



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

It Happened in America: *The Plot Against America*
as a Uchronia

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2016

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Línea temática: Literatura Norteamericana

It Happened in America: The Plot Against America as a Uchronia.

Sucedió en América: ucronia en *La Conjura Contra América*.

Abstract

La Conjura Contra América narra una versión de la historia de los Estados Unidos en la que un gobierno de tinte fascista gana las elecciones a Roosevelt en 1940. Las medidas adoptadas por este gobierno liderado por el aviador Charles A. Lindbergh afectan de una manera directa a la familia Roth. Esta familia judía de clase media-baja se ve marginada de repente cuando el gobierno empieza aplicar dichas medidas. Los eventos vividos por Philip Roth cuando tenía entre 7 y 9 años de edad son narrados por un Philip Roth adulto desde un punto de vista crítico hacia la sociedad americana. El género de esta novela puede ser analizado en base a lo que Elizabeth Wesseling acuña bajo el término uchronia. Este tipo de textos difieren del curso actual de la historia ofreciendo diferentes formas que la sociedad podría haber adoptado en el caso de que un hecho hipotético hubiera ocurrido en la realidad. En el caso de *La Conjura Contra América* la historia difiere de su curso normal durante solo dos años, pero sin ninguna duda modificaría la forma de entender la sociedad Americana. Los aspectos formales analizados en esta narrativa son el narrador, la focalización, el punto de vista sobre el discurso dominante en la historia de los Estados Unidos, el personaje de Philip Roth y la forma en la que Lindbergh marginaría al personaje de Herman Roth.

The Plot Against America targets American canonized history offering a counter historical plot in which a fascist government lead by Charles A. Lindbergh runs the

country during the years 1940-1942. This has direct consequences over the Roths, a Jewish lower-middle class family which is suddenly moved to the realm of otherness. The events are seen through the eyes of little eight-year-old Philip Roth and narrated from a critical point of view by a mature Philip Roth sixty years later approximately. This text can be interpreted as what Elisabeth Wesseling defined as Uchronia. These kinds of texts deviate from documented history offering alternative views of societies. In this case, this novel offers a deviation of two years from canonized history. The different formal elements and the roles of the characters Philip Roth, and Herman Roth contribute to the development of a critique upon the status of Jews in society and certain values on which American identity claims to be built. The age gap between narrator and focalizer, the structure of the novel, the treatment of history, the three different projections of Philip Roth and the way in which Lindbergh's government policies attack the economic stability of the Roths are analyzed to provide a better understanding of the critical message upon American values of liberty and freedom this novel provides.

Introduction

The possibility of imagining a different version of history and considering alternative societies has attracted many authors. *The Plot Against America*, published by Philip Roth in 2004, is a novel that reflects an alternative America in which Anti-Semitism has defeated democracy, one of the most important symbols of the United States. This novel, set between the years 1940-1942, tells us how fascism could also have spread through the United States and how it would have affected American society. In this book, the main characters are a lower middle-class Jewish family, the Roths, who live in Newark (New Jersey). This American family tries to preserve its origins and traditions as Jewish, at the same time as they try to deal with their American identity.

In this novel, Charles A. Lindbergh wins the presidential elections instead of Roosevelt in 1940. The aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, who was an isolationist, blames Jews for being the ones who wanted to enter WWII. That makes him popular in the South and Midwest and he gains votes, allowing him to run the country. The Roths' fear of America being fragmented after this situation becomes a reality when they make a trip to Washington, and they are expelled from the hotel because they are Jews. Since that, eight-year old Philip's feeling of alienation in his childhood increases up to the point of stalking Christians and running away from home.

Meanwhile, Lindbergh designs two programmes to "Americanize Americans". One of them is called Just Folks program, which consists in the immersion of young Jews in the South and Midwest. Philip's elder brother, Sandy, joins the program and lives with a Catholic rural family in Kentucky during the summer of 1940. After his experience in Just Folks he will have a different, estranged point of view regarding Jews. Also Philip's aunt, Evelyn, marries Rabbi Bendgelsdorf, a conservative Rabbi who works for Lindbergh's administration. This results in a break of their family relations and a threat for family stability.

