

# Goodbye, Columbus



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PHILIP ROTH

Philip Roth was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey, in a Jewish family. His parents, Bess and Herman Roth, were second generation Americans whose families immigrated from what is now Ukraine. Roth graduated from Weequahic High School in 1950 before attending Rutgers University for a year. Afterwards, he transferred to Bucknell University, graduating magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. He then earned an M.A. in English from the University of Chicago in 1955 and briefly worked as an instructor at the university's writing program. Roth enlisted in the army, but he was medically discharged after injuring his back. He went on to teach at the University of Iowa, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania. Roth published his first novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*, in 1959, along with several short stories, which immediately garnered acclaim, winning the national book award in 1960. Roth's first full length novel, *Letting Go*, was then published in 1962. Roth rose to even more prominence and success with his fourth novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, which was controversial for its explicit sexual content. Roth's body of work is often semi-autobiographical and often involves themes surrounding Jewish identity, though Roth considered himself an atheist. Roth has written 26 novels in addition to non-fiction works and short story collections. Some of his most prominent novels include *The Plot Against America* (2004), *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Ghost Writer* (1979), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). Roth's awards include a Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastoral*, three PEN/Faulkner Awards (the first author to achieve this feat), the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama in 2011, and the Man Booker International Prize for lifetime achievement in 2011. In his personal life, Roth married Margaret Martinson in 1956 and separated from her in 1963. Roth then married Claire Bloom in 1990 after they had been living together since 1976; in 1994 they divorced. Roth died in Manhattan in May 2018 and was buried at the Bard College Cemetery.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Goodbye, Columbus*, focuses on two third-generation Americans, Neil and Brenda. Roth draws on the history of Jewish people in the United States, many of whom immigrated to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, predominantly from Eastern Europe. The Russian pogroms in particular, which began in 1900, forced large numbers of Jews to seek refuge in the U.S., moving through immigration centers on the east coast like New York's Ellis Island. This then led many to settle in New York and New Jersey. Many Jews were

poor and took up working-class jobs but were able to become prosperous within a few generations and moved from cities to the suburbs—just as Brenda's family did. Additionally, Roth's novella touches briefly on birth control. At the time in the late 1950s, the period in which the story takes place, the birth control pill had not yet been created and condoms were the most readily available method of birth control. The diaphragm was available to married women but was restricted for young, unmarried women like Brenda.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Roth has written many other works that focus on Jewish identity, class divisions, and assimilation, including *The Human Stain*, *American Pastoral*, *Indignation*, and the other short stories in the same collection of fiction in which *Goodbye, Columbus* appears, including "Eli, the Fanatic." Other authors at the time investigating similar questions of Jewish identity, assimilation, family dynamics, and sexuality included Saul Bellow and Henry Roth. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Neil also references modern Jewish philosopher Martin Buber whose work *I and Thou* questions the relationship of people to God and to each other. Philip Roth's short stories have also been included in American short story collections like *A Celestial Omnibus: Short Fiction on Faith* and *American Jewish Fiction: A Century of Stories*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Goodbye, Columbus
- **When Written:** 1955-1959
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Illinois
- **When Published:** May 7, 1959
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Fiction, novella
- **Setting:** Late 1950s Newark and Short Hills, New Jersey
- **Climax:** Neil and Brenda break up
- **Point of View:** First person from Neil's point of view

### EXTRA CREDIT

**First in print.** Although *Goodbye, Columbus* was published in a collection of fiction in 1959, the novella itself was first published in the autumn-winter 1958-1959 issue of the *Paris Review*.

**Film adaptation.** In 1969, *Goodbye, Columbus* was made into a popular film directed by Larry Peerce and starring Richard Benjamin, Ali MacGraw, and Jack Klugman.



## PLOT SUMMARY

23-year-old Neil Klugman lives with his Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max in a working class Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey in the late 1950s. One summer day, Neil is invited to the Green Lane Country Club in the suburb of Short Hills, New Jersey by his cousin Doris; there, he meets 21-year-old Brenda Patimkin. Brenda is beautiful, with short auburn hair, and she asks Neil to hold her glasses for her while she dives into the pool. Smitten, Neil calls her that night and introduces himself, asking if they can meet up. She agrees. Neil drives to meet Brenda back at the club, where she is playing tennis with a friend. After she wins her match, she and Neil walk and sit together, getting to know one another. She tells him that she goes to school “in Boston” (meaning Radcliffe, Harvard’s sister college) and talks about the fact that she has had her nose fixed because it used to be “bumpy.” After they speak some more, Neil kisses her for the first time.

Over the next week, Brenda and Neil continue to meet at the club. They start to deepen their feelings for one another as they play in the pool together. Neil meets Brenda’s athletic older brother Ron and also goes over to her home in Short Hills for dinner, where he meets her 10-year-old sister Julie and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin. He notes that the Patimkins are very wealthy and he feels intimidated at the dinner.

Neil also works at the Newark public library, and just as he starts his relationship with Brenda, a small African American boy begins coming in every day to look at a **book** of Paul Gauguin’s artwork. The boy particularly likes the images of the Tahitian women, and he dreams of having a peaceful life like the one depicted. Neil understands his enthusiasm for the images, and he thinks that Short Hills is just as idyllic.

One night, Neil arrives at the Patimkins’ just as they are driving Ron to the airport—he is going to visit his girlfriend Harriet in Milwaukee. Brenda asks Neil to stay and watch Julie. Neil at first wants very little to do with Julie and instead explores the house, eating fruit out of the Patimkins’ refrigerator in the basement. When Julie catches him, he agrees to play ping pong with her. He refuses to go easy on her, however, and she cries and storms off when he is one point away from winning. That night, Neil and Brenda make love for the first time in the Patimkins’ TV room after everyone else has gone to sleep, and Neil thinks that it is as sweet as winning the match against Julie would have been.

Over the next week and a half, the young boy returns to look at the Gauguin book in the library, and when an older white man comes in to check the same book out, Neil lies and says it is on hold so that the boy can continue to look at it. Meanwhile, Neil continues to see Brenda every night. One evening, they go to the club as it is closing, and Brenda suggests they play a game. One person closes their eyes and waits as the other person

does laps in the pool, then comes back and gives them a very wet kiss. Neil grows worried during the game that Brenda will simply leave him. When she returns after staying away a particularly long time, he clings to her and tells her that he loves her.

The summer continues, and Neil and Brenda do many different activities together: swimming, walking, driving, attending basketball games, dancing, and making love almost every night. One day, Brenda suggests to her father that Neil stay for a week at the end of August, and Mr. Patimkin agrees. When Neil tells Aunt Gladys about this, she is skeptical that a Jewish family would live in Short Hills, but she agrees to let him go.

On Neil’s last day of work before his vacation, the older white man comes back to ask about the Gauguin book. Neil tries to cover for the little boy again, rudely turning the older man away. As Neil drives to Short Hills that evening, he worries that the old man might complain and that he’d lose his job, but he realizes that he doesn’t want the library to be his life anyway.

When Neil arrives, Julie tells him that Ron (who has returned from Milwaukee) is getting married to Harriet in two weeks, on Labor Day, and so the Patimkins immediately launch into wedding planning. Neil unpacks in the guest bedroom, but he and Brenda make a plan for Neil to sleep in her room and then sneak back into the guest bedroom in the morning. While Neil unpacks, he hears Brenda and Mrs. Patimkin argue over the fact that they have too much company, and Mrs. Patimkin accuses Brenda of being lazy. Brenda returns to Neil, upset, but she assures him that Mrs. Patimkin simply doesn’t like Brenda and is stressed about Ron’s wedding. Brenda also shows Neil a room off of the guest bedroom in which the Patimkins have stored all of their old furniture from their old house in Newark. She tells him that Mr. Patimkin hid \$300 in there for her if she needed it, but when she can’t find the money, she tells Neil to make love to her on their old sofa.

The week passes, and Brenda and Neil race together on the track at the high school and continue their routines, with him sneaking into and out of her room each night. Neil starts to realize that he is looking more and more like Brenda in the way he dresses and acts. Brenda then arranges for Neil to stay another week, straight through to Ron’s wedding (which is the day before she returns to school). When Harriet arrives, Neil starts to think about marrying Brenda, but he is worried she’ll say no. He instead suggests to Brenda that she get a **diaphragm**, but she is hesitant because she doesn’t want to have to lie that she is married to get one. He is upset, thinking that he would do a lot of things for her, but that she doesn’t do anything for him just because he asks. She walks away, crying at the implication that she doesn’t care for him enough to get a diaphragm.

The next day, Brenda and Harriet go into the city to buy dresses for the wedding, while Neil does an errand for Mrs. Patimkin. He goes to Mr. Patimkin’s work (he runs a kitchen and sink

business) and picks up silver patterns for the wedding. There, Mr. Patimkin talks to Neil about his children, saying that they are “*goyim*” (non-Jewish people). Mr. Patimkin says that when he got married, they only had cheap silverware, while his kids have to eat off of gold—though Neil notes that he says this with pride rather than consternation. When Neil returns to the house, Brenda and Harriet are back. Brenda tells him that she called the Margaret Sanger Clinic in New York to get a diaphragm, but they asked her if she was married and she hung up. When Neil presses her that they can go to a doctor together, she finally relents.

Three days before Ron’s wedding, Neil and Brenda go to New York City so that Brenda can get a diaphragm from the doctor, even though she’s still visibly upset about the idea. While she goes into the office, Neil goes to a church and prays, wondering if he really loves Brenda or if he’s rushing into things. When Brenda returns, she says she’s wearing her diaphragm. Neil tells her that he loves her.

Over the weekend, Neil and Brenda barely see each other in the chaos of wedding preparations. The night before the wedding, Ron plays a **record** for Neil, which has his school song on it (he went to Ohio State University) and highlights from his senior year, including the announcement of a basketball game in which he played. The record ends with a voice saying, “goodbye, Columbus,” and Ron hums along with the record, nostalgic.

The wedding is full of drunken cheer, and Neil and Brenda dance during the reception. Neil also speaks to Mr. Patimkin’s half-brother Leo, who is resentful of Mr. Patimkin’s vast wealth while Leo (a traveling lightbulb salesman) has so little. He tells Neil that if he plays his cards right and marries Brenda, Neil can have some of that wealth. Mr. Patimkin also implies to Neil at the reception that if he and Brenda wanted to get married, they would have Mr. Patimkin’s blessing and Neil could join the business. At the end of the night, Neil finds Brenda asleep in the lobby of the hotel, and Neil wonders if he really knows her. The next day, he drives her to the train, and Brenda returns to school.

Neil returns to the library, where his boss Mr. Scapello scolds Neil for his treatment of the older man. The Gauguin book is checked out, and Neil doesn’t see the young boy anymore. Soon after, Brenda suggests that Neil come up for the Jewish holidays to visit her, telling him that she booked a hotel room for them, and Neil agrees. Aunt Gladys is displeased that Neil will miss his parents, who are coming in from Arizona for the holidays, but Neil is insistent on visiting Brenda.

When Neil arrives in Boston, however, Brenda reveals that she left the diaphragm in her drawer and her mother found it. Her mother is heartbroken, and her father admonished her for her mistake. She doesn’t know how she could bring Neil to their home again. Neil is frustrated, thinking that Brenda left the diaphragm on purpose so that Mrs. Patimkin would find it and

they’d have to break up. Brenda denies this, but both of them realize that they can’t continue their relationship. Neil leaves the hotel and thinks about how much their relationship had been built on this idea of winning and losing, and how he had likely loved her just for her beauty and wealth. Neil gets on a train back to New Jersey, and he arrives in Newark on the first day of the Jewish New Year.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Neil Klugman** – Neil is the protagonist of *Goodbye, Columbus*; the novella recounts his brief but passionate summer relationship with Brenda Patimkin. At the beginning of the story, Neil is 23 years old, works at the Newark Public library, and lives with his Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max in Newark, New Jersey. He sees Brenda for the first time when he goes to the Green Lane Country Club in Short Hills with his cousin Doris. Afterward he calls Brenda and asks to meet, beginning their relationship. At first, he feels as though he is of a lower status than the Patimkins: while he comes from a working-class Jewish family, the Patimkins have assimilated into the wealthy white American elite and have outwardly distanced themselves from their Jewish heritage. Over time, however, Neil becomes more integrated into the family, as he starts dressing more like Brenda and distancing himself from his own family. Even though Neil maintains that he loves Brenda, Roth hints throughout the novella that this is only because Neil is idealizing her beauty and the wealth and ease of her life, while in fact he knows very little about Brenda herself. Neil and Brenda’s relationship grows more serious over the course of the summer, particularly when he stays over for two weeks and they start having sex every night in her room. Neil thinks about asking Brenda to marry him, but worries that she will say no. Instead, he asks her to get a **diaphragm**, both as a representation of her commitment to him and out of a desire to assert some power in their relationship. Brenda does so, but this leads Mrs. Patimkin to find the diaphragm in her dresser drawer. As a result, Brenda feels that she can’t remain with Neil if she wants to be accepted by her family, and they break up. Ultimately, Neil recognizes that his love for Brenda was only a fantasy, and he returns to his home in Newark on the Jewish New Year, indicating a return to his Jewish heritage and family while simultaneously turning away from her family’s wealth.

