

# Identity Transplantation: A Psychoanalysis of “Puppetness” in the Novel of *Sabbath’s Theater*

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## Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the lower class in America, the novel *Sabbath’s Theater*, which can be interpreted as a “memory’s museum of earthly blight” (Roth, 1996, p. 353), unveils a panorama of how an innocent and ingenuous boy degenerates into a dissolute and lascivious puppeteer. Mickey Sabbath, the protagonist of the novel, is described as a decadent libertine whose lustful cupidity does not subdue in the wake of his ongoing senility. Working as a puppeteer, Sabbath shrewdly turns his fingers into a pragmatic tool of subsistence and more sardonically, a licentious hook of sexuality. He epitomizes every desperate and listless loser who languishes in a dilemma between life and death. However, the law of nature has no mercy for the defeated. Like “one of billions who has grown old, ugly and embittered” (Roth, 1996, p. 143), Sabbath, at the age of sixty four, is confronted with a battery of crises—he becomes “wifeless, mistressless, penniless, vocationless and homeless” (Roth, 1996, p. 142). Enveloped in desperation and fatalism, Sabbath sets foot upon a journey toward the ultimate destination of death, during which he recalls his “motherless” childhood, his disillusioned adolescence, his youthful debauchery in whorehouses, and his irrevocable self-abandonment to puppets and women. Philip Roth compares puppetry into a “faultlessly rendered duet” (Roth, 1996, p. 438), shedding light on the cohesive juxtaposition of two divergent identities in a puppet show. This research focuses on why and how Mickey Sabbath’s outrageous abuse of identity transplantation becomes a scourge of his perversion. The concept of “puppetness” is introduced in this paper to account for the quasi-human attributes of puppets and the trinity relationship among puppets, puppeteers, and audiences. The distinctive power of puppets in emotional appeal makes them a soul-stirring agent that can mediate through performers and audiences. Psychoanalysis is expected to be an optimal theory to approach to “puppetness” in this empathetic scenario.

**Keywords:** puppetness, psychoanalysis, Philip Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater*

## 1. Introduction

Matthew Arnold (Note 1) once wrote that a great masterpiece usually appears when the “great power of the man and the great power of the moment come together” (Allot & Super, 1986, p. 31). The novel *Sabbath’s Theater*, which has been put into oblivion for long, should not be expunged from Philip Roth’s long list of weighty masterpieces. The book came into publicity in 1995 and earned Roth the third National Book Award. Literary critics are divided in their attitudes toward this novel. *The Guardian* acclaims *Sabbath’s Theater* as “Roth’s best novel so far”. Al Alvarez, editor of *The Times*, appreciates the novel as “the book of the year and even of the decade” (Roth, 1996, p. 1). However, Carmen Callil lashes out vehemently at this novel, and she declares it to be a stain on Roth’s reputation as a professional writer.

In contrast to the writer’s previous works, the novel *Sabbath’s Theater* focuses upon a string of antithetical themes which are threatening to rip apart the American way of life; such as life and death, wife and mistress, fidelity and betrayal, debauchery and asceticism, monogamy and promiscuity, moral sublimation and sexual gratification. This novel breaks away from the distinct division of chapters in structure and goes deep into the inner world of the American people at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Philip Roth’s adeptness in the field of supernatural dialogues, abstruse flashbacks, desultory narration, and psychic movements infuses *Sabbath’s Theater* with an inclination toward “stream of consciousness”.

In *Sabbath’s Theater*, Philip Roth maintains his pungent pique against a range of sensitive topics such as sexism, racism, consumerism, Communism, Fascism, feminism, and homosexual marriage. For instance, the writer

reveals an ingrained antipathy against the Japanese nationality when he recounts the history of WWII, coinciding with a widespread anxiety over the imminent intrusion of Japan's economy in western society during the 1990s.

The title of *Sabbath's Theater*, which combines Jewishness with religious allusions, conveys Philip Roth's idiosyncratic concerns about the way how his books are entitled. The word "Sabbath", as is known to all, is a ritual day on which all the Jews must refrain from working. It is written in Exodus 20:11, the Bible: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. The Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." In Exodus 31:13, it is once more stressed that the Sabbath day, hallowed as part of the Ten Commandments, would be a sealed covenant between the Lord and the Jewish race for generations to come. "Sabbath", evocative of the end of life, corresponds to the protagonist's lunatic pursuit of suicide. The word "theater" can be interpreted from three layers. Firstly, the "theater" indicates that the protagonist depends on puppetry for a living. Secondly, the writer has an intention to associate Sabbath's personal impasse with the misfortunes which Shakespearean characters suffer from, so the "theater" can be understood as a hint to Shakespearean plays; such as *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. Thirdly, the "theater" is synonymous with something surreal and whimsical.

