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Feminist Themes in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

The current article presents evidence that, in his novella *Goodbye, Columbus*, Philip Roth should be commended for illustrating the limitations placed on women in Jewish-American culture during the 1950s, rather than criticized for exhibiting the misogynistic viewpoints of that era. Roth uses a combination of male narration and female characterization to show the limited opportunities available to women. Brenda, the primary female protagonist, is presented from the perspective of the male narrator, Neil, as frustrating and incomprehensible. This characterization demonstrates the difference between Neil's way of thinking, as a male, and Brenda's as a female. Brenda is an affluent character who demonstrates that wealth alone cannot provide a woman with opportunities and freedoms that equal even those available to males of lesser status. Brenda lacks freedom, financially because of her lack of options as a woman, within her own skin because of a lack of autonomy over her body within sexual relationships, and over her self-image because of the criticism she experiences from her mother and the expectations placed upon her by her parents as a Jewish woman in 1950s society. The current article, therefore, argues that what is often misinterpreted as misogyny in Roth's use of criticism of Brenda's character by Neil is, in fact, a vivid demonstration of the lack of options and autonomy available to women in that era.

Keywords

Feminism, 1950s, Jewish American, Philip Roth

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In *Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth, feminist themes are made relevant through the actions of female characters in the novel. Roth uses the character of Brenda, and her conflicting relationships with the people in her life, in order to demonstrate the limitations placed on a woman, even as young, and affluent as Brenda and with a future as promising as hers. Roth creates the character of Brenda as a difficult person, through a combination of realistic portrayal of her actions, as well as the tainted viewpoint of an impatient young man lusting after her affections. He does this not to discredit Brenda as a character nor to destroy the reputation of women in the novel, but to show how badly they can be perceived, and how great are the obstacles and limitations women face in gaining an education, career and autonomy over their bodies and their lives.

Neil and Brenda's sexual relationship is a major conflict in the novel. The lack of options for both Neil and Brenda in a 1950s environment becomes obvious to a modern-day reader. In *The Gender Knot, Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, Allen Johnson discusses the illusive nature of stereotypes and patriarchy in sex:

One thing that makes gender issues difficult to deal with is that they often seem so *natural* that they aren't something we can make choices about. This is especially true of sexuality, which we tend to see as entirely rooted in nature, embedded in emotion and body, and so immediate that it's hard to imagine how it could be shaped by something as remote as society. Surely something like orgasm isn't a social invention. But that doesn't mean sexuality is all hard-wired biology

unshaped by the conditions of social life. (p. 147)¹

In Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* this sense of sexual captivity through society's expectations of gender roles is created through what is unmentioned. There are no alternatives discussed besides heterosexuality, no characters involved in relationships outside of marriage, or relationships presumed to have the end result of marriage. In Roth's novel, actions made by female characters are presented as being carried out for the sake of male characters involved. These sexual values reflect the ways in which the women of Brenda and Neil's generation are conditioned to carry out patriarchal roles within their relationship.

Neil's persistent pursuit of Brenda begins by watching her play tennis. She competes hard, and tries to destroy her competition, another woman her age. Rather than using this episode to portray Brenda as a dedicated hard worker, Roth makes her competitiveness seem vicious and overly aggressive. Through the novel's portrayal, the reader interprets the sport as being carried out for the benefit of the onlooker, Neil. The success of the two women is taken from them, and Neil watches Brenda's antics with criticism and skepticism rather than appreciation. He states, "The darker it did get the more savagely did Brenda rush the net... Her passion for winning a point seemed outmatched by an even stronger passion for maintaining her body as it was." (p. 10)²

Neil is critical of Brenda, as exhibiting over-competitiveness and attributing the way she plays to vanity. This moment, the

¹Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, 2nd Edition. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005), 1-320.

²Roth, Philip. *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. (New York: Vintage, 1993), 1-298.

start of their first official date, he is judging her in terms of whether he should date her. He takes away her achievement and the effort of her competitor, and replaces it with skeptical evaluation of her as his potential mate. Neil's narcissism in which he believes he has a right over Brenda, and his perceptions of her actions, for the most part created by his own thoughts, demolish Brenda's character in all that she does. She cannot have autonomy over her body in sports or in sex because the novel is written from Neil's perspective and he views her as an object of his desire.

