The Conversion of the Jews Study Guide

The Conversion of the Jews by Philip Roth

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews" was first published in 1959 in his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories.* The book's novella and five short stories offended many Jewish Americans, who quickly lashed out at Roth for his unflattering depictions of Jewish Americans. However, most non-Jewish critics loved the book, and it received a 1960 National Book Award, an impressive achievement for a short-story collection, much less one from a new author. This polarized sentiment about Roth's works has persisted throughout his career, making him both controversial and adored. For critics who like Roth's writing, "The Conversion of the Jews" is viewed as a seminal story, which includes themes he has since examined in many other works.

The title of the story is derived from "To His Coy Mistress," a seventeenth-century poem by British poet Andrew Marvell in which the poet refers to the conversion of the Jews that some Christians believe will take place before the Last Judgment. The story was written and takes place in the 1950s, following the Holocaust of World War II, a time in which many Jews immigrated to the United States from Europe. Most Jews embraced assimilation into American culture but still attempted to maintain some degree of cultural solidarity. In the story, Ozzie Freedman, a Jewish teenager, questions the hypocrisy that he witnesses as a result of this solidarity and devotion to Jewish formalism. His rabbi's efforts to suppress Ozzie ultimately lead to Ozzie's escape onto the synagogue roof, where he achieves religious freedom by forcing the Jewish community to convert to Christianity. This story can be found in *American Short Story Masterpieces,* which was published by Laurel in 1987.

Author Biography

Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, on March 19, 1933, into a working-class Jewish family. He attended Rutgers University (1950-1951), then transferred to Bucknell University, where he received his bachelor's degree in English in 1954. He received his master's degree in English from the University of Chicago in 1955; then he briefly joined the United States Army. However, within a year, he was discharged because of a back injury and returned to the University of Chicago. He did two years of doctoral work (1956-1957), working as an instructor at the same time. In 1957, he withdrew from the doctoral program, traveled for a summer in Europe, then moved to New York City. His experiences growing up as a Jewish American in a largely Jewish community have influenced many of his works, including his first work, *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories* (1959), which included "The Conversion of the Jews." The book was awarded a National Book Award for fiction in 1960.

Over the next four decades, Roth published more than twenty books, including novels, two autobiographies, and a collection of essays. One book in particular, *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), addresses many of the controversial issues that surround Roth's satirical attacks on Jewish Americans. The book also addresses another controversy surrounding Roth's writing, the fact that he has repeatedly changed his style throughout his career. While most writers with long careers generally hone their writing skills in a certain style of writing, Roth has used a wide range of fiction styles, from tightly plotted novels to wildly experimental fables. In the past ten years, Roth has published six novels, including *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), which won a National Book Award for fiction the same year; *American Pastoral* (1997), which won both a National Book Award for fiction and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the same year; and *The Dying Animal* (2001). Roth lives and works in New York.

Plot Summary

"The Conversion of the Jews" starts with a theological conversation between Ozzie Freedman and his friend, Itzie Lieberman, two Jewish teenagers. Ozzie recounts an argument that he had that day with Rabbi Binder in Hebrew school at their synagogue, or Jewish place of worship. The rabbi had denounced the virgin birth of Jesus as impossible. Ozzie was confused because he had been taught to believe that God was all-powerful, which would mean that He could create a divine birth if He chose. Ozzie pushes the issue, and Rabbi Binder says he needs to speak with Ozzie's mother. This is the third time that Ozzie's widowed mother will have to come speak to the rabbi about Ozzie's religious questions. (The first two times were sparked by Ozzie's rebellion against the belief that Jews are the chosen people.) That night, Ozzie delays telling his mother about his day, waiting patiently while his mother performs her Sabbath candle-lighting ritual. Afterwards, he tells his mother why she needs to go meet with the rabbi the next day, and she slaps his face for the first time in his life.

The next day, during free-discussion time, Ozzie asks his previous question about why God cannot do anything He chooses to do, then he insults the rabbi by attacking his knowledge of God. The rabbi smacks Ozzie's face, giving him a bloody nose. Ozzie curses the rabbi and escapes to the roof of the synagogue. Yakov Blotnik, the old custodian at the synagogue, calls the fire department, thinking that the firemen will get Ozzie off the roof as they once did a cat. The fire engines arrive, drawing a larger crowd in the process. A fireman asks Ozzie if he is going to jump, and Ozzie says he will, and then he runs around to different parts of the roof, making the firemen follow him on the ground with their safety net. The rabbi gets down on his knees and pleads with Ozzie not to jump, while Ozzie's friends tell him to jump. Amid this commotion, Ozzie's mother arrives and pleads with Ozzie not to jump. Ozzie carefully considers whether he should commit suicide. He tells everybody to kneel, and they do, assuming the Gentile, or non-Jewish, posture of prayer. Ozzie makes the rabbi and the assembled crowd say that they believe God can do anything, including making a child without intercourse, and that they believe in Jesus Christ. After this, Ozzie starts to cry, and he makes his mother and the rabbi say that they will not ever hit anybody over religious matters, like they did him. The entire crowd repeats this statement, then Ozzie jumps safely off the roof into the firemen's net.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As this story begins, two Jewish boys, Itzie Lieberman and Ozzie Freedman, are having an argument about the existence of Jesus Christ and the circumstances of his birth. Itzie, like Rabbi Binder, the boys' Hebrew schoolteacher, does not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin; rather he believes that Mary conceived Jesus in the usual way, through sexual intercourse. Ozzie argues that if it is possible for God to create heaven and earth, why is it so unreasonable to assume He can also arrange for a virgin birth? Ozzie tells his friend that when he posed this question to Rabbi Binder the previous day, he raised the ire of his teacher who demanded to meet with his mother. Since this is the third time such a meeting is needed, Ozzie finds himself in danger of not being having a bar-mitzvah.

That evening, Ozzie knows her has to tell his mother about what had transpired in Hebrew school. However, when she comes home from work, she immediately begins the task of lighting the Sabbath candles, a ritual that Ozzie finds to be spiritually uplifting. When she finishes, Ozzie tells her about the meeting with Rabbi Binder. Upon explaining why the meeting is necessary, his mother slaps him.

Wednesday arrives, and Ozzie finds himself back in Hebrew school. It is four o'clock in the afternoon and as Rabbi Binder announces to the class that it is free-discussion time, Yakov Blotnik, the old custodian, was polishing a window in the rear of the room. Blotnik, because of his seemingly constant mumbling, is a curiosity to most of the students in the school.

At first, Ozzie is reluctant to suggest a topic. His reluctance stems from the fact that earlier that afternoon, Rabbi Binder chastised him for not reading quickly enough from the Hebrew book. When Ozzie protested that reading quickly prevented him from understanding the text, the rabbi told him he was not showing adequate progress. In an attempt to appease his teacher, Ozzie began to read at a rapid pace, but quickly stopped and told the rabbi that he did not understand the words. This angered the teacher who and resulted Ozzie receiving a verbal lashing.

Now intimidated, Ozzie's classmates remain quiet as Rabbi Binder prods them for a discussion topic. When a small noise comes from Ozzie's direction, the rabbi suggests that he shares his thoughts with the remainder of the class. Ozzie tells his teacher that he forgot what he was going to say, an explanation the teacher does not accept. Prodded further, Ozzie repeats the question that had gotten him into trouble during the previous week: why can't God make anything He wants to make?

As the rabbi thinks of his answer, Itzie makes a gesture to his back, which causes the rest of the class to laugh. As Binder turns his back to Ozzie to quiet the room, Ozzie erupts in a torrent of frustration and accuses the rabbi of not having enough knowledge

about God to be able to adequately answer the question. The rabbi orders Ozzie to apologize, which he refuses to do. Binder reaches out to calm Ozzie down, but in the process, hits him directly on the nose, causing it to bleed. Frightened, Ozzie runs from the classroom and toward the building's roof.

Because Ozzie is able to outrun his teacher, he reaches the roof first and bolts the door behind him. As he stands on the roof's edge, Ozzie begins to wonder if the events of the past few minutes actually happened. The voice of his teacher on the street below convinces his that he indeed did occur. The rabbi tells him to come down immediately and although Ozzie agrees to do so, he really has no intention of moving.

Meanwhile, Yakov Blotnik, the custodian, surveying the proceedings, decides to call the fire department for assistance. Soon, four fire engines arrive and a yellow net is stretched out for Ozzie to jump into. When Ozzie does not immediately jump, one of the firemen talks to him and suggests that he jump into the net. Ozzie replies that he is going to jump and then runs to the other side of the roof where there is no net below waiting to catch him. When the firemen run with the net to the spot below where he is standing, Ozzie runs back to the other side of the roof. They continue to do this a few more times, until the firemen are no longer able to keep up. As this transpires, Rabbi Binder implores Ozzie to not jump, while his friends encourage him to leap from the roof.

Soon, Mrs. Freedman, Ozzie's mother, arrives for her appointment with Rabbi Binder. Seeing her son on the roof, she appeals to the rabbi to get him down. Binder tells her that he cannot, that it appears as though Ozzie wants to listen to his friends and jump from the roof. As Ozzie remains on the roof, he contemplates whether to jump. Unable to decide by himself, he wishes he were able to reach through the sky to the sun and find a coin with either the words "Jump" or "Don't Jump." Then, he asks his mother to kneel beside Rabbi Binder before ordering everyone else to do the same.

After everyone is kneeling, he asks Rabbi Binder if he believes in God. When the rabbi says that he does believe in God, Ozzie asks if he believes God is capable of doing anything. When the rabbi begins to protest, Ozzie demands him to say that God can do anything. Finally, he orders the rabbi to tell him that God can allow a child to be conceived without intercourse. After the rabbi makes this statement, Ozzie orders his mother to say the same thing before making the rest of the crowd repeat it as well.

