FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AS LITERARY ANALYSIS:
THE CASE OF PHILIP ROTH

By

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AS LITERARY ANALYSIS: THE CASE OF PHILIP ROTH

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Psychoanalytic theory has been far more influential in literary studies than any other model of psychological inquiry. However, it is not the only available approach; Murray Bowen’s family systems theory, while relatively new and unfamiliar to humanities scholars, offers great potential to the field of literary studies. The purpose of this essay is to evaluate the critical effectiveness of systems theory as a literary construct, using as a test case the early fiction of Philip Roth, which was written concurrently with the development of Bowen’s theory. Given Roth’s lifelong personal and professional interest in Freud’s work, his disappointment with the practice of psychoanalysis, and his exploration of the self within the context of the family, his novels serve as apt and valuable subjects of study for family systems theory. This essay therefore seeks to recognize the joint development of systemic thinking as expressed theoretically by Murray Bowen and figuratively by Philip Roth, in the hopes that family systems theory be recognized as a valuable and compelling means for literary criticism and that Philip
Roth’s early fiction be appreciated for its systemic exploration of the family unit through language and imagery that (often parodically) depart from the traditional psychoanalytic model.
FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AS LITERARY ANALYSIS:  
THE CASE OF PHILIP ROTH

Introduction

Psychoanalytic theory, whether Freudian, Lacanian, ego psychological, or object relationist, has been far more influential in literary studies than any other model of psychological inquiry. While psychoanalysis\(^1\) is by far the most prevalent school of psychology – both theoretical and clinical – in the West, there are perhaps additional reasons as to why it has retained such a monopoly in American departments of English. As “liberal” thinkers, literature scholars understandably identify with Freud’s appeal to the arts and Lacan’s semiotic formulation that the unconscious is structured like a language. Lacan himself recognized that Freud considered a literary background “the prime requisite in the training of analysts” (139). Additionally, psychoanalysis, which Mark Poster deems “a theory of the individual” (34), is expressly more “subjective” in its reliance on free association, transference between the analyst and the analysand, and an implicit understanding of the patient’s victimization by his or her innate desires or lacks; it is therefore seemingly more akin to the theoretical teachings of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “Freud

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\(^1\) Unless otherwise specified, when I discuss psychoanalysis, I am referring to Freud’s theory as it has been applied in the United States. Of course, it is important to realize, as Nathan Hale points out, that Freud may not have “recognized the current panoply of clinical practices as his own,” but “many of today’s psychoanalysts would” (Schnogg 4). As Nancy Schnogg points out, “These theories may no longer be purely Freudian, but they have descended from the founder of psychoanalysis” (4).
discovered the subjective nature or abstract essence of desire” (qtd. in Poster 1).

However, psychoanalysis is not the only available psychological approach to literature.

Family systems theory, while relatively new and unfamiliar to most humanities scholars, offers distinctive potential to literary studies. Its goal is to demonstrate that the study of the human can be more objective; in other words, it can be a science. To formulate his theoretical claims about the psychological identity of the family, Murray Bowen, as well as his colleagues and followers, relied on an extensive collection of data about both human and animal families. Bowen’s assertion that the “family is a system in that a change in one part of the system is followed by compensatory change in other parts of the system” (155) makes a universal claim that seems “anti-humanities.” In our postmodern age of Foucauldian subjectivity and Derridian deconstruction, the universality of a systemic science of humanity seems suspect. Yet it cannot be denied that, as humans, we maintain a common experience of existence; what family systems attempts to do is provide a comprehensive theory that recognizes the common origin of our species: the mammalian organization of the family. C. Margaret Hall summarizes it as “a general theory of emotional processes in human relationship systems, with an emphasis on biological rather than cultural variables” (2). While systems theory may be

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2 I will therefore devote a good portion of this essay to reviewing family systems’ fundamental concepts.

3 Freud, of course, considered psychoanalysis to be a science, but given his tendency to abstract universal claims from a limited collection of data, as well as his focus on literature as models for psychoanalytic thought (i.e. the Oedipus complex), that label is necessarily called into question. Lacan also believed that psychoanalysis should be a science; however, he recognized a differentiation between exact sciences, such as biology and physics, and conjectural sciences, within which Lacan located psychoanalysis. Poster raises a relevant criticism against Lacan’s reliance on the supposed “scientific” metaphysic of language by pointing out, “Language is not totally malleable but shaped by a social and natural system which in good measure precedes it” (96).
a more conventionally “scientific” understanding of the human psyche,\(^4\) this does not
discount its potential as a theoretical construct for literary analysis. As John V. Knapp
explains:

> The family system becomes the source of the matrix of identity, rather than only
> the individual character. Thus, the “causes” of a given problem in growing up
> (and beyond) in fictional and real families is much less the person construct or
> single event, and more the emotional process that links people and events. . . . To
> understand a member(s) of a fictional family, one needs to understand the family
> system. (15)

This essay illustrates how family systems theory can function as a critical framework,
using as a test case the early fiction of Philip Roth, which is especially applicable given
his lifelong personal and professional interest in Freud’s work, his disappointment with
the practice of psychoanalysis, and his exploration of the self within the context of the
family. Through this case study, then, I suggest that family systems theory’s
comprehensive understanding of the family’s functioning allows for a nuanced and
rewarding reading of literature that in return demonstrates the insight of the theory.\(^5\)

**Skepticism about Family Studies**

Before continuing, I would first like to anticipate some skepticisms that could
very appropriately be raised about the study of the family. Along with the advances in
such postmodern criticisms as feminism, queer theory, and Marxism has emerged a
valuable deconstruction of the family, despite its undeniable influence on human culture.

\(^4\) While family systems can be viewed as more “scientific” than psychoanalysis in its universalized
understanding of the human experience and its reliance on the thorough collection of data, it should be
emphasized that it does not fall into the category of a solely pharmacological answer for emotional
disturbance. Though it does not deny the necessity in certain cases for medication, it stresses therapy as the
prevailing and most effective treatment.

\(^5\) It should be noted that my purpose in applying family systems theory as a form of criticism is not meant
to deny the importance of such vital work as cultural criticism, gender and race studies, or even other
schools of psychological criticism. Rather, I am simply offering another frame of discourse, one that
focuses on the emotional dynamics of human beings, that should provide additional and sometimes more
complicating readings.
Poster explains the difficulties involved in studying the family: “Today the family is being attacked and defended with equal vehemence. It is blamed for oppressing women, abusing children, spreading neurosis and preventing community” (ix). For example, feminist Kate Millett argues that the family, because of its engrained patriarchal structure, is hazardous to the goals of feminism. She writes, “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unity within a patriarchal whole” (45). Her criticism is, of course, completely accurate. And yet, she continues, “Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state” (45). What Millett is struggling with, what she challenges about the family, then, is not necessarily its inherent patriarchy, but rather its systemic functioning within the larger family of society, which, of course, is patriarchal. In other words, the family is not patriarchal innately, but, as a cultural product, it conforms to society’s economic, political, and cultural influences. While this argument does not solve the problem, it does leave room for understanding the patriarchal organization of the family as a relational response to society at large, as opposed to a lost cause not worthy of evaluation.

Jane Gallop, influenced by feminist theory as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis, similarly questions psychoanalytic assumptions about gender and the family: “Psychoanalysis often considers revolutionary conflict along the parent-child model, thus reassimilating larger social issues into the familiar domain” (xv). However, because

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6 As a side note, family systems would interpret society’s patriarchal structure as a dysfunctional attempt to manage the human population’s anxieties. I will discuss this process in greater detail in the section, “Societal Emotional Process.”
Gallop reads the family solely as a one-to-one relationship, which is entirely accurate according to the psychoanalytic model, she fails to take into account the larger system of the family that is made up of far more complex, interrelated webbings of relationships. An additional feminist criticism of Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular is raised by Catherine Baliteau who argues that “Lacanians are always blaming the mother of the child’s problems, even to the point of insisting that it is the mother’s task to introduce the father and the principle of the symbolic phallus. But where is the father while the mother tends the child, seducing it to her desire at the level of the imaginary?” (Poster 95). This sexist leaning is especially evident in Robert Forrey’s Lacanian analysis of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, in which he diagnoses Portnoy’s problem as a prohibition by his mother to become a Jewish father (272). One could equally wage such a feminist criticism against many other schools of psychoanalysis, including object relations. What family systems theory offers that psychoanalysis does not is the belief that each member contributes to the functioning and dysfunctioning of the family unit. Additionally, unlike psychoanalysis, family systems does not prescribe specific patterns, tendencies, and/or neuroses as attributes of one’s gender.

Marxist critics have similarly found fault with the structure of the family, viewing it as a governmental means to provide the proletariat with leisure time and privacy. And just as Millett suggests that the family upholds the patriarchal system, so too does it uphold the ideological, capitalistic structure of the social system (Poster xviii). Engels, in his *The Origin of the Family*, was one of the first to recognize that the family has a “long and important history . . . which proved that patriarchy and monogamy were limited,

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7 I will provide a systems’ reading of *Portnoy’s Complaint* over the course of this paper.
relative social forms connected with fateful developments in the mode of production” (Poster 43). However, Poster criticizes the Marxist position for viewing the family as a “dependent variable” that will “change after the revolution” and for overlooking the oppressions that occur within the family itself (xviii). Yet despite these criticisms, Marxism does remind those doing psychological inquiry into the family that “one must be aware of class differences in family structure” (63).

Another appropriate criticism of the psychological study of the family, especially of psychoanalysis and ego psychology in particular, is its tendency to “normalize” the family, to assume that there is a standard against which all families are measured. Of course, the danger is that the theorist doing the normalizing does not realize that his or her standard is culturally bound and determined. As Millett testifies, “The effect of Freud’s work, that of his followers, and still more that of his popularizers, was to rationalize the invidious relationship between the sexes, to ratify traditional roles, and to validate temperamental differences” (252). Poster agrees. Criticizing the ego psychological work of Erik Erikson in particular, he writes, “Erikson’s lofty spiritual quest ends in an affirmation of all social orders as providing adequate chances for each individual to attain these values” (70). Therefore, psychoanalysis often has the tendency of becoming more of a moralizing force than an objective critique of the human psyche. Of course, this was one of Lacan’s primary complaints against psychoanalysis as it is often practiced in the United States. What sets family systems apart, however, is that it does not “normalize” the family or declare, “this is what a healthy family looks like”; instead, the theory does its best to objectively examine the universal emotional patterns,

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8 Ego psychology has been the most prevailing mode of psychoanalysis in America since mid-century.
such as fusing and triangling, by which all families, to some degree, function. Hall adds, “He [Bowen] is more concerned with possibilities and probabilities than with modes or norms of behavior” (20). Additionally, Bowen never defines exactly what a family is. His theory operates under the premise that any collection of adults and/or children, for example a single mother, a gay couple, an adopted child and parents, can function as a family unit. The goal of systems therapy is not to heal by altering “immoral” behavior, but rather to reduce anxiety by acknowledging the structuring patterns of the family dynamic for what they are. Of course it cannot be denied that Bowen did rely on heterosexual, married couples as his initial objects of study and most likely developed his theory under the assumption that heterosexuality is the “norm.” However, Michael Kerr, Bowen’s established successor, responds that homosexual relationships and family units function no differently than do those of heterosexuals (“The Relationship”).

Murray Bowen and Philip Roth’s Concurrent Interest in the Family

Murray Bowen’s development of family systems began in 1957 at the Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, where he presented his paper, “Treatment of Family Groups with a Schizophrenic Member.” Bowen explains the impetus to convert the traditionally psychoanalytic model into a more systemic paradigm as inspired by a dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis after a decade of its domination in postwar America. With World War II and its vastly dismal effects on the world’s population (as well as on the structure of the family itself) came the understandable acceptance of psychoanalysis as the primary mode of American psychiatry; however, as many disconcerted practitioners soon came to realize, it did not provide effective treatment techniques for severe mental illness. Poster adds, “It became clear to these [family] therapists that earlier theories were deficient in articulating the social nature of
psychic life” (110). Therefore, mid-century, “Hundreds of eager psychiatrists began experimenting with modifications of psychoanalytic treatment for the more difficult problems” (Bowen 186). Yet this search for a more effective understanding of the human psyche was not limited to psychiatrists.

