

**THE SELF IN THE MAKING :  
A STUDY OF JEWISH SENSIBILITY IN THE  
EARLY FICTION OF PHILIP ROTH**

**Thesis submitted to the  
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT  
For the award of the Degree of**

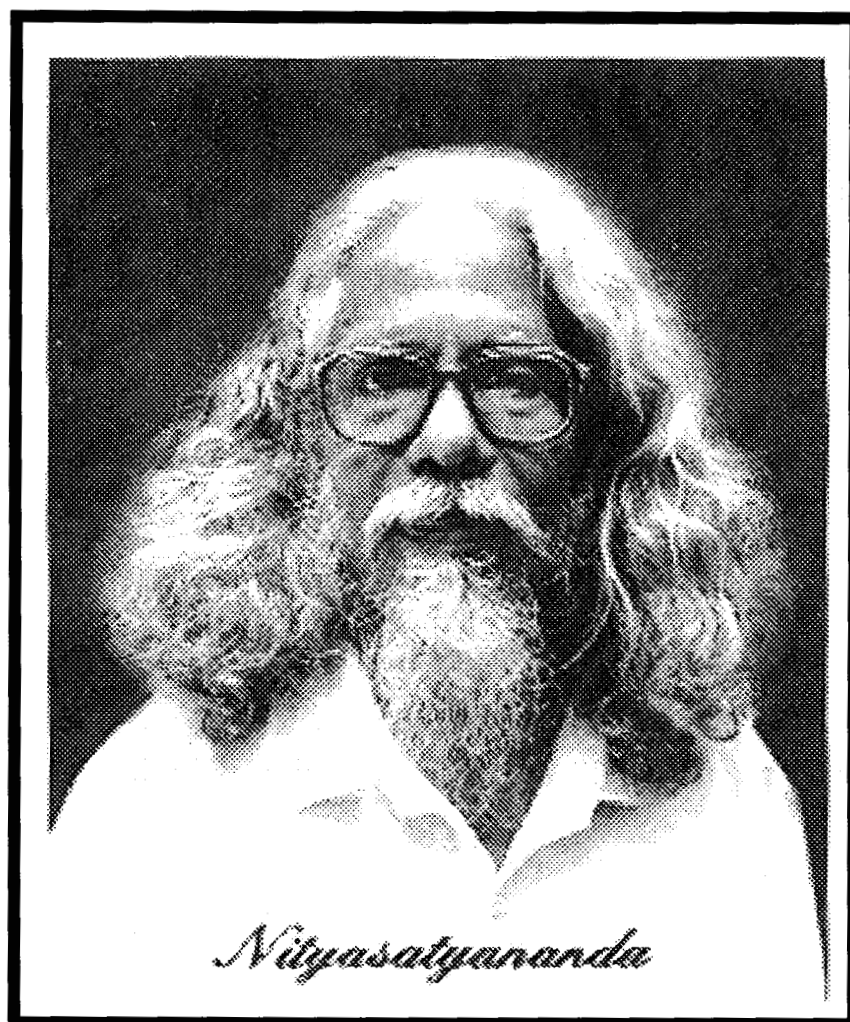
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
in English**

*BY*  
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*Dedication:*



*Acharaya Nityasatyananda  
(Dr. Joseph Kolangaden)*

*- my former Research Supervisor*

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that **Shri. K.P. Nanda Kumar** has been doing doctoral research under my guidance since 21-1-2003, following the expiry of his former Research Supervisor Dr. Joseph Kolengaden, on the topic "**The Self in the Making: A Study of Jewish Sensibility in the Early Fiction of Philip Roth**".

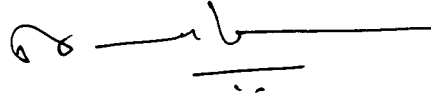


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## DECLARATION

I do hereby affirm that the thesis "**The Self in the Making : A Study of Jewish Sensibility in the Early Fiction of Philip Roth**" has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar title or recognition.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CLC</i>	-	<i>Contemporary Literary Criticism</i>
<i>GC</i>	-	<i>Goodbye, Columbus</i>
<i>LG</i>	-	<i>Letting Go</i>
<i>PC</i>	-	<i>Portnoy's Complaint</i>
<i>RMAO</i>	-	<i>Reading Myself an Others</i>



# Introduction

K.P. Nanda Kumar “The self in the making : A study of jewish sensibility in the early fiction of Philip Roth ” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2003

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Wandering Jew has always been an important metaphor for Jewish writers. The wandering in search of anchorage is often prompted by the self and not by an external agency. The Jew has always been at the receiving end, wandering in search of unconditional, unadulterated joy or peace. Even total or partial acculturation fails to win for the Jews their long cherished desire for happiness. Paradoxically, the cause of their disintegration is the uncomfortable realization that they have accomplished the task of breaking away from their Jewishness, which had earlier been a stumbling block in their material prosperity.

The origin of Jewish literature can be traced to the historically significant migration of East European Jews to the Promised Land. The second stage involved the recording of the immigrant experience involving both the torturous break with the old traditional Jewish life and the simultaneously occurring assimilation or acculturation into the complex tormenting experience of American life. Jewish writers are definitely nourished by

their Jewishness, though in varying degrees. At the same time, they draw upon the complex aspects of American life too.

Theodore L. Gross states in *The Literature of American Jews that it has resulted in:*

A literature of humor and seriousness, of tolerance and misunderstanding, of moral sensitivity, of the repeated assertion that man, in spite of his absurd condition possesses dignity. Like all great human experience transfigured into literature, the gift of being Jewish in the twentieth century has been returned as a gift for all people, a token passed on in the form of permanent literary heritage. It is American in its broadest contours, but Jewish in its silent intimate furrows, in its buried places and hidden half forgotten echoes of immigration, childhood, family and religion. He states that it is American, certainly, but somewhere in its tangled roots, stubbornly Jewish. (17)

Elie Wiesel, in "Foreword" of *The Literature of American Jews* states "Jew by conviction or Jew in spite of himself, the Jewish writer cannot be anything else. What is more ironic is that even his rejection of his

Jewishness identifies him..... He remains a Jew even if he writes against Jews”(13).

Murray Roston referring to the American-Jewish writer in “The Flight of Jonah: A Study of Roth, Bellow and Malamud” states:

The recent outcrop of American novelists, whose central theme, whether latent or overt, is an exploration of the Diaspora Jews’ place in a Gentile society”. According to him, Jewish – American writing is “often an agonized introspective appraisal by the offspring of European immigrants, of the rewards, the responsibilities and not least, the price to be paid for his intellectual and spiritual assimilation into modern American society. (304)

In the article, “Jewish American Literature”, Richard Tuerk has defined a Jew as one, “who, as a result of either birth or conversion, whether formal or informal, considers himself or herself as a Jew”. Examining the genre Jewish-American literature, he describes it as “literature written by American Jews; it does not have to deal specifically with the ethnic dimension”(134).

According to Mark Shechner, as stated in *Jewish Writers:*

To try to be cogent on the subject of Jewish writing in America at a time when a coherent and identifiable Jewish culture and religion have effectively ceased to exist except in special enclaves is to confront such ambiguity that one must be wary of all tidy definitions of Jewish group identity. Since we want to talk about a historical fact that is everywhere acknowledged - the many ranking American novelists who happen to be Jews, or to put it more prudently, of Jewish descent - it is not unreasonable to invoke "the Jewish writer" as a convenient shorthand for a feature of the literary census that we want to examine but are not yet prepared to define. (191)

But Philip Rahv has a different perspective regarding American-Jewish writers. He states in the "Introduction to A Malamud Reader":

Many writers are Jewish in descent without being in any appreciable way 'Jewish' in feeling and sensibility.... It is one thing to speak factually of a writer's Jewish extraction and it is something else again to speak of his 'Jewishness' which is a very elusive quality and rather difficult to define". (371)

He agrees that a "stubborn residue of Jewishness lives in all these writers and gives their work a point of

view and an attitude that is distinct from that of Christian authors" (371).

Jewish writing has been described as a "new look in post-War writing" by Donald I. Kaufman, in his essay, "Norman Mailer; The Countdown" (99). Irving Malin and Irwin Stark have acknowledged in the "Introduction" to *Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American – Jewish Literature*, that American Jewish writing is "an important, possibly even a major reformatory influence in American life and letters"(1). Richard Tuerk, describes Jewish authors and Jewish writing as a predominant force, if not the dominant force, in American literature during the latter half of the 20th century.

Irving Howe, states in *World of Our Fathers*, that 'Yankee Society' by its very nature, ensured the total disintegration of Yiddish culture. He states that American society set for the East-European Jews a trap or lure of the most pleasant kind:

It allowed the Jews a life far more normal than anything their most visionary pogroms had foreseen, and all that it asked – it did not even ask, it merely rendered easy and persuasive – was that the Jews surrender their collective self. (641)

Issac Rosenfield, in his article, "Under Forty", states that Jews, as members "of an international insecure group", have grown personally acquainted with some of the fundamental themes of insecurity that run through Modern Literature"(380). But, Irving Malin and Irving Stark observe:

American Jewish writer violently assaults the corrupt values of his society, endeavours to mediate between the dualities which divide him from himself, recognizes suffering as the necessary condition of compassion, insists on the sanctity of life - or in the face of man's alienation from man as well as from God - reasserts the centrality of love in the reconstruction of the social order. (24)

American born children of East European immigrants are torn between the idealistic Jewish tradition inherited from their forefathers and the materialistic American way of living. This conflict is central to the Jewish immigrant experience. The successful immigrants fail to derive contentment from their material triumphs. Paul Levine states in "Recent Jewish American Fiction: From Exodus to Genesis" that "the first generation of Jewish fictional protagonists went into business and contented with failure; a second

generation enters the professions and struggles with success (72).

Thus, material success was accompanied by spiritual loss. The repercussions could be felt in the family and social set up calling for unavoidable but unpleasant compromises. It is this loss of identity that is reflected in much of American – Jewish fiction. In the ultimate analysis, the protagonists lose more than they gain.

The role reversals could be felt in the family too. The patriarchal father was reduced to the status of a money – making automated machine. He was no more a spiritual or intellectual guide in his family. Instead, the mother becomes the modern matriarch of Jewish suburbia and sets standards for her family. In the process, a new matriarchate develops. Often her dominating and domineering attitude results in sons ending up as nervous wrecks.

Murray Roston, states that “the motivating ideal of Judaism was transformed from the spiritual to the physical sphere and the father’s concern with transmitting the teachings of Judaism to his sons was replaced by the newly domineering mother’s insistence on material survival” (306). But according to Sol



Gittelman as stated in *From Shtetl to Suburbia*, "Survival of family means survival of the Jewish tradition" (176). Thus, the significance of the existence of the family has been one of the crucial themes of Jewish writers from the days of Yiddish literature.

The two irreconcilable elements of Jewish experience – material comfort, ease and security on one hand and the aftermath of the holocaust on the other hand is something which anyone who retained even the faintest sense of Jewish identity would have to live with, as best as he could. Contemporary Jewish American experience is inherently schizoid. Jewish – American writers have evoked this schizoid tendency and explicated the division in the minds of their protagonists. Ultimately it is an encounter between the individual and his conscience. According to Paul Levine:

In Jewish-American writing, assimilation is described as a process of eliminating the 'European', the authentic Jewish characteristic. Jewish American writing is basically an attempt to reconcile Jews' unbreakable link with the past Jewish experience, with an allegiance to the sophisticated ways of modern life that is at conflict and warring with traditional cultural beliefs. In the process, they try to

redeem their lost souls from the conflict between the individual and society. (77)

Basically Jewish-American literature is an attempt to portray "the struggle within the individual as he attempts to save himself from the overriding overindulgence in the self as well as the over regimentation within the society," states Frederick R. Karl, in "Black writers - Jewish Writers - Women Writers" (571).

The essential features of Jewish sensibility, as portrayed by American Jewish novelists, include suffering accompanied with humour and pathos, compassion, a reasonably experienced sense of irony and ambiguity, a strange feeling of alienation, highly intellectualized morality, a sense of righteousness, responsibility, guilt and social concern. The sensual feeling of life, the taste, the smell and feel of it is manifested in Jewish works. The conflict experienced by the protagonists, their family and their society is explicated in American-Jewish fiction. Against the onslaught of external forces, the heroes defend themselves with their implicit faith in Jewishness, with the inspiration derived from the fortress of family life and with the inner strength drawn from the Talmudic

laws. Yet as a result of falling into the Melting Pot, modern American Jewry is inclined to alienate itself from its haven - the essential Jewishness. Consequently, it suffers a sense of rootlessness, loss of identity and lack of religious sense. Thus, it is a case of assimilation, accompanied by alienation. It is this love-hate relationship with their Jewishness that is portrayed in Roth's fiction.

The parent generation viewed anti-Semitism as a threat to their existence and social acceptance. Their children too were tutored this belief. So successful had the parents been in this that the children viewed the protected world as a natural birthright rather than a value or ideal. There was something tempting in the parental scheme, a reassuring prospect of safety – all the more reason to admire those Rothian protagonists who could resist the lure of bourgeois materialism, and strike out independently towards higher goals.

Though Roth's Jewish-American childhood has always been the basis for his fiction, his succeeding as a writer often necessitated betrayal of that childhood. 'From the Jewish-American home to an international acculturation' is always Roth's subject, reckoning and making terms with that Jewishness. Roth himself has

admitted finding inspiration in "a conscience that has been created and undone a hundred times in this century alone" (*RMAO* 221). His fiction has had to find its own way of describing how to be a Jewish son, a Jewish adult and a Jewish writer, one and all at the same time.

Roth is part of the cultural change that has produced the post-war triumph of the Jewish novels in America. He began to publish at the end of the 1950s, the decade when Jewish-American fiction had become important for its treatment of the history of persecution followed by the process of assimilation and when the Jewish-American hero- the victim, survivor, joker and voice of moral conscience-had come of age. Roth has always wanted "to alter a system of responses to Jewish fiction" and not to be thought of, either by literary critics or by rabbis, as a writer who must be judged only in terms of his Jewishness. It is a trap he has repeatedly fictionalized. He has always propagated his opinion that a Jewish writer must treat his own background and use what he knows best, while wanting to "fly by those nets" and remain "unbound" (*RMAO* 157).

Roth's self-unconscious literary dualism - good taste versus vulgarity, restraint versus licence- is

analogous to the 'Abel and Cain' predicament of all Jewish sons. According to Roth, literary highmindedness was the product of the "penchant for ethical striving that I had absorbed as a Jewish child" (*RMAO* 71). Roth believes that literary anarchy, vulgarity, and obscenity were quite as much the product of Yiddish wisecracks, "lascivious neighbourhood gossip" of unconstrained "Jewish living room clowns", a rhetoric and folklore that made up the demythologizing side of the Jewish-American childhood (*RMAO* 75).

Jewish fiction, believes Roth, oscillates between appetite and renunciation, between 'I want' and 'I am horrified'. The general tendency on the part of the writers and critics in the post War era has been to glorify the 'self' at the expense of social and political reality. It only underlines the reluctance of the writers to deal with the complicated and overwhelming problems of the world, following the horrifying experiences of the war, the concentration camps, the atomic holocaust, the failure of the dream of a socialist revolution etc. The fiction of these writers make it evident that no man can be completely insulated from the influence of the world he lives in. Reality impinges with a vengeance on him.

The theory of the separate self is self-defeating and leads to despair and disappointment in the end.

Theodore L. Gross feels that Roth reveals in his fiction the essence of Jewish sensibility – the essential Judaism – and the Yiddish ethos, the struggle for universal justice and human brotherhood. Roth believes and proves that mere identification of oneself with the Jewish community or mere ritualistic observation of Jewish rituals will never constitute real Jewishness. The real Jew must identify with Jewish aspiration, suffering, dignity and sensibility.

Robert F. Kiernan, states in *Jewish Fiction; American Writing Since 1945: A Critical Study* that compared to Bellow and Malamud, “Roth is less concerned with the mystique of being Jewish and more concerned with the emotional dynamics of a Jewish rearing ....” and “gives voice to the Jewish libido as it wages a losing battle with guilt, sexual confusion and thralldom to the family”(35). Thus the essence of Jewish family life with its intricacies and complications dominate Rothian fiction. Middle class Jewish family structure, the sense of duty, commitment and loyalty of the family members are subtly delineated by the author. The protagonist’s constant inner conflict between his

total involvement with American life and the externally haunting Jewish past comprise the chief element of Rothian fiction.

Tracing the level of progression in Rothian fiction, Bonnie Lyons opines in his article "Jews on the Brain in 'Wrathful Philippics' ", that "Roth's work has moved inwards in recent years, into questions of consciousness and self consciousness and the deeper into the self he goes, the more the question of the Jew resonates" (186).

Roth's Jews have never been idealized nor elevated to sainthood. Neither has he depicted them vaguely or created faceless ghosts. They are of flesh and blood with all virtues and vices of a typical human being. In the article "The Artist as a Jewish Writer", Aharon Appelfeld considers Philip Roth a Jewish writer for the following reason:

All the experiences in his fiction from *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959) to *The Dying Animal* (2001) reflect the facial expressions, words, intonations, the mannerisms of the Jews' language of stares and grimaces, with which they are so generously endowed ... However, what he knows most intimately and comprehensively is the

Jewish family: the love, the closeness, the burden, and all the entanglements of mother, father and sons who chase one another as if one of them were going to be kidnapped. (14-15)

Incidentally, Roth never espises his Jewishness. He considers himself "fortunate in being a Jew" (*RMAO* 20).

Sam B. Girgus, in his article "The Jew as Underground Man", states his belief that Philip Roth has "asserted the importance of Jewish writers in developing new literary styles and tastes as both a response to their situation as Jews in America and as a way of fulfilling their artistic and literary promise" (163). The protagonists reflect upon their Jewish childhood which is a salient feature of the Jewish clan. The dominating figure in this childhood is always the father. The mother is always a secondary character, striving for the perpetuation of the patriarchal family structure. But Rothian protagonists are always found drifting away from the Orthodox Judaism insisted upon by the elder generation, resulting in the disintegration of the old formula. Dislocation of the traditional orthodox set-up results in confusion, which in turn leads to turmoil. The emotional security normally expected from the parents is found lacking in the American - Jewish families.



Hence, the victims of alienation are forced to seek this security elsewhere in lovers, and surrogate parents.

Roth, states in "Writing About Jews":

Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee us of the appropriateness of our feelings. The world of fiction, in fact, frees us from the circumscriptions that society places upon feeling; one of the greatness of the art is that it allows both the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways not always available in day-to-day contact; or if they are available, they are not possible, or manageable, or legal, or advisable, or even necessary to the business of living. We may not even know that we have such a range of feelings and responses until we have come into contact with the work of fiction. This does not mean that either the reader or writer no longer brings any moral judgment to bear upon human action. Rather, we judge at a different level of our being, for not only are we judging with the aid of new feelings, but without the necessity of having to act upon judgment, or even to be judged for our judgment ceasing for a while to be upright citizens, we drop into another layer of consciousness. And

this dropping, this expansion of moral consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to a man and to society. (450)

In his article, "What Does Philip Roth Want?", Joseph Epstein states :

Philip Roth wishes also to have the right to strike out against the bourgeoisie-particularly the Jewish bourgeoisie – and to be adored for his acute perceptions of it. And he wishes to have appreciated what he takes to be the universal application of his own experience as it has been transformed by the imagination in his several novels. (210)

Continuing in the same vein, Epstein informs us that Roth "has a fine eye for the detail and texture of social scenery. He has a splendid ear and an accompanying gift of mimicry, which allows him to do the Jews in a thousand voices" (212).

Philip Roth, despite his stature as "Jewish" novelist, has quite often been preoccupied with social rather than religious material. Unlike Malamud or Bellow, for whom the examination of religious symbol is essential to the novel, Roth uses religion almost solely in ironic terms. According to Stanley Cooperman, as stated in "Old Jacob's Eye with a Squint", Roth's attitude to Judaism is

that of the social realist rather than symbolist or moralist: he has come to use religion – and ethnic identification – as raw material for either parody or caricature” (438). As a consequence of this approach, Philip Roth has been alienated from the Jewish tradition that has always provided the chief impetus for his best works. Thus Roth, an exile from exile, is a man swimming in the mainstream of American culture, and yet unable to come to terms with the culture and the tradition, which shaped his alienation in the first place. Thus Cooperman believes that Roth is wandering through a metaphysical comic nightmare in which moral value is reduced to mannerism and formal tradition to eccentricity – an eccentricity at best picturesque or exotic and at worst graceless or hypocritical, a mouthing of obsolete incantation which has for its origin fear based upon ignorance

In 1964, speaking at the Annual American – Israel dialogue at the Weizman Institute, Roth defiantly announced that “I am not a Jewish writer, I am a writer who is a Jew”. Though critics had predicted the trio of Bellow, Malamud and Roth orienting themselves to unJewish themes, Roth has proved them wrong by returning to Jewish material for his novels. After

publishing *When She Was Good*, his earliest excursion into WASP Americana Roth returned to home territory by publishing *Portnoy's Complaint*. Judaism, whether or not elevated into universal symbol, has continued to occupy the main creative centre for him as well as his compatriots, including Bellow and Malamud. By publishing *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth seemed determined to prove that he indeed was more (or less) than a mere "Jewish Writer". The struggle to negotiate the competing claims of the individual imperative (the American theme) with the group imperative (the Jewish theme) constitutes the single focal point of all Rothian literature. The individual theme is characterized by individual happiness, personal freedom and self-reliance that personify America's official myth of itself. The other is the belief among Jews at large, a belief both naïve and profound, that Jewish writers are heirs to a common legacy, partners in the common destiny and therefore spokesmen for the common will.

Roth's writing is sufficiently thick with overlays. The thickest of them is the romantic and erotic. All his works, from *Goodbye, Columbus* onwards are epics of hopeless longing punctuated by bursts of pleasure and then pratfalls and collapses. The drama of love and loss

and the pressure of pent-up sexuality that drives it remain constant in Roth's writing, expressing itself as ever more demanding, ever more uncontrollable, ever more anarchic and dangerous as the years go by.

Roth's central male characters are introspective and persistently tormented. This is a shortcoming in Rothian Literature in which an entire literary culture is complicit. The main avenue of Jewish fiction writing in America has dedicated itself to the project of creating a Jewish Persona that could not only detach itself from the shackles of Old World tradition and submit itself to the self-reliance, the uncertainty, the desublimation and the commercialism of American life, but also distinguish itself from the Jewish middle class by the obstacles of conscience it sets in its own path to self – realization.

Roth is a master creator of character. He works comfortably with a dual conception of character as both archetype and mask, drawing upon one or the other according to his needs. From the one he derives what is lasting in human relations: like the son's feeling for the father, out of which he extracts the touching, sometimes grueling encounters of fathers and sons as in *Patrimony* (1991) *Zuckerman Unbound* (198) and *The Professor of Desire*.(1977) Each relationship draws upon a depth of

emotion, a legacy of recollection, and a heartstring stretched to breaking point. From the conception of character as mask, Roth gets the brisk theatrical effects of *The Counterlife*. While *The Counterlife* traces an elaborate counterpoint between the inertia of history and the agility of the imagination, contradicting itself repeatedly without losing its unity of purpose, *Deception* features a novelist whose wife has discovered a notebook in which her novelist-husband had detailed his extra-marital affair with another woman.

Along with numerous awards, prizes and praises, Philip Roth has also had to face devastating condemnation, leaving a mark on his writing. Roth found it difficult to take the attacks in his stride, recorded the bitter ones and retorted strongly when opportunity provided him a chance. Notable examples include, "On Portnoy's Complaint", "Writing About Jews" and "Writing and the Powers That Be".

*Portnoy's Complaint* forced Philip Roth to go into hiding. Bitter criticism included the article, "Laureate of the New Class" by Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary* and "Philip Roth Reconsidered" by Irving Howe. Roth was accused for being an informer to the

Gentiles, a writer who denies his characters fullness, contour or surprise.

In theory, Saul Bellow and his junior Jewish colleagues share William Faulkner's belief that in literature the road to universality was through the particular. Faulkner believed that it was precisely the particularistic Southernness of his own work that gave it universality. Of all the Jewish writers, Philip Roth exploded into a culture in which there had developed a new receptivity to fiction about Jews. But this acceptability and receptivity was not without conditions. The work under debate had to be sufficiently related with the still exotic Jewish – American experience to render it convincing. At the same time the author had to be sufficiently distanced from this experience to write about it with a critical eye. Roth succeeded this test. In Roth's first three publications subjected to evaluation in this thesis, he has demonstrated that he had a perfectly pitched ear for the speech of the first two generations of Jews who had come to America from Eastern Europe, a keen eye for the details of the life they lived, and an alert perception of the quirks and contours of their psychological make-up.

At the centre of Philip Roth's stories and early novels was a Jewish sensibility so familiar that it seemed to have a local colour and flavour. The literary subject of a nice young man struggling to emancipate himself from the oppression of bourgeois conformity was a thoroughly familiar subject. But its application by Roth to a Jewish milieu gave it a rare freshness. The characters, all members of a closely-knit family stumble in a wonderfully comic way over their newly acquired language, possessions and position. In the process, the perspective of the sensitive, educated hero becomes the perfect vehicle for exploding the naïve materialism and flamed morality of the parent generation.

Philip Roth and his fiction do not yield easily to Jewish-oriented theses about Jewish-American writers and their fiction because he is the most marginal of Jewish novelists. He has a secular and skeptical perspective about his raw materials. He has defended this perspective right in the enemy's den with the article in *Commentary* and the Jewish Symposia held in Tel Aviv in 1963. His retorts are often acerbic, but his point of view is both consistent and illuminating, and thus serves as a helpful context for understanding his



intentions and achievements as a Jewish – American writer.

Roth while having a secular view of his Jewish raw materials, regards himself as a Jew. But he has always held fast to the view-controversial, of course – that the American Jew does not inherit a body of law and learning, but rather a psychological shell without clear historical, cultural or moral substance. Roth does not bring a strong sense of Judaic heritage to either his fiction or his view of himself as a writer. He did not consider himself as a Jewish writer in the parochial sense of the term. Instead he considers himself as a writer who happens to be a Jew. His biggest concern and passion in his life was to write fiction and not to be a Jew.

In Rothian fiction, it is often felt that when Jews and Gentiles meet each other, they have wrong notions about each other. The Jewish males are obsessed with a mythical creature called Shiksa and her promise of hither to unimagined sexual delights. At the same time, but to a greater or lesser degree, his non-Jewish women are filled with ideas about Jewish men. These feelings, in turn, are connected, clearly, to Jewish attitudes and Gentile male attitude toward women in general.

The early fiction of Philip Roth is set against the backdrop of the close-knit family life of post- World War II Jews in America. All the central characters, including those who are the subject of study in this work appear to be a medium to explore the causes for the fragmentation of modern man's psyche. The pressure - situations, both inside and outside the individual, including the family do have positive and negative results. Assimilation and acculturation are accompanied by the characters losing their mental integrity and coherence. Roth seems to have given lesser importance to the communal life of Jews in America than to their internal anguish and struggles. The outward signs of communal life only serve as milestones for the readers to measure how far the central characters have distanced themselves from traditional Judaism in their attempts at assimilation. The self that is in the making gets trapped in a series of paranoia- like situation. According to Aharon Appelfeld, Roth's protagonists are Jews because of a "biographical accident rather than philosophical commitment" (14).

The works selected for scrutiny in this thesis belong to the formative years of Philip Roth's career as a writer. His creative years commence from 1959 when

"Goodbye, Columbus" was published and still continues unabated. "*Goodbye, Columbus*" (1959), *Letting Go* (1962) and "*Portnoy's Complaint*" (1969) have been selected for scrutiny in this thesis for their thematic relevance to the title. As stated earlier, the family plays a very important role in the making of the self. The family ties prove too strong to be severed and cast their influence wherever the protagonists go. In spite of conscious and deliberate attempts on the part of the protagonists to transcend the limits of family encumbrances, ultimately, they find it difficult to let go off those influences. Finally, it results in bidding goodbye to everything that America represents and returning to the safe, familiar home territory of Judaism, imbibed from the Jewish family. Thus the Jewish heritage, inculcated in the characters by the older generation, continues to be an invisible umbilical connection between two generations. The characters complete a full circle and reach "home": the Jewish home, the true synagogue.

*Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*, (1959) consists of the title story and five short stories. This work may rightly be viewed as the precursory text to the later novelistic discourses that dramatize the

transformation of the self into various grotesque forms. All the five short stories as well as the title story expound the celebration of selfhood. Of the five short stories, "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings" is devoid of Jewish milieu and hence has not been taken up for study in this thesis. A skillful alteration of imprisonment and liberation of the self is part of the literary device used by Roth in all the stories. The atmosphere of cultural refinement in which the self unfolds itself imposes upon the characters an intense desire to be good, at least in the eyes of their parents and society. But due to exasperation, the characters rebel after some time.

These motifs, the products of rebellion, get manifested through the endless ranting of the subject who is laden with guilt, anxiety and paranoia. According to Donald Kartiganer, as stated in "Fictions of Metamorphosis: From Goodbye, Columbus to Portnoy's Complaint" the characters expand their discord by magnifying their divisiveness "into a crisis of internal warfare"(82). Roth seems to be extending this problematic situation into his later novels too. The characters embark upon a monologic ranting often bordering on the brink of mental delirium.

In *Goodbye, Columbus*, the hero Neil Klugman is faced with choosing between surrendering before the harsh social forces with a sense of resignation or taking on the power of reality with stubborn activism. Neil opts for the latter course. An identical situation can be deciphered in *Letting Go* as well as *Portnoy's Complaint*. Thus, Gabe Wallach is the natural successor to Neil Klugman, Ozzie Freedman and Eli, the Fanatic. His legacy is continued by Alexander Portnoy. From Ozzie Freedman Gabe inherits a sincere, and at times naive, resentment of limitation; from Eli Peck Gabe inherits a keen awareness of society's expectations for conformity, a nervous indecisiveness, and a final courage to exert his individuality despite the consequences; and from Neil Klugman, Gabe inherits an intellectual awareness of moral issues and a misguided yearning for wealth and social advancement.

Gabe Wallach is deeply family - oriented. There are three significant motifs in this novel: "mistaken intentions", "crossed purposes" and "conflicting demands". In the search for order and self-fulfillment, Gabe Wallach is forced to grapple with a series of issues including filial obligation, flirtatious relationship, professional pursuit, marital compatibility etc.

Portnoy, the main character of the third work under scrutiny, indulges himself in a monologic discourse which may be studied as an uncompromising battle between private desire and socially implored moral conscience. It is the comedy of excess where obscenity is not only a kind of language but is very nearly the issue itself.

Portnoy's sexual explicitness and political rebellion capture the destruction of political and social boundaries, as well as its greater freedom and opening of new possibilities for men and women. *Portnoy's Complaint* was published in 1969 at the height of the political and racial unrest that led to the burning of American cities, anti-Vietnamese war and the beginning of women's liberation movement in America. Echoing many of the themes of *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Portnoy's Complaint* completes Roth's study of the Jewish family in Postwar America. In between we have *Letting Go*, also exploring the relationship of confused fathers and their perplexing, disappointing sons who themselves are disappointed and dejected. While in *Goodbye, Columbus* the relationship between the son and his surrogate parents is brought into focus, in *Letting Go*, Roth scrutinizes the relationship between Dr. Wallach and his son Gabe

Wallach and in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the subjugation of the son's individuality by an overbearing mom.

Apart from the aforementioned three works, none of Roth's subsequent publications can claim anything specifically Jewish except American-born Jewish characters who find nothing special about being a member of The Chosen Tribe. Similarly only in the novels subjected to scrutiny do we find a sincere conversion to essential Judaism. Hence, the choice of novels.

# Philip Roth and the Jewish Sensibility

K.P. Nanda Kumar “The self in the making : A study of jewish sensibility in the early fiction of Philip Roth ” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2003



## Chapter 2

### Philip Roth and the Jewish Sensibility

Webster's *Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English language* defines "sensibility" as, among other things, "liability to feel hurt or offended". Basically sensibility is a quality related to emotions and it can be refined or vulgar. M. H. Abrams defines the novel of sensibility as something that "emphasize[s] the tearful distresses of the virtuous, either at their own sorrows or at those of their friends" (191). A person's sensibility is best expressed when confronted with situations involving suffering and related sorrow.

According to Norman Podhoretz, "the Jew is humanity seen under the twin aspects of suffering and moral aspiration. Therefore any man who suffers greatly and who also longs to be better than he is can be called a Jew" (177). Suffering is an inevitable part of Jewish sensibility. Like his compatriots Philip Roth has been fascinated by the theme of Jewish suffering that shapes Jewish sensibility. In fact, it is this fact of human nature that has affected greatly the moulding of Jewish

sensibility. Suffering is one of the prominent qualities of Jewishness.

A survey of Jewish history is one of wandering and suffering. The Jew is always on the move, accompanied by suffering, both mental and physical. In the New Testament, the plural "Jews" is the term usually employed to refer to Hebrews, the descendants of Jacob and who belong to the Hebraic branch of the Semitic race that descended from Eber. Thus, in ancient times, these people were known as "Hebrews" under the monarchy of David. Later following the birth of Israel in 1948, Jews started being called Israelis, a logical fall-out of the earlier "Israelites". The modern representatives of this stock call themselves Hebrews in race and language, and Israelites in religion, but Jews in both senses.

Suffering has been the lot of Jews from the very beginning of their existence. Right from the days of Jacob (later renamed as Israel, after whom a nation was established in 1948), when Egyptian Pharaohs tortured them and later in the land of Canaan, where they suffered misery in the hands of Moabites, Ammonites and Philistines, Jews have suffered considerably. This suffering continues even today. Its worst phase was in

the early forties of the previous century when Adolph Hitler embarked upon a mad adventure of extermination that caused the death of six million Jews. The wandering may have abated, but not the suffering. Surrounded by Arabs, it continues. It is enough to say that the term "Jew" has come to symbolize pain and agony, sorrow and suffering.

The Jewish experience throughout the ages have provided them with an extraordinary resilience and tenacity to maintain their ethnic identity successfully in their arduous struggle for survival. The secret of this success is due to the Jewish tradition of mutual responsibility, the responsibility of the Jew for one another, the individual Jew's sense of Jewish collectivity, the Jewish fellow feeling for the lonely Jew in distress and the better-situated Jew's compassion for the under privileged one. Constant suffering has fostered the values of compassion and charity in Jews. Thus suffering obviously has a special meaning to the Jews.

It is not surprising to note that the Jewish audience is receptive to the relentless pageant of Jewish suffering in literature. A family pride springing from two sources goes with it. Suffering is first of all the distinguishing

mark of the Jewish people. It is also a part of that which demarcates them as the Chosen People.

Judaism is both parochial and universal at one and the same time. Rituals are grounded in the experience of the Jewish people and the teachings cannot simply be adopted by or grafted on to some other group delinked from Jewish history and life. Yet, without contact, the universal truths that Judaism embodies cannot permeate elsewhere. Within Judaism itself, the advocates of assimilation and xenophobia have not been able to arrive at a compromise.

The making of the self is related to the theme of alienation and is an important subject particularly in the American context. Of all the varied cultural and sub-cultural groups, the Jews and Blacks have been the most affected, dissolving themselves in the melting pot that America is. The Jews have succeeded in moving towards the centre of American social culture. Yet the feeling of alienation still remains a psychological residue.

Naturally the Jews consider suffering to be God-given. Suffering, an integral part of the Jew's chosenness has been viewed with a feeling of pride in his painful mission. European Jews in the Middle Ages and again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

experienced an extraordinary amount of suffering. But in elevating their hardship to the level of an ethical suffering, many Jewish American novelists have resorted to excessive sentimentality. Fortunately Philip Roth, who does not view the story of the Chosen People with sympathy has steered clear of fictionalizing sentiments. Like Malamud, Roth too asserts that all men in the world suffer from various misfortunes like the Jews. Jews alone are not prone to suffering, pain, sorrow and misfortune. Transcending himself the rigid parameters of being labeled a 'Jewish writer', Roth looks upon suffering as a way towards man's ennoblement and enlightenment.