After a few moments, Ozzie's mother calls up to him. Ozzie, weak and emotional, tells his mother that it was not right for her or for Rabbi Binder to hit him when he has questions about God. With this finally said, Ozzie jumps from the roof and into the net.

Analysis

Philip Roth's short story, "The Conversion of the Jews," appears in the anthology *Goodbye Columbus*. On the surface, this story appears to be one of teenage rebellion and the questioning of authority. Indeed, the story's main character, a teenage boy

named Ozzie Freedman, on three separate occasions, has raised the ire of his Hebrew schoolteacher for questioning the basic tenants of his Jewish faith. Yet, upon further analysis, it becomes clear that this story has a greater significance.

The primary theme of this story is that of blind obedience. In this story, Ozzie and his classmates, and indeed all the young men of his generation, are expected to be unfaltering in their acceptance of the teachings of their faith. When Ozzie questions his teacher about some of these teachings, he is immediately labeled a troublemaker.

Many people can relate to this theme. In most cases, religion is something that, at least until adulthood is reached, is imposed upon children by their parents. Few children are given the opportunity to choose their religious beliefs rather they are expected to share in their parents' faith. In some cases, they are expected to do so without question. This is the case with Ozzie. Recall the portion in the story in which he is asked to read from the Hebrew book. Rather than being allowed to take his time so that he can better understand the words, Ozzie is pressured into reading quickly by his teacher. Clearly, the measure of success is not the extent to which Ozzie understands what he is reading, but rather, how quickly he can recite the words.

This is not to say, however, that Ozzie does not believe in the teachings of his faith. This is made clear early in the story when he picks up the ringing telephone so that it does not disturb his mother's ritual lighting of the Sabbath candles; his belief that the candles should be lit in a complete reverent silence tells us that there are customs that he holds as sacred.

Yakov Blotnik, the old man who is the synagogue's custodian, represents the expectations placed upon Ozzie and the other boys. His constant, almost mechanical, muttering of prayers is symbolic of those who automatically accept the teachings of their faith. In fact, Ozzie thinks Yakov "had memorized the prayers and forgotten all about God."

Rabbi Binder is another symbol of the expectation placed upon Ozzie to accept his faith without question. It is no mistake that the author uses words such as "tall," "broad-shouldered" and "strong-fibered" to describe the teacher; he wants to be sure that the reader views him as an authoritarian figure – one that is difficult to challenge. Even his name "Binder" is meaningful in that it represents the fact that he is trying to bind Ozzie to his Jewish faith. So strong is this expectation that even the so-called "free discussion" time – time set aside by Binder during each class to discuss non-academic matters - is limited to topics of Jewish relevance.

Finally, the time that Ozzie spends on the roof contemplating whether or not to jump, represents his internal struggle with his religious beliefs, specifically choosing to accept the teachings of his faith (staying on the roof) or rebelling against it (jumping). While it is not specifically said, it can be assumed that by making his mother, rabbi and classmates voice their belief in Jesus Christ, Ozzie, at least for the time being, questions his faith. His decision to jump, albeit into the safety of the net waiting below, is representative of the fact that while he seeks more answers and information, he knows that he is very

much defined by his Jewish faith and that regardless of his questions, that faith will always be there for him.

Characters

Rabbi Marvin Binder

Rabbi Binder is Ozzie's teacher at the Hebrew school who constantly punishes Ozzie for his religious questions, which the rabbi sees as deliberately insolent behavior. The rabbi believes in order and does not like to have his explanations questioned. When Ozzie asks him about the possibility of Jesus Christ's virgin birth, the rabbi says that Jesus was an historical figure, not a divine one. Ozzie says the rabbi knows nothing about God, and Rabbi Binder tries to lightly slap Ozzie on the face, but ends up giving Ozzie a bloody nose. Ozzie curses the rabbi and escapes onto the roof. The rabbi tries to be firm with Ozzie, commanding him to come down off the roof. This does not work and, at several points, it looks like Ozzie is going to fall or jump off the roof to his death. The rabbi falls to his knees, pleading with Ozzie to come down, then crying. At Ozzie's request, he says that he believes God can make a child without intercourse, he believes in Jesus Christ, and he will never hit anybody again over a religious matter.

Yakov Blotnik

Yakov Blotnik is the synagogue's aged custodian, who calls the fire department. He is only interested in whether situations are good or bad for Jews. Ozzie believes that Blotnik's constant praying is meaningless, since Blotnik appears not even to know the meaning of what he is saying anymore.

Mrs. Freedman

Mrs. Freedman is Ozzie Freedman's widowed mother. Mrs. Freedman is a devout Jew and reverently observes Jewish rituals such as the Sabbath. She is distressed that she has to keep going to see Rabbi Binder about Ozzie's behavior and slaps Ozzie's face after he tells her she must do so again. This is the first time that she has slapped Ozzie. When Mrs. Freedman comes to the synagogue for her appointment with the rabbi, she sees Ozzie on the roof and pleads with him not to jump. At Ozzie's request, she gets down on her knees and says that she believes God can make a child without intercourse, she believes in Jesus Christ, and she will never hit anybody again over a religious matter.

Oscar Freedman

Oscar Freedman is a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy whose persistent questions about the validity of Judaism eventually lead him to escape the classroom and go onto the synagogue roof. Oscar, known throughout most of the story as Ozzie, is an earnest young man who wants to understand his religion. As a result, he reads the Hebrew book very slowly, trying to comprehend each word, and questions his religion in ways that

others do not dare. These actions constantly get Ozzie in trouble with Rabbi Binder, who feels that Ozzie is being deliberately insolent. Ozzie is particularly troubled by the fact that Jews do not acknowledge the possibility of Jesus' divine birth, even though Jews believe that God is all-powerful. Ozzie persists in his question about this issue, and then he says that Rabbi Binder knows nothing about God. The rabbi hits Ozzie, who then curses Rabbi Binder. Ozzie escapes onto the synagogue roof and ignores the rabbi's commands to come down. The fire department comes, and Ozzie makes them move back and forth, shad- owing his movements as he runs from one end of the roof to the other, threatening to jump. While Rabbi Binder pleads with Ozzie to come down safely, Itzie Lieberman and the other children chant for Ozzie to jump and kill himself. Ozzie threatens to commit suicide unless his mother kneels. Then, Ozzie makes the largely Jewish crowd kneel, admit that God can make a child without intercourse, and profess their belief in Jesus Christ. After this mass conversion, Ozzie starts to cry and makes them promise that they will never hit anybody over a religious matter. Finally, he jumps safely into the firemen's net.

Itzie Lieberman

Itzie Lieberman, Ozzie's best friend, initially criticizes Ozzie's outspoken behavior but later encourages Ozzie to jump off the synagogue roof. In class, while Ozzie persists in asking Rabbi Binder about the possibility of Jesus' virgin birth, Itzie is content with making gestures behind the rabbi's back. However, after Ozzie goes up on the synagogue roof, Itzie becomes more outspoken. While the rabbi pleads with Ozzie not to jump, Itzie starts chanting for Ozzie to jump and kill himself, inspiring other children to chant as well.

Ozzie

See Oscar Freedman

Themes

Hypocrisy

Ozzie is a truth-seeker who does not deal well with factual inconsistencies, especially in his religion. He is passionate about Judaism and deeply respectful of its beliefs and rituals. When his mother lights candles on the Sabbath, he picks the ringing phone off the hook but does not answer it; instead, he holds it "muffled to his chest." He does not want anything to disturb his mother's ritual: "When his mother lit candles Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing, if you could manage it, should be softened." However, as much as he strives to be a respectful Jew, he has problems claiming allegiance with any religion that supports hypocrisy—the act of claiming to be something that one is not or believing in something that one knows is not true. Ozzie knows that Jews believe in the allpowerful nature of God. As a result, he is surprised when the Jewish elders to whom he looks for guidance—his mother and his rabbi—fail to acknowledge even the possibility of Jesus' divine birth. Ozzie is even more shocked when his mother and rabbi hit him as a result of his attempts to point out this hypocrisy.

Ozzie sees evidence of this hypocrisy in other areas of the Jewish life. He notices Yakov Blotnik, the seventy-one-year-old custodian, who constantly mumbles prayers to himself that he does not seem to understand. Ozzie believes that it is more important to understand one's prayers than to mouth them ritualistically without understanding. Ozzie follows the same belief when he reads slowly from the Hebrew book in order to increase his comprehension. But doing so gets him in trouble with Rabbi Binder: "Ozzie said he could read faster but that if he did he was sure not to understand what he was reading." However, the rabbi does not care whether Ozzie can understand. As far as the rabbi is concerned, the important thing is that Ozzie follows the rules.

Freedom

When Ozzie asks questions about his religion, he is not trying to be "deliberately simple-minded and a wise guy," as the rabbi assumes. He is earnestly trying to understand his religion. Nevertheless, in his quest for truth, he comes up against a restrictive wall of religious authority, represented mainly by Rabbi Binder. On the surface, the rabbi encourages students to ask him questions. However, the students also witness the rabbi's "soul-battering" of Ozzie after Ozzie tries to question the idea of reading faster at the expense of comprehension. For them, the rabbi's actions speak louder than his words: "Consequently when free-discussion time rolled around none of the students felt too free." The students do not ask any questions, and the silence is filled only with Blotnik's rote, uninspired prayers. This detail underscores the fact that what Rabbi Binder really wants is conformity. Blotnik is an obedient Jew, one who adheres totally to his faith. Roth states: "For Yakov Blotnik life had fractionated itself simply: things were either goodfor- the-Jews or no-good-for-the-Jews." When he witnesses Ozzie up on the roof, Blotnik surveys the situation and sees that nobody outside of the synagogue is

watching, so "it-wasn't-so-bad-for-the- Jews. But the boy had to come down immediately, before anybody saw." Blotnik is concerned more with his religion's reputation or image than with Ozzie's safety.

