

Societal Structure, Family, and Masculinity in the *Bildungsroman*: An Analysis of *The Great Santini* and *Portnoy's Complaint*

By

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Abstract

This thesis considers the idea of Becoming as presented in post-World War II American novels. As a model, the Hero's Journey is presented as a structure in which an individual can achieve freedom and satisfaction through discipline, according to internal psychological forces in combination with external narratives. In the body of this piece, I present two narratives: Ben Meechum's successful journey to adulthood under the cruel tutelage of his father, and Alex Portnoy's journey to an unstable adulthood after choosing a life different from what was modeled by his overbearing parents, who followed strict cultural rules. By comparing a successful journey to one which is unsuccessful, we can note how deviancies in upbringing, according to structures like The Hero's Journey, have a lasting impact on characters as they seek to become well-adjusted, productive adults. We can also note the necessity of Becoming for the success of a character, as well as the fact that completing a Becoming journey is not guaranteed. The Hero's Journey is a literary story structure that appears in these novels and shows a path to Becoming.

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Chapter 1 Introduction and Terminology

Why do coming of age stories exist across cultures? Why, across independently established and developed societies, must young men compete for acceptance within their own society or group, and what does that say about the role of young men in complex human society? How should men order their lives to achieve such an acceptance, and why bother chasing acceptance in the first place? Are we not good enough as we are? And how are such intersections between psychology and history expressed through literature, and what is the role of fiction finding answers to interdisciplinary questions?

We will grapple with such questions in this paper through an analysis of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and Pat Conroy's *The Great Santini*. I aim to answer the questions listed above by conducting a literary analysis of these two popular texts to prove their innate understanding of concepts from various fields like psychology and neuroscience. I believe these texts offer intersections between creativity and science, as character design and story structure meet developmental psychology. This literary analysis will be guided in part by the ideas of anthropologist David Glimore as written in his book *Masculinity in the Making*, as well as recent neuroscientific and psychological research conducted by Simon Baron-Cohen in *The Essential Difference*, in which Baron-Cohen explores the existence and development of what he calls the "systemizing" male brain. As fields of science such as psychology advance, more evidence becomes clear that fiction and story structure often capture truths about the function of the human brain. With this in mind, the lynchpin of the interdisciplinary works listed above will be the popular story structure, The Hero's Journey, as described by Joseph Campbell's famous text, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

It is worth noting that literary studies are inherently interdisciplinary. Great works of literature reflect truths in the development of human psyche, groups, and society. This paper will use newly researched and accepted psychological concepts, as well as an anthropological framework on the development of the human brain, as a roadmap to prove the relevance of two famous texts within the genre of *Bildungsroman*. There is perhaps no better story structure to analyze than the *Bildungsroman* to determine the rules for acceptance within a given society. *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Great Santini* can be analyzed in a variety of ways, but when we study them through the lens of *Bildungsroman*, an analyst can draw connections between story structure and the development of young men into “heroes,” or rather, people who are necessary for the function of society.

Literary studies is an old field. Psychology is relatively new, in its infancy compared to other sciences, like the “pure” field of physics. We see representations of psychology within storytelling across genres, time periods, and literary eras. In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Harari argues that the difference between homo sapiens and all other creatures on earth, including other sapiens, is that:

The ability to create an imagined reality out of words enabled large numbers of strangers to cooperate effectively. But it also did something more. Since large-scale human cooperation is based on myths, the way people cooperate can be altered by changing the myths – by telling different stories... Without an ability to compose fiction, Neanderthals were unable to cooperate effectively in large numbers, nor could they adapt their social behavior to rapidly changing challenges. (Harari 32)

From this perspective, fiction is not only a form of entertainment or a way to make an argument. Rather, fiction serves a unifying purpose. If a story becomes widespread, it can actually shape

the way that a group of people will think, operate, fight, and cooperate. It is important to note that Harari makes little to no distinction between fiction and mythology, as he argues that mythology is simply another form of fiction, only “founded on a belief in a superhuman order” which implied “fundamental laws” within constructed belief systems (Harari 210). Though the superhuman order is absent, what is popular fiction if not a shared cultural mythology that a large audience can grapple with and buy into?

With these ideas in mind, there are many reasons to choose *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Great Santini* for this analysis. These texts have enough similarities to be categorized together, and key differences that allow an analyst to make meaningful comparisons between them. Each text was popular and influential in its own right. *Portnoy's Complaint* was published in 1969 and sold over 400,000 copies in its first year of printing alone, as it received rave reviews from critics while blasting apart taboos in writing about sexual deviancy and family. *The Great Santini* was published in 1976 and became a New York Times Best Seller. The film adaptation garnered \$4.7 million at the box office. In their time of publication and beyond, these books appealed to vast audiences in the United States and beyond. In addition, each text upset traditional Hero's Journey narratives by placing the son in direct conflict with the “frame” of the father; instead of ascending to take the father's place, as is present in the traditional Hero's Journey, the son in each text must establish his own place outside of the father's frame, and grapple with the consequences of such a decision. Additionally, both young men come from complete family units, in which mother and father are both present in the household, as well as siblings. This approach allows a background of family structure through which the characters experience childhood stability, a stability which is upset as the young men transition into adulthood and attempt to establish themselves within American society.

In this text, the term “Becoming” will encompass the story of the *bildungsroman* from a literary, mythological, and developmental psychological perspective. This allows the term to operate as a lynchpin for “coming-of-age” as a concept which appears across different fields.

Another term used in this paper is the “Frame” and “establishment of Frame,” which will describes the structure through which a character orients their goals and actions. The establishment of the Frame is the guiding structure of a character’s life. I have repurposed this idea from the physics term “frame of reference.” A frame of reference is characterized as an “abstract coordinate system whose origin, orientation, and scale are specified by a set of reference points... geometric points whose position is identified... mathematically” (Kovalvsky 1). Applied to a character within this analysis, the establishment of a frame is an essential part to the story of Becoming. A successful adult character will have established certain unassailable values and a structural hierarchy of principles which they use to guide their lives. Usually the system of values is based on the synergy between id, ego, and superego: the unconscious, the conscious, and the societal conscious. The ordered manifestation of synergy between these forces is the Frame that applies to characters who have designed a successful life. This analysis shows that characters without an established frame are often children. Adults without an established frame tend to operate within the world in a manner that is confused or disordered. Such characters tend to be unhappy. Many of them need their own Becoming stories.

Finally, the term “Systemizer” will refer to a character who intentionally orients themselves within their environment, society, or social group, with an eye for placing themselves within a hierarchical social structure. I have borrowed the term from neuroscientist Simon Baron-Cohen. In his book *The Essential Difference*, Baron-Cohen outlines his research in autism and the general conclusions that one can draw about the defining mechanisms of the “male”

brain, which he calls S, or, the “systemizing” brain. Systemizers tend to need a strong Frame to be satisfied. This work focuses on two developing male characters, and so Baron-Cohen’s research is especially enlightening when examining the development of Ben and Portnoy.

Chapter 2 The *Bildungsroman* and Basic Story Structure of The Hero’s Journey

One of the fundamental stories that exists across cultures is the *Bildungsroman*. It exists everywhere. But why? What’s the connection of this sort of story across societies, and why does this structure connect with vast numbers of individuals?

