

**THE VINDICTIVE NATURE OF JEWISH WRY
HUMOR IN
PHILIP ROTH'S EARLY WORKS
GOODBYE, COLUMBUS AND PORTNOY'S
COMPLAINT**

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Abstract

Sigmund Freud once said that he never knew any other instances of people mocking themselves as do Jewish people. Humor related to Jewish communities throughout history and among diverse peoples is characterized by a certain feature, which facilitated the breaking of social barriers or erecting them in order to catapult others. In most cases, mocking the self and its flaws in dealing with non-Jews is one of the most distinguishing features of Jewish humor. Studying this kind of humor more closely, one realizes a sly vindictive nature lurking behind a façade of self-laceration mockery while the other is always the intended target. The mechanism of Jewish wry humor depends on counter attacking the aggressor by mocking the self as a measure of defense and retaliation. Philip Roth's early works, commonly semi-autobiographical recreations of his experiences as an adolescent, deal with the dilemma of central Jewish male protagonists who are repeatedly caught in a tragic-comic limbo between the demands of their social and religious affiliations and their unquenched desires for self-fulfillment and gratification. The bitter sweet blend of mirth and agony is the main feature of Jewish wry humor as the agony is of a masochist nature and the mirth is of a scandalizing purpose. The aim of these commonly wry self-mocking narrative discourses is the vindication of the self against religious, familial, or social oppressive powers. This papers aims at studying the mechanism of Jewish wry humor in the wryly humorous narrative discourses of Philip Roth's early works.

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النزعة الانتقامية فى الفكاهة اليهودية الساخرة فى روايات فيلب روث الأولى وداعاً كولومبس و شكوى بورتنوى

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ملخص

يقول عالم النفس الشهير سيجموند فرويد أنه لم يعرف قط أى أمثلة مشابهة لأناس يسخرون من أنفسهم مثلما يفعل اليهود. إلا أن الفكاهة الناتجة عن الجماعات اليهودية على مر العصور و ما بين شعوب الارض المختلفة كانت لها سمة مميزة ساعدتهم على كسر الحواجز الاجتماعية أو على أقامتها و محاربة الآخرين من ورائها. وفى أغلب الأحيان تمثل السخرية من الذات و التهكم على نواقصها فى معاملتها مع الأغيار أحد أهم مميزات الفكاهة اليهودية. ولكن إذا ما أمعن الدارس ما وراء ذلك لأدرك ما فى تلك السخرية من نزعة إنتقامية خبيثة تستتر وراء حائط جلد الذات و التهكم عليها بينما المقصود طوال الوقت هو الآخر. فهناك نوع من إسقاط الذنب على الآخرين و وصمهم بالنقص و من ثم التهكم عليهم. و هنا يصبح جلد الذات هو جلد للآخر و بالتالى تسقط الحواجز و تذوب الفواصل و يصبح الساخر اليهودى هو بؤرة الحدث يصيب بنيرن تهكمه و يضرب بمعول الهدم كل من هم فى محيطه الإجتماعى. و تقوم هذه الدراسة بالنقد و التحليل الموضوعى على محاولة سبر أغوار تلك النزعة الإنتقامية الكامنة فى الفكاهة اليهودية الساخرة فى الروايات الأولى لأشهر الكتاب الأمريكان فيلب روث. فالشخصيات الرئيسية فى تلك الروايات تسخر من نواقصها و تتهكم على ما فيها من عيوب و فى ذات الوقت تتهكم على كل من هم فى محيطها الإجتماعى و تلقى باللوم عليهم و تفضحهم و هى بذلك تعمل على الإنتقام منهم جميعاً.

For Jews, throughout history, various lines between “us” and “them” have been imposed; voluntarily or otherwise. The borderlines have been always insurmountable between Jews and non-Jews; Orthodox and Reform; Israel and Diaspora; Ashkenazic and Sephardic, *et cetera*. Humor for Jews, however, has always been, and continues to be, one way to draw such fundamental lines—in some cases to cross them. Still, the distinctiveness of Jewish humor pertains to its wit of retaliation. For instance, in *Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival*, Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson retell the following Joke to give an example of Jewish humor as sly means of vindication, “An elderly orthodox Jewish man was walking his dog. He approached a stranger with an attractive dog. “What breed is he?” “A cross between a Jew and a mongrel” “Oh!” said the elderly Jew, “then he is undoubtedly related to both of us!” (85)

In her introduction to *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* Sarah Cohen Blacher, traces “comic fragments,” (1) in the Old Testament; “remnants of humor” in the Talmud; and “Yiddish humor” (2) in the late nineteenth century that defined the identity of Jews in Eastern Europe. In addition, she observes that this particular kind of humor, and according to Jewish perspective, is “born out of the vast discrepancy between what was to be the “chosen people’s” glorious destiny and their desperate straits” (1). Basically, this kind of humor jibes on Jews’ perilous attempts at adaptation to the incongruities of their existence:

The butt of a cruel joke, they found that God had signaled them out to be a light unto the nations, but had given them a benighted existence. Powerful in interpreting the vast complexities of sacred texts, they were powerless in their dealings with brainless peasants, priding themselves on the cohesiveness of their private world; they felt isolated from the world at large. (2)

Jewish humor in America, as a form of ethnic humor has developed, as well as other forms of ethnic humor such as Black, Irish, and Polish, from an aggressive means of depreciating at the hands of the superior WASP, white Anglo Saxon Protestant, majority to a counterbalancing and retaliating means at the hands of the Jewish minority. Sarah Blacher Cohen traces this development as she refers to

the fact that the first wave of Jewish immigrants carried with them a form of humor in which they “wryly deprecated their persecutors and bitter sweetly mocked themselves” (6). However, this generation was baffled by the new country and the new enemy that is “not so easily identifiable,” so they were promoted to make comedy out of their constricted situation:

Initially, however, they, like the Blacks, their fellow outsiders, were the butts of American society’s aggressive humor. In pejorative tales and jokes the dominant culture depicted Jews as avaricious, cunning shylocks and blacks as genial, indolent Sambos. Such comic stereotyping was designed to keep the minorities in their place, to keep the “wretched refuse” from polluting the mainstream...To alter misconceptions, to sustain their pride and recoup their powers, both blacks and Jews retaliated with a hidden form of protest humor, response to subordination which Joe Boskin characterized as “inwardly masochistic and tragic and externally aggressive and acrimonious. (6-7)

It is the second post-war generation of American-Jewish writers, per se and from among other ethnic minorities, whose humor reflects their attitude towards their uneasy situation of strongly regarding themselves as members of the Jewish community, but wishing to separate themselves from the stereotypical image of the unassimilated immigrants. Thus, Dan Ben-Amos writes in *The “Myth” of Jewish Humor*, that American Jews find themselves caught in a socio-psychological dilemma as they try to define their ethnic identity between dual polar comparisons; “on the one hand they measure themselves in relationship to normative American culture, and on the other hand they set for themselves the standards of traditional Judaism. Since they resemble none of these, they consequently indulge in self-derogatory humor” (119). In other words, it is the schizophrenic existence of American Jews once underscoring their adherence to the values of mainstream American culture and another time rejecting what they considered ostentatious in the conformity of their Americanized parents to the values of well-to-do suburbia. Nonetheless, this kind of wry humor is a form of vindication against the depreciating mockery of the superior majority as Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson explain in *Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival*:

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Ethnic humor in the United States originated as a function of social class feelings of superiority and white racial antagonisms, and expresses the continuing resistance of advantaged groups to unrestrained immigration and to the emancipation of black subcitizens barred from opportunities for participation and productivity. In time, ironically, the resulting derisive stereotypes were adopted by their targets in mocking self-description, and then, triumphantly, adapted by the victims of stereotyping themselves as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors. (81)

The mechanism of Jewish wry humor depends on counter attacking the aggressor by mocking the self as a measure of defense and retaliation. The narrator of a Jewish joke ridicules his own plight and jibes on his misery with which the audience can easily identify itself. Thus, the narrator is a “sly fellow,” as Irving Howe describes in *The Nature of the Jewish Laughter*, “if you extend his remark just a bit, it becomes a sardonic comment, not merely on the plight of Jews, but also on the plight of all humanity” (22). This defensive process is also a “psychical correlative to the flight reflex,” as Sigmund Freud explains in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which performs the task of

preventing the generation of unpleasure from internal sources...humor can be regarded as the highest of these defensive processes. It scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing effect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defense. It brings this about by finding a means of withdrawing the energy from the unpleasure that is already in preparation and transforming it, by discharge, into pleasure. (233)

Thus, Jewish wry humor that depends on mocking the self with the sly aim of mocking the other is basically “shrewd humor,” which became, Robert Alter explains in *Jewish Humor and The Domestication of Myth*, “a source of necessary inner strength, a mode of survival” (25). It is also considered by Albert Goldman in *Laughtermakers* “as basic and necessary as food and drink” for American-Jews, per se, because