## 2. Literature Review

Puppets first appeared as a personified substitute for human actors during 3,000 BCE. The advent of puppetry broadens the dimensions of performing arts and more importantly, reflects a trend to a role swap in stage plays. In this sense, puppetry epitomizes men's imitative instinct in a way of visual confession. Carlo Collodi (Note 2) tells an interesting story about an enlivened puppet in *The adventures of Pinocchio*. This fairy tale marks a breakthrough in the literary portrait of puppets as real people.

The quasi-human attributes of puppets elicits a question of whether puppetry should be considered as an art form of typecast. Puppetness, or simply referred to as "puppet traits", was originally used to specify an anti-realist theory of drama. Though there has been no consensus on the definition of puppetness, not a few artists are interested in making the use of this concept to demolish the vanity of human actors and subvert the inferiority of inanimate objects in stage plays. Sergei Obraztsov (Note 3), a renowned Russian puppeteer, is among the first group of theorists to introduce and study the concept of "kukolnost" (literally translated as "the state of puppetness" in English). He uses "kukolnost" as a weapon to challenge the prevalence of realism among his contemporary playwrights in Communist Russia. Heinrich von Kleist (Note 4) makes a mockery of the narcissistic hypocrisy of human species and disillusion human actors' superiority over puppets in his essay entitled "On the Marionette Theater" (Blumenthal, 2005, p. 52). Kleist's attempt to defend the independent status of puppets coincides with Sabbath's internal monologue in the novel: "With puppets you never had to banish the actor from the role. There was nothing false or artificial about puppets, nor were they 'metaphors' for human beings" (Roth, 1996, p. 21). Edward Gordon Craig (Note 5) is also active in speaking for the substitution of puppets for human actors in theatrical performances. He articulates that puppets are "the only one actor who has the soul of the dramatic poet, and who has ever served as the true and loyal interpreter of the poet" (Bell, 2000, p. 29). Moreover, he thinks that the use of disguises such as puppets and masks on stage can effectively arouse the profuse empathy of audiences.

Compared with Roth's other published best-sellers, *Sabbath's Theater* is largely obscured because of some contentious issues. Book reviewers and critics in the U.S. respond differently to this novel. William H. Pritchard, a book reviewer, publishes a book review of *Sabbath's Theater* in *The New York Times* issued on September 10, 1995. He argues that the novel well responds to Philip Roth's ideal vision of "half-imaginary existence". Garth Risk Hallberg, editor of *The Millions*, associates *Sabbath's Theater* with Roth's another book *American Pastoral*. He points out that Levov and Sabbath, namely the protagonists of these two novels, are exactly "obverse sides of the same coin." Hallberg's comments seem to indicate that the two novels approach to the paradox of human nature in an antithetical way. Michiko Kakutani (Note 6) speaks of her antipathy toward *Sabbath's Theater* in *The New York Times* issued on August 22, 1995. In her review, Kakutani makes a comparison between *Sabbath's Theater* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. She insists that "Sabbath's plodding pursuit of defiance lends 'Sabbath's Theater a static and claustrophobic air, resulting in a novel that is sour instead of manic, nasty instead of funny, lugubrious instead of liberating."

In 1996, *Sabbath's Theater* was first introduced to China by Mr. Feng Yidai (Note 7), but a relatively nonchalant reception from Chinese readers impeded its nationwide promotion. It was once reported that Mr. Zhu Shida from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was making preparation for the translation of *Sabbath's Theater*. Yet, it is disappointing that there has been no concrete news about the publication of its Chinese version till now.

In 2009, Zhu Jie from Fudan University made an in-depth exploration of *Sabbath's Theater* in her master-degree thesis entitled *Everyman's Complaint* (Note 8). Her thesis, centering on the themes of self-identity and

life-pursuit, discusses on how Philip Roth reconciles his identity dilemma in real life with his protagonist's identity crisis in the novel.

