

JEWISH IDENTITY IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE CONVERSION OF THE JEWS***Eniko Maior, Assoc. Prof., PhD, Partium Christian University of Oradea**

*Abstract: In my paper I want to deal with Philip Roth's short story *The Conversion of the Jews* (1959) and the question of identity. The protagonist of the short story tries to find his own identity in America. The Jews experienced total freedom in speech, in life and most importantly in thoughts in the new world. The bounds of their past life were forgotten and a new set of values had to be elaborated in order to fulfill the needs of this assimilated, acculturated and Americanized individual. Jewish families and communities were no longer the most important things in the life of the individual. The individual came to the foreground and left no place for other things. My task is to show how the protagonist defines himself in this new world without losing his ethnic identity.*

Keywords: Identity, Jewish identity, assimilation, religion, Americanized individual.

Philip Roth (1933-) belongs to the so-called second generation of Jewish-American writers. The members of this generation are the children of immigrants born on American soil and struggling for their own identity. In a racialized and multicultural context, they have tried to define themselves, i.e., to figure out who they really are. They grew up in a Jewish environment, living according to prescribed religious norms and dietary laws, studying the Torah and being continually reminded of their past. Roth, who grew up in Newark, N. J., had the following to say on the cultural environment in which he grew up "Highly Jewish neighborhood, which had been squeezed like some embattled little nation among ethnic rivals and antagonists, peoples equally proud, ambitious, and xenophobic, and equally baffled and exhilarated by the experience of being fused into a melting pot" (qtd. in Girgus 122). The pressure of two different worlds seems to have influenced these second generation Jewish-American writers. They have to develop their own identity which is no longer Jewish or American but rather Jewish-American. Frederick R. Karl speaks about a Jewish American literature that deals with "the enormous problems of acculturation and assimilation, and the radical questioning of the traditions and values of both cultures" (qtd. in Fried 63). In Roth's thinking, Jewishness is not the only accepted *modus vivendi*. He presents the wrestling of modern man to find his own identity and place in the world. The ghetto mentality present in his books is juxtaposed to the American drive for individual freedom. His heroes are no longer immigrant Jews struggling to accommodate themselves in an alien world and make a living. They are not peddlers or shop assistants but intellectuals, doctors and teachers. They are likely to attend the most prestigious universities and colleges, not only to do they master English but, in most cases, to get a degree in it. As Clement Greenberg contended

Jewish life in America has become, for reasons of security, so solidly, so rigidly, restrictedly and suffocatingly middle class that behaviour within it is a pattern from which personality can deviate in only a mechanical and hardly ever in a temperamental sense. It is a way of life that clings even to those who escape from it in their opinions and vocations. No people on earth are more correct, more staid, more provincial, more commonplace, more

inexperienced; none observe more strictly the letter of every code that is respectable; no people do so completely and habitually what is expected of them: doctor, lawyer, dentist, businessman, school teacher... (qtd. in Greenspan 200).

The old values kept on living but their meaning was lost. Financial prosperity and the American freedom had to reshape the values of the Jews. Roth felt that the rituals and traditions became simple exercises which had no meaning. He was the angry young man who could not help mimicking that way of life. He used the type figure of the schlemiel to show how the passive hero became the active one. He cannot stay still and rely on his belief in a God that let millions of Jews be killed. The schlemiel's deeply rooted religious faith is questioned by this new American one. The old concept had to undergo several changes so as to be able to represent perfectly the anxieties of the individual of the 1950s.

Roth's major thematic preoccupation has become the quest for a psychological identity and an intimate confession of the feelings elicited by this search. His questions are no longer concerned with his heritage, family and faith but rather with the condition of modern man, reiterated with increasing urgency by dozens of post-World War Two authors: Who I am? In his book *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) Roth claimed that one of his "continuing problems as a writer has been to find the means to be true to these seemingly inimical realms of experience that I am strongly attached to by temperament and training – the aggressive, the crude, and the obscene, at one extreme, and something of a good deal more subtle and, in every sense, refined, at the other" (82). He is first of all an American writer who happens to be of Jewish origin. Typically, his characters reflect a kind of Jewish insecurity and American ambivalence. In a broader sense, he presents the alienated condition of modern man. Roth's fictional characters are men and women "whose moorings have been cut, and who are swept away from their native shores and out to sea, sometimes on a tide of their own righteousness and resentment" (McDaniel 20).

