

# The late American novelist Philip Roth attacked as a “misogynist”

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We live at a time of widespread historical ignorance and cultural debasement. The most preposterous things are written and said, and, especially if they touch on gender and racial matters, no one dares respond.

In the wake of American novelist Philip Roth’s death May 22, numerous commentaries have appeared accusing him of misunderstanding or being hostile to women and related failings.

One of those appeared in the *New York Times* May 25, “What Philip Roth Didn’t Know About Women Could Fill a Book,” by Dara Horn. The *Times* leads the foul charge on these issues.

Horn essentially complains that Roth was not complimentary enough about people like herself, upper middle class Jewish women: “The Jewish New Jersey women I know are talented professionals in every field, and often in those two thankless professions that Roth quite likely required to thrive: teachers and therapists. Roth, who achieved true greatness in depicting people like himself, never had the imagination to give these women souls.”

This is simply not true. Roth tended or certainly aspired to be as critical of “people like himself” as he was of people like Horn. He rarely inflicted a wound on others without inflicting one on “people like himself.”

What Horn and others find impermissible, among other things, is that Roth painted unflattering portraits of numerous female “professionals.”

Furthermore, in “Stop Treating The Misogyny In Philip Roth’s Work Like A Dirty Secret” (Huffington Post, May 26), Sandra Newman takes Roth to task for, among other things, the “gleefully lascivious objectification of women in his novels.” She takes for granted “Roth’s misogyny,” observing that for “many 21st-century Americans, it’s still not misogyny at all but the normal psychology of the male.”

This is a slander against men in general and Roth in particular. He openly represented his male characters’ lust and desire for women, often comically, sometimes graphically and semi-obscenely. That was one of his more liberating contributions to American literature, which was still much in need of it. How does that by itself constitute “misogyny” or “objectification”? The new Puritanism includes the urge to censor and suppress, to return cultural life perhaps to the mid-1950s when D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was still banned in the US.

Generally speaking, Roth’s female characters give as good as they get, from Brenda Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus* [1959] (“Gloria Feldman made her way over to our end of the table and said freshly ‘Well our little Radcliffe smarty, what have you been doing all summer?’ ‘Growing a penis’”) onward.

Newman complains about Roth’s treatment of a number of female characters in *American Pastoral* (1997), which deals with a middle class New Jersey girl in the 1960s who becomes for a time a radical terrorist. The characterizations in this case are weak and unconvincing. However, the problem stems not from misogyny, but from the novelist’s failure to artistically imagine and create individuals driven out of their minds, as it were, by the immensity of the crimes committed by American imperialism

in Southeast Asia.

Most stupidly and cheaply, Newman associates Roth with her vision of typical Donald Trump supporters and claims that “his political novels have a nagging MAGA [Make America Great Again] aftertaste. ... Reading these novels in 2018, one half expects the male protagonist to angrily comment, ‘This is why people voted for Trump.’” This is nonsense, unsupported by any quarter-serious reading of Roth’s books.

What irks a good number of the commentators is the fact that the late novelist had no use, generally speaking, for the obsession with identity politics, the brand of fraudulent and reactionary postmodern “leftism” that has proliferated on American campuses and elsewhere over the past 40 years or so. Unforgivably to Newman, Horn and company, Roth treated a number of female academics and other such types rather roughly in his books, suggesting that behind their aggressive “feminism” lay a good number of hidden factors, including psychological insecurity, personal ambition and avarice. His instinctive hostility was entirely appropriate.

In any case, the numerous attacks on Roth along the same general lines, his failure to paint his “talented professional” women characters the way his critics would have liked him to, i.e., as unfailingly confident, brave and smart, are based on misconceptions about art that are widespread at the moment.

The job of the novelist or artist is not to present his or her segment of the population positively and to inspire it to greater heights (and this always proves to be a segment of the *petty bourgeois* population, which invariably identifies itself with Man and Woman in general). It is currently taken for granted, codified and legitimized in thousands and thousands of “scholarly” works and practices, that no artist can—or should try to—transcend his or her subjectivity. It doesn’t generally occur to the critics to ask whether Roth’s portrayals, pleasing or not, correspond to realities outside the novels, whether they approximate the way things are.

Thus, along with the criticisms of Roth as a supposed woman-hater inevitably arrive a host of articles and essays questioning whether men are ever capable of writing honestly or truthfully about women. Most reveal little or no historical knowledge or perspective.

These recent media headlines tell us much of what we need to know about the articles’ superficial (or worse) content: “Why men can’t write about women,” “How Women See How Male Authors See Them,” “Can a Male Novelist Really Write, and Get, Women?” “Do women and men write differently?” etc.

In passing, one should note that postmodern feminism resoundingly answers “Yes” to the last question. For example, French theorist Hélène Cixous, a disciple of Jacques Derrida, argued in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) that there was or should be a distinctly “feminine mode” of writing, bound up with the particularities of the female body. She went on, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ... I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man.”

Directly or indirectly, postmodern subjectivism and irrationalism

strongly influence or drive contemporary thinking. Jonathan McAloon, in the *Guardian* (of course), asked last May, apparently in all seriousness, “Can male writers avoid misogyny?” He explained, “As a critic and a writer, I am curious to know what male authors who are feminists can do to address misogyny. How can men write honestly about the bad behaviour of men, without it being a busman’s holiday for female readers? These days, I feel all authors have a duty to write about misogyny, especially men. ... Men are experts in misogyny; after all, we invented it. It is ubiquitous: even writing the previous sentence, I could easily be accused of mansplaining misogyny.”