The act of sex is presented in a male-oriented way throughout the novel. Everything sexual for Brenda is a trade-off, not something she engages in for her own pleasure. Neil speculates about Brenda's every action and thought, but never once questions if she is ready, interested, or enjoying the intimacy that they share. Their first kiss is an exchange; Brenda asks whether, if she allows a kiss, Neil will stop teasing her. It doesn't seem like it's something she wants for herself, and even as she agrees to it she is losing something, her leverage in the relationship perhaps, maybe her reputation as well. The scene of their first kiss is strange, forced. Brenda starts:

If I let you kiss me, will you stop being so nasty?" Neil thinks, "We had to take about two too many steps to keep the approach from being awkward, but we pursued the impulse and kissed. I felt her hand on the back of my neck and so I tugged her towards me, too violently perhaps, and slid my own hands across the side of her body and around to her back. (p. 14)³

The exchange is rough, and Brenda acts out of obligation and a desire to keep Neil close, as opposed to the lust that Neil himself exhibits.

³See note 2.

When sex is brought into the relationship, it is presented as a course of action, rather than as a passionate affair. Neil relates:

Later that night, Brenda and I made love, our first time...When I began to unbutton her dress, she resisted me, and I like to think it was because she knew how lovely she looked in it... How can I describe loving Brenda? It was so sweet, as though I'd finally scored that twenty-first point. (p. 46)⁴

Brenda's hesitation is avoided and ignored, regarded by Neil as an expected challenge he's meant to overcome, which he compares to a sporting game.

Neil's discussion with the drunken man at Harriet and Ron's wedding further demonstrates the value of male pleasure over that of females in the novel. Sex is discussed in a drunken rant, because this seems like the only opportunity it can be discussed, under the pretext of alcohol, and between men. When it is brought up, the male's perspective is what's focused upon. The man describes oral sex from his wife as something he loves, yet never mentions what she enjoys except to point out that she doesn't like doing that. The man continues to describe his home life to Neil:

Look', he went on after another drink, 'I love my kid like Ben loves his Brenda. It's not that I don't want to play with her. But if I play with the kid at night and then get into bed with my wife, then she can't expect fancy things from me. It's one or the other. I'm no movie star.' (p. 114)⁵

These moments in the novel illustrate the gap between what men like and what women like, and how this discrepancy in interactions between the sexes can be attributed to men's disregard of women's

⁴See note 2.

⁵See note 2.

ideas about pleasure in sex. The man clearly has no idea what his wife would enjoy, and considers the workload of any effort on his part as superhuman.

The only instance in the novel where Brenda openly initiates sex is in an act of anger and defiance towards her parents, and in a moment of desperate frustration with her own life. She tells Neil to make love to her among her family's dirty antiques. Her objective is to act out against the life she was brought up in by doing something unacceptable among belongings important to her family's wealth and history, in this way mocking the life of entitlement her family has given her, through what she may feel is a moment of freedom from their control.

The issue of the diaphragm, which becomes the breaking point in Neil and Brenda's relationship, illustrates the way in which sex is a determinant of power and control within Neil and Brenda's relationship. Neil tells Brenda that the reason he wants her to get a diaphragm is not for safety or practicality, but for his pleasure. He poses it as a challenge, as a way to gain standing within a short and challenging summertime relationship in which he feels a lack of control over Brenda. She is going off to school, and his distance from her makes him feel powerless in a situation where he already felt he lacked the upper hand. He contemplates his options, and decides, in a split second of unsureness, that he is not ready to ask her hand in marriage. Marriage would place responsibility on him as the male as the role of provider, and would mean spending the rest of his life with Brenda. Not ready or willing to make this commitment, he places the burden of maintaining the relationship on Brenda.

He prepares himself for battle when raising the topic of the diaphragm and views her lack of cooperation as an act of defiance against him. He throws insults and

arguments at her, hoping that she will cave in to his persistence, all the while convincing himself that the issues in their relationship are based on her self-centeredness and lack of cooperation. He is able to put the burden of the relationship's survival on Brenda, and at the same time deprive her of autonomy over her own body. She is finally forced to relinquish control to Neil, and enters the birth control clinic uncomfortable and teary-eyed.

Another way in which Roth promotes feminism in his novel is by showing the limitations of the female characters in terms of education and career and the financial and familial issues surrounding these rights. The subject of wealth is a huge theme. It separates classes of people and determines what neighborhoods they will live in, what schools they will attend, who their friends will be, what careers they will be able to achieve and whom they will marry. Within all these class differences, however, is the issue of women's opportunities and responsibilities in comparison to men of the same social standing.