With the advent and advancement of materialism, man has become lonely in a crowd, a depersonalized creature, a victim of modern technology whose individual identity gets lost in the image of a mob. It is this image of an isolated man and his sensibility that has been portrayed in the fiction of Philip Roth, especially his early fiction. The characters wander in the dark, trying to redeem themselves. Ultimately they gain a foothold and in the process, preserve their identity. The message is clear: Self-indulgence seems to erode loyalty, respect and responsibility, which are the cornerstones of stable

families. Malamud's opinion that all men are Jews has been expanded in its connotative sense by Philip Roth to conclude that all Jews are destined to suffer and any sufferer is a Jew. All sufferers are Jews and vice-versa. All humanity is destined to suffer and all of them have imbibed the Jewish quality of suffering. According to Roth, suffering is not the exclusive privilege or prerogative of Jews. The Jew as a concept has become a metaphor.

Philip Roth's arrival on the literary scene – especially as a fiction writer – and his image zooming upwards had much to do with the state of American Jewry in the fifties of the twentieth century. Post-war Jewry, yet to recover from the shock of the Holocaust, was obsessed with Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the dramatic version of Anne Frank's *Diary* and Leon Uris's *Exodus*. Even while trying to forget the past, the Jews in America had a fear that Hitler's Germany could be repeated in the States.

When *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* was published in 1959, American Jewry was leaning towards the view that Jews could be liberal, open to opportunity, loving and lovable and mentally strong enough to resist the lure of American materialism that

would result in the loss of Jewish identity. The crisis resulting from excessive penchant for assimilation and acculturation was articulated as to seem a threat to Jewish values. These values are the only means to strengthen what the Jewish community really considers most important: Jewish identity and communal survival. Like suffering, assimilation too has altered the nature of Jewish sensibility in America. This change can be felt in Roth's fictional contributions, especially the earliest ones. Following the reaction to *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth's attention to the problem of Jewish conflict in America became intensified by his needs to come to terms with his own unforeseen rejection. As a way out he created a gallery of testifiers, including writers and himself who embarked on a self-rescue mission justifying his view-points and what he had written.

After the publication of Roth's first few works, the main question that was raised in magazines, newspapers and surveys was "why should my being Jewish keep me from sharing the American dream? Even while remaining a Jew, a person could partake of the American dream. Many of Roth's protagonists – his testifiers – are men like himself born in the thirties whose life resemble

that of their creator. Majority of them – Wallach, Kepesh, Tarnopol, Zuckerman, Klugman and “Philip Roth” – are men of letters, teaching literature.

Literature becomes the medium through which Roth’s central characters assimilate America into their Jewish selves and themselves into America. Ultimately it is just fighting off parental control by the younger generation and the control of the organized Jewry threatening the artistic independence of the older generation. Those who escaped the holocaust had to bear the guilt of having escaped it. These are all contributory factors that have shaped and continue shaping Jewish sensibility in America.

Philip Roth has struggled to establish his identity as a Jewish writer. Perhaps no other modern American writer has done as much to challenge old stereotypes and concepts of masculinity as Roth. Roth has written almost compulsively about achieving independence, authority and maturity as an artist and man in America. Roth’s heroes are multiple guises of a single mythic consciousness of the modern urban Jew. This fact both complicates and enriches his fiction and vision of American culture.



Philip Roth's heroes find themselves ensconced in a mental ghetto. This theme of finding one's self unable to escape the past or overcome a perennial perspective from a psychic ghetto pervades most of Roth's fiction. Along with Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, Philip Roth has written intensively about the responsibilities of the writer to explore the American idea and explain contemporary American culture. Roth believes that Jewish writers in America should develop new literary styles and tastes as both a response to their situation as Jews in America and as a way of fulfilling their artistic and literary promise. The Jewish writer and thinker is a linguistic innovator who develops the rhetorical and narrative structures of the myth and ideology of America while maintaining the role of the modern American hero of thought. American reality, according to Philip Roth, may be intractable but Jewish – American writers cannot avoid the challenge.

Roth's dismay at trying to reflect American reality eventually develops into an affirmation of the writer's role. Philip Roth is in direct connection with the American literary tradition. Roth is trying to bridge the chasm between serious writers and spontaneous, vernacular writers. Jewish writers are more spontaneous

and vernacular. The contrast between genteel sensibilities and the spontaneous reality of Jewish ethnicity as well as class origins creates acute tension for the Jewish writer and intellectual.

Philip Roth acknowledges himself as Jewish writer in terms of experience and thought. He considered it a good fortune to be born a Jew. He considered Jewishness as a complicated, interesting, morally demanding and a very unique, singular experience which he liked. He found himself in the historic predicament of being Jewish with all its complications. Roth has always believed that his own experience as a Jew largely dictates his perception and understanding of the moral and psychological themes that dominate his work.

From the psychological point of view Roth's remark – amply described in *Goodbye, Columbus* – seem more akin to the earlier ghetto of the Lower East Side. Trying to fictionalize his adolescent experiences, Roth has acknowledged that his early fiction drew upon the ethos of his highly self-conscious Jewish neighbourhood, the inhabitants of which were proud, ambitious and equally exhilarated by the experience of getting fused in a melting pot.

It was to his Jewish roots and background that Roth instinctively turned for material at the beginning of his writing career. Later in 1969, Roth distilled from that background – the Jewish background – the fictional, folkloric family that he christened Portnoys. Critics may accuse Roth for using Jewish materials, but according to him, these critics are victims in a country where they need not be victims provided they have the will power. Some other critics, according to Roth, prefer to indulge in self-pity – the eternal sufferers – as opposed to more serious and honest expressions of Jewish-American life.

Roth's insights into the styles associated with different cultural perspectives of literary modernism, Americanism and Judaism have contributed to his special status as a writer. A happy blending of the conflicts and incongruities associated with these perspectives accounts for the numerous social and cultural criticism of his prose. The different styles reflect different modes of thought and ways of life. Naturally, they operate as checks and critical perspectives on one another – Jew versus American and middle class conformist versus modernist rebel. Brought together by Roth into one consistent style, they become the ironic consciousness and multi-perspective of the modern urban Jew.

Zuckerman, the protagonist of *Zuckerman Unbound* is the autobiographical alter ego of Philip Roth. In *Zuckerman Unbound* published in 1981, Zuckerman's hopes are defeated by the dramatic tension between his middle class Jewish background and the combination of creativity and nihilism implied in his ambition to be a writer who can revolutionize the consciousness of his times. Roth, as a son had personally experienced the 'protective adoration of parents' who will even construe rebelliousness on the part of sons as something praiseworthy. Conversely, unremitting love on the part of parents effectively countered the effectiveness of that rebellion. The fact of the 'broken heart' was stronger than the fear of punishment. The difficulty that Zuckerman encounters in breaking away from such loving parents by establishing true independence from them signifies the schlemiel's prolonged adolescence that undermines any challenge to this rebellion. Zuckerman and Alex Portnoy know that the thwarted parents will be waiting for them, somewhere in a corner of their psyche.

Guilt and the associated prick of conscience keep the characters close to home but being Jewish in America creates the kinds of anxieties and doubts that

naturally send one back to one's roots. Even surrogate parents fail to cleanse the minds of the protagonists of their backgrounds. Zuckerman disowns his Jewish father and instead substitutes him with an older, famous writer, E.I.Lanoff as an adopted literary father figure. But in Lanoff's writings, Zuckerman discovers his own background! Lanoff's writings remind Zuckerman of his family's Jewish background and his own Jewish upbringing. Through Lanoff's fiction, Zuckerman finds himself able to identify with the burdens of exclusion and confinement that weighed upon the lives of his parents. Zuckerman's condescension toward his real father and his desperate search for a new father figure dramatize the insecurities of his past carried forward into his adult life.

Roth's heroes, including Portnoy, Gabe Wallach and Klugman swim to the surface of their lives as seemingly successfully, bright young Jewish men, but are basically men underground. They dramatize the situation of being Jewish, modern and American all at once.

These underground heroes are engaged in a perennial search for identity and masculinity. Roth's development of his fiction as a continuous search for a centre is in conformity with the search of his characters

for a sense of self. *My Life As A Man* is a typical example for this technique of combining fiction and theme – the theme of the loss of uncertain self. The third part of this novel titled *My True Story* is autobiographical. The fictional process of creating a real self is sustained by the attempt in the novel to find the real author. Roth is actually searching through the self to find a real self.

In “*My True Story*”, Zuckerman is found addressing a bored class. He quotes from Joseph Conrad’s Introduction to the *Nigger of Narcissus*. The opening words of the quotation reflects the mindset of the novelist who has quoted them. Roth’s heroes not only want new identities and fathers, but also exhibit what Alex’s psychiatrist, Dr. Otto Spielvogel, terms the narcissism of the artist.

There is a thin line of impersonation and confession and it is this line that Roth is continuously exploiting in his fiction. He has succeeded in developing the tension between fiction and the self in a way that elevated his heroes to the level of a cultural myth. The identity of this hero emerges from Roth’s public self and literary self. By writing onto his recent fiction so many brilliant, internal variations of a single fictive self that resembles

himself, he creates heroes who live in both literature and public life. Ultimately, Philip Roth achieves a modern-day bridge that connects the public Roth with the literary self that searches in his novels for a solid centre. As both a Jew and a modernist, Roth projects a mythic self onto American culture that seems nothing less than revolutionary in its departure from the historic model of the hero in American literature and culture. At the same time, the receptivity to such a heroic figure by the general public conveys something of the revolution in values, tastes and style that the culture as whole has undergone in the past several decades.

# The Self in Exile

K.P. Nanda Kumar “The self in the making : A study of jewish sensibility in the early fiction of Philip Roth ” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2003



## Chapter 3

### The Self in Exile

*Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*, published in 1959, won Philip Roth the National Book Award, thereby launching him on a brilliant literary career that continues its upward mobility even today. The title story, dealing with the vulgarity of the upper middle Jewish class and its excessive interest in material possessions, accompanied by an unavoidable deterioration of moral standards, uses realistic dialogue for conveying a message to the readers. Philip Roth, incorporating into his stories what he has seen and felt, fortifies it with his sense of traditional Jewish values. The novella is a penetrating social commentary on post-war Jewish life in America, especially the shift in social status experienced by a section of Jewish immigrants. It delineates the change in outlook exhibited by this section as a result of its members drifting out to urban prosperous neighbourhood, thereby immersing themselves in the mainstream of modern American life. Thus, the title story of Roth's first fiction is a well - illuminated picture of the new suburban Jewish family.

Roth's natural subject is the self-conscious Jew of the new middle class, the Jew whose 'identity' though never in doubt, is a problem to himself, resulting in the character making himself the subject of ridicule. Philip Roth has always refused to identify his characters with legendary virtues and pieties of Jewish tradition. Instead he dislikes them as a group for an unconscious submission that takes the form of hysteria.

In the novella, as well as the short stories, we find the characters endeavouring to come to terms with traditional Jewish values in the context of modern American experience. What Roth is endeavouring in all the stories is to present the specific tensions and dilemmas in Jewish suburban life arising out of the dual heritage of the American Jews.

Efforts to create such protagonists epitomize the possibilities that are open to the American writer in general and the American Jewish writer in particular. Like Salinger, Bellow, Malamud and Styron, Roth has tried to create out of the experiences of the modern American Jew a portrait of American experience itself.

Roth's concerns as an American political satirist and as an ethnographic recorder of Jewish life work together in the five short stories in *Goodbye, Columbus*.

American and Jewish themes are linked in these five stories by moral pattern, literary strategy and rhetorical tactics. Each of these stories moves to a crisis in which the protagonist must acknowledge his Jewishness by resorting to a particular course of action. This recognition has major consequences for the other characters and transforms the situation radically. Ironically, in each instance, the Jewish course of action turns out to be identical with, rather than opposed to the democratic American choice.

While the first of the five short stories, "The Conversion of the Jews" is a humorous portrayal of a Jewish boy who forces his Jewish world to kneel and acknowledge his beliefs, the second story, "Defender of the Faith" delineates the moral anguish of a Sergeant in whom latent religio-ethnic feelings are successfully set aflame by a trainee. The third story, "Epstein" is about the mental anguish of a Jewish businessman. Philip Roth presents this anguish as the natural corollary of his incestuous extra-marital relationship with a widow who lives nearby. Though the fourth short story "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He sings" is the least Jewish of the collection, it portrays the story of a young man who realizes belatedly that a man's history is his fate. As if

to counterbalance the unJewishness of this story, the fifth and final one, "Eli, the Fanatic" narrates the mental and physical conversion of a progressive Jew into an orthodox one following his attempts to modernize an Orthodox greenie.

The novella and short stories have been viewed as a social, penetrating commentary on present day Jewish life, particularly on the rearrangements of its middle class. The title story tells us about Neil Klugman caught between two classes in a love affair. The story illuminates the picture of the new suburban family whose home, bursting with food and sporting goods, rather resembles a supermarket. "Eli the Fanatic" provides some equally telling observations of a Jewish group trying to assimilate with a secular community in Woodenton. But according to Theodore Solotaroff, as stated in "Philip Roth and the Jewish Moralists", "the focus of Eli is not on social questions but moral ones" (16). Generally this is true of Roth's work as a whole, including his earlier published stories. Assimilation has resulted in changes. Roth's notation of these changes acquire depth, not by his fixing them merely by their external signs like club membership, horse shows, etc., but also by their subtle intrinsic effects upon the

individual's sense of his personal, moral identity as a Jew.

Ozzie Freedman in *The Conversion of the Jews* struggles to emerge from under the shadow of cold unreasonable dogmas, but the characteristic problem is that of Sergeant Marx in *Defender of the Faith* and that of Eli Peck, in *Eli the Fanatic* both of whose Jewishness has become merely a vague feeling and requires both a direct challenge from outside and an act of moral imagination to come alive and identify themselves and their basic values. Even *Goodbye, Columbus* is ultimately a story about the fatal moral demands that Neil Klugman has made on Brenda Patimkin and her 'fancy - schmancy' world. The problem of identity and moral question of "What am I" is involved.

According to Saul Bellow, as stated in "Swamp of Prosperity", *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* is a first book but "not the book of a beginner unlike those of us who came howling into the world, blind and bare. Mr. Roth appears with nails, hair and teeth speaking coherently(79). Continuing in the same vein, Bellow avers that the stories of Mr. Roth show the great increase of power of materialism over us. He states that Roth has "a greater interest in society and its manners

and is aware of a great change in the condition of the Jews" (78). Irving Howe, observes in *Philip Roth Reconsidered* :

*Goodbye, Columbus* bristled with a literary self-confidence such as few writers two or three decades older than Roth could command. His stories were immediately recognizable as his own, distinctive in voice, attitude, and subject; they possessed the lucidities of definition, though I would now add, lucidities harsh and grimacing in their over-focus. (69)

Irving Howe further writes:

The Stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* are of a special kind. They are neither probings through strategic incident to reach the inner folds of character, nor affectionate renderings of regional, class or ethnic behaviour. They are not the work of a writer absorbed in human experience as it is, mirroring his time with self-effacing objectivity. (69)

Howe believes that the title story as well as the five short stories "rests in the grip of an imperious will prepared to wrench, twist, and claw at its materials in order to leave upon them the scar of its presence - as if

the work of fiction were a package that needed constantly to be stamped with a signature of self" (69).

According to Theodore Solotaroff, "the consistent vitality of Roth's stories and their full emotional range give one the sense of a writer who has somehow broken through, who is really in touch with both the American - Jew scene and with himself" ("Moralists" 14). He further states:

Roth appears to have managed it by making the energy and color of his stories flow in from direct connections to his own wit and feelings and observations and by an almost aggressive frankness about Jewish experience. In any case he deals with his situations and characters in the rare right way - without piety or apology or vindictiveness, and by combining a first - rate eye for surfaces with a sense of depth. (14)

Howe and Deer aver in "Philip Roth and the Crisis in American Jewish Fiction" that "Roth himself is willing to cheer the hero who chooses to go underworld only after he has desperately tried to make his way in the world, and only after he has come to realize that this choice is no cause for celebration" (353). They believe that Roth, as an artist, has directed his talents towards

the creation of a hero who, realizing the confusion and absurdity of modern American society, determines to make a truthful way of acting in it, instead of rejecting it.

Louis Harp opines in "Confessions of Philip Roth" that unlike "Defender of the Faith", the other stories seem to him to be "valid satirical depiction of much of the post-War Jewish middle class with much of its empty, conformist, suburban values"(134). According to him, the stories challenge religious obscurantism, in the process inviting criticism from the Jewish community for portraying anti-Semitic, self-hating emotions. Paradoxically, Philip Roth was awarded the Jewish Book Council's award for the best work of Jewish fiction for *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*.

Alfred Kazin, in an article titled "Tough Minded Mr. Roth", states:

Jews, in writing about other Jews, do not often strike: the appeal to raw human nature, to the individual in his human complexity and loneliness as a mere human creature, is less common than the grand collective themes of Jewish life, of Jewish solidarity in the face of oppression. Even the most gifted and profound writers among Jews tend to describe love



and hate, misery and savagery as if they were merely symbols of the depth and range of Jewish experience. The unusual thing, Mr. Roth's achievement, is to locate the bruised and angry and unassimilated self - the Jew as individual, not the individual as Jew - beneath the canopy of Jewishness. (258)

Philip Roth was fully conscious of the mixed reactions he had created following the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. As he candidly states in "Writing About Jews" "My work has been attacked from certain pulpits and in certain periodicals as dangerous, dishonest and irresponsible". Philip Roth has been accused for creating a distorted image of the basic values of Orthodox Judaism and for denying the non-Jewish world an opportunity for appreciating the overwhelming contributions which Orthodox Jews are making in every avenue of modern endeavour. Roth was blamed for adding "fuel for [their] fires, particularly as it is a Jew himself who seemingly admits to habits and behaviour that are not exemplary, or even normal and acceptable"(446). But Roth justifies his approach in the same article:

What readers have taken to be my disapproval of the lives lived by Jews seems to have to do more with

their own moral perspective than with the one they would ascribe to me: at times they see wickedness where I myself had seen energy or courage or spontaneity; they are ashamed of what I see no reason to be ashamed of and defensive where there is no cause for defense. (446)

At the same time, Roth was also praised by certain American critics for his brilliant description of modern American Jewish foibles and his excellent ear for realistic dialogue. Critics spoke of Roth's perspective and prophetic social vision. He was praised for seeking earnestly to improve man's relations with his fellows by establishing a sincere dialogue with them.

But the attacks far outweighed the accolades, forcing Roth to declare that as an artist he had the right to say anything about the Jews that he honestly thought was true. Acknowledging anti-Semitism, Roth asserted that the solution is not to make people like Jews so as to tolerate them; it is to let them know that they cannot kill Jews even if they are hated. In other words, it is better to dramatize Jewish faults than to attempt to conceal them because the latter method would only enable misguided or vicious people to give disproportionate significance to facts about Jews.

The novella as well as the five short stories is thematically consonant with each other in their concern regarding conflicts associated with love, the family, and the difficulties of communication in a world in which materialism has replaced spirituality. These stories also introduce another theme that pervades Roth's later works but remains submerged in *Goodbye, Columbus*. This theme emanates from Roth's representation of the individual in a society that values 'normalcy' and conformity more than the development of the individual.

All the major characters in the five short stories, in the process of resisting the dominion of others over their lives, must also resist their own earlier acceptance of the roles that the family, society and the people they love had imposed upon them. As always, the struggle for the Roth protagonist is complicated by the duality of an enemy that is at the same time internal and external.

Philip Roth as a novelist and short-story writer, is generally concerned with society and its values especially the new society that second generation Jews emerged into and recreated. *Goodbye, Columbus* suggests the complex and irrational position of the rich and self-assimilated Jew in suburban American society. The external signs of acculturation and assimilation are

part of a series of signs and indices telling us exactly what have happened to Jewish life in America.

Late twentieth century reveals a radical shift in American class connections and relationships. The boundaries become blurred and are no longer well defined. Jews managed to infiltrate into white, middle-class Protestant society with considerable success. The divisions between people became class-based instead of religion based. Naturally, believers of the same faith started getting segregated along class lines. Philip Roth illuminates this changing aspect of Jewish life of America in his first novel *Goodbye, Columbus*. There is as much of a barrier between Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin as there would have been had they been of different religions.

In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth has dealt with the conflicts in American life as they are experienced in the everyday lives of his Jewish characters. These conflicts are economic, psychological, generational and religious, repeatedly pointing to the underlying incongruity between ethical ideals and material realities in American culture. Philip Roth has used Jewishness, not to universalize, but to particularize and make more specific universal conflicts. In the process, the portrayal

becomes more realistic. Throughout the novella, as well as the five short stories the readers are encouraged to see the world as the protagonist sees it and wants them to see it.

But it is not Jewish life alone that suffers better satire in the novella. Even New Jersey on the other side of Hudson is seen as “the swampy meadows that spread for miles and miles, watery, blotchy, like an oversight of God” (GC 118). Jews are treated as people and people are corruptible. Roth has not only exhibited a heightened sensitivity to the sweep of the past, but can read the future in the matrix of the present. He displays sympathy for the social or racial class, standing where the narrator might have stood a generation earlier.

In the opening encounter of the novella, Philip Roth captures and portrays the Jewish realization of suburbanization of American life. Brenda and Neil are not only the quintessential American girl and boy but rather a phenomenon of the 1950s, when the democratic possibilities of upward social mobility were coming true for large segments of the American population, who had, until then, been on the margins of American life.

The average hero of the title story is not so much victimized by society or woman as he is victimized by himself. Neil Klugman has retreated into a lonely and unbridled individualism, more out of self-interest, egotism, a sense of superiority and contempt for his fellows than out of any spiritual or moral need. Basically a prisoner of the self, his alienation is of his own making. The hero is in flight from personal relationships and responsibilities. They are construed as hindrances on his way to freedom. His attempts to live as a separate self are often responsible for his unhappiness and disillusionment.

Howe and Deer feel that the sense of alienation suffered by the modern intellectual strikes a deep responsive chord in Roth. So, he has created Neil Klugman who is cut off from his sweetheart Brenda - and therefore denied the possibility of genuine love - because he is nauseated by the phoney standards of success and happiness to which her brother and father would expect him to conform as Brenda's husband. The values implicit in the empty spectacularism and the sentimental pieties of school loyalty programmes, or in dedication to a successful career as a manufacturer of plumbing equipments, would prevent him from

maintaining either a sense of his own identity or a worthwhile relationship with the woman he loves. Having failed to achieve human communion, he is thrown back into despair and isolation.

Neil Klugman could serve as a prototype of other male protagonists that follow in *Letting Go* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. This twenty three year old Newark boy, who works in the New York Public Library temporarily, feels alienated from the people and the world around him. But the alienation is largely of his own making, an outcome of his snobbery, self-righteousness and lack of feeling or concern for others. As part of this self-righteousness, Neil Klugman claims a singular sensitivity for himself and persuades himself that he cares for the things of the spirit whereas others are only interested in the things of the flesh like food, money and material possessions.

Neil does not visualize a bright career for himself in the library. Neither does he have an idea of what his future is going to be. Basically a drifter, Neil looks down upon his colleagues, parents and relatives alike. His parents are referred to as penniless deserters. Neil's scathing remark, "They are not my parents" sums up his parental attitude. For him, "My aunt's all right

really”(GC 50). When Neil visits Mr. Patimkin’s factory in the Negro section of Newark, he is reminded of his grand parents who had “struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, towards the edge of Newark, then out of it---- (GC 90). To Mrs. Patimkin’s query if Neil is Orthodox or Conservative, he replies “I am just Jewish” (GC 88). Neil does not have much contact with any synagogue. He justifies by saying that “since my parents left, I haven’t had much contact”. (GC 87). This reference to a decade of heathenism bears testimony to the absence of religious content in the protagonist’s life. His parents as well as surrogate parents have failed to instil in his young mind religious aspirations.

Brenda belongs to the snobbish upper-middle class Jewish strata for whom Newark is something obnoxious and abominable. Neil belongs to Newark. Plagued by a sense of inferiority complex, coupled with insecurity, Neil takes refuge behind insult and offence, viewing it as his best defence against Brenda. At the same, Neil is also contemptuous of the snobbery of Brenda and her family.

Ironically Neil Klugman does not strike one as very different from Brenda and her family. Even while looking down upon the Patimkins, Neil continues to



enjoy their hospitality and the fruits of their success. There is no clear proof in the novel to show that, given the opportunity, Neil would not go for material success. Neither is there proof to prove that the Patimkins are as bad as Neil makes them out to be.

Neil's problem is that he can neither accept the world of the Patimkins nor the world of Aunt Gladys. He abhors the shallowness of the Patimkins, yet finds nothing in Jewish history to sustain him. Life in Newark and New York is not palpable to him. Lincoln Tunnel is described as "Longer and funnier than ever, like Hell with tiled walls" (GC 98). Even the humidity of New York seemed to be hateful. A "fountain seemed to be bubbling boiling water on the people who sat at its edge" (GC 99).

Neil's rejection of Brenda means his rejection of neo-Jewish Americanism. His dilemma is whether to accept or reject the neo-Jewish American world as proved in his description of the suburbs when he drives out to meet Brenda. He is half envious and half satirical as he drives to the tennis court. His car drove past houses "where no one sat on steps, where lights were on but no windows open, for those inside, refusing to share the very texture of life with those of us outside,

regulated with a dial the amounts of moisture that were allowed access to their skin" (*GC* 8-9).

Wandering through the spacious Patimkin home one evening, Neil Klugman discovers the previously unimagined possibilities of suburban life. For the Patimkins, privacy and gracious living go together. The size of the suburban house and its specialization of functions by room make it possible to hide the past, once so integral and jumbled together. Neil discovers that the finished basement - the heart of the suburban ideal - includes a wet bar. Roth finds the refrigerator equipped with "bacchanalian paraphernalia":

Plentiful, orderly, and untouched, as it can be only in the bar of a wealthy man who never entertains drinking people, who himself does not drink, who, in fact, gets a fishy look from his wife when every several months he takes a shot of schnapps before dinner". (*GC* 41-42)

Neil discovers the ambivalence of this newly rich family. The Patimkins are caught between the demands of their Newark Jewish ethnicity and the desire to show that they have arrived in Short Hills by emulating the ways of its Protestant upper class; their ambivalence echoes the complexity of his own desires. But just as

there is no spatial integration of different functions in this suburban house, so is there no spiritual, economic or communal hierarchy of values. Only the tall old refrigerator "was a reminder to [him] of the Patimkin roots in Newark". Neil hesitates to pour himself a drink because he knows that "you had to break a label to get a drink"(GC 42). The Patimkins are held together as a family by a system of programmed responses to conspicuous consumption, including food, rather than the values of the close-knit family of the urban Jewish neighbourhood.

While on a visit to the heart of the Negro section of Newark, where Patimkin Kitchen and Bathroom Sinks are located, Neil ruminates that years ago, at the height of the great Jewish immigration, it had been the Jewish section. But now the earlier smells have been replaced by "the grander greasier smell of auto wrecking shops, the sour stink of a brewery, the burning odour from a leather factory----" (GC 90). Neil wonders, "who would come after the Negroes" (GC 91). While listening to Mr. Patimkin, Neil is told that for succeeding in business, "you need a little of the gonif in you" (GC 94). Neil knows that gonif means thief. Mr. Patimkin has learnt to survive. He suggests that Neil is the true heir to his

business because he knows the intricacies of business better than Ron - rather the yet to be Americanised son-in-law who can do what the already Americanised son cannot. The encounter of Neil and Brenda thus serves to bridge the values of the immigrant Jewish past and the American future.

Neil is not a particularly sensitive man who is being put upon by a scheming bourgeois girl. Although he satirizes the fierce competitive spirit of the Patimkins, he too competes, and that too, in the most insensitive ways. Here is Neil's comment about his first lovemaking with Brenda. "How can I describe loving Brenda? It was so sweet, as though I'd finally scored that twenty first point. (GC 46). His allusion is to a frustrating game of ping-pong he had earlier played with Julie.

Neil Klugman exhibits timidity before the two spheres of love and work in his life. On the work front, Neil considers the possibility of his being put in charge of the Reference Section of the library where he works. He is not particularly attracted to the stifling atmosphere of the library; yet in what he describes as his 'muscleless devotion' to his work, he finds himself unwillingly 'edging towards' the promotion, which he views as entrapment. It is as if he had no choice in the matter -

because it is about to happen, it must happen. Visualizing this imprisonment over which he seems unable to exert his will, Neil considers that 'life from now on would be not a throwing off, as it was for Aunt Gladys, and not a gathering in, as it was for Brenda, but a bouncing off, a numbness" (GC 33). At the age of twenty-three, Neil reacts to circumstances, like a person etherised.

In the second scene that places in perspective Neil's passivity, he contemplates the prospect of asking Brenda to marry him. Life in the Patimkin house, under the shadow of the preparations for Ron's wedding, reminds him that separation need not be a permanent state. Curiously enough, but understandable in terms of his fuzzy view of commitment, Neil views marriage as implying uncertainty and impermanence rather than security and union. As if it were a new realization to him, he suddenly thinks.

People could marry each other, even if they are young! --- Well, I loved her, and she me, and things didn't seem all right at all or was I inventing troubles again? I supposed I should really have thought my lot improved considerably; yet, there on the lawn, the August sky seemed too beautiful and temporary to

bear, and I wanted Brenda to marry me. Marriage, though, was not what I proposed to her when she drove the car up the driveway, alone, some fifteen minutes later. That proposal would have taken a kind of courage that I did not think I had. (*GC* 78)

Neil's thoughts on the subject of marriage are full of 'yets' and 'thoughts', and what he proposes instead of marriage is diaphragm.

Neil's meditation in St. Patrick's Church, which he has entered into just for escaping the heat of New York, provides a pointer to his motivations and ideals. He reviews for God the principle upon which he has been directing his life when he says that "the race is to the swift. Should I have stopped to think? (*GC* 100). Neil is caught up with the American Dream and his version of the scriptures, although faulty, is one way to sum up this dream. The same sentiment is echoed in Mr. Patimkin's advice:

A man works hard he's got something. You dont get any where sitting on your behind, you know. The biggest men in the country worked hard, believe me. Even Rockfeller. Success don't come easy. . . He did not say this so much as he mused it out while he surveyed his dominion. He was not a man

enamoured of words, and I had the feeling that what had tempted him into this barrage of universals was probably the combination of Ron's performance and my presence – me the outsider who might one day be the insider. (*GC* 93-94)

Mr. Patimkin is also echoing the credo of the Jews and the Blacks, who move out, cross the mountains and claim the race.

Apart from Neil's rumination in the church, there is also another Biblical allusion in the novella. After the break-up of his love affair with Brenda, Neil was standing in front of the Lamont Library and viewing his reflection in the glass frontage of the library. Reflecting on his broken love affair, he wishes:

If she had only been slightly not Brenda.... but then would I have loved her? I looked hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, and then my gaze pushed through it, over the cool floor, to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved. I did not look very much longer, but took a train that got me into Newark just as the sun was rising on the first day of the Jewish New year. I was back in plenty of time for work. (*GC* 136)

Here we decipher a faint echo of Paul's discourse on perfect love in I Corinthians 13. Dorothy. H. Bankston observes:

In "Goodbye, Columbus" Philip Roth's choice of the darkening glass does suggest the standard that judges Neil's life and the lives of people whose relationships with others are characterized by acquisitiveness and carnality, those who view diaphragm and wedding as par, sentimentality as a synonym for genuine love and religious activity as a substitute for religious feeling.

Religion is never a source of comfort for the protagonist. For him, religion is a joke and God, a joker. When Brenda is with a gynecologist, Neil visits a church. Speaking to God, he says:

If we meet you at all, God, it is that we're carnal and acquisitive, and thereby partake of You. I am carnal, and I know You approve, I just know it. But how carnal can I get? I am acquisitive. Where do I turn now in my acquisitiveness? Where do we meet? which prize is You?". Neil does not get any reply from god. " And God only laughed, that clown". (*GC* 100)

What does finally set Neil apart from the Patimkins is his inability to accept his own ingenious equation of



materialism with the 'prize' that is God. Ashamed of his clever but certainly profane prayer, he hears the answer to his question, "which prize is You?" in the noise of Fifth Avenue. "Which prize do you think, schmuck? Gold dinner ware, sporting - goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, bumpless noses, Patimkin sinks, Bonwit Teller" (GC 100). Once again Neil is in a kind of limbo that characterizes his condition throughout the novel.

For Neil, it is the doctor who weds Brenda to him, not the rabbi. Void of any spiritual dimension in his life and critical of the rituals in which others engage, Neil typifies that element in American culture, which opts for a semblance of commitment. He is disengaged spiritually and emotionally, and substitutes the profane for the sacramental. In a highly ironic sense that stands out as the thematic climax, Neil's spiritual vacuousness, attraction to the materialistic and acquisitive life of the Patimkins, and passive relinquishment of responsibility for his own actions emerge clearly. Waiting for Brenda to be fitted with a diaphragm, Neil wanders into St. Patrick's and begins to "make a little speech" to himself, which he calls a prayer:

God, I said, I am twenty three years old. I want to make the best of things. Now the Doctor is about to

wed Brenda to me, and I am not entirely certain this is all for the best. What is it I love, Lord? Why have I chosen? Who is Brenda?. (*GC* 100)

An analysis of the behaviour of the protagonist proves that the predicament he is in is of his own making. A deterministic view of man may absolve him of his responsibility. But there are few takers for the argument that man is a helpless victim of the forces that are too large, complex and powerful for him to understand or withstand. Philip Roth does not subscribe to this view, resulting in his first literary protagonist ending up empty hearted and suffering from a gloom of uncertainty on Jewish New Year day.

But throughout the novella, Neil Klugman refuses to sacrifice his moral integrity for a comfortable position in the Patimkin family, even if it involves the break-up of the love affair with Brenda. He is at least half aware of some of the less savoury emotions that make up his complex desire for Brenda. In the beginning it partakes of aggressive social climbing, coupled with a tinge of envy of what he lacks.

Neil as narrator describes what happens as if he was a camera and the unfolding experience in which he participates was a romantic movie of a summer love

affair. He presents himself as detached and disinterested, but what he registers is more complicated than what he is willing to admit. As he says, "The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses. Then she stepped out to the edge of the diving board and looked foggily into the pool; it could have been drained, myopic Brenda would never have known it" (GC 3). Here, Brenda, as an object of desire is brought into focus. Simultaneously Neil's complicated feelings for Brenda, of which he is not fully aware, is also brought into limelight by Roth. As the novel begins, Neil literally sees what Brenda cannot and he takes moral advantage of the situation. Neil compares Brenda's head, made up of short-clipped auburn hair to a rose on a long stem, thereby viewing her as a source of potential romance. Brenda, as a self-conscious character, may be putting up an act and Neil is an open-eyed participant in his own seduction.

The plot of the comedy at first mirrors Neil's desire, as boy meets-girl and then boy-gets-girl, coming to an ironic conclusion with boy-losing-girl episode that fulfils the romance pattern. Along the way Roth defers the action by interspersing scenes that reveal Neil's divided loyalties. Neil's job in the library is posed against

Brenda's country club afternoons. Her sister, Julie, an obviously spoiled child, is contrasted to a young black schoolboy who visits the library to browse Gaugin. Neil treats him with respect and even reserves a book for him even when it is in heavy demand among regular members. But Neil treats Brenda's sister with contempt, taking out on her his frustrations at not having the advantages of the Patimkins.

