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Jewish American Identity in Philip Roth’s “Goodbye, Columbus”: An Analysis of Neil Klugman

1. Introduction

“Who am I?” – this is the question the main character of the novella “Goodbye, Columbus” (= GC) by Philip Roth, a contemporary American writer, asks himself at different stages in the plot. Being a Jewish lower-middle class boy who lives with his aunt and uncle in Newark, New Jersey, Neil meets Brenda, an upper-middle class college student who lives in an assimilated Jewish family in Short Hills. The differences could not be more obvious. Yet, they fall in love with each other and Neil is no longer sure of himself, whether he is strictly Jewish or not, whether he wants to be part of Brenda’s rich family, or whether the price for all this is too high for him to pay or not – in sum, what makes him “Neil”.

The present term paper will first concentrate on what a reader might understand by the term “identity” in general in order to provide an idea of the topics that identity quests of any person could be about. A
second chapter then focuses on the concept of “Jewish American Identity”, on its history as well as on different types of contemporary Jewish denominations in the world. Neil’s identity quest will then be discussed in particular in a third chapter, concentrating on various scenes from the book that illustrate his inner struggle.

In the end the questions will be asked if Neil is able to come to a solution of his problem and whether there is a certain development or if it is possible to ever come to an end with the quest for identity – both Neil’s quest in the present book and the reader’s quest in general.

2. Definition of “identity”

When asked what they understand by the term ‘identity’ most people will mention topics like nationality, ethnicity, social and cultural identity or community. One might also say that identity is a self-reflection which is influenced by others or by others’ views on oneself. When it comes to bringing the term down to a definition, one can be found in the American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Identity is ‘the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitely recognizable or known’ and ‘the set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group’. As mentioned above not only these personal character traits are important to identify a human being but also his cultural identity which is “influenced by one’s belonging to a group or culture” (American Heritage® Dictionary 2003: entry identity) and which therefore depends upon place, gender, race, history, nationality, language, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and ethnicity. This culture is not being shaped by individuals but it is a social process in which individuals participate in the context of changing historical conditions. In order to move on to the concept of “Jewish American Identity” it is vital to look especially at these aspects of a social process in the context of history.

3. Jewish American identity

For this chapter only a few aspects of the concept of identity will be chosen. It is certain that the Jewish history before, during and after World War II in Europe is among the factors that shaped the development of Jewish American identity. Also the consciousness of being only a minority wherever the Jews were about to settle down as well as their outer appearance\(^1\) which clearly marked them as Jews should not be neglected (cf. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009: entry Orthodox Judaism).

\(^{1}\) ‘Outer appearance’ refers to the manner of dress of Orthodox Jews: Women dress modestly and keep most of their skin covered; married women even cover their hair. Men can easily be identified by their wearing a skullcap (kipa) and fringes; they often grow beards and wear black clothes (hats and suits).
3.1. History

Historically, America has always been considered the site of liberation for the Jewish people – it meant redemption from Europe, and the new American ideals like tolerance, pluralism and freedom of religion were seen as biblical ideals. This means in particular that the Jews believed that “America would restore the manliness of Jews that Europe had undermined” as Heschel (2003: 32) argues in her essay. With the end of World War II this optimism ended and the thoughts reversed themselves. The Eastern European religious forms which were formerly considered to be a movement backwards came now to be seen as the only source of authentic Jewish identity: “the authenticity of Judaism was linked to its European expressions, with American Jews viewed as its pale imitators” (Heschel 2003: 47).

3.2. Orthodox, conservative and reformed Judaism

For orthodox Jews the law, consisting of the Torah, which was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, plus the oral transmission of the laws called Talmud form the principles of their lives (cf. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009: entry Orthodox Judaism). Therefore young men and women become men and women of the law when they are bar mitzvahed (men) or bat mitzvahed (women) at the age of 12 or 13. Another aspect of orthodox Judaism which plays an interesting role in the following discussion is that the day of the wedding is the first time a man and a woman are allowed to have sexual intercourse.

In contrast, there is another form of Judaism, namely Conservative Judaism, which was formed in the USA. Its adherents preserve their tradition but even though the observance of the law is required, it is not as strict as for orthodox Jews. This is why Conservative Judaism enables Jews to assimilate to American culture without breaking Jewish law (cf. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009: entry Conservative Judaism).

The aim of Reform Judaism, which has its roots in Germany, is the establishment of a contemporary way of religious life. Main differences between this form and the other two are the use of languages other than Hebrew in their services and furthermore that the decision of observance to the law is made by the individuals and not by the community (cf. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009: entry Reform Judaism).