### 3. Sabbath's Puppetized Performance on the Stage of Life

#### 3.1 *The Shadow of Childhood: No Maternal Love*

Mickey Sabbath, whose Jewish grandparents immigrate to the United States in anticipation of a better-off life, is not so fortunate as Norman and Lincoln (Sabbath's two wealthy Jewish friends and sponsors). Despite their assiduous effort, the Sabbaths are "still a poor family by American standards" (Roth, 1996, p. 14). The economic inferiority of the Sabbaths dissipates the stereotyped aura of dignity, decency, and wealth encircling the American Jewish community.

The way that a son interacts with his mother is analogous to a power wrestling game between puppeteers and puppets. A puppet's attempt to detach itself from its self-thwarted abnegation is strongly evocative of a son's susceptibility to Oedipus complex. Sabbath is deeply aware that "nothing in the world could be stronger than the bond between mother and the little boy" (Roth, 1996, p. 46), but he fails to benefit from this strongest bond because he finds it difficult to get along with his own mother. Morty, Sabbath's elder brother, is innocently reduced to an impediment to a better understanding between the mother and Sabbath.

As the only financial pillar of the family, Sam Sabbath (Sabbath's father) seems to be so taciturn and compliant that he gives in to his wife in every aspect. By contrast, Yetta Sabbath (Sabbath's mother) becomes a substitute for her husband's role. She devotes wholeheartedly to the subsistence of the whole family. Sabbath's father deifies his wife as an omnipotent, "she had eyes in the back of her head and two pairs of hands" (Roth, 1996, p. 14). The mother is described to be so obsessed with "folding things, straightening things, arranging things, stacking things, packing things, sorting things, opening things, separating things, building things" (Roth, 1996, p. 14) that she is symptomatic of obsessive-compulsive disorder (Note 9). She has no "Sabbath day" in her life, and thus fails to keep in line with her family name.

When the mother is alive, Sabbath is emotionally detached from his family because he feels that he is not as well treated as his elder brother. For instance, the mother would send her younger son to buy her rolls every morning so that she could make sandwiches for her elder son. Despite a bad skin and the clumsiness in getting along with girls, Morty is treasured within the family due to his unparalleled talent for athletics and his proficiency with the work of repairing and mending. Morty, five years senior to Mickey Sabbath, is much more sedulous and conscientious. He well fulfills his different roles in the family by helping his father with the "egg-and-butter business", supporting his mother to do all kinds of housework, and protecting his younger brother from latent dangers. The mother, who always seems to neglect how her younger son feels, boasts that Morty is "the kindest brother in the world" (Roth, 1996, p. 15). What seems more biting to Sabbath, Morty's good reputation is not limited to his own family. After the Pearl Harbor attack, Morty chooses to join the army voluntarily instead of waiting to be conscripted, and then he succeeds in becoming a heroic pilot of B-25 after an arduous training.

On hearing that Morty is killed in the war, Sabbath feels that "he was finished" (Roth, 1996, p. 298). The loss of Morty even undermines Sabbath's libidinous lechery so that he suffers from "his stupor for a year" (Roth, 1996, p. 300). When people uninformed of Morty's death continue to inquire about his news, Sabbath seems to be exasperated. His grumbling grievance about Morty's popularity betrays his plausible affection for his elder brother:

There was a gym teacher, a big, strong guy who had wanted Morty to give up track and train as a gymnast. "How is your brother?" he would ask me. "Fine," I'd say. I couldn't say it. Other teachers, his shop teacher, who always gave him A's: "How's your brother doing?" "Fine." (Roth, 1996, p. 300)

Sabbath's attempt to perpetuate the lie that Morty is still alive discloses his insufficient self-confidence. The death of Morty does not promote the reconciliation between Sabbath and his mother, but it provides Sabbath with an opportunity to redefine his status in the family. Sabbath comes to realize that the mother hardly cares for her younger son when she is alive. During her last few years, the mother becomes so mentally delirious that she even fails to distinguish Mickey from Morty.

After the mother passes away, her ghost frequently alternates between a puppeteer and a puppet in Sabbath's consciousness. Though the deceased mother maintains her omnipresent "puppeteer's power" (Roth, 1996, p. 30), Sabbath identifies her as "another of his puppets, his last puppet, an invisible marionette flying around on strings, cast in the role not of guarding angel but of the departed spirit making ready to ferry him to his next abode" (Roth, 1996, p. 111).

