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INTRODUCTION

Almost from the moment he burst into literary prominence, with the 1959 publication of his first book *Goodbye, Columbus*, Philip Roth has been the center of a critical controversy. Unfortunately, this controversy has, for the most part, been anything but scholarly in the usual sense of the word. Many critics, primarily conservative Jewish ones, have attacked Roth for what they feel is his negative portrayal of Jews. He has been labeled a "poet of humiliation," a reviler and ridiculer of Jews, and a producer of "self-hate" literature. Other critics, like Rabbi Dan Isaac, have attempted to rebut Roth's detractors with the result that both sides of the critical issue have shown a marked tendency to interpret his work in terms of its impact on contemporary Judaism.

While it is true that the majority of Roth's books deal with the problems of Jews in modern American society—one notable exception being *When She Was Good*, a novel set in the midwest with all gentile characters—his work is of sufficient breadth to transcend the single categorization of "Jewish" writing. Critics like Irving and Harriet Deer, Charles I. Glicksberg and Lois G. Gordon have recognized the Jewish elements in Roth's fiction but view this ethnic emphasis as part of the author's attempt to create a larger "portrait of American experience" and as his effort
at dealing with "archetypal and enduring,"⁶ "significant and universal"⁷ themes of literature.

As Glicksberg points out, one of these "archetypal" themes is the "quest for identity"⁸; a search which, as the text below will illustrate, becomes not only a complicated psychological struggle for Roth's fictive creations, but very nearly an unsolvable problem as well.

A considerable number of critics, in addition to Glicksberg, have commented on the self-identity theme in Roth's work. Theodore Solotaroff's statement that Roth's characters are trying to discover their "true identity,"⁹ Alfred Kazin's assertion that Roth's achievement "is to locate the bruised and angry and unassimilated self,"¹⁰ and Robert Detweiler's depiction of the Roth protagonists as "schlemiels" fighting for a "Jewish identity"¹¹ are representative of the general critical attitude toward this topic.

What the critics have not done, and it is on this point that the present work will depart from prior criticism, is treat the theme of self-identity in Roth's books as a central, pervasive one. In contrast to previous scholarship, then, the scope of this thesis will be restricted solely to the discussion of this theme.

In addition to being thematically concerned with the single subject of self-identity, the range of this paper is also designed to achieve a comprehensive view of the thesis topic as it is revealed in four of Philip Roth's
books. The books to be included in this analysis are: *Goodbye, Columbus, Letting Go, When She Was Good*, and *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Roth has published four other books of fiction besides the ones mentioned above, but since they are essentially departures from the main body of his creative output and do not bear a significant relationship to the subject at hand, they will be excluded from this work. One of these books, *Our Gang*, is a political satire with the presidency of Richard Nixon as its target; another book, *The Great American Novel*, is, as Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr. has shown, Roth's contribution to "standard" American humor of the Southwestern "tall-tale" variety; the third book to be excluded is *The Breast*, a novella of sexual fantasy; and the fourth work is *My Life As A Man*, a story of how a terrible marriage affects a young writer.

Since the subject of this paper will focus on the problem of self-identity as it pertains to the characters in Roth's early fiction, it is necessary to define this term as it will be used throughout the thesis. For the purpose of the analysis to follow, self-identity will refer to that state of mind wherein an individual is cognizant of his goals, motives, and actions and is aware of the reasons behind his mental and physical motivations; whether they stem from a racial, societal, or familial source.

To avoid monotony and for the sake of variation, the single word "identity" and the terms "self-knowledge", "self-
awareness", and "individualism" will be used as interchangeable approximations for self-identity where they are appropriate in the text. The term "self-realization", indicating the state in which the individual attains identity and fulfills the needs and desires which constitute that identity, will be used in the discussions of certain books where it is important to the thesis topic.

Concerning the text itself, the method of presentation will be chronological and in the following order: Goodbye, Columbus, first published in 1959; Letting Go, 1962; When She Was Good, 1967; and Portnoy's Complaint, 1969.

The critical approach to each book will be that of character analysis. In each analysis, the initial concern will be to show that there is textual evidence for the assertion that the specific characters have a problem of identity and that the topic is sufficiently valid for critical exploration. From this base the analysis will turn to the discussion of the reason, or reasons, why the individual characters are having a problem, or crisis of identity, e.g., the assimilation of the Jew into American society, parental interference ("momism"), interpersonal relationships, the conflict of values between the individual and society, sexuality, and racial and/or religious heritage.

In both the identification and development portions of the character analyses, the primary supporting evidence for the thesis subject will come from the texts of Roth's
works themselves; relevant scholarship on the topic will be used in a secondary, supportive or contrastive role only.
Philip Roth's first book, \textit{Goodbye, Columbus}, includes five short stories and the novella, "Goodbye, Columbus," from whence came the book title. From among these six fictional pieces, three stories, "Eli, the Fanatic," "Defender of the Faith," and "Goodbye, Columbus," are especially useful in the consideration of the problem of self-identity in Roth's work. As will be shown in this chapter, each of the central protagonists in these stories, Eli Peck, Sergeant Nathan Marx, and Neil Klugman, is a man struggling to find out who he is as an individual in relation to the individuals and society that constitute the world in which he must live and function.

On the surface, narrative level, Neil Klugman's story, in "Goodbye, Columbus," is the age-old one of poor, young boy meets rich, young girl; they fall in love but are finally separated by the unbridgeable gap between their economic and class backgrounds. Philip Roth is not, however, a writer of old-fashioned, shallow love stories, and Neil's bitter-sweet love affair with Brenda Patimkin not only encompasses the difficulty of Jewish assimilation into American society and the conflict of values between economic classes, but also becomes the catalyst for Neil's struggling attempt at self-identification.

That Neil is having trouble determining who he is
is not fully revealed until the final paragraphs of "Goodbye, Columbus," but there are indications earlier in the story that make this revelation a not totally unexpected one. While musing about his job at the Newark Public Library one day, Neil recognizes that he is not altogether sure of his reasons for being there. "I had strange fellows at the library," he thinks, "and, in truth, there were many hours when I never quite knew how I'd gotten there or why I stayed" (GC, p. 23). A little later in the story, Neil and Brenda, talking about Neil's family life, exchange the following dialogue, again reflecting a lack of self-awareness on Neil's part, when Brenda asks him why he lives with his aunt and uncle:

"They're not my parents."

"They're better?"

"No. Worse. I don't know why I stay with them."

(GC, p. 35).

Some pages further into the narrative, Neil's identity begins to fuse with Brenda's and she remarks: "You know... you look like me. Except bigger" (GC, p. 50). Feeling the encroachment on his personality which her words indicate, Neil begins, although his thoughts only interpret what Brenda had said, to analyze what is happening to him. "She meant, I was sure," Neil tells himself, "that I was somehow beginning to look the way she wanted me to. Like herself" (GC, p. 50).

By the time Big Ron Patimkin, Brenda's brother, is
to be married—the marriage ceremony itself foreshadowing both the material advantages and spiritual disadvantages that would accrue to Neil should he marry into the Patimkin "Sink" family—Neil seriously questions why he loves Brenda but is not yet ready to stick the "scalpels" of awareness too deeply into himself (GC, p. 68).

At the conclusion of the novella, after their affair has ended, ostensibly because Mrs. Patimkin found the diaphragm Brenda had "hidden" in her personal affects, Neil makes some effort, though unsuccessfully, to come to terms with himself.

From the light of the lamp on the path behind me
I could see my reflection in the glass front 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...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...to get behind that image of me...then my gaze pushed through it....I did not look very much longer....I was back in plenty of time for work (GC, pp. 96-97).

It seems fairly obvious that Neil is having an iden-
tity crisis. It also seems obvious that, at the conclusion of the novella, he is not yet willing to make the painful effort to solve that crisis. He is, as Norman Leer has suggested, escaping larger "questions of value and meaning" by "the avoidance of confrontation" with himself.¹⁴

If it was not Roth's intention, as was maintained earlier, to write a simple love story then Neil's identity problem must involve more than the usual difficulties a young man would have in a terminal love affair.

There seem to be at least two major, and interrelated, reasons why Neil finds himself in a crisis of identity. One reason for the problem, as Irving and Harriet Deer propose, is that Neil is torn between his own values and the "phoney [sic] standards" of the Patimkin success story,¹⁵ and the second reason, one which Allen Guttmann sees in much of Roth's fiction, is the problem of Jewish assimilation into American society.¹⁶ The interrelatedness of the values and assimilation conflicts that occur in Neil is expressed, perhaps a bit too simplistically, by Rabbi Dan Isaac's opinion that Neil's "only real antagonist" is "the vulgar materialism of middle class Jewish life."¹⁷

Essentially, then, Neil's crisis can be seen as the result of a values schism in which he finds himself trapped between two sets of standards: those of traditional Judaism as opposed to the new, assimilated American-Jewish
life, and those of non-materialism as opposed to materialism.

