
CHAPTER 4

THE DISASTROUS COLLISIONS: *WHEN SHE WAS GOOD*

The second full-length novel of Philip Roth is distinct from most of his books in two ways: this is a book without any Jewish character in it, and its protagonist is a woman. The novel is in the form of naturalistic tradition of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris and Sinclair Lewis, and Roth painstakingly maintains a controlled and detached tone throughout the narrative. Surprisingly, of all his novels *When She Was Good* received the least attention when it was published in 1967. But later, many critics considered it a kind of contemporary document depicting the American social reality, which in Roth's opinion is difficult to express because of its absurdity and grotesqueness.¹ Roth asserts time and again in his essays and interviews that the artist's purpose is to arouse the moral awareness of the reader through his depiction of the contemporary social reality. In *When She Was Good*, he presents the clash between the ethical values of the individual and those of his community.

The novel narrates the tale of an American Midwestern girl driven mad by single-minded adherence to her self-righteous notions of right and wrong. In his previous novel, *Letting Go*, Roth delineates the protagonist's dilemma of involvement in social interaction and the preservation of his personal freedom and identity. In *When She Was Good*, he explores the consequences of the lonely and bitter struggle of an individual who, convinced of her own moral superiority, fails to understand the true nature

of existential reality. Initially, the novel was criticised by many critics as banal, dull, 'laboured' and 'lifeless'.² Hermione Lee calls it the "most uncharacteristic and uninspired of his books" in which the writer has tried, though unsuccessfully, to portray the Midwestern Gentile milieu.³ But now that the critical opinion of Roth's fiction is well-established, it is considered to be one of the greatest novels by Philip Roth.

Though Roth's main concern in all his fiction is the ethical implications of individual's experience in family and society, in no other novel does he explore the nature of moral values so intensively and comprehensively as in *When She Was Good*. At one level, Lucy appears to be the epitome of goodness whereas on the other, she seems to assume the role of a self-righteous, horrid monster. Caught in the value system of a Midwestern small town, she overlaps her own ethical convictions and beliefs, howsoever justified, and the pragmatic demands of the society. As in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Letting Go*, the protagonist in *When She Was Good* faces the conflict between her idealistic values and the compulsions of existential reality; but here she stretches her notions of moral rectitude too far. She not only tends to follow the strict self-improvised moral principles but also insists on others to comply with her. As a consequence of her failure to understand and imbibe the existential reality, she is isolated and alienated from her society. The achievement of spiritual harmony and peace seems to be a remote possibility in her case, since in her egotistic fury she refuses to participate in the essential human process and negates the humanitarian virtues of forgiveness and kindness.

In *When She Was Good* as in all of his fiction, Roth presents his ethical concerns through the interpersonal relationships in family and society. Except his autobiographical book, *Patrimony*, nowhere is Roth more concerned with the theme of parents-children relationship as in this novel. As Roth himself admits in *Reading Myself and Others*, *When She Was Good* and *Portnoy's Complaint* deal with the same theme of "warfare between parents and children."⁴ He points out the striking similarities in *When She Was Good* and *Portnoy's Complaint*: "Wholly antithetic in cultural and moral orientation, she is, in her imprisoning passion and in the role she assumes of the enraged offspring, very much his soul mate."⁵ The difference in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *When She Was Good* is superficial inasmuch as Portnoy is rallying against his Jewish milieu while Lucy's rage is against the value system of a small Midwestern Protestant society. Nevertheless, the nature of conflict is different in both the books; in *Portnoy's Complaint* the conflict is mostly internal and psychological whereas in *When She Was Good* it is predominantly external, between Lucy and the whole system notwithstanding her miserable isolation in the later part of the novel. Under the suffocating burden of parental authority, Portnoy has recourse to sexual gratification whereas Lucy, convinced of her own goodness, launches a fierce attack on all those around her. But ultimately, both of them find themselves in the same predicament. Totally exhausted by his passions and conflicts, Portnoy collapses in the couch of his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel, and Lucy destroys herself in a schizophrenic frenzy.

