



**REINFORCING AND REPULSING THE STAGES OF LIFE'S WAY:
A KIERKEGAARDIAN READING OF PHILIP ROTH'S
SABBATH'S THEATER (1995)**

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Abstract

This paper unveils the postmodernist patina of Philip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater* through the affairs of its main character Morris "Mickey" Sabbath—a 64-year-old puppeteer who finds absolute delight in pursuing the base pleasures of life and one who also indulges himself in the American world bringing him to a state of alienation and destruction. We attempt to present Sabbath as the "aesthete" who greatly wallows in the fleshly pleasures of life. His sexual trysts generate the grounds for discoursing on the matter of sex as a potent postmodern site of disorder, self-cognizance, and reflexivity that leads towards annihilation of the self. In our analysis, we present him akin to an animal wallowing in base pleasures. Bounded by the "finite" from the perspective of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, his sexual trysts, ethnic displacements, and the juggling between home (Jewish origins) and host (American landscape) are factors that make it not possible for Sabbath to acquire a true self. Capitalizing on the descriptive-analytical research design, the paper leans on the critical concepts expounded by the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard particularly his three stages of life and the discourse on finitude in further making sense of Mickey Sabbath's untamed pursuit of worldly desires. We present Sabbath greatly wallowing in the aesthetic stage of life. The ethical and religious stages are depicted only as specters that persistently confront the novel's hero. The findings highlight Sabbath as the aesthete and pleasure-seeker who wallows in sexual pleasures as well as the person who immerses himself in art and other intellectual pursuits. All the worldly feats that affect the disposition of Sabbath compel him to spurn the ethical stage. This leads to the assertion that there is no commitment to virtue and integrity on the part of the Sabbath that can lead to the religious stage of life.

Keywords: aesthete, finitude, infinitude, postmodernity

Introduction

Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* is markedly noted for its robust depiction of alienation, subversion, degeneration, and disillusionment. Through his extremely libidinous and antagonistic disposition in life, Mickey Sabbath, the novel's gargantuan hero, concretizes the postmodern depiction of the self—one with a

multiphreniac patina making it possible for the authentic self to recede from focus validating the idea that one does not get to be a single and consistent body in a world that is highly postmodern. Kenneth Gergen (1991), in *The Saturated Self*, plainly substantiates such a postmodernist disposition stemming from the character of the Sabbath. To echo Kenneth Gergen (1991), “For everything that ‘we know to be true’ about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This particularly resonates with the titular “theater” attached to the name Sabbath. The word “theater” highlights the idea that the protagonist greatly depends on the feat of puppetry to earn a living. In the context of the novel, “Theater” can also be understood as a projection of the references to various Shakespearean plays as Roth chronicles the particular negotiations and deadlocks of Sabbath with troubles, chaos, and disorders.

Moreover, the titular Sabbath’s theater also moves in consonance with the main character’s world which is remarkably built on the illusory, strange, and unreal. Echoing the postmodern in Sabbath, his “theater” is also a signification of the dominant multifarious self-devoid of any other layers of meaning. In his worldly exploits, Sabbath incites the postmodern dictum concerning human nature – “we are what we say we are.” In the case of Sabbath, one sees a self that has no clear essence and coherence—one that is only animated by madness, absurdity, and self-destructive tendencies. Sabbath is in a constant state of flux and flow, always being redefined, and constantly experiences and capitalizes on various scripts and modes of beings. Aware of this dilemma, one can affirm that there is no enduring “I” on the part of Sabbath. Through these varying dispositions of Sabbath, one can see how his self and his states can be reminiscent of postmodernity’s problem when speaking of identity—the problem of the concurrent continuance of discontinuity of the self. (Stan & Colipcă, 2012)

The departed Yiddish mother of Sabbath had been a resilient spectator of Sabbath’s decentered and multiphreniac existence making her compel Sabbath to consider suicide as a means of ending his disastrous life. Sabbath’s mother still communicates with her son and reminds him to consider the afterlife as a viable option for averting the dismantling of his self. It is seen that Sabbath always ends in a terrible collision with his surroundings—the kind of collision and suffering that will make possible his rapid degeneration, from social mortification to alienation and mental sickness as a result of his character. Such are the reasons that compel Sabbath’s mother to consider putting an end to his life.

