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Reflections on Identity in Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus* and Mary Doyle Curran's

*The Parish and the Hill*

At first glance, Philip Roth's 1959 novella *Goodbye Columbus* and Mary Doyle Curran's 1948 novel *The Parish and the Hill* have little in common. *Goodbye Columbus* is the title story of Philip Roth's award winning first book *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories*. It paints a vivid picture of life in the relative affluence of 1950s New Jersey as it follows the progress of the love affair between its young Jewish protagonists: Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin. *The Parish and the Hill* is Mary Doyle Curran's (Curran) only published novel. It is set in the textile-manufacturing town of Holyoke, Massachusetts, between the First and Second World Wars. In her Afterword to the 1986 Feminist Press edition, Anne Halley describes it as "the fictionalized account of one Irish Catholic immigrant family's difficult, only partial, assimilation into the already established Irish-American and Yankee social system, from the first generation to the third" (223). It explores several generations of a family as its individual members struggle to create identities suited to their new environments.

Despite living in very different worlds, the narrators of *The Parish and the Hill* and *Goodbye Columbus* are both sceptical of the impacts of social mobility on the American immigrant's sense of identity. Both stories are narrated in the first person and both narrators are shrewd observers of their environments. Helge Normann Nilsen (Nilsen) describes *Goodbye Columbus*'s narrator, Neil Klugman, as a young man "involved in a struggle to develop and preserve an identity of his own amid different environments and conflicting impulses within him" (79). He is a twenty-three-year-old army veteran and graduate of

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, who lives with his aunt and uncle in Newark where he works for the public library. Neil's is a relatively modest background: his Jewish family still go on Workmen's Circle picnics (Roth 41) and his Aunt Gladys worries about the costs of long distance phone calls (Roth 95). When Neil falls in love with Brenda, an undergraduate at the prestigious Radcliffe College, he becomes acquainted with her life in the affluent suburb of Short Hills. Brenda's more acculturated Jewish family enjoys the privileges and comfort that come with money. Neil observes and reflects upon the different "social universes" (Nilsen 79) in which he operates. His rather detached and detailed observations of those around him allow him to consider the factors that help determine an individual's identity. As Nilsen puts it, "Personal identity is a mystery that can only be partly unveiled..." (88) and yet Neil is concerned that the choices he makes, the people that surround him, will influence --and maybe even limit-- the development of his own identity. When Neil eventually breaks up with Brenda he wishes he could understand why, "What was it inside me that had turned pursuit and clutching into love, and then turned it inside out again? What was it that had turned winning into losing, and losing --who knows-- into winning?" (Roth 104). Neil loses Brenda, but he avoids an existence "on the surface" (Roth 67) with the wealthy Patimkin family. He cannot commit to life in an environment that he feels will limit his personal development and play too great a role in defining his identity.

Mary O'Connor is *The Parish and the Hill's* young narrator. She tells the story of three generations of her Irish-American family, from her grandparents' arrival in Holyoke in the late nineteenth century (Halley 226) to her mother's death in the 1930s (Halley 224). "Mary O'Connor's narration is one of memory and commemoration..." (Conboy 62). She is not often at the centre of the events she narrates; she recounts the family stories she heard as a child and describes the complex family relationships she witnesses growing up. Like Neil Klugman, she offers an interesting perspective on the impact of social mobility on identity.

“The process in which people of one kind change into another, abandon one identity and set of values to adopt new ones...is the process that troubles Mary O’Connor...” (Halley 229). Of her family’s move away from the Irish Parish of her birth, Mary says: “...we became outcasts from our own race, and aliens among the Yankees into whose hallowed circle we moved. There were, it is true, a few Irish on Money Hole Hill; and they were the worst of all, imitators of imitators, neither Yankee nor Irish, but of that species known as lace-curtain Irish” (Curran 18-19). Mary’s familiarity with both these Irish-American allows her to observe their impact on individual identity.

Neither *Goodbye Columbus* nor *The Parish and the Hill* are autobiographical works and yet their narrators’ eras and environments would have been contemporary and familiar to each young author. Mary Doyle Curran’s novel illustrates the possible effects of varying degrees of social mobility and assimilation on different generations of an extended Catholic-Irish family in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Philip Roth’s novella addresses similar themes through Neil’s contact with two rather different Jewish families in 1950s New Jersey. The two stories provide insight into the immigrant experience in two distinct American worlds. This paper will take a close look at reflections on social mobility in both *The Parish and the Hill* and *Goodbye Columbus*. It will attempt to describe its impact on the identities of the characters and immigrant communities in both stories. It will look for an intrinsic immigrant experience, one common to both these American stories.