Neil's economic background is lower-middle class, and there are a number of indications that he has not been unduly influenced by materialism. His lack of interest in money, his less-than-new car, and his unconcern with job advancement at the library—"the library wasn't going to be my life," he thinks at one point (GC, p. 43)—all seem to add up to a disregard for middle class, material comfort.

Juxtaposed to Neil's non-material background is the ultra-materialistic success story of the Patimkin family. These Brobdingnagians of the American upper-middle class help create Neil's problem of identity for it is the Patimkin wealth, symbolized in Neil's hyperbolic vision of their fruit-growing refrigerator and sporting goods tree (GC, p. 31), that tempts him into desiring something he had apparently not considered as valuable before.

The influence of this potential, materialistic "promised land" is not unnoticed by Neil. At one juncture he admits that he has been "partially wooed and won on Patimkin fruit" (GC, p. 55), and after viewing a group of "immortal" upper-middle class housewife "goddesses," Neil, as mentioned earlier, questions his real motives for loving Brenda (GC, p. 68).

In the end, of course, Neil rejects this often gross materialistic Patimkin world, as foreshadowed in his pro-
phetic dream of a lost island paradise (GC, p. 53); but given his indifference to the life he leads away from the Patimkin's and his unwillingness to probe his own psyche, Neil seems destined to remain a "static hero." 18 He seems locked into a stationary mental attitude that makes him a man who knows who he is not and what he does not want, but one that is also unable or unwilling to find out who he is or what he wants.

Despite previous scholarly reactions, or scholarly furors, Neil Klugman's struggle cannot be seen strictly as the "fight for a Jewish identity," 19 but, on the other hand, this Jewish element cannot be ignored altogether either. Since Neil admits to a "paganism" and has very little interest in religion (GC, pp. 62-63), Judaic theology has no apparent impact on his identity difficulties. The matter of ethnic identification, specifically in regard to the assimilated-unassimilated American Jew, is, however, of some relevance to Neil's problem of self-knowledge.

In the story there is, if you will, a dichotomy of Jewishness. On one side is the unassimilated Jew: Neil's aunt and uncle and Brenda's Uncle Leo Patimkin, the classic long-suffering wandering Jew, and on the other side are the Patimkins, everybody's All-American family right down to the bobbed noses (GC, p. 9).

Again, Neil is the man in the middle, caught between worlds which he cannot or will not embrace as his own.
Under the critical eye of Mrs. Patimkin, Neil meekly admits that he is "just Jewish" (GC, p. 62), but that confession, under stress, coupled with a lack of supporting evidence in the rest of the story seems to preclude any attempt to interpret Neil as a strongly identifiable Jewish character.

Since Neil clearly rejects the assimilated world of the Patimkins and only tolerates the old ways of his aunt and uncle, it is fairly apparent that he is in a state of ethnic limbo, and without some point of reference remains a man without cultural identity.

Unable to find his niche in either American class structures or the social world of the Jewish-American, and certainly not being a goy, Neil returns to his role as librarian, unwilling to pursue the psychologically painful quest for identity. At the conclusion of the novella, Neil is still, despite his experience, "pathetically unable to see inside himself." 20

Sergeant Nathan Marx, the protagonist of Roth's story, "Defender of the Faith," also suffers a crisis of identity, but his problem is not immediately revealed. Marx has just returned to the United States, toward the end of World War II, as a decorated hero of the European Theatre and as the newly promoted first sergeant of a training unit at an Army camp in Missouri.

In the opening paragraph, Marx's self-evaluation
gives every indication that he is a man who knows who he is and one who is secure in that knowledge.

I had changed enough in two years not to mind the trembling of the old people, the crying of the very young, the uncertainty and fear in the eyes of the once arrogant. I had been fortunate enough to develop an infantryman's heart, which like his feet, at first aches and swells but finally grows horny enough for him to travel the weirdest paths without feeling a thing (GC, p. 116).

Marx's powers of self-analysis, however, are quickly shown to be anything but perceptive. On the first evening at his new assignment, the unfeeling sergeant with an "infantryman's heart" meets a young trainee, Sheldon Grossbart, who immediately begins to manipulate the sergeant's "sympathies on the basis of their common Jewish background." 21 At this first meeting, Marx, against his own belief that all soldiers should be treated alike and to his complete, confused surprise, allows Grossbart to wrangle "formal" permission for himself and two other trainees to attend synagogue services rather than work in the mandatory, Friday night "G.I. party" in the barracks.

Profoundly and immediately stirred by the reawakening of his Jewish identity, Sergeant Marx begins, on the next day, the process of trial and error that will force him to "redefine his identity." 22 While he is following
trainee Grossbart and his friends as they march to Friday night services, the shrill sound of Grossbart's cadence call triggers a flood of memories into the rapidly dissolving hard shell of Sergeant Marx's personality.

Recalling pleasant memories of his youth and the emotional hardening effect of his war experiences, Marx realizes that he is not the battle toughened man he thought he was.

But now one night noise, one rumor of home and time past, and memory plunged down through all I had anesthetized, and came to what I suddenly remembered was myself. So it was not altogether curious that, in search of more of me, I found myself following Grossbart's tracks to Chapel No. 3, where the Jewish services were being held (GC, p. 122).

In this story, then, the problem of identity, as it affects Sergeant Marx, is an ethnic one, and the catalyst for Marx's re-evaluation of self is primarily Trainee Grossbart, assisted somewhat by a gruff anti-Semitic captain. If Grossbart is the catalytic agent in the reawakening of Marx's Jewish identity, he is also a complicating factor in this same process, for the values which inform his Judaism, while appearing similar on the surface, are in fact antithetical to those which Marx eventually espouses.

Grossbart's proclaimed interest in his Jewish tra-
di tions: Friday night "shul" at the synagogue, eating "kosher" chow in the mess hall, and celebrating holy days with his family, strikes a responsive chord in Marx's rapidly returning sense of his own ethnic identification. Swayed by Grossbart's easy intimacy, "Jewish" fraternalism, and apparently honest complaints, Marx, who only vaguely suspects the trainee's motives, even attempts to defend the values of Jewish life to his commanding officer, a complete anti-Semite.

After listening to Marx explain traditional dietary, family, and religious Jewish values, the captain ironically concludes that Marx has told him that "Jews have a tendency to be pushy" (GC, p. 126). Coupled with his own awakened religious identity, this example of gentile anti-Semitism helps block Marx's insight into the self-seeking motives behind Grossbart's "Jewish" objections to army regulations.

Even after he heatedly breaks off personal communication with Grossbart; because the sergeant has learned that Grossbart goes to "shul" just to drink the wine, that eating non-"kosher" food does not really make him sick, and that a holiday family visit had been a ruse to get an un-authorized weekend pass (GC, p. 141), Marx still does not realize the utter self-centeredness of the youth's behavior. However, when Grossbart uses his Jewish fraternalism routine with a young personnel clerk in order to get out of going to the Pacific war front, Marx fully
comprehends the base egocentrism behind Grossbart's front of Jewish togetherness.

With his own sense of Jewishness and personal integrity aroused, Marx has the orders corrected, sending Grossbart to the war zone. In a final, angry confrontation, Grossbart finally reveals his complete egotism and Marx the positive depth of his reborn Jewish consciousness: (Grossbart speaks first)

"I owe nobody nothing...now I think I've got the right to watch out for myself."

"For each other we have to learn to watch out, Sheldon. You told me yourself."

"You call this watching out for me—what you did?"

"No. For all of us." (GC, p. 143).

Clearly, Marx's rediscovered ethnic identity means much more than Sheldon's cover for self-seeking individualism. Still, it has not been an easy process re-defining his Jewish identity. The concluding lines of the story reflect how difficult this re-awakening of identity is; Marx watches his men as they prepare to ship out for war:

With a kind of quiet nervousness, they polished shoes, shined belt buckles, squared away underwear, trying as best they could to accept their fate. Behind me, Grossbart swallowed hard, accepting his. And then, resisting with all my will an impulse to turn and seek pardon for my vindictiveness, I accepted my own (GC, p. 143).
Although Grossbart was instrumental in awakening Marx's Jewish identity, the sergeant's rejection of the false values Grossbart stands for make him a true "defender of the faith." In the end, Marx has discovered his true identity and has accepted a spiritually deeper, morally positive Judaism which rejects men like Grossbart "who would use it to exploit their differences from the rest of mankind and to destroy the common good." 23

Like Sergeant Marx in "Defender of the Faith," Eli Peck, the protagonist of Roth's short story, "Eli, the Fanatic," also suffers an identity crisis in which his ethnic identification is the central factor influencing his problem.

