

Literature, Language, and Learning: English in Contemporary Contexts

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2. Revealing the Overarching Narrative Layer in *Philip Roth's Deception*

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Abstract

Philip Roth's *Deception* stands apart in his oeuvre for its radical formal minimalism and intricate exploration of metanarrative ambiguity. Dispensing with conventional narration and temporal progression, the novel unfolds almost entirely through cyclical, overlapping dialogues that create psychological tension and disorient the reader. This structural innovation not only subverts traditional novelistic expectations but also foregrounds the themes of uncertainty, instability, and existential doubt. The work's self-reflexive dimension is enriched by Roth's introduction of a protagonist named "Philip," a choice that deliberately blurs the boundaries between author and character and draws the reader into a space of autobiographical ambiguity. Engaging ideas from Barthes, Iser, and Rose, the novel exposes the inherent artifice of storytelling, challenging distinctions

between truth and fiction, reality and fabrication. Deception thus becomes an extended meditation on narrative construction itself, using bare dialogue to mimic theatricality and psychoanalytic intimacy while simultaneously destabilising the reader's interpretive framework. Ultimately, Roth demonstrates that fiction is a creative deception—an imaginative reconstruction of life rather than its replication—where personal experience becomes material for an unending narrative process. Through its metafictional strategies and linguistic austerity, Deception offers a profound reflection on authorship, authenticity, and the complex entanglement of life and literature.

Keywords: Metafiction; Autobiographical Ambiguity; Narrative Construction; Dialogic Structure; Author–Character Blurring.

Within Philip Roth's extensive body of work, "Deception" distinguishes itself by two significant aspects that characterise both its structure and its content. The first aspect concerns the cyclic nature of its narrative discourse, in which tense, overlapping, and recurring dialogues engender a palpable psychological intensity within each character's situation. This divergence from the conventional plot progression seen in Roth's other novels, such as "American Pastoral," "The Plot against America," and "The Dying Animal," is evident. In these novels, a logical-temporal sequence of events unfolds, reflecting intricate contexts and relationships. "Deception," however, employs a unique narrative technique. It does not rely on a narrator

to arrange the narrative flow. Instead, each moment unravels organically, with pertinent and seemingly insignificant words strategically intertwined, creating a swirling sensation where everything finds its place, albeit partially confounded. The innovation of "Deception" lies in its title, which serves as a framework for both the story's commencement and conclusion. This framework is populated with words that lend semantic depth to the apparent void enveloping the narrative. This results in a sort of literary playfulness, culminating in a text handed over to the reader who becomes partly immersed in the construction of the novel's verbal ambiguities.

The second significant aspect pertains to the deeply metanarrative essence of the text. This quality becomes apparent as the author's decisions construct a narrative framework in which Philip Roth, as the narrative voice, refrains from explicitly outlining the characters' roles and interpersonal dynamics. As Claudia Roth Pierpont astutely observes, "the issue of intent—whether we accept his authorial explanations, whether the women are intended to be genuine — imparts a sensation akin to one of Escher's paradoxical creations" (Roth Pierpont 2014, p. 168). Maurits Cornelis Escher's etchings are famous for their utilisation of geometric distortions. These distortions create paradoxical visual effects that almost contradict the very essence of what they portray. This results in a continuous redefinition of space. Similarly, in this specific novel by Roth, there is a resemblance to Escher's approach.

Roth skillfully shuffles the narrative cards, providing both the reader and the characters themselves with a sense of bewildering interaction. The characters appear to navigate their lives in a state of dialogic confusion, societal instability, and existential uncertainty. This fluidity, central to the metatextual aspect of the novel "Deception," is made even more compelling by the introduction of a narrator named Philip, who mirrors the actual narrator's name. This narrative device serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it alludes to the cyclical nature often found in novels, and on the other hand, it directly ties into the inception of the metanarrative. This prompts us to ponder what storytelling truly is, if not a form of 'deception' in its essence. Fundamentally, the composition is shaped within the realm of ambiguity, a concept epitomised by Barthes in his piece "Writing Degree Zero." Published in 1953, this work thoroughly explores the examination of writing and language, delving into the intricate interplay between the writer and society. Furthermore, it delves into the intricacies of the creative process within the backdrop of societal expectations.