He grew up in an environment where being Jew meant belonging to God's chosen people. Although he had to live in a liberal and democratic America, where the freedom of the individual was a frequently used term and a cherished right, his Jewishness prevented him from living his life as he wanted to. His parents tried to give him a traditional Jewish education where everything was defined and confined. Roth was severely criticized by his literary parents and by his co-religionists for presenting Jews as a vicious, immoral ethnic group, as if the problems they had with the Gentiles were not enough.

Some critics, like Irving Howe, claimed that Roth's themes were not Jewish themes any longer and this signified "the end of a tradition, the closing of an arc of American Jewish experience" (qtd. in McDaniel 24). On the other hand, Theodore Solotaroff had a very different opinion from the above-mentioned one

Roth is so obviously attached to Jewish life that the charge of his being anti-semitic or a "self-hater" is the more absurd. The directness of his attack against arrogance, smugness, finagling and acquisitiveness should not obscure the perfectly obvious fact that he does so flying a traditional Jewish banner of sentiment and humaneness and personal responsibility[...] (qtd. in McDaniel 24).

As Roth himself confessed in an interview:

I have always been far more pleased by my good fortune in being born a Jew than my critics may begin to imagine. It's a complicated, interesting, morally demanding, and very singular experience, and I like that. I find myself in the historic predicament of being Jewish, with all its implications. Who could ask for more? (qtd. in Girgus 121).

I think that critics will never reach a consensus regarding Philip Roth's literary achievements. But this does not prevent the readers from enjoying his books.

Now let me speak about the short story entitled "The Conversion of the Jews" (1959). The question of conversion has been around since Christianity appeared. Philip Roth borrows the term to speak about a conversion to the rights of American citizenship rather than to a specific religion. He uses the term to show the struggle of the individual to find his own personality which is no longer Jewish but Jewish-American.

The story was probably influenced by J. D. Salinger's fiction of rebellion, according to Ezra Greenspan. With Ozzie Freedman's character, he introduces a prototype of Alexander Portnoy, the hero of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Ozzie is a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy who lives in the America of the 1950s. He is the perfect example of what the schlemiel has become. He cannot stand any longer for a nation or an ethnic group. He is no more the passive hero of the literary works aiming to guide people to God. He is the individual who has to find his own identity which is rather a mixture of Jewishness and residues of an American way of life. He lives in a traditional Jewish family where everything was defined and confined, but he has reached an age when he starts to question everything that he has heard or learnt.

The title of the short story is taken from Andrew Marvell's (1621-1678) poem "To His Coy Mistress" which was written in 1651-1652 and published in 1681:

Had we but World enough, and Time,
 This coyness Lady were no crime.
 We would sit down, and think which way
 To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.
 Thou by the Indian Ganges side
 Should'st Rubies find: I by the Tide
 Of Humber would complain. I would
 Love you ten years before the Flood:
 And you should if you please refuse
 Till the Conversion of the Jews.

According to Christians, the conversion of the Jews will take place before the Last Judgment. We can read about it in Romans 11:25-26a: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved". We can notice the contradiction that exists between the line in the poem and the title of the short story. The line refers to eternity, while in the short story it signifies the beginning of a new era. A new period of assimilation into American culture started in the 1950s.

The main character of the story, Ozzie Freedman asks questions about his religion, bringing distress to his mother and his rabbi. He has arrived at a moment in his life when his consciousness filters all information and questions everything. Ozzie does not want to

challenge his mother and his teacher who in a way become one and the same person the oppressor. In other words they become the representatives of old world values opposed to the new world values represented by the protagonist. He says “Mamma, don’t you see – you shouldn’t hit me... You shouldn’t hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God “(8). Ozzie’s mother appears as a very powerful feminine force who tries to impose her religious belief on her son. She does not want to understand that her son can choose for himself in what to believe, she cannot force her religious belief on her child. This child who lives in a democratic and free country cannot accept to believe in something because he is told so.