### 3.2 *Ambition and Frustration: Growing Pains*

Sabbath, who claims that “nothing miserable to compare with the period between fourteen and sixteen” (Sabbath, 1996, p. 298), lives in the state of insecurity and frustration during his teenage years. His first beloved, Sonia Gindi (a Syrian Jewish girl in his class), thwarts his precocious gesture of love by threatening to ask her brothers to teach him a lesson. Morty’s death aggravates Sabbath’s feeling of being “finished”. He describes the loss of Morty as “the tragic period of his life” (Roth, 1996, p. 298). When talking with Norman, Sabbath painfully recalls his pent-up afflictions:

We were one of those families with a gold star in the window. It meant that not only was my brother dead, my mother was dead. Some days I’d actually manage to forget about him, but then I’d walk home and see the gold star. (Roth, 1996, p. 144)

When Europe was enveloped in the gloom of Fascism during the 1930s, the Jews there were forced to wear the Star of David in public places. Even though Morty is posthumously commemorated as a national martyr, Sabbath shows his antipathy to this deadly glory by describing “the house with the gold star” as a blighted house (Roth, 1996, p. 144). The way Sabbath thinks of the gold star is evocative of how the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust feel about the Star of David. This mixed feeling of self-respect and stigma drives Sabbath to keep his unhealed wound unknown to outsiders in the face of their overpowering praises of his elder brother.

“Morty’s death didn’t just break the mother, it broke the whole family” (Roth, 1996, p. 298). Sabbath and his families respond to the loss of Morty in different ways. Sabbath’s mother, who is blind to the fact that her elder son is dead, undergoes a mental disintegration and loses her incomparable enthusiasm for housework. Sabbath’s reticent father, who always tries to inhibit his emotions from being disclosed, cries out his anguish with everyone he meets. Sabbath himself perceives the death of Morty as the “loss of a part of body” (Roth, 1996, p. 298) and falls into the habit of “winding Morty’s watch every morning since it became his in 1945” (Roth, 1996, p. 147).

### 3.3 *The Temptation of Youth*

Youth is infused with vitality and aspiration. Norman, one of the few people in favor of Sabbath, expresses his admiration for Sabbath’s masculine glamour, “people can’t take eyes off Sabbath” (Roth, 1996, p. 331). Sabbath, who pays little attention to his outer appearance, is probably the least attractive male character in the novel, but not a few women succumb to his irresistible virility.

Although Sabbath concludes his youth with an obscene word “ensnarer” (Roth, 1996, p. 376) in his imaginary epitaph, he has no intention to mess up his promising life in the beginning. Sabbath’s immature aspiration is aroused by his awareness that “he has to be the strong one” (Roth, 1996, p. 289). When Morty is enlisted in the air force at the age of eighteen, Sabbath feels at one time that he has a responsibility to make up for his brother’s absence. He would help his father “with the deliveries the way Morty did”; he “would wash the floors for his mother every week” (Roth, 1996, p. 299). However, Sabbath’s rosy prospect into taking over his elder brother’s position turns out to be a failure.

Upon graduation from high school, Sabbath, who can’t help feeling that he is superfluous in the family, is well determined to shake off “his mother’s tyrannical gloom and his father’s pathetic brokenness” (Roth, 1996, p. 81). Instead of attending college, he sets off for a trip in New York with Ron Metzner (Sabbath’s childhood buddy), ushering in an unexpected intermezzo of sailing abroad. Even when working “all day as a seaman on deck” (Roth, 1996, p. 155), he dreams of becoming a ship’s officer by reading extensively prior to his surrender to debauchery.

### 3.4 *Foreignization and Self-Degeneration: Lost in New York*

New York Harbor looks like a threshold leading to the horizon of the American dream. Henry James—an American writer who spent most of his lifetime in exploring the relationship between the European continent and the North American Continent—delineates in *The American Scene* (Note 10) how the city of New York helps to renew the visions of the Jewish race: “The scene in New York bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, unmistakable, of a Jewry that had burst all bounds” (Kramer & Nesher, 2004, p. 199).

New York coordinates Sabbath’s journey to the feast of death with his ingenuous pursuit of happiness and success. At the age of seventeen, he embarks on a commercial steamer sailing from New York to Havana. The steamer takes him onto an adventurous voyage during which he becomes irreversibly perverted in the Caribbean whorehouses. When recalling those incipient years as a vagabond seaman, Sabbath finds it natural to go to sea to “receive a real education” (Roth, 1996, p. 98). He euphemistically refers to his youthful promiscuity in whorehouses as “education”, revealing his ingrained cynicism about his insipid childhood and adolescence. The libertine abuse of libido comes to a standstill after he is conscripted in the U.S. army. Thanks to the GI Bill,

Sabbath is funded to be trained in a puppet school in Rome after his military service, and then he returns to New York to start up his theatrical career as a puppeteer on Broadway (Note 11). He is thought to be “not just a newcomer with a potentially huge theatrical talent but a young adventurer robustly colliding with life” (Roth, 1996, p. 142). Disappointingly, this promising attempt made by Sabbath later proves a resurgence of his exacerbating depravity.