When read psychologically, Philip Roth’s fiction has been read from the psychoanalytic perspective. This, of course, is no surprise, given Roth’s lifelong personal and professional interest in Freud’s work. However, despite his experience with analysis, he registers doubt about its efficacy throughout his writing career. Bowen began formulating his theory in 1957, and Roth’s career took off just two years later, with the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. While in different fields, both men express frustration with psychoanalysis as an effective psychological theory. Given Roth’s disappointment with psychoanalysis as well as his career-long exploration of the self, his books serve as apt and valuable objects of study for family systems theory. By reading Roth’s novels in the context of family systems, I hope to reveal complementary meanings that explore the deficiencies of psychoanalysis while presenting a more systemic functioning of the family unit. This essay therefore seeks to recognize the joint development of systemic thinking as expressed theoretically by Murray Bowen and figuratively by Philip Roth, in the hopes that family systems be recognized as a valuable and compelling means for literary criticism.

I will first devote some time to exploring the discontent that Roth conveys both in his fiction and nonfiction in order to allow for the possibility of alternate psychological readings. Because family systems theory is most likely unfamiliar to most literary scholars, I will then review its basic premise and discuss its eight interlocking concepts.
With each concept, I will look to moments in Roth’s novels, specifically *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *Letting Go* (1962), *When She Was Good* (1967), *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), and *My Life as a Man* (1974), that seem to explore a similar dynamic within the family system. These books represent Roth’s five earliest novels, excepting a political satire about Nixon (*Our Gang* – 1971), an equally satiric baseball saga (*The Great American Novel* – 1973), and a Kafkaesque novella that is more of a literary exercise than a fully dimensional work of fiction (*The Breast* – 1972). While contemporaneous with Bowen’s development of family systems theory, these early novels tend to share a common interest in a character’s development of self within the context of the family: “He writes about individuals in families and marriages; political or social involvement . . . is a secondary subject” (Lee 49). I cannot see that Roth would have any problem with my pursuit, given that he himself admits that “family and religion as coercive forces have been a recurrent subject in my fiction” (*Reading* 8). McDaniel additionally recognizes Roth’s interest in exploring his characters within their familial and communal circumstances: “Roth believes that the writer should investigate the self as it exists in society” (51). It is Roth’s willingness to situate his characters within his or her cultural context, specifically the family, that sets him apart from many of his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, and Norman Mailer, who appeal to “the necessity of divorcing oneself from society” (51) and whose heroes “are not willing to confront the storms of social, familial and religious pressures” (88). This attribute also makes Roth a valid and worthwhile subject of inquiry for family systems theory.
Roth’s Discontent with Psychoanalysis

In order to allow for the possibility of other psychological interpretations, it is necessary to locate moments in Roth’s writing that suggest a discontent with psychoanalysis. While much of the psychoanalytic imagery and language that commonly appear in Roth’s work have been taken at face value, I believe that moments of subversion, satire, and spoofing have been regrettably overlooked. Roth’s collection of nonfiction essays, Reading Myself and Others, which was first published a year after My Life as a Man, offers considerable insight into Roth’s (supposedly) candid beliefs. In a 1974 interview with the Italian critic Walter Mauro, Roth responds to a question about the extent of his loyalty to his religious and familial origins:

I am probably right now as devoted to my origins as I ever was . . . But this has come about only after subjecting these ties and connections to considerable scrutiny. In fact, the affinities that I continue to feel toward the forces that first shaped me, having withstood to the degree that they have the assault of imagination and the test of sustained psychoanalysis (with all the cold-bloodedness that entails), would seem by now to be here to stay. (Reading 9)

Roth here is very clearly disturbing the conventional critical view that he is an advocate for psychoanalysis. He claims that despite the cold-blooded attempt of psychoanalysis to detach himself from his family, Roth has remained, after much genuine deliberation, faithful to his origins. In his autobiography, The Facts, Roth additionally reveals the profound effects that his family has had on him: “In our lore, the Jewish family was an inviolate haven against every form of menace, from personal isolation to gentile hostility. Regardless of internal friction and strife, it was assumed to be an indissoluble

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9 See critics such as Jeffrey Berman, Harold Bloom, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Hermione Lee, and Howard Eiland.
consolidation. *Hear, O Israel, the family is God, the family is One*10 (14). Hermione Lee, alluding to Bloom’s psychoanalytic theory that the writer desires to “kill off” the fatherly writers of the tradition in order to find success as a writer himself, reads Roth’s fiction also as desirous of extinguishing all familial and literary influences. However, it is clear from his nonfiction (and his fiction as well), that he has a sincere appreciation for the intense impact that the family can and continues to have on one’s emotional (and writerly) development.

Roth offers an alternate criticism of psychoanalysis in a 1984 interview with Lee for *The Paris Review*. To the question, “Then what is the relationship between your experience of psychoanalysis and the use of psychoanalysis as a literary stratagem?,” Roth answers:

> The experience of psychoanalysis was probably more useful to me as a writer than as a neurotic, although there may be a false distinction there. It’s an experience that I shared with tens of thousands of baffled people, and anything that powerful in the private domain that joins a writer to his generation, to his class, to his moment, is tremendously important for him, providing that afterwards he can separate himself enough to examine the experience objectively, imaginatively, in the writing clinic. . . . So many enlightened contemporaries had come to accept the view of themselves as patients, and the ideas of psychic disease, cure, and recovery. (*Reading* 128)

Therefore Roth’s interest in psychoanalysis and the use of it in his writing is for its social implications, its ideas about “subjectivity,” and its intense cultural influence on his generation. In the last sentence of the above passage, Roth likewise criticizes the tendency of psychoanalysis to focus on mental illness as a disease, as opposed to something more organic. Family systems makes this same criticism.

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10 Here, Roth is echoing the *Shema*, the most important of Jewish prayers that attests to the unity of God; it reads, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!”
Roth additionally registers disapproval with psychoanalysis in his fiction. For example, in his second novel, *Letting Go*, Roth narrates a highly impassioned, even disturbing encounter between Libby, the desolate, desperate young wife of Paul Herz, and the psychoanalyst, Dr. Lumin. While Berman suggests that Roth actually portrays his psychoanalysts as “men of good will, expertise, and integrity” (240), on closer inspection, it seems more accurate that his psychoanalysts are, at the least, misled, arrogant, and inappropriate. For example, in response to Libby’s impassioned confession, the narration reads, “The doctor rocked in his chair; he placed his hands on his belly, where it disappeared into his trousers like half a tent. ‘I don’t know,’ he mumbled” (346). In addition to the doctor’s mumbled, unconstructive response, Roth additionally goes so far as to imply, through the suggestion that his hands are in his pants, that Dr. Lumin is sexually aroused by Libby’s psychological breakdown. Libby ends up leaving the office in a mad outburst of disappointment and never returns. While some critics, such as Berman (243), have blamed this failure on Libby and her “extreme” temperament, it is perhaps fairer to put the blame on the supposed mental health professional for this failure, especially given this unattractive portrait of him.

In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth not only adopts the confessional mode of psychoanalysis, but also exploits it and turns it against itself. While Roth himself is obviously very familiar with psychoanalytic terms and discourse, Portnoy’s baffled, fanatical rant undermines the value of psychoanalysis through subversive spoofs and misreadings. Some critics, such as Bruno Belletheim in his “Portnoy Psychoanalyzed,” seem to blame Roth for these discrepancies; however, I argue that they are perfectly deliberate. For example, Portnoy cheers desperately, “LET’S PUT THE ID BACK IN
YID! Liberate this nice Jewish boy’s libido, will you please?” (124). Here, Roth seems to be at least questioning, if not challenging, psychoanalysis in its claim that such a thing could be possible. Similarly, upon making the discovery that “essentially titless women seem to be [his] destiny,” Portnoy sidebars to ask, “by the way—now, why is that? is there an essay somewhere I can read on that? is it of import? or shall I go on?” (216). It is necessary to acknowledge the deliberate mocking sting that this aside at least implies, if not confirms. Additionally, Portnoy candidly challenges the efficacy of psychoanalysis, which of course, is made even more ironic by the fact that he is sitting on an analyst’s couch: “Doctor, my psyche, it’s about as difficult to understand as a grade-school primer! Who needs dreams, I ask you? Who needs Freud?” (180). And though Dr. Spielvogel does get the last line of the novel, it is his only one: “So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” (Roth’s brackets – 274). Yet this section of the novel is entitled, “Punch Line”; therefore, the psychoanalytic authority’s only line in the novel is a joke (as is all of Portnoy’s “free association”). The reader does not hear any of the analysis; it does not concern Roth. The purpose of the novel, its substance, lies in Portnoy’s story itself. Interestingly enough, Millett appreciates Roth’s disparagement of the psychoanalytic discourse: “Portnoy’s long kvetch is a hilarious demonstration of how elaborate cultural penis-worship may produce, in a man of intelligence or sensitivity, a monumental infantilism whose only satisfactions are a contradictory blend of onanistic

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11 It would perhaps be irresponsible not to discuss the constant theme of the Jewish joke running throughout both Roth’s and Freud’s careers. Sanford Pinsker has written much of Freud’s Jewishness and psychoanalysis as a “Jewish science.” Hermione Lee likewise makes a comment that seems to be hinting at Roth’s critique of psychoanalysis through his use of Jewish humor: “Portnoy is doubly a self-abusing humorist: that is, he makes use to the full of the tradition of ‘self-abuse’ in the Jewish joke, and at the same time abuses the tradition” (38). For more on Jewish humor, see Pinsker and Lee as well as Stephen J. Whitfield.
self-deprecation and the cheap glory of settling old minority scores in the sexual exploitation of women” (455). While many critics have read Portnoy’s Complaint as Roth’s embrace of the psychoanalytic discourse, I rather agree with Millett that it is psychoanalysis itself, as it has been embraced by the American mythology, that has contributed to Portnoy’s complaint.

In My Life as a Man, Roth continues to take issue with psychoanalysis, again through the figure of Dr. Spielvogel.12 Roth repeatedly and deliberately questions Spielvogel’s authority. For example, Spielvogel can make no other diagnosis, can do nothing to help Peter, other than to repeatedly call him a “narcissist,”13 especially when Peter expresses his fears that Susan will kill herself if he leaves her. We readers, though, know that Susan does indeed attempt to commit suicide, as Roth includes this information near the beginning of his narration. Therefore, Spielvogel’s hasty dismissal of Peter’s fears as “in his head” cannot be taken seriously; we know that Peter’s fears are indeed legitimate, yet remain unacknowledged by the psychoanalyst. Peter pleads, “Look, what if after the affair is no more, she cannot accept the fact and commits suicide?” To which Spielvogel answers, “You think every woman in the world is going to kill herself over you? . . . What a narcissistic melodrama you are writing here, Mr. Tarnopol. If I may offer a literary opinion” (166). Roth here casts Spielvogel as extending beyond his proper position as an analyst and into that of a literary critic (Peter's/Roth’s own territory) – that is how far he has strayed.

12 Dr. Spielvogel is most likely modeled after Roth’s own analyst, who, like Spielvogel, published an article about the narcissistic artist, whose subject was a very loosely disguised Roth.

13 A diagnosis that critics often make of Roth himself. It should be noted that a family systems therapist would not only avoid labeling a client with any “diagnosis,” but would also absolutely avoid declaring this label to his or her client. Instead, the systems therapist would ask why Peter began dating such a dependent woman in the first place.
Similarly, Peter repeatedly gets frustrated with Spielvogel who will not believe that he could have had a happy childhood. While a family systems therapist would admit that all families are anxious and therefore experience times of unhappiness and dysfunction, Spielvogel instead insists that Peter was conveniently forgetting “the threatening aspect of [his] mother’s competence and vigor and attentiveness, and the ‘castration anxiety’” (214). Peter, and no doubt Roth, cannot buy this rewriting of Peter’s family history, nor its suggested misogyny. Later in the novel, desperate to be better, Peter attempts to adopt the psychoanalytic course of action. He tells himself that his mother was a “phallic threatening figure” and so goes “up to Yonkers to have Passover dinner” where he describes his behavior as “crudely abrupt and cold with my mother, [putting up] a performance about as bewildering afterward to me as to this woman who so looked forward to each infrequent visit that I made to her dinner table” (218). Not only does psychoanalysis not help Peter figure out more about himself, but it also makes him act against his own nature.

Given this short chronicle of moments in Roth’s writing when he seems skeptical of the psychoanalytic mission, or “talking cure,” it appears more possible that he would be curious about other available ways of thinking about the psychological nature of human beings. After a brief introduction to Bowen family systems theory, I will locate moments in Roth’s writing that echo its innovative psychological concepts.