The identity gap that Eli must bridge, however, is considerably wider than those which Marx and Neil Klugman were confronted with in "Defender of the Faith" and "Goodbye, Columbus." In dealing with their identity problems, Neil and Marx were only attempting to reconcile the conflict of values between assimilated Jews and first generation Jewish immigrants in American society. Of course that is a difficult enough problem in itself, but Eli Peck, in his struggle for self-awareness, must not only reject his status as an assimilated Jewish-American but also embrace the age-old, traditional values of European Jewry as represented by a group of displaced Jews who have survived and fled the German persecution to settle in
America. Complicating Eli's problem is the fact that he has had a history of mental disorders, "nervous breakdowns" (GC, p. 184), and that he considers himself to be "neurotic" (GC, p. 188).

When Eli, acting as the legal counsel for his Jewish neighbors in integrated Woodenton, New Jersey, approaches the leader of the displaced Jews, Leo Tzuref, with an ultimatum to either adapt the Yeshivah to modern American standards or get out, what Eli thought was his "true" identity begins to crumble.

After Eli has explained that his community will prosecute the Yeshivah if it does not change, Tzuref tries to elicit Eli's personal response to the situation:

"But you, Mr. Peck, how about you?"

"I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzuref."

"Aach! You are us, we are you!" (GC, p. 192).

Before the interview is over, Eli begins to waver in his identification with his assimilated neighbors. "'It's not me, Mr. Tzuref,'" Eli admits, "'it's them.'" Tzuref responds, "'They are you,'" and Eli, in return, is forced into an admission of personal feelings that reflect the initial step in his problem of self-awareness; "'No,' Eli intoned, 'I am me. They are them. You are you'" (GC, p. 193).

What really upsets the Woodenton suburbanites is the presence of the man they call the "greenie," one of the Yeshivah residents who, in his all black suit and
black Talmudic hat, symbolizes the undiluted values of traditional Judaism which they have dropped in the process of assimilation. More importantly, it is the presence of the "greenie," a man who has suffered unbelievable persecution, including emasculation at the hands of the German Nazis and who sticks steadfastly and openly to his Jewish heritage, that brings Eli's identity crisis directly into the open.

After Eli gets the "greenie" to wear one of his "modern" suits, they meet and Eli's sense of identity becomes confused with that of the "greenie." Looking at the man's face, Eli feels that "those eyes were the eyes in his head" (GC, p. 205). And later, when Eli has put on the "greenie's" black clothes in exchange, he goes to see the man at the Yeshivah and Eli's appearance shocks the "greenie."

The recognition took some time. He looked at what Eli wore. Up close, Eli looked at what he wore. And then Eli had the strange notion that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits (GC, p. 209).

Besides making him feel that he is two people, Eli's donning of the black suit further confuses his identity to the point that he is no longer able to know what he wants (GC, pp. 209-10).

Obviously, then, Eli is having a problem with his self-identity, and it also seems obvious that the primary
source of his difficulty is the contact he makes with the Yeshivah, especially when that contact is with the man referred to as the "greenie."

Because of Eli's mental history some critics have referred to him as "mad" and "misguided," but in view of evidence to the contrary it seems that this interpretation of his problem is invalid. At the very point where Eli enters the hospital dressed in the "greenie's" black suit, the ultimate act which could be construed as "madness," he is extremely lucid and aware of what is happening to him:

...he quaked an eighth of an inch beneath his skin to think that perhaps he'd chosen the crazy way. To think that he'd chosen to be crazy! But if you chose to be crazy, then you weren't crazy. It's when you didn't choose. No, he wasn't flipping. He had a child to see (GC, p. 213).

That Eli chooses to visit his baby boy dressed in the black garb of an orthodox Jew from the European past does not show his insanity, rather it reflects the depths to which the influence of the Yeshivah Jews has struck into his sense of Jewishness. It is not neurosis that brings on Eli's identity crisis; instead, it is the presence of Leo Tzuref, the "greenie," and the Yeshivah children that awakens in him a Jewish identity he had apparently repressed.

Eli's recognition and acceptance of his Jewish her-
itage and identity is symbolized by his exchange of clothes with the "greenie" and his subsequent walk through town to visit his new born child at a local hospital. As he walks through town to the sound of gasped cries from his neighbors, calling "Eli Peck Eli Peck Eli Peck Eli Peck" (GC, p. 212), Eli is totally aware of his identity: "He knew who he was down to his marrow—they were telling him Eli Peck" (GC, p. 212).

The price Eli may pay for his new self-awareness is potentially high. By returning to his Jewish heritage Eli could, because public opinion points to him as a madman, conceivably lose his marriage, his child, his livelihood, and even his personal freedom. Eli's faith in his new-found identity is exceptionally strong, however, and at whatever cost society may force him to pay for his acceptance of this individualism he seems determined to retain it.

As two interns, informed that Eli is having a "nervous breakdown" in the maternity ward, restrain Eli and inject him with tranquilizers, the story ends on the note of "Eli's ineradicable self." Eli is so secure in his Jewish identity, finally, that when he is tranquilized, "The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached" (GC, p. 216).
CHAPTER TWO

LETTING GO

While it did not provoke the volume of critical responses that *Goodbye, Columbus* did earlier and that *Portnoy's Complaint* would some years later, Roth's second book and first novel, *Letting Go* did bring on the polar­
ization of scholarly opinion that has been the hallmark of the criticism during Roth's two decades as a creative writer.

On the negative side, Stanley Cooperman denounced Roth for his use of ethnic identification and religion "as raw material for either parody or caricature," and he described *Letting Go* as an example of Roth's "reductive" writing. Alan Cheuse, a Marxist critic, viewed *Letting Go* as a failure "because the narrator is a lover of capital­
italism."  

Roth's supporters, however, saw the book in a somewhat different light from Cooperman or Cheuse. Leo W. Schwarz praised Roth for his "remarkable psychological insight" and Scott Donaldson boosted *Letting Go* as a "landmark in the genre of psychological realism." Even one of Roth's detractors, Mordecai H. Levine, was moved enough by *Letting Go* to grudgingly admit that the book at least "revealed a more positive view of the Jewish religion" than Roth's work had shown before.

As may be implied from the divergence of the criticism
quoted above, *Letting Go* is a book rich in interpretive possibilities. It is a massive, complex book of over six hundred pages, and it is primarily concerned with the psychological difficulties of a trio of characters, Gabe Wallach and his unhappily married friends Paul and Libby Herz, whose lives become complicatedly interrelated.

The suggestion that the psychological turmoil experienced by Gabe, Paul and Libby involves a problem of identity, as will be maintained in the discussion below, is somewhat strengthened by critic Donaldson's assertion that the "theme of *Letting Go* is the confrontation of the self by itself and by the world as it is."\(^{33}\)

The first of these three characters to be introduced in the book, Gabe Wallach, also becomes the first of the three to reveal his self-identity difficulties. Very early in the book Gabe describes his personality in terms of what parts of it were influenced by his mother or by his father; and he attributes certain aspects of his behavior, such as the fact that he does not act the same when he is alone as he does with people, to this parental influence (*LG*, p. 5).

Discussing himself in one of a series of personality sketches of the faculty of the University of Chicago English Department where he has taken a job, Gabe begins to show the confusion about his own life that eventually leads to his emotional collapse. In this sketch he describes himself as being better "than anything that he has
done in life has shown him to be"; as feeling "upon parting from friends," that he has "behaved badly" with them; and as being directionless in life, not knowing "what to do with himself" (LG, p. 69).

Later in the book; while spending a holiday with his father in New York, Gabe makes a visit, at Libby's request, to Paul's family as an envoy of reconciliation between the ostracized son and his family. Just before he meets the elder Herzes, Gabe, who is feeling confused and skeptical about his role in the Herz reconciliation process, becomes very unsure of his identity.

I pulled myself up to my full height...and rang again, this time with the premonition that...in fifteen or twenty minutes, I would not be the same man I had been when I entered. The boundaries of my own personality seemed as blurry and indefinite, as hazy, as the damp blowy mist above the river I had crossed from Manhattan (LG, p. 172).

As the story progresses, Gabe's identity problem worsens. In the center section of the book, he becomes emotionally involved with Martha Reganhart, a divorcee with two young children, and during this period Gabe makes a number of references to his dwindling ability to understand himself or his actions. As his self-understanding diminishes, Gabe feels that his "spirit is like a vapor" (LG, p. 234), that he will never understand his own life (LG, p. 310), and that the control over his life is no
longer in his hands (LG, p. 363). At another point he declares himself to be "out of tune" with himself (LG, p. 384), and, a few pages later, he has a frightening vision of his self as it spins endlessly, "chasing nothing, pursued by nothing, powerless to discontinue" its "own frantic rounds" (LG, p. 398).