Finally, the second program for the integration of Jews in American society, "Homestead 42" intends the disintegration of the so-called *ghetto Jews* by relocating families in the South and Midwest, where there is no Jewish population. They are offered a house and the same job position there. Herman quits his job to avoid the program, so the family can stay in Newark. However, Philip's neighbour, Seldon, and his widowed mother are forced to move to Kentucky. At the same time, the political panorama gets worse. At this point, the Jewish radio broadcaster Walter Winchell denounces the situation and consequently he gets fired. He decides to run for the presidential election and make a speech tour. This will generate riots along the South

and Midwest that will kill Seldon's mother and Winchell, among many other Jews. Then Philip's father, Herman, and Sandy have to travel to Kentucky to rescue Seldon. Roosevelt, after Winchell's death, decides to be again a candidate for the White House; a Nazi plot to govern America by blackmailing Lindbergh with his kidnapped son is dismantled, Roosevelt is president again, and America is attacked by Japan in Pearl Harbour in 1942. At the end, action catches canonized history again.

It is certainly true that this text speculates with history and some parallels with recent historical events are suggested. Far from allegories of the US political panorama at the time this novel was published, the intention of this essay is to analyse the different aspects that this novel presents and to offer a reflection of the message it provides, which is reconsideration of the values that define American identity, and to whom they apply.

This dissertation on *The Plot Against America* examines different formal aspects that contributed to the recreation of the events in such a realistic way that it offers a reflection on the status of Jews in America. There are different aspects of this novel worth exploring: firstly, the concept of uchronia and the way in which it applies to the novel; secondly, formal aspects including the narrator, focalization and the structure of this novel are analysed; finally, the roles of Philip Roth and Herman Roth are analysed in order to provide better understanding of the underlying message. Also, there is an ironic element in the novel created by the age gap between focalizer and narrator that allows critical distance. This critical distance is the element that allows for a rewriting of the events and therefore provides a critical point of view about the situation. The distance achieved by the age gap between narrator and focalizer creates a reassessment of the American values of freedom and liberty.

Form of the novel

The Plot Against America combines historical and fictional materials. It holds a combination of two elements: the fascist and authoritarian government in America from 1940 to 1942, and a set of historical characters such as Charles A. Lindbergh, or FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt). Also, the Roth family is taken from reality, as Roth states in his essay about the novel: he chose his own family to make it as genuine as possible. As a result of this combination, we obtain a misleading of canonized history. This misleading changes the course of events in American history during two years. The Note to the Reader's first sentence: "The plot Against America is a work of fiction" (364) together with the deviation from historical facts may lead to the interpretation of the text as a uchronia.

Elisabeth Wesseling offers an in-depth exploration of the term and of the genre she denominates uchronian fantasies. Firstly, the term "*uchronie*" (101) has been used to make reference to those works that formulate alternatives taking "documented history" as starting point. Secondly, "Uchronian fantasy" is an output of the combination of fantasy and the deviation from canonized history. This genre draws a fictitious course of the events which clearly did not take place, but could have happened (Wesseling 102). These works of fiction depart from canonized history by means of an event that misleads the course of history. In this way, uchronia has an affinity to utopian thinking, giving tentative descriptions of how society would look like *if*.

Although it seems that this sort of works needs to be placed in the future, they can also be set either in the past, or in the present. In the case of *The Plot Against America*, the element that modifies the course of canonized history is Lindbergh's presidency. This work of fiction contains characteristics of Uchronian fantasies such as its starting point from "documented history" and the alternate history provided as background.

Nonetheless, utopian thinking is not a significant element in this story. This is probably due to Roth's intentions to recreate something close to reality ("The story" 1). We could say that the purpose of this text is to explore the consequences of an Anti-Semitic government in the US during these years.

In order to reflect counterfactual history, the narrator, the structure of the novel and the treatment of history are possibly the most significant elements regarding the form of the novel. As mentioned before, the aim to recreate something close to reality positions the focalizer as a key element. The events in the novel are seen through the eyes of eight year-old Philip Roth. This implies an age gap between narrator and focalizer providing the text with a memoir form. In other words, the first person narrator depicts something that happened to him in the past.

The events in the novel are presented in a precise and accurate way. It could be said that the tone of this novel is descriptive most of the time. In order to achieve this, the narrator describes in a detailed and vivid way his childhood under Lindbergh's government. For that purpose, the narrator makes use of a simple syntax and direct speech most of the time, as the following example illustrates:

So, are you glad to be home?

Sort of. I don't know.

You going to go back next year?

Sure.

What if Mon and Dad won't let you?