**Bowen Family Systems Theory: An Overview**

During the 1950s, Murray Bowen, along with other American psychotherapists, began exploring the significance of the family on a person’s emotional development. When Bowen refers to “emotions,” it is important to note that he is not referring to such
“feelings” as happiness and fear, but rather to expressions more instinctual and even animalistic. Defining emotions in the Bowenian context, Gilbert writes:

Emotions are the intense reactivities, both physiological and mental, including the instincts, that are generated in the part of the brain humans share, anatomically and functionally, with the rest of the animal kingdom. They are highly complex behavior patterns that are so necessary to the survival of both the individual and the species that nature has given them an insistent quality and hard-wired them into the nervous system. (38)

Feelings, in contrast, are simply “emotions that have come into awareness” (39). With this recognition of the “natural” development of individuals within their instinctually emotional settings, Bowen soon came to realize that making a “family diagnosis,” as opposed to an individual one, is essential to the psychological pursuit. By focusing on an individual’s functioning (as opposed to his or her illness), Murray Bowen formulated the most comprehensive theory of family systems of the time and remains so to this day. Bowen family systems not only views the family as an organic unit, but also recognizes universal patterns that govern a family’s management of anxiety. Literary scholar Denis Jonnes explains:

In contrast to psychoanalytic approaches which assign predetermined, essentially static “roles” to parental figures (with which the child must identify or disidentify if independence and maturity are to be attained), family systems therapy regards all family members as equal participants within a fluid, dynamic system, which may take either growth-promoting or pathogenic forms. (277-278)

Bowen determined that the “emotionally disturbed” individual is not only a product of the family’s dynamic constitution, but also a predictable component of the family’s operating system – a billion-year-old emotional system that functions to maintain a family’s survival (Kerr “One Family’s” 1). Detailing the properties of such a system, Bowen and Kerr explain:
The emotionally determined functioning of the family members generates a family emotional “atmosphere” or “field”; that, in turn, influences the emotional functioning of each person. It is analogous to the gravitational field of the solar system, where each planet and the sun, by virtue of their mass, contribute gravity to the field and are, in turn, regulated by the field they help create. One cannot “see” gravity, nor can one “see” the emotional field. The presence of gravity and the emotional field can be inferred, however, by the predictable ways planets and people behave in reaction to one another. (Family Evaluation 54-55)

Bowen’s distinctive theory, then, recognizes the family as an emotional unit whose functioning is rigorously determined by its patterned method of anxiety management.

While a mature and psychologically healthy individual develops a differentiated sense of self, most family members instead formulate identity through their family’s emotional characteristics. Consequences of this sacrifice of self can range from experiencing minimal levels of anxiety to severe emotional and/or physical illness. Therefore family therapy’s primary goal “is to help the involved family members to differentiate clearly defined ‘selves’ from the undifferentiated ego mass” (Bowen 114). It is important to realize, though, that differentiating a self from the family unit does not entail cutting off from one’s family; it rather requires recognizing one’s unique position within the family system in relation to the other members.

Bowen’s family systems entails more than applying traditional concepts of individual psychotherapy to the family unit as a whole. A family systems therapist must adopt an intricate, systemic approach in order to grasp the inner workings of the family as an emotional unit. Bowen admits, “the concept is subtle and complex, with far-reaching implications that involve a major shift in the way man thinks about himself and illness” (73). The difficulty with family systems is that it proposes a new theoretical framework that is alien to our (Western) individualistic, cause-and-effect mindset. It is perhaps for this reason that Bowen systems is practiced so infrequently – to our detriment. And
maybe it also explains why family systems theory has yet to be embraced by the literary community. As Knapp contends in the introduction to *Reading the Family Dance*:

> Recent clinical and historical work . . . suggests that the twin needs of most human beings—the need for agency and self-direction and the need for affiliation and connectedness—are not mutually exclusive by any means, in spite of Western (read American) cultural tradition that often forces its heroes and heroines to conclude that they are. (21)

While literary scholars have embraced much of the work of postmodern theory that considers authors and their characters as products of their backgrounds, conceivably, family systems offers a psychological viewpoint, while “scientific,” that is complementary to that position as well.

Perhaps the most amenable way by which to perceive the subtleties of Bowen family systems is via its eight interlocking concepts. Each of these concepts, “triangles,” “differentiation of self,” “nuclear family emotional system,” “family projection process,” “emotional cutoff,” “sibling position,” and “societal emotional process,” operates, at least to some degree, in every family. Using his knowledge of families as they function according to their biological and evolutionary makeup (Bowen claimed to be more interested in Darwin than Freud), Bowen developed these concepts as products of the universal emotional system that guides all of our maturation within the family unit. By realizing how we all are determined by these eight concepts in our own development and in our relationships with others, Bowen purports that we can recognize our patterns and thereby function as healthier, more complete selves. What is challenging about family systems is that it requires individuals to move beyond the

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14 It is important to remember that each of these concepts is intricately related to the others, so that when discussing one, it is impossible not to refer to another. It is the fabric of these concepts, woven together, that comprises systems theory.
position of a victim of mental illness (as often prescribed by psychoanalysis), toward an acceptance that each of us is an anxious contributor to a problem. Poster explains the difference in outlook between Freud’s work and that of family systems:

Freud proposes a being with “needs” and a mechanism through which the satisfaction of the needs leaves as a residue an attachment not to the satisfaction of the needs but to the beings who made the satisfaction possible. Thus the “people who have a share” in the satisfaction of the child’s “needs” are simple mediators for Freud. They are not active in shaping the needs or the manner in which the needs are satisfied. The fact that children become attached to their parents is simply a by-product of their individual quest to satisfy needs. (5)

Therefore, Freud does not recognize the powerful influence that family members can have on the shaping of a child’s emotional make-up. Instead, they are victims to their basic desires. Poster explains that this is why Freud fails to recognize the parents’ role in the case of Little Hans and why he “consistently misinterpreted the defensive communications of the parents as the inevitable psycho-sexual development of the child” (7). It cannot be denied that many of Freud’s initial blind spots to the influence of the family linger in today’s practice of psychoanalysis; however, much progress continues to be made.

As I work through each of family systems’ eight concepts, I will provide examples of similar dynamics occurring in Roth’s early fiction; in so doing, it should become apparent that even though Roth may not have conceived of the family’s functioning in such theoretically rigorous terms as Bowen did, nonetheless, he does express in language more figurative, more ironic, and perhaps more entertaining, a similar recognition of the systemic functioning of human beings in relationships.
Triangles

The first concept, “triangles,” or “interdependent triads,” explains the tendency of individuals to relate to each other in systems of three. Triangles occur because a dyad, or two-person relationship, is unable to contain, or manage, much anxiety before a third member or thing is needed to absorb the excess anxiety. Kerr explains that a triangle “is considered the building block or ‘molecule’ of larger emotional systems because a triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system is unstable because it tolerates little tension before involving a third person” (“One Family’s” 3). “Paradoxically,” he adds, “a triangle is more stable than a dyad, but a triangle creates an odd man out, which is a very difficult position for individuals to tolerate. Anxiety generated by anticipating being or by being the odd man out is a potent force in triangles” (3). Because dyads are so delicate, couples often will involve a third party in order to avoid the original relationship problem. While the most frequent form of triangling is between parents and one or more children, the third party can be filled by anyone from a grandparent to a lover and anything from work to drugs and alcohol. While the psychoanalytic community often views men who talk daily to their mothers as entangled in the Oedipus complex, interpret adultery as the action of an uncontrolled (by the ego) id, and view alcoholism as a genetic disease, Bowen instead proposes that each of these (and other) behaviors is actually a form of triangling that is only a natural course when unable to cope with the anxiety of a two-person relationship. This is not to say that Bowen condones such acts; it is only that he is able to put them in a more “human”

15 Bowen’s concept of triangles as outlets through which people in relationships manage anxiety should not be confused with René Girard’s theory of triangular desire, in which subjects seek an object through an imitation of an ideal(ized) model, or mediator: “The effects of triangular desire are . . . from the moment the mediator’s influence is felt, the sense of reality is lost and judgment paralyzed” (4).
context so that we can understand them as products of an underlying and more difficult problem. The object in family systems theory is not to replace one addiction for another (for example the twelve steps for drinking or workaholism for a wandering eye), but rather to determine the emotional process involved in triggering symptoms.

In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth depicts a clear illustration of the Bowen triangle and how it can lead to emotional disturbance. For example, Sophie Portnoy is usually seen clinging, or fused, to her son, Alex. When he is quite young, she confesses that she could have married rich, but instead married his father. While this confidence effectively rallies the two of them against Jack Portnoy, Sophie does not hesitate to shift that alliance when anxieties are raised. When Alex has been bad (or at least bad according to her principles), she shifts her adulation to Jack and/or Alex’s sister, Hannah (who is usually neglected), in order to make Alex feel like the “odd man out,” as Kerr expresses it in a different context. When Alex will not take the bagged lunch that his mother packed for him, he recalls her threat, “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 (a master really at phrasing things just the right way to kill you). . . . We won’t be needing you any more” (15). In another scene, Roth again portrays the transfer of Sophie’s affections within the triangle. Believing that Alex has been eating french fries, she deserts him and realigns herself with Jack. She wails to her husband, “He goes after school with Melvin Weiner and stuffs himself with French-fried potatoes. Jack, you tell him, I’m only his mother. Tell him what the end is going to be” (32). To which, Alex observes, “Who in the history of the world has been least able to deal with a woman’s tears? My father. I am second. He says to me, ‘You heard your mother’” (32-33). Whereas usually Jack would have
little say in what Alex eats, at this moment, Sophie must side with him in the triangle in order to deal with her anxiety that Alex is moving away from, or rejecting, her.

In a similar scene, when Alex has done an unnamed “terrible thing,” he recounts that his mother “lifts Hannah (of all people, Hannah!), who until that moment I had never really taken seriously as a genuine object of anybody’s love, takes her up into her arms and starts kissing her all over her sad and unloved face, saying that her little girl is the only one in the whole wide world she can really trust” (88). While Hannah is usually on the outside of the triangle, at this particular moment when Alex has roused his mother’s anxieties, she assumes the more privileged position. While many critics, such as Sarah Blacher Cohen, Mary Allen, and Alix Kates, have interpreted Roth’s description of the manipulative mother as the unconscionable fuming of a misogynist, he is actually rather faithfully depicting a common occurrence in anxious families. While it is definitely severe compared to the average family’s triangling, it is an accurate portrayal of how a triangle works in a more disturbed family – one that would produce such an emotionally dysfunctional individual as Alexander Portnoy.

Yet Sophie is not the only character to shift alliances in the triangle, though she is undoubtedly the most controlling as the family’s overfunctioner.\(^{16}\) When Sophie is in the hospital on Rosh Hashanah, Jack is feeling particularly lonely and ineffectual due to his low differentiation of self.\(^{17}\) Alex reveals that the reason “my father is crying in the kitchen . . . without protection of the newspaper, and with such pitiful fury— is because my mother is in a hospital bed recovering from surgery: this indeed accounts for his

\(^{16}\) See the third concept, “the nuclear family emotional system.”

\(^{17}\) See the next (second) concept, “differentiation of self.”
excruciating loneliness on this Rosh Hashanah, and his particular need of my attention and obedience” (63-64). Therefore because he is lonely, Jack attempts to fill the void of his wife with the presence of his son, an impossible position for Alex. This shift in attention portrays the continuous fluidity of the triangle.

Interestingly enough, Roth seems to have been inspired by his own family’s triangling when portraying that of the Portnoy’s. In *The Facts*, he confesses: “Needless to say, the link to my father was never so voluptuously tangible as the colossal bond to my mother’s flesh” (18). It is telling that he chooses the word “tangible” to discuss the bond between him and his mother. He is not saying that the bond to his father was not there or not as influential – simply that it was less noticeable. Just because his relationship with his father was not so obvious does not therefore mean that it was any less fused. And to account for this, he ends this chapter of his autobiography with, “To be at all is to be her [his mother’s] Philip, but in the embroilment with the buffeting world, my history still takes its spin from beginning as his [his father’s] Roth” (19).

