Vol.16 / Issue 91 / August / 2025 International Bimonthly (Print) – Open Access ISSN: 0976 – 0997

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fading Voices, Failing Bodies: Memory, Aging, and Trauma in Philip Roth's the Humbling and Everyman

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Received: 06 Jun 2025 Revised: 29 May 2025 Accepted: 19 Jun 2025

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ABSTRACT

Philip Roth's *The Humbling* (2009) and *Everyman* (2006) are profound explorations of memory, aging, and trauma, offering intimate portrayals of protagonists grappling with the disintegration of identity and the inevitability of mortality. In *The Humbling*, Simon Axler, a once-celebrated actor, confronts the collapse of his career and sense of self, navigating a psychological breakdown and an ill-fated relationship with a younger woman, Pegeen. His memories of past performances and relationships haunt him, reflecting the fragility of memory and the performative nature of identity. In *Everyman*, the unnamed protagonist reflects on his life - marked by failed marriages, a distant relationship with his children, and a declining body - as he faces his own mortality. His memories of youth, love, and loss underscore the universal struggle against aging and the search for meaning in the face of death. Both novels delve into the interplay between personal and cultural memory, the trauma of physical and emotional decline, and the ways in which memory shapes and disrupts identity. This article compares *The Humbling* and *Everyman* through the lens of memory studies, examining how Roth uses memory to explore the psychological and emotional effects of aging and trauma, while highlighting the distinct ways each protagonist confronts their past and present. By analyzing these themes, the article illuminates Roth's broader preoccupation with the human condition in his later works.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Ageing, Philip Roth, Nemeses, Mortality, Existential Crisis, Identity and Selfhood.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Humbling* and *Everyman*, memory serves as a powerful lens through which Roth explores the psychological and emotional effects of aging and trauma. While both protagonists grapple with the fragmentation of identity and the inevitability of decline, their relationships with memory differ significantly. Axler's performative memory reflects the fragility of a singular identity tied to professional success, while the protagonist of *Everyman* engages with memory as a universal, shared experience that connects him to others even as he confronts his own mortality. These differences highlight broader concerns about identity, mortality, and the human condition, offering profound insights into Roth's exploration of aging and memory in his later works. Axler's memories are deeply tied to his identity as an actor. His recollections of past performances and the adulation he received are central to his sense of self. However, his inability to perform anymore disrupts this identity, leading to a crisis of memory and selfhood. Memory, for Axler, is performative - it is about maintaining a facade of success and vitality, even as he feels these slipping away. Axler's trauma stems from the loss of his professional identity, and his memories of his past successes only deepen his sense of dislocation. His relationship with Pegeen represents an attempt to reclaim his former self, but it ultimately fails, highlighting the futility of trying to escape the effects of aging and decline. Axler's memories isolate him, as they remind him of what he has lost. His inability to reconcile his past and present leads to despair, culminating in his tragic end. His relationship with memory reflects a broader concern about the fragility of identity and the psychological toll of aging. Unlike Axler, the protagonist of *Everyman* is not defined by a single aspect of his identity. His memories encompass a wide range of experiences—his career, relationships, and encounters with illness and death. Memory, in this case, is universal rather than performative, reflecting the shared human experience of aging and mortality. The protagonist's trauma is tied to the inevitability of aging and death, rather than the loss of a specific identity. His memories of his parents' deaths and his own health struggles highlight the universal nature of these experiences. While he grapples with regret and fear, he ultimately moves toward a kind of acceptance, recognizing the inevitability of his own mortality. The protagonist's memories connect him to others, even as they underscore his isolation. His reflections on his life reveal a deep sense of regret but also a recognition of the interconnectedness of human experience. His relationship with memory reflects a broader concern about the search for meaning in the face of mortality and the ways in which memory shapes our understanding of life and death.

