



# A critical view on American Jewishness and the use of Irony in Philip Roth's "Goodbye Columbus"

**Cijo Christofer. J.**, Reg.No: 22113224011001, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, St. John's College of Art and Science, Ammandivilai, Nagercoil Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India - 627 012

**Dr. R. S. Regin Silvest**, Assistant Professor/Research Supervisor, Department of English, St. John's College of Art and Science, Ammandivilai, Nagercoil Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India - 627 012

## Abstract

The 1950s might be considered the beginning of the "Golden age" of Jewish American writing, which helped to shape and influence American culture. The rise of Jewish American writing may be seen as a turning point, the first of many works of ethnic literature that the academia would recognize as valuable. Philip Milton Roth is one of the most notoriously divisive authors in modern literature as a whole and Jewish American literature in specific. *Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth upset the literary community with its harsh portrayal of Jews. Roth, following a cue from Jewish co-medians, was more than ready to demonstrate, exaggerate, and satirize Jewish dysfunction. In contrast, earlier Jewish American writing cared about presenting Jews favorably. This is exemplified to the fullest extent in the *Goodbye Columbus* short tale "Defender of the Faith," when a Jewish soldier uses his origins to evade his obligations. However, the book focuses on Jews developing as they move into the suburbs and struggle to adapt to American life rather than the military or World War II. From the publication of *Goodbye Columbus*, a set of tales, in 1959, until his formal retirement announcement, Roth has consistently caused waves in the vast body of American literature. In his frequently published pieces, Jewish American characters are seen grappling with how to balance their urgent need to be totally "American" with a firmly rooted sense of "self-identity." His harsh and ironic pictures of Jewish life in a compelling and contentious style that is allegedly pornographic and humorous, as well as the scatological information in some of his early works, have garnered not only widespread critical attention but also established his place in the vast field of American fiction.

**Keywords:** Judaism, notoriously, American Culture, Scatological., Modernization.

With more than fifty years of writing experience and what is perhaps an unfair and misunderstood reputation, Roth primarily draws from his "Jewish American upbringing" and experiences as a writer to explore a wide range of topics, including the search for one's identity, the tension between traditional and modern moral values, the blurring of the lines between reality and fiction, and more. Writing about growing up Jewish in America and American identity at the end of the 20th century, post-war fiction, black humor, and satire, autobiographical and meta-fictional engagements with the art of fiction, sexuality, and gender in the feminist and post-feminist eras, and aging and the aging process are just a few of the many categories that Roth's vast and extensive body of work falls under the end of life. Throughout his extensive and exciting creative career, Roth has continuously written books that tackle issues facing Jewish Americans, showing Jewish Americans as they attempt to balance a strong sense of "self-identity" with the urgent need to be truly "American." His harsh and satirical depictions of Jewish life in a style that is captivating, controversial, allegedly pornographic, and humorous, along with the scatological content in some of his early works, have not only drawn widespread critical attention but also solidified his position as the preeminent Jewish American writer following Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow.

Philip Roth is one of the most important Jewish authors of contemporary American literature. His work explores issues of diversity, inner psychology, and Judaism. At the age of 26, he was the recipient of a National Book Award for *Goodbye, Columbus*. The cinematic rendition of the tale is equally captivating and humorous. As a novelist, Roth unquestionably has a funny and humorous viewpoint while providing the facts in a fact-based environment. However, while rudeness or hostility are prevalent in practically all novels and nonfiction works, Roth's approach and narrative are rather distinct. In actuality, despite how frequently he employs rudeness in his writing, Roth may be seen as having humorous and comedic qualities, which enhance the appeal and wit of his works. Neil Klugman, the protagonist of Roth's 1959 first tale and book *Goodbye, Columbus*, which also includes five more short tales, is a librarian who aspires to become an upper-classman by marrying into the Pattinkins family. In Roth's early books, ethics and morality play a major part. The paradox of trying to be more magnificent in a world that is tainted

and hypocritical overwhelms his previous characters. Roth also highlights the evolving conventional family and the roles that men and women play in each other's lives. One may classify the novella as a satirical work. Over time, Roth's satirical and critical gaze has shifted both inside and outside. Focusing on Jewish American culture and tradition, he looked both inside, at his identification as a Jewish writer, and outside, at the shortcomings and vices of Jewish American families and communities.