But Neil holds up to simultaneous ridicule and praise the fructuous life of the Patimkins in Short Hills. According to Howe and Harriet Deer he rebels against the "Patimkin stereotypes of bobbed noses, opulence, and social climbing, not because they are false, but because they prevent him from being true to himself" (358). True, Neil makes fun of the "Brobdingnag" Patimkins and their nouveau rich trappings and morals. At the same time, however, he aspires to be a Patimkin, and on a vacation visit at the Patimkin estate, he thinks:

Aunt Gladys saw me packing my bag and she asked where I was going. I told her. She did not answer and I thought I saw awe in those red - rimmed hysterical eyes - I had come a long way since that day she'd said to me on the phone, 'Fancy - Schmancy. How long are you going, I should know how to shop I

would'nt buy too much you will leave me with a refrigerator full of milk it'll stink up the refrigerator.  
(*GC 57*)

Later in the novella he tells himself. "Perhaps I was more of a business man than I thought. May be I could learn to become a Patimkin with ease". (*GC 120*). The sordid Patimkin ideal of wealth has not corrupted Neil, since he holds the contrary ideal to be corrupted.

Neil's speech is full of cliches such as "All for the best" and "The race is to the swift" inter-mixed with quotations from the Bible and good old American optimism. It is also filled with emphasis on all - American materialism, the God that seems most important in the novella. In a logic that is contrived to justify his lack of the religious principle, Neil equates encountering God with some kind of ultimate expression of the appetites both for 'sex' and for things. This connection between love and materialism pervades the novel.

The sense of transience and impermanence that characterizes not only the relationship between Brenda and Neil, but also Neil's whole approach to life is accentuated by the summer - romance theme and the vacation atmosphere. Admitting that he is not a

planner, Neil drifts through his love affair and his job with the same lack of commitment to permanency. Life for him seems to be a kind of interlude in which nothing in the present has the cast of the future. He constantly reiterates that he does not visualize his job at the library as being forever, and although he considers the possibility of marriage with Brenda as a way to mitigate the transience of their relationship, he lacks the courage to make such a proposal.

Apart from Neil's reluctance to confirm personal or social values, he seems to shy away from forging any values what so ever. In his temporary migration from New Jersey and his own family to the suburbs and the Patimkin family, Neil wonders if assimilation may not be easier than expected. Yet, finally he finds the competitiveness of the upper-middle-class Patimkins as offensive as the humble acceptance of his own family. All he can manage is scepticism and an ironic view of each of these sets of values, but find nothing with which to replace them.

Through the dream sequence Neil's unconscious reflects a mode of existence that is also evident in his life. Both dreaming and waking, Neil is unable to will himself to any action other than drifting with the tide of

circumstance. In the dream he sees himself and the little black boy on the boat and "the boat was moving and there was nothing we could do about it" (GC 74). This image recalls his seemingly powerless "edging towards" what he envisions as a life of numbness in the library. It also characterizes the drift of his relationship with Brenda. Particularly wooed on the abundance of possessions in the Patimkin way of life, Neil still seems incapable of any permanent attachment to Brenda. After her mother finds the diaphragm and it is clear that Brenda faces the crucial choice between loyalty to her parents, who equate love with material possessions, and devotion to Neil, who offers her little more than occasional sex under the guise of love, the affair simply dissipates.

Neil leaves the hotel and walks to Harvard Yard, where he stands before the Lamont library and becomes as introspective as he is ever shown to be in the novel. He views his reflection but that external image offers him no clue about what is inside him.

Ironically, Neil does not know whether in losing Brenda he has won or lost. He uses here the same kind of language of competition he had used earlier in his

little speech to God, when he had affirmed that the race is to the swift and had questioned God.

Only in the last two sentences of the novel does Roth suggest the prospect that Neil may be beginning a journey away from aimless non-involvement to something he has chosen; and even there, the cryptic nature of the passage leaves its significance open to interpretation. As the sun rises on the first day of the Jewish New year, Neil arrives back in Newark in "plenty of time for work (*GC* 136). If, for a moment, Neil recognizes an image of his disordered life as he looks through the window of his library and sees a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved the deliberateness with which he returns to Newark and his work may mark the beginning of an attempt to arrange his life in a more meaningful pattern.

Neil is, nevertheless, clear sighted enough to recognize in the manipulations of his and Brenda's families and in the shallowness of the Patimkin affluence, values that he cannot, ultimately, accept as his own. This is one of the few Rothian novels in which the protagonist's parents are not a significant presence, and perhaps, in part, because Neil's parents are removed from the action of the novel by having been



despatched to the neutral territory of Arizona. Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin take centre stage as the surrogate parents. That there is some connection between Neil's family and the Patimkin family, however, despite their differences in social status, becomes apparent when Neil meets the Patimkins at the dinner table:

Mr. Patimkin reminded me of my father, except that when he spoke he did not surround each syllable with a wheeze. He was tall, strong, ungrammatical, and a ferocious eater. When he attacked his salad-after drenching it in bottled French dressing - the veins swelled under the heavy skin of his forearm. He ate three helpings of salad, Ron had four, Brenda and Julie had two, and only Mrs. Patimkin and I had one each. (*GC* 21)

Like other Rothian characters, Neil Klugman cannot seem to balance the dualities of his nature: a side that responds to the ideals and moral imperatives associated with a humane or literary vocation and a side that seeks unrestrained materialistic and sexual self-gratification. It is significant that as his relationship with Brenda intensifies, Neil takes a vacation from the library to spend all his time with her; when the affair is over, it is to the library that he returns. Because the job and

the love affair seem to draw upon antithetical aspects of his nature, they are largely unintegrated experiences for Neil, just as his conflicting desires are unintegrated.

Neil is a bit of a sore loser as he endures Brenda's winning streak. Neil's background may not be the gilded one Brenda enjoyed, but he, the adored Jewish son, has been catered to by his parents and resents being ignored in the wake of Brenda's victories. He also seems somewhat envious of Brenda's family's sheltered Short Hills affluence, defensively bristling at Brenda's slighting references to their Newark past, which is still Neil's present. All the qualities depicted in Brenda have passed through the filter of Neil's sensibilities, values, and assumptions concerning his place in the Jewish social universe. This is not to say that he has misperceived or misrepresented Brenda's penchant for winning and her family's attitude toward it. Yet, however accurate his observations are, he is nevertheless looking at Brenda and her family through a somewhat invidious eye.

The libidinous and acquisitive part of Neil sees Brenda and the affluent suburban world she inhabits, transforms them into a Polynesian maiden dwelling in an exotic American Tahiti, camouflages itself under the

guise of love, and cries, "I want!" At the same time the disapproving moralist in him sees a spoiled little rich girl, a family of Brobdingnags living in a world of conformity and expedience, and decorously protests, "I am horrified".

This internal struggle - and Neil's hazy awareness that he has been more willing than he would like to admit in listening to the acquisitive cry and ignoring the horrified whisper - is what gives his retrospective narrative its bitter, misanthropic tone.

The parting image we have of Neil confirms his status inferiority and the social gulf that separates him from Brenda. He has crossed Harvard Yard and is staring at his reflection in a window of the darkened Lamont library. Examining his image and wishing that he could understand himself, Neil asks. "What was it inside me that turned pursuit and clutching into love, and then turned it inside out again?" (GC 135).

One of Neil's most important comments on the two poles of existence of his life - the Columbus dream of a perfected paradise, and the promise of unrestricted though corrupt opulence in the upper middle class - is found towards the close of the novella:

Days passed slowly, I never did see the colored kid again, and when, one noon, I looked in the stacks, Gaugin was gone..... I wondered what it had been like that day the colored kid had discovered the book was gone. Had he cried?..... No sense carrying dreams of Tahiti in your head, if you can't afford the fare". (GC 85-86)

What Neil says is that all is bound to end with a 'sailing out of port', no matter how intensely one may wish to anchor. Such a comment is that of a man deeply disappointed by his own incapacities and by the corruption in society around him. Neil finally settles for a state of Diaspora, a separation from society and self.

At the end of the novella, Neil at least comes near the realization that his dilemma may be partly his fault, but his is an incomplete, even a pitiful anagnorisis. After he leaves Brenda for the last time, he walks by the Lamont library at Harvard and sees his image in the glass door of the building:

Suddenly I wanted to set down my suitcase and pick up a rock and heave it right through the glass, but of course I didn't. I simply looked at myself in the mirror the light made of the window. I was only that substance, I thought, those limbs, that face that I saw

in front of me. I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me. I wished I could scoot around to the other side of the window faster than light or sound or Herb Clark on Homecoming Day, to get behind that image and catch whatever it was that looked through those eyes. (*GC* 135)

Imagery associated with sports also serves to distance the Patimkins from their lower class roots. The Patimkins are Yankee fans, first of all. Anyone from the New York metropolitan area old enough to remember the 1950s will perceive at once the social significance of this affinity: the Yankees were the team of success; they had money to buy the best players; and they dominated World Series play in that area. The New York Giants, and even more, the Brooklyn Dodgers were usually despised by the "rich kids". For the Patimkins, Yankee slugger Mickey Mantle is a Messiah. As Brenda jokes, "when the yankees win, [...] we set an extra place for Mickey Mantle" (*GC* 19). The Patimkin estate had a basketball court and its trees sprout sporting goods: "beneath sporting - goods trees..... like fruit dropped from their limbs, were two irons, a golf ball, a tennis

can, a baseball bat, basketball, a first -baseman's glove and what was apparently a riding crop" (GC 21-22).

Brenda is a good, aggressive tennis player, but one who will not charge the net when there is any threat to that emblem of upper-class membership, her nose-job. Ron fully subscribes to the American metaphor for economic struggle - athletic competition. But for girls it is different. Mr. Patimkin uses the basketball court to teach his daughters that "free throws were theirs for the asking" (GC 29). This angers Neil, for whom there are no extra throws. Later, he avenges this extra privilege on Julie in a game of ping-pong. Julie, angered at having to play according to rules accuses Neil of stealing the 'fruit', symbolically, that fruit of her father's achieved status with which she has learnt to purchase exemption from the rules.

This confrontation brings into relation three patterns of imagery that converge on the social conflict and will ultimately end Neil and Brenda's romance: competition (athletics) mobility (the old refrigerator), and success (fruit). These three images of the American dream are brought into focus by the Goodbye, Columbus audio record that Ron Patimkin has brought home with him from Ohio State.

Neil refers to the record's narrator as a "Voice, bowel-deep and historic, the kind one associates with documentaries about the rise of Fascism" (GC 103). This voice of America intones for Ron the verities of the national culture, toward which he has been impelled by his father.

Life calls us, and anxiously if not nervously we walk out into the world and away from the pleasures of these ivied walls. But not from its memories. They will be the concomitant, if not the fundament of our lives. We shall choose husbands and wives, we shall choose jobs and homes, we shall sire children and grand children, but we will not forget you, Ohio state.... (GC 105)

Here we have the great American commodity machine : wives and husbands, work and homes chosen alike; children 'sired' like corn-fed Ohio cattle, living in the bland and faded nostalgia of middle American culture - the America that Ben Patimkin has spent his life buying for his children.

Ron's wedding party serves to reveal the link between ecstatic sex and Jewish celebration. The rich talk of the participants becomes an index of their vitality and sexual intensity. Neil, in whom everybody confides,

draws out their linguistic energy. The affluent Patimkins celebrate the marriage of Ron by overdoing things in good American, rather than strictly Jewish, style. Their excesses mark the exuberance with which they have chosen to be Americans. But their Jewish energy shapes their Americanness with which they address the possibilities of life. The event highlights the lessons Neil must learn about his American and Jewish identity. In bringing the values of the past to bear on the present, Roth's satire implicitly recovers neglected values. Preserving a people's memory, he keeps alive the possibility of a vital American Jewish historical consciousness in the 1950s, a decade devoted to forgetfulness.

The setting of the story is determined by class distinctions. The protagonist has literally to climb the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark (which) brought one closer to heaven. In other words, Neil should elevate himself to be at par with Brenda. The Patimkins had capitalized the upward tide of post-war prosperity and shifted from Newark to Short Hills permanently.

Throughout her life, Brenda's ostensible characteristics have been forged by her family's wealth.



She wears expensive clothes, spends her time at the luxurious Green Lane Country Club, and is educated in one of the best schools available. Of even greater significance is the fact that her father encouraged her to have her nose fixed by a plastic surgeon. It was 'with joy and pride' that Mr. Patimkin "paid to have Brenda's diamond removed and dropped down some toilet in Fifth Avenue" (GC 28). Thus from the clothes on her back to the nose on her face, all of Brenda's identifying traits are products of her father's patronage. Even more telling is the fact that Mr. Patimkin refers to Brenda as his Buck. This nickname is an allusion to Brenda's masculine tendencies. It also has a monetary reference.

Brenda's assertion in the latter part of the story that if the bills kept hidden in the family storeroom were actually there, she would have torn them up and placed them in her mother's purse, underscores the importance of Brenda's unfulfilling relationship with her mother. "I wanted to find it and tear it up in little pieces and put the goddam pieces in her purse. If it was there, I swear it, I would have done it" (GC 69) Apart from the agony of having missed an opportunity to avenge her mother, Brenda has come to rely so much on her father's sponsorship for self-definition that she becomes

distraught when it is removed. Stripped of the plush amenities on which she has become dependant, Brenda is moved to trace her initials on the dust-covered window, as if to remind herself of who she is. Her vulnerability is described by making her appear 'naked' with 'her shoulders shaking'. Pathetically, Brenda, devoid of money, has little individuality as a naked, sobbing child. Without money, she has no sense of direction, no ability, even to move. The Buck stops there.

Brenda's mom is a Jewish hypocrite, who, in spite of membership in Jewish clubs, is ignorant of Judaism. When Neil asks her, "Do you know Martin Buber's work?" she stammers, "Buber..... Buber, she said, looking at her Hadash list. Is he Orthodox or Conservative? she asked?"(GC 88).

Brenda is liberated sexually and socially, intelligent, and the one most able to combine her Jewish heritage and American possibility. The surprise with which Neil registers her words reveals how accurately and fully Roth has articulated the power of the new American-Jewish girl. Brenda is not the stereotypical Jewish-American princess of contemporary American folklore. Rather, Brenda is a figure of the fullness of

American female possibility. She is the potentially liberated, new woman of the twentieth century, presented through the eyes of a man who comes to challenge, but stays to admire.

Brenda detests Mrs. Patimkin's resentment and is unable to feel any of her mother's ministrations as affectionate; she sees her catering, instead, to sister Julie and ignoring her. As she remarks, "I can't even think of her as my mother. She hates me. Other girls, when they pack in September, at least their mothers help them. Not mine. She'll be busy sharpening pencils for Julie's pencil box while I'm carrying my trunk around upstairs" (GC 25). Clearly Brenda fails to consider that Julie is only ten and needs more maternal help than she herself should. She continually complains that her mother never serves her needs. Mrs. Patimkin never gives her anything she wants, acting indifferent to what her daughter's wants are. Brenda claims that Mrs. Patimkin's withholding of 'everything' valued by her is due to her rivalry with Brenda, and her jealousy of Brenda's youth, attractiveness and prowess in tennis. Yet despite her surface confidence, Brenda may not be so sure she could win in this rivalry, never having received essential approval from her mother. Thus her

criticism and resentment of Mrs. Patimkin may be a defence against her feeling of inadequacy as rival to Mrs. Patimkin. Even more significantly, it may be a defence against her narcissistic rage because her mother is not completely available to her and because her mother rejected some parts of her self. Brenda's pain at this material neglect and rejection contributes to her wounded self-image and to her overall immaturity.

But this immaturity is most potent in her childish craving to stay attached to her mother, despite her ongoing anger and sense of emotional deprivation. Her yearning to reattach the umbilical cord, to re-establish the symbiotic relationship, is revealed when her brother's fiancée Harriet visits: "Harriet appeared and Brenda's mother lifted one wing and pulled the girl in toward the warm underpart of her body, where Brenda herself would have liked to nestle" (GC 83). Her desire for re-union with her mother, for her mother's warmth and protection, is well described through this evocative bird imagery. Mrs. Patimkin is the mother hen and Brenda is her outcast chick, according to Barbara Frey Waxman. As she observes :

While the pre-Oedipal attachment of son to mother enables the son to develop his 'differentness' from

the mother, the daughter's attachment to the mother does not encourage the growth of her separate identity. Mothers also tend to identify more and for a longer period with their daughters". ( 98)

Brenda desires a response that emerges through as a fully realized filmic sequence:

She glided to the edge and then was beside me. "Thank you extended a hand for her glasses but did not put them on until she turned and headed away. I watched her move off. Her hands suddenly appeared behind her. She caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it belonged. My blood jumped. (*GC 3*)

This exclamation of aroused desire punctuates the vivid opening paragraph, revealing that the young man from Newark who had posed as a wry and somewhat detached cynical observer is no longer merely a spectator. Thenceforth, a romance blooms.

Carol Gilligan, observes that young women are in conflict "between personal integrity and loyalty in family relationships. Hence, their desire to avoid hurting their families often results in choices that stymie their self

development" (42). This conflict is increasingly apparent in Brenda as her relationship with Neil deepens and she has to choose between him and her parents, between what Neil demands of her and the kind of behaviour her parents expect of her. Early in her relationship with Neil, this conflict in Brenda and the fragility of her own identity are masked by grandiosity and a superficial self-confidence, which encourages her to steal most of the limelight in their interactions.

When Brenda returns from the airport where she had gone to receive Harriet, Neil suggests a diaphragm instead of proposing to her. Trying to explain his motives, Neil says he did not possess the courage required for proposing marriage as he was not prepared for any other answer than an enthusiastic outright 'yes' on Brenda's part. As he concludes, 'so I imagine that's why I proposed the surrogate, which turned out finally to be far more daring than I knew it to be at the time' (GC 78). In short, diaphragm seemed to be a surrogate for marriage. By evading the question of marriage, Neil is denying himself the opportunity to assess Brenda's love for him. Neil lacks confidence in himself and his lover. Suffering from a feeling of insecurity, Neil is also haunted by a sense of the impermanence of love, as his

dream about sailing out of port indicates. Neil does not believe in the enduring quality of love as he confuses it with romance and sex.

It is difficult to believe that the notion of the contraceptive diaphragm is a proof of Neil's love and concern for Brenda. The diaphragm was recommended by Neil with a few days left for her departure. The affair and the related illicit escapades had been going on for quite some time between the lovers. Neil is reminded of Brenda's imminent departure as he muses about the forth-coming marriage between Ron and Harriet. He ruminates:

But it was more than that: the union of Harriet and Ron reminded me that separation need not be a permanent state. People could marry each other, even if they were young ! And yet Brenda and I had never mentioned marriage, except perhaps for that night at the pool when she'd said, "when you love me, everything will be all right! Well, I loved her, and she me, and things didn't seem all right at all. Or was I inventing troubles again? (*GC 78*)

Discovery of the diaphragm precipitates the termination of the love affair between Neil and Brenda. Brenda realized her lover's poor opinion about her family,

parents and herself. She is critical of his penchant for unnecessary criticism and accuses Neil for not having faith in her. Both of them refer to their love for each other in the past tense:

“I loved you, Brenda, so I cared.

I loved you. That’s why I got that damn thing in the first place.”

And then we heard the tense in which we’d spoken and we settled back into ourselves and silence.

*(GC 134)*

They spoke in the past tense and the tense signified the break.

The diaphragm that Neil attempts to impose on Brenda is a symbolic attempt to keep the ship of his dreams from drifting out to sea. Both seem to understand its significance as a symbol: by force of will Neil hopes to place his mark of ownership on that limited part of her to which he has access. “It would change us”, he pleads, but Brenda resists making this commitment to him: I just don’t feel old enough for all that equipment... I mean it is so conscious a thing to do” *(GC 82)*.

In the love affair characterized largely by competition, sterility and secretiveness, the issue of the



diaphragm becomes highly symbolic. Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance state that "It is apparent that, in part, Neil asks Brenda to buy it in order to test her willingness to acquiesce to his demands. He wants her to "just do it. Do it because I asked you to"(13). More important, the buying of the diaphragm comes to represent for Neil a kind of surrogate ritual performed in the absence of the religious ritual of marriage.

Throughout the novella, Neil shuttles from contradiction to contradiction. During the first date with Brenda, he sees her surrounded by ethereal leaves, and he imagines angel's wings on her back. Next, she is a Diana who is able to transform base swimming pool water into marble. Yet, in the midst of such rarefied thoughts of Brenda, Neil describes Brenda as a girl with "high walls of ego that rose, buttresses and all, between her and her knowledge of herself" (GC 19). Throughout the novella, Neil's life is aimless and confused, forced by impetuous motives and desires.

The same Neil hates Brenda's boastful reference to her school. She reminds him of "the pug-nosed little bastards from Montclair who come down to the library during vacations, and while I stamp out their books,

they stand around tugging their elephantine scarves until they hang to their ankles, hinting all the while at "Boston" and "New Haven" (GC 11). He finds her morals and manners abominable.

Even his sexual encounters with Brenda turn out to be unexpectedly frustrating for Neil. He discovers that what their bodies can manage, they fail to express and communicate fully. Neil realizes - although belatedly - that apart from this physical urge, there is nothing in common between these two Jews. They fail miserably in developing their relationship into a shared world. Their mutual and reciprocal incomprehensibility is most clearly expressed in the childishness of their dialogue. Brenda wants to know if "I let you kiss me would you stop being nasty?" (GC 14). The sexual favours Neil seeks with the intensity of an ambitious working class boy, Brenda bestows with the ease and abandon of the upper class girl:

We had to take about two too many steps to keep the approach from being awkward, but we pursued the impulse and kissed. I felt her hand on the back of my neck and so I tugged her towards me, too violently perhaps, and slid my own hands across the side of her body and around to her back. I felt the wet spots on

her shoulder blades, and beneath them, I'm sure of it, a faint fluttering, as though something stirred so deep in her breasts, so far back it could make itself felt through her shirt. It was like the fluttering of wings; tiny wings no bigger than her breasts. The smallness of the wings did not bother me. It would not take an eagle to carry me up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark. (GC 14)

Neil's resentment at the advantages of wealth and status, which he does not share with Brenda, veils his eyes to the causes of their attraction to each other. "Do you love me, Neil?" asks Brenda to which Neil did not have an answer. "I'll sleep with you whether you do or not, so tell me the truth" says Brenda. Neil considers it as a crude answer. She tells him not to be prissy and he replies, "No, I mean a crude thing to say about me". "I don't understand", she said and she didn't (GC 51). Both are confused as to whether they love or merely lust for each other.

For Brenda and Neil, sexual intimacy is easy and difficult at the same time. They discover that it is quite easy to make love in the room where Neil stays in the Patimkins' place of residence. It is a far cry from the

Klugman residence in Newark where Neil does not have the desired privacy to communicate over the phone with his lover. Privacy is paramount and everyone is left alone to do what he or she wants in Mr. Patimkin's house.

Nevertheless, Brenda and Neil have a vexed relationship, which they carry forward by negotiating the clever management of their sexual escapades. Often they sound like experienced lovers managing an affair than young lovers experiencing the fullness of sexual intimacy for the first time. As the two lovers perform sexually for each other, the social, economic and psychological differences at the root of their inability to communicate begin to make their presence felt. Masked by their emphasis on sexuality, these differences cannot fully be dealt with, and break their relationship apart. Despite the link of their common Jewish heritage, the gaps of class and moral consciousness between Neil and Brenda are too great for their relationship to succeed.

Philip Roth has drawn the title of the novella from two sequences. Both those episodes revolve around a reluctant leave-taking and a voyage into the unknown. In Neil's dream, he is a reluctant version of the explorer Columbus, and his destination is unknown to him. In

Ron's record, he and the other seniors at Ohio State are to venture out from Columbus, Ohio, into the world, in search of "life". The implications are that neither Neil nor Ron has before him a clear sense of where the voyage will culminate, but certainly for Ron there is a clearer sense of moorings to which he can return. Ron is being forced to let go of something he has actually had; Neil is cut adrift from something he knows only in a dream.

In the novella, the differences between city and suburbs are translated into attitudes toward sexuality. Neil seeks to discover whether there is a necessary connection between Brenda's sexual openness to him and her family's wealth, which he alternately prizes and scorns. Neil is unsure whether he seeks Brenda's social position and money, sexual initiation or her love. His ambivalence leads him to accept with startling passivity the various tasks she expects him to perform, including holding her glasses while she swims, waiting for her to finish her tennis game, or taking care of her sister Julie. His words, however, consistently have an irritated, angry edge. Brenda imposes tasks on Neil as if their lives were a chivalric drama of knight and princess, but at the same time she appears to be readily paying him

for his services (and leading him on to new challenges) with sexual favours. Neil cannot decide whether Brenda is testing him to find out if he might be a worthwhile partner for her and, despite his lower-middle-class origins and education, is sufficiently malleable to meet her needs, or whether he is simply her summer adventure. Neil's keen city vision and abrasive, aggressive behaviour defend him against an acknowledgement of how much he is in love with Brenda and her affluent world.

As their relationship continues, Neil starts asserting with Brenda; however he does not ask her to marry him but rather to get a diaphragm. Brenda reacts by accusing that Neil is only interested in his own pleasure. Nevertheless, she agrees. For Neil, Brenda is a prize to be won by him. The brief interlude in the church when Brenda is with the doctor proves to be a milestone in his life.

Neil reverts to the tough, street-smart kid who won't let anyone, not even himself, get away with anything: "And then I saw Brenda coming out of the Squibb Building. She carried nothing with her, like a woman who's only been window shopping, and for a moment I was glad that in the end she had disobeyed

my desire". But Brenda surprises Neil: " 'Where is it?' I said. At last she said, "I'm wearing it" (GC 101). The insouciance with which Brenda manages this transaction expresses her ease and habit of control; by contrast with Neil's identity crisis, Brenda, even though younger, knows who she is.

Ultimately the summer's romance comes to a painful end in the autumn. Brenda goes back to Radcliffe, and Neil returns to the Newark Public Library and a promotion to Head of the Reference Section. After much negotiation, Neil agrees to go to Boston over Rosh Hashna, the Jewish New year. In Boston, however, Neil and Brenda find it difficult to recover their summer intimacy. Instead of sexual encounter they are forced into their long deferred conversation by the two letters Brenda has received from her parents. The resulting quarrel ends up forcing each not only into self-justification but also into inadvertent choosing of his and her own family, class and home. Returning to Newark, Neil asks himself the questions that might help him account for what has happened. He is left with the bitterness of his ambivalence. He arrives in Newark just as the sun was rising on the first day of the Jewish New year, back in plenty of time for work. Instead of the old

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ritual of family and synagogue, or the newly discovered one of sexual fulfilment, Neil has only his unsatisfying job to which to devote himself.

Despite their physical intimacy, Neil, who felt a hollowness when Brenda was away, worries about her ending the affair when she returns to school in the Fall. Made to feel insecure by his failure to suggest marriage, which would legitimize him, he proposes more as a test of authority than as a physical convenience that she buy a diaphragm. However, during the argument which follows her refusal, he admits his uncertainty as the real reason for his insistence. Brenda too suggests they are talking about something other than the diaphragm when she objects to buying it because it would be so conscious a thing to do. Having recognized Neil's insecurity and her own power over him, she does not want to acknowledge either the fact of their sexual relations or the permanence of their union. Only after Neil has accepted the situation and the force has gone out of the gesture does she agree to it. It proves to be an excuse for their final separation, when on her return to school, her mother discovers it among her possessions. But the issue had long since been decided. Brenda justifies herself by remarking, "Neil, you don't understand, they



are still my parents. They did send me to the best schools, didn't they? They have given me everything I've wanted, haven't they? (134) Neil does not understand. What she has wanted and what she received from them was the force of authority, not the material benefits she confuses it with, and with the meaning of the terms thus hidden, Neil can only assert his own frustration and inadequacy. When he rejects both the demands of his job and the urging of his family to follow her to school, the collapse of his integrity leaves nothing to sustain her and she returns to the field of force exerted by her parents in the very middle class substantiality that Neil both envies and condemns.

Right from the beginning, Brenda, misusing her intimacy with Neil, invents new games and Neil dances to her tune. Even 'baby - sitting' is one such game. At night, they share the same bed. The relationship does not elevate above the level of the physical as most of the time they are either busy playing games or getting laid. There is little attempt on the part of either to understand or know each other. There is little room for affection or tenderness or sympathy, which helps one to overcome one's sense of alienation and loneliness. Neil and Brenda thus remain strangers to each other till the

end and Neil is forced to admit to himself the night before Brenda leaves for her school, "How could I ever come to know her, I wondered, for as she slept I felt I knew no more of her than what I could see in a photograph" (GC 118). This remark should also warn the reader against judging Brenda by what Neil says of her.

The critics who look upon Brenda as a scheming bourgeois and hold her responsible for failure of love in the novella obviously take their cue from Neil Klugman. Brenda is accused for using and abusing Neil. Howe and Deer feel that "Even in bed, she is either using Neil or doing a poor boy a favour" (358). They felt that Brenda wants a transient, romantic free love relationship - something very different from the permanent responsible relationship that Neil is trying to establish. But if that was the case, Neil would have proposed marriage and not the diaphragm. It is hard to believe that the notion of the contraceptive diaphragm is a proof of Neil's love and concern for Brenda. It is strange too that he should suddenly think of it after having slept with Brenda for quite some time and when only a few days are left for her departure. It is interesting to note how Neil comes to think of the diaphragm in the first

place. As he muses about the forthcoming marriage of Ron and Harriet, he reflects to himself:

Well, I loved her, and she me, and things didn't seem all right at all. Or was I inventing troubles again? I suppose I should really have thought my lot improved considerably; yet, there on the lawn, the August sky seemed too beautiful and temporary to bear and I wanted Brenda to marry me. (*GC 78*)

Neil is not oblivious of the treacherous disguises of Short Hills. His is a sceptical, rather distanced perspective. Brenda's attempts at Americanisation at the cost of her Jewishness is but one part of the cost of admission into this new world. The growing inability of parents and children to communicate with each another is another. Neil's values, so much closer to the immigrant world committed to work and achievement, make him someone that at one point in the story Mr. Patimkin can respect - by contrast with his feeling for his own son, Ron, who does not share these values. The lower - middle class world of Newark lays stress on hard labour while the upper class world of Short Hills cordons off work and keeps it out of sight; nothing costs too much, and only the right appearance and good looks matter.

The long title story plays with names. Though it has an American milieu in the background, the title is also that of a phonograph record dedicated to memories of Ohio State University, located at Columbus, Ohio. It is viewed as a 'devotional' aid by Ronald Patimkin, the athletic young man who is about to enter his father's business, where he will "start at two hundred a week and then work himself up" (GC 61). The Patimkins represent the neo-rich who, through sale of kitchen sinks, phenomenally good during the war years, have proved that sale of cleanliness is more profitable than godliness, even for the Jews.

Allen Guttman has stated that the members of the Patimkin household are "a far cry from the vanquished world of the East European Shtetl"(68). He says that Ron has nothing in common with "the pale scholar of the shtetl and the exploited needle trades worker of the ghetto" At the same time, Harvey Swados, views Ron as "the self satisfied muscle-bound numbskull", for whom "notions of Jewish alienation are entirely foreign". (174).

Mr. Patimkin, in his pursuit of material prosperity, has severed his family and himself from their ethnicity and their lower - middle-class roots in Newark. The

controlling images of the novella are all directly related, through the protagonist's perceptions, to the Patimkin's successful struggle to distance themselves from their past and to gain roots in the national, largely gentile elite.

The marvels of money and the physical beauty of Brenda Patimkin are matched by the vision of Gaugin's Tahiti. The Negro boy comes daily to the library where Neil works, to stare at a book of paintings by Gaugin. His moan of pleasure is poignant: "Man, the boy smiled, chuckled almost, "I knew that. He don't take pictures like no colored men would. He's a good picture taker... Look, look, look here at this one. Ain't that the fuckin life"? (GC 37). But Tahiti is unobtainable for the little Negro boy except in fantasy just as Short Hills will always remain unattainable for Neil. His dream of classless, creedless, colourless hedonism turns out to be equally unobtainable.

Neil and the young boy each gaze at distorted utopian visions of love. The irony is that Brenda is just as inaccessible to Neil as Gaugin's Tahitian maid is to the ghetto boy. Neither has the power to break out of subservient position. In Neil's case, the subtle but impermeable barrier of social class makes Brenda more

glamorous and desirable but at the same time-as he will discover at the end of the story-ultimately unattainable. The barrier of social reality is like a lens; for the black boy the lens is Gaugin's (white man's) eye. For Neil, it is a class system, erected by the dominant (and goyish) American commodity culture. Neil's identification with the black boy as a fellow outsider is cemented by the imagery of his dream, the unattainable South Pacific Paradise that is seen from the deck of a ship over which neither has any control; it is peopled by "beautiful bare-skinned Negresses" singing "Goodbye, Columbus". Neil remembers:

Though we did not want to go, the little boy and I, the boat was moving and there was nothing we could do about it, and he shouted at me that it was my fault and I shouted that it was his.... but we were wasting our breath, for we were further and further from the island, and soon the natives were nothing at all. (*GC* 74-75)

It is likely that the pictures of naked women a young ghetto boy might be expected to have seen would not be "good"; in other words, they would not be romanticized images of primitivist art, but raunchy, or clinical, and even perhaps pornographic. Nor is Neil

attracted by raw sexuality in his desire for Brenda; he exhibits a similar romantic vision of her and her social world. Immediately after his conversation with the black boy, Neil returns to his seat and reflects: "I would have to get gas before I started up to Short Hills, which I could see now, in my mind's eye, at dusk, rose colored, like a Gaugin stream" (GC 38).

Neil is drawn between two opposite poles. But his flaws prevent him from achieving either extremes. He is attracted to the dream he has of himself and the Negro boy who is fascinated by a book of Gaugin prints in the Newark library. Neil's dream is of Tahiti, a paradise in an unsullied new world:

It had taken place in a ship, an old sailing ship like those you see in pirate movies. With me on the ship was little coloured kid from the library - I was the captain and he my mate, and we were the only crew members. For a while it was a pleasant dream; we were anchored in the harbor of an island in the Pacific and it was very sunny. Upon the beach there were beautiful bare-skinned Negresses, and none of them moved; but suddenly we were moving, our ship, out of the harbor, and the Negresses moved slowly down to the shore and began to throw leis at us and say

“Goodbye, Columbus,... Goodbye, Columbus...  
Goodbye (GC 74).

One pole, then, is the idyllic dream he shares with the Negro boy, and possibly with Columbus - that promise of the green and unspoiled new world, the world of imagination in which everyone's refrigerator is as bountiful as the Patimkins'. The idyll makes Brenda a goddess with wings on her back, and in one sense, the idyll is the illusive one of the world of the heart.

For almost a decade and a half, most commentators on Philip Roth's "*Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*" have been preoccupied with Jews and Jewishness in the novella. Saul Bellow avers that the major subject of the novella is the radical economic change Jews undergo in contemporary American Society. Howe and Deer see the novella as an unsuccessful satire of certain affluent Jewish communities. Ultimately, the focal interest in the novella is what happens to Neil, and its major theme is not what Neil learns during his summer romance with Brenda, but what he fails to learn.

Alan W. France states in "Reconsideration: Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus and the Limits of Commodity Culture*":



The novella occupies the historically anomalous calm at the end of the post-war era but before the student revolt of the following decade. It is thus an excellent introduction to the problems of cultural identity and authenticity at the heart of that revolt, which was treason not of young Klugmans but of young Patimkins. *Goodbye, Columbus* can help today's students to see the poverty of a culture idealizing commodity satisfactions, one that continues to bulldoze ethnic and religious traditions to built the shopping malls and entertainment worlds of mass consumption. (83)

Baruch Hochman, has observed that Philip Roth has proved, through his first publication, to be a writer whose "promise is perpetually in excess of fulfilment". Roth's first collection, according to him, is the "work of a writer who had a keen eye, a barbed pen, the knack of instant characterization - and a gift for pinpointing absurdity swiftly and with deadly accuracy" According to Hochman, the stories have as their subject, "the social and cultural conflict that arises in the experience of the Jews as they make their way from the lower middle class communities of the cities to the prosperous country-club civilization of the suburbs"(68).

