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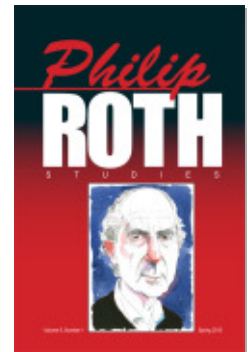
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The Woman of *Ressentiment* in *When She Was Good*

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# The Woman of *Ressentiment* in *When She Was Good*

*Nicole Peeler*

ABSTRACT. Read alongside Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*, this essay challenges the popular critique that *When She Was Good* (1967) serves as proof of Philip Roth's misogyny or his hatred of his ex-wife. Instead, the author argues that *When She Was Good* actually presages Roth's developing interest in the pre-ideological formation of values that we see in later works such as *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), and *American Pastoral* (1997).

*When She Was Good* (1967) was published five years before Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz used the pages of *Commentary* to attack Philip Roth as an arrogant iconoclast, determined to destroy both Jewish and American literary high culture with the force of his anger, his vulgarity, and his inability to understand or appreciate "middle-class America and what later came to be called 'family values'" (Podhoretz 32). While this "reading" was leveled at Roth as a response to *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Howe's and Podhoretz's critical "intervention" actually restates in quite simplistic terms elements of the relationship between morality and life that I would argue has been the subject of Roth's fiction from its inception and that is fully realized in *When She Was Good*. This fascinating novel, however, has often been dismissed as evidence that his greatest weakness as a writer is, in the words of Podhoretz, Roth's desire "to take stock of the world in which he lived and give it the business" (30). Indeed, many dismissive readings of the novel are based on Roth's autobiography—specifically, his divorce from his ex-wife, Margaret Williams—and conclude that Roth is anti-feminist and/or a misogynist.<sup>1</sup> In the case of *When She Was Good*, however, a reader who insists on seeing only "proof" of Roth's hatred of women or sees in Lucy only a shade of Margaret Williams will miss what is, in fact, a set of important and prescient ethical questions that Roth's work will continue to explore throughout his career.

Therefore, instead of offering another reading of a Roth novel based on his biography, I will argue that *When She Was Good* represents Roth's first sustained attempt to imagine the pre-ideological development of moral ideas.<sup>2</sup> To establish this reading, I will explore how Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* can be employed to unlock some of the novel's key themes.

Nietzsche is certainly not the only thinker through which *When She Was Good* can be read, and both Sam B. Girgus and James B. Carothers have explored the Freudian aspects of the novel. That said, this passage from Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* clearly anticipates the mindset of Lucy Nelson:

The revolt of the slaves in morals begins in the very principle of *ressentiment* becoming creative and giving birth to values—a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge. While every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says “no” from the very outset to what is “outside itself,” “different from itself,” and “not itself”: and this “no” is its creative deed. (19)

This quotation reveals two crucial aspects of Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* (here translated as “resentment”): that it is *reactive*, and that *ressentiment becomes creative and gives birth to values*. Thomas J. Brobjer argues that in Nietzsche's estimation, “Moral principles, even relativistic moral principles, assume or presuppose moral opposites, presuppose good and evil things, thoughts and deeds. Nietzsche, however, rejects the belief in moral opposites” (65). *Ressentiment* offers a glimpse not only into why moral principles dichotomize the world but also what the individual “gets” from this dualistic vision of morality. According to Lee Spinks, “*Ressentiment* describes the movement in which this reactive and resentful denial of higher life begins to *create* its own moral system and vision of the world” (97). As Spinks suggests, an individual's subjective reaction against a particular mode of life, stemming from that person's jealousy for or resentment towards that way of life, becomes the origin and basis of individual and collective ideologies. Paradoxically this primary act of negation becomes the “positive” principle at the very heart of a particular vision of life. Eventually this reactive stance establishes itself as the “universal” interpretation of the moral groundings of life.