However, Ozzie has no intention of coming down from the roof, at least not right away. He escapes to the roof to get away from his rabbi but soon realizes that his position on the roof gives him great power. When Rabbi Binder commands Ozzie to come down, Ozzie can see that the rabbi is bluffing, because he has no way of making Ozzie follow his order. "It was the attitude of a dictator, but one—the eyes confessed all—whose personal valet had spit neatly in his face." When Ozzie realizes that he is in charge, not the rabbi, he starts "to feel the meaning of the word control: he felt Peace and he felt Power." Once Ozzie realizes that the crowd also thinks he is going to kill himself, and the rabbi and his mother do not want him to do so, he gains even more power. He uses the freedom of his newfound power to once again address his question about the possibility of Jesus' virgin birth. This time, he takes it one step further, by forcing the assembled crowd—including the rabbi, his mother, and even Blotnik—to say they believe God can do anything, they believe in the possibility of a virgin birth, and they believe in Jesus. By forcing the crowd to acknowledge his beliefs, Ozzie beats the system of religious authority and achieves the freedom that he has been seeking.

Irreverence

The story raises the issue of what constitutes irreverence, or lack of respect, for one's religion. Characters in the story variously interpret the concept. The rabbi thinks that Ozzie's questions are deliberately disrespectful. He is shocked when Ozzie, frustrated that he is not getting answers, tells him: "You don't know! You don't know anything about God!" He is even more astounded when Ozzie curses him after he smacks Ozzie for this comment. "Ozzie screamed, 'You bastard, you bastard!' and broke for the classroom door." For Rabbi Binder, these are all clear signs of irreverence. As for Ozzie, he does not think his questions are irreverent, since he is asking them out of a genuine desire to understand. However, even Ozzie is surprised that he has cursed his rabbi and wonders whether he is still himself—"For a thirteen-year-old who had just labeled his religious leader a bastard, twice, it was not an improper question." However, upon further examination, Ozzie believes that he is not being irreverent. On the contrary, he feels that, by taking a stand against religious hypocrisy, he is more reverent than his rabbi or any other conformist Jew. In fact, he feels so comfortable with his actions that he briefly considers the possibility of jumping off the roof and dying for his cause. Finally, there is the case of Itzie, who is deliberately irreverent but who practices a passive form of disrespect. Itzie has seen Ozzie's outspoken behavior get him in trouble to the point where Ozzie's mother has to come talk to the rabbi. Itzie, who is irreverent for the thrill of misbehaving not because he has serious issues with his faith, does not think getting in trouble is worth it. "Itzie preferred to keep his mother in the kitchen; he settled for behind-the-back subtleties such as gestures, faces, snarls and other less delicate barnyard noises."

Style

Satire

Satire is a form of criticism that makes its point through biting irony and ridicule. Satire can be more effective than direct discussion because satire leaves lasting image. In the story, Roth's satirical target is Jewish formalism in the 1950s, particularly in Jewish communities like the one depicted in the story. In this community, Jews take to ludicrous and dispassionate extremes the belief that they are God's chosen ones. For example, Ozzie's mother studies newspaper article describing a plane crash and only declares the accident a tragedy when she sees that eight of the victims have distinctly Jewish names. Roth satirizes this Jewish community in other ways, too, such as in Rabbi Binder's insistence that Ozzie read fast from the Hebrew book, even though he does not understand the words. Of course, the ultimate satire is the fact that the rabbi, a representative of Jewish religious authority, refuses to acknowledge the possibility of a virgin birth, even though this refusal means denying the fact that his Jewish God is all-powerful.

Imagery

Unlike the Jewish community in the story, which Roth portrays as very closed-minded, Ozzie is an independent thinker who views his world in an expressive way. Nothing is boring for Ozzie. His mind, which depicts even simple acts and situations as vivid images, influences the narration. The imagery in the story is particularly expressive when it applies to Ozzie's religious beliefs. For example, he likes watching his mother perform the ritual of lighting candles: "When his mother lit the candles she would move her two arms slowly towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up." Ozzie is enthralled by the spiritual nature of this simple yet meaningful ceremony. The power of this image makes him think that his mother will support his religious inquiry into the possible divine birth of Jesus. Says the narrator, "when she lit candles she looked like . . . a woman who knew momentarily that God could do anything." For this reason, he is crushed when his mother hits him for asking his question in class.

Ozzie thinks he is going to receive an even harsher punishment from the rabbi when he curses him and escapes onto the synagogue's roof. Ozzie locks the trap door and sits on it to prevent the rabbi from coming after him. However, Ozzie is still tied to the traditional Jewish belief that one should never disrespect a rabbi, and so he imagines violent consequences. As the narrator notes, "any instant he was certain that Rabbi Binder's shoulder would fling it open, splintering the wood into shrapnel and catapulting his body into the sky." When this does not happen, Ozzie begins to realize that his religion is not as powerful as he had assumed. Although this gives him a sense of power, it also puts him in a state of confusion, since he does not know where to go for guidance for serious issues such as whether he should die for his religious beliefs. In

one of the most expressive images in the story, Ozzie looks to the heavens for answers: "Yearningly, Ozzie wished he could rip open the sky, plunge his hands through, and pull out the sun; and on the sun, like a coin, would be stamped JUMP or DON'T JUMP."

Symbolism

Some of the images in the story also have symbolic meanings. A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. A symbol can be local, with a meaning that is dependent upon the context of the story. It can also be universal, with a meaning that remains the same regardless of its context. The most prominent examples of local symbols in the story are the last names of Ozzie and the rabbi. Ozzie's last name is "Freedman," which symbolizes his quest for religious freedom, in which his rebellion makes him a freed man. His main opponent is Rabbi "Binder," who constantly tries to restrict Ozzie's religious inquiries and bind him to formal Jewish doctrine.

The story also contains several universal symbols. One that evolves throughout the story is connected to the crowd of Jewish children that gathers on the street outside the synagogue to watch Ozzie on the roof. When Ozzie first observes this crowd, the narrator describes it as follows: "In little jagged starlike clusters his friends stood around Rabbi Binder." Whenever a star is used in conjunction with Jews or Judaism, it usually refers to the Magen of David. This six-pointed star, which is located on the flag of Israel—the world's only Jewish state—is a recognized symbol of Jewish solidarity. When the children form themselves into star-shaped groups around the rabbi, the shape suggests the idea of cultural unity. However, as Ozzie realizes that he has the power to rebel against his religion, the children in the crowd follow his example, starting with Itzie. "Itzie broke off his point of the star and courageously, with the inspiration not of a wise guy but of a disciple, stood alone." The use of the word "disciple," a term generally used to refer to the followers of Jesus in his lifetime, underscores even more the religious significance of Itzie's defiant gesture. As more children follow suit, the star disintegrates, a clear symbol of religious rebellion.

Historical Context

The Attempted Annihilation of the Jews

To understand the historical context of the 1950s, when Roth wrote the story and when the story takes place, one must first look at the mass killing known as the Holocaust. During World War II (1939-1945), the German Nazi regime carried out a plan of genocide known as The Final Solution. The Nazis intended to wipe out European Jewry. They nearly succeeded. Prior to World War II, approximately nine million Jews lived in Europe. Of these, roughly six million Jews, or two-thirds, had died by the war's end.

The Migration of the Jews

Following the defeat of the Nazis, many European Jews could no longer face life in Europe and became part of a mass migration to other countries. In 1948, the Jewish state of Israel, the first Jewish state in nearly two thousand years, was formed in Palestine. Some European Jews chose to migrate to this new Jewish homeland. However, Israel was economically disadvantaged and experienced near constant hostility from its Arab neighbors, so it was not an attractive choice for many European Jews, who had just been through a war. For those who did not go to Israel, a new opportunity presented itself in the United States. Jews had been living there since its founding, but anti-Semitism was prevalent in the States until and even during World War II. When the gruesome details of the Holocaust came to light, American anti-Semitic feelings dissipated.

The Assimilation of the Jews

Now that Jews were more welcome in the United States, they came in large numbers in the late 1940s and the 1950s, eager to take advantage of American freedom and other opportunities. The Jewish community as a whole, recognizing that Jewish prosperity in the States hinged on the ability to blend in, encouraged assimilation into American culture. The segregation of distinctly Jewish communities, which had been practiced in Europe, was now seen as a barrier to success. The rapid development of U.S. suburbs after World War II helped Jews assimilate rapidly. Except in certain neighborhoods where anti-Semitic tensions still existed, Jews moved next door to non-Jewish neighbors and formed multi-faith friendships.

The Education of the Jews

One area in which Jews, especially children, were rapidly assimilated was in their education. Traditionally, Jews receive extensive education in their faith from both their parents and the community. To help their children fit in as Americans, many Jewish parents sent their children to public schools. As a result, most Jewish children received

their Jewish education in Hebrew school, a supplementary schooling that took place in the afternoons after the public schools let out.

Critical Overview

Roth's critical reputation for "The Conversion of the Jews" is the same as for the rest of his works: sharply divided. Sanford Pinsker sums it up best in his 1984 entry on Roth for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography:* "His readers tend to have strong attachment to one end or the other of the evaluative yardstick, which is to say, people either love his fiction or they hate it. Gray areas are rare indeed." This trend began with Roth's first book, *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories.* Much of the Jewish community, critics and readers alike, were shocked and outraged at Roth's negative or unflattering depictions of American Jews. As Pinsker says, the book "made it clear that Roth was a force to be reckoned with." Pinsker also notes that the book "changed the ground rules by which one wrote about American-Jewish life."

