



## Abraham Maslow's Notion of Self- Actualization in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 08 June 2023 Revised: 12 Sept 2023 Accepted: 17 October 2023	<p>This article makes the argument more specifically on the humanistic psychology; a vibrant movement of the late 1950s; emphasizing the qualities, growth, need, creativity, and motivation of an individual. Philip Roth's <i>American Pastoral</i> was an American classic, a novel of American culture. It is not only a biography, but an intensive interpretation of the fall of American dream. The author demonstrates the <i>American Pastoral</i> from the humanistic point of view. This paper attempts to analyse the humanistic attitudes and values in the novel <i>American Pastoral</i>. The process from the basic to the being needs in the novel is being critically expressed within the framework of the humanistic psychology.</p>
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	<p><b>Keywords:</b> American dream, betrayal, success, personality, and self-actualization.</p>

### Introduction

Kurt Goldstein introduced the term 'self-actualization', but Abraham H. Maslow explored and popularized it as a concept of self-development. Maslow added how actualization can emerge as a motivator to actualize the full potential of oneself. Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* illustrates this aspect.

### Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* as Everyman's Tragedy

The novel *American Pastoral* can be considered as a tragedy and Roth has explicitly evoked the tragic elements in the novel by representing the story of Seymour Irving Levov. Swede is initially being portrayed as having a famous and very stunning wife. "During the week in September 1949 leading up to the Miss America Pageant, when she called Newark every night from the Dennis Hotel ..., what radiated from herself was sheer delight in being herself" (Roth 5.7). Swede was having a lovely home and running his family business like a charm. Swede is unprepared to witness things going wrong. This person is not prepared for the worst-case scenario of life.

It was published in 1997 was a critical analysis of the demise of American dream. The loss of meaning in life, innocence, and success echoes throughout the novel. *American Pastoral* is in a sense, the tragic story of a brilliant man. Another narrative involves the tragedy that everyone experiences when life takes unexpected turns. "The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy – that is every man's tragedy" (Roth 94). Nathan Zuckerman is an alter-ego writes the story of his childhood idol Seymour Levov who was a talented and a very famous athlete. Seymour's fate drastically made a shift from the very fascinating aura of success to an aura of sorrow and failure.

In Nathan's memories of his time at Weequahic High School in Newark, New Jersey, Seymour Levov, sometimes known as "the Swede" comes to the mind. Zuckerman and Jerry Levov the swede's younger brother were buddies in the high school. The swede had been a star athlete in the basketball and football. He had been

a tall boy and having blonde hair. He was being admired by his Jewish residents of New York as well as his fellow pupils. "Of the few fair – complexioned Jewish students in our predominantly Jewish public high school none possessed anything remotely like the steep- jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue- eyed blond" (Roth 1). After completing high school, college, and a military service, he married Dawn Dyer, Miss New Jersey, and an Irish Catholic girl. Seymour took over his father's glove manufacturing company in New York. Seymour and Dawn settled in the rural community of old Rimrock, New Jersey where they had their sweet daughter Meredith/ Merry.

Zuckerman encounters Swede twice after high school. First in 1985, Zuckerman travels to New York City to attend a game. They have not seen one another in 36 years. Swede is still attractive. Swede still remembers Nathan Zuckerman. After conversation with each other, they separate. The Swede sends Zuckerman a letter in the year 1995, ten years later, inviting him to dine in New York. He asked Zuckerman to assist him in creating a tribute for his father, Lou Levov.

Zuckerman needs Miami based Jerry Levov at his Weequahic High School for 45<sup>th</sup> reunion. Zuckerman meets Jerry Levov who informs him that the Swede passed away recently from prostate cancer. Zuckerman is in disbelief. Even more shocking to him is the revelation that Merry, the Swede's daughter blew up the Old Rimrock post office in 1968 to oppose the Vietnam War. Merry fled to live as a fugitive underground after the bomb killed a man. Jerry informs Zuckerman that the Swede's life was completely shattered because of that bomb. "The loneliness he would feel as a man without all his American feelings" (Roth 53).

Mary plants a bomb in the town's post office in 1968 when she is a teenager, killing a man in the process. Merry is angry with the world and finds her focus in being angry about the war. She runs away and her father searches for her desperately for years until finding her in Newark living in poverty. That's just the beginning of the Swede's life's downward spiral. Merry's life has been miserable ever since the bombing, marked by poverty, two rapes, residing in several communes and having passionate relationships with women. She even planted two more bombs which resulted in two more fatalities. Sheila Salzman, her speech therapist was the first person to hide her as revealed by Merry herself. The Swede finds it hard to accept that Merry's life has come to this. Her stench repulses him, and he vomits. She resists his requests to return home with him, so he abandons her in Newark. The Swede then tells his brother Jerry over the phone about seeing Merry. Jerry rants at the Swede telling him the entire situation was his, rather than consoling him.

Literature reflects life and life always takes place in the mental arena. The younger sibling of literature- psychology is focused on the human mind as well as human behavior, emotions, dreams, and desires. The Behavioral movement emerge in society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with an idea that understanding human behavior is important for analyzing social and political realities. The power of psychology is increasing every day. Understanding human ability and appreciating its fundamental values are now crucial for achieving greater results in any sector.