Nietzsche, however, wants to understand why, and not just how, such reactive stances come into existence, and he theorizes that these “values” conceal a will to power. *Ressentiment* inscribes moral judgment at the very heart of life even as it underscores the ascendancy of purely reactive values, including

the conspiracy of the sufferers against the sound and the victorious; here is the sight of the victorious *hated*. And what lying so as not to acknowledge this hate as hate! What a show of big words and attitudes, what an art of “righteous” calumination! [. . .] What do they really want? At any rate to *represent* righteousness, love, wisdom, superiority, that is the ambition of these “lowest ones,” these sick ones! And how clever does such an ambition make them! You cannot, in fact,

but admire the counterfeiter dexterity with which the stamp of virtue, even the ring, the golden ring of virtue, is here imitated. They have taken a lease of virtue absolutely for themselves, have these weakest and wretched invalids, there is no doubt of it; "We alone are the good, the righteous," so do they speak, "we alone are the *homines bonae voluntatis*." (88)

By advertising their values as "truth"—as righteous, good and just—proponents of *ressentiment* not only bring their own imaginative world into focus but also elevate themselves and their values above their enemies. In other words, a system of values that enshrines a violent recoil from life claims instead to find its roots in "universal" values such as love, goodness and selflessness. Therefore, in Nietzsche's example, the slave seeks power through being "good," even while he claims that the quest for power is immoral. Crucially, this claim to superior morality also allows the "man or woman of *ressentiment*" to malign his or her enemies as corrupt, evil and dishonest. The implication here is that this "lease of virtue" can become a lease of violence. As William Mackintire Salter warns, "It is the people with 'absolute truth' who burn Jews and heretics and good books, and root out entire higher cultures, as in Peru and Mexico—fanatical love of power leading them on" (374). The ultimate irony of this situation, however, is that just as the man or woman of *ressentiment* may bring unhappiness unto others, he or she is doomed to be unhappy as well. Bernard Reginster cautions that because *ressentiment* is caused by a person's self-deception, "'The man of resentment' is thus left pathetically hanging between the impossibility to enjoy the satisfaction of desires he does not really have, and the impossibility to enjoy the satisfaction of desires he has, but cannot embrace" (303). If Nietzsche's slave does succeed in convincing people that all are equal, he cannot actually rejoice in his triumph. For what he really wants is to exert *power* over his followers. Reginster continues: "In the last analysis, *ressentiment* revaluation is predicated upon the unacknowledged hope that turning away from the frustrated desires, and pursuing the very opposite values, somehow will at last bring about the satisfaction of those desires" (292-93). As Salter cautions, however, *ressentiment* revaluation may not bring about true happiness for the men and women of *ressentiment*, but it can lead to tremendous suffering for those who fall on the wrong side of their dichotomized world view.

By reading Lucy in the light of Nietzsche's ideas on *ressentiment*, the question of why Lucy would choose a destructive, reactive life over a more constructive, active life becomes easier to answer. In my reading, *When She Was Good* is about far more than Roth's revenge against of his ex-wife, the female sex, or feminism. Instead, it is a novel about goodness—about what being "good" really means and how individuals conceive of and perform "goodness." In the same vein as Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), it satirically plays with the genre of the "good life," searching for what underpins people's ideas about goodness and finding unexpected ulterior motives. In other words, *When She Was Good* is a text that deliberately draws upon

and reconfigures certain classical philosophical tropes about what sort of life should be lived to live well. Roth indicates his thematic intentions not only in his choice of title, but also in the novel's first sentence: "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 [Willard's] life" (*WSWG* 3). In other words, Roth warns, this novel is about why people live as they do, how they conceive of themselves and their desires, and how they imbue those desires with a moral connotation.

That such "values" are not entirely selfless is another theme immediately introduced in *When She Was Good*. The opening pages find Willard waiting in the cold on the arrival of Lucy's father—his ne'er-do-well son-in-law, Whitey—and thinking about all that Willard has survived. He wonders why he does not just give up, whether he should fake senility in order to rest and be free of worry. Willard resists this temptation, in the end, thinking, "But why? Why should I be senile? Why be off my head when that is not the case? He jumped to his feet. 'Why be getting pneumonia and worrying myself sick—when all I did was good!'" (38). Here Willard's conception of goodness is revealed to be the same as his conception of civility. For the reader also discovers, in these first pages, the harsh childhood lessons Willard learned at the hands of his brutally ignorant father. Indeed, Willard's express purpose in life has been to escape his childhood spent in the symbolically named Iron City—a purpose he feels he has met through his new life in Liberty Center, which was, "as far south as Willard had gotten when at the age of eighteen he had decided to journey out into the civilized world" (5). Just as Willard conceives of the "civilized" Liberty Center as being a place that offers him freedom from "that terrible tyranny of cruel men and cruel nature" that was Iron City, he also appears to conceive of his own "goodness" as something that should cushion him from the harsh realities of life (6). If "all [he] did was good," Willard feels he should not have fallen victim to Whitey's machinations and the worries they have caused him; after all, in Willard's philosophy, both goodness and civility should *protect* a person from a brutal world (38). In other words, Willard believes that sacrifice and conformity to the community means living "well," or being good, and yet his thoughts reveal that this is actually part of a bargain he believes he can strike with the cosmos. This belief that the good deeds of good people are rewarded with a good life is really a form of self-preservation rather than genuine altruism. But Lucy, Willard's granddaughter, represents a far more extreme moral vision of life, one that is purely reactive and that revels in its will to power.

