

PROTEAN LIFE-STYLE OF THE PROTAGONIST
IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH-AMERICAN FICTION

by

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(1)

CERTIFICATE

I am satisfied that the thesis presented by Mr. Mukesh Williams is worthy of consideration for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and is a record of the original bonafide research work carried out by him under my guidance and supervision and that the results contained in it have not been submitted in part or full to any other university or institute for the award of any degree/diploma. I certify that he has pursued the prescribed course of research.



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CLARIFICATION

I have used American spellings in this dissertation and retained the original spellings in the quotations.

I have followed the conventions of the MLA Style Sheet (2nd edition).

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Abstract

In this dissertation, an attempt has been made to identify the salient traits of the Jewish protagonist in the novels of Chaim Potok, Joseph Heller, E.L. Doctorow, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. The typical protagonist is a Jew and an intellectual, who, under the impact of Wasp American urban culture, has grown skeptical of the Jewish tradition and values. He realizes the marginality of his existence and suffers from a feeling of meaninglessness: consequently, he falls back upon himself for structuring disparate experiences.

To overcome these feelings he seeks compensation in sex but because of his consumeristic mentality it does not provide complete felicity. In the crises that ensue he seeks emotional sustenance from the family or friends but he is reluctant to reciprocate their goodwill because he avoids long-term commitments. Sometimes, he also resorts to self-mockery. At this stage, some of these protagonists tend to become operational men, without acquiring the full maturity that goes with this stage. The operational stage is marked by a recognition of his protean character, an attitude of self-criticism, an acute awareness of his environment, an acceptance of disorder and flux in life, and a sense of humility.

The first chapter includes a survey of the critical literature on these authors, and it defines the protean man and the operational man. Chapters II to VI deal with individual authors. All the selected novelists are contemporaries but they have been arranged in such a way that the process of crystallization of the protean protagonist and his transition to the operational stage becomes clear. Although all their major novels have been referred to, one or two novels by each author have been chosen for detailed analysis. Besides analysing the protagonists, an attempt has been made to evaluate other literary aspects of these novels. The last chapter brings all the threads together.

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