**Differentiation of Self**

Bowen defines the second concept, differentiation of self, as “the degree to which one self fuses or merges into another self in close emotional relationships” (200). By “self,” Bowen is referring to that which cannot be traded or lost when with others. It is not the divided psyche that Freud characterizes with the id, ego, and superego. Also called the “basic self,” it is the ability to adhere to one's own principles and stay goal driven no matter the degree of emotional pressure or anxiety. In his research, Bowen soon came to realize that not many of us have much self because it necessitates the use of
the cerebral cortex over the more innate emotional system that we share with animals.\textsuperscript{18}

Basically, differentiation of self is the level of one’s emotional maturity and individuality. However, Bowen was not the first to use the term “differentiation.” For example, eminent ego psychologist Heinz Hartmann “characterized the immature psyche as internally ‘undifferentiated,’ to suggest that at birth, the ego, superego, and even the basic drives of libido and aggression are not yet articulated and distinguishable from one another” (Mitchell 40). Therefore his understanding of differentiation is quite different from that of Bowen, who believed that “the less developed a person’s ‘self,’ the more impact others have on his functioning and the more he tries to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others” (Kerr \textit{One Family’s 7}). If an individual does not have enough self to accomplish his or her goals, he or she will then attempt to manipulate others through such mechanisms as bullying, rebellion, and/or guilt. In contrast, “A person with a well-differentiated ‘self’ recognizes his realistic dependence on others, but he can stay calm and clear-headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotionality” (Kerr 7). Bowen realized that those individuals with less differentiation of self often suffer from mental illness and/or physical maladies, and those with higher levels of self-differentiation function more efficiently both in society and within the family environment. He additionally found that a person’s level of differentiation greatly affects his or her major life choices; for example, people almost always marry people with the same level of self-differentiation. And after leaving one’s family of origin (around the age of eighteen), one’s level of differentiation changes little. But this is not

\textsuperscript{18} I will return to a discussion of the characteristics of the cerebral cortex under the “societal emotional process” section.
to say that one cannot improve one’s level of functioning. Even individuals with low levels of self-differentiation can work with a “coach” in therapy to gain a better understanding of his or her family system and thereby function on a healthier and more productive basis. The purpose of therapy, then, is to encourage the client\(^\text{19}\) to develop his or her functional, or “pseudo,” self. This self, however, which can be trained to function at higher levels of differentiation, is not solid and can yield to the basic self in states of great anxiety. The challenge of becoming a functional individual, then, is to develop a self that is able to hold to one’s goals, beliefs, and values while respecting those of others, and without being emotionally determined by the pressures of the family system. To be a mature self, one must be able to remain in the familial context, but, at the same time, be emotionally defined. The model is not wholly personal or social, but rather a delicate cooperation between the two. And if a person can find a way to hold on to his or her unique self within the emotional framework of the family, then he or she can continue that mature mode of functioning anywhere.

Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self allows for a more profound assessment of Paul Herz’s character in *Letting Go* than other critics have allowed for. For example, while McDaniel reads him as “a victim of false ideals” (118), family systems theory allows the reader to appreciate Paul as someone more deeply embedded within a familial environment that has restricted his self differentiation. In an eloquent portrayal of the frame of mind of a lowly differentiated individual, Roth describes Paul’s thoughts:

> He had only to . . . get a little room somewhere, get a job in some government office, and disappear. Start making a life not on the basis of what he dreamed he was, or thought he was supposed to be, or what literature, philosophy, friends,

\(^{19}\) Family systems therapists do not refer to their clients as “patients” and like to think of themselves as “coaches.”
enemies, wife, parents told him he must be, but simply in terms of his own possibilities. (412)

Roth clearly delineates exactly what Paul’s (and Libby’s) problem is. Paul even admits it to himself, but does not recognize it as the problem: he makes life decisions based on what others tell him, not what he wants for himself. With such a low differentiation of self, it is no wonder that he has spent his entire life doing for others, but ignoring his own principles. Ultimately, it has left him a depressed, lost, and deeply anxious man who is never able to just “let go.”

In *When She Was Good*, Roth considers a low differentiation of self as a cause for mental illness. Though it is unclear whether or not Willard’s sister, Ginny, is mentally disabled due to scarlet fever, a genetic disease, or a product of her family’s dysfunction, Roth nevertheless accurately depicts the function of low self-differentiation and understands its outcomes. The reason that Willard must take Ginny to a “state home” is, ultimately, because she has no self. Willard clearly articulates the extreme level of fusion that Ginny has with Lucy:

> In Ginny’s brain so many things were melted together that in real life are separate and distinct. She seemed always to think that Lucy was somehow herself—that is, more Ginny, or the rest of Ginny, or the Ginny people called Lucy. When Lucy ate an ice cream, Ginny’s eyes would get all happy and content, as though she were eating it herself. Or if as a punishment Lucy was put to bed early, Ginny, too, would sob and go off to sleep like one doomed. (10)

This description Roth provides of sharing emotions and experiences with another is very accurate to extreme cases of mental illness, especially schizophrenia. In Bowen’s early studies on schizophrenia, he realized that parents (usually mothers) of schizophrenics were often so fused to their children that they could even share the same thoughts. Such is the case with Ginny. Willard asks himself why he must put Ginny away and realizes it
is because she cannot “understand the most basic fact of human life, the fact that I am me and you are you” (11). It is this concept, of an individual’s intricately fused identity, that leads to all levels of emotional disturbance.

**The Nuclear Family Emotional System**

The third concept, nuclear family emotional system, is comprised of four basic relationship patterns by which all families – to some degree – function. Some families only operate according to one model while others exhibit characteristics of them all. The degree to which families adhere to these patterns in order to assuage anxiety determines their ability to function. In the first family pattern, “marital conflict,” the couple, during periods of high tension, externalize their anxiety into the marital relationship (Kerr *One Family’s* 13). Usually marital partners in a conflictual relationship have experienced conflict in their families of origin and blame the other member for all of their problems, become critical, project their problems onto others, and/or behave abusively (Gilbert 47). Conflicted couples are severely aware of the pain they are in and, for this reason, they are most likely to seek therapy.

In the second emotional pattern, “dysfunction in one spouse,” or “overfunctioning-underfunctioning reciprocity,” both members of the couple depend on the dysfunction of the other in order to manage the family’s anxiety. As Kerr explains, “One spouse pressures the other to think and act in certain ways and the other yields to the pressure. . . . The anxiety fuels, if other necessary factors are present, the development of psychiatric, medical, or social dysfunction [in the underfunctioning member]” (13). While the underfunctioning member is more easily viewed as dysfunctional for his or her inability to work, passiveness, depression, alcoholism, etc, in
fact, the entire system is dysfunctional; the overfunctioner contributes equally to the relationship problem. Characteristics of an overfunctioner include giving advice when it is not needed, accomplishing tasks for others that would not normally require help, constantly worrying about others, feeling responsible for others, talking more often than listening, and experiencing sudden “burnouts” from the inability to manage the burdens of two individuals’ concerns (Gilbert 67). Underfunctioners tend to ask for advice when it is not necessarily needed, get others’ help when it is not needed, act irresponsibly, listen more than talk, lack goals, become mentally or physically ill, and become addicted to drugs and/or alcohol (68). Neither gender is more likely to be an overfunctioner or an underfunctioner; it solely depends on the emotional dynamic of the individual’s family of origin. Additionally, some people may be underfunctioners in their family situation, but overfunctioners at work.

The third emotional pattern, “impairment of one or more children,” is mostly a product of severe triangling. In this pattern, “the spouses focus their anxieties on one or more of their children” and “the more the parents focus on the child the more the child focuses on them” (Kerr 14). Therefore the child develops less self and is less able to differentiate a self. Impairment of a child for the sake of managing the parents’ anxiety can lead to learning disabilities, delinquency, drug addiction, and/or critical mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia.

The fourth and final emotional pattern, that of “emotional distance,” develops when a couple cuts all intimate connection with each other in order to minimize tension: “People distance from each other to reduce relationship intensity, but at the risk of becoming too isolated” (Kerr 14). Individuals who distance from their partners, thereby
forming an “emotional divorce,” usually have experienced emotional distance in their family of origin and/or extended family. While a distant relationship may seem healthy from the outside, it is actually bitter and empty within. It is difficult to make couples aware of the dangers of emotional distance, due to the tendency to interpret it as “independence.” And distancing is so common, it is often not even seen as a problem (Gilbert 54). Members of a couple who distance from each other tend to go through long periods of no communication, become workaholics, abuse alcohol and/or drugs, become quiet and withdrawn when anxiety rises, and talk only about trivial matters (55).

Each of these four emotional patterns provides a useful understanding of how families attempt to manage their anxiety and avoid difficult issues. While focusing one’s attention on a problem-child instead of dealing with the underlying family anxiety might seem the most direct course of action, it only eases the tension for the short term while further embedding the nuclear family emotional system in the long term. And the long-term effects are far more critical. Kerr reveals, “the more anxiety one person or one relationship absorbs, the less other people must absorb. This means that some family members maintain their functioning at the expense of others” (14). Therefore in order for families to avoid emotional patterns that cause dysfunction in one or more members for the sake of “keeping the peace,” they must become consciously aware of their everyday patterns of behavior and work to act as independent selves instead of as passive cogs in a system. For example, if a husband constantly finds himself asking his wife to accomplish small tasks or make decisions that he could do on his own, then he should realize that he is contributing to her overfunctioning as well as his own underfunctioning.
It is significant that Bowen focuses his attention on the “nuclear” family – that structure that, in the 1950s and 60s, was being so highly esteemed over the more common organization of the extended family (especially amongst immigrants). Interestingly enough, Bowen considered the nuclear family less healthy than the extended family; while the latter offers a wider emotional support system, the former’s limited relationships tend to promote intense triangling. It should be noted that just because Bowen theorizes about these family patterns within the nuclear setting does not therefore imply that they only apply to nuclear families. The nuclear family is simply the smallest representative unit by which to understand the complex emotional dynamic of the family or of any collection of people. Under the section “societal emotional process,” I will discuss the implications of family systems as they apply to larger social groupings, but, for now, suffice it to say that the emotional processes that these four patterns illustrate occur not only in extended families, but also amongst colleagues and countries. When people come together, sharing the same space, the emotional process that encourages reciprocal relationships takes effect in order to assure survival. While in the beehive, certain bees may play the role of drones, and others the workers, in the office, certain individuals may take on the role of the overfunctioner, always getting assignments turned in early and reminding the underfunctioners when their assignments are due. Because the concept of the nuclear family emotional system is actually more like four concepts in one, I will spend a good amount of time finding examples of each of them in Roth’s fiction.

Roth’s comprehensive portrayals of families in his early novels strikingly correspond with variations of Bowen’s four models. For example, in Goodbye,
Columbus, Roth accurately portrays the interaction (or lack thereof) of an emotionally distant relationship (the fourth nuclear family emotional pattern). Roth goes to great lengths to expose how limited the communication is between Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin, so much so that throughout the whole novel, they do not speak more than a couple of sentences to each other. The most apparent illustration of the Patimkin distancing is during the first dinner that Neil eats with them. Lee reads this scene as an illustration of the Patimkin’s glut and “wasteful materialism” (15). However, when read from a family systems point of view, the reader can additionally appreciate the psychological dysfunction of the Patimkin family. Roth writes, “There was not much dinner conversation; eating was heavy and methodical and serious, and it would be just as well to record all that was said in one swoop, rather than indicate the sentences lost in the passing of food” (22). He then proceeds to list, in sparse narration, the superficial dialogue amongst the Patimkin family at dinner:

Mrs. P.: Carlota, give Ronald more.
Carlota (calling): More what?
Ron: Everything.
Mr. P.: Me too.
Mrs. P.: They’ll have to roll you on the links.
Mr. P. (pulling his shirt up and slapping his black, curved belly): What are you talking about? Look at that? (22-23)

Mrs. Patimkin ignores her husband and the two parents focus their attention on their children for the remainder of the meal. It is telling that Roth chooses to portray this particular scene as if it were a script or screenplay as opposed to a novel, to stress the choppy, even trivial interaction between the Patimkins. Raban, believing that Roth subtly

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20 Carlota is the Patimkins’ maid and cook, and Ron is the son.
forces the reader into preferring Aunt Gladys’ neurotic mealtime talk over the Patimkins’ emotionally barren conversations, comments:

The script form prevents Neil from making any interpretative comments. The banality of the conversation has to stand on its own, and we are immersed among a family of strangers making jokes that we don’t altogether understand. No one bothers to make Neil feel at home: all the Patimkins sound complacently wrapped up in themselves. (23)

While Raban’s commentary is cogent and discerning, the only psychological reasoning he can provide for the Patimkins’ lack of conversation is that they are tritely “wrapped up in themselves.” Through the concept of emotional distance, family systems theory provides a more psychologically accurate portrait; it also accounts for Neil’s discontent with and ultimate rejection of the family.

