

DISEASE IN POPULAR CULTURE: THE ELEMENTS OF TRAUMA, INEVITABILITY, AND THE PANDEMIC IN PHILIP ROTH'S *NEMESIS*

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Abstract: Philip Roth is considered as a master of fiction and lucid prose. His precise narration characterized by dark humor, while simultaneously being hard-hitting, is marked with a distinctive style that has been specific to him since Portnoy's Complaint. Roth's final novel, *Nemesis*, is a thematic departure from his customary works, which, while diverse in subject matter, are rather predictable in tone, usually caustic and filled with a sarcastic humor that revels in itself. *Nemesis* however, is a welcome exception to this rule. Despite the fact that the work is set against the backdrop of a polio pandemic, with themes of survival and the fear of death at the forefront, Roth's prose has a warmth and nuance to it. This makes *Nemesis* surprisingly honest and worth a closer look. The objective of this paper is to look at how the novel portrays the themes of trauma and disability and how Roth's fictional pandemic can be juxtaposed with the current covid-19 pandemic, especially in the themes of public fear and distrust towards the establishment apart from various concerns is one aspect of concern that can be analysed through the lens of popular culture.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Disability, Popular Culture, Psychoanalytic criticism.

Philip Roth and the Evolution of His Literary Style:

Philip Roth is one of the most celebrated American authors of the 20th and early 21st centuries, embarked on his literary journey with the publication of his debut novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*, in 1959. The novel marked the emergence of a distinctive voice in American literature. The novella, a tale of love and class divisions, introduced readers to Roth's wit, humor, and keen social observations. His prose was concise, and his characters were sharply drawn, reflecting the influence of Jewish-American writers like Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow, who also explored the complexities of identity and assimilation. Roth's writing style underwent a notable transformation with the introduction of Nathan Zuckerman, a recurring character who first appeared in *The Ghost Writer* (1979). These novels signalled Roth's experimentation with self-reflexivity and metafiction, where he blurred the line between fact and fiction by creating an alter ego through Zuckerman. This period saw Roth's prose become more introspective and philosophical, as he delved into themes of authorship, identity, and the tension between reality and fiction.

Roth's writing took a turn towards political and social commentary in his *American Trilogy*, comprising *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and "The Human Stain" (2000). These novels explored the complexities of American identity and history, especially through the lens of the Jewish-American experience. Roth's style became more

expansive and his narratives more intricate, reflecting his deep engagement with the broader socio-political landscape of the United States. As Roth aged, his writing turned increasingly introspective and concerned with themes of mortality. His later novels, including *Everyman* (2006) and *Exit Ghost* (2007), showcased a sombre and reflective tone. These works grappled with the inevitability of death and the isolation of old age, demonstrating a departure from the exuberance and irreverence of his earlier writing. On a whole, one cannot deny the fact that over the course of his prolific career, Roth produced a remarkable body of work that spanned various themes and styles, earning him numerous accolades and a dedicated readership.

It is with this vast body of influential work that we visit Roth in 2008. *Nemesis* serves as a culmination of Roth's career-long exploration of identity, society, and the human condition. This novel, set against the backdrop of a polio epidemic in Newark, New Jersey, returns to the themes of guilt and responsibility present in *Goodbye, Columbus*. However, the writing style in *Nemesis* is characterized by a matured simplicity and a poignant examination of the fragility of life. Roth's prose is spare but powerful, underscoring the gravity of the novel's themes. The novel stands as a departure from many of Philip Roth's other works in several key ways. For one, *Nemesis* is notably more sombre and emotionally charged than many of Roth's earlier works. While Roth's novels often contain elements of humor, satire, or even farce, "Nemesis" adopts a much more serious and mournful tone throughout. This departure is particularly striking when compared to some of Roth's more satirical and comically charged works, such as *Portnoy's Complaint* or *The Breast*.

Another aspect of critical interest on this 'departure' is the fact that *Nemesis*, unlike many of Roth's novels, which are set in urban environments or explore the Jewish-American experience in America's cities, *Nemesis* is set in Newark, New Jersey, during a polio epidemic in the 1940s. This rural setting is a departure from Roth's more urban-centered narratives. The novel explores the impact of the epidemic on a small, close-knit Jewish community, allowing Roth to delve into themes of fear, disease, and the vulnerability of individuals within a tight-knit community. The novel follows the story of Bucky Cantor, a young and idealistic gym teacher who grapples with his moral responsibilities during the polio outbreak.