I'll go anyway. (*Plot* 99-100)

This dialogue takes place between Philip and his brother, Sandy. Questions are simple, direct and short. On the other hand, to achieve a more realistic approach to the atmosphere and the setting the narrator makes use of long enumerations, using adjectives to describe different situations, settings or environments: "By the storm from

the locust tress and the swirl of candy wrappers, beetles, bottle caps, earthworms, cigarette butts, and, mysteriously, inexplicably, predictably, the single mucilaginous rubber" (*Plot* 209). In this particular example the narrator is picturing the ambience of the place. Apart from this, the descriptions generally provide detailed information about places and the people who inhabited Weequahic:

The Jewish doctors and lawyers and the successful merchants who owned their stores downtown lived in one-family houses on streets branching off the eastern slope of the Chancelor avenue hill, closer to grassy, wooded Weequahic Park, a landscaped three hundred acres [...] At the western end of the neighbourhood, the parkless end where we lived, there resided an occasional schoolteacher or pharmacist but otherwise few professionals. (*Plot* 3)

The way in which Weequahic is described offers a clear vision of how it is divided and structured; with the use of simple syntax, long enumerations and detailed descriptions, the narration offers a realistic approach to the events. On one hand, it draws the setting and the atmosphere in a very clear way. On the other hand, the simplicity of his style keeps coherence with the realistic form; therefore, it makes of Roth's narration a reliable one.

Yet another aspect that contributes to the reliability is the structure of the novel. There are two parallel plots. One of them is the narrative plot which involves the fictional events narrated in the story. The other one refers to the political decisions made by Lindbergh's government, constituting a parallel plot due to the way in which the action works in the story. The action is organised following an action-reaction pattern. In other words, the actions taken by the government will have a reaction over the characters' lives. Both of them are interrelated. The separation between these two is also clearly established by the narrative voice. When the action refers to the characters' plot, Philip as homodiegetic narrator tells the events. On the contrary, when the narrating voice makes reference to the political plot there is an external voice that informs the

characters and the reader of the last decisions taken. This generally acquires the form of a radio broadcasting news, frame breaks or other media such as journals. In that way, there is a separation between the lives of the Roths and the government, helping to create a more reliable situation and narration. Apart from the narrative voice, there are two characters in the novel that are part of Roth's family life and Lindbergh's administration that somehow connect both stories. These characters are Bess's sister, Evelyn, and Rabbi Bendgelsdorf, who is enthusiastically working for the government, and who will eventually become Evelyn's fiancé. Summing up, there are two different plots that recreate a reliable situation and they are interconnected by means of two elements: the distribution of the action and the characters that are part of both plots.

In line with the structure of the novel, the word "plot" is another element that gives cohesion to the different lines. It stands for three different meanings in the novel: Lindbergh's government's hidden aims as a conspiracy against America, the plot of the novel, and the historical plot described. The Nazi's attempts to control America by blackmailing Lindbergh, so he would present himself as a candidate for US presidency is what sets off the alternate historical plot, and the Roths' family plot. In that sense, the idea of "plot" as conspiracy is what generates the other two meanings of plot in the novel. Stefanie Boese reckons that the word plot in the title of the novel immediately triggers the meaning of plot as conspiracy. In this sense one cannot link at first sight the other two meanings of the word. However, it is the conspiracy that allows for the other two plots to exist in this narrative. That is why the opposed meanings of the word plot are yet "inextricably linked" (277). We can draw the conclusion that the structure of the novel constitutes a conglomerate whose links are the characters that form part of both plots, and the word plot by itself.

History and fiction

As mentioned before, the treatment of history in this novel is one of the most significant elements. Wesseling states that Uchronias deal with the potential histories that could have happened. In the same way, alternate histories are somehow close to factual history, offering a consistent alternative view. It is because of this that uchronian fantasies incorporate a “parodic aspect” (Wesseling 105). That is the reason why Linda Hutcheon’s view on parody is relevant in the analysis of this novel.

In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon defined parody as “repetition with a critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (5). Parodic texts may include target texts which could be any form of “coded discourse” as Hutcheon pointed out in *A Theory of Parody: the Teaching of Twentieth-century Art Forms* (16). In the case of this novel, rather than intertextuality, the parodic aspect in the narrative resides in the targeting of the predominant discourse in American canonized history that established democracy as the finest institution in the country. Philip Roth recalls the events from a critical distance, establishing an element of self-reflexivity towards the social status of Jews in America. The main target of this text is a reflection on certain values that form part of the concept of American identity. Postmodernist texts target master narratives in order to reassess them. Thus, *The Plot Against America* creates a self-reflection on certain values that are meant to be a fundamental part of American society. This is achieved by turning upside down the lines between history and fiction, including autobiographical elements as facts within the fiction and establishing history as fiction. As a consequence, the boundaries that delineate history and fiction are subverted

This is activated because of the reader’s awareness of the fact that Lindbergh never was president of the US and that Roth is a Jew (Siegel 137). Indeed, the whole

Roth family is taken from reality together with other characters such as Walter Winchell, who was a radio commentator. This novel tackles factual history in order to recreate a process of reflection on certain values like liberty and freedom. Roth creates an alternative America of characters taken from reality in a fictional context where Lindbergh's Anti-Semitic discourse is running the country.