In *Letting Go*, the relationship between Libby and Paul Herz is a compelling example of the second pattern, dysfunction in one spouse. While Howard Eiland and others read her as hysterical, Libby, the sickly, indecisive, idle wife, is actually an emblematic underfunctioner. Therefore, in addition to appreciating Roth’s character as a member of a complex emotional dynamic instead of as a confining “label,” family systems provides a psychological framework and language that allow for an understanding of women that is not limited to seemingly sexist pathologizing. Paul, the workaholic, take-charge, over-concerned husband, is also not necessarily the tragic hero that many make him out to be, but actually a representative overfunctioner. Lilly herself seems to have a perceptive awareness of what the problem is with their relationship: “She was the nut in the family, and he was the one with his hands full” (327). Later, she attempts to convey this awareness to Paul. Though she is not wholly articulate in the
following dialogue, she seems to comprehend that it is their relationship that is contributing to her illness:

“There’s something wrong with me, Paul.”
“You’ve been sick—”
“What makes me sick?”
“Germs! Bugs! Viruses!”
“You!” she cried. (438)

Paul cannot grasp the systemic nature of their problem. He does feel, however, its pressure weighing on him, as previously described in terms of his level of self-differentiation. When he has left Libby, ostensibly to visit his dying father in the hospital, the narration reveals his anxious mindset, “This morning he had awakened . . . without first having to feel, accidentally or on purpose, anybody’s hands, feet, or hair, without having to worry first thing in the morning about somebody else’s feelings” (412). Paul here realizes his penchant for putting others before him, and completely neglecting himself, yet cannot identify it as the problem and as a symptom of his anxiety. Whereas Irving Feldman cannot account for Paul’s failures other than to say that he is a product of the reductive era of the 1950s (33), family systems allows for a more psychologically grounded interpretation, one that, ultimately, inspires more sympathy for Paul (and for Libby).

In *When She Was Good*, the Carroll family is a characteristic example of the pattern of dysfunction in one spouse, yet it is moderated by the manifestation of the third pattern, impairment of a child. Willard is undoubtedly the overfunctioner of the family, who, like Paul, feels responsible for every one else before himself. He has spent his entire life providing a home for his grown daughter and her erratic husband, and finally, in his 80s and nearing the end of his life, Willard, experiencing an inevitable burnout,
finally realizes, “Oh hell, the fellow [Whitey] is nearly fifty—what else can I even do? . . . I am not God in heaven! I did not make the world! I cannot predict the future!” (39). It is significant that Roth begins with this present-day frame before the flashback that encompasses the bulk of the novel. Before the reader bears witness to the reason why Willard is so tired, so overburdened, we first realize that he is a person who has long played the role of the tireless overfunctioner, but can no longer. Through this plagued narration, Roth reveals the hardship of the overfunctioner, despite his seeming good intentions. Family systems theory allows the reader to realize that Willard, though apparently the stable member of the family, is also part of the problem.

In addition to his overfunctioning and Berta’s corresponding underfunctioning, the Carroll family is also plagued by its reliance on the third pattern, child impairment. Willard is undoubtedly fused to his daughter Myra and has infantilized her throughout her life. Berta, playing into this triangle, as the underfunctioner, has gone along with it. Neither has forced their daughter to leave their house and be on her own. Contributing to their daughter’s dependence, they take in her alcoholic, abusive husband, as well. It is understandable, then, that Willard would feel the strain of such overboard fathering. Yet it is the only way that he knows to manage his anxiety. Rather than deal with the unhappiness in his life (as the disregarded schoolteacher) and in his marriage, he takes on the role of the steadfast caretaker. His protective role additionally allows him to (over)compensate for the dissatisfaction he feels toward his daughter and son-in-law, his guilt for putting his sister away, and his anger with his parents, whom he describes on the first page of the novel in patent overfunctioning-underfunctioning terminology: “His father was a fierce and ignorant man. . . . His mother was a hard-working woman with a
slavish nature who could never conceive of wanting anything other than what she had” (3). Unfortunately, the consequence of Willard’s focus on Myra is that his fear of losing her to Whitey pushes him to keep her close by and restrict her growth and differentiation. Yet Berta, in one of her rare articulate moments, understands that their daughter’s problem is not that she is married to an alcoholic, but that they have treated her (and Whitey) as a child. Because Myra and Whitey have been considered, and continue to be considered, incompetent, they remain incompetent. Berta insists, “He [Whitey] goes, and if she [Myra] wants to, she goes with him. I believe she is now thirty-nine years old.” To which Willard answers, “Age isn’t the question, Berta, and you know it.” But she counters, “Not to you it isn’t. You baby her. You watch over her like she was solid gold.” Willard denies it, however: “I am not babying anybody. I am trying to use my head. It is complicated, Berta.” But Berta simply responds, "It is simple, Willard” (34). And she is right. When viewed systemically, the problem is simple. Yet she is too much the underfunctioner to put her ideas into action.

Despite their cultural differences, the Portnoy’s express a similar family dynamic as that of the Carroll’s. They too form a triangle among Sophie, the overfunctioner, Jack, the underfunctioner, and Alex, the “favored” son. Most critics when reading Portnoy’s Complaint focus overly on Sophie Portnoy as the problem parent, thereby pathologizing the female character, and brand her as the cause of Alex’s masturbatory addiction, as well as Jack’s constipation. For example, Robert M. Greenberg interprets Alex’s masturbation as a rebellion to his “melodramatic” mother: “With adolescence, masturbation becomes the spearhead of Alex’s rebellion” (489). This misled application, then, leads to a seemingly logical accusation of misogyny. For example, Martha Ravits condemns
Portnoy’s Complaint: “the Jewish mother became the favorite target of the Jewish son, the parent who could be blamed for his own sense of vulnerability” (10). Because Ravits reads Roth’s novel psychoanalytically, she misses the systemic functioning of the family that indicts Jack Portnoy and his underfunctioning just as much as it does Sophie and her overfunctioning. What becomes critically clear here is that family systems provides an alternative to Freud’s and many other major psychoanalytic thinkers’ undeniable targeting of women as the source of their children’s problems. As so much attention has been paid to this family, I will dedicate most of my discussion in this section to it.

Since so few critics have discussed Jack Portnoy, I will begin with my analysis of him and his role as the underfunctioner. Despite his seeming obsessional, narcissistic mindset, Alex, at times, can be extremely insightful into the systemic functioning of his family. After recounting his mother’s fused connection with him, he humorously explains: “And how did my father take all this? He drank—of course, not whiskey like a goy, but mineral oil and milk of magnesia; and chewed on Ex-Lax, and ate All-Bran morning and night. . . . He suffered—did he suffer!—from constipation” (4-5). Instead of being addicted to alcohol (or to any number of other “traditional” triangles), Jack is addicted to his constipation medication. His constipation, in itself, is a reasonable symptom of his underfunctioning status, as underfunctioners often express their anxiety through physical malady. Roth clearly makes the association between his father’s anxiety and his physical illness when he explains that the reason he is constipated is “because ownership of his intestinal tract is in the hands of the firm of Worry, Fear & Frustration” (26).
In another instance when his mother is using her intense, overfunctioning strategy to get her son to eat his vegetables, most critics again put the blame on Sophie. However, Alex, thinking more systemically, does not fall into such a one-dimensional line of thinking. He explains: “So my mother sits down in a chair beside me with a long bread knife in her hand. It is made of stainless steel, and has little sawlike teeth. Which do I want to be, weak or strong, a man or a mouse?” (16). While it is easy to read his mother as conniving and manipulative and driven to castration, Alex then insightfully asks: “And why doesn’t my father stop her?” (17). It is this notion, that his father could very well stop her, stand up for himself (if he had a high enough level of differentiation of self), but that he doesn’t, that allows Roth to present a family that does not function according to the Oedipal myth, but rather as one deeply embedded within the constructs of the nuclear family emotional system. However, by employing an obvious image of castration, Roth is additionally able to mock the psychoanalytic diagnosis.

In another scene, Alex again questions his father’s ability to function “like a man.” In a hilarious, yet somewhat disturbing moment of Freudian satire, when Alex, as a young boy, is watching his mother put on her stockings, he confesses:

I look away not for me but for the sake of that poor man, my father! Yet what preference does Father really have? If there in the living room their grown-up little boy were to tumble all at once onto the rug with his mommy, what would Daddy do? Pour a bucket of boiling water on the raging, maddened couple? Would he draw his knife—or would he go off to the other room and watch television until they were finished? (46)

The reader is left to assume the latter. Roth, unlike his critics, is willing to understand the more complex functioning of the family system and realize that one’s problems are never

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21 By “man,” I do not think that Roth is necessarily connoting the traditionally “masculine” qualities of the male sex, but rather or additionally, something more like “adult.” Alex is here frustrated with his father’s inability to stand up for himself the way a grown, mature, differentiated person should.
attributable to just one member or to cross-gendered attraction within the family. It is also important to realize that Roth’s purpose here is not necessarily to criticize the family for its dysfunction, but rather to illustrate the actually very common ways that families behave to manage anxiety, yet end in dysfunction.

But of course, Jack is not the only dysfunctional member of the family. His underfunctioning is a reciprocal response to Sophie’s overfunctioning, which is closely related to her fusion with her son. By overly focusing on Alex, she sacrifices everything for him, while feeling sanctified in so doing. When she senses that Alex is rejecting her, she feels exploited (of course, it is she who puts herself in the position vulnerable for exploitation). As Alex points out, “It was my mother who could accomplish anything, who herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good” (11). Both Rodgers (92) and Berman (245) cleverly point out the irony presented when Alex complains about his mother while using language very similar to her own; however, family systems provides an additional psychological explanation for such a linguistic feat. In attempting to explain Roth’s technique, Berman writes:

Portnoy becomes his own Jewish mother. The irony is crucial. Portnoy criticizes his seductive overprotective mother for overwhelming her docile son; but the son, now a grown man, has internalized his mother’s values to the extent that even while rebelling against her, he cannot prevent himself from similarly overwhelming the analyst-father. (245)

Berman here chooses to blame Portnoy for the failure of his analysis. However, if anything, I believe it is more the failure of the analyst who remains quiet for so long. In any case, Berman’s skewed Oedipal reading does not provide as satisfactory an explanation for Portnoy’s complaint as does a family systems reading. That Alex’s narration is often presented as united with his mother’s voice additionally illustrates their
intense level of fusion. For example, in the following passage, Alex presents his mother’s claimed belief that she, much like Willard, surrendered her own self for the sake of her son’s. However, the point of view turns from his third person, to her first person: “Wouldn’t she give me the food out of her own mouth, don’t I know that by now?” (16). In a tour de force of ventriloquistic fusion, he adds, “Please! a child with my potential! my accomplishments! my future!–all the gifts God as lavished upon me, of beauty, of brains, am I to be allowed to think I can just starve myself to death for no good reason in the world?” (16). Here, Alex reveals the incredible strain and pressure put on him by his mother (and father through his unstated acquiescence), who, from her own point of view, believes by focusing all of her attention on her son she is raising him well. However, as my discussion of “differentiation of self” reveals, it is by focusing on one’s self, not another, that one reaches emotional maturity. And it is only by being emotionally developed in one’s self that one can truly be of help to others. Roth reveals that Sophie’s supposed sacrifice of herself for her son is actually her way of avoiding her own fears and anxieties.

Sophie wraps herself up so adamantly with her son that she (unwittingly, of course, and with the aid of her husband) prevents him from forming a highly differentiated sense of self. The very first sentence of the books reads: “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” (3). Later, in a rather grotesque Freudian parody, Alex recounts a supposedly oft-performed exchange between him and his mother, “Who is going to stay with Mommy forever for ever? Me. Who is it who goes with Mommy wherever in the whole wide world Mommy goes? Why me, of
course. *What a silly question—but don’t get me wrong, I’ll play the game!*” (46). Roth’s point here, is not that Alex is dysfunctional because his mother overly plays into the Oedipus complex, which is used more effectively as a target of parody, but because she has focused her attention on him, instead of on herself.

However, it is limiting to solely view Sophie as fused with her son, for Jack is as well; just because he is an underfunctioner does not mean he does not play into the triangle and fuse with his son to the same degree; he simply fuses in a different, though perhaps inconspicuous, way. I have already discussed Jack’s dependence on Alex when his mother is in the hospital; Alex also realizes that he intimately shares experiences with his father, much in the same way he shares his mother’s, and much in the same way that a severely emotionally disturbed child shares thoughts, feelings, and experiences with his or her parent(s). Alex confesses to Spielvogel, “To this day our [his and his father’s] destinies remain scrambled together in my imagination” (9). And it is because of this severe triangling that Portnoy is unable to develop his own self, why he is addicted to masturbation, and why he cannot establish a healthy relationship with another.