In her article, "Jewish American Princesses, Their Mothers, and Feminist Psychology: A Rereading of Roth's *'Goodbye, Columbus,'*" Barbara Waxman discusses the idea of a "Jewish Princess," the female child beginning to be valued as much as the traditionally-valued son. In this role, as valued child, Brenda is raised with everything materialistic she could want and is in turn expected to feel indebtedness to her family for what they have given her. This creates a conflict between Brenda and her mother. Brenda's mother feels that Brenda does not value what has been given to her, and that Brenda is unconscientious about money. However, as Waxman argues, Brenda has been raised as dependent on her parents, and so cannot be realistically expected to be independent.

The conflict between Brenda and her mother is heightened by her mother's criticism. As Waxman points out, Brenda's relationship with her mother is much more important to her development of self than how a boy child experiences a relationship with his mother. When criticized, Brenda's self-esteem and confidence are deeply affected. She seeks an independent life, by going away to college, yet never escapes internalization of the criticism and competitiveness her parents have instilled in her. Waxman argues that this internal doubt is what keeps Brenda from accessing opportunities outside her parents' home. Waxman describes the Jewish mother and daughter, identifying Brenda as the "Jewish American Princess" (JAP):

'Mothers who overprotect their daughters produce women who expect to be catered to and looked after' (Dundes 461). In return for this overwhelming love, nurturance, indulgence and protection from the cruel world, the Jewish mother expects from her daughter 'eternal loyalty and love' (Dundes 460); the JAP becomes the dutiful, obedient good daughter, or if she does not, she suffers guilt and conflict over her 'misconduct.' The Jewish mother's love is, thus, not unconditional. (p. 92)⁶

Brenda is unhappy in her home life but has been raised as dependent on her family, and feels an obligation to them because of the life they have provided for her. Waxman explains:

The emotional refuge and identification between mother and daughter can provide 'rich, various and vital sources of feminine selfhood' (Kahn 76), which

Brenda has been denied at least intermittently. Thus, because her primal trust in her mother had been undermined, Brenda experiences... frustration and resentment, impairing her ability to establish her own identity. (p. 99)⁷

Roth's novel is clever in running through Brenda's various options as a woman. She's first presented with the possibility of marriage upon experiencing a summer romance with Neil. As readers, we're given a clear picture of what this life will mean for Brenda. There's Harriet and Ron's wedding ceremony, a final opportunity for the parents to dote upon and congratulate their son. This celebration is peppered with drunken laments by family members and friends engaged in married lives of their own. Brenda's mother would probably love this life for Brenda (perhaps she'd be even more appreciative if the groom were a husband other than Neil) for Mrs. Patimkin immediately takes a liking to Harriet, Ron's fiancée. Neil observes Mrs. Patimkin, "Harriet appeared and Brenda's mother lifted one wing and pulled the girl in towards the warm underpart of her body, where Brenda herself would have liked to nestle" (p. 59).⁸ Despite the ways in which marriage has the potential to improve Brenda's quality of life by bettering her relationship with Mrs. Patimkin, neither Brenda nor Neil are ready for that life together. While Neil is unsuccessfully gathering the nerves to become a Patimkin, Brenda is drinking away her dissatisfaction and vomiting in the bathroom.

The characters of Mrs. Patimkin and Neil's aunt provide an image of what married life is like for a Jewish woman in this era. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, John Duvall states, "In giving voice to a postwar period

⁶Waxman, Barbara. "Jewish American Princesses, Their Mothers, and Feminist Psychology: A Rereading of Roth's 'Goodbye, Columbus'" *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 7.1 (1988): 90-104.

⁷See note 6.

⁸See note 2.

or cultural and political realignment, especially for Jews... Roth prolifically chronicle[s] the struggles, ironies and calamities of American life and disclosure" (p. 132).⁹ While class differences may affect the amount and quality of the products accessible to women in the different communities presented, as well as differences in their affluence in their individual communities, both women are presented with similar jobs of organizing and preparing. Mrs. Patimkin is spared kitchen-related jobs but, in turn, she fills her time with activities that seem trivial to the reader, like organizing community groups and planning her son's wedding. Despite her affluence and comfort, there is no career in Mrs. Patimkin's life, no room for advancement, no financial reimbursement for her efforts, and no recognition of achievement from the community. Neil's aunt has even less effect in her own life; her effort for control is mocked in her silly efforts to dictate when and what her family eats and to keep Neil within her decision-making authority.