**Brenda Patimkin** – Brenda is Neil’s girlfriend and Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin’s daughter. Neil meets Brenda at the Green Lane Country Club in Short Hills when his cousin Doris invites him. After she asks him to hold her glasses for her, he decides to call her and introduce himself, beginning their passionate summer relationship. Brenda is described as thin, athletic, and beautiful, with short auburn hair. Neil often idealizes Brenda, describing her as if she were an angel. Roth also illustrates how Brenda’s

family's wealth has allowed her to assimilate into wealthy American culture. Her father paid for her to have her nose "fixed" so that it would be less "bumpy," getting rid of a stereotypically Jewish feature. Brenda also attends Radcliffe College (the former sister college of Harvard) and owns expensive clothing. Over the course of their relationship, Brenda enjoys setting up competitions with Neil, such as when they are swimming in the club pool together or racing on a track. These competitions frequently reflect the fact that Brenda has the upper hand in their relationship, as Neil feels that Brenda can make him do whatever she wants and he isn't allowed to question it. Neil tries to flip the dynamic on Brenda in their sexual relationship, particularly in suggesting that Brenda get a **diaphragm** from a doctor—though she is hesitant to do so. Over the course of the summer, they grow more and more serious about each other: Brenda invites Neil to stay in her family's home in Short Hills for two weeks, and they spend every night together in Brenda's room. They even briefly hint at getting married, despite their continued conflict over whether Brenda should get a diaphragm. Ultimately she relents, but this decision leads Mrs. Patimkin to find the diaphragm when Brenda goes back to school at the end of the summer. Her parents' disappointment in discovering that she had been having sex leads her to feel that she and Neil must break up in order to be accepted by them.

**Mr. Patimkin** – Mr. Patimkin is Brenda, Ron, and Julie's father, and Mrs. Patimkin's husband. Mr. Patimkin comes from a similar background to Neil's family, growing up working-class and Jewish. However, Mr. Patimkin was able to build a successful business and gain a great deal of wealth over the course of his life. This allowed him and his family to cast aside many markers of their Jewish heritage and become assimilated into wealthy white American culture. This includes moving out of Newark and into the affluent suburb of Short Hills, buying expensive clothing and cars, and doing activities like attending country clubs and playing tennis and golf. Mr. Patimkin understands that his children have become assimilated, as he notes that they don't understand Yiddish words or aspects of Jewish culture. However, Mr. Patimkin views this as a point of pride and a marker of his own success. Unlike other characters who fixate on their nostalgia for the past, Mr. Patimkin appreciates the success that he has attained in the present and also hopes for more progress in the future. At the end of the novella, when Mrs. Patimkin discovers Brenda's **diaphragm**, he writes a letter expressing his disappointment in Brenda and his hope that she will learn from her mistake. This fuels her feeling that she must break up with Neil in order to be accepted by her family.

**Mrs. Patimkin** – Mrs. Patimkin is Brenda, Ron, and Julie's mother, and Mr. Patimkin's wife. She is beautiful and very polite. Brenda believes that Mrs. Patimkin hates Brenda because she is jealous of Brenda's youth and athletic ability, but Roth demonstrates that Mrs. Patimkin also resents her daughter

because their family's wealth has enabled Brenda to be lazy. Mrs. Patimkin is also more religious than the rest of her family: she is orthodox, she keeps a kosher kitchen, and she belongs to a Jewish service organization. Thus, while the Patimkins are outwardly very assimilated in appearance, they also privately maintain their religious practices. At the end of the novella, Mrs. Patimkin discovers Brenda's **diaphragm** in her dresser drawer. Mrs. Patimkin is scandalized by the idea that Brenda and Neil had been sleeping together over the summer and writes a distraught letter to Brenda. This forces Brenda to break up with Neil, believing that this is the only way that her family will accept her again.

**Aunt Gladys** – Aunt Gladys is Neil's aunt, Uncle Max's wife, and Susan's mother. Neil lives with Aunt Gladys and her family in Newark, and their life is working class. The family maintains many cultural markers of being Jewish, like Aunt Gladys's Jewish dialect and speech patterns. Aunt Gladys constantly frets over making sure that Neil has enough to eat while also trying not to waste any money on food, in contrast to the Patimkins' excesses. Aunt Gladys frequently judges the Patimkins, saying they are not really Jewish because they live in the affluent suburb of Short Hills and calling them "fancy-schmancy." She simultaneously worries, however that Neil will become enticed by the Patimkins' wealth and want to spend less time with his own family.

**Ron Patimkin** – Ron is Brenda's older brother. He is large and athletic, having played basketball at Ohio State University. Initially, his plan is to become a gym teacher, but when he and his girlfriend Harriet decide to get married, Mr. Patimkin hires him at his business because Ron now has the responsibility to support a family. Yet Roth makes it clear that Ron is nostalgic for his former glory, particularly when it comes to his athletic success. Ron has what he calls his "**Columbus record**," which includes a recording of one of his basketball games at OSU. He listens to this record constantly, humming along to songs from his alma mater and becoming particularly excited when he hears the crowd cheer for him, illustrating his nostalgia for this time.

**The Boy** – A young African American boy often visits the library where Neil works. He becomes obsessed with looking at **a book of Paul Gauguin reprints**, and is particularly captivated by his paintings of the Tahitian women. He comes back every day for over a week just to look at the book. At first, Neil empathizes with the boy and tries to ensure that the book will not be checked out by other people at the library. Neil also begins to share in the boy's fantasies when he thinks about Brenda, describing Short Hills like a Gauguin painting. But at the end, Neil realizes the futility of the boy's dreams because they are unattainable for a poor Black boy who lives in Newark. Thus, Neil emphasizes how self-reflection is necessary to face reality.

**Leo Patimkin** – Leo is Mr. Patimkin's half-brother, whom Neil



meets at Ron's wedding. Leo is a light bulb salesman who laments that he is unsuccessful, and he's particularly bitter at the contrast between his modest life and Mr. Patimkin's success. Leo talks about how he can count the good things that have happened to him in his life on one hand, and he wistfully recounts those things to Neil. Neil observes that Leo could find happiness if he were more willing to take risks, but instead he is too fixated on the past, and as a result, he is too pessimistic about the present and the future.

**Carlota** – Carlota is the Patimkin family's African American maid, who cooks, cleans, and watches Julie. Neil explains that he feels a kinship with Carlota, reinforcing how the stark class divisions between Neil and the Patimkins make him feel lower status despite the fact that they share an ethnic and religious background.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Harriet Ehrlich** – Harriet is Ron's fiancée—they marry at the end of the novella. Neil observes that Harriet is “all surfaces.” She is a nice person and quite beautiful, but she has very little depth.

**Julie Patimkin** – Julie is Brenda and Ron's 10-year-old sister, and Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin's youngest child. She is athletic and competitive like the rest of her family.

**Mr. Scapello** – Mr. Scapello is Neil's boss at the library. He promotes Neil to the Reference Room over the summer, and Neil fears ending up on Mr. Scapello's boring career trajectory.

**Luther Ferrari** – Luther is Ron's friend and best man, and Brenda's ex-boyfriend. Neil feels threatened when he and Brenda go to see Luther play basketball.

**Uncle Max** – Max is Neil's uncle, Aunt Gladys's husband, and Susan's father.

**Doris** – Doris is Neil's cousin, who invites him to the Green Lane Country Club.

**Susan** – Susan is Neil's cousin and Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max's daughter.

**John McKee** – John is a coworker of Neil's at the library.

Klugman's brief but passionate summer relationship with 21-year-old Brenda Patimkin. While Neil and Brenda have genuine affection for one another, their relationship is plagued by constant power struggles as each one tries to take the upper hand. This is echoed by the fact that they often have literal competitions between themselves, such as running races or playing games in the pool, which reflect the power dynamic between them. Far from bringing them closer together, however, these games stir up resentment and hostility between the couple, and they end their relationship in the fall. Through Brenda and Neil's failed relationship, Roth illustrates how romantic relationships that center around competition and power struggles breed conflict, not love, and are doomed to fail.

Brenda loves making up competitions and games to play with Neil, but instead of being the source of lighthearted fun and bonding, these competitions have serious stakes: they determine who has the upper hand in their relationship. For instance, at the beginning of their relationship, Brenda invents a game: she'll close her eyes, and Neil can go swimming in the pool and then come back and surprise her with a wet kiss. They take turns doing this, and although Neil tries to will himself to stay away from Brenda longer and longer, he's secretly terrified that Brenda will no longer be there when he gets back, or that on her turn, she might dip into the pool and then leave the club instead of returning to kiss him. When Brenda comes back after a particularly long turn in the pool, Neil holds her desperately and tells her that he loves her for the first time. Though the game seems innocent and fun on the surface, Brenda actually sets up a competition of who can be the most withholding; she wins by getting Neil to cave first and recognize how insecure he is about her leaving. Thus, Brenda's game establishes a power dynamic between them wherein she holds all the power. In another example of this dynamic, later in the story Brenda instructs Neil to run with her on the nearby high school track every day, which reminds him of “one of those scenes in race-horse movies, where an old trainer like Walter Brennan and a young handsome man clock the beautiful girl's horse in the early Kentucky morning, to see if it really is the fastest two-year-old alive.” In other words, Neil sees himself as the race-horse, and this metaphor implies several key points about their relationship. First, it suggests that Brenda is Neil's trainer and that she has the power to condition him to be and do what she wants. Second, just as a horse's job is to perform well for its owner, their relationship is centered on Neil's ability to make Brenda happy, while Neil is pushed to his limits in order to please her.

Although these competitions make Neil feel like Brenda has all the power over him, he willingly engages in their power struggles, too. As the pair gets more serious about each other, Neil attempts to gain the upper hand in his own way, particularly relating to their decisions about sex. Neil describes how making love to Brenda for the first time is “so sweet, as



## THEMES

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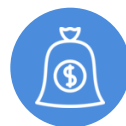


### RELATIONSHIPS, COMPETITION, AND POWER

*Goodbye, Columbus* follows 23-year-old Neil

though [he]’d scored that twenty-first point,” referring to a ping pong game he had not been able to finish earlier in the evening. Neil’s language here reinforces how he puts their sexual relationship in the context of a competition—and in this case, he is winning that game. Neil also frames sex as a game or a competition when he suggests that Brenda get a **diaphragm** (a contraceptive device), which involves her going to a doctor and claiming that she is married (in the late 1950s, doctors only gave this kind of birth control to married women). Neil views Brenda’s acquiring a diaphragm as a way of confirming Brenda’s commitment to him, but it also gives him power in the relationship because he is asking for control over part of her sexuality. When she is hesitant, he says that he doesn’t want to press her on it and tells her that she’s “won.” Again, he equates her agency surrounding sex with her “winning,” echoing the power struggle that Brenda’s made-up games created.

Brenda eventually relents and goes to the doctor to get a diaphragm despite being upset about it. But her refusal to take the diaphragm back to school at the end of the summer leads her mother, **Mrs. Patimkin**, to find it in Brenda’s dresser drawer. Mrs. Patimkin is scandalized to find out that Neil and Brenda were having sex over the summer, and Brenda feels that the only way her family will accept her again is if she breaks up with Neil. Despite Neil’s attempt to gain the upper hand, then, he still loses their relationship. After they break up, Neil asks himself, “What was it that had turned winning into losing, and losing—who knows—into winning?” He sees how their relationship had been built on this dynamic of losing and winning, and how it ultimately turned them against each other and led to its end. Thus, Roth argues that the power struggle between Neil and Brenda—reflected in their constant competitions—deprived them of cultivating the sense of equilibrium that’s necessary for a healthy, loving relationship.



## ASSIMILATION AND WEALTH

Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin’s relationship highlights the economic disparities between their two families. Both families are Jewish and live in

New Jersey in the late 1950s, but Neil’s family comes from a working-class background, while Brenda’s family is much wealthier. Neil observes that due to the wealth that Brenda’s father Mr. Patimkin has earned, the Patimkins are able to erase outward appearances of their Jewish roots and are consequently better assimilated into white Protestant American culture. Neil, too, recognizes that the more time he spends with Brenda’s family, the more he assimilates into this culture as well—which results in him turning his back on his own family’s Jewish culture. Roth thus suggests that a Jewish family’s ability to assimilate is directly related to their wealth.

The Patimkins’ relative wealth enables them to erase any outward appearance of their Jewishness, which consequently makes it easier for them to associate with white Protestants.

The Patimkins used to live in Newark, New Jersey, a hub for working-class Jews, but they now live in the more affluent (and less Jewish) suburbs of New Jersey. Because of their wealth, the Patimkins are able to cover up the remnants of their poorer Jewish past (hiding their old furniture in a storage room, for example, and replacing it with new, expensive furniture). While the Patimkins do still maintain aspects of their Jewish identity, like being a part of an orthodox synagogue and keeping kosher at home, their wealth allows them to remove external markers of their Jewishness. For example, Brenda surgically removes the “bump” in her nose, and her brother Ron plans to do the same. Since a prominent nose is a stereotypical marker of Jewish appearance, Brenda’s operation is symbolic of removing a piece of her Jewish identity—an operation that is only available to her due to Mr. Patimkin’s wealth. So while the Patimkins are able to privately adhere to their Jewish faith, their wealth allows them to outwardly remove any difference in their appearance and align themselves with white Protestant culture.