Following the tragic death of Martha's young boy and the unhappy conclusion of Martha and Gabe's affair, a disheartened, directionless Gabe longs for a return to his "old old self again" (LG, p. 528). In a clear indication of the magnitude of his identity crisis he significantly refers to his old, "happier" self in the past tense: "He remembered a self of his that was more substantial than the one he was saddled with now; he remembered being in the saddle. He remembered being happier" (LG, p. 528).

It is not Gabe's destiny, in Letting Go, to be either "in the saddle" or happy, and after a nearly disastrous attempt to convince a young couple to allow Paul and Libby to adopt their unwanted child—the wife and husband claimed the real father was a third party—Gabe suffers an emotional collapse and the total loss of his personal identity (LG, p. 625).

Gabe's visit to the home of Theresa and Harry Bigoness, the couple providing the baby for adoption, is, then, the immediate cause of his identity collapse, but the reason for his problem of identity, as it is developed
throughout the book, appears to be more complex than just Gabe's involvement with the Bigonesses.

Roth seems to suggest, through Gabe's narrative point of view, that Gabe's identity difficulties are the result of a genetic determinism whereby Gabe's personality is not so much a separately structured psychological entity as it is the product of behavioral responses inherited either from his mother or father.

This interpretation is suggested early in the book when Gabe tries to analyze the impact his parents have had on his personality. "I am," he says, "...in a few ways like my father....However, if I am my father's child, I am my mother's too" (LG, p. 5), and in the following lines, where he concludes that he "cannot trace out exactly the influences nor deal in any scientific way with the chromosomes passed on" to him, it would appear that Gabe's personality, at least the way he sees it, is an amalgamation of his parent's genes.

In a second interpretation of the influence his parents had on his psychological development, Gabe proposes that he is also the product of a personality conflict between his parents in which each of them tried to be the guiding force in the young boy's life. Recalling his childhood, Gabe reflects that there had always been a struggle for me in the Wallach household....So I 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, p. 45).

Whether Gabe's personality is the result of genetic or environmental parental influence, Roth makes it clear, as Scott Donaldson says, that the mother usually wins "the tug of war for possession" of Gabe's psyche even though there is "at least a trace of his father's first-rate heart" affecting the young man's behavior.

This lopsided union of parental influences is also important in Roth's depiction of Gabe as a man whose personal identity is caught somewhere between two warring psychological forces, the cold, calculating way as represented by his mother and the soft, warm-heartedness of his father. Thus, Gabe's destiny is always to be the man in the middle, his identity continually linked with that of the third-party presidential candidate of 1948 Henry Wallace, whose last name so closely resembles Gabe's.

Gabe's third-party status in the lives of the many people that affect his life in Letting Go—Paul and Libby Herz, Martha and Dick Reganhart, Theresa and Harry Bigoness, and Mr. and Mrs. Wallach—contributes considerably to the emotional and psychological confusion which plagues his vision of himself and eventually brings about his "nervous" collapse.

Although there may be "no happy ending" in sight for Gabe as he tries to put the pieces of his shattered
personality together again in the conclusion of *Letting Go*, there may be some hope for this "Everyman in the twentieth century." At least he has gained the strength to face what he has been and done in the past and is willing to begin the painful trek to a self-awareness that will allow him to "make some sense of the larger hook" (*LG*, p. 628) upon which his mental health, and consequently his self-identity, seems to hang so precariously.

While Paul Herz's problem of identity does not reach the "emotional collapse" stage that Gabe Wallach's did, it is, nonetheless, of considerable proportions and readily apparent. Early in the book, Paul is already wondering whether his attitude toward his impending marriage to Libby is that of "a realist or a romantic" (*LG*, p. 98), and in the first years following their marriage when he convinces Libby to get an abortion, the resulting guilt and shame leaves Paul feeling unable to control his own life (*LG*, p. 121), terribly confused (*LG*, p. 142) and wondering if he cares for Libby (*LG*, p. 145).

By the time the Herzes have met Gabe Wallach, their marriage is in difficulty, due in large part to Libby's continuously eroding physical condition and Paul's sexual impotence. Irrationally hoping that Wallach will seduce Libby and thereby satisfy her sexual needs which he is no longer able to do, and also to atone for a one time liaison he had with a young coed, Paul leaves his wife
and friend alone and rushes to the library to try to figure out who he is and who he is not (LG, p. 153). Nothing more physical than a single, regretted kiss passes between Gabe and Libby, but Paul, suspecting much more, sits in agitation at the library convinced that there is something missing in himself and positive that he does not understand his "mess" (LG, pp. 154-55).

Another of the problems that plagues Paul and Libby is that when they were married, Paul from a Jewish heritage and Libby from a Catholic one, the parents on both sides bitterly broke off personal contact with the financially struggling young couple because of their "mixed" marriage. On a train headed back to New York to visit his dying father, then, it is not surprising to find Paul analyzing both his marriage and his reason for visiting his father.

What he discovers about himself on this train ride is that instead of having a single identity as one man, he is really "two selves," one representing his "feeling side and the other his sense of "duty." He is also aware that these two selves have "become confused," leaving him with the illusion that they are one and leading him to "a very heavy sense of self" (LG, p. 408).

By the day of his father's funeral Paul is mentally exhausted from his self-evaluation. During this arduous self-examination Paul has discovered that he had constructed an incorrect "idea of himself" (LG, p. 410), that he is not what he had "dreamed he was," or thought
he was supposed to be," or what his work or family "told him he must be" (LG, pp. 412-13).

Sitting in his Uncle Asher's apartment trying to decide if he should go to his father's funeral or not, Paul feels that the circumstances in his life have conspired to do him in (LG, p. 432). In his fatigue, Paul's crisis of identity reaches its climax with his dreamy wish to divest himself of himself" (LG, p. 436).

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 Herzeness. What he was! Or perhaps nothing. To unpeel all day and all night and wind up empty-handed. To find that all he had rid himself of was all there was. And what?... that he was Libby, was his job, was his mother and father, that all that had happened was all there was (LG, p. 436).

Paul's obvious difficulty in defining a solid and acceptable identity for himself appears to be based on his inability, as he himself described it, to reconcile the feeling side of his personality with his sense of duty (LG, p. 408), especially as these two sides of his personality are affected by his relationship with Libby and his parents.
There are two things that Paul wants to be in life, "a good son" to his parents and a loving husband to Libby (LG, p. 93), and he has "a powerful sense of duty" toward accomplishing both. Unfortunately, Paul's desire to be a good husband conflicts with his wish to be a good son because his marriage to a gentile girl represents the ultimate rejection of the Jewish heritage his parents insist so strongly he must retain.

Ostracized, then, by his family, Paul goes ahead with his marriage to Libby, but his decision does not produce happiness for the young couple. In the years that follow, Paul's sense of duty to wife and family leads him and Libby through a series of blunders—Libby's "conversion" to Judaism, her abortion and subsequent suicide attempt, and his decision to quit working for his Ph.D.—that eventually leaves Paul feeling that he is emotionally barren and that the "man of feeling" he had believed himself to be has been replaced totally by a man of duty (LG, p. 411).

In the crucial section in which Paul returns to New York where his father is dying, the mentally and emotionally exhausted young man tries desperately to come to grips with who he is. He realizes that his overdeveloped sense of duty has helped nullify his feelings for Libby and that his rejection of his parents has produced this same lack of feeling for them (LG, pp. 408-14).

Upon the realization that he is alone and unnoticed in New York, Paul's first impulse is to let go his sense
of duty to both Libby and his parents and to flee from all the responsibilities that weigh him down so heavily. Instead, Paul goes to the graveyard—his father had died without Paul visiting him—and standing outside the gate he accepts the burdensome direction of his life.

There were several choices open to Paul that moment; it was not because all the paths of escape were blocked that, instead of moving out, he moved in. He could have run away, or simply walked away, but he moved in because in was the direction of his life (LG, p. 451).

The price and reward of his self-denial and self-knowledge is explicit in the following passage in which Paul enters the graveyard and embraces his mother in the climactic scene of reconciliation with both his estranged family and his long-ignored Judaism.

...he saw...his life—he saw it for the sacrifice that it was. Isaac under the knife, Abraham wielding it. Both!...he saw his place in the world. Yes, and....What he saw filled him for a moment with strength....He...stood still at last, momentarily at rest in the center of the storm through which he had been traveling all these years. For his truth was revealed to him, his final premise melted away....He felt himself under a wider beam (LG, p. 452).