Unlike many of Roth's other works that delve into complex family dynamics or the Jewish-American experience, *Nemesis* is more singular in its focus on one character's internal moral struggle. It's a departure from the broader canvas Roth often paints in his novels. Apart from changes in subject matter, Roth's writing style takes on a simpler, more direct quality in the novel. The prose is less ornate and more focused on conveying the emotional and psychological turmoil of the characters, especially Bucky Cantor. This is a departure from some of Roth's earlier works, which may feature more intricate or experimental narrative styles.

In terms of themes, while many of Roth's novels explore themes of identity, sexuality, and Jewish-American culture, *Nemesis* primarily deals with themes of guilt, responsibility, and the randomness of suffering. These themes are explored through the lens of the polio epidemic and its impact on the characters, marking a departure from some of Roth's more familiar thematic terrain. There exists also, a plethora of allegorical hints within the novel. Inbar Kaminsky, in his intertextual study on the novel entitled *Epidemic Judaism: Plagues and Their Evocation in Philip Roth's 'Nemesis' and Ben Marcus's 'The Flame Alphabet'* says

Nemesis spreads numerous allegorical hints in different directions, the most evident ones point towards Greek tragedy—Bucky's initial hubris in his belief that he cannot contract polio, only to end up as the most likely carrier of the disease among the

playground boys; the plural first-person narration of 'we', which is evoked throughout the novel, reminiscent of the commentary of the Greek chorus; the title *Nemesis*, which alludes to the Greek goddess of revenge against those who surrendered to hubris.

(Kaminsky, 2014)

While the novel represents a departure from Philip Roth's earlier works due to its more serious and introspective tone, it's imperative to understand the fact that the novel works more as a study on what it means to be disabled, echoing the later years of Roth, who has come a long way from writing about Jewish identity to that of universal suffering.

The Trauma of Maternal Absence:

Nemesis explores the profound impact of maternal absence on the protagonist, Bucky Cantor. Roth's narrative delves into the trauma experienced by Bucky as a result of his mother's absence during his childhood and how this trauma shapes his adulthood. This essay examines Bucky Cantor's early life, the maternal trauma he endures, and the lasting effects it has on his character and decisions as an adult.

Bucky Cantor's childhood is marked by the absence of his mother, who died during childbirth. This early loss leaves a void in Bucky's life, as he lacks the maternal care and guidance that is crucial during a child's formative years. The absence of a mother figure in his life contributes to a sense of abandonment and emotional deprivation, which sets the stage for the trauma he experiences later in life. Bucky's maternal trauma becomes more pronounced when he takes on the role of a counsellor at the Weequahic playground during the polio epidemic. His deep sense of responsibility and concern for the children under his care, fuelled by his own vulnerability as an orphan, leads to a profound inner struggle. As polio claims some of the children under his supervision, Bucky grapples with intense guilt and self-blame, believing that he should have done more to protect them.

Bucky's intense desire to protect the children from polio reflects his need to compensate for the absence of his mother in his life. He seeks to be the perfect protector, striving for an unattainable level of perfection in his role as a counsellor. This overcompensation stems from his unresolved maternal trauma, leading him to push himself to the brink of exhaustion in his pursuit of perfection. Characterizing this from trauma, there is the aspect of physical strength that is explored in Bucky's character. Bucky's physical attributes before polio were seen to be commanding in the novel, which then becomes a glaring omission from his life, almost making up the entire narrative to be based on this loss of health. Roth uses this aspect of physical strength, instinctively to allow him to muse on disability in the later parts of his narrative. Nicholas Stangherlin, in his '*Nemesis*' and *the Persistence of Tragic Framing: Bucky Cantor as Job, Hebrew Prometheus, and Reverse Oedipus*, speaks about how Bucky's tragedy was 'framed' by Roth,

Bucky is one of the many Jewish characters in Roth's fiction whose Promethean characterization includes physical strength and the ability to defend themselves, qualities that defy the anti-Semitic stereotype of the passive Jewish victim. Epic figures like the Swede and Ira Ringold, far from conforming to the image of Jewish "weaklings", are characterized by their strength and physical prowess. The protagonist's strength becomes even more relevant in *Nemesis*: the exceptionality of his physical characteristics and his athletic ability is continuously reiterated and its communitarian and educational significance expanded upon by the narrator in various instances.

