household Jack's absence has consequences. When Alex recalls his mother drawing a knife on him at the kitchen table he asks himself "why doesn't my father stop her?" (1996: 17), implying that his father fails to be the authoritative male figure in the Portnovian household, and instead it is Sophie who becomes the phallic figure with the knife as a symbolic weapon. Alex's confusion is total as he tries to sort out the gender roles in his family:

> [I]f my father had only been my mother! and my mother my father! But what a mix-up of the sexes in our house! Who should by rights be advancing on me, reatreating – and who should be retreating, advancing! Who should be scolding, collapsing in helplessness, enfeebled totally by a tender heart! And who should be collapsing, instead of scolding, correcting, reproving, criticizing, faultfinding without end! Filling the patriarchal vacuum! Oh, thank God! Thank God! At least *he* had the cock and the balls! (1996: 41−42)

This confusion makes Alex doubt if he is supposed to idolize his father or his mother. His anger towards Jack regarding the gender role-reversal in the home, forces him to ask: "Poppa, why do we have to have such guilty deference to women, you and me – when we don't! We mustn't! Who should run the show, Poppa, is *us*!" (1996: 88). The only definite sign that convinces him of whom he should imitate is the exterior sign of maleness, his father's genitals. This is what unites them as men, and that is what makes Alex so aware of and obsessed with his own genitals as well. Monick says that "[a] male uses his phallos; he is not a man if he cannot do so. Men need to know their source of authority and to respect their sacred symbol. Phallos opens the door to masculine depth" (1987: 10). In *Portnoy's Complaint* Alex's genitals become his keys to manhood and eventually his primary source

of power and male authority that he believes he has inherited. Even when he doubts his own authority his genitals are there to witness about his maleness.

Jack is often not only symbolically absent as a masculine model but also physically absent from the home when he is at work. Sophie, on the other hand, is always at home since she is a housewife. Nancy Chodorow (1988: 137−138) explains that the absence of the father in the household makes the mother turn to another male member of the family, namely her son, and she starts behaving seductively towards him whereby she repays his incestuous Oedipal impulses. Alex views his father's unimportance in the family by de-familiarizing/foreignizing him: "where she [his mother] sleeps with a man who lives with us at night and on Sunday afternoons. My father they say he is" (Roth 1996: 45). Alex's disappointment with his father is balanced out with his secret desire to be alone with his mother, without his sister and father around: "This man, my father, is off somewhere making money, as best he is able. These two are gone, and who knows, maybe I'll be lucky, maybe they'll never come back" (1996: 45). He despises his father's ignorance and inadequacies as the masculine figure. He wishes that his father would take the authoritative role and seriously become his Oedipal rival by directly imposing the threat of castration on him as he imagines himself in sexual intercourse with his mother: "Would he draw *his* knife – or would he go off to the other room and watch television until they [Alex and his mother] were finished?" (1996: 46). Emily Miller Budick states that by using psychoanalysis as a narrative instrument Roth has found an acceptable medium through which he can talk about disturbing things openly, such as incest and sex, and the high amount of graphic descriptions in the novel also testifies to this. (quoted in Parrish 2007: 74) Furthermore, although Jack is not the one who enables the development of castration anxiety within Alex by psychologically threatening him according to Freud's theory, his absence as the phallic authoritative figure results in an "Oedipal Triumph" (Mangs & Martell 1982: 119) for Alex, and his incestuous attraction for his mother is not prevented but rather encouraged by Sophie as she turns to him in her husband's absence. They never actually commit incest but the fact that it is not impossible largely contributes to Alex's

unsuccessful resolution of his Oedipal conflict which lies at the heart of his imagined psychoneurotic disorder.

4.4.2 The Castrating Sophie

"She was so deeply imbedded 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" (Roth 1996: 3).