While he begins his story with Willard, it is through the character of Lucy that Roth takes his exploration of "goodness" a step further. Lucy's adolescence and adulthood are dominated by her hatred for her father and her contempt for her family. Whitey, her father, is an out-of-work alcoholic, unable to support his wife and child. Her long-suffering mother, Myra, cannot renounce her love for her husband, despite his flaws. Meanwhile, Lucy

believes her grandfather's generosity towards his son-in-law allows Whitey to maintain his fecklessness and immaturity, and she sees in Willard's desire for "civility" only emotional weakness and an inability to confront reality "like a man." When Lucy is fifteen, her father comes home drunk and takes offense at the sight of his wife soaking her tired feet. Enraged, Whitey verbally assaults Myra, tears the window shades off the wall and upends her footbath onto the rug. Lucy, alone with her cowering mother and violent father, calls the police and Whitey goes to jail. Her grandfather, embarrassed by this public display of his family's secrets, asks Lucy why she called the police, rather than calling him. Their conversation emphasizes the growing disparity between their views of the world:

"I wanted him to *stop!*"

"But calling the jail, Lucy—"

"I called for somebody to make him stop!"

"But why didn't you call *me*? I want you to answer that question."

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because you can't."

"I *what*?"

"Well," she said, backing away, "you don't . . ."

[. . .]

"We are civilized people in this house and there are some things we do not do, and that is number one. We are not riffraff, and you remember that. We are able to settle our own arguments, and conduct our own affairs, and we don't require the police to do it for us. I happen to be the assistant post-master of this town, young lady, in case you've forgotten. I happen to be a member in good standing of this community—and so are you."

"And what about my father? Is he in good standing too, whatever that *means*?"  
(21-22)

For Willard, it is the appearance of respectability and civilized behavior that is important, but Lucy questions her grandfather's emphasis on appearance. She does not want her grandfather to appear civilized; she wants him to assert his authority over her father, to have the power to "make him stop." In other words, she wants her family to *be* good, not merely to maintain "good standing."

Calling the police becomes, for Lucy, the defining act of her childhood. In her own imagination, and in the imagination of many of the town, she has become the girl who had her own father arrested. As if to justify this act to herself and to her community, Lucy becomes increasingly obsessed with her own virtue. She sees herself as morally superior to the rest of Liberty Center,

a sense of superiority that is vague but indomitable. As she thinks of her friend, Ellie Sowerby, “she was Ellie’s superior in every way imaginable, except for looks, which she didn’t care that much about; and money, which meant nothing; and clothes; and boys” (73). Lucy’s conception of herself as morally superior is carefully crafted to exclude all of the external signals normally used by her society to judge a young woman’s success as a female. Therefore, with the superficial discounted, her sense of superiority must come from an otherwise indeterminate, internalized quality of virtue. This implication is supported by her early flirtation with Catholicism, especially with Saint Teresa of Lisieux, a figure of suffering and uncompromising virtue. But this Saint is also a silent sufferer, and to act in her image would require Lucy “to appear serene, and always courteous, and to let no word of complaint escape her, to exercise charity in secret, and to make self-denial the rule of life” (80). This way of being in the world is actually similar to that of Lucy’s forgiving and selfless mother, Myra, and forbearance also underlies the code of conduct that her grandfather espouses. Lucy’s fealty to a Saint Teresa style of patient suffering ends, however, on the night that her father overturns her mother’s foot bath onto the rug. At that point the forceful declaration of Lucy’s own superior virtue—and the inferiority of everyone else in her life—becomes her exclusive mantra.