(Stangherlin, 2016)

While comparisons to Oedipus have been widely explored in the discourse that was surrounding the novel, it is the aspect of setting up a truly capable being as a protagonist, only to strip it off from him, that makes the novel echo the structure of a true classic tragedy.

As the epidemic worsens, Bucky makes the painful decision to leave his position as a counsellor and enlist in the military, further isolating himself from his responsibilities and the children he cares for. This decision to distance himself from the trauma and his perceived failure in protecting the children illustrates the deep emotional scars left by his maternal trauma. Bucky's trauma affects his ability to form intimate relationships in adulthood. He struggles to connect with women, fearing that his past experiences and the guilt he carries will hinder his ability to be a good partner and parent. This fear of repeating the abandonment he felt as a child contributes to his emotional detachment and reluctance to commit to a romantic relationship. The story serves as a poignant exploration of the profound and lasting effects of maternal absence, illustrating how unresolved trauma can influence one's choices, relationships, and sense of self.

Disability Studies and the American Novel:

Disability theory, a critical framework that emerged in the late 20th century, has played a significant role in reshaping the way we understand and depict disability in American literature. This theoretical perspective challenges traditional narratives that have often portrayed disabled individuals as objects of pity or as symbols of tragedy. Instead, disability theory advocates for a more nuanced and authentic representation of disability, emphasizing the diversity of disabled experiences and highlighting the social and cultural factors that shape them.

There has also been a marked increase in the body of text that is being generated across mediums of communication on disability life writing. With the increase in interconnectedness among more and more people because of the widespread increase in the availability and democratization in internet, we find a massive increase in the discovery and participation in disabled communities across the world. Alice Hall in her book, *Literature and Disability* opines,

The boom in disability life writing exemplifies the blurring of the line between the autobiographical and the fictional in contemporary writing. Blogs, websites, YouTube videos and Twitter feeds allow new voices to be heard and provide far-reaching, low-cost platforms that allow people who have historically been silenced to tell their stories. Online self-publishing bypasses the traditional publishers who have been the gatekeepers of the literary establishment. Digital technologies serve as a vehicle both for the wider distribution of disability narratives but also for the production of new genres, forms of writing and types of language.

(Hall, 2015)

As part of the woke movements that have enveloped the world in the 21st century, awareness on disability has been steadily increasing, with major companies and corporations putting in tangible efforts to make their products, experiences, and services accessible to more disabled people. The rise of internet applications like Google Maps indicating places marked with 'wheelchair access' is an indication of this drift.

In the context of the American novel, disability theory invites readers and writers to explore disability as a complex social construct rather than a mere medical condition. It encourages us to examine how disability intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and class, and how it is influenced by historical and societal contexts. This approach has led

to the creation of more inclusive and empowering narratives that reflect the lived experiences of disabled individuals.

One example of this shift can be seen in contemporary American literature. Novels like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon and *The Reapers Are the Angels* by Alden Bell feature disabled protagonists who defy traditional stereotypes. These characters are not defined solely by their disabilities but are portrayed as complex individuals with their own agency, desires, and challenges.

The Polio Pandemic as a Background

In Roth's novel, the polio pandemic of the 1940s serves as a haunting and pervasive backdrop against which the characters grapple with the fragility of human existence. Roth masterfully uses this historical context to underscore the vulnerability of individuals and communities in the face of an invisible, relentless, and seemingly capricious threat. The polio pandemic in the novel is not merely a plot device but a symbolic representation of the unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of life. As the disease spreads through Newark, Roth paints a vivid picture of the panic and fear that permeate the community. The disease strikes indiscriminately, affecting children and adults, the healthy and the weak, without regard for social status or background. This portrayal serves as a powerful metaphor for the inherent unpredictability and randomness of human existence. The pandemic forces the characters, especially the protagonist Bucky Cantor, to confront the limits of their control and the fragility of their lives. Bucky, as a playground director, is entrusted with the safety of the children under his care. However, the relentless advance of polio challenges his ability to protect them. This powerlessness in the face of an invisible threat mirrors the broader human experience of dealing with the uncertainties of life.