*Portnoy’s Complaint* offers one other example of the close-knit operation of the family system, that of the Nimkin’s, whose son kills himself. This family offers an indicative example of the “impairment of one child” model through the acute triangling of parents with their child. While the Nimkin’s and Alex’s parents themselves cannot comprehend the reason why a young Jewish boy would commit suicide, Alex can more perceptively grasp the systemic functioning of a disturbed family. He understands that an individual is not “sick” because of his genes, or because he is “disturbed,” but rather because the members of a family, in an attempt to manage anxiety, often will overly
focus on one individual in order to displace their own worries, thereby contributing to the dysfunction of that individual. Alex describes Mrs. Nimkin weeping in their kitchen. She asks, “Why? Why? Why did he do this to us?” To which he responds, “Hear? Not what might we have done to him, oh no, never that—why did he do this to us? To us! Who would have given our arms and legs to make him happy and a famous concert pianist into the bargain!” (97). Again, while family members may claim to have the child’s best interest at heart, they are more likely contributing to the child’s anxiety—to the point of addiction, schizophrenia, or even suicide.

In *My Life as a Man*, the relationship between Peter and Maureen is most evidently the first emotional pattern: marital conflict. Because they do not have any children, they do not have direct access to a third person with whom to triangle. (This does not mean, however, that they do not triangle with other people and/or things.) Through angry and violent interaction, both Peter and Maureen consistently put the blame of their relationship’s failures on the other. When Peter narrates, Roth often capitalizes or italicizes his letters, uses many exclamation points, and includes excessive amounts of obscenities. Shortly before Maureen tricks Peter into thinking she is pregnant and they marry, he tries to kick her out of the apartment, telling her she should sleep at her own place, when the following exchange ensues:

“My own place isn’t a ‘place,’ as you so blithely put it! You wouldn’t sleep there for half an hour.”
“Where’s the typewriter?” [She had stolen his typewriter and pawned it.]
“The typewriter is a thing, damn it, an inanimate object! What about me?” and leaping from the chair, she charged, swinging her pocketbook like a shillelagh.
“CLIP ME WITH THAT, MAUREEN, AND I’LL KILL YOU!”
“Do it!” was her reply. (184)
While many critics have again read Roth’s ugly depiction of Maureen as more evidence of his misogyny, they fail to realize that he does not portray the male character, one who greatly resembles Roth himself, in the most honorable of lights either. In this one example, he is seen threatening his girlfriend, and soon to be wife, with murder. And later in the novel, he nearly follows through by beating her, and then, finally, rejoices in her accidental death. While it is clear that Peter and Roth himself do not look highly on women like Maureen, his criticism against men and men like himself points to a deeper understanding of the systemic functioning of people in relationships that cannot be resolved by making just one person responsible. Perhaps part of the reason why critics have overlooked Roth’s equally critical treatment of men in his fiction is because his male protagonists possess so many similarities to Roth himself. While Roth has adamantly denied that his male protagonists are perfectly analogous counterparts to himself, and while much of his later fiction, such as *Operation Shylock* (1993), works enthusiastically to disallow such readings, critics often seem reluctant to admit that just because Roth’s characters seem to resemble Roth himself does not mean that they are always the heroes.

**Family Projection Process**

“Family Projection Process,” the fourth interlocking concept of Bowen family systems theory, borrows the term “projection” from Freud, who used it in order to “designate the fantasied expulsion of unwanted impulses: that which could not be experienced as in the self was experienced as located in others, external to the self” (Mitchell 101). However, Bowen’s conception of projection is more contextual than Freud’s. For Bowen, projection occurs when individuals cannot accept their fears, regrets, and anxieties, which they then transmit to a willing other. For example, by
triangling within the third emotional pattern of impairment in a child, parents project their anxieties about, let’s say, being failures onto their child, but under the guise of protection. If a father feels as if he has not succeeded in life in the way that he was meant to, then he may focus all of his attention on his daughter, constantly pressing to make sure she does not fail, and thereby putting an enormous amount of pressure on her. Kerr defines projection as “the primary way parents transmit their emotional problems to a child. . . . The parents’ fears and perceptions so shape the child’s development and behavior that he grows to embody their fears and perceptions” (19). In another example, if parents feel that their son has low self-esteem (most likely because they themselves are lacking in self), they then repeatedly praise and compliment him. Ultimately, then, instead of the child gaining self-confidence, he only develops a self that is wholly dependent on his parents’ esteem. To complicate the process of projection, parents will often contradict their words with their actions, telling their child to be independent, but still treating him or her like a baby. Identifying the parents’ paradoxical, and therefore harmful, communication with their child, Bowen determines that, “the child’s life course is one in which he tries the best he can to remain the [parent’s] baby and at the very same time to become a mature adult” (61) – ultimately, an impossible feat.

In When She Was Good, Whitey, of all people, reveals an apparent understanding of the systemic functioning of projection – one that clearly accounts for his alcoholism. He explains, “Somehow you start thinking you’re a failure, and that there’s nothing to do about it, and so the next thing you know there is nothing you are doing about it, except failing some more. Drinking, and losing jobs, and getting jobs, and drinking, and losing them. . . . It’s a vicious cycle” (28). While he does not come out and say it, Whitey does
realize that he has learned from somewhere, i.e. from his parents, that he is bound to be a failure. And though he does not necessarily realize it, the cycle that he is describing also accounts for why his own parents most likely made him feel like a failure: because they did as well.

In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth clearly illustrates the projection from Alex’s parents that is evidently contributing to his masturbatory addiction. Very early on, Sophie boasts of Alex, “He doesn’t even have to open a book—‘A’ in everything. Albert Einstein the Second!” (4). Obviously, the expectations for her young son are nearly impossible, yet they suggest that Sophie, as an evidently intelligent housewife who has not had a career, is struggling with her own sense of failure. And it is not only Sophie who has impossible expectations for her son. Jack also greatly desires that Alex be well-learned and brilliant; however, when he begins formulating ideas of his own, ones that contradict Jack’s, his own sense of insignificance is inflamed, not having had the opportunity to go to high school or college. When Alex is wearing Levis on Rosh Hashanah, they get into a heated debate over the existence of God. In response to Alex’s claim that there is no God, Jack scoffs, “That’s brilliant. I’m glad I didn’t get to high school if that’s how brilliant it makes you” (62). Later, he adds, “A’s in school, but in life he’s as ignorant as the day he was born” (63). Though he’s arguing with just a fourteen-year-old boy, Jack cannot take the idea of his son having ideas divergent from his own. At the end of the scene, he cries and “carries himself to the kitchen table, his head sunk forward and his body doubled over, as though he has just taken a hand grenade in his stomach” (63). Instead of allowing his son to think for himself, maybe even to engage in thoughtful discussion, Jack is obviously triggered by his son’s “intellectual”
thoughts, and, through his enraged, pitiful response, projects his feelings of insecurity at not having been educated. In turn, Alex embodies his parents’ own insecurities; while he may be brilliant in school, he is a failure in life.

In *My Life as a Man*, specifically in the Tarnopol story, “Salad Days,” Mr. Zuckerman has a similar triggered response to his son’s “superior” ideas. It is clear from this scene, when the narrator recalls Nathan’s decision to drop out of the Jewish fraternity, that Mr. Zuckerman, the storeowner, is projecting his feelings of inferiority onto his son: “Tell me, Nathan, how do you quit something you don’t even belong to yet? How can you be so god-damn superior to something when you don’t even know what it’s like to belong to something yet?” (13). The stress on “belonging” implies that Mr. Zuckerman is hypersensitive about never belonging to anything himself. In response to Nathan’s views, he seethes, “you are right, if I’m getting the idea, and the rest of the world is wrong. Is that it, Nathan, you are the new god around here, and the rest of the world can just go to hell!” (13). Neither Mr. Zuckerman nor Mr. Portnoy can accept the fact that their young sons may have attitudes different from theirs, not necessarily because what they are doing is “wrong,” but because it challenges their (deficient) intellectual faculties.

**Multigenerational Transmission Process**

The fifth interlocking concept, the multigenerational transmission process, allows for a systemic reading that extends beyond the nuclear family and into the extended family. Referring back to differentiation of self, Kerr explains, “small differences in the levels of differentiation between parents and their offspring and between the members of a sibling group lead over many generations to marked differences in differentiation among the members of a multigenerational family” (27). Basically, it functions as a
domino effect. Due to the nuclear family emotional patterns by which each family operates, one child will probably develop a little more “self” than the other, on whom the parents overly focus: “Therefore, if one sibling’s level of ‘self’ is higher and another sibling’s level of self is lower than that of the parents, one sibling’s marriage is more differentiated and the other sibling’s marriage is less differentiated than the parents’ marriage” (27). A natural biological balance ensues, and, over time, one line of the family becomes “progressively less differentiated” (28) and one progressively more. The less differentiated family line, once it joins with that of another (recalling that individuals marry those with equal levels of self-differentiation), becomes progressively emotionally dysfunctional. Therefore, “the roots of the most severe human problems as well as of the highest levels of human adaptation are generations deep” (28). Hall similarly explains:

Family interaction tends to crystallize in particular patterns through time, and these patterns are frequently repeated in several subsequent generations. When sufficient intergenerational data about a family are available, the degree of persistence in certain patterns of behavior or the intensity of system reactions to a disruption of established patterns of behavior and dependency can be estimated fairly accurately. (16)

This infinitely layered process accounts for the incredible intricacy that goes into discovering a family’s emotional patterns and, in so doing, making an effort to change them. Additionally, it makes it impossible to ascribe blame for dysfunctional behavior. Because Roth usually focuses on just one nuclear family at a given time in his novels, it is more difficult to identify moments when he seems to be expressing a similar notion about the generational process of anxiety transmission. In Letting Go, however, he does seem to be expressing the complexity of one’s emotional development, or as Tony Tanner describes it “the psychologically crippling effects of being brought up in the family net, or trap” (311). Describing the formation of his personality, Gabe comments,
“I am, for good or bad, in a few ways like my father, and so have never been the same person alone that I am with people. . . . If I am my father’s child, I am my mother’s too. I cannot trace out exactly the influences, nor deal in any scientific way with the chromosomes passed on to me” (5). While the language is a bit elusive, it does seem that Gabe recognizes the complicated effects that contribute to one’s emotional and psychological makeup. He finally realizes, after reading his mother’s posthumous letter, that his relationship with his parents was not as unambiguous as he once thought. He recalls:

I had never even been willing to believe that my mother had treated my father badly, until she had gone ahead and told me so [in her posthumous letter]. Much as I loved him, he had seemed to me, while she still lived, unworthy of him. And that is a strange thing to have happen to you—to feel yourself, after death, turning on a person you have always cherished. (11)

During his mother’s lifetime, Gabe always considered his mother to be the perfect parent (the overfunctioner) and his father the imperfect, needy parent (the underfunctioner). Describing his relationship with his parents, he writes, “I was pulled and tugged between these two somewhat terrorized people—a woman who gripped at life with taste and reason and a powerful self-control, and a man who preferred the strange forces to grip him” (45). Yet it takes not only his mother’s death, but also a barefaced confession to expose him to the reality that his mother contributed just as readily to the downfalls of her marriage as did his father. As Gabe puts it, “Death upset everything” (45).

I have already discussed how the Carroll family in *When She Was Good* effects the development of their daughter, Myra; however, over the course of the generations, it also contributes to Lucy’s psychological identity, as well as to her death. While Willard and Berta do have a reasonably healthy relationship, they rely on the nuclear family
emotional patterns of overfunctioning-underfunctioning reciprocity and impairment of a child (Myra) through triangling to contain their anxiety. Especially due to the latter, Myra’s differentiation of self becomes substantially lower than her parents. And with the lowly differentiated Whitey, Myra gives birth to Lucy, whose differentiation of self is so low that she finally ends her own life. Bowen likewise recognized that family lines with low differentiations of self do tend to eventually die out, whether because of their members’ suicidal tendencies, addictions, and/or physical illnesses.

In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Alex is able to understand that his parents did not develop their anxieties in a vacuum, nor is he solely a victim of a “Jewish joke.” Rather, he asks, “Who filled these parents of mine with such a fearful sense of life?” (35). He recognizes that mental illness does not emerge from within a “sick” psyche, but rather from without, as a product of the complex emotional system of generations of anxious families.