There are five different floors. The basement is reggae, and black people come there. The next floor is dance music, disco. Yuppies stay on the floor with the disco, people like that. And then there is techno, and then there there is more techno—music made by a machine. (Roth, 1996, p. 57)

The “different floors” and the different styles of music symbolize the hierarchical echelon of New York society and New Yorker’s disparate predilections. When she is asked about her impression upon New York, Christa (Note 12) replies, “it is hard to make friendships with Americans in New York where people want to use you in any possible way” (Roth, 1996, p. 55). The word “use”, which pertinently pinpoints the exploitative and predatory nature of New York, reflects how humanity is savagely belittled, besmirched, and disintegrated in this city.

It is in New York that Sabbath meets, falls in love with, and then loses his most beloved Nikki. After the mysterious disappearance of Nikki, Sabbath flees New York and hides himself in a remote New England town because he is suspected of murdering his first wife. Away from New York for about thirty years, Sabbath returns to this heart-broken place to attend Lincoln Gelmanthe’s funeral so that he could foresee “what death is like before he does it himself” (Roth, 1996, p. 290). Yet the farewell to Linc’s corpse is no more than a gullible subterfuge. It is Nikki that drives Sabbath to return to New York because “he could never stop thinking about the body of his first wife, her body, alive, that he might at last he shepherded to” (Roth, 1996, p. 138). Sabbath indignantly complains that New York in the 1990s “brings to perfection the art of killing the soul” (Roth, 1996, p. 102), which enhances New York’s stereotype as a dehumanizing city devoid of pity, care, and fraternity.

### 3.5 *Loneliness and Isolation: No Country for Old Men*

When confronted with an endless expanse of the waste land, Sabbath, who spends most of his lifetime with either puppets or women, is engulfed in an abysmal cocoon which stifles his crooked talent for manipulation. Before saying farewell to his puppetized life, Sabbath returns to his family graveyard to reserve an open grave for himself. He takes it for granted that death is probably the only way for him to be reunited with his deceased families, but his unctuous bargain with Crawford (the superintendent of the cemetery) over the price of a burial place reminds him that death is not as trivial as it looks:

“I would suggest that the two graves would be the best thing for you over there. You will be better off.”

“The two graves are too far away. I want to order a monument. How much?”

“It depends how much you want to say.”

“I need a coffin, buddy. One like I saw today.”

“Plain Pine. That one was four hundred. I know a guy can do the same for three fifty.” (Roth, 1996, p. 373)

Sabbath does not fully understand what bereavement really means to him until he approaches death. As a victim of marginalization, he is increasingly concerned about whether he will be properly “accommodated” after his death, and thus has to make preparation for his own interment. His confusion about the pervasive aloofness of modern society evokes him of his long-lost family attachment:

Sabbath asks, “Where do the fish go to?”

Morty says, “Nobody knows where the fish go. Once they go out to sea, who knows where they go to? ” (Roth, 1996, p. 376)

The “sea” in this melancholic conversation is a metaphor for a society characterized by isolated estrangement and apathetic nonchalance. Sabbath himself comes to realize that he is forgotten by his families the moment when he leaves his home. He describes the process of aging as the “pure, simple and self-destroying hilarity of the last roller coaster” (Roth, 1996, p. 158). The “roller coaster” is expressive of Sabbath’s uninhibited excitement about the impending denouement of his adventurous life, but this ostensible audacity is merely a perverse reflection of his ingrained disillusionment.

## 4. The Destiny of a Quasi-human Puppet

### 4.1 *A Puppet’s Revolution: The Identity Inversion*

Despite its longtime obscurity among critics and readers, *Sabbath’s Theater* published in the mid-1990s marks

Philip Roth's personal eulogy to a century of progress but a time of despair. The image of puppetry not only juxtaposes the protagonist's fragments of consciousness for dramatic effect, but also provides an antithetical perspective from which human nature is anatomized without one-sidedness. The writer makes a sarcastic remark that "manufacturing secrets, which takes care of internal peace, is mankind's leading industry" (Roth, 1996, p. 88) to satirize man's innate demerits of hypocrisy and duplicity.