## The Climb Up the Orange Mountains

Like many young adults, Neil Klugman is attempting to define his own authentic identity. In *Goodbye Columbus*, he interacts with two examples of “untroubled Jewishness . . . both the ascendant suburban, Cold War consensus-situated variety practiced by the Patimkin family and the residual urban, Yiddishkeit-situated variety practiced by his Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max . . .” (Schreier 109). Neil also observes his colleagues at Newark public library and is intrigued by “the little colored kid” (Roth 93) who regularly browses through “a large-sized edition of Gauguin reproductions” (Roth 34). Familiarity with these three social environments provides Neil with the opportunity to contemplate their impacts on individual identity.

When driving to Patimkin Kitchen and Bathroom Sinks in the Black neighbourhood of Newark, he reflects on the immigrant journey towards assimilation. In his 2004 book, *American Judaism*, Jonathan Sarna refers to several 1950s studies that “found that ‘between 1945 and 1965, about a third of all American Jews left big cities and established themselves in suburbs.’ For Jews and non-Jews alike, suburbia during these years became the ‘symbol of Utopia’ – a sign of success, prestige, money, power, and security – the ‘middle-class Shangri-La’” (AJYB 53 (1952) qtd in Sarna 282). Neil’s thoughts appear to reflect the scholarly discourse of his contemporaries.

The neighbourhood had changed: the old Jews like my grandparents had struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, towards the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains, until they had reached the crest and started down the other side, pouring into Gentile territory as the Scotch-Irish had poured through the Cumberland Gap. Now, in fact, the Negroes were making the same migration, following the steps of the Jews . . . Who would come after the Negroes? Who was left? (Roth 72)

Neil's description of his grandmother drinking "hot tea from an old *jahrzeit* glass" in what, "...at the time of the great immigration, ...had been the Jewish section [of Newark]" (Roth 72), suggests that Neil is probably third, or maybe even fourth, generation American. He is not a particularly religious young man; he has not had been to the Hudson Street Synagogue since his parents' move to Arizona (Roth 70). There is no suggestion that Neil's Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max are very practising; though they celebrate Rosh Hashana (Roth 96), there is no evidence of them observing the Sabbath. In *American Judaism*, Sarna describes "the widespread belief during the interwar years that Jewishness (*Yiddishkeit*) could thrive in America even in the absence of such standard components of religious life as synagogue attendance, ritual practice and Jewish education" (223). Sarna includes the following quote by Vivian Gornick: "We did not have to be 'observing' Jews to know that we were Jews" (223). Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max, "sharing a Mounds bar in the cindery darkness of their alley...each cool breeze sweet to them as the promise of afterlife..." are reminiscent of this more secular interwar "Jewishness" (Sarna 223).

In her 2008 essay, "Diving into the Wreckage," Judith Lewin reports Dara Horn's reaction to *Goodbye Columbus*:

I grew up in Short Hills, New Jersey, which is probably best known for Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. As a reader who cared about Jewish identity, that book made me so angry. . . . I have to say I was frustrated and disappointed with much of the American Jewish literature of the 1960s. Roth and other writers of that generation told stories that had nothing to do with what people my age experience growing up. (51)

Lewin describes Horn, an early twenty-first century novelist, as an example of "'Hansen's law': 'What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember'" (Hansen qtd in Silverman 422). For Horn's generation, "the way to rebel against your parents is to become Orthodox" (qtd in Lewin 50). However, as Horn herself suggests, "if you choose to become

more religious than your parents, that means that someone in your family, however many generations back, had made the opposite choice, deciding to become less religious than *their* parents” (qtd in Lewin 50). Maybe Neil is an example of a third generation American who is less practising than his parents. He no longer attends his synagogue and is comfortable missing his family’s Rosh Hashana celebrations in order to visit Brenda in Boston (Roth 96). The Jewish secularism of the interwar generation emphasised “Jewishness” rather than “Judaism” (Sarna 223). Neil’s more secular Jewish identity might be closer to a type of “Jewishness” (Sarna 223) that would have been present in his grandparents’ Jewish neighbourhood. “Simply by living there [less religious members of the tight-knit interwar Jewish community] absorbed and in many ways internalized [their] Jewishness” (Sarna 223). Neil might no longer practice his religion but his secular Jewish identity is an integral part of his person. This is evident in his reaction to Brenda’s nose job. He is uncomfortable when faced with her flippant explanation of the operation: “I was pretty. Now I am prettier” (Roth 18). When she tells him her brother might also have his nose “fixed,” Neil is genuinely baffled: “I don’t mean to sound facetious. I mean why’s he doing it?” (Roth 18). He later seems comforted by the thought that Mr Patimkin, “would never bother to have that stone cut from his face” (Roth 28).