Most critics who like Roth's work have also liked "The Conversion of the Jews." Many of them note the story's use of themes that Roth revisits in much of his work. Even those who do not like the story, like Peter L. Cooper, agree that it is one of Roth's seminal works. In his 1991 entry on Roth for *American Writers,* Cooper notes: "Although marred by a simplistic treatment of good and bad, a strained resolution, and a heavy-handed underscoring of 'message,' the story presents issues that pervade the later work." As Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance note in their 1981 book, Philip Roth, these issues include "the difficulties of communication in a world in which materialism has replaced spirituality" and "representation of the individual in a society that values 'normality' and conformity more than the development of the individual."

Of course, these are generic themes. Many critics are more specific and note Roth's application of these themes to Jewish life, which has continued to outrage much of the Jewish-American community. However, as Naseeb Shaheen notes in his 1976 article for *Studies in Short Fiction,* this negative criticism has not affected sales. Says Shaheen, "the fact that his works on Jewish themes have been by far the most successful of all his works indicates where his genius truly lies." As Roth has come under repeated fire from the Jewish community, some critics who like Roth's work have explored answers to Jews' questions about why Roth would depict them in such a manner. In his overview of "The Conversion of the Jews" in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* Steven Goldleaf answers the question, posed by members of the Jewish community, of why Roth would portray Jewish people "as small-minded bigots who suppress Ozzie's inquiries." Goldleaf responds: "The reason is the same for both Roth's affront and for Ozzie's: because, by restricting free discussion, the community harms itself while claiming to defend itself."

Likewise, in their 1990 book, *Understanding Philip Roth,* Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried offer some historical background of actual events in the Jewish community at the time, which support Roth's satirical attacks in the story: "Like many Jewish communal leaders in the 1950s Rabbi Binder spends the greater part of his energies in separating what is Jewish from what is non-Jewish." Shaheen agrees, noting specifically the inability of Rabbi Binder and others in the story to acknowledge the possibility of Jesus' virgin birth. Says Shaheen in 1976, two decades after the story

was written: "The tenacity with which this conviction is held in some Jewish circles is disquieting."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Roth's use of foils and religious imagery.

Ozzie is quickly identified as the moral voice in Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews." He is respectful of Jewish ceremonies, he is quick to point out hypocrisies that he sees committed by his Jewish community, and he refuses to be silenced in his quest for the truth. However, in addition to these noble characteristics, Roth also uses foils and religious imagery to emphasize Ozzie's superior morality and strength of conviction.

A foil is a character who contrasts strongly with another character to make the second character seem more prominent in a specific way. In this story, several characters are deliberately depicted as weak in their morals or religious convictions, which makes Ozzie appear even stronger in these areas. Since these foils are all Jewish, Roth has taken fire from some Jewish readers at their negative portrayal. Says Steven Goldleaf in his overview of the story for the Reference Guide to Short Fiction: The story "offends its audience by addressing a serious theme in terms of low-comic characters."

Indeed, Ozzie's counterparts in the story are a motley bunch of characters. The rabbi, who is positioned as Ozzie's nemesis, is so bent on denying the legitimacy of the Christian faith that he is willing to deny the legitimacy of his own faith in the process. Judaism advocates the belief in an allpowerful God, one who can do anything. If one applies this belief to the virgin birth of Jesus, as Ozzie does, then Jesus' divine birth would be possible. Yet, the rabbi stubbornly refuses to agree with this logic. This is only the first of many moral paradoxes in the rabbi's ministry. He also gives Ozzie a "soul-battering" for reading from the Hebrew book too slowly. Ozzie tries to explain that "he could read faster but that if he did he was sure not to understand what he was reading." However, the rabbi is not interested in whether Ozzie understands. He only wants him to show progress in his reading speed. Finally, the rabbi outwardly encourages people to discuss any Jewish question with him but makes it clear through examples like Ozzie's punishment that what he really wants is conformity.

Ozzie's friend, Itzie, demonstrates both a lack of religious conviction and a questionable morality. Ozzie is extremely impressed with the fact that God created heaven and earth in six days, especially God's ability to make light: "the light especially, that's what always gets me, that He could make the light." Itzie, however, does not have Ozzie's degree of reverence. "Itzie's appreciation was honest but unimaginative; it was as though God had just pitched a one-hitter." Itzie's behavior demonstrates that he is childish and mostly interested in creating disorder, which eventually affects his morality. When Ozzie and Itzie start talking about the possibility of Jesus' virgin birth, Itzie is very crass and uses sexual slang: "'To have a baby you gotta get laid,' Itzie theologized. 'Mary hadda get laid.'" Ozzie, on the other hand, is trying to keep the conversation at an academic level and so uses the neutral term "intercourse" instead. Even this inspires a juvenile response in Itzie. "For a moment it appeared that Itzie had put the theological question aside. '[Binder] said that, intercourse?'" The thought makes Itzie smile, and he focuses

on the idea of intercourse for the rest of the conversation. Itzie exhibits this same childishness when Ozzie is on the roof, although this time it affects his morality. When Itzie first breaks off from the rabbi, it appears to be a courageous move. He soon proves that he is really only interested in creating disorder, even at the expense of his friend's life. He is the first to tell Ozzie to jump and kill himself, and he incites the rest of the children to try to get Ozzie to jump, too.

Ozzie's mother is another paradoxical character. Although she observes the Sabbath and is stronger in her religious convictions than most of the other foils in the story, she still exhibits some disturbing moral quirks. Ozzie witnesses his mother and grandmother looking through the paper after a plane crash to count the Jewish names. Since his mother finds eight names, "she said the plane crash was a 'tragedy.'" Ozzie is sickened by the thought that the fifty-eight deaths on the plane are not enough to make the crash a tragedy in his mother's mind.

The most comical foil in the story is Yakov Blotnik, the seventy-one-year-old custodian. Yakov is completely clueless about his surroundings, "unaware that it was four o'clock or six o'clock, Monday or Wednesday." Yakov's religious conviction is equally clueless. He is the ultimate example of the effects of blind devotion to doctrine and ritual without understanding. He has been mumbling his Jewish prayers to himself for so many years that Ozzie suspects he has "memorized the prayers and forgotten all about God." Yakov has lost all objectivity outside of his limited sphere of Jewish exist- ence. For Yakov, the public reputation of the Jews takes precedence over understanding what he is praying about or anything else for that matter, including the physical safety of one of the Jewish community's members. As a result, life events are defined only as whether they are good or bad for Jews. When Ozzie first goes up on the roof, Yakov panics, thinking that if he does not get the boy down, somebody will see and the Jews will look bad. Yakov calls the fire department, like he did in the past to get a cat off the roof. Because he does not think that Ozzie will be any different than the cat, he is befuddled when Ozzie runs around the roof. As Yakov notes to himself: "It wasn't like this with the cat." Instead of worrying about Ozzie's safety, Yakov is still more focused on the potential for bad publicity, since a crowd has gathered to watch the event: "In the excitement no one had paid the crowd much heed, except, of course, Yakov Blotnik, who swung from the doorknob counting heads."

In addition to the foils, Roth also includes a number of descriptions and images that underscore Ozzie's depiction as a superior religious person. When Ozzie tells off his rabbi, he does so in "a loud, toneless sound that had the timbre of something stored inside for about six days." By deliberately choosing six as the number of days for this description, Roth is referring to the six days in which God made heaven and earth, which is mentioned earlier in the story. By associating Ozzie with God in this way, it helps to make Ozzie appear more holy. Other references in the story add to this positive depiction of Ozzie. When the rabbi asks him if he is ready for the rabbi to count to three, Ozzie realizes that a divine change has come over him. "Ozzie nodded his head yes, although he had no intention in the world—the lower one or the celestial one he'd just entered—of coming down even if Rabbi Binder should give him a million." Noting that Ozzie has entered a "celestial" world once again makes him seem holier than

everybody else. Another image of his holiness comes at the end of the story, when Ozzie jumps safely off the building, "right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo." By giving Ozzie a symbolic halo, Roth elevates Ozzie even higher.

In fact, throughout the story, Roth elevates Ozzie to a higher place than the other characters, physically by placing him on the roof and spiritually by making him seem so holy in comparison to the other characters. In fact, what Roth is doing becomes apparent if one follows this elevation idea along to its natural conclusion: Roth is turning Ozzie into a Christ figure. Both Christ and Ozzie were born Jews. Both had the utmost reverence for the Jewish God. Both spoke out against religious hypocrisy in the Jewish faith. Both succeeded in converting a number of Jews to Christianity. By making Ozzie into a Christ figure, Roth sharpens the edge of his satirical sword even more. Now, he is doing more than just symbolically converting Jews to Christianity. He is doing it through a boy who evokes an image of Christianity's most revered figure, Jesus—the same figure whose divine birth the Jewish characters in the story refuse to acknowledge.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Conversion of the Jews," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Theoharis explores Ozzie's questions about and confrontation with Judaism in "The Conversion of the Jews."