This is how Roth opens the novel and this is what Alex Portnoy continues to believe in his search for the perfect mother-substitute, sensing that his incestuous affection for his real mother is forbidden. The role-reversal is complete in the Portnovian household with Sophie Portnoy taking on the active role rather than the passive in her son's maturity process. This confirms her role as the female-castrator who imposes the threat of castration on her son as the phallic authority, as Monick has explained: "In other situations, the mother takes a clearly active role, maneuvering her son to her advantage" (1991: 83). During his psychotherapeutical session Alex recalls memories from his past testifying to his mother's obsession with him: "Why was this woman so grossly insensitive to the vulnerability of her own little boy – on the one hand so insensitive to my shame, and yet on the other so attuned to my deepest desires!" (Roth 1996: 44). Regarding the recently discussed absence of masculinity in Jack Portnoy, Alex's psychosexual development is threatened when there is no one to stop and forbid Alex's attraction for his mother, not even herself.

According to Antler (2000: 141), Sophie "seduces" Alex by giving him much attention, praising him and being physically intimate with him. When Alex is young Sophie often boasts about his accomplishments and behaviour, and she compares him with his sister Hannah, who she thinks is less intellectual. Alex also remembers her tickling his penis to make him pee, and when she is rolling up her stocking in front of him he interprets it as seductive behaviour. Monick (1991: 85) says that "[a] mother unsure of herself,

unconnected to her inherent feminine authority and dignity, can feel compelled to keep her son to herself, emotionally dependent, to maximize her own importance". Sophie's dominating character is possibly a result of a desire to be a more powerful woman than she would otherwise be, and because she does not get the desired attention from her absent husband she instead focuses on Alex so much that it has severe consequences for his psychosexual development. Roth has clearly depicted this Freudian Oedipal dilemma and constructed Sophie as the catalyst of Alex's disorder.

In Alex's story Sophie imposes the threat of castration on him both indirectly and directly. An example of the former is when she is deliberately trying to exclude him from the family by locking him out of the house saying "I don't love you anymore, not a little boy who behaves like you do. I'll live alone here with Daddy and Hannah, says my mother (a master really at phrasing things just the right way to kill you) […] We won't be needing you anymore" (Roth 1996: 15). This is something that would be devastating for any child to hear from its mother, the fear of abandoning would be fulfilled. Another event that has clearly traumatized Alex is when he recalls Sophie directly threatening him with a knife: "So my mother sits down in a chair beside me with a long bread knife in her hand […] Which do I want to be, weak or strong, a man or a mouse?" (Roth 1996: 16). At several occasions Alex returns to this childhood memory, and the image of 'the knife' threatening him, and he says: "Doctor, *why,* why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son? […] Why a *knife*, why the threat of *murder,* why is such total and annihilating victory necessary" (1996: 16−17). Sophie continuously questions his manliness, or aspirations for manliness, and completely degrades and feminizes him putting him on the spot with her own authority. Even during his adolescence and also in his adult life she continues to infantilize him with her sarcastic remarks about his immaturity, and as will be further analyzed in subchapter 4.5, her endless influence on him results in what is called "Auto-Castration".

Sophie has a tendency to belittle her son, preventing his identity-forging process and differentiation. When she is trying to make him eat she says: “Do I want people to look down on a skinny little boy all my life, or to look up to a man? […] Which do I want to be when I grow up, weak or strong, a success or a failure, a man or a mouse?” (Roth 1996: 16). Alex even begs his psychotherapist to “bless [him] with manhood!” (1996: 37). Sophie takes every chance to remark on him and another incident is when Alex wants to buy new trunks with a jock strap in them: “Yes, sir, this just breaks my mother up. “For *your* little thing?” she asks, with an amused smile. Yes, Mother, imagine: for my little thing” (1996: 51). By ridiculing his penis she degrades his sense of masculinity and he is critically aware of her influence on his sense of sexuality, and to him emasculation is closely connected with homosexuality:

> “Alex”, you say to me … “the way you cut your meat! the way you ate that baked potato without spilling! I could kiss you, I never *saw* such a little gentleman with his little napkin in his lap like that!” *Fruitcake*, Mother. Little *fruitcake* is what you saw – and exactly what the training program was designed to produce.” (1996: 125)

The word ‘fruitcake’ is here assumed to refer to homosexual people. What is also remarkable is that Alex compares his upbringing with a “training program” where Sophie is the chief programmer producing unmanly mama’s boys. As discussed earlier in subchapter 4.3, American housewives were educated by experts through different media to raise “scientifically programmed children”, and this is a fact recognized by Roth as he lets Alex give voice to it.