The Patimkin family’s climb up the Orange Mountains has been accompanied by an increasing assimilation of Anglo-American norms and hearty consumerism. When Neil first drives out to Short Hills, he has the illusion that the hundred and eighty feet rise in altitude is bringing him “closer to heaven” (Roth 15), to a world where he observes “long lawns which seem to be twirling water on themselves...” (Roth 15). There are two oaks in the Patimkin garden that “one might call ...sporting-goods trees. Beneath their branches, like fruit dropped from their limbs, were two irons, a golf ball, a tennis can, a baseball bat, basketball...” (Roth

24). Neil does not appear to share the family's vigorous appetite for the trappings of a successful middle class existence; as Mr Patimkin observes, Neil "eats like a bird" (Roth 25).

The Patimkin parents have perspective on their journey to prosperity and this is coupled with a keen sense of a Jewish identity, something that their more assimilated children seem to lack. Mrs Patimkin is involved in Jewish community affairs. As Sarna points out: "For Jews, the migration to the suburbs posed particular challenges. Outside the protective womb of the urban Jewish subculture, Judaism could no longer be absorbed like sunshine, from the surrounding atmosphere" (283). Mrs Patimkin is an example of "the Jewish pioneers, the scattered and isolated suburbanites [who] moved to establish a sense of community" (Sarna 283). She is one of the many Jewish women in the suburbs who "became ... involved with their synagogue: its sisterhood, its Hadassah group (a popular women's Zionist organization), its Jewish education classes, its social and cultural activities..." (Sarna 286). When the family first moves to Short Hills, Mr Patimkin hides \$300 dollars in their box room, telling nine year-old Brenda that it is for her in case of emergency. Maybe a move away from the safety of his tight-knit Newark community, so shortly after the atrocities of the Second World War, threatened this thoroughly Jewish-American's sense of security. When Brenda notices the money has gone she says: "...I didn't need this. I guess one day *he* figured I wouldn't need it" (Roth 57). The Mr Patimkin Neil meets is more established and confident than the man who first moved his young family to Short Hills. Unlike her parents, Brenda appears disconnected from her Jewish identity. When discussing her Hadassah work with Neil, Mrs Patimkin refers to Brenda as "nothing" (Roth 71). Mrs Patimkin describes her daughter as, "'the best Hebrew student I've ever seen,' ... 'but then she got too big for her britches'" (Roth 70). In her own way, Brenda is an example of "Hansen's Law," a member of the (second) generation that tries to forget (Lewin 50). Brenda's success is measured in equestrian rosettes (Roth 38) or on the tennis court (Roth 15). Unlike Neil, she does not

appear concerned with defining an authentic sense of self. Her apparent disconnection from her religious roots might partly explain her difficult relationship with her mother.

Though Brenda's parents will eventually summarize Neil's stay in their home as a "nice vacation...supplied" (Roth 98) to a "complete stranger" (Roth 99), there are moments when it appears that if things were to work out with Brenda, they would accept Neil into their fold. Mr Patimkin hints at this at Ron's wedding, "'I like my kids' weddings...(preceding ellipses in original)'... 'Whatever my Buck wants is good enough for me. There's no business too big can't use another head'"(Roth 85). However, Neil is increasingly disturbed by the Patimkin children's lack of perspective on their own social position and their somewhat phony sense of identity. Ron is almost a caricature of the All-American college athlete. He is exceedingly polite and has a hearty handshake: "Before I'd even reached them, Ron stepped forward and shook my hand, vigorously, as though he hadn't seen me since the Diaspora" (Roth 35). Neil is disquieted by what he perceives to be Ron's lack of depth. When he first asks Ron, "How does it feel?" (Roth 53), referring to his upcoming wedding, Ron misunderstands him and thinks he is asking about a recent sports injury. He is more focused on his measurable sporting achievements than on his emotional life or future with Harriet. Ron is struggling to form a new identity, one beyond that of the successful athlete. He does not seem motivated to shape his own future. He spends the night before his wedding listening to a recording of his Homecoming Game (Roth 82). The identity Ron forged for himself as an athlete is behind him; his future persona will be determined by a position in the family company and his marriage to Harriet, a young woman of whom Neil says: "All was surfaces, and she seemed a perfect match for Ron, and too for the Patimkins" (Roth 67).