Lucy’s monomania and her inability to empathize with others become even more pronounced in her relationship with Roy Bassert, the young cousin of her friend Ellie. Her interactions with Roy serve as an excellent example of how inaccurate and biased Lucy’s perspectives really are, despite her belief in her own superior judgment. As Julie Husband suggests, Lucy’s attraction to Roy is based partly on a set of subjective comparisons that “prove” her belief that he is the opposite of her father: “Roy has served in the military; her father had a medical waiver. Roy is looking for a girl with a ‘brain in her head,’ not one with ‘thin little wrists and ankles’ [like her mother]. Roy is addicted to Hydrox cookies instead of whiskey. Yet he is as self-deceiving as her father—and as Lucy” (36). Lucy and Roy become romantically involved, and, despite her ambivalence about him and her distrust of his intentions, they begin a sexual relationship. Predictably, she becomes pregnant, and she and Roy are married. Her marriage to Roy renders the fundamental flaws within Lucy’s worldview more pronounced. Within the intimacy of marriage, her inability to compromise, her steely determination to tell “the truth,” and her refusal to see her own flaws become increasingly destructive. Still enraged at her father and determined not to repeat what she believes to be her mother’s mistakes, she becomes focused on changing Roy into the resolute patriarch that she believes her own strength and goodness deserve.

Unfortunately, as with all of Lucy’s philosophies, she does not know what she wants from Roy; she only knows what she does *not* want. And so, her attempts to transform Roy take the form of constant reproach. She mocks his ambitions to start his own photography studio but continually criticizes

him for not bringing home enough money. When he tells their young son stories of his time in the army, she resents his harmless exaggerations, made for the benefit of the child's amusement, as outright lies. After a terrible argument and a brief separation, during which time Roy's Uncle Julian, Ellie's formidable father, supplies Roy with a lawyer and advises a legal separation, Lucy forbids him to have any contact with this side of his family. Even Roy's Hydrox cookies transform, for Lucy, into a symbol of Roy's immaturity and helplessness. Her constant assaults on her husband become so pronounced that their young son Edward is depicted as fleeing continuously from the dinner table, the scene of her most cruelly barbed insults. A typical response from Lucy to Roy's employment woes consists of her throwing down her napkin and yelling, "Must you whine! Must you complain! Must you be a baby in front of your own child!" (212). And yet, any attempts by Roy to be even the least bit defensive with his wife earn even more violent reactions from Lucy.

Such violence is exemplified when, in a crucial development that heralds the tragic climax of the novel, Lucy discovers that her father is in a Florida prison for stealing from an employer. She also discovers that her mother has been in contact with her father for the years he has been missing. Myra has even broken off an engagement with a successful local business man who promised to be the, "stern, serious, strong and prudent" father Lucy had always wanted (225). Lucy is so enraged by this news that she conflates her feelings for her father and mother with her feelings for Roy. When Roy comes to pick her up from her family home, her thoughts reveal her confusion: "Mom was what [Roy] called Lucy's mother. Mom! That weak, stupid blind . . . It was the police who had put him there. It was he himself who put him there!" (259). In Lucy's mind, the figures of her husband and father become confused, and she punishes Roy in Whitey's stead. On the drive home, she begins screaming. Roy tries to soothe her, but she continues screaming, to the evident distress of Edward. Upon their arrival home, Roy does his best both to comfort Lucy and to remind her that their young son is present. But Lucy has lost all control and lashes out at her husband with all the years of anger and resentment built up against her father:

"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'll never change—you don't even want to change! You don't even know what I mean by change! You stand there with your dumb mouth open! Because you have no backbone! None!" She grabbed the other cushion from behind her and heaved it toward his head. "Since the day we met!"

He batted down the cushion with his hands. "Look, now, look – Eddie is right be—"

[. . .]

But she pursued him. "You're nothing! Less than nothing! Worse than nothing!"



He grabbed her two fists. "Lucy. Get control. Stop, please."

"Get your hands off of me, Roy! Release me, Roy! Don't you dare try to use your strength against me! Don't you dare attempt violence!" (262)

The reader knows that it is not Roy, but her father, whom Lucy believes to be a "leech," a "sponge," and whom she curses for his inability to change. For Lucy, however, her relationships with men have been defined by her mistrust of and aversion to her father. And so, because neither Whitey nor Roy meets her irrational standards, she accuses them of being "nothing," "less than nothing," "worse than nothing." In other words, Lucy, like Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment*, has "taken a lease of virtue absolutely for [herself]" (Nietzsche 88), reacting to the world she inhabits, as does Nietzsche's slave morality, by screaming, "'no' from the very outset to what is 'outside itself,' 'different from itself,' and 'not itself.'" Lucy's "no" becomes her "creative deed" (Nietzsche 19).

