

A Struggle for Identity: Neil Klugman's Quest in "Goodbye, Columbus"

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In this novella, published 1959, one of Philip Roth's finest works of fiction, the protagonist Neil Klugman is involved in a struggle to develop and preserve an identity of his own amid different environments and conflicting impulses within himself. Throughout the story he makes love to Brenda Patimkin and tries to find a role for himself in society that corresponds to what he regards as his own, unique self. In the process he loses Brenda, but he refuses to compromise and surrender what he regards as his integrity. As a modern, liberal intellectual living in the conservative American society of the 1950s, he identifies with a set of secular and rationalistic values that bring him into conflict with the world around him. He represents the third generation of a Jewish immigrant group that has experienced great changes and transitions, and his milieu is basically working class or lower middle class and strongly colored by traditional Jewish ethnic attitudes and customs. He himself is a librarian with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and an assimilationist approach to American society.¹

Neil is clearly ready to break away from the life-style of the parental generation, and when he meets Brenda, he is attracted both to her beauty and her manners. A resident of the wealthy suburb of Short Hills, she seems to represent a different and better world. Newark and Short Hills represent two sharply contrasted regions in the symbolic geography of the story, and Neil tries to define his own identity mainly in relation to these two extremes. The library where he works offers another possibility, but at this stage Neil finds it disappointing because he cannot identify with the "strange fellows" that are employed there and worries that he may end up like one of them, a dusty librarian with a pale skin whose life becomes a "numbness" and a "muscleless" devotion to his work.² Always alert and aware of the imperfections of his surroundings, Neil establishes a distance between himself and his colleagues and wants to define himself in terms of his opposition to them, just as he does in relation to his own family and, later, to that of Brenda. In the library he achieves such a separation by sympathizing with a little black boy who spends hours in the art book section looking at pictures of Gauguin's Tahiti paintings. Neil appreciates the longing of the boy for a freer and more sensuous life which is so powerfully expressed in these colorful scenes and figures. The pictures are part of a chain of imagery which includes a South Sea island and symbolize an alternative life-style which Neil longs for. Though he becomes disappointed in Brenda's family, Neil continues to dream of a better and more interesting life which may lie in store for the two of them.³

¹According to Steven M. Cohen, the third generation is characterized by a "diminishing attachment to Jewish life" and a "decline" of "Jewish identification." *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York: Tavistock, 1983), p. 60.

²Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (New York: Bantam, 1959), p. 4. All references are to this edition.

³According to Norman Leer, however, the relationship between these two is "nothing more than a means of escape," and Neil "remains without the values of commitment which could take escape beyond itself." Here, Neil's love for Brenda is seen as pure escapism, whereas he in fact is engaged in a search for something and someone that he can commit himself to in a genuine fashion because they correspond to his real self. "Escape and Confrontation in the Short Stories of Philip Roth," *Christian Scholar*, 49 (1966), 135-36.

His actual dream about an island in the Pacific suggests that he is beginning to fear that the affair with Brenda cannot last, that the realities of their situation, the influence of the Patimkin environment, may destroy his goal of love and freedom. In the dream, he and the black boy, his coconspirator, as it were, are on a boat in the harbor of one of the islands, but soon they drift away from the nude Negro women on the shore and have to watch their island paradise disappear. The natives say "Goodbye, Columbus" (p. 53), the refrain of Ron's, Brenda's brother's, college record, thus suggesting that the two will not possess their dream, their America. The historical parallel is fitting, inasmuch as the real Columbus also became disillusioned in his quest for a better world. Thus Neil is spurred on by his fear that the affair will be over once Brenda returns to Radcliffe, and he begins to contemplate a marriage proposal as a way of securing her for himself. He is, however, afraid to propose since he is not sure of Brenda's reaction and suspects that there are still unresolved issues between them. Instead, he decides to ask her to wear a diaphragm both to increase his sexual pleasure and as a symbol of their defiantly intimate relationship out of wedlock.⁴

Another identity that is offered, so to speak, to Neil, is that of an employee in Mr. Patimkin's firm, where Ron already works. Mr. Patimkin suggests to Neil that he, too, would be able to learn the business, but Neil recognizes that he is unsuited for such a life. He is not robust enough for the work, but, on the other hand, he is attracted to the neighborhood where the company is located, the black section of Newark that once was peopled by immigrant Jews of his grandparents' generation. There is an authenticity and vitality in life as it was and is lived in these neighborhoods, and their pungent smells suggest it. The ways of the Jews of old as well as the blacks of the present are chaotic and povertyridden, yet more suited to real human needs than the middle-class way of life that is replacing it. The old blacks, for example, are not segregated from the community, but are placed in "screenless windows" (p. 64) where they can watch the throbbing life in the streets. Here, in spite of many problems, there is a freedom and zest for life that Neil appreciates and will not entirely give up struggling for in his own existence either. In a sense, the impossible Tahiti of his dreams is closer to him here than anywhere else, and at the end of the story he returns to the scenes of his childhood.

