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Table of Contents

Eva Hänßgen <i>Introduction</i>	1-2
Sarah Willim <i>An Analysis of Neil Klugman in Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus": Questions of Classes and Religious Identity</i>	3-15
Deborah Kühnle <i>Jewish American Identity in Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus": An Analysis of Neil Klugman</i>	17-22
Max Graff <i>Parts of a Whole: The Interplay of Form and Contents in Philip Roth's Operation Shylock: A Confession</i>	23-33
Katharina Burck <i>Living Under the Influence of History: The Issue of Coping with the Past, Present and Future in The Plot Against America</i>	35-44

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Introduction

*Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary
existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life.
There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that's it.*
(Philip Roth)¹

Philip Roth (b. 1933) started his literary career with the short story collection *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959 and – fifty-two years and thirty books later – is still productive, highly acclaimed and controversial: When he was awarded the Man Booker International Prize in 2011, one of the judges resigned because of Roth's alleged misogyny.

The papers in this special issue of *Contributions to the Study of Language, Literature and Culture* were prepared during the course "Philip Roth" (PS II Literaturwissenschaft / EPG II) in the summer of 2009. Our focus was not only on gender roles in Roth's fiction, but on Jewish American identity and the postmodern play with fact and fiction, history and autobiography. We studied three books from different periods of his career: *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) and *The Plot Against America* (2004).

The first two papers concentrate on Neil Klugman, the protagonist of the novella "Goodbye, Columbus", who shares elements of the author's biography, his Newark roots and his troubled Jewishness. Both papers evaluate aspects of Neil's identity: Sarah Willim explores how he is torn between his lower-class roots and the upper-middle-class "heaven" his lover, Brenda Patimkin, shows him. In the end, he decides against the Patimkins' corrupted suburbia and moves on. Deborah Kühnle examines the religious aspects of Neil's quest for identity and the role different

¹ Interview with Hermione Lee ("The Art of Fiction No. 84," *The Paris Review* 93 (1984); <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth>).

strands of Judaism play for the characters. Roth's humorous take on these issues earned him the epithet "self-hating Jew" and even charges of anti-Semitism.

Max Graff's paper on *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, a novel or an autobiographical confession set in Israel during the First Intifada, investigates formal aspects and postmodern strategies of the text. Roth keeps the readers on their toes: What are the facts? Who are these people? Roth's personal identity (as writer, narrator and character in the book, chasing a *doppelgänger* posing as "Philip Roth") and Jewish identity in Israel and the US are called into question.

Katharina Burck's paper analyses the personal experience of history in *The Plot Against America*, an alternate history of a 1940s pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic America under president Charles Lindbergh. The book fuses autobiographical material – the Roth family, with the boy Philip as narrator, and their Newark neighbourhood – and historical facts with fiction.

I would like to thank all students of the Roth course, especially the contributors to this volume, for the stimulating discussions and inspiring term papers. My special thanks go to Frank Polzenhagen, the general editor of the e-journal, for his generous help in preparing this issue.

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Sarah Willim

An Analysis of Neil Klugman in Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus": Questions of Class and Religious Identity

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1. Introduction
 2. Neil and his lower-middle class background
 - 2.1. Neil versus his family
 - 2.2. Neil as a part of the lower-middle class?
 3. The Patimkins as a breakout for Neil?
 - 3.1. The Patimkins' extravagance and their disguises
 - 3.2. The Patimkins obsession with sports
 4. Conclusion
- References
-

1. Introduction

The novella "Goodbye, Columbus" (= GC) by Philip Roth was published in 1959. The story takes place in 1957. The protagonist is a 23-year-old Jew struggling with himself and his surroundings. He is trying to "come to terms with his own ethnic identity" (Tenenbaum 2006: 34f.) and to find a suitable lifestyle.

Throughout the story Neil Klugman, the protagonist, describes two very different lifestyles in great detail. Firstly, the life of his relatives he lives with and secondly the life of his girlfriend's family, both from Jewish immigrant background. Neil's relatives still lead the life of a rather poor family characterized by uprooting from their original home country, yet

fully integrated into the Jewish neighbourhood. Opposed to this Brenda Patimkin's family is fully assimilated into American society and lives in wealth in an American secular neighbourhood. Neil feels his life is positioned somewhere in between these two extremes, but he is not sure yet which way of life he will make his own.

In my paper, I will give an account of these two polarized life-styles. The paper intends to find out in how far Neil is part of the lower-middle class and in how far he is not. I will analyse his description of both families, first his relatives and then the Patimkins, and will try to find out why he rejects some elements which characterize their lives. In the end I will show what Neil learns from his summer with Brenda and how he develops.

Neil is a Jewish man and his religious identity plays an important role in the novella. His search for identity is always connected to the questions "how Jewish am I?" and "how will my identity combine my Jewish ancestry and my Americanness?". To give as detailed an analysis as possible, I will include his struggle with religious beliefs and his Jewishness in general in the paper as well. In the end I hope to find an answer to the guiding question: Neil Klugman – caught between two social classes and sceptical about his Jewishness. Where does he belong?

2. Neil and his lower-middle class background

2.1. Neil versus his family

Neil Klugman was born in Newark to Jewish lower-middle class parents. He went to school and then to university in the city. Neil received a bachelor's degree in philosophy. During his studies he constantly held jobs to be able to afford a little extra on top of what his parents were able to give to him. When the novella opens, he is currently working in the Newark State Library in Downtown Newark.

Neil lives with his aunt Gladys' family in the Jewish neighbourhood in Newark, because his parents have left the humid weather conditions of Newark to live in Arizona to have their asthma treated. Neil does not seem to miss them and he calls them "penniless deserters" (GC: 20). In fact, the reader rather gets the impression throughout the story that he did not get on well with them. So we accept with little astonishment that he does not mention them often. He particularly seemed to have difficulties with his mother. He is convinced that "the bigger the lungs get the more you're supposed to hate your mother" (GC: 58). We can only guess about the problems mother and son used to have.

Yet the reader gets the impression that Gladys is similar to Neil's mother in her behaviour towards Neil. Aunt Gladys is the prototypical lower-middle class Jewish mother. We do not learn anything about a job of hers other than housekeeping. Her world is very much focused on nourishing the family and looking after the children. Irving Howe

describes the likes of her as follows: "Even when the son is a grown-up man, the mother will still fuss and fume about his food [...] as if to maintain the modes of affection and dependence" (cit. in Wöltje 2006: 113). Neil is aware of this and "ridicule[s her] every time she appears" (Larner 1982: 31) in the novella, particularly for her obsession with food. She is always concerned about food wasting in the refrigerator. Food and how fast it might go off seems to be everything she is thinking and talking about. On top of the never-ending discussion, Neil never eats and drinks enough in her opinion and she is very quick in drawing conclusions about the reasons: Neil does not work hard enough and this is why he drinks and eats little (cf. GC: 12). Gladys never questions her world and speaks as she thinks. She is not aware of her presumptuous nature (cf. GC: 49). Still Neil endures her with patience: "There is nothing to explain this beyond that fact that my aunt is crazy" (GC: 11).

The life Neil's aunt Gladys and his uncle Max lead is very traditional. They still live the life of immigrants, who get involved in socialist activities like the "Workmen's Circle" (GC: 47) to meet people of the same background. So, the atmosphere of "Armut und Entwurzelung" (Wöltje 2006: 113) due to immigration is still very present. Neil sees that his family will always be stuck in their class. This might hinder his chances of leading a life only dependent on his decisions. Brenda appears as an opportunity to escape this pre-defined way of life. She seems to be his chance of getting hold of wealth and a higher social status easily. None of his relatives would ever dream of getting in contact with a member of the middle-higher class.

To show that Neil is not entirely part of his lower-middle class background, Roth stresses Gladys' affiliation to this very class even more. When Neil wants to call Brenda and is looking for the telephone book with the numbers of the wealthier suburbs of Newark, he discovers that Gladys uses it to stabilize the "dresser where the leg came off" (GC: 12). Gladys does not need the phonebook because she does not know anybody in the suburbs and does not want to know anybody. This shows how different the lives of lower-middle class people and middle-upper class people are. They move in different social circles, they are geographically separated and their leisure time activities could not be more different.

Neil is the connection between these two classes. He wants to establish contact with a member of a different class to get the possibility of a different life-style. He knows that associating with Brenda would open up this opportunity.

But before taking a closer look at the Patimkins I think it is necessary to analyse Neil's work situation and his experiences there, because these are reasons for his search for something new as well. I want to focus particularly on his relations to his colleagues.