In Alex’s diagnosis it is stated that “[i]t is believed by Dr. Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship” (1996: epigraph). Not even when Alex is an adult can Sophie stop reminding him of their implied relationship: “’Well how’s my lover?’ Her *lover* she calls me, while her husband is listening on the other extension!”(1996: 97). This emphasizes Sophie’s selfishness as she plays with Alex’s feelings and continuously puts salt into his Oedipal wound. As a person

Roth portrays Sophie as a pedantic and controlling woman who is never satisfied. She needs to check everything that Alex does: his food, his personal life and even his excrements. This affects Alex in that he always has to check her approval since he always has to live up to her expectations. This is a sign of an unsuccessful resolution of the Oedipal conflict since Alex never breaks the bond between them in the form of detachment from her to become fully masculine. Ravits (2000: 11) says that the Jewish mother stereotype emphasizes the masculine fear of emasculation, where the mother makes the son a 'mama's boy'. This is true for Sophie who is unable to cut the umbilical cord between her and Alex. Monick (1991: 45) also says that "castration from the mother occurs through the boy's success in remaining 'hers', through a kind of psychological merging with her […] when a boy wins his mother, if his libido goals are met, he is mother-castrated". "Psychological merging" is exactly what happens to Alex, and even though he never commits incest with his mother which would fully result in mother-castration, the threat and anxiety is always there lurking in his mind.

From this analysis it becomes evident that Roth is using Freud's theories on a child's psychosexual development as scientific evidence of Sophie's bad mothering. Budick (quoted in Parrish 2007: 74), says that Freud's theories have become the *Bible* for many of Roth's characters who almost precisely act out the Freudian plot with all its Oedipal details. Sophie becomes the phallic and castrating mother in the Oedipal dilemma, and she is completely in tune with the most archetypal depiction of a Jewish mother's atypical and inappropriate attachment to her son employed in the media. The stereotype suggests that apart from being overprotective and worrying, the Jewish mother's behaviour also damages the son psychologically, preventing him from a sane development into a man. On top of all, as seen from the "Oedipus, Shmedipus" joke in subchapter 3.4, the mother is portrayed as a simple-minded and comical caricature unaware of how disastrous her behaviour is: "Oedipus, Shmedipus, just as long as he loves his mother" (quoted in Antler 2007: 100). In the next subchapter I will look at another emblematic feature of the JAM, namely her inability to let go of her adult son.

4.5 Sophie Never Lets Go

"And my mother, she just keeps whispering. *Sophie whispers on!*" (Roth 1996: 35).

The Rottweiler joke in subchapter 3.4 clearly illustrates the Jewish mother stereotype's inability to let go of her adult children, and this is an evident feature of Sophie's as well. As stated in the previous subchapter, and as the quote at the beginning of this subchapter suggests, Alex is psychologically merged with his mother and affected by her mothering and emotional blackmailing where she uses Judaism as a moral compass. The reason why Alex is lying on Dr. Spielvogel's coach in the first place, is because of his childhood experiences, structured by the author as following psychoanalytic theory, and his inability to escape his mother's influence even as an adult. There are numerous examples of Sophie's interference in Alex's adult life, and most of them occur in her concrete absence, where she is only present in his own mind. In this subchapter I will examine how Alex experiences his mother's impact on him as an adult, and I will begin by looking at how her ever-presence triggers what Monick calls "Auto-Castration" (1991: 87).

In his discussion on Auto-Castration, Monick (1991: 87), states that "[a] present-day son who remains, beyond childhood, obedient to his mother effectually castrates himself. His sexual life belongs not to himself but to her". Alex does this by not psychologically breaking the bond with his mother properly, but instead lets her unconsciously control his thoughts and decisions. Even after he has had sexual intercourse with a woman on a hotel room he refers to his mother by pleasing her and throwing up: "My *kishkas,*[27] Mother – threw them right up into the toilet bowl. Isn't that a good boy?" (Roth 1996: 138). Whether Alex says this with a sarcastic undertone or not, it bears witness of Sophie's continuous influence on Alex. Guilt and shame have been inseparable features of Alex's childhood, and they continue to influence his self-image throughout his adult life. Kaufman (1985: 28) says that the cultural script we inherit from our specific cultural group through which