Apart from working as a central plot device that decides the fate of the turn of events in the novel, the pandemic itself can be studied as a character in and of its own. Emily Budick, in her *Roth's fiction from Nemesis to Nemesis*, speaks about this aspect while expanding on Coetzee's analysis on the novel:

What polio represents in Roth's text, then, is, as Coetzee suggests, the mortal condition itself, but without any of the dignity that might accrue to a tragic view of death. Death, the novel suggests, is simply the inevitable, natural culmination of human existence, which human beings nonetheless convert into a nemesis in all the complex meanings of that term. *Nemesis* is one of those odd words that in popular usage comes to take up a meaning almost the total opposite of what it originally meant. Especially in reference to literary texts, a nemesis is most typically an arch enemy of a dramatic hero: the joker, say, for Batman, or Moriarty for Sherlock Holmes. Throughout his fiction Roth has displayed numerous such antagonists of his protagonists: the girl friends and mothers who emasculate his vital male heroes, Judge Wapter in *The Ghost Writer*, the brother in *The Counterlife*, or the alter-Roth in *Operation, Shylock*, and so on.

(Budick, 2014)

While the title of the novel wasn't intended to be a self-serving oxymoron by Roth, it is fascinating to identify the irony that exists inherently. While the polio pandemic is indeed a specific archetype of the past, we can very much replace it with model pandemics like the COVID-19 pandemic, to achieve a similar effect in the narrative. While Roth can be praised for his painstaking detail in his depiction of Weequahic, it is the depiction of human suffering that transcends time, and the nature of the pandemic when one reads it in a different context.

The structure of the novel itself also lends an important insight into the way in which the Pandemic is used by Roth as the central factor on which the narrative is based on. We find a detailed deconstruction of the novel's structure and its parts in Zina Giannopoulou's *Oedipus Meets Bucky in Philip Roth's Nemesis*:

In *Nemesis*, Roth places the postmodernist tropes of fictional doubles and self-refashioning at the service of narrative, specifically the roles of the narrator and the main character in the three parts of the novel. In Parts 1 and 2, Arnie is the unobtrusive narrator of Bucky's life, his mild voice the counterpoint to Bucky's roar: Bucky is the ubiquitous hero of the story, the beloved teacher, whereas Arnie is the self-effacing reporter of Bucky's life, the adulatory student. Arnie operates in Bucky's shadow and as Bucky's shadow: he lets his teacher shine, while he hides behind an impersonal, third-person narration. This distribution of narrative roles across two characters echoes the relationship in OT between Oedipus' illusory public persona and his true but undetected self. Part 3 of *Nemesis* inverts this power dynamic: Arnie is now both narrator and character, has coped with his affliction and become an architect, a husband, and a father, whereas Bucky emerges as the character of Arnie's story, is defeated by polio, lives alone, curses God, and blames himself for having spread the disease.

(Giannopoulou, 2016)

Looking at how the structure of the novel works on several levels, one can say that, on a whole, it can be seen that the polio pandemic highlights the interconnectedness of individuals within a community. The spread of the disease underscores how the actions of one person can impact the lives of others. Roth emphasizes the collective suffering and shared burden as families and friends grapple with the illness and its consequences. This sense of community vulnerability reinforces the novel's exploration of the fragility of humanity as a whole.

Bucky Cantor's Struggle Against Inevitability:

The novel in question, is the final volume in the "Nemesis" series of novels, in which Roth develops the protagonist Bucky Cantor through a series of life-altering events, the unforeseen consequences of which form the plot. The narrative is largely set in Newark during the polio pandemic, in the predominantly Jewish neighbourhood of Weequahic, with the underlying theme of fear hovering over its protagonists, putting them against fate, nature, and the inevitability of human agony and mortality. Bucky, the protagonist grew up a relatively peaceful childhood with his maternal grandparents, but the absence of a maternal figure, his mother, reverberates as an incurable trauma that haunts him. Bucky is pushed into a hostile world. Bucky's fight against unfathomable odds during the polio outbreak, his ambition to eventually leave it all behind only to find happiness that he chooses to deny himself, and his physical suffering, which Roth depicts in gruesome detail, serve as anti-therapy.