The major characters in this novel epitomize those who make desperate attempt to safeguard their fragile dignity under the disguise of gullible masks. Mortified by her indecent and licentious father, Nikki encapsulates herself within a "fairy castle" which does not allow anything dirty, ugly, and obscene. Roseanna indulges herself in dreaming of a consummate matrimony. Drenka is insanely reduced to a clandestine "prostitute" because of her impotent husband. Matija is engrossed in managing his family inn to cover up his hidden disgrace of being sexually cheated. Norman has to be tolerant of his adulterous wife without vitiating his endangered reputation. Of all these characters, Mickey Sabbath is the only one who breaks off his camouflage entirely because he is so brazen and shameless that he finds it superfluous to live with masks. When performing in shows, Sabbath adheres to the pleasure principle that "the crazier and the uglier, the better" (Roth, 1996, p. 245). It is puppetry choreography that sparks up Sabbath's "contentment of being hands and a voice" (Roth, 1996, p. 245).

The duplicity of human species finds expression in the quasi-human nature of puppets and the trinity relationship among puppets, puppeteers, and audiences. Puppets in the center of this "power wrestling" game function as an empathetic agent through which puppeteers' instinct of manipulation is combined with audiences' sympathetic introspection. The malleability of puppets coincides with puppeteers' imaginative creativity, allowing human attributes an opportunity to be represented by these inanimate objects. In the midst of puppets' and puppeteers' conflicting "grope for either the words or the motions" (Roth, 1996, p. 438), the impromptu response of audiences is foregrounded as a stimulus to the derailment of puppets from where they are designed to go, turning a puppet show into an improvised shelter for the exposure of human stains.

The antithesis between puppeteers and puppets is susceptible to being understood in a condescending way. More specifically, puppets are most of the time regarded as being synonymous with slaves, substitutes, and scapegoats because they are stereotyped to be unilaterally dependent on puppeteers rather than the opposite.

#### 4.2 *Puppetry: A Quasi-human Scenario*

A puppeteer's patronizing indifference to the spontaneity of puppets becomes a prelude to his own self-abnegation. Sabbath is so desperate to shirk responsibility for his self-abandoned life by claiming that "all he is doing is to pretend to be someone else" (Roth, 1996, p. 145). The suspicion about how puppets are akin to human beings triggers off an insight into the quasi-human nature of puppetry. Puppetry, which "confuses the distinction between art and life, truth and falsity, the real and the imagined" (Pinsker, 1982, p. 18), seeks for the perfection of personification. The way a puppeteer casts puppets' roles is analogous to one's endeavor to be aligned with a specific mode of living in real life, but Sabbath strives fanatically to escape from being patterned because he thinks that "a pattern is what is printed on a piece of cloth." (Roth, 1996, p. 91). His eccentric conviction that men are not cloths catalyzes his coveted alignment with puppets. The following paragraph provides a crucial clue to Sabbath's puppetized outlook upon his distorted illusions. Sabbath, immersed in the perverted concoction of puppets' dialogues, is deprived of an ability to refrain himself from his professional habit of speaking like puppets in coping with his own predicament:

Sabbath's mother never did communicate with him, and just because she didn't he came dangerously close to believing that she was not a hallucination—if he was hallucinating, then easily enough he could hallucinate speech for her, enlarge her reality with a voice of the kind with which he used to enliven his puppets. (Roth, 1996, p. 51)

Although Sabbath would never admit to it, his hallucination empowers him to talk transcendently with the phantom of his dead mother. He pretends to be emotionally severed from his deceased mother, but the recurrence of the mother's ghost is a concrete hint to his thirst for the nourishment of maternal love. His irrational infatuation with women can be seen as his hysterical revenge to compensate for the loss of oedipal companionship since his childhood.

Apart from the rite of hallucination (Note 13), Sabbath's regular visit to Drenka's cemetery is another of his rituals to reminisce his dead mother because "he was often sure that at the edge of his vision there was something darting among the tombstones, something he believed was his mother" (Roth, 1996, p. 70). The lunatic whims about the inescapable surveillance of the dead mother implies that Sabbath can never get rid of his mother's tyrannical manipulation.

