

The Plot of Fear

J.E. Pellemans

“If you want to control someone, all you have to do is to make them feel afraid.” – Paul Coelho.

Fear, one of our most primal emotions. It is what makes people keep an eye out for the unexpected, and in all likelihood, the suspense greatly enjoyed in many a novel could be said to be fear's borderline cousin. Philip Roth's latest novel, *The Plot Against America*, draws heavily on fear and plays a clever trick on the reader's mind by the manipulation of historical events. But although the *The Plot Against America* can be categorized as a counterfactual history, readers may ask themselves what it is about Roth's counterfactual – but all too real – re-telling of the onset of America's 1940s that makes their flesh creep? What is the underlying implication of Roth wanting us to relive that fear? Some have suggested it to be a cautionary tale (Siegel 1). It is most likely that Roth has wanted us to simply tell us to beware of fascism even in our present day. But other than that, what does the emotion of fear itself symbolize with regard to who we are? Do the types of fear that the characters deal with symbolize anything other than just plain, raw, human emotion? Did Roth intend for us to carry away something even deeper and meaningful from the story and a historically fictitious American nation that is held firmly in the grasp of fear, anxiety and paranoia?

In this essay, I will explore how Philip Roth makes use of stylistic devices and literary techniques in *The Plot Against America*, hoping to learn more about whether how this affects the reader, and how the two of the characters deal with fear tells us something about how our perceptions and the way in which we view our world and each other, change and get distorted under its yoke. Before focusing on that, however, I will first provide a brief overview of the story's outline, which allows me to link up my arguments with the story's major events. Throughout the essay I will make use of brief excerpts and quotes from the book solely for the purpose of solidifying and elucidating the statements I put forth. Second, I will elaborately discuss several stylistic devices and

literary techniques which the author employs to instill the reader with uneasy feelings and apprehension. Additionally, to move my argument into a broader perspective, I will introduce both arguments that oppose and buttress my own. Third, I will address the issue of fear, providing in-depth analyses of several different types of fear and zooming in on how the protagonists Philip and Herman encounter fear and respond to their emotions. Finally, I will attempt to distil from my findings how their fears and response to it fit into the grander picture and how this bears relevance to my final and last question, namely whether the author has sought to teach us something about fear on a more personal level.

“[F]ear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear” (Roth, *The Plot Against America* 10), is how *The Plot Against America* – hereafter, for convenience’s sake, referred to as *The Plot* – takes off. As the story’s very first line has been quoted and discussed numerous times in many essays and articles on the novel, I will refrain from scrutinizing it *ad nauseam*, save perhaps for noting the fact that it rather unsurreptitiously sets the tone for the, give or take, three hundred pages that follow. *The Plot* revolves around a Jewish family living in 1940s Newark, New Jersey and is narrated by a older, fictitious Philip Roth against the backdrop of the ominous threat of WWII looming just across the Atlantic. The older Philip character’s first-person narration alternates with a style of narration that provides a broader scope of global events, and shows similarities with a good news bulletin . The family of four, Philip’s brother Sandy, his father Herman and his mother Bess, reside in a small apartment in the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Weequahic. At the beginning of the story we learn that Charles A. Lindbergh – historically known for his adventurous piloting skills – is running for the U.S. presidency. Lindbergh successfully defeats Franklin D. Roosevelt, preventing him from taking office for a third term. Unfortunately, for Philip and his family, their newly elected, blonde-haired president seems to harbor anti-Semitic sentiments, gradually introducing and passing inconspicuously repressive legislation and state-funded programs that increasingly undermine the legal rights and freedom of the country’s Jewish ethnic population. While American society polarizes and middle ground crumbles off by the day, Philip and his family face and endure a series of

setbacks, including the family's cousin Alvin's left leg being blown off while fighting the Nazis under Canadian flag, and the aftermath of his convalescence as he is taken in by the Roth family, but also the family being the victim of verbal abuse during a visit to Washington D.C. Of course, there are many more examples, which I cannot all mention here, of the Roth family bearing the full brunt of Lindbergh's increasingly overt fascist and anti-Semitic leadership. In parallel with the struggles which the protagonists are encumbered with on family level, tensions out on America's streets and cities between Jewish and non-Jewish civilians approach their imminent breaking point, unleashing into violent outbreaks and killings. However, out of the blue, Lindbergh mysteriously disappears, and as public order is gradually restored throughout the nation, the reader finds that the story merges with the authentic historical time line, from which it strayed, and in which the United States military forces join WWII, thereby waylaying Germany in their efforts to establish a pan-Nazi Third Reich. In the following paragraphs I will commit myself to highlighting and discussing several stylistic devices and literary techniques employed by the author that enhance the story's credibility and induction of fear.