The term "other" can express a relation of simple opposition—the reverse, "the other side of the coin," or a relation of simple identity—the additional, "the other penny." Very often, though, the relation presented by the 'other' involves a complex and dynamic fusion of opposition and identity. Literature and philosophy and religion may reasonably be thought of as attempts to disclose the laws by which that fusion works, to make its energy our own. The natural sciences and the humanistic disciplines have long given the name "conversion" to the process by which opposition yields up identity. For centuries the phrase "conversion of the Jews" has been a trope for the pragmatically unlikely, the tragically impossible, the heroically resisted, the idealistically sought for event. Andrew Marvell plays wittily on all these meanings in his carpe diem love lyric "To his Coy Mistress." If the two had "World enough, and Time," the speaker promises gallantly, he would woo her indefinitely while she could, if she "please, refuse/Till the Conversion of the Jews." The complex reversal invoked and forestalled by axiomatic reference to the "conversion of the Jews," is, of course, the acceptance by the Jews of Christ's, and Christianity's claim that Jesus is the fusion raising all oppositions into redemptive identity, that he is God for us and with us, our life, whether we are for him or not, our joy if we are. Two faiths separated by a common dogma, monotheism, Christianity and Judaism are locked in a simple credal opposition—God is One, that One is Three. God is not only the unmultiplied other, but most crucially the unassimilable and unassimilating other for Jews; from Jesus forward, he is another one of us, any one of us, all of us, for Christians. The history of the Jews in Christian times has been a struggle with assimilation. They are the paradigmatic "other," always struggling with the simple and complex meaning of being different, and always bringing Christians to struggle with the same problem. Christians have carried out the struggle violently, almost entirely antagonistically, and mostly unsuccessfully; Jews have prevailed by suffering stubbornly and righteously past the Christian campaign of assimilation through annihilation. Wittily, elegantly, and with elemental humanistic dignity, Philip Roth takes all these matters up in the story of obdurate Ozzie Freedman's unconventionally righteous preparation for his Bar Mitzvah.

Ozzie, like Socrates, confronts the false necessities of his world by persistently exceeding them. As Roth puts it, "What Ozzie wanted to know was always different." During afternoon Hebrew school, which Roth depicts with genially burlesque comedy, Ozzie has wanted to know something different three times. Each desire has ended in the dreaded summons of his mother to the Rabbi's office. The first time he required Rabbi Binder to resolve the contradiction between his instruction that the Jews are God's chosen people and the Declaration of Independence's claim that all men are created equal. When Binder offered a distinction between political and spiritual identities, Ozzie discounted it, insisting that what he wanted to know was something different. The implication Roth makes here is that Ozzie wanted to know why the Rabbi made the incoherent statement to begin with, not how he can get himself out of it, why,

in other words, being Jewish can never mean being created equal. The second question is similar: why did his mother single out the eight Jewish deaths in a plane crash as tragic, ignoring the rest. To Binder's inadequate citation of cultural unity, Ozzie responds not only that he wanted to know something different, but when pressed to accept it, blurts out that he wishes all fifty-eight victims had been Jews. Mrs. Freedman is summoned again. The exasperated response again annuls the privilege of Jewish "difference," substituting a comically punitive, absurd compassion, a Marx brother's quip, along with the anger— if they all had been Jews, his cracked logic runs, there would be less of what Ozzie cannot understand and more compassion.

The third connundrum is the worst, and centers on the dividing line of Christianity and Judaism: the human and divine status of Jesus. If God is omnipotent, Ozzie asks, how can Binder claim that he could not father Jesus on Mary without intercourse? Roth makes much of the snickering comedy attending thirteen year-old male inquiry into this subject, as in this exchange: "'Sure its impossible. That stuff's all bull. To have a baby you gotta get laid,' Itzie theologized. 'Mary hadda get laid.'" As the story begins, Ozzie has not yet responded to Binder's evasive restatement that the historicity of Jesus excludes his divine status, except to say again that he wants to know something different. The implied object of inquiry here is how can being Jewish, an identity established in righteous worship of an omnipotent God, require a stiffnecked limitation of that omnipotence. The bulk of the action takes place on Wednesday afternoon, the day his mother has to come and account a third time to Binder for her son's insubordinate recalcitrance. Ozzie has told her why she's been summoned again, and her response, over Sabbath supper, has been to slap his face.

Before she arrives Ozzie and Binder have a blowout, in which Ozzie challenges the Rabbi with the question, "Why can't He make anything He wants to make?," and then assaults him with the rebellious insult "You don't know! You don't know anything about God!" Binder responds with an accidental blow to Ozzie's nose; a nosebleed, and a chase ensue, and the scene ends with Ozzie on the roof of the synagogue, and the other boys, with Binder, on the sidewalk staring up at him. Binder commands Ozzie to descend, unavailingly, at which point the dotty caretaker of the synagogue calls the fire department to get Ozzie off the roof, because he once got a cat off his roof that way. Going to the roof to flee repudiated and discredited religious instruction, Ozzie starts his real initiation into manhood. Accordingly, he's confused about what he's done, initially. The first question, Is it me up here?, yields quickly to a subtler pair—is the question Is it me on the roof, or Is it me who called Binder a Bastard? The split inquiry presents the split status of the boy straining to become the man in Ozzie, and the division is quickly dispelled once his identity as defier is established by Binder's command that he descend immediately. Establishing him as Ozzie, the command ironically fills him with a feeling of peace and power. The first strain toward adulthood is finished, and the irenic potency it bestows will swell soon into comic resolution of Christian and Jewish theological and cultural difference as Ozzie compels, in his peculiar way, childrens' and adults' submission to his righteousness, his difference.

Enter the firemen. Roth turns the escalating circumstances deftly thematic by having Binder opportunistically respond to the fireman's appropriate but mistaken questions Is

the kid nuts, Is he going to jump? with the terrified lie "Yes, Yes, I think so. . .He's been threatening to. . ." Ozzie registers Binder's cowardly fraud, and responds to the matter of fact fireman's challenge . . . jump or don't jump. "But don't waste our time, willya?" by playing with the power incompetent and indifferent adults have just accidentally and formally bestowed on him. The moment is a comic masterpiece, and teasingly ethnic, sounding what Joyce in Ulysses calls the Jewish "accent of the ecstasy of catastrophe" in a sequence of events that fractures and preserves the formal logic of cause and effect. To torment the Rabbi, impress his friends, lord it over the firemen, and match the new man he's becoming to the boy he still is, Ozzie calls back, "I'm going to jump." He runs back and forth on the roof, feigning to jump from one side and the other, pulling the crowd with him like a puppet-master. A competition then ensues, as Itzie, who's caught on to the anarchic power Ozzie wields, counters Binder's "Please don't jump," with his call for Ozzie to do so, a call taken up by all the other boys. Eventually they reduce Binder to tears, in a triumph of the adolescent will.

Enter, at precisely that moment, the mother. When she asks Binder what Ozzie's doing on the roof, the Rabbi stays mute with humiliated fear and anguish. To her plea that Binder get Ozzie down from the roof and prevent him from accidentally killing himself, the Rabbi pleads impotence, explaining to Mrs. Freedman that Ozzie wants to kill himself to please the boys urging him to do so. The mother finishes the cleric's logic by calling her son down: "Don't be a martyr, my baby." Binder repeats this last plea to Ozzie, and the boys immediately turn the infantilizing parental counsel to their advantage. Following Itzie's lead they all shout out in chorus to their heroic rebel leader to gawhead and "Be a Martin, be a Martin. . ." Their ignorance of what they're asking, comically indicated by their changing of the sacred role into a common name, signals that Ozzie's championing of Jesus has reached a new ironic level in the story.

The scene Roth evokes here is from the three temptations Jesus undergoes in the wilderness before he starts his ministry. Matthew 4, 5-7:

Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

The logic of the story casts Binder as the original tempter here. He put Ozzie onto the pinnacle of the synagogue, and first put the idea of jumping into Ozzie's head. The boys have usurped and transformed that unintended seduction. The Rabbi doesn't want the martyrdom at all, unlike Satan; the boys do, but not exactly for Satan's reason. Unlike the Biblical seducer, they have the angels immediately at hand, those put upon firemen, and they are boys, and therefore can't belief in death and so don't envision or require any self-destruction in Ozzie's self-aggrandizing leap. The parental figures do, of course, see that death is really possible now, despite the firemen. Here Roth makes his criticism of Christian culture: its worship of martyrdom may too much resemble an incoherent adolescent frenzy delusionally aspiring to utopian and vain rebellion.

And where is Ozzie in all this? He's finally realized how strange the boys' request for him to jump is. The question he now poses to himself is no longer Is it me that counts up here on the roof, but "Is it us? . . . Is it us?." The issue, in other words, is cultural. Ozzie wonders if he can create an order of values for his fellows if he jumps. He asks himself if the singing would turn to dancing at his leap, if the jumping would stop anything in the culture of the parents or the boys. He has a fantasy of plucking a coin from the sun with an inscription do or don't written on it, and then hallucinates that each part of his body is taking a vote, independently of his will, on what he should do. The sum makes the decision for him, but not as he expected. The late afternoon gets suddenly darker, and the voices are subdued by the oncoming night. Ozzie makes his mother, the Rabbi, the boys, the caretaker and the firemen with their net all kneel. In this omnipotent posture he forces Binder to go through a catechism that ends with the Rabbi saying "God . . . can make a child without intercourse." The mother the caretaker and the boys and the firemen are then all forced to make the same confession to Ozzie, who then requires the multitude to confess singly and then in chorus that they believe in Jesus Christ. There is yet a triumph to compel. Ozzie turns an exhausted, weepy voice, his boy's voice which Roth says has the sound of an exhausted bell-wringer's, to his mother, tells her she shouldn't hit him, or anybody ever about God, and when she asks him to come down, makes her promise first that she'll "never hit anybody about God." Although he's only asked the grey-haired madonna (Ozzie's earthly father is teasingly symbolically absent from the story through death) everyone kneeling in the street makes the promise. Roth ends Ozzie's impossible performance this way.