4. Neil’s identity quest in “Goodbye, Columbus”

In “Goodbye, Columbus” the main character Neil Klugman struggles with his inner self and his Jewish identity. The precipitation of this crisis is his
first meeting with Brenda at a swimming-pool, where he is supposed to hold her glasses while she is diving through the water (GC: 7). As mentioned before, their socio-economic differences are enormous although this does not prevent them from starting a relationship.

The first scene which is interesting for the quest for identity is the first real conversation between Neil and Brenda, in which she reveals that she has had a nose surgery because of a typical Jewish facial characteristic – a bump. Neil admits in this passage that he has a desire to please other people, which can be seen in his uttering after Brenda’s revelation: “My next question was prompted by a desire to sound interested and thereby regain civility. – How much does it cost?” (GC: 18). Not a question that one would interpret as sounding empathetic. Brenda’s answer shows that she and her family try to assimilate to the American way of life and that they also have the money to do so. But not only does the wealth show the easy assimilation but also the process of de-emphasizing their Jewish heritage.

Another scene, the discussion between Neil and Mrs. Patimkin, Brenda’s mother, makes clear how insecure Neil is in terms of religious identity: While she is a member of Hadassah, a Women’s Zionist Organization (cf. GC: 69) which puts efforts into health care, education and the needs of Jewish children, and is active in the Orthodox Temple, Neil does not have any affiliation with a synagogue or a specific Jewish organization. He tries to hide his atheistic tendencies and expresses his insecurity by uttering, “‘Well, I haven’t gone in a long time... I sort of switch...’”, I smiled. ‘I’m just Jewish’” (GC: 70). This leaves no doubt that he does not want to discuss this topic any further. Nevertheless he pretends interest in what Brenda’s mother is doing although he is confused about his own belonging to a certain Jewish religious group.

A further scene which is worth looking at in this context is the one when Neil and Brenda are in New York to get a diaphragm for her. While waiting for Brenda, Neil goes into a nearby church and his first thought after entering is whether he looks like a catholic (cf. GC: 79). Here it is not the question what kind of Jew he is but if one could think he is a catholic (GC: 79). His thoughts about God are an expression of his genuine desire for insight and self-knowledge, which is often the case if a person asks about God. People want to know about their own identity and the purpose of their life. Neil thinks about his love for Brenda and what he expects from it – it stands partly for what she represents, namely wealth and assimilation, which are things he is not sure he wants to achieve or not. “Which prize do you think, schmuck? Gold dinnerware, sporting-goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, bumpless noses, Patimkin Sink, Bonwit Teller – “(GC: 79). Whether the price for such a life is too high for Neil or not is not answered here.

The decision seems to have been made in the separation scene between Neil and Brenda. Immediately after their break-up Neil leaves the room and before going to the train station to travel home again he ends up
in front of the window of a library which reflects his own picture (cf. GC: 104). It symbolizes Neil’s self-reflection where he can clearly see and state that he is not the way the Patimkins are. The broken wall he sees might stand for Neil’s acceptance of himself as being imperfect – at least in the Patimkins’ view. Also the rising sun and the beginning of the Jewish New Year could mean that Neil not only wants to start anew for himself but that he has also gained a new sense of himself as a Jew.

5. Conclusion

In summary, one might say that Neil in a certain way has found his way of dealing with himself and his identity. At least he seems to be stronger in this last scene than in the scenes before, where he shows his instability and insecurity in religious and personal identity matters. He says: “I was sure I had loved Brenda, though standing there, I knew I couldn’t any longer. And I knew it would be a long while before I made love to anyone the way I had made love to her” (GC: 104). When the sun rises again, welcoming him to the Jewish New Year, Neil is able to start anew even if he goes back into his often disliked surroundings of his aunt and uncle and the library where he works. One can guess that he might go on leading his life as he did before. But still, it can be interpreted as a beginning. He leaves his broken relationship with Brenda behind and does not “look very much longer” at the window of the library, where he sees in the mirroring glass “a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved” (GC: 104), which might represent his mental state. Neil is broken, he is not sure about his identity and there are several books in his life – but although imperfectly, they are shelved in a certain way and it is the task of every person who seeks for his or her own identity to shelving the different parts of his or her life so that they form a whole. In realising that his relationship with Brenda brought him away from himself, Neil takes a first step in the right direction to shelving his books better.

The question whether the quest for identity will ever come to an end cannot be answered directly. Neil in a way has made the experience that this process is never-ending and it might be so for any person in this life – one’s identity can only become clearer but never be defined completely.
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Note

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