In this manner, Roth positions himself outside the confines of conventional literature, aligning with the realm of uncertain decisions that, as Barthes notes, align with "the requisites of an autonomously generated language." From this perspective, the notion of deception extends beyond the mere pattern of relentless unfaithfulness that defines the central character, someone consistently primed to embark on new liaisons while maintaining an air of innocence in the

face of the theme of adultery. The novel's core deception revolves around narrative craftsmanship. This is underscored by the fact that Roth employs writing as the platform on which he intricately stretches the interplay between fiction and reality, a dichotomy that can be identified as the clash between authenticity and falsehood to its utmost ramifications. In many respects, the author presents a narrative composition that, albeit indirectly, brims with a succession of inquiries: How profoundly are our everyday lives shaped by both our own lies and those propagated by others? To what extent does infidelity symbolise a narrative construct that we transmit to the person who has been betrayed, a kind of fictional storytelling? Moreover, above all, a question of paramount narratological significance: Why is "Deception" structured in a manner that persuades the reader of the seamless fusion of narrative fiction and actuality? In essence, the overtly autobiographical elements provide the cornerstone for this novel, which essentially recounts an act of betrayal. Within this context, literary fabrication metamorphoses into the tale of an autobiographical fabrication, wherein the reader is granted insight into how the protagonist, Philip Roth (a figure expected to be genuine but who necessarily adheres to literary conventions), delineates his personal variant of deceit. This deceit, within the context of the story, materialises as adultery and, consequently, the breach of trust directed at his spouse. Indeed, we are stepping into the realm of metafiction here.

However, underlying the tension of metanarrative lies something more intricate than a mere plot involving characters betraying their partners. As pointed out by Margaret A. Rose, parody and metafiction inherently challenge “an attack (implicitly or explicitly) on theoretical oppositions between reality and unreality in the artwork or as given in the canons of literary criticism” (Rose 1979, p. 150). Ultimately, Roth aims to expand the horizons of his creative writing by employing a tactic that, in terms of pleasurable reading, dismantles all the elements stipulated by the narrative pact. This approach is intended to furnish the reader with a dynamic text that, above all, serves as an experiment and, we would venture to add, as an intense self-portrayal in the guise of autobiography through profound dialogue. To refrain from using the term “pseudo-autobiography,” though it might appear more accurate, because an entirely candid and truthful autobiography is a notion that does not truly exist. All autobiographies present a perspective on life in which order supplants disorder, the linear arrangement of events supplants the chaos of everyday existence, and the artifice of reconstruction supersedes the objective truth of events. In essence, there is a point where autobiography and fiction merge.

Furthermore, to contemplate a Victorian autobiography like Trollope's, among various others. “Deception” is fundamentally built on this type of ambiguity, though it employs dialogue as its predominant mode to establish greater credibility for autobiographical fabrication. In this context, Searles has astutely observed:

“True to its title, *Deception* is deceiving. Despite the erotic hard sell of the dust jacket, there are no graphic descriptions of sex – or of anything else. The novel is pure dialogue, without a phrase of exposition or attribution, without a single ‘he said’ or ‘she said’ – just bare-naked talk” (Searles 1992, p. 254). This dialogue, which is rendered without the inclusion of descriptive instances or linguistic markers that typically indicate the speaker (“he said,” “she said,” and the like), constructs a version of events with the intent of imparting an impression of authenticity. It has been duly noted earlier that the narrator is acutely aware of the ruse being played. Nevertheless, he finds himself unable to evade his own belief in it, entrusting his words—which, much like any written expression within a narrative creation—necessarily operate within a backdrop that is not truly real. Needless to say, this suspension of disbelief on his part becomes equally shared by the reader.