Before the formation and rise of a postmodern society, the self plays an instrumental role in ensuring that ideas, concerns, feelings, and fantasies blend well with each other through a complex but meaningful process of sense-making which markedly includes “narrative construction, story-telling, self-interpretation, rationalization, and inner dialogue” (Sloan, 1994). The postmodernist patina of Mickey Sabbath is astonishingly captured by Philip Roth in the form and structure of his novel. In postmodernity, the self is presented as a composite of various forces (Mehrabi and Maleki, 2010). This is accentuated by these two features of the novel. As Roth chronicles the worldly realm and skirmish of Sabbath with death, it is noteworthy that he renders the novel distinctly structureless employing techniques such as convoluted flashbacks, unfocussed narrations, and the apparent inclusion of spontaneous actions that espouse the very precept of the stream of consciousness. Such employment of the “structureless” in the novel makes the novel distinctive

and also an astonishing means of capturing the self-reflexive disposition of Mickey Sabbath.

Roth puzzles his audience with what is transpiring within the mind of Sabbath as he was faced with the “desire-not-to-live-any-longer” right down the station stairway when he was on his ride downtown. This employment of the stream of consciousness by Roth is a clear validation that Sabbath, no longer rendered as an autonomous individual, is convincingly inhabited with manifold actions, views, thoughts, and behaviors of the people he observes and mingles with. Sabbath’s thoughts become the concretization of what postmodernity calls “social saturation”—the kind of personal and social permeation that results in the loss of the independent self (Gergen, 1991). In this case, Mickey Sabbath is being modeled by his complex yet fleeting relationships affirmative of a “pastiche personality.” To quote a passage from the novel about this:

a blur whizzing blur why now most unpleasant invention nobody thinks ticker tape like this I don’t head coming down here stupid find what I lost idiocy Greek village gyro sandwich souvlaki sandwich baklava you know Nikki gypsy clothes spangles beads angelically on Victorian boots never a fuck without a rape (Roth, 1995).

This senseless projection of what lies within the mind of Mickey Sabbath makes him a marvelous and repugnant character. Such absurd patina is significantly associated with the vanishing days of Sabbath—loose and amorphous. In the novel, Mickey Sabbath is a 64-year-old puppeteer of Jewish origins. He was once a theater director and street artist who possess arthritic fingers. He resided in Massachusetts for almost 30 years. His wife Roseanna supported him but the woman that made him extremely libidinous is Drenka. Drenka is Sabbath’s Croatian concubine. This woman is noted for her massive sexual energy which had greatly satisfied Sabbath and other partners from the past. The sullenness and depression of Sabbath begin after the death of Drenka due to pancreatic cancer. His solitude, separation from Roseanna, and his condescension for contemporary life bring him to his final journey in New York which is emblematic of his final journey or his death trip. In his final sojourn, the American Dream, viewed in the light of postmodernity, together with the death of his beloved mistress, turns out to be horrendous and bizarre for Sabbath.

What we see in Sabbath is a lucid indication that part of the postmodern patina of the self is that it is comprised of “fragmented, situational images that result in emotional flatness or depthlessness” (Kenneth, 1997). The self and its very core are remarkably erased (Gergen, 1991). Roth powerfully creates the image of a person who possesses no center but one who is drawn in various routes and roots—perpetually changing and being delineated by the manifold external relations that he has with others most importantly that of women. The diversity of coreless selves erases the “I” of the Cartesian marque. From the vista of postmodernity, the complete concept of the human person is communally constructed. Such is not a simple distinct exercise for the reason that we recognize individual bonds in the fashioning of identities but the results are that of multiphrenia and the decentering of the self. The postmodern American Dream is rendered atrocious as he appeared as “one-time puppet master of the Indecent Theater of Manhattan” (Roth, 1995)—

an enticing street performer who was able to obtain reputable fame and infamy in the good old days—now rendered a kind of a depthless wanderer emerging like “a visitor from Dogpatch, either like a bearded character in a comic strip or somebody at your doorstep in 1900” (Roth, 1995).

The novel of Roth merges Jewishness with religious discourses and references. Taking the cue from the religious vantage point, the word “Sabbath” is associated with a ceremonial endeavor where all Jews stop working on the seventh day and allot a day for rest and worship. Ironically, Roth powerfully projects the Sabbath as a site of destruction and demise making him traverse a reckless, crazy, and unwise quest for worldly pleasures and demise. Sabbath remarkably wallows in concupiscence, self-pleasure, hedonism, and the unbridled pursuit of worldliness emplacing his life in a frenzied state. Armed with a gargantuan worldly and sexual appetite, the character of Sabbath also projects what postmodernism calls the “protean self.” As one who does not possess capitalize on consistency in forming the self, Sabbath is seen to bestride conflicting scripts and modes to suit the current circumstances where he is emplaced constantly being tossed to and fro by Jewish and American foregrounds.