2.2. Neil as a part of the lower-middle class?

What makes Neil a part of his lower-middle class ancestry is the fact that he always had to work to have a little extra as opposed to Brenda and her brother and sister, who have never worked and yet have everything. Neil tried several jobs like selling shoes and working in the real estate agency of his uncle, but he preferred the work in the library to the other jobs (cf. GC: 44). This does not necessarily mean that Neil works ambitiously to be promoted and get more money quickly, in fact he does not. When Brenda asks him if he wants to make a career in the library, Neil replies "I'm not planning anything. [...] I'm not a planner" (GC: 44).

It shows that Neil does not seem to be eager on money and material possessions. Not being a "planner" also implies that Neil does not live his life very actively, but that work and love rather happen to him.

Neil's bachelor's degree in philosophy seems to be of no help in setting a goal for his life either. He rarely talks about his studies. The reader can only presume that Neil has developed a critical mind during his studies, but he does not seem to see his diploma as a means of escaping his poor background. He does not use it to apply for a better job than the one he currently has. He shows close to no ambition concerning this. We can conclude then that he does not mind his poor background and does not necessarily want to escape from it. If this is true, further questions arise such as why he criticizes his family and their lower-class lives so much if he is not fully turned against them. His comments about his colleagues and workplace give further clues about this.

His descriptions of the library building with the "pale cement lions [standing] unconvincing guard on the library steps, suffering their usual combination of elephantiasis and arteriosclerosis", the marble stairs, which are "an imitation of a staircase somewhere in Versailles" (GC: 31), and the colleagues who have "a thin cushion of air separating the blood from the flesh [under their skin]" (GC: 32) rather make the reader wonder why Neil still works in the library. Neil always tries to "define himself in opposition to" his colleagues and is "always alert and aware of [their] imperfections" (Nilsen 1987: 80). Neil realizes that their ignorance and intolerance derive from simple-mindedness and he wants to stay separate from them so he will not eventually become like them.

Their presumptions about black people in the "Negro section" of Newark, which are projected onto the little black boy who regularly comes to the library (cf. GC: 33), make Neil very angry. The little black boy is not at all like the black people described by the colleagues. Neil starts to identify with the boy, who comes to the library to look at a book of Gauguin's Tahiti pictures. This boy, who is obviously from the poorest part of Newark, seems to be an outsider in his family. He is interested in art and we can assume that nobody in his family understands this. That is the

reason why he never takes the Gauguin book home. He knows that “at home somebody [will] *dee-destroy* it” (GC: 50).

Neil’s identification with the boy makes him act in a surprising way. He defends the boy against comments by his colleagues and protects him from their inspection by checking up on him. Neil is moved by the boy sitting on the floor fascinated by the Gauguin pictures. Furthermore Neil keeps the book in stock for the boy when somebody else wants to take it out (cf. GC: 42) and abuses his power at work there. Neil starts to work with more motivation. He is determined to have the boy look at the pictures whenever he wants to.

On the one hand it becomes clear that Neil does not want to fully detach from his lower-class background. If he did, he would not identify with the little boy the way he does. On the other hand the little boy might also be Neil’s motivation to fight for something which appeared to be unreachable or might be easily taken away from him, like Brenda. The dream Neil has shows this clearly:

With me on the ship was the little colored kid from the library – I was the captain and he my mate, and we were the only crew members. [...] But suddenly we were moving, our ship, out of the harbour, and the Negresses moved slowly down to the shore and began to throw leis at us and say ‘Goodbye, Columbus... goodbye, Columbus... goodbye’ and though we did not want to go, the little boy and I, the boat was moving and there was nothing we could do about it, and he shouted at me that it was my fault and I shouted it was his for not having a library card, but we were wasting our breath, for we were further and further from the island, and soon the natives were nothing at all. (GC: 61)

In the dream both Neil and the boy are separated from the world they want to belong to. And nothing they do will keep them in it. This is clearly shown by the ship moving away without stopping. In the novella we get evidence for this, because suddenly the boy does not come back to the library. Neil knows that either something has happened to him or the boy has realized that he will always be different and alone if he keeps coming to the library and dreaming of a place he will never be able to go to (cf. GC: 93). It is a hint for the reader that Neil might lose the “paradisical love with Brenda” (Rudnytsky 2005: 33) as well. The only possibility to keep Brenda is a proposal of marriage. This is what Neil’s mind is occupied with after the dream. The reasons why the marriage of Neil and Brenda does not take place will be analysed in the next chapter.

In summary it can be said that Neil tries to live in opposition to his social class, but not because he wants money or possessions. He does not approve of the narrow-mindedness of his aunt Gladys. Neil criticizes his colleagues because they are intolerant and cannot think for themselves. They rather believe blindly in prejudices without questioning them. Neil does not want to be part of this class anymore if it means to be surrounded

by stupid and presumptuous people. Whether he changes his life by relating himself to the upper-middle-class Patimkins will be analysed in the following chapter.

3. The Patimkins as a breakout for Neil?

3.1. The Patimkins' extravagance and their disguises

The Patimkins are a family of Jewish heritage as well. The father, Ben Patimkin, has his own business in the "Negro section" of Newark (cf. GC: 72). He and his family, however, moved away to the noble suburb Short Hills. Financially and socially they represent the Jewish immigrants who have climbed up the social ladder, but who have sacrificed some social values along the way.

The Patimkins spend their free time in a stylish country club rather than taking part in social services and communities with other Jewish people. They want to remain separate from the Jewish immigrants who still live in downtown Newark like they once did. Their wish to share their comfort with nobody else becomes clear through Neil's description of the house when he approaches it for the first time. All the windows and doors of the house stay shut throughout the entire day, even more so when the sun is shining brightly, to keep the air-conditioned air inside the house (cf. GC: 15). This habit forms a big contrast to Neil's relatives and their friends, who spend their evenings on the small porch or on the balcony outside, so they can enjoy the fresh air (cf. GC: 15) and perhaps get the chance to talk to a neighbour. They also share sweets with each other.

When Neil first has dinner with Brenda's family, he is on the one hand enthusiastic about the fact that she wants to present him to her parents and that he will see her home, on the other hand he is afraid he will not be accepted. He is worried about not wearing the right clothes (cf. GC: 23). But Brenda tells him they always dine "au naturel" (GC: 23) and Neil calms down. Once at the house, he seems impressed by dining in a dining room rather than a kitchen and being served by Carlota, the Patimkins' African American maid.

Possessing money and thus living a good life is not necessarily accompanied by good manners towards other people as the first dinner at the Patimkins' perfectly demonstrates. During dinner, Mr. Patimkin bares his big belly and Ron imitates him shortly after. When Neil is asked to do the same, he declines. Shortly after this incident, Mr. Patimkin states that Neil ate like a bird, because he turned down Carlota's offer of more food (cf. GC: 25). Neil feels insulted by this remark and eats all he can from then on. This starts off a discussion about birds, which can only be ended by Mrs. Patimkin asking her family not to "talk about animals at the dinner table" (GC: 25). When she wants to direct the dinner conversation to something else and tries to involve Neil into it, she calls him by the wrong

name. This shows a lack of interest and good behaviour towards a guest. If a name of a recently introduced person slips one's mind, one should politely ask to be given the name again. Eventually, the dinner ends with Ron rushing off without waiting for everybody to finish eating. Julia shouts after him while their father fails to suppress a belch.

This scene presents clues about the Patimkins' "vulgarity" (Howe 1986: 73). They make Neil feel uncomfortable due to their missing respect for a guest. They constantly underline the fact that he is from a lower social class. The Patimkins make Neil feel "as though four inches had been clipped from [his] shoulders, three inches from [his] height, and for good measure, someone had removed [his] ribs and [his] chest had settled meekly in towards [his] back" (GC: 24). Even Brenda does nothing to make Neil feel more comfortable among these "Brobdingnags" (GC: 24). Through this representation of the Patimkins, the reader's view of them is supposed to be influenced negatively right from the beginning. Yet, it is also meant to enhance Neil's status and self-confidence (cf. Wöltje 2006: 115). Neil presents himself as the only person with manners in this scene.