Though she resists the idea, Brenda finally accedes to Neil's request to get a diaphragm. She seems to do this both because she wants to be independent, but also because she is affected by Ron's upcoming marriage and begins to want the same thing for herself. For example, she acquires a new dress which makes her look as attractive as the bride, or even more so. Deep down, it seems, Brenda does not mind seeing herself in the role of Ron's Harriet, a lovely bride with a successful husband, being led to the altar on her father's arm and being protected and adored by her mother. But for the time being she carries on with Neil Klugman and goes to New York with him to obtain the diaphragm. For Neil, however, this turn of events is very serious and fraught with consequences. He is both enthusiastic about what he sees as Brenda's affirmation of their rebellious bond and anxious about the responsibilities that lie ahead of him now that their union is about to assume a more permanent aspect. His uncertainty about Brenda and himself emerges in his reflections in St. Patrick's cathedral, where he seeks refuge while she is in the doctor's office: "Now the doctor is about to wed Brenda to me, and I am not entirely certain this is all for the best. What is it I love, Lord? Why have I chosen? Who is

⁴The diaphragm does not exactly represent what has been called his dream of a "classless, creedless hedonism." It is true that Neil aims to break down the barriers of class and religious conventions, but hedonism is not a purpose in itself for him, but rather a means by which he affirms his dissenting values. Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 69.

Brenda?" (p. 71) One crucial question is the first one, concerning the nature of his love, and the answer that suggests itself is that Neil loves the possibilities that he sees in Brenda, apart from her physical attractiveness, and that he is haunted by a sense that he may be mistaken, that he does not really know her. That he may have an idealized vision of her is suggested in his thoughts about her during his trip to watch the deer at South Mountain Reservation.

Continuing his meditation in the church, Neil addresses God, but his "prayer" is hardly meant to be serious. In fact, the god he talks to seems to be a pantheistic one who is present in everything: "I was getting no answers, but I went on. If we meet you at all, God, it's that we're carnal, and acquisitive, and thereby partake of You. I am carnal, and I know you approve, I just know it. But how carnal can I get? I am acquisitive. Where do I turn now in my acquisitiveness? Where do we meet? Which prize is You?" (p. 71) Neil is hardly a philosophic pantheist, but he makes some good points in this strange inner monologue. If God is identical with a universal process of creation and life, our sexual urges must be one of the manifestations of the divine will. Moreover, if God made us acquisitive, he himself must share that trait in some sense. Neil has no problems with his carnal nature and welcomes it, and he also admits to being acquisitive. He is, however, less certain of the strength of this particular trait in himself and is overwhelmed by the roaring answer that Fifth Avenue gives to his question about the importance of the desire for possessions: "Which prize do you think, *schmuck*? Gold dinnerware, sporting-goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, bumpless noses, Patimkin Sink, Bonwit Teller—" (p. 71). Neil's concept of God is jocular, but it also embodies his satirical view of religion as an integrated part of the whole bourgeois value system of an acquisitive middle class. The prize of meeting this God is to join in the race for wealth and position, and it is here that Neil draws the line as far as he himself is concerned and insists on another self-definition.

The end of "Goodbye, Columbus" is ripe with imagery suggesting loss of love as well as illusions. Brenda's uncle Leo and his wife leave, looking like people "fleeing a captured city" (p. 84), and to Neil driving on the New Jersey Turnpike, the desolate landscape looks like "an oversight of God" (p. 84), a phrase that echoes the image of the valley of ashes in *The Great Gatsby*. When Brenda leaves for Boston, "the wind was blowing the fall in and the branches of the weeping willow were fingering at the Patimkin front lawn" (p. 85).⁵ At the library things are also changing, the black boy disappears and Neil is charged with discourtesy by an old gentleman who had wanted to borrow the Gauguin book. However, at this stage Neil has also changed his attitude toward his job and his colleagues. He becomes more assertive and sure of himself and invents a story to cover up his manipulations with the book. He is beginning to feel that he belongs in the library as much as the others, but on his own terms and according to his own definition, and he even has Mr. Scapello, his superior, apologizing to him as he is led to his new post and actually receives a promotion. He is aware of the change in him and half-ironically attributes his new-found strength to the lesson he has learnt in the Patimkin family, where there is a premium on aggressive behavior in the workplace. However, Neil's renewed attachment to the library does not bode well for his relationship with Brenda, who has never shown any appreciation of the job he has chosen for himself and the meaning it may have for him.