Regarding this luring construction of life, we argue that the existence of the Sabbath can best be substantiated by Soren Kierkegaard’s three stages in life. As this paper attempts to examine Sabbath in the light of the stages of life’s way, we see Sabbath’s postmodernist disposition “awaiting individuals in every situation and every situation is a multi-situated activity system” (Goffinan, 1961). Kierkegaard’s stages of life shall make intelligible how the self is fashioned through various interactions rendering Sabbath as “trans situational” and “coreless.” In this regard, we attempted to answer the following questions:

- How does Mickey Sabbath construct himself?
- How do his actions validate the postmodern discourse on the dismantling of the human self?

Through Sabbath, Roth has wonderfully presented sex as a postmodernist contraption of disturbance, uproar, self-reflexivity, and self-awareness that paves the way to the destruction of the self and expressive disillusionment. The sexual trysts not only dismiss understanding and intimacy but also disclose a degrading mortification of the characters that play a role in the life of Sabbath. The activities of Sabbath in the novel can be rendered as a resounding springboard to engage the issues and trends related to postmodernity. Viewing Sabbath’s undertakings in the light of postmodernity, one can affirm and confirm that reality itself is not merely and easily reflected and paralleled in the human comprehension of it. In the case of the Sabbath, we can see the unveiling of the postmodern dictum that the mind can freely create, fashion, and understand its realities on markedly personal heights. In a more specific sense, Sabbath, in his relative theater, becomes the living exposition of the postmodern condition that is strikingly interesting to explore. In this paper, he becomes the concretization of how an individual perilously can adhere to his relative truths becoming extremely skeptical of other reasons and justifications that can be considered valid as well for his race, tradition, and culture. This is an interesting tenor to explore concerning postmodernity and postmodern existence in particular. Sabbath establishes a resounding postmodern truth as he is emplaced in his theater. In the light of postmodernity, Sabbath’s relative interpretations and

expositions become the compass in navigating his feats in his theater. From his sexual and worldly enterprises, it becomes interesting to explore the problems of postmodern existence. In the case of the theater of Sabbath, we see it as heavily anchored on the concreteness of the experiences of Sabbath being the principal actor who distinctly veers away from abstract principles and ruminations.

The power and calling of his phallus are a clear concretization of how experience can certainly be relative and fallible when viewed from the perspective of postmodernism as opposed to it being universal and particular. We can also espouse that Sabbath becomes the symbol of a certain “lack” specifically the absence of optimism for a philosophical, scientific, or even a religious and sacred truth that can demarcate and justify everything for an individual. Like the hallmarks of postmodernity, Sabbath can also be viewed as an individual that resists definition—veering away from the notions of unity and grounded and further delineated by the differences and intricate conflicts emanating from his worldly means of knowing and being. Sabbath’s affairs expound clearly on the postmodern tenors of placing a belief in a crisis of representation. This is seen in how he immerses himself in deformation in the Caribbean whorehouses, his frequent masturbation in both public and private spaces as his means of countermanding death, and the futile attempt to engage meaning and impose it in his life. Grounded on these assertions, we also attempt to unveil how literature can participate in postmodern discourses as reflected in Philip Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater* as our reading of the novel further fleshes out the universal qualities and truths of postmodernity which include the multifaceted illogicality and ludicrousness of contemporary life, the loss of faith in ethical and dogmatic authorities, estrangement from society, disaffection and the embracing and acceptance of distortions and fragmentations.

Method

In this theater of Sabbath sprawling in the rays of postmodernity, it becomes interesting to see how Sabbath, being a postmodern rendering of the human person, constructs himself amidst the various forces that render his existence extremely disputed. The novel is seen foregrounding the notion of idiosyncratic fragmentation (Harper, 1994). Cleverly and delicately, the novel also explores the intricacies of Jewish ethnicity moving in consonance with to present Sabbath, the ethnic subject in the novel, in the light of the flux and flow enveloping current American society (Royal, 2000). This paper capitalizes on a descriptive-analytical method. We look for instances in the life of Mickey Sabbath and exchanges between Sabbath and other characters in the novel that can make us validate the hallmarks of the three stages of life posited by Soren Kierkegaard. Concerning this, we espouse the fact that the existence of Mickey Sabbath is a remarkable site of contestation. Invoking the postmodern delineation of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and that of content analysis, Mickey is to be regarded as the individual who fashions himself through encounters and reflections thereby imposing meaning and order in his life. In this paper, we problematize the existence of Mickey Sabbath—how he exists as an individual who strives, chooses, decides, and most importantly, how he makes commitments as he is emplaced in a postmodernist setup of life (Obinyan, 2014). In propounding Mickey’s Sabbath as the gargantuan hero, extremely antagonistic and libidinous, it is evident that he noticeably lurches in the pleasurable, forbidden,