Throughout the entire novella, Neil tries to make the reader see the Patimkins' superficiality. He never fails to mention their need to show off. The first time he takes a walk through the big house he spots every single detail which shows their wealth (cf. GC: 38): Everybody has a room of their own, even the TV is in a separate room. Mr. Patimkin owns many liquor bottles which are untouched. He obviously needs to own them even though he seems never to drink from them. In the basement, Neil discovers a huge refrigerator, which "can host an entire family of Eskimos" (GC: 38). It is full of fruit. The Patimkins do not worry about "the fruit going bad, because wealth can afford this luxury of what might go to waste" (Novak 1988: 56) in contrast to Aunt Gladys. The social dimension of donating food to the needy comes up as well. Aunt Gladys gives away food in packages for "poor Jews in Palestine" (GC: 13) whereas the Patimkins would never dream of sharing what they have, because "wealth doesn't give away easily" (Novak 1988: 56).

Criticizing and ridiculing the family seems to be the only weapon left for Neil. He is fully aware that he is inferior to them in social status and money, the only two things in life important to that family. Neil can only present himself as superior to them when he describes the family and he makes use of this advantage whenever possible.

The reader gets the impression that "appearance is everything" is the most important principle the Patimkins live by. Even their religious conviction is exposed as pure superficiality. From the very beginning when Neil meets the entire Patimkin family, he feels he will have problems with Mrs. Patimkin. She seems least sympathetic to him. In the only conversation the two share, it becomes clear why Neil does not like Mrs. Patimkin.

At one point, Neil and Mrs. Patimkin end up alone in one room and start to talk out of civility. The conversation is about different Jewish denominations. Neil mentions his studies and a philosopher he particularly liked: Martin Buber (cf. GC: 69). Buber seems to be an ideal for Neil's Jewish beliefs. Mrs. Patimkin has never heard anything about Buber. She is only concerned about whether Buber was a reformed Jew. Neil shows her fatuousness nicely by stating she was "piqued either at my evasiveness or at the possibility that Buber attended Friday night services without a hat, and Mrs Buber had only one set of dishes in her kitchen" (GC: 70). After discovering how simple-minded Mrs. Patimkin is, he is unable to respect her at all any more.

Neil could not care less about the different religious persuasions within Judaism. The important thing for Neil is to find the balance between the life as a Jew and as an American citizen. Mrs. Patimkin suspects him of rejecting his Jewishness. He does not. If he did, he probably would have been looking for a Christian or an atheist girlfriend instead of a Jewish one. When Neil visits Mr. Patimkin in the factory in Newark, Mr. Patimkin and the reader discover that Neil is still more closely connected to his heritage than expected. Mr. Patimkin mentions the Yiddish word "gonif" (GC: 75) to him and Neil knows the meaning of it. Neither of the Patimkin children would have known the word even though they were raised with a stronger religious belief than Neil.

Neil has a very modern understanding of religious belief. As Brenda gets the diaphragm, Neil walks into St. Patrick's Cathedral. He kneels down like a Catholic and prays:

If we meet You at all, God, it's that we're carnal, and acquisitive, and thereby partake of You. I am carnal and I know You approve, I just know it. But how carnal can I get? I am acquisitive. Where do I turn in my acquisitiveness? Where do we meet? Which prize is You? (GC: 79)

Neil's understanding of God is characterized by the belief that human beings are a part of God and that they were created in his likeness. Carnality and acquisitiveness are therefore two of the most prominent characteristics of human beings which we share with God. Neil understands this and accepts it. The one thing Neil does not know is the "prize" (GC: 79) or what he would have to pay if he married Brenda and acquired money and a better social status through this. The preparations and the wedding celebration of Brenda's brother's wedding give Neil the opportunity to get a glimpse of what his future would look like as a part of the Patimkin family. He does not like the idea very much. Furthermore the couples he meets at the wedding show him what he does not want to become in life as they "are affluent, but they have paid dearly for their success with emotional frustration, physical decay and spiritual emptiness"

(Nilsen 1987: 84). It becomes obvious that a life in which social position and money demand a sacrifice like that is not what Neil wants to pursue.

So far the Patimkins do not make Neil turn his back on his lower-class world. In fact, as the next chapter will show, he will turn his back on their world. The next chapter deals with the sports theme of the novella and the effect it has on the family members and on Neil as a non-athletic man.

3.2. The Patimkins' obsession with sports

Up until now, Neil uncovered the Patimkins' mask of middle-class manners. But this is not the only mask he pulls down. He also uncovers what is hidden behind their sports addiction and their constant need to compete with each other or with others.

Mr. Patimkin plays golf every once in a while, a sport only wealthy people can afford to engage in. Brenda used to ride horses and won a lot of trophies. Now she plays tennis like her mother used to do. Tennis is a sport which is still expensive today, but was really elitist in the 1950s. She plays golf as well. Ron plays basketball and Julie particularly likes ping-pong. On the Patimkin grounds you even find a basketball court, a table-tennis table and countless other sporting goods which "[drop] from their trees" (GC: 39) as Neil states. Sport as such is not a vice, but the Patimkins seem to be unable to spend their time otherwise.

Along with this obsession comes the constant need to win in sportive competitions. The second time Neil meets Brenda she plays tennis and wins against her partner. The victory is essential, because otherwise she would have stopped playing before it became too dark. But instead Brenda "shifting, running, up on her toes, would not stop" (GC: 15). She is only satisfied when she finally beats her opponent.

Julie does not differ from her sister in this. She proves to be a bad loser, which we can suspect Brenda to be as well. The first time Neil throws baskets with Julie she shows her competitiveness openly. The reader can already assume that Julie cannot take a defeat easily. A few lines down we get the proof: Julie misses a shot and gets a second chance. When Neil misses, however, he does not get a second shot. It becomes clear that Julie has never learned to lose, because whoever plays with her lets her win, even Ron (cf. GC: 29).

Neil understands right away that he is supposed to accept a defeat whenever he plays with Julie. He does not obey this rule once and is close to winning against Julie in ping-pong. But before Neil has a chance of winning the match, Julie runs away shouting "You cheat!" (GC: 40). Neil did not cheat during the game. Julie just cannot take a defeat. Her reaction shows her lack of real sportive spirit, which would make her acknowledge

a defeat and congratulate the winner. Julie, however, has never learned how to behave civilly in difficult moments.

Neil discovers that the Patimkin children all lack the ability to accept a fair defeat with style. Winning seems to be ultimately linked to their worthiness in life. Neil, however, has a different understanding of life. His work becomes very important to him when he realizes that he can help the little black boy to look at, admire and dream of the Tahitian pictures by Gauguin. It makes him feel useful (cf. GC: 43). This is stressed even more when Neil gets promoted. Neil is looking forward to working in a better-paid job. The reader sees that when Neil fears that “[his] new job would be taken away from [him]” (GC: 51). When he tries to convince the reader in the following sentence that he does not care, because “the library wasn’t going to be [his] life” (GC: 51), we can read between the lines and understand that he just pretends not to care. In describing Neil’s work ethics positively, Roth emphasizes the difference between Neil and Brenda further. Brenda does not care for Neil’s job and shows no interest in anything but sports and clothes. This attitude is exactly what makes Neil ultimately refuse “to subscribe to the narrowly commercial values of [her] family, Brenda included” (Tindall 1989: 60).

While getting to know the Patimkins better, Neil realizes that even at university Brenda and Ron show more dedication to sports than to their actual studies. For Neil this is a sign of superficiality and he uses his intellectual advantage – his studies have made him develop a mind of his own in contrast to Brenda, who simply takes over the opinions of her parents – in “being nasty” (GC: 18) to Brenda and ridiculing and criticizing her family ruthlessly. His behaviour is not nasty, but he asks questions about certain things to make Brenda think about her attitudes and behaviour. One thing Neil despises is the fact that Brenda had her nose “surgically altered to make her prettier as well as [...] less Jewish” (Baumgarten & Gottfried 1990: 25f.). For Neil the fact that she wants to look less Jewish is the irritating part and the reason why he teases her so often.

For Neil it becomes obvious that the Patimkins try to hide their small-mindedness behind successes in sportive competitions. He knows he will always lose sportive fights with Brenda, but he is aware that “Eloquenz ist [sein] einziges Mittel gegen den materiellen Erfolg und die Sportlichkeit der Patimkins” (Wöltje 2006: 114). He makes use of his advantage by drawing a picture of a family which could not make them appear more ridiculous. That way Neil creates a distance to them which sets him morally and intellectually apart.

As analysed earlier, the Patimkins always emphasize their social status as upper-middle class Americans. They choose their food and their leisure activities accordingly. They always make Neil feel that he does not belong into their world, because he represents the past they desperately want to forget, disregarding Neil’s intellect. Neil criticizes this effort to show people that they have moved up the social ladder by stressing their

sportive competitiveness. One critic agrees with Neil that “athletics are not a favorite vehicle of the upper-middle class, but rather of *lower* classes on the move upwards” (Larner 1982: 28).