Once again there was silence.

"I can come down now, Mamma," the boy on the roof finally said. He turned his head both ways as though checking the traffic lights. "Now I can come down. . ." And he did, right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo.

Both senses of "other"—the reverse and the additional—which were invoked at the beginning of this essay play through Ozzie's conversion of the Jews. He has compelled Binder to tell him the different thing he wanted to know, to reverse himself and admit that Jewish exclusiveness cannot bind God. This much is righteousness and converts Jews not to Christianity, but back to the ethos of loving and exemplary obedience to God which their status as "chosen" was meant to secure when it was first announced to Abraham. Ozzie's prophetic compelling of the crowd to confess belief in Jesus Christ is pure bravado, the exuberance of an Alexander in short pants, and certainly not an acceptance on their part or on his of Christian dogma or worship. Indeed the whole scene is a burlesque of both. Roth's comic reduction of salvation through martyrdom makes that much perfectly clear. But something Christian is required by the boy of his people, something Christians have consistently proved to be exemplary failures in, something Christians were told by Jesus himself was the basis of the law and the prophets. In his commandment that no one violate their neighbor for God's sake, Ozzie condenses what Jesus in Mark 12, 29-31 cites to demonstrate his authority as a religious teacher against the scribes, the Binders of his day, who view him as a subversive interloper.

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God in one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Jesus claims, and Christians believe, that he not only obeys and preaches these commandments, but exemplifies them uniquely by instantiating, in his living presence, the God who set them forth to establish the proper relation of human life to him. God is now no longer the reverse of you, but another one of you, and loving him should be all that more compelling, immediate, and pure. This fusion of otherness as difference and as similarity in the logic of the Incarnation is the conversion Jesus urged on his contemporary Jews. Ozzie also feels himself to be an exemplary instantiation of God's power and peace, and the mixture of delusion and insight on his part may very well be Roth's final word in the story on Christ's mentality. But the ethos of the Incarnation is certainly included in the broken-hearted injunction Ozzie closes the story with. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself Jesus says is like the first commandment, thou shalt love thy God exclusively and exhaustively. The identification here of exclusive and exhaustive love is the theological basis for the humanism, Christian in one aspect, Jewish in another, of Ozzie's belief, to which he converts the Jews, that "You should never hit anybody about God." Exclusive love of God means exhaustive love of humankind. Exclusive and exhaustive love are two sides of the one Jewish coin, and of the additional Christian coin, and of the coin that is Judeao-Christian. In Ozzie Freedman's glorious tantrum on the pinnacle of a synagogue, Philip Roth comically condenses a strife over Jewish "otherness" that has in many ways defined the Christian world as much as it has the Jewish one. Ozzie is able to turn martyrdom as a resolution of that strife into a boyman's righteous game. Whoever has meditated on the cross might profit much from imagining the look on Ozzie's face as he leaps into the firemen's net that Roth has made this new man's halo.

Source: Theoharis C. Theoharis, "'For with God All Things Are Possible': Philip Roth's 'The Conversion of the Jews,'" in Journal of the *Short Story in English,* No. 32, Spring 1999, pp. 69-75.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Jones and Nance explore the struggles of individuals against conformist society in "The Conversion of the Jews" and other stories in Roth's Goodbye, Columbus collection.

Goodbye, Columbus contains not only the title piece but also five of Roth's short stories. Among these, "Epstein," "The Conversion of the Jews," and "Eli the Fanatic" are thematically consonant with the novella in their concern with the conflicts associated with love, the family, and the difficulties of communication in a world in which materialism has replaced spirituality. These stories also introduce another theme that will pervade Roth's later books and which exists, submerged, in *Goodbye, Columbus.* This theme emanates from Roth's representation of the individual in a society that values "normality" and conformity more than the development of the individual. In the essay in which he maintains that choosing is the "primary occupation" of protagonists like Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin, Roth goes on to make choosing the principal activity of the characters in his short stories as well. He says:

Then there are the central characters in the stories published along with *Goodbye, Columbus,* "Defender of the Faith," "The Conversion of the Jews," "Epstein," "Eli, the Fanatic," and "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings," each of whom is seen making a conscious, deliberate, even willful choice *beyond* the boundary lines of his life, and just so as to give expression to what in his spirit will not be grimly determined, by others, or even by what he had himself taken to be his own nature.

All the major characters in these short stories, in the process of resisting the dominion of others over their lives, must also resist their own previous acceptance of the roles that the family, society, and the people they love have said they should play. As always, the struggle for the Roth protagonist is complicated by the duality of an enemy that is at the same time internal and external.

Of the three stories, "Epstein" connects most closely to the dual themes of family restraint and the conflict of the individual identity with the social expectations he and those around him have imbibed. A stalwart father and successful first-generation American businessman, Lou Epstein feels at fiftynine that "everything is being taken away from him." His son Herbie, who was to have been heir to the Epstein Paper Bag Company, is dead of polio; his rosy-complexioned baby Sheila has grown into a pimply, fat socialist who curses him for being a capitalist; and his once beautiful and sexually adventurous wife, Goldie, has become an unappetizing cooking and cleaning machine with pendulous breasts, who smells like Bab-O.

One night, Epstein's discovery of his nephew passionately making love on the living room floor with the girl from across the street, Linda Kaufman, finally jolts him into realizing the full extent of his impoverishment and leads him to an emotional and sexual involvement with Ida Kaufman, Linda's widowed mother. The result is comedy that borders on the tragic. Epstein develops a rash that he fears indicates syphilis; and in a

comic scene in which everyone in the house winds up in Epstein's and Goldie's bedroom, Goldie declares that she wants a divorce. Displaced from his bedroom and from his usual duties as husband and father, Epstein seeks refuge in Ida Kaufman's house, where he has a heart attack. In the final scene, Goldie asserts her prerogative as Lou's wife and rides beside him in the ambulance, urging him to come to his senses and live a normal life.

Like many of the fathers in Roth's fiction, Epstein has accepted fully the responsibilities of citizenship, marriage, and parenthood but has missed out on pleasure. He has lived a sensible, structured life of conformity to the images his culture has taught him. Pleading his case to his nephew, Michael, after he has been banished from his own bedroom, Epstein offers the rationale that has governed his life: "All my life I tried. I swear it, I should drop dead on the spot, if all my life I didn't try to do right, to give my family what I didn't have. . ." The irony of this statement is fully realized in the double meaning of Epstein's attempting to give what he "didn't have." The surface meaning is, of course, that Epstein has tried to provide for his family those material possessions which he had not had. But the submerged implication is that Epstein tried to give his family what he did not have to give. He has tried to give them a self duty-bound to accept the loss of his dreams—to be a "good" father and a "good" husband despite the little he receives in return. The affair with Ida, however, causes him to confront an uncharacteristic side of himself—a side that is passionate and, more significant, adulterous. As Roth points out in one of his essays, Epstein's adultery does not "square with the man's own conception of himself." Having acted in a way contrary to what he had perceived to be his own nature, Epstein sounds like so many of Roth's characters when they exceed the limits of the image that they and others have of them: "I don't even feel any more like Lou Epstein."

If Lou sees his actions as uncharacteristic, his wife regards them as positively aberrant. Ordered, meticulous, and resolute, Goldie is associated repeatedly in the story with cleanliness, restriction, and normality. When she is told by the doctor in the ambulance that Lou can recover if he will forgo trying to act like a boy and live a life normal for sixty, Goldie repeats his message as if it were an incantation: "You hear the doctor, Lou. All you got to do is live a normal life." Much of the pathos of this story turns on the meaning of the normal life. Experiencing it as attrition and restriction, Lou has, for a time, attempted to free himself; but, as Roth says in synopsizing the story, "in the end, Epstein . . . is caught—caught by his family, and caught and struck down by exhaustion, decay, and disappointment, against all of which he had set out to make a final struggle." The extent to which Epstein is caught is evident in the last lines of the story. The doctor assures Goldie that he can cure Epstein's rash "so it'll never come back," and Epstein's grim future is forecast in his words.

"Epstein" is one of Roth's short stories that has attracted considerable hostility from the Jewish community. It has drawn charges of anti-Semitism against Roth and has been condemned for presenting a negative picture of Jews in America. In defending himself and the story against readers who resent the presentation of an adulterous Jew, Roth reasonably asserts that his interest is principally in the man Epstein, not the Jew, and that his focus on a man who is an adulterer is intended primarily to reveal the condition

of the man. That the adulterous man is a Jew seems, in itself, to set up the kind of internal conflict Roth wishes to explore in a character who "acts counter to what he considers to be his 'best self,' or what others assume it to be, or would like it to be." Part of Epstein's sense of his "best self" is inextricably tied up with the religious and cultural fact of his being Jewish, with all the attitudes toward marriage, the family, and adultery that socialization implies; and it is with his acting contrary to that image of himself that Roth the fictionist becomes engaged.

This emphasis upon fidelity to "characterological" truth rather than moralistic truth leads Roth to make some important distinctions between the apologist and the artist and between moralism and literature. He maintains that it is not the purpose of fiction to "affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold" but rather to free our feelings from societal restrictions so that we may respond to imaginative experience without the compulsion to judge in the same way that we would in everyday experience, where we might be expected to act on our judgments. "Ceasing for a while to be upright citizens," Roth suggests, "we drop into another layer of consciousness. And this expansion of moral consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to man and to society."