disgusting, banned, illegal, and the things that horrify the bourgeoisie faction of the society. With Sabbath deriving delight in the outlawed aspects of life, Sabbath's feats and the way he forms and regards relationships incite remarkable contingencies concerning the stages of life mentioned by Kierkegaard in the book *Stages of Life's Way*—particularly the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages with the first one being the stage where he greatly wallows and derives worldly pleasures being a finite being. To quote Kierkegaard regarding the “finite being”:

For a finite being, and that, after all, is what human beings are as long as they live in temporality..., the negative infinity is higher, and the positive is a dubious reassurance. Spiritual existence, especially the religious, is not easy; the believer continually lies out on the deep, has 70,000 fathoms of water beneath him. However, long he lies out there, this still does not mean that he will gradually end up lying and relaxing on shore.... (Storm, n.d.)

It becomes interesting to examine how Mickey Sabbath constructs himself in the novel. He is a contradicted character who operates from the experiences of the absence of layered and meaningful grounds in his life (Heidegger, 1962). One can regard him as a creating self from the point of view of Kierkegaard. Sabbath perpetually resides in the worldly and temporal with a strong disregard for the spiritual valuing only the satanic side of earthly and physical pleasures. In this light, it becomes interesting to highlight how for Mickey Sabbath human existence becomes a particular kind of task (Amilburu, 1988 in Obinyan, 2014).

Capitalizing further on the descriptive-analytical method, we capitalize on the three stages of life as posited by the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. To expound further on these stages, the first stage is called the aesthetic stage. The aesthetic sphere of life is demarcated by immediacy. In this regard, immediacy means that the individual has no special regard for rumination concerning the nature and way of their living. People who are trapped in this stage are the people who cannot be trusted because of their disposition to disappoint people in various ways (Onwuatuegwu and Ebelendu, 2020). They do not ponder about the future because they are trapped within their desires and worldly engagements. The person will instantly grasp any opportunities that will bring him enjoyment. He lives a life of pleasure. As the aesthete, the core of his life becomes an amalgamation of scrappy and disconnected spasmodic moments (Lawhead, 2002).

The absence of a decision is the underlying characteristic of this stage of life. It is essential to note that Sabbath as the aesthete immerses himself and markedly shifts from pleasure to pleasure. Grounded on these precepts from Kierkegaard, we look at the feats of

the Sabbath that make him experience this worldly pleasure. These include his sexual trysts, ethnic displacements, and the juggling between home (Jewish origins) and host (the American landscape). These are the forces that make it not possible for him to acquire a true self in his undertakings. From these noteworthy activities of Sabbath in the novel, we affirm the fact that he becomes a person delineated by immediacy and not seriously committed to any higher goal in his life. He will simply change his direction and orientation once he sees a more alluring alternative in his theater of pleasure. Correlating this assertion with postmodernity,

existence becomes associated with manifold possibilities that can be tentatively savored rather than in terms of projects or objectives that can be fulfilled in the long run (Watts, 2007). It is from this claim that we come up with a springboard to validate what Kierkegaard said: “boredom is the root of all evil” (Kierkegaard, 1971).

In this theater of debasement by the Sabbath, the ethical and the religious stages of life remain only as specters that perpetually haunt Sabbath in his life. Sabbath settles upon nothing, no commitments, and moral choices. As the aesthete who wallows in the aesthetic sphere of life, he will never be able to have an authentic direction in his life. We validate this by the show that he is only committed to himself being the aesthete who is only committed to worldly affairs in his theater. The ghost of his dead mother becomes the reminder that he could have gone far beyond the aesthetic sphere of life. The messages of his dead mother are the echoes that he can also possibly have an assortment of social roles in his theater resulting in him at least possessing an authentic existence. They are the lingering reminder that he could and must establish a true commitment with himself and with others as well. This is the main precept posited by the ethical stage. With the aesthetic disposition presented as the more dominant aspect of his life, it becomes evident that his identity will never be summed by the so-called “series of universals” that can further put meaning in his aesthetic life.