Roth satirically captures how Jewish people are affected by the shifting roles and structures in American Jewish culture. Unfortunately, some critics and reviewers find it difficult to understand his satirical writing. Sometimes, Roth's critical viewpoint overarouses their curiosity. Newark and New Jersey are significant places for Philip Roth, and they serve as symbols for both the affluent and the poor in the novella. There are a lot of differences between the critics. While some support Roth's vision for the city of New Jersey, others find his factually based reality in *Goodbye, Columbus*, disappointing. *Columbus* Roth draws inspiration for this chapter of *Goodbye* from his upbringing. In the novella, he employs a sarcastic manner in place of comedic elements. Given that they are of the same ethnicity, Roth undoubtedly focuses on Jewish culture and interpersonal relationships even if Afro-Americans and Jews make up the majority of the ethnic groupings. But Neil also has a young black lad who frequents the library who is his alter ego, and their paths are meant to cross. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, the main focus of the portrayal is Judaism, along with the distinctions and interactions between the high and lower classes. Roth parodies Jewish people of all social classes' way of life and aspirations.

One of Roth's most defining traits is his enduring humor. He is a master comic—a comedian par excellence—because of his ability to portray the nuanced aspects of spoken word and human existence in a range of accents, intonations, and cadences. However, his command of language and superfluous literary devices may cause the untrained reader to overlook the underlying philosophical and political sarcasm and critique. Despite being primarily written from a "Jewish perspective," his satires offer a "universal insight" into the shortcomings of the much-lauded American way of life. Jewish history is a tale of fear, captivity, and exodus. Assessing Jewish history as a combination of "promise" and disappointment, "appointment" and disillusionment would not be incorrect. It was a life of terrified compromises and existential adjustment, a life in which one's "Jewishness" was a perpetual source of worry. Being Jewish under Roman rule was never easy, and living under Nazi rule in Europe during pogroms and gas chamber explosions was far worse. The prevailing historical perspective holds that life was quite easy for Jews in America. However, the Jewish experience in America was distinct because it had a healthy blend of orthodox, reform, conservative, and reconstructionist adherents.

One of the things that set out the Jewish experience was the ongoing struggle between isolation and integration. The need to integrate and adapt was always at odds with the steadfast desire to keep a distance to retain the historically upheld "chosen race" identity. This was a deliberate attempt to minimize the real distinction that resulted from the need to maintain one's identity. The "American experience" was distinct, even if this conflict persisted across the Jewish diaspora. The distinction in the assimilation theme is where the distinctiveness of the American experience originates. For a "second generation" American Jew, the conflict between assimilation and estrangement was unlike anything else. The conflict that existed between Judaism and Christianity, as well as the associated prejudices and alienations that were exemplified by the department stores' signs that said, "No dogs or Jews allowed," or the classified ads that stated, "Christians only need to apply," faced by the first generation of American Jews. However, the Judaeo-Christian "inter-religious" struggle gave way to an "intra-religious," or better still, an "intra-Jewish," conflict for the second generation of Jews residing in America. It was between the young, assimilationist Jews and their traditional and parochial parents, and between the believing Jews and the secularised Jews. That was the American post-World War II situation.

In America, the dichotomy between isolation and integration turns into an existential dilemma. Unlike in Europe, the Jews were not singled out for distinction because the inter-religious and inter-racial disparities that existed in America were shared and dispersed throughout a wide range of racial and ethnic groupings. The tension started when many immigrant Jews discovered that a secular American sense of self was desirable, sometimes even more desirable than their Jewish identity itself, in their quest for the idealized American dream—a dream of prosperity, freedom, and equality of opportunity—the Horatio Alger myth of "rags-to-riches." One of the most significant eras in the development of Jewish American writing was the years 1950–1970. The 1950s were known as the "Jewish decade" (Cronin and Alan, xx) in American literature, and authors like Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Herman Wouk, and Chaim Potok explored the themes of Jewish American estrangement in the wake of the Holocaust, World War II, and modernism. They contrasted Jewish life before and following the Shoah in the few decades that followed. One of the most significant authors of modern Jewish American literature, Philip Roth has uncompromisingly tackled the issue of Jewish American absorption and the problems that accompany it for more than 50 years.