In contrast, Neil’s working-class family doesn’t have the financial means to assimilate as fully as the Patimkins, so they remain clearly Jewish to anyone who meets them. Neil’s Aunt Gladys notes that the Patimkins can’t be “real Jews” because they moved from Newark to Short Hills—indicating that the Patimkins have given up a large part of their Jewish identity in moving to an affluent neighborhood. The Klugmans, on the other hand, don’t have the means to leave Newark. Since Aunt Gladys has grown up in this community, she has recognizably Jewish speech patterns and she and Neil are familiar with Yiddish words and phrases. Their culture and habits—including their meals and religious practices—are also obviously Jewish, and they never try to appear otherwise.

The more Neil hangs out with Brenda, the more he, too, starts to assimilate into the Patimkin family’s embrace of WASP suburban culture. In order to be accepted by the Patimkins, he forgoes his family, and along with it, his connection to his poorer Jewish background. When Neil starts to hang out with Brenda, he often feels as though the Patimkin family treats him like a servant because of their class difference, such as when he is made to watch Julie or when Mrs. Patimkin sends him on errands. Neil even describes feeling a kinship with their African American maid, Carlota, illustrating how Neil’s lack of wealth means that he can’t feel fully accepted by Brenda’s family. Yet over time, Neil is able to assimilate into the Patimkins’ family. He does this largely by distancing himself from his own family, which is his primary connection to his Jewishness. Neil confesses to Mrs. Patimkin that he hasn’t attended synagogue in a long time, and rather than being orthodox or conservative, he’s “just Jewish,” suggesting that he views his Jewishness as a part of his heritage, not necessarily his religion. Aunt Gladys even worries that he won’t want to come home after living with the Patimkins for two weeks, illustrating how only by

abandoning her and his Jewish community can he become more integrated into Brenda's household. Neil also buys new clothes to dress like Brenda, and he notes that she appreciates that he dresses "like herself"—in other words, like a person who often frequents country clubs or plays tennis, hallmarks of the American elite. Additionally, Neil thinks towards the end of the novella that he could have the makings of a businessman, as Mr. Patimkin is. This is reinforced by the fact that Mr. Patimkin hints that he could always add Neil to the business if Neil wanted to marry Brenda. Thus, Neil's exposure to the family and their wealth—and the possibility of joining that family—gives him a greater ability to achieve the classic American dream.

At the end of the novella, however, Neil and Brenda break up. He happens to return to his life in Newark on the first day of the Jewish New Year, representing a return to his Jewish identity and a turning away from the Patimkins' wealth and assimilation. This ending is a decision to stay true to himself in several ways: by not marrying a woman he doesn't love, by not seeking high social status for its own sake, and by embracing his Jewish heritage.



### SELF-DELUSION AND FANTASY VS. SELF-EXAMINATION AND REALITY

Working class Neil is captivated by wealthy Brenda.

His desire for her is both sexual and material—he longs to have the kind of life that her upper-class family leads. However, as the pair's relationship unfolds, Roth hints at the fact that Neil is simply living out a fantasy through his relationship with Brenda. The two are not suitable for one another, and Neil is with Brenda not because he loves her for who she is, but because he's enamored with the idea of what his life might be if he married her. Over the course of the novella, Neil gradually develops self-awareness about his own motives and values, but for most of his relationship with Brenda, he remains captive to his delusional belief that he would be happy if he had Brenda's life. Only at the end does he see that marrying her would have been wrong for him. In this way, Roth suggests that a lack of self-awareness enables people to pursue unrealistic fantasies, which is unsatisfying and unproductive. It's only through brutally honest self-examination that a person can face reality and build a life that suits them.

Early on, Roth establishes how Neil fantasizes about Brenda and her family's life. Neil compares Brenda to an angel, as he admits that he thinks of her as having small "fluttering" wings underneath her shoulder blades. He also thinks of Brenda's town of Short Hills as a kind of gateway to heaven: he describes when he is driving to Short Hills from his home in Newark that "It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven." In this way, Roth illustrates how Brenda and her life in the suburbs are literally and figuratively elevated above Neil's own, establishing how Neil puts Brenda and her life on a

pedestal.

Neil maintains his fantasy of Brenda's life through his lack of self-awareness—his refusal to acknowledge that he likes her for her beauty and wealth alone. Roth makes the connection between lack of self-evaluation and the ability to buy into a fantasy explicit when Neil drives up into the mountains alone and watches some deer. He wonders about his relationship, thinking, "Only Brenda shone. Money and comfort would not erase her singleness—they hadn't yet, or had they? What was I loving, I wondered, and since I am not one to stick scalpels into myself, I wiggled my hand in the fence and allowed a tiny-nosed buck to lick my thoughts away." In this moment, Neil begins to understand that he loves Brenda perhaps only because of the money and comfort that she could provide, but he immediately pushes away this thought, refusing to follow it to its logical conclusion: that they should break up. With this, Roth shows how self-delusion and a resistance to self-examination perpetuate one's fantasies.

This notion that lack of self-reflection fuels fantasy is also apparent at Neil's library job. For a time, a young Black boy comes to the library every day to stare at a **book** of paintings by the artist Paul Gauguin. The boy is obsessed with looking at the Tahitian women in the paintings, dreaming about a peaceful life on a Pacific island. Neil connects the boy's dreams with his own experience: when he visits Short Hills, Neil describes the town as having become "rose-colored, like a Gauguin stream." He, too, fantasizes about his own version of Gauguin's paintings. It is only at the end of the book that Neil understands the folly of such fantasy. When the boy stops coming to the library, Neil thinks that this might be for the best, positing, "No sense carrying dreams of Tahiti in your head if you can't afford the fare." Neil understands the value of self-reflection and the value of facing reality, even if he doesn't fully do so himself yet.

Towards the end of the novella, however, Neil starts to recognize his fantasies about Brenda for what they are: simple idealizations rather than true love. The more he reflects on himself and what he wants out of life and his relationship, the more he realizes how much he has been living in a fantasy and that he must return to reality. At the end of the summer, when Neil and Brenda attend her brother Ron's wedding together, he watches her sleeping at the end of the night and thinks that he felt he knows "no more of her than what [he] could see in a photograph." While he believes he loves Brenda, he starts to recognize that he has only fallen in love with an image or an idea of her, rather than an actual person. Only at the very end of the novella, once Neil and Brenda break up, is Neil able to reflect on himself and genuinely evaluate their relationship. This is made literal when he approaches a library window and stares at his reflection in the glass. While he does this, he acknowledges that he loved Brenda, but he also wonders honestly what it was about her that made him love her. He thinks, "If she had only been slightly *not* Brenda...but then

would I have loved her?" If she had been a little different, in other words, he might have been able to idealize her less—but then, he acknowledges, he may not have loved her at all. Thus, only through reflection can Neil move beyond fantasies and evaluate what he might truly want from life.



## NOSTALGIA VS. PROGRESS

In *Goodbye, Columbus*, the protagonist, Neil, observes that many people around him appear dissatisfied with the current state of their lives.

This is often due to their obsession with the past, as they are nostalgic for their former glory and cannot imagine a future quite as bright as their past. Those who *are* satisfied with their lives, however, rarely dwell on the past and focus instead on the progress they have made and the strides they might continue to make in the future. In other words, obsession with the past precludes happiness in the present, because it isn't focused on making the future better.

Through Ron and Leo Patimkin, Roth illustrates the toxicity of nostalgia. Ron is nostalgic for his college years, which is symbolized by his favorite **record**. This record highlights events from his senior year at Ohio State University, including announcements from a basketball game in which Ron played and a recording of the school song that ends with a voice saying, "goodbye, Columbus" (Columbus is the city in which Ron's college was located). Ron constantly plays the record in his room, humming along to the song as he remembers his former glory. This contrasts with the unhappiness that he feels in his job at his father's kitchen and sink company. He took this job as a way to provide for his fiancée, Harriet, although he had intended to become a gym teacher. It's clear from the joy Ron finds in sports that teaching gym would have made Ron happier than working for his father, but instead of taking steps to fix his career, he tries to relive the glory of his sports days by listening to his record on repeat. Nostalgia is, for him, a form of escapism that prevents him from being excited about the present or the future—on the night before his wedding, for instance, he spends the evening listening to the record over and over and feeling sad, rather than feeling excited and lucky to be marrying someone he loves and starting a new chapter of his life.

Likewise, Leo Patimkin (Mr. Patimkin's half-brother) seems ruined by nostalgia. When Neil meets Leo at Ron's wedding, Leo recounts the two best things that ever happened to him: getting a good deal on his first apartment and spending a night with a woman in San Francisco during the war. His life in the present, however, is much less happy, as he laments getting married too early and he hates his dismal job as a light bulb salesman. Neil recognizes that in focusing on the past, Leo is preventing potential happiness in the present: it's clear to Neil that the world is open to Leo as a salesman, but that he nonetheless refuses to travel farther than Connecticut for fear of more disappointment. Neil thinks, "if you had a heartfelt [of

sorrow] by the time you reached New London, what new awfulness could you look forward to in Vladivostok?" Neil posits, then, that Leo's obsession with these two fleeting moments in the past and the sorrow he has experienced since then only inspire pessimism and prevent him from trying to improve his life.

By contrast, characters who try to move away from the past—primarily Brenda's father, Mr. Patimkin—find happiness more readily in the present. Mr. Patimkin avoids the trap of nostalgia because he is proud of the progress that he has made in his career and with his family. For instance, he recounts how, during his wedding, he ate with forks and knives from the "five and ten" (a store selling inexpensive goods) but says with pride that Ron needs "gold to eat off [of]." Thus, rather than idealizing his former life, he is instead able to appreciate the progress that he has made. Neil also notes as he looks around the Patimkins' house that there are no pictures of Mr. Patimkin growing up as a poor Jewish child, but there are many photos of his own children's successes in sports and other life events. His refusal to focus on the poverty from which he came enables him to be happy in the present and optimistic about progress in the future. Neil also recognizes the broader appeal in focusing on progress rather than nostalgia. He thinks about Jews in Newark who had struggled but eventually enabled their children leave the city for more affluent suburbs like Short Hills. Yearning for the past is characteristic of people who do not have hopes for improving their station in the future, but when one is able to appreciate the progress they've already made—and anticipate making more progress in the future, like positioning one's children for future success—it's easier to avoid the trap of nostalgia.

The novella is inherently rooted in the past, as Neil reflects on the youthful experience of first love from an unspecified future time. While Neil's narration is sometimes wistful, he also recognizes the difficulties and bittersweet feelings that plagued his relationship with Brenda. It is unclear whether Neil falls victim to the same nostalgic obsession as other characters, or whether he is recounting these events after finding a better future and is looking at his relationship with Brenda not out of nostalgia but to appreciate how far he has come. In this way, Roth does not suggest that evaluating the past is inherently good or bad; rather, it is one's attitude toward the past that can affect one's happiness in the present and in the future.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.





## THE GAUGUIN BOOK

The Gauguin book illustrates how some fantasies can only be maintained through self-delusion. The Gauguin book is first introduced when a young African American boy visits the library where Neil works and finds the art section. Neil sees him looking at a book of reprints of paintings by Paul Gauguin, particularly his idyllic paintings of Tahitian women. The boy dreams of going to Tahiti, fantasizing about a peaceful life among the women. He returns every day for more than a week to look at the book obsessively. Neil even takes on some of the boy's fantasy himself, thinking about Short Hills (where Brenda lives) as though it is a Gauguin painting, and dreaming about sailing to Tahiti with the boy. But at the end of the novella, Neil recognizes how the boy's fantasies (and by extension, Neil's own) are unproductive and unrealistic. Another man checks out the Gauguin book, and the boy stops showing up at the library. Neil thinks that the boy is probably better off this way, thinking there's no use dreaming of Tahiti if the boy has no way of getting there and fulfilling this fantasy. Thus, Roth uses the book to demonstrate that only through brutal self-reflection can people move on from fantasies and face life more realistically.



## THE COLUMBUS RECORD

The Columbus record symbolizes the way in which nostalgia for the past can impede one's happiness in the present and future. The Columbus record is a record given to all seniors at Ohio State University, the college that Ron attended. It includes the school song, highlights from the year, and it ends with a voiceover saying "goodbye, Columbus," referring to the town where OSU is located. Ron listens to it constantly, and he is particularly thrilled by a recording of a basketball game in which Ron played—in the recording, he can hear people cheering him on. Ron listens to this record particularly after he is forced to join Mr. Patimkin's business instead of becoming a gym teacher, as he wanted. He even listens to it with Neil on the eve of his wedding. Thus, the record exemplifies a part of Ron's life that he loved, and which he has been forced to give up now that he is getting married. His obsession with the record illustrates how it is a tool to escape into a happier time for him, while simultaneously underscoring Ron's dissatisfaction with aspects of his life in the present.



