A Rothian Analysis of Walt Disney’s Pastoral Symphony

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A Rothian Analysis of Walt Disney’s *Pastoral Symphony*

Philip Roth, a primary author among scholars of Jewish-American literature, uses his writing to comment on the struggles faced by the Jewish community in America. Many of Roth’s novels explore the importance of Jewish identity and livelihood among the Jewish communities of Newark, New Jersey. However, Roth’s work does not exclude the non-Jewish from identifying or parallelizing their artistry with Roth’s themes and characters. A prime example is Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940). While many of *Fantasia’s* animations are nonsensical and do not follow a structured storyline, “Pastoral Symphony” is one of the few that provides the audience with a definite tale. This particular featurette correlates with Philip Roth’s writing. The use of Roth’s work to analyze *Pastoral Symphony* provides unique insights into the themes of Disney’s animation. The mythological creatures and characters featured in *Fantasia*, when viewed through the Rothian lens, represent themes, such as Jewish Identity and Jewish Persecution, and certain characters found in Roth’s publications.

*Pastoral Symphony* opens with the introduction of Greek mythological creatures (pegasi and centaurs). Individually, these creatures represent different characters and themes of Roth’s writings; however, when observed as a whole community, these beings represent the once peaceful Jewish nations. Specifically, the featured pegasi represent the ideal Jewish family and Rothian archetypes of the Jewish mother and father.

The Pegasus family properly models the ideal Jewish family. In Roth’s novels and short stories, the families are rarely portrayed as the pegasi. While the heads of the household may wish for such obedience and peaceful cooperation in their children, Roth points out that in a realistic environment the family structure is often corrupted. A prime example of the corrupted ideal Jewish family is found in Roth’s *The Counterlife*. In this novel, Roth, via Nathan
Zuckerman, explores the different possibilities for the lives of Nathan and his brother Henry. Scholarly author Matthew Wilson explains the fallacy of an idolized family structure. The ideal Jewish family cannot exist strife and rebellion are present. For the ideal family structure to exist, all members of the family must respect their assigned roles. The Pegasus family is a perfect model for this family structure; however, in their blind perfection, they are susceptible to lifetime disaster.

In *Pastoral Symphony*, the pegasus father represents the Rothian paternal archetype. The pegasus father guards the family, keeps them safe, but neglects to show true affection to the children. Despite the lacking affection, he serves his children through wisdom and strength. The pegasi are only one aspect of *Pastoral Symphony* that equate to Rothian archetypes. The centaurs, creatures of human and horse, represent the ideology of the ideal Jew, the socioeconomic status of Jews in Rothian literature, and provide a direct relation Seymore “Swede” Levov of *American Pastoral*.

Unlike the pegasi, the centaurs are waited upon by the other members of the mythological community. The centaurette (female centaurs) use the help from others to beautify themselves for the men. The centaurs featured in *Pastoral Symphony* are the crème a la crème of Rothian Jewry. However, Disney’s original animation featured an African-inspired centaur, Sunflower, who served as a handmaiden to the centaurette and was later cut from late-twentieth-century revisions. The idea of the ideal Jew is not properly understood without Sunflower’s presence. In Roth’s first novel, *Goodbye, Columbus*, the African American community is viewed as lesser, or subservient, to the Jewish community.

Neil Klugman, the protagonist of *Goodbye, Columbus* spends most of the novel scorned by his lacking social status in Newark; however, he redeems his feelings through the exploitation
of an African American patron of the local library where Neil works. He uses this child to feel better about himself, and, by giving him special treatment, attempts to rectify his moral and socioeconomic dilemmas.

Philip Roth faces criticism in the area of racism and treatment of his African American characters; however, Roth’s portrayal of the Judeo-African relationship is historically accurate. During World War II, news reports from the southern states gave great sympathy to the Jewish struggle in Europe against Hitler. Ironically, many of the southern authors did not recognize their hypocrisy in rebuking Hitlerism while maintaining the Jim Crow Laws. Dan J. Puckett and Christopher E. Koy discuss the southern prejudice and social status of Jews in America during this time. While individual statements from a southern newspaper do not accurately depict the view on Jewishness as a whole, the support of the European Jews created a sense of belonging and acceptance in America. The editorial support and influx of Jewish immigrants built the Jewish communities, and, subsequently, further squandered the African American people.