Husband writes of how Lucy's irrational demands on Roy leave him with no options:

If Roy obeys her, he is weak. If he doesn't, he has fallen under the influence of others, especially his confrontational Uncle Julian, and is again weak. If he defends himself, he is attacking her and is therefore a brute. If he doesn't defend himself, he is guilty of being unmanly. For Lucy, being a man is being a brute, so Roy has no positive identity to embrace. (39)

Here, Husband emphasizes Lucy's fundamental flaw: her take on life is entirely reactive. In this example, it is Lucy's definition of "manhood" that comes under suspicion. In Lucy's skewed logic, she wants Roy to be the responsible father figure that Whitey failed to be, and yet any attempt at decision making on Roy's part, such as moving them in with his parents for a summer to save money, leads inevitably to fierce marital disputes in which Lucy depicts Roy as attempting to manipulate or oppress her. Lucy wants Roy to be the opposite of those men in her life who she feels have wronged her. She wants him to be the opposite of "brutes" such as Uncle Julian and her father, but also the opposite of "cowards" such as her grandfather. This entirely reactive stance cannot generate any alternative definitions of manhood, and Roy is trapped between Lucy's dueling definitions of masculinity as feeble and masculinity as oppressive.

Just how far Lucy's rage has infected her perception of reality becomes obvious in her further confrontation with Roy's Uncle Julian. After her violent outburst over Whitey's letters, Roy waits until Lucy is asleep and then escapes with Edward back to the Sowerbys and the protection of Uncle Julian—the one character in the novel who is able to stand up to Lucy's onslaughts. When Lucy arrives at the Sowerby home, she tries to appeal to Uncle Julian by talking to him of Roy's "duty," her own "rights" as a mother, and her own responsibility to see that her son "is not misused by all the beasts in this filthy world" (276, 274, 276). Julian responds by calling Lucy "a real saint," a designation

she accepts, until he amends it to “Saint Ball Breaker” (267, 277). Confronted with Julian’s wrath, Lucy loses all composure, tells Julian’s family about his affairs with his employees, verbally attacks her former friend Ellie, and finally charges up the stairs, only to hit Roy hard enough to draw blood. All of this again takes place in front of her horrified young son, who shrieks in terror at the sight of his mother. At this point, the reader knows that Lucy has doomed herself by attacking Roy so violently in front of his family and their son.

After Lucy’s violent outburst at the Sowerbys, her grandfather brings her home and tries to convince her that she needs medical care. Enraged that her family believes her to be having a mental breakdown, Lucy flees into the freezing winter. She dies of exposure in the cold weather, seeing enemies everywhere, and clutching a recent letter from her father to her mother. In the letter, Whitey begs Myra’s forgiveness and declares his love and faithfulness—while also hinting that he needs a sponsor and a job to be released from prison. In other words, Lucy dies defeated. In fact, the novel begins with Lucy already defeated, a clear novelistic decision on Roth’s part. Opening years after Lucy’s death, with Willard picking Whitey up from the train station, after Willard has sponsored his son-in-law and found him a job. Myra will take Whitey back; Whitey will again live in the house Lucy grew up in and believed she had exorcised her father from forever; and Lucy will lie silently in her grave next to her mentally disabled Aunt Ginny, the other person in the novel who suffered because “she could not understand the most basic fact of human life, the fact that I am me and you are you” (11). Lucy’s insistence on her own “goodness” in the face of opposing values makes her not only destructive but also brittle in her own weakness.

Lucy, like Nietzsche’s ascetic, is full of hate, and in her lust for revenge against the world she allows her rage to consume her. Nietzsche’s description of Schopenhauer, to him a most hated example of asceticism, could be used to describe Lucy. Nietzsche writes that Schopenhauer

needed enemies to keep him in a good humour; that he loved grim, bitter, blackish-green words; that he raged for the sake of raging, out of passion; that he would have grown ill, would have become a pessimist [. . .] without his enemies [. . .] but his enemies held him fast, his enemies always enticed him back again to his existence, his wrath was just as theirs was to the ancient Cynics, his balm, his recreation, his recompense his *remedium* against disgust, his *happiness*. (75)

This describes Lucy’s own reactive ideology that, rather than freeing her from her hated family, makes her absolutely dependent upon them. She needs her enemies to function; she defines herself through that which she despises. And as such she is paralyzed, forever attached to that which she hates. Like Willard, she lives a life according to pre-established generic rules and conventions but, unlike Willard, her only rule is to work against Liberty Center and her family. Furthermore, *When She Was Good* implicates goodness as being an ideological home for violence. To Lucy, being “good” means having the right, the responsibility even, to impose herself on others. There is a link here between moral-

ity and violent coercion. After all, if I know what is “good” and you refuse to obey me, then I have the right to treat you as a criminal. In *When She Was Good*, Roth begins to trace a genealogy of morality that will run throughout many of his novels, and he begins to understand the desire to be “good” as a desire for supremacy that can have explosive consequences.