## DIAPHRAGM

The diaphragm represents Neil's desire to take the upper hand in his and Brenda's sexual relationship. A diaphragm is a type of contraceptive device; it is a cap that is used during sex to block a woman's cervix and prevent pregnancy. At this time in the 1950s, diaphragms were usually

only given to married women by doctors. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Neil insists that Brenda get a diaphragm as a way of demonstrating her commitment to him. Brenda is hesitant, knowing she will have to lie about her marital status to get one, but ultimately relents, giving Neil power over decisions about Brenda's sexuality and affirming that she is serious about him. However, when Mrs. Patimkin finds the diaphragm in Brenda's dresser, she is scandalized that her daughter is having premarital sex and sends Brenda a distraught letter. This forces Brenda to break up with Neil, feeling that she will not be accepted by her family unless she does so. Thus, the diaphragm illustrates how the power struggle between Neil and Brenda ultimately ruins their relationship.




## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Goodbye, Columbus* published in 1993.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven, for the sun itself became bigger, lower, and rounder, and soon I was driving past long lawns which seemed to be twirling water on themselves, and past houses where no one sat on stoops, where lights were on but no windows open, for those inside, refusing to share the very texture of life with those of us outside, regulated with a dial the amounts of moisture that were allowed access to their skin.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 8-9

### Explanation and Analysis

After having seen Brenda at the Green Lane Country Club earlier that day, Neil drives from Newark—the working class industrial city where he lives—to hang out with Brenda in the wealthy New Jersey suburbs. His effusive language illustrates his idealization of the suburbs, as he literally describes it as a kind of magical "heaven" rising above his life in the city. Even before he fully understands the extent of Brenda's family's wealth, he knows that the life they lead is one literally and figuratively elevated above his own.

Yet here Neil also recognizes the dark side of that heaven, as it creates and reinforces class divisions. While in the city people have to sit out on stoops to stay cool, in the suburbs,

homes are air conditioned and people are able to regulate the amount of discomfort that they feel. It is notable, too, that Neil understands exactly on which side of that division he falls, as he clearly describes himself as being on the “outside” and understands inherently that he doesn’t fully fit into this fantasy of the suburbs.

“I had my nose fixed.”  
“What was the matter with it?”

“It was bumpy.”

“A lot?”

“No,” she said, “I was pretty. Now I’m prettier. My brother’s having his fixed in the fall.”

“Does he want to be prettier?”

She didn’t answer and walked ahead of me again.

“I don’t mean to sound facetious. I mean why’s he doing it?”

“He wants to...unless he becomes a gym teacher...but he won’t.”


she said. “We all look like my father.”

“Is he having his fixed?”

“Why are you so nasty?”

“I’m not. I’m sorry.”

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman, Brenda Patimkin (speaker), Mr. Patimkin, Ron Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis

When Neil meets Brenda at the country club while she’s playing tennis, he notes that she won’t play close to the net until it gets dark. Brenda explains that this is because she got her nose “fixed.” This dialogue illustrates one aspect of Brenda and her family’s assimilation. Since “bumpy” noses are a stereotypical Jewish feature, Brenda’s choosing to get rid of the bump in her nose is symbolic of her family’s desire to assimilate. Brenda also reinforces the idea that she *wants* to assimilate, because she thinks that having a bumpy nose is ugly, so she prefers to conform to white Protestant standards of beauty.

Neil’s sarcasm hints at his view of the matter—he thinks it’s excessive and unnecessary to change one’s nose, and also, as he notes later, he knows the procedure probably cost a lot of money. Neil understands the relationship between wealth and assimilation, recognizing that the only reason Brenda and Ron are able to wash away some of their Jewish heritage to fit into the elite culture of their suburb is that their wealth allows them to change their appearance. Thus,

Roth suggests that their ability to assimilate is directly related to their wealth.

“I felt the wet spots on her shoulder blades, and beneath them, I’m sure of it, a faint fluttering, as though something stirred so deep in her breasts, so far back it could make itself felt through her shirt. It was like the fluttering of wings, tiny wings no bigger than her breasts. The smallness of the wings did not bother me—it would not take an eagle to carry me up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 14

### Explanation and Analysis



After Brenda and Neil spend their first evening together, Neil pulls Brenda in for a kiss. As he places his hands on her back, he feels a “fluttering” go through her. This description of Brenda reinforces Neil’s view of her as an angel who lives in heaven; he had previously referenced her wings and her white outfit earlier in the chapter. Thus, Roth illustrates how Neil has already started to view Brenda as a kind of fantasy, idealizing her past the point of being a normal girl and elevating her into something almost supernatural.


Roth also illustrates how this idealization goes hand in hand with Neil’s idealization of the wealthy suburbs. He hints here that Brenda’s wings could literally carry him from Newark to Short Hills—a place that he has already described as being physically closer to heaven. Thus, his fantasy about Brenda is inextricably tied to the fantasy about the life that Brenda represents. Later, when Neil later tries to evaluate the sincerity of his desire for Brenda, he is forced to come to the conclusion that his affection for Brenda is derived not from genuine love for her. Instead, it has to do with his idealization of the money, comfort, and success that she and her family could provide for him if he married her. At this point, however, Neil is unable to fully recognize that this is the source of his affection—he still thinks that he loves Brenda herself.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ The next day I held Brenda's glasses for her once again, this time not as momentary servant but as afternoon guest; or perhaps as both, which still was an improvement. She wore a black tank suit and went barefooted and among the other women, with their Cuban heels and boned-up breasts, their knuckle-sized rings, their straw hats, which resembled immense wicker pizza plates and had been purchased, as I heard one deeply tanned woman rasp, "from the cutest little *shvartze* when we docked at Barbados." Brenda among them was elegantly simple, like a sailor's dream of a Polynesian maiden, albeit one with prescription sun glasses and the last name of Patimkin.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), The Boy, Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 14


**Explanation and Analysis**

After Neil and Brenda spend their first evening together, Neil returns to the club with Brenda the following day. Neil's description of the club once again highlights its affluence, particularly his description of the women's rings, their implied plastic surgery, and their vacations in Barbados. The quote also begins to track Neil's slow ascension into someone who fits in at the club despite his poorer origins. Even though he is still a "momentary servant," he is also an "afternoon guest," and the book will track his increasing comfort in being at the club as he assimilates into the culture of Brenda's family.

Neil's reference to Brenda as a Polynesian maiden also foreshadows the plot with the young boy who comes to Neil's job at the library and looks at Gauguin reprints, dreaming of a peaceful life in Tahiti among the Polynesian women depicted in Gauguin's paintings. These impossible dreams mirror the way that Neil thinks about Brenda as he puts her on a pedestal and idealizes the life that she leads. Like the boy, he associates her with a life of simple elegance and comfort—but also like the boy, it's a life he'll never be part of.

☞☞ Money! My father's up to here with it, but whenever I buy a coat you should hear her. "You don't have to go to Bonwit's, young lady, Ohrbach's has the strongest fabrics of any of them." Who *wants* a strong fabric! Finally I get what I want, but not till she's had a chance to aggravate me. Money is a waste for her. She doesn't even know how to enjoy it. She still thinks we live in Newark.

**Related Characters:** Brenda Patimkin (speaker), Mr. Patimkin, Mrs. Patimkin, Neil Klugman

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 26

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Neil's first dinner at the Patimkin's, he and Brenda discuss her family members. Brenda reveals to Neil that she thinks her mother hates her. First she implies that this is because Mrs. Patimkin is jealous of Brenda's youth and athleticism, but in this quote Brenda gets at the heart of their conflict. Roth has already explored the way in which the Patimkin family has been able to assimilate because of their wealth. Here, Roth introduces a tension between Brenda, who appears to want to use their wealth to assimilate, while her mother is more hesitant to do so. This likely stems from the fact that Mrs. Patimkin is orthodox and embraces more traditional Jewish culture and beliefs, whereas her husband and children are less orthodox than she is.

Brenda's assimilation is symbolized by the different department stores she references. Bonwit's is a luxury department store, whereas Ohrbach's is more moderately priced and has Jewish founders. Thus, Brenda's wealth enables her to afford clothing that symbolizes the American elite, while her mother would prefer her to remain somewhat connected to her Jewish roots.

Brenda's statement that Mrs. Patimkin "still thinks [they] live in Newark" also highlights the class and cultural differences between herself and Neil. This statement implies that living in Newark necessarily comes with a lower socioeconomic status, which would put Mrs. Patimkin in the frame of mind of spending less money on clothes. But while Brenda emphasizes that the Patimkins have moved beyond their Jewish roots in Newark, Neil still lives there and remains connected to it. Brenda thus reinforces their socioeconomic hierarchy and the fact that wealth has enabled their ability to leave Newark and assimilate into a more affluent society.


## Chapter 3 Quotes


☝☝ “Look, look, look here at this one. Ain’t that the fuckin’ *life*?”  
I agreed it was and left.

Later I sent Jimmy Boylen hopping down the stairs to tell McKee that everything was all right. The rest of the day was uneventful.

I sat at the Information Desk thinking about Brenda and reminding myself that that evening, I would have to get gas before I started up to Short Hills, which I could see now, in my mind’s eye, at dusk, rose-colored, like a Gauguin stream.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman, The Boy (speaker), Brenda Patimkin, John McKee

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 37

### Explanation and Analysis


At Neil’s job at the library, a young Black boy comes to look at a book of Paul Gauguin’s reprints—particularly the paintings depicting Tahitian women. Neil’s coworkers are skeptical of what the boy might be doing with the book, and so Neil agrees to check on him. Here, the boy shows Neil the paintings he is looking at, excited and entranced by the idyllic settings. Neil then echoes the sentiment as he thinks about driving to Short Hills.

Roth thus illustrates how both Neil and the young boy are fantasizing and idealizing the images in their lives—for the boy, the idea of what life in Tahiti looks like, and for Neil, the image in his mind of life in the suburbs and his relationship with Brenda. Both idealizations end up being unproductive, as Neil notes later in the story, because they are unattainable and a form of self-delusion. But Neil doesn’t yet see how his fantasy is really a form of self-delusion, preferring to believe that he loves Brenda even while he doesn’t really know her. Instead of seeing her as a full and complex person, he only sees the future she represents: an affluent life in the suburbs. Seeing Brenda through the sheen of a Gauguin painting makes everything appear rosier and more pleasant than it actually is.

☝☝ When I began to unbutton her dress she resisted me, and I like to think it was because she knew how lovely she looked in it. But she looked lovely, my Brenda, anyway, and we folded it carefully and held each other close and soon there we were, Brenda falling, slowly but with a smile, and me, rising. How can I describe loving Brenda? It was so sweet, as though I’d finally scored that twenty-first point.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Julie Patimkin, Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

About a week and a half after Neil and Brenda begin dating, they make love in the Patimkins’ TV room. Here, Roth demonstrates how Neil sees their relationship as a competition for power, just as Brenda had done and will continue to do. Neil asserts power over Brenda when he convinces her to make love to him despite her hesitation, and then he describes having sex with her literally as winning—the “twenty-first point” refers to a ping pong game that he had played earlier with Julie, wherein she had stormed off before Neil had won the last point. Thus, Neil is seeing their relationship in the context of that game. In this moment, he is the one who is winning.

Yet Neil’s desire to have the power over the sexual aspect of their relationship proves to be their downfall—when Neil pressures Brenda to get a diaphragm and then Mrs. Patimkin finds it in her room and discovers that they have been having sex, Brenda and Neil are forced to break up. This illustrates how relationships that are based on power struggles rather than equity and love are ultimately doomed to fail.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ But Brenda was gone and this time it seemed as though she’d never come back. I settled back and waited for the sun to dawn over the ninth hole, prayed it would if only for the comfort of its light, and when Brenda finally returned to me I would not let her go, and her cold wetness crept into me somehow and made me shiver. “That’s it, Brenda. Please, no more games,” I said, and then when I spoke again I held her so tightly I almost dug my body into hers. “I love you,” I said, “I do.”



**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

Less than two weeks after Brenda and Neil start dating, they spend an evening at the club and stay past dark, after the club's staff has gone home. Brenda suggests that they play a game, explaining that she'll close her eyes, Neil can take a swim, and she'll wait for him to come back and surprise her with a kiss. They take turns doing this, but each time Neil is anxious that Brenda will leave while he's in the pool, or while he's waiting for her to come back.



This quote occurs at the end of their game, when Neil is terrified that Brenda has stayed away so long and feels desperate for her to return. Brenda has thus set up a game that reflects the power dynamic between them: a test to see who can be more withholding from the other person. Neil's insecurity about their relationship and his doubt about Brenda's affection for him causes him to cave first, holding onto her desperately and affirming his love for her. This is particularly significant because Brenda asked him earlier in the evening if he loved her, and he responded that he did not. Thus, Brenda's game also proved that she had the power to make him say that he loved her out of fear that she might leave otherwise. Yet the coldness and the anxiety that Neil feels as a result of the game foreshadows how this dynamic isn't a healthy one—power games are not conducive to fostering a loving relationship.

●● “A week?” she said. “They got room for a week?”  
“Aunt Gladys, they don't live over the store.”