Jewish humor in mid-twentieth century America...was the plaint of a people who were highly successful in countless ways, yet who still felt inferior, tainted, outcast; a people who needed some magic device of self-assertion and self-aggrandizement...It was their stimulant, their narcotic, their secret weapon. (83-84)

Thus, wry humor, for Jews in America and elsewhere, has always been a principle source of salvation as they have been able to liberate themselves psychologically by laughing at their dire incongruity of existence. Sigmund Freud writes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* that he did not know “there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.” Freud, furthermore, argues:

The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that number of the most apt joke...have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by foreigners are for the most part brutal comic stories in which a joke is made unnecessary by the fact that Jews are regarded by foreigners as comic figures. The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews admit this too; but they know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates the subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke-work. (111-112)

Jewish wry humor, then, is remarkable for its *mélange* of mirth and agony as the self-directed mockery is a camouflaged form of counterfeit masochism that causes more relief than pain to the narrator. In the process of ridiculing his plight and mocking his dire situation the narrator ridicules his social periphery, and in doing so he rids himself of responsibility and concomitant feelings of guilt. Thus, it is a flight from guilt and responsibility for trespassing and desecration whether it is of a social, moral, or religious nature. In literature, as Robert Alter explicates in *Jewish Humor and the Domestication of Myth*, “Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities” (26). This is of course congruent with Freud’s above-mentioned psychical analysis of Jewish humor as a “flight reflex.” Robert Alter further explains that the first half of the *mélange* of mirth and agony is directed at lifting up any feelings of guilt by globalizing the ridicule of the dilemma:

As the sense of inner crisis has deepened in modern literature, one important direction taken by writers beginning with Conrad, Mann, and Eliot has been a conscious re-mythologizing of literature, usually in order to make it sound the full cultural resonance of our collective disorders. Against this general drift of literary modernism, writers significantly

touched by the Yiddish heritage have often been dy-mythologizers, using the wryness of homey realism of Jewish humor to suggest that a less melodramatic, less apocalyptic, perspective than that of myth might be appropriate for viewing even the disquieting state of affairs of the modern world. (26-27)

Remarkably, however, this escapist strategy of “dy-mythologizing” pain through self-ridicule served, as Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson write in *Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival*, “to support the ladder for upward social mobility” (82) Jewish humorists. They also explain that after World War II Jewish comedians as well as Jewish writers “defiant in the wake of the Holocaust and proud of Israel’s birth” emerged from the cultural closet to declare and establish their existence in the mainstream American cultural milieu:

Among them Sid Caesar, Jack E. Leonard, Milton Berle, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks. Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth laughingly carried their low comedy into virtually every avenue of popular culture. They freshened up old stereotypes and injected doses of Jewish comic wisdom into American life. Their message was strong and clear: mir Zeinen doh (we are here). (90)

Jewish wry humor was a vernal means of social and psychological differentiation from the immigrant parental generation and affiliation with the peer society of all-Americanized youth. Thus, Jewish-American humorists—stand-up comedians and writers—have centralized for themselves a considerable focal interest in American culture as Sarah Cohen Blacher also remarks in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* that “Jewish-American humor” is now a “firmly established, a highly admired and sought after commodity by the whole country” (12).

Still, while Sigmund Freud’s attribution of masochism to Jewish humor became an axiom in literary criticism dealing with this subject, Dan Ben Amos, in *The “Myth” of Jewish Humor*, laments the fact that “scholars did not stop at mistaking Freud’s interpretation for fact” (115). He further explains that “humor is an abstract notion, self-mockery is property of verbal action. Hence, the attribution of the latter to the former is an ascription of a realistic quality for an abstract

concept” (121). Therefore, Dan Ben Amos opposes the analysis of Jewish humor in the form of accumulated, often classified, anthologies of Jewish Jokes told by Jews about Jews and non-Jews about Jews, and rather calls for their analysis as “they are told during the communicative events of joking within the Jewish community,” because the view of the Jewish society should be changed:

from an image of a united whole to a realistic picture of a complex and segmented group, which stratified according to social and economic classes and in which individuals identify each other in terms of social roles and subgroup affiliations. For the thesis of the masochism of Jewish humor to be valid, there should be a direct relationship of social identification between the narrator and the subject of his joke. (122)

Therefore, in line with the idea of studying Jewish wry humor in a contextual social milieu and in an attempt to locate a direct identification between the narrator and the subject of jokes, this paper works on tracing features of Jewish wry humor as being depicted in the early semi-autobiographical works of Philip Roth *Goodbye Columbus* and Portnoy’s *Complaint*. The purpose, of course, is the presentation of an objective study of the vindictive nature of the practice of self-mockery as an essential conceptual ingredient of Jewish wry humor in the narrative discourse of the above-named works. The Jewish protagonists’ sly practice of wry humor—mocking the self while incriminating the other whoever happens to be in his social periphery—is of a vindictive nature the depth of which this paper aims at fathoming.

In Philip Roth *Judith Paterson Jones* and Guinevera A. Nancy remark that “in some of his early work and in Portnoy’s *Complaint*, the novel that made Roth a millionaire, he relies heavily upon the ethos of the lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood in Weequahic section of Newark where he grew up” (2). Moreover, Roth’s early works are commonly characterized by their central male Jewish characters’ self-mockery towards the bafflement at their situation as William Peden explains in “In a Limbo Between the Past and Present,” *New York Times Online*. Online, May 17, 1959:

Most of Mr. Roth’s protagonists are, like Neil Klugman, adrift in a limbo between past and present. The author seems to know his people inside out...these stories, though concerned with universal, archetypal experiences, are somewhat transmuted into that which is at once strange and familiar. “I’m a Jew,” one character says. “I’m different. Better, maybe

not. But different.”

In 1959, Jewish-American Philip Roth, aged twenty-six, wrote *Goodbye, Columbus*, which won him the National Book Award, early fame, and so much indignation on part of the Jewish community. This literary debut is a novella and collection of short stories about American-Jews who are perilously caught in a limbo between their American and their Jewish halves; their present and their past; their duties and their desires; and especially their Id and their Ego. Ten years later Roth wrote *Portnoy's Complaint* that established him as an iconic figure in American culture. Needless to say, these aforementioned literary works are distinguished nationally as well as internationally for their remarkable humorous feature which essentially pertains to Jewish wry humor per se.

In *Jewish Wry: The Jewish Sit-Down Comedy of Philip Roth*, Alan Cooper writes, “Sales history suggest that *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Goodbye Columbus* have been far more widely read than Roth's other twelve books and numerous magazines pieces combined” (159). In *Philip Roth, In the American Grain (Portnoy's Complaint)*, Bernard F. Rodgers, JR. discusses the popularity of Philip Roth's literary debut *Goodbye, Columbus* and his equally acclaimed *Portnoy's Complaint*. He agrees with other critics and reviewers that these works are among the 60's “cultural milestones.” If someone mentions Philip Roth's name in a conversation, “nine times out of ten the response will be “Isn't he the one who wrote that dirty book about...?” for of all his novels “*Portnoy's Complaint* is by far the best known—*Goodbye, Columbus* , rivals it” as one work “firmly rooted in the popular consciousness.” Furthermore, he writes, “the *Portnoys* may very well join *Hawkeye*, *Huck Finn*, and *Holden Caulfield* as permanent characters of American popular lore” (80). Likewise, in “*Goodbye, Columbus;*” Roth's *Portrait of the Narcissist as a Young Man Peter L. Rudnytsky*, refers to the distinctiveness of Philip Roth's first book that “For all the undoubted virtuosity of the other five stories in the collection, it is of course *Goodbye, Columbus* that is the piece de resistance and the reason Philip Roth won the National Book Award for his first book” (25).

Although on the surface *Goodbye, Columbus* deals with the failure of a summer affair between Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin, it wryly exposes the impossibility of reconciling their worlds. Ironically, both Neil and Brenda belong to Jewish American families and both live in the state of New Jersey. However, Neil's family lives in Newark, the poor Jewish quarters where "old Jews" like his "grandparents had struggled and died," (90) and Brenda's family lives in the rich suburb Short Hills where, "Fruit grew in their refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from their trees!" (43). The novella is narrated in a wryly humorous manner from the view point of its first protagonist Neil Klugman, whose extended narrative monologue depends on irony in exposing the polar opposites of his and his girlfriend's social milieus. Thus, while Neil's narrative discourse is innerly masochistic and tragic, it is externally aggressive and acrimonious. Neil Klugman is a recent graduate of Newark Colleges of Rutgers University, who works at a dead-end job at the Newark public library. Neil lives with his poor Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max while his parents, "penniless deserters" left to Arizona to "roast away their asthma" (16). Brenda, in contrast, is a Radcliffe student and daughter of wealthy parents living in Short Hills "hundred and eighty feet" above Newark where "summer nights are so much cooler" (14) than they are down hill in Newark. It is Short Hills, as Neil wryly compares it to his poor dwelling, where no one sits on the stoops of the houses and where "those inside, refusing to share the very texture of life with those of us outside, regulated with a dial the amount of moisture that were allowed access to their skin" (8-9). The sarcastic tone of this narrative is replete with acrimonious vindication against his poor parents and relatives and envy against Brenda's affluent family.