[27] The English translation is "intestine". (The Free Dictionary)

values, taboos, conventions, and rituals are transmitted, is where the tension between shame and honour is first created. As a Jewish mother, Sophie is the prime mediator of Jewish normative values which grow into a seedbed of shame for Alex who cannot help feeling ashamed when he does not succumb to what Sophie has taught him about the Jewish way of life. Self-defensively, Alex constantly tries to convince himself of that he is a grown-up, and should be out of reach of his mother's manipulative attempts at controlling him: "Leave off with the blushing, bury the shame, you are no longer your mother's naughty little boy! Where appetite is concerned, a man in his thirties is responsible to no one but himself!" (Roth 1996: 199). He is sick of playing the game in which Sophie roles the dice and he only follows, and expresses his anger at her Oedipal manipulation: "More than twenty-five years have passed (the game is supposed to be over!), but Mommy still hitches up her stockings in front of her little boy" (1996: 46). Sophie is so closely linked to his sense of self and sexuality that she becomes an inseparable part of him that he is unable to cut off. Indeed, she becomes his very moral conscience. The themes of guilt and shame go hand in hand with castration anxiety and every time Alex is afraid of being publicly exposed and shamed which would threaten his masculinity, the castration complex is ready to emerge. In his adult life this is very obvious as he constantly expresses his fear of being exposed, which means being shamed, either by his girlfriends, or in the public newspaper, which will ultimately bring his complex into the public.

Alex's sexual experiences and relationships as an adult can be seen as the rage he expresses about the inability to escape his mother's presence. Monick explains that: "[e]ven to tentatively enter the girl would diminish his bond with his mother, the core parent of the family. The irrationality of this fear points to the awesome power of guilt and its connection with auto-castration in the unconscious" (1991: 88). Furthermore, the sense of guilt: "expresses itself in rage […] Rage, taken out on oneself, is auto-castration" (1991: 88). This rage is seen in Alex's teenage years as rebellion, and later on as phallic authority as he sexually uses the women he comes in contact with, scared of any sort of longer-lasting commitment. As an adult Alex is also angry with himself for letting Sophie still

control him. Traumatized by his mother as a child, he still remembers *her* phallic authority: "The Puerto Rican is shouting at me in Spanish, my mother is waving a knife at me back in my childhood" (Roth 1996: 207). The title of this subchapter "Sophie Never Lets Go", suggests that she is hindering his differentiation process. However, Alex himself is also unable to cut the cord and free himself, so the blame is not to be put solely on Sophie, but also on Alex who cannot seem to let go of his mother, even though his therapy session can be seen as an attempt to do exactly this.

One of the most important lessons that Sophie teaches Alex is the difference between the Jews and the Gentiles – between right and wrong. From childhood Alex remembers how Sophie fiercely distances her family from American society by enforcing the dichotomy of *us* and *them*. In her eyes, goys are seen as other, since they are different from the Jews. To Alex, Sophie's got it all backwards and she is hindering his aspirations to become truly American. Concerned with Alex's future Sophie warns her son about the dangers of involving with goys, and anxiously exclaims:

> ONLY YOU MUST BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR LIFE! YOU MUST NOT PLUNGE YOURSELF INTO A LIVING HELL! YOU MUST LISTEN TO WHAT WE ARE SAYING AND WITHOUT THE SCOWL, THANK YOU, AND THE BRILLIANT BACK TALK! WE KNOW! WE HAVE LIVED! WE HAVE SEEN! IT DOESN'T WORK, MY SON! THEY ARE ANOTHER BREED OF HUMAN BEING ENTIRELY! YOU WILL BE TORN ASUNDER! (Roth 1996: 188)

This naturally results in that Alex *especially* chooses non-Jewish women to refuse and resist his mother's pleading, and because his mother is Jewish, being with American women would help him escape her control. He also aggravates his parents since he cannot live up to the expectations of carrying the family name on in a favourable manner by marrying a Jewish woman. However, even though Sophie's warnings do not fall on good soil, Alex cannot help being affected by her recommendations later in life, which is seen, for example, in his inability to get sexual gratification with non-Jewish women. By still

following his in-bred sense of morality as an adult, Alex describes his relationship with his parents as a "hopeless, senseless loyalty to the long ago" (1996: 219).