Neil is hoping for more from his relationship with Brenda. They fall head-over-heels in love and quickly embark on a sexual relationship. At first, neither of them seems concerned with conforming to norms. They happily sleep together in the television room while Brenda's



family is asleep upstairs. They are discreet and do not confront others with the sexual nature of their relationship. They seem to trust in their love for one another despite the fact that their feelings are playing catch-up to their interaction: “Actually we did not have the feelings we said we had until we spoke them- at least I didn’t; to phrase them was to invent them and own them. We whipped our strangeness and newness into a froth that resembled love” (Roth 22). However, Brenda and Neil are not skilled at reading each other’s feelings. When Neil calls Brenda crude for having said that she would sleep with him whether or not he loved her (Roth 45), she does not understand that he feels that she is underestimating his feelings for her: “‘I don’t understand,’ she said, and she didn’t, and that she didn’t pained me” (Roth 45). When Neil realizes that he “wanted Brenda to marry me,” he does not propose to her for fear of rejection: “I did not feel myself prepared for any answer but ‘Hallelujah!’” (Roth 64). Instead he “proposed the surrogate, which turned out finally to be more daring than I knew at the time.” In asking Brenda to get a diaphragm he is asking for a “surrogate” (Roth 64) proof of her love. He hints that “It’s not even the pleasure of the flesh I’m talking about” but myopic Brenda says, “Then frankly I don’t know *what* you are talking about” (Roth 65). Neil is looking for evidence that a relationship with Brenda will not have to conform to Patimkin expectations. He does not want to lose his integrity in order to follow “a path similar to that of Ron” (Nilsen 86). According to Nilsen, “the whole point of the story is to render a protagonist who is determined to retain his own identity and not surrender to outside pressures” (86-87). When discussing the diaphragm Brenda admits, “I don’t feel old enough for this equipment” (Roth 66); she does not see the commitment that Neil is hoping to make “conscious” (Roth 66).

While staying at the Patimkin’s house, Neil dreams that he is on an old sailing ship with the “little colored kid from the library” (Roth 61).

For a while it was a pleasant dream; we anchored in the harbor of an island in the Pacific and it was very sunny...but suddenly *we* were moving, our ship, out of the harbor, and the Negresses moved slowly down to the shore and began to throw leis at us and say ‘Goodbye, Columbus... goodbye, Columbus...goodbye...’ (previous three ellipses in original) and though we did not want to go... the boat was moving and there was nothing we could do about it...(Roth 61)

This dream captures the contradictions in Neil’s relationship with Brenda. Though he loves her, like the original explorer, Neil is disillusioned by the new world he discovers through Brenda (Nilsen 82). Neil is beginning to realize that his “Polynesian maiden” (Roth 19) is only a “sailor’s dream” (Roth 19); money and comfort will probably erase her singleness (Roth 76). At the end of their affair, Brenda asks Neil: “Can I bring you home?” (Roth 102). This could be interpreted as a request for a marriage proposal. If Neil proposed and legitimized their relationship her parents might accept it. However, Neil has come to the realisation that he and Brenda would never define their own relationship, she would only be happy in a relationship that conformed to her parents’ norms and values. Brenda avoids “responsibility for herself by referring to her family’s standards instead of her own opinions” (Nilsen 86). She is not prepared to investigate an alternative set of values in a relationship with Neil.

When Aunt Gladys says, “Since when do Jewish people live in Short Hills? They couldn’t be real Jews believe me” (Roth 49), Neil answers: “They’re real Jews” (Roth 49). However, Neil grows to share Aunt Gladys’s scepticism, he begins to equate upward mobility with a loss of authentic cultural identity. He does not feel the Patimkins’ values are “real”; he could never share their ideals. As Schreier suggests, in the Garden of Patimkin, the Tree of Jewish Knowledge has become a sporting-goods tree (123). Neil is a Philosophy major who gravitates towards books and values intellectual pursuits. He is intrigued by “the little colored

kid”(Roth 42) who enjoys Gauguin’s beautiful paintings of life in Tahiti. He is defensive of the child’s interest; he even prevents another library user from borrowing the Gauguin book so that it will still be on the shelf when the boy next visits the library (Roth 49). Neil cannot reconcile his values and interests with the Patimkin family’s voracious materialism.