It was mere chance that Brenda asked Neil a favor to hold her glasses while she took a dive in the country club swimming pool marking off the beginning of their summer romance. Neil is invited to stay at the Patimkins' luxurious house for two weeks where his relationship with Brenda develops so far as to having regular illicit sex. Due to his fear of losing Brenda, his voucher to affluence, he asks her to buy a diaphragm. Neil, thus, violates the sanctity of his hosts' household and wastes any chances of success although he keeps

receiving hints from Brenda's father accepting him as a would-be son-in-law and partner as "there's no business too big enough it can't use another head" (108). As the summer break comes to an end, Brenda has to leave for college. She and Neil arrange to meet secretly during the Jewish holidays in Boston. In the meantime, Brenda's parents learn about the nature of their relation through discovering her diaphragm. They also send her letters expressing their dismay and disdain for Neil as a result. Skeptical of Brenda's love and uncertain of his social and financial standings, Neil accuses Brenda of leaving the diaphragm in Short Hills on purpose. Eventually, Brenda chooses her family over him after she faces him with the fact of his skepticism, "you kept acting as if I was going to run away from you every minute. And now you're doing it again, telling me I planted that thing on purpose" (134).

In spite of the semi-tragic seriousness of its thematic subject matter, and although its author refers retrospectively to its comedy, in *Reading Myself and Others*, as a "very mild comedy, in turn ironical and lyrical in the way of books about sensitive upstarts in summer romances," (50) *Goodbye, Columbus* is characterized by the vindictive nature of its wry humor through the narrator's sense of irony in depicting the worlds of his own and of Brenda's family. For instance, while Neil's parents are penniless deserts "roasting away their asthma" in Arizona, Brenda's parents live in an air-conditioned house with a dial that regulates the "amount of moisture allowed access to their skin" (9). In both cases, Neil is disdainful for the desertion on his parents' side and the envious feeling of inaccessibility to Brenda's affluent world. So, the wry humor in Neil's account reveals itself in his masochistic self-mockery that always belittles his prospects and jibes on the poverty of his family and in the meantime it is enviously vengeful in mocking the prosperous welfare of Brenda's family. Therefore, Neil's wry remarks include other members of his social milieu. On one hand, Neil's aunt Gladys toils in the heat and humidity of her kitchen to serve four different meals and "there is nothing to explain this beyond the fact that [his] aunt is crazy" (4). On the other hand, the Patimkins' household is served by the maid Carlota, "a Navaho-faced Negro," (21) whom Mrs. Patimkin directs

not to “mix the milk silverware and the meat silverware again, and Carlota is eating a peach while she listens” (24). Moreover, while Aunt Gladys’ refrigerator is stuffed with canned fruit, the Patimkins’ old refrigerator in the basement is “heaped with fruit, shelves swelled with it, every color, every texture, and hidden within, every kind of pit” (43). Still, while Neil unpacks his suitcase in the Patimkin’s house, he takes out “one shirt with a Brooks Brothers label and...let it linger on the bed a while, the Arrows...heaped in the drawer,” (63) he finds to his greatest envy that the Patimkins’ sporting goods “dropped from their trees” (43).

In fact, Neil’s wry remarks about the social and economic gaps that separate his family and Brenda’s reveal an aggressive nature cloaked in spleenful sarcasm. For instance, Brenda tells Neil about her nose job and he cannot help but being vindictively sarcastic:

“I was pretty. Now I’m prettier. My brother’s having his fixed in the fall”

“Does he want to be prettier?”

She didn’t answer and walked ahead of me again.

“I don’t mean to sound facetious. I mean why’s he doing it?”

“He wants to...unless he becomes a gym teacher...but he won’t,” she said.

“We all look like my father.”

“Is he having his fixed?”

“Why are you so nasty?” (13)

Likewise, Neil is greatly disturbed by Brenda’s remark that her mother “Still thinks we live in Newark,” (26) where he stays with his poor aunt. Neil says he could succeed for once in remaining silent, “I did not want to voice a word that would lift the cover and reveal that hideous emotion I always felt for her and is the underside of love” (27). However, this “hideous” underside emotion in Neil’s love is what cajoles a “cycle of tit-for-tat aggression” (28) between him, the aggressor, and Brenda, the defender, as Peter L. Rudnytsky explains in “Goodbye, Columbus:” Roth’s Portrait of the Narcissist as a Young Man. Neil’s series of offences is a “vicious cycle,” Rudnytsky adds, from which Neil cannot escape:

Because only Neil’s subjectivity is laid bare by the first-person narrative, the psychological origins of his susceptibility to the “hideous emotion” that starts as the “underside” of love before finally overmastering it are, as we have seen, much more thoroughly delineated. (30)

Right from the beginning Neil knew that Brenda was his chance to achieve societal ascendance. This is why kissing her for the first time he felt a “faint fluttering” across the side of her body and around her back like the “fluttering of wings, tiny wings no bigger than her breasts,” and he did not bother the smallness of the wings as it would not “take an eagle to carry [him] up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark” (14). Although Neil is quite apprehensive about losing his catch and the byproducts of luxury that may come with marrying her, he does not think seriously about marriage. This, however, leads him to squander his chances by coercing Brenda into buying the unnecessary diaphragm to guarantee her physical and psychological attachment to him.

Studying this novella more closely in the perspective Jewish wry humor we find that there is a movement “along the social ladder,” which allows us the chance of savoring those “delicious contrasts of manners between social strata which Jews so enjoyed noticing,” (22) as Irving Howe explains in “The Nature of Jewish Laughter.” There are also two different stereotypical humorous images of Jews belonging to upper and lower social strata that relate thematically to Neil Klugman’s story. The first has to do with the counter position of the Jewish Millionaire against the schnorrer, the Jewish beggar. And the second has to do with schlemiel, the good-natured fool who, Irving Howe writes, “has a positive gift for getting into trouble, for doing things the wrong way, for saying the inept word at the inappropriate moment—and always with the best if intentions” (23).

Forcing Brenda to buy a diaphragm was Neil’s foolish plot to shackle her both psychologically and physically. So, he thought after summer break is over, she would be attached to him via that contraceptive device “like a walking stick, or a pith helmet” (79). Still, through Neil’s account of his failure one can recognize the basic feature of wry humor in masochistically lacerating the self for its ineptness and aggressively attacking the others at the same time.

In fact, Neil’s doomed failure is the failure of the stereotypical Jewish fool, the schlemiel, who naturally wastes his

chances, and his self-righteous superciliousness in the face of the Patimkins' affluence are remnants of the traditional Jewish joke of the Jewish benefactor and the Jewish beggar. It is a joke that captures the "comic reversal of roles," as Sarah Blacher Cohen writes in *Jewish Wry*, that the beggar pretends to be superior to his benefactor. It is a joke that "mocks [the beggar's] impudence for claiming absolute control over money that is not his" (3). The following Joke, Sarah Cohen explains, illustrates this point:

Chernov, the *shnorrer* of Petrograd, had a very wealthy patron who for some obscure reason, had taken a liking to the nervy little beggar. Each year he would give Chernov a handsome stipend—never less than 500 rubles. One year, however, the rich man gave him only 250 rubles.

"What is the meaning of this" demanded the insolent *shnorrer*. "This is only half of what you have been giving me!"

"I'm sorry, Chernov, but I must cut my expenses this year," Apologized the wealthy man. "My son married an actress and I am paying all the bills."

"Well, of all the *chutzpah!*" roared Chernov, hoping mad. "If your son wants to support an actress, that's his business. But how dare he do it with my money!" (3)

Sigmund Freud further explains in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* that this kind of Jewish millionaire-Jewish beggar jokes is "equipped with a façade to mislead the understanding." So while we are expected to laugh at the impertinent demands of the beggar, who treats the rich man's money as his own, we learn that according to the Jewish religious law he almost has a right to act the way he does. Moreover, Freud explains, "the indignation raised by this joke is of course directed against a Law which is highly oppressive even to pious people" (113).

In fact Neil's failure results from his indecisiveness to commit himself to a serious relationship and this in turn makes his inquisitive journey into the affluent world of the Patimkins a failure—hence the title of the novella *Goodbye, Columbus*. In psychological terms also, as Peter L. Rudnytsky explains in "Goodbye, Columbus:" *Roth's Portrait of the Narcissist as a Young Man*:

The diaphragm is a *symptom*, a classic example of the compromise formation that expresses at once his desire for and fear of marriage...Again, to borrow Freud's extremely helpful language, a process of *displacement* is at work, which shows by the similarity between the thing itself and the

“surrogate” the force of Neil’s desire, but also reveals by their difference the countervailing force of his fear. (36)

This uncertainty on part of the central Jewish figure in this story as well as in the collection of the other short stories that make up the volume of *Goodbye, Columbus* is at the core of their identity problem. These stories as Hermione Lee describes in *Philip Roth* are all “comic dilemmas,” however, unlike *Goodbye, Columbus*, “the attempt to ‘push through’ into a real choice of ‘selfhood’ is more powerfully made” (30).