Reactions to *Goodbye Columbus* were divided among reviewers and readers. While some called it a work brimming with literary assurance, others charged Roth with taking advantage of Jewish-American culture to establish himself as an American writer. Diverse and incongruous opinions exist on the nature of this work. For instance, Jeremy Learner refers to *Goodbye Columbus* as an "indictment of the Jewish upper-middle class" in his article "Conversion of the Jews" (Jeremy Learner, 28). According to Roth expert Debra Shostak, an English professor at the College of Wooster, Ohio, in "Impersonation and the diaspora Jews," the process of Jewish assimilation during World War II is the main inspiration for Roth's *Goodbye Columbus*. In addition to the exterior dilemma that Roth discusses in this book, the reader will also face an internal dilemma since each of the five stories that Roth has collected has a distinct emphasis or many focal points. Therefore, it would be a little unrealistic to give a generic or "blanket theme." *Goodbye Columbus* was a fictional portrayal of the post-World War II reality that existed at the time. It showed indications of consumerism, socioeconomic awareness, hypocrisy, favoritism, blind assimilationism in favor of social advancement, etc., and the author believed that if these trends continued unchecked and unreported, they might have grave consequences in the future that were comparable to the German Nazi holocaust. According to Roth, Jewish society in America as a whole has to get out of these situations as quickly as possible.

A prime illustration of the Rothian perspective that the newly wealthy Jewish community's glaring materialism is vulgar and detrimental to human values is seen in *Goodbye Columbus*. In the first tale, Roth attempts to both explain and parody this

materialism. He contrasts the nouveau riche lifestyle of the New Jersey suburb "Short Hills" with the working-class Jewish existence of "Newark," as represented by Neil Klugman. This novella, which shares the same title as the book, focuses on three main issues: Jewish materialism, class consciousness, and the newly discovered autonomy of sexuality in the new country. Brenda Patimkin, the male protagonist's counterpart, serves as a metaphor for Neil Klugman, the male protagonist, and his struggle with his Jewish-American identity. In his distinctive manner, Roth offers a critique of Jewish consumerism, assimilation, and sexual freedom against the backdrop of a tale of longing and youthful love, contrasting one generation with the next, each of them in their way correct in what they believe to be right. The Patimkins and the Klugmans are examples of the two generations that differ greatly in terms of their outlooks, lives, and attitudes toward society and religion.

Patimkins are a symbol of the affluent, suburban, materialistic post-World War II generation that tries to break away from its history to become a part of the predominantly gentile national elite. Brenda's mocking comment on Mrs. Patimkin, in which she states, she still thinks we live in Newark" (Goodbye Columbus, 27). When young Patimkins gets cosmetic surgery to improve her physical looks, it becomes clear that they are materialistically wealthy and have perfectly assimilated. In his critical article, Alan France points, out, "Philip Roth's Goodbye Columbus and the Limits of Commodity Culture calls it as a conscious attempt to create a physical distance from their ethnicity and lower middle-class roots in Newark" (Alan, 84). Additionally, the novel contains metaphorical cues that allude to the same theme. For example, the Sports Tree at the Patimkins symbolizes the nouveau riche's emphasis on outdoor sports activity, which contrasts sharply with Neil Klugman's scholarly lifestyle and his residence at the Newark Public Library's reference desk. The struggle between conventional morality and the sexual freedom connected to the "American dream" is the second area of emphasis for Roth in the narrative. Brenda is a symbol of suburban affluence and the American ideal. Premarital sex between Brenda and Neil is something that her conservative father views as one of life's "shocks" (Goodbye Columbus, 98). Her mother, in a letter to Brenda, claims that their activity is something that, "she never in her life be able to understand" (Ibid, 99).