In this paragraph I will attempt to answer the question of how the author has succeeded in constructing a literary work that evokes in many a reader a sense of apprehension and uneasiness, and what literary techniques and stylistic devices he employs to support the story's credibility.

The Plot is set in a counter-factual 1940s America, meaning that the author took a close look at historical events, changed one or two things and turned it into a "what if" story. In this particular case, the author, Roth, became inspired by a line from Arthur M. Schlesinger's *A Life in the 20th Century* (Schlesinger).

[I] came upon a sentence in which Schlesinger notes that there were some Republican isolationists who wanted to run Lindbergh for president in 1940. That's all there was, that one sentence with its reference to Lindbergh and to a fact I'd not known. It made me think, "What if they had?" and I wrote the question in the margin. Between writing down that

question and the fully evolved book there were three years of work, but that's how the idea came to me. (Essay; The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America.')

The line Roth encountered in Schlesinger's work led to the inception of *The Plot's* plot. However, with regard to the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, it may prove to be interesting to analyze Roth's words "What if they had?" it seems that the definition of fear itself is rooted in the what-if assumption, i.e. for people to be afraid of something, they must first make active use of their imagination to draw conclusions about the dangers they face, which in turn creates the feeling of fear. Fear then is the product of perceived risk and "[i]mplies the recognition of potential danger". (Ferraro) The fact that Roth has written a counterfactual history implies, as discussed some lines earlier, that although one key event was changed, – i.e. Lindbergh defeating FDR – the rest of the story's context has remained as historically true as possible. "[T]o alter the historical reality by making Lindbergh America's 33rd president while keeping everything else as close to factual truth as I could -- that was the job as I saw it." (Roth, Essay on the Plot Against America) Arguably, it is the preservation of historical facts and Roth's adeptness at blurring the two that makes the reader believe they are reading non-fiction.

Changing our focus to the story's protagonist, we come across other highly interesting stylistic choices. For one, the fact that Roth himself features as a fictional character in the book. In reply to why he made himself the protagonist, Roth says, "[I] also thought that I could add a certain authenticity to it, and, as it were, trick the reader into believing it. If I used our real names and said, "look, I was there," at a certain point in the book the reader might forget that this was an invention. A false memoir is what it is, and it is not the first time I've done that" (Freeman). In this excerpt, 'Our real names' refers to the names of his family, i.e. Philip, Sandy, Herman and Bess. It is interesting to note with regard to his remark about "false memoirs" that Roth quite deliberately opted for a type of narration that would coax his readers into believing him as if he were recounting a personal or traumatic to his readers in person. A further stylistic device that occurs in Roth's writing is that of

parallelism. The reader may have noticed that certain passages in the book to some extent mirror the terrifying events that took place on Europe's mainland at that time, including for example allusions to Europe's concentration camps by the starkly contentious 'Homestead 42 program', designed by the Lindbergh administration to relocate Jewish families, and the 'Just Folks' program that Philip's older brother Sandy is signed up for, which is faintly reminiscent of the Nazi Hitlerjugend indoctrination. Another parallelism is rendered by the author's description of the civil unrest and violent upsurges ravaging the major cities, echoing the 1938 Kristallnacht. For example, Roth describes how "[s]hops were looted", "windows broken" and how "[a] firebomb was thrown into the front foyer of Winterhalter Elementary School". The author seems to have borne in mind the importance of emphasizing the Weequahic citizen's' growing awareness of the tangible fascist threat moving closer and closer toward them and could be knocking on their door any day now. Each passage in which the members of the Roth family are glued to their radio to hear the latest on the developing unrest seems to introduce new hints to the reader that the threat is constantly spreading the country like an inkblot. Roth seems to draw on the idea that threats that are geographically removed from us may appear relatively harmless, but become all too real when they manifest themselves more locally – that is, in the cities in which we live.