To analyze Philip Roth's *The Humbling* and *Everyman* through the lens of memory studies, several theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant. By applying trauma theory, cultural memory, narrative identity, and theories of aging, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Roth explores these themes in his later works. These frameworks are particularly suited to analyzing *The Humbling* and *Everyman* because both novels are deeply concerned with memory, aging, and trauma. Roth's protagonists grapple with the psychological and emotional effects of aging, using memory as a means of understanding their lives and identities. The relationship between aging and memory has been extensively studied in gerontology and psychology. As individuals age, they often experience changes in memory function, which can affect their sense of identity and self-worth (Cohen 45). Additionally, aging is often accompanied by a process of life review, where individuals reflect on their past to find meaning and coherence (Butler 72). Trauma theory further explores how traumatic events disrupt memory and identity, often leading to fragmented or repressed recollections. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by a "belatedness" - the inability to fully process the traumatic event at the time it occurs, leading to its return in fragmented forms (Caruth 4). This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding how aging protagonists in Roth's novels grapple with memory and selfhood. Both *The Humbling* and *Everyman* explore the interplay between memory, aging, and trauma, portraying protagonists whose fading memories and declining physical health disrupt their sense of self. While both novels depict the psychological and emotional effects of aging, they do so in distinct ways that reflect the unique struggles of their protagonists. In *The Humbling*, Simon Axler's fading memory and sense of self are deeply tied to his aging body and declining career as an actor. Axler's identity is inextricably linked to his profession, and his inability to perform anymore creates a profound crisis of memory and selfhood. Roth writes, "He had lost his magic. The impulse was spent. He was no longer himself" (*The Humbling* 3). This passage highlights how Axler's loss of professional ability disrupts his connection to his past successes, leaving him feeling alienated from his

former self. Gerontological studies suggest that such a loss of professional identity can lead to a fragmented sense of self, reinforcing Axler's despair (Cohen 47). According to Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, memory plays a crucial role in shaping self-perception, and Axler's inability to reconcile his past and present identities leads to a crisis of self (Ricoeur 108). Axler's memories of his past performances and relationships haunt him, serving as both a source of pride and torment. He reflects on his glory days, remembering "the applause, the admiration, the sense of being someone extraordinary" (*The Humbling* 15). However, these memories also underscore his current irrelevance, exacerbating his feelings of inadequacy and despair. His relationship with Pegeen, a younger woman, represents an attempt to reclaim his vitality and sense of purpose, but it ultimately fails, highlighting the futility of trying to escape the effects of aging and decline. Trauma theorists such as Dominick LaCapra distinguish between "acting out" - repetitively reliving trauma—and "working through"—consciously processing and integrating trauma into one's narrative (LaCapra 21). Axler's psychological breakdown can be understood as a form of "acting out," where his memories of past successes prevent him from moving forward. His aging body becomes a symbol of his fading memory and identity. Roth describes Axler's physical decline in vivid detail, noting how "his body betrayed him, his mind betrayed him, and he was left with nothing but the hollow shell of who he once was" (*The Humbling* 45). This passage illustrates how Axler's aging body mirrors his fragmented memory and sense of self, leaving him isolated and despairing. In *Everyman*, the unnamed protagonist's memories of his youth, career, and relationships contrast sharply with his present experiences of physical decline and mortality. The novel opens with the protagonist's funeral, immediately framing his life within the context of aging and death. As he reflects on his past, he recalls moments of vitality and success, such as his career as an advertising executive and his relationships with women. However, these memories are tinged with regret and loss, as he confronts the inevitability of his own mortality. Butler's concept of life review suggests that the process of recalling past experiences can serve as a way of finding meaning in later life, and Roth's protagonist engages in this reflective process throughout the novel (Butler 74). Cultural memory also plays a role in shaping his identity. Jan Assmann distinguishes between "communicative memory" (short-term, everyday memory) and "cultural memory" (long-term, institutionalized memory) (Assmann 126), while Aleida Assmann explores how cultural memory shapes collective identity and historical consciousness (Assmann 97).