Mrs. Patimkin would carry with her to the afterlife the conflict between assimilationistic liberal freedom and conventional morality. When Ron and Harriet's marriage is shown, the internal tension that the characters are experiencing is evident and perfectly aligned with traditional Jewish morals. Brenda's diaphragm becomes a counter-witness if their traditional wedding turns into a symbol of Jewish ethical conduct even in the face of material affluence, but her parents' disapproval highlights the inner turmoil that the nouveau riche American Jews experience. Roth views as the great American predicament as a predicament that arises from the desire for social mobility, class advancement, and a socio-ethnic assimilation and identification. This predicament is constantly at odds with the desire to uphold traditional Jewish morality, which does not sit well with the accompanying indulgence and sexual freedom. Brenda and Neil provide a very apparent case of dilemma. Neil's last rejection of Brenda and Brenda's choice to go back to her parents represent a pair of "divided selves." They are the victims of an unsolved dilemma, an internal struggle between assimilation and traditionalism, both of which contain aspects that are equally "desirable" and "undesirable. It is a narrative about seeing one's own reflection back to oneself from the outside of Neil's idealized, intellectual, gentile America (Shostak, 119). It is the tale of a Jew realizing, despite his wealth and financial accomplishments, that he is an outsider. He describes himself as "a substance" (Goodbye Columbus, 103) as he stands at the entrance of the Lamont Library, but when he boards the train to return to Newark, he keeps his identification as a Jewish outsider and the problem remains unsolved.

The purpose of this research project is to examine how Roth used ironic de'doublement to reveal Neil's theological crisis, psychological breakdown, and fanatical behaviour rather than to demonstrate how he regains his emotional composure and Christian faith. Neil's middle-class background, which prevents him from realizing his romantic dreams of living on a Pacific island, contributes to his sense of social inferiority. In Patimkins House, Neil has feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, which hinder him from completing his work effectively in the library. This not only reflects his work as an ironist but also his behaviors broken life and the materialistic society of America. In addition, Roth paints the protagonist as sardonic, making them laugh at themselves while he does so. Columbus introduces Neil as a speaker who shares stories about his summer vacations and manner of life in Goodbye. Living in Brenda's house causes him to lose his sense of self, which he fails to recognize due to his low sensitivity and desire to avoid apparent obligations. Neil has no plans for the future either. Neil compels himself to endure the existence of a piece of human clay to be molded by other people and forces, as seen by his defensiveness and passivity. He becomes an optimist of Columbus and offers a diaphragm to Brenda rather than marriage, but he is never able to realize his goal. Neil is not a skilled organizer. Religion is also an unfulfilled desire for him. Despite what he tells himself, he is not a decent Jew. He is incapable of becoming a decent Jew or a Christian. For him, God is a comedian and religion is a joke.

Neil's wish to avoid having to do apparent tasks demonstrates his lack of ambition in his work at Newark. He is always driven by rash decisions and impulses. His life is confusing and without purpose. In addition, he has strong mixed feelings regarding his background and identity as a Jew who lives in America and adheres to its culture. He seeks to avoid his obligations since he is uneasy and insecure in American society. But since the works' release, a lot of critics have overlooked Roth's use of sarcastic denouement. According to Nilsen, the central theme of Goodbye Columbus is Neil Klugman, the protagonist, and his fight to define and maintain his identity. Nilsen discovers that Neil's devotion to Brenda Patimkin and his quest for social acceptance align with his perception of his distinct identity. Brenda is lost in the process, but he doesn't give up on his principles or make any concessions. According to Peter L. Rudnytsky, the relationship between Neil and Brenda Patimkin in the book is an interpretation of Neil's interactions with people of color.