While the centaurs as a whole represent the ideal Jew and the prolific social status of the Jewish community, a particular centaur pair directly relates to Seymour “Swede” Levov (American Pastoral). After the centaur courting ceremony, there are two centaurs left alone, without a mate. These centaurs are despondent and refuse to act for themselves. They eventually need the intervention of the cherubs to find happiness. These two centaurs, though they find happiness in the idyllic pastoral of Pastoral Symphony, are models for the indecisive Levov. Swede Levov constantly laments for the ill fate that befalls him throughout American Pastoral. While other characters, such as Jerry; Merry, his daughter; and Dawn, his wife, try to shake him into understanding, he cannot grasp the concept of self-actualization. Swede Levov refuses to accept his inactions as reasonable explanations for the turmoil in his life. For the centaurs in
Pastoral Symphony, happiness is the work of other creatures. Life, unlike the idyllic pastoral, refuses to reward the lukewarm, the stagnate.

The primary half of Pastoral Symphony focuses on the peaceful life of the mythological creatures; however, this ends when persecution from Zeus and Vulcan arrives. Under the Rothian lens, Zeus and Vulcan represent Charles Lindbergh (The Plot Against America). While serving as President, Lindbergh nationalizes anti-Semitism and starts relocating Jewish communities. The characters featured in The Plot Against America intrinsically know that if they move, disaster will occur. The characters of Zeus and Vulcan use their power to persecute the mythological creatures, the Jews, for personal gain and entertainment. The gods’ actions against the idyllic pastoral community is a direct attack on the Jewish community and, according to Debra Shostak, denies legitimacy to the “other” (Shostak).

The mythological creatures, lost in the storm of persecution, are sent into a Diaspora that mimics the reality of Jewish history. The “home is broken” (Shih), the idyllic pastoral is destroyed. The Jewish community and the mythological creatures are forced to live and accept this new life of separation. They live in the Diaspora. However, the Diaspora need not be a source of tribulation for the Jewish community. Roberta Rosenberg focuses on a new definition for the Diasporic Jew. In her article, Rosenberg features the work of Maeera Shreiber in which morphemes of “Diaspora” translate to “to sow” (113). This reunion of Judaism into a beautiful new definition is seen at the end of Pastoral Symphony. After searching for one another, they mythical creatures find their community once more and bask in the glory of the idyllic pastoral.

The final scene of Pastoral Symphony and the final section of the Rothian analysis pertains to the importance of religion to the Jewish people and the mythological figures of the pastoral. Pastoral Symphony’s ending relates to common archetypes and symbols found in
western Abrahamic religions. The centaur with the horn represents the character of the Archangel Gabriel. The second depiction of Jewish tradition is the rainbow. The rainbow stands as God’s symbol of peace and covenant with the Jewish people. The ideals and beliefs of the Jewish people were crucial to the creation of Roth’s novels, and without them, Roth would never have been able to create such extensive artwork. The Jewish people and the mythological creatures of the idyllic pastoral recognize the covenant and the peace that is guaranteed them for enduring persecution and tribulation.

Disney’s *Pastoral Symphony* directly correlates with many of the ideologies, characters, and themes featured in Roth’s literary works. As a producer of Jewish-American literature, and as an active critic on various social constructs, Roth provides his audience and literary scholars with the resources necessary to recognize Jewish struggles and ideals in all works of art. Artwork is fluid, malleable. The very nature of art allows it to brush against other masterpieces to create something new. Just as Disney created a visualization of music composition, Roth creates the opportunity for scholars to analyze art, politics, and life through his ideologies.

*Pastoral Symphony* depicts a beautiful ancient Greek landscape that, when observed through the Rothian lens, provides insight into the fallacies of Jewish idolatry. The ideal Jewish family and the ideal Jew do not exist; however, the threat of persecution is real. By observing a secular work of art through a Rothian and Jewish perspective, audiences and scholars may learn from the past and the social critiques of active artists. The analysis of *Pastoral Symphony* is not just an exercise in academic ability, but is an opportunity to recognize the injustices, ideologies, and archetypes that still exist in the modern world.


Shih, Chung-ling. “No Place to Fix Identity: Philip Roth’s American Pastoral.” The Explicator,