Saul Bellow, himself the creator of several Jewish characters, opines that "Neil Klugman is different in many ways from the heroes of Jewish stories of the thirties and forties. His appetites are more boyish, his thoughts are more shrewd. He is strong on observation, a little less strong on affection"(77).

According to Hermione Lee, the journey of Neil from Jewish ghetto to Short Hills "is enough to disturb Neil's sense of identity" (29). At the same time, Neil, in rejecting the old world Jewishness of Newark, also rejects his surrogate parents, Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max. However, the rejection is temporary and the novella concludes with the protagonist returning to Jewish fold. George Searles states that in reality Neil Klugman just does not go far in his revolt -just from his surrogate mother's kitchen and the Newark library to the household of the Patimkins, wealthy suburbanized Jews.

Roth's photographic eye absorbs the absurdities and incongruities of suburban life: the athleticism of the Patimkins, the material prosperity enjoyed by them, the callow, shallow sentimentality of Ron, his passion for his alma mater's song, "Goodbye, Columbus" etc. Roth also brings to limelight the moral blindness of the Patimkins' relationship with Neil: he is welcome to sleep in their

house where he makes clandestine love with Brenda, but any serious, permanent liaison is unthinkable to them as he is from Newark and not Short Hills, the posh residential area of the affluent Jews.

A close reading of the novel reveals that neither the corruptness of the society that the Patimkins seem to represent nor the disparity of social status between the two lovers are as much an obstacle in the way of love as Neil would have us believe. It is his egotism that prevents him from transcending the self and feel genuine love and concern for others. It is his inability to turn his relationship with Brenda into anything more than physical that contributes to his alienation from her and his final disappointment. Roth succeeds in ensuring that the reader cannot fail to notice Neil's nastiness, snobbery and his contempt for others. It is apparent that Neil is projecting his own shortcomings and neurosis on Brenda. When viewed through the distorted mind of Neil, Brenda could not have emerged as a better person than she is in the novella.

Hermione Lee observes that "the revolts are more closely circumscribed, the net of family and community more closely drawn around the central figure (28). Neil Klugman describes the park outside the Newark Public

Library with a charmed devotion to local minutiae which springs from a "deep knowledge of Newark, an attachment so rooted that it could not help but branch out into affection" (GC 31). Like Stephan Dedalus, Neil is emotionally and aesthetically bound to the environment he wants urgently to resist. Indecisive like Prufrock, Neil Klugman does not go far in his revolt. The short journey from his ethnic roots in the 'Jewish Ghetto' to the world of secularized, Americanised Patimkin is enough to disturb Neil's sense of identity. The newly rich Patimkins have moved from Newark into gentility on the back of the wartime kitchen sink boom and now represents the nineteen fifteen American dream of affluence.

What we find in the novella is that Jewish holidays, rather than representing a heightened sense of reverence for Jewish values, turn into opportunities for open licentiousness. Thus Rosh Hashonah is merely an opportunity for Neil to get off work and go up to Boston to continue his sexual romance with Brenda. He undergoes a personal rebirth, not because he believes in the religious efficacy of Rosh Hashonah but because he got an opportunity to see Brenda.

The title of the novella has multiple meanings. For Ron, it is a farewell to the time and place where he was important and a star. The one thing Ron can do beautifully has no permanent value in the money making world and even now he looks back with nostalgia and a sense of loss to his years at Columbus, Ohio. Roth puts him on display as just another sad victim, sacrificed to the new cult of adjustments and security. Ron submits to and salvages himself from his wounds with the manufactured sentimentality of a recorded document.

In rejecting Brenda, Neil is actually rejecting her neo-rich way of life. This is the obvious and successful purpose of Roth. The novel marks the successful working of a significant theme: the rejection of Jewish life, not because it is too Jewish but because it is quite un-Jewish and infused with the American ethos that it partakes of while offering no significant alternative. Howe and Deer write:

Roth is not precise and certainly not scrupulous enough in his use of social evidence. The Patimkins are easily placed - what could be easier for a Jewish writer than to elicit disdain for middle-class Jews-but the elements of what is new in their experience are grossly manipulated. (370)

Similarly, Theodore Solotaroff has observed that the novel "lacks the fusion of its materials, the sense of being really 'done' that one finds in "Epstein" and "Defender of the Faith". According to him, "Neil is seen too much as an observer and he is too far along the path he is supposed to be travelling in the story"(Moralists 28). For two-thirds of the story then, Neil's social ambitions and moral problems connected with Short Hills are too often stated rather than made visible to the reader by the action and it is only when he forces the situation by demanding that Brenda get a diaphragm that the story takes on complexity and force.

The final scene is a retreat for the protagonist from Americanism to Jewishness. The Patimkins are willing to forgive his poverty, but not his failure to appreciate their affluence, Neil, in turn, ignores this affluence, but would not accept Brenda's worship of the Patimkin stereotypes or her vision of him as the poor boy, thirsting for a rich girl. All that Neil can do is to retreat to the New York Public Library, where he can at least share with the Negro boy an enthusiasm for art.

Neil's return to his work in the library on the day of the Jewish New Year is not the act of desecration that it seems. It is meant to be an act of dedication to dreams

and meanings and values symbolized by the library. The return to work is Neil's own *Goodbye, Columbus*, a goodbye to the sad values and empty lives that are normal in America - a land sometimes referred to in Yiddish as "Columbus' Medineh [Country]". That his renewal of himself should take place on the New Year is symbolically appropriate. The day meant for carnival is spent at work. He cannot join the Patimkins, cannot use Brenda to rise up "those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark" (GC 14).

The title of the novella, taken from Ron's fraternity song, "Goodbye, Columbus", refers to the city of Columbus, Ohio, Ironically, it evokes the world of the Jewish immigrant by pointing to the discoverer of the New World, Christopher Columbus, and bidding him goodbye. The song, with its focus on sports and college life, reveals that Ron has substituted the masculine ideals of assimilated American life for traditional Jewish values. The same shallow values colour the entire experience of Brenda's family and reveal the superficiality their new wealth has brought. In leaving the city for the suburbs, upwardly mobile Jews, like other Americans, are suppressing their urban ethnic

past, exchanging it for a luxurious and privileged, if sanitized, present.

After having read "Goodbye, Columbus", Theodore Solotaroff has observed in "The Journey of Philip Roth":

It was like sitting down in a movie house and suddenly seeing there on the scene a film about the block on which I had grown up; the details of place, character, incident all intimately familiar and yet new, or at least never appreciated before for their colour and interest. This story of Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin was so simple, direct and evident that it couldn't be "art", and yet I know that art did advance in just this way: a sudden sweeping aside of outmoded complexities for the sake of a fresh view of experience, often so natural a view and so common an experience that one wonders why writers hadn't been seeing and doing this all along. The informal tone of the prose, as relaxed as conversation, yet terse and fleet and right on the button; the homely images that makes the passages glow. Such writing rang bells that not even the Jewish writers had touched; it wasn't Malamud, it wasn't even Saul Bellow; the literary fuzz of, say, Augie March, had been blown away, and the actualities of life behind it came forth



in their natural grain and colour, heightened by the sense of discovery. (65)

Baruch Hochman views the novella as the story of a young man "in the throes of ambivalence about a life he both scorns and covets" (70). According to him, it is a brilliantly managed story "crackling with the tension of this ambivalence and galvanized by an authentic energy of observation and response. It moves briskly from sharp observation of manners and attitudes to what seems to be a crystallization of issues bearing on the moral life"(72). The novella deals principally with the passivity with which its protagonist faces the risks of commitment. In tracing Neil Klugman's exodus from Newark to Short Hills and vice versa, "Goodbye, Columbus" introduces several other themes, most of which recur in Roth's fiction. Among these are the difficulties of love and communication, the confusion between generous and acquisitive instincts, the duality inherent in the necessary, but difficult to achieve family coherence and the tendencies toward moral and spiritual degeneration of modern American life, with the latter two ideas carrying the fullest weight of Roth's satire.

The Patimkins, in Roth's fictional world of post-War America have, it would appear, succeeded in

assimilating. Yet, they are not allowed to join regular, established, gentile country clubs the suburban Jews have formed on their own. But this suburban haven is no centre for Jewish culture. With their country clubs comes a hierarchy of class and money, and no longer is there solidarity between Jew and Jew. In America, Short Hills is better than Newark and so the suburban Jew such as the Patimkins resort to other havens to get themselves defined as Jews.

As they attempt to integrate themselves into the culture and society of America, these suburbanites simultaneously attempt to strengthen their commitment to religious Judaism. Mrs. Patimkin's Hadassah affiliation and her obsession with attending Orthodox religion worship are good cases in point. While in Roth's treatment the entire situation between Neil and the Patimkins is hysterically funny, it does point out a pervasive problem in Jewish American culture: can one assimilate totally? And does one really want to? With assimilation comes the risk of losing one's rich culture; without it, one is limited economically and socially. This dilemma illuminates the paradox that while the Jew finds a home in America as other immigrants have, he is no more at home here than anywhere else in the world.

What Roth's novel is best at pointing out is not the centre that exists, but the lack of centre in the dream of assimilation. All the Jewish country clubs, clothes, success and money can't change the fact that the Jew is still somehow different from the WASP culture he aspires to; he is always somehow 'other'. The class division between Jews and the absence of satisfaction from fulfilment of the dream of assimilation are what Roth's first publication has demonstrated. Neither Brenda nor the rest of the Patimkins and their suburban paradise of sporting - goods trees, and fruit-giving-refrigerators provide a meaningful home or centre for Jewish American culture. The only place where one can find peace and a home, it seems, is in books. It is not the library where Neil works, but the books in the library which hold the promise of stability and adventure, of dreams and a world to inhabit. The little black child who hides in the 'art' ('heart for him) section, entranced by Gauguin's Tahiti Paintings, is the figure of promise for Neil Klugman. The promise is that the centre of Jewish - American culture might be found in books.

As a novelist who believes that institutionalised religion has failed to deliver the goods, Philip Roth has

narrated "The Conversion of the Jews" in the wry, tongue-in-the cheek voice typical of *Goodbye, Columbus*.

Ozzie Freedman, the school-boy protagonist experiences a spiritual crisis that surfaces during a religious instruction class, and finds himself questioning the rabbi who was handling the class. Yet he is unable to communicate with his parents the essence of this dilemma. Ultimately, Ozzie Freedman finds resolution in a moment of sudden epiphanic realization. The rabbi, young, but orthodox, binds the students to traditional interpretations. Ozzie, on the other hand, desires to make full use of the free discussion periods. He is unable to digest the concept of 'Chosen People' and his mother's narrow - minded Jewish perspective. Rabbi Binder refuses to admit the possibility of virgin birth - the birth of Jesus Christ. Ozzie's argument is that if God could call into being all of creation, then surely the arranging of a virgin birth would be within His powers. As he tells his mother, "I asked Binder if He could make all that in six days, and He could pick the six days he wanted right out of nowhere, why couldn't he let a woman have a baby without having intercourse". (Conversion 141). But Binder equivocates on this, and Ozzie feels that "he was trying to make me stupid"

(Conversion 154). Binder, misunderstanding the curiosity of the boy, feels that Ozzie was "deliberately simple minded and a wise guy..." (Conversion 142). When the virgin birth again became a bone of contention, Ozzie brashly asserts, "you don't know!". You don't know anything about god!" (Conversion 146). The story then veers towards hyperbole: Binder strikes Ozzie, who flees to the Synagogue roof; after some confusion, Ozzie succeeds in forcing the crowd gathered below, including his mother, the Rabbi, his classmates and a contingent of net-wielding impatient firemen, to kneel in prayer and say, "first one at a time, then all together" (Conversion 158) that God is omnipotent and He could "make a child without intercourse", that they recognize the divinity of Christ, and that religious beliefs should not be imposed by force. Symbolically, Ozzie then leaps "right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo" (Conversion 158).

On the rooftop, Ozzie confronts himself with the question of his own identity. "Is it me? Is it me ME ME ME ME! it has to be me - but is it!" (Conversion 148). Perplexed, he looks down: "glazing down at the street, he became confused as to the problem beneath the

question: was it, is-it-me-who-called-Binder-a bastard? or, is-it-me-prancing-around-on-the-roof? (Conversion 148). Running atop, Ozzie is involved in the deeper issues of life. He becomes concerned with the identity of the whole group of people watching him. "Is it me" gets replaced with "Is it us? --- Is it us?" (Conversion 156). According to Tony Tanner, Ozzie emerges as "a small American hero going out to a lovely edge to make his complaint against fixed definitions and rules" (Conversion 311).

As Ozzie looks down at the crowd in the street below, at the Rabbi, 'normal' in his faithless faith, at Blotnik the caretaker, who had "memorized the prayers and forgotten all about god" (Conversion 144), Ozzie's mother cries up to him with splendidly unconscious irony, "Don't be a martyr, my baby" (Conversion 155). But to Philip Roth, the history of Judaism is the history of a faith so deeply held that it embraced martyrdom and gloried in the miraculous potential of life. The Jews have always been martyrs, and it is, ironically, their martyrdom that has kept them alive, that has made their history significant and transformed them as Ozzie's mother was transformed in the glow of the Sabbath candles. To be a Jew is to be a martyr.

Ozzie Freedman feels that when his mother dressed up, she appeared to be just like any other lady. But when she lit candles she appeared different. It was as if she knew that God was Omnipotent. He tries unsuccessfully to reconcile his sense of miraculous Divinity and miraculous life with the domesticated, naturalized and reasonable local Diety of Rabbi Binder. The contest is reflected in names. The efforts of the youth aspiring to freedom outrage the Rabbi who binds and is earth bound.

Ozzie Freedman does not privilege Jewish theological themes over American ones for, according to him, Jewish and Christian themes are part of his inheritance as an American Jew. It is the Rabbi's effort to deal with Ozzie's specific concerns by abstracting them into matters of "cultural unity and some other things" that cause all the confusion and confrontation. Even an opportunity to "think it over" in the Rabbi's office for an hour fails to change the rebellious boy. Ozzie is of the conviction that God, the creator is all-powerful. Ozzie suspects that Rabbi Binder, like the seventy-one year old custodian of the synagogue who mumbles his prayers, has memorized the prayers but forgotten God.

By contrast, Ozzie's deep religious feelings lead him to honour the Christian Sabbath. As he states, "When his [Jewish] mother lit candles Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing, if you could manage it, should be softened". She may be tired from work, but "when she lit candles she looked like something better, like a woman who knew momentarily that God could do anything" (Conversion 143). But when Ozzie tells her that she will have to see Rabbi Binder again, for having insulted Jews over the plane crash issue, she slaps him. Shocked by the discovery that she does not share his view of God's power and presence, Ozzie cries through Sabbath dinner.

Surrounded by various forms of indecisive accommodation to the communal confusions of the time, Ozzie is a representative man. By virtue of his innocence, idealism and intuitive vision, Ozzie is an 'atypical' man too. He embodies Roth's implication that spiritual fulfilment may be achieved only through such a transcendent, child-like faith.

In the five short stories in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth's concerns as an American political satirist and as an ethnographic recorder of Jewish life are juxtaposed together. Moral pattern, literary strategy, and rhetorical



tactics link American and Jewish themes, revealing themselves to be opposite sides of the same coin. Each of these stories builds to a crisis in which the protagonist must acknowledge his Jewishness by taking a particular course of action. That recognition has major consequences for the other characters and transforms the situation. Ironically, in each instance, the Jewish course of action turns out to be identical with, rather than opposed to, the democratic, American choice.

Sanford Pinsker, has interpreted Ozzie's leap as Ozzie's "wish fulfilling dream.... fantasized" (13) . This short story juxtaposes two very different approaches to religion. Significantly, Ozzie's position is neither profound nor radical. He is only interested in validating traditional belief and not challenging it. But it is this validation that Binder is unable to provide.

Ozzie Freedman's innocence makes him take at its face value what his teachers interpret allegorically and contextually. A marginal figure, he does not participate in the conventions that limit the adult world. Ozzie thinks for himself, as a result of which his questions unintentionally subvert normative values and beliefs and threaten the social order of his elders. The violence that greets Ozzie's sincere desire for knowledge leads him to

the discovery of the political dimensions of the social contract and the extent of his own isolation and marginality.

Joseph. C. Landis states that "The Conversion of the Jews" is "far more than (perhaps even far from) a plea for tolerance or a beautiful treatment of a young boy coping with comparative religion". According to him, in this story, there is "a plea for dreams, for life's wonders, for aspiration to the meaningful and the miraculous and the bold. It is a plea for the conversion of the Jews - but to Judaism" (262).

Rabbi Binder is eager to bind his flock to their Jewish values; unfortunately that effort blinds him to the values that Americans, whether Jews or Christians, share. Rabbi Binder views his rights as an American as circumscribed by his Jewishness, while Ozzie's actions reveal how vigorously he pursues his rights as an American citizen.

The strength and force of this story depends upon parallel sources in American and Jewish culture that emphasize the power of the innocent child. Ozzie may be a Jew by birth but he is the true outspoken, rebellious young American; he is also the smart

questioning Jew whose understanding far surpasses that of his elders.

Finally, what transpires is that Ozzie Freedman, the young American Jew has taken religion out of the private realm and makes it a public issue. The Rabbi is forced to acknowledge the beliefs of both Christian and Jew, which depend upon an identical kind of faith. In effect, they are different in degree rather than kind, existing together in the same universe of discourse. This recognition is one, which Rabbi Binder has steadfastly denied in response to Ozzie's clever queries. Rabbi Binder has separated religious and ethnic experience, limiting his moral explorations to what he thinks of as Jewish issues, while refusing to confront larger, more general questions about belief and faith. In "The Conversion of the Jews", Roth, the political satirist and Jewish ethnographer shows the intertwining of religion, politics and ethnicity.

Moral fantasy and moral fable appear intertwined in the story. Herein, the young novelist - Philip Roth was twenty three when he wrote this story - explores the dilemma of the individual caught by his family and in conflict with the constraints of his immediate

environment. The story deals with religious myopia, cultural limitation and power.

When atop the synagogue, Ozzie confronts an unrealised side of his nature and comes to discover the meaning of power. He personifies the urge for individualistic freedom, while Rabbi Binder, the social and religious constrictions, which seek to bind that freedom. The story suggests that defiance is heroic when one's soul is in jeopardy. It also illustrates in a general way, through its focus on the particular constraints imposed by the Jewish community, that the sustaining influences of family and culture are often the most powerful forces working to inhibit the spiritual and psychological development of an individual. The soul-battered Ozzie is literally driven to defiance out of frustration when he is forced either to deny his own perceptions and be 'good' or to deny the teachings of religion and family and be 'bad'. Such a double - bind leaves him with no clear-cut options.

The events of the second story, "Defender of the Faith" are bracketed by a retrospective opening in which Sergeant Marx, the main character muses about his war experiences in Europe and a concluding scene which looks towards combat in the Pacific. Together, dramatic

confrontation, meditative retrospect and prospect make it possible for Marx to arrive at a decision about his identity as an American Jew and soldier. In the course of the story, Marx is forced to choose between the Jewishness that Grossbart insinuates should entitle him to privileges at the hands of his fellow soldiers and a holistic view of Judaism and Americanness as a set of mutual and overlapping obligations.

The text of the story revolves around a Jewish Sergeant Nathan Marx, back from combat duty in Germany, and his relationship with a group of recruits, led by Sheldon Grossbart, who attach themselves to Marx, presumably out of common feeling toward the problem of being Jews in a foreign country. Sergeant Marx, basically decent, has a sense of being Jewish, which he finds difficult to articulate. Grossbart's actions are motivated by selfish motives. Roth himself has described Grossbart as a man whose lapses of integrity seem necessary for his survival. Lapses are actually committed in the name of integrity. Finally, Sergeant Marx incensed at the manipulation to which he had been subjected, becomes vindictive and punishes his manipulator.

Sheldon Grossbart, ironically named "Big Beard" begs cravenly for special treatment on the basis of the ethnic bond between him and the Sergeant. Although military tradition sanctifies Friday nights to "G.I parties", Sheldon insists that Jews must attend religious service. Sergeant Marx, who gives exemption to the Jews from cleaning their barracks, himself attends a service he hasn't attended for years. There he thinks he hears Sheldon cackle, "let the goyim clean the floors" (Defender 172). The worried Sergeant's ambivalence further increases when he is informed by the captain of Grossbart's complaint about the Army's non-kosher food. The captain's outrage is deftly captured in the following passage:

Look, Grossbart, Marx here is a good man, a goddam hero. When you were sitting on your sweet ass in high school, Sergeant Marx was killing Germans. Who does more for the Jews, you by throwing up over a lousy piece of sausage, a piece of first cut meat-or Marx by killing those Nazi bastards? If I was a Jew, Grossbart, I'd kiss this man's feet. He is a goddam hero, you know that? And he eats what we give him". (Defender 180-181)

It turns out that Sheldon himself, not his father, wrote the letter to the congressman proving that he will misuse his Jewishness to draw advantage for himself from the persecution of others. He does not even have the excuse of a sincerely held faith. Given a chance to go to town for Passover, he heads for a Chinese restaurant. The penultimate turn of the screw comes when Sheldon arranges, with a Jewish acquaintance at headquarters, to be removed from orders that send him to the Pacific, where the war has not ended. At this moment, Sergeant Marx decides to defend the faith: he gets the cancellation order cancelled, so that Sheldon has to fall in line. Sheldon shrieks, "There is no limit to your anti-Semitism, is there' (Defender 199). Sergeant Marx calls himself vindictive, but he may also be seen as the defender of a democratic theory by which the accidents of birth give no exemption from our common fate. He acts from a sense of justice that is, finally, humanistic in its universality.

Like Neil Klugman of the novella, Sergeant Marx is victimized by a person who thinks in stereotypes. But unlike Neil, he is able to control the damage that that person can do to his individuality. Grossbart's very pressures help him to clarify in his own mind the

difference between sentimental stereotypes and the realities of army life. Sergeant Marx belatedly realizes that rituals are worth protecting only when they are meaningful to the people to whom they are being denied. When Grossbart misuses his Jewishness for escaping hazardous duty in the Pacific, Sergeant Marx perceives that he has two obligations: first, to treat Grossbart as an individual and not as a sentimental stereotype of the Jew; and second, to act on his individual grasp of truth. To do otherwise would be to give in to the very stereotype Grossbart had tried to encash on him. Of all Rothian heroes, Sergeant Nathaniel Marx is the most successful in cutting through stereotypes to the roots of truthful action.

While Sergeant Marx is held up to the recruits at the base camp as an example of someone who has earned his commander's respect, he is also doubted for his name and his Jewishness. It would be easy for him to choose ethnic solidarity over American citizenship. However, unlike Grossbart, Marx does not separate his Jewishness from his Americanness. Like Ozzie Freedman in the earlier short story, Marx demands that both be fulfilled. Nathan Marx and Ozzie Freedman both demand that the Jew live up to the highest universal standards of



justice and fairness. For Nathan, it is not enough for Jews to fight the Nazis; because Jewish and American values overlap, the war must also be brought to a conclusion in the Pacific.

The power of this highly criticized short story derives from presenting a moral entanglement so as to draw out, yet remain unresolved, its inherent difficulties. Grossbart's cunning use of all the weapons at his disposal seems to be real and convincing. Similarly, Sergeant Marx's manipulation of rules to help the Jewish recruits is plausible and admirable. He shares their loneliness and vulnerability. Established as a figure of humanness, Marx commits an act that seems shocking, even to himself, so that he must try to resist with all his will an impulse to turn back and seek pardon for his vindictiveness. If it is right to punish Grossbart, Marx also knows the punishment to be cruel, a result perhaps of the same Jewish uneasiness that had first made him susceptible to Grossbart's designs.

Roth's story suggests a final generalization: that the values placed on free - flowing feeling on the one hand, and on moral firmness, even toughness, on the other, fortifying, testing, correcting each other - is what comes from the peculiar heritage of the modern Jew.

Before Roth's heroes can realise their desperate hope of living with others, they must learn to live with themselves: they must learn to accept themselves for what they are. But because they reject - and are rejected by - others, they find it difficult to accept their own limitations. They are torn by doubts about their ability to love and to live fully. They cannot live with themselves because they cannot live with others, and they cannot live with others because they cannot live with themselves. When Sergeant Grossbart accepts his fate to do Pacific duty, he begins the process of conversion, of becoming a defender of the faith, by accepting man's fate of suffering. On the contrary, Sergeant Marx, by ensuring Grossbart's Pacific duty, accepts the knowledge and the guilt of his own vindictiveness and the accompanying suffering that is a penalty for that knowledge. In the process, the Sergeant is discovering another dimension of martyrdom.

Sergeant Marx is the consciousness and voice of the story. He is a man who calls himself a Jew more convincingly than does Grossbart. He is not sure what it means to him, for he is not unintelligent or without conscience; he is dutiful, almost to a point of obsession, and when confronted by the needs of another Jew, does

not for a while know what to do. He moves back and forth from feelings of righteousness to feelings of betrayal and only at the end, when he betrays the trust that Grossbart tries to place in him, does he commit what he had hoped to do all along: an act he can believe to be self-redeeming.

Following the publication of "Defender of the Faith", Philip Roth received several letters from Jews criticizing him bitterly. Yet he was never invited to address any anti-Semitic organizations. Instead, he was invited by Jewish ladies' groups, Jewish community centres, and different sorts of Jewish organizations, large and small. The final act of Sergeant Marx in getting Grossbart's order cancelled appears callous and even anti-Semitic, unless understood as arising out of an honest conflict that profoundly wrestles with the problem of how best to serve Jewish interests. The solution is one that sacrifices the interest of one-not-very-likeable member of the tribe to an abstract principle of absolute justice. Thus the concerns of Judaism are consequently translated from self-preservation to a prophetic vision of universal justice. The guilt-provoked rebirth of Sergeant Marx's Jewish feelings struggling against his "assimilative" rejection of these feelings – is strongly

figured in his language patterns. When the story ends, it is Marx's use of unaccustomed language, which signals the resolution of his conflict.

Most of Roth's chief protagonists are second generation American Jews, and in his short stories he satirizes them (usually with some warmth) whenever they employ their Jewishness as a means of cutting themselves off from others, Jews or non-Jews. According to Howe and Deer, the entire story is "centred on Marx's struggle for personal integrity rather than on what he does to reassert the communal sanctity of Judaism" (356). While he fondly remembers his Jewish upbringing, he feels guilty together with all mankind about what happened to European Jews in the first half of last century. Confused and disturbed, he is being torn between helping the Grossbarts of the world because they are Jewish - and demanding that every man be judged. Howe observes:

Neither before nor after "Defender of the Faith" has Roth written anything approaching it in compositional rigor and moral seriousness. It may however, have been the presence of this in *Goodbye, Columbus* that led reviewers, including myself, to assume that this gifted new writer was working in the

tradition of Jewish self-criticism and satire.  
(Reconsidered 73)

Philip Roth himself has observed in "Writing About Jews":

The story is about one man who uses his own religion, and another's uncertain conscience, for selfish ends; but mostly it is about this other man, the narrator, who because of the ambiguities of being a member of his particular religion, is involved in a taxing, if mistaken, conflict of loyalties. (448)

But Roth himself says in the same article:

I don't know, however, and didn't while writing, see Marx's problem as nothing more than 'Jewish': confronting the limitations of charity and forgiveness in one's nature - having to draw a line between what is merciful and what is just- trying to distinguish between apparent evil and the real thing, in one's self and others: these are the problems for most people, regardless of the level at which they are perceived or dealt with. (449)

The moral complexities are not exclusively characteristic of the experience of being a Jew. As he says in the same article, it was not a matter of making Grossbart a Jew and Marx, a gentile, or vice versa. Telling half the

truth would have been much the same as telling a lie. Similarly, to have made any serious alteration in the Jewish factuality of "Defender of the Faith" as it began to fill itself out in his imagination would have tantamount to unwinding the tensions he felt in the story so much so he would no longer have been left with a story that he wanted to tell.

For Philip Roth, Grossbart is not an anti-Semitic stereotype, but a Jewish fact. Roth has depicted Grossbart as a single blundering human being, one with force, self-righteousness, cunning, and on occasion, even a little disarming charm. He is presented not as the stereotype of The Jew, but as a Jew who acts like the stereotype, offering back to his enemies their vision of him, answering the punishment with the crime.

The two central characters of "Defender of the Faith" are Jews. Nevertheless, their views of the obligations and responsibilities of modern American Jews diverge. Marx does not accept Grossbart's definition of the situation as "them against us". In an era in which the organized American Jewish community was emphasizing its ethnic solidarity, Nathan's exposure of Grossbart's pursuit of preferential treatment caused many readers to label the story as anti-Semitic. For

Marx, to shirk the fulfilment of one's duty as an American is to fail to fulfil a Jewish obligation as well. Thus he repudiates Sheldon's charge that he is an anti-Semite on account of not helping him escape assignment to combat in the Pacific.

The importance of language to Marx is clearly demonstrated after Grossbart forces him into giving passes to himself and his friends. Softened and sentimental now, Marx remembers his own Jewish childhood and his grandmother, whose Jewish American language shapes and controls his memory as he fantasizes her response to his dilemma: "what are you making a tsimas?". Then, parodying her language, he permits her spirit to admonish him, "Who was Nathan Marx to be such a pennypincher with kindness? Surely, I thought, the Messiah himself - if he should ever come - wont niggle over nickels and dimes. God willing, he will hug and kiss" (Defender 193). The reverie over, Marx takes up again the language of the assimilated. Sergeant Marx's final, self-comforting comment, "For each other we have to learn to watch out, Sheldon" (Defender 200) is a Jewish answer, and one expressed in the Jewish syntax - an answer that his grandmother could have

made. And with it the assimilated Jew reveals that he knows what it really is to be a Jew.

"Defender of the Faith" bridges the predominant themes of Epstein and "The Conversion of the Jews". It recalls Epstein in its presentation of an uncertain and somewhat pathetic man in conflict with what he and others around him regard as normal, and it extends the "what-is good- for-the-Jews" attitude of "The Conversion of the Jews" in a manner that becomes ironic in the light of the previous story. It also anticipates Roth's emphasis in "*Goodbye, Columbus*" on the moral and spiritual vacuousness of the assimilated, suburban Jew whose pursuit of the materialistic American Dream has cut him off from the sustaining aspects of Jewish culture and tradition.

"Epstein", the third short story, deals with the dual themes of family restraint and the conflict of the individual identity with the social expectations he and those around him have imbibed. A successful first generation American businessman, Lou Epstein feels at fifty-nine that he is losing ground. His son Herbie, who should have inherited Epstein Paper Bag company, died of polio; his daughter Sheila, a socialist, hates him for being a capitalist; his once - beautiful and sexually



adventurous wife, Goldie, has become an unappetizing cooking and cleaning machine with pendulous breasts.

The sight of love -making jolts Epstein into realizing the full extent of his impoverishment and leads him to an emotional and sexual involvement with Ida Kaufman. The result is comedy that borders on the tragic. Epstein develops a rash that he fears is syphilis; and in a comic scene in which everyone in the house winds up in Epstein's and Goldie's bedroom, Goldie declares that she wants a divorce. He seeks refuge in Ida's house, where he has a heart attack. In the final scene, Goldie asserts her prerogative as Lou's wife and rides besides him in the ambulance, urging him to come to his senses and live a normal life.

Epstein has lived a sensible, structured life of conformity to the images his culture has taught him. As he tells his nephew, "All my life I tried. I swear it, I should drop dead on the spot, if all my life I didn't try to do right, to give my family what I didn't have..." (Epstein 218). The irony of this statement is fully realized in the double meaning of Epstein's attempting to give what he "didn't have". He has tried to give his family what he did not have to give. He has tried to be a "good" father and a "good" husband, despite the little

he receives in return. The affair with Ida causes him to confront an uncharacteristic side of himself - a passionate but, adulterous side.

Much of the pathos of this story turns on the meaning of 'normalcy'. Experiencing it as attrition and restriction, Lou has, for a time, attempted to free himself, but is caught by his family, and struck down by exhaustion, decay, and disappointment, against all of which he had set out to make a final struggle. Epstein's future is forecast in the words of the doctor, who assures Goldie that he can cure Epstein's rash "so it'll never come back" (Epstein 230).

That the protagonist happens to be an adulterous man and also a Jew, seems to set up the kind of internal conflict Roth wishes to explore in a character who acts counter to what he considers to be his 'best self', or what others assume it to be, or would like it to be. Part of Epstein's sense of his "best self" is inextricably tied up with the religious and cultural fact of his being Jewish, with all the attitudes towards marriage, the family and adultery that socialization implies.

In "Writing about Jews" Philip Roth states his beliefs that Epstein's adultery is "an unlikely solution to his problems, a pathetic, even a doomed response, and

a comic one, too, since it does not even square with the man's own conception of himself and what he wants". But none of this unlikeliness leads Roth to despair of his sanity, or humanity. Roth has admitted in the same essay that the character of Epstein "happened to have been conceived with considerable affection and sympathy"(447).

Unlike Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Epstein is not even free to hope again. It is given to Goldie, his wife, to pronounce the most terrible sentence in Roth's book: "You hear the doctor, Lou. All you got to do is live a normal life" (Epstein 229). Underlying the farce and ferocity of the story is the grief of the protagonist's outcry to his nephew:

You are a boy, you don't understand. When they start taking things away from you, you reach out, you grab - may be like a pig even, but you grab. And right, wrong, who knows! With tears in your eyes, who can even see the difference! (Epstein 221)

After the outcry, there is the sad defeat that seals Epstein's fate. His rash and his yearning are merely an 'irritation' which the doctor promises to clear up. And underneath the sadness of Epstein's defeat is the sadness of Roth's own sense of man's defeat. The rash

in man is only an irritation, which the world will all too soon and irrevocably clear up so that it'll never come back.

Eli Peck, the hero of the last story of the collection may be a fanatic, but also a prophet, misunderstood by a society that uses its zoning laws as instruments of persecution. The corrupt, insulting and heartless society fails to understand the meaning of Eli's suffering. Eli is trying to redeem the viciousness, masking itself in a sophisticated modern rationalism, of the American Jew. Once again, modern society is the real villain and the American Jew, to the extent to which he has steeped himself in America's mythos, is a visible sign of this villainy. American Judaism has become the willing servant of an immoral society, corrupted by the very force it should oppose. Roth has exposed and ridiculed the very system that has nourished American Judaism to an unparalleled position of wealth and power.

The story focuses on moral questions. Assimilation into mainstream is fixed by Roth not only on the basis of external signs, but also by their subtle effects upon the individual's sense of his personal, moral identity as a Jew. The Jewishness of Roth's heroes is a vague feeling, requiring both a direct external challenge and an act of

moral imagination to throb again and get identified. In the story, Eli's conversion into the essential Jew is achieved by acts of striving, sacrificing and suffering for the sake of some fundamental goodness and truth in oneself that has been lost and buried. Feelings of sympathy, love and identification are successfully awakened in the characters. These feelings become powerful and finally indicate their purpose: produce suffering and sacrifice that lead to purification and discovery of one's true identity. As in Malamud's *The Assistant*, Eli becomes a thorough Jew. In "Eli, the Fanatic", the favourite theme of conversion is provided a different, contemporary context, but embedded in the same traditional morality.

The suit of the bearded man in the short story is symbolic of his ancestral faith. He is a victim of Auschwitz. His faith is his last and sole possession. Eli's act of dumping his dress in the 'Yeshivah porch' under cover of darkness is his first act of involvement, a dim recognition of the need for commitment rather than flight. What bothers him is if his Jewish identity should be totally submerged by assimilation with the Gentile world. The white garment and the fringed prayer shawl are viewed as the flag of his voluntary surrender to

Judaism. His newborn son represents the future generation. When Eli goes to the hospital to see his son, he is wearing Jewish clothes. Eli's conversion to Judaism is complete. Now all that is left is to have the suit reshaped to fit his boy.