The protagonist's reflections on his life intersect with universal cultural narratives about aging, mortality, and the human condition, reinforcing how individual memory is embedded within broader cultural frameworks.The protagonist's memories of his parents' deaths and his own health struggles highlight the universal nature of aging and memory loss. Roth writes, "Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre" (*Everyman* 156). This passage underscores the protagonist's sense of helplessness as he grapples with the physical and emotional toll of aging. His memories of his youth and health serve as a painful reminder of what he has lost, leaving him feeling isolated and vulnerable. Unlike Axler, whose memories exacerbate his despair, the protagonist of *Everyman* gradually moves toward an acceptance of his mortality, aligning with psychological studies that suggest a strong correlation between memory integration and emotional well-being in older adults (Cohen 52). According to Ricoeur, individuals create their identities by weaving memories into narratives that give meaning to their experiences (Ricoeur 32). The protagonist's life story, shaped by his memories of relationships, career, and health, reflects how narrative identity plays a crucial role in self-perception. Despite his physical decline, the protagonist's memories also reveal a deep sense of connection to others. He reflects on his relationships with his children, ex-wives, and friends, recognizing the ways in which these connections have shaped his identity. Roth writes, "He had lived, he had loved, he had lost, and now he was dying" (*Everyman* 182). This passage highlights the protagonist's acceptance of his mortality, even as he struggles with the pain of loss and the passage of time. Unlike Axler, who clings to the past as a way of resisting his decline, the protagonist of Everyman engages with memory as a means of understanding and reconciling with his life's trajectory (Ricoeur 112). Both *The Humbling* and *Everyman* depict aging as a process that disrupts memory and identity, but they do so in distinct ways. In *The Humbling*, Simon Axler's identity is tied to his career as an actor, and his inability to perform anymore creates a crisis of memory and selfhood. His memories of past successes haunt him, exacerbating his feelings of inadequacy and despair. In contrast, the protagonist of *Everyman* reflects on a broader range of experiences, including his career, relationships, and encounters with illness and death. His memories highlight the universal nature of aging and mortality, underscoring the interconnectedness of human experience.

While both protagonists grapple with the psychological and emotional effects of aging, their relationships with memory differ significantly. Axler's memories are deeply tied to his professional identity, and his inability to reconcile his past and present leads to isolation and despair. In contrast, the protagonist of *Everyman* uses his memories to reflect on his life and relationships, ultimately moving toward a kind of acceptance. These differences reflect broader concerns about identity and mortality, highlighting the ways in which memory shapes our understanding of life and death through a psychological and existential lens. *The Humbling* and *Everyman* are part of a series of late-career novels in which Roth explores themes of aging, memory, and mortality. These works include *Exit Ghost* (2007) and *Nemesis* (2010), which similarly depict protagonists grappling with the physical and emotional challenges of aging. In *Exit Ghost*, Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's recurring alter ego, confronts his aging body and fading memory as he returns to New York City after years of isolation. Like Axler in *The Humbling*, Zuckerman struggles to reconcile his past and present selves, highlighting the disruptive effects of aging on memory and identity (*Exit Ghost* 45). Set during a polio outbreak in the 1940s, *Nemesis* explores themes of mortality and helplessness through the character of Bucky Cantor, a young man who grapples with the randomness of suffering and death. While not explicitly about aging, the novel reflects Roth's broader preoccupation with human vulnerability and the inevitability of decline (*Nemesis* 112). These novels, along with *The Humbling* and *Everyman*, form a cohesive exploration of Roth's late-career themes, offering a profound meditation on the human condition. Roth's memoir *Patrimony* (1991), which chronicles his father's decline and death, serves as a precursor to the themes of aging and memory in *The Humbling* and *Everyman*. In *Patrimony*, Roth reflects on the physical and emotional toll of his father's illness, writing, "You must not forget anything" (*Patrimony* 23). This imperative to remember underscores the importance of memory in confronting mortality, a theme that resonates in both *The Humbling* and *Everyman*. The memoir's intimate portrayal of decline and loss informs Roth's later novels, which similarly grapple with the fragility of memory and the inevitability of death. Roth's *The Humbling* and *Everyman* are deeply informed by the author's own aging and reflections on mortality. Situated within Roth's larger body of work, these novels form part of a cohesive exploration of late-career themes, including the fragility of memory, the physical and emotional toll of aging, and the inevitability of death.

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