In "The Conversion of the Jews," written when Roth was twenty-three, moral fantasy and moral fable are intertwined. As in "Epstein," Roth explores the dilemma of the individual caught by his family and in conflict with the constraints of his immediate environment, but this story is less realistically rooted than "Epstein." Elsewhere, Roth calls it a "daydream" and describes it in a way that suggests its fabulous qualities: "A good boy named Freedman brings to his knees a bad rabbi named Binder (and various other overlords) and then takes wing from the synagogue into the vastness of space." On a less mythical level, the story deals with religious myopia, cultural limitation, and power. Ozzie Freedman, a young student in the Hebrew school of Rabbi Binder, comes into conflict with his teacher when the rabbi contends that Jesus was historical but not divine and that a virgin birth defies biological possibility. Building on the logic that God was omnipotent in making what he wished, when he wished, during the six days of the Creation, Ozzie reasons that surely God could "let a woman have a baby without having intercourse."

Binder's insistence on a major difference between Judaism and Christianity—that Christ was human but not God—and Ozzie's refusal to deny that God could make anything he chose leads to a physical confrontation in the classroom. For the second time, Ozzie is struck in the face over the issue of God's omnipotence and Christ's divinity. When his mother had learned why he was once again in trouble with the "authorities," she had hit Ozzie across the face "for the first time in their life together." When Rabbi Binder strikes Ozzie, the boy flees to the roof of the building, after calling his teacher a bastard. Amazed at the extent of his defiance, Ozzie Freedman on the roof of the synagogue confronts an unrealized side of his nature and, at the same time, comes to discover the meaning of power. Because the crowd below, which eventually includes the rabbi, his fellow students, his mother, and the fire department, construes Ozzie's taking refuge on the roof as a threat that he will jump, Ozzie turns their fears against them and begins to control the crowd by threatening to jump. Seeing Rabbi Binder on his knees in an

unprecedented pose of supplication, Ozzie realizes the full extent of his power and makes everyone kneel in "the Gentile posture of prayer." He begins to catechize the rabbi and then his mother, making them both admit that God can "make a child with- out intercourse," and, finally, he extracts from everyone in the crowd a verbalization that they believe in Jesus Christ.

Having accomplished at least a ritualistic, if not actual, conversion of the Jews, Ozzie directs his final demand to his mother—a promise that she will never "hit anybody about God." The religious symbolism that pervades the story and the positiveness with which Roth obviously intends to present Ozzie Freedman are accentuated in the concluding line, when Ozzie jumps "right into the center of the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo."

On the level at which "The Conversion of the Jews" reads like a fable, with Ozzie Freedman's personifying the urge for individualistic freedom and Rabbi Binder the social and religious constrictions which seek to bind that freedom, the story suggests that defiance is heroic when one's soul is in jeopardy. It also illustrates in a general way, through its focus on the particular constraints imposed by the Jewish community, that the sustaining influences of family and culture are also often the most powerful forces working to inhibit the spiritual and psychological development of the individual. The soul-battered Ozzie is literally driven to defiance out of frustration when he is forced either to deny his own perceptions and be "good" or to deny the teachings of religion and family and be "bad." Such a double bind leaves him with no clear-cut options.

Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., has suggested that a parallel exists between Ozzie's position and that of the young Roth during and after the writing of *Goodbye, Columbus.* He sees "The Conversion of the Jews" functioning as

an effective metaphor for the pressures of the Jewish community which combine with the self-righteousness of its young author to prompt the satiric thrust of *Goodbye, Columbus* itself. Rabbi Binder, Mrs. Freedman, and Yakov Blotnik personify all that Roth was determined to reject in the attitudes of the Jewish environment which had surrounded him for the first eighteen years of his life; and Ozzie Freedman's adolescent revolt against their xenophobia and closedmindedness, their constant concern for "what-isgood- for-the-Jews," reflects Roth's own artistic revolt.

Although in approaching the story metaphorically Rodgers makes some questionable assumptions about Roth's intention—that he was "determined" to reject portions of his early Jewish environment, for example—he appropriately suggests that the piece is grounded in personal experience. Roth's comments on the story indicate that he wrote from what he knew. He says that it "reveals at its most innocent stage of development a budding concern with the oppressiveness of family feeling and with the binding ideas of religious exclusiveness which I had experienced firsthand in ordinary American-Jewish life." Out of this early personal knowledge of constraint, Roth has proceeded to construct a diversity of fictional worlds in which the characters attempt to work through a dispute over control between themselves and some outside authority; thus "The

Conversion of the Jews" occupies an important place in Roth's career—as the first indication of a concern that becomes pervasive.

"Eli, the Fanatic" bridges the predominant themes of "Epstein" and "The Conversion of the Jews" on the one hand and *Goodbye, Columbus* on the other. It recalls "Epstein" in its presentation of an uncertain and somewhat pathetic man in conflict with what he and others around him regard as normal, and it extends the "what-is-good-for-the- Jews" attitude of "The Conversion of the Jews" in a way that becomes ironic in light of the previous story. It also anticipates Roth's emphasis in *Goodbye, Columbus* on the moral and spiritual vacuousness of the assimilated, suburban Jew whose pursuit of the materialistic American Dream has cut him off from the sustaining aspects of Jewish culture and tradition.

Eli Peck, the "fanatic" in this story whose title ironically takes the perspective of those opposed to him, is a successful Jewish lawyer living in the secular suburb of Woodenton (Wooden Town), He and his Jewish friends have been assimilated into the once exclusively gentile community by distinguishing themselves as little as possible from the Gentiles—by seeking to become largely inconspicuous as Jews. They manage successfully to secure a peaceful coexistence out of this compromise until a group of Orthodox Jews—displaced persons from Germany—establish a "yeshivah" in the community and disturb the security of the assimilated Jews by being in dress and manner conspicuously Jewish. Particularly offended by one of the emissaries from the school who comes into town dressed in an antiquated black suit and a talmudic hat, whom they refer to as the "greenie," the Americanized Jews hire Eli Peek to use the law in ridding them of these reminders of their own difference from the rest of the community—of their Jewishness. Eli's commission as the spokesman for this Jewish constituency brings him into contact with Leo Tzuref, the director of the yeshivah, and the mysterious greenie; and from that point the story focuses predominantly on Eli Peck's strange involvement with the yeshivah and his progressive identification with the greenie until, finally, he is dressed in the greenie's rabbinical garb and becomes his "Doppel-ganger," or double. At the conclusion of the story, Eli, considered insane by his friends and family, has taken on the characteristics of religions fanaticism that had previously been associated only with the dispossessed Orthodox Jews living on the edge of Woodenton.

The story begins with Eli in conflict with Jewish orthodoxy and ends with him in conflict with modern, assimilated Jewishness. Initially, in speaking for the progressive upper-middle-class Jews of Woodenton, Eli urges Leo Tzuref and his companions to conform to the customs of the community, pointing out that the amity which Jews and Gentiles have established has necessitated that each relinquish "some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other." Ironically, he builds his case for conformity to these remnants of Hitlerian Germany on the notion that if Jews in prewar Europe had been less obviously Jewish—had not given offense to those in power by differentiating themselves from the "norm"—the persecution of the Jews might not have occurred. On the continuum from the "normal" to the "abnormal," the progressive Jews of Woodenton obviously stand in relation to the Orthodox Jews as the Gentiles in restrictive communities have generally stood in relation to assimilated Jews. The

Gentiles have required of the Jews that they conform to traditional, normal American practices in order to live peacefully in the community, and these Americanized Jews, in their turn, require of the yeshivah members that they conform to the standards of their segment of the society in order to live satisfactorily with the Jewish community.

Seen from this perspective, the "what-is-goodfor- the-Jews" motif of "The Conversion of the Jews" takes on ironic overtones in his story. In both instances, that which is good for the Jews is whatever protects the Jew from the disapproval of the "goyim"—usually inconspicuousness. In "The Conversion of the Jews," Yakov Blotnik is concerned with Ozzie Freeman's making a spectacle of himself on the roof of the synagogue, and in "Eli, the Fanatic," the assimilated Jews are concerned with the traditional Jews' making a spectacle of their religious distinctiveness.

There are significant differences, however, in the way the two stories deal with what may be called "Jewishness." In "The Conversion of the Jews," Ozzie's intellectual progressiveness is at odds with religious exclusiveness, and Roth treats his resistance to the restrictions of Jewish dogma sympathetically. His unwillingness to conform to what others want him to believe, although perhaps not good for the Jews, is represented as being good for him. In "Eli, the Fanatic," Eli's progressive acculturation is initially at odds with religious orthodoxy, and Roth treats his and the Jewish community's antipathy for Jewish exclusiveness, or distinctiveness, unsympathetically. His and his neighbors' insistence that the refugees from the yeshivah conform to their secular way of life, although perhaps good for the Jews, is represented as being insupportably restrictive and ultimately not good for the very sensitive Eli. In his own way, the unstable Eli Peck is as much an identity in flux, seeking to ground itself in an individuality of its own choosing, as the adolescent Ozzie Freedman; and when his compromised modern Jewishness comes up against uncompromising traditional Jewishness, he seems to lose his balance.

Whether Eli actually loses his balance or gains it at last depends entirely upon the perspective one chooses; and Roth has constructed the story deftly so that it supports either conclusion. What the Jewish community and Eli's family regard as insanity, Eli experiences as revelation. And because the story is clearly about identity and the standards that define it as normal or abnormal, the question of how Eli Peck is finally to be regarded is ironically consistent with the principal issue of the story. To call him insane because his behavior is inconsistent with social expectations, or to call him whole because he embraces a severed portion of his past and comes to know who he is, implies something about the perspective of the judge. At the beginning of the story, speaking for legalism and compromise in his initial encounter with Leo Tzuref, Eli is clearly associated with the Americanized Jewish community, which desires to rid itself of an obtrusive reminder of its nonmaterialistic, non-American, immoderate past. Asked by Tzuref to distinguish his position from that of the community, Eli responds, "I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzuref." He is, then, by the standards of his neighbors, sane—normal. But what Eli comes slowly to realize is that he must say of his relationship to the yeshivah the same as he has said of his relationship to the Jewish-American community: "I am them, they are me." As he begins to acknowledge his kinship with the "fanatical" Jews, his neighbors determine that he is insane.