Eli's attempts to reconcile quests for integration and survival ultimately result in his hospitalisation. The Woodenton Jews are sceptical of Yeshivah and its teacher called 'greenie'; rather they prefer acculturation and assimilation. His wife is a typical Woodenton Jew who wants to get rid of the Yeshivah. ". . . all she wanted really was for Eli to send Tsuref and family on their way, so that the community's temper would quiet, and the calm circumstances of their domestic happiness return" (Fanatic 261).

Eli has a feeling that he is questioning not only the rights, but also the very identity of the Yeshivah Jews. Later, even home refuses to offer him solace. He nurtures sympathy for the greenie and even advocates reconciliation between the Woodenton residents and Yeshivah Jews. He puts forth a couple of conditions for an amicable solution.

1. The religious, educational and social activities of the Yeshivah of Woodenton will be confined to the Yeshivah grounds.
2. Yeshivah personnel are welcomed in the streets and stores of Woodenton provided they are attired in clothing usually associated with American life in the 20th century. In return, Eli offers “not to carry out legal action against the Yeshivah for failure to comply with township zoning ordinances No. 18 and No. 23”. (Fanatic 262)

The discussion with Tsuref ultimately strengthens Eli's sense of personal obligation towards the Yeshivah. By demanding that greenie sacrifice his dress, Eli knows that he is being forced to disrobe himself of his identity; paradoxically, Eli himself wears that dress, identifying himself strongly with the Hassidic Assistant. He greets Jews with 'shalom', visits his newborn son and is finally drugged to sleep.

Although Eli prevails on Mr. Tsuref to dress his assistant in one of Eli's greenish tweed suits, he cannot stand the sight of the greenie dressed in his clothing, like a vision of another self. Tormented, guilty, unable to withstand the pressures from every side, Eli breaks down, dons the black clothing deposited by the orthodox

at his door, and wanders through the town. He goes to the hospital to see his newborn son, where he is drugged by the men in white needles in their hands.

Eli asserts his identity like Ozzie Freedman and assumes the responsibility of martyrdom. His formula for the solution of the crisis - let the activities of the Yeshiva be restricted to its own grounds, and above all, let its strangely clad teacher give up his funny - looking garb and hat - is reasonable enough in a world striving for normalcy. But the headmaster informs the mediator that the suit the teacher wears is all he has got. Eli realizes the meaning of the sentence belatedly. The teacher is a victim of the Auschwitz and the Nazis have disrobed him of everything, except his Jewish identity in a tradition of martyrdom for faith. When Eli discovers the greenie's abandoned clothes at his doorstep, the message is clear. Eli Peck should take up the identity which the normalcy seeking Jews of Woodenton have forced the greenie to shed. Eli and the Jews of Woodenton must accept the heritage of faith and martyrdom that is symbolized by the suit. Eli's earlier words acquire an added dimension. "In a life of sacrifice what is one more? But in a life of no sacrifices even one



is impossible" (Fanatic 252). There is no doubt as to which of these is life and which is death.

Having donned the greenie's clothes, including the ritual undergarment worn by every orthodox Jew, Eli visits the greenie to seek forgiveness and direction. The greenie points his finger skyward, and Eli has a revelation. Like Ozzie Freedman, Eli Peck is converted. But he is seized on either side by solicitous interns. "But he rose suddenly- - -. and flailing his arms, screamed, "I'm the father!" before undergoing the martyrdom of modern man - sedation. Not the son this time. The father himself" (Fanatic 298).

There are eighteen students in the Yeshiva, a number symbolic of life in Jewish tradition. The headmaster's name, Tsuref, is an amalgam of the Yiddish and Hebrew words tzureh (trouble) and rufueh (remedy). Similarly, one can read in the name of Eckman, the tranquillising, normalizing analyst of the story, the pun in Yiddish signifying both man's tail and man's end. But whether or not the names were thus chosen, the men themselves represent these conflicting forces in Roth's world. Eckman wins. Normalcy is the opiate of the people.

On donning the greenie's black cloak, suit, hat and fringed undergarment, Eli had the strange feeling that he was two people or that he was one person wearing two suits. The encounter leads Eli to an understanding of some of the experiences of the Holocaust survivor, of which Tzuref had spoken earlier. Identifying with him, Eli has a revelation. Now he becomes the committed Jew- the fanatic of the story's title, living up to 'Eli', which means "my god" in classical Hebrew.

The black suit accumulates additional meanings in the course of the story. His wife and friends become convinced that Eli has had another attack of mental illness and summon the psychiatrist who has always been a threatening presence in his life. Eli feels very clearly about who he is for the first time in his life. His friends however, cannot acknowledge his discovery. His sense of having come home at last makes no sense to them, for unlike Eli, they do not pursue issues to their conclusions, preferring instead to keep things stable and normal by banishing unwanted cultural and personal memories. As the story concludes, Eli is grabbed by a couple of interns, who call him rabbi as they administer a sedative. The blackness with which the story ends becomes a complex image: it is the colour of the

traditional suit of clothes, an emblem of tradition, and the colour of the horror of the Holocaust.

When the rabbi directs the black - clad Eli towards Woodenton, Eli has a revelation. It is the awareness toward which he has been moving throughout the story - the recognition that he is connected with the Jews of the Yeshivah in a way that his fellow American Jews deny. When Eli descends the hill and walks through the town of Woodenton, he seems to know who he is and to feel that he has the ability to choose. He has chosen to be crazy. Failing to choose is craziness. Ultimately, the spiritual assimilation Eli has achieved remains untouched by sedation. If normalcy in this story means moderation, compromise and alienation from religious and cultural past, Eli will never be normal again.

In "Eli, the Fanatic", there is the dangerous possibility of disqualifying the significance of anything Eli does on grounds of nervous breakdown. But, within him, two competing cultures are struggling for dominance. The American homemade moral system of rational pragmatism does battle with a weaker, but more ancient and durable adversary: traditional Judaism.

What we decipher in the short story is a remarkable reversal of sympathies, in its unhesitating

reaffirmation of Judaism in a modern world totally blinded to positive values. The protagonist's neurosis serves a central function. His life is emasculated, first by the mother figure and later by his young wife, reflecting the continued suppression of patriarchal law. The wife is only a reincarnated mother of Eli. The basic symbolism remains unchanged; suffocated by concern with his physical and mental health in a woman-dominated society, the sensitive Jew finds his deeper spiritual urges ridiculed, warped and frustrated. Yet the very neurosis into which Eli is driven is the twentieth century equivalent of the visionary insight attained by the Biblical prophet, which reveals to him hidden truths. Eli's inability to cope with modern society, while inviting the derision or condescending pity of the successful professionals around him, singles him out as a seer whose real reason for failing to come to terms with society is his perception of its hollowness and corruption. Eli is the Jewish version of the modern anti-hero, growing out of the tradition of the prophet as the moral castigator of society.

In "Eli, the Fanatic", we find a reaffirmation of traditional Judaism - uncompromising reaffirmation - wherein the reader's sympathies are directed throughout

the story away from the brash, complacent Jews of suburbia and towards those spiritual values, which alone make Eli's life meaningful. The yearning for a father image alone calms the fury of the revolts of most of Roth's heroes. Due to this yearning on the part of the protagonists, their reaffirmation becomes reconcilable.

The suburbs that Neil Klugman aspires are the ones that Eli, the fanatic, inhabitant of Woodenton, lives in. The contrasts in this story are extreme. The 'highly assimilated Jews' of Woodenton are suddenly confronted by a group of Jews more strange and orthodox than Neil's Aunt Gladys in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Eli is the tragic go-between. Both sides in the suburban dispute are equally rigid. Philip Roth has succeeded in demonstrating how far the 'assimilated Jews' are from their ancestral faith. One of Eli's friends argues with him on the telephone:

Sunday I drive my oldest kid all the way to Scarsdale to learn Bible stories... and you know what she comes up with? This Abraham was going to kill his own kid for a sacrifice. She gets nightmares from it, for God's sake! You call that religion? Today a guy like that they'd lock him up. (Fanatic 277)

From this position, an orthodox Yeshivah is simply incomprehensible. But the caftan - clad Jews of the Yeshiva are equally unable to understand the Americans or to realize why Eli and his neighbours are upset. Eli's desperation is intensified by his pregnant wife's devotion to Sigmund Freud. Eli pats his wife's belly and says, "you know what your mother brought to this marriage - a sling chair, and a goddam New School enthusiasm for Sigmund Freud [...] three months to go on a New Yorker subscription, and *An Introduction to Psychoanalysis*." His wife answers, "Eli, must you be aggressive" (Fanatic 259). There is no comfort for him.

It may be argued that Eli's transformation is a "conversion into the essential Jew" whose essence is to suffer for truth. Another line of argument can be that Eli has been touched by the strange power of an authentic religion. It can also be argued that there is only one path across the psychic abyss that separates Woodenton from the Yeshivah - madness. Eli's fate is truly a tragedy and not an expiatory aberration. He has been driven to insanity, at least for the moment, by the hardness of the zealots who have treated him as a fanatic. The conversion into the essential Jew is achieved by acts of striving, sacrificing and suffering for

the sake of some fundamental goodness and truth in one's self that has been lost and buried. The consummation of the heart's ultimate need is represented by becoming a Jew thoroughly.

The story is a cautionary fable about what happened in the fifties to the Jews as they tried to disappear into the suburbs and abandon their communal life. When Eli dons the black dress and moves through Woodenton, the response of the Jewish suburb to the appearance of some one in the traditional clothing of religious Jews reveals that the effort to forget extends to the visible marks of their historic meaning. The name of the town precisely expresses what they have done in anaesthetizing themselves against the shocks of modern Jewish history.

Philip Roth has attempted to picturize in the story the continuity of Jewish life down through the ages. When Eli Peck, the assimilated and some what self-hating Jewish lawyer and American suburbanite changes clothes with a Hassid in Woodenton, the shtetl credentials of America- Jewry are validated, and what had been a world of ghosts quite suddenly becomes real once again. Roth was among the very first to see how difficult it was for the Jew to be a Jew, amidst the

affluence of America. He recognized the danger in American affluence for the Jew, and the threat to his identity. From that very first thought, Roth would assure his audience that the future of the Jew in America would be anchored by both the past and the future: the one a memory which would not die, the other a nation just born.

The story begins with Eli in conflict with Jewish Orthodoxy and ends with him in conflict with modern assimilated Jewishness. On the continuum from the "normal" to the "abnormal", the progressive Jews of Woodenton obviously stand in relation to the Orthodox Jews as the Gentiles in restrictive communities have generally stood in relation to assimilated Jews. The Gentiles have required of the Jews that they conform to traditional normal American practices in order to live peacefully in the community, and these Americanized Jews, in their turn, require of the Yeshivah members that they conform to the standards of their segment of society in order to live satisfactorily with the Jewish community.

Philip Roth presents Eli's progressive acculturation as initially at odds with religious orthodoxy. He treats Eli's and the Jewish community's antipathy for Jewish



exclusiveness, unsympathetically. His and his secular, progressive neighbours' insistence that the refugees from the Yeshivah conform to their secular way of life, though perhaps good for the Jews, is represented as being insupportably restrictive and ultimately not good for the very sensitive Eli. In his own way, the unstable Eli Peck is as much an identity in flux, seeking to ground itself in an individuality of his own choosing.

What the Jewish community and Eli's family regard as insanity, Eli experiences as revelation. And because the story is clearly about identity and the standards that define it as normal or abnormal, the question of how Eli Peck is finally to be regarded is ironically consistent with the principal issue of the story. Howe and Deer state :

Eli's grotesque attempt at atonement is doomed to failure: it cannot be understood or accepted by his neighbours, for it is private and also dishonest in the sense that Eli can no more own the experience that make the orthodox dress a truthful expression of the Greenie's identity than he can disown that part of himself which belongs to Woodenton. (359)

The so-called accultured secular Jewish community of Woodenton desires to rid itself of an obtrusive reminder of its non-materialistic, non-American, immoderate past.

When Eli identifies himself with the Jews of Woodenton, he is viewed as sane by the community. When he acknowledges his kinship with the fanatical Jews of the Yeshivah, he is labelled insane. Paradoxically, the identification is identical.

Murray Roston observes:

Eli's is the flight of Jonah, the prophet longing to escape the burden of his task, eager to live in peace with his neighbours, but driven by an unconquerable inner force to prophesy despite himself. His impulse is not self-glorification, but imbibing the all-important lesson of human compassion. (308)

Theodore Solotaroff argues that Eli's transformation is identical to that of Frank Alpine's in *The Assistant*, "a conversion into the essential Jew achieved by acts of striving, sacrificing and suffering for the sake of some fundamental goodness and truth in one's self (Moralists 20). According to Josephine Zedowsky Knopp, Eli, "with his single compulsive yet courageous act, through his adherence to human values by steadfastly remaining a 'mentsh', has vindicated Judaism, raising it from the lowly estate to which it has been brought by the Jewish community"(108). Judaism

can also offer a significant alternative, the difficult one chosen by Eli, the Fanatic.

Another noted critic, Howe, does not subscribe to the view that Orthodox Judaism comes out as a positive element in the story. He has averred that it is "difficult if one bears in mind Roth's entire work, to take at face value this solemn espousal of Yeshivah orthodoxy as the positive force in the story" (Reconsidered 77).

Dan Issac, in his article, "In Defence of Philip Roth", has stated :

Eli, the protagonist ought to be taken seriously because within him two competing cultures are struggling for dominance. In short, the short story may be viewed as a clash of the forces of total assimilation into American society and survival as a member of a distinctly Jewish community. (95)

Reconciliation of these forces fails because Eli is forced to reject the modern American part of himself. The pressure results in a nervous breakdown. It may also be construed that conversion to traditional Judaism may on certain rare occasions end up in mental sanity. Thus, "Eli, the Fanatic" is the story of a modern Jew placed in a paradoxical situation. The character himself is ambivalent and dangling and his dilemma can best be

resolved only if the character has a sure sense of his identity. Autobiographically the story sheds light on the author's dilemma as a Jewish -American writer caught between two worlds.

Most of the short stories begin within an encounter of people of unequal status. Then they progress to a possible friendship between themselves and move to a tumultuous climax when their differing expectations clash on. In each case a secret is revealed that brings the original encounter full circle. Each story presents the conflict visually, so that "The Conversion of the Jews", for example, has Ozzie on top of a building demanding that his mother, friends and rabbi kneel to keep him from jumping off. The vertical axis in this story, with Ozzie on top and Rabbi Binder kneeling below, reverses the expected social hierarchy.

The "what-is-good-for-the Jews" motif of "The Conversion of the Jews" takes on ironic overtones in *Eli, the Fanatic*. In both instances, that which is good for the Jews is whatever protects the Jew from the disapproval of the goyim - usually inconspicuousness. In "The Conversion of the Jews", Yakov Blotnik is concerned with Ozzie Freedman making a spectacle of himself on the roof of the synagogue, and in *Eli, the*

Fanatic", the assimilated Jews are concerned with the traditional Jews' making a spectacle of their religious distinctiveness.

In *Goodbye, Columbus*, the net of family and community are closely drawn around the central figure. The distinctive feature of these stories is their attentive, comic display of social detail - army talk in "Defender of the Faith", suburban Jewish life in *Goodbye, Columbus* and "Eli, the Fanatic", schoolboy behaviour in "The Conversion of the Jews". In "*Goodbye, Columbus*", Neil Klugman's short journey from his ethnic roots in the 'Jewish ghetto' to the world of secularised, Americanised Patimkin wealth is enough to disturb his sense of identity. Neil does not go far in his revolt. Neil is emotionally and aesthetically bound to the environment he wants to resist. But the novella does not get beyond being a satire on the alternative family lives that are observed by the Jewish boy discovering America.

In the short stories, a self-made crisis faces the central characters. Ozzie Freedman, in "The Conversion of the Jews", resists orthodoxy; Sergeant Marx, in "Defender of the Faith" refuses to be compromised by Private Grossbart's self interested appeals for Jewish solidarity in a Gentile world; Epstein tries, farcically, to

spring the family trap - dead son, fat, nagging wife, grimly politicized daughter - by having an affair with the widow next door. An embarrassing infection and a badly timed heart attack end the bid for freedom.

Both Eli the lawyer and Sergeant Marx are challenged by potential 'doubles', who may be persecutors or saviours. In Roth, these doubles are always Jewish. The characters lack a sense of values. They are continually concerned with complex alternatives placed in problematical situations and are forced to think their position through and emerge with a new formulation. Two value systems clash and a sympathetic character makes a definitive choice, as in "Defender of Faith".

In "The Conversion of the Jews", "Eli, the Fanatic" and "Defender of the Faith", Roth tries to hint that Judaism is often used as a means of separating men from each other and for fostering selfish commercial individualism rather than creative communal values. In all the three stories, Roth does not simply juxtapose 'good' traditional Judaism and 'evil' American Judaism, rather, in each story, he focuses on the struggle of the protagonist to reconcile the contradictory demands of

being a Jew on the one hand and a member of the modern American community on the other.

Roth has repeatedly answered his critics from the Jewish community by insisting that as a writer he has no obligation to write Jewish 'propaganda'. He has always believed that there is a higher moral purpose for the Jewish writer and the Jewish people than the improvement of public relations. With regard to his own fiction, Roth strikes a similar note in responding to his critics when Jews objected to his maligning of the Jewish soldier, Sheldon Grossbart in "Defender of the Faith", Roth responded:

He is not meant to represent the Jew or Jewry ... Grossbart is depicted as a single blundering human being, one with force, self righteousness, cunning and on occasion, even a little disarming charm; he is depicted as a man whose lapses of integrity seem to him so necessary to his survival as to convince him that such lapses are actually committed in the name of integrity. (449)

Throughout his fiction, Roth is preoccupied with the moral imperatives that a person imposes on himself and their relationship to the dictates of family, culture and religion. In the absence of heroes of epic proportion, he

presents protagonists characteristically modern in the sense that their battleground is the self and their struggles are with the forces that shape and attempt to impose limitations upon that identity. Similarly, Roth refuses to believe that Jewish suburbs are the best of all possible suburbs in the best of all possible America.

What grieves Roth most is the awareness that normalcy has truncated the range of life, excluding, on the one hand the embrace of aspiration, as well as the exhilaration of wonder, and on the other hand, the acceptance of suffering. From this sadness grows Roth's ferocity, directed mainly against those who deny life, against the cowards who fear it, against all who would reduce it to safe insignificance. According to Joseph. C. Landis, Roth is "committed to his unheroic heroes who yearn and aspire, who want to climb out of the morass 'up the long marble stairs that led to Tahiti". Such a hero is Gaugin of "*Goodbye, Columbus*". Like the lion in the novella, Roth too shakes his head in sadness and then growls" (260).

Ultimately, what directs and defines his stories are a few brave values that connect human feeling with human conscience. In "Eli, the Fanatic" and "Defender of the Faith", Roth associates these values with Jewish



tradition. Roth tries to put his values through the fire - working from the impulse, strains and solutions of a modern Jew outward to the traditional morality of sentiment, suffering and rectitude.

Roth really sees through his Jewish characters. His reports are wonderfully candid. Beneath a 'typical' character like Epstein, you find a man. And along with the man, you find again in his strife and grief, something fundamentally Jewish. Roth presents this defence equally sincerely with his unsavoury characters too, like the Army chaplain in "Defender of the Faith". Basically it is an attempt by Roth to present his characters as trying to come to terms with traditional Jewish values in the context of modern American experience. Roth endeavours to present the specific tensions and dilemmas in Jewish suburban life arising out of the dual heritage of the American Jews. In the novella, as well as the accompanying short stories, emphasis is on the corruption of Jewish tradition within the middle class Jewish community in America. Neil Klugman's rejection of Brenda is for personal salvation, rather than vindication of Jewish morality. Neither is his rejection the result of any newfound concern with Judaic values. Rather, it is motivated by revulsion at the vulgar

materialism of middle class and upper middle class Jewish life. Roth, in the introductory novella, exposes the lowly state to which Judaism has been brought by the Patimkins and their numerous counterparts. *Goodbye, Columbus* marks the rejection of Jewish life because it is not Jewish enough, but infused with American ethos. Thus, an ambivalence towards Judaism, a mixture of rebelliousness and admiration, is visible, although it is conveniently polarized into its separate parts in this anthology. At the same time, the stories approximate to Portnoy's revolt in their devastating expose of Jewish middle class flashiness, hypocrisy and the rebellion against conventional morality.

Rothian critics agree on the acerbity of his portraits and view in it Roth's essential quality. Klugman means 'clever fellow' in Yiddish and Roth's tone and style are those of a clever fellow. He is also extremely satirical. 'Klugman' can also mean 'sadfellow' or 'mourner'. Thus Roth is both sad and clever. Roth is indignant at the values of a prosperous world; he is also saddened by the sheer emptiness, the comfortable meaningless and the petty superficiality of the lives he sees. Under the ferocity of the satire is a terrible sadness that is

ultimately the more important quality of his vision, a sadness that life has become merely a comfort station for easing tensions. The world of Roth's fiction is not one damnably dedicated to making money; it is a world dedicated to nothing, desiring nothing except "normalcy". What oppresses Roth above everything is the insignificance of those normal, humdrum, and comfort seeking lives.

It is that which carries and preserves within the larger, more immediate experience of being an American today, and it is that which helps to direct these writers in their search for values that men can still live by and remain human. Exploring and affirming the potency of the heart to make men better and truer and to help them survive as men, they indicate a course through our shifting sands of determinism and nihilism. And given the moral evasiveness, rootlessness, and blankness that characterize so much modern literature, this is no mean contribution.

The stories are sharply etched segments of the American middle class reality. These narratives, for all their individuality, belong to American literature's normative or realistic tradition. They reveal Roth's strong wit and satiric bite, his sharp eye for the

revealing gesture, and his keen ear for the accompanying inflections and nuances.

Characters are intellectually and sexually active, but whose lives are emotionally and spiritually atrophied. Therein lies the root of modern man's sickness and neurosis. Technology encourages the devaluation of emotional life and personal relationships. In his obsession with personal freedom and salvation, modern man unknowingly plays into the hands of the very forces he detests. Philip Slater writes:

Individualism is rooted in the attempt to deny the reality of human independence. One of the major goals of technology in America is to free us from the necessity of relating to, submitting to, depending upon, or controlling other people. Unfortunately, the more we have succeeded in doing so, the more we have felt disconnected, bored, lonely, unprotected, unnecessary and unsafe. (26)

The average hero in these novels is a man in flight from his emotional life as well as from the discomforts and challenges of personal relationships. With such a state of affairs, the prospects for a satisfactory and lasting man - woman relationship may look bleak. Yet, it is not impossible.

# The Procrastinating Self

K.P. Nanda Kumar “The self in the making : A study of jewish sensibility in the early fiction of Philip Roth ” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2003

## Chapter 4

### The Procrastinating Self

Acknowledging American influence on his writing, Roth states:

The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates and finally, it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. (*RMAO* 120)

Perhaps nowhere else had Philip Roth felt it in such abundant measure than when writing *Letting Go*, published in 1962. Compared to *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Five Short Stories*, published three years earlier, *Letting Go* exhibits a more positive view of Jewish religion and sensibility. The novel is replete with sharply etched segments of American middle class reality. These portrayals are witty, satirical and deal with behaviour in extreme situations.

*Letting Go* deals with internal depths and external surfaces, as well as the confrontation of the self by itself and the external world. At the same time Philip Roth

feels that *Letting Go* is thematically a continuation of "Defender of Faith" and "Eli the Fanatic". In Roth's interview with Jerre Mangione, he raises the question: "The central problem is really how far do you go? How far do you penetrate into the suffering and the error and the mistakes, say, in other lives?" (6).

Roth explores permutations of love, success and problems of personal identity as well as communal origins in ways that echo the personal, professional and psychosexual dilemmas of *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. However, instead of the daring adventurers like Neil and Brenda, Paul and Lilly Herz have the psychic and social fragility of survivors. Their economic and social deprivation comes to focus in their inability to have children, and the plot of the story turns on the process of adoption which they initiate.

*Letting Go* is a major effort to inch forward from *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. While in *Goodbye, Columbus* the themes of communal coerciveness and individual rights dominate, in *Letting Go* Roth has developed the theme of subtle perversions of loyalty, duty, and fellow feelings that flow through the ties of Jewish family, marriage, and friendship. *Letting Go*, though a novel of initiation and education, exhibits

the same mastery of American vernacular, social milieu and characterization typical of *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Five Short Stories*. Yet Roth has replaced the strict moral schematization of his first work with an acceptance of the centrality of accident and ambiguity essential for the realistic depiction of twentieth century Jewish American life. While *Letting Go* precludes the comforts of easily distilled moral judgments, it abounds with 'seemingly inconsequential' action and trivial incidents. *Letting Go* is peopled with characters caught up in the web of conflicting demands. But the major characters move from innocence to experience and a resultant maturity.

Both *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Letting Go* reveal Roth's close participation in the lives of American Jews. The protagonists are Jewish youngsters bursting with fury and child-like frustration. But they fail to comprehend their failures. The author has succeeded in implicating his readers in their resentments. *Letting Go* also suggests the pathos of children caught in the entanglements of modern marriage and divorce. These entanglements even lead to the death of a child pushed down from the upper bunk "in which his sister was lying because she felt that 'he was going to do something' to



her". (*Letting Go* 508). The girl, Cynthia, who had been a witness to her parents' turbulent marital life, feared that: "if it was the right month and a man got into bed with a lady, that was that" (*LG* 509). Apparently, Cynthia had wrong notions about marital life and sex. She knew: "All men had penises. They were what gave you babies" (*LG* 510). Cynthia, who had accidentally killed her brother, "missed her mother. She really did. She wanted to see her, to put her head right into her mother's breasts and yet two days later when all the adults had returned to the house from the funeral, Cynthia had her chance and did not even use it (*LG* 523).

The expansiveness of *Letting Go* is in total contrast to the brevity and sharp focus of Roth's earlier work. Yet, it extends in details some of the themes of the novella as well as adding to them other concerns. Roth portrays the attraction and repulsion existing in paternal love for son and vice versa, marriage, friendship and sexual affairs more beguiling than Neil Klugman's simple lusts for Brenda Patimkin. Basically it is the 'letting go' attitude of the principal characters that binds the situations in the novel.

*Letting Go*, Roth's first full length novel, accurately captures the fragmentation of the Jewish American family. It deals with father-son relationship in the context of traditional Jewish experience. Judaism, as a religion, lays great stress on the relationship between man and man. It believes that the fundamental problem of erosion of values can be effectively tackled only through meaningful relationships among family members. *Letting Go* is the story of the desire to escape commitment and let go of responsibilities. Norman Leer, in his essay. "Escape and Confrontation in the Short Stories of Philip Roth", has remarked that American Society "has developed many ways in which personal confrontation can be avoided"(134). Basically it is this letting go attitude towards responsibilities and the escape from commitment which is responsible for the imperfect father-son relationship in the life of the principal characters.

According to traditional Judaism, the father is a semi God for the son. The father is obeyed without question and given his rightful place in the family as the patriarchal God-like figure. But the twentieth century American Jew is not the traditional Jew. Like the Gentile, he too questions his parents, including his father. While

it is easy to blame American society for such ills, the fact remains that there exists a dichotomy between the reality of the American situation and the traditional Jewish idealism imbibed through centuries of folklore. The archetypal Jew embraces the rule of the father and the archetypal American rebels against the father.

Between the clash of these two value systems, the Jewish son stands caught in the middle. To him neither the world of his father nor his own is acceptable. *Letting Go* is an accurate description of disharmony in the Jewish American family. The novel deals with the problems of personal relationship on a wider scale beyond the family units. According to Barbara Koenig Quart, *Letting Go* expresses strong ambivalence about filial loyalty, conjugal bliss and domesticity in general. The Jewish characters seem to be living with a huge rock on their chests. Yet, solid Jewish virtues go to the very roots of the novel and the reader is initiated into a world of conventions and constraints of lower middle class Jewish familial life maintaining their strong hold.

A savage superego is always at work, reminding the protagonist of what he 'should' do, be it the conventional behaviour of couples, or the ideal excellence of a student or the moral and professional

goals juxtaposed with the inadequate and imperfect self. The "should" is generally personified by a woman though on other occasions it also wears with remarkable tenacity, the face of a judgmental Jewish elder, twisted in scorn and disgust at the sight of the ravenous sons indulging in freedom frenzy.

Albert Goldman, conversing with Roth, concludes that "the effort of the self to break the bondage of narcissism by renouncing all self-gratification in favour of a self-sacrificing dedication to the happiness of others is the central theme of *Letting Go*"(62) The novel is a study of entangling attachments beginning with Gabe's efforts to release himself from his father's possessiveness and ending with his frantic effort to end his intervention in the lives of the Herzes by helping them to adopt a child. In between, a host of characters push and pull, smother and neglect each other, usually under the guise of solicitude or obligation.

Uncle Asher's letting go attitude seems to have the approbation of the novelist himself. All around one finds circumstances that can ultimately be met with fortitude if one determines to be utterly oneself and adhere to the dictates of one's own conscience. This involves conducting one's personal life in accordance with one's

nature. The scene of action of the novel is Chicago, nicknamed Windy City, whose variable weather serves to counterpoint the moods of the characters.

*Letting Go*, a novel dealing with the ethical dilemmas of a young Jewish academic at the University of Chicago, is also a novel of Jewish manners. The intricacies of Jewish family custom and sentimentality are combined with a genre of personalities demanding careful scrutiny: the lower class academicians, the Lucky Jims of the non cadre rank, whose lives reveal a mixture of pride and fear, and an occasional mobility. Frederic J. Hoffman, author of "The Modern Novel in America" avers that "though there is much confusion, much hurrying about, the novel returns repeatedly to basic human engagements, which must be respected and above all, comprehended"(243). Jones and Nance comment:

*Letting Go* deals with a pervasive treatment of human relationships. Out of it, Roth raises the crucial existential question of what it means to be self and then follows it with an exploration of the impact of involvement with another person, or a group of persons, upon the individual's sense of self hood. Involvement is mistaken for interference, commitment regarded as constraint, autonomy

viewed as detachment and beneficence camouflages manipulation. (38)

Gabe Wallach, the central character of *Letting Go* believes in the doctrine of letting go of responsibilities and commitments. As a person thoroughly disillusioned with life, Gabe's only option is to act with integrity within the orbit of one's personal relationship. His absorption is with his personal self. Relationship with the external world is complex and restricted to the minimum. Gabe knew that neither the external world nor his personal academic achievements are going to give him any joy. He was fully aware of the fact that it was not from his students, or his colleagues or his publications, but from his private life, his secret life, that he would extract whatever joy was going to be his.

Gabe Wallach is an older version of Neil Klugman. Basically lacking a sense of direction and always indecisive, Gabe's boundaries seem blurry and indefinite. But, compared to Neil, Gabe is more self analytical and suspects that by taking decisive decisions, he would be committing himself to avoidable botheration. He is desirous of finding some way to build on experience, and learn from it without being hurt by it. He desires a balance between love and distance,

attachment and aloofness. According to Martin Buber, author of "I and Thou", relationships are of two types: I-Thou and I-It. The "I-Thou" plane is superior to the "I-It" plane. In *Letting Go*, Gabe Wallach is engaged in a search for the I-Thou relationship while existing in the unsatisfying involvements of I-It relationship. His understanding of the situation he is in seems mature, which in turn, explains his detached sad intellectualism. His encounters have the casualness of a spontaneous interview. Experiences end up in grief and confusion, which force Gabe to promise himself "that [he] would do no violence to human life, not to another's and not to his own"(LG 3). This is the hinge principle of Gabe's personality.

Gabe's confusion is based on his inability to understand the true meaning of attachments. He is at a loss to comprehend his father's love for him or his own love for others. Neither can he comprehend others' concern for him. Gabe seems to be occupying a supra intellectual launching pad from where he takes off every time. Gabe does not come to terms with his past and its psychological implications. Neither does he consider himself as a meddler. He is a whining and ineffectual hero whose chronicle is that of disaster piled upon

disaster. Though he is sexually attracted by Libby, he is more deeply moved by pity for the unhappy pair of the Herzes. Gabe's dead mother, through her letter written during her last few conscious minutes, continues to maintain her stranglehold over him throughout the novel. She establishes a major perspective in Roth's fiction about the relationship between apparent beneficence and manipulation, when she writes to Gabe that she "was always doing things for another's good. The rest of my life I could push and pull at people with a clear conscience" (LG 2).

According to Jones and Nance, this letter "hangs like a shadow over the relationships and events in Gabe's life, unobtrusively influencing what he avoids and what he seeks"(40). The governing factor of all his relationships resides in his response to her letter. He vows not to do any violence to any human being including himself. It is this letter that forces Gabe to withdraw into his shell.

This noble aim has disastrous results for Gabe. He can neither love nor be loved by his father. Gabe equates intimacy with surrender of self. It is this that prevents Gabe from having a healthy relationship with Martha Reganhart, the only character who offers him



intimacy without subterfuge. Gabe acknowledges his propensity for avoiding the most threatening and potentially most meaningful relationships when he recognizes that "towards those for whom I felt no strong sentiment, I gravitated; where sentiments existed, I ran"(30). Love and commitment are construed by Gabe Wallach to mean a negation and surrender of the self to another. By remaining detached, Gabe believes that he is deluding both pitfalls - manipulating (like his mother) and being manipulated (like his father). The parents are viewed as prototypes for dealing with life and relationships. Gabe vows never to be a manipulator or be manipulated, thereby unwittingly recapitulating his mother's pattern of attempting to be Very Decent to People.

The parents compete among themselves for expressing their love for their only son, little realizing that Gabe is caught in a whirlpool of strong emotional undercurrents that are virtually sucking him in. Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr. believes that "Gabe's psychological conflicts and behaviour grow out of the tensions in his family"(58). Ironically, it is this emotional turbulence that ultimately converts Gabe into a compulsive performer and doer. The contradictory

personalities of his parents are responsible for the emotional wreck that Gabe is. According to Donald Kartiganer, Gabe “evolves a personal dynamic that reflects their conflict of feeling and reason: a dynamic of attachment and remoteness, engagement and separation, commitment and aloofness” (91).

Gabe knows that “there had always been a struggle for [him] in the Wallach household. Each apparently saw [his] chances in life diminished if [he] grew in the image of the other. So [he] was pulled and tugged between these two somewhat terrorized people - a woman who gripped at life with taste and reason and a powerful self control, and a man who preferred the strange forces to grip him”(LG 45).

It is the mother’s final letter that reveals her in her true colours. Gabe realizes that her qualities – hitherto viewed as virtues – were only manipulations. The letter converts the son into someone indecisive, non involving and self-confining. Richard A. Rand, feels that as an individual, Gabe Wallach had an obsession “about his relationship with others”(22). As an individual, Gabe had cultivated the creed of non-interference and non-commitment, little realizing that this creed is destructive

to him and others. In the process Gabe was only deserting the search for greater self-consciousness.

As a son, the protagonist has a totally different view regarding the father-son relationship. The aged father, a widower, longs for company; the son does not have time to spare for that. When the father invites the son for Thanksgiving Day, the son asks him to "wait until Christmas. It's only a few weeks later, and I'll have plenty of time" (LG 19). The knowledge that Thanksgiving is traditional does not alter Gabe's decision to avoid the visit. Gabe is at a loss for words. When he tells his father over the phone that "I don't know what to tell you" (LG 19) Wallach Sr. considers it funny "because I know just what to tell you". The lengthy telephonic conversation ends with Gabe telling his father, without regret of course, that "I don't think I'd be a help" (19).

The shallowness of their relationship is further made explicit to the reader through a boring tennis match between the father and son. Life had been "Polite emotionless volleying" for both the father and son during the past four days. The game consisted of "pushing dull --- lifeless shots back and forth" and attempts by both the players "not to inconvenience his

opponent by so much as a foot". When a shot by the father compels the son to move three feet to the left, the father apologizes for inconvenience caused. Gabe comprehends father's fear that "three feet to the left and next thing I'd be off the courts, out of the club, gone from New York forever"(LG 33).