“I lived over a store I wasn't ashamed. Thank God we always had a roof. We never went begging in the streets,” she told me as I packed the Bermudas I'd just bought, “and your cousin Susan we'll put through college, Uncle Max should live and be well. We didn't send her away to camp for August, she doesn't have shoes when she wants them, sweaters she doesn't have a drawerful—”

“I didn't say anything, Aunt Gladys.”

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman, Aunt Gladys (speaker), Susan, Uncle Max, Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

When Neil tells Aunt Gladys that he's going to spend a week at Brenda's house, she is miffed—and Neil's assurance that the Patimkins aren't poor (that they don't “live over the store”) only makes Aunt Gladys feel worse. This highlights the class tension between Neil's and Brenda's family: while his family comes from a humble background, Brenda's family has been able to amass a large amount of wealth. Aunt Gladys's statement on Susan's clothes also contrasts with Brenda's earlier rant about being able to buy the luxury clothing that she wants. Aunt Gladys affirms, however, the fact that they are not completely poor—that they too have been able to make progress and improve their social standing.

Yet Aunt Gladys's protests in the face of Neil's offhanded comment also belie a certain amount of insecurity. Aunt Gladys understands the appeal of the Patimkins' wealth for Neil and the fact that he is literally and figuratively becoming distant from his family as he assimilates into the Patimkin family. This is reinforced by the small detail that Neil is packing Bermudas that he just bought—the same type of clothing that Brenda wears. Thus, he is trying to fit into the family more comfortably through adopting the style that is typical of the upper class.

●● “Millburn they live?”

“Short Hills. I'll leave the number.”

“Since when do Jewish people live in Short Hills? They couldn't be real Jews believe me.”

“They're real Jews,” I said.

“I'll see it I'll believe it.”

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman, Aunt Gladys (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

When Neil tells Aunt Gladys that the Patimkins live in Short Hills, she rejects the notion that “real Jews” would live there. This is another example of how the Patimkins' wealth enables their assimilation and distances them from their Jewish heritage, at least outwardly. Newark (where Neil lives and where Brenda used to live) is known as a hub for working-class Jews, and so living there represents a

connection to Jewish identity. Short Hills, however, is not known as a particularly Jewish town, as Aunt Gladys implies here. Thus, the fact that the Patimkins live in Short Hills illustrates how they have given up a large part of their Jewish identity by living in an affluent neighborhood. The ability to afford to move to this town enables them to assimilate into the wealthy American elite.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ When the puny sixty-watt bulb was twisted on, I saw that the place was full of old furniture—two wing chairs with hair oil lines at the back, a sofa with a paunch in its middle, a bridge table, two bridge chairs with their stuffing showing, a mirror whose backing had peeled off, shadeless lamps, lampless shades, a coffee table with a cracked glass top, and a pile of rolled up shades.


“What is this?” I said.

“A storeroom. Our old furniture.”

“How old?”

“From Newark,” she said.

**Related Characters:** Brenda Patimkin, Neil Klugman (speaker), Mrs. Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 67

### Explanation and Analysis

While Neil is staying at the Patimkins, Brenda shows Neil a storage room where they keep all of their old furniture from Newark. The room is a physical reminder of the family's humble origins, which resemble Neil's present life. Stowing the furniture away in a dusty spare room is odd—instead of getting rid of it, they hang on to it, presumably to remind themselves of where they came from. In this way, the furniture is a little like their Jewish heritage. They hang on to it, they still maintain some Jewish traditions and practices in their home (like keeping kosher), but to anyone who didn't know them well, they would seem just like their wealthy Protestant neighbors. It seems that the Patimkins, despite their commitment to assimilation, still hang on to aspects of their working class Jewish identity—although, those aspects (like the furniture) are neglected and kept private.

☛ “I'm just going to run a half today, Bren. We'll see what I do...” and I heard Brenda click the watch, and then when I was on the far side of the track, the clouds trailing above me like my own white, fleecy tail, I saw that Brenda was on the ground, hugging her knees, and alternately checking the watch and looking out at me. We were the only ones there and it all reminded me of one of those scenes in race-horse movies, where an old trainer like Walter Brennan and a young handsome man clock the beautiful girl's horse in the early Kentucky morning, to see if it really is the fastest two-year-old alive.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 72



### Explanation and Analysis


During Neil's vacation at the Patimkins, Brenda suggests that Neil run on a track every day while Brenda times him. Here, Neil describes the experience, likening what he and Brenda are doing to horse racing. In this scenario, Neil is the racehorse and Brenda is the trainer, which illustrates the power dynamic between Neil and Brenda. Brenda is likened to Neil's trainer, implying that she has the power to make him do what she wants. Not only that, but Brenda is literally conditioning him every day to perform better and better, just as a horse is conditioned to perform well for its owner. Additionally, like a racehorse and its trainer, their relationship is centered on Neil's ability to please Brenda, and Neil is pushed to his limits in order to do so.

This dynamic is reinforced even further when Neil's improvements lead Brenda to tell Neil that she loves him for the first time. Like the owner of a horse, she is rewarding him for good behavior, and is thus training him to work towards her high standards in exchange for her praise and love. Overall, this racehorse metaphor implies that the competition that Brenda has set up endows her with the upper hand in their relationship.

Up on the beach there were beautiful bare-skinned Negresses, and none of them moved; 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...” and though we did not want to go, the little boy and I, the boat was moving and there was nothing we could do about it, and he shouted at me that it was my fault and I shouted it was his for not having a library card, but we were wasting our breath, for we here further and further from the island and soon the natives were nothing at all.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Ron Patimkin, Brenda Patimkin, The Boy

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 74-75

### Explanation and Analysis

After Neil spends his first week at the Patimkins, he has a dream that upsets him, which depicts him on a ship with the boy from the library. Here, Neil’s dream mixes two metaphors in the book: first, he imagines that he is sailing away from Tahiti, which represents the fantasy life of the little boy. The fact that they are slowly and helplessly moving away from this fantasy correlates to Neil’s concern that, by the end of the summer, when Brenda returns to Radcliffe, their relationship will end. This would signify the end of his own fantasy—that of making a life with Brenda. The dream also illustrates Neil’s concern about the future more generally, because the reference to the library card illustrates that Neil is still concerned that he may lose his job at the library, adding to his general worry about not fulfilling his potential. This is another reason why making a life with Brenda is so appealing to him, as it opens up the possibility that Neil could join the Patimkins’ business—as she said to him earlier, all of Neil’s worries could disappear if he loved her.

Additionally, Neil’s dream integrates the Columbus record that Ron had been playing during the previous nights. The record is a representation of nostalgia, and the bittersweet feelings of saying goodbye to something a person has loved. The fact that “goodbye, Columbus” is present in the dream illustrates his worry about having to look back on his relationship after it has already ended, just as Ron looks back with crippling nostalgia on his time at Ohio State. The irony of this concern is that this is exactly what Neil is doing in the novella—he is narrating from a time in the unspecified future, telling the full story of his old relationship. The fact

that “Goodbye, Columbus” is the title of the novella reflects that he’s still remembering this young summer love, even far in the future.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

“Okay,” I said. “I just wish you’d realize what it is you’re getting angry about. It’s not my suggestion, Brenda.”


“No? What is it?”


“It’s me.”

“Oh don’t start that again, will you? I can’t win, no matter what I say.”

“Yes, you can,” I said. “You have.”

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Harriet Ehrlich, Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

As Brenda and Neil fight over his suggestion that she get a diaphragm, Brenda gets upset, arguing that they have safe sex and she would have to lie about being married in order to get that kind of birth control. Neil argues that she should want to get it simply because he’s asking her to do so. Thus, Neil’s suggestion becomes an extension of the general competition and power struggles that characterize their relationship. He views her getting a diaphragm not only as a gesture of commitment, but as evidence that she is willing to do what he wants simply because he wants it. To him, Brenda agreeing to his request would stand in contrast with many of their other disagreements or games, in which Brenda often takes the upper hand and makes Neil do whatever *she* wants.

As they argue about an intimate issue, Neil thinks about the situation in terms of a competition. When he relents, saying that he doesn’t want her to get a diaphragm if it will make her this upset, he equates this with her “winning.” Their argument thus reinforces the idea that these constant competitions only invite conflict between them, and that power struggles undermine the foundation of a loving relationship.

☛ Here you need a little of the *gonif* in you. You know what that means? *Gonif*?"

"Thief," I said.

"You know more than my own kids. They're *goyim*, my kids, that's how much they understand."

**Related Characters:** Mr. Patimkin (speaker), Harriet Ehrlich, Mrs. Patimkin, Ron Patimkin, Brenda Patimkin, Neil Klugman

**Related Themes:** 


**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

One day while Brenda is out shopping with Harriet before the wedding, Mrs. Patimkin sends Neil on an errand to collect silver patterns from Mr. Patimkin at his work. There, Mr. Patimkin talks about how Ron (who has recently started working at the business) has brains but doesn't have the attitude of a thief. Here Mr. Patimkin reinforces how his children have been able to assimilate, which highlights the class division between the Patimkins and Neil. Mr. Patimkin's wealth has enabled them to live in an affluent neighborhood in which they are not as exposed to Yiddish words like *gonif*. Neil, on the other hand, has grown up in a neighborhood around people who share his Jewish culture, and therefore he is more familiar with the vocabulary. This distinction even leads Mr. Patimkin to characterize his children as *goyim*—the Yiddish word for a non-Jewish person. Even though their families come from similar ethnic backgrounds, the wealth that Mr. Patimkin has able to amass has led to his own children's assimilation into white Protestant culture, and therefore he characterizes them as not really Jewish at all.

☛ "Ronald, get him the silver patterns." Ron turned away and Mr. Patimkin said, "When I got married we had forks and knives from the five and ten. This kid needs gold to eat off," but there was no anger; far from it.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman, Mr. Patimkin (speaker), Ron Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis


When Neil is picking up silver patterns from Mr. Patimkin's

work for Ron's wedding, Mr. Patimkin talks about how he had silverware from an inexpensive store, while Ron needs more expensive things for his own wedding. Yet the fact that Mr. Patimkin says this without anger (and the "far from it" implies joy or pride, even) illustrates his lack of nostalgia for the past, and how instead he is appreciative of the progress he has made. He is able to appreciate the fact that his children are in better financial standing than he was growing up. Even if they need or expect more expensive things, this only highlights the fact that they can afford those things.

Mr. Patimkin is thus in contrast with other characters, like Ron or Leo Patimkin (whom readers meet at Ron's wedding). Those characters are instead focused on nostalgia because the past was a happier time in their life, and this nostalgia precludes them from feeling happy in the present. Mr. Patimkin, on the other hand, is happy with his life in the present, observing how far he and his children have come from his humbler past.

☛ Only Brenda shone. Money and comfort would not erase her singleness—they hadn't yet, or had they? What was I loving, I wondered, and since I am not one to stick scalpels into myself, I wiggled my hand in the fence and allowed a tiny-nosed buck to lick my thoughts away.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 96

### Explanation and Analysis

One day while Brenda is out shopping for the wedding, Neil drives his car into the mountains to look at the deer. He reflects on his love for Brenda, wondering about the source of it. This is one of Roth's prime illustrations of how Neil's self-delusion and willful ignorance of his feelings is enabling their relationship. He notes that Brenda shines singly in his mind, but he wonders whether this is in spite of, or because of, the money and comfort that she provides.

However, his immediate insistence that he is "not one to stick scalpels into [himself]" illustrates that Neil is purposefully avoiding self-examination. He doesn't want to see that his fantasy of Brenda is based not on any real affection for her, but rather her beauty and the easy life that she could provide for him. The course of the rest of the novella tracks Neil as he stops pushing away this impulse





and attempts to understand more and more about why he loves Brenda. This culminates at the end of the story, in which Neil finally understands his attitude toward their relationship. But here, Roth continues to emphasize how a lack of self-reflection enables Neil to pursue an unrealistic fantasy.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ God, I said, I am twenty-three years old. I want to make the best of things. Now the doctor is about to wed Brenda to me, and I am not entirely certain this is all for the best. What is it I love, Lord? Why have I chosen? Who is Brenda? The race is to the swift. Should I have stopped to think?

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

When Brenda is visiting the doctor's office in New York City to get her diaphragm, Neil peeks into St. Patrick's church to escape from the heat. While he is there, he prays silently to God, wondering whether what he is doing is right and examining his love for Brenda once more. This illustrates a turning point in how Neil thinks about his relationship. Before this point, Neil had been hesitant to try to understand himself and his relationship with Brenda, choosing not to think too hard about why he loved her. This allowed him to perpetuate this fantasy of a perfect relationship and a perfect life that Brenda could provide for him.

This monologue illustrates a shift in that thinking. Even though they aren't getting married, Neil views Brenda getting a diaphragm as a significant commitment—explicitly likening it to being “wed.” Yet simultaneously, he realizes perhaps for the first time that he doesn't really know Brenda and doesn't fully understand why he loves her. Yet it is significant that Neil is asking God these things and still not fully seeking the answers in himself. Thus, while Roth illustrates that this is a step forward for Neil on his journey to come to reality and move away from his fantasies, he hasn't fully made the necessary examination of himself yet that will allow him to recognize that a life with Brenda is not actually what he wants.