In addition to *parallelism*, *The Plot* may also be characterized by the gradual and imperceptible development of the Lindbergh threat, as I lightly touched upon in the previous paragraph, more specifically how the Lindbergh administration succeeds in driving a psychological wedge between the country's Semitic and non-Semitic population, while at the same time alienating Jewish family's children from their parents. How this affects the individual members of the Roth family, Herman and young Philip, I will discuss in later paragraphs. Nonetheless, from the excerpt below, it is strikingly clear how Lindbergh wishes to present himself to the electorate, using campaign rhetoric that appeals first and foremost to the country's anti-warmongers.

“[Y]our choice is simple. It’s not between Charles A. Lindbergh and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It’s between Lindbergh and war.”

With the passing of the Homestead 42 Act, Lindbergh tightens his grip on the Jewish families. The story’s Homestead 42 Act is based on the 1862 Homestead Act enacted by President Abraham Lincoln, which granted uncultivated American land to farmers at little or no cost. The intention of the Homestead 42 Act as proclaimed by the Lindbergh administration is that of “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” for families “to move their households, at government expense, in order to strike roots in an inspiring region of America previously inaccessible to them.” The pretense by which the government seeks to gain control over the abode of Jewish families seems to go unnoticed by the Roths, except for Bess. “And just where do they get the gall to do this to people?” The tactics employed by Lindbergh may faintly remind the reader of the boiling frog analogy, which states that when placing a live frog into boiling water, it will jump out, thereby saving its own life; but, a frog placed in cold water that is gradually heated up to boiling point, may cause the frog to take each change in temperature for granted, only to discover that it has been sitting in boiling hot water when it is already too late. Although at times blinded by the attempts of the Lindbergh administration to hide their true intentions, Herman and Bess often see right through the OAA’s professedly well-intended outreach programs aimed to improve the Jewish population’s social position in American society. This is clear from Herman when he gets off the phone with his sister-in-law, Evelyn, who strongly advocates in favor of Sandy attending a state dinner in honor of the German foreign minister Von Ribbentrop. Herman puts down the phone and roars, “ [I]n Germany, Hitler has the decency at least to bar the Jews from the Nazi Party. That and the armbands, that and the concentration camps, and at least it’s clear that dirty Jews aren’t welcome. But here the Nazis pretend to invite the Jews *in*. And why? To lull them to sleep.”

In the subsequent paragraphs, I will focus on how fear and feelings and anxiety take a hold of some of the members of the Roth family and how this affects their character. I will first look more

closely at the story's most important protagonist, the young Philip Roth, as more than occasionally, he seems overtaken by fear. To differentiate between the fictional and non-fictional Philip Roths, I will henceforward refer to the young, fictional character as Philip, while referring to the book's real author simply by 'the author' or 'Roth' and to the older, fictional Philip Roth by 'the narrator'.

Philip's fears, particularly the anxiety attack-like episodes, seem to stem from his lively imagination. By narrating the story through the eyes of young child, Roth makes the reader feel sympathetic toward the child due to its innocence, yet at the same time it allows the reader to envision the story from the standpoint of a young, vulnerable child. Philip is affected by fearful situations in various ways. A particular case in point is when he has a nightmare about his stamp collection, "[a]cross the deep blue water and the high waterfalls, across everything in America that was the bluest and the greenest and the whitest and to be preserved forever in these pristine reservations, was printed a black swastika." In some way, one could argue that, unconsciously, triggered by him overhearing his father listening to news bulletins, Philip's mind reacts to the potential threats waiting in the wings of a country that is on the verge of turning fascist. His stamps, showing iridescent and resplendent American scenes of nature which, in his dream, become stained with black, which may well symbolize his fear for losing the country he has come to love and feel attached to. Lynn describes this particular scene as "[O]ne of the more haunting images in the novel" (Brittain 47) and "a scene that seemingly ties the horrors of the alternate/dystopian world with the developing Holocaust-like atmosphere of the story. (Brittain 47) Basically, a world in which the opposite of a good, utopian is the case. The fact that in Philip's dream, the stamp portraits of Washington have been replaced by ones of Hitler, both generally thought of as leaders who either designed or laid down the law, may suggest that Philip is unconsciously afraid of American laws of his country being subject to change, which would ultimately result in the dissolving of his Jewish American identity.