Bucky finds himself in a relentless battle against the inexorable force of polio. His journey is a testament to human resilience, as he grapples with the inevitability of the disease, ultimately succumbing to both physical suffering and emotional denial. Bucky's battle against polio is marked by his determination to protect the children at the Weequahic playground, where he works as a counsellor. He takes his role seriously, striving to create a safe haven for the youngsters amid the polio epidemic that ravages Newark in the 1940s. His commitment to their well-being drives him to implement strict safety measures and enforce quarantines, attempting to shield them from the menace of the disease. Despite his best efforts, however, polio continues to claim victims, shattering his belief in his own invincibility.

As polio strikes closer to home, Bucky's struggle intensifies. He watches helplessly as one of the children under his care, Eugene, succumbs to the disease. Roth describes Bucky's emotional turmoil as he realizes the futility of his efforts: "His terror at discovering the swiftness of the disease's contagion and the difficulty of its control had taken him out of himself." This realization underscores the inevitability of polio's spread and the limitations of human intervention.

Bucky's battle with polio extends to his own physical health when he contracts the disease. Despite his initial denial, characterized by a refusal to believe he could be infected, Bucky's body betrays him. His fever and weakened limbs force him to confront the harsh reality of his condition. Roth vividly depicts Bucky's suffering as he struggles with the physical manifestations of polio: "His legs, on their way to nowhere, went leaden, and now their weight was overpowering." The physical pain he experiences is a brutal reminder of the disease's inexorable grip.

Bucky's denial of his own illness is a poignant aspect of his battle against inevitability. He clings to the belief that his strong, athletic body will spare him from the worst effects of polio. However, his condition deteriorates rapidly, and his denial becomes increasingly untenable. His resistance to accepting his vulnerability mirrors the broader human tendency to deny the inevitability of suffering and mortality. His struggle against inevitability culminates in his decision to leave the Weequahic playground and enlist in the military. He believes that by distancing himself from the children and the epidemic, he can escape the clutches of polio. This decision, while motivated by a desire to protect himself, ultimately leads to emotional isolation and self-imposed exile. Bucky's abandonment of his responsibilities underscores his desperation to elude the inescapable grip of the disease.

Trauma Studies and Psychoanalytic Criticism:

Cathy Caruth's trauma model posits that traumatic events often disrupt an individual's capacity to narrate or understand their experiences coherently. Trauma, according to Caruth, is defined by its belatedness – the victim experiences it as if it is happening again in the present, even if it occurred in the past. The trauma is not fully processed at the time of its occurrence, resulting in symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, and an inability to integrate the traumatic event into one's life story. In her infamous book on trauma, *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*, Caruth simplifies the types of trauma:

Trauma theory often divides itself into two basic trends: the focus on trauma as the "shattering" of a previously whole self and the focus on the survival function of trauma as allowing one to get through an overwhelming experience by numbing oneself to it.

(Caruth, 2016)

The "shattering" of a previously whole self is done to Bucky, by the pandemic. Hence, it could be easily deduced that Bucky Cantor's experiences exemplify Caruth's trauma model. Bucky is traumatized by the relentless polio epidemic that strikes the children under his care at the Weequahic playground. His trauma is marked by his inability to comprehend the randomness and brutality of the disease. Bucky, in his role as a caretaker, is exposed to the suffering and death of the children, which profoundly affects him.

Bucky's initial response to the polio epidemic is to repress the trauma. He attempts to maintain a semblance of control, implementing strict safety measures and quarantines, believing that he can protect the children. This is evident when he says, "You can't panic. You have to think clearly," reflecting his denial of the emotional toll the epidemic is taking on

him. Caruth's trauma model suggests that Bucky's repression is an attempt to avoid confronting the overwhelming emotional impact of the epidemic.