Considering his description of the family, Neil realizes that the Patimkins in Short Hill are “closer to heaven” (GC: 15), but he “sees [their] disguises” (Baumgarten & Gottfried 1990: 25) and comments on them ruthlessly. He describes the Patimkins as sheer mindless (cf. Larner 1982: 28) Jews whose “growing inability [...] to communicate” (Baumgarten & Gottfried 1990: 26) with each other is a result of their corruption by wealth. Charles Israel even goes further stating that “the meaninglessness of their lives pervades the novella and is epitomized by the fact that their money is earned by the manufacture and sale of sinks, receptacles of waste and dirt” (Israel 1974: 9).

Relating himself to this family by marrying Brenda is not a temptation anymore for Neil to escape from his lower class. He realizes in the end that “pleasure lasts only one season and that wealth will enslave him” (Bankston 1978: 21) rather than making him a free man who can decide on his future all by himself.

4. Conclusion

When “Goodbye, Columbus” opens, Neil appears as a young man completely unsatisfied with his life. He does not feel at home with his uncle and aunt, who he constantly exposes to ridicule and he does not get on well with his cousin. His job appears to be an unloved duty and he does not like his colleagues. He wishes to escape the limitations of his lower-middle-class world.

The first time Neil sees Brenda in a rich country club he is captured by her. He falls in love with her right away and starts dreaming of a better future with her shortly after. In the middle of the summer Brenda starts to feel the same for Neil and the reader expects a happy ending. It is only later that Neil has to realize that this happy summer romance will not develop into a steady relationship. Brenda’s parents and their lives are only defined by money and social position and Neil does not approve of that.

Neil’s merciless insight and his accurate descriptions leave everything exposed to his criticism. He uncovers the world the Patimkins want everybody to believe to be theirs. He presents them as poor victims of superficiality and simple-mindedness.

After seeing the family of his girlfriend and her in such a negative light, he realizes that he does not want to belong to their world. He knows he would have to sacrifice his independence and his free and sharp mind as Brenda’s husband. In Brenda’s world, wealth corrupts personal convictions and is not used as a moral and intellectual example for others. Furthermore richness produces power- and money-addicted people. Neil is not willing

to become corrupted by money. When Neil goes back to work after he and Brenda split up, not only a new Jewish year is about to begin, but a new life for Neil as well. His new life starts by working in a slightly higher position in the library.

During the summer Neil finds out that the people from the upper-middle class are not as different from the people of his surroundings as he had thought. He also learns that lasting happiness cannot be found in a summer flirt. But Neil becomes sure of the fact that he will have to work honestly for success and rewards. Neil has become more mature after this summer and after he found out what he does not want in life, we can assume he will find what it is he wants.

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Note

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Deborah Kühnle

Jewish American Identity in Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus": An Analysis of Neil Klugman

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1. Introduction
 2. Definition of "identity"
 3. Jewish American identity
 - 3.1. History
 - 3.2. Orthodox, conservative and reformed Judaism
 4. Neil's identity quest in "Goodbye, Columbus"
 5. Conclusion
- References
-

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 appearance¹ 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 (*kippa*) 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 shelve 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 shelve 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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Max Graff

Parts of a Whole: The Interplay of Form and Contents in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock: A Confession*

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1. Introduction
 2. The title
 3. The epigraphs
 4. The preface
 5. The main narrative
 6. The epilogue
 7. The note to the reader
 8. Conclusion
- References
-

1. Introduction

Operation Shylock [is] an explainer's paradise.
(Schechner 2003: 140)

The following pages are an attempt to dive into this "paradise", to elucidate certain aspects of Philip Roth's highly complex *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (= OS). Published in 1993, it was labelled "Roth's most ambitious work to date" by a critic in 2000 (Royal 2000: 50). The novel offers a myriad of potential fields for research and investigation, like Roth's dealing with the Holocaust, his identity crisis or his attempt to come to terms with Israel and American Jewry. A quick and superficial glance at *Operation Shylock* already reveals that the book consists of several parts, most of which are titled and of unequal length. Starting from a more discourse-oriented perspective, my paper will analyze the composition and

the “external” structure, that is the different parts, in order to draw conclusions with respect to content and message. The aim of my paper is to show how thoroughly and consciously constructed *Operation Shylock* is and how the individual parts and their interplay enhance and influence the book’s statements.

2. The title

Any thorough analysis of a literary text should pay due attention to the title, since it usually raises certain expectations or has a specific effect. In the case of *Operation Shylock*, the title is a particularly rich source for comments and interpretation (cf. Shostak 1997: 728).¹

The very first word of the title, “Operation”, undoubtedly creates suspense and leads the reader to anticipate a certain type of plot. It could announce a spy story or even a mystery thriller.² Considered from this point of view, *Operation Shylock* certainly contains elements which are typical of the genre “thriller”, like “Roth’s”³ trip to Ramallah, which ends in a quite dramatic confrontation with Israeli soldiers, his constant struggle to defeat his antagonist, Moishe Pipik, or “Roth’s” supposed Mossad mission to Athens. However, Safer (2005: 162) states that “[t]here is ironic incongruity between the need for the thriller to move quickly and the narrator’s longing to digress and show off his intellectual prowess”; Roth playfully challenges the reader’s expectations and thwarts them. The reader, who is almost desperately waiting for clues or a solution to the many mysteries, is disappointed and inevitably incited to reflect on the author’s actual intentions.

The proper name “Shylock”, then, immediately strikes expert readers as familiar. It originally refers to a Jew on trial in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1600); over the centuries, “Shylock” has come to represent the anti-Semitic stereotype of the “avaricious, bloodthirsty Jew” (Budick 2007: 78). Thus, the title introduces the omnipresent theme of Jewish identity. “The shadow of Shakespeare’s Shylock hovers over the Jews of *Operation Shylock*” (Budick 2007: 78), and one could even add, over most of the other characters and considerable parts of the plot as well. The diverging, often complicated, subjective and extreme conceptions of Jews and Jewish identity and history are part and parcel of Pipik’s Diasporist ideology, George Ziad’s denunciation of Israel and the Jews, Jinx’ biography, Smilesburger’s lecture on Jews and above all,

¹ The significance of the title is stressed by the fact that Roth originally considered a number of other titles before choosing *Operation Shylock: A Confession*.

² *Amazon.com* shows about 550 search results for the keyword “operation” in the category mystery/thriller books and over 220 in the categories adventure/action and mystery/suspense movies (last accessed Juli 3, 2011).

³ Whenever the character/narrator Philip Roth is referred to (and not the author), this is either explicitly stated or the name is put in inverted commas.

“Philip Roth’s” desire to position himself as an American Jew. Furthermore, the name “Shylock” could be read as an allusion to the Demjanjuk trial, one of the central aspects of the book (Shostak 1997: 744).

Interestingly, “Operation Shylock” is the title of the eleventh chapter, which “Roth”, in the epilogue, claims to have deleted in an “operation of excision or omission” (Budick 2007: 75), and of “Roth’s” secret Mossad mission. According to Milowitz (2000: 191), the fact that “the unspoken words” give the book its title suggests that “[w]hat is missing tells the story”; in order to grasp the full meaning of the book, the reader has to engage in an act of reconstruction and read between the lines – quite a postmodern idea.

The subtitle *A Confession* deserves just as much attention. On the one hand, it ranks *Operation Shylock* among the so-called “Philip Roth books”, also referred to as the “autobiographical tetralogy”⁴ (Royal 2007: 25; Royal 2000: 54). This immediately raises an issue inherent to many of Roth’s works: how much of the book is fact, how much fiction – and where is the boundary? “The book is true,” Roth coquetted in an interview (Fein 1993: C13), which naturally complicates the discussion about the genre of the book. However, *Operation Shylock* has always been advertised, reviewed and analyzed as a novel, and this is undeniably the right approach (on the relationship between fact and fiction, see section 7). On the other hand, the term “confession” clearly has religious connotations. The reader expects the protagonist of the book to make some kind of statement about his religious beliefs and convictions or even to be stuck in a deep crisis of faith. The subtitle could also be regarded as an allusion to Augustine’s *Confessions* (see section 5 for a brief discussion).

3. The epigraphs

Roth starts his book with three epigraphs:⁵ a quote from the book of Genesis, in Hebrew and in English, and two quotes the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Both the content of the sentences and their sources potentially influence the reading of the novel and prove to be quite telling and thought-provoking.