On a universal level, a *Bildungsroman* is a coming-of-age story which allows a reader to follow the journey of a character through a specific set of trials related to a group in order to achieve a place within that group. This symbolic journey, called “The Hero’s Journey,” by Joseph Campbell, is one that all young protagonists must go through and endure, *if* they are to be considered successful, necessary members of their given societies. These stories vary widely, depending on the cultures and social structures involved in their creation; however, the general structure of such stories is remarkably similar. To connect this concept with The Hero’s Journey I will briefly analyze Simba’s story of Becoming as seen in *The Lion King*. This film provides a brief overview of the most basic elements of the story of Becoming that will guide the coming textual analysis.

There are many reasons to use this story as a guiding text. *The Lion King* became an animated film which transcends its “cartoons are for kids” stereotype. The film earned \$968.5 at the box office in 1994, taking the title as the second highest grossing film of all time after *Jurassic Park*. In addition, Disney is known for its adherence to The Hero’s Journey as a basic structure. Screenwriter and consultant Brian Smith reveals that *The Writer’s Journey*, a

screenwriting book based directly on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, actually began as an internal memo circulated at Disney. It was "meant as a guide for developing stories into feature films, becoming required reading for Disney Feature's creative executives, and was essentially their gospel for creating stories over the ensuing decade" (Smith 1).

Considering the success of Disney feature films, we can be assured that The Hero's Journey is alive and well in the American storytelling lexicon. What is it about this structure that is so appealing to audiences? What gives us such satisfaction in reaching the conclusion of such stories?

In *The Lion King*, we follow the Western, Americanized story of a young anthropomorphic lion who must return to his homeland to assume his rightful place as King. The audience meets Simba in his infancy, at Pride Rock, where he is protected and cared for by his mother, and seeks to be like his father, a stern, powerful, relatively cold character. As a child, Simba knows that he must grow and achieve a level of competence in order to be valuable to his society. He says to himself, "I just can't wait to be King"; however, he must wait all the same. He is not quite ready. This natural desire allows the story to progress through the first act of the Hero's Journey, "Departure."

Like a fetus, Simba is protected by his mother. On an archetypal scale, the unripe, unmanly boy, the child, is cared for by "The Mother." While Simba relies on his mother, he is acutely aware of his limitations in heroic endeavors and the fact that he is replaceable; as a child, Simba is incapable of taking responsibility for his society and generating value. This is the cause of great internal suffering for Simba. It is his relinquishing of safety, of the protection of his mother, that he ventures forth for the first time into the realm of the unknown, the shadowy place

of danger and adventure, to prove his powers. The problem with this plan is that he is still a child. Once in danger, he must be rescued by his father.

Mufasa, his father (The father, the superego) is the culmination of all that Simba is not. Mufasa is the statue, the warrior, the God which presides over the world that Simba is not ready to confront. The father is powerful, a master of his chosen and rightful realm. He offers the image of competence that Simba must strive towards.

While Simba ventures into danger before he is ready, he does have the right idea. Simba is desperate to assume responsibility and take his place within his society. This is a critical desire for young people and often the driving force behind the necessity of Becoming. The male hero needs to take responsibility and provide value, and complete acts of service for the community in order to achieve goals larger than themselves. This is not only necessary for the individual, but it is necessary for a functioning society to produce individuals with this desire. Simba is well loved, yet deeply unhappy. Love is a wonderful gift, but not what he needs. What Simba needs is the ability to serve his kingdom.

After his father's death, Simba runs away from home. Simba believes that he is the cause of Mufasa's death, which is the ultimate disservice to his community. The rightful king is dead, and if Simba knows anything at this point of the story, he knows that he is ill equipped to be king. His uncle Scar convinces Simba to run away in shame. Simba listens, unknowingly skirting his responsibilities. This is Simba's first failure and results in his exile into the wilderness and the second act of the Hero's Journey, the "Initiation," noted by Joseph Campbell as the place where the hero must engage with villains, tests and trials, and his own misguided nature.

Simba enters adolescence under the tutelage of Timon and Pumba, a meercat and a warthog. While these characters are friendly enough, upon closer examination we can see that

they are the worst tutors that a young lion could have. They file his claws to make him harmless, and teach him that vegetarianism is the way to live. On top off all this, they teach him that all-encompassing phrase: *hakuna matata*. Your kingdom is suffering? Just don't worry about it, Simba. These lessons weaken Simba and make him comfortable while he ignores his responsibilities.

Dangerous individuals are often disguised as sweet and harmless. The fact of the matter is that Timon and Pumba only want Simba around for protection, and will try with all their might to keep him from assuming his rightful place in the world. All their teachings seem innocent at first. The problem is that Simba is not a meercat, or a warthog, he is a lion. His claws (in this cultural rendition of the tale of anthropomorphic lions) are meant to defend his society against aggressors. Being harmless is not a virtue for Simba, or for any hero. It is a flaw. Simba's place is Pride Rock, but instead, he finds himself hanging out in a hammock underneath a waterfall with his buddies, who keep telling him not to worry about anything as they chomp on insects. All the while his people suffer. In this image we see the angst-ridden teenager who chooses not to grow up.

Simba has repressed his desire to Become because his last attempt was disastrous. Simba's failure rings in his deep unconscious, and it takes a trip underneath the Great Tree, the twisted, tangled basement dwelling representing his deep unconscious, for him to reconcile his fears. Only after this internal confrontation can he forgive himself. With forgiveness comes acceptance. Simba's self-acceptance makes the path clear. He must return and fight Scar, not just for himself, but for his society. He must take responsibility and complete the ultimate act of service for his people.

Once Simba returns and accepts himself as the lion he is, he can return to his home, defeat his evil uncle, and restore order to his homeland. This represents the third and final act of the Hero's Journey, "Return." The defeat of the evil king brings rainfall, and the promise of rebirth. Simba is accepted back into society, and has a cub of his own. At this stage, society has been righted. With structure back in place, it is back to "The Circle of Life" for all the animals in the kingdom. Simba's rebirth in the special world allows him to return and gain the ultimate victory for his kingdom, survival. It is this ultimate act of service that allows Simba to take his rightful place on Pride Rock. We can see that Simba's victory and the reestablished societal Frame is not just better, it is *necessary* for the kingdom to function.

Simba has several massive advantages in his story that must be noted. Firstly, he is the son of a good and just King. On a structural level, Simba knows where he belongs, and those in the world around him know it too. He is given encouragement from many other characters in the text, including Nala and Rafiki, who understand the order of their universe and can provide guidance for him to achieve his rightful place. Purpose is built into Simba's character by nature of his place in the world. At its core, the guiding force in the *Bildungsroman* is purpose, as characters work to determine their place in their society.

A critical factor to note here is that Becoming and acceptance are boons to be won, to be achieved, and not gifts to be received or acquired by luck. As a person or character develops, they gain far more from what they earn than by what they are given. It is often the case that the most satisfaction an individual can derive is from acts of service to one's community. Simba is perfectly primed to give an ultimate act of service by nature of his birthright. Most characters or individuals are not so lucky as to fit perfectly into the cookie-cutter universal archetype of the hero as Simba does. Additionally, an individual may fail to Become or to gain acceptance into a

group for a variety of reasons; lack of competence, insurmountable differences in philosophy or action, unmet requirements, and many other reasons besides. Many individuals fail to Become and gain acceptance from their community. Failure to gain acceptance from one group does not mean that acceptance will forever elude the individual in question. Perhaps there is more to learn, and the character needs more development before they are ready to serve their community. Perhaps the character in question is seeking acceptance from the wrong group.

Individual failures which occur along a journey are not only expected but necessary for the formation of a strong foundation when challenges appear in an individual's lifetime. The only true failure is a final failure, like giving up, or if a hero removes himself (or is removed) from competition outright. The establishment of achievable purpose and structure can limit confusion for a character within a story and allow that character to grow and become valuable to their society. Simba's purposes and desires are achievable. As an audience, we root for Simba's community serving desires. We want to see him achieve his purpose.