☝ There was goose flesh on Ron's veiny arms as the Voice continued. “We offer ourselves to you then, world, and come at you in search of Life. And to you, Ohio State, to you Columbus, we say thank you, thank you and goodbye. We'll miss you, in the fall, in the winter, in the spring, but some day we shall return. Till then, goodbye, Ohio State, goodbye, red and white, goodbye, Columbus... goodbye, Columbus...goodbye...”

Ron's eyes were closed. The band was upending its last truckload of nostalgia and I tiptoed from the room, in step with the 2163 members of the Class of '57.

I closed my door, but then opened it and looked back at Ron: he was still humming on his bed.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Ron Patimkin

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

The night before Ron's wedding, he invites Neil into his room to listen to the Columbus record, which Ron listens to constantly. Here, Neil discovers that it is a record that is given to the seniors at Ohio State University (located in Columbus, Ohio), which includes highlights from their final year of college. Ron's reaction to the record, even though he listens to it nearly every day, provides insight into Roth's views on nostalgia. Even on the eve of what is meant to be one of the happiest days of Ron's life, he is not looking forward, but is instead looking backward on what he is missing and what he is saying goodbye to. His marriage means that he has had to give up his plan to become a gym teacher, and instead he has joined his father's business because he feels he has responsibilities to his family now, even though becoming a gym teacher would clearly have made him much happier. Now, he is nostalgic for the ability to play sports and to do what makes him happy, illustrating how that nostalgia is precluding, at least to a degree, his happiness in the present.



Additionally, it is significant that Roth uses the phrase “Goodbye, Columbus” as the title for the novella, as it implies a certain nostalgia in Neil as well. The whole story centers on Neil as he looks back from an unspecified future point on his summer romance with Brenda. Yet it is unclear whether Neil looks back on this time solely with nostalgia or whether he is recounting the events after finding a better future and is looking at the relationship in appreciation of his progress. In this recounting, therefore, Roth does not

suggest that evaluating the past is inherently good or bad; rather, it is one's attitude toward the past—like Ron's obsession with reliving his glory days—that can affect one's happiness in the present and in the future.

☞ Then he looked at me. “Whatever my Buck wants is good enough for me. There's no business too big it can't use another head.”

I smiled, though not directly at him, and beyond I could see Leo sopping up champagne and watching the three of us; when he caught my eye he made a sign with his hand, a circle with his thumb and forefinger, indicating, “That a boy, that a boy!”

**Related Characters:** Mr. Patimkin, Neil Klugman (speaker), Ron Patimkin, Leo Patimkin, Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 109

### Explanation and Analysis

At Ron's wedding, Mr. Patimkin shares his joy with Brenda and Neil. He also implies that if Brenda and Neil want to get married, he would support the decision and let Neil work for his business. This illustrates how Neil's exposure to the Patimkin family, and the fact that he has become more and more assimilated into their lives, could become fully realized if he married Brenda—he would become a real member of the family. It would also give him a greater chance at achieving the American dream, providing him with a much better paying job than his job at the library and his own degree of wealth and success

Leo acknowledges Neil's success at becoming integrated into the family. Because Leo has expressed his disappointment at not sharing his brother's wealth and success, it is a gesture indicating that Neil can avoid that same disappointment. Marrying Brenda would mean fulfilling the fantasy that he created at the beginning of their relationship—one that entails wealth and comfort.


## Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ What had probably happened was that he'd given up on the library and gone back to playing Willie Mays in the street. He was better off, I thought. No sense carrying dreams of Tahiti in your head if you can't afford the fare.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda

Patimkin, The Boy

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 120



### Explanation and Analysis


When Neil returns from his vacation, the Gauguin book has been checked out, and the young boy does not return to the library. Neil thinks that it's better that the boy didn't continue fantasizing about going to Tahiti, because it's unlikely he'd be able to achieve his fantasy. Thus, Neil recognizes that maintaining fantasies can often be unsatisfying and unproductive because they are often unattainable. If the boy were able to recognize the fact that the fantasies were unrealistic, then could he find something more productive to pour his time and energy into.

The same is true of Neil, even though he hasn't yet recognized it. His situation parallels the boy's: he views Brenda and Short Hills as a fantasy. Even though this might feel more within reach than Tahiti, in reality this only appears so because Neil has not fully examined himself or his love. Neil, too, may not actually want to adopt the life necessary to become Brenda's husband, but he does not realize it yet. It is only when he inspects his motivations and his feelings at the end of the book that he realizes that his fantasy was also unproductive, because it was not based in genuine love and would not have led him to a life that he truly wanted.

☞ 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? I was sure I had loved Brenda, though standing there, I knew I couldn't any longer. And I knew it would be a long while before I made love to anyone the way I had made love to her. With anyone else, could I summon up such a passion? Whatever spurred my love for her, had that spawned such lust too? If she had only been slightly not Brenda...but then would I have loved her?

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 135-136

### Explanation and Analysis



After Neil leaves Brenda in the hotel room in Boston, he finally reflects on himself and the reality of their relationship. First in this quote, he recognizes that so much of their relationship was consumed by competition—this desire to win out over the other, even in their sexual relationship. This competition had not only been a dominant feature of their relationship, but it had also actually led to its end: even though Neil won in the argument for Brenda to get a diaphragm, this ultimately led to the relationship's downfall.

Neil also finally comes to examine the source of his affection for Brenda. Even though he doesn't explicitly state it, he implies that so much of his love for her had been also spurred by lust: not only his desire for her physical beauty, but his desire to partake in her affluent lifestyle. He knows that these things had prevented him from actually loving Brenda as a person, but if Brenda had not had these qualities of beauty, he understands that he may not have loved her at all. It is only through this brutal self-examination that Neil can finally see how unrealistic the relationship was, how it was not truly based on love, and therefore that the only way to move forward is to end it.

●● I looked hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, and then my gaze pushed through it, over the cool floor, to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved.

I did not look very much longer, but took a train that got me into 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.

**Related Characters:** Neil Klugman (speaker), Mr. Patimkin, Brenda Patimkin

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

After Neil and Brenda break up in the hotel room in Boston, Neil walks along Harvard Yard and looks at his reflection in the glass window of a library. He thinks about his relationship with Brenda before returning home to Newark. His examination of his face in the glass is a literal representation of the fact that Neil has been forced to examine himself in order to understand what he truly wants in his life and to forego the fantasies that he has maintained about his relationship with Brenda.

Roth also uses the end of the novella to demonstrate how in ending his relationship with Brenda, Neil has turned away from his assimilation into the American elite and instead returned to his roots. The fact that Neil looks past himself in the glass to see the shelves of a library symbolizes his return to his working-class job, in contrast to the life of a businessman that he had foreseen in working for Mr. Patimkin. This symbolism is then made literal when Neil gets on a train to return to work at his library in the morning.

The fact that Neil returns to Newark on the first day of the Jewish New Year is also symbolic. Neil had traveled to Boston to spend time with Brenda rather than remain in Newark for the Jewish holidays with his family, and Roth concludes Neil's story with a reversal of that dynamic. This illustrates how turning away from Brenda's family's wealth also means returning to his home, his family, and his Jewish heritage—an inversion of how the Patimkins have been able to turn away from those things through their wealth.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

The first time Neil meets Brenda is at a country club to which his cousin Doris belongs. Brenda asks Neil to hold her glasses for her, then she dives into the pool and returns to him to retrieve them. He is instantly drawn to her, and that night, Neil decides to call her. When his Aunt Gladys prods him about who he's calling, he tells his Aunt that Brenda's last name is Patimkin and that he met her at the club. Aunt Gladys says that she doesn't know anyone named Patimkin, and Neil thinks that she wouldn't know anyone who belongs to Green Lane Country Club.

Aunt Gladys returns to cooking dinner. Neil, his cousin Susan, Gladys, and his uncle Max all eat dinner at different times, which Neil explains is due to the fact that his aunt is crazy. He suggests to Gladys that they all eat the same meal together, saying that it'll be easier for her. She replies that they all want to eat different things, and that it's less work to serve four different meals at different times. She says, "Twenty years I'm running a house. Go call your girl friend."

Neil calls up the Patimkins' house, but Brenda isn't home, so he apologizes for calling and hangs up. Then Neil eats dinner: a pot roast with gravy, potatoes, peas, and carrots. Aunt Gladys pesters him as he eats, saying that she won't buy peas if he doesn't want to eat them, or that if he doesn't like bread with seeds she wouldn't have cut a slice for him. Neil protests, trying to assure her that he likes all of the food.

Neil tries to call Brenda again after dinner, and this time she picks up. He introduces himself nervously, telling her that his name is Neil Klugman and that he held her glasses for her. She doesn't remember him, but he asks her if he can see her tonight. She says she'll be playing tennis, but that he can pick her up at 8:15 in Briarpath Hills. He says he'll be driving a tan Plymouth (though he doesn't say that it's a very old model) and he hangs up, pleased.

*Roth immediately establishes the class distinction between Brenda and Neil's two families, even from Neil's first interaction with Brenda. While Brenda belongs to the Green Lane Country Club, the fact that Aunt Gladys wouldn't even know anyone who belongs to the country club—much less belong to it herself—implies that the two families move in different social circles.*



*Here, Roth establishes the character of the family life that Neil has. He lives not with his parents but with his aunt, uncle, and cousin. Neil and his Aunt have a kind of classic banter, and the quote here illustrates the typical New York/New Jersey Jewish dialect and speech pattern that Aunt Gladys has.*



*Roth suggests the family's lower socioeconomic status through Aunt Gladys's nervous concern about wasting food or spending money on food that Neil doesn't like. Pot roast is also a stereotypically Jewish dish, establishing the connection between class and heritage as well.*



*Roth continues to provide small details that illustrate Brenda and Neil's class divide. While she spends her time playing tennis at country clubs in the suburbs, Neil lives in an apartment in the city of Newark and drives a very old car. Cars are classic symbols of social status and the American dream, and the fact that he has a very old one illustrates that Neil may have some means, but not so much that he falls into the upper echelon of society, as Brenda does.*





Neil drives out of Newark and approaches the suburbs, which he describes as driving “closer to heaven.” He arrives at the tennis court and sees Brenda, calling hello. She tells him that she’ll be one more game, which infuriates her opponent, Simp. As Brenda plays, Neil observes that in the sunlight, she seems to want to maintain an air of attractiveness—but as it grows darker, Brenda’s playing grows more intense and aggressive.

After the game, Simp refuses Neil’s offer of a ride home. He asks Brenda why she calls the girl Simp, and Brenda reveals it’s her Bennington name. When Neil asks if Brenda goes to Bennington, she says she goes to school “in Boston.” This frustrates Neil, who understands the veiled meaning of people who hint at “Boston and New Haven.” He says that he always comes out and says that he went to Newark Colleges of Rutgers University. When he presses her on it, she admits she goes to Radcliffe.

Neil and Brenda sit down on a bank of grass near the court, and he thinks, in her white outfit, that she looks like an angel and could have had wings. Brenda asks where Neil lives. When he says Newark, she remarks that she lived there when she was a baby. They start to walk together, and Brenda walks a step ahead of Neil.

Neil asks Brenda why she only rushes the net when it’s dark. She says that she doesn’t like to be too close to the net unless she knows that her opponent won’t return the hit. She explains that this is because of her nose, which she had fixed. He asks her what was wrong with her nose. She says it was “bumpy,” and that she wanted it to be “prettier.”

Brenda says that her brother Ron is getting his fixed, too. Neil asks if Ron wants to be “prettier,” too, and Brenda asks why Neil is being nasty. Neil apologizes. He then asks how much it costs; when she says \$1,000, he asks to see if she got her money’s worth. Brenda asks if Neil will stop being nasty if she lets him kiss her. He goes silent, and pulls her in for a kiss, feeling a faint fluttering through her body as he does so, as though she has wings.

*Neil’s thought about the suburbs being like heaven illustrates his idealization of the suburbs and the fact that he views them as a kind of fantasy. Additionally, here Roth constructs the idea that Brenda’s competitions (like the game of tennis) reflect her tendency to try to have power over others through winning. The game foreshadows how Neil will come to think of her throughout their relationship: as a formidable opponent.*



*The schools that Neil and Brenda attend represent another divide between them. Brenda goes to Radcliffe (the former sister school to Harvard and an elite private school), while Neil went to Rutgers (a public school). Neil is frustrated by the code of “Boston and New Haven”—which are unobvious hints at Harvard and Yale—because he views it as a snobby way of hinting at one’s wealth and social status.*



*Even this small exchange touches on many of the themes in the novella: Neil’s continued idealization of Brenda, whom he describes like an angel; the fact that Brenda’s family used to live where Neil lives, but now has the wealth to live in the suburbs; and the fact that Brenda is always trying to be a step ahead of Neil, in control of their conversation and their relationship.*



*Because “bumpy” noses are stereotypical features of Jewish appearance, getting rid of the bump in Brenda’s nose is a marker of her assimilation and a desire to get rid of any aspects of her Jewish identity that will outwardly mark her as being different. She also inherently places a negative value judgement on that identity, arguing that without it she is prettier.*



*Even though it is clear that Neil has some resentment for Brenda’s wealth and the fact that she uses that wealth to try and assimilate to white Protestant American culture, he continues to view her as a fantasy in once again referring to her wings (like that of an angel).*



## CHAPTER 2

The next day, Neil returns to the club with Brenda. He holds her glasses once more as she jumps in the pool. When she asks him to join her and dismisses his fretting over her glasses, he wonders why she doesn't have her eyes fixed, which irks Brenda. Neil gives her glasses to Doris to hold, who isn't pleased about being treated like Brenda's servant.