Sabbath is also symptomatic of repetition compulsion (Note 14). He resorts to some abstruse rituals to assuage his bereft estrangement and forlorn loneliness. For example, he discovers an access to his deceased elder brother by inheriting Morty's mystic power to throw things extremely far: "Morty threw the shot, so I had to. I imbued myself with him. I used to look up at the sky before I threw it and think that he was looking over me. It was a state meet. I was in fifth place" (Roth, 1996, p. 300). Sabbath's spontaneity to imitate Morty coincides with his unfettered impulse to spring onto the foreground from behind the curtain.

#### 4.3 *A Puppet's Conversation with King Lear*

As an immortal classic, *King Lear* is artfully revitalized in the novel through Sabbath's ridiculous attempt to adapt this play into a wry puppet show. In the original drama, King Lear, a father of three daughters, is subjected to an infernal retribution for his credulous susceptibility to unctuous flattery and his ignorant blindness to "a silent love".

Sabbath's travesty of *King Lear* can be regarded as a hilarious climax in his checkered career as a puppeteer. When driven to the precipitous cliff of life, Sabbath becomes awakened to the scourge of his irreparably sinful career: "He had mistaken innocent, loving, loyal Cordelia for her villainous sisters Gonreil and Regan. He'd got it as backward as old Lear" (Roth, 1996, p. 248). Sabbath's intuitive identification with King Lear circuitously discloses his remorse for his misjudgment.

On learning that King Lear is betrayed by her elder sisters, Cordelia is anything but reluctant to rescue her father from lethal crisis, but her earnest devotion to her father is rebuffed by King Lear's grumbling complaint filled with poignancy and repentance:

"How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty?"

Lear replies, "You do me wrong to take me out of the grave." (Roth, 1996, p. 301)

King Lear's cold attitude to Cordelia's steadfast devotion gives expression to his guilty self-loathing, but the status as a king and a father impels him to maintain his last decency in front of his daughter. This tragedy reminds Sabbath of how his wrongdoings scare Nikki away. They are so alike yet so divergent, making their eternal separation inevitable. It is in his soul conversation with King Lear that Sabbath seems to be reunited with his most beloved Nikki:

Nikki says, "Sir, do you know me?"

Lear says, "You are a spirit. Where did you die?"

I say, "Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight? I am mightily abused."

Nikki: "O look upon me, sir, / And hold your hand in benediction o'er me. / No, sir, you must not kneel." (Roth, 1996, p. 54)

Nikki clings to her "emotional virginity" (Roth, 1996, p. 137) until the day she disappears, driving Sabbath to visualize her as an impeccable nymph. Sabbath feels as if his hypocritical cynicism is atoned when he is thrown into the same situation as that of King Lear, whose taciturn confession interweaves with Sabbath's inhibited voice of conscience.

Sabbath asks his mother when he is merely an innocent boy, "Is being dead even worse than heading there?" This is a perennial question which has no answer at all. A few decades later, after the mother passes away, Sabbath, who fully tastes the bitterness of living, once again inquires about the feeling of death, "Is being dead just something you do the way you ran the house?" This seemingly irrelevant comparison between death and housework unravels Sabbath's uneasy suspicion about his decision to die.

Sabbath, surrounded by a constellation of the tombs of the deceased, is eventually galvanized to the apex of excitation: "In search of the graves he was growing excited. The last forty eight hours had been replete with theatrics, confusion, disappointment, adventure, but nothing with a power as primary as this" (Roth, 1996, p. 357). Sabbath's visit to his family graveyard stirs up his sense of belonging, but he is disappointed to find that there is even no spare space for him to be posthumously reunited with his families even when he decides to put an end to his life—"Dad to one side of him, Mother to the other, and, to Mother's side, Ida instead of me" (Roth, 1996, p. 359). Sabbath's last-minute epiphany about the desolation of being a dead man puts a halt to his compulsive pilgrimage to death.