In response to the Psychoanalysis and Behaviorism- Humanistic psychology evolved as the third force. Not as a system, but as a movement that began to take shape in the early 1960s. Humanistic psychology is a movement that has brought together psychologists from many specialties. It was created in response to the first two factors and focused on both the individual's capacity for development as well as his subjective experiences. Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, the two founders of Humanistic psychology, downplayed the significance of the unconscious mind and the environmental stimuli. The humanists placed emphasis on conscious, logical, free-will creativity and choice of an individual.

Not all humanists share the same opinions. It is a system made up of academics and scholars from many disciplines who identify as humanists. This system was put into place in 1962 when Abraham Maslow who is generally regarded as the founder of Humanistic psychology, and his adherents gave it that name. Humanists thought about examining a person. All actions and behaviors were examined while considering a person's entire life history. Humanistic psychology views the individual as a complete organism and interprets a person's conduct by looking at their full life trajectory. The first two forces of psychology gave rise to the Humanistic system. Behaviorism, according to humanists, ignores the entirety of human being and all its processes. Maslow claimed that behaviorism viewed people as organisms that respond to environmental stimuli. In addition to behaviorism, psychoanalysis was also opposed by humanism since it places a man inside

the realm of instincts and conflicts. Maslow stressed that psychoanalysis does not consider mentally fit persons and exclusively investigates abnormality in living beings. He brought Humanistic force to the forefront to bring out creativity, personality, and desires of an individual.

Although emphasizing on an individual's inherent potential, humanists also stressed the value of development and the need to achieve self- actualization. Maslow contends that the person has inherent goodness and is deserving of realizing their potential. He continued by saying that human beings' divergence from this natural propensity is the cause of all problems, social or mental. Humanistic psychology looked at the whole individual. Because the personality is investigated as an individual's subjective experience, the term phenomenology resonates with the Humanistic method. This theory takes the holistic view of human existence and places a strong focus on concepts like human potential, spirituality, individual accountability, and self-actualization.

### **Needs And Self-Actualization in *American Pastoral***

There are five different levels of need arranged in a hierarchical system by Abraham Maslow.

There are two levels of needs - the higher and the lower order needs. The idea behind the Maslow's Humanistic theory is that the higher order needs become the motivating factors for an individual once he satisfies the lower order needs. The five different needs in the hierarchy are:

1. Physiological needs
2. Safety needs
3. Love and belongingness needs
4. Esteem needs
5. Self- actualization needs.

Philip Roth, an American novelist, has written several short stories, essays, and novellas. He is one of the most prolific American writers. He was awarded with several prestigious awards for his immense contribution in the field of American literature. Roth's character in the novel *American Pastoral* is not static. His character represents the process of development. His character represents his amazing journey of life. The ripeness of life has been attained by Seymour at the very end of his life. The growth towards maturity has been clearly observed in the character of Seymour Irving Levov. His character symbolizes a responsible youth. Surroundings play a pivotal role in shaping his character. Some sort of harmony exists between his character and surroundings.

The novel *American Pastoral* traces and exciting progression of Seymour from a child to a teenager and then to an adult. The relationship he had with other people from an important role in his life. The important part of Seymour's life has critically been explored and explained. He is a kind of a person who is ready to accept challenges in life. With positivity and optimism, Seymour Irving Levov embarked on a new journey with great hopes and aspirations. One can trace the impact of environment on Seymour.

Maslow and Rogers, the two great pioneers of Humanistic Psychology put great emphasis on the importance of a fully functioning being. To become the best version of oneself is the aim of everyone and such version is termed as self- actualization. This version is the highest order a person can reach up to. An individual can achieve physical, emotional, material, or spiritual potential in his life depending upon the path and individual chooses in his life. One individual is different from the other one and so is his experiences, dreams, and aspirations. Although the experiences are unique in nature but the underlying mechanisms in individuals remain same- the process to achieve self-actualization.

Maslow in his theory of Hierarchy of needs portrayed the concept of self- actualization.

He discussed a hierarchical level of needs to be achieved before reaching the optimal state. The different levels in the hierarchy indicate the stages of fulfillment in an individual that led him to seek higher order needs in life. To become psychologically and physically healthy, an individual needs to reach the optimal state in the hierarchy- self- actualization. According to humanists, the desire or the inquisitiveness in an individual to attain self- actualization is innate and can never die. Every person in the universe is walking on the path of learning and attaining the self- actualization but it is their level of growth that varies.

The character of Seymour Irving Levov is an epitome of what humanists try to establish- that everyone's innate desire is to grow and learn. One can see his inclination towards growth and attaining mental and physical freedom. Everything that is related to Seymour- be it his family or environment contributed a lot to make him a matured being. A lot many instances are there in Seymour's life that alter his overall personality. Nathan represented the life of Seymour in an exciting way and transformed his aura from the very raw form to a matured form. Several ups and downs were there that made Seymour's personality to blossom at each part of the novel.