As the epidemic worsens, Bucky's denial deepens. He refuses to acknowledge his own vulnerability, believing that his strength and athleticism will shield him from polio. However, when he contracts the disease himself, his denial becomes untenable. His physical suffering and weakened limbs force him to confront the reality of his condition. Bucky's denial, according to psychoanalytic interpretation, can be seen as an ego-defence mechanism aimed at protecting his psyche from the overwhelming trauma. Caruth's model also highlights the concept of regression, where trauma can lead to a return to earlier, more primitive stages of mental functioning. Bucky's regression is evident in his decision to leave his responsibilities at the Weequahic playground and enlist in the military, attempting to distance himself from the trauma. This act of regression is a form of psychic repetition, a futile attempt to escape the traumatic experience. Bucky's abandonment of his duties is a manifestation of his desperate need to protect himself from further harm, even if it means abandoning his responsibilities.

Polio and Generational Jewish Trauma:

Although it doesn't seem so on the surface, generational Jewish trauma is a powerful theme in Philip Roth's novel. The long-lasting effects of historical events on Jewish individuals and their families is a traumatic experience that is shown through the pandemic. The novel is a thought-provoking and emotionally charged exploration that sheds light on the lasting effects of trauma. This undercurrent theme is obvious when read in the Jewish context. Aimee Pozorski, in her *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*, points out this undercurrent theme:

The conflict at the heart of Roth's latest work, *Nemesis*, is less overtly about intergenerational strain. In fact, it appears to look not back to the American Revolution in any way but forward to an empty future. As such, in these closing pages I am interested less in the way the tetralogy considers the traumatic ideals of democracy and more in its investment in a new problem — perhaps one related to aging, on the surface, but also one that is related to the problem of futurity.

(Pozorski, 2011)

Although this is an interesting aspect of concern, when considering the fact that Jewish trauma and suffering is a prolific aspect of most of Roth's works, it is hard to justify such a claim as Roth has eventually transformed into a writer whose central concerns are now more universal. The similarities could be seen as subconscious artifacts than intentional narrative choices.

Popular Culture, COVID-19 and Polio:

Although *Nemesis* predates the COVID-19 pandemic by a decade, there are striking similarities and thematic resonances between the two. This essay will compare and contrast *Nemesis* with the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing upon textual evidence from the novel and real-world events to highlight the commonalities and differences. In the novel, is an unseen enemy, lurking in the shadows, much like the coronavirus in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both diseases spread quietly and stealthily, often infecting individuals before any visible symptoms manifest. This invisible threat adds an element of fear and uncertainty to both narratives.

Roth vividly portrays the fear and panic that grips Newark as polio cases surge. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread fear and panic, with people rushing to stockpile supplies, wearing masks, and practicing social distancing. The sense of an impending crisis

and the uncertainty about the future are palpable in both contexts. In the novel, the infected are quarantined to prevent the spread of polio. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and quarantines were enforced to curb transmission. The theme of isolation, both physical and emotional, resonates in both situations. Those affected by polio in the novel are often stigmatized as carriers of the disease, leading to social ostracization. Similarly, individuals with COVID-19 faced discrimination and stigma, with some communities unfairly blaming certain groups for the spread of the virus. One significant difference between the two pandemics is the level of scientific understanding. In *Nemesis*, polio was a relatively unknown disease, and medical knowledge was limited. In contrast, during the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists and healthcare professionals had a much better understanding of the virus, which allowed for the development of vaccines and treatment options at a much faster pace.

Bucky's Disability and the Pandemic's Horror:

Bucky Cantor's contraction of polio in *Nemesis* thrusts him into a world of disability, a realm often depicted as terrifying in popular culture. American horror films, for example, have a long history of portraying disability as a source of fear and dread. Characters with disabilities are often cast as monsters or villains, exemplifying society's discomfort with physical difference. Bucky's own fear and discomfort with his disability mirror these societal attitudes.

While popular culture often perpetuates negative stereotypes about disability, there has been a shift in recent years towards more positive and empowering representations. The *heroic disabled* narrative has gained traction, portraying characters who overcome their disabilities and achieve remarkable feats. In *Nemesis*, Bucky's resilience and determination to live a fulfilling life despite his disability align with this emerging narrative. He becomes a symbol of strength and courage, challenging traditional notions of disability as a source of horror.