Despite his later remarks to Libby that he still does
not understand his actions totally and that as a new person he is not completely reborn (LG, pp. 613-14), it seems clear that Paul has chosen his sense of duty over his sense of personal feeling and that his personal identity is completely and irretrievably linked not only to his role as a devoted husband and dutiful son, but also to his Judaic heritage of sacrifice and suffering as well.

Philip Roth once said that "the mystery of personality is nothing less than the writer's ultimate concern," and in Libby Herz he has created a character that reflects his "concern" with "the mystery of personality" quite appropriately. Libby's personality is such a mystery that neither her husband Paul, nor her off-and-on friend Gabe Wallach, nor Libby herself is able to adequately define who or what Libby Herz really is.

The first time Gabe Wallach speaks to Libby he is convinced, even though their conversation is only on the telephone, that she is neurotically "inclined" (LG, p. 6). Libby's behavior throughout the book tends to support Gabe's initial response, for she is constantly swinging, with an "incredible pendulum action" (LG, p. 52), from one emotional state to another.

It is not surprising that a person whose emotional instability leaves them feeling "like a windmill" (LG, p. 99) should be suffering an identity problem, and Libby proves this to be true quite early in the book. In the
scene in which Gabe and Libby exchange their one kiss, the distraught Libby cries, "Oh Gabe, what am I? Am I awful or am I crazy?" (LG, p. 58).

Libby's confusion seems to mount throughout the book until she realizes that when she tries "to puzzle out the circumstances of her life" her mind is "blank" (LG, p. 327). At this point she seeks the aid of a psychiatrist (LG, p. 343)—thereby becoming the first of Roth's main characters to do so—but instead of being relieved by the doctor's Freudian solutions, Libby is only further confused and tries unsuccessfully to kill herself (LG, p. 353).

In the final section of the novel, with Paul having made his uneasy peace with himself, his family and Libby, and with Libby anticipating the imminent adoption of the Bigoness baby, Libby prematurely proclaims that at long last she is sure of her identity. "Oh, darling Paul," she bubbles, "I know what I am" (LG, p. 603). The security of self-knowledge that she feels is short lived, however, and, after the pre-adoption night out with Paul becomes a grim reminder of the marital problems they still have, Libby becomes fully aware of the variability and complexity of her long standing identity struggle.

She had difficulty, anyway, associating herself with any of those other Libbies, the young, stupid, helpless Libbies...though Libby Herz was always and forever sloughing off old Libby Herzes—bidding a fond farewell sometimes to what she had been as
little as twenty-four hours earlier (LG, p. 617).

Libby's problem of identity does seem related to what Gabe Wallach called her neurotic inclinations (LG, p. 6) and what Robert Detweiler has described as her "neurotic preoccupation with herself," but simply labeling Libby a "neurotic" does not produce an understanding of the reasons which may have induced her "windmill" personality.

There is no evidence in Letting Go to indicate that Libby suffered from identity problems before she married Paul, but there is ample textual evidence to support the contention that her marriage to Paul, with the subsequent entanglement of Libby's identity with his, their numerous marital difficulties and her rejection by both her own and Paul's families, could easily have been the primary source for the neurotic state in which Libby bounces from identity to identity.

When Libby first enters the book she is already the victim of eroding mental and physical health, but in later "flashback" chapters Roth provides a detailed account of the events that occurred before Paul and Libby entered Gabe Wallach's life.

Two occurrences that have some effect on Libby's state of mind are the familial rejections she and Paul receive from both their families. In trying to help ease the strained relationship with the Herzes, Libby converts to Judaism, but the result of her conversion is a painful
silence from the Herzes and a harsh letter from her Catholic father disclaiming any "obligation to Jewish housewives" (LG, p. 141).

Compounding Libby's problem is the entanglement of her identity with Paul's. At different times in the book she is shown to be unduly influenced by Paul's personality—her conversion to Judaism was "masterminded" by Paul (LG, p. 143) and she often echoes his words (LG, p. 98)—but the real degree to which Libby reflects Paul's personality is revealed in the final section of the novel. While she and Paul discuss their lives over a restaurant meal, Libby, showing both the insecurity of her own identity and her dependence on Paul's, asks "Are we religious or aren't we?" (LG, p. 612).

To reach this state of insecurity Libby had to struggle through years of economic woes, the rejection of parents and parents-in-law alike, an abortion she really opposed, a suicide attempt, a constantly deteriorating physical condition which leaves her unable to bear children, and a marriage marred by her husband's passionless impotence. It is no wonder, then, that anyone who has experienced such a phalanx of physical and emotional problems as Libby has would incline towards neurosis and self-identity problems.

Still, Libby is at least able to realize her identity problem, recognizing the multiple and constantly changing identities that comprise her personality (LG, p. 617), but
Roth offers no evidence that this new self-awareness will produce any notable change in her life. As the novel draws to an end, Libby remains unable to comprehend the things that are happening to her (LG, p. 619), and she becomes sadly conscious that despite having recognized the shifting multiplicity of her identity, she is still the girl she was "five years back" and she will be "the same girl five years hence" (LG, p. 618).
CHAPTER THREE

WHEN SHE WAS GOOD

When She Was Good is, in one sense, the most unusual book Philip Roth has yet published. In this, his third book, Roth used an entirely gentile cast of characters and set the novel in a fictive mid-western city, Liberty Center, Illinois. By limiting himself to white, Anglo-Saxon middle America, Roth chose, for the only time so far in his career, to exclude any mention of the Judaism that is such an integral part of all of his other short stories and novels. Unfortunately for Roth, his experiment in goy-land was not exactly given a rousing critical reception. In fact, the scarcity of scholarly articles on When She Was Good makes it seem that the book was hardly received at all. Beyond the usual amount of reviews that attends the publication of any best-selling author's work, the response to Roth's second novel has been almost negligible.

Among the critics who did comment on the novel, there was a tendency to view When She Was Good as an experiment that failed. Richard Gilman called the book "a flawed but energetic melodrama on the highest level of ladies magazine fiction," and Robert Alter said the "kindest thing one can say about Philip Roth's...novel is that it is a brave mistake." The anti-Roth critic, Mordecai H. Levine, simply and sarcastically dismissed When She Was
Good as an attempt by Roth to "show his virtuousity by writing a book without a single Jewish character in it." The

Whether When She Was Good is a good, bad, or mediocre novel is, of course, secondary to the subject at hand, but even if it lacks "any true literary interest" as a novel it does present two interesting characters, Lucy Nelson Bassart and her husband Roy Bassart, who represent a continuation of Roth's thematic concern with the problem of self-identity. Unlike the characters in Goodbye, Columbus and Letting Go, however, Lucy and Roy have identity problems that involve, as will be shown in the character analyses that follow, the concept of self-realization: a general term used here to signify the attainment of those spiritual and material goals which represent the outward manifestation of the inner needs and desires of a character's personality.

When She Was Good is essentially the story of Lucy Nelson Bassart, and while it may be broadly true that she is "the perfect frigid American wife," a bitch and a puritan, and an emasculator of men, it is specifically true that this young woman, as Roth makes evident in the book, is a character suffering from deep emotional disorders, including a problem of self-identity.

From the first part of the novel, which covers the years leading up to Lucy's marriage to Roy, there is a wealth of textual references to the young girl's emotional turmoil and unstable personality. Basically, Lucy
suffers from feelings of inferiority and personal shame because of her father's status as one of the "town drunks," and her shame and anger becomes channeled into rather neurotic behavior.

In an early attempt to find a solution to her emotional problems Lucy tries converting to Catholicism, but the effort has no effect on her father's drinking, and Lucy's identity suffers from a feverishly confused association with the martyred Saint Teresa of Lisieux (WG, p. 81). Lucy's brief conversion ends with her realization that religion cannot stop her father from drinking and with the first of her numerous assertions that she is "right" and everyone else is "wrong" (WG, p. 84).

During her courtship with Roy Bassart, Lucy feels "very confused" about her reasons for becoming involved with a man who appears to have little chance for a successful "future" (WG, p. 115), and when she becomes pregnant by Roy, Lucy becomes so emotionally tormented—she oscillates between a fierce self-reliance in her relationship with Roy and a wistfully dependent hope that her parents will rescue her from her problems—that a frightened Roy hesitantly suggests she is "practically crazy" (KG, p. 157).

Despite the misgivings she feels about Roy's potential, her lack of love for him, and the fact that she will have to forego her goal of a college education, Lucy insists that she and Roy must get married. For a short while after the marriage Lucy and Roy maintain an uneasy peace,
but, after the birth of their baby boy, Lucy refuses to put up with what she sees as Roy's ambitionless, directionless life as an irresponsible dreamer. The result of Lucy's subsequent attempts to make Roy a "good" man is an increasingly hostile home environment that leads to a series of separations and the feeling in Lucy that she is "doomed forever to a cruel and miserable life" (WG, p. 230).