In his undertakings, it is clear that his fleshly passions become the yardstick that he adheres to in his life. The norms, societal regulations and principles, divine providence, and faith in God are all factors that he had significantly shunned in his life. The religious sphere becomes a herculean task for Mickey Sabbath to achieve. The aesthetic is the only sphere that dynamically animated the life of the Sabbath. As part of our method in this paper, we attempt to show how Sabbath had convincingly spurned these two stages—with Sabbath showing that he does not possess the qualifications to become the “completely real man” that Kierkegaard is espousing in his philosophy regarding the ethical stage and the veering away from the act of having faith in and trusting God as stated by the religious stage (Kierkegaard, 1968). The aesthetic stage makes the person greatly wallow in the various pleasures of the world. The ethical stage affirms the importance of commitment. The religious stage entails having an authentic self armed with the very goal of committing himself to God and divine providence.

Findings and Discussion

Confinements and wallowings: The aesthetic stage

Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage of existence regards the person as someone who lives on the level of the senses, impulses, and emotions with a sort of childlike intimacy (Obinyan, 2014). Echoing the tenets of this stage through the novel’s hero, Sabbath is persistently emplaced in the quest for gratifying moments. He is the pleasure-seeker who wallows in sexual pleasures as well as the person who immerses himself in art and other intellectual pursuits. We can give an image of Sabbath as someone who enjoys intellectual and sexual ideas like fine wines but without any commitment coming from him to any of them. Sabbath delights in the forbidden, the illegal, and the disgusting. It was said that he feels remarkably elated after “making people uncomfortable, comfortable people especially” (Roth, 1995). To validate the disposition as an aesthete person, the novel chronicles the youth of

Sabbath as teeming with energy, dynamism, intensity, and desires. Norman, one of the characters in the novel, who showed his admiration and regard for the mannish glamour and aura of Sabbath averred “To look at you was to die... ‘There’s a bull in Sabbath. He goes all out. He says people could not take their eyes off you. A force. A free spirit” (Roth, 1995).

Mickey Sabbath is not an attractive character but his remarkable virility makes him appealing to women. In an illusory epitaph, he sees himself as the “Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth” but he has no intentions of harnessing his gifts and talents from the very start. As seen as how Sabbath helped his father after his brother Morty died, his desire “to escape his mother’s tyrannical gloom and his father’s pathetic brokenness,” (Roth, 1995) and his not attending college for him to be able to go on a journey to New York along with his friend Ron Metzner escorting in an unforeseen and astonishing intermezzo of leaving the country, one can see Mickey Sabbath seeing his life as a frenzied endeavor of countering boredom and doldrums. Sabbath fills his life with newfangled experiences.

Whereas Rene Descartes affirmed, “cogito ergo sum,” Sabbath’s actions transpire because “boredom is the root of all evil” (Kierkegaard, 1971). Rendered as an aesthete, he sees boredom as a kind of threat because of the transitory nature of his feats and experiences in life. His life wallows in sexual pleasure. The forbidden, filthy, and illegal are how he makes sense of his emptiness. In the same way that Kierkegaard sees Don Giovanni as the paradigmatic exemplification of the aesthetic stage (Amilburu, n.d.), the novel presents Mickey Sabbath as someone who for the immediate gratification of his senses particularly his penis. He becomes the exemplar of a person who makes himself perform in the light of his senses. Sabbath simply enjoys himself specifically his penis—the part of his body that makes him experience various heights of sexual pleasure and brings him from one conquest to another. This is a lucid postmodernist affirmation of the masculine power of the Sabbath as reflected in his worldly activities. In the case of the Sabbath, the aesthetic existence is thus an inconsistent kind of phenomenon that wafts here and there in a transitory world (Amilburu, n.d.). As an aesthete, Sabbath prominently enjoys “the satanic side of sex” and sees himself as a “villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old-white bearded Satan” (Roth, 1995). Roth (1995) greatly captures in detail the psychoneurotic preoccupation of Sabbath—a distinctive, ironic, and disastrous fixation of Mickey Sabbath as an aesthete:

You must devote yourself to fucking the way a monk devotes himself to God. Most men have to fit fucking in around the edges of what they define as more pressing concerns: the pursuit of money, power, politics, fashion, Christ knows what it might be-skiing. But Sabbath had simplified his life and fit the other concerns in around fucking.