The convergence of reality and fiction initiates at the very crossroads of character nomenclature. At the diegetic level, this marks the primary hint that the discourse seemingly alludes to autobiography—a first-person recollection of a personal ordeal centred on betrayal. However, beyond merely hinting at betrayal, the protagonist's name, “Philip,” serves as a pivotal element in the overarching strategy of ambiguity. From the novel's structural standpoint, this element serves as a pivotal component. Simultaneously, it is crucial to emphasise that “*Deception*” does not adopt the format of a personal journal or a textual confession: it is, in essence, a work of fiction,

not a replication of reality. In this regard, the significance of the protagonist's name "Philip" holds no interpretive weight. What remains evident is that the authentic Philip Roth is credited above the title, signifying his ownership of the copyright for "Deception." Meanwhile, the character within the narrative emerges as a creation stemming from the author's imaginative prowess:

Most of *Deception* consists of pre- and postcoital conversations between adulterous lovers: an unnamed Englishwoman and a Jewish-American novelist living in London. Roth, too, is a Jewish-American novelist who has lived in London, but he insists that *Deception* is fiction, not autobiography. The novel's protagonist offers the same argument to his shocked wife after she discovers a notebook recording his conversations with his mistress. He tells her that he made the whole thing up, that a trick of literary ventriloquism has taken her in. (Johnson 1990, p. 66)

From a semiotic standpoint, Roth's inclination to amplify narrative's potential generates a sense of alienation in the reader. In numerous respects, those engaging with "Deception" will discover themselves, to borrow Wolfgang Iser's expression, within "a kind of uncharted territory of implicit connections, and it is precisely these connections that actively engage the reader within the novel" (Iser 1990, p. 136). While the critic's allusion pertains to Faulkner's

masterwork "The Sound and the Fury" (1929), it is fitting to extend the same assessment to Roth's approach, which, as evident in his other literary works, draws explicitly on his personal existence. Indeed, in the realm of literature, personal everyday encounters serve as a pivotal catalyst for igniting the flames of creative imagination. Hemingway, for instance, could not have vividly depicted Africa and the pursuit of game without firsthand experience. Faulkner could not have woven a tapestry of Southern American cotton planters and the African American community without having directly observed these characters. Similarly, John Fante consistently drew from his own life, yet he was acutely aware that his self-expression through writing took on a form distinct from strict autobiography.

In a similar vein, Roth possesses a keen awareness of the intimate connection between the various junctures of his own experiences as an American Jew and his literary craft. However, he is equally aware that the art of storytelling is distinct from life itself, recognising that when personal experiences enter the realm of fiction, they cease to be strictly autobiographical. Roth deftly navigates this terrain, as highlighted by Gooblar, always adhering to "a refusal to impose a restrictive and reductive vision upon a reliably complex and unknowable world" (Gooblar 2011, p. 155). In numerous respects, the novel delves into this intricate and enigmatic reality, employing a technique that, in its linguistic execution, evolves into a narrative of equal intricacy and opacity.

It is important to emphasise that the novel's framework mimics a theatrical enactment, predominantly centred on exchanges between the protagonist, Philip, and his female conversational partners. Within this context, "Deception" markedly diverges from Roth's other literary creations, adopting a presentation that closely resembles the dialogue of a stage play. In other words, this work cannot be strictly classified as a conventional novel, as its composition mirrors the intensity and tempo of a theatrical performance, wherein voices take turns within the same space, seemingly revolving around themes of love and the various manifestations of betrayal, whether they are of a psychological nature or confined to the physical realm.