During the game, the father indulges in wisecracking. Gabe views them as "a watered - down version of my mother's wit, in part it arises from having lived his life in America" (LG 34). The game ends with Gabe slamming a wicked backhand stroke to quieten his father. The net result is filial remorse.

The father, who is a dentist by profession, examines the son's teeth and gives him a dental floss. Gabe views the dental floss as a last minute attempt "to bind us together across some thousand miles of this vast republic". When the father smiles at his son, the smile, cold and artificial, "like the one on the face of the stewardess, involved none of the deeper muscles" . Gabe has reduced Dr. Wallach to a state wherein he lives, "anticipating patriotic holidays"(LG 47).

Gabe is unable to differentiate between interference and commitment. The sorrows other people suffer on account of him do not involve him at all. As he

says, "If Marge Howells wanted to run, let her run! If my father wanted to pine let him pine. If Libby Herz wanted to weep, let her weep" (LG 58). As Howe and Deer conclude: "Trying to do good without making any commitments, he fails to find the way" (360). Ultimately Gabe Wallach is only a Wandering Jew, a mad crusader who, without knowing why, offers himself to others. Lack of obligation results in Gabe ending up as a 'dangling man' unsure of himself.

The novel is divided into seven sections. The first section begins with a letter Gabe's mother had written to him and traces the conflicting messages Gabe had received from his parents. In a note, which Gabe received while in the Army, his father had pointed out the difficulties of life. Gabe's mother, on the other hand, wishes him to learn what it is to be 'Very Decent to People'. When his father's note arrives announcing her death and enclosing his mother's letter, Gabe Wallach, as if enacting his mother's message, is reading *Portrait of a Lady*. He places the letter inside this book. In retrospect, this action becomes for him an emblem of the impossibility of choosing between the conflicting poles of the parents, when, in fact, both have helped in shaping his character. As Gabe admits, "in the weeks

following, [he] read and read the letter so often that [he] weakened the binding of the book”(LG 3). Naturally, the letter had started influencing him.

A year later, this letter becomes the vehicle for the continuing relationship between Libby Herz and Gabe Wallach. Ultimately, Gabe arranges for her husband to join his Faculty and thereby become family friends. In the process, Gabe ensures Libby’s proximity.

Section 2 is a section of self-realization for the protagonist wherein he realizes that his efforts to live up to his mother’s injunction and thereby be decent to everyone prevents him from realizing what they really want. Naturally, Gabe says and does the wrong thing. The third section, titled “The Power of Thanksgiving” portrays a host of characters partaking in a Thanksgiving get-together, yet none the happier for it. The characters fail to fulfill familial roles. The struggle of the sons to live up to their father’s expectations interfere with their relationships. Gabe is introduced to Fay Silberman, a drunkard whom Dr. Wallach wishes to marry. Gabe detests her for several reasons, especially for her drunken wantonness. He finds it difficult to obey his mother’s instruction and be civil to his future stepmother.

Later, Gabe visits the parents of Paul Herz who are also staying in New York. The novelist, like a cinematographer, turns the zoom lens from one member of the scene to another, changing the narrative focus of the novel to reveal the older Jewish generation's desire for acceptance by their Americanized children. Reference by Gabe to their son's Gentile-turned-Jewish wife evokes no response at all. Gabe refers to her profession: "Libby works for the Dean of College, you know". Immediately he realized: "No one knew, no one cared"(LG 176). Mrs. Herz accuses her son for having given his father "a wound that man will never forget". According to her, Paul was "always critical" . As she says, "Suddenly nobody was good enough for him. In this whole life we never asked him to do one thing, one favour"(LG 178). The conversation reveals their daughter-in-law in a new light. Gabe felt that Libby was "my adversary, I recognized how much craftiness there was in her behaviour towards me" (LG 179).

Whatever Gabe suggests ends up in failure. As a solution to the sorrow being suffered by the parents of Paul, Gabe suggests to Doris and Maury that they contact him over the phone. This response from Doris makes it clear that it "was a cut-and-dried impossibility

to those in the know" (LG 184). Thus his Thanksgiving visit to the Herzes ends up as a failure with the mother lamenting about Thanksgiving.

On another occasion, Gabe witnesses an emotional encounter between Paul and Libby. Neither does Libby want to stay at home nor mark papers because she does not have a degree. The scene of action is her office. Unable to control herself Libby moans "Oh I want a baby or something" and continues that she wants "a dog or T.V." She continues murmuring "A baby or a dog or a T.V.", rocking in her husband's arms. Unable to control himself, Gabe, in a situation wherein he had no right to interfere, shouts: "Then give her a child! Have a child!"(LG 246).

Gabe had shouted when he should have kept silence. Libby turns towards him and starts shouting hysterically: "What are you talking about? "What are you even saying? Why don't you just say anything for a change? What are you even saying? Do you even know?". When Gabe apologized for the intrusion, she ordered him to shut up. Gabe had no reply when Libby asked him, "Why don't you mind your own business?"(LG 247) Gabe had, as usual, made a mess of things.



In his relationship with the Herzes, Gabe Wallach is desirous of doing good because it provides him with a semblance of relationship without apparently entailing the commitment that a sustaining relationship with his father or Martha Reganhart would demand of him. But Gabe did not calculate the extent to which Paul and Libby too were manipulative. Consequently Gabe gets entangled in a three-sided liaison in which he and the Herzes push and pull at one another in a destructive fashion.

Gabe Wallach's relationship with the Herzes is only to prove that he is capable of action, especially in the light of his inability to satisfactorily resolve his relationship with his father. Neither could Gabe become fully engaged in his relationship with Martha Reganhart. So when Harry Bigoness attempts to convert the adoption into a profitable business venture, Gabe swings into action, in the process losing his composure and the reserve that had continually kept him from acting decisively earlier. Thinking that he has "passed beyond what he had taken for the normal round of life, beyond what had been kept normal by fortune and by strategy", Gabe decides to act at the risk of impudence (599). The net result is emotional collapse.

The Herzes, manipulative in their subtle way, silently welcome Gabe's involvement in their lives as a means of escaping responsibilities for solving their own problems. Paul even silently approves of his colleague developing an illicit relationship with his wife. As far as Libby is concerned, she views her husband's colleague as her potential rescuer from an impotent husband. The relationship between Gabe and Libby is sexually tinged while that between Gabe and Paul is wary, watchful, at times warm and on other occasions, antagonistic. In short, the relationships between the trio forms the nexus of a set of conflicts that are central to the novel. Scott Donaldson believes that Gabe's helpful attitude towards the Herzes is motivated by sex. Apart from kissing Libby, Gabe, in order to ensure continued proximity, arranges to accommodate her husband in his Faculty. Scott Donaldson feels that Gabe's help in the adoption process is "quite possibly to take himself off the hook of his feeling for Libby (25).

Gabe does not desert his past for the sake of the present but uses it as an integral part of his investigation into the meaning of his life. But he fails to come to terms with that past or its psychological implications for his present state. Gabe's habit of

looking backwards while inclining forward reduces him to a whining, ineffectual hero with whom the reader is supposed to sympathize. Even when drifting intellectually and emotionally, half in love with Libby and half in love with Martha Reganhart, Gabe insists upon the possibility of meaningful choices that would define his life. Even the environment of the University adds to the intellectual drift of this academician. The intellectual and emotional drift of Gabe could have been reduced if he had, with his final climatic choice, really thrust himself out of the drift into action and thereby autonomy. The intention to do this is not realized as Gabe's weaknesses prevail, overwhelming the readers' sense of him as he undertakes his only and very belated significant act in the novel. Gabe's final letter to Libby, in which he reveals no trace of being properly penitent, is contrived to give metaphysical depth to an ordinary problem of a basically dull modern man caught in the meaningless drift of our times.

Gabe's ultimate conversion into a decisive helpful Jew can be construed as the Conversion into the Essential Jew, achieved by acts of striving, sacrifice and suffering for the sake of some fundamental goodness and truth in one's self that has been lost and buried,

says Theodore Solotaroff. According to him Gabe's final action has been caused by awakening feelings of sympathy, love, identification and guilt which, becoming more and more powerful, finally indicate their purpose - to produce the suffering and sacrifice that lead to purification and to a discovery of one's true identity.

Gabe's problems are of his own making. Basically one-sided, but never same-sided, Gabe shifts stands that result in his vantage positions always altering. This approach denies him a position totally independent of others as well as himself. Only his final letter to Libby, written at London with his luggage packed and waiting for the taxi to take him to the airport, hints of a finality of decision as well as final escape from the constraints of overpowering relationships and a decision to begin anew. Enroute to Harry Bigoness he evaluates himself: "Up till now he had stopped before the end. Now with the basket beside him on the front seat, he started his car. Someone was to get what he wanted! Someone was to be satisfied! Something was to be completed!" (LG 598).

Roth, through the persona of Gabe Wallach, has internalized the cultural malaise of an America sick with the surfeit of suburban consumerism and spiritual loss.

The answerless question - "What is the point of it all?" - underlines everything Gabe does.

Throughout the lengthy novel, Philip Roth explores the mental framework of the protagonist caught between two wrong ways of loving - one totally inadequate and the other, manipulative. The protagonist is ensconced within these two cross currents, with the Herzes on one side and father and lover on the other side. Roth has Gabe recognize these two approaches as the extremes of impotence and savagery.

Belatedly, Gabe realizes that in spite of the emotional distancing, complete detachment is totally impossible. At the end of the novel, Gabe comprehends the delicate balance that exists between involvement and interference. It is this realization that provokes Gabe to undertake a mad crusade, overcoming all obstacles in the way of adoption. Gabe wants to gatecrash his way into manhood and tidy up certain messy lives.

Another reason for embarking upon this crusade may also be the desire to be a family man. Watching the sleeping Rachael, Gabe "saw his solace, what it was that would set his days right" (LG 533). He had been living a "restricted bachelor existence" when "he was just about

ready for a more expansive career." Gabe concludes that "he was ready now to be someone's husband, someone's father"(LG 534).

Philip Roth uses Henry James as a shorthand device for revealing some of the attributes of Gabe's character. Gabe, for example, cannot wholeheartedly condemn Isabel Archer's manipulative nature because he associates her with his dead mother. Libby, on the other hand, romanticizes her as well as condemns her. She knows that "Isabel will marry Osmond" and "be miserable. She's a romantic .... "(LG 9) Yet the same Isabel, according to Libby, is "one of those powerful women, one of those pushers - around of men" (LG 10) and least charming. Gabe is offended, humiliated and relieved by the conversation in the car at the beginning of the novel.

One might argue that *Letting Go*, in its inability to create viable alternatives to nihilism, which permeates life is existentially faithful to the way-it-is. But in Gabe's protests we inevitably read a larger, finer intention to show the pitting of the choosing self against the caging of his past and the determinism of his environment.

Even after the story has concluded, Gabe Wallach has not achieved a life of order and tidiness. But as an

exile, Gabe has a clear vision about what he hopes to attain after leaving London for Italy. As he writes to Libby, "If you've lived for a long while as an indecisive man, you can't simply forget, obliterate, bury, your one decisive moment" (LG 627). This letter indicates that Gabe sees the wisdom of ending a relationship with the Herzes that had, in many ways, been a mechanism for evading self examination and a substitute for a more threatening relationship. Finally Gabe deliberately undertakes the task of scrutinizing himself directly and attempting to make sense of the "larger hook" he is on. Here, he differs from Neil Klugman, who at the end of the novella only contemplates his image in a glass. For Gabe, who is literally fleeing away from bondage and commitment, there is hope. He realizes that freedom does not consist in alienation but in successfully resolving claims made upon the individual. The novel ends on an optimistic note.

Compared to Gabe Wallach, Paul Herz is a secondary character who is also "trying to bully his way into manhood". He had married Libby out of obligation. As Paul told himself, "If there was a sense of obligation it was to himself"( LG 85). Libby was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism after marriage, for gaining

acceptability by her in-laws and society. In the process, both the husband and wife get estranged from their respective parents, as well as in-laws.

Paul agrees for an adoption, not for himself, but for Libby. Adoption seems to be of little consequence to the adoptive father. It seemed to be of greater significance to Gabe than Paul. It is of very little significance to Paul for he had already solved to his own satisfaction the question of paternity and the sacrifice that is involved in father-son relationship.

It is while watching his father's funeral furtively behind the fence surrounding the graveyard that Paul Herz wakes up to a new realization. As he believes, he was "bringing the first part of his life to a formal conclusion" (LG 450). Life was going to begin afresh for him. There are several options open for Paul. Instead of running away or moving out, Paul moves in "because in was the direction of his life". And as he moves in, he sees a figure "moving out and out, towards him". It is his estranged mother, a figure in black. When Paul closes his eyes and opens his arms, "What he saw next was his life-he saw it for the sacrifice that it was" (LG 451). Paul Herz "felt himself under a wider beam". The truth is revealed to him. As he realizes to himself,



"What he had taken for order was chaos. Justice was illusion. Abraham and Isaac were one" (LG 452).

From that moment of realization, Paul Herz feels to have attained the manhood that he had desired at twenty. In describing the character of Paul Herz, Philip Roth has devoted a considerable segment of the novel for retrospective exposition, delineating his love affair with Libby Dewitt, his confrontation with his parents for ceasing to be their good boy and instead becoming their prodigal son and the subsequent deterioration that occurs in the marriage.

Like Gabe Wallach, Paul too shirks the responsibility to combat manfully the conflict between duty and feeling, restraint and assertion. Very often, as a result of reining himself, the character loses vitality. Sometimes the rake overcomes the scholar and vice versa; but both the rake and the scholar are necessary aspects of the protagonist's nature.

With regard to Paul's marital life with Libby, Philip Roth has succeeded in portraying the level of impoverishment to which it has sunk. The marriage had deprived them of cultural, financial and spiritual sustenance, estranged them from their parents on both sides and ultimately from each other. But because both

have been disowned by their families for having married the wrong person, both are equally determined to make their relationship succeed. As Mrs. Herz tells Gabe of her son:

In his whole life we never asked him to do one thing, one favour. He came home and told us he was going to Cornell - that was good enough for us. He was going to work in South Fallsburg, we wouldn't see him for a whole summer-we never said a word. We gave him all the independence he wanted. (*LG 178*)

Yet, Paul's father knew that the relationship between his son and himself was not traditional, but unJewish. He ruminates:

He won't listen to me. In my own house my voice don't carry from the kitchen to the toilet. All his life the boy has been filling in applications. You lift up a piece of paper in this house and underneath's an application. When did I ever see him? When did he learn to listen to a father? (*LG 77*)

Leonard Herz had only one desire and it was that "once he should listen to me. Just once" (*LG 77*).

Mrs. Herz never forgives her son for giving his father "a wound that man will never forget" (*LG 178*).

She considers Paul's attitude to be a thankless Thanksgiving. Discarded by his parents, Paul has no alternative but to transfer his love to his wife. But he feels no prick of conscience in discarding those commitments as a result of marrying Libby. He backs away from parenthood and even contemplates running away from marital life.

After reaching New York where his hospitalized father is breathing his last, Paul vacillates between visiting the dying man or escaping. Uncle Asher advises Paul against visiting his father. Paul is almost convinced of this argument and seriously contemplates running away. But better sense prevails and Paul discards Uncle Asher's advice for "nobody cuts all" ties (*LG* 447). Paul realizes:

He could take off his wedding ring (which he had not yet been quite able to do); he could leave the University. But how to divest himself to himself---- stretched out on Asher's sofa, fatigue helped to direct his thoughts to the precise issue at hand, self disinvestment. In his drowsy state he was able to think of himself as something to be peeled back, layer after layer, until what gleamed through was some primary substance. Peeling, peeling, until what was

locked up inside was out in the open. What? His Paulness. His Herzness. (*LG* 436)

Paul Herz returns from New York, a totally transformed man. He has come to terms with his internal agony and becomes the archetypal dutiful son, realizing that it is impossible to disown his parentage and Jewish tradition. This belated realization forces him to go to a synagogue to say Kaddish for his 'dead father. Jewishness wins.

In a way, Leonard disowning his son was tantamount to exiling the son and excommunicating him from Jewish tradition. But following the death of Leonard, the mother had, by embracing the son, brought him back into the fold of Jewish tradition. Paul is neither Uncle Asher, disowning responsibilities nor Gabe, unconcerned with responsibilities. Unable to suffer either, Paul suffers from indecisiveness, which ends only at the cemetery.

The problem with Paul and Libby is that both suffer from walling - in mentality, which prevents them from understanding their predicament. At the same time, Libby and Gabe share a brief interlude together, which provides sexual fantasy material for both of them. But to Gabe, the kiss resulted in a mess of emotions. As he

says, "It wasn't so much emotion, in fact, as emotionality. Much strong feeling, no particular object" (LG 57).

Gabe and Libby are further linked by complementary functions. Libby embodies the malaise which engenders the questions about the meaning of life. But Gabe cannot bring himself to address inconvenient questions. The meaning of existence haunts their meandering lives. Libby Herz, the directionless powerless person devoid of viable alternatives outside her marriage, reveals the sense of futility at the heart of the novel and of the deracinated characters and communityless milieu Roth has successfully depicted.

Asher, Paul's uncle, has an odd relationship with an Asian woman who stays with him. As a loner, he demands nothing from the people he knows, expects nothing, does only what he can and takes only what is explicitly offered. Asher is Paul's opposite who tries to talk Paul into relinquishing his deep and perhaps misplaced obsessive sense of caring, so that he can let go. Asher, whose Hebrew name means 'the fortunate', satisfies none, and does not want Paul to call on his

dying father or later attend the father's funeral. Yet Asher did that which he tried to prevent.

Gabe Wallach's relationship with Martha Reganhart is the most compelling aspect of the entire novel. It mirrors the relationship of Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin of *Goodbye, Columbus*, but with the gender situation reversed. Gabe's father, like Brenda's father, is successful and like Brenda, Gabe has everything he could hope for. Martha, more like Neil, has had to struggle a lot, and now a divorcee, has to raise and provide for her two children, Cynthia and Markie single handedly. Martha, unlike Neil, is tempted into a relationship with Gabe Wallach, not by the prospects of material comfort as by the hope of emotional stability and support. Unfortunately, Gabe, even when enjoying her hospitality, is unwilling to make a real commitment. Their interfaith relationship, though potentially enriching, terminates abruptly because of Gabe's suburban limitations, as he is alienated from others as well as from himself.

Martha exerts a positive influence over Gabe Wallach throughout the novel. Philip Roth has picturized her as a sensible, independent, conscientious character. According to Donald Kartiganer, because of Martha,

Gabe becomes "a crusader to save a marriage and a child" (99).

Gabe Wallach views his relationship with Martha Reganhart "as a green, watery spot in a dry land; I felt in her something solid to which I could anchor my wandering and strained affections" (LG 169). *Letting Go* is a novel aplenty with parental abuse. Yet Martha is an exemption, giving no room for complaints whatsoever. As critics have said the only character who has any credibility is Martha, which is partly owing to the fact that having two children to support and raise, her life intentions are to some degree, objective.

Gabe's relationship with Martha is another occasion for him to exhibit his tendency to let go of obligations and responsibilities at crucial junctures. When sick and laid up in Martha's apartment, Gabe concocts plausible reasons for leaving her, forcing her to remark not to "precipitate some lousy argument to leave". Her only request - and a sensible one-is that, as a person who has always been at the receiving end, "spare me that, will you? If you want to go - she made a slow backhanded movement - just go" (LG 283) Similarly when Gabe goes to New York on Thanksgiving Day, he seriously contemplates cutting short his relationship with

Martha. As he puts it to himself, "she had been the escape hatch, to put it crudely, through which I could crawl from that new and startling image of my father" (LG 167). But Gabe did not want to hinge himself too long to that escape hatch. Gabe viewed Martha as an escape hatch, not only from his father, but also from Libby Herz.

Whether or not Gabe comprehends the reasons why he has become so deeply involved in the lives of Libby and Paul and at the same time been unable to commit himself sincerely to a relationship with Martha Reganhart remains unanswered at the conclusion of the novel. There are two parallel plot lines : Gabe's relationship with the Herzes on one hand and Martha Reganhart on the other hand. Given its reflective, retrospective tone, and the separation of its two parallel plot lines, no fuller resolution is possible.

*Letting Go* begins and ends with letters. The final letter, in which Gabe Wallach acknowledges the shortcomings of his character, both parallels and responds to the letter with which the novel commences. The narrative that traces Gabe's interference in other people's lives while he attempts to avoid too much interference and intrusion upon his own, is introduced by



the first letter. This letter is a deathbed confession of Mrs. Wallach's self-analysis of her character. Gabe's attempt to bully his way into manhood is also an act of penance for the guilt he feels for not having been a dutiful son. He also feels himself responsible for the death of Martha's son, Markie.

The decisive events in the novel have to do with infants and children. Adult needs and feelings are very often displaced into them. Gabe Wallach arranges an adoption and the climax of this sequence comes when, Gabe, while baby-sitting, undertakes a wild drive across Chicago with his care, intending to coerce the real mother to agree to a legal adoption. In the wake of this experience, Gabe belatedly realizes that he has been spending much of his life looking after others, engaged in perpetually unresolved relationships with people like Paul and Libby because he has not known how to take care of himself. Gabe, recoiling from the tenuous quality of such relationships, decided to let go of everyone and every self-binding entanglement.

The episodes involving children amplify and orchestrate all the uncomprehended and inarticulate feelings suffusing everyone's lives. The entire novel is in fact pivoted on the ugly feelings of childish castouts

from unparadisical childhoods. Most of the relationships in the novel deal in one way or other with letting go of children. Mr. Wallach, realizing that he will have to let go his only son, instead gets hooked on to Fay Silberman; Paul and Libby are both deserted by their parents; they in turn adopt a child they cannot afford to nurture; Martha Reganhart forsakes Cynthia and Markie in order to begin a new life with Gabe Wallach, and Theresa Haug relinquishes her son to the childless Herzes. It is no wonder that Gabe comes to view the adoption of Rachael as the crystallization of several acts in one. All the relinquishing of children that takes place in the novel is symbolically counterbalanced by a single act of adoption; although that act too involves a relinquishment. Gabe plays an important role in that final act and it assumes overwhelming significance for him. Norman Podhoretz' observations on the novel are significant:

There is hardly a scene in *Letting Go* that is not played out against a backdrop of squalor ... The effect of this... is finally to make us lose patience with these people and their nasty little woes... Roth would apparently like us to think that these things matter; certainly he describes them with the

solemnity befitting importing events. But the truth is that he also does everything in his power to prevent us from developing respect for his characters to see enough meaning or significance in their climactic moments. (236)

Roth undercuts - sabotages - his own characters primarily because he is more of a satirist than a novelist who can explore themes in depth as attempted in *Letting Go*. In the novel, the mutual renunciation of Gabe Wallach and Libby Herz -based on their individual readings of *A Portrait of a Lady* - is prelude to six hundred pages of indecision (his), neurasthenia (hers), confusion and sudden irrational tantrums (theirs).

Gabe Wallach's loneliness is the loneliness of an intellectual, something achieved through effort and to be preserved. Paul's helplessness is the helplessness of an enslaved. Roth has certainly succeeded in catching the noisy, irrelevant clutter of domestic life and the novel attains a kind of unbearable familiarity in its rendering of the frustrated, gestural language of the suburban home. The scene in which Martha Reganhart wakes up in the morning to the conflated effects of Sissy playing Sarah Vaughan on the phonogram, Cynthia calling the weather on the telephone, and Markie climbing into Martha's bed

with wet pants, is representative of the predominant tone of the whole novel.

*Letting Go*, wherein there is a wide range of minor characters hailing from different ethnic groups and social classes, can be read as a linguistic atlas because these minor characters have different ways of using English. There is an urban interaction of different classes, ethnic groups, folk and high cultures drawn from the personal experiences of the novelist garnered as a graduate student of University of Chicago and later as a faculty member there. Roth seems very particular that these characters rub their noses in the grime and muck of others' lives.

Positive relationships can exist between the two extremes of possessiveness and indifference. We may assume that such possibilities exist when a relationship is based on a desire to preserve the integrity of both, oneself and the partner. *Letting Go* demonstrates the unlikelihood of individuals caught between the demands of self and the imperatives of another person achieving this subtle balance.

*Letting Go* is an attempt at a comprehensive representation of the various manifestations and claims of love. In the process, Roth multiplies the possibility for

demonstrating the complexities of human relationships by structuring two separate, yet interwoven narratives. Functioning separately, each narrative involves sets of relationships that have their own particular characteristics; as the two narratives come together, a third dynamic is created out of the intermingling of the two separate stories and the interaction of the several characters. At the centre of both narratives is a young man attempting to "bully his way into manhood" by committing some decisive act that will validate him as a man and also permit him to do good and be good. In the process, he struggles to learn his own nature by detaching himself from, or involving himself with, others. Around these two men, counterparts of one another in several ways, Roth establishes a panorama in which the participants obtrude upon and manipulate one another under the guise of love and duty.

As a novel, *Letting Go* betrays a swelling nausea before the ordinariness of human existence. The nausea seems insufferable and an affront to our most cherished images of self. Philip Roth, in nagging at his characters, seems to be venting some deep and unmanageable frustration with our fate.

Roth, in *Letting Go* can do no more than fossilize for posterity all the boredom and failure of middleclass urban academic life. Even the death of Markie has to be shrugged off by Gabe, as part of his disowning its responsibility and instead viewing it as an inevitable fact. By the end of the novel, Martha has been cast off into oblivion, Gabe adrift, still unattached and irresolute; Paul and Libby begin life anew. But there are no motivations for these separate fates; they have just happened.

Except for Martha Reganhart, all the characters are stripped of any aggressive claim on the world. They have little to do but hang around women and talk about "working it out". Their obsessive devouring relationship breeds malaise. From the characters he himself has created, Philip Roth fails to develop a little natural dynamic.

Yet, *Letting Go* does possess patches of genuine achievement. One can discern a stumbling, grasping honesty as well as tokens of struggle with the materials of American Jewish life. Ironically the characters achieve a higher plane of intimate articulacy over the long-distance phone than they do face to face. The novel is full of phone-calls, usually interrupted, overheard or

manipulated. There are abortive conversations in cars where drivers try to overhear voices of passengers seated behind, exchange of dialogues in halls, corridors etc.

In the novel, Philip Roth has introduced issues and themes that recur in later works: the difficulties of being a Jewish son amidst the claustrophobia of parental love, self absorption and the difficulty of maintaining relationships, ethnicity, assimilation resulting in intermarriage; the privileges of caste, moral responsibility and ethical choice.

*Letting Go* can be viewed as a novel dealing with the theme of individual determination versus social and familial coerciveness that *Goodbye, Columbus* had introduced. The novel anticipates *Portnoy's Complaint*, not only in its emphasis on the family as a particularly powerful force but also in its ironic examination of the idea of being good or doing good. Most of Roth's fiction deals with the concept of 'good' as one might turn a kaleidoscope, to reveal a changed pattern in each new position. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth's concern with what it means to be good is implied in the equation that Rabbi Binder, Goldie Epstein, the secular Jewish community of Woodenton, and the Patimkins make

between the necessity for conforming and being good, normal or sane. But in *Letting Go* Roth shifts the perspective and forms another new pattern that deals with goodness- this time focusing explicitly on 'doing good'.

Jewishness in various degrees and types appear throughout *Letting Go*. Gabe and Paul are Jewish characters, but their wives (or mistresses) are non Jewish. Roth captures the traits of a variety of Jews of different social strata from middle class to working class, Central Park West to Brooklyn: a cynical artist, an unscrupulous lawyer; a small businessman and several others. Both Catholic and Jewish parental intolerance of mixed marriage is an important plot element. The Jewish husband of this marriage observes that the reasons for the failure of the marriage are not to be thrust upon the parents, but on their own maladroit way of dealing with their lives. As Arthur Mizener states:

*Letting Go* is a deliberate and almost too fully achieved realization of the sense of life that Roth shares to a large extent with his whole generation and in very obvious ways with Bellow, Styron etc. This sense of life is oddly self conscious and limited, despite the talent and insight of these writers, as if



they had spent more of their lives with the Paris Review crowd or in Iowa City or some similar 'creative writing' centre than was good for them as writers. It is also almost exclusively personal. (49)

*Letting Go* presents the ambivalent situation in which a Jewish son is placed in twentieth century America. Juxtaposing Gabe and Paul, Philip Roth offers two alternatives: rejecting the father and remaining adrift like Gabe Wallach or accepting parental protection as desired in Judaism and getting anchored, like Paul Herz. Gabe continues in exile while Paul returns from exile. *Letting Go* is really a couple of separate, but inter-related stories superimposed on one another. The irresolution of the dilemma becomes the most important statement of *Letting Go*. Like Gabe Wallach, the reader too remains adrift, unanchored and unable to find a satisfactory answer to this question.

# The Kvetching Self

K.P. Nanda Kumar “The self in the making : A study of jewish sensibility in the early fiction of Philip Roth ” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2003

## Chapter 5

### The Kvetching Self

Rahv's definition of Jewish writing as stated in "Introduction" to *A Malamud Reader*, is only partially applicable to Roth (Refer Chapter 1). It would be improper to conclude that he lacks Jewish feeling or sensibility. Much maligned and misunderstood, Roth does possess the required Jewish sensibility, lacking which, he could not have written "*Portnoy's Complaint*". In this novel, Roth tries to do away with the parochial setting he was raised in and instead plunge fictionally into the realities of Gentile America. Roth realizes that the cause of his earlier failures is that he had left behind an unfinished business, both in New Jersey and in his own psyche. He appears to be going back and dealing with it before he moves on to bigger things: the true inner story of his childhood and adolescent revolt against bourgeois values. The net result is a novel in which he invents an 'outrageous autobiography' for himself whose outward scurrilousness is the fictional correlative of the states of the soul he wishes to portray.

Jews are an emotional group motivated and exercised by a love, whose archetypes are family relatedness, social justice, and compassion for fellow beings. Historically, victims of hatred and prejudice, Jews have consolidated an ethic of love and consider themselves distinct in a hardhearted, functional, status-conscious world of Gentiles. Described as a novel of comic sex, *Portnoy's Complaint* treats Jewish themes from a sexual perspective. The work may be considered as one written in the comic mode, but one in which there is a serious treatment of themes. To the American Jews, it documents a new level of consciousness, stripping them of illusions, which they had imbibed earlier. The novel also succeeds in providing a brilliant catalogue of the main literary as well as social currents of the fifties in America. Alex Portnoy may be a Jew; but he is a representative of the suppressed and oppressed outcasts of American society, like the poor whites and the blacks.

In the novel, Roth brilliantly describes the consequences of the deflation of liberal values. The hero belongs to a generation committed to post-war euphoria. They desire no special status or exceptionalism. The Jews experience the same

dislocation as other middle class Americans who perceive only dimly that many of their basic values are being called into question. *Portnoy's Complaint* is a novel wherein the emphasis is on the corruption of traditional values in middle class Jewish - American society. The entire work is an extended complaint against the absurdity, cowardice and crippling effects of middle class Jewish life in U.S.A. It is also the voice of Jewish - American adolescence with no prospective adulthood to arrive at. The stream of consciousness monologue succeeds in expressing the protagonist's erratic personality. His down-to-earth language and maniac delivery have been likened to that of a stand-up comedian's.

Roth employs social satire to make fun of everything American. The habits and values of middle class Jews and White Anglo-Saxon Protestants are also targeted. The impeccable dialect is considered to be the main strength of the novel. On the individual level, it deals with the psychological problem of a modern Jewish - American. The hero's problems have a universality that reaches beyond ethnic boundaries. The peculiarly Jewish comedy borders around fantasy and despair, exhibitionism and strongly felt ethical impulses, sexual

lust and over-riding feelings of shame. The complaints are terrible, sad, hilarious, bawdy and universal.

The novel appears to be no more a rejection of Judaism than it is of Christianity. Nevertheless, it is more an indictment of the Jewish mother and the Jewish family. In a suffocating Jewish family set up, with an overbearing mom to lord over his life, Alex knows that he is "living it is the middle of a Jewish joke" and that he is "the son in the Jewish joke - only it ain't no joke!" (PC 36-37).

The collapse of the Jewish family unit and its associated values also becomes a serious concern. Portnoy's own complaint is not a plain yiddish 'kvetch', for it signals lament or lamentation, just as much as neurotic whining. The fantasial sex play and masturbatory perversity seems to be an extravagant but apt image for the narcissism to which Alex Portnoy, along with millions of other countrymen of his, is fated to live with.

Alex's story may be viewed as the late version of the old story of a newcomer aiming at acculturation and assimilation in the American milieu, away from ghetto identity. One remarkable feature of the novel is its less spectacular subject: the authorial self. This self

gradually becomes his sole concern, with many things getting pushed to the fringes. "Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak?" is a phrase that marks the central irony of the novel (*PC* 37). For the protagonist, every situation is a joke, told in language of urbane mockery, stiff with the wry humour of the ghetto.

Helen Weinberg views the novel as an allegory of the Jew in Diasporic America, "of the restlessness, the near feverishness, the anarchistic itchiness of the young American Jew, burdened with the remnant of an authentic tradition of justice, law, reason and righteousness"(241).

The novel marks a major moment in the history of Jewish experience. Roth's main thrust is to question the assumptions of Jewish exceptionalism, assumptions which have been implicit in the works of every Jewish-American writer upto this time. As Alex Portnoy says: "No, I am a child of the forties, of network radio and World War II, of eight teams to a league and forty eight states to a country" (*PC* 235).

Alex even challenges his psychiatrist to "name [his] branch of service" and is confident of singing him "[his]song" . He remembers having sung Americans

songs "in unison to keep up [their] morale until the all-clear signal sounded"(PC 235) . Alex wants Dr. Spielvogel to "name it, and if it was in praise of the Stars and Stripes", he knows it "word for word" (PC 236). He continues:

Colin Kelly went down in flames when I was eight, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki went up in a puff, one week when I was twelve, and that was the heart of my boyhood, four years of hating Tojo, Hitler and Mussolini, and loving this brave determined republic! Rooting my little Jewish heart out for our American democracy! ( PC 236)

Finally Alex pledges allegiance "to the twat of the United States of America" (PC 236).

For a Jewish writer in the Diaspora, it was most important to present Jewish life as sympathetically as possible because Jews had been hitherto remorselessly oppressed. All the good qualities of Jewish life are heaped up in the foreground of their stories. Raw sentiments are frequently withheld. There is a general tendency to idealize ghetto life, to cover it up in prayer shawls, phylacteries and Sabbath sentiments, the Kaddish, the Schnorrer and the Rabbi. Jewish literature and art have sentimentalized the ghetto, even though



their appealing pictures are far less interesting than the real thing. With a considerable change of diction, Portnoy tries to explain to his father why "the saga of the suffering Jew", as he puts it contemptuously, or, the Talamud, has no meaning for him, the tradition having been vulgarized and sentimentalized (*PC* 76). Even when celebrating sexual freedom, the novel staggers with sexual guilt. There seems to be a constant justifying of sex for its own sake: endless fantasies are caught, exposed, humiliated and thus ruined. When Sophie Portnoy tells him that, "Hannah tells me what you're doing and so don't think I don't know", Alex realizes that he has, "been caught! Oh, let me be dead! I'd just as soon!" (*PC* 23).

The protagonist is a freak of sorts, a sexually disturbed neurotic, though respectable and intelligent. While his mother - the Jewish mother - is overpossessive and even cannibalistic, his father is a constipated insurance salesman, always at the receiving end, both at home and in office. The Jewish dietary laws, taught at home, disturb Alex as they are totally incomprehensible and irrational. Alex desires an identity of his own. Masturbation offers a means of rebelling against those suffocating moral values imbibed from

home. Though it offers him the ecstasy of enjoying forbidden freedom, the privacy essential for enjoying it is lacking and hence suffocating: "What is this, a home or a Grand Central station?"[...] Privacy[...] a human being [...] around here never". Alex desires that, "everybody leave [him] alone", so that he can complete his act in total privacy (*PC* 20).