In *Reading Myself and Others*, Philip Roth reminisces on his teenage that “the best of adolescence was the intense male friendships,” because of “the opportunity they provided for uncensored talk.” So he remembers how he and his teenage friends would spend time participating in an “amalgam of mimicry, reporting, kibitzing, disputation, satire, and legendizing from which we drew so much substance with the work I now do” (4-5). Roth also remembers that the verbal aggressiveness of those camaraderie sessions in his Jewish neighborhood resulted in “something like a folk narrative of a tribe passing from one stage of human development to the next” and millions of words that were “the means by which we either took vengeance on or tried to hold at bay the cultured forces that were shaping us” (5). This sense of teenage rapport and vindictiveness is part and parcel of the wry humor in the narrative discourse of Roth’s *The Conversion of the Jews*.

It is the story of the thirteen-year-old *Yeshiva* student Oscar Freedman, Ozzie, who opposes Judaism’s archetypical rabbinate as it is embodied in the dictatorial and monological person of Rabbi Binder—and hence the humorous choice of the name “Binder”. As the story begins, we learn that Ozzie’s mother “had to see Rabbi Binder twice before about Ozzie’s questions and this Wednesday at four-thirty would be the third time” (139). In fact, Ozzie’s account of these times shows in wryly humorous manner the comic dilemma of the irreconcilability of the unrelenting dogmatized rabbi and the genuine free thinking Jewish child. The first time was when Ozzie asked Rabbi Binder how he “could call the Jews “The Chosen People” if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal”

(141). The second time was when there were fifty-eight people killed in a plane crash, “among the dead eight Jewish names,” and his mother and grandmother were concerned only with the Jewish causalities. Ozzie wondered why his relatives care only about Jewish causalities. And although Rabbi Binder tried to explain “cultural unity and some other things,” Ozzie stood up at his seat and said that what he wanted to know was different. “Rabbi Binder insisted that he sit down and it was then that Ozzie shouted that he wished all fifty-eight were Jews” (142). The third time was when Rabbi Binder started speaking about Jesus Christ as a “historical” character, and that Immaculate Conception is impossible. Ozzie rejected the idea because of his genuine belief that God the Almighty can do anything while Rabbi Binder, screaming, vowed that Ozzie “would never be *Bar-mitzvahed* if he could help it” (142). It seems, however, that Rabbi Binder can neither communicate with his pupils nor gain their respect as they mock him behind his back in and out class. This shows clearly in the following childish conversation, which Ozzie has with Itz, his classmate:

“That’s what Rabbi Binder says, that it’s impossible—”

“Sure it’s impossible. That stuff all bull. To have a baby you gotta get laid,” Itzie theologized....

“That’s what Binder says: ‘The only way a woman can have a baby is to have intercourse with a man.’”

“He said that, Ozz?”...“He said that, intercourse?” A little curled smile shaped itself in the lower half of Itzie’s face like a pink moustache. “What you guys do, Ozz, you laugh or something”...

“No, I asked the question about God, how if He could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days—the light especially, that’s what always gets me, that He could make the light. Making fish and animals, that’s pretty good—”

“That’s damn good.” Itzie’s appreciation was honest but unimaginative: it was as though God had just pitched a one-hitter. (140-141)

Ozzie goes home carrying the news of his misbehavior to his widowed mother. In fact, Ozzie confession’s of his transgression is a heavy burden, especially when it has to be to his mother whose rigid religious belief and practice are not different from those of his tyrannical monological Rabbi Binder. It is Friday night, time for Sabbath prayer, when Ozzie decides to tell his mother about what he did in the synagogue. The account of Ozzie’s mother performing

prayer has a sarcastic trait of occult or sorcery that he does not seem to believe in:

When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears. Even when his father was alive Ozzie remembered that her eyes had gotten glassy, so it didn't have anything to do with dying. It had something to do with lighting the candles....When his mother lit candles, Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing, if you could manage it, should be softened. (143)

Still, as soon as Ozzie confesses his transgression, his mother slaps him "for the first time in their life together ...across the face with her hand" (143). Thus, the wry humor of the situation reveals itself in Ozzie's mockery of his mother religious practice and of his own apprehensiveness while he in effect wryly revenges against her rigidity.

The story reaches its dramatic climax on a Wednesday afternoon at four o'clock, half an hour before Mrs. Freedman's meeting with Rabbi Binder in the synagogue. Rabbi Binder tells Ozzie's class that it is time for free discussion and they are totally free to discuss any topic. He approaches Ozzie's seat and pushes him to speak on whichever topic he may choose. Ozzie in return chooses to discuss religion and surprises the Rabbi by telling him that he "does not know anything about God!" (146). Infuriated, the Rabbi flicks his hand out on Ozzie's face and blood comes in "a short, red spurt on Ozzie's shirt front" (146). Ozzie then screams at the Rabbi "You bastard, you bastard!" and breaks out of the class, followed by his classmates and the Rabbi. Few minutes later Ozzie climbs up to the synagogue's roof and locks "shut the trapdoor in the Rabbi's face" (147).

The final scene becomes intensely farcical as the firemen are called to rescue Ozzie, by-passers gather in front of the synagogue, and Rabbi Binder kneels and pleads with Ozzie to get down. Ozzie orders everybody to kneel and to repeat whatever he says. It is remarkable how Ozzie's account is wryly humorous as he mocks himself running from side to side on top of the synagogue; mocks the rabbi pleading him on his knees to descend; and mocks the passers by watching and repeating whatever he orders them to repeat.

It is remarkably humorous how Ozzie forces Rabbi Binder to change his attitude. Before firemen came, he would yell at Ozzie to get down with a voice “that could be seen, would have looked like the writing on scroll. “Oscar Freedman, get down from there. Immediately!” (148). A few minutes later, Ozzie orders Rabbi Binder to kneel or else he would throw himself off the roof. So, Rabbi Binder “fell to his knees, exhausted, and with his hands curled together in front of his chest like a little dome, he pleaded, “Oscar, stop it, Oscar. Don’t jump, Oscar. Please come down...Please don’t jump.” (153) Ozzie’s mother arrives and takes a symbolic posture as she turns toward the kneeling Rabbi “so close that only a paper-thickness of dusk lay between her stomach and his shoulders,” (154) and in a gesture “older than pyramids, older than prophets and floods, her arms came slapping down to her sides. “A martyr I have. Look!” (155). However, as the number of people watching the scene increases, Ozzie orders everybody to kneel down, including the seventy-one-year old custodian of the synagogue who does not speak English and whom Ozzie suspects of having “memorized the prayers and forgotten all about God” (144). Ozzie finally decides to jump into the firemen’s rescue net, but before he does so he makes Rabbi Binder and everybody else convert to what he believes in:

“Tell me you believe God can do anything.”

There was a second’s hesitation. Then: “God can do Anything.”

“Tell me you believe God can make a child without intercourse.”

“He can.”

“Tell me!”

“God,” Rabbi Binder admitted, “can make a child without intercourse.”...

Ozzie made everybody say it. And then he made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ—first one at a time, then all together.

“Mamma, don’t you see—you shouldn’t hit me. He shouldn’t hit me. You shouldn’t hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God—”

Everyone kneeling in the street promised he would never hit anybody about God. (158)

Bernard F. Rodgers, JR. writes in Philip Roth, “People in Trouble,” “Ozzie’s choice of revenge—his “conversion of the Jews around him to a verbal expression of religious tolerance—is a justifiable outgrowth of all that has come before, a farcical poetic justice” (22). The humor in this situation is of a vindictive nature as

Ozzie vindicates himself against his social periphery by mocking himself and others in this totally farcical situation. This satiric vitriol originates from Ozzie's painful perplexity at the discrepancy between what his religious teacher preaches and how he acts. Ozzie's struggle, in other words, is to free himself from the unreasonable religious dogma impersonated in the character of Rabbi Binder and the practice impersonated in his mother. The Rabbi, for instance, says that the class is open for free discussion and when Ozzie speaks freely, he reprimands him and asks to see his mother, who in turn hits him both physically and psychologically. The satirical wrath is also directed against the fragility and ineptness of the elders—the rabbinate and the religious parent—in dealing with the childish inquisitiveness of a young pupil. Therefore, there is a certain *mélange* of agony and mirth that characterizes the wry humor of *The Conversion of the Jews*. Nonetheless, Ozzie's conversion of the Jews is a vindictive conversion of all those monological merciless non-Jews. Through criticizing his own religious affiliates' relentlessly unshakable beliefs, Ozzie seems to be directing a wider universal satirical message.