Lucy’s definition of virtue is one that makes her superior to her perceived enemies; in the otherwise powerless hands of a lower-middle class young girl, virtue becomes a powerful weapon. Through his exploration of Lucy’s belligerent version of virtue, Roth establishes the undertone of violence in any ideology that defines itself as good by defining itself against an “other.” Lucy’s is an image of goodness that wants others to have to bow down to it and seeks to punish those who do not capitulate. Her moral vision promises her the ability to impose herself upon her world: not only to combat the chaos that disturbs her but to grant her the authority and pleasure of being a “good person.” And so Lucy invests herself in her own moral self-image. She becomes “good,” and this gives her a sense of power over those who threaten or challenge her. Because of this absolute division of good and evil, through dividing the world in this binary way, Lucy feels it is within her rights to demand other people witness her goodness and acknowledge her superiority. And if they fail to do so, then they deserve her punishment. Lucy feels justified even while committing her most heinous acts. Julian’s family deserves to hear about his infidelities because he has worked against her; Roy deserves to be attacked because he has betrayed her; her mother deserves to hear Lucy’s venomous form of “truth” because Myra insists upon being weak where Lucy is strong. Unfortunately, while Willard and Lucy may attempt to impose a moral view of the world on life, life does not have to accept such neat framing devices. When the contingency of existence reasserts itself, binary ideologies must inevitably collapse. Subjecting life to a relentless moral reading subdues both empathy and creativity, and Roth’s novel considers the outcome of leading such a life. In Willard’s case there remains the niggling doubt that life has not upheld its share of the bargain; in Lucy’s case, her collapsed empathy leads to her destruction.

*When She Was Good* raises many of the themes that will continue to preoccupy Roth’s fiction. While there are many possibilities to choose from, both *American Pastoral* (1997) and *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) serve as two of the best illustrative examples.<sup>3</sup> The most obvious thematic link lies between Lucy Nelson and the character of Merry Levov, in *American Pastoral*. Indeed, the relationship between the saintly Swede and his daughter, Merry, can be seen as the thematic culmination of the relationship between Willard and his granddaughter, Lucy. Like Lucy, Merry explicitly rejects the values of her family and of her community. Unlike Lucy, however, Merry makes no pretense of goodness, although her beliefs *are* couched in the language of “values.” Take, for example, the motto, attributed to the Weatherman, that hangs in Merry’s room and that her father—an ideal of American “family values”—“tolerates”:

“We are against everything that is good and decent in honky America. We will loot and burn and destroy. We are the incubation of your mother’s nightmares” (*Pastoral* 252). Both the Swede and Willard—self-created, “civilized” men—raise lovely girls who become monstrous women. Carothers comments on how, “Roth presents Lucy Nelson, the exquisite product of [Liberty Center’s] ‘civilization’ as a horrifying angel of destruction” (22). Like Lucy, Merry represents a figure of violent renunciation, and yet certain important differences can be distinguished.

Merry is a far more radical character than Lucy on a number of levels, not least of which is in the ways that Roth uses her to deviate from Nietzsche’s theory of *ressentiment*. Indeed, some critics read Merry Levov as an “answer” to the violence of the Sixties in the same way that Lucy Nelson can be read as an “answer” to a similar type of ideologically charged self-destructiveness. After all, Roth’s Lucy Nelson offers a rationale for her brand of madness, and Nietzsche’s theory of *ressentiment* helps to understand this rationale. Similarly, as Ross Posnock writes, “Neoconservatives [...] delightedly devoured [American Pastoral] as a portrait of a heroic father and son, the noble Swede, brought low by vicious student leftists” (106). And yet Roth explicitly warns of the dangers of attributing such “motivation” to a character like Merry. Keeping in mind that all of *American Pastoral* is, quite literally, made up—Zuckerman continually reminds us that he knows nothing of the “real” story behind the Swede’s life outside of a few facts he has picked up second hand—helps to explain Zuckerman’s irritation with the Swede’s brother, Jerry, who insists he understands what went wrong with Merry: “Jerry tries to rationalize it but you can’t. This is all something else, something he knows absolutely nothing about. No one does. It is not rational. It is chaos. It is chaos from start to finish” (*Pastoral* 281).<sup>4</sup> Roth explicitly warns, here, against reaching the sort of conclusions about motivation, rationale, and “understanding” in regards to Merry’s violent refutation of life, with which *American Pastoral* teases its reader. In this sense, then, *American Pastoral*, and Merry, can be read as an evolution in Roth’s understanding of pre-ideological motivation that refutes some aspects of *When She Was Good*. Where the earlier novel sought to “understand” a character such as Lucy Nelson and insinuated that such an understanding was possible, *American Pastoral* self-consciously lures the reader into the trap of trying to understand a character who, as Zuckerman warns, is really an embodiment of chaos. Ironically, of course, “understanding” Merry is a siren’s call even Zuckerman cannot refuse, and *American Pastoral* is the result of his indulgence in a project he has already admitted he can know “nothing about.”