**Emotional Cutoff**

Emotional cutoff, the sixth interlocking concept, is the driving force of the fourth nuclear family emotional pattern, emotional distance. Kerr defines it as “people managing their unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, and other family members by reducing or totally cutting off emotional contact with them” (33). In order to deter their anxiety, many individuals will choose to cutoff from a significant person in their relational field. While they may claim that such issues as money, divorce, or religion are the source of the cutoff, the underlying push comes from the low differentiation of the family (or societal) members (Gilbert 62). People who cutoff in their families of origin are more prone to doing so within the workplace, friendships, and intimate relationships. Additionally, because people who cutoff tend to be involved in
smaller systems of people, the few relationships they do retain are extremely intense, and therefore volatile (62). Interestingly enough, America has sometimes been referred to as a “nation of cutoffs” because it was “settled largely by immigrants” (61). Much research has been done to prove that those who have distanced themselves from significant relationships tend to suffer from depression, alcoholism, and/or other serious mental or physical illnesses. People who then work to restore those relationships often show much improvement in their health. In order to remedy cutoff, Gilbert advises:

The pattern must be recognized. Often a cutoff person indulges in lesser forms of cutoff on a regular basis. Distancing maneuvers may be repeated many times in a given day. When people become familiar with their own patterns, they are in a position to recognize the anxiety that lies beneath the patterned behavior. (64)

It is imperative that individuals pay close attention to their daily functioning in order to come to terms with the overriding system that may be working to assuage anxiety in the short-run, but seriously injure one’s mental and/or physical health in the long-run.

In *Letting Go*, Roth seems very eager to explore the frequency and depth of emotional cutoff. Because of supposedly religious differences, both the Herz and the DeWitt family have cutoff from their children. However, as Bowen asserts, emotional cutoff often occurs because of problems more deeply rooted than those of religious difference. In the rare glimpses we get of Paul’s parents, we hear of his youth as one of great intensity; his parents had far-reaching hopes for their brilliant son, much like the Portnoys and Tarnopols, and when he “lets them down” by marrying a Gentile, their projected expectations are crushed. The only way they can even conceive to deal with their anxieties is to cutoff. And though Paul pretends as if he does not care that his parents had emotionally abandoned him, and even seems not to be bothered by the impending death of his father, it is clear that the scar runs deep, driving him even to be
violent with Libby. When she confronts him about going to see his dying father, he
smacks her and “roars,” “I’ve got feelings! . . . I’ve got feelings that tell me he could live
without me, so he can die without me too!” (410). It is one of the rare emotional
outbursts that Paul experiences over the course of the novel because it is a pain that is
kept so very deeply buried most of the time.

In When She Was Good, the only way that Lucy can deal with her guilt for
having called the police on her father is by emotional cutoff. And Whitey, because of his
extreme shame, can only do the same. Readers witness the devastating effects of their
failed relationship through the endless troubles Lucy experiences as a young adult.

Because he reads When She Was Good from a psychoanalytic point of view, Robert Alter
overlooks the devastating emotional dynamics by which the Carroll family lives.

Criticizing Roth’s characters as flat and evil, he writes:

A novelist should be at least capable of seeing all around his characters, even to
their attractive sides; to put this another way, he has to imagine at least the
possibility of change and development in his personages. The characters of When
She Was Good, on the other hand, are fixed in one anguished posture which we
are made to see again and again—the men forever set in weak-need knavery
around the central figure of the woman who, palpably victimized by them,
unpityingly makes them her victims. (45)

What Alter misses in this rather misogynistic critique is Roth’s actually very accurate
portrayal of a family caught in an emotionally distraught system of anxiety management:
emotional cutoff. And it is also quite unfair of him to claim that there is no change or
development in Roth’s characters when the entire novel plots Lucy’s slowly spiraling
psychological decline from a young, forlorn child to a grown, suicidal woman. Roth
gives a lucid and sad description of the mindset of one having cutoff emotionally from a
loved one:
Lucy herself never gave her father a moment’s thought, not if she could help it; when his name was mentioned, she simply tuned out. His welfare was of no more concern to her than hers had been to him; where he was now, what he was now, that was his business—and his doing too. She might have been the one to lock that door, but what had sent him running was his own shame and cowardice. (221)

Unfortunately, Lucy cannot see the part she played in her father’s abandonment—not that she did anything wrong, only that her actions led to very specific, and very unfortunate reactions on the part of her father, who, likewise, cannot grasp his own contributions to his child’s emotional dysfunction.

**Sibling Position**

Sibling position, the seventh interlocking concept, differs from the others in that the bulk of its material comes not from Bowen’s research but from that of psychologist Walter Toman. While Bowen did observe the impact of sibling position on behavior, he found “Toman’s work so thorough and consistent with his ideas that he incorporated it into his theory” (Kerr 37). Of Bowen theory, Toman himself writes that it is one of the “earliest practical and teachable forms of psychotherapeutic treatment of families in need and distress” (xiv). Toman’s prevailing thesis is that an individual’s sibling position within his or her family and the mix of genders in that configuration predictably impart identifying characteristics onto his or her emotional and mental development (all other things being equal) (Gilbert 86). However, Bowen complicated Toman’s work by pointing out that at higher levels of self-differentiation, “sibling position becomes less and less relevant to forming and maintaining successful relationships” (87). In other words, the more differentiated one’s self, the less “typical” one’s personality as an “oldest son” or “youngest daughter.”
Roth explores a similar development of personality type in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Brenda is the typical middle child, influenced both by her position as a younger sister of a brother (Ron) and as an older sister of a sister (Julie). The more influential position is that of younger sister of a brother, because it is the one that Brenda occupied for ten or so years before Julie was born. Therefore, much of her personality as a youngest was already established by the time Julie came along. Brenda exhibits such characteristic “younger sister of a brother” traits as being “a bit spoiled [and] extravagant” (Gilbert 204), which the reader learns with the first sentence of the novel; Brenda asks a person she does not know (Neil) to hold her glasses while she dives into the pool. The reader also learns that Brenda is spoiled from her mother, who is emotionally triggered by the attention she gets from other men, especially Mr. Patimkin. Seemingly out of nowhere, Mrs. Patimkin yells at her daughter, “You ought to learn what a day’s work means,” to which Brenda asks, “Why?” Her mother answers, “Why? Because you’re lazy . . . and you think the world owes you a living” (64-65). The typical younger sister of a brother is also “attractive and charming to men and they instinctively seek her company” (Gilbert 204). The reader learns of these qualities in Brenda very early on; Neil calls to ask her out on a date just after obeying her request to hold her glasses. (She does not even know his name).

However, as the middle child, Brenda is also an older sister of a sister, displaying such typical qualities as a “caretaker and order-giver” (Gilbert 202). She often calls Julie “sweetheart” and looks after her. A couple times over the course of the novel, Brenda supports Julie and wants to hear her ideas. When Julie wants to talk about how much birds eat at the dinner table (in response to Mr. Patimkin’s accusation that Neil eats like a
bird), Brenda asks to hear more. Mrs. Patimkin, however, threatened by this other “mother,” responds, “Brenda, why do you encourage her?” (23) and the conversation is ended. Another common attribute of the older sister of a sister is that she is devoted to a male authority figure, usually her father (Gilbert 202), from whom she gains her own sense of authority over other men (in this case, Neil). Mr. Patimkin and Brenda’s close relationship is therefore one typical of an older sister of a sister, and explains much of the reason for why her mother (supposedly) hates her.

In *Letting Go*, Gabe insightfully comments on the two personalities of Martha’s children. He repeatedly realizes that Cynthia, the older one, imitates her mother in her “overfunctioning” mode. According to Toman, an older sister of a brother “is independent and strong. She enjoys taking care of men and does not ask for much in return” (Gilbert 204). Gabe recognizes these qualities in Cynthia, for instance, when he is looking after the children. Even though he is the babysitter, Cynthia takes on the mothering role. Gabe recounts, “She [Cynthia] turned to face Mark. ‘I think you had better go to sleep too.’ With her hands on her hips, she was, in both posture and tone, as much like Martha as she could manage to be” (276). In another scene, when Cynthia is setting the dinner table, Roth makes great effort to convey her overfunctioning, even perfectionist, qualities:

> With a painstaking concern for symmetry, the child was aligning and realigning the dinner plates between their appropriately squadoned knives, forks, and spoons. She might just as well have been defusing a bomb, for the expression on her face. As she circled the table, she smoothed out the tiniest wrinkles in the white cloth. (306)

Mark, on the other hand, as the younger sibling, is constantly underfunctioning and needing to be taken care of. According to Toman, the younger brother of a sister
“without trying, attracts solicitation, care, and services. . . He [is] valued and privileged by his parents” (Gilbert 201). Characters repeatedly point out that Mark seems younger than he actually is (and that Cynthia seems older). While Cynthia is precocious, Mark is evidently slow to develop because someone is always taking care of him. When Cynthia is showing Mark a picture of one of their father’s paintings, Martha’s commentary illustrates the positioning dynamic of the Reagenhart children:

“Where’s Daddy’s picture?” [Mark asks.]
“Here, dope. Can’t you see?” . . .
“Who?” — Markie was asking.
“This—” Cynthia said. “It’s Daddy’s picture!”
Mark didn’t get it; his jaw only hung lower and lower. Would he ever learn to read? Lately she had begun to wonder if he might not be retarded. Should she take him in for tests? (204)

As the younger brother of a sister, and within an obviously high-tension familial environment, Mark takes on the position of the extremely spoiled son whose character cannot fully develop, and who therefore will function (or had he lived, would have functioned) all his life as an underfunctioner.

The concept of sibling position additionally allows for a more nuanced and satisfying understanding of Lucy’s character in *When She Was Good*. From a psychoanalytic point of view, Jonathan Baumbach comes close to understanding the complex dynamics going on in the Carroll family, but is unable to understand the reasons why. He first writes, “She [Lucy] is provoked—her mother too attached to her own father to be wife to her husband—to act in her mother’s place, to become a kind of surrogate wife to her father” (47). This reading, obviously influenced by the concept of Oedipal desire, falls a bit short in its claim that Lucy’s mother is too attached to her father. In reality, Willard plays into this fusion just as readily as Myra does. Additionally, nowhere
is there evidence that Lucy is functioning as a surrogate wife to her father. If anything, she acts as a surrogate mother to both her parents when she “calls the police when her father, in a drunken rage, hurts her mother” and when she “bolts the door against her father, locking him out of the house” (47). The only explanation Baumbach can give for Lucy’s apparently “wifely” position is that the other characters “refuse to act on their feelings. She acts for her mother, for her grandfather, confusing their desires with her own” (47). While I do agree that Lucy acts for others, I do not believe it is because she confuses their desires with her own. Instead, it is to contain the high level of anxiety in the household.

Lucy, the only child, is forced to act as an oldest, since her parents are both underfunctioners. She therefore feels overly responsible for saving her mother from the abusive Whitey. While her own mother is the typical female only child, one who tends to “believe that [her] parents owe [her] help and support long into [her] adult years” (Gilbert 205), Lucy does not have the “luxury” of occupying her assigned family position. Her adopted position is one that eventually puts great strain on such a young woman and hinders her development. It also explains why she turns to the Catholic Church early in her life. Though she is critical of Roth’s portrayal of Lucy, Mary Allen is nonetheless seemingly aware of the systemic dynamic that urges Lucy to find an “overfunctioner” to take care of her: “Lucy turns to Catholicism, but not for solace or spiritual guidance, instead for the authoritarianism which her parents do not provide, the one thing she equates with parenthood” (144). I would add here that authoritarianism is not the one

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22 See my discussion of *When She Was Good* under “Nuclear Family Emotional System.”

23 This is probably a bit of an overstatement.
thing that she equates with parenthood, but rather the primary quality that her parents have lacked throughout her life. When Willard, the only overfunctioner besides Lucy, tries to tell her that she should respect and love Myra and Whitey because they are her parents, she angrily remarks, “Then why don’t they act like parents!” (23). Her complaint is perfectly justified, and I believe that Roth here wants his reader to sympathize with Lucy’s position as one of almost complete isolation and unwarranted responsibility.

In *My Life as a Man*, Peter Tarnopol, as the youngest son, obviously feels spoiled and needs the reassurance of another: hence his relationships with women “below him” who depend on him and respect him for his mind. Because he has both an older brother and an older sister, Peter occupies the position of “younger brother of a sister” and “younger brother of a brother.” As a younger brother of a sister, Peter assumes such customary traits as one who, like Mark, “without trying, attracts solicitation, care, and services from women around him” (Gilbert 200). It is also clear that “he was valued and privileged by his parents,” and has retained “that position as he goes through life in his relationships at work and in the family” (201). Peter himself reveals an awareness of the reverent treatment he received as a child:

> I certainly did expect deferential treatment of a kind, and from my mother I got it. As I remember it, I could sweet-talk that lady into just about anything during my high-school years, without too much effort get her to agree to the fundamental soundness of my position on just about every issue arising out of my blooming sense of prerogatives; in fact, it was with demonstrable delight (as I recalled it) that she acquiesced to the young prince whom she had been leading all these years toward the throne. (214)

When discussing his relationship with Susan, Peter, perhaps unconsciously, closely associates it with that of his relationship with his mother through the repeated image of
the throne: “at Susan’s I needed no more defense than a king upon his throne. Where else could I go to be so revered?” (164). Here, Roth makes the keen systemic insight that individuals (especially with a lower level of self-differentiation) often will seek relationships with others that match the relationships they had with one of their parents. However, Roth also recognizes the dangers of such a relationship. Peter admits that the more he plays the authoritarian role of “father” toward Susan in order to gain her respect and deference, the more dysfunctional the relationship becomes: “the more paternal or patriarchal my influence upon Susan, the more remote the prospect of the orgasm” (165).