In a final moment of hope, during a time of relative marital calm and non-hostile relations with Roy's family, Lucy mistakenly believes that Roy now wants another child and, in so believing, convinces herself that she "had made him a good man" (WG, p. 252). Basking in the warmth of what she believes will be a new life for herself and Roy, Lucy reveals not only her identity problem but also the fact that the identity she seeks has never been allowed to develop. With her new-found hope, Lucy rejoices that "if in her life she had been stone, if in her life she had been iron, well, that was all over. She could now become—herself!" (WG, p. 253). "Herself!" she continues, "But what would that be like? What was she even like?—that real Lucy, who had never had a chance to be—" (WG, p. 253).

Lucy's hopes that she will discover her true identity and have a happy life are short lived, however, for just moments after her happy revery she learns that her errant father has been put in a Florida penitentiary. Then, some few hours later as she and Roy are driving back to their
home, Lucy experiences her first emotional "breakdown," apparently because Roy was telling their son tall tales about army life (WG, p. 263).

From this point in the novel, Lucy's mental condition rapidly erodes. She becomes so disoriented that she believes she is a freshman in college again (WG, p. 266) and has a hallucinatory vision of her father sitting in a jail cell with the word INNOCENT written across his teeth (WG, p. 272). At Roy's uncle's house, where Roy and the baby are hiding in fright of her, Lucy barges into the home demanding the return of her husband and child.

In the ensuing scene, in which she collapses after bloodying Roy's mouth in a mad, desperate attempt to at least recover her son, and is taken to her grandfather's home to recuperate, Lucy exposes the rampant nature of the paranoia that now rules her behavior (WG, pp. 285-86). Just before she attacks Roy, Lucy refers to Roy and his family as those who had "conspired against her," (WG, p. 280) and while she rests at her grandfather's she consistently blames everyone but herself for her problems (WG, pp. 287-99).

Her complete mental disorientation finally leads Lucy to rush out into sub-freezing winter temperatures in a wild and fatal attempt to save her son from those monsters like Roy "who so cruelly destroy the lives of innocent women and innocent children" (WG, p. 306). Melo-
dramatically enough, Lucy is found some days later frozen to death in the local teen-age lover's lane, appropriately called "Passion Paradise," the site of the conception of Lucy's and Roy's child and of the beginning of the last unhappy stage of her life (WG, pp. 308-09).

Lucy's problem of identity appears to be related to a combination of three factors that significantly affect her emotions and thoughts: the enormous amount of shame and guilt she feels about her family life, the arrested development of her personality brought on by her inability to achieve personal goals, and the miserable relationship and marriage she has with Roy.

Lucy's family problems, which set the groundwork for her other problems as well, are primarily centered on her father's drunkenness. Throughout the book Lucy is tormented by the memory of her hated father and the shame she felt because of him (WG, p. 75). As a child she was too embarrassed to bring friends home for fear they would see her father drunk in the house (WG, p. 76); as a teen-ager she had her father arrested for beating her mother (WG, p. 81); and as a young woman she transferred the mistrust she had for her father onto her husband Roy—even confusing their identities at times—militantly pushing and pulling on his character in an attempt to make him a "good" man and responsible husband (WG, p. 228).

Her marriage to Roy also contributes to Lucy's emotional and identity problems because it is as a result
of her vain attempt to make Roy a "good" man, and the subsequent separation struggles they endure, that Lucy reveals she has not been allowed to be herself (WG, p. 253). In the same way, these struggles lead her finally to expose the depths of her mental illness on her last, fatal encounter with the sub-freezing temperatures of "Passion Paradise" (WG, pp. 308-09).

The identity problem that Lucy has seems to be linked to her inability to achieve self-realization. It seems clear from previous discussion that her family difficulties had a considerable and totally negative impact on Lucy's social growth, but her efforts to attain self-realization are frustrated as well. In a passage where she outlines her personal goals for Roy's father, Lucy says she hopes to "Develop a logical mind...self-discipline...increase her general fund of knowledge...learn more about the world we live in...learn more about herself" (WG, p. 121).

To accomplish these goals Lucy enrolls at the Fort Kean College for Women, but, of course, her unexpected pregnancy causes her to drop out of school after the baby is born. The frustration of her desire to finish college has a profound effect on Lucy even up to the last few hours of her life; one of the first impressions she has after awakening from her emotional collapse at the house of Roy's uncle (WG, pp. 285-86) is that she is still a freshman in college back at Fort Kean (WG, p. 296).

Lucy Nelson Bassart is, then, never able to attain
either self-identity or self-realization. Stymied by her own state of neurosis induced by familial, societal, and marital difficulties, Lucy never really even begins the quest for identity. Instead, the circumstances of her life function as obstacles in the embryonic stages of her personality growth until, finally, any hope for Lucy's achievement of self-awareness is canceled by her premature and unnatural death.

Lucy's husband Roy Bassart has an identity problem too, but unlike most of Roth's characters, he does not appear to be very aware of it. In fact, after the section in which Roth introduces him as the just-mustered-out G.I. trying to readjust to civilian life, Roy's self-evaluation is limited to Walter Mitty-like dreams of vocational and financial success.

When he first gets out of the service, however, Roy seems genuinely concerned about who he is as an individual. He rejects an offer to work for his uncle, Julian Sowerby, because of "the damage that accepting something like this could do to his individuality" (WG, p. 46), and he expresses an apparently legitimate interest in trying "to discover just how much of an individual he really was" (WG, p. 47). A few pages later Roy elaborates on his beliefs about self-identity:

He had never really traveled with the athletes in high school, or with any gang, if he could help
it; you lost your identity in a gang, and Roy considered himself a little too much of an individualist for that. Not a loner, but an individualist, and there's a big difference (WG, p. 55).

As it turns out, Roy's talk about individuality is made slightly ludicrous by the knowledge that most of his post-military philosophy was taken directly from the ideas of his G.I. buddies (WG, pp. 66-68).

Once he meets Lucy Nelson, Roy's self-evaluation is dropped in favor of their "love" affair, and by the time Lucy enters the Fort Kean girl's college, Roy has enrolled at a Fort Kean photography school with the intention of learning to be a professional photographer. Unfortunately, Lucy turns up pregnant just after school begins, and Roy's dreams of a creative photography career are dashed by his premature exposure to married life.

Following a few months of relative marital calm, Roy decides, during spring finals, to abandon school in the hope of finding a commercial photography job. This decision, coupled with his insistence on visiting his family every weekend, begins the young couple's serious marriage problems. As mentioned earlier, Lucy is intent on making Roy accept his fatherly and husbandly responsibilities, as she sees them, and the result of her pushing and pulling tactics is disaster for Roy's psyche.

The more marital squabbles they have and the more emotionally draining these become, the more Roy becomes
disenchanted with his job and the more his visions of financial success become impossible dreams (WG, pp. 205-16). Corresponding to the deterioration of their marriage is an increasing tendency on Roy's part to rely on the advice of his close relatives and the sanctuary of their homes.

Roy becomes so shattered by Lucy's ever increasing outbursts of "unusual emotions" that he finally flees in panic, with his little boy, to the refuge of his Uncle Julian's home in Liberty Center. In a final encounter with his now emotionally ill wife, Roy is unable and unwilling to defend himself from her crazed demand that he and the baby return with her to Fort Kean, a demand which she punctuates with a wild right cross that bloodies Roy's mouth (WG, pp. 285-86).

In that last confrontation, it is Roy's Uncle Julian who defends his nephew against Lucy's verbal and physical attack. Julian, a hard-cursing old World War II veteran, minces no words in describing what he thinks Lucy has done to her husband and child. "You busted his balls," Julian tells Lucy, "and you were starting in on little Eddie's, but that is all over" (WG, p. 280). Roy, the victim of Lucy's mental emasculation, is reduced to a cowed entity unable to physically defend himself or to respond to her verbal abuse with anything stronger than a tearful concession that he "can't take anymore" (WG, p. 285).

Roy's problem has three chief causes: his own personal inertia and "unfocused ambition," his dependence
on family members for advice and support, and the emotional pounding he takes from Lucy as she tries to mold him into her image of a "good", responsible man.

Roy's inability to realize himself within the context of a vocation detracts from his effort to create a clear picture of who or what he really is, but to a large extent this problem is brought on by a certain inertness in his character, as shown in the section devoted to his return from the Army (WG, pp. 43-71). This personal inertia is also reflected in Roy's visions of financial success, his own photographic studio (WG, p. 208) and a photography story book, (WG, p. 231), which turn out to be no more than wistful pipe dreams.