While Brenda is seeing the doctor in New York, Neil - who is waiting outside - steps into St Patrick’s Cathedral to escape the city heat. He takes this opportunity to reflect on their relationship and says to God: “I am twenty-three years old. I want to make the best of things... What is it I love, Lord? Why have I chosen? Who is Brenda? ...Should I have stopped to think”(Roth 79). He continues: “I am acquisitive. Where do I turn now in my acquisitiveness? Where do we meet? Which Prize is You?”(Roth 79). Though Neil suddenly feels ashamed of his ingenious meditation (Roth 79), he has formulated essential questions. He realizes that he will have to choose an existential direction. Neil does not aspire to the same “prizes” as the Patimikins. He is not looking to measure his success in: “Gold dinnerware, sporting-goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, bumpless noses, Patimkin Sink, Bonwit Teller-”(Roth 79). This rather unorthodox appeal to God is typical of Neil; he is not impressed by surface expressions of identity. He is a young Jew who remains true to his quest for an authentic self even from the heart of a Catholic cathedral.

Neil is aware of class differences and their link to the immigrant journey to prosperity (Roth 72). When Brenda and Neil first meet, she asks him to hold her glasses while she dives into the pool. Her physical myopia reflects an insouciance to class differences that frustrates Neil. When criticizing her mother, Brenda inadvertently makes a condescending remark about Newark: “Money is a waste for her. She does not know how to enjoy it. She still thinks we live in Newark” (Roth 27). She is insensitive to how this stings Neil who still lives in Newark. Neil is attempting to determine what he finds important in life. Both Brenda’s lack of perspective on her privileged social position and her lack of insight into her own identity take

their toll on his feelings for her. Eventually he cannot ignore “that hideous emotion I always felt for her, and is the underside of love”(Roth 27). Neil equates a life with Brenda and “the climb up the Orange Mountains” (Roth 72) with the loss of authentic identity. He is an outsider in this proudly consumerist world and feels a future with Brenda would compromise his integrity. Just after breaking up with Brenda, Neil finds himself looking at his own reflection in the window of Harvard’s Lamont Library, “and then my gaze pushed through it, over the cool floor, to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved” (Roth 104). This moment seems to suggest to Neil that of all the worlds he knows, the library offers him the most genuine platform for personal development. Neil’s train gets back to Newark “just as the sun was rising on the first day of the Jewish New Year. I was back in plenty of time for work” (Roth 104). Neil’s work at the library will allow him to pursue his quest for knowledge and identity whilst remaining true to his interpretation of his Jewish heritage.

### **From the Parish to the Hill (and Back Again)**

Unlike Neil Klugman, Mary O'Connor is not pivotal to the events she narrates in *The Parish and the Hill*. Her intimate observations of three generations of her Irish-American family are reminiscent of the family chronicles recounted in her first-generation grandparents' kitchen in Irish Parish. Mary's narration resembles that of Irish Parish's favoured story-tellers who had "the longest memory" and "could tell visions that were none of [their] own, but belonged to those dead ones whose names were forgotten" (Curran 5). As Mary tells her family's story, it becomes her own (Curran 5). Though the family anecdotes rarely revolve around Mary; she is emotionally moved by the events she witnesses. Mary provides sensitive descriptions of each of the three generations' social and historical contexts.

Mary's grandparents emigrated from post-famine Ireland and like so many other Irish families soon discovered that for them, "the myth of social mobility which fuelled the immigration of Irish people to America throughout the nineteenth century proved to be ill-founded" (Conboy 61). When Johanna Sheehan emigrates ahead of her future husband, John O'Sullivan, she tells him he will find her in a place "where there are Kerry men" (Curran 15). John follows her to Holyoke, a community that clearly embodies the difference between shanty and lace-curtain Irish and the problems of transition from one to the other (Fanning 299). Shanty is a term that has often been used to describe, "crowded shanties and tenant-houses where newly arrived shiploads [of immigrants] quartered upon already domiciled 'cousins'" (Wakin qtd in Halley 231). According to Francis Walsh, the term lace-curtain became popular in the 1890s "to identify the newly emerging Irish middle class" (139). In *The Parish and the Hill*, lace-curtain is used to differentiate the more settled middle-class Irish of Money Hole Hill from both their wealthy Yankee neighbours and from their more ramshackle compatriots in Irish Parish. When Mary is very young, her family move to Money Hole Hill, away from the tight-knit community where her grandfather John O'Sullivan is

considered one of the “archangels of Irish Parish” (Curran 18). “Even the priest would come to him if there was a Parish problem he could not cope with” (Curran 16). The family move to a community where: “The curtain emphasises boundaries, separations, small units set off from each other in a larger conformity” (Halley 233). Mary observes these two communities and tries to understand their very different values and identities. Like Neil, Mary sees a correlation between the climb up to the “Hill” and the loss of cultural identity.