Bernard F. Rodgers, JR. in addition argues that *The Conversion of the Jews* is Philip Roth's "artistic revolt" against the "the attitudes of the Jewish environment which had surrounded him for the first eighteen years of his life" as being impersonated in "Ozzie Freedman's adolescent revolt" (22). Likewise, Philip Roth in *Reading Myself and Others*, refers to the fact that he had a "first-hand" experience with religious unrelenting dogma same as did his fictional creation Oscar Freedman:

"The Conversion of the Jews," for instance, a story I wrote when I was twenty-three, reveals at its most innocent stage of development a budding concern with the oppressiveness of family feeling and with the binding ideas of religious exclusiveness which I had experienced first-hand in ordinary American-Jewish life. A good boy named Freedman brings to his knees a bad rabbi named Binder (and various other overlords) and then takes wings from the synagogue into the vastness of space...claustrophobic little Freedman, who cannot cut loose from what binds and inhibits him quite so magically as the hero I imagined humbling his mother and his rabbi. (8-9)

The vindictive nature of Jewish wry humor is not only innate in blasphemous transgression against religious dogma but also in

desecrating religious laws prohibiting promiscuity and fornication. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud explains that jokes pertaining to the theme of breaking the taboo of sexual transgression out of marriage's yoke are strictly guarded against yet very inviting as he writes:

Among the institutions which cynical jokes are in the habit of attacking non is more important or more strictly guarded by moral regulations but at the same time more inviting to attack than the institution of marriage, at which, accordingly, the majority of cynical jokes are aimed. There is no more personal claim than that for sexual freedom and at no point has civilization tried to exercise severer suppression than in the sphere of sexuality. A single example will be enough for our purposes..... 'A wife is like an umbrella—sooner or later one takes a cab.' (110)

In his short story Epstein Philip Roth wryly tackles the theme of the guilt of fornication as a comic idea. The eponymous character of Epstein is caught in the middle between his familial and business worries and his psychological and physical gratification. Philip Roth as Bernard F. Rodgers, JR. explains in *Philip Roth: People in Trouble (Five Stories)*, uses promiscuity as a humorous thematic element in exploring the main character's comic dilemma:

In contrast to the satiric vitriol which permeates the humor of "The Conversion of the Jews" and the other stories in *Goodbye, Columbus*, "Epstein" which blends humor, pathos, and satire with an obviously warm affection for its central character and his plight. Duty, responsibility, guilt, hidden desires—all of the conflicting imperatives which form the characteristic tensions underlying Roth's fictions first appear in this early story. And here, for the first time, he seized upon sexual behavior as both a physical manifestation of his hero's psychological problems and comic possibility. (23)

Lou Epstein, a Jewish man who suffers from middle-age, is the owner of "Epstein Paper Bag Company". Epstein is an affluent man who had struggled and "bled during the Depression and Roosevelt, only, finally, with the war and Eisenhower" his business became successful. However, he is only a year away from retirement and his most grievous concern is the problem of who will take over his business after he had lost his son, who "died of polio, age eleven" (205). In spite of the fact that Epstein has one daughter Sheila, he does not think of her as a possible heiress because of her preoccupation with socialism and her engagement to a futureless folk singer. In fact, Lou Epstein feels disdain towards his twenty-three-year-old socialist

daughter and her boyfriend as he sarcastically says, "She hunts all day for a picket line to march in so that at night she can come home and eat like a horse" (205). Thus, Epstein feels deep remorse as he self-mockingly wonders, "What could he do? Does a man of fifty-nine all of a sudden start producing heirs?" (205).

Lou Epstein bought his brother's share in the company twelve years ago and they rarely see each other. Still, upon his father's request, Lou's nephew Michael goes to pay the Epsteins a transient visit on his way to the army. Michael, however, engages in an affair with the daughter of Ida Kaufman, Lou Epstein's attractive widow neighbor who had lost her husband to cancer. The Epstein's house becomes a place of rendezvous for the young couples: Michael and Ida Kaufman's daughter and Sheila and her boyfriend Marvin. Epstein, suffering from his middle-age problems and his business' uncertain future, feels insomniac. Thus, Epstein mocks himself and his problems as he sarcastically says that he knows about the lovers downstairs. He has even seen Michael and his girl friend naked in the living room and later on the same night it was Sheila and the folk singer:

The whole world, he thought, the whole young world, the ugly ones and the pretty ones, the fat and the skinny ones, zipping and unzipping! He grabbed his great shock of gray hair and pulled it till his scalp hurt. His wife shuffled, mumbled a noise. "Brr..Brrr..." She captured the blankets and pulled them over her. "Brr..." Butter! She's dreaming about butter. Recipes she dreams while the whole world zips. (208)

Among Epstein's ailments is the fact of his wife, once "a beautiful, beautiful woman" (220) is now growing old and no more attractive. He even thinks that she does not deserve him, "What, she cooks? That's a big deal? She cleans? ..." "How did this happen? My Goldie, that such a woman become a cleaning machine" (217). The third person narrative discourse of Epstein engages the reader in a sarcastically misogynous as well as vindictively degrading description of his no-more-attractive old wife:

Ten minutes before she had undressed and he had watched her as she dropped her white nightdress over her head, over the breasts, which have funneled down to her middle, over the behind like pillows, the thighs and calves veined blue like a roadmap. What was once could be pinched, what once was small and tight, now could be poked and pulled. Everything hung.

He had shut his eyes while she had dressed for sleep and had tried to remember Goldie of 1927, the Lou Epstein of 1927. Now he rolled his stomach against her backside remembering, and reached around to hold her breasts. The nipples were dragged down like a cow's, long as his little finger. He rolled back to his own side. (203-204)

Anyhow, out of vengeance against all his worries, Lou Epstein commits adultery with his widow neighbor Ida Kaufman, whom he saw waiting one "warm April day" when birds "sang in the elm trees, and the sun glinted in the sky like a young athlete's trophy." And unlike his wife, Ida Kaufman is described as a very appealing woman:

Epstein saw her waiting, and beneath the dress, the stockings, the imagined underthings he saw the body of the girl on his living room rug, for Ida Kaufman was the mother of Linda Kaufman, the girl Michael had befriended. So Epstein pulled slowly to the curb and, stopping for the daughter, picked up the mother. (209)

After three weeks of meeting Ida Kaufman secretly in her beach house, Epstein discovers that he has contracted a skin rash. Epstein knows that Ida is a "clean woman" (217), and what he has must be a sand rash as "sand must have gotten into his trousers and irritated him on the drive up to Parkway" (212). However, when Goldie Epstein sees the rash on her husband's groin, she surmises his adultery. The scene becomes farcically scandalous as Goldie, coming out naked from the shower, walks in on naked Epstein and discovers his rash. A fight starts between Goldie and her husband and she asks for divorce. The young people, Sheila and her boyfriend and Michael and his girlfriend, come in to see what was going on and refuse, out of curiosity and shock, to go outside the room. "'All of you,' scandalized Epstein shouted. 'Get out!'" But no one obeyed. Sheila blocked the door, politically committed; Michael's legs were rooted, one with shame, the other with curiosity" (216).

Everybody outcasts Epstein including his wife who orders him to sleep in the room with the two small beds, where their passed-away son used to sleep. Epstein tries to defend himself and his audience is his unconvinced young nephew Michael. Epstein explains, "When they start taking things away from you, you reach out, you grab—maybe like a pig even, but you grab. And right or wrong who knows!" (221). Grabbing for things being taken away from him, avenging himself against his familial and business worries, Epstein goes to Ida

Kaufman one more time. However, this time he is struck by a heart attack and an ambulance is called for. The scene becomes more scandalous and hysterically humorous as neighbors and passers by gather in front of the Kaufman's house to see who is the adulterer. A few minutes later everybody recognizes that it is Lou Epstein. Goldie falls on her knees in the ambulance and pleads with Epstein not to die and to live normally. Ironically, living normal, anyhow, is not what Epstein hopes for at all as he did what he did as an act of revolt against his status quo:

Epstein opened his mouth. His tongue hung over his teeth like a dead snake.

"Don't you talk," his wife said. "Don't you worry about anything. Not even the business. That'll work out. Our Sheila will marry Marvin and that'll be that. You won't have to sell, Lou, it'll be in the family. You can retire, rest, and Marvin can take over. He's a smart boy, Marvin, a *mensch*."

Lou rolled his eyes in his head. (229)

In fact, the humor in Epstein's account of his fornication is wry humor as guilt is ridiculed and desecration is belittled through mocking himself, his plight, and his social periphery.