In this case, Roth associates emotional happiness with physical happiness – an accurate observation when one considers that if one is anxious within one’s relationship, the chance for successful intimacy is equally remote.

Through Peter, Roth understands the patterned dynamic of a youngest son seeking intimate relationships with women who treat him as his mother did. While the following passage is a bit lengthy, I include it here due to its striking revelation of the emotional system that drives one kind of person to seek a relationship with another kind of person:

Outwardly, of course, Maureen and Susan couldn’t have been more dissimilar, nor could either have had a stronger antipathy for the “type” she took the other to be. However, what drew them together as women—which is to say, what drew me to them, for that is the subject here—was that in her own extreme and vivid way, each of these antipathetic originals demonstrated that sense of defenselessness and vulnerability [as exhibited by his mother] that has come to be a mark of their sex and is often at the core of their relations to men. That I came to be bound to Maureen by my helplessness does not mean that either of us ever really stopped envisioning her as the helpless victim and myself as the victimizer who had only to desist in his brutishness for everything to be put right and sexual justice to be done. . . . Right down to the end, I still saw Maureen, and she saw herself, as the damsel in distress. . . . Maureen was actually more of a Susan than Susan was, and to herself no less than to me. (172)
That Peter recognizes that he is just as caught up in the web of “helplessness” as both Maureen and Susan are confirms that Roth is unwilling to view problems in relationships as the fault of one party, but instead as understandable derivatives of a dysfunctional emotional system. Interestingly, Roth, a younger son, likewise recognizes such a pattern in his own life. When discussing the disastrous marriage to his first wife, whom he calls Josie in *The Facts*, he explains the dynamic of the relationship in much similar terms as he uses to describe that of Peter and Maureen. He admits that he was attracted to her because “she was that world’s *victim*, a dispossessed refugee. . . . She was adrift” (82). Even in his nonfiction, then, Roth is again willing to identify the systemic interaction of human relationships.

As a “younger brother of a brother,” Peter Tarnopol is also “obstinate, daring, bold, and complaining” (Gilbert 200). Throughout the novel, Roth portrays Peter in such a light, especially in his often violent, yet also plaintive, association with Maureen. It is not surprising that he goes to his oldest brother’s house to have his mental breakdown. Whereas Peter cannot handle Maureen’s impudent treatment of him, Morris can defend his brother against Maureen and is “not intimidated”(123) by her. Peter narrates, “At the end of two days of hiding behind his bulk, I told Moe I was ‘myself’ again” (123). Therefore, though Peter at times appears to be audacious and overly confident, when a woman does not treat him with the deference he feels he deserves (having been treated that way by his parents), he deteriorates into a whimpering child in need of nurturing.

One more quality of the younger brother of a brother is that he is “not goal- or content-oriented, but if not tied to routine work, he may accomplish great and unusual things, especially in scientific, technical, or artistic fields” (Gilbert 200). That Roth
characterizes Peter as a younger brother of a brother (and that Roth himself is a younger brother of a brother), can possibly account for his creative abilities as a fiction writer.

**Societal Emotional Process**

Bowen died in the midst of discovering all of the implications of the eighth and final interlocking concept, societal emotional process. This concept extends beyond the locale of the family and applies to the greater family of society-at-large. Explaining the sociological contributions of Bowen systems, Hall writes, “As any group can be considered an emotional system, Bowen’s family theory can be applied to behavior in other social settings” (19). Somewhat surprisingly, Hermione Lee (perhaps influenced by Roth?) makes a similar recognition: “Political coercion and obstruction are public versions of family, marital and psychological struggles” (62). Kerr further explains:

*Societal emotional process* describes how the emotional system governs behavior on a societal level, promoting both progressive and regressive periods in a society. Cultural forces are important in how a society functions but are insufficient for explaining the ebb and flow in how well societies adapt to the challenges that face them. (*One Family’s* 41)

Therefore Bowen family systems reveals that society actually functions in a predictable, patterned way in response to its levels of anxiety. When the global community is severely stressed by such pressures as overpopulation, war, economic depression, and environmental catastrophe, it can fall into a regression. Rather than acting on principle with the long-term view in mind, people in a regression (much like an anxious family) only work to relieve the anxiety of the moment, thereby sacrificing their values and use of reason (Kerr 42). Bowen believes that our society fell into a regression shortly after World War II as it struggled with its moral and physical havoc and the “sweeping advances in technology” (Bowen 271) of the mid-20th-century. Bowen adds, “man’s
increasing anxiety is a product of population explosion, the disappearing of new habitable land to colonize” (272). He continues,

Man has always used ‘getting away from the crowd’ as a way of allaying anxiety and stabilizing his adjustment. The thesis here is that man became increasingly aware of the disappearance of frontiers, more through his ‘instinctual radar’ than by logical thinking. Man has become increasingly aware that his world is limited in size through rapid communication and television, and rapid travel. (272)

Paradoxically, as technology continues to enhance our world, we suffer from more and more claustrophobia (which perhaps spurred our journeying into outer space). What is additionally ironic is that despite the apparent security following the victory of World War II – with our advanced technology, longer lifespan, and stable economic growth – Western culture still fell into a regression (Bowen 272). While science had matured beyond “cause and effect thinking” and profited greatly from its more systematic understanding, our own behaviors were and still are lagging behind, governed by emotion and fear. Bowen contends that human beings’ intellectual system is a function of our “newly added cerebral cortex, which was developed last in his [human’s] evolution and which is the main difference between man and the lower forms of life” (198). Perhaps because it is our newest, and therefore most advanced, tool for making decisions, we are not yet fully adept at using it. However, the more we exercise it by becoming aware of the influential and animalistic emotional system that governs us all, the more healthy and functional we will become.

The symptoms of a societal regression include: “a growth of crime and violence, an increasing divorce rate, a more litigious attitude, a greater polarization between racial groups, less principled decision-making by leaders, the drug abuse epidemic, an increase in bankruptcy, and a focus on rights over responsibilities” (Kerr 42). While our society is
aware of these symptoms, we have not made successful efforts toward lifting them. Instead of examining our own individual selves and determining how each of us is contributing to the regression, our culture has instead chosen to focus on the next generation and its problems: “Using the child’s problems as justification for increasing the focus on them is precisely what the child-focused parents have been doing all along. An increase in the problems young people are having is part of an emotional process in society as a whole” (Kerr 43). Again, we are more eager to look outside the system than within to make a difference. Because Bowen died in the midst of his work on this concept, many of his followers have continued his research. At the Georgetown Family Center, scholars and clinicians are currently exploring the wide-ranging possibilities for employing family systems theory as a sociological paradigm in addition to a psychological one. So far, the findings have been promising, revealing strong evidence that even such large social groupings as countries tend to relate to others reciprocally.

In Goodbye, Columbus, Roth seems to be aware of the human need to “spread its wings” in order to deal with anxiety and “prosper.” He describes the evolving migration of immigrant families from the inner-city toward the suburbs:

Years ago, at the time of the great immigration, it [inner-city Newark] had been the Jewish section, and still one could see the little fish stores, the kosher delicatessens, the Turkish baths, where my grandparents had shopped and bathed at the beginning of the century. . . . [Now] on the streets, instead of Yiddish, one heard the shots of Negro children playing at Willie Mays with a broom handle and half a rubber ball. The neighborhood had changed: the old Jews like my grandparents had struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, towards the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains, until they had reached the crest and started down the other side, pouring into Gentile territory as the Scotch-Irish had poured through the Cumberland Gap. Now, in fact, the Negroes were making the same migration, following the steps of the Jews, and those who remained in the Third Ward lived the most squalid of lives and dreamed in their fetid mattresses of the piny smell of Georgia nights. (90)
This is just one example of the many “side-bar” commentaries on the state of society that parallels the emotional state of the story’s characters. Roth thus illustrates his shared notion with Bowen that the same processes that affect the functioning of the family correspondingly affect those of society as a whole.

Similarly, in *When She Was Good*, Roth metonymizes the turmoil of the family to represent those of society as a whole. He employs many elements of the melodrama to depict the harrowing psychological deterioration of Lucy and the Carroll family in general. However, he is additionally depicting the deterioration of the Mid-Western American culture of the 1950s – one that is so cold and bitter, it can drive an entire family to ruin. Rodgers points out, “Roth’s story is not just a case study of one aberrant member of American society; it is also a fable designed to show a fundamental weakness in the character of the larger society of which Lucy is a part” (69). And Roth agrees:

It has always seemed to me that though we are, to be sure, not a nation of Lucy Nelson’s, there is a strong American inclination to respond to life like Lucy Nelson—an inclination to reduce the complexities and mysteries of living to the most simple-minded and childish issues of right and wrong. (qtd. in Rodgers 69)

Therefore Roth recognizes the correlations between what emotional disturbance in a family can drive an individual to do, and what emotional disturbance in a society can drive its people to do.

Because my study has focused on those novels in which Roth has dedicated his literary pursuit to the familial environment, it becomes more difficult to locate many obvious examples of what Bowen termed the societal emotional process in his fiction, although *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel* as satires would be more appropriate objects of analysis. In any case, perhaps the best example of Roth’s awareness of the
societal emotional process is one that he experienced in real life. Ever since the 1959 publication of “The Defender of the Faith” in *The New Yorker*, Roth has been accused of anti-Semitism, Jewish self-hatred, and “airing the Jews’ dirty laundry.” On the Jewish reaction to *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth responds:

> Informing. There was the charge so many of the correspondents had made, even when they did not want to make it openly to me, or to themselves. I had informed on the Jews. I had told the Gentiles what apparently it would otherwise have been possible to keep secret from them; that the perils of human nature afflict the members of our minority. (*Reading* 204)

Because of the precarious social place that Jews occupy as history’s perpetual scapegoat (especially in the decades following the Holocaust), Roth acknowledges that writing about a Jew can be read as writing about all Jews, which only motivates further persecution. Roth therefore experienced first-hand the intense level of anxiety that the American Jewish population was suffering after World War II, and still to this day. Yet Roth remained true to his beliefs and values and did not recant his fictional purpose.

**Conclusion**

Family systems theory, while a relatively new development in the psychological field, offers much potential for doing literary criticism beyond the psychoanalytic framework, if not in conjunction with it. By simply applying this alternate theory to the work of a writer who has long been misunderstood (by some) as an anti-Semite, a misogynist, a writer of the ego, or even a bad writer, I hope that I have made it clear that Roth’s early novels, while undoubtedly imperfect, should not be as flagrantly dismissed as they often have been. His purpose, in many cases, is to explore the psychological functioning of the family unit in language and imagery that (often parodically) depart from the traditional psychoanalytic model. Therefore Murray Bowen’s theory and Philip Roth’s fiction, if interpreted carefully, allow us readers to understand both ourselves and
the literary characters we read as members of a family, not necessarily suffering from penis envy, or the name of the father, or a weak ego, but from living within the strained patterns of an anxious family and societal system. And because of the attention family systems pays to individuals as both unique selves as well as products of their environment, it provides an awareness that is more akin to cultural criticism and race and gender studies than might initially be believed. There is obviously much more work to be done in this field, more genres and eras of literature to be studied, and I hope that this essay is just the beginning of a greater proliferation of the benefits of family systems theory not only for the psychological field, but also the literary.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah was born in Mobile, Alabama to two Canadian parents. No wonder she’s been confused ever since. At a young age, though, she realized that books gave her the ability to understand the world – if only a little – in ways that also made her laugh, cry, tremble with fear (she’s been known to throw scary books across the room), and fall in love. In fourth grade, she decided that her career would have something to do with books, though exactly what has yet to be determined. In high school, she was known as that nerd who always had a book in front of her face. At Georgetown, she came to realize her passion for 20th-century literature and also acquired a new one: religion. She suspected that the world’s religions were somehow doing something very similar to its great authors. At the University of Florida, she picked up one more interest: psychology. In her future studies, she hopes to discover how the study of the mind and the study of the soul might cooperatively function as paradoxical, yet enlightening paradigms for literary inquiry.