For Brenda's brother, Ron, there is the option of inheriting his father's business. He is groomed to run the company, an instant and guaranteed source of inherited wealth. Is this option available to Brenda? It's unlikely, and Neil imagines if anything, he'd be the one to inherit the Patimkin business. Brenda may have opportunities like education that were unavailable to women in past generations, but her ending point will most likely be marriage to someone her parents approve of.

As an unmarried woman, Brenda is a dependent on a family she feels in conflict

with. As a married woman, she will lose autonomy in another sense. Her body will be her husband's, whether she is using it as a means of leverage in the relationship, or whether Neil is demanding that she agree to his terms. Her happiness and independence are not factors in either of these relationships. With her parents, she is a dependent reflection of their success in both business and parenting. As wife to Neil, she will always experience the pressure he exerts on her to maintain control because of his feelings of inadequacy in her presence as a result of their class differences.

The internal conflict Brenda experiences on a daily basis between her family, her relationship with Neil, and her failing quest for independence is contrasted with Neil's separation and independence from his family and his steady, if not high-paying, job. While Brenda is raised as captive to her mother's criticism, Neil has no hesitation in telling off his aunt and escaping her antics. Waxman writes:

Clearly, Neil, as a male, phallogocentrically sees separation from the mother as a simple, positive goal... Desiring dissociation from his mother, he cannot appreciate either the positive elements of daughters' symbiosis with their mothers or their conflict over attachment versus separation... (p. 99)¹⁰

Neil fails to understand the responsibility Brenda has to her family, how this restricts her and how his relationship with her compromises her standing with her parents. Neil's frustration with Brenda, after she reads him her parents' letters regarding their discovery of the diaphragm, illustrates his incomprehension of the obligation she feels towards her family, which is different from any obligations he feels towards his own. He asks, accusingly:

'Who are you going to bring home Thanksgiving---- Linda?' I said, 'or

⁹Duvall, John N. *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 1-275. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521196314>

¹⁰See note 6.

me?’ ‘Who *can* I bring home, Neil?’ [Brenda replies]... [she continues,] ‘Neil, be realistic. After this, can I bring you home? Can you see us all sitting around the table?’ [Neil responds] ‘I can’t if you can’t, and I can if you can.’ (p. 133)¹¹

Neil is frustrated at Brenda, for not being more dismissive of her family despite her obvious unhappiness living with them, and he unleashes this frustration upon her in their arguments. He lacks understanding of how Brenda depends on the relationship with her family, as a woman raised in obedience and reliance upon comfort provided by her parents.

Through Neil’s narration, he presents the issue that distinguishes him from Brenda as the difference in the classes they were raised in. When the reader takes a deeper look, it becomes evident that the real separation between the two characters is related to gender, not class. Neil, as a male, not even a family member, has a better chance of obtaining a high-paying job at Mr. Patimkin’s business than Mr. Patimkin’s own daughter, Brenda. While Brenda has limited options besides the expectation of marriage, Neil has different career opportunities without fearing judgment from his family. Neil has control over his body, which is something Brenda is losing through her relationship with Neil, and will inevitably lose through marriage.

Through Roth’s female characters, we are shown the lack of opportunities available to women of the era during which the novel is written. The character of Brenda is presented from Neil’s perspective as infuriating and unapproachable, in order to demonstrate just how different Neil’s way of thinking is, as a male, in comparison to Brenda’s as a female. While Brenda has been raised in luxury, this comfort cannot provide her with opportunities and freedoms

that equal even those of males of lesser status in society. As a woman, she lacks freedom, financially (because of a lack of options), within her own skin (because of a lack of control over her body) within her relationships, and through her self-image (as a result of the criticism she experiences from her mother and the expectations placed on her by her parents). What can be misinterpreted as misogyny in Roth’s novel *Goodbye, Columbus* is, in fact, a presentation of how Brenda, as a woman, is trapped in her personality, how she is misinterpreted by Neil through his male perspective, and how these conditions limit the options and conditions available to her as a woman.

¹¹See note 2.