In *Reading Myself and Others*, Philip Roth writes that he wrote Epstein ten years later after his father had recounted a similar tale of neighborhood adultery. He also writes that at fourteen he was "delighted" to hear that "scandalous passion had broken out on [their] decent, law-abiding street." However his greatest "pleasure derived especially from the blend of comedy and sympathy with which the story had been told" (173). Basically, this blend of mirth and agony is at the core of the comic dilemma of Lou Epstein himself. This comes to light as we recognize that the account of Epstein's act of fornication is an act of vindication—though scandalous and unsuccessful—against all his worries and troubles pertaining to his business and his family. Roth explicates, "I myself find Epstein's adultery an unlikely solution to his problems, a pathetic, even doomed response, and a comic one too, since it does not even square with the man's own conception of himself and what he wants" (153). Therefore, the vindication of wounded Epstein against his social milieu is executed through the scandalous story of his adultery that seems to scandalize whoever is in that milieu.

Philip Roth's creations of male protagonists—adolescent, middle-

aged, and in their prime—are all commonly based on semi-autobiographical facts. In *The Truth Hurts: The Ethics of Philip Roth's "Autobiographical" Books*, David Gooblar refers to the fact that “Neil Klugman, Alex Portnoy, David Kepesh, Peter Tarnopol, and Zukerman all share a certain amount of biographical detail with their creator,” and he also agrees with Joe Moran’s claim in *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* that he has “created a kind of “hall of mirrors’ effect” which has, “only added to the public confusion about the relationship between the author and his characters” (34). Thus, the pathos of these central figures facing their comic troubles are all recreations of Roth’s as he admits in *Reading Myself and Others*:

In my own earliest work I attempted to transform into fiction something of the small world in which I had spent the first eighteen years of my life. The stories did not draw so much upon immediate personal experience or the history of my own family as upon the ethos of my highly self-conscious Jewish neighborhood, which had been squeezed like some embattled little nation in among ethnic rivals and antagonists, peoples equally proud, ambitious, and xenophobic, and equally baffled and exhilarated by the experience of being fused into a melting pot. It was to this nation-neighborhood—this demi-Israel in a Newark that was our volatile Middle East—that I instinctively turned for material at the beginning of my writing career, and to which I returned, ten years later, when I tried to distill from that Newark Jewish community the fictional, or folkloric, family that I called the Portnoys. (172)

This, however, sheds more light on the idea of vindication in the mélange of mirth and agony that make up the formulation of Jewish wry humor of Roth’s early fiction. Neil Klugman, Oscar Freedman, Lou Epstein are all Jewish persona of Philip Roth’s creation mocking their rueful dilemmas and in the course of doing so they vindicate themselves against their social peripheries. However, the lines of Roth’s personal and artistic development converge as Peter L. Rudnytsky explains that Neil’s failure in *Goodbye, Columbus* is necessary, “to his personal and artistic development. To leave Brenda, to renounce Tahiti, is to choose a life of sexual adventure...over the safe enclosure of marriage” (34). Therefore, the “relentless promiscuity,” Rudnytsky adds, of Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth’s most notorious novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* takes the form of a vindictive conquest of America. It is also not surprising that Alexander Portnoy should sarcastically name *Columbus* as the first of

his forefathers to have conquered America's New-Found-Land: "Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington—now Portnoy" (235).

Alexander Portnoy, the eponymous character of Philip Roth's most notorious novel Portnoy's Complaint, lies down on his psychiatrist's couch and says, "Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I am living it in the middle of a Jewish Joke. I am the son in the Jewish Joke—*only it ain't no joke!*" (36-37). In fact, Portnoy's Complaint raised the indignation of Jewish readers and critics because of its scandalizing exposure of urban Jewish-American family with the mother at its center. In a genuinely creative treatment of themes such as sexual disorder, *Oedipus rex*, racial discrimination, and Zionism, Philip Roth casts his main protagonist upon a psychiatrist's couch and allows him to rend himself and rave self-mockingly about his plight. The result is an extended confessional monologue that could be best discussed from the perspective of Jewish wry humor because it is based on a *mélange* of agony and mirth. Portnoy mocks his ailments and those responsible for inflicting them, and as a consequence he scandalizes his social milieu and avenges himself against it.

In spite of the fact that Alexander Portnoy achieves successful societal ascendance in American society as the "Assistant Commissioner for the City of New York Commission on Human Opportunity" (170), he self-mockingly complains about his failure to lead a normal personal life. Dr. Speilvogel, Portnoy's psychiatrist describes his patient's disorder in the following manner:

Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, autoeroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient's "morality." However, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feeling of shame and dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration. (1)

In addition to his chronic obsession with masturbation, throughout his teenage up till his manhood, Portnoy is a sex maniac in his thirties who indulges in promiscuous sexual relations with Jewish and non-Jewish women. Thus, Portnoy's tragic-comic dilemma has to do with thought of himself as a "highly respected man in [his] profession" (110), yet he feels ashamed because he is "the only member of his

graduate class who hasn't made grandparents of his Mommy and Daddy. While everybody else has been marrying nice Jewish girls, and having children, and buying houses...Putting down roots" (100). However, in his extended confessional exposure of his sexual disorders and promiscuity, Portnoy blames his parents, "the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time" (36). Therefore, Portnoy vindicates himself against his social periphery by bitterly sweetly mocking himself: through his scandalous account, he scandalizes not only himself but also his parents. Guilt in this way is comically belittled and others are to be blamed for it.

Portnoy's Complaint begins with Portnoy's childish account of his mother's ubiquitous presence in his life that she is "deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise" (3). Alexander Portnoy also sarcastically jibes, "for mistakes she checked my sums; for holes my socks; for dirt, my nails, my neck every recess of my ears by pouring cold peroxide into my head" (12). Furthermore, Portnoy's mother used to think and speak of her son as "Albert Einstein the second" (4). In fact, Portnoy's claustrophobic feelings of guilt are mainly caused by his repressive upbringing. For instance, Alexander's mother was never benign when she punished him. She would pack his suit case, give him a meal, and kick him out of the house when he insults his sister or breaks any of the household austere regulations. She would even draw a knife on him because he would not eat his food; "someone waves a knife in my direction, I believe there is an intention lurking somewhere to draw my blood!" (17). Ironically, while Alexander Portnoy is brought up to think and act like he is "the nicest Jewish boy, who ever lived," (247) his pervert sexual transgressions are symbolic acts of rebellion against that image of the exemplary son. In other words, Alexander Portnoy's wryly humorous account of his perversion and promiscuity is a destructive and self-depreciating act of vindication against his over-protective and obsessive mother.

Nonetheless, a considerable part of Portnoy's complaint has to do with his father Jack Portnoy, a sales representative of "Boston & Northeastern" insurance company. Among the indelible memories in Alexander Portnoy's life in the Portnoys' household are the lengthy

hours his father spent trying to ease his constipation. Portnoy wryly says that he knows why his father has headaches all the time as he knows that “he is constipated all the time—why he is constipated is because the ownership of his intestinal tract is in the hand of the firm of Worry, Fear & Frustration” (26). Alexander also knows that while the president of the company and his father’s seniors, whom he “hates their guts,” have their sons in “Harvard College and the daughters in fishing school...whole pack of them up there in Massachusetts, shkotzim fox-hunting! Playing polo,” his father is in a ferocious and self-annihilating way, like “so many Jewish men of his generation,” serving his family, “Particularly [him]” (8). Thus, while Sophie Portnoy is an over-protective mother who wants her son to be “Albert Einstein the second,” (4) and his father is toiling his life because he sees in him ““the family’s opportunity to be “as good as anybody,”” and their “chance to win honor and respect,” (5) he is self-destructively flagellating himself behind the locked bathroom door and he is not sure, he tells his doctor, “Doctor, what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred...or the love? (27). In a bitter-sweet self-mocking manner Portnoy jibes about the repeated excuses he would make to run from the dinner table to the bathroom because of his diarrhea while his father would be pleading with him a few minutes later to open the door because of his constipation; ““—Come on, give somebody else a crack at that bowl, will you?” my father says. “I haven’t moved my bowels in a week.” I recover my equilibrium, as is my talent, with a burst of hurt feelings. “I have a terrible case of diarrhea!” (21) The formula of mirth and agony is quite at heart in this farcical situation of the constipated father, the diarrhea-suffering son, and the obsessively overprotecting mother crazily yelling, “Alex, I don’t want you to flush the toilet...I want to know what you’ve done in there” (22). It is surely an act of revenge against his parents for his “hurt feelings” that Portnoy scandalizes them so severely.

Moreover, adolescent Portnoy rebels against his mother’s over protection and perfectionism by desecrating the religious Jewish dietary laws in the most blasphemous manner. Thus, religious law is also aggressively desecrated through this wry humor. For instance, Portnoy admits that he had once bought a piece of liver at a butcher’s

shop and “believe it or not, violated behind a billboard on the way to a bar mitzvah lesson,” (19) thus violating the Jewish dietary law and desecrating against Jewish religious lessons. Portnoy, however, recounts that that piece of liver was not his first as “that—she—it—wasn’t my first piece. My first piece I had in the privacy of my own home...in the bathroom at three-thirty—and then had again on the end of a fork, at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of mine. (134)

In order to explain this perversion, one has to delve deeper in Portnoy’s wry complaint. Sarcastically Portnoy says that Sophie Portnoy is very keen on preserving the Jewish dietary laws and “like a hawk,” watches the butcher “to be certain that he did not forget to put her chopped meat through the kosher grinder” (11). She also serves the “goyish” Christian black servant with dinner “on a special glass plate that does not absorb her germs,” (75) and later whispers to him that she “might be too good for her,” while she runs “scalding water over the dish from which [she] has just eaten her lunch, alone like a leper” (13). She warns her son against eating out and says “Hamburgers,” bitterly, Portnoy mockingly reports, “Just as she might say Hitler, “where they can put anything in the world” (33).