Consciously Alex tries to escape his mother's feminine influence by using his masculine source of power, his penis. Through masturbation he uses it to mark his territory, and exposes it publicly in his desperate need of proving his masculinity. Mangs & Martell (1982: 100) explain that excessive practice of masturbation derives from feelings of anxiety which once more confirms Alex's anxious condition. On an unconscious level Alex is looking for his mother in the girls he meets. He finally finds the Jewish Pumpkin Naomi, his "final downfall and humiliation" (Roth 1996: 258), as he puts it, in Israel. He is being ironical when he says: "This mother-substitute! Look, can that be so? Oh please, it can't be as simplistic as that! … Because she wore red hair and freckles, this makes her, according to my unconscious one-track mind, my mother?" (1996: 266). Once again, Roth portrays Alex's awareness of psychoanalysis as he lets his protagonist sarcastically complain and confess to his doctor. When Alex attempts to sleep with the Jewish Pumpkin he cannot perform and Alex himself expresses it like this: "Doctor: *I couldn't get it up in the State of Israel!* How's *that* for symbolism" (1996: 257). Alex's unconscious quest for his mother-substitute results in impotence when he finds her, and since he causes this degradation himself it can be seen as auto-castration.

Another instrument of power which Sophie tightly holds on to is her tendency to belittle her son, making him feel responsible to her even as an adult. This is something Alex is acutely aware of, and as a grown-up it becomes a heavy burden keeping him from growing up in their eyes, and implicitly, also in his own eyes:

> Oh, why go on? Why go on in my strangled high-pitched adolescent voice? Good Christ, a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy till *they die!* […] A Jewish man with his parents alive is half the time a helpless *infant!* Listen, come to my aid, will you – and quick! Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke! (Roth 1996: 111)

What Sophie suffers from is something that many parents experience when their children are about to leave the home, namely, separation anxiety. However, Roth takes this one step further by exaggerating Sophie's behaviour as typically Jewish, hence marking all Jewish mothers as "hovering" mothers. For example, Sophie compares Alex to a plum which is not yet ripe, and thus not ready to fall off the tree (read: leave home), and says: "But to us, to us you're still a baby darling" (1996: 111). Alex's need for differentiation culminates in what he calls his "Emancipation Proclamation", when he calls his parents telling them he is not coming home for Thanksgiving, which is an important family holiday. However, he says that this is still an on-going, a never-ending circle which he cannot break: "only I'm still telephoning my parents to say I'm not coming home! Fighting off my family still!" (1996: 228–229).

One of the most familiar representations of the JAM, is the telephone joke, often illustrated as a sketch, Antler writes in her book aptly entitled *You Never Call! You Never Write!* (2007: 7). The theme of the joke draws upon the Jewish maternal intrusiveness and anxiety about her children's welfare, and perhaps most importantly, the children's concern with *her* well-being and her seemingly impossible survival without them. Alex vividly describes his parents' overprotection to Dr. Spielvogel and the reader:

> Doctor, these people are incredible! These people are unbelievable! These two are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time! They render it from me like fat from a chicken! "Call, Alex. Visit, Alex. Alex, keep us informed. Don't go away without telling us, please, not again." (Roth 1996: 36)

Added to this, Alex is also weighed down by the burden of not only living according to his parents' standards and conventions, but also of taking care of them as they grow older. This motive is what Sophie uses when she says: "Alex, to pick up a phone is such a simple thing – how much longer will we be around to bother you anyway?" (1996: 36). By saying this she insinuates her self-awareness of her intrusive behaviour, but instead of excusing it, she uses it as a weapon to trigger Alex's bad conscience for not keeping in touch with them.