When looking at the *Bildungsroman* with this universal lens, we can identify deviations from traditional story structure within a given story. The deviations might be inspired by cultures, societal structures, or individuals. Either way, the deviations allow us to examine the societal or cultural impacts upon an individual as they try to ascend within the structure of their own society or group. Universal and cultural archetypes manifest widely within the *Bildungsroman*. This genre of story can give us much to analyze about the cultures and societies from which they come, through the coming of age of these characters, who, when successful, act as symbols representing the values within the collective unconscious of their societies.

In the story of Becoming, we expect our hero to succeed. Usually they do, but sometimes they fail. A fascinating implication of the genre as a whole is that, while our hero is usually

successful, there are many members of society who are not. What happens when our protagonists fail, or only partially succeed? What happens when cultural values conflict, as is the case with much of American literature?

Chapter 3 Variation of Cultural Standards Within Universal Structure

This analysis will focus on *The Great Santini* by Pat Conroy and *Portnoy's Complaint* by Phillip Roth, published in 1976 and 1969 respectively. Each of these texts can be read as presenting the process of Becoming in America, and the complications of becoming an adult when one is presented conflicting values within groups which compete for individual loyalties.

The United States is the great melting pot of the world. Just like elemental metals melting down to form a stronger alloy, the diversity of people within American culture serves as a cornerstone of the nation. Many works of American literature in the 1960s and 1970s deal with themes of belonging, achieving a state of acceptance from those within accepted societal norms, especially within young men ascending to adulthood. On the other side of the coin, many of these texts serve to explore the role of the outsider, both within the larger content of the United States, within a sub-community, and even within an individual family. These stories of ascension are especially necessary in an era of great change and warfare. In The United States, it was necessary for young people to ascend to help stabilize their society.

The football captain, the preppy cheerleader, the decorated military commander, the rich family man in the city; in this era, the beauty of the standard American life, the American hero, was as visible as it was dazzling. This vision contrasted the experience of many new Americans who also belonged to smaller communities within American society. Conflicting cultural values could be confusing for young Americans who sought acceptance. By comparing what it means to

be an American with what it means to be a successful Jew, or a successful son of a Marine fighter pilot, we can ask ourselves this: is it possible to attain acceptance across different hierarchical structures, and what are the links between such acceptances? Why are such links relevant?

The Great Santini is, in many ways, the story of a young man growing up in the shadow of his self-professed military hero father, while *Portnoy's Complaint* follows the stream of consciousness of Alex Portnoy, a Jewish man who shares a complaint about his continuous internal feelings of strife, which should have been put to rest because of his material success. Our characters of focus, Ben and Alex, are part of larger cultural groups, Jews and military brats, that have their own distinct rituals of Becoming. I would argue that the foremost achievement of these two works is the identification of exactly what these characters are missing in their stories of Becoming, which structural misunderstandings or inadequacies hold them back as individuals. These insights connect the texts with generations of readers and keep the characters and narratives relevant in the cultural lexicon. These texts explore the cognitive confusions of a young character who seeks to establish a Frame in the world, yet cannot work past the fractured Frame that he was offered by his family structure or his group within American society.

In his book *Manhood in the making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*, David Gilmore argues that on the most general scale, every culture designs the rules around what is masculine and manly in different ways. Young men are expected to ascend according to the rules presented by their varied societies and cultural influences, depending on what sort of adult they wish to become. The story of Becoming, and its most basic structure, is not societal; it is universal. On the same note, Becoming is universally necessary for a male to be considered a man within a given society. The individual differences within the story of Becoming, those which go past the structure, are what offer the meat of our analysis.

Think of a skeleton. This structure exists within every human body, with varying degrees of size, shape, and health. The skeleton is the structure of the story. The muscles, sinew, and ligaments atop the skeleton act as the cultural components of the story. These are the ideas behind the plot and characters, the meat of the text. Finally, the skin would act as the prose. Just as each individual has their own idea of beauty, so too do different individuals have a range of ideas about the beauty of prose.

Chapter 4 Portnoy's Complaint: Good American, Jew-ish

Portnoy's Complaint is a wildly funny, taboo shattering novel which follows the life and escapades of attorney Alex Portnoy. On the surface, Portnoy has it all. Born and raised a poor Jew from Newark, David Portnoy has ascended the American social hierarchical ladder by achieving great career success that has taken him to the high-rise apartments on the other side of the city. Portnoy works to help connect the new wave of immigrants with the social services provided to them by taxpayers. He is, in many way, the archetypical defender of the less fortunate, a philanthropist and hero to the needy, the "Father" figure who makes society a better place. He commands a massive salary, helps the poor and disavowed, and is an upstanding citizen in public. He is well known; there are articles about him in the newspaper, and more promotions coming his way. He is dating a beautiful woman, has lifted himself up 'by the bootstraps' to overcome a modest upbringing, and has moved to the side of the city with the important folks. So why is he so unhappy, and why does self-loathing haunt him at every turn? Portnoy wonders, "[I]s this the Jewish suffering I've heard so much about?" (Roth 37).

The novel, told through stream of consciousness in a therapist's office, reveals that Portnoy is trapped by his own childhood and cannot move past the childish desires which were

once denied by his family. Much of the novel describes Portnoy's family, in which his father is a struggling pushover of an insurance salesman, his sister is a plain, often ignored, second favorite child of two, and his mother treats him both like a young prince and an invalid idiot. They share many similarities with the other Jewish families in their apartment complex. Each family member is constantly in each other's business.

His mother Sophie is the powerhouse of the family. She dotes on her only son in a way that he hates, scolds him mercilessly, and cries if he disobeys or conducts himself in a way with which she disagrees. Portnoy describes the way that Sophie looks at his excrement before he flushes to make sure that his gut is healthy, and scolds him mercilessly when she hears that a friend of his ate French fries at a restaurant, a disgusting act that Sophie can hardly believe; an act that she ascribes to her innocent son. Portnoy complains, "who in the history of the world has been least able to deal with a woman's tears? My father. I am second" (Roth 32). In such moments, Portnoy grows to believe that his mother is illogical, and hates that his father never stands up for him, or for himself.

His father, a struggling insurance salesman, allows himself to be bulldozed at work and at home. His father's Frame of the world revolves around sacrifice; he will give up all of himself to his wife to achieve 'peace' at home, and give up all his working hours to society, doing a job he hates, in order to allow his children to become Americans, in a time before Jews faced difficulties being accepted. Such sacrifices seem illogical and foolish to a young Portnoy, who decides that he will be nothing like his father, and will stay far away from the Jewish community that he was raised in. Portnoy is too young, at the time of this decision, to recognize that such sacrifices were made first and foremost for him.

As a teenager, Portnoy resorts to lying and scheming to establish a sense of self out from under the microscope of Sophie's intrusive eyes. He lies about eating, about what he does in the bathroom, and later, as an adult, about how busy he is and what his life is like. As a result, he is unable to hold any relationship beyond superficial attachment. He has not been able to grasp any sense of self. As an adult, he can clearly articulate what went wrong in his childhood, but he is not *over* what happened; he is separated from the events that he never emotionally processed.