Seymour Irving Levov grew up in the shadow of his parents. He had an inclination for his parents which represents his fulfillment of his first order of needs as mentioned in Maslow's theory. He had an affectionate, warm, cozy and secure relationship with his parents. It is evident that Seymour's basic physiological needs were fulfilled as he had a comfy place to stay in, family to share food with and a very safe environment to live in. He received unconditional love from his parents. As he was an athlete he is seen as already in touch with the nature and this touch with the nature provided him with much needed warmth care and affection.

Seymour's basic physiological needs have been met- he then moved towards the next order of needs- need for safety. Seymour is physically and mentally safe as he was provided a safe and secure environment by his parents. This represents a healthy psychological mechanism in his life. He fulfilled the second step of ladder of hierarchy of needs as he did not perceive any sort of danger in his surrounding and always felt safe and secure. From the very young age, the sense of safety, security, confidence, and mental peace was engraved in Seymour's mind. The environment that surround him gave him an opportunity to grow and achieve mental peace and freedom. Seymour Irving Levov is a strong, secure and a confident being and is easily noticeable in his personality.

Seymour received unconditional love and positive regard from his loved ones which made him to develop with utmost confidence. His life was filled with love and acceptance from the parents. Such love, security, and safety he received made him to walk in the direction of becoming a fully- functioning being. The positive environment he received allowed him to grow and foster. "The person in peak- experiences feels himself, more than other times, to be the responsible, active, creating center of his activities and of his perceptions. He feels more like a prime- mover, more self- determined (rather than caused, determined, helpless, dependent, passive, weak, bossed). He feels himself to be his own boss, fully responsible, fully volitional, with more "free- will" than at other times, master of his fate, an agent" (Maslow 100). Seymour has fulfilled the basic physiological, safety and belongingness needs. He was in a stage where he fulfilled the first three order needs. He handled his father's business like a charm. He run his father's glove manufacturing company with full passion and enthusiasm. He became a reputed being in the society. Seymour fulfilled all his intellectual cravings. His self- esteem grew when he is considered as an important being. Both his family and environment had an important contribution in establishing Seymour's self- esteem. The unconditional positive regard provided by his family fostered his sense of self and contributed to the development of a fully functioning being.

Seymour became a self- actualized being. He became what he aspires for. He married Dawn Dyer, the love of his life. He was happy and contented. But life has some different plans for him. He was living a reputed life and suddenly, he faces a downfall in his esteem. He has earned a great deal of success in his life but fate hits him so hard. Tragedy befalls upon him when he realized that his own daughter is solely responsible for planting a bomb which resulted in a fatality. "False optimism sooner or later means disillusionment, anger and hopelessness" (Maslow 142). Seymour was immensely affected to encounter this. He was disheartened because the most crucial person in his life- his daughter Merry had done the disastrous thing. In the wake of such event, he received to the stage two and three of Hierarchy of Needs. He found it extremely hard to deal with such event. He lack the love, care, sympathy, and esteem in his life. He felt all alone now. The reader can witness Seymour's needs change from the fifth stage to the second and the third stage where he feels the lack of safety and belongingness.

All these events hit him so badly that he detaches himself from the outer world. He remained fixated in the second and the third stage as the current need of Seymour now becomes the need for care and affection. He felt relaxed and at peace with himself. The traits of strength and development are quite evident. Seymour searches for his daughter here and there. And finally, he met her, he got stunned and shattered to see her

condition and forced her to move with him, but she denies. Seymour broke all his bonds and connections with his daughter and came back home. He tried hard to again get back to the path of learning, development and achieving self- actualization. He wanted to foster the mental peace and security back in his life, but he was internally so broken- which makes this process of achieving self- actualization more tedious.

In the novel, Seymour Irving Levov can be seen as possessing several characteristics. He is represented by Nathan as a kind of man who has a clarity of thoughts and strong preferences in life. "...to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow 46). He can make judgements, viewpoints and always staying conscious of the thoughts. His life was filled with love, warmth, care and affection. Nature, learning, and surroundings played a pivotal role in his life. "The good or healthy society would then be defined as one that permitted people's highest purposes to emerge by satisfying all their basic needs" (Maslow 58). All these parameters lead him to have a healthy psychological functioning. If the situation has continued in the same way until his last stages, Seymour might have developed into a complete self- actualized being. The support he had act as a building block of his personality, but certain events of his daughter shattered his life which marks an end of a self- actualized being. If the circumstances remain the same, he would have been a different personality, he would have been an idol two different people. The bombing session of his daughter and later her miserable condition broke a strong man into several parts which makes him unable to get back to his usual lifestyle.

### Conclusion

The life and the different stages of Seymour's life illustrates Maslow's theory of 'hierarchy of needs' (Maslow 2017). Different events made him a different personality. He walked in the direction of ultimate fulfillment. He had experienced all strong emotions from happiness to sorrow, from having friends and family to no one. Initially, he becomes a self- actualized being but later with the downfall he became dull and weak. He may not have reached his maximum potential after her daughter's bombing session, but he managed to be the best at every stage of his life.

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