His parents and grandparents grew up in small communities in Europe. But they do not live in these shtetls any longer. The environment has changed; they have arrived to the big faceless urban communities in which the formerly strong ties have become loose. Ozzie finds it hard to understand that people can be divided into Jews and Gentiles. He cannot understand his grandmother’s words when she reads about a plane crash

Then there was the plane crash. Fifty-eight people had been killed in a plane crash at La Guardia. In studying a casualty list in the newspapers his mother had discovered among the list of those dead eight Jewish names (his grandmother had nine but she counted Miller as a Jewish name); because of the eight she said the plane crash was “a tragedy”(102).

The Rabbi tries to explain to Ozzie his grandmother’s words by speaking about “cultural unity and some other things”(102). Ozzie feels that this is not the proper answer. It seems that he transcends his limitations and assumes the role of a questioning student whose understanding far surpasses that of his teachers. On another occasion, Rabbi Binder reminds him that he should read faster in Hebrew, but Ozzie explains to him that he wants to understand the words. For him, what he has to perform as a good, obedient Jew is not only a ritual; he wants to understand it also with his mind. It seems to Ozzie that many Jewish practices and traditions have become part of a ritual performed without having anything to do with God. He mentions Yakov Blotnik, the custodian of the school, who always mumbles some prayers “To Ozzie the mumbling had always seemed a monotonous, curious prayer; what made it curious was that Old Blotnik had been mumbling so steadily for so many years, Ozzie suspected he had memorized the prayers and forgotten all about God” (103-104). Tradition and rituals became more important than the individual. Ozzie struggles against becoming one individual who keeps repeating the prayers without being convinced about the existence of a God. Customs have become empty and he wants to fill them with value. He does not want to reject Judaism and Jewishness; he only shows that they need a few reforms. They have to adapt to the needs of the 20th century man, to satisfy the needs of the changed climate.

Rabbi Binder does not want to accept such changes. In a broader sense, he refuses assimilation into American culture. Rabbi Binder is the typical parochial Jew. He knows the rules and laws of Judaism, but this is not enough. He spends a lot of time on sorting out what is Jewish and what is non-Jewish. He does not understand the America of the 1950s. Ozzie’s intentions are innocent. He does not want to challenge Rabbi Binder, but their confrontation cannot be avoided. Ozzie cannot accept the term “God’s Chosen People” when the Declaration of Independence claims that all men are created equal.

On another occasion, Ozzie raised the question of the Immaculate Conception. Ozzie’s mother has to come to the Hebrew school for the third time to speak with Rabbi Binder. Their

final confrontation is caused by the Rabbi, who, during free-discussion time, forces Ozzie to ask his questions. The result is Rabbi Binder's punching his nose. Then, Ozzie runs to the roof and locks the only door. The firemen appear and a crowd starts gathering under the roof. We can observe Roth's sense of humor in the way he depicts the firemen's running to and fro to catch Ozzie. The roles change now: Ozzie has the power, while the others- his mother, Rabbi Binder, the firemen- become his puppets: Ozzie, who a moment earlier hadn't been able to control his own body, started to feel the meaning of the word 'control': he felt Peace and he felt Power (107). The chain of power is reversed by the protagonist. He realizes that he can ask these agents anything he wants. He even makes them kneel down as Gentiles do when they pray. He is like a commander who makes people say, first individually and then together, that God can do anything and He could make a child without intercourse. His final request is that they have to promise, his mother and Rabbi Binder, that, in the future, they will never hit anybody in the name of God. His mission accomplished he can come down. Roth affirms the individual's freedom to choose how much to assimilate or what to believe regarding his religion. Ozzie struggles for a sense of self and, in a way, he gets his Bar Mitzvah on the roof of the Hebrew School. Rabbi Binder has to accept that these two religions – Christianity and Judaism – exist in the same universe of discourse. His moral explorations are limited to Jewishness, but in the America of the 1950s this cannot be taken as a *modus vivendi*.

“The Conversion of the Jews” has often been labeled as the example of Jewish self-hatred which, in my opinion, is not true. I agree with Baumgarten, who contends that the story “shows the intertwining of religion, politics and ethnicity” (qtd. in Baumgarten and Gottfried 47).

As Ozzie's last name – Freedman – suggests, he only wants to be free to think and to believe what he wants. As Irving and Harriet Deer insightfully said “what has been violated in him is not so much his logic as his sense that as an individual he has the right to ask questions, even of religion. He is protesting his individuality rather than his theology” (qtd. in McDaniel 54).

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