The problem of space and boundaries is represented by Roth as emblematic of Portnoy's community as a whole. Even his Jewish neighbor and hero, Heshie, is brought to his knees by parental expectation, as his '*shikse*' girlfriend is paid to break up with him by his own father, because of communal demands that he marry a Jew. Heshie is the strongest, the most manly of the Jewish boys, yet even he is not free from expectations. Portnoy makes it his mission to fulfill boyhood fantasies, to be freed from his parents, "the two... [most] outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time!" (Roth 36). He makes similar remarks about the parents of other families that live in their apartment complex. Portnoy begins to believe that a part of being Jewish means that one is unable to establish boundaries, both within a family and in larger society, and fears that he will be dominated forever, unable to achieve any of his desires of freedom and growth. This understanding of the world steers him far from the Jewish family structure that he grew up with, into a life designed around the unfulfilled fantasies of his childhood; dangerous sex, absence of family, and complete integration with American society at the cost of his Jewish cultural heritage.

Portnoy's Complaint is incredibly vulgar, and chooses to lean into the fantasies of the young male hedonist brain. Portnoy lives a life of devious sexual escapades with all sorts of women, and hides his true nature behind a good boy public persona that he has invented for

himself. Portnoy cannot seem to figure out what is wrong; the reader can see that he was unable to progress naturally from adolescence to adulthood, as he picked up habits of lying and avoiding problems rather than working out a functional system for himself. We can determine that Portnoy's dissatisfaction comes from a lack of Frame.

Portnoy is Jewish, and he has not fulfilled any of the obligations of his Jewish family. In his piece *Portnoy's Complaint: It's about Race, Not Sex*, literary scholar Dean Franco writes "a conventional approach to the question would be to track the character's oedipal rage: Portnoy overthrows his father by attacking his faith in America... Portnoy folds Cold War politics into his rebellion against his family's assimilationist agenda" (Franco 87-88). Portnoy feels the sting of racial separation in the 1960's, "when black and Jewish interests caused friction between the two groups in New York" (Franco 86). Franco describes Portnoy as a man focused on tenets of "the rights of man" and "true liberation from... prejudice" but lives his life in a manner which expresses the anti-thesis of these terms. Portnoy is obsessed with sex and devious sexual acts. As Franco describes, the "exploration of pleasure without limits is understood as a scandal to philosophy's promotion of 'freedom' and human rights," so too, does Portnoy's pursuit of limitless pleasure engage with and scandalize the liberal civic virtue of 'human opportunity'" (Franco 88-89). In short, Portnoy lives a life of hypocrisy. He learned early on that the only way to be free was to lie and hide. Now that he is an adult, he still has not overcome the Frame of his father. Portnoy has tricked himself.

Judaism, despite Portnoy's agnosticism, is an essential part of his psyche, the loudest part of his superego. His father and mother, as well as his community in general, teach him to settle down with a nice, family oriented Jewish woman. He knows the advantages of such a potentially peaceful family life. A Jewish union with a nice woman would fulfill the public image that

Portnoy has constructed for himself; the upstanding social activist who helps those in need from a high powered position. Instead, Portnoy consistently worries about his health while he dates a gorgeous blonde who has exchanged sex for money, which is a crucial factor for Portnoy's orientation of her within his world; with this action, she proves to be distant from the family oriented woman that Portnoy has been taught to seek. The ideal woman is represented by the image of his young, beautiful Jewish mother, whose picture Portnoy picks out and remembers from an old yearbook. Later on, the image of his mother is reflected in Israel.

Portnoy describes his brief fling with Naomi, who he describes as "The Jewish Pumpkin, The Heroine." As the nicknames imply, Portnoy projects all sorts of characteristics onto this girl that he "hardly knew" in order to provide himself with the symbols necessary to overcome his own hedonistic shortcomings. He thinks that she will be his savior. "How my life would change," Portnoy thinks to himself; he would be "a new man! – With this woman!" (Roth 260). Portnoy acknowledges that "within minutes of picking her up... I was seriously asking myself, why don't I marry her and stay? Why don't I go up to that mountain and start a new life?" (Roth 259). He compares a life with Naomi to his own, and claims "I don't want a sexual extravaganza for life, or a continuation of this masochistic extravaganza I've been living either... I want simplicity, I want health, I want her!" (Roth 259). This passage invokes the oedipal complex as Portnoy's desperation with his own actions are revealed, and he believes that, as when he was a child, he could perhaps be rescued and cared for by a woman. He even describes her directly as a "mother stand-in"! It is with surprise that Naomi rejects him, thoroughly and with disgust. She wants nothing to do with sexual deviancy and a complete disregard for family and Jewish tradition. As it turns out, Portnoy's hedonism and masochism have caught up with him. He is not even close to the kind of man that she would want. Portnoy has not stopped to consider that despite his

American material successes, he is a low form of man to a Jewish woman who understands, accepts, and lives within her own culture. At the end of their interaction, in which Portnoy becomes violent and is ultimately defeated, Portnoy claims “she said a kind thing. She could afford to, of course, way up there. She said, ‘You should go home’” (Roth 269). That home of reference is not in Israel, “where other Jews find refuge,” but rather, symbolically, in America (Roth 271).

Back in New York, Portnoy is supposed to visit his family each Friday for Shabbat dinner, but rarely, if ever, attends, a fact that breaks his parent’s hearts. This is the root of Portnoy’s complaint; that he has done everything that he should do, by American standards, and yet, is still miserable, as his superego has yet to work in conjunction with the rest of his decision making process, which relies heavily on his id. Portnoy has become extremely attractive to the blonde women that he had always desired in childhood, but cannot attract a nice Jewish woman, a fact that disturbs him towards the end of the novel. He is, by cultural standards, a successful American and a successful man. He is not a successful Jew, nor a successful communist or rebel, nor, even, a person who stands for freedom from oppression.

Despite his vocal complaints, Portnoy is Jewish boy who is deeply attached to his culture, and thus the desires and wishes of his often hysterical mother. The family is constantly in each other’s business. The success of one member is the success of all, as are the failures. Even after our main character has ascended professionally, there are cultural components of life that he has not completed, so for him, the journey isn’t over, which is a source of frustration for Portnoy. The combination of being an American and a Jew presents an interesting discrepancy between cultural and universal archetypes. Perhaps both must be satisfied for this hero, Portnoy, to finish the journey.

To complicate matters further, Portnoy has an obsession with the ‘goyim’ (those who are not Jewish). To him, the vision of blonde, white America reeks of masculinity and power, “the world of goyim with golden hair and silver tongues,” so strongly, and his own father’s lot in life seems so pitiful, that Portnoy is drawn to stray from his familial roots. Thinking of a particular event when his father collapses under the weight of his wife’s powerful verbal onslaught, Portnoy wonders, “do you think one of those big shots deer hunters with a gun collapses in a chair when he gets caught committing the seventh and starts weeping and begging his wife to be *forgiven?*” (Roth 86). The lecture and pending punishment could be over a case of adultery or the ingestion of the final portion of leftover chocolate pudding; the crimes blend together, such is the force of his mother’s reaction, and her consistent conquering of his father. Portnoy loves his father, but is so disgusted by his father’s Frame. The life that his father lives and the philosophies behind that lifestyle drive Portnoy away from Judaism altogether. Judaism is the representation of the weakness in his father that Portnoy hates.