The theme of a struggle with an opponent alluded to in the first epigraph – Jacob’s wrestling the angels – is obvious on the plot level. During his stay in Israel, “Roth” is forced to engage in a battle with a

⁴ The other books are *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography* (1988), *Deception: A Novel* (1990) and *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991). *The Plot Against America* (2004), the latest “Roth book”, does not have a subtitle and differs considerably from the “tetralogy” in that it does not pretend to stick to facts but proposes to fictionally rewrite history.

⁵ The dedication “For Claire” is not commented on in this paper. The table of contents is briefly referred to in section 7. The use of epigraphs is not uncommon in Roth’s works; see, for example, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Everyman* (2006) and *Indignation* (2008).

tenacious impostor and an eloquent Mossad agent – the verse is written on the blackboard when the protagonist is held captive in a school in Jerusalem (cf. OS: 315) – but, perhaps most importantly, also with his own conscience. “Let your Jewish conscience be your guide,” says Smilesburger at the end of the epilogue (OS: 398), suggesting that a delicate and controversial thought process is awaiting the protagonist. Jacob’s struggle with a divine angel seems to imply as well that, in the narrative which follows, the protagonist is going to experience a sort of enlightenment, a far-reaching event affecting his religious identity and convictions.

Moreover, Budick (2007: 80-81) states that

[s]truggle, “contradiction,” and “debate” (the terms of the [...] epigram (sic) from Kierkegaard) – these are the “terms” of Roth’s art, the terms on which he will produce fiction. [...] These are also the terms of Jewish consciousness.

Thus, the quotes from Kierkegaard – who is surprisingly akin to Roth in his stressing of subjectivism and individualism, his literary experiments and his portrayal of the problematic condition of the modern individual (cf. Sander 2006: 264; Kauvar 1995: 412) – accurately describe many of Roth’s works and themes. They are also reminiscent of Roth’s remarks in his essay “Writing American Fiction” (1960) and of some of his characters, like Mickey Sabbath, who realizes that “the direction of life is toward incoherence” (Roth 2008: 159). *Operation Shylock*, with its multiple identity issues, its intricate relationship between fact and fiction and its numerous open questions, undoubtedly confirms this position.

The juxtaposition of two so diverging sources illustrates another major concern of the novel: the clash of religion and philosophy, of beliefs and intellect, which becomes apparent in the development of “Philip Roth”. According to Kauvar (1995: 432), the “divided sources of the epigraphs – the Hebrew Bible and Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* –” are “emblems of the contradictions with which the novel abounds” and “set forth the terms of the book’s dialectic”. Thus, the epigraphs announce certain themes of the novel and yield clues to what the author intended to impart to the reader.

4. The preface

At first sight, the function of the preface is basically to create the illusion that the story which follows is rooted in reality. However, a closer examination reveals intriguing details which are quite useful for an overall assessment of the text.

The narrator seems to be quite humbly assuring the reader of his efforts to relate his story truthfully. He specifies and even justifies the “minor changes” (OS: 13) he was forced to make and indicates the source of text: he is not reconstructing the events from his memory, but actually drawing “from notebook journals” (OS: 13). Roughly half of the preface is

dedicated to the introduction and description of the Demjanjuk trial, which so to say constitutes a historically verifiable background.⁶ The narrator delineates the subject, course and outcome of the trial, going beyond what actually happens in the scope of the narrative. Finally, the preface is dated ("December 1, 1992") and signed ("P. R."; OS: 14), apparently the ultimate proof that the reader is about to scrutinize an account of "actual" events.

Nevertheless, a closer reading undermines this alleged reliability and shows how subtly Roth sows doubt and uncertainty. Indeed, readers who are well acquainted with his oeuvre should be caused to stop short when Roth, a master in the art of misleading and confusing, promises that *Operation Shylock* is "as accurate an account as I am able to give of actual occurrences" and admits that he has made "minor changes [...] of little significance" (OS: 13, cf. also Royal 2007: 32 and Royal 2000: 57). The discussion of the Demjanjuk trial is also quite ambivalent. First of all, it brings up – in an almost incidental way – one of the most crucial matters of the novel: the question of identity. Demjanjuk's identity cannot be determined "beyond a shadow of a doubt" (OS: 14); similarly, "Philip Roth's" quest for identity is confusing and strenuous, and just as the court "is still deliberating the appeal" (OS: 14), his quest may still be in progress or even a lifelong process. Then, it is illuminating to examine the phrases which characterize the new evidence in the Demjanjuk trial: it is "riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions" and "inadmissible hearsay" (OS: 14). Does this judgement, a reader might ask himself, not also apply to the text which follows? He at least detects a slight ironic undertone, and is possibly reminded of certain phrases occurring in the peculiar meta-poetical digression at the beginning of chapter 8: here, the reader comes across formulations like "general implausibility", "unlikely coincidence" or "absence of inner coherence" (OS: 245) with respect to the "Pipik plot" (OS: 239) – this is certainly *not* a coincidence. A re-reading of the preface thus yields astonishing insights and exhibits how – pretending to cling to fact – Roth blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction.

5. The main narrative

The actual narrative consists of two parts of roughly equal length, each of which comprises five chapters. Kauvar (1995: 432) points out that this division into two parts imitates "the paradigm of all autobiographical stories", namely Augustine's *Confessions*, written around 400 AD. Roth must have been aware of this analogy or might even have deliberately intended this intertextual allusion, since, significantly, he chose to give his book the subtitle *A Confession*. One could even go as far as to stress other

⁶ The constant references to the Demjanjuk trial, the excerpts from interviews with the Israeli author Aharon Applefeld and the references to the author's own biography are obviously meant to give the book an air of authenticity and verisimilitude.

similarities between the two works. Augustine's "introspective" autobiography is often considered as the beginning and the explanation of a reorientation in his religious beliefs. Moreover, he seems to discover that the purpose of human existence lies beyond the individual (Habermehl 2006: 88).⁷ "Roth's" "confession" could also be read as an attempt to (re-)define his religious identity by grappling with Jewish history, contemporary conditions in Israel and different attitudes toward Jews in general. Similarly, the protagonist undertakes a secret mission for the welfare of the Israeli state, so to say abandoning his right to act as an individual for the sake of the Jewish community. At least on a surface level, these parallels seem to establish a relationship between the two works; further analyses would have to study in how far Roth plays with this correspondence or adapts it to his intended statement.

In the main narrative as well as in the epilogue, then, the story is told by an autodiegetic first-person narrator. This kind of narrator almost *per se* raises doubts about his own reliability, doubts which eventually are quite justified. However, it seems as though this highly subjective way of narrating *Operation Shylock* is the only imaginable and suitable solution: what is at stake – questions of identity, personal development and decision making and "The Uncontrollability of Real Things" (OS: 239) – becomes all the more powerful and impressive when told from this personal perspective.

The setting of the plot is also meaningful. "Roth" leaves New York for the Middle East – with a short stay in London –, where he visits both Israel and Palestine. Jerusalem, where he spends the major part of his time, becomes an utterly symbolic place: this city, where conflict is omnipresent and where religions, ideologies and political attitudes clash, is the main setting for "Roth's" own conflicts, both external – with the impostor Moishe Pipik – and internal – with the aftermath of his nervous breakdown, his own image of himself and his conscience.

One characteristic feature of the plot of *Operation Shylock* is the fact that the action is often interrupted by monologues. Shechner (2003: 140) calls them "long, tedious monologues unbroken by action"; they allow the various characters – like George Ziad⁸ (OS: 121-126), Jinx (OS: 87-102, 216-238), Pipik (OS: 192-202), Gal Metzler (OS: 169-170), Supposnik (OS: 273-280) or Smilesburger (OS: 332-344) – to delineate their biographies and their often extreme and contrasting political attitudes as well as their religious and ethical beliefs. The result is a "multivoiced text where ideologies compete" (Safer 2005: 158), in which a central aspect, Jewish history and identity, is explored from multiple points of view, offering a variety of possible judgments and interpretations.

⁷ Habermehl uses the phrase "introspektive Autobiographie".

⁸ For more comments on the character George Ziad and the Arab "other", see Furman (1995).

Wade has proposed a very convincing analysis of the plot of *Operation Shylock*. He states that the novel departs from “closely controlled fictional structures into a metafictional extreme [...], embracing several interconnected or parallel themes” (Wade 1996: 123). The plot is indeed not linear or straightforward, but rather peculiarly unfocused: the reader is often amazed by the multitude of occurrences and pieces of information which are sometimes amusing and improbable, but always incite him to reflect on their purpose. Moreover, Wade (1996: 123) suggests that *Operation Shylock* embraces several narratives which make use of different genre codes and conventions:

Roth allows the narratives to progress concurrently, and these consist of metafictional mode of address, autobiographical digression, adventure thriller (the trip to Ramallah), Dostoevskian double sources and finally, documentary fiction techniques.