The individuality Roy insisted he had to retain falls by the wayside when, after his marriage to Lucy, he comes to depend more and more on his family for support and advice. When they have marital difficulties he runs home to his family, usually returning to Lucy full of his Uncle Julian's advice (WG, p. 211). Of course, in his last face-to-face meeting with Lucy, as mentioned earlier, Roy is practically a non-entity with his Uncle Julian doing all his talking for him (WG, pp. 275-86).

It is probably Lucy who does the most damage to Roy's personality, however, because he simply does not have the emotional stamina to withstand her repeated attacks on his character. Her constant badgering about his responsibilities toward her and their baby and the impact of her vi-
olent outbursts against him are too much for Roy to take. At one point Lucy screams:

"You worm! Don't you have any guts at all? Can't you stand on your own two feet, ever? You sponge! You leech! You weak, hopeless, spineless, coward! ...You have no backbone! None!" (WG, pp. 264-65).

In the end Lucy is right; Roy is a spineless, cowering mass of shattered nerves, but what Lucy never sees and would never admit is that she has been instrumental in molding Roy into the irresponsible "leech" she so madly despises.

Roy Bassart is, then, a case of arrested development. The combination of his "unfocused ambition," his dependence on family, and his emotionally battering marriage leaves Roy a defenseless, beaten man without any apparent means of achieving self-realization or self-identity in his foreseeable future.
CHAPTER FOUR
PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT

A few years after the release of Goodbye, Columbus, Philip Roth, responding to a barrage of criticism, felt the need to defend himself from rabbinical and scholarly charges of anti-Semitism. Writing in the December, 1963 edition of Commentary, Roth told his Jewish detractors that they could not "recognize a bear hug when one is being administered right in front of" their eyes.

To those people who felt Roth's portrayal of Jews in Goodbye, Columbus represented the type of anti-Semitism that "ultimately led to the murder of six million in our time," Portnoy's Complaint, with its often bitter and scorching attacks on Jewish life and traditions, must have seemed the last word in the tragic history of Jewish persecution. Perhaps because it did not seem necessary to defend himself from the same charges twice, Roth did not answer the predictable scholarly "complaints" about anti-Semitism in Portnoy's Complaint.

Two of the "scholars" who took Roth to task for his alleged hatred of his own Jewish heritage were Peter Shaw and Mordecai H. Levine. Shaw said that "in Portnoy's Complaint, Roth goes even further than before in this paradoxical effort to help the Jews by reviling them," and that "Roth has been a positive enemy to his own work, while for the Jews he has been a friend of the proverbial sort
that makes enemies unnecessary."²⁵² For his part, Levine suggests that Roth's achievement in Portnoy's Complaint is that no one before him had "seen the uproarious comic possibilities that one could extract from masturbation in a variety of unusual circumstances and oral intercourse with near nymphomaniacs," and that in making Portnoy a "slum sex-maniac" Roth had confirmed "the stereotyped lies that many anti-Semites...have told concerning the Jews whose greatest desire is to rape Gentile girls."²⁵³

Fortunately for the health and integrity of literary criticism, most scholars tried to analyze Portnoy's Complaint and not Philip Roth's attitude toward his ethnic heritage. When they did limit themselves to literary analyses, some of the critics offered interesting interpretations of Portnoy's Complaint. Eileen Z. Cohen saw the book as having "a great deal in common with Alice in Wonderland,"²⁵⁴ and, for perhaps the only time in his career, Roth's work was compared to Shakespeare's when Alan Warren Friedman asserted that the character of Coriolanus was "a precursor of Portnoy."²⁵⁵

That a part of Alexander Portnoy's "complaint" involves a problem of identity has also been noted by Cohen and Friedman and by other critics as well. Cohen describes Portnoy as having a "chronic identity crisis,"²⁵⁶ and Friedman, relating Portnoy to the God of Exodus, says that he is "constantly trying to prove...that he knows his own identity."²⁵⁷ Patricia Meyer Spacks talks about Portnoy's static "amount" of "self-knowledge,"²⁵⁸ and Tony Tanner maintains that the
"focal point at the centre of" Portnoy's Complaint is "the uncertain, suffering self." 59

A number of critics, then, have lent their support to the assertion that Portnoy is struggling with his self-identity, and a review of the novel should help validate this point. Throughout the book, the troubled young protagonist gives ample evidence that the chant he learned as a schoolboy, "I am the Captain of my fate, I am the Master of my soul" (PC, p. 41), does not apply to his life at all.

Some early indications of Portnoy's identity problem are revealed in his statement that as a teenager "My wang was all I really had that I could call my own" (PC, p. 35) and his recollection of his maternally dominated childhood when he turned from watching a snowstorm to ask, "Momma, do we believe in winter?" (PC, p. 37). His problem is further defined at the end of the first section of the novel when the tormented Portnoy cries, "Doctor....Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me whole!" (PC, p. 40).

One of the more pathetic instances of Portnoy's inability to feel positive about who he is as an individual is expressed in the metaphor of a baseball center fielder which Roth develops in "The Jewish Blues" section of the book. Lamenting the loss of "the ease, the self-assurance" he used to feel as the center fielder for his boy's softball team, Portnoy recalls that "one knew exactly, and
down to the smallest particular, how a center fielder should conduct himself," and he is amazed to realize that "there are people like that walking the streets of the U.S.A." (PC, pp. 79-80). This realization provokes a very human response from the character Mordecai H. Levine called "one of the vilest men seen in the whole range of literature": 60 "I ask you," Portnoy moans, "why can't I be one! Why can't I exist now as I existed for the Seabees out there in center field! Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder—and nothing more!" (PC, p. 80).

Probably the most obvious facet of Portnoy's character is his "interest" in having sexual relations with his numerous girl friends, women he rather chauvininistically names "Monkey," "Pilgrim," and "Pumpkin." Of course his rampant emotional problems eventually help destroy all of his relationships with women. Portnoy moves from one unsuccessful affair to the next, always confused about his motives and always castigating himself for his apparently unquenchable, and, as far as his career as a New York City civil rights official goes, potentially disastrous need to jump in to one girl's bed after another:

What is he doing to himself, this fool! this idiot! this furtive boy! This sex maniac! He simply can not—will not—control the fires in his putz, the fevers in his brain, the desire continually burning within for the new, the wild, the unthought-of and, if you can imagine such a thing, the un-
dreamt-of (PC, p. 113).

As implied in this quotation, Portnoy's sexual exploits do very little to enhance his struggling progress toward self-knowledge or self-identity and, in addition to the confusion he feels about his sex life, Portnoy's identity problem is compounded by the division of loyalties he feels between his ethnic heritage and the larger American culture in which he wishes to assimilate.

At various places in the book, Portnoy expresses a love-hate relationship with the values of both Judaism and American society. His resentments toward Judaism are no better represented than in the "Jewish Blues" section of the book when he screams:

Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I happen also to be a human being! (PC, p. 84).

Certainly Portnoy's resentments are strong, but what many critics, even good ones, have ignored is the side of this troubled young man that also loves his Jewish background. In his poignant recollection of the men in his old neighborhood playing sand lot softball, Portnoy shows a profound respect for his Jewishness. "How I am going to love growing up to be a Jewish man!," he exclaims, "Living forever in the Weequahic section, and playing softball on Chancellor Avenue from nine to one on Sundays" (PC, p. 275).
And this wistful dream has meaning for Portnoy because, as he says, "I love those men! I want to grow up to be one of those men....in other words, feeling great, a robust Jewish man" (PC, p. 277).

Portnoy's feelings toward largely gentile American society also reflect a mixture of love and hate. While visiting at the "Pumpkin's" home in Iowa, Portnoy reveals the dual nature of his regard for middle America. First he is impressed with what he feels are the positive aspects of goyische life:

...this is what the goyim who have got something have got. Authority without the temper. Virtue without the self-congratulation. Confidence sans swagger or condescension. Come on, let's be fair and give the goyim their due, Doctor: when they are impressive, they are very impressive (PC, p. 244), but he is also aware that all is not perfect in the heartland, especially in regard to white Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards ethnic groups, and his fear of a possible confrontation with anti-Semitic Christians draws his anger to the surface:

...please, let there be no anti-Semite among them! Because if someone starts in with "the pushy Jews," or says "kike" or "jewed him down"—Well, I'll jew them down all right. I'll jew their fucking teeth down their throat! No, no violence (as if I even had it in me), let them be violent, that's their
The result of Portnoy's mixed feelings toward his dual role as a Jew and as a Jewish-American is that he is without ethnic, cultural or national identity, "never quite good enough" (PC, p. 300) for the Jews and unable to "feel at home" (PC, p. 306) in the mainstream of American society.