The hybrid nature of the work also entails a blending of language that deliberately destabilises the reader, mimicking real-life occurrences closely. From a narratological vantage point, it seems that Roth has taken Henry James's notion of characters living more through actions than explanations to its utmost consequences: the narrator's role is to demonstrate how characters move and converse, avoiding external descriptions or explicit declarations of their morality, whether they are virtuous or flawed, unfaithful or loyal, honest or deceitful. In "Deception," Roth refrains from being judgmental or categorical; he presents only the characters' dialogue, avoiding the intrusive perspective of a narrator. While this technique indeed thrives in theatre (where characters are identified by their appearance, attire, and vocal inflexions), its efficacy is somewhat diminished when transposed to the

printed page. Beneath the dramatised situations crafted exclusively through dialogue, there unmistakably resides a strategy that draws parallels to psychoanalytic therapy. Here, words metamorphose into the foundation upon which a remedy for the struggles of existence is erected, transitioning from gratification to dissatisfaction.

Nevertheless, it holds that "Deception" represents therapy in a negative or even disdainful light. This aspect becomes particularly evident through the words of Philip's lover: "Actually, I think they're all quite creepy [...] I didn't think I'd heard anything that I hadn't thought a million, million times before" (Roth 2006, pp. 144-145). As noted by Mauren Scheurer, "While therapeutic talk is disparaged [...] the entire novel is written in dialogue and has the quality and intimacy of a therapeutic exchange"(Scheurer 2015, p. 42).

Consequently, prior to embarking on an analysis of the text as metatext, it is crucial to underline this characteristic, which, in numerous respects, not only challenges the novel's conventional structure but also profoundly shapes the reader's interpretive process. Consequently, a heightened level of ambiguity emerges, casting a shadow over the discourse itself and engendering ontological uncertainties (often encapsulated by the female characters questioning "what am I doing here?") as well as psychological divisions (the genuine author himself seems torn between embodying the character and embodying the implied author who narrates said character). As is common in Roth's literary works, the opening words not only unveil

the theme to be explored but also provide insight into the author's approach to unfolding the narrative and the manner in which he employs various techniques and rhetorical methods. In the instance of "Deception," a meticulous examination of the initial page exposes the precise thematic and narratological parameters that distinguish the narrative.

‘I’ll write them down. You begin’.

‘What’s it called?’

‘I don’t know. What do we call it?’

‘The Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire.’

‘The Lovers-Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together- Questionnaire.’

‘The Middle-Aged-Lovers-Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire.’

‘You’re not middle-aged.’

‘I certainly am.’

‘You seem young to me.’

‘Yes? Well, that shall certainly have to come up in the questionnaire. Everything to be answered by both applicants.’ (Roth 2006, p. 7)

Evidently, a dialogic framework emerges that forgoes the customary constituents found within a narrative

composition. The initial portion makes it evident that there exists an "I" and a "you," simultaneously alluding to the central activity: writing. Simultaneously, the declarative tone of "You begin" implies a metanarrative and almost redundant manner of commencing: the first-person narrator informs us that someone is initiating a discussion about themselves, immediately ushering us into a psychological and existential realm. However, this self-focused approach is somewhat counterbalanced by the subsequent statements. Indeed, his response to her inquiry indicates that the piece's title will be "The Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire." However, once the title is introduced, it also sparks an imagery of a reciprocal linguistic skirmish. The woman inserts the term "lovers," thus altering the title. This alteration prompts Philip to respond with a touch of self-deprecating humour, appending "middle-aged." The initial exchanges predominantly revolve around the questionnaire, which, in a sense, they immediately proceed to fill out, effectively rendering the words the reader has encountered so far as a preamble. This is so pronounced that the initial phrase commencing the subsequent section (post-preamble) is precisely "Begin," the very word that inaugurates the novel. The initial reflections prompted within us, the readers, pertain to a sense of disorientation precisely because our anticipations are unfulfilled. On the contrary, they generate a form of psychological dissatisfaction.