While examining female characters in Roth's fiction, Mary Allen comes down heavily on Lucy, branding her as a kind of despicable monster:

But the fact that Lucy is offered an abortion and refuses it begins to establish that she is more a victimizer than an innocent victim. Her desire for revenge along with the bleakness of her surroundings, to which she does not bring the imagination that enlivens her husband, work together to make her one of the super bitches of the sixties."⁶

But this is stretching the point too far. Admittedly, Lucy has her shortcomings, but her reactions more often than not are a by-product of her family upbringing. Despite his best intentions Willard Carroll, her grandfather, is an ineffectual head of the family and Lucy's accusation in the last part of the novel that he is an "impotent and helpless man," though the outcry of an anguished soul, has some grain of truth in it.⁷ For her father she has Whitey, a "no-good low-life weakling" who is a parasite on Willard and instead of supporting his family squanders his time and money drinking in Earl's Dugout (40). Her mother Myra tolerates his wayward behaviour submissively and never grumbles or revolts against him. Lucy naively cherishes the idea of a perfect family in which men are expected to discharge their duties and responsibilities dauntlessly. Having grown up in the Forties, she naively nurses the illusion of an ideal family where the men and women play their specified roles. Even Roth opines in *Reading Myself and Others* that her illusory notions are more or less typical in this respect and not peculiar or abnormal in American society in 1950s:

For it has always seemed to me that though we are, to be sure, not a nation of Lucy Nelsons, there is a strong American inclination to respond to life *like* Lucy Nelson – an inclination to reduce the complexities and mysteries of living to the most simple-minded and childish issues of right and wrong.⁸

As if her father and grandfather were not enough for her, she chooses Roy as her husband who, ironically, turns out to be exactly the kind of man Lucy abhors vehemently. Roy is a lazy and immature person who seems to be unable to bear the burden of his wife and child and runs away to his uncle Julian for emotional support on every occasion. Thus, Lucy's hopes of an ideal man in her life are shattered: "And yet it was what she had prayed for all her life – that a man stern, serious, strong and prudent would be the husband of her mother, and the father to herself" (228). Interestingly, there is only one male character in the novel who fulfills her criteria of a man, and he is Julian Sowerby whom Lucy hates for his shrewdness and hypocrisy. Disgruntled with the attitude of the members of her family, she starts suspecting the small-town ethical values of her immediate society and her suspicions like "Ozzie's questions about normative values and beliefs, threaten the social order of her elders."⁹ But whereas innocent Ozzie, though rebellious, is forgiven by his elders, Lucy as a grown-up woman is castigated, suppressed, and finally marginalized by the male dominated society.

Given her rebellious and rigid temperament, Lucy refuses to be a victim like her mother and unintentionally assumes the role of the victimizer:

"But she hated suffering as much as she hated those who made her suffer, and she always would" (84). She even tries conversion to Catholicism and "dedicated herself to a life of submission, humility, silence and suffering" till the incident when her father in a drunken state throws away the pan of water in which her mother was soaking her feet(81). Her adoption of noble Christian virtues, however, is shortlived and temporary: "After calling upon Saint Teresa of Lisieux and Our Lord – and getting no reply – she called the police" (81). As if this shock was not enough for the family, on another occasion she bolts her father out of the house. When Whitey sees his pregnant daughter shutting him out he feels so abashed and humiliated that he leaves Willard's house for good only to return after her death. Thus, her sense of ethical superiority over others is explicitly shown by the author in the very beginning of the novel.

Like Neil, Gabe, and Paul, Lucy cherishes some idealistic notions of ethical conduct which should govern the life of the people around her. Sanford Pinsker compares her to the heroine of *Madame Bovary* in her illusory concept of reality.¹⁰ The choices before her are limited: either to follow her ideals of moral and ethical principles defying all the familial and social exhortations, or to conform to the small-town value system thrust upon her by the society and deny herself the possibility of self-fulfilment and harmony. Without much hesitation she chooses the former and refuses staunchly to be the victim of the dehumanizing system little realizing the inevitable consequences of ignoring the pragmatic reality of the recognizable social world. Her naive question, "Oh, why can't people be good?" demonstrates the narrow moral groove in which she has chosen

to confine herself in her quest for selfhood and identity (288). In her assertion of simplistic notions of moral rectitude, she fails to see and imbibe the essential truth Father Damrosch preaches to her: "The world is imperfect Because we are weak, we are corrupt. Because we are sinners. Evil is the nature of mankind"(291).

Roth makes extensive use of irony in the portrayal of Lucy's complex personality. In the beginning of the novel, Lucy is projected as the good girl of the traditional nursery rhyme but as the novel progresses Roth makes more and more use of irony till the last part when she assumes the role of the bad girl turned horrid. Through the deft manoeuvring of his narrative perspectives, Roth unfolds her character in such a way that just before her death she appears an obsessive beast though even then she is not altogether bereft of the reader's, and, perhaps, his creator's sympathy. To bring her moral stance in sharp focus, Roth in the first section of the book juxtaposes her goodness, honesty and courage to the passivity of Willard, irresponsibility of Whitey, utter submissiveness of her mother, and immaturity and waywardness of her husband, Roy.