Although the connections are less obvious, another novel that lends itself to Roth’s examination of the pre-ideological nature of existence is *Sabbath’s Theater*. In my reading, this book offers a more mitigated, balanced portrayal of a character trying to make sense of the pre-ideological forces at work in human life. The great paradox of Nietzsche’s philosophy of *ressentiment* is

that, in many ways, it is based on the same violent renunciations that it purports to abhor. The vituperation with which Nietzsche describes the man of *ressentiment* or the ascetic illustrates his obvious hatred for his subject, and the language with which he uses to describe the extreme nature of his subject is, in itself, quite extreme. In other words, the bold delineations of Nietzsche's theory lends itself very easily to characters such as Lucy and Merry, who are, in many ways, caricatures of human life.

Mickey Sabbath, however, is anything but a caricature, despite the fact that he continually strives to present himself as such. His fervid mask continually slips, revealing his all-too-human human face. Like Merry Levov, Mickey claims to embrace the chaos that underlies existence. He attempts to define himself in Sadean terms as a devotee of "the satanic side of sex" (*Sabbath* 20). His sensibility also has a Nietzschean tinge, and he is working on a "five-minute puppet adaptation of the hopelessly insane Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" (194). Indeed, he embraces the Nietzschean role of Dionysus, which Raymond Geuss describes as, "the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess" (*xi*). Mickey believes that gesturing towards nihilism symbolizes his independent and anarchical spirit, forgetting that the role of Dionysian or Sadean anti-hero is also entirely scripted. In the scene in which Sabbath is confronted by Norman over his daughter's stolen underpants, Sabbath declares, "I am flowing swiftly along the curbs of life, I am merely debris, in possession of nothing to interfere with an objective reading of the shit" (*Sabbath* 347). This pronouncement reveals the fundamentally paradoxical nature of his self-conception and self-representation. On the one hand, he claims that he has actively embraced a view of life that allows him to understand objectively "the shit" that makes up everyday existence. This image enables him to portray himself as active and fully in control of his existence: he flows through life by removing any obstructions that might slow him down. On the other hand, Sabbath also identifies himself as debris caught in a stream that runs outside of his control. Much as Lucy attempts to live "against" Willard and Liberty Center and Merry tries to live "against" the Swede and Old Rimrock, Sabbath is attempting to define his own desire to live as a Dionysean or Sadean phallic anti-hero against his friend Norman's self-consciously "normal" existence. But even Mickey's most outrageous assertions reveal a grain of insecurity about his ability to create and control his own destiny in a world he recognizes as both hostile and capricious.

Mickey's divided nature and contradictory understanding of his own existence alert us to a fascinating and under-explored aspect of the novel: the fact that divisiveness is actually the structure of the novel. For every thought Mickey thinks, there is a counter-thought offered; for every action, a counter-action. For every moment of outlandish, predatory, or destructive behavior on Sabbath's part, there is a moment of compassion, honesty, or insight. And meanwhile Mickey remains a mystery, especially to himself. For example,