This subdivision allows readers to distinguish and describe such heterogeneous episodes like the depiction of the narrator’s nervous breakdown, his thoughts about literature and its function and limits, the confrontations with Pipik, the transcripts of the Appelfeld interviews and the Rosenberg testimony. Similarly, Royal (2000: 56) states that the novel “is filled with texts that attempt to transcribe a life,” both “oral texts” like Pipik’s tape or Apter’s stories and “written texts” like the Klinghoffer diaries.

Roth thus creates quite a unique reading experience for his reader. The latter is constantly left with unanswered questions and doubts. The resulting suspense is then ironically broken when, instead of an eleventh chapter narrating the “operation”, an epilogue and a confusing note to the reader follow.

6. The epilogue

The epilogue both confronts the reader with new uncertainties and hints at possible interpretations. First of all, the title is rather contradictory: even though “Words Generally Only Spoil Things” – a quote from the Talmud (Cohen 2007: 86) – the narrative is followed by over forty pages, a kind of addendum to complete the novel. There is a noticeable and significant change in setting vis-à-vis the main narrative. The events described in the epilogue take place at least three years after “Roth’s” trip to Israel,⁹ and the protagonist is now back in New York. In an interpretation focusing on the identity issue, this shift seems meaningful. Only back in the United States does “Roth’s” quest come to an end, with the writing down of the story and

⁹ Smilesburger states that he has read *Patrimony* (see OS: 380), which was published in 1991.

the final meeting with Smilesburger; in the epilogue, the narrator seems to assert his identity as an *American Jew*.

Instead of ending the narrative in a conventional way, the narrator states at the very beginning of the epilogue: "I have elected to delete my final chapter" (OS: 357). He goes on to explain that in the eyes of the Mossad (represented by Smilesburger, who has read the manuscript) a publication of the original text could potentially endanger the state of Israel. Shostak (1997: 727) suggests that

[i]n bringing the narrative to the point of refusal and in rationalizing that refusal, Roth represents the pressures that bear on Jewish identity and the contradictory desires to confirm and elude, to define and confound Jewish subjectivity, especially in relation to the Jewish nation-state.

The deliberations on how to present *Operation Shylock* to the reader thus seem to be the narrator's final attempt to come to terms with his Jewishness. Roth "tempt[s] the reader with an absence, an unspoken 'reality', the suppression of whose narrative seems to increase its facticity" (Shostak 1997: 747). Smilesburger proposes that "Roth" present his "suicidal book" (OS: 397) as a "subjectivist fable" (OS: 391), which the latter rejects despite his uncertainty "about the book's verisimilitude" (OS: 359-360). The tension between fact and fiction, which pervades the whole text, is literally verbalized here.

Finally, the reader is offered a possible albeit unsatisfactory conclusion to the Pipik plot. In order to "quiet his own anxiety" (OS: 364), the narrator imagines a letter to Jinx and even her answer. However, the reader is left to wonder: If Pipik's end is made up, what about the rest of the story? Again, what it boils down to is the question about the boundary between literature and reality – is this one of Roth's main issues? At least, many things seem to point into this direction.

7. The note to the reader

At the very end of the book, the reader stumbles upon a "Note" declaring that what precedes is a "work of fiction" (OS: 399); by now, his confusion is complete and he is left helpless and bewildered. The "two narrative qualifiers" (Royal 2007: 31), the preface and the "Note to the Reader" – ironically, "Roth" rejected the inclusion of the latter in the epilogue (OS: 361) – stand in complete contrast to each other. This "complicate[s] any straightforward reading of his text" (Royal 2007: 34.16); the text claims to be both fact (in the preface) and fiction (in the note to the reader). The "Note" is very similar to the standard disclaimer used by the publisher Simon and Schuster for all works of fiction (cf. Royal 2007: 31; Royal 2000: 57); however, Roth adds an intriguing and ambiguous last sentence: "This

confession is false" (OS: 399). The term "confession" could refer to both the whole book – we have to bear in mind the subtitle *A Confession* – or to the "Note to the Reader" alone; in a kind of ultimate, intellectual climax, Roth again confronts his reader with a dilemma. Royal has come up with very astute comments about the "Note": he pointed to the fact that, contrary to the common practice, it is positioned at the end of the book, not immediately before the text. Furthermore, it is printed in the same type as the rest of the novel, which could insinuate that it belongs to the text proper, and it is even included in the table of contents. This could hint at the fact that readers are to take the "Note" as part of the novel; no matter how the reader decides, the "Note" is undoubtedly "a narrative slap in the face" (Royal 2000: 58).

Even though many parts of *Operation Shylock* obviously originated in the author's imagination, it is nonetheless significant that he repeatedly endeavours to make the reader consider the novel to be the truth. Milowitz (2000: 185) argues that by forcing the reader to focus on "the simple facts, the reality of the characters and their concerns" and by preventing him from wanting to see the characters and events in the novel as allegories or metaphors, Roth makes an important statement about the world we live in. Appelfeld tells "Roth": "Reality, as you know, is always stronger than the human imagination. [...R]eality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of all proportion" (OS: 86). The reader is led to acknowledge that there are certain facts and truths, even if they seem completely inconceivable and improbable: Appelfeld's biography as a Holocaust survivor is a perfect example. Shechner (2003: 135) goes into the same direction: even if the characters in *Operation Shylock* "do not exist, their voices do"; that is one of the conclusions to be drawn by the reader.

8. Conclusion

The frame of *Operation Shylock* comically challenges what the reader is led to expect about the boundaries of fiction and reality.
(Safer 1996: 161)

The preceding pages have shown that the very structure of Roth's novel is loaded with meaning; at the same time, the author seems to take enormous delight in playing with expectations, conventions and traditions. The individual parts analyzed above offer numerous starting points for fruitful investigations. Every single part yields valuable clues which have to be integrated into an overall assessment of the novel. Roth has cleverly succeeded in choosing a structure which constantly challenges the reader and creates a fascinating kind of tension. This has become particularly obvious in the contrast between the preface and the "Note to the Reader". An in-depth-analysis certainly confirms many readers' first impression: *Operation Shylock* is indeed an extraordinary reading experience.

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Note

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Living Under the Influence of History: The Issue of Coping with the Past, Present and Future in *The Plot Against America*

1. Introduction
 2. The genre of 'Alternate History'
 3. The question of what constitutes history
 4. The impact of history on the people living through it
 - 4.1. Alvin
 - 4.2. Sandy
 5. Conclusion
- References
-

1. Introduction

Immediately after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York on September 11th, 2001, the image of America as a politically superior power was damaged. It did not take long until people came up with various conspiracy theories and used the term 'plot' to refer to the events of 9/11, which, to a certain degree, proved the vulnerability of America. In October 2004, three years after this tragic event and four weeks before the U.S. presidential elections, the American writer Philip Roth published his novel *The Plot Against America* (= PAA). The mere choice to include the term *plot* in the title already raised expectations. Many people took the title to mean that the novel is topical even though Roth's story is not linked to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated hijackers who flew into the towers. The author "has rejected interpretations of his novel as an allegory of President George W. Bush and the post-9/11 political landscape"

(Graham 2007: 145) although a slight parallel in terms of politics cannot be denied: Roth's depiction of Charles A. Lindbergh's successful presidential campaign against Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 clearly reveals the significance of political decisions and their impact on society even if the author mixes up fact and fiction in his work.

The aim of this paper is to analyze at first the technique of this mixture, called 'alternate history,' both in form and content, which will include a closer examination of the narrator's function in the story. In order to find out more about the actual relevance of mixing fact and fiction, Roth's point of view towards this approach will also be depicted. In the following, a few of the novel's central characters will be in the focus of analysis. To begin with, the examination of Philip's and his father's opinion of what constitutes history is worth a closer look. Then the question in how far history actually affects the people living through it will be pointed out using Alvin and Sandy as an example. In doing so, particular behavior patterns, emerging conflicts, decision processes and questions of responsibility will be taken into account and finally lead to the conclusion of this paper.