Both the literal and the symbolic indications of Eli's identification with the Orthodox Jews and with Jewish orthodoxy revolve around clothes. Clothing, in fact, is a central metaphor in the two predominant conflicts in the story—the Jewish community's conflict with the yeshivah and Eli's internal conflict between secular and religious Jewishness. The relation of clothing and identity emerges when Tzuref responds to Eli's insistence that the greenie wear modern attire by saying, "The suit the gentleman wears is all he's got." It becomes clear that Tzuref is referring to the rabbi's identity, his connection with his past, and not to his clothes. The clothes are all that he has of what he was. Later, the connection between appearance and identity reaches its culmination when Eli and the greenie exchange clothing. Putting on the discarded clothing that the greenie has left on his doorstep, Eli feels himself transformed into a Jew. When his suburban neighbor, busy with the meaningful task of painting the rocks in her yard pink, tells him that there is a Jew at his door, Eli responds, "That's me." And when he goes up the hill to the yeshivah dressed in the greenie's garb and encounters the greenie clothed in his own best green suit, Eli at first has the notion that he is two people and then that "he was one person wearing two suits." To Eli, the intermingling of the two identities is so complete that for a moment "his hands went out to button down the collar of his shirt that somebody else was wearing." The "Doppel-gänger" motif here indicates that in facing the "fanatic," the rabbinist who stands for the unassimilated Jewish tradition, Eli also confronts a part of himself—that part of his identity represented in his religious and cultural heritage.

When the rabbi, without uttering a word, points down the hill to the town of Woodenton, Eli has revelation. It is the awareness toward which he has a been moving throughout the story—the recognition that he is connected with the Jews of the yeshivah in a way that his fellow American Jews deny. His earlier words, "I am them, they are me," now refer to Old-World Jews rather than modern Jews. Like Moses descending from the mountain with a holy commission, Eli walks down the hill into Woodenton and among those who were his people. For the first time Eli seems to know who he is and to feel that he has the ability to choose. He worries for a moment that he has chosen to be crazy but then decides that it is when a person fails to choose that he is actually crazy. Therefore, he makes a conscious decision to remain in his rabbinical garb as he goes to the hospital to see his newborn son, whose birth happens to coincide with Eli's spiritual rebirth.

The story ends with the hospital attendants humoring Eli long enough to tear off his jacket and give him a sedating shot that "calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached." Since Eli has associated blackness with the clothes of the rabbi, and Roth has constructed the story so that clothing stands symbolically for identity, the conclusion implies that the spiritual assimilation Eli has achieved remains untouched by sedation. In the sense that normality in this story means moderation, compromise, and alienation from the religious and cultural past, Eli will never be normal again.

In this story, as in "Epstein" and "The Conversion of the Jews," Roth explores the conflicts between conformity and identity, between the individual and his social environment, and the conflict within the individual as he makes a choice that challenges

not only what others would like him to be but also his own sense of his "best self." In the introduction of these themes, the stories in the *Goodbye, Columbus* volume are auguries of the predominant issues to emerge in Roth's novels. Throughout his fiction, Roth is preoccupied with the moral imperatives that a person imposes on himself and their relationship to the dictates of family, culture, and religion. In the absence of heroes of epic proportion, he draws protagonists characteristically modern in the sense that their battleground is the self and their struggles are with the forces that shape, and attempt to impose limitations upon, that identity.

Source: Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance, "Good Girls and Boys Gone Bad," in *Philip Roth,* Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981, pp. 9-86.

Adaptations

Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Other Short Stories was adapted as an unabridged audio file by Audio Literature. It is available on the Web at www.audible.com and features several narrators, including Theodore Bikel and Harlan Ellison.

Goodbye, Columbus was released by Paramount Pictures in 1969 as a feature film entitled *Goodbye Columbus.* The film, which was directed by Larry Peerce, featured Richard Benjamin, Ali MacGraw, and Jack Klugman. It is available on VHS from Paramount Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

Christianity has a long history of attempting to convert non-Christians. Jews, on the other hand, do not usually try to convert others to their religion, although converts are generally welcome. Research the steps required to convert to Judaism and create a diagram that depicts these steps. Include relevant artwork, photos, quotes, or other sources that illustrate each of these steps.

Choose any example from history in which a mass of people was converted to Christianity, either by choice or against their will. Write a short overview of this event, discussing where and when this mass conversion took place, whether the converted people had a choice in their conversion, and what long-term effects the event had.

Using a standard calendar, plot all of the Christian and Jewish holidays. Write a short description of each holiday, including its history and traditional rituals. Also, discuss the differences between a standard calendar and the Jewish calendar.

Research the Jewish bar mitzvah ceremony. Imagine being a Jewish boy or girl going through your own bar or bat mitzvah. Write a journal entry that describes what the bar or bat mitzvah is like, using research to support your ideas.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Following the Holocaust during World War II, which kills an estimated six million Jews, many European Jews emigrate to other countries such as Israel and the United States. In 1957, due to this migration, the United States attains the world's largest Jewish population.

Today: The majority of the world's estimated thirteen million Jews live in either the United States, which hosts almost six million Jews, or Israel, which hosts almost five million Jews.

1950s: Most American Jews encourage assimilation with American culture as a way to get ahead and make a better life for themselves.

Today: The biggest problem facing American Jewry is the loss of its Jewish identity as a result of assimilation into American culture. Judaism, like other major religions, is in a state of flux as it attempts to reconcile secular issues with religious traditions.

1950s: Intermarriage is frowned upon, and a mere 6 percent of Jewish marriages are to non-Jews.

Today: More than 50 percent of all Jewish marriages are to non-Jews.

What Do I Read Next?

Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) concerns the title character, a young Jewish American in a working-class Chicago neighborhood, who is forced to embark upon a number of odd jobs during the Great Depression. Despite all of his negative experiences, Augie fights to remain optimistic and attempts to make sense of the world by seeking a worthwhile fate.

Since the Holocaust, a number of prominent Catholic and Protestant religious leaders have made public statements expressing remorse at the Christian mistreatment of Jews and have also expressed the desire to recognize the validity of Judaism. *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (2000), a collection of essays by Tikva Frymer-Kensky and more than thirty other Jewish and Christian scholars, opens a dialogue about the similarities and differences between the two faiths.

The essays in Richard J. Israel's *The Kosher Pig: And Other Curiosities of Modern Jewish Life* (1993) explore the difficulty of adhering to traditional Jewish beliefs and practices in a modern world. Israel explores his many topics with humor and insight and offers such eclectic tips as how to survive a Yom Kippur fast with the least amount of discomfort and how to keep a *yarmulke*—or skullcap—on a bald head.

In Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), Frankie Alpine, an Italian-American street thug, gets a job working for a humble Jewish-American grocer, Morris Bober. Morris cannot modernize his traditional Jewish beliefs, even though his inability to change threatens his family's economic survival. Meanwhile, Frankie falls in love with Morris's daughter and is forced to question his own moral and religious beliefs.

In Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Nathan Zuckerman is a young Jewish-American author who is in love with the literary classics. Zuckerman's father does not see the value in his son's story, which portrays Jews in a negative fashion, and Zuckerman seeks out his literary idol, E. I. Lonoff, for guidance. During an evening at Lonoff's rural home, Zuckerman explores the complex nature of a writer's moral responsibility to both art and society.

In *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), Roth collects a number of his previously published articles and essays. These include commentary on his works, his reasons for writing about Jews in ways that are sometimes viewed as disparaging by members of the Jewish community, and various aspects of Roth's life.

Further Study

Brodkin, Karen, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America,* Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Brodkin explores her own racial status as a Jewish American and discusses how Jews have shifted from the non-white to the white category in the American social consciousness. She also applies this discussion to the greater issue of how racial-ethnic backgrounds help to define social identities in the United States.

Cooper, Alan, *Philip Roth and the Jews,* State University of New York Press, 1996.

Cooper examines and dispels the common impression that Roth is either a self-hating Jew or a writer bent on making fun of the Jewish community. Cooper reviews Roth's life and works and compares the author's experiences to the experiences of Jewish Americans in general.

Dershowitz, Alan M., *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century,* Little, Brown and Company, 1997.

Dershowitz says that modern Jewish Americans face a different challenge than previous generations, which fought against an anti-Semitic attitude that has largely disappeared. Instead, today's Jewish Americans, who have been widely assimilated into American culture, stand to lose their Jewish identity through the increase in intermarriage and the lapse of Jewish practices. Dershowitz proposes some steps to ensure that a permanent loss of identity does not happen.

Heilman, Samuel C., *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century,* University of Washington Press, 1995.

Heilman draws from his dual background as sociologist and Jewish Studies professor to demonstrate the sociological changes that have taken place in the Jewish-American community since the 1950s.

Robinson, George, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals,* Pocket Books, 2000.

Robinson offers an up-to-date, one-volume overview of Jewish practices and beliefs. Written in an accessible style, the book includes several sidebars that highlight specific aspects of Judaism, answer the most commonly asked questions, and explore current controversies.

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Roth, Philip, "The Conversion of the Jews," in *American Short Story Masterpieces,* edited by Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks, Laurel, 1987, pp. 440-55, originally published in *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories,* Houghton, 1959.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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