In the novel Roth also lets Jack stand out as a nagging parent: “Listen, you know what he says to me three times a week on the telephone – and I’m only counting when I pick it up, not the total number of rings I get between six and ten every night” (1996: 35). However, behind Jack’s behaviour and anxiety is his wife’s pleading which convinces him of joining in the art of intrusiveness. As discussed in subchapter 4.4, the gender-reversal in the Jewish household is complete, with Sophie taking on the authoritative role, and her husband Jack becoming a mere bystander who is easily manipulated by his wife – the true domestic matriarch. However, as discussed in subchapter 3.1, the relationship between a Jewish wife and her husband, is one of equality and Sophie respects Jack and demands Alex to do the same. When Jack’s birthday is approaching, Sophie says: “But he’ll be sixty-six, Alex. That’s not a baby, Alex – that’s a landmark in a life. So you’ll send a card. It wouldn’t kill you” (Roth 1996: 37). This reveals Sophie as a loving wife who is mindful of every family member’s happiness. Undoubtedly, this is something that has to be taken away from her and smeared by Roth as he lets Alex sarcastically remark: “Sophie’s famous whisper that everybody in the room can hear without even straining, she’s so considerate: ‘Tell him you’re sorry. Give him a kiss. A kiss from you would change the world.’” (1996: 111). The last part of the quote draws on Biblical allusions with Judas Iscariot betraying Jesus with a kiss, and one is led to think that Sophie considers Alex as a betrayer of both his ancestors’ religion Judaism with which he has a frosty relationship; his own ethnicity by wanting to become American; and his own family with whom he has too little contact.

In the light of this analysis, Sophie confirms the stereotypical depiction of the Jewish mother as an intruding, overprotective, controlling and interfering character in her child’s life. Whenever these features of hers are viewed in a positive way, Alex is not late to remark on her with a sarcastic voice as if Roth is careful not to betray the caricature by offering a more multifaceted picture of her persona. Sophie’s inability to let go of Alex has its roots in her love for him, a love that is demonstrated as overbearing and suffocating. Roth does not show Sophie any mercy, but aided by the psychoanalytical framework of Dr. Spielvogel’s office and Alex’s mind which he has created for a purpose, he lets Alex fire

off comments about her that perhaps otherwise would be questionable. However, since Alex *is* a patient, his thoughts cannot be wrong, and must therefore be accounted for as earnestly as possible in order to "cure" him. Instead of seeing Sophie's behaviour as normal for every parent whose child is about to leave the nest, her separation anxiety is negatively viewed as abnormal and wrong, unworthy of comprehension and sympathy.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Fiction is an instrument of power which is in constant dialogue with its surroundings, and which challenges or reinforces the existing ideas and ideals of a certain social context. Whether Philip Roth's intentions with *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) was to re-establish a misogynist depiction of the Jewish American Mother (JAM) or not, his novel indeed had an immense social impact by making the mother figure an icon in the American consciousness. Echoing Antler's (2000: 143) words, the novel's social effect as a cultural event in a decade characterized by social, cultural and sexual reformation, has been larger than its literary success and the novel has caused alarm among both the Jews and the Gentiles. For the Jews the antagonistic depiction of the anxious relationship between the Jewish mother and her son was cathartic but simultaneously an uncomfortable reminder of their otherness in America. For Gentiles, the novel's Jewish mother also came to represent the overall American mother and thus labelled all mothers in America as stereotypically Jewish. The aim of this thesis was to examine Roth's representation of the Jewish mother, and by looking at specific elements of the caricature, see how closely it corresponds to the JAM stereotype in popular media.

The primary tools used by Roth to justify and enhance the story's credibility are humour and psychoanalysis. Humour has historically had important psychological and social functions in ensuring the Jews' survival in both the European *shetl* and in America. Jewish self-ridicule has been used as a crucial linguistic self-defence mechanism against inferiority and awkwardness in both Europe and America. By making the Jewish mother the scapegoat for incomplete Americanization due to her backwardness and traditionalist ideas, the JAM joke has been the primary means of catapulting Jewish comedians into the American entertainment business, which in turn has degraded the Jewish American Mother's reputation. Jewish feminists such as Erica Jong have made attempts at restoring her reputation by taking humour in their own hands and thereby repaying male comedians with their own medicine, but the effect of male comedic practice still lingers on and is

difficult to alter, as most stereotypes are as they have become automatized in our brains. Roth also used Freud's psychoanalysis as scientific evidence to enhance the story's credibility with the psychotherapist's office serving as the physical setting. In the 1960s, Freud's theories were popularized and mothers were encouraged to follow experts' opinions on child-rearing based on these, and Roth has recognized this by making his protagonist Alex a patient suffering from his childhood experiences, with his mother as his key influencer. Psychotherapy gives Roth the liberty to address many taboo things, such as incest and perversity legitimately, since his main character *is* a patient. As a result, Sophie is brutishly treated by her son and the reader is heavily influenced by his negative view of her.