Though her hatred and aggressiveness is discernible in the novel as early as when she calls the police to arrest her drunken father, the full force of her diabolic self-righteousness and egotism is felt in the third section of the novel. After returning to Fort Kean from their visit to their parents, Lucy gives vent to her disgust for Roy, her husband:

"You worm! Don't you have any guts at all? Can't you stand on your own two feet, *ever*? You sponge! You leech! You

weak, hopeless, spineless, coward! You will never change – you don't even *want* to change! You don't even know what I *mean* by change!(264).

Obviously, her disgust and hatred are a measure of her neurosis and morbidity. Her hatred for Julian is boundless, as in her opinion he is the symbol of the cruel and indifferent social system which thwarts the desires of the individual for self-fulfilment and demands conformity. As if to repudiate the whole social system she exposes his moral turpitude most unashamedly in the presence of all the members of his family. Lastly, she utters her misanthropic outburst against all men:

Goodbye, protectors and defenders, heroes and saviors. You are no longer needed, you are no longer wanted – alas, you have been revealed for what you are. Farewell, farewell, philanderers and frauds, cowards and weaklings, cheaters and liars. Fathers and husbands, farewell! (305).

In her diabolic hatred she seems to forget that in her insistence on goodness she herself has deviated from the universal human virtues like righteousness, magnanimity and forgiveness. Unable to overcome the adverse outer forces or to reconcile with them, she recoils in her own interior dark recesses and, eventually, destroys herself.

Some critics are of the opinion that Lucy is an embodiment of the typical American destructive female character, a "ball-breaker of a bitch" (279) as Julian calls her.¹¹ But when evaluated against the social and moral background of the Fifties, it is evident that her conflict has much to do

with the normative value system of a small Midwestern town – Liberty Center. The name of the town is ironical as Roth himself states that it was not accidental that he "came up with Liberty Center as the name for the town in which Lucy Nelson rejects every emancipating option in favour of a choice that only further subjugates her to her grievance and her rage."¹² Lucy's firm belief in the familiar myth prevalent in the mid-century American society of the perfect family with clearly defined masculine and feminine roles distorts her vision of the social reality. Keeping in view the moral and social ambience of the Fifties when the watchwords for the young generation were duty, responsibility, and manhood, it is not surprising for a girl like Lucy to insist obsessively on these premium virtues.

Willard's only aim in life is to lead a civilized life, away from the savagery and illiteracy of his father in Iron City. The name is again symbolic as he has settled in Liberty Center in the hope of a life of enlightenment and emancipation, where Lucy finds herself entrapped in the ethical principles as hard as iron. His ethical choices are clear and unambiguous in the very opening sentence of the novel: "Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized – that was the dream of his life"(3). He takes upon himself the role of the guide and protector of the lives of those dependent on him. While performing his duty and responsibility towards them, he inadvertently tries to control their life. "Failing to understand basic human individuality", Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance point out, "as his sister had, he deprives those whom he attempts to protect of their essential identity."¹³ Albeit, in his innocence he claims that it is not feasible for him to mould and regulate

the lives of others: "I am not God in heaven! I did not make the world! I cannot predict the future!"(40). Lucy's refusal to accept the basic fact of human relationships leads to her negation of sanctity of human life and, finally, to her annihilation. Amidst all the confusion in the end it is only Willard who reaffirms faith in human dignity and civilization.

George J. Searles rightly remarks that *When She Was Good* is a "probing exploration of family tensions."¹⁴ Lucy's relationship with her parents is certainly the pivotal point of the novel. Having grown up in a broken family where her wayward father tortures her tender, timid, and subservient mother, she is mortified by isolation, marginalization and emotional insecurity. In her anger and resentment she gets her father arrested by the police and on another occasion she bolts him out of the house.

Actually, the idea of guilt which is the central theme in *Portnoy's Complaint* germinates in *When She Was Good*. Whitey is a victim of the Great Depression and has never been able to make it in America. Like Leo Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus* and Asher in *Letting Go*, he is a typical failure in the highly materialistic American society. Finally, unable to tolerate his condition he takes to drinking. His repeated resolutions to reform his life never prove successful as the sense of guilt again pushes him into the vicious circle of alcoholism. Willard concludes: "*There is nothing the man can do. He is afflicted with himself. Like Ginny*"(32). Ironically, in the house of his father-in-law whose sole commitment in life is to civilized behaviour, Whitey inflicts violence against his own daughter. What saves him from utter damnation is his sense of repentance and regret,

and a desire for reformation. His wish to reform his life, however, is thwarted by his dipsomania which finally lands him in the Florida State Prison on the charge of theft. But still, he nurses tender feelings towards his wife and daughter, as is evident in his last letter to Myra from the prison. Whitey does not even remotely resemble the typical father – figure in Roth's fiction who is generally a hard-working, self-sacrificing, and responsible person.