2. The genre of 'Alternate History'

The genre of alternate history is also known under various other names such as "alternative or counterfactual history" (Michaels 2006: 288) and "'What if?' story" (Graham 2007: 119). Each of these terms designates the description of history from a retrospective point of view. In doing so imagined history and actual history are mixed up. The principal issue constituting this genre is to ask what if a particular historical event had gone differently and to consider in how far this could have changed our world. Graham refers to Rosenfeld saying that "alternate history has become more visible in recent decades because its 'playful rearranging' of history relies so heavily on a freewheeling postmodernist culture – the very culture, of course, that has both shaped and been shaped by Roth" (Graham 2007: 123). His statement is comprehensible considering the huge amount of works dealing differently with history and the numerous discussions concerning the question of how to look into history, both of which emerged especially after the Second World War (cf. Schmunk n.d.: n.p.).

A characteristic of postmodernism is the merging of different genres, which can also be found in *The Plot Against America*. Belonging to alternate history, a genre of postmodernism, Roth's work is both a novel and an autobiography. It deals with "two separate, if intertwined dramas, personal and political: Roth's and the nation's" (Schweber 2005: 129). In retrospect the American author depicts history from the point of view of the young Jew Philip Roth and thus makes himself a character in the story.

In doing so he mixes up fact and fiction not only on the level of historical events but also with regard to various autobiographical elements included in the story as some of them are simply invented. In addition, the time gap between the experiencing I and the narrating I inevitably prompts the reader to question the reliability of the intradiegetic first-person narrator Philip.

Although the author Roth insists on the verisimilitude of his work, he also attaches importance to its fictional character stating in the novel's appendix that "[t]his postscript is intended as a reference for readers interested in tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" (Roth 2005: 434). Hence it cannot be denied that *The Plot* is actually nothing more than a product of the imagination, which in turn does not mean that it is less important than any other work which is only based on factual history. On the contrary, it is exactly this technique of mixing fact and fiction that constitutes the novel's relevance as the reader is thereby invited to scrutinize history. However, the novel's intention is not only to make people consider political activities of former times but also to prompt them to grapple with their individual past.

In response to the question if *The Plot Against America* is a cautionary tale, Roth answers that "[he does not] write books for people to draw lessons from them" (Interview I). Nevertheless, his work clearly has a didactic function: It is necessary to face the consequences of past events in order to learn and benefit from them for future decisions; but this is only possible by departing from standard views of history and thus accepting alternative historical versions for an instructive purpose (cf. Graham 2007: 124). Miller (2004: n.p.) confirms this function arguing that "this novel [...] is less interested in the unfolding of global events than in the way those events affect the most intimate experiences of the people who live through them." Accordingly, it is more important to look at peoples' lives against the background of history than to analyze solely what happened in the past. In doing so the issue of what the term *history* actually means to the people within the story plays a decisive role and will therefore be analyzed in the following.

3. The question of what constitutes history

Within the novel, Philip's father is of the opinion that "[h]istory is everything that happens everywhere. [...] Even what happens in his house to an ordinary man – that'll be history too someday" (PAA: 215). According to this concept, the present and the future also constitute a part of history since every current event no matter if personal or political will be an element of history sooner or later. History thus claims everybody and any attempt to avoid it can only fail. The narrator himself adds that in living through history any event seems to occur all of a sudden saying that

[t]urned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as "History," harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic. (*PAA*: 135)

Being equated with 'the relentless unforeseen', history is thus not predictable. It is not possible to prepare for it, but as scholarship does not present history as a threatening element, there hardly seems any need to do so. In retrospective, allusions to the frightening nature of sudden negative past events are avoided and they are rather depicted as a kind of story. All those who learn history the hard way witnessing these events and possibly suffering from them know that 'the relentless unforeseen' exists and that it cannot be avoided but they are unable to find out what it really is and how to deal with it. This implies that clarifying past events is up to later generations (cf. Graham 2007: 140). However, history is of course foreseeable, at least to a certain degree, as it is possible to draw conclusions and observe tendencies on the basis of what has happened so far. For this reason responsibility in living through history plays a decisive role in order to avoid unwanted consequences. The issue of how to cope appropriately with current events and how to confront history leads to the next point of the analysis.

4. The impact of history on people living through it

4.1. Alvin

The character who is most significantly affected by history is probably Philip's cousin Alvin. Traumatized by his parents' death, he comes to live with the Roth family. In order to fight Hitler, Alvin then decides to leave for Canada to join the Canadian armed forces (cf. *PAA*: 53ff.) because America under isolationist Lindbergh is not going to join the war. On the British Isles he is wounded and loses the lower part of his left leg (cf. *PAA*: 107f). As he is from then on always physically confronted with what happened and also stigmatized, forgetting about it is all the more a difficult task. Suffering a trauma again, he nevertheless has to contend with his past decision.

Of course, the loss of his limb changes his outward appearance but it also causes psychological problems and a mental change. Alvin clearly shows his despair answering Philip's question, "How long will it take [to heal]?" with the single word "Forever" (*PAA*: 162). Although he has trouble with his stump and the bandaging, the young man must use the artificial limb and the crutches if he wants to walk somewhat properly. The result is a state of dependency not only on these material elements but also on other members of the family (cf. *PAA*: 184), who must help him to get up when

he has fallen down. Notwithstanding, he disavows the need of his crutches and wants to get on without any help, obviously because he is absolutely unwilling to rely on anything or anybody else.

Anyhow, this dependency is also reflected in Alvin's trouble to find a job due to his mutilation: The young man is reliant on Uncle Monty, who offers him employment, but he is soon fired for being accused of planning to kill Lindberg (cf. *PAA*: 206). In this case, the past catches up with him and he again has to bear the consequences of his political attitude although in this respect his behavior has changed since his stay in Canada. Philip's cousin was once so eager to fight Hitler (cf. *PAA*: 63) that, apparently regardless of the consequences, he would have done nearly everything in his power to achieve this aim. However, after his return to Newark, Alvin "[does not] display any interest in the fight against fascism" (*PAA*: 187) and neither does he want to hear any information concerning the war nor is he willing to discuss his view of politics with Herman Roth anymore (cf. *PAA*: 187), who in contrast to him favors Roosevelt. According to Philip's rhetorical question "[c]ould the abandonment have been any more complete of the moral code that had cost [Alvin] his leg" (*PAA*: 346), his cousin is like a totally different person. Alvin's mental change must thus be traced back to his tragic experience and the permanent view of his stump, which have caused him to give up his idealistic pursuit of making the world a better place.

This also applies to his modified moral concepts, which can probably be illustrated best on the basis of his position towards capitalism. Alvin's engagement with Minna Schapp alludes to his endorsement of this economic system although he was once a clear opponent of it and even despised other people such as Abe Steinheim, whom he called "a walking advertisement for the overthrow of capitalism" (*PAA*: 60), for their exaggerated interest in money. He did not attach great importance to material goods then but now he seems to have deviated from this principle and everything he does is based on the idea that only extrinsic goods like the possession of an expensive car and richness in general (cf. *PAA*: 344f.) will make the appearance of intrinsic goods possible, such as personal happiness and well-being, which will in turn satisfy his new ideal conception of a secure life. Notwithstanding, there is an obvious difference between Steinheim and Alvin because the latter does not have to do anything on his own initiative in order to gain wealth, a fact that Mr. Schapp alludes to by telling Alvin that "Minna takes care of your leg, you take care of Minna, and I take care of you" (*PAA*: 344). Once again, a state of dependency is established although, this time, it turns out to be an acceptable situation for Alvin because he soon profits by the death of Minna's father that provides his future son-in-law with extrinsic goods and thus grants him access to the upper class (cf. *PAA*: 346f.).

Nevertheless, Alvin cannot pretend that he has accepted his fate even though he notifies the Roth family of his plans to apologize for what

he did (cf. *PAA*: 347). His behavior is rather characterized by anguish and grief and even if he tries to hide this, in particular moments his subconscious makes him demonstrate his helplessness. This even brings about a bloody dispute between him and Philip's father, which is explained by the narrator with "[Mr. Roth's] failing to understand that Alvin's nature was never really reformable" (*PAA*: 354). Consequently, the attempt to make peace with Herman and his wife can only fail. Above all Philip's cousin blames the Jews and Mr. Roth for the loss of his leg, since he fought for them and in his opinion Herman is the one responsible for making him enter the war (cf. *PAA*: 355). It is obvious that he is completely wrong in this respect because, as Graham (2007: 133) points out, "Mr. Roth at one point trie[d] unsuccessfully to keep his nephew [...] from joining the Canadian military in its fight against the Axis". Alvin's decision to fight Hitler was thus solely an act of his own volition and responsibility because actually nobody forced him to do so, but shifting the blame on somebody else, as characteristic of people suffering from a trauma, helps him to get on with his life.