When Mary is born, her grandmother has long died of excessive “childbearing” (Curran 16) and her grandfather has moved in with her parents. Mary’s mother, Mame, is John O’Sullivan’s “favorite child” (Curran 16). Mame is the most Irish of John’s children, unlike many of her fifteen surviving brothers and sisters she seems very comfortable in the her father’s Irish world. Mary is exposed to the O’Sullivan family’s Parish identity and her father’s dour lace-curtain aspirations. Mary is aware of the gulf between these two worlds: “I remember standing in the doorway with my father pulling me one way and my mother the other. Full of pain and panic, I wondered why neither would cross the threshold. With the clear logic of a child, I realized that I could not go both ways” (Curran 95). Mary’s father wins the geographical battle as he moves his family to the fringes of Money Hole Hill. However, Mary seeks refuge from the insecurity and isolation of the Hill in the arms of her beloved grandfather (Curran 95-96).

John O’Sullivan and Mame’s Catholic faith is woven into the fabric of their lives. Mame’s Catholicism is “made up mainly of candles and holy water” (Curran 78). These are the ritual expressions of her internal dialogue with God. Unlike other members of the congregation who fetch small bottles of holy water on Holy Saturday, Mary is sent off with a “great water jug” (Curran 79). Though Mary is initially embarrassed by this annual errand, her mother’s enthusiasm proves infectious and Mary eventually uses a wagon to “carry [...] enough for the whole neighborhood” (Curran 79). Mame and her father are blessed with a

great capacity for love; it is the vehicle of their faith and they share both generously and without discrimination. Mary describes her mother's kindness to others as one "of a sort I have never met with since" (Curran 72). Mame is the oldest of seventeen children and she continues to look after her seven brothers long after she has married and had four children of her own. As Mary says, "in the early days [of the family's move to Money Hole Hill] our house overflowed with the O'Sullivans" (Curran 58). Every Saturday night Mame rounded up her brothers and herded them home in one or another state of drunkenness (Curran 58). "Beds would be made up, scoldings administered, my father would sulk – but every Saturday she went out and led them home, respectability or no respectability" (Curran 58).

Mame is a strong woman who will not tolerate "persecutors" (Curran 72). She is active in the local Democratic Party until the day that a hate-mongering Boston Irish politician comes to Holyoke calling to "get rid of Jews, Protestants, Polacks – make America really America – ... - make it Irish!" (Curran 77). Mame does not protest quietly, after hearing the fascist Father Coughlin, she writes to her Bishop to denounce this "politician hiding behind the skirts of the Church" (Curran 78).

Mame chooses her friends amongst like-minded people. Her Jewish friend Mr. Adelson is a man with whom she sees "eye to eye on almost everything" (Curran 78). She and Mary "attend the Synagogue as his guests" (Curran 78). After his death, Mame receives a parcel from Mr Adelson's wife; he has left her "a set of beautiful silver candlesticks ... used on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath ... with the one request that she continue to use them in the same way, and that she pray for him" (Curran 78). Mame lights the candles every Friday night "for the repose of Mr Adelson's soul" (Curran 78).

The young Mary associates her mother and grandfather with unconditional respect for others. They are comfortable with their own identities and do not need to differentiate themselves from others. They never seek to compare the merits of different cultural heritages.

It is her grandfather who quietly corrects Mary when he sees that she is not sharing her chocolates with Polish children in the local park. He notices his granddaughter taking pleasure in having more than the other children and explains that: “It’s the sense of ownership that divides people. It’s happening in the Parish the same way as on the Hill” (Curran 25). Mary’s grandfather helps her develop a sense of a common immigrant identity that goes beyond that of an Irish immigrant. John O’Sullivan is as intolerant of Irish-American bigotry as his daughter Mame. When listening to Irishmen complaining about the new wave of Polish and French Canadian immigrants, John responds:

...You’re no better than any of these, though you’ve been here longer. You’re an earner of bread by the work of your hands same as these, and you may hold your head no higher for that than they do. This country has plenty of room for all, but not enough if there’s to be bitterness between those who have nothing but their hands to sustain them. There’s enough bitterness between the Hill and the Parish as it is, with the Yankees looking down on the lace-curtains and the lace-curtains looking down on the shanties, and here now we have the shanties thinking themselves better than someone else so that they can have someone to look down on. (Curran 27)

John O’Sullivan’s interpretation of social mobility and the immigrant experience is more overtly political than Neil Klugman’s, but both men are aware that it is a continuing process and both seem convinced that it can negatively impact the immigrant’s values and sense of identity. For John O’Sullivan, social aspiration is “a disease ... and if you catch it you’re done for, that I know, for I see it on the Hill. You’ll end up hating the person who eats and sleeps next to you” (Curran 28).