In order to understand the message Roth wants to transmit, language becomes fundamental. Despite the simplicity of the language used by Philip Roth, he plays with language and creates oxymora and puns. This reflects critical distance, irony and some paradoxical elements of the situation that Roth narrates. Significant examples include "The Americanization of Americans" (34) and the fact that "Sandy lived in exile in our house" (209). The two oxymora are reflecting contradictions and paradoxes. Both quotes make reference to the fact that Jews are being left behind in their own home-country, America. There is also a peculiar antithesis that I would like to highlight: "they live in a dream, and we live in a nightmare" (76). Bess' words are clearly defining the situation Jews in America are living. It also claims that Jews are being pushed away of the American mainstream.

Apart from oxymora, there are also two remarkable puns such as "Jewyork" and "American main street" (262). The first one emphasizes the amount of Jews that lived in New York. The second one is used to bring to the surface the reality and cruelty of the situation:

There in the old brick cityscape of little family-run shops and streetcars and shade trees and small houses, each topped back then, before TV, only by the appendage of a towering chimney, in the Boston where the Depression had never ended, aimed the storefronts sacred to the American main street—the ice cream parlour, the barber shop, the pharmacy [...] clubs surged forward screaming "kill him!" and two weeks from its inception in New York's five boroughs,

the Winchell campaign, as Winchell had imagined it, was under way. He has at last brought the Lindbergh grotesquery to the surface. (262)

In this excerpt we can observe a long depiction of what can be a description of an American city in the East coast. The word stream changed by the word “street” is denouncing the current situation of repression and violence the country is living. Summing up, oxymora and puns highlight the cruel situation Jews were living under Lindbergh’s government and the paradoxical situations that this generated.

Apart from word playing, the way in which counter-factual history is embedded within the actual canonized history of the US constitutes another way of questioning those values on which America claims to be built. Moreover, there are several allusions to “future” events (past events for the narrator) which embed the alternate history narrated within the master narrative of history everybody knows. For instance, in the following example: “Israel didn’t yet exist” (4) the narrator makes reference to the actual conflict existing in Israel which is a consequence of WWII indeed. A reference to the assassination of Robert Kennedy is also remarkable: “It wasn’t until twenty-six years after Winchell’s assassination that a second presidential candidate would be gunned down –that was New York’s Democratic senator Robert Kennedy, fatally shot in the head” (272). In this case, in order to be coherent the narrator uses “second” including the events that are narrated in the novel. The events chosen are by no means accidental. Most of the events mentioned have been a source of controversy in the public opinion, such as the following allusion to the project Manhattan:

Even more important, Lindbergh’s presidency furnished German industry and the German scientific establishment [...] with a further two years in which to complete preparation for the apocalyptic struggle [...] whose outcome would determine the progress of Western civilization.

(Plot 324)

This project, which hosted both, German Jewish expat scientists who were asking for asylum, and German scientists who took part in Hitler's government, designed the atomic bombs thrown in Hiroshima in 1945. In this way, alternate history meets the so-called canonized history, bringing the text closer to reality, and making the reader more aware of the fact that it could have actually happened.

This approach to history resides in the question: "What if they had?" (Roth, "The story"1). Roth offers a counter history, that is to say, he offers to the readers (particularly American ones) an account of something that did not happen, but it could have happened. That implies the use of realistic elements such as autobiographical items or historical characters like Lindbergh or Winchell. Also, the allusion to further events in factual history in the text brings the text closer to reality, making the reader aware of the chances for it to happen. By using these elements the text stays closer to factual history and makes the reader reconsider the idea that it could have actually happened. In fact, the novel itself seeks a definition of history made by Herman: " 'Because what's history?' He asked rhetorically [...] 'History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark' " (*Plot* 180).

This definition of history allows us to consider all possible versions of history establishing Roth's memories as another narrative of history. In relation to the term uchronia and Hutcheon's definition of parody, critical distance turns upside down the boundaries between history and fiction establishing a memoir as an account of historical facts. Together with the different plots in which the novel engages, we can conclude that American history cannot be accurately represented by a "unified teleological storyline" (Siegel 21) allowing a self-reflection about the values on which America claims to be built.