Alex is the "Raskolnikov of jerking off" who works as Assistant Commissioner for Human Opportunities, which itself is a reflection of his negative image. The familial situation is responsible for the guilt-ridden slimy situation in which Alex is trapped. As he remarks to Dr. Spielvogel, "imagine then what my conscience gave me for all that jerking off! The guilt, the fears [...] the terror bred into my bones!" (*PC* 35). As part of this terror, Alex fears that he is inflicted with Syphilis, contracted from an eighteen year old Italian girl in Hillside, as a result of which his penis gets detached from him and falls to be ground. Seeing it on the kitchen floor, his father mistakes it for a black plastic thing and demands an explanation from him. He answers that, Its not "a plastic one" and cries out. "It's my own" (*PC* 167).

On another occasion, Alex squirts his own semen into his eyes and fears that he is going to be blind. The

situation could have been avoided if the Christian, Bubbles Girardi had 'done it' for him. He imagines himself returning home with the assistance of a "seeing-eye dog" because he is blind: a just punishment for being promiscuous.

Alex's relationship with Mary Jane Reed, nicknamed "The Monkey" is guided by the twin emotions of "delirious desire" and "contempt" for himself. Occasionally, fear and distrust replace a wild upward surge of "tenderness and affection" and vice versa (*PC* 85). He is sure that the fear of retribution is not merely a play of his imagination; for "whatever revenge I might imagine", the Monkey "could imagine too" (*PC* 250). There is a blending together of the conscious and the unconscious in Alex and he realizes that the only way to deal with guilt is to become more guilty and then try to slither into it. He cries out, "Do me a favour, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass - I happen also to be human being!" (*PC* 76). The suffering heritage of the Jews remains an eluctable fact. The wisdom of his people is a burden, reinforcing his sense of inadequate experience.

Alex's indignation is perceptibly directed outward. His is a defiance of things as they are, of the iniquities

and horrors of the human condition, of the need for analysis and of the final impossibility of analysis. Alex is a victim of his history and is trapped by his inability to be content. His splendid indignation is due to his inability to make people what he wants them to be. His affliction is also his accomplishment, his indignation, the enemy of resignation. Unable to accept Shikse or Jew, Alex refuses to compromise. His impotence in Israel is evidence of his inability to settle for the surface appearance of exemplary femininity. Alex declares "need dreams" [...] because [he has] this life instead. With [him] it all happens in broad daylight! The disproportionate and the melodramatic, this is [his] daily bread!"(PC 257).

Israel too becomes a liability for Alex. There he is even more of an outsider, than in America, where, at least there are Portnoys aplenty. Israel is an exile for him. He discovers his impotency in Israel, the usual fate of sexual athletes like him. The oedipal drama with Naomi ends up with an impotent Alex being kicked. Alex is, throughout the novel, on the couch of his analyst: One more martyr - a nice Jewish youngster - in the cause of sexual freedom.

Enroute to the Promised Land, Alex daydreams of what had been for him the perfect Jewish homeland, the Weequahic neighbourhood field where on Sunday mornings he had watched the Jews play softball. There were Jews of every station and he had supposed that he would always be there, even when grown, to complete his Sundays with his wife and children after having participated in such games. He dreams of his weekends ending with homely Jewish family meals and radio shows in a Jewish home where he would be "fully at home" without feelings of dislocation. Alex here expresses clarity of views about his "idea of a good time":

And meant it-sitting at home listening to Jack Benny with my kids! Raising intelligent, loving, sturdy children! Protecting some good woman! Dignity! Health! Love! Industry! Intelligence! Trust! Decency! High spirits! Compassion! (PC 248)

Alex decides to snap his fingers and own for himself things he could have earned earlier and get on with his life. But ultimately the dreams remain dreams forever.

Alex is more of a subdued character: as a man, as an American, and as a Jew. He flees to Israel to see if he could regain two out of the three, but realizes that he

could not succeed either as a man or a Jew. If America is Thereal McCoy, Israel is Sophie or Naomi, the soldier who resembles Sophie, and so impregnable to sexual conquest. Naomi's rejection, drives him into a frenzied attempt at rape, and renders him impotent. Portnoy recoils, no more at home in Israel than in New York. The Jew in him, cultivated by fear, had prevented his 'fully entering' America. The American in him had all but eviscerated the Jew. Powerless to assert a self, Alex appears unmanned. The obscenity of his situation leaves him on the couch, unpacking his heart like a whore, with obscene words.

Alex's problems are of social and psychological significance, although his apparent unawareness of this truth is another of his conspicuous intellectual limitations. He inhabits a world of diminished possibility and demands that it yield him meaning. His experiences suggest the limitations inherent in such a world. For him sexuality is the only arena for action remaining within individual control. In his world, there are no new worlds to conquer, only women.

Alex's fantasies are real. He is incapable of intimacy because other people are only projections of himself. His is a fantastic mother and the Monkey is a

real fantasy. The moment this fantasy becomes a reality, she is rejected. Women take on mythic simplicities and proportions.

Alex's final scream, "A aaa aaa . . . . hhh !!!!" is due to real pain and anguish (*PC* 274). It is provoked, and is a pain of partial awareness of paranoia, perhaps of persecution. It is hidden behind the comedy of pure fantasy with the mind dwelling on the trivial, forcing logic to absurdity, glorying in its capacity to follow out consequences. It is the same mind we encounter throughout the novel: always inventive, elaborating and discovering the comedy behind the pain.

Alex lets out of himself a generational cry requiring an answer. He is fit for success, but unfit for existence. His answers to his doctor are enmeshed in his parents. He states that "the most unforgettable character" he has met is his mother who is unforgivable and despicable (*PC* 3). Memory functions as a perpetual lacerating faculty that binds Alex to his mother beyond escape. Alex is afraid of abandonment and castration by his mother. It is her twin actions of locking him out and threatening him with a bread knife that makes her unforgettable: "Nonetheless, there is a year or so in my life when not a month goes by that I don't do something

so inexcusable that I am told to pack a bag and leave" (PC 14). But Alex does not know why he is being told to pack a bag and leave. Similarly, threatening him with a long bread knife is to make Alex decide if he wants "to be weak or strong, a man or a mouse" (PC 16).

When the parents wail the wail of two thousand years of pogroms, Alex's response is strange. He finds his fellow Jews contented, wealthy and successful while non-Jews are not that well off. There is a reference to Jews with pornographic surnames who have all been highly successful. Sophie praises "Dr. Seymour Schmuck" who has the "theme song from Exodus pumped into operation theatres while performing complicated surgeries, so that everybody could know what religion he is" (PC 100). Alex does not share his parents' knowledge of history nor their sense of guilt at having escaped concentration camps. So, from the very outset, there is a split. If he is a successful Jew, the credit goes to his parents. There seems to be a dichotomy between his wants and his needs, so he wants nothing or none for his own sake, but for the sake of his parents. What he needs, he merely needs, for all his wants have been apportioned to his parents as the gifts of a dutiful son.



Alex wishes to tell the truth about himself. The truth, if it is to be truthful, ought to be brutal. Even his sexuality is brutalizing. Foul words are used for denigrating and dirtying sex. Seemingly enough Alex has the syndrome of the maimed man who has suffered such a deep and even permanent psychic wound that he is unable to love anyone or anything. Psychologically and sexually, Alex is an arrested adolescent who has never left the bathroom of masturbation. His maiden experience of an unsuccessful masturbation ends up in the revelation that what one does to and for oneself is not real sex. All sexual escapades are like mere variations of masturbation.

The strivings of Alex towards integration and secularization are natural, notwithstanding the horrified reactions of his parents. Throughout the novel, Alex is lucid and consistent in his criticism of his parents, heritage and religion. His skepticism and rationalism are convincing and based on a keen understanding of human realities and motivation. Unfortunately, this maturity is offset by his inability to utilize his insights in the area of his own emotional problems. He seems to be the victim of forces beyond his control, a helpless spectator to a conflict within him that he can analyse, but not resolve.

He asks his psychiatrist, Dr. Spielvogel to resolve the mystery he encounters:

Whew! Have I got grievances! Do I harbor hatreds I didn't even know were there! Is it the process, Doctor, or is it what we call "the material"? All I do is complain, the repugnance seems bottomless, and I'm beginning to wonder if may be enough isn't enough. I hear myself indulging in the kind of ritualized bellyaching that is just what gives psychoanalytic patients such a bad name with the general public. (*PC 94*)

Perhaps it is the conflict between duty and pleasure, conscience and transgression. But his goal, however difficult, is to rid himself of his own taboos and lead a life according to his own convictions. At the same time, he is oppressed by shame, inhibition and fear, no matter how much he hates them, realizing that they have no rational foundation. As far as sex is concerned, Alex is pitched against a deep-seated division within himself, which is a major cause of his sufferings. He wants to be a swinger, a carefree hedonist, but his sexual and emotional egotism leads to disappointments and disillusionment, both for himself and his partners. Suffering mankind means nothing to him. The only

feelings he has ever experienced have been located in his sex organs. Alex may be right in condemning the idiocies of his Jewish background, but in the process of liberating himself from it, Alex has largely lost the warmth and ability to care for others that the people of his tribe possessed.

Alex's identification of his problem verges on a deterministic acceptance of the very stereotypes that he otherwise passionately rejects. In other words, he comes to surrender not only to his Jewish weakness as a phase that can be overcome but as an eradicable historical fact. Portnoy balances on the sharp edge that divides his sense of helplessness from his determination to transcend the limits which his background threatens to impose upon him. But he also reveals the influence of his birth in the contradiction between the self contempt that he expresses and the pride he experiences as a member of the Chosen Race. He is also secretly convinced that he is mentally superior to non-Jews: "We are the boys who eat no ham. We play football, we play soccer" and keep "matzohs in our lockers" (PC 56). They are not ashamed to say that they are Jews, who lost to goyim in football, but because they "could not commit [their] hearts to victory in such a thuggish game, [they

are superior]" (*PC* 56). Such assumptions suggest that Alex is endowed with an attitude that define him as Jewish though he is wholly sincere in his rejection of the ancestral heritage.

As an individual, Alex is "torn by desires that are repugnant to [his] conscience, and a conscience repugnant to [his] desires" (*PC* 132). To free himself from goodness, from being the "nice Jewish boy" that his job description appears to underscore, he would be secretly bad, sexually licentious, except that the shame such behaviour engenders only intensifies the problem. He wants to be bad and enjoy it. But he cannot, at least not without help. Desperately he involves the blessings of "Lord" Spielvogel: "Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me whole. Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!" (*PC* 37).

In the recollection of his childhood days, Alex is the centre fielder of his softball team. A sense of poise and control was felt by him on such occasions. It was an exclusive Jewish team. Everything was clear and Alex knew who he was and what he had to do. Practice let him do it without endless contemplation about moral consequences. Since his mother knew nothing about its

mysteries, there was no question of pleasing or disappointing her, or need or opportunity 'to disappear within the team'. Alex tells his doctor. "Oh, how unlike my home it is to be in center field, where no one will appropriate unto himself anything that I say is mine" (PC 69).

For Alex, center field is like "some observation post, a kind of control tower, where [he is] able to see everything and everyone, to understand what's happening the instant it happens" (PC 69). Alex also knows that "there are people who feel in life the ease, the self assurance, the simple and essential affiliation with what is going on, that [he] used to feel as the center fielder for the Seabees?" Those people, at ease under spacious skies, are Americans. Alex desires "to be a center fielder, a center fielder - and nothing more"(PC 72).

Like the playground, another haven from oppression is the "shvitz bath", or the Turkish bath which offers Alex a dream time away from his two nemeses: women and goyim. The former is tainted by his mother and the latter by suspicion nurtured by his Jewish parents. Beyond the bounds of Weequahic, in headlines and table talk is Gentile America and Gentiles

make the country unkosher. Neither principled egalitarianism nor all his familiarity with the America of movies and radios can make natural the Gentiles his parents have taught him to distrust. As Alex puts it, "The first distinction I learned from you, I'm sure, was not night and day, or hot and cold, but goyische and Jewish" (PC 75).

Roth does not believe in such distinctions. He knows that, "all haven't been lucky enough to have been born Jews," and is "sick and tired of goyische this and goyische that!". What he desires from his parents "is a little *rachmones* on the less fortunate, okay?"(PC 75). Interludes in the bathhouse could expunge them from consciousness, but afterwards - and long after - it is he who would be the alien. Seeing himself at the mercy of the goyim, Alex could approach them only indirectly through their daughters. By conquering Thereal McRoy or her nicknamed variants, Alex seems to conquer America.

Unpacking himself before Dr. Spielvogel, he does not seem to be proud of his sexual escapades. Guilt-ridden, he desires to rid himself of them just as he would rid himself of his parental prejudices and inhibitions that have magnified themselves in his

unconscious. As a schoolboy, Alex remembers chanting, "I am the captain of my fate, I am the Master of my Soul". Meanwhile, within his own body, he experiences "an anarchic insurrection" that is launched by one of [his] privates - which he is helpless to put down"(PC 38).

At 14, Alex Portnoy rejects the synagogue. To him, Judaism is a "sour grape of a religion!" and "religion is the opiate of the people!"(PC 76). He is proud of his communism and demands to be spared of rabbis and religion, in the name of "human dignity!". Yet, his sister Hannah insists that he is a Jew, a condition that he may not wish to acknowledge. He even contemplates changing his name into something American: Al Port then, Al Parsons! "How do you do, Miss McCoy, mind if I skate alongside, my name is Al Parsons" (PC 149).

He foresees McCoy asking him his name to which he replies: "My name? I am Alton Peterson - a name I had picked for myself out of the Montclair section of the Essex country phone book - totally Goy I was sure, and sounds like Hans Christian Anderson into the bargain" (PC 164).

But then the real shock comes when Alex realizes how difficulty it is "to lie about this fucking nose?" While

a baby, the nose is "the button of [his] childhood years" something that "people used to look at in [his] carriage" but now it is something that betrays his Jewishness (*PC* 149). Even when the novel ends, Alex knows, that he "can still do it" (*PC* 270). It is in that spectrum of possibilities between phobic avoidance and insane lapping that the minute moral discriminations of Jewish life are made. To the reader, 'moral' derives etymologically from 'oral'. When Alex swallows unkoshered liver, healthy as milk, warm and safe as his own childhood, it is self-defeating.

In spite of all his anti-Jewish outbursts, Alex is unable to sever himself from family and childhood- a weakness which manifests itself in his flight from all intimacy, except on a frenzied physical level. In a desperate quest for male strength and freedom, Alex looks to his father's simple male biological presence as the sole antidote to his mother's destructiveness. The senior Portnoy's situation is seen as common to that of other Jewish men of his generation. The heritage of fear, inhibition and shame against which the novel protests is viewed by Alex as a cultural as well as personal issue. It evolves in a clear line from pogroms and Jewish taboos. For Alex, all dietary rules are important:



Why else , I ask you , but to remind us three times a day that life is boundaries and restrictions if its anything, hundreds of thousands of little rules laid down by none other than None Other, rules which either you obey without question, regardless of how idiotic they may (and thus remain, by obeying, in His good graces) or you transgress, most likely in the name of outraged common sense [...]. (PC 80)

Alex despises the rabbi, who lists Alex's great achievements proudly in the end thus: "Oh, the sunny Saturday morning meanders slowly as he lists my virtues and accomplishments to the assembled relatives and friends, syllable by syllable (PC 202).

Alex refers to his flattery as blowing a "horn" (PC 202). The speech ends with the same Rabbi denouncing Alex for possessing "the mentality of a pimp! with the human values of a race horse jockey!". The Rabbi wants to know, what are "the heights of human experience?" He has the answer to himself: "Walking into a restaurant with a long-legged kurveh on his arm!" (PC 203). Roth appoints a Jewish elder to stand in judgment over the ways of the wayward protagonist, just as the good Jewish family men are presented as Alex's ideals. The Israeli woman who later chastizes Alex as "nothing but a

self-hating Jew" (PC 265) is still another from of the Jewish judge who finds him wanting. He dislikes her, but crawls around her feet, as if to bear out that he is exactly the disgusting insect this Amazonian believes him to be. It is not that Alex is incapable of permanent relationships; he is not desirous of cultivating one. He has his arguments against established institutions like marriage and marital love. To extricate himself from such Jewish clutches, Alex even professes himself to be a communist, knowing fully well that a Jew can never disown his Judaism.

What Alex would rather aspire to be is to become a Jew without Judaism. Sex is for him a means to free himself from his mother, religion and culture. But even the cause of sexual freedom requires courage against or indifference to social opinion. Portnoy lacks this courage because he is trapped within the confines of his religion. Perversions are practiced furtively. Essentially a bourgeois intellectual, proud of his intellect and social status, Alex fears social ridicule. He is ashamed of the Monkey's non-sexual inadequacies. The Monkey may view him as her Messiah, who will lead her to the marriage altar and ultimately to respectability. But Alex backs out. The question he usually asks himself is not

whether he loves the Monkey or could love her, but whether he should love her. So when she becomes more than a masturbatory medium, she is ditched. She breaks the secret rule which forbids a woman making greater claim on Portnoy than his sex organs make. Alex knows that "she has a very low opinion" of herself and simultaneously [...] a ridiculously high opinion of me" (*PC* 106). As a medium, the Monkey has total freedom, but as a woman, none.

Paradoxically, enough attempts by parents to inculcate a fear of non-Jews in Alex only results in making goyische females seem more desirable than Jewish girls. Warning Alex against running "after a blondie", Jack Portnoy tells him, "she'll take you for all you're worth and then leave you bleeding in the gutter [...] she'll eat you up alive" (*PC* 189). But Alex refuses to be tied down by taboos as they may unman him.

Yet, throughout the novel, the protagonist appears to be ashamed of himself at having been involved in a sordid affair with an Italian whore. The shame far outweighs the shame of having been put to shame. Alex is convinced of his impotence. The whore embodies experience accepted, not considered. Her accomplice, the Monkey, embodies experience considered but

resented. Alex is caught between the two: he can neither fully accept nor fully resent his own experience. With regard to his relationship with the Monkey and Lina, Alex expresses a feeling of enigma: "But so was I waiting too. And was my heart pounding. It had come to pass, two woman and me..... So now what happens? still, you see, I am saying to myself No!" (PC 137). The escapade ends with a sense of repulsion: fucking some dark odoriferous combination of sopping Italian pubic hair, greasy American buttock, and absolutely rank bedsheet (PC 138).

For Alex, women are objects of Jewish revenge, especially if they are American women. His sexual relationship with them is a source of sweet Jewish revenge. When Alex breaks off with the American Sarah Maulsby he is smug with the satisfaction that he has done "something nice a son once did for his dad" (PC 240-241). It is a "bonus extracted from Boston and North Eastern, for all those years of service and exploitation" (PC 241). Alex can never acknowledge women's identity or integrity.

Among his several bed-mates, only the Monkey becomes any where near a rounded character with needs and the capacity to love. But sexually liberated,

nearly fulfilling Portnoy's fantasy, she emerges highly demanding and hence dangerous. Her being almost illiterate (though a highly successful professional model) and slightly whorish, affronts the Jewishness buried within him. He leaves her on the ledge of a hotel window and flees for Israel. Portnoy's assertion of penile prowess - his personal myth of the battering rams that could break down barriers - has left him alienated and lonely. He wonders to himself, how he could "come to be such an enemy and flayer of myself? And so alone! Oh, so alone! Nothing but self! Locked up in me! (PC 248)".

With his coterie of Christian friends, Alex plays many roles. With the Pumpkin, he is a Jew. When she refuses to convert, he breaks off with her. The paradox is that Alex cannot live with his Jewishness, and simultaneously tolerate a girl who is secure. With Sarah Maulsby, he is his father's avenger. Here, he is the snoz, the prize fighter at the center of the ring. Monkey looks upon him as her husband, and she is Mrs. Somebody [Alex] can - look-up-to. For his part, he is like Arnold Mandel, a hero out of Newark's past, as they register at the lodge for their Vermont weakened. He is also a preacher and teacher as he wryly describes his sermonizing and his giving "the stupid shikse" a reading

list that will help to rid her of her prejudices. With her, Alex can afford to be condescending. Yet the superior attitude in himself repels just as his sense of inferiority does occasionally. The voyage to Israel is also to have a fresh perspective of himself. There he gets cast in the role of the Schlemiel. Naomi even dismisses that single aspect of his life with regard to which he is successful: his profession. She snubs him as "only one of its policemen, a paid employee, an accomplice". She ridicules him for being "a lackey of the bourgeoisie". The system, according to Naomi is untouched because Alex is "as corrupted by the system as Mr. Charles Van Horn (PC 262). Naomi labels his humour as ghetto humour because it is derisive of self. Stripped naked figuratively, Alex feels severely unmanned. He returns to New York to seek psychiatric help and to expose his inner self. The escaped escapist now completes a full circle.

Alex is threatened by the Monkey of being exposed as a hypocrite, inspite of his esteemed designation. Yet the threat only liberates him from shameful secrets. He has a feeling of having been cleansed, strengthened and Americanized. There are several targets for Roth's satire here, not the least of which is the candour and frankness of the protagonist's sense of being reborn, cleansed and

Americanized. The Monkey's threat to expose Alex's hypocrisy is not without foundation. So Alex snobbishly decides to educate her about her origins, "Origins, of course, holding far more fascination for the nice left wing Jewish boy than for the proletarian girl herself" (*PC* 208). Alex christens the course of study, "Prof. Portnoy's Humiliated Minorities, an Introduction" and the purpose is evident:

To save the stupid shikse; to rid her of her race's ignorance; to make this daughter of the heartless oppressor a student of suffering and oppression; to teach her to be compassionate, to bleed a little for the world's sorrows. Get it now? The perfect couple: She puts the id back in Yid, I put the oy back in goy. (*PC* 209)

Similarly, Alex considers Kay's reluctance to convert, an unpardonable crime. Her feeling of American security is unacceptable to him. Once estranged, she strikes him as "boringly predictable in conversation, and about as desirable as blubber in bed". The estrangement shatters her and Alex wonders, "I'd thought it was I who had loved her, not she who had loved me" (*PC* 231). Here, Alex proves himself to be as much a Jew as his parents are. But ironically, he finds fault with his

parents for being excessively Jewish. Alex also realizes his power over women. With this exhilarating discovery, Alex is all set to conquer America through *shiksies*. He becomes Alexander the Conqueror:

What I am saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds - as though through fucking I will discover America. Conquer America - may be that's more like it. Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington - now Portnoy. (*PC* 235)

Alex accuses adult Jews of hypocrisy, stating that the traditional lore of Jews has become hysteria and superstition. Like other members of his generation, Alex recognizes and acknowledges the changes that have taken place in the attitude of American Jews since the turn of the century. He remembers his father purchasing a Kaiser. They had a '39 Dodge with them, which was exchanged for the Kaiser. It was a "new make, new model, new everything - what a perfect way for an American dad to impress his American son" as Alex feels it (*PC* 116). Similarly Alex boasts of the "Venetians" in his Newark house, for which his mother "has been saving out of her table-money for years".



"What a rise in social class we have made with those blinds!" says Alex to his doctor (*PC* 148). In fact, the main grouse of Alex is that his parents, or for that matter, all Jewish parents, fail to recognize those changes. The dad wants to impress his son, little realizing that owning a brand new automobile is an invariable part of the American way of life. Alex, on the other hand, is involved in a quest to discover the relationship between his identity and the meaning of American life.

The Jewish mom is his primary satirical target. He swears, because swearing violates everything his mother represents. Alex wants to rebel against her influence and if possible, forget that. Alex has an ambivalent attitude towards his heritage as well as the feeling of rootlessness. He is the typical example of the alienated Jew, viewing America as "a shikse nestling under [his] arm and whispering love love love love love!", unlike his grand parents for whom America "may have been gold in the streets" and "chicken in every pot to [his] father and mother" (*PC* 146) . Alex aims at assimilation, and gets alienated from his own self in the process. He is the schlemiel quester who succeeds in losing his freedom.

Alex is yet to learn that true freedom lies in the willing acceptance of others.

His only outlet is Dr. Spielvogel, sitting opposite the couch. All his words are but a preface to dubious action. Any healing has to commence after Alex's monologue has ended. Behind Spielvogel looms his mother, her female musk oedipally perfuming - and endowing with moral sanction - every woman he will meet from his first grade teacher to the Israeli who finally wrestles him into humiliated submission. His father desires for his son opportunities beyond the eighth grade and a company desk. His Insurance Company is situated in Massachusetts, where the pilgrims still hold sway; on his company stationery, a picture of the Mayflower underscores the awareness that Jack and his crew of customers are still adrift and yet to land in real America. With the hope that his son can complete that journey, he sacrifices endlessly. But Alex can move past his father only in paroxysms of guilt, alternately ranting and weeping, "Doctor, what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred.... or the love?" (PC 27).

Alex is out to wreak vengeance. The Yiddish mamma is the symbol of Judaism on the American scene

of this century, endlessly fussing and worrying over her children's welfare. Knowingly or unknowingly, this tendency has supplanted a firm patriarchal tradition stretching unbroken from the earliest history of Judaism to the late 19th century. From the time of Abraham, through the kings and priests, and on through the generation of rabbis who followed it was a bearded father seated at the head of the table who constituted the family's unquestioned spiritual and religious authority: the wife occupying a respectable, yet clearly subordinate position in the household hierarchy. But later, following emigration westward and subsequent contact with the New World, the roles of the father and mother became subtly interchanged. The motivating ideal of Judaism was transformed from the spiritual to the physical sphere and the father's concern with transmitting the teachings of Judaism to his sons was replaced by the newly domineering mother's insistence on material success.

Alex wants to know "what have they done for me all their lives, but sacrifice?" (*PC* 25). But it is something beyond his understanding. For him, the parents "are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt" (*PC* 36). Alex is ashamed of his parents, especially about his

mother's dominance and father's lack of it. His overpossessive mother wants to know if he wants "to make a nice sis?" when he actually wants "to make a torrent or flood". Every part of his household brooks something to be ashamed of: "Shame and shame and shame and shame - every place I turn something else to be ashamed of" (PC 50). Alex is left shattered, a cripple, a sex maniac, who luckily is able to channel his frustrations by becoming a kind of artist, a tormented leader of a motley society. Overwhelming sense of unworthiness gets coupled with an equally overwhelming sense of detached love for his parents.

Alex believes that his father, a seller of insurance, is more comfortable with death than with life, just as later Alex himself seems at odds with his own attempts to advance human opportunity. There is genuine ambivalence in his relationship with his father. While detesting his father for being emasculated on all fronts, Alex knows that his own liberation is a means for liberating his father too. About the father, the son opines "What he had to offer I didn't want - and what I wanted he didn't have to offer" (PC 27). Alex tells his psychiatrist, "to this day our destinies remain scrambled together in my imagination" (PC 9). The father's

constipation and diarrhea seem to be expressions of suppressed anger and that takes us to the emotional and sexual centre of Portnoy's complaint.

Knowingly or unknowingly, Alex's parents appear to be close enough to the immigrant experience to cling on to certain old view points; yet they are in a stage of transition, having moved into the suburbs and also apparently withdrawn themselves from Jewish religious activities. Jack views the saga of Jewish people with great reverence. But the household atmosphere is far from the orthodox mould and the Portnoy's seem to have been influenced by American values. Material success is of paramount importance to them as it is to any American family. The parents are not in a position to teach Alex Jewish culture or religious values. The only active remnant of these is certain dietary ban on shellfish and hamburger meat, ferociously upheld by the mother.

The case against Sophie Portnoy is not an individual indictment but a generic class action. To prove this point, Roth presents the character of Mrs. Nimkin, another smothering mother. Alex fails to comprehend such Jewish characters. He wants to know, "What are they, after all, these Jewish women who raised us up as

children?”. Finally, Alex consoles himself by thinking of them as cows who have been given the “twin miracles of speech and mah-jongg”(PC 98). Alex only wants “to be left alone” and nothing more (PC 121).

Portnoy’s sense of responsibility for helping his father to continue learning is part of the Diaspora heritage. It need not be demeaning to either father or son, provided the father has dignity at home. But Alex’s counter feelings towards his father arise from another aspect of their transformed heritage. The father’s achievements outside the house fade out in comparison to the mother’s need for recognition of her accomplishments. In their Jewish value system, Alex is that ‘accomplishment’. Since he is the only son, it leaves him with the burden of being Sophie’s major project. He has to be good, brilliant and something more. A couple of generations earlier, in shtetl society, women earned much of the living, keeping store or sewing clothes while men engaged themselves in respectable study. But later, women no longer had outside occupations or even large families to diffuse their energy, and among men, study for its own sake, was no longer respected. Alex may be brilliant, but his brilliance will be acknowledged only if he becomes

somebody in the world and brings dividends, including children, back home. Implicit in Alex's complaint is resentment about the reduced role of the father created by the new Jewish need to gratify a home-centred mother. But Alex refuses to be the super achiever and feels emasculated. Roth lets the overwrought Alex sum up this trap in the burlesqued description of Ronald Nimkin committing suicide with a message for his mother: "Mrs. Blumenthal called. Please bring your mah-jongg rules to the game tonight. Ronald" (*PC* 120). At the same time, Alex resents his father having been reduced to nothing and made ridiculous. This was indeed a Jewish subject.

Although supposedly often absent, Father Portnoys' is a very sympathetic presence in the book. His sizable inadequacies simply appear to move the son to tears of deeper affection. Similarly Alex suffers from his inability to sever himself from family and childhood.

When Pumpkin's father behaves politely to Alex, he is unable to decide if it is due to his having been forewarned that the visitor is a Jew or his not knowing that truth. On this occasion the question exists only in Alex's head, sparked by guilt at having defied his parents. But his paranoia is not entirely baseless. He

knows that his Jewishness, when revealed, will evoke reaction. Later when Kay refuses to convert, the romance breaks off. Reaction cuts both ways.

Roth's Jews are not a people, culture, nation, tradition or any other noun of rabbinical piety. They are a tribe, which after its own primitive fashion, observes arbitrary taboos and performs strange rituals. As Alex sees it, the Kosher laws are as primitive and irrational as any aboriginal cult. His morality and immorality begins at the dining table. Here is the law, according to that Moses of Manhattan, the Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the city of New York:

Let the goyim sink their teeth into whatever, lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of the dirty earth, we will not contaminate our humanity thus. Let *them* (if you know who I mean) gorge themselves upon anything and everything that moves, no matter how odious and abject the animal, no matter how grotesque or shmutzig or dumb the creature in question happens to be. (PC 81)

The terrifying corollary is that if the "goys" eat everything, "they will do anything as well" (PC 81). But Alex, instead of eating anything, would rather eat "pussy" (PC 270).



Food - Jewish food-is one of the images with which maturity and sense of identity are developed. It has all the obvious sexual implications that one associates with oral gratification. Alex can understand his mother's rationale behind eating Chinese pork, but not lobster. The Chinese are poor in English, unintelligent and consider Jews as 'whites', may be even Anglo-Saxons. Naturally, Chinese waiters cannot intimidate them. But Chinese lobsters can be the cause of death and hence Sophie does not permit Alex to eat them. Alex finds it difficult to transgress these foolish dietary rules and taboos. He recalls masturbating in a bus from New York. He concludes that "may be the lobster is what did it"(PC 79).

Alex promises his mother that he will never eat food that is taboo to their culture. He then escapes to masturbate, or as he says to, "grab that battered battering ram to freedom, my adolescent cock"(PC 33). He is all too conscious that his sex organ is all that he could call his own; his throat and stomach belong to his mother. Jack forewarns Alex that if he transgresses Jewish dietary laws, his own precious name will never be among those "who are going to get to live until the following September"(PC 80).

As a boy, Alex looks for blood in his orgasm for he knows that he must be punished for his sin. He associates his mother's menstrual blood with the blood often found on the koshering board. Blood is unclean and must be salted out of the meat. It is bestial and grotesque on the one hand and 'life' on the other hand. Alex chooses a piece of liver, a blood soaked chunk of meat to make his penis erect and also to bring guilt and knowledge of his own transgression. The family then gets nourishment from the desanctified liver, which is eaten for dinner.

Food is the first medium of love and authority. Alex declares, "I am eight years old and chocolate pudding happens to get me hot"(PC 87). It is then understandable that the Jewish table is the battlefield on which Alex's bid for manhood is fought and lost. The toilet and the bed are also put to military use. But they are only secondary weapons and by the time Alex has understood their potential, the battle is over.

The politics of food and guilt at the table gives rise to a unique taboo: chazerai. It is not necessarily unkoshered food, unblessed or formally proscribed by the laws; neither hotdogs or cupcakes are mentioned by name in Leviticus. But chazerai is impure food. It is

cheap, processed, mass produced snack food, obtained outside the kitchen, behind one's mother's back. It ruins the appetite and Sophie fears that an adolescent who stops for a burger and French-fries at fourteen, will, at thirty, be stopping after work for a *shikse*. But for ultimate aphrodisiacal virtue, there is lobster, a terror beyond chazerai, an unambiguous threat to sanity and life. Sophie Portnoy's historic bout with lobster, paralysis and an attractive insurance agent named Doyle is text book hysteria:

I was throwing up so hard, got stiff just like this, like I was paralyzed and ask your father – Jack, tell him, tell him what you thought when you saw what happened to my fingers from the lobster Newburg. What lobster Newburg? That your friend Doyle forced down my throat. ( *PC* 92)

It is to prevent and protect sons from such madness that a Jewish mother must keep up her dietary vigilance. Naturally this education in taboo-by-diet is the responsibility of the mother, for she understands better how food, love, power and possession are arranged. The mother's purposes are plain and sinister. She wants nothing less than the annexation of her son; the full possession of and control over his manhood; and

will have it by stalling his growth at a level of oral dependence. So the mealtime is the most likely occasion for the protagonist to make that libidinal leap to the toilet. He dines at home and his mouth belongs to his mother. Only his penis belongs to him.

For any Jew, being one is a historical fact, which the surrounding world will never permit him to forget or ignore. This contention is a time honoured one. Yet Alex Portnoy refuses to accept it. He continues to protest and rebel, and the reader finds it difficult to refute his indictment of his mother. Her attitudes contribute in a large measure to the crystallization of his present problems and anxieties. The father too is impeached for his submissiveness and weakness, both to his employers and also to his wife. Nor is there a sincere effort on the part of the father to discover and assert his individuality. But he has a strong sense of his culture and tradition, although he fails miserably in articulating this commitment. He expects his son to fulfill his cherished ambitions and thereby be a Jew of the kind that he himself would have desired to be. But Alex is antagonistic towards the tyranny of the entire older generation. For him, Heshie's love affair with a

Gentile and Ronald Nimkin's suicide are results of parental despotism.

Alex is a symbol of the dilemma of a Jew as well as the human being caught between the desire to satisfy all of his lustful impulses, obeying the traditional code of his parents and people. American Jews can no longer claim the exceptionalism of an earlier generation or the nice balance of being both American and Jewish without enduring a great deal of anguish.

The blunt attack on American Jewish life executed in the novel with clinical precision may be viewed as a natural development of the tendency Roth establishes in his earlier novels. The attack is more direct and effected through the literary device of the patient-psychiatrist relationship. Portnoy believes that his guilt and fear are essential parts of the Jewish experience in America. Roth's generalization from the nuclear Portnoy family to the Jewish community at large is significant in assessing the role, in the novel, of the loss of *mentshlekhhkayt* (This is an ethic concerned with improving man's lot in this world and dedicated to the position that action is the path toward moral redemption). The novel reveals Roth's insight into human nature, his gift for satire, his authentic use of American Jewish dialect and a nefarious

sense of humour. The problems faced by the protagonists are a metaphor of the human condition in the last century. It is also considered to be an archetypal treatment of the post World War II Jewish – American dilemma. In the era following the war, when American Jews get better education and begin moving into middle class Gentile suburbs, they face the predicament of either embracing the ethnic heritage, thereby getting increasingly alienated from the American milieu, or assimilating themselves to Gentile ethos.