Mame does not fit Hansen’s description of a second-generation immigrant that “tries to forget” their parents’ cultural heritage (Hansen qtd in Silverman 422). However, not all her brothers and sisters seem as comfortable with their Irish Parish heritage. Mame’s seven



brothers are First World War veterans and none have “escaped the marks of it” (Curran 118). The battlefields of the Somme are more than enough to explain a fragile sense of self, but one brother in particular suffers from a very Irish affliction. Mame’s brother Smiley “was Irish from sole to head, but not as my grandfather had been, secure in being that” (Curran 127). Mary describes her uncle as a “patriot with no country, for I knew that he had never set foot in Ireland” (Curran 131). This decorated American war hero’s Irish heritage is an obstacle to his building an independent life for himself. Smiley’s identity hinges on a sense of bitterness and hatred of the persecutors of a [home] country he has never known (Curran 131). Smiley is an Irish-American, thousands of miles away from Ireland’s 1919 Revolution or the 1922-1923 Civil War. As his father suggests, “Smiley should have been a Sinn Feiner in Ireland. There he could have found an outlet for his nationalism” (Curran 132). Instead, Smiley dies a painful alcoholic’s death; cracking his skull in a gutter as he stumbles out of a bar.

Smiley’s expression of Hansen’s Law manifests itself in his rejection of his father’s “desire for peace and justice” (Curran 127). His sister Josie distances herself from her parents’ heritage by becoming lace-curtain Irish. She marries a “good solid businessman” (Curran 143) at the age of thirty-two and has only one child, a doll-like girl called Ann (Curran 143). Mary describes her aunt as someone who “had worked very hard at respectability and achieved it in all its stuffiness” (Curran 143). Josie feels that her new “style” (Curran 144) entitles her to criticize her sister’s family. Mame “was so much concerned with more important things, she never noticed what people wore” (Curran 71). However, Aunt Josie “characterized a hanging lip, a loose hair, a knot in the shoelace, as ‘shanty’” (Curran 144). Josie’s daughter, Ann, will not let her cousin Mary touch any of her toys; she tells Mary: “Your hands are too dirty” (Curran 145). Halley describes Josie as “the survivor in the family... She chooses property, gentility and a carefully planned rise to home ownership; she acquires standing in the community by joining the right clubs and avoiding

her old Irish acquaintances” (241). Aunt Josie appears to embrace Patrick Donahue’s philosophy: “The man who acquires property by honorable means is really clothed with power, both legally and morally” (qtd in Walsh 139). Josie’s desire for property and status in Money Hole Hill are reminiscent of the Patimkin family’s comfortable life in Short Hills.

When Josie insists that the aging John O’Sullivan be put into a residential care home, Mame is horrified by her suggestion, retorting: “Have you left off remembering the past, Josie, that you can so easily dismiss the joy of it?” (Curran 44). Forgetting the joys of the past is the price that Josie must pay for her membership of the lace-curtain community. The O’Sullivan family is too economically vulnerable, eccentric and unpredictable not to be a liability in the conformist world of the Hill. Mary cannot admire the values that have accompanied her aunt’s new prosperity:

Both she and her husband picked up their [the Yankees’] worst traits, their stinginess, their hard-headed business methods, the ways of the Yankees that had made them owners of the mills in Irish Parish and family-proud with nothing but a shopkeeper’s ancestry behind it...Insecure before the Yankees, they secured themselves against the shanty Irish with a position that only money can buy (Curran 150-151).

Like Neil Klugman, Mary feels that upward mobility is accompanied by shallow materialism and a loss of authentic identity.