It’s an incomplete separation. Portnoy wants to be distant from what he is, but he does not quite fit in with goyim. He finds that he doesn’t fit in there, either. Portnoy finds himself stuck somewhere in the middle. Portnoy says of the goyim:

They worship a Jew, do you know that, Alex? Their whole big-deal religion is based on worshipping someone who was an established Jew at that time. Now how do you like that for stupidity? How do you like that for pulling the wool over the eyes of the public? Jesus Christ, who they go around telling everybody was God, was actually a Jew! And this fact, that absolutely kills me when I have to think about it, nobody else pays any attention to. That he was a Jew, like you and me, and that they took a Jew and turned him into some

kind of God after he is already dead, and then... The dirty bastards turn around afterwards and who is the first one on their list to persecute? (Roth 40)

The irony here is that Portnoy identifies the hypocrisy of “goyim” religion, yet lives in a state of hypocrisy himself. Despite his complaint, Portnoy lives in a thoroughly goyim world. He is a bureaucrat, he does not spend Friday’s at home with his family, and he seeks, at all costs, women who aren’t wife material, to avoid the “trap” of being a “good Jew.” While the vision of a beautiful Protestant American life, free from rules of Kosher food and domineering mothers was appealing, Portnoy’s rejection of his own culture leaves him in a state of instability as he tries to make the right decisions in his adult life. He has not taken the time to acknowledge what was good and necessary about his family and culture before he left them behind. In their absence, he finds himself lost.

Portnoy’s complaint stems from an insecurity, his own inadequacy in fulfilling the requirements of his own culture, and the feelings of hypocrisy which come along with his lifestyle. It’s worth noting that Portnoy is well loved by his family and by many members of the American community. Regardless, he is deeply unhappy. This is where systemizing brain comes back into play. Respect and acceptance, not love, would counteract his deepest insecurity. Portnoy continues to operate within the Frame of other people. His own Frame is susceptible to being shattered and discarded by a domineering force. Portnoy has not succeeded in his story of Becoming because he has not designed and fortified a Frame that guides his life. His life, rather, is guided by several pieces of various Frames that he borrows and mismanages. Portnoy does, in fact, have a choice in this case, and an important one. He can choose how to establish his own Frame, and to actually live by that Frame, whatever it may be. An established Frame would allow Portnoy to complete his own Hero’s Journey. He does not have the advantages of a clear

path, like Simba, but he does have all of the structures and skills to create his own place. Joseph Campbell wrote “It is those who know neither an inner call nor an outer doctrine whose plight truly is desperate... In this labyrinth without and within the heart” (Campbell 17). Portnoy’s complaint stems from his own confusion. We hope that he finds a path of self-acceptance.

Chapter 5 The Immature Father and The Standard of Excellence

Bull Meechum is the perfect representation of the fine line between man and boy, mature and immature, established yet scorned by the organization he loves so much; the Marine Corps. He is the ultimate Systemizer to the point that he lacks empathy. Pat Conroy describes the way that Bill views the role of commander within a squadron:

In Bull’s mind, a rational structure that underwent analysis, change, decay, transfusions, and bright injections of insulin whenever he found a flaw undermining the whole system, he plotted out the course of how he would be the best squadron commander in the history of the Marine Corps. In his body he could feel war with Cuba an inevitability and he constantly exhorted the young pilots to hone their skills because he felt that their day of fire was very near. (Conroy 168)

Bull is a natural, in many ways, at identifying the values within an established group of people so that he may join and become an integral part of those groups. Baron-Cohen notes that the Systemizer understands “some actions will cost you rank, other actions will gain you rank, and the good systemizer will be tracking these outcomes” (Baron-Cohen 121). It is in this way that Bull began his service with the Marine Corps and rose through most of the ranks.

Bull’s skill at gaining acceptance are on display during his incorporation at Hobie’s Grill, the town hotspot for ‘lean’ gossip. The community at Hobie’s was “a closed and grandly

intolerant brotherhood” where the regulars had “their family names on the street signs and monuments”; however, Bull is a master at discipline, and identifies that “routine was a powerful icebreaker with the boys” (Conroy 169). Bull starts to show up at Hobie’s every morning during the work week, same time, same stool. He orders the same food and gives the guys a hard time, even on day one, for their Southern ways; specifically, Bull always tries to order hash browns, though the restaurant only serves grits. His first day at the grill, Hobie tells Bull that “we only serve grits. It’s kind of a custom down here.” Bull responds “I wouldn’t mind eating grits if there’s ever a famine” (Conroy 170). In this moment, Bull both establishes himself as a respectable man (there are certain lines he refuses to cross, no matter how mundane, if the lines affect his Frame) and plants himself within the community. The “boys” at the restaurant know that they can trust Bull; he will never be dishonest in order to make them happy, and that allows them to open up to him differently from how they would with most outsiders. It’s one of Bull’s many brilliant entrances within the novel and positively affects his time in the town of Ravenel.

The Systemizing is good for Bull’s own journey, according to his goals and community. But what happens when his role shifts, and he must act as a father? Bull is unable to step aside and allow his son the space that he needs in order to grow and Become. The story is still about Bull.

Here lies the issue that plagues Ben through his whole childhood, as he grows and comes of age under the “reign of Santini.” Any notion that Ben might surpass his father is quickly shut down or made to seem small. Bull is even willing to “sweep the leg” during a game of pickup basketball. Bull was a great basketball player, but missed out on elusive college scholarships thanks to a lack of artistry mixed with a tendency to throw illegal elbows and generally play the game with more contact than was allowed. Ben is an artist. Though smaller than his father, and

kinder, Ben is an excellent player who works extremely hard to become great. Father and son play each other in one-on-one through the years, but things change during Ben's senior year of high school, when he is finally better than Bull, so much better that the cheating, pushing, and punching is not enough to intimidate him.

During a game of one-on-one, the family watches as Ben is about to beat Bull for the first time. When the family members are excited that Ben is about to finally beat Bull, they notice a change in Bull's demeanor. As the game nears its conclusion, Lillian, Ben's mother, as well as Mary Anne, his sister, each try to put a stop to the game. "Why don't we just call it a tie, and call both of you winners?" [Lillian] said. 'I'd quit now, Ben,' Mary Anne advised. 'He's getting that same look on his face that he gets when he runs over turtles on trips'" (Conroy 129).

There is no empathy for the turtles or for Ben. There is only an acknowledgment, due to his own Frame of his family, his castle, his American society, that in order to be "the man," Bull has to be the best at everything, all the time. Being "the best" is another way that Bull covers up his embarrassment at missing a promotion many years prior, just as he has covered his embarrassment at not being good enough to earn a Division I scholarship for basketball. Since he always needs to be the best, the dominant, the winner, none of those who serve under or with him can ever ascend to be better. To put it simply, Bull is a lousy empathizer and teacher, a cause for the military to pass on his promotion many years ago.

Ben beats Bull in the final play of the game. Bull fouls his son hard, then refuses to accept the victory, attempting to change the rules after the end of the game, rules that he instated to give himself an advantage. Bull's Frame is structured around winning all the time, at all costs. It's an immature Frame, as it doesn't allow space for his son, or anyone else for that matter, to grow and achieve.

Bull refuses to pass the torch; he has not yet achieved what he needs to in order to be comfortable with his victories or himself, which places him in a role that passes the “usual” competition between father and son. Bull’s frame of his own manhood is dictated on remaining the best, at everything, and his own son’s ascension therefore cannot be a good thing; rather, he views it as a threat.

This scene is one of the most powerful and memorable of the novel, and comes with Conroy’s direct observations about the role of the son in a certain type of military family:

Ben just walked and with all his powers of concentration rising to the surface of consciousness, of being alive, and of being son, Ben tried not to cry... He wanted to show his father something of his courage and dignity. All the way up the stairs, the ball was hurled against his head. The hair short and bristly from the morning haircut, the head this moment vulnerable, helpless, and loathed. Ben knew that once he made it to his room the ordeal would end, and he would have the night to consider all the symbols of this long march: the heads of sons, the pride of fathers, victors, losers, the faces of kicked wives, the fear of families, the Saturdays in the reign of Santini – but now, now, through this hallway and up these final stairs, I must not cry, I must not cry. (Conroy 132)”

It is a gut wrenching moment. We know that Ben is an empathetic young man, willing to stand up for kids who get picked on in school, a kid who wants to win his father’s approval and live a life that makes him happy. But he cannot accomplish both goals at the same time. To be happy is to forego his father’s Frame and create his own, which is difficult for Ben, as he is still in many ways a child. For now, Ben has learned that “men don’t cry,” and that is the image that he has to uphold until he can escape the situation. With a military haircut that he hates, raised within an

organization from which he cannot escape and a father who mistreats him, Ben represses his emotions long enough to get to his room.