Indeed, it is difficult to overlook that Roth demands a form of narratological exposure within his narrative text,

an aspect that resonates in the minimal presence of contextual cues (such as spatial and temporal indications). The level of information presented is notably reduced compared to what one would typically encounter in a twentieth-century play, where even if briefly, the spatial context is depicted and the characters' names are conventionally included in the written text alongside their dialogue lines. Consequently, the pursuit of this intentional silence regarding the characters and the unfolding events scarcely inhibits our contemplation. Instead, it propels us to consider that Roth, the author, aims to construct a scenario where textual austerity acts as a conduit for the internal vulnerability of the characters:

‘Begin.’

‘What is the first thing that would get on your nerves about me?’

‘When you are at your worst, what is your worst?’

‘Are you really this lively? Do our energy levels correspond?’

‘Are you a well-balanced and charming extrovert, or are you a neurotic recluse?’

‘How long before you’d be attracted to another woman?’

‘Or man.’ (Roth 2006, p. 8)

As previously highlighted, the second use of the word "begin" serves as a verb that, within the narrative framework, appears to nullify the impact of the initial "begin," which effectively functioned as a false start. This initial deviation perhaps aimed to momentarily divert the reader's focus as they grapple with comprehending the dialogical structure Roth has crafted. Up until this point, the narrative's primary focus has been the concept of a questionnaire, which, in various ways, conveys the notion of a psychoanalytic session rather than a dialogue rooted in the reciprocal exchange of information. Notably, an evident sense of circularity is established in the questions, especially in the initial pages. Whenever she poses a question ("What's the first thing that would get on your nerves about me?"), Philip consistently counters with another question ("When you are at your worst, what is your worst?"), strategically prompting her to elaborate further rather than providing direct answers. In essence, these questions evolve into not only a questionnaire but also a form of self-examination bordering on obsession. Subsequent sessions witness a progression of these somewhat assertive queries, akin to the expansion of concentric circles. Indeed, Philip inquires about her personality ("Are you a well-balanced and charming extrovert, or are you a neurotic recluse?"), and her response takes the form of a very personal question directed back at him ("How long before you'd be attracted to another woman?"), a query that deftly shifts the discourse toward matters of sexual ambiguity ("Or man"). Consequently, the outcome of this exchange is not just an ambiguous

questionnaire, but rather its antithesis—a form of dialogue that can be aptly characterised as an "anti-questionnaire."

The novel's concluding pages firmly establish that the dialogue surrounding the questionnaire bears no relation to the narrative or the portrayal of betrayal. Beneath the structure of rapid exchanges and the use of a realistic, seemingly transparent language lies the essence of "Deception," which centres on the question, "Should I write it?" The proper inquiry delves into contemplations on the narrative approach and the discourse that may or may not be transcribed. Were narrative creations to encompass every notion traversing an author's mind, chasms would open up, into which the very act of writing, distinct from reality, would plummet. To narrate entails an engagement with the realm of falsehoods, for writing is fundamentally an artifice. It is not truth that is recounted, but rather artful deceptions, sleights of hand, and facades of the self—akin to the manifold masks that every individual dons, much like the characters within "Deception." As the novel culminates, the ultimate extended conversation with his past lover shifts once more toward discussions of books rather than individuals. The central concern shifts more toward the methodology of narration than the content to be narrated, focusing on identifying authentic characters and distinguishing between reality and fiction. The phrase encapsulates this sentiment: "However visible you may be feeling, you weren't identified in that book or made overtly identifiable. However much you may have served as a model, the great British public happens to be ignorant of it