The last meeting of Brenda and Neil takes place in a Cambridge hotel where she has reserved a room, pretending that they are a married couple and wearing a fake wedding ring. At this point, Neil, with his strengthened sense of identity as

⁵The parallels between "Goodbye, Columbus" and Fitzgerald's novel are explored in Don Graham, "The Common Ground of 'Goodbye, Columbus' and *The Great Gatsby*," *Forum*, 13 (1976), 68-71.

a result of his experiences in the Patimkin family and the library, realizes that he has come to visit her because he wants to ask her to marry him: "it had been long enough. It was time to stop kidding about marriage" (p. 89). Her registering in the hotel also encourages him, since he sees it as a sign that she is getting to be more liberated and ready to subvert social conventions. However, she tells him that her parents have discovered her diaphragm at home and that she has received two letters from them, an angry one from her mother and a more conciliatory one from her father, who is all too willing to forgive and forget if she will only stop seeing Neil. The letters themselves are marvelous examples of the crippling conventionalism and total lack of horizon and perspective in sexual matters on the part of the parents.

Brenda's revelation comes as a shock to Neil, and he cannot help feeling that her carelessness in leaving the diaphragm indicates her half-conscious or subconscious wish to prevent their relationship from becoming serious and permanent. She is scared by any prospect which would force her into an open confrontation with her parents. Her decision to take a hotel room with Neil does not suggest any liberation but rather that she wants him as a casual lover. She indulges in what can be called a pseudorebellious act. But Neil is acutely aware of the significance of her forgetting the diaphragm and suspects that this means that they are incompatible. She denies having left it behind on purpose, and there is no way to prove that this has been the case. However, the fact that she has done it is enough. It clearly reveals her insecurity and insincerity to Neil and makes him desperate, since it suggests that she has never really freed herself from the moral viewpoint of her parents. When he asks her if she thinks that their sleeping together was wrong, she does not answer for herself but refers to her parents' opinion. In other words, she accepts their verdict by refusing to take a stand against it.

But during this final confrontation the issues between them become clear. Neil declares his willingness to continue the relationship and defy her family, but Brenda chooses the security of the known instead of the uncertainties that she feels that he represents. There is no doubt that Neil is ready to go with Brenda to the Patimkin house for the Thanksgiving feast and defy her parents along with her, but she shies away from this.⁶ Considering that the action occurs in the 1950s, Brenda's choice is understandable, but the fact remains that she ends a relationship that has a basis in love, and that contains the promise of increasing depth and development.

Both Neil and Brenda finally realize that there is an unbridgeable gap between them, and he leaves the hotel, walking into the yard of Harvard University. He stops before the Lamont Library, where he can see himself in the window as if it were a mirror. Frustrated and disappointed that he is, he experiences an impulse to pick up a rock and throw it through the glass, but instead he speculates on the mystery of identity. These are his thoughts: "I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me . . . What was it inside me that had turned pursuit and clutching into love, and then turned it inside out again? What was it that had turned winning into losing, and losing—who knows—into winning?" (pp. 96-97).

To become aware of one's real identity, or that of others, is difficult. Ultimately, personal identity is a mystery that can only be partly unveiled, and Neil had felt this also when looking at the sleeping Brenda at the end of Ron's wedding party, wondering if he knew "no more of her than what I could see in a photograph" (p. 84). But though Neil admits to a sense of confusion regarding the enigma of his

⁶To argue that "To oppose Brenda's parents would have required a decisive commitment which neither is capable or really desirous of making" is to misread the ending of the story. Leer, p. 139.

own self, certain answers to his questions do suggest themselves. He has lost Brenda by winning her, since she did not turn out to be what he thought, but by relinquishing, or losing, her, he has won in the only real sense that exists for him, that is, by remaining true to himself.

The final paragraph of the story has a promising ring: "I did not look very much longer, but took a train that got me into Newark just as the sun was rising on the first day of the Jewish New Year. I was back in plenty of time for work" (p. 97). The image of the rising sun suggests that Neil is going to make a new start in life, and that Newark, as indicated earlier, is his real home after all. It is not the region associated with the parental generation of Jews, but his own Newark, as it were, a place where he can maintain the self that he has struggled toward during this summer of lovemaking and taking his own measure against various temptations, absurdities, and illusions. He returns to the library with a new and greater awareness of its attractions and limitations. It is, after all, an institution where culture, art, and dreams are allowed a kind of existence which is impossible in the other environments that he has known, and it is located in a neighborhood that has preserved a certain room for individuality and a measure of freedom. It is only here that Neil may protect and develop, however imperfectly, the identity that is his.