Philip Roth

Apart from Philip Roth as narrator and critical voice, there are other aspects that this character contains and must be analysed. There are three different projections of Philip Roth in the novel. Firstly, as mentioned before, Philip Roth as an adult and narrator is the element that allows a rewriting of the events from a critical point of view. Secondly, the projection of him as an internal focalizer and child transmits a sense of fear. Thirdly, Philip Roth as a character and narrator acts as representative of American Jews.

As regards the projection of Philip Roth as a child, he transmits the idea of fear. Fear is the word that opens the novel: “Fear presides over these memories” (*Plot 1*). Besides, in this example Roth as narrator is making the reader aware of two things: firstly, the word “memories” indicates that the following events are Roth’s personal experience. Secondly, the word “fear” is indicating the way in which Philip Roth feels about the events he is going to narrate. Right after the opening line, another significant word that must be borne in mind is the word “shock” (*Plot 1*). When Philip Roth as a narrator is introducing the events—both from the political panorama and from his family panorama—he uses the word shock to express his impression about Lindbergh’s nomination for the presidency of the US. As far as the action goes on he will become fully aware of the situation, and therefore his fears will increase progressively to the point that he will try to escape from home and stop being a Jew.

Philip Roth is a smart child and he perfectly knows that Christians are the dominant class in society. When Christmas arrives at Newark, he and his best friend, Earl, decide to stalk Christians. For that purpose, they get into a bus and follow a man until he arrives home. Perhaps this scene can be seen as part of a child’s nature which is being curious. However, Philip Roth being both, a child and a Jew under an Anti-Semitic government, links his fears with a feeling of displacement: “With Lindbergh’s

convenience, Hitler had invaded America and Earl and I were feeling the Nazis. And all the while I assailed myself with my fears" (*Plot* 116). The last excerpt illustrates clearly the way in which Roth feels about the situation. Hitler's anti-Semitic discourse has reached America and he knows the consequences it has. That is the reason why his fears go hand in hand with a feeling of marginalisation.

Regarding Philip Roth as a Jew, he feels alienated: "Our home land was America. Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed" (*Plot* 5). This prolepsis confirms that what is going to follow in the narration is not going to be an easy journey for the Roths. Moreover, his fears of America being fragmented into two different sides become a fact when they make a trip to Washington. In this trip the Roth family is forced to change hotel because they are Jews. When they move to their new hotel a "Negro" (*Plot* 72) welcomes them. The moment when they have to pack and move to another hotel where they are welcomed by a black person symbolises the realisation of their nightmare, America rejecting them as citizens. The African American bellboy symbolises a part of American history that has always been overlooked. This entrance in the hotel constitutes the entrance of the Roths in the subaltern.

The Washington trip will trigger a feeling of displacement among the Roths. In Philip's case, he will become more and more obsessed with Christians up to the point of stalking them. On the contrary, Sandy (his brother) becomes part of Lindbergh's political discourse and he will participate in Just Folks programme. This programme was designed for Jewish teenagers to move away for a while from their *ghettos* to a Southern state to live with a Christian family. When Sandy comes back from Kentucky after his experience in Just Folks programme, he narrates his experiences and Philip compares them to what his father does, as the following example illustrates:

Mr. Mawhinney was able to make a living right out of the earth and then, at Sunday dinner [...] eat only food that he himself had raised, and all my father could do was sell insurance. It went without saying that Mr Mawhinney was a Christian, a long-standing member of the great majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslaved the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro, one of the good clean hard-working Christian millions who settled the frontier, tilled the farms built the cities [...] one of those unassailable Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Protestant who ran America and would always run it [...] while my father, of course, was only a Jew. (*Plot* 93-94)

These parallels established between both of them are clear. Firstly, the structure of these sentences follows the same pattern: Roth mentions Mr Mawhinney followed by a long enumeration of tasks, or the history behind his ancestors; and, to conclude the sentence he refers to his father in a brief way. While Mr. Mawhinney's ancestors have set up a country—“founded the nation and conquered the wilderness”—Herman is compared as a plain man who is “only a Jew”. In that way Philip Roth is feeling that the place for Jews in society is less than the place in society for Protestants.