before he attempts to bribe the young woman at his wife's clinic with alcohol for sex, Mickey's thoughts paradoxically reveal his respect for her as well as providing a generous insight into the nature of her condition: "Her laugh was very sly now, a delightful surprise. A delightful person, suffused by a light soulfulness that wasn't at all juvenile, however juvenile she happened to look. An adventurous mind with an intuitive treasure that her suffering hadn't shut down" (290). Comparing such insights with his audacious behavior suggests that Mickey is not wicked *or* good; instead he is simultaneously wicked *and* good. Everything Sabbath says or does is both endorsed and undermined. He is a sexual and moral terrorist, but also a version of Socrates; both a hopelessly clichéd libertine and a self-questioning thinker whose very existence forces others to confront their own assumptions. The point of the novel, it gradually emerges, is not to arrive at the "right" conclusion about Mickey or his view of the world; the point is to submit to the rigorous course of self-testing that we see enacted before us in the character of Mickey Sabbath. The strenuously bifurcated structure of the novel—in which everything that Mickey stands for is refuted and everything that he ridicules is later defended—is therefore crucial to Roth's embodiment and projection of Sabbath's own divided and self-questioning nature.

The irony of this situation is that even as the novel's structure undermines any transparently moralistic interpretations, its protagonist seems to demand the reader's moral judgment. Much as *American Pastoral* lures us into "understanding" 1960s radicalism through Zuckerman's depiction of Merry Levov, *Sabbath's Theater* forcibly confronts us with certain elements that appear to demand either censure or approval. On the one hand, the reader is confronted with Mickey's poetic nostalgia as well as his intense love for Drenka and his family. On the other hand, one cannot help but feel averse to Mickey's racism and cringe at some of his more outrageous sexual antics. Indeed, the novel makes the reader *want* to sympathize or to judge; either to venerate Mickey or to stand above him in contempt. The structure of the book, however, ironically undermines either of these two affective stances. After all, the full spectrum of Mickey's outrageous actions and opinions cannot be fully embraced. And yet, simply to judge him is to sanction a moralizing attitude that renounces both empathy and forgiveness, a position that Roth depicts in characters such as Lucy Nelson as a formula for misery. In other words, Mickey Sabbath can, in some ways, be read as Roth's "answer" to Lucy Nelson. Sabbath may be unhappy, unreasonable, and anarchical, yet he is absolutely and entirely *active*. Unlike the utterly *reactive* Lucy, Mickey creatively engages with life and he does have his own, strange form of empathy for others. Even more importantly, he refuses to stagnate in the noncreative, judgmental aspects of life that Roth parodies in the novel through Roseanna's AA jargon or the feminist hotline, SABBATH's mantra of female victimization. Through *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth dares us to resist passing judgment, suggesting that such a reductive stance offers less insight into Mickey's complex, if occasionally

repulsive, character than it does into readers eager to see their own values reproduced and corroborated through the fiction they read.

The implications of reading Roth's fiction in the light of Nietzsche's theories of *ressentiment* are far reaching. I am certainly not arguing that Roth's *oeuvre* should be read as a textbook application of Nietzschean philosophy, but understanding that Roth shares Nietzsche's interest in the pre-ideological formation of "values," for both the individual and his or her society, opens up a rich new vein in Roth studies, especially when mining novels such as *When She Was Good*, so often dismissed as exhausted. Indeed, rather than an anti-feminist portrayal of a woman who destroys herself as part of a misogynistic fantasy on Roth's part, *When She Was Good* can be read as the moment Roth turns the table on his own critics. If they will insist he is immoral, then he will make the nature of morality the focus of his barbed intelligence. Through Lucy—and later characters such as Merry Levov and Mickey Sabbath, amongst others—Roth explores how such ideologies come into being and how ideologies become dangerously intractable. Rather than an author who revels in immorality, as critics such as Howe and Podhoretz suggest, Roth's fiction actually questions how our ideas about morality come into being. He is as interested in the pre-ideological as the ideological, in asking how we come to see the world as we do. Lucy Nelson also raises another question that vexes Roth and his fiction, and that is the question of why people will destroy themselves and others rather than compromise their ideals, no matter how radical, untested, or untenable they prove to be. It is ironic that so many readings of *When She Was Good* indulge a "moral" renunciation of the very critique of modern life—Roth's—that underpins their own moral fervor.

#### NOTES

1. Sam B. Girgus explicitly challenges this common reading of *When She Was Good*, arguing that the novel can actually be read as a feminist text.
2. These themes can be located in the stories that comprise *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959), as well as *Letting Go* (1962), but I would argue that *When She Was Good* takes the subject of the pre-ideological formation of morality as its central topic.
3. James B. Carothers discusses Roth's own statements connecting Lucy Nelson to the titular protagonist of the 1969 novel, *Portnoy's Complaint* (24).
4. For an in-depth analysis of issues of contingency and narration in Roth's *American Pastoral*, see Derek Parker Royal.

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