The other most important male character in Lucy's life is Roy Bassart, her husband, who has spent sixteen months in The Aleutian Islands in the army. At the tender age of eighteen when she is lonely and isolated, she is seduced by him in Passion Paradise in most banal and unromantic circumstances and, consequently, gets pregnant. She insists on marrying Roy despite her parents' advice to have an abortion and apparently her own dislike of him even at this early stage. This only proves her rigidity and obstinacy. It is ironical, and even tragic, that Lucy chooses for her husband the kind of male she dislikes most – immature, irresponsible and weak. Roy is a day-dreaming drifter who is unable to support her family financially and emotionally, as is proved by his frequent visits to his uncle Julian whenever he confronts the slightest domestic problem. On one occasion he even suggests a kind of "temporary separation" from Lucy (211). Surprisingly enough, even before her marriage Lucy is certain that Roy is not a suitable person as a husband: "*She didn't want to marry him! He was the last person in the world she would ever want to marry!*"(169). In making her choice of marrying a person of Roy's character, she irrevocably plunges herself in a miserable condition. Irritated by his naive

optimism and escapism, she wonders: "Who, after all, was Roy Bassart that he should feel no pain? Who was Roy Bassart that he should live a privileged existence? Who was Roy Bassart to be without responsibilities? This was not heaven. This was the world!" (271). Ironically, it is she who fails to grasp the pragmatic implications of her ethical choices.

In the last section of the novel when Lucy is engaged in an all out war with the social forces, Roy fails miserably to come to her rescue. Taking their child, Edward, with him he runs away to Uncle Julian and leaves her alone to fend for herself and her unborn child (she is pregnant for the second time). On this occasion, Roth's sympathy, though implicit, is with Lucy, as nowhere in his fiction does he approve of uncivilized and irresponsible behaviour of a character in howsoever trying circumstances he may find himself. On such occasions, he expresses his disapproval of the character's diversion from humanistic virtues through gentle humour, irony or satire. However, as he himself asserts in *Reading Myself and Others*, he refrains from proposing explicitly any normative value system: "Now I won't claim that I am the one proposing those virtues here, since Daddy will - as his family calls him - does not speak or stand for me in the novel any more than his grand daughter Lucy does."¹⁵ Notwithstanding his consistently sustained narrative distance from the protagonist, Roth undoubtedly presupposes the reader's sympathy with Lucy when she, in the very presence of her husband, is waging a lonely battle against Julian who stands for the normative values of society:

She kicked backward – the hand grasped and caught her ankle. Meanwhile Roy's face was moving up – to block her way! Her husband, who should be protecting her! defending her! shielding her! guarding her! instead stood between herself and her child, herself and her home, between herself and the life of a woman!(285).

Though confounded and miserable himself, Roy chooses to become a part of the ruthless and inhuman system and leaves her in the lurch. Driven into a corner, Lucy loses all hopes of help from outside and fights alone against the physical force of Julian and her husband. In her schizophrenic violence against her husband, she reminds us of the heroine of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, who pushes her husband down from the roof of the house. Significantly, the plot has come full circle, from Willard's commitment to civilization in the opening sentence of the novel to violence against and by a pregnant woman. Roy's choice is difficult to justify from any moral point of view.

The conflict in *When She Was Good*, like that in *Death of a Salesman* and *Invisible Man*, is between the lonely individual and the post-war American society which demands conformity to its hollow and false values. The protagonists of Arthur Miller and Ralph Ellison fight their lonely battle against the hostile social forces almost certain of their defeat. In the case of Lucy, these forces comprise largely the familial authority which is the microcosm of the recognizable social world. As has been mentioned earlier, the process of the confrontation of self and the destructive elements

of outer reality may lead to different kinds of consequences. The individual is either reduced to a formless "jelly-fish", utterly vulnerable and without identity, in the manner of the protagonists of Kafka; or after being victimized he tries to minimize the damage caused by the destructive experience, like the hero of Bellow's *Seize the Day*; or he is crushed psychologically, socially and even physically.¹⁶ Lucy falls into the last category. Her condition is aggravated by her rigidity and egotism which lead her to the dark void of schizophrenia and ultimate self-destruction. John N. McDaniel rightly observes: "Lucy has been victimized by the banal normalcy of the Protestant Midwest ethic, and she has simply nothing with which to combat the banality of her existence, other than a misguided and ineffectual outrage."¹⁷ But his contention that Lucy "acts out the drama of the absurd" is hard to accept.¹⁸ Lucy does not move in a fantastic and grotesque void as, for example, Benny Profane in Thomas Pynchon's *V* or David Kepesh in *The Breast* do. Lucy firmly believes in her value system, but her rigidity, egotism and self-righteousness distort her vision of social and ethical values.