There is a natural tendency to yearn for more and to pursue the excesses, to seek oneself, and a restless urge to find something stable to be committed to (Obinyan, 2014). In the aesthetic stage, the search for physical gratification and hedonism is always the prominent feats being pursued. Correlating this thought from Kierkegaard with Sabbath’s actions, it is seen in the novel that he does not permit any inhibitions to put a hindrance to his actions. Sabbath only heeds the

ephemeral imperatives of his extreme lust for pleasure sending him in “a perpetual pursuit of fresh sensations” (Amilburu, n.d.). As an aesthete, Sabbath is seen to be putting variations in his actions but still traversing the path that will make him wallow in pleasure and all its glammers. His means of immersing himself in pleasure is markedly blunted by the emotional whirlpool that envelopes him. In the light of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, he is trapped in the aesthetic stage of life as “he seeks ever more intense sensation to quench his thirst for enjoyment” (L'Equilibrie de l'esthetique in Amilburu, n.d.). A clear example of this extreme wallowing by Sabbath is seen as how to desecrate the grave of Drenka with his self-pleasuring feat. One cannot wrangle over the fact that it is anxiety that makes Sabbath pursue such forbidden and defiling pleasures. To quote from the novel:

Smiling invitingly, she replied, “First you’ll have to die,” and raised Silvija’s dress to reveal that she was without underpants—dark stockings and a garter belt but no underpants. Even dead, Drenka gave him a hard-on; alive or dead, Drenka made him twenty again. Even with temperatures below zero, he would grow hard whenever, from her coffin, she enticed him like this...He came on her grave many nights (Roth, 1995).

This is the kind of postmodern character that Philip Roth has created in the novel—the kind of character makes us sex as a weapon to be employed in countering death ultimately consigning him to the eternal darkness of oblivion—also making possible the dehumanization of other characters as well in the novel. Pleasure can still be found in the here and now even after the death of his beloved mistress Drenka. This is a clear validation of one of the conclusions that Kierkegaard posited in his philosophizing: “The best expression of the aesthetic existence comes down to saying that it lies in the moment” (Kierkegaard in L'Equilibrie in Amilburu, n.d.). In the case of the Sabbath, restraint, control, and delay do not have a hold on him as he continuously wallows in the aesthetic stage of life. Capitalizing always on his penis, Sabbath becomes a clear projection of the notion of emptiness as he attempts to protect himself from death and oblivion. As he is manipulated by his phallus and his arthritic hands, Sabbath remarkably creates his subjectivity.

Through Sabbath’s various hedonistic feats, one can read that Roth is provoking others to scrutinize the genuineness of a self that changes and replaces—throwing his expressions and dispositions unto others, particularly that of women. Sabbath is best typified by his manipulative disposition. In the novel, such movement and exploitation are remarkably shown by Roth as Sabbath also takes control of the women in his life. The aesthete Sabbath has the capacity and charm to make his women agree with the immoral and the ignoble. In the feats and mind of Sabbath, there is a notable subject-object schema that makes Sabbath treat women as sex objects making him counter the oblivious power of death. In Sabbath, there is an imaginative and personal kind of fiefdom that Roth clearly shows through his undertakings. This is greatly validated by the role of Drenka in the life of the Sabbath. Debra Shostak (2004) puts in the limelight the Croatian mistress of Sabbath and how she becomes a unique instrument of wantonness in the life of the novel’s gargantuan hero:

Nikki, the malleable actress to Sabbath's willful director serves as his instrument, his implement, the self-immolating register of his ready-made world, Nikki, whose name echoes Mickey's to suggest a doubling of him, a sameness with a difference, leaves a tangible absence where there was always an ontological absence.

Sabbath evidently and frivolously resides in the present making him still see Drenka as the ultimate object of his lust even after her death. Sabbath the aesthete's existence is a spectacle of phallic juggling—a shameless, agile, outgoing, and extremely libidinous one. Sabbath is markedly enveloped by despair trying to make sense of his life after the death of Drenka and his many encounters with women in the past. Aesthete Mickey Sabbath is shown at all times poking his erected phallus into places it should not be such as in the mouth of the lover of his niece and the anus of the house cleaner of Norman Cowan. Furthermore, he even pleasures himself many times at any place like in the grave of Drenka, the photograph of the daughter of Norman Cowan, and also the many recorded conversations that he had with the young lasses from Athena College. With these feats comprising the foreground of the life of 64-year-old Sabbath, Roth cogently presents the body of Mickey Sabbath slowly being shrouded by its mortality bringing him to a great state of angst and ultimately to his demise. Examining his feats, Kierkegaard has this to say to Mickey Sabbath wallowing in the aesthetic stage of life:

So it appears that every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows it (and you indeed know it), a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement (Academy of Free Ideas, 2015).

Sabbath is aware of such despair in his life and it is a force that powerfully compels him to become like Mozart's Don Giovanni—one who exists for the immediate gratification of his senses and the relentless pursuit of hedonism as informed by the power of his phallus. It is in this regard that we can label ourselves as trapped in a state of despair. In the philosophy of Kierkegaard, the person who lives at this level is desperate, whether he/she knows it or not, regardless of any attempt to conceal it (Amilburu, n.d.).