Tracing the Jewish mother's transformation from a nostalgic and affectionate mother figure at the beginning of the 20th century into a monster mother of the mid 20th century and further, to a more complex and progressive character in contemporary times was crucial for the understanding of Roth's portrayal of Sophie Portnoy. The post-immigrant generations of Jews in America were not as nostalgic about their European past as their predecessors had been, and the Jewish mother's pursuits at keeping and maintaining a Jewish lifestyle in the New World was increasingly seen as an obstacle for especially Jewish men trying to fulfil the hegemonic model and myth of masculinity in America. She was blamed not only for hindering their social adjustment, but also their differentiation into unique individuals. The results of the cross-cultural anthropological study conducted by Mead and her team in the 1940s, were an indirect attack on Jewish motherhood and revealed the key elements of the stereotype, namely: love, suffering, worrying and food. These characteristics were all clearly visible in Roth's Jewish mother, and therefore the basis of my analysis of Sophie.

Sophie's religious role as the guardian of faith and thereby the most prominent marker of Jewishness imbues the whole novel, and was divided into different categories. Firstly, the Jewish appearance was discussed with the aid of Sander L. Gilman's comments on the Jew's body and its negative racist associations. Her physical appearance and especially the

Jewish nose causes great anxiety in Alex as it inevitably confirms his otherness as a Jew. Also her boisterous and emotionally dramatic verbal behaviour witnesses of abnormality compared with the Gentiles' behaviour, according to Alex. Secondly, Sophie is described as a Jewish woman, who takes her religious duties seriously, especially those pertaining to food and keeping it kosher. Food is the third category which is an often recurring theme in Jewish jokes, with the Jewish mother over-feeding her children since offering food equals giving love. Fourthly, along with Judaism, Sophie stands as the moral compass of Alex's conscience, indeed, she *becomes* his very Jewish conscience and an inseparable part of him as he carries his mother's advice with him even as an adult, feeling obliged to obey them even in her absence. The last theme is the sense of community between Jewish women, which served as an important forum for middle-class suburban women where they could air their thoughts amidst like-minded. It can also be seen as a form of resistance and source of strength for Jewish mothers to continue enforcing the Jewish lifestyle in the Jewish neighbourhoods in America. Roth has clearly emphasized Sophie's ethnic traits as Jewish, but instead of making them exotic and interesting, they are seen as distancing, digressive and ultimate markers of difference.

Another strong characteristic of the JAM was *suffering* seen as martyr-like behaviour. Sophie stands out as the ultimate martyr and emotional blackmailer, to borrow Susan Forward's (1999: 23, 39) term, and Roth models her behaviour to fit the stereotype. She is portrayed as a manipulative, complaining, self-punishing, guilt-inducing and self-glorifying mother who is egocentric and has the leading role in her own melodrama. The underlying reason for her behaviour is fear; however, the intention is not to understand her comportment, but rather as a reader, to criticize and despise her mothering. Her sarcastic use of language for controlling and manipulating purposes is but a symptom of the dis-ease she is feeling as a mother afraid of losing her son. Roth; however, gives the Jewish mother no pardon but offers the reader the subjective view of the son caught in the middle of the drama, and whose thoughts are justified by his position as patient.

The situational context of the novel's plot is important for a broader understanding of Sophie as a more complex figure than the position of a flat character without a voice of her own, given to her by Roth. As a housewife in America in the mid 20th century, she is overburdened with expert advice and opinions on housekeeping and child-rearing circulating in the media and women's magazines. However, this fact does not work in her favour, but her fantastic qualities as a housewife are rather seen as pedantic, controlling, and over-protective and whenever she is given credit for her work, it is either done in a sarcastic manner or with exaggerated admiration insinuating magic realism rather than actual reality. She directly correlates with the stereotypical view of the Jewish woman as the family matriarch with supreme authority. In my analysis of Sophie's positive features, I have emphasized the author's neglecting of her helpfulness, her devotion to her family's welfare, and her will to be progressive and keep up with the Joneses when it comes to housekeeping. Important is, that this actually reveals a fracture in Roth's stereotyping of Sophie as the prototypical JAM, and invites a more complex interpretation of her character. Nevertheless, Roth has clearly failed to portray the strong drive in Sophie, which is the love for her family, and instead this is seen as suffocating and unbearable as she is indirectly blamed for damaging her family.