Neil jumps into the pool, and he and Brenda play and kiss in the water. He thinks, in that moment, that he doesn't care for anything but Brenda. Afterward, they sit under an umbrella together and talk. Brenda says that it feels like they're going very fast—that she feels “pursued.” When Neil argues that Brenda invited him to the club, she notes again that he sounds nasty. When he says sorry, she tells him to stop apologizing, because he's so automatic about it. He points out that she's being nasty to him. Brenda tells Neil not to argue.

Brenda says that she likes Neil —particularly the way he looks. She says he has nice shoulders, and asks if he plays a sport, but he doesn't. When she asks if he likes her body, he jokes that he doesn't. After they sit together for a while, he notes that she hasn't asked him anything about himself. When she asks him how he feels, he says that he wants to swim. They spend the rest of the afternoon in the water, taking occasional breaks and talking about their feelings toward each other. Neil notes that he didn't really have the feelings until he talked about them.

Around 4:00 p.m., Brenda's older brother Ron arrives and begins to hang out with Brenda and Neil. Ron is very large and athletic and he is particularly pleased because the Yankees won their most recent game. Brenda explains that when the Yankees win, their family sets a place for Mickey Mantle at the dinner table. Brenda then introduces Ron and Neil to each other. Brenda tells Ron and Neil to race while she calls home to say that Neil is joining for dinner. Realizing that Brenda has invited him, he backs out of the race so he can call Aunt Gladys to say that he would not be home for dinner. She simply says, “fancy-shmancy.”

*Neil continues to indirectly express discomfort about Brenda's wealth, inadvertently teasing her about why she wouldn't get her eyes fixed since she already got her nose fixed. Roth also reinforces the idea that Brenda thinks of Neil as lower status in making him hold her glasses, as Doris views doing the same task as being treated like a servant.*



*Here Roth establishes the unequal power dynamics between Neil and Brenda. Brenda believes that she's being “pursued” by Neil, feeling obligated to relent to his advances. But at the same time, the way in which Brenda speaks to Neil makes Neil feel as though she has all the power and control in the relationship, because she can criticize him while he cannot do the same.*



*Brenda hints at the priority she places on competition in talking about his shoulders and asking if he plays a sport. Neil also exhibits a lack of self-examination here. Even though he wants Brenda to ask him about himself, as soon as she does so he immediately deflects and asks Brenda to swim in the pool with him. Even the feelings he professes toward Brenda appear insincere, since he seems to be telling Brenda what she wants to hear rather than genuinely expressing how he feels.*



*This exchange provides more evidence for the fact that the Patimkins have assimilated. Setting an extra place at the table during Passover is a Jewish tradition honoring the prophet Elijah; here, however, that tradition has been repurposed as a way to honor Mickey Mantle instead—a representative of the classic American sport of baseball. Roth also reinforces the fact that by turning towards the Patimkins' wealth, Neil is turning away from his own family. Aunt Gladys's comment of “fancy-shmancy” makes fun of Neil for mingling with people whom she views as above his social status.*



That night, Neil eats with Brenda, Ron, Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin, and Brenda's 10-year-old sister Julie. Neil thinks Julie is very bright, that Mr. Patimkin reminds Neil of his father, and that Mrs. Patimkin is very polite and very beautiful. Neil explains that the Patimkins also have a black maid named Carlota. Neil feels very intimidated eating there. There is not much conversation over dinner, and Neil delivers what little there is in short statements: Ron and Mr. Patimkin asking for more and more food, Neil refusing more food and being told that he eats like a bird, Julie and Ron discussing Mickey Mantle's batting average, and Mrs. Patimkin attempting to get to know Neil and being constantly interrupted.

As the family waits for dessert to be served, the phone rings, setting off a cacophony. Ron jumps up to answer it, as it is his girlfriend Harriet calling. Mrs. Patimkin instructs Carlota not to mix the milk silverware and the meat silverware, and Brenda is teasing Neil's calf with her fingers. After dessert, they sit under an oak tree and watch Mr. Patimkin play basketball with Julie.

Neil and Brenda discuss Brenda's family. Neil says he likes Julie, and Brenda agrees. Brenda also says Mrs. Patimkin hates her, because she's jealous of Brenda's youth and athleticism. Brenda's mom was once the best tennis player in the state, and Brenda wanted to have a photograph blown up of her mom when she was a girl, but her mom didn't want her to spend the money. Brenda says that her mother doesn't know how to enjoy the money they have, and that she "still thinks [they] live in Newark." Neil is silent, unsure of what to say.

Mr. Patimkin grows tired playing with Julie and asks Neil to finish the game. Neil and Julie begin to play, and Neil observes Mr. Patimkin as he sits and watches them. He notes that Mr. Patimkin's nose does have a bump in it, but that it suits him well. He thinks that Mr. Patimkin would never bother to fix his nose, but had paid "with joy and pride" to have Brenda's fixed.

*The dinner at the Patimkins' contrasts with Neil's dinner at home. Whereas Neil's family doesn't eat together because Aunt Gladys struggles to prepare so many dishes at once, the Patimkins have a maid who helps with dinner and they share their meals together. Their personalities also differ: rather than the complaining banter that Neil and Aunt Gladys share, Mrs. Patimkin is polite. However, Neil also notes their shared roots in thinking that Mr. Patimkin reminds him of his father—it's just that the Patimkins have moved beyond those roots. They are also able to eat heaps of food, whereas Neil is used to eating less and not wasting food.*



*It is notable that the Patimkins keep their meat and milk silverware separated, meaning that they follow the Jewish practice of keeping kosher. It draws a distinction between the fact that the Patimkins still maintain aspects of their Jewish heritage through private practices, while at the same time relinquishing outward indicators of their Jewish culture and identity.*



*Brenda touches on the idea of nostalgia—that Mrs. Patimkin longs for her past as a beautiful, athletic young woman. This desire for the past only makes her more resentful of her present situation, which she takes out on Brenda. Additionally, Brenda highlights the disparity between herself and Neil once again. In mocking her mother for thinking that they still live in Newark (and thereby implying that people in Newark don't have money), Brenda inadvertently disparages Neil's socioeconomic status, his family, and his community.*



*Here Roth introduces the idea of progress as the inverse of nostalgia. Mr. Patimkin isn't ashamed of his past, but he is proud of the fact that he has been able to achieve success and earn a better future for his family. Neil also notes that a large part of that better future (enabled by this accumulation of wealth) is assimilation into the upper classes.*



Julie and Neil play, and every time she misses a shot Mr. Patimkin tells her to take it over. Neil tries to play his hardest to catch up to Julie. As the game goes on, he notices Mrs. Patimkin and Carlota watching. When he misses a shot, he jokingly asks to take it again, and Julie says no. He thinks that this is how the game is played: Mr. Patimkin taught his daughters to ask for free throws, but others can't have the same. When they finish and Julie wins, Julie thanks Neil for the game.

*Neil's game with Julie serves as another example of competitions reflecting power dynamics. Even though Julie is much younger and Neil should win the game, Mr. Patimkin's status allow him to tip the scales in Julie's favor—while Neil isn't afforded the same opportunity. This reflects the class divisions between them, as wealth inherently often affords greater opportunity and future success.*



## CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Neil drives to his job at the library. He is there twenty minutes early and takes a walk in a nearby park. From the park, he looks out at the Newark Museum and a bank building where he had taken some classes in college. He reminisces about his time in college, which he finished three years earlier, and the friends he had, all of whom worked at night to be able to afford school. He looks back at a bookstore, a luncheonette, and an art theater—all of which he had known intimately. He feels a deep affection for Newark.

*Even though Neil previously thought of the suburbs as a kind of “heaven,” it is clear from Roth's descriptions that he doesn't have negative feelings towards his home city. Instead, the distinction is that Neil's view of the suburbs is a fantasy in which he doesn't fully belong, while Neil's view of Newark is a reality in which he feels more comfortable.*



At 9:00 a.m., Neil heads into the library. As he does, he notices a small Black boy standing in front of the lions, growling at them. Neil sits behind the desk on the main floor, watching all of the people enter the building and thinking about Brenda. After lunch, Neil will take over the Information Desk upstairs. Neil had also heard from his boss, Mr. Scapello, that when Neil returned from his summer vacation, he would be put in charge of the Reference Room. Neil is often unsure how he got a job at the library, or why he has stayed. He feels as though he is becoming numb to life, and he is afraid of it.

*Neil's job at the library is another example of his inability to reflect and examine his own life. He knows that he doesn't want to remain at the library forever because it is making him numb to life, as he points out here. And yet he doesn't seem to be able to recognize or imagine what a life outside of the library might look like. The only thing he seems to be able to daydream about is Brenda, foreshadowing the fact that he will use Brenda as a way to imagine a life for himself outside of the library.*



Just before lunch, the young Black boy comes into the library and approaches Neil, asking where the “heart section” is. Neil gradually determines that the boy means the “art” section. When Neil says that the books can be found in several places and asks which artist he's interested in, the boy starts backing away, mumbling “all of them.” Neil assures him that it's okay, and that the art section is in Stack Three. The boy leaves to find the section.

*The discomfort that the young boy feels at the library and the difficulty that he faces in explaining what he's interested in learning about illustrates how unequally resources are distributed. While Neil might not always feel comfortable in Brenda's country club because of his socioeconomic status, the boy experiences similar discomfort—even at the public library, which is supposed to be for everyone—because of his race.*





After lunch, Neil's coworker John McKee approaches him. John asks Neil if he's seen a little Black boy pass the desk. Neil says he saw the boy come in. John asks if Neil saw the boy go out. Neil says he probably has, telling John not to be nervous. John says that someone should check on him. John then launches into a speech, worrying about "the way they treat the housing projects we give them" and wondering "where did he ever find out about art?" Neil says that he has to go upstairs anyway, and that he can check on the boy.

Neil finds the boy in Stack Three, delightedly looking through the art books. He is holding an edition of **Gauguin reproductions**, with three native women standing in a stream. When the boy asks where the pictures were taken, Neil explains that it's a painting of Tahiti. The boy says he wishes he could live there, excited by the prospect of a peaceful, idyllic life. Neil agrees, then returns to the desk to assure John that everything is all right. Neil then continues thinking about Brenda, imagining Short Hills at dusk as though it is a Gauguin painting.

When Neil arrives at the Patimkins' house that evening, everyone is waiting for him. Brenda is wearing a dress for the first time, and Neil finds that it suits her. Brenda tells him that she and her parents will be right back—Carlota is off, and they have to take Ron to the airport. She asks him to sit with Julie while they drive Ron. Neil agrees, though he's angry that he has to babysit. Brenda tries to ask how he likes her in a dress, but he doesn't answer, and she departs with Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin and Ron.

Julie tries to get Neil to play with her, but he just tells her to watch TV. Neil then begins to look around the different rooms of the house. He notes pictures of Brenda, her siblings, and a young Mrs. Patimkin. Neil avoids the bedrooms and instead goes down to the basement. He finds bamboo furniture, a ping pong table, and a bar table stocked with every kind of glass but which seems completely untouched. Over the liquor shelves are newspaper articles about Ron playing basketball and another picture of Brenda on a horse with ribbons and medals clipped to it. Neil notes that he has not yet seen a photo of Mr. Patimkin.

*Here Roth gives an example of casual and vitriolic racism. John suggests that African-Americans mistreat the housing projects that they are "given" by white Americans and that they do not have adequate education to know about art. In fact, it's totally normal for any child to be interested in art, and housing projects are notoriously under-funded, which leads to deteriorating conditions. Jewish families—especially wealthy ones like Brenda's—are more easily able to assimilate to white Protestant culture, which gives them more access to resources and allows them to face less constant prejudice as they go about their day-to-day lives.*



*The boy's obsession with the Gauguin paintings and the vision of a peaceful life in Tahiti is an example of a character fantasizing about something unrealistic and unattainable, as he expresses a desire to live in Tahiti with the women depicted in the painting. Roth echoes these unrealistic fantasies in Neil's own thoughts, as he idealizes Brenda's life in the suburbs later that same day.*



*Here Roth illustrates how Neil is treated as lower status than the Patimkins. He essentially takes the place of Carlota in being made to babysit, which echoes Brenda previously making Neil hold her glasses while she swam, reinforcing the idea that Neil is still being treated as a kind of servant rather than a guest of the family who is of equal worth.*



*Neil's explorations of the Patimkin house touch on two of the story's major themes. First, the bar reinforces the fact that the Patimkins are concerned with appearing just like everyone else. Mr. Patimkin has an extravagant bar, despite the fact that he clearly does not drink often, in order to fulfill some kind of vision of what an affluent American home should look like or have. Additionally, Neil's noting that there are no photos of a young Mr. Patimkin illustrates that Mr. Patimkin wants to move beyond his poor Jewish childhood and instead focus on the progress and success that he and his children have had.*



In the basement, there is a tall old refrigerator that reminds Neil of “the Patimkin roots in Newark.” The old refrigerator holds heaps of every kind of fruit. Neil grabs cherries and a nectarine, but then Julie interrupts him, telling him he should wash the nectarine—a hint that he shouldn’t be taking the fruit. Neil says he was just looking around, and he drops the cherries into his pocket, growing embarrassed.