and you only have not to tell them for them to remain ignorant" (Roth 2006, p. 201). Consequently, a recurring theme emerges, echoing the narrative's inception and juxtaposing actual and fictional events. Evidently, for a writer akin to the one portrayed by Roth, his creative fiction holds greater value than the tangible reality that merely serves as a wellspring of inspiration. The tale perfectly exemplifies this sentiment just penned: the utmost priority is to obscure any trace of the source material's identity. It is not coincidental that his lover draws conclusions aligning precisely with the real-life state of affairs, indicating that the writer's preoccupation is predominantly centered around his craft: "What it comes down to is that a woman comes to a man to chat a little, and all the man is really thinking about is his typewriter. You love your typewriter more than you could ever love any woman" (Roth 2006, p. 201, my emphasis). The narrator-protagonist's retort is significant, as, from a narratological standpoint, he conflates the fabrication of fiction (embodied by the typewriter) with the actuality of the model that has spurred him. Characteristically, Philip's existence is woven from a tapestry of written books and those yet to be penned. This is why, within their final extensive telephone exchange, the woman underscores the fact that his book would unfold in an alternative manner, elucidating their emotions with greater clarity: "And it—my book—is all about kissing and telling because if I were to write this book, I would be doing that" (Roth 2006, p. 201, emphasis in the text). In response, Philip suggests that she should endeavour to compose a novel, recounting her own perspective on the events:

‘Should I write it?’

‘I’m not the one to say no, especially as I may do another about you.’

‘You wouldn’t. You’re not. You aren’t, are you?’

Laughing. ‘Yes, of course I will. This’ll be part of it.’

‘Well, I’d be amazed. I would call that scraping the barrel, really.’

‘Don’t underestimate yourself. You’re a great barrel. For me you were.’

‘Was I? Oh, I felt so angry. I was angry for months. Although I was very torn, really, becauseas soon as I read it, I also couldn’t be angry.’

‘Why was that?’

‘Because it was so, so tender... I think. Unless I got it wrong.’

‘No. I thought there were some things you’d like. Things I planted just for you to be amused by.’

‘Oh, there were. I didn’t miss them. It was very strange reading it, absolutely strange. Because I was in no doubt which of them was addressed to me. I may have been wrong

but I felt no doubt. And which bits of it were not, particularly.'

'I'm sure you didn't miss any of it. But that was our life, I thought, as it might have been. Our life also.'

'I saw. I saw. It's such a strange story.'

'I know. No one would believe it. (Roth 2006, pp. 201-202)

The epilogue revisits the book and its creation, stating, "It was very strange reading it, absolutely strange." In this manner, the writer—distinct from Philip in the narrative—conveys that his novel may not yet encompass the entirety of his imagination's constructs of a love story told through the lens of betrayal. Indeed, the phrase "I may do another [book] about you" also communicates to the reader that, from a narrator's perspective, imagination possesses an almost boundless quality. The writer's task is to transform seemingly trivial details into substantial narratives, thereby opening the door to an unending continuum, using the same event as a foundation. This isn't a matter of "scraping the barrel," but rather, initiating the narrative machinery anew. When Philip tells the woman, "You're a great barrel. For me, you were," he is essentially confessing that, for a narrator, there is never an exhaustion of material. Reality is an infinite expanse from which an endless stream of stories can be drawn, an idea eloquently expressed by Maurice Blanchot.

To prevent any potential misinterpretations, the closing lines of "Deception" unequivocally convey that novels are crafted to be read and to represent the enigmatic journey of human existence: "It was very strange reading it, absolutely strange." Undoubtedly, the woman's words are an insightful revelation, akin to an epiphany in reading. The strangeness she alludes to is intricately linked to the capriciousness of human life, the formation and dissolution of relationships, and the "particular web" that embodies our interactions with others and with society at large. Indeed, we coexist in a state of simultaneous isolation and companionship, possessing both autonomy and freedom while being tethered and somewhat confined by emotions, routines, and familial bonds. Philip Roth's brilliance within this specific novel lies in his masterful staging of these facets. He achieves this by magnifying the spectrum of possibilities presented by the art of narration, along with its artifices and conventions. For this very reason, "Deception" can rightfully be regarded, within its metanarrative scope, as one of the most profound embodiments of Roth's experimentalism.

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