Mary’s brothers reach adulthood in the 1930s when the family is suffering the effects of their father’s long-term unemployment. Tabby is a choleric man who drinks too much and makes a living doing dirty work for shady Boston politicians. He believes, “you’ve got to use your fists if you want to get anywhere in this world” (Curran 216). Tabby’s values are so far removed from his mother’s that she eventually cuts all ties with him. She cannot accept him neglecting his young family and beating his wife. Mary’s oldest brother Eddie is a gentle soul and talented violinist. However, Eddie is the family’s only breadwinner during the Depression

and he crumbles under the weight of his miserable job as an unemployment clerk. Eddie eventually hardens in the face of “the long procession of woe” (Curran 204) and loses all sympathy for the suffering he witnesses. His heart is likened to “that of a black and bloody Englishman” (Curran 207). Eddie is very influenced by the manipulative Billy Kilpatrick’s hate-filled political rhetoric. Eddie eventually leaves the family home in an alcohol-fuelled rage. Poverty forces the O’Connor parents and their two remaining children back to Irish Parish. As Mary says, it was “no triumph ... Tabby and Eddie were gone. My grandfather was gone. The O’Sullivan boys were gone. There was no return to what had been. We had lived on the Hill” (Curran 214).

The story ends on a slightly positive note, Mary witnesses Eddie fighting Billy and Tabby whilst crying out “I’m not like you! I’m not like you! I’m not like either of you!” (Curran 218). That night she hears Eddie sneak into to the family home and open his violin case. Later, Mary has a dream that is reminiscent of the wakes she so often attended with her mother and grandfather. Mary dreams that she is standing outside in the cold, looking into the kitchen of her childhood home. Her whole family, the dead and the living, have gathered in the warm room. In her dream, a phonograph is blaring loudly and Tabby is singing a brash accompaniment to it (Curran 220). Mary is the only one to notice her mother and grandfather slip away “down the long dark hallway” (Curran 220). It is as if those who upheld the values of kindness and solidarity within the Irish community have left, leaving behind only the self-serving and “loud” (Curran 22). In her dream, Mary looks on helplessly until she notices Eddie pick up his violin. He is surrounded by shouts to play something Irish and “make it loud” (Curran 220) but Eddie’s tune is “thin and sweet... It was a dirge, a lamentation for the dear dead men” (Curran 220). In her grief, Mary realizes that she is not the only one to mourn the loss of her mother and grandfather’s intrinsic goodness. Mary has realized that she must forge her own identity, taking the best of Mame and John O’Sullivan and adapting it to her

modern world. Eddie's return to the family home and his break from Billy and Tabby suggest that Mary will not be doing this alone.

### **Conclusion**

*The Parish and the Hill* is set in a far harsher and more hostile world than *Goodbye Columbus* and yet both narrators are equally sceptical of middle-class aspirations and their impact on identity. Neil falls in love with Brenda during a sunny 1950s summer and Mary witnesses the effects of the First World War, and later the Depression, on her working class family, but both characters feel that consumerist values are a great threat to immigrant Americans' sense of identity. Neil and Mary both equate upward mobility with a betrayal of cultural heritage. Neil is disappointed by the Patimkin family's acquisitive life-style and feels that their children have lost an authentic sense of self as they have become more overtly middle-class American. For Mary, her comfortably Parish mother and grandfather provide stability and a sense of integrity. She sees her aunt and brothers struggle to create new identities for themselves. Mary equates the pursuit of prosperity with a loss of intrinsic human values. Aunt Josie must curb her spontaneous self in an attempt to fit the mould of the Yankee community.

Both Mary and Neil are nostalgic in their descriptions of the early immigrant communities. They do not dwell on the crowded conditions of these early settlements, but on the warmth and welcoming spirit. Mary describes her grandparents' kitchen as a place where "the teakettle stood always simmering" (Curran 4). Neil imagines his grandmother drinking "hot tea from an old *jahrzeit* glass" (Roth 72). Both associate the early phase of the immigrant experience with tight-knit communities and a strong sense of identity. Mary knows her grandmother chose to settle in a community "where there are Kerry men" (Curran 15). Johanna Sheehan expected to be welcomed by her countrymen. To a certain extent, Neil's life in Newark is reminiscent of the hospitality of early settlers. His aunt and uncle have

welcomed him into their home because his parents have moved to Arizona. For both Mary and Neil, the move up the consumerist “hill” is a move away from an authentic identity.

Both *The Parish and the Hill* and *Goodbye Columbus* end with their protagonists standing outside windows reflecting on their own identities. Neil is leaving Brenda and returning to his life in Newark, he wants to determine his own values and identity alone. He feels that life with the Patimkins would stifle his integrity. Mary too appears to be stepping away from her family. As she looks through the window, she knows what she will miss and which values she would like to integrate in her own identity. Mary’s story has spanned several years and she is leaving her own family, hers is not such an abrupt departure.

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