It is remarkable that the theme of the Jewish obsessive mother and the rebellious Jewish son has been tackled before by Roth in his short story *The Conversion of the Jews*. Yet, while Oscar Freedman’s rebellion against the binders and oppressors of his freedom of thought and expression is executed in the form of a vindictive farce, Alexander Portnoy’s rebellion takes the form of a large-scale revengeful, as well as scandalizing, desecration of all moral institutions pertaining to religion, family and marriage. Moreover, while Oscar Freedman’s revenge was against superior and more powerful members of his community, Portnoy’s revenge is against his desperate inner vehemence for being the Jewish child, and adult, “in the middle of a Jewish joke” (36). In *Reading Myself and Other*, Philip Roth sheds more light on the matter:

Ironically, where the boy in the early story is subjugated by figures of real stature in his world, whose power he for the moment at least is able to subvert, Portnoy is less oppressed by these people—who have little real say in his life anyway—than he is by the rage that persists against them. That his most powerful oppressor by far is himself is what makes for the farcical

pathos of the book. (9)

Still, scandalizing his mother, and in so doing vindicating himself against her, Portnoy says that he can not rid himself of an indelible memory his mother inscribed in him in which food and sex, kosher and non kosher, are overlapping. Portnoy says that he once saw her menstrual blood:

saw it shining darkly up at me from the worn linoleum in front of the kitchen sink...Also in this icon an endless dripping of blood down through a drain board into a dishpan. It is the blood she is draining from meat so as to make it kosher and fit for consumption. Probably I am confusing things—I sound like a son of the house of Atreus with all this talk of blood—but I see her standing at the sink salting the meat so to rid it of its blood, when the attack of “women’s troubles” sends her, with a most alarming moan, rushing off to her bedroom. I was no more than four or five, and yet those drops of blood I beheaded on the floor of her kitchen are visible to me still...as is the box of Kotex...as are the stockings sliding up her legs as is—need I even say it?—the bread knife with my own blood would be threatened when I refuse to eat my dinner. (42-43)

Needless to say, the image of blood with all its negative connotations of prohibition in food and sex is so imbedded in Portnoy’s psychology that he relates non-kosher “junk” food to unlawful, mostly degrading, sexual practices with non-Jewish women. Alexander Portnoy thinks that non-Jews “will eat anything...They will do anything as well” (81). Therefore, all of his sexual pervert fantasies and practices are with non-Jewish women. One of the most revealing clues to Portnoy’s, and to his family’s, misanthropy and racism is his account of the visit of his father’s Christian cashier, Anne McCaffery, to their household. In fact, Portnoy’s xenophobic and misanthropic impressions about non-kosher food, non-Jewish women, and blacks are all the same:

Such a creature, needless to say, has never been boiled alive in our house—the lobster, I refer to. A Shikse has never been in our house period, and so it is a matter of conjecture in what condition she might emerge from my mother’s kitchen. The cleaning lady is obviously a Shikse, but she does not count because she is black. (82)

The psychological explanation of Alexander’s vengeful degradation of non-Jewish women, is also best given in Philip Roth, “Are You Finished?” by Hermoine Lee who writes, “Portnoy’s pursuit of Shiksa is a pursuit of ‘junk’ sex, unkosher goods. What he wants is

freely to consume (Did I eat! He says of his first encounter with the Monkey) and to be consumed” (15). In other words, due to his belief in his religious and racial superiority to non-Jewish women, he humiliates them intentionally. In addition, Alexander does not consider this humiliation sinful as he sarcastically treats them as merely sexual objects for his own pleasure—the same way he did with his sex toys during his adolescent years. Thus the wry account of the “Jewish son” in the middle of a Jewish joke reveals a vindictive nature in jibing on Portnoy’s guilt of fornication and his scandalized victims. The agony and mirth here has to do with the fact that this wry humor is externally masochistic and internally acrimonious.

In fact, transgressing against the laws that prohibits non-kosher food and adultery, especially with non Jewish women, is an act of vindication against his overprotective parents. Thus while for Portnoy’s Jewish parents and grandparents America was the land of opportunity to achieve prosperity, for Alexander Portnoy it became a land to conquer sexually regardless the religious and parental inhibitions:

Don’t tell me we’re Americans just like they are...O America! America! It may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me...America is a Shiksa nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love! (146)

As a consequence, throughout Alexander Portnoy’s wryly humorous confessional monologue we learn about his endless series of sexual adventures with non-Jewish women. In addition to referring to them degradingly in Yiddish as Shiksas, he depersonalizes them by calling them names such as “The Pumpkin,” “The Pilgrim,” and most shamefully “The Monkey”. However, Portnoy’s account of these promiscuous adventures is quite sarcastic in tone and indicative of his hideous vindictive nature. Therefore, Portnoy’s promiscuity, as he brags about it, is a conquest of America, “Conquer America—maybe that’s more like it... As though my manifest destiny is to seduce a girl from each of the forty-eight states” (235).

Portnoy’s first affair was with his Christian colleague in college, Kay Campbell. Portnoy engages with Kay in a sexual relationship during their first year in college. Although Portnoy says that he and Kay were in love and they cared neither for money nor for religion, his account of his visit to her family’s household, though humorous, is

quite xenophobic. For instance, every time Kay's father calls her mother's name "Mary," Portnoy's blood temperature "shot into the hundreds. There [he] was, eating off dishes that had been touched by the hands of a woman named Mary" (223). Furthermore, Portnoy's wry account of his stay at the Campbells' household exposes his vengeful feelings towards them, which are symptomatic of his Jewish paranoiac misanthropy:

As soon as I enter the house I begin (on the sly and somewhat to my own surprise) to sniff: what will the odor be like? Mashed potatoes? An old lady's dress? Fresh cement? I sniff and I sniff, trying to catch the scent. There! Is that it, is that Christianity I smell, or just the dog? Everything I see, taste, touch, I think; "Goyish!" my first morning I squeeze half an inch of Pepsodent down the drain rather than put my brush where Kay's mother or father may have touched the bristles with which they cleanse their own goyische morals. True! The soap on the sink is bubbly with foam from everybody's hands. Whose? Mary's? Should I just take hold of it and begin to wash, or should I maybe run little water over it first, just to be safe? But safe from what? Schmuck, maybe you want to get a piece of soap to wash the soap with! (224)

When Kay "missed a period" near the end of their junior year, Portnoy says, they started to "make plans to get married" (230). Still, Portnoy had one precondition that Kay converts to Judaism. However, as Kay refuses to convert and Portnoy decides to abandon her though in his account he says that he thought it was him who loved her, and the pain should be his not hers; "I was astonished. Because all along I'd thought it was I who had loved her, not she who had loved me" (231). Portnoy, anyhow, calls Kay Campbell "the Pumpkin" because of her physical shape as she was, "slight as a butterfly through the rib cage and neck, but planted like a bear beneath! Rooted, that's what I'm getting at! Joined by those lineman's legs to this American ground!" (218) Kay Campbell is given this name moreover, as George J. Searles argues in *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike*, "not only because of her rotundity, but because to Portnoy she represents rural America, the agrarian Midwest" (15). Searles adds that while Portnoy is "at first attracted to Kay because she is not Jewish, he ultimately rejects her for the same reason. This establishes a pattern that will remain constant in his other affairs as well" (15).

Portnoy's second sexual conquest has to do with his vindictive

relation with the daughter of his father's boss whom he refers to mockingly as "The Pilgrim." Sarah Abbott Maulsby was a girl, "who knew how to sail a boat, knew how to eat her dessert using two pieces of silverware" (237). Moreover, while the Senator from Connecticut had been a roommate" of Sarah's father and her bother "held a seat on the New York Stock Exchange" (237), Portnoy's father "this kindly, anxious, uncomprehending, constipated father!" was "doomed to be obstructed by this Holy Protestant Empire!" (39). Therefore, Portnoy aims at humiliating Sarah Abbott as an act of vengeance against her father as he admits, "a little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the colored district. A little bonus extracted from Boston & Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation" (241).