Another example of Portnoy's problem of personal identity is explicit in his moment of regret over having left the "Pumpkin." Recalling the stability of the "Pumpkin's" personality, Portnoy is still amazed that she was "psychologically so intact" and he is full of admiration for her because she was someone "who knew who she was!" (PC, p. 283).

The novel ends, in fact, with Portnoy losing contact with reality and his identity in two fantasy episodes. The first fantasy is of himself on trial for his sexual behavior, especially with the "Monkey," and the second, which draws the book to a close, is Portnoy's frantic vision of himself as a James Cagney-type gangster trapped in a gun battle with police because he had torn the "Do Not Remove Under Penalty of Law" tag from the mattress of his bed (PC, pp. 307-09).

It seems transparently obvious that Alexander Portnoy is a man with a self-identity problem, but the sources of his problem may not be quite so obvious, if for no other reason than the fact that Portnoy's "complaint" is such a complex one. Still, there appear to be at least three
major reasons for the young protagonist's difficulties: the parental interference he encounters, especially from "Momism"—when a dominant mother exerts undue influence on a submissive son; the difficulty he has accepting or rejecting both his Jewish heritage and assimilation into American society; and his inability to come to terms with the past he "is impaled on." 

Although Portnoy accuses his parents of being the two "outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time" (PC, p. 39) and of making him the "smothered son" in a Jewish joke (PC, p. 124), and although he blames his father for being powerless to correct the "mix-up of the sexes" (PC, p. 45) that so frustrated him as a boy, Portnoy's main family problem is with his mother. Alan Warren Friedman proposes that "Portnoy's neurosis results primarily from rebelling against what he hates (and yet also loves) in his mother and finding it in himself," and there is considerable evidence to support this contention.

Sophie Portnoy's loving overprotectiveness, balanced by a tendency to frighten and mentally emasculate the young boy, leaves Alexander Portnoy a "constrained and tight-ass human being" (PC, p. 88) saddled with an excessive burden of guilt and repressions, not the least of which stem from the often Oedipal nature of their mother-son relationship. In one of his efforts to shed the identity-crippling effect his mother has had on him, Portnoy angrily declares that the reason he and men such as the "good to
the last drop" (PC, p. 135) suicide victim, Ronald Nimkin, cannot and will not be what their mothers want is

BECAUSE WE CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE! BECAUSE YOU FUCKING JEWISH MOTHERS ARE JUST TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR! (PC, p. 136).

What men like himself want, Portnoy says, is simply to "be left alone" (PC, p. 136).

Two more reasons for Portnoy's identity problem are, one, that he is only partially assimilated into the mainstream of American culture and, two, that he is unable or unwilling to completely divest himself of his Judaic roots. The result of this incomplete assimilation is that Portnoy is left in a state of ethnic and cultural limbo having "not yet arrived at a place where he can have a confident new identity." Nowhere is this more evident than in Portnoy's pilgrimage to Israel, the very origin of his Jewish heritage. That he does not fit into either a totally Jewish society or a totally American one is revealed in his journey to the Holy Land.

Since Portnoy's major fixations deal with sex, Roth chose a proper symbol to express his protagonist's lack of affinity for a completely Jewish social order: Portnoy's impotence. First with a young female Army lieutenant (in a dream), and then with Naomi, "the Jewish Pumpkin," Portnoy discovers he cannot "get it up in the State of Israel" (PC, pp. 289-91), and, in chagrin, he asks "How's that for symbolism, bubi?" (PC, p. 291).
Although his impotence in Israel may symbolize a dissatisfaction with traditional Judaism, Portnoy is not altogether pleased with his assimilation into American society either. "Yes," he replies to Naomi's sharply nationalistic badgering, "I am a patriot too, you, only in another place!" Yet that other place is somewhere, Portnoy has to admit, "Where I also don't feel at home!" (PC, p. 306).

Tony Tanner has said that for many of Roth's heroes, including Portnoy, "There is no real knowing of the self until it becomes aware of the past it is impaled on" and that for these characters "the sense of self and untranquil recollections from the past are inseparable." Tanner's suggestion that Portnoy's identity problem is in part prompted by the continuing impact of the protagonist's past experience appears to be valid, and there is textual evidence to support this contention.

What Portnoy cannot eliminate from his past is, of course, his guilt, specifically the guilt he feels about his sexual behavior. In the scene just after he has first picked up the "Monkey," Portnoy, fearing immediate retribution for the gratification of his sexual desires, declares:

But don't you see—my right mind is just another name for my fears! My right mind is simply that inheritance of terror that I bring with me out of my ridiculous past. That tyrant, my superego, he should be strung up, that son of a bitch, hung
by his fucking storm-trooper's boots till he's dead! (PC, p. 181).

And after he has failed to have either a sexual or a spiritual relationship with Naomi, Portnoy moans:

And all I wanted was to give a little pleasure—and make a little for myself. Why, why can I not have some pleasure without the retribution following behind like a Caboose! Pig? Who, me? And all at once it happens again, I am impaled again upon the long ago, what was, what will never be! The door slams, she is gone...and I am whimpering on the floor with MY MEMORIES! My endless childhood! Which I won't relinquish—or which won't relinquish me! (PC, p. 306).

Portnoy's problem of self-identity, then, is fairly clearly related to the fragmentation of his personality caused by the emotional and intellectual tug of war in which he is engaged with his parents, especially his mother, his Jewish heritage and faulty assimilation into American society, and his repression-filled past. His progress in this battle for self-identity has been variously interpreted by the critics.

Portnoy's Complaint ends with Portnoy's long howl against "the ridiculous disproportion of the guilt" he feels he has to carry and with the psychiatrist, Dr. Spielvogel, announcing "So....Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (PC, p. 309). Eileen Z. Cohen interprets this
ending as meaning that "Alex must once again live the nightmare," and Tony Tanner surprisingly says that Dr. Spielvogel "opens his mouth only to close the book." Patricia Meyer Spacks shows a little higher degree of critical acumen when she describes Portnoy's scream at the end of the book as showing his "pain of partial awareness," but Alan Warren Friedman seems to have analyzed most accurately the ending of Portnoy's Complaint and the status of Portnoy's continuing identity problem. "The book ends," Friedman says, "with a cry for help and the possibility of a beginning," and the optimism that such a conclusion engenders should not be ignored, for, as Friedman further states, the book is "after all, only Portnoy's first session of self-analysis and self-definition."

Reflecting on the discussions above, it seems clear that in his early work one of Philip Roth's major concerns is the problem of self-identity. It has been shown, here, that most of his major characters in the first four books, for a variety of reasons, are searching for a solution to the puzzle of personal identity. Some of the characters, like Sergeant Marx and Eli Peck, succeed in their quests, but most fail. For those who do succeed it is usually a traumatic, nerve-wracking victory, and for the failures it is a defeat that often leaves them with a shattered personality—and in one case, that of Lucy
Nelson Bassart, dead.

In these early books of Roth's there seems to be a subtle shift in neurotic tendencies among the characters, beginning with the fairly stable Neil Klugman and ending with the tortured collage of neuroses that is Alexander Portnoy. Whatever degree of neurosis these characters show, however, it can be said that very few of Roth's leading protagonists achieve self-identity or an integrated personality, and that they remain a rather pathetic group of quivering, tension-ridden "fractured heroes."
FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION


2 Peter Shaw, "Portnoy and His Creator," Commentary, 47, May 1969, pp. 77-78.


8 Glicksberg, p. 196.


CHAPTER ONE


15Deer, p. 354.

16Guttmann, p. 255.

17Isaac, p. 90.


19Detweiler, p. 3.

20Leer, p. 135.

21Isaac, p. 91.

22Isaac, p. 91.

23Deer, p. 356.

24Landis, p. 264.

25Deer, p. 356.

26Leer, p. 145.

CHAPTER TWO


33 Donaldson, p. 22.

34 Donaldson, p. 31.

35 Donaldson, p. 33.


39 Detweiler, p. 29.

CHAPTER THREE


43 Levine, p. 164.

44 Gilman, p. 19.
CHAPTER FOUR

50 Roth, "Writing About Jews," p. 450.
52 Shaw, pp. 77, 79.
53 Levine, pp. 165, 169.
56 Cohen, p. 161.
57 Friedman, pp. 42-43.
60 Levine, p. 170.
61 Tanner, p. 311.
62 Friedman, p. 57.
63 Tanner, p. 315.
64 Tanner, p. 311.
65 Cohen, p. 168.
66 Tanner, p. 316.
67 Spacks, p. 635.
68 Friedman, p. 59.
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Cohen, Eileen Z. "Alex in Wonderland or Portnoy's Complaint." Twentieth Century Literature, 17, July 1971, pp. 161-68.