Neil A twenty-three-year-old Newark slum inhabitant, college graduate, and librarian falls in love with Brenda Patimkin, an upper-middle-class woman. Because he is a middle-class Jew and cannot achieve his dreams and thrive in his relationship with Brenda, Neil feels socially inferior. Neil is plagued by contradictions inside contradictions. He always strives to find happiness in things outside of himself, like Brenda's flawlessness and beauty, but he never quite reaches his own level of perfection. However, he lies to both Brenda and to himself when she forces him to say what he intends to say: "I'm not planning anything. I'm not a planer. I'm a lover" (36). His most crucial strategy, which was to force Brenda into getting fitted for a diaphragm, backfired and put a stop to the affair because of his rash intentions and ambitions. Roth aims to ridicule Jews in America who struggle with their

cross-cultural identities in one manner or another. Roth also exhibits some insensitivity and defensiveness in his heroes. Similarly, Roth's sardonic rage and self-reflexive narrative intrusions both drive and undercut the protagonist's humorously neurotic struggle to move in and out of their Jewishness. The narrative voice, which is shared by both heroes, exhibits the sarcastic limits of its own perspective through parody and neurotic self-consumption. Roth's protagonists therefore exhibit the Prufrockian traits, having gone through a mental breakdown and a religious crisis before recovering their emotional engagement and Christian faith. They draw Roth's wrath and turn into ironic butts because their broken selves are unable to piece together the Jewish American existence.

The essence of laughter, whereby the sarcastic of the author emphasizes the capacity for self-laughing. The ironist is perpetually aware of the difference between his detached observing self and his empirical self. Neil also has an observational self and an empirical self, one as an ironist and the other as a Jew in a multicultural America with conflicting social roles. Neil Klugman, a young librarian from a lower class background who lives with his aunt away from his parents, develops feelings for Brenda Patinkin, an upper class woman he met at a country club. The connections between Brenda, The Patimkins, and Neil—who remains with Aunt Gladys—are the main topics of the novella. With the exception of Aunt Gladys, none of the novella's characters can be considered humorous. According to Halio, Aunt Gladys has a humorous demeanour and is a typical Jewish mother. But the readers are drawn in by her caustic portrayal. She is portrayed as a comedic figure rather than as a typical, traditional Jewish relative. Pinsky's suggestion of this figure supports the novella's use of satire. He claims:

To be sure, there had been Jewish satirists before. Mendele the Bookseller exposed the corruption and folly of shtetl life with the savagery of a Swift. And, the Prophets did not hesitate to throw a well-aimed stone at the Establishment when they felt the urge, Divine or otherwise. But Goodbye, Columbus, so the argument went, was another story altogether (1980: 35).

The humour in the novella comes from the traits and culture of Jews. For example, both groups make fun of the size and form of their noses. Neil feels self-conscious about his nose as he starts to flirt with Brenda. Moreover, the nose is a crucial indicator of a person's Jewish identity and has to be functioned in the upper-class society of Columbus, Georgia. The story of all the Patimkins, including Brenda's father's nose surgery, is hilarious. Neil, a lower-class person, does not see anything wrong with his nose; the Patimkin family believes it is a symbol of their Jewish heritage, but it needs to be removed. To be a true American, one must conceal their Jewish traits. Brenda is an outcome of the capitalist system that affluent individuals initiated. As was already established, Roth's main goal in writing the novella is to satirize Jewish life in the 1960s. While Neil Klugman adopts the phrase "get rich quick," the potential of achieving one's dreams is the only goal shared by the Patimkins' daughters. Brenda is portrayed as a young woman who follows Klugman around as she pleases. Brenda's father's views, which include buying her whatever she wants and allowing her to win every game, make her weird and give her an unhealthy personality and mindset. In the novella, Brenda, "who appeared in countless jokes" (Diner, 2001: 139), is portrayed as a humorous humorist. She becomes more witty when she is around Neil. That notion is supported by the protagonist's talks. Puns and ambiguities, on the one hand, are highly significant in her language universe. The fancy word she uses is meant to signify an extraordinarily fancy thing, incident, or person that your enviousness causes you to play down," but in reality, it actually means "beyond your social strata and/or tax bracket," according to UrbanDictionary. There's also a reference to Neil and her relative socioeconomic standing. Conversely, Brenda's other characterization involves her repeating a contentious term in a particular situation to highlight