Mickey Sabbath and the spurning of the ethical and religious stages

In the philosophy of Kierkegaard, the ethical stage of life is the life stage where the individual is said to create selections. In this stage, the morality of one's decisions needs to be essentially taken into account as the person is continuously being tossed to and fro by the good and bad decisions that he had created in life. If perchance the path of morality had been pursued by the hero of the novel, Mickey Sabbath can start to naturally devise and articulate moral principles that can deliver him from the aesthetic stage of life. The institution of marriage further strengthens one stays in this stage of life. In the context of this stage, marriage is not merely regarded as an avenue for experiencing the heights and excesses of love it also entails making a special and essential commitment. The idea of commitment

requires a distinctive kind of continuity within the individual from moment to moment (Obinyan, 2014).

In Kierkegaard's view, the adherence to such a promise renders the individual as a self that can transcend the here and now. He does not just ground himself on the fractal instances that the aesthetic stage has to offer. He decides for himself allowing him to build his self for in the words of Kierkegaard: "The self cannot be itself unless it is creating itself. So, the fact that people have to form themselves means that human existence is a task" (Kierkegaard, 1984 in Amilburu, n.d.). Furthermore, Kierkegaard espouses the very prospect of obtaining and securing a history for the self (Kierkegaard, 1941). Put simply, the human person has the ethical disposition to create and embrace the values that will bring him to a good and delivering experience of life. Regrettably, these precepts are blatantly rejected already by Sabbath as seen in the opening scenes of the novel particularly his conversation with Drenka regarding fucking and their forbidden affairs outside the bond of marriage. Department and moral conduct are markedly absent in the life and mindset of Mickey Sabbath. To quote from the opening conversation in the first chapter of the novel:

"One monogamous mate isn't enough for you?" he asked Drenka. "You like monogamy so much with him you want it me too? Is there no connection you can see between your husband's enviable fidelity and the fact that he physically repels you?" Pompously he continued, "We who have never stopped exciting each other no vows, no oaths, no restrictions, whereas with him the fucking is sickening even for the two months he bends you over the dinner table and does it from behind (Roth, 1995).

In these opening lines alone, it is evident that the novel's hero does not possess the tenacity to become a real man. This is a man who did not possess moral self-sufficiency as he reached the latter years of his life. He is still evidently enveloped by despair. In the words of Mickey Sabbath as he was talking to Drenka: "I am confused by you. I can't follow you. What exactly is happening here today? It's not I but you who propose this ultimatum out of the fucking blue. It's you who presented me with either/or. It's you who is getting rid of me overnight unless, of course, I consent to become overnight a sexual creature of the kind I am not and never have been" (Roth, 1995). Echoing Kierkegaard, he can choose between good and evil, but in the case of Sabbath, the evil and the high regard for the lower orders of life are the paths that Sabbath had chosen in his existence thereby spurning the ethical stage—allowing himself to treat relationships superficially and letting his mind be swayed by his phallogocentric endeavors (Lobo, 2013).

Mickey Sabbath can never immerse himself in the act of remorse, even back into his family as he persistently spurns the edifying pieces of advice from his departed mother who frequently visits, back into his race as he had already indulged in the cultures of the Americans enabling him to also disregard his Jewish roots, and the path that will bring him to order, harmony, rationality and good relations which are emblematic of God Himself. He can never repent himself "out of the whole existence" (Lobo, 2013). One can posit that transgression cannot be recognized by Sabbath himself for the reason that Sabbath cannot yield to

repentance and reparation of himself. The hero of the novel himself substantiates this claim concerning his unrepentant disposition in life which was also felt by his beloved Croatian mistress Drenka. Sabbath affirms his take on “luxurious seriousness” to his paramour:

“Yes, yes,” he replied. “Luxurious unseriousness was what the outsmarter often felt the greater the seriousness with which he conversed. Detailed, scrupulous, loquacious rationality was generally to be suspected when Morris Sabbath was the speaker (Roth, 1995).