The novel could be considered as a comic monologue wherein the fury of memory, the omnivorous details of infantile rejections and resentments are captured with a fair level of perfection. A generation's psyche is anchored onto family but at the same time equally resentful of it. Calculated profanation of mother, father and even the most intimate offices of the body is seen as a treatment to the therapeutized members of the professional middle class to whom everything anatomical has become 'small talk' at the dinner table. The theme of Jewish family seem to be secularized by Roth to the last micrometer of stained undergarment while giving it an enumerative quality. The author also

disproves, with exactitude, the hypothesis that Israel is the safest bet for the wandering Jew.

The funny self-mockery becomes a hopelessly belated struggle to cut the Jewish umbilical cord. Self-indulgence is more of a childhood gesture of defiance against the smothering affection of his mother. His philandering bachelorhood and a deliberate refusal to provide grand children for the masterful mother are two other ways in which he undermines Sophie's authority. Each conquest of a Gentile girl seems to constitute a semiconscious protest against the symbol of his own arrested development, the "Yiddish mamma" to whom he will always remain a little boy in need of coddling.

Alex rightly or wrongly assumes that Jewish rituals have robbed him of his manhood. The fact is that, by openly violating those laws, he loses his virility, no less than if he had observed them. What the reader deciphers is an identical ambivalence towards Judaism – a judicious mixture of rebelliousness and admiration.

Alex's true role and vocation is that of a great comedian – a psychological victim who cannot be saved by either Jewishness or American assimilation. His suffering and comedy are those that of the modern man who seeks and finds plausible explanations for his plight,

but is unable to resolve it. His understanding is as limited as his sense of possibility; and he is forced to seek an appointment with psychiatrists for making sense of his experience. Setting aside moral pretensions, Roth treats sex with a non-worrying gusto and self-mockery. Personal anguish, social insatiability of an entire generation and universal social implications of this insatiability are all treated in the novel with candor .

The novel is shaped by successive conflicts between innocence and experience. The roles keep shifting. The protagonist exemplifies natural virtue and natural vice alternately. The Jewish mother has ample simple Jewish faith. Alex lives through the complexities of adolescence. Sophie's faith in his virtue can only intensify his awareness of his own complicated and necessary wickedness.

The passionate yearning for experience and the knowledge it yields could also be located as another theme of the novel. There is the experience of the Jews as well as the experience denied to Jews. Standards and possibilities shift, and Alex struggles to find out what it is like, what he is like, what the world is like and also what women are. He is an innocent desperate sinner yearning for experience.



As the Assistant Commissioner for Human Opportunities, he talks, but does not believe in the elimination of social problems. Limitations of his world, exemplified by limitations of his experience can be seen in the work. There may be a variety of partners, but monotony of endeavour appears to define the meaning of his condition. Possibilities exist only in adolescent fantasy. They are realized when wet dreams come to life. But then it creates images of sterility and monotony. The novel proves that perverse sex is emotionally unsound.

The novelist accuses Judaism for its timidness, lack of spine, lack of knowledge and generosity. The castrating mother is a logical by-product of a religion, itself castrated and emasculated. But the faults of Alex's parents are not exclusively Jewish faults. Insofar as Sophie Portnoy is Americanized, she understandably acts out the faults of an American mother. The American pursuit of success, the dislocation or dilution of meaningful traditions and values, the loyalty oaths to the country and parents, the stress put on the best schools, professions and tax evasions – all these and more represent a confluence of Jewish and American faults. It is his personal and intimate way to larger

American and even international issues that gives Roth's novel a comprehensive historical typicality.

Unlooked for subtlety and indecently overt and pre-emptive action is what certainly certifies the Americanness of "Portnoy's Complaint". The profound complaint, the element of old lingering protest against a whole way of living, the sounds of unlikely eloquence and balancing of cynical deflations are identifiable marks of Jewishness. Taken together, these strengths, which come to Roth from his linkage to the contemporary Jewish American literary school could very well account for the technical virtues and extra dimension in "Portnoy's Complaint".

Alex observably lacks a clear perception regarding the nature of his condition. He views the others in terms of his own needs and rejections. In fact, a persistent pattern of rejection in his reaction to the Jewish milieu can be deciphered. Alex exhibits a complete lack of enthusiasm for all the basic principles of Judaism and the attitudes that go with them. There is a quality of sincerity in his abandonment of Jewish beliefs which seem to belong to a norm stronger than the troubled hero himself.

Seen in the larger context of the historical development from oppression in Europe to freedom in America, the entire Portnoy family has been moulded by the greater forces that have shaped the destiny of the Jews in U.S.A. In Europe, there is misery and poverty; but the land of opportunities also exacts its price. Jack Portnoy reduces himself to a mere bread winner for the family. This is the trap that Alex wants to escape from; but he finds that he carries a burden of remorse and loneliness that may be the price he will have to pay for his freedom.

Liberation from Jewishness is a more complex process that Alex reckons with. Even the placid demeanour of Kay is foreign to Alex who is more used to the tempestuous relationship between people that he witnesses at home. The same Alex enjoys a sadistic pleasure when he breaks off an affair, especially if it is with a Gentile. Beginning with his mother, Alex develops an attitude of excessive dependence on female attentions and a consequent vulnerability towards women which is bound to stir resentment against them within him. Another complicated factor is that Alex puts romance together with social climbing. So, in his flight

from Jewishness, he falls in love with the background of Mausbys and Campbells.

The basic thrust of the novel is not anti-Semitism or an expression of a traditional Jewish self-hatred, but a yearning to undo the fate of birth. In spite of all his outpourings about guilt and feeling hampered by his background, Alex's daily life seems to have virtually no Jewish content at all. During his visit to Israel, he dutifully sees all the sights and immerses himself in the atmosphere of the homeland of the Jews, but has no sense of contact or identification with that land or its people. His trip rather seems to be his final and successful test of his own seriousness as an apostate. For him Israel seems to be a disappointment in the most vital sense when he discovers that he is impotent.

The novel seems to be a rebellion against middle class perspectives too. For Roth, Anglo Saxon Middle Western Protestant and East European migrant Jews are a part of the same tradition: the mobile, rising, rootless middle class – the bourgeoisie, the class that must keep tight control over its instincts in order to avoid chaos. Instead of being a local colourist or a believer in the aesthetic and ethical value of a presumably Jewish tradition, Roth provides an account of the axioms of the

middle class apparent in the fifties and sixties in America.

Roth prominently use sex as an instrument of revolt against middle class rigidity. Sex dissolves the tight uninvolvedness, the rigid defense of the integrity of loneliness, necessary for the bourgeoisie figure to make his way in an hostile world. The novel also apparently chronicles the necessary steps to begin breaking away from the middle class, outlining the contours of revolt.

Portnoy opts for a Jewish psychiatrist as he fears that no Gentile would ever understand him or his predicament. It also proves that he is unwilling to sever his ties with his Jewish past. But he traces all his troubles to his orthodox Jewish background. In opting for a Jewish psychoanalyst, Portnoy is only manifesting that deep down, he does not want to transcend his own background. He opts for an analyst, who, on account of his background, would not alienate him from what he pretends to hate, but without which, he feels, there would be nothing left of him or his life.

Alex proves or rather attempts to convince the psychoanalyst that all the cliches of a spoiled background and boyhood are valid. The family background and a couple of specific traumas are responsible for the wreck

that his life is. He suffers from physical and psychological problems. The undescended testicle is a physical problem; the mother's threat of desertion is a psychological problem.

Alex views himself as a victim. But his psychoanalyst concludes that his self-hatred forces him to hate all those who love him. The psychoanalyst does not diagnose a conscious effort on the part of his patient to unburden himself of his past. Alex, on the contrary, makes the most of it. He refuses to acknowledge his parents' love for him as that would entail an obligation to reciprocate. He can enjoy only 'tabooed sex', not permitted sex. His surrender to psychoanalysis is only to cleanse himself of the pricks of conscience he suffers due to his selfishness. Little does he realize that the Jewishness he attacks is also responsible for the intelligence on which he preens himself. The novel cannot be labeled anti-Semitic. What the book seems to speak for is a yearning to undo the fate of birth. Alex wants to be left alone, free from the claims of distinctiveness and the burdens of the past, so that out of nothingness he may create himself as a human being.

Jewish problems are not exclusively Jewish. The *goyim* are not one homogenous mass. Extra-ethnic

sexual adventure is an American problem. Self-mockery and invective are not exclusively Jewish arts. Their peculiar combination may constitute a Jewish syndrome, but it is the Jew's belief that it is their problem exclusively that makes it a Jewish subject.

"Portnoy law" demands perfection on the part of Alex. He knows that it is impossible for him to be that. Yet he does not feel any prick of conscience. He has fought against emotional castration by his mother, but at the same time feels ashamed that she has not succeeded. Here, he blames himself for her failure. Alex is so imbued with the idea that Jews are law abiding that he is shocked at what he sees in Israel. There, even the hoods are Jewish. In any case, finally he must stand trial for a crime for which he has already been punished in advance. He is a defendant, prosecutor and judge all rolled into one.

A wreck in Israel, Alex must return to the only world he knows: the Jewish homely world of ordinary conventions. It is the victory garden of his childhood, a time when he does not have the desires and insights of a man. He seeks that "endless childhood! Which [he] won't relinquish - or which won't relinquish [him]!" (PC 271). By the end, the man convicts himself for his guilt

according to laws which he had earlier rejected intellectually.

When the novel ends, it is clear to the reader that the protagonist has a long way to go before he can be cured. At the age of 33, Alex is still a masturbator at heart and is far from being able to attain a mature love relationship with any other human being. He may be bound to taboos that are diminishing and unmanning. The joke on Alex is that for him, the taboo turns out in the end to be as unmanning as the knowledge of it. In other words, the American Jew is doomed if he does and equally doomed if he does not respect his parents and their teachings.

What the novelist is aiming at is an autonomous individual who is free enough in spirit to acknowledge all aspects of his personality, including sexuality. The novel appears to deliver all the right confessions demanded of an analysis: confessions of undue bondage to the past, of secret humiliations and secret rages, of crimes against the family, of failures of the body and over compensations of the will.

Holding on and letting go are terrors because they are wishes and it is in the struggle between those wishes that the protagonist gets paralyzed. Every odd libidinal



enterprise of Alex is an attempt to satisfy the two wishes: to be a man and a baby at the same time.

The basic conflict in the novel is between American individualism and the Jewish family structure. Portnoy is obviously pulled between two opposites: the American individualism with its maxim of every man for himself on the one hand, and the Jewish moral law on the other hand, with its insistence on restraint, repression, renunciation and responsibility to others. Alex would like to enjoy the unrestrained sexual freedom that his age offers and he rebels against the moral and social authority that Sophie represents. But Alex does not realize that like his mother, he too is a creature of his culture and that his attempts to destroy the moral side of his nature is bound to fail. Neurosis results, not only from the repression of one's physical nature, but also from the denial of one's spiritual nature. Irving Howe observes that, "What seems really to be bothering Portnoy is a wish to sever his sexuality from his moral sensibilities, to cut it away from his self as historical creature" (Reconsidered 75).

What elevates the character of Alex far above the usual black comedy victim is his insistence on knowing why he is in such pain and his willingness and the ability

to examine every inflamed nerve ending. His upbringing is not exclusively Jewish. It is a characteristic carry over from a time in the twenties and thirties when many immigrants and first generation Americans see their sons as Columbuses, who would lead their families to security and status in the New World. The burden of those aspirations leaves many of those Columbuses with painful kinks. About the sensibility promoted by the novel, Pearl K. Bell observes in "Philip Roth: Sunny Boy or Lennie Bruce?": "Alex Portnoy's brazen confessions, as it seemed, emancipated Jewish intellectuals from their addiction to brainy ambition and granted them the long overdue freedom to do what they pleased with their bodies, not only their nimble minds" (161).

Younger Jews, weary or bored with all the talk about their heritage, took the novel as a signal for letting go of their past and perhaps themselves, a guide to swinging in good conscience or better yet, without troubling about conscience. Gentiles, on the other hand, were happy to view the wave of post Holocaust pro-Semitism slowly evaporating. No longer would they need to listen to all that talk about Jewish morality, endurance, Jewish wisdom and Jewish families.

Thus it could be observed that *Portnoy's Complaint* is a passionate, honest and comprehensive portrait of a man and his generation in anguish. Roth presents that dilemma with the fullest range of its despair, not only for all that he has suffered so far, but also for all that he and Judaism is to suffer in future America. The net result is not merely the identity crisis of a single individual, but the tragic awakening of an entire generation in history.

# Conclusion

K.P. Nanda Kumar “The self in the making : A study of jewish sensibility in the early fiction of Philip Roth ” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2003

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Jewish fiction in America is characterized by the thrust and trust in the strong, instinctive impulses of the heart. It is also characterized by its moral rectitude that is flexible and searching, but firmly centred too. The writers are not without definite concepts of right and wrong. Jewish American writers view life's losers and victims with deep compassion. But this is done with a firmness and intelligence that prevents pity from slipping into sentimentality.

Elie Wiesel describes the literature of American Jews as rich and abundant, reflecting their anguish and their joy, real or imaginary:

Some communicate a thirst for understanding, others yearn for justice. Some see themselves as creators on the level of consciousness, others draw from their experiences. Poets with an elusive vision, writers of fiction with a burning message: without them, American Literature would not be what it aspires to be: the humanizing element in the course of history.

The critical and popular success of American - Jewish writers belonging to the fifties and the sixties did much to affirm the presence of Jews in American literature. Acculturation of second - generation Jews has resulted in American Jewish literature becoming more an expression of individual talent than of ethnicity. Themes like marginality and identity are getting sidelined. American Jewish authors have chosen to redefine and reaffirm their traditional connections with their Jewish heritage.

Theodore Solotaroff refuses to believe that Philip Roth is an anti-Semite or self-hater. He recommends that Roth's attack "against arrogance, smugness, finagling, and acquisitiveness, should not obscure the perfectly obvious fact that he does so flying a traditional Jewish banner of sentiment and humanness and personal responsibility - all of which makes the accusation have some further melancholy implications" (Moralists 15). He is basically an 'insider' in the American Jewish community and the 'insider's view' has certainly affected his sense of life more than he appears to allow, especially with respect to his almost automatic assumption that no one is quite human who does not feel the obligations of passionate, demanding, selfish-

love of the kind he regularly ascribes to Jewish families. Roth has succeeded in portraying with overwhelmingly convincing reality the Jewish community.

As Louis Harp says, "Roth does not accept characteristic Jewish values as fundamental to his outlook" (136). Roth does not seem to have large associations with his Jewishness, which he regards as simply a fact of life. But that does not mean an end of Jewish awareness for Roth, for "there were reminders constantly that one was a Jew and that there were goyim out there". What was finally left, he believes", was a psychology, not a culture and not a history in its totality". But Roth believes that he inherited a "psychology without a content, or with only the remains of a content" (136).

Philip Roth's struggle with American culture has developed along two fronts, one religious and the other artistic. Of the two, the former is more important. It calls upon the artist to confront American society. This, Roth feels, is a confrontation that is essential to the writing of fiction and to the writer of fiction. Roth has declared several times that as a writer and thinker, his arena of interests is not Jewish. Roth's works like *When She Was Good* (1967) *Our Gang* (1971) and *The Great*

*American Novel* (1973) are a few typical examples of his non-Jewish publications. He is basically a humanist whose concerns are moral and social. His artistic vision, though rooted in the particularities of Jewish life, extend outward to the common humanity.

Once having rejected the idea of exceptionalism, Roth can see that the Jews experience the same dislocations as other middle class Americans, who perceive only dimly that many of their basic values are being called into question. Roth has repeatedly insisted that he writes about Jews and their behaviour because that is what he knows best. In the process he has uncovered some interesting circumstances in Jewish history. Like Jewish families, American families too have become matriarchal on account of the father trying to be successful. In the mad rush for material success, the father loses grip over the family and is questioned by one and all, including his wife. The pressure is then on the second generation, especially the son, who also finds himself questioning the adequacy of the father.

Ultimately, all of Roth's stories are about the conversion of the Jews. Unfortunately, Roth formulates Jewish sensibility and tradition in a vague manner. Faith and martyrdom, affirmation of life and acceptance of



suffering are part of Jewish sensibility. Roth uses these concepts symbolically. None of his novels convey the feeling that he views them literally. Neither does he want to be taken so.

The protagonists may be out of tune with themselves, family and society. Yet, the Jewishness, imbibed from the same family with which they are at loggerheads and the commitment to society saves them from total damnation.

The causes for the confrontation between the protagonists of Roth's novels –representatives of second generation Jews and their earlier generation can be summarized into four:1) autocratic parents and unyielding children 2) conservative parents disobeyed by progressive children 3) Role reversal of father and mother and 4) Jewish ethics at loggerheads with American materialism. The ultimate solution to all these problems lie in the return to the Jewish family and consequent strengthening of Jewish sensibility.

Louis Harp states in the same article that Roth's depiction of Jewish characters and of a Jewish milieu, even if it is deprived and diminished by its call upon a residue of a rich Jewish culture, "is nevertheless an ethnic phenomenon" (136). Relics of Judaism, Hebrew

and social custom can be detected in his work. The "invented" Jew of Roth is a species of assimilated Jew who may himself retain traits or turns of mind inherited from a family closer to fuller ethnicity. Very often the Jewishness will be minimal and consists only in an awareness of being regarded by others as a Jew.

Roth's concerns are not exclusively Jewish. Many of them are universal. But Roth cannot be blamed for presenting them as Jewish because his first stories were written out of facts and people he knew, places he visited and things viewed with a Jewish sensibility. Even after broadening his views and becoming more cosmopolitan in outlook, Philip Roth continues returning to Jewish characters and situations for these were so deeply ingrained in him. Roth continues to exhibit the psychology of one who is ethnically Jewish.

There is in Rothian literature a happy blending of personal and artistic themes, resulting in an ever renewing literary originality. All his works are magnifying glasses through which the author examines his life as an American writer who cannot ignore the fact that he is a Jew. Each novel dramatizes its raw material in a way that achieves a highly personal yet universal pathos about man as a rebel and outcast who

must suffer for his cultural resistance and transgressive authenticity. Roth's depiction of second generation Jewish Americans may be seen as a representation of a more generalized late twentieth century alienation. But it cannot be denied that Roth's narratives derive their universal power from their ethnic and socio-cultural specificity. Yet Philip Roth is not a hyphenated, Jewish American writer. He is a Jewish American writer whose novels reveal a tension between subcultural and mainstream experiences and it is this tension that constitutes the core of each of his novels, beginning with *Goodbye, Columbus* and ending with *The Dying Animal*.

Roth's commitment to social realism, accompanied by a willingness to confront the Jewish community is crystal clear. The confrontation between the hero and society, as well as between private and public realms is the confrontation that is central to the fiction of Philip Roth. His artistic intentions are moralistic, method realistic and subject, the self in the making.

The crisis depicted in Roth's fiction are moral. Characterization may begin with the question of identity and selfhood. But later they assume broader significance, transcending the limits of the characters'

narrow circle to permeate the whole of society. He realizes belatedly that he has been victimized by false ideals and self deceptions grounded in the society of which he is a part.

From the critical point of view, it is not surprising that Roth refers to authors like Tolstoy, Conrad, Doestoevski, Gogol and Henry James in his works. Roth's fiction is essentially the fiction of manners and moral realism like that of the novelists referred to in his works. The burdens of responsibility, the clash between the actual world and the invented reality that emerges out of what one sees and feels, the moral difficulties of letting go the responsibilities - all these are concerns that Roth has in common with European and American novelists of manners and morals.

Roth's fiction, like that of Henry James, not only treats moral issues, but has the purpose of elevating and liberating the reader's social and moral consciousness through realistic examination of man's condition. A strong social and moral consciousness, coupled with a readily evident persuasion toward realism earns for Philip Roth a unique position among American authors. Roth scales the moral and aesthetic heights in a

novel using the ladder of social observation. He is a social realist who does not yield to the romantic impulse.

Despite the diversity of Roth's fiction, despite the variety of themes, values and characters that emerge from his novels and short stories, a discerning eye can observe an abiding faith beneath Roth's apparent pessimism. Roth has demonstrated a willingness to explore the limits of his artistic creed with a deeply felt concern for man and society, a concern that is detectable beneath his realistic novels and his most vitriolic satire.

Philip Roth is basically a writer of contemporary Jewish life who writes with special colour, freshness and honesty. He is in touch with both the Jewish – American scene and with himself. The energy and colour of his stories flow in from direct connections to his wit, feelings and observations. There is an aggressive frankness about his Jewish experience. Philip Roth deals with situations and characters without piety, apology or vindictiveness. The reports are candid, combining surface observations with a sense of depth.

Roth exhibits a mental affinity with his characters. He feels and thinks with his characters' Jewishness. In the process he uses the thick concreteness of Jewish

moral experience to get at the dilemmas and decisions of the heart. Writing from the heart, Philip Roth illuminates, extends and assess the fading meaning of being a Jew and in the process leads the readers back to the heart, its trials and moral potency. Thus, Roth shares with Bellow and Malamud the preoccupation with griefs as well as the potentialities of the Jewish heart. Roth brings into his fiction what the Jew carries and preserves within the larger experience of being an American.

Roth's stories are strongly and carefully plotted. He confronts human situation as human beings see and live it. In the process, he makes moral sense out of it. At the same time, Philip Roth also questions assumptions of Jewish exceptionalism. Right from the outset, Roth had been perturbed by the theory of exceptionalism.

Following the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, the Jewish community accused Roth for indulging in 'self-hatred,' little realizing that this self-hatred was a honest critique by the author of an American society that had lost its moorings. The only shocking element was that Roth could not find a plausible reason for exempting Jews. He included them, resulting in unavoidable furore.

Roth's heroes desire to be 'centre-fielders', autonomous individuals free enough in spirit to acknowledge all aspects of their personality. They are engaged in the quest for identity. His works are essentially exposures of disparity in American life between apparent appearance and deeper reality. He has succeeded in creating out of the experiences of the modern American Jew, a portrait of American experience itself. He is deeply responsive to the sense of alienation at the heart of the American crisis. Roth is not unaware of the traditional bonds securing Jewish family life. He uses these bonds for their dramatic and symbolic values. He seems to be more interested in solving the American crisis than the Jewish one. He is trying to adapt and blend Jewish warmth, loyalty, moral purpose and faith to the serving of American individualism. He wants to advance beyond alienation to some kind of affirmation. Roth seems to be using the Jewish dilemma for solving the current American crisis. What he is aiming at is the creation of a new individual.

Roth is finding ways and means to sustain and perpetuate Jewish vision of man and society in liberal America. His natural subject is the self-conscious Jew—the new middle class-whose identity, though never in

doubt, is a problem to himself. Roth has always exhibited an ability to stand moral isolation. His characters are conscious of their personal anxieties on account of being Jewish ; the Jewish problems engage their minds. These problems create intense uncertainty in their personal lives. In story after story, in the contrasting voices of his long novels and short stories, in his derisions, satires, lampoons, Roth calls attention to the self - declared aloofness of his fictional intelligence, emphasizing odd facts in people's behaviour.

According to Philip Roth, to be Jewish, is to resent. Roth continues to be glued to the family romance. He depends on an emancipated Jewish audience as much as he depends on Jews for his best material. Roth's greatest success lies in locating the bruised, angry, unassimilated Jewish individual's self beneath the canopy of Jewishness.

Imprisonment and liberation are metaphors in Roth's fiction. Characters refuse to acknowledge each others' freedom to be individuals. This tendency can be seen at the centre of every important relationship in Roth's fiction. His works prove that his opinion of non-Jewish Americans, especial small town WASPS unredeemed by patrician blood is hardly better than his



opinion of Jews. They are all disgusting to him and his works are devoted to exploring that disgust.

The reasons for Philip Roth fracturing and restructuring the traditional novel are literary- critical as well as psychological. The discerning reader can detect autobiographical elements in the creation of Roth's fictional characters. Almost all his protagonists are autobiographical with little or no ties to the Jewish community, yet with a sense of Jewishness which is a vexing personal concern. The autobiographical elements have been cleverly concealed. Roth would rather prefer maintaining a dialectical relationship between his characters and himself than bestowing independent destinies on his fictional protagonists. He aims at making this relationship the central axis of his fiction.

The middle class Jews about whom Roth writes are distinguished by their Americanism rather than their Jewishness. The problems Roth discusses are not exclusively Jewish. He seems to be least bothered about the problems of American Jewry: its struggles to maintain or transmit or define its moral values, its cultural creativeness, its scholarship, its relationship with Jewish life in other lands etc. Jews may be a special

class in America, but their problems are not exclusively Jewish.

At the same time it will be overstating a point to deny his relationship with Jewish tradition. Making skillful symbolic use of Jewish tradition, Roth uses tradition, custom and language in all his stories. All of Roth's stories are about the 'conversion' of the Jews. Their problems are viewed with a Jewish sensibility by Roth.

Roth's fictional canvas has the domesticated, personal family as its framework. The solid Jewish virtues go to the very roots of Roth's fiction. The conventions and constraints of lower middle class Jewish family life maintain their strong imperative. Assaults on the faith of the forefathers continue to leave behind a heavy sense of guilt and betrayal. A savage superego has always been at work in Roth's fiction. The inadequate and imperfect self is lashed by the super-ego which often assumes the form of a woman or judgemental Jewish elder - a face more often than not twisted up in scorn and disgust at the sight of those ravenous Rothian sons in their freedom frenzy. Going down memory Lane, Philip Roth looks back on himself in youth:

I was a good, responsible, well-behaved boy controlled (rather willingly) by the social regulations of the self-conscious and orderly lower middle class neighbourhood where I had been raised, and mildly constrained still by the taboos that had filtered down to me, in attenuated form, from the religious orthodoxy of my immigrant grandparents. (*RMAO* 3-4)

The problems of American Jewry have always been Roth's familiar territory. As a writer with special colour, freshness and honesty, Roth has had to face innumerable problems. But basically Philip Roth is a writer who is in touch with both the American Jewish scenario and also with himself. Yet he has been falsely accused of creating a fear psychosis among Jews, for highlighting shortcomings that are not exclusively Jewish and for presenting Jews in bad light when he could have easily opted for a cosmopolitan colour to his contributions.

Jewish families in America feel the break with Jewish traditions sharply. Second generation American Jewish writers have the same sense of loss as most of the serious American writers, but perhaps their sense of loss is sharper because they have been cut off from their

past within one or two generations. The children of Jewish immigrants and perhaps even of first-generation American Jewish parents find their relationships predicated on parental authority. In course of time, as a result of Americanism impinging on their Jewishness, the youngsters start questioning all authority.

It is in such a background that Roth views his Jewish past. Though Roth is deeply responsive to the sense of alienation at the heart of the American crisis, he is desirous of advancing beyond alienation to some kind of affirmation. He is interested in creating a new individual rather than in conserving old communal values. Roth is trying to assimilate past European experience to present American literature.

Roth's Jewish community retains its special accents like religiousness, the Victorian belief in the natural obligations of family love, acute awareness of social position and class symbol. But for the most part, these qualities distinguish it from the rest of America only in intensity. In short, Roth's Jewish characters are mainly dramatic examples of what he believes Americans in general are.

The Jew is an individual with a characteristic historical sense, an ethical code of religious significance, a sense of commitment to family and a steadfast sense of community. But very often their sense of goodness clashes with the community's irresistible fascination for Americanization. Jews are characterized by a love for recollection and a kind of nostalgia - an unusual clinging to the memory of the past. This results in the individual reflecting upon his childhood as well as the community reliving its past glory and the long history of suffering and persistence.

The parents' way of living and long history of suffering intensifies the second generations' agony when, in spite of nostalgic recollections, they are unable to resist fascination for assimilation. The resultant agony adds to the basic mental torture already existing due to the intellectual, sexual and spiritual conflicts already in their minds.

Roth's career as a writer has been a full one. The events that loom large in his career are central to his life as well. The privacy he guards is that of a writer whose life has been bound to words, his own and the words of others. His is a very cloistered privacy. Philip Roth maintains a friendly relationship with Richard Stein, the

Jewish contemporary Aharon Appelfeld, characterized in "Operation Shylock" and the Czech novelist Milan Kundera. Roth has championed the cause of East European anti-communist writers and has edited the Series Writers from the Other Europe for Penguin/Viking Books. He publishes a book, once in two years, his latest being *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Dying Animal* (2001). Roth has boldly indulged in daring reinventions of other writers, including Franz Kafka and Anne Frank (*Zuckerman Bound*). All these mark Philip Roth as the most resolutely bookish of twenty first century major contemporary writers with promise of better things to come undoubtedly.

Justifying himself for his literary views, Philip Roth has stated that racial prejudice need not necessarily lead to annihilation as the Germans did to Jews. He believes that between "Prejudice and persecution there is usually, in civilized life, a barrier constructed by the individual's conviction and fears, and the community's laws, ideals and values" (Jews 450). Toeing a controversial stance, Philip Roth accuses the Nazis as well as the Jews for this barrier collapsing in Hitler's Germany. He believes that apart from anti-Semitic misconceptions of Germans, the

intolerability of Jews was also equally responsible for the barrier crumbling.

Roth believes that such a barrier between prejudice and persecution does exist in U.S.A. Gentiles and Semites should join hands in strengthening it. And as part of this strengthening process, Jews ought to get rid of the habit of tolerating persecution that has seeped into the Jewish sensibility - the adaptability, the patience, the resignation, the mute silence, the self-denial - with an adamant, vociferous "I refuse" attitude. In other words, the solution is not in forcing Gentiles to love Jews, but making it inevitable and unavoidable.

But Roth is practical minded enough to realize that there will be Gentiles who will continue seeing red as long as Jews continue to call and treat themselves Jews. Philip Roth refuses to believe that a time will come when Jews will be accepted by Christians:

But if some Jews are dreaming of a time when they will be accepted by Christians or Christians accept one another. - if this is why certain Jewish writers should be silent - it may be that they are dreaming of a time that cannot be, and of a condition that does not exist, this side of one's dreams. Perhaps even the Christians don't accept one another as they are

imagined to in that world from which Jews may believe themselves excluded solely because they are Jews. Nor are the Christians going to feel toward Jews what one Jew may feel toward another. (Jews 451)

According to Irving Howe. Roth's stories come from a thin personal culture. It is this culture that releases as well as control his creative energies. But Roth has chosen to tear himself away from that tradition and hence, Howe fears that the Jewish tradition does not nourish his imagination as it should. Howe feels that it is this situation that has given "that tone of resentment, that free floating contempt and animus, which begins to appear in Roth's early stories and grows more noticeable in his later work. Unfocused hostility often derives from unexamined depression" (Reconsidered 73). Irving Howe has detected this hostility in all of Roth's early fiction.

But Howe and Deer feel that "Roth and his fellow writers have achieved at least popular success in trying to create out of the experiences of the modern American Jew a portrait of American experience itself" (353-354) Jewishness is an extremely marketable commodity. America is basically a nation of outsiders and the



Americans have much to learn from the Wandering Jew. The Jewish and Yiddish tradition embody simple direct action based on faith in communal values and hence may serve as a basis for a new anti-crisis literature. Modern American - Jewish writers, with their weak sense of belonging but strong sense of their upbringing in waterproof airtight Jewish milieu, have found the myths, rituals and conventions of the Jewish family and religion to be a source of effective metaphors.

Studying the criticism that was directed against him, Roth felt that the critics were unnecessarily confusing the purpose of the writer with that of a public relations man. He admits that he is an informer, but all that he has told the Gentiles is that "the perils of human nature afflict the members of our minority" (Jews 450). As a social realist, Philip Roth studies human character and heroic potential as it developed in the communal life of America. Roth's protagonists are his answer to his critics. They are men yearning to discover themselves by swimming into dangerous waters beyond social and familial strictures. They should not be studied as Jews in an ideological, traditional or communal sense.

Many of Roth's Jewish contemporaries had sensed in his earlier works a kinship closer than mere American

brotherhood. In "Philip Roth Then and Now", Ruth Wisse describes Roth's voice as distinctive:

He was the first literary voice that seemed to speak for our bunch, our group, our set, the particular gang of adolescents with whom I shared a mutual affection and an idea of what we stood against ..... a sensibility so familiar that it seemed to have come from our own midst, and in a sparkle of language ..... attractive to us .... our affection for Philip Roth was part of the tenderness we felt for ourselves. (56)

As stated elsewhere, the fictional canon of Philip Roth extends from *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959) to *The Dying Animal* (2001). Roth's works challenge the concept of the unique, autonomous self-conscious individual forming the centre of the realm of meaning. In fact, a close reading of the novels reveal the irrelevancy of this concept.

Roth has positioned his subjects in such a way that they demand a multi-pronged textual strategy of interpretation. His works are experimental in nature with prominent multivalent characteristics. An exclusively empirical and conventional reading of Roth's discursivity would be incompatible with the tenor, especially of Roth's early fiction.

Roth has made abundant use of various literary devices for presenting Jewish sensibility. These include psychoanalysis, alienation, erotic – fixation, pornography, urban violence, familial crisis and Jewish history. The different devices are sharpened or blunted as the occasion demands. Hermione Lee has divided Roth's literary evolution into three stages. The first stage involves Roth transcending the parochial Jewish cultural ghetto to wider spaces of the world. Later Roth grows up with the rest of America and becomes a skeptic of sorts. Thirdly, and most importantly, Roth's fictional strategies reject anecdotal realism and opts for confessionals, psychic fantasies and objectified autobiographies. Naturally, the twenty first century student of literature cannot expect Roth to exercise authorial authority the way the realist writers of the nineteenth century did.

Of Roth's first four fictional contributions, the first, a novella and four short stories out of five, as well as the second and fourth novels have been taken up for evaluation of Jewish sensibility. His third novel, *When She Was Good*, published in 1967, does not deal with Judaism or Jewishness. Similarly, the fourth short story of "Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories", "You

Can't Tell a Man By The Song He Sings" has also been omitted for its un-Jewish setting.

In all the works taken up for study in this thesis, the institution of family is at conflict with the self. The self's response to this conflict makes or unmakes it. Ultimately, the self realizes that the family and its constituents scorned till then is the biggest and most potent determinant in the shaping of the character's sensibility.

The first chapter is an introduction that gives a perspective on Roth's position in American literature as well as the literary world's response to the genre, American Jewish literature and a few of its notable stalwarts including Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. The criticism targeted at Roth and his retort have been referred to in that chapter. The accusations directed against him for being an informer, a Gentile spy and betrayer, have, in no way altered his views about writing fiction. Roth continues in the same vein even now, though there seems to be a considerable non - Jewish aura for his post-seventy novels.

The second chapter, a general one, deals with Roth's handling of Jewish sensibility. Roth attained notoriety for his opinion that much of the Jews problems

were of their own making. Refusing to toe the oft-repeated claim that the Jews are the Chosen People, Roth wanted the Jews to emerge out of their shells and respond to problems with an un-Jewish sensibility.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters are exclusively thematic chapters. While for Neil Klugman, the grand finale consists of bidding adieu to Americanism represented by the Patimkins and consequent safe return to his family on Jewish New Year Day, Gabe Wallach of *Letting Go* realizes belatedly the potency of family life and makes amends accordingly. Portnoy, of *Portnoy's Complaint* finds himself an utter failure in his macho adventures in America, forsakes his family, goes to Israel, is overpowered there and returns to America, the country where he was born and brought up and where his family is. For none of these characters is there an escape from the family. Similar is the case of the characters in the four short stories. The main characters, Ozzie Freedman (The "Conversion of the Jews"). Sergeant Nathan Marx ("Defender of the Faith") Epstein ("Epstein") and Eli Peck ("Eli, the Fanatic") return to Jewishness. **Jewishness is synonymous with family life. The home is the biggest synagogue in the life of a Jew.**

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