Being aware of the social and cultural gap between them, Portnoy begins humiliating Sarah Abbott by involving her in some sexual deviations such as voyeurism and oral coitus in spite of her resistance:

Our one peripheral delight was the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. There, standing, thigh to thigh, I would whisper, "look, Sarah, look". At first she was shy, left the looking to me, at first she was modest and submitted only because I wished her to, but in time she developed something of a passion for the looking glass, too, and followed the reflection of our joining a certain startled intensity in her gaze. (234)

It is remarkable how the wry account of this relationship reveals Portnoy's hideous vengeful feelings. It is also important to recognize how Portnoy's use of words such as "assault," "surrender," and "submission" reflect his innate desire to dominate Sarah. The second sexual deviation that Portnoy forces Sarah to perform, in spite of her resistance, is oral coitus. He says that he spent three months "applying pressure to the back of her skull (pressure met by a surprising counterforce, an impressive, even moving display of stubbornness from such a mild and uncontentious person)" (239). Self-mockingly, Portnoy seems fully aware of his vindictive nature as he says, "What made me so irate was precisely my belief that I was being discriminated against. My father couldn't rise at Boston & Northeastern for the same reason that Sally Maulsby wouldn't deign to go down on me" (238). One night, however, she invites him to a Mozart "Budapest String Quartet...at the library of the Congress," and during the final movement she tells him that she will do it. As soon as

Alexander succeeds in conquering Sarah Abbott Maulsby, the daughter of his father's employer, he abandons her. He even admits that "there could never be any "love" in me for the Pilgrim. Intolerant of her frailties, jealous of her accomplishments, and resentful of her family. No, not much room there for love" (240).

Unlike Portnoy's first or second mistress, who were culturally and socially superior to him, his third mistress Mary Jane Reeds is an uneducated underwear model who "used to earn as much money in an hour posing for underwear ads as her illiterate father would earn in a week in the coal mines of West Virginia" (106). This time, Portnoy's libido dominandi directs his vindictive assault not against the superior American social stratum rather against the lower one. Thus Mary seems to be the fulfillment of Alexander's sexual pervert fantasies because she is a licentious illiterate woman who was involved in sexual perversion before he met her. Portnoy's feelings are perplexed as he admits his admiration towards her and at the same time he feels superior to her; "This girl is really special. Even if I did pick her up in the street" (194). Moreover, Portnoy gives Mary the depersonalizing name "The Monkey" same as he gave humiliating names to the other girls. Portnoy's choice of the nickname "The Monkey" is based on an incident that took place only a month before he met her. Mary was sick with a virus and had a "temperature of 102" when a couple she knew came to make her dinner and afterwards asked her to watch them make love naked while she eats bananas; "they wanted me to eat one. While I watched" (159). In addition, Portnoy admits his paranoiac disdain for the Christian name Mary the same way he felt towards Kay Campbell's mother, "there I was, eating off the dishes that had been touched by the hands of a woman called Mary. (is there a clue here as why I so resisted calling the Monkey by her name, except to chastise her?" (224)

Mary's sexual licentiousness and perversion were the flaws that Portnoy made use of in dominating her and breaking up with her later on. Spending a vacation in Italy, Portnoy convinces Mary to get involved with him in a sexual ménage a trio with an Italian streetwalker. Two times in the ménage a trio and it becomes non-exclusive as the streetwalker's boyfriend expresses his desire to make

love to Mary. She, then, full of remorse, tells Portnoy that she wants to beget children and be normal. Mary says, “I want a child too! And a home! And a husband! I am not a lesbian! I am not a whore!” (142). Eventually, Mary threatens to kill herself, and Portnoy flees to Israel. Portnoy, anyhow, wishes that Mary would die because she has threatened to scandalize him; “Oh Jesus, let her be dead then! Jump, you ignorant destructive bitch—better you than me!” (250). Actually, Portnoy’s flight from Mary in Italy to Israel is motivated by the impulse to free himself of his pervert life. Alexander says that the trip to Israel would be an educational experience that would free him and make him in control of his life:

I’d had enough of the improbably with my companion in Greece and Rome. No, to make sense of the impulse that has sent me running aboard El Al flight to begin with, to convert myself from a bewildered runaway into a man once again—in control of my will, conscious of my intentions... Yes, I would have (no that I was unaccountably here) what is called an educational experience. (252)

And an “educational” experience he has indeed. One day he goes to the beach in Israel and he sees a sea full of Jews. Though the ambiance is assuring to Portnoy he is still skeptical of the idea of being in a place full of Jews only. He is off shore and away from the America he vowed to conquer:

Frolicking, gamboling Jews! Look at their Jewish limbs moving through the Jewish water! Look at the Jewish children laughing, acting as if they won the place... Jewish sand. I buy a Jewish ice cream from a Jewish vendor. “Isn’t this something? I say to myself. “A Jewish country!” But the Idea is more easily expressed than understood; I cannot really grasp hold of it. Alex in Wonderland. (256)

In Israel, Portnoy meets Naomi, whom he refers to in his confessional complaint as his “mother substitute” (266). Naomi is a Sabra girl whose parents are, “Zionists from Philadelphia who had come to Palestine just before the outbreak of World War Two” (258). She, Portnoy says, loves the living conditions that were “primitive” and the constant danger of “Syrian infiltrators slipping into the encampment at night, with hand grenades and land mines” (258). For him she is “an admirable and brave girl” a “Jewish Pumpkin!” as he is “given a second chance” (258). Portnoy, however, engages with her in an extended conversation about his life in America and she in response gives him the “disapproving gaze” of his mother as she says:

You seem to take a special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor. Everything you say is somehow always twisted, some way or another, to come out 'funny.' All day long the same thing. In some little way or other, everything is ironical, or self-depreciating. (264)

And by dawn Portnoy is given a hard time and made to realize that he is the "epitome of what was most shameful in the culture of the Diaspora...frightened, defensive, self-depreciating, unmanned and corrupted by life in the gentile world" (265). Still when Portnoy tries to take advantage of her, the rudiments of sexual potency fails him. There on the floor crawling under her feet as she is preparing to leave, Portnoy realizes that in Israel "where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes!" (271). By this Portnoy's extended confession comes to an end and his psychiatrist says in a funny Yiddish accent "Now vee may perhaps begin" (274).

It is remarkable that after Naomi crushes Portnoy, she reprimands him for taking "special pleasure, some pride in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor" (264). He tries to defend himself by saying that "self-depreciation is, after all, a classic form of Jewish humor," to which Naomi replies "Not Jewish humor! No! Ghetto humor" (265). This, however, relates to the fact that Israelis' sense of humor mocks their gleeful impudence and excessive self-confidence. It is what Sarah Cohen Blacher names in *Jewish Wry: Introduction: The Varieties of Jewish Humor* a "bellicose" comedy as she reflects on humor in Israel's popular literature:

Gone is the awkward sycophantic smile of Diaspora Jews, their use of self-deprecating humor as a social lubricant to ease into the closed gentile society...it is also a humor which can laugh at its own pugnacity, as exemplified in the following joke by Israel's most celebrated humorist, Ephraim Kishon: "You are walking down the street and somebody kicks you from behind. 'Excuse me,' he says, 'I thought you were somebody else.' You say, 'Do you have to kick me?' 'Sir,' he says, 'you are telling me whom I am supposed to kick'" (13)

Fathoming the depth of Portnoy's experience in Israel we understand Philip Roth's Zionist message: the Diaspora Jews are a disgrace. Portnoy says, "it was Diaspora Jews just like myself who had gone by millions to the gas chambers without ever raising a hand against their persecutors, who did not know enough to defend their lives with their blood" (265). It is remarkable how Portnoy's promiscuous conquest

fails in Israel. Portnoy says "it's home...these are (there's no other word!) the natives. Returned this is where it all began! Just been away on a long vacation that's all!" (254). Still, it is only in Israel that Portnoy has "perished," as Eileen Z. Cohen writes in *Alex in Wonderland, or Portnoy's Complaint*, where "others find life" (166). The dilemma in question here is the schizophrenia of Portnoy's understanding of himself, explains Cohen:

One cannot exist with the knowledge that all of life is irrational. Portnoy has no such instinct for survival. He cannot escape from his horrifying insights. The conventions, the laws, the way of life that he was reared in, are exposed as too limited and in some measure fraudulent. But the knowledge does not free Alex, for he still clings to the myth of perfection in himself. His sexual demands and subsequent guilt are his living nightmare. He has humor and he has the proper public conscience, but he does not control centerfield. (167-168)

Eventually, Philip Roth's early works, commonly semi-autobiographical recreations of his experiences as an adolescent, deal with the dilemma of central Jewish male protagonists who are repeatedly caught in a tragicomic limbo between the demands of their social and religious affiliations and their unquenched desires for self-fulfillment and gratification. The bitter sweet blend of mirth and agony is the main feature of Jewish wry humor as the agony is of a masochist nature and the mirth is of a scandalizing purpose. The aim of these commonly wry self-mocking narrative discourses is the vindication of the self against religious, familial, or social oppressive powers. In Jewish wry humor the aggression against the self is also an aggression against the other whoever happens to be in the social periphery of the Jewish male protagonist.

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