Even little Philip becomes aware of his cousin's grief watching him masturbating in the cellar of the Roth house albeit he misinterprets the situation saying, "I imagined [the ejaculate] was something that festered in a man's body and then came spurting from his mouth when he was completely consumed by grief" (*PAA*: 176). Reflecting Alvin's attempt to prove that despite the loss of his leg he is not mutilated sexually, too, the masturbation scene is vindicated by the author Roth saying that "[he] wanted somehow to capture a side of Alvin's grief that the little boy would not understand" (Interview II). The legs of the girls walking outside serve Alvin as a stimulus in order to check his masculinity and even if the body fluid actually originates from somewhere else, Philip's unusual perception of this situation has to be confirmed in so far as this is in fact an act which must be ascribed to Alvin's grief. It remains arguable in how far Alvin's engagement with Minna can be interpreted as a confirmation of his masculinity because, as already pointed out, their relationship seems rather based on profit than on anything else.

4.2. Sandy

Soon after Alvin's departure to fight Hitler, the older son of the Roth family also leaves the house in order to participate in Just Folks, "a volunteer work program" (*PAA*: 101) introduced under the Lindbergh administration. Unlike his cousin, Sandy needs a parent's signature and thus cannot leave without prior agreement. This in turn implies that the one consenting can be brought to account for anything that will happen from now on, a fact that Mr. Roth seems to be aware of. Especially with regard to his powerlessness towards his nephew Alvin it seems comprehensible that

now, in the face of his son's departure, he tries all the more to hold him off. Herman objects resolutely, pointing out the program's actual purpose (cf. *PAA*: 102), but any attempt at appealing to his son's conscience fails. Confederating with his mother's sister Evelyn, who encourages him, Sandy succeeds in getting his way when his father finally agrees "to avoid making more difficult a predicament whose ultimate danger still wasn't entirely clear" (*PAA*: 109).

Graham (2007: 134) accounts for Mr. Roth's consent saying "[he] has no real evidence to support his suspicion of Just Folks [...] and his vision of future contingencies is little more than a conspiracy theory". Anyhow, to a certain extent Herman's warnings can be traced back to his sense of responsibility with regard to his son but also to his experience of life, his practical faculty of judgment and his common sense, all of which make him, in contrast to his son, challenge the announced purpose of the program and consider what seems unforeseeable. This is what makes the future appear insecure for Herman and within this context a mixture of paranoia and justifiable fear contributes to coming up with plot theories. For the people within the story it is indeed difficult to guess at this point of time what the future will look like. This applies especially to Sandy, who, captivated by the "great opportunity [...] [of] seeing America" (*PAA*: 102) and lacking experience of life, is rather egged on by his self-interest and his childlike curiosity, ignoring any kind of warning and being thus all the more one of

Roth's characters [who] are by and large unable to wholly grasp the nature of the threat facing them, illustrating how difficult it is to anticipate atrocity and imagine contingencies that, though seemingly unlikely and even impossible at the time, will eventually come to pass. (Graham 2007: 125)

Unlike his father, the young boy is absolutely unconcerned about Just Folks reassuring him that "this doesn't have anything to do with anti-Semitism" (*PAA*: 102) but the head of the family soon senses a parallel to the concentration camps in Germany (cf. *PAA*: 221) and is convinced that the acts of the Lindbergh administration are actually directed against them as Jews.

When the boy returns, nobody has any difficulties in facing him as it was the case with Alvin (cf. *PAA*: 149f.) although Sandy has also changed physically but to a less fatal extent. Noticing his gain in weight and the changed color of his hair, Philip has the "impression [...] of [his] brother in disguise" (*PAA*: 109) but what makes the situation even worse is Sandy's changed behavior because his Kentucky "drawl and the twang" (*PAA*: 110) make him appear as a stranger. Designed for "encouraging America's religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society" (*PAA*: 101), the program perfectly serves its purpose with Philip's brother. The great irony, though, is the implication that the boy as a supporter of Lindbergh now gradually grows more and more distant from

his parents, who favor Roosevelt. Accordingly, “with [Sandy’s] cultural change has come a political one [...] [and he] has become an enemy within the family” (Graham 2007: 135).

With the occurrence of what Philip calls “history’s next intrusion” (PAA: 219), this situation grows even more acute when his brother in his new position as an official spokesman of the Lindbergh administration is invited to the White House for a dinner with a Nazi leader, which turns out to be an issue of discussion in the family again. Mr. Roth becomes short-tempered and aggressive because “his son’s conversion now must appear predictable, even unavoidable in hindsight, for the links of causality have finally become clear” (PAA: 140). Whereas Mrs. Roth at first tries to bring Sandy to terms by suasion and make him consider the actual relevance of his intention to accept the invitation, she then, after Sandy’s verbal slander of his father as “a dictator *worse* than Hitler” (PAA: 229), expresses her helplessness by resorting to violence and smacking her son (cf. PAA: 230). The fourteen-year-old boy, once again encouraged by his aunt, could not care less, announcing “I’m going to the White House with Aunt Evelyn. I don’t care whether you ghetto Jews like it or not” (PAA: 230). Using the pronoun ‘you’ in this context indicates that he dissociates himself from ‘the ghetto Jews’ and can be interpreted as a denial of his identity as a Jew in general, too. His statement clearly reflects the success of the Just Folks program since he appears now as a full member of American society and thus of the new regime, which necessarily implies a turning away from his family.

5. Conclusion

The retrospective description of history allows a look at past events from an alternative point of view, which is implemented by the American author Roth in his novel *The Plot Against America*. A detailed analysis in how far he mixes up fact and fiction with regard to contents would have gone beyond the scope of this paper but this issue is definitely worth further examination. Departing from actual history and allowing counterfactual versions is necessary in order to scrutinize history, which in turn has an instructive and didactic function. The author’s aim is not only to present past events but to reveal their impact on those who actually live through them. This is all the more important because these people are hardly able to predict the ‘relentless unforeseen’ that constitutes history for young Philip. Although the clarification of what once happened is indeed up to later generations, drawing conclusions and observing tendencies is possible even in living through history, for which reason responsibility then plays all the more a decisive role.

Living under the influence of history always implies gaining experiences which, depending on their significance, can either have a

positive or a negative effect. As everybody passes through an individual process of development, history affects our lives to a different extent. If an individual's voluntary decision to do something one is actually convinced of turns out to be wrong and has a tragic ending, shifting the blame on someone else initially facilitates getting on with one's life. However, sooner or later the past will catch up with us whether we like it or not and even if history is sometimes only present in our subconscious, we will definitely become aware of it in particular situations reminding us of what once happened and making us react in a particular way. Suffering from a trauma, people like Alvin then often begin to appreciate their life as they have never done before, which may also make them change their moral concepts or give up their principles and any kind of idealistic pursuit of intangible things. Accordingly, a tragic event frequently entails psychological problems and a mental change so that the person concerned alters his or her behavior and attitude.

As a result of a trauma people sometimes even seem to about-face, which is why others have difficulties in recognizing them anymore but this can also happen in living through history and without suffering from past events, as the example of Sandy illustrates. In a gradual process the fourteen-year-old boy unconsciously adapts more and more to the new regime and thus becomes a sort of opportunist. This situation is so much the worse since his parents, who feel responsible for him, are powerless in the face of what their son intends to do. Herman and his wife finally have to give their consent lacking credible evidence to support their view but at the same time knowing that any agreement always implies the risk of being brought to account for what will eventually happen. The fact that Mr. Roth soon draws a parallel to the German concentration camps can on the one hand be interpreted as a paranoid vision but on the other hand it must also be traced back to his common sense and experience of life, both of which make him suspect that anti-Semitism is not impossible in his country under the Lindbergh administration. The question in how far the government's activities can actually be interpreted as acts of anti-Semitism turns out to be an interesting topic of a more detailed analysis.

Throughout the novel it becomes obvious that the author Roth depicts a hot-button issue choosing a Jewish family living in America in the 1940s, but illustrating it within the framework of alternate history is probably the most adequate way to consider the problem of anti-Semitism and a possible Holocaust in the United States. Although these issues are a matter of common knowledge nowadays, it is still difficult to approach them not only because some people still completely deny that anything like that ever happened but also since there has been so much discussion about the persecution of the Jews recently. Nevertheless, this topic must not be hushed up in any way as it is important for all of us to grapple with both political and personal history in order to learn from what has happened for future decisions.

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Note

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