Lucy chooses not to be a victim like her mother, Myra, who tolerates patiently the injustice and even physical violence at the hands of her husband and still protects him on all occasions. Moreover, she expects Lucy to follow her suit. But Lucy firmly determines that "she would not repeat her mother's life, nor would her offspring repeat her own"(200). Commenting on his conception of the character of his protagonist, Roth says: "As I remember it, what most intrigued me at the outset was the utter victimization of this girl, whose misfortune it was to have been born

into a world to which she believed herself morally superior."¹⁹ Having made her choice not to follow her mother and be a victim, she embarks upon a mad crusade against what she believes injustice and evil around her. Ultimately, convinced of her own moral superiority she is outraged at others because of their reluctance to conform to the ethical code of conduct devised by herself: "I am their superior in every single way! People can call me all the names they want – I don't care! I have nothing to confess, because I am right and they are wrong and I will not be destroyed!"(84). Under the influence of some illusory notions of social morality, she refuses to see beyond the narrow confines of her ethical vision. She not only refuses adamantly to conform to the normative values of society but also inadvertently insists others to conform to her value system little realizing its narrow and limited range.

On the surface level, she resembles Gabe's mother who strives all her life to be "*Very Decent to People*" and is obsessed with the idea of goodness.²⁰ Seated on her high moral pedestal she reflects: "There were principles to be honored, values to respect, that went beyond blood relationships; but apparently they had no more knowledge of what it meant to be human than did her own family" (269-270). In the last part of the novel she finds herself in the typical predicament of modern man – lonely and isolated from her family and the community. She is alienated from her parents, grandparents, her husband and – if Roy's accusation is to be believed – from her own child, Edward, who is unwilling to live with her. Just like the typical postmodern "rebel-victim"²¹ hero, she is imprisoned

in her own egotistic cell: "Why would he come to her aid, when even those closest to her had turned against her? No, there was only one person she would rely upon; it was now as it had always been – the one to save her was herself"(304). Realizing the irreconcilable nature of the constituent elements of her conflict, she attacks all those around her. In her hallucination she first curses her father, then her husband and lastly all men who are, in her opinion, the perpetrators of evil. At this moment she has confined herself in self-devised ethical boundaries away from all the benevolent influences of humanity. Even her last words display her self-righteous and simplistic notions of right and wrong: "For they are wrong, and you are right, and there is no choice: the good must triumph in the end!"(307).

In *When She Was Good* Roth analyses the problem of ethical choices in all its dimensions. Significantly, he does not attempt to categorize his characters in watertight compartments of good and evil and prefers to suggest all the possible alternatives. Lucy is undoubtedly projected as a tragic figure having serious shortcomings in her character which ultimately cause her damnation. Apparently, her simplistic notions of ethical conduct in the social milieu of limited moral freedom prevents her from grasping and accepting the complexity of social reality and human nature. Particularly in her interpersonal demeanour she develops a kind of rigidity and obstinacy which proves to be her nemesis. Not only does she staunchly and obstinately adhere to her idea of truth, duty and goodness but also expects others to tread her path of virtue:

Because they simply will not reform! They simply will not change! All they will do is get worse and worse! Why were they against a mother and a child? Why were they against a family, and a home, and love? Why were they against a beautiful life, and for an ugly one? Why did they fight her and mistreat her and deny her, when all she wanted was what was right!(302).

Firmly convinced of her own moral superiority to those who are better equipped than she is with worldly wisdom and experience, she gradually but definitely retreats into her own inner self from where she is unable to evaluate social reality clearly and objectively. Commenting on the predicament of Portnoy and Lucy, Roth says: "Those two characters, at the same time that they yearn for a more sociable and settled existence, are hell-bent on maintaining their isolation with all the rage and wildness in their arsenals."²² When her father comes to know about her premarital pregnancy he does not so much as rebuke her (it was in 1950s, the years when freedom in sexual matters was considered as unacceptable and unjustifiable in society). He mildly suggests an abortion as the best solution. But in her rigidity she does not agree to his proposal notwithstanding her dislike for Roy and decides to marry him. Even when in Fort Kean she discovers the fact of her pregnancy, she was sure that Roy was not for her. After their marriage she poignantly feels that Roy does not fit in her idea of a man and tries to improve him by stern discipline and admonitions. Ironically, the outer authority she vehemently despises in her own case is

thrust upon Roy by her to make him a responsible man, father and husband. She appears to have forgotten the universal virtues of accepting and forgiving the common human weaknesses and failings.

