

Self-deconstruction and Alienation—An Existential Reading of *The Anatomy Lesson*

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Abstract: *The Anatomy Lesson* is the third book of the “Zuckerman Trilogy” of Philip Roth. The protagonist Nathan Zuckerman, tortured by the untraceable pain, tries to give up the identity of being a writer and illusioned to be a doctor. Basic on careful reading, with Sartre’s Existentialism and Foucault’s theory of madness, this paper tries to analyze Zuckerman’s living state, living conditions and free choices. Zuckerman’s self-deconstruction and alienation reveals modern people’s loneliness and pain and the influence of Existentialism on Philip Roth.

Keywords: Pain; Self-deconstruction; Revolt; Alienation; Existentialism

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1. Introduction

Philip Roth (1933-2018) is one of the most famous contemporary Jewish writers in the United States. He has worked hard all his life, wrote a large number of far-reaching novels, won almost all literary awards in the United States except the Nobel Prize in Literature, and was once known as the “living myth” of American literary circles. *The Anatomy Lesson* is the third book of the “Zuckerman Trilogy”. The protagonist of the story, Nathan Zuckerman, after became famous, his parents died, and his wife and lover left one after another. After that, he suffers from an unknown disease. The whole body is painful. The doctors still have no improvement after diagnosis and treatment, and suspect that the pain comes from Zuckerman imagination because of guilt.

Some scholars believe that *The Human Stain* echoes Sartre’s existentialism in all aspects, from character images to plot design, from narrative techniques to language. After reading *The Anatomy Lesson* carefully, you will find that Sartre’s two core concepts “being is nothingness” and “others are hell” are fully reflected here. The protagonist Zuckerman and the women around him are suffering from all kinds of well-known and unknown pains in the absurd modern society, living in a way of self-deconstruction and self-indulgence, feeling the “unbearable lightness of life”.

2. Self-Deconstruction

In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth uses Zuckerman to show readers the social outlook of life in a witty and humorous way. As Duban says, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, highly specific reference to existentialism exists in Zuckerman’s reference to *Waiting for Godot* to characterize the writer’s block^[1]. Anatomy is not only a compulsory course in medical school, but also a demonstration course for Roth modern people. Under his pen, writers, doctors and all kinds of women have revealed their own natures, using kind of near-real fiction to prove how reasonable existential thinking is.

After Nathan Zuckerman became famous with the book *Carnovsky*, he gained a lot of money and popularity, but as this novel exposes some of the vices and abuses of the Jewish nation, people equate Zuckerman with Carnovsky, and naturally regarded the plot of the story as a real event happening around Zuckerman. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, people point to him and his family. His mother was threatened with intimidation, and his father called him a “bastard” before dying and died with hatred to him. His mother eventually passed away due to cancer, and his younger brother’s family cut off contact with him. Since then, Zuckerman has truly become a lonely man. Zuckerman is happy with the writer’s loneliness. He has repeatedly emphasized that only by being alone can he create literary works that “engulf and purify life”^[2], just like a fanatic. Loneliness means freedom and nothingness. The exile of the self is the result of loneliness. It is precisely because of this lonely existence that the pain is like a shadow.

Roth once said in an interview that literary creators should give the pain itself due attention and sufficient recognition^[3]. Writers should pay attention to the damage caused by disease and pain to human rationality, self-esteem and maturity---the impact and wear on human character and temperament. Roth once said: “When I was writing *The Anatomy Lesson*, I thought of many novels about disease and pain^[4].” But here, pain is a phenomenon, but also a kind of appearance, symbolizing the state of human existence. Prometheus, who is bound, suffers for the sake of mankind. What do you have in common with Zuckerman? The suffering of Prometheus was the punishment given by Zeus. Zuckerman’s suffering came from his well-known awareness of disclosing the evil habits of the Jews and the guilt of his parents and family members being harassed and frightened. Although Prometheus was finally rescued by Hercules, who was looking for the golden apple, he would always wear an iron ring tied to a stone. Zuckerman would always be scolded by the

Jews and the pain of losing his parents and brothers.