Roth's feeling of displacement increases as the action goes on. He and Earl begin to stalk Christian people. They are probably looking forward to exploring the unknown in this case, the world of Christians. They follow a Christian man who worked “downtown” (*Plot* 116). Roth recalls imagining what it would feel like being a lost boy: “when he whispered the name of the neighbourhood into my ear, I was lost, a lost boy” (*Plot* 116); then he starts to wonder what would happen if he were actually lost. He wonders if some Christian family would adopt him. This denotes a sense of rejection from Roth towards his community. He feels alienated and marginalised. That is the reason why he decides to follow Christians. By following them, he can learn how they act, and by acting like them, he might be able to join them.

The following depiction of Christmas decoration in Newark highlights the presence of Christian items making the feeling of alienation more apparent: “on every

corner street another Santa Claus laughing, it was the month of the year when the heart of my birth place was sublimely theirs and theirs alone" (*Plot* 118). Roth is establishing a separation between him and them by using the pronoun "theirs" twice. Christmas decoration has invaded Newark, and there is no space for other ethnic groups but Christians. Finally, Roth's feeling of alienation becomes clearly evident when he runs away from home and decides to join a Christian orphanage. As he narrates in this scene: "I wanted nothing to do with history. I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible. I wanted to be an Orphan" (*Plot* 233). Such statements are highly symbolic. He feels trapped by history. In other words: "his fear and desire to become the unprotected orphan—represents the perpetual cycle of guilt and fear that haunts American Jews, without which no true history of the United States is complete" (Siegel 289). The dominant discourses that have generally attacked Jews over history now are attacking Philip. By denying the existence of his Jewish heritage and the existence of his Jewish parents, he gets the opportunity to start from scratch, and create himself a new identity according to American dominant discourses.

Philip Roth is a smart Jewish child who is aware of what is happening around him. He identifies Christians as the most powerful members of society. That is the reason why he decides to spy and eventually join them. We could conclude that little Philip feels alienated in society. He feels displaced and unsafe. In order to recover again his feeling of safety he decides to join Christians. That is the main reason behind his tracking of a Christian man, so that, by spying them, he can analyse their behaviour, imitate them, and eventually join them. Roth acting as a representative of American Jews in the novel transmits a feeling of alienation. Combined with the two other projections of Roth, we could conclude that this fear of exclusion is perpetual,

considering that the events are written sixty years later and still the feeling of fear persists.

Family and masculinity

The role of the family in *The Plot Against America* is worth analysing. It has two main aims in the novel: firstly, it provides safeguard and coherence to Philip's fragile childish world. Secondly, it acts as a representative of American society. The Roth family is what we can call a nuclear family. This prototype of family represents the stereotypical white heterosexual family of the American mainstream at the time: "A young couple with a small number of healthy children living in an adequate home" (Bernardes in Hobss 126). This establishes a clear division of the tasks and roles in the family, as presented in the first pages of the novel:

The men worked fifty, sixty, even seventy or more hours a week; the women worked all the time, with little assistance from laboring devices, washing laundry, ironing shirts, mending socks, turning collars, sewing on buttons, mothproofing woolens [...] tiding closets and drawers, overseeing paint jobs and household repairs, arranging for religious observances, paying bills and keeping the family's books while simultaneously attending to their children's health, clothing, cleanliness, schooling, nutrition, conduct, birthdays, discipline, and morale. (*Plot 3*)

This is a clear example of how a nuclear family works: whereas men devoted themselves to their jobs, women did the household chores. Within the Roth family, Herman is the head and the one who brings the money to the family unit. On the other hand, Bess does the exhaustive list of tasks described above.

Regarding the character of Herman, he is depicted as the most loving figure in the novel. He represents what the New Deal policies and FDR pointed out as the "common man". The New Deal contributed to the inclusion of new ethnicities in the mainstream (Forner 2:890) which also gave FDR an important amount of votes from immigrant communities. Common man was an umbrella term to make reference to the

lower classes. It ranged from farmers to migrant workers or city dwellers (Forner 2:891). This is the case of Herman Roth, a common man who earns “fifty dollars a week” and lives in a Jewish neighbourhood in Newark (*Plot* 1). Like many other Americans, he is struggling between his heritage and his American identity – which is connected to the concepts of masculinity and freedom. Herman is a breadwinner whose main aspiration is to become a house owner. He is offered a promotion and thanks to that “he would be able to realize an ambition he had nurtured growing up penniless in a Newark tenement flat: to become an American homeowner ‘Pride of ownership’ ” (*Plot* 8). The concept of ownership is linked with the notion of White American Freedom described by Forner as “self-ownership, family stability, religious liberty, political participation and economic autonomy” (2:591). Owning a house can bring most of these virtues to Herman Roth’s life. It can give him more economic autonomy, family stability and self-ownership. To Herman this is a must if they want to fully become part of the mainstream.