As a result of women's confinement to domesticity in the mid 20th century America, when the children spend most of their time with their mothers, Sophie becomes an easy prey for Roth's depiction of the Oedipal drama in the family, which has been a popular theme in JAM jokes in the American entertainment industry. When Alex's father Jack fails to be the masculine role model for Alex, Sophie becomes the phallic authority in the family who both directly and indirectly imposes the threat of castration and thereby feminization and emasculation, on Alex. Her bad influence on Alex's psychosexual development is highlighted as Sophie clearly fails to encourage differentiation and a sane development. The title of the novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, is the diagnosis of Alex's imaginary disorder, which has its roots in the Oedipal dilemma in which Sophie is described as playing the key part. The Jewish mother has been blamed for being overtly attached to her son and for

belittling and infantilizing him even as an adult. In this sense Sophie directly fits the stereotype with her controlling behaviour and authoritarian mothering style. Her husband Jack becomes a mere bystander and is not given much attention by Roth who instead focuses on the juicy details of Alex's incestuous wishes and taboo thoughts in which Sophie is implicitly the fulfilment of his fantasies in his quest for the perfect mother-substitute in the girls he dates. Even though Roth's intentions may have been to parody Freud's theories, he, nevertheless, succeeds in once more reinforcing a stereotypical element of the Jewish Mother and thereby confirming her failed mothering style.

The Jewish mother stereotype's intrusive behaviour, and her inability to cut the umbilical cord with her children, in this case her son, was the last theme to be discussed. This is vividly displayed by Roth, as Sophie's controlling behaviour extends even beyond her physical presence as she continues to influence Alex's decisions as an adult. Eugene Monick's (1991: 87) psychoanalytical term for this is auto-castration in the unconscious. However, what the reader might overlook is the fact that Alex is also unable to let go of his mother, not just the opposite, and being a psychotherapy patient might be an attempt to do just this. Sophie's black-and-white division between Jews-Gentiles, is furthermore, seen as a desperate means of preserving the Jewish legacy, and results in Alex's rebellious behaviour as he does everything to resist her influence. When Roth wrote the novel he was largely influenced by the comedic practice of the time especially exercised in the Jewish resort hotels in the Borscht Belt. The belittling and infantilizing features of the JAM are evident in Sophie as she continues to treat Alex as a little child. Her natural grief and regret after Alex who has moved out, is exaggerated by Roth and displayed as abnormal and overprotective. One might wonder what signal this gives to all women feeling exactly the same way about their children. Sophie and Jack nag at Alex over the phone about not visiting them, calling them, remembering their birthdays, and so forth, in other words, things that many parents recognize. However, Roth illustrates this as a comical farce with the Jewish mother as a hovering bird who frantically flaps her wings above her children disabling them to breath on their own.

In conclusion, Sophie Portnoy is the quintessential fulfilment of the Jewish American Mother stereotype. Roth has succeeded in making her an icon that is difficult to erase or even alter in the collective mind of the audience. Jewish feminists have tried, and as a result the Jewish Women's Archive has been established to pay tribute to all the Jewish mothers in the American history who have never had a voice of their own other than through Jewish men. The message the novel succeeds in transmitting to its reader audience is that being a Jewish mother is not desirable, and the novel becomes a recipe on how to avoid becoming one by offering the worst imaginable prototype. The effect is still visible to this day, with popular TV-series sending the same message by making the Jewish mother a flat character whining and complaining at a high pitch at her children who are, of course, the stars of the show. *Portnoy's Complaint* played a fundamental role in not only manifesting the stereotype, but also in banishing her behaviour as abnormal by exaggerating it. Finally, the warning that is catapulted into society reads: a mother should be careful about loving her children too much − she might turn into a Jewish mother.

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