

Nusrat Raida

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Professor Nochomovitz

FIQWS

The Impact of Secularism on Philip Roth's Writing

Philip Roth, an esteemed writer, was born in Newark, New Jersey on March 19, 1933, to two Jewish Americans. Roth's parents were children of immigrants. His father had a grade school education while his mother had a high school diploma. Regarding his childhood, Roth grew up in a predominantly Jewish area of Newark. Although he came from a Jewish family and was raised in a Jewish neighborhood, he considered himself to be anti-religious. He went on to graduate from Newark's Weequahic High School in 1950 and he was enrolled in Rutgers University in Newark. However, after a year there, he transferred to Bucknell University. Prior to attending Bucknell University, Roth didn't take writing seriously, but afterward, his love of books and literature as well as his enthusiasm for writing both intensified. He earned his B.A from Bucknell University in English. Later, Roth was given a scholarship to attend the University of Chicago, where he earned an M.A. in English literature in 1955 and began writing in addition to teaching. He published his first book, *Goodbye Columbus*, on May 7, 1959, and made reference to Jewish faith and cultural integration in it. Through his stories, Roth wrote more about secularism and secular Jews in America than he did about religious Jews. Many aspects of Philip Roth's writing are influenced by his background.

In the article "Face To face", Ira Nadel discusses what Roth taught him about the difficulties of having a Jewish identity in America and how Jewish people interact with society. he states, "Growing up American is his persistent subject, blending with his Jewish environment, which surprisingly and unexpectedly provided him with the material of his early writing-prompts first by Richard Stern at Chicago and then by his first editor, George Starbuck at Houghton Mifflin, who shuffled and edited the stories in *Goodbye, Columbus* to emphasize their Jewish themes." He primarily wrote about "secular" Jews and produced "secular Jewish American fiction" (Jacques Berlinerblau).

Philip Roth's novel *Goodbye Columbus* was one of his most popular works. In "A Humorous and Satirical Perspective to Jewish Classes in *Goodbye, Columbus*, By Philip Roth" article Kalay Faruk makes a connection between Roth's writing and criticism that he created within Jewish characters and criticism that he received for his work. He states "'*Goodbye, Columbus*," a novella, recounts a frustrated love affair between Brenda Patimkin, daughter of a nouveau riche Jewish man, and Neil Klugman, a poor young Newark librarian, in which the empty, mindless, false values of this new upper class created by World War II, of which the Jewish sector had its special features, are satirized". Also, he mentioned a piece that states "Since when do Jewish people live in Short Hills? They couldn't be real Jews believe me." "They're real Jews," I said. This dialogue discloses the perspective of lower-class Jews to East Coast Jews. Charging them with the idea that they are assimilated and abandoning all the Jews' traditions and culture, the lower-class Jews hold at bay with them. (Kalay Faruk)" This is an illustration of how Roth differentiated Jewish characters in his fictional work. The Jewish characteristics and culture are the source of humor in the novel. "The reason why Roth

criticized so harshly is that the novel depicts Jewish culture and people under the controversial conditions according to the critics”. In this article he also states “The novella and its derivation seem satirical and humoristic according to the reviewers. The critics depict him in a much-diversified way: “He has been read as a political radical, an anti-communist, a stand-up (or sit-down) comedian, a misogynist, a liberal apologist, a solipsist, a communitarian, a Jewish godfather, and even an anti-Semite. (Kalay, Faruk)”

After reading Roth's short story "*Eli, the Fanatic*," I can infer that it is somewhat similar to his novel "*Goodbye Columbus*" in the way it introduces Jewish characters who have differing viewpoints on their own religion. In "*Eli, the Fanatic*" Eli is a secular Jewish lawyer in Woodenton who deals with local issues. Eli initially attempted to have the Yeshiva moved out of the residential area because he was concerned that the religious Jews living there would become a threat to his assimilated way of life. In my perspective, Eli is a Third-generation Jew who is losing his Jewishness. Because the man wearing the black suit, in Eli's opinion, represents ancient tradition and isn't assimilated because they have their own language and culture. He wrote a letter to Tzoref explaining that the man with the black hat and clothes had been bothering him and his community and he stated, “This is, after all 20th century, and we don’t think it too much to ask that the members of our community dress in a manner appropriate to the time and place,” (Eli, *The Fanatic* 263). But Eli was unaware that they are the Holocaust survivors who follow a stricter religious code than he does. In this story, Philip Roth made the argument that as generations pass, individuals become more secular. In the article Philip Roth’s Hebrew School O’Donoghue, Gerard states “In “Operation Shylock” Philip Roth expands on the nature of this negotiation: Hebrew school wasn’t school at all but a part of the deal that our parents had cut with their parents, the sop to pacify the old generation—who wanted the grandchildren to be

jews the way that they were jews,”(Gerard). As a third generation American Jew, Roth himself was more of an anti-religious Jew than a religious Jew.

As a reader, I found it incredibly fascinating that Roth used his work to highlight his own struggles as a secular Jew. Additionally, I had no prior knowledge of any religion besides my own. Moreover, I found the connection between America and Jewish immigrants interesting. After reading “*Eli, the Fanatic*” and understanding that the author is a third-generation Jew, I was also able to draw comparisons between Philip Roth's writing and my own life, such as how my grandparents are more religious than my parents and I am less religious than they are. This led me to make the connection that as generations go on, people become more secular and modern.

Work Cited

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