The so-called “teleological suspension of the ethical” (Kierkegaard, 1968) evidently cannot transpire in the persona of Mickey Sabbath. Sabbath can never associate itself with a transcendent source for the reason that angst greatly forms the very core of Sabbath even in the latter years of his life. When he was in Manhattan, the ghost of Sabbath’s mother appeared to him and gave him a resounding reminder that life is shaped by and grounded on despair: “This is human life. There is a great hurt that everyone has to endure” (Roth, 1995). For Kierkegaard, reaching God in the last stage of life entails disavowing the worldly, becoming detached, and being indifferent to the finite itself. The ordeal that Sabbath has to face is to cut his connections with the finite. It is noticeable in the novel that Sabbath is heavily immersed in the world’s pleasures and disappointments. He remarkably departs from the Kierkegardian dictum: “He lives in the finite but does not have his life in it” (Academy of Ideas, 2015)—unalterably impervious to its failures and sorrows.

To further propound on this, Sabbath existence is best delineated by his phallic clownings, mournful recollections of the memories of departed loved ones, discarded responsibilities, the straining process of disconnections, the death of Drenka and Morty giving him the feeling of being finished, his stranger-like disposition in the American environs where he is emplaced in, the struggles to overturn the cultural effects of the Jewish depiction in the society, and the decision of Roseanna, his wife, to replace him with a lesbian lover—all render Sabbath as a resilient finite being floundering in the finitude avenue of life.

All the worldly feats that affect the character and action of Sabbath compel him to spurn the ethical and the religious. There is no commitment to morality on the part of the Sabbath that can lead to the third stage of life. The religious person’s relationship to anything finite and relative is always governed by his commitment to the absolute God (Obinyan, 2014). Sabbath is thrown in the world, living in it, and is very much dependent on it. The finite things of life render the Sabbath desperate. Not only Sabbath but also most of the characters are also experiencing the challenges of the finite to their lives. Nikki experienced humiliation at the hands of his violent and wicked father. The mistress Drenka is frantically reduced to a secret prostitute because of the impotence of her husband. Matija, Drenka’s husband, conceals his furtive stain of being sexually duped. Norman, the friend of Mickey, remains open-minded about his unfaithful wife without marrying his jeopardized status. Echoing the thoughts of Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, Sabbath possesses the “security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again under the absurd” (Academy of Ideas, 2015).

Conclusion

In general, one can say Sabbath and the multifarious nature of his existence make him a reverberating example of a vulgar aesthete. His feats in life render him akin to an animal wallowing in base pleasures. Bounded by the finite and in the vista of Kierkegaard, one thing in particular—his sexual trysts, ethnic displacements, and the juggling between home (Jewish origins) and host (the American landscape) make it not possible for Sabbath to acquire a true self. In this case, Roth can be seen as underscoring the claim to an identity that refuses ethical organization and social construction and instead seeks the favoring of its own worldly and protean narratives (Neelakantan, 2007). Such forces do not allow him to place himself on morally bounded commitments and associate himself with the transcendent. Ergo, Sabbath is a clear illustration of failure as a human being from the point of view of Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, it is still important to note that Mickey Sabbath is still cognizant of himself as an individual. He remarkably engages in base pleasures and becomes communally interrupted because of the social order in which he is enmeshed. As he tries to make sense of his existence as an aesthete, one can see that he is still “hyper-aware of possibilities” (Academy of Ideas, 2015). Such are the possibilities that make he tremendously revolve around sex and self-pleasure. Roth (1995) confines his hero in the first stage as he says:

Since masturbation had all but taken charge of his life, a dream that overflowed in scenarios of perversity and excess but that he now, in a seaman’s suit, was to encounter thigh-to-thigh, mouth-to-mouth, face-to-face: the worldview of whoredom, the tens of thousands of whores who worked the docks and the portside saloons wherever ships made anchor, flesh of every pigmentation to furnish every conceivable pleasure.

The titular theater is the drama of his youthful impetuosity and promiscuity, his deformation in the Caribbean warehouses, his frequent masturbation in both public and private spaces, countermanding death, and the struggle for meaning. His theater is the site where art is created—the art of pleasure in particular. In this theater of debasement, the ethical and the religious remain only as a specter that perpetually haunts Sabbath in his life. Sabbath settles upon nothing, no commitments, and moral choices. He is the perfect example of a person who refused to put his utmost loyalty and devotion to anything. He pursues the people and pleasures in the very heat of the moment, his disposition lusty and antagonistic being at the age of 64. Be that as it may, Roth never fails to bring into the limelight the gravity of commitments, morality, and seriousness—factors that will lead to the fruition of the authentic self—the self that grounds Sabbath on a definitive avenue that animates his life with existential purpose and moral duties. In the case of Sabbath, this remains as a shadow that irrevocably follows him as symbolized by the ghost of his mother who habitually visits him convincing him to pursue suicide as a means of putting an end to a life of angst, meaninglessness, and despair.

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