In some instances, popular culture employs disability as a metaphor for larger societal issues. Disabilities are used symbolically to represent the human condition, reflecting themes of vulnerability, marginalization, and the struggle for acceptance. Bucky's disability in can be seen as a metaphor for the vulnerability and uncertainty faced by all individuals during the polio pandemic. His physical condition reflects the broader societal fear and horror surrounding the epidemic.

There's a dearth of critical discourse on how popular culture usually treats pandemics like these, while the after effects of COVID-19 haven't yet been seen, several instances of such global diseases have been addressed at length in classic works like *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe and *The Plague* by Albert Camus. The Polio pandemic especially is an interesting aspect of study in popular culture, Katie Ellis, in her *Disability and popular culture: Focusing passion, creating community and expressing defiance*, says,

McKay locates the origins of a disability presence in popular music within the polio epidemic in much of the Western world and situates Ian Dury at the center of 'a strand of disabled cultural identity'. Dury – the lead singer of the iconic 1970s/ '80s English group the Blockheads – suffered polio as a child and sang of his experiences with institutionalization and social disablement. McKay argues that Dury forms the bridge between earlier popular artists with disability such as Gene Vincent and the figure of post-punk enfreakment in the hunchbacked body of Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols.

(Ellis, 2016)

Hence, as Ellis mentions, the cultural identity of the disabled has been a new area of studies that neatly fits within the context of the inclusivity and increased wokeness in 21st century America.

The aspect of viewing disability as a societal construct with its own identity is practice that comes with a two-fold perspective. While the identity brings into light the several ways in which the disabled can be provided for in terms of accessibility, like working towards wheelchair accessible places and better equipped urban planning to name a few, it also creates a segment of classification that might introduce a newer later of discourse that might inevitably see disability as something that it isn't – a way of life. Tobin Siebers, in his infamous book *Disability Studies* suggests,

Undoubtedly, the central purpose of disability studies is to reverse the negative connotations of disability, but this pursuit tends to involve disability as an identity formation rather than as a physical or mental characteristic. Many disability theorists - and I count myself among them - would argue that disability as an identity is never negative. The use of disability to disparage a person has no place in progressive, democratic society, although it happens at present all the time. As a condition of bodies and minds, however, disability has both positive and negative valences.

(Siebers, 2008)

While Siebers suggests that the aspect of identity could not be negative, it is imperative to assume that the intention being considering disability as an identity has to do more with providing access than any other political ideology. However, a discourse on identity and disability is of paramount importance as it provides deeper insights into the loss and suffering that disability carries with itself.

In recent years, there has been a growing effort in popular culture to subvert traditional horror tropes related to disability. This includes representing disabled characters as multidimensional individuals with agency and complex lives. Bucky Cantor's character in *Nemesis* can be seen as a subversion of the typical horror narrative associated with disability. While his disability is a source of personal struggle, it also becomes a catalyst for personal growth and self-discovery.

Conclusion:

In exploring the multifaceted dimensions of disease in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*, this research paper has unveiled a rich tapestry of themes and subtexts that not only mirror the historical context of the polio pandemic but also resonate with contemporary concerns surrounding pandemics, such as COVID-19. Through an examination of Roth's evolving literary style, the trauma of maternal absence, the intersection of disability studies and the American novel, and Bucky Cantor's relentless struggle against the inevitability of disease, we have delved into the profound emotional and psychological aspects of disease. Moreover, our exploration of trauma studies and psychoanalytic criticism, as well as the generational Jewish trauma catalysed by the polio pandemic, has deepened our understanding of how Roth's narrative transcends the mere depiction of a medical condition. This paper has also underscored the relevance of Roth's work in the context of today's global health crises, highlighting the enduring anxieties and human responses to pandemics. It demonstrates that literature has the power to serve as a lens through which we can examine not only the physical toll of disease but also its psychological and societal repercussions. As we grapple with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Roth's exploration of trauma, inevitability, and the human spirit in the face of disease remains not only pertinent but also profoundly illuminating, offering valuable insights into the human condition when confronted with the spectre of illness. Ultimately,

Nemesis serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience and vulnerability that define our shared human experience in times of crisis.

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