The reader is able to access a small moment of victory, as Ben gets the final line in the exchange; “His father stood in the doorway and Ben heard him say so that the whole family could hear, ‘You’re my favorite daughter, Ben. I swear to God you’re my sweetest little girl.’ Then turning toward the door, blinded by water and light, Ben spit back, ‘Yeah, Dad, and this little girl just whipped you good’” (Conroy 132).

Ben receives love from his mother and siblings, but even Lillian makes some missteps which add to Ben’s difficulties in establishing his own Frame. Lillian says, “‘If it weren’t for you children and our differences over discipline, we would have the happiest marriage possible. All of our fights are over the children.’ Ben untied his shoelaces again and began lacing them up, tighter than before” (Conroy 138). The lacing and unlacing of the shoelaces is one of Ben’s nervous ticks, identified earlier in the book. These ticks appear when he is forced to take blame, in a roundabout way, for the way that his father treats him. The family must appease Bull, no matter what, even at the expense of the children. Due to Bull’s attitude and the way that he treats the family, everyone around him is forced to take blame and question their sense of self for his actions; in this moment with his mother, Ben internalizes the blame for his parents’ ugly marriage, as Lillian (albeit, accidentally) needs to place that blame anywhere but on her husband.

Some of the Marine kids act out. Others, like Ben, must act perfectly. Pat Conroy, a military brat himself, identifies the organization as filled with children who try to compensate in whatever way possible. Ben says “I’ve seen a thousand Marine kids and you and I both know that they’re the most screwed up bunch of kids that ever lived” (Conroy 137). Acting “perfectly”

to the point where he acts out with nervous ticks becomes the only semblance of control that Ben is able to express in front of his mother.

Ben does not lack love. What he lacks is respect, his own Frame, as a person who is trying to grow up and become an established member of society. He lacks the ability to ascend, to climb the hierarchical ladder of importance within the community to become a valuable, respected member of a group. The military is not the group that Ben wants to be part of, yet visions of military prowess haunt his daydreams. Ben believes, deep down, that he can finally throw off the heavy yoke of his father's brutal expectations by becoming a better pilot than Santini ever was. When all is said and done, will Ben actually become a pilot? This fantasy is present in his daydreams, but even to Ben, it seems misguided.

The problem with this conceptualization is that Ben is still using his father's frame of the world to make judgments about himself. Ben hates the military and what it has stood for within his family, but he still sees military prowess as the only way to become a man. He cannot grow beyond his father if he accepts his father's framing of the world. In his case, Ben's superego is stronger than his ego, which leads to the paralysis and disruption of the id.

We do have an immense amount of hope for Ben as he establishes his own frame, independent from his father. After a violent outburst against his family at home, Bull flees into the night, dangerously drunk. Ben is sent out to bring his father home safely, still bruised and angry from their encounter. However, when he finds his father, passed out on the ground,

Ben's rage had fled and it angered Ben that he had no camel hump of spirit where rage could be stored, preserved, and called upon whenever it was needed. Twenty minutes ago he would have spit on this obscenity in the grass or he thought he would have done it... He heard himself saying, unbelieving, unwilling: 'I love you, Dad.' He saw his father

looking over him as though he was witnessing the birth of something wild and schizophrenic in the psyche of his oldest son. Bull pulled away from Ben... and began running into the darkness... He ran in an agonizingly circuitous pattern, weaving and stumbling... unable to escape anything... [Ben] started chanting joyously, teasingly, the master of his tongue again, 'I love you Dad. I love you, Dad. I love you. I love you. I love you. Ben stopped. He was smiling, exhilarated, liberated. (Conroy 431)

Ben is not like his father. He does not carry with him the disappointment, the rage, or the close to psychotic commitment to excellence that trumps all else in Bull's life. It's in this moment that, for the first time, Ben can see his father for what he truly is; not a perfect specimen, but rather, a lost and immature man, who has built up a front of perfection to hide deep insecurities in self. In this moment Ben is able to chase his father down and "turn him like a steer" (Conroy 431).

In her book *Understanding Pat Conroy*, Catherine Seltzer argues that "*The Great Santini* engages in a complicated consideration of a broader form of paternalistic power... in particular the ways that institutionalized constructions of masculinity shape identity" (Seltzer 29). Bull's ideas of masculinity and his Frame were developed in accordance with the Marine pilot doctrine. The focal point of the Marine pilot doctrine is excellence, and more specifically, being better than everyone else, which becomes Bull's understanding of manhood. Seltzer argues that this understanding of masculinity "warps [identity] to the point of alienation" (Seltzer 29). Bull is unable to acknowledge that the Marine pilot way is not the only way. Ben is the one who suffers most because of Bull's rigid Frame. At the end of the book, Ben is able to recognize that his own Frame of the world, one day, will perhaps be built upon something more natural to him, like love.

Despite his immaturity, Bull displays many characteristics of excellence in his commitment to the standards of the Marine Corps, and by extension, the defense of his country and community. Bull is disciplined, athletic and strong, smart, and fiercely defensive of his family in the face of danger. By extension, he defends his country with the same brutality that he beats the snot out of the bullies that follow Ben home from school. Bull can be described as a man bred for war, living in a time of peace. When Bull goes down in his fighter, his superior, Varney, relates the fact that “he went down about ten miles east of here, We don’t know if he punched out or what. He was trying to fly his bird away from town” (Conroy 456). This is reflected in Bull’s final thoughts that Conroy gives the reader: “Populated areas. The phrase meant something to Bull. That was where people lived and slept, where families slept. Families like my family, wives like my wife, sons like my sons, and daughters like my daughters” (Conroy 453). This is the ultimate expression of empathy from the great Systemizer and Marine, as he risks his own life to avoid causing damage to the innocent American people below, who he swore to protect. They are his people. His role is to protect them.

Only after Bull’s death can Ben ascend to his place and continue his own journey of Becoming. When Bull’s body is found by the men from Hobie’s Grill, who have searched all night for his body, Ed Mills tells Ben, “You become a man this morning, Ben. They found your papa. He’s dead, son” (Conroy 459). Bull’s frame fades into the background with his death. With the death of the old frame, we have hope that Ben will be able to Become and establish his own. We also wish the best for the rest of the young family who survive their father.

We do root for these characters to succeed in the face of the hardships they encounter. Each of these characters does, in fact, work hard to attain the skills necessary to achieve Becoming within their given structures, though they are held back by what the reader could

understand as unprocessed psychological confusion, misunderstood influences on the psyche, or direct interference from figures who represent the superego. With such difficulties, this begs the question, what is the role of Systemizing if these male characters are to be accepted within their societies and complete their journey of Becoming?

Chapter 6 Systemizing and the “Male Brain”

When cultural values conflict within a character, a character or person must look to universal tools in order to establish a new Frame. One such tool is The Hero’s Journey, and another is Systemizing. These tools exist across cultures, and operate in a way that can break through boundaries and borders which might inhibit a character’s understanding of the world.