As far as Roy is concerned, until now he loves her genuinely and has high opinion of her character: "She had courage. She had strength. She knew right from wrong. There was no one in the world like her. He felt privileged and honored to be her husband ..." (213). How her egotism and pride leads her to misery is best illustrated by her utterance:

He had settled at last into the daily business, whether he liked it or not, of being a father and a husband and a man ... and it was she alone who had made all this come about. This battle, too, she had fought and this battle, too, she had won, and yet it seemed that she had never in her life been miserable in the way that she was miserable now. (228)

In her moral rage she fails to realize that the actual cause of her misery is her negation of basic human virtues. In the last chapter, ironically entitled "Innocent", she castigates all the people closely related to her – Julian, Irene, Ellie and Roy. Her diabolic obsession with truth and justice is clearly reflected in her ferocious outburst against all of them. She venomously discloses the truth of Julian's adultery in front of his wife and young daughter. Roth seems to suggest here that the truth which poisons the life of so many people is not of much worth by any standard of morality. Naturally enough, she dies in freezing snow, which is symbolic of her cold soul devoid of any human warmth, kindness and sympathy.

As already indicated, Roth's characters invariably grow and set out on their quest for identity and ethical being in the matrix of family and society instead of escaping the reality in the void of absurdism like the characters of many of the contemporary American novelists. In this regard, he says: "Not that I think that madness or alienation are glamorous or enviable conditions; being insane and feeling estranged don't accord with my conception of the good life."²³ In *When She Was Good* Roth intensively probes the intricate ramifications of human relationships and their ethical implications. The interactions of the minor characters with the central figure and with each other also form a part of the process of the evolution of his ethical vision. His concern with ethical values in this novel is evident in his observation that virtues of generosity, kindness and responsibility are "proposed as a way of life in the opening pages of the novel and continue to haunt the book thereafter (or so I intended)."²⁴

The very opening sentence of the novel strikes the keynote of Roth's moral and ethical preoccupations when Willard pronounces his choice of leading a civilized and decent life. This reminds us of Gabe's mother in *Letting Go*, who discloses in her last letter to her son her intentions to do good to others. Willard has left the savage and ignorant world of his father in Iron City and settles down in Liberty Center in his pursuit of a noble and virtuous life. He is always haunted by his little mentally-retarded sister who, ignored by his illiterate father, "lived and died beyond the reaches of human society"(12). But despite his best intentions, Willard is confronted by chaos and disorder in his family. He tolerates patiently the wayward and irresponsible behaviour of his drunkard, "scheming, lying,

thieving" son-in-law for sixteen long years, always pleading with Berta that the man would reform himself (40). In a grotesque incident Whitey pawns Willard's medals with Rankin's Pawnshop to get drunk in Earl's Dugout, but Willard still forgives him. Even after Lucy's death he is seen to be waiting for his middle-aged son-in-law to take him to his house so that he can start a new life. Alone in the graveyard he wonders, "Why be getting pneumonia and worrying myself sick – when all I did was good!"(39).

In fact, Willard hovers over the whole narrative of the novel in the manner of a vast mirror in which the moral purpose and intentions of all the other characters are reflected and magnified. Though Roth maintains a detached and objective tone throughout the novel, occasionally Willard appears to share the moral convictions of the writer. He never deviates from his virtuous path. However, in his innocence Willard fails to realize the fact that in doing good to others he is unconsciously striving to control their lives. The point Roth is trying to make in *When She Was Good*, according to Searles, is that "too much family, too much 'love', is as destructive as too little."²⁵ While pursuing his ideals of freedom and responsibility he inadvertently thrusts the tyranny of his love and authority upon all whom he tries to protect. In this connection, Roth writes, "The issue of authority over one's life is very much at the center of this novel, as it has been in my other fiction."²⁶ In this sense, Willard is the precursor of Sophie Portnoy who, through the ostensible promise of protection, tries to control indirectly her son's life. Portnoy lacks the will to protest; instead, he invents other channels to assert his freedom. Lucy, on the other hand,

has the will and strength to oppose the dominance of Willard and refuses to accept the familiar myth of men as protectors and saviours. But when her rebellion crosses the socially defined moral boundaries, it brings about her doom.