## 5. Conclusions

Although a common purpose of play-acting triggers off an expedient illusion of interdependence between puppets and puppeteers, a hidden inequality in puppetry can not be alleviated if human actors insist on their

patronizing attitude to inanimate objects. Shakespeare writes in Act II, Scene Seven of his comedy *As You Like It*: “All the world is a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts.” The novel *Sabbath's Theater*, whose theme resonates with Shakespeare's insight into the omnipresence of role play, unveils a grandiose burlesque during which a paranoid puppeteer desperately squanders his vanishing arsenal of puppets without realizing that he himself is thoroughly puppetized. At the entrance to Sabbath's inglorious theater, a swarm of devilish demons and pristine angels throng earnestly to run for a last role before the finale. Driven by the delirium of “departure to a high artistic drama-search for independence in the sticks, for spiritual purity and tranquil meditation” (Roth, 1996, p. 70), Sabbath feels that his salacious passion for puppetry choreography is rekindled. Yet, he finds it no longer hopeful to make a choice about where he should be rightly positioned because there is nowhere to satiate his unfulfilled lechery. He makes a complaint about all those “invented” taboos, “puppets can fly, levitate, twirl, but only people and marionettes are confined to running and walking” (Roth, 1996, p. 56). The ingrained status of puppeteers and puppets is therefore interchanged, unfolding a hilarious parody of self-enslavement and insurrection.

Despite their natural malleability, puppets are indeed not so amenable as kites flown in the air. The moment when puppets are enlivened in the hands of puppeteers, they are instilled with a strong hope for self-identity and independence. In a puppet show, “fingers are made to move, and though their range is not enormous, when each is moving purposefully and has a distinctive voice, their power to produce their own reality can astonish people” (Roth, 1996, p. 122). The synchronous coordination between human fingers and puppets' bodies brings about an antithetical scenario characterized by the centralization of puppets and the deprivation of human actors. More specifically, puppetry builds up an empathetic passage through which the counter metamorphosis of Mickey Sabbath is reproduced in his imaginary portrait of puppets. Sabbath's failure to distinguish theatrical fantasies from stern realities coincides with the transplantation of identities from human actors to inanimate objects in puppetry. The verisimilitude of puppetry facilitates a quasi-human ambience where an “other self” is personified, transplanted, and resurrected in a reciprocal way. “Puppetness”, which is in essence an embodiment of a puppet's insurrection against plausible stereotypes and egocentric bias, leaves room for the rebellious resistance of puppets and the self-effacing compromise of puppeteers. It not only provides a soul-stirring footnote to the transplantation of identities among different agents, but also conveys an empathetic warning to identity crisis engulfing an institutionalized society.

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## Notes

- Note 1. Matthew Arnold was a renowned British poet and literary critic during the Victorian period.
- Note 2. Carlo Collodi, the pen name of Carlo Lorenzini, was known as a famous Italian writer of children's literature. *The adventures of Pinocchio* is one of the world-known classics written by Carlo Collodi.
- Note 3. Sergei Obraztsov was a prominent artist of puppetry in Russia. *Encyclopedia Britannica* acknowledges his contribution to the development of puppetry as an independent art form.
- Note 4. Heinrich von Kleist was a German poet, dramatist, novelist, and short story writer.
- Note 5. Edward Gordon Craig was known as a forerunner of modernist movement. He was actively engaged in acting, directing, and scenic design during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Note 6. As a Japanese American, Michiko Kakutani, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her outstanding achievements in literary criticism, is a well-known literary critic in America. She has been noted for her piquant remarks on books written by white male writers.
- Note 7. Mr. Feng Yidai was a literary scholar, translator and critic, and he was known in particular as an influential expert on American literature in China.
- Note 8. Zhu Jie's thesis *Everyman's Complaint* coins the titles of Roth's two epoch-making novels, namely *Everyman* and *Portnoy's Complaint*.
- Note 9. Obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is usually abbreviated into "OCD", is generally reflected in three aspects, namely, intrusive thoughts, repetitive behaviors, and the combination of obsessions and compulsions.
- Note 10. *The American Scene*, written by Henry James, keeps record of the writer's peregrination across America during 1905 and 1906. The book touches upon some contentious issues which are still significant in today's American society, such as materialism, environmental protection, racial conflicts, and foreign immigrants.
- Note 11. Broadway, a world renowned street in New York, is commonly recognized as the paradise of theatrical artists in America and even around the world.
- Note 12. Christa is a young girl with German descent. Sabbath gets acquainted with Christa by accident when he drives one night on a highway. Christa is portrayed as a bisexual prostitute who sleeps with both Sabbath and Drenka.
- Note 13. According to Freudianism, hallucination, which usually occurs when one suffers from fantastic and unrealistic whims, is considered as one of the most commonly diagnosed syndromes of schizophrenia.
- Note 14. Repetition compulsion describes one's inclination to repeat some impressively traumatic settings, situations, rituals, practices, and initiations.

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