With reference to masculinity, the character of Herman stands for the idea of hegemonic masculinity, although Lindbergh’s policies are an obstacle for him to fulfil this stereotype. He fits the pattern of father and head of the family. Nonetheless, he does not fit in the pattern of hegemonic masculinity known as: “good-looking, courageous, strong, ambitious and successful man”; in this way Lindbergh is a clear example of this (Hobbs 128). Lindbergh’s administration tackles Herman’s economic autonomy by making him choose between staying in Newark without working or moving to Kentucky and being the only Jewish family in the area. He decides to quit his job and stay with his beloved ones in Newark. As a result he cannot achieve success in economic terms and therefore he has to renegotiate his masculinity. We get to know the character of Herman through Philip’s eyes. To Phil, Herman is the prototype of

masculinity to follow. For instance, Herman bursting into tears when Alvin (his nephew) comes back from fighting the Nazis in Canada with a prosthetic limb (*Plot* 113) is described by Philip as a “childhood milestone” (*Plot* 113). Crying is seen as feminine and therefore it constitutes a demonization of Herman as a prototype of masculinity to Phil. On the other hand, Herman is the male character in the novel that is the most loyal to his family and to his moral values. In this way, he is portrayed as a hero by Philip. To him, the family is the entity that provides him with comfort and safety. Herman as head of the family is the one who leads and safeguards the family. He rejects his promotion and quits his job in order to protect his family from anti-Semites’ government policies. This makes of Herman an example of strength and bravery. Lindbergh’s policies attack basic concepts which are part of the prototypical American man such as economic autonomy or family stability. Consequently, Herman is obliged to reject some of these terms such as ownership in order to survive.

The role of the family in the novel is fundamental to create a critical view of certain American values, such as freedom or liberty. In every chapter more often than not the radio is broadcasting the latest news or there is a voice over talking about the latest political decisions. After these minor frame breaks, the action goes back to the family who is directly affected by these decisions. The action is structured in an action-reaction way. That is to say, whichever action is taken by Lindbergh’s administration has a reaction over the Roths. The choice of a traditional American lower-middle class family which is struggling between their American identity and their heritage is used to make a critique of the idea that all men are created equal and the reconsideration of to whom the value of freedom on which American society is allegedly to be built apply.

Endings

The decisions taken by the government and the consequences that affect the Roths constitute two parallel plots and each of them has its own ending. The political plot's ending is summarized in less than thirty pages (from 301 to 327); it acquires a journal format called *Archives of Newark's Newsreel Theatre*. Basically, the initial order is restored in this document. FDR is elected president again and America is attacked by Japan in Pearl Harbour. A Nazi plot to govern America in which Lindbergh works merely as a puppet is dismantled, and the political order goes back to normal. However, the ending of the character's plot is somehow an open ended one. We are left with an ending in which there is a lack of knowledge about the consequences for American society after such an anti-Semitic period. There is no clue whether or not the initial social order is completely restored. Neither is it said whether Herman is able to get his job back.

The very ending of *The Plot Against America* is brought to analysis by Leona Toker: “The endings of such novels (uchronias) are usually associated with the authors’ beliefs about whether the societies which provided the soil for the sprouting of tyranny possessed mechanisms of self-correction” (42). In the case of *The Plot Against America*, the way in which the character's plot is solved in the last chapter gives us clues about whether it is just fiction or a rather more complex reconsideration about the situation of American society regarding extremist political views in the last sixty years. In the last chapter, Herman and Sandy travel by car to Kentucky to save Seldon from riots after his mother's death. Finally, the historical events in the novel catch up with the current events in the actual history's master narrative. However, there is a lack of knowledge about what the lives of Jews are going to be like from that point onwards.

Taking into account the first sentence of the book and the title of the last chapter of the book, we get a sense of continuity. The very last chapter of the novel provides a sense of open closure, and it gives a sense of continuity and circularity to the story. The title of this chapter is “perpetual fear”. The same phrase is presented in the opening sentence of the novel: “fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear” (*Plot* 1). This leads us to analyze the very end of the novel and some key expressions. The very last word of the novel, “prosthesis” (*Plot* 362), is turned into a metaphor, suggesting a cultural and symbolic reading rather than a mere inroad of “naturalism into the experimental mode.” Some critics have characterized the ending as weak (Toker 43). However, if we take into consideration the memoir form that the age gap between narrator and focalization provides to the novel, there is a motif of continuous fear in the end that suggests a re-thinking of the social status Jews hold in American society and the values of equality and liberty upon which America claims to be built.