In Primitive freedom is primitive subjective consciousness. Freedom can only be obtained through choice. This is a matter of subjective initiative. People face various choices throughout their lives, until death. However, the choice is subject to the dual constraints of objective conditions and subjective consciousness, so it may not be realized. But Sartre emphasized free choice itself, not the result of choice. Personal existence is a kind of nothingness, existence is only a possibility. People are always dissatisfied with their own situation, and then ignore the present and continue to pursue the future, that is, nothingness. In this absurd world, conflicts and crimes between people lead to various diseases and sufferings. The world is cruel, and human beings are miserable. The future is full of uncertainty, and existence is an adventure. Everyone is the other of others. People try to change this opposition, but they cannot achieve it.

3. The alienation of the self

Art comes from life, but it is higher than life. In “Zuckerman Trilogy”, not only the readers, but even Zuckerman himself often confuse art with life, although Zuckerman declared that “life and art are completely different” (39). In this absurd and real world, Zuckerman drifted away from his original intentions, and “self-imprisoned” because of his writing, becoming an alien among the Jews. Zuckerman was not a lonely writer from the beginning. In his early days, he was as pious and innocent as other emerging writers. He regards Lonov, Appel and others as his spiritual and creative godfather. After constantly discovering the gloom behind the noble writers in the eyes of these Jews, Zuckerman became cold and selfish under the torment of jealousy and hatred from his own people. The death of his mother destroyed his last trace of reason and kindness. Since then, communication with others is no longer simple. Associating with women is only for sex, and dealing with others is only anger and deception. The whole world is the world of the other. Ross once said in an interview, “Everyone’s work is very hard. ---Writing protects me and keeps me away from greater threats”^[5].

Zuckerman came from a Jewish family in Newark. His father was an expert in foot diseases, his mother took care of the family diligently, and his younger brother was also a doctor. After Zuckerman went to university at the age of 20 and ran away from home, after he published his first work “Higher Education”, his relationship with his father was getting worse and worse. The mother was regarded as Mrs. Carnovsky, and she was often harassed and humiliated because of having a shameless son. The seriously ill father finally died, and the close brother cut off contact with him. All four wives left Zuckerman, and the lovers broke up because they couldn’t bear his indifference and boring life.

With the popularity of *Carnovsky*, Zuckerman was attacked in many ways. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, he was stalked and threatened by Pepler, who suffers from hypothesis, accused of stealing other people’s stories, and even blackmailed. In the Jewish community where his parents lived, Zuckerman himself was taken for granted as Carnovsky himself, and his family members were all taken into seats and pointed out. Appel, who once admired his work publicly denounced Zuckerman as an anti-Semite. Zuckerman aspires to become a six-foot tall and arduous American, but for a non-Christian Jew, the American society has been marginalized, let alone such a fanatical “nerd”. His anger cannot be vented through words, but only by vilifying his career, falsely claiming that he is the founder of a pornographic magazine “Lickety Split”, and presuming that he is a wife swap club that saves women from ignorance and poverty. Boss. He cleverly combined his mockery of the sanctimonious America and the hypocrite Appel, and vented his dissatisfaction with this so-called democratic and free society in a crazy state. Zuckerman, who has been tortured by pain, is like Samsa in Kafka’s pen, carrying a heavy shell of atonement, and is struggling in this world full of hatred and jealousy. He drags this increasingly aging body, facing the almost lost creative inspiration and the betrayal of the family, fully exposing the society, family and himself to the readers, dissecting himself, and even this absurd society. In Rose’s writings, you come and go with Goethe, Beckett, and Sartre, allowing readers to keep thinking in the process of reading novels, gaining knowledge in reading, and interpreting life in thinking.

4. Conclusion

Pain is temporary and eternal. The world is real and cruel. Human nature is kind and ugly. Zuckerman has been fleeing all his life, fleeing the fetters of his family, his responsibilities to his wives, his sense of Jewish nationality and mission, and fleeing pain and torture. In Sartre’s view, subjectivity is subject. It is human subjectivity that gives us the ability to choose our own path in life. The nature of who we are or what we are is not determined by social standards, but by ourselves. In the exile and dissolution of self, Zuckerman deeply understands the emptiness of existence, walks lonely in confusion, sees reality in fiction, and regenerates in pain.

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