One of the novella's primary features is the use of satire. Roth received extremely strong criticism because, in their opinion, the book presents Jewish culture and individuals in contentious ways. For example, Brenda's mother is shown as stiff, unimportant, and uncaring, in contrast to a typical Jewish mother; this makes the topic of paternity and maternity fraught with Jewish conventions for the upper class. She sees Brenda's boyfriend Neil Klugman as a functioning one. This is the point of view that is considered throughout the novella. Brenda's parents write letters to their daughter to express their sentiments after learning about Brenda and Neil's close relationship. Her mother uses satirical writing to express her sentiments, despite her father's insistence that she shouldn't worry about her and his repeated assurances that he will get her the coat she desires. she writes; "About your friend, I have no words. He is his parents' responsibility and I cannot imagine what kind of home life he had that he could act that way. Certainly, that was a fine way to repay us for the hospitality" (Goodbye, Columbus 105). In his Newark, Roth used sarcasm to portray his surroundings and culture. Reviewers who are specifically Jewish heavily criticise him for his choice against representation in Jewish family structures. "American Jews' use of comedy to mitigate ambivalences surrounding assimilation, as well as gender and generational tensions within Jewish communities and individual families" (Materson, 2009). In fact, one of the key details Roth presents about Mrs. Patimkin's character is how men perceived women back then. She is described as a devoted Jew in a society where Jewish males support the non-Jewish people. Furthermore, her pessimistic views get less compassion and attention from the readers.

Compared to Neil and Aunt Gladys, Roth's upper-class characters employ humour in a somewhat different way. The Jewish upper class is known for their vituperation and use of sexuality-related language, which has drawn scathing criticism and accusations that Roth is anti-Semitic. Neil, however, gets to know the senior Patimkin family members at Brenda's brother's wedding. This time, Neil and the seniors' jokes and humour are more polite and steer clear of sexuality. There are differences in the distance between the person who acts as though she doesn't remember anything he says and the person who is indifferent to everything. In actuality, Roth depicts the characteristics of every Jewish class in the 1960s. Two of their classmates, Neil and Aunt Gladys, are portrayed in jokes about Jews as conventional Jews. However, Jews from higher social classes tend to be more sexual and sarcastic in their culture. They appear more integrated and ready to adopt consumer society, which leads to Roth being strongly condemned and held accountable for anti-Semitism. Roth highlights the clever and humorous ways of both courses, while facing harsh criticism. Budik sums up the novella in the way that we usually,

"'Goodbye, Columbus' is a comic satire "of upper-class Jewish American life. Nonetheless, like 'Defender of the Faith,' it preserves behind the humor the serious question that Jewish assimilation raises: does assimilation signal the end of Jewish identity as such, or is the Jewish American, as embodied by Nathan Marx or Neil

Klugman, the beginning of a new form of Jewish identity characterized by a secularizing Americanization of Judaism's commitment to ethics and communal activism?" (Budik 488-9).

### Works cited

- Budik, Emily (2000). "Philip Roth" *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth- Century American Short Story* Ed: Blanche H. Gelfant and Lawrence Graver New York: Columbia University Press 487-490
- Cronin, Gloria L and Alan Berger. *Encyclopaedia of Jewish American Literature*. New York: Facts On File Inc. 2009. Print.
- France, Alan W. "Philip Roth's Goodbye Columbus and the Limits of Commodity Culture." *MELUS*, 15.4(1988)83-89. Print.
- Hunter, Jeffrey W. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol.201, New York: Thomson Gale. 2005. Print.
- Learner, Jeremy. "The Conversion of the Jews." *Critical Essays on Philip Roth*. Ed. Sanford Pinsker. Boston: G.K. Hall &Co. 1982.Print.
- Diner, Hasia R. (2001). "Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation, by Riv-Ellen Prell" *Shofar* 19/2 139
- Materson, Lisa G. (2009). "You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother" *Shofar* 28/1 190+ <https://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2022296041/you-never-call-you-never-write-a-history-of-the>
- O'Donnell, Patrick; Madden, David W. and Nieland, Justus (2011). *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Volume: 2 Malden: Wiley- Blackwell.
- Roth, Philip (1989). *Goodbye, Columbus* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Rudnytsky, Peter L. "Goodbye, Columbus: Roth's of the Narcissist as a young Man." *Critique* 51 (2005): 25-42.