How do concepts of Systemizing align with The Hero’s Journey? How much of these representations of American Becoming and acceptance are societally driven, and how many are universal? Or, are they all attached to the experience of each individual character in question? Is it a coincidence that these similarities exist across texts, or is there something more? Why the focus on systems; aren’t all people completely, absolutely different, with minds that process the material of the world on an individual basis?

I would argue that literature is the record of the human experience, and before the field of psychology (still in its infancy, compared to other “purified fields,” like physics) existed, if one wanted to understand the operations of the human and individual experience, there was literature. Becoming mythology exists, with cultural differences, across cultures, civilizations, and time periods. It is only recently that studies on the brain have come to support these stories as necessities for the survival of an individual or culture; an understanding of the necessity of Becoming and how Becoming situates an individual within their society is part of what Simon

Baron-Cohen argues is essential to a good “systemizing” brain, or an S type brain, also called the “male” brain.

In *The Essential Difference*, Baron-Cohen makes the case that concepts of masculinity and manhood can be recognized in behavior as a natural expression of the “male brain” which he labels S, or “systemizing.” The selection of his data was rigorous, and much of the data was collected during the first hours following birth, which Baron-Cohen argues, eliminates the possibility of social conditioning as a cause for differences in behavior. Baron-Cohen goes on to argue that through research conducted on socialization within humans and monkeys, there are key aspects to evolution which led to the development of masculinity and the necessity of male systemizing. Baron-Cohen writes:

It turns out that a lot of socialization is about gaining, maintaining, and improving your social rank... It is not hard to see why your rank, and your skill at negotiating the ranks, determines your survival chances. For one reason, to be socially excluded is to lose the protection of the group. Equally, if you fail to recognize your place in the social system, you risk a conflict with someone higher up who also needs to protect his or her own social rank... Among monkeys, for example, a shocking 50% of adolescent males are killed in conflicts over status. (Baron-Cohen 120).

Baron-Cohen argues that the importance of interpersonal social systems for monkeys is similar to that of humans, though monkeys do have fewer avenues of self-expression, so their method of transitioning between places in the social system is usually violence. Humans have far more avenues for social mobility, however Baron-Cohen argues that such research on monkeys is directly applicable to humans. The prolific Systemizer will situate themselves firmly within the social hierarchy in a place that is both as high as possible and stable. The ineffective Systemizer

will be unable to establish himself and risks disturbing the system, and coming into conflict with other Systemizers. For monkeys, such misunderstandings result in violence. Humans can often avoid violence when social status is called into question; sometimes, however, even humans become violent. We see this on many occasions in *The Great Santini*, when Bull fights with other men in the military to assert dominance, when Ben sticks up for a smaller boy and embarrasses a bully, and many other occasions aside. We see violence in *Portnoy's Complaint* when Portnoy is rejected by the Israeli woman, who embarrasses him by calling his manhood into question. Even for humans, such questions of status and placement within systems can become violent. Essentially, it is a matter of life and death for a young man to recognize and place himself properly within his society in order to achieve the safety which comes from acceptance.

This passage reminds us, too, of Bull Meechum's basketball game with his son Ben, and the metaphysical battle that was taking place beyond a simple game of pickup. Bull, yet to achieve his final stage of Becoming, is still much like the adolescent monkey (and is at times, even described by his son as an ape) who has not yet firmly situated himself within the group. Therefore, any defeat or deviation from his own social framing must be viewed as a threat. Bull cannot lose in a game of basketball because it is still a sore spot for him; he wasn't able to play for the team that he wanted in college. After his defeat, Bull leans on abuse, both to keep his son in line and to feel better about his own internalized inadequacies. The reaction shows immaturity within Bull and keeps Ben from celebrating his own moment of Becoming. The immaturity of the father stunts the growth of the son.

On the other side of the same token, Portnoy witnesses the repetitive 'emasculatation' of his father by way of his mother's dominance. This has a great effect on Portnoy, who cannot bear

to give a women, or anyone else for that matter, even an ounce of “control” over him as he grows up. Portnoy says of his father:

In that ferocious and self-annihilating way in which so many Jewish men of his generation served their families, my father served my mother, my sister Hannah, but particularly me. Where he had been imprisoned, I would fly: that was his dream. Mine was its corollary: in my liberation would be his – from ignorance, from exploitation, from anonymity. To this day our destinies remain scrambled together in my imagination. (Roth 8)

Portnoy’s relationships with others become about control, power, and dominance, because to him, that is how loved ones and caretakers interact with each other. There is always a loser and winner, a right and wrong; and in his tiny household in the Jewish neighborhood of Newark, the one in the wrong is the man. Portnoy watches his father’s lot in life with more than an ounce of fear and steers himself into different sorts of trouble as he tries his best to avoid the sort of home life in which he grew up. Where the father has failed, Portnoy has a duty to succeed. What Portnoy fails to acknowledge is that, in the small Jewish community of Newark, raising successful Jewish children was the ultimate societal boon. His father, according to the highest measure of his own Frame (being a good Jewish man) was therefore a success. If Portnoy chooses to view his father as a failure, it will disrupt the development of his own frame, his own hierarchy of values; this could be said to be the cause of Portnoy’s inability to attract the one type of woman that he really wants, the “nice Jewish woman” with whom he can raise a family.

Portnoy thinks back to a moment in his childhood, when “a terrible act has been committed and it has been committed by either my father or me. The wrongdoer, in other words, is one of the two members of the family who owns a penis” (Portnoy 87). He does not remember

what the problem was, only that he and his father suffered a verbal berating from his mother, perhaps for his father's perceived adultery, perhaps for his going out in the sun too long or eating French fries at a local restaurant. No matter the crime, Portnoy resents his father for not standing up for himself; "How long did the whole thing last that you should suffer such damnation from her mouth – such guilt, such recrimination and self-loathing!" (Roth 88). Portnoy cannot see the benefits of his father's life, aside from the ability to raise nice children. It is not enough of a reason for Portnoy to steer into a traditional Jewish life. He would prefer to be the playboy in a New York high rise apartment.

Yet, Portnoy is extremely unhappy. Sure, goes on all the best trips to Europe and Vermont, with a beautiful girl on his arm. He minds not the cost, spares no expense, and he has the means for such decisions, though he reflects on how money meant a lot more when he was growing up with less. Extravagant spending is what a great American should do, right? That is what he has earned... Right? Surely, that is the goal of every young man, to be able to do what you want, when you want it, all the time? To be respected and upstanding (to the public, at least), to live in a way that no one can tell you what to do?

Roth tells us, through Portnoy, that this sort of lifestyle is not, in fact, desirable. Portnoy has become so focused on getting away from his family that the escape has taken the place of establishing a real frame, based on values and principles. Instead, sexual deviancy takes center stage as Portnoy spins his wheels, dating women he knows he will not marry, for whom he has little respect to begin with, as he works a stepping stone job and avoids spending time with his family. Who could be happy in such conditions? This is the lifestyle of the Systemizer who has tricked himself into living a shallow life. Portnoy has misidentified what he needs, and is stuck in a state of perpetual Becoming and adolescence.

Baron-Cohen is careful to note that many of the studies that he references, for one defined reason or another, show that “sex difference in... preference was still found; cultural stereotyping cannot explain the result of [these] experiment[s]” (Baron-Cohen 58). He claims as well that “the accumulation of evidence from independent laboratories over many decades persuades me that there are essential differences that need to be addressed. The old idea that these might be wholly cultural in origin is nowadays too simplistic” (Baron-Cohen 10).