The three female characters in the novel – Myra, Berta and Eleanor – may be viewed as three different points of reference for the purpose of focussing on the predicament of Lucy. Myra, in sharp contrast to Lucy, suffers all the injustice, cruelty and violence perpetrated by her husband; still, she tolerates her misfortune stoically. Her faith in his love is firm and unshakable. On the other hand, Berta is a down-to-earth, prudent and pragmatic woman who believes in social conformity. She always disapproves of the kind attitude of Willard and Myra towards Whitey and demands stern action against him to maintain her domestic decorum. Ellie reminds us of Brenda, a shallow and romantic girl who lives complacently in the material comforts provided by her father's millions. In Lucy's opinion she is "a vain and idiotic child" always thinking only of her hair, clothes and shoes (283). In the last crucial scene, instead of showing any sympathy for her old friend, Lucy, she calls her "crazy" and "insane" (282). Roth deliberately presents all these characters in the last section when Lucy attempts madly to retrieve her son from Julian's house. Through Lucy's self-righteous assertion of her goodness and the complacency of others, Roth is able to explore the ethical issues from different perspectives sustaining, at the same time, his solemn, detached and objective tone throughout the narrative.

Among all the minor characters, Julian Sowerby is the one whose moral stance seems hard to justify on any ground. More than any other character in the novel, he seems to be a part of the cruel and dehumanizing system which victimizes the individual and pushes him to the lowest level of human dignity. Ellie herself confides to Lucy that her father pays money to women for sleeping with him. Lucy smells evil in Julian very early when, on one occasion, she realizes with discomfiture that Julian was staring at her legs with more than usual interest. Naturally, she is aghast at the revelation of his adultery and exclaims, "What a disgusting cheat of a person!" (136). As she rightly suspects, Roy reposes more faith in Julian than his father as far as his domestic and personal matters are concerned. On one occasion he himself confesses that the suggestion of "temporary separation" from Lucy was offered to him by Julian (211). It is but natural that he becomes the main villain in her eyes. She is infuriated to learn of the threat of divorce from Julian's lawyer from Winnisaw. In the last chapter his conduct crosses all limits of decency when he literally assaults her, a pregnant woman half his age. Though it would be unwise to judge Julian through the distorted vision of Lucy, the fact remains that Roth does not approve of such hypocritical and adulterous characters. In this respect, he does not spare even Epstein, the protagonist of the story of the same title, who is a helpless victim of circumstances. Julian's wife and daughter know his true character but he is accepted because of his monetary power which he can use unscrupulously. He is the fittest person to thrive in the materialistic American society. The fact that he fails to express any emotion of guilt or repentance when his moral depravity is exposed before

his wife and young daughter clearly indicates that he has gone beyond all hopes of redemption.

Though Julian is a sort of surrogate father of Roy inasmuch as he guides him in all his personal matters, yet he singularly lacks the humanistic qualities generally found in the typical father-figures in Roth's fiction. Lloyd Bassart, on the other hand, resembles the typical Rothian father-figures such as Jack Portnoy, Dr. Kepesh, Dr. Gabe and E. I. Lonoff in the sense that he is educated, scrupulous and civilized. Though he does not appear much in the novel, his moral stance is clear and unambiguous. When Roy confesses to him the truth of Lucy's pregnancy and asks him to expedite their marriage, he reflects, "Between a man doing the right thing and a man doing the wrong thing, there was really no choice ..." (189).

In most of his novels Roth employs first person participatory point of view. The advantage of this technique is that "it permits total access to the inner workings of the central character's mind", and best suits him to delineate the conflicts of his highly sophisticated, urbane and intellectual protagonists.²⁷ On the other hand, in most of his short stories and realistic novels such as *When She Was Good*, *Zuckermann Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, and *Sabbath's Theater*, he uses third person omniscient point of view. The reasons for this technique in *When She Was Good* are not far to seek. Here Roth intends to explore the moral and ethical implications of his protagonist's experience of social reality in a Midwestern Protestant town in America in the Fifties. To analyse the

predicament of Lucy from all perspectives, he relies heavily on irony. Consequently, his attitude varies from deep sympathy to utter disapproval of his victimized and obsessive heroine. In the first section of the novel which is a kind of epilogue to the whole story of Lucy Nelson, he uses third person omniscient point of view though it shifts gradually from the author to Willard, and the whole plot is unfolded in a sort of pre-view as Willard sees it. Roth continues the same third person point of view in the second and third section of the novel in the naturalistic mode maintaining a detached and objective tone to allow the reader to judge for himself the propriety of Lucy's response to her social milieu. The last chapter which is a kind of epilogue is entitled "Innocent". The word is highly suggestive as at this stage Lucy, totally alienated from all human communication, wages her lonely battle in a state of schizophrenia just before her tragic end.