The character of Herman presents us with another side to fear. Rather than cowering away, Herman intent on wanting to fulfill his role as the family's protective male character. He is the one who always stands on principle and firmly believes in the U.S. constitution. A particular scene in the story from which this is evident is when the family visit Washington D.C. After having been shown around the city by the professional tour guide Mr. Taylor, who they have hired for the day, the family returns to the hotel they checked into earlier that day. However, the family is dumbfounded when they discover that the hotel manager presents them with their suitcases all packed up downstairs. "[F]olks, I have to apologize. Had to pack these up for you. Our afternoon clerk made a mistake. The room he gave you was being held for another family. Here's your deposit." Upon hearing this, Herman remains perfectly reasonable and composed, asking his wife for copies of their reservation. However, despite his efforts to correct the misunderstanding, the manager brushes aside his objections and goes on to further inform them about their eviction, "[W]e will not charge you for what use you all made of the room today or for the bar of soap that is missing", in an attempt to mitigate the situation. However, Herman is not convinced by the manager's arguments, nor is he able to ignore the glaring accusation that is made amid of all commotion, and consequently goes on the defensive by replying "[M]issing?" "Are you saying we *stole* it?" From this it is clear that Herman prefers sticking to his guns when the law is on his side. As the story progresses, however, Herman's ability to keep his family out of harm's way and safeguard his sons, Sandy in particular, against the psychological warfare used by Lindbergh, is challenged in several ways, which at the same time seems to greatly influence Philip's feelings of well-being as the robust, patriarchal role model shows breaks down. "[I] was sitting beside his bed in that hospital— " and that was as far as he got. It was the first time I saw my father cry. A childhood milestone, when another's tears are more unbearable than one's own". But a sentence in which Philip describes his father's mental state even more clearly is, "[a]nd a father who'd defiantly serenaded all those callow cafeteria anti-Semites in Washington was crying aloud with his mouth wide open— crying like both a baby abandoned and a man being tortured— because he was powerless to stop the unforeseen." That Herman is a firm believer of

principle and does not easily resort to violence is not only clear from the hotel scene but also from the fact that, during an argument with Sandy, in which he is called, “[a] dictator *worse than Hitler*”, his response is “[t]o turn away in disgust and leave for work.” Later, however, we see how the bulwark of his morality and faith in principles is torn down completely. Herman eventually gives up principles and, during the Winchell riots, having first declined the pistol he was offered by his friendly neighbor Mr. Cucuzza, “[N]ice of you,” my father said to him, “but I really don’t know how to shoot.” and saying “All my life I have paid my rent on time, I have paid my taxes on time, and I have paid my bills on time, I’ve never cheated on an employer for as much as a dime. I have never tried to cheat the United States government. I believe in this country. I love this country.” By saying this, Herman in fact confesses that his worst fear would be for the system that he so strongly adheres to break down. This happens after he and Alvin get into a fistfight and under the imminent pogrom threat, he finally gives in, “[T]his time when Mr. Cucuzza offered a pistol, my father accepted it.”

Concluding this essay, I first would like to point out that the fear is a recurring theme throughout the book and that in all likelihood I have not even scratched the surface of all of it in this essay. Moving along to answer my main question about whether Roth intended to convey a message about the importance of fear in his story and what fear itself symbolizes with respect to who we are, I would say that, to some extent, Roth juxtaposes his characters in such a way that the reader subliminally feels related to the way fear affects their personality and comportment. What Roth may have wanted us to carry away from this, is that our deepest fears directly confront us – as we have seen in the characters – with the loss of the values, morals, people and other possessions that we hold dear, and that in going to great lengths to protect them, we bias ourselves and take on a different perspective, which may or may not be in our best interest. Fear teaches us what is important to our lives, but can at the same time cripple us if we let it gain complete control over us.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

– Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address*

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