I note these discoveries in order to further narrow the focus of this analysis, as well as to suggest that further literary studies could be produced which would allow the enhancement of understanding and connections across cultures. Literature and storytelling are great cross-cultural unifiers.

Chapter 7 Becoming: A Narrative of Developmental Psychology

In his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt creates a powerful metaphor to represent the psychological functions of the human brain. He describes an elephant with a human rider; along with the human rider, there is another, older human, who does not have control of the reins, but tells the rider exactly what he should do, influencing his decisions as he attempts to retain control over the elephant. The elephant itself is the unconscious id; the rider is the ego, and the opinionated passenger is the superego. Within this metaphor is the representation of the three most important elements of the human decision-making process, along with their corresponding power.

Universal archetypes are attached to the elephant, the deep unconscious that exists within individuals across societies. The elephant is the most powerful and the least understood, the hardest to control or influence. The ego is the driver. He holds the reins; he is the conscious

mind, seeking to live the life that he has chosen, doing his best to steer his powerful subconscious in the right direction. The opinionated passenger is the superego. The passenger sits higher up than the driver; he is covered with a royal umbrella, and believes that his duty is to steer his young, irresponsible driver. He has quite a few opinions, some of which are relevant, some which are not. This passenger represents society; societal expectations, conventional wisdoms, and cultural archetypes. The passenger will diverge widely depending on which society he represents. Studying the relationship between these influences can be beneficial for individuals who seek to understand themselves and develop purposeful structure in their own lives.

The elephant, the id, is more powerful than either human. The rider can learn to control the elephant as much as he can, and will grow better with experience, though the elephant will always be more powerful. The opinionated, older passenger is always there to make the rider uncomfortable, and attempt to influence him, and criticize him for both his and the elephant's actions. The same can be said for literary characters. This metaphor allows us to perform critical readings on characters who appear in literature, and determine their relevance as representatives of their group or society.

Portnoy's elephant, his id, steers him in the direction of dangerous sex and general mischief. His ego cries out in pain and longing for that which he cannot understand. His superego is split in two; the American side tells him that he is perfect, while the Jewish side deteriorates from lack of acknowledgment. Portnoy needs to acknowledge and heed the voice of his superego, specifically the Jewish side, if he is to learn how to be happy. He cannot simply pretend it does not exist for the sake of hedonism.

Ben's elephant steers him towards being a good person, far away from the drama and neglect of the military family unit. His ego is torn; on one hand, he acts out of love when he trains for a basketball scholarship or sticks up for his friends and sister. On the other, he injures a boy during a basketball game because of his father's advice, and daydreams about becoming a military fighter pilot just to show up his dad. Since the ego is torn, Ben is unable to establish a Frame; the ego is the most important aspect within this metaphor to establish if one has a goal of a strong Frame. Finally, Ben's superego is the military community of Marine fighter pilots, represented in the physical world by his domineering, cruel father.

For true fulfillment, a character must fulfill the id, ego, and superego; the conscious ego must satisfy the elephant and the critical passenger. Each successful character must fulfill their basic innate desires, while simultaneously satisfying their cultural expectations, in the process of their individual pursuits, to attain a sense of internal order. It is quite a tall task to satisfy each of these requirements simultaneously. That is a lot of voices for one character to deal with!

A character can only become satisfied through the adherence to and acceptance from varied, hierarchical orders of thinking, represented by these various internal voices. The Superego must be understood and satisfied, whether its rules and structures be inherited or chosen. The id must be acknowledged and reined in. The ego must be confident and mature in order to steer. Each of these internal acceptances of self and society are necessary. If not, a character must be willing to separate themselves from a particular group entirely.

Contemporary American literature has often shed the light on some of these characters who do not find synergy between id, ego, and superego. Additionally, we can note that narratives of Becoming are highlighted in many of the most popular stories that exist across cultural mythology. Once we understand the most basic aspects of the Becoming story, we can identify

universal standards, as well as the areas where cultural standards deviate from the universal. It is possible to achieve a balance between the id, ego, and superego.

We've noted concepts from fields of literature, psychology, gender studies, and history. How does fiction act as an interdisciplinary lynchpin between these fields of study?

Chapter 8 Conclusion

No matter the language, hierarchical structure, or rituals, each culture has its own fictional stories of Becoming. The *Bildungsroman* exists across cultures. One of the primary goals of this kind of story is to set the systems in place for individuals to understand their role as necessary members to a functioning society or group. While *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Great Santini* are specific to American culture, each can be analyzed to capture the conjunction between The Hero's Journey story structure and the "systemizing" male brain that appears within "successful" societies. The existence of these connections proves that these stories, and the necessity of individual development displayed within them, aren't just cultural. They are, rather proof of either a deep connective unconscious, or perhaps, the necessity of such stories in order to produce individuals which prop up their societies, and increase the chances of survival against the crushing wheel of progressive history.

Let us take this idea a step further. If we are to agree with historian Yuval Harari in that "telling effective stories is not easy... Yet when it succeeds, it gives Sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate" (Harari 31) then how exactly to do view the role of the story of Becoming? Are these cultural mythologies indicative of a universal unconscious, as posed in part by Campbell? Or, could it be that those cultures who developed the Becoming story and integrated it within their mythology and accepted fictions that were the

cultures that were able to survive, as human groups combined over thousands of years? Is the Becoming story indicative then, not of a deep unconscious, but rather a mark of a storytelling society intent upon long-term success?

These are questions that could be answered as the field of psychology continues to develop, in an interdisciplinary way, along without understanding of history and the role of fiction within societal development. For now, we can simply conclude that there are hierarchical levels, or an order of importance, in the deeds which are considered necessary for the survival or even basic function of a society. Many of these deeds and structures are passed on through popular stories and mythologies.

In the stories examined in these pages, young men must become Heroes of sorts in order for their society to survive and thrive. The metaphysical function of the successful hero's actions, to ensure the survival of his society. Heroism is determined largely by the task which the hero is charged with completing, and the relative importance of that task to the society or group to which the hero is a part. Heroism is always contextual in this manner; we can examine individual cultures or group by the task that is necessary to complete, with Richard Slotkin would call a "cultural mythology", or we could examine, near the top of the hierarchical structure of analysis, the notion that all male heroes are required to protect or conserve their group's survival in some way or another. The masculine hero is not just an arbiter of dramatic events; he is a necessary fulcrum in a machine that will collapse without him. The mark of a satisfied male character is one who has become a necessity. His world would be different without him. In some ways, he has for the first time become irreplaceable.

The ways in which Portnoy and Ben become irreplaceable, or fail to do so, is a direct mark of their success or failure to grow up and Become. Similarly, the ways in which they

adhere to the cultural values that are passed down to them by their respective groups show the distinctions between their societies. Campbell writes “we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread” (Campbell 18). Though Becoming rituals are different across cultures, the fact is that, for boys to transition to men, they must successfully embark on the journey and succeed, or risk internal suffering, as well as the suffering and potential dismantling of their individual groups or societies.

Perhaps it is not surprising that much of the literature produced which exemplifies American culture in the late 1900’s, the aspects pertaining to Becoming, acceptance, ostracization, and success, could be seen as an exploration of the larger, universal masculine hero mythology. The American version is certainly not the first cultural expression of such stories. They have existed across civilizations since evolution first led to the development of new, powerful brains within humans during the paleolithic period. These texts are simply a contribution to a much longer history that details the necessity of Becoming for the proper function of the individual and their society. It is our hope that these characters, can accept the aspects of themselves that cannot change, and change the aspects that are necessary for success. It's what we come to hope for ourselves, when we commit to achieving our goals.

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