The language and syntax used by Roth in *When She Was Good* aptly convey the solemnity and seriousness of his thematic concerns. Some critics have pointed out that there is something artificial in his narrative and that "the uncomfortable syntax, the embarrassing archaisms" and "the dull choice of words" do not suit Roth's characteristic linguistic skill.²⁸ But we should not overlook the fact that in *When She Was Good* Roth is painstakingly trying to capture the linguistic overtones of the Fifties to render his characters realistically. For this purpose, he skilfully manipulates his language to portray them in their different social and cultural context. Thus, the novel demonstrates his mastery of English language.

In *When She Was Good*, Roth analyses the moral predicament of the individual through delineating his encounter with the adverse social forces. Like her predecessors Neil and Gabe, Lucy cherishes some idealistic notions of social reality which are shattered at her very first encounter with the recognizable social world. In his encounter with the outer forces, Neil discovers the hollowness of the contemporary social scene and gains a valuable insight into the true nature of these forces and his own response to them. Gabe strives to achieve his ethical ideals through interpersonal relationships only to discover in the end that involvement with others negates his own personal freedom and identity. In the portrayal of the character of Lucy, though, Roth seems to hint at the perils of egotism and self-righteousness in the assertion of one's own ethical values. She chooses to oppose the inhuman system with all the resources at her disposal and to fight to a finish. Unable to overcome these destructive forces and refusing to bring about any kind of reconciliation with them, she turns her strength inward and destroys herself. The phase of suffering through which Lucy passes is an essential step in the ethical evolution of the Rothian protagonist, since her fate demonstrates the necessity of the individual's reconciliation with the ethical norms of the society for his self-fulfilment and spiritual harmony. Roth seems to suggest here that moral rectitude when pursued beyond a certain point itself proves a grave threat to individual as well as the social milieu which nourishes him. Lucy's ethical choices inevitably push her beyond her psychological and social boundaries and leads to her annihilation.

After these early serious and traditionally realistic novels, Roth chooses the medium of comedy to express his ethical concerns in his next novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*. It is in this novel that the protagonist Portnoy, Lucy's counterpart, is made to give vent to his moral and psychological anguish through the comic mode.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, 1975) 120.
- ² Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper, 1971) 312.
- ³ Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (London: Methuen, 1982) 63.
- ⁴ Roth, *Reading Myself* 26.
- ⁵ Roth, *Reading Myself* 26.
- ⁶ Mary Allen, "When She Was Good She Was Horrid", *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1976). Rpt. in *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1986) 141.
- ⁷ Roth, *When She Was Good* (New York: Bantam, 1970) 294. All subsequent citations will be to the text as given in this edition and the page numbers will be indicated in parentheses appearing immediately after the quotation.
- ⁸ Quoted in Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., *Philip Roth* (Boston: Twayne, 1978) 69.
- ⁹ Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried, *Understanding Philip Roth* (South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 1990) 72.
- ¹⁰ Sanford Pinsker, *The Comedy That 'Hoits': An Essay on the Fiction of Philip Roth* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1975) 43.
- ¹¹ Allen 141.
- ¹² Roth, *Reading Myself* 28.

- ¹³ Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance, *Philip Roth* (New York: Ungar, 1981) 57.
- ¹⁴ George J. Searles, *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 39.
- ¹⁵ Roth, *Reading Myself* 27.
- ¹⁶ Tanner 18.
- ¹⁷ John N. McDaniel, *The Fiction of Philip Roth* (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield, 1974) 128.
- ¹⁸ McDaniel 128.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Granville Hicks, "A Bad Little Good Girl", rev. of *When She Was Good*, by Philip Roth, *Saturday Review* 17 June 1967: 25.
- ²⁰ Roth, *Letting Go* (London: Corgi, 1972) 2.
- ²¹ Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 31.
- ²² Roth, *Reading Myself* 66.
- ²³ Roth, *Reading Myself* 72.
- ²⁴ Roth, *Reading Myself* 26.
- ²⁵ Searles 41.
- ²⁶ Roth, *Reading Myself* 28.
- ²⁷ Searles 109.
- ²⁸ Lee 63.