In fact, some parallels with some US institutions or events that happen in the novel and that happened in the second half of the 20th century and the turn of the century can be established. For instance, Just Folks program and the boarding school program for Native Americans had similar aims. Boarding schools banned young Native Americans from practicing their religion or speaking their mother tongue (Dunbar-Ortiz 151), similar to Just Folk program and the OAA (Office of American Absorption) whose aim was “encouraging American religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into larger societies” (*Plot* 85). Both of them were aiming at the assimilation of a certain Christian set of values which constitute a part of American identity. Also, in connection with McCarthy’s House of Un-American Activities Committee, the OAA was a tool to create a homogeneous society. Similar to the raise of anti-Semitism, the fear created after the 9/11 favoured conservative policies

to be implemented. Or, in accordance with the latest events, the present anti-Muslim feeling in the Western world after several terrorist attacks that is giving many votes to conservative immigration policies. These connections suggest an interpretation of the word “perpetual” and the very ending that make the novel a reflection about the continuous threat of authoritarian governments and their chances to be elected.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay on *The Plot Against America*, there are different aspects that we must bear in mind such as the treatment of history, the narrator, the critical distance and the implications these have on the characters. The element that breaks up with canonized history is the election of Lindbergh as president of the US. This would affect directly the Roths and therefore the whole American society. This deviation of history is known as alternate history. This text speculates with an alternative version of history that could have happened. Those texts known as uchronias either explore a certain political discourse or the consequences of such events on society. In the case of this novel, Roth’s main concern is to explore how an Anti-Semitic government in America would have affected Jews.

For that purpose, the text offers a realistic recalling of the events narrated by Philip Roth and focalized through him at the age of eight, making the text acquire a memoir form. Moreover, long and accurate descriptions reinforce the narration’s reliability so that the text can recreate the events in realistic terms. The need to recreate something realistic lays on the author’s intentions to create something that could have happened, allowing for a critique of society. Also, the structure of the novel contributes to this. There are two parallel plots in the novel, both separated and yet interlinked at the same time. They are separated by means of the narrating voice and interlinked by

means of the characters that take part in both plots. There is also a parodic element in this narration that targets the master narrative of American history. In order to do that the autobiographical element becomes a key one: there is an autobiographical element in Roth. He is the implied author and the whole of the Roths' family together with other significant political figures of that time such as FDR or Walter Winchell have been taken from reality. Taking into account that the fictional element that constitutes the historical background, and that what it is supposed to be fictional (characters) are indeed historical, the boundaries between history and fiction are turned upside down. In this way, Roth makes American history look like another narrative.

The parodic element together with word-play creates a rewriting of the memoirs from a critical point of view, making the reader aware of the situation Jews lived. Although uchronias generally depict an alternate history and consequently an alternative society, *The Plot Against America* deviates from history for only two years (1940-1942) and finally it embeds the alternate history within the factual history of America. This brings the text closer to reality and makes the reader think that it could have actually happened as it does not modify the latest events.

We could conclude that there is an element of self-reflection that is reinforced by the characters of Philip Roth and Herman. Firstly, Philip Roth as a character feels alienated and scared. He acts as a representative of Jews: his feelings and intentions of escaping home and joining a Christian orphanage show that he does not feel safe within the Jewish community. On the other hand, Herman shows anger and as head of the family is a reference to Phil. Lindbergh's measure of relocating Jews will affect his economic stability which, linked together with the notion of freedom contained in American identity that involves economic autonomy as a basic pillar, and the parodic element constitutes a critique on American values of freedom and liberty. When it

comes to minorities there is a perpetual fear of exclusion that generates a lack of security. That is the reason why Philip feels scared. Although the events in this novel are set sixty-two years before it was written, the allusions to further events in American history make it clear that there is still a fear of exclusion and marginalization from the American mainstream and who are the ones included and who are the ones more likely to be the others when things go wrong.

To finish with, we can conclude that *The Plot Against America* establishes a critique of these values and tries to reassess the way in which we have always looked at America and its society. By deviating history from its course, and together with the different formal elements that constitute the form of the novel, this text creates and depicts an alternative America that puts Jews in the realm of otherness. However, by making it a reliable and realistic narration, this critique towards White Protestant discourses that shaped the values of freedom and liberty becomes evident. Thus, it suggests a reflection on the ways in which American society is structured.

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