Let’s pass on—as quickly as we can. A few years ago, Michele Willens posted an article in the *Atlantic*, “The Mixed Results of Male Authors Writing Female Characters,” with the sub-headline, “Authors of both genders have long experimented with narrators and protagonists of the opposite sex—but there’s still debate as to whether either sex can do it right.” Well, there really isn’t a debate, the historical record settled it long ago, but, in any event...

Willens noted that when “*Nation* magazine writer and poet Katha Pollitt learned that I was pondering whether men write women better than women themselves, her response practically crashed my computer. ‘You could not possibly be suggesting that! I think few men write female characters who are complex and have stories of their own. Where are the vivid, realistic and rounded portrayals of women in Roth, [Saul] Bellow, [John] Updike?’”

The reaction of Pollitt, a veteran campaigner for gender politics and enthusiastic supporter of corporate warmonger Hillary Clinton in 2016, was predictable, both as to its feminist prejudices and its historical shortsightedness. If postwar novelists Roth, Bellow and Updike were incapable, and they may have been guilty of this sin, of offering “vivid, realistic and rounded portrayals of women,” that was bound up with a more general intellectual and artistic degeneration and a decline in “vivid, realistic and rounded” artistic pictures of social life *as a whole*.

After all, it is absurd to the highest degree to suggest that a writer could accurately and full-bloodedly depict “men” or “women” distinct from one another, or apart from the social organism, as purely biological species existing in different galaxies. In the most decisive sense, the social and historical one, men and women have one common experience. Sexual identity, of course, plays an immense role in the existence of each individual. But neither men nor women participate in life primarily, let alone solely, on the basis of their sexual physiology, even under the worst and most backward theocracies, but as members of one or another social class or fraction of a class. As Marx explained, all human beings contain within themselves and are formed by “an ensemble of the social relations.”

There would be no art without human physiology, because there would be no human beings at all, but that doesn’t mean art can simply be *explained* by human physiology. Between that physiology and art work, as Marxists understand, lies a complex system of transmitting mechanisms in which there are individual, species-particular and, above all, social elements. The sexual-physiological foundation of humanity changes very slowly, its social relations more rapidly. Artists find material for their art primarily in their *social* environment and in *alterations* in the social environment. Otherwise, there would be no change in art over time, and “people would continue from generation to generation to be content with the poetry of the Bible, or of the old Greeks” (Trotsky).

No truly great artist in modern times, or perhaps at any time, has ever been overwhelmingly a “specialist” in only one gender (or sexual orientation), because the definition of the great artist, in our view, is his or her ability to attempt as comprehensive as possible view of the social totality and its driving forces. Obviously, there have been limitations bound up with particular stages of social evolution, taking into account utopian socialist Charles Fourier’s assertion that in every society the

degree of female emancipation has been the natural measure of emancipation in general.

Most of William Shakespeare’s greatest figures are male, but at the dawn of the modern age already the English dramatist produced immortal women characters without whom his plays would be unthinkable: Cleopatra, Rosalind, Titania, Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Goneril, Queen Margaret, Gertrude, Viola, Juliet, Imogen, Miranda, Ophelia, Beatrice, Portia and countless others.

“Can men write about women?” As the poet Heine once wrote, “And the fool expects an answer.” When bourgeois art was at its progressive height in the 18th and 19th centuries, male novelists, playwrights and opera composers paid great attention to the condition of women because that condition was to them the most representative and often most painful expression of the state of contemporary society. What would be left of modern literature, drama and opera without *Clarissa*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Little Dorrit*, *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Resurrection*, *Effi Briest*, *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll’s House*, *Miss Julie*, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *Nana*, *La Traviata*, *Luisa Miller*, *Rigoletto*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and many more, most of them tragedies? And, one might add, long before the current focus on sexual harassment, Shakespeare produced a remarkable work entitled *Measure for Measure*.

Of course, the monumental character of this body of work is no deterrent against contemporary stupidity and blindness. There is every reason to believe that the reader will have no difficulty in putting his or her hands on articles or entire books devoted to “Shakespeare the misogynist,” “Tolstoy: Woman-hater,” “How Flaubert slandered his female protagonists,” etc.

It is also a backward and, frankly, philistine notion that men ought to be most interested in writing about men, and women about women. In addition to the social question, certainly the central element, there is also a natural, human curiosity in the opposite (almost regardless of sexual orientation). Men spend a good deal of their time thinking about women, and, I believe, vice versa. Contrary to Cixous, Pollitt and their shallow, self-centered ilk, it is certainly “possible to suggest” that men, under certain conditions, might hold the better mirror up to women than women themselves—and, again, vice versa.

When, in the wake of the French Revolution, above all, women fought their way into the ranks of serious literature, it can’t be said that they showed an inclination to only concentrate on themselves. They too had a wider view of the world and a higher, more ambitious conception of what art and literature could do.

Jane Austen is as much (or more) remembered for Mr. Darcy and George Knightley as she is for Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse. The same goes for Charlotte Brontë in relation to her Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre, and Emily Brontë in relation to Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. George Eliot titled four of her seven novels after male characters and only one, one of her weakest works, after a woman (*Romola*). Women artists, it turned out, had a special concern with and sympathy for the difficult and often heartbreaking situations of many *men* in class society.

These are only a few of the issues raised by the manufactured controversy surrounding Philip Roth’s alleged misogyny.



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