Neil asks where Ron is going, and Julie replies that he is seeing his girlfriend Harriet, who lives in Milwaukee. Julie looks suspiciously at Neil’s hands to see if he’s taken any more fruit, then suggests playing ping pong. Neil agrees, to placate her, and he starts to beat Julie, relishing in the revenge from their basketball game the day prior. Whenever she asks to redo a point, Neil refuses, and Julie grows more and more upset. When he is about to beat her handily, she screams that she hates him and accuses him of stealing fruit before storming off.

That night, Neil and Brenda make love for the first time. They sit on the sofa watching TV until they know that everyone else has gone to sleep. Neil begins to unbutton Brenda’s dress. She resists at first, but gradually lets him. To Neil, it was as sweet as if he had scored the twenty-first point in the ping pong game. Neil returns home and calls Brenda at one o’clock in the morning. Brenda tells him that their sex was really nice. Neil agrees and tells her to go to sleep, pretending that he’s there in bed with her.

## CHAPTER 4

Over the next week and a half, the young boy comes into the library every day and looks at the same **Gauguin book**. One day, however, when the boy does not show up, an older white man tries to take out the same book. Neil claims that there’s a hold on the book, and he says that he can call the man to tell him when it is free. Neil then returns the book to the shelf so that the boy can look at it when he returns.

Neil also sees Brenda every evening, and as long as everyone goes to bed early, they make love in front of the TV. One evening, Brenda takes Neil swimming at the club. They sit on chairs side by side late in the evening, and when the lights around the pool go out, they don’t move. Neil starts to push the straps of Brenda’s suit down, but she rolls away from him.

*It’s significant that the only sign of the Patimkins’ life in Newark (which means their poorer Jewish identity) is hidden away in the basement. This shows their desire to assimilate and project status. Additionally, Julie’s suspicion of Neil taking the fruit is similar to John’s suspicion of the boy looking at the Gauguin paintings—both are indicators that Neil and the boy don’t belong in their environments and don’t have the right to take what is available to them.*



*Neil’s game of ping pong with Julie contrasts with their game of basketball the previous day, reinforcing the idea that competitions and games can reflect power dynamics. Whereas in the basketball game, Julie had the upper hand because Mr. Patimkin was dictating the rules and letting her retake shots, here Neil holds the power and is therefore able to beat her easily.*



*Neil comparing sex with winning the ping pong game illustrates how Neil, too, puts their relationship in the context of a competition. Whereas in other scenarios, Brenda is able to have the upper hand, here Neil is able to get Brenda to relent to having sex with him, and therefore he is winning that game.*



*Neil’s decision to lie and make sure that the boy can continue to look at the Gauguin book illustrates his desire to help the boy continue to develop fantasies. Neil’s own self-delusion echoes this decision, as he resists realistically examining his own fantasies and the source of his love for Brenda.*



*Before, Neil was able to gain the upper hand in his and Brenda’s sexual relationship. But the fact that she turns away from his advances here foreshadows a shift in power—one that will become even more pronounced following the game they play later in the evening.*



For the first time in their two weeks together, Brenda asks Neil a question about himself. She asks where his parents are, because her mother wanted to know. He says they're in Tucson. When Brenda asks why he lives with his Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max, he explains that it's convenient to his work, and it's cheaper. Brenda also asks about his job at the library, explaining that her father asked about it. Neil says it's fine, and that it's better than selling shoes or working at his uncle Aaron's real estate company or being in the Army—all of which he did previously.

Brenda asks Neil if he plans on making a career in the library. Neil tells her that he hasn't planned anything in three years, and that he doesn't like to plan (though he admits internally that this is a lie). Brenda asks if he loves her, and when Neil says no, Brenda responds that she wants him to love her. When he asks if working at the library will be a problem for their relationship, she says that when he loves her, he won't have to worry about anything. He assures her that if this is the case, he will love her.

Brenda suggests that Neil take a swim. She'll close her eyes and when he comes back, he'll surprise her with his wetness. Neil agrees, but when he dives into the water he has an uneasy suspicion that Brenda is planning to leave. He immediately races back to the chairs, but Brenda is still there, and he kisses her. They take turns going to the pool and returning, but when Brenda leaves and doesn't return for a long time he becomes unreasonably worried. When she returns, he holds her desperately and tells her that he loves her.

The summer goes on, and Neil sees Brenda every evening. They swim, walk, and eat dinner at restaurants together. When Ron returns from Milwaukee, they watch him play basketball in a summer league. At the games, Neil becomes unnerved because Brenda knows everyone, including a player named Luther Ferrari whom Brenda dated in high school. Luther is very nice to both Neil and Brenda, but Neil becomes more and more anguished at the prospect of going to the games. Instead, they go to see movies and dance together, and when they return to Brenda's house, they make love.

*Brenda's questions give her a deeper understanding of Neil, but it is ironic that both are prompted by questions that her parents asked, rather than her own curiosity. Her parents' questions illustrate a curiosity both about Neil's background and about Neil's aspirations—indicating that they want to make sure that he shares their values and their appreciation for success and progress before letting him get too serious about their daughter.*



*Here, Roth provides more evidence for the idea that Neil's love is based purely on the fantasy of what Brenda's life can do for him. He doesn't love Brenda yet, but the idea that all his worries might go away if he were to love Brenda is an appealing one, so he readily agrees to it.*



*Brenda essentially sets up a game to see who can be the most withholding. She wins by getting Neil to give in first because of his insecurity in their relationship, and at the same time she gets him to say that he loves her, whereas only a short time earlier, he had said that he did not. Thus, Brenda's game restores her power in their relationship.*



*Neil and Brenda's activities are an encapsulation of the small power struggles between them. Neil doesn't like attending Ron's games because he feels that Brenda holds power when they are there. She knows everyone and also interacts with an ex-boyfriend, making Neil feel isolated and jealous. In turn, he persuades her away from attending the games in order to try to reassert his own power over her.*



Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin continue to treat Neil kindly, and when Brenda suggests to her father that at the end of August Neil stay at the house for a week, Mr. Patimkin agrees. When Neil tells Aunt Gladys about his vacation on the Friday before he is leaving, she is amazed, but also annoyed he didn't tell her sooner. She asks if they have room to take Neil for a week. When Neil responds that they don't live "over the store," Aunt Gladys says that she lived over a store when she was growing up and wasn't ashamed. She says that even though they don't have money lying around, they can put Susan through college and live comfortably.

Aunt Gladys asks Neil if he doesn't get enough to eat in her home. Neil assures her he gets everything he wants at her home, but he's just taking a vacation. Aunt Gladys asks him to leave the Patimkins' telephone number, and she asks where they live. When Neil says that they live in Short Hills, she says that they can't be "real Jews" if they live in Short Hills. She then gives him a few pieces of fruit to take with him, which he eats on the way to work.

That day, Mr. Scapello tells Neil that when he returns from vacation, Neil will take over the Reference Room and will get an \$8 increase in salary. Mr. Scapello says that he got the same promotion twelve years earlier, and Neil worries that he will follow in Mr. Scapello's exact footsteps. Just then, the older white man returns in search of **the Gauguin book**. Neil says, somewhat rudely, that the book should be back any day, hoping the man will leave before Mr. Scapello returns and potentially catches Neil lying. The man leaves in a huff.

After lunch, the boy returns and Neil asks if he wants to get a library card to take the book home so that he doesn't have to come back every day. The boy protests that someone at home could destroy it and that he likes to come to the library. He becomes upset thinking that Neil doesn't want him around the library. Later, Neil worries about losing his job as he drives to Short Hills, but then he realizes that he doesn't want the library to be his life anyway.

*Here Roth illustrates how Neil is starting to align himself with the Patimkins rather than with his own family. Not only is he physically distancing himself from them by staying at the Patimkins' house for a week, but he is also unintentionally judging his family's economic status. Aunt Gladys affirms that even though they weren't wealthy growing up and still aren't as wealthy as the Patimkins, she is pleased with what she has been able to accomplish in her life and the progress that she has made for her family—just like Mr. Patimkin.*



*Aunt Gladys's comment—that the Patimkins can't really be Jewish if they live in Short Hills—indicates her belief that the Patimkins have distanced themselves from their Jewish identity by moving to an affluent neighborhood. Roth suggests that their wealth has enabled them to assimilate and forego some of their Jewish heritage.*



*Roth often focuses on characters other than Neil in exploring the theme of nostalgia and progress, but here Roth implies that Neil is a person who remains optimistic and looks forward to a better future, even if he doesn't fully understand what that path looks like yet. This is also one of the reasons that Brenda's life is so appealing to Neil, because she is a possible escape from his job at the library—something she hinted at earlier in the chapter.*



*Neil again tries to protect the boy's ability to fantasize about life in Tahiti using the Gauguin book. The boy's affirmation that he likes the library and doesn't want to bring the book home is another nod to the power of fantasy. The library is a peaceful place into which he can escape, and he worries that bringing his fantasy home into his real life might destroy it.*



## CHAPTER 5

When Neil arrives at the Patimkins' house, Julie shouts excitedly that Ron is getting married on Labor Day. Brenda explains to Neil that her parents have to arrange everything in a day or two, and now Ron is joining the business instead of becoming a gym teacher. At dinner, Ron talks about the fact that he is going to have a boy, and when his son is six months old, Ron will sit him down with a basketball, football, and baseball, and whichever one he reaches for they'll concentrate on. Hearing this, Julie starts to sing that she's going to be an aunt.

Neil goes up to the guest bedroom to unpack. There, he suggests to Brenda that he can spend the night in her room and sneak back in the morning. Though Brenda worries he might get caught, she agrees. Brenda says that she thinks Mrs. Patimkin is nervous about Neil's being there. Neil wonders whether he should really stay a week, but Brenda assures him that when Harriet arrives no one will notice him anymore.

Ron greets Neil as he unpacks, and Neil congratulates him on his impending wedding. Ron tells Neil that he's welcome to borrow his phonograph to listen to music. Downstairs, Neil can hear Mrs. Patimkin and Brenda arguing about having too much company. Brenda says it's not extra work for Mrs. Patimkin, because they have Carlota. Mrs. Patimkin responds that Brenda wouldn't know about extra work because she's lazy. Brenda starts to cry and runs out of the room, cursing.

When Brenda bursts into the guest room, Neil asks if he should go. Brenda assures him that Mrs. Patimkin wasn't really upset about him. Brenda then opens another door in the room, which leads to a storeroom with all their old furniture from Newark in it, as well as \$300 that Mr. Patimkin put aside for Brenda. Neil is dismayed by all the dust, wondering why the furniture is in there. Brenda checks the sofa where the money is hidden, but she can't find it. She wonders if her dad took it back. Neil asks her why she wanted it; she says that she would have ripped it up and put it in Mrs. Patimkin's purse. She tells Neil she wants to make love with him on the old sofa, and he obeys her.

The next day, Brenda and Neil eat breakfast alone together. Brenda says she wants to run on the track. Neil is hesitant, but Brenda insists and they head to the high school's track. Brenda notes when they arrive that they look alike. They are dressed similarly, and Neil gets the feeling that what she means is that he is beginning to look the way she wants him to—"like herself."

*While Ron's wedding is an exciting development in his life, the consequences and responsibility that come with it provide the foundation for his later nostalgia. Having to give up a job that would keep him involved in sports is disappointing to him, and it foreshadows his later obsession with reliving those glory days. However, Roth also illustrates that Ron is still optimistic about the future in dreaming of his future son and remaining connected to sports through him.*



*This is another smaller example of Neil taking the upper hand in their sexual relationship, dictating when he wants to see Brenda despite the potential risks involved in doing so.*



*Mrs. Patimkin's view of their wealth again appears different from the rest of the family. While Mr. Patimkin is proud of the progress that he has made, Mrs. Patimkin appears to worry about the privileges to which her children (particularly Brenda) feel entitled and the fact that they do not work as hard as she once did.*



*The room with the furniture and money illustrates how the Patimkins' wealth enables them to afford nice, new furniture in place of older furniture that hints at their poorer Jewish roots in Newark. Their wealth also enables them to have an extra space to store away this old furniture, which gestures to the excess of the American dream. Additionally, Brenda again tips the shifting power dynamics in her favor by demanding that Neil make love to her in a dusty storage room, putting her own desire above his feelings about being in the storeroom.*



*This marks a point in Neil's assimilation into the Patimkin family—the point at which Brenda is noticing how much he fits in with her and her family. This means dressing similarly to Brenda, but the greater significance lies in the fact that he is dressing like someone who would go to a country club or play more affluent sports like tennis.*





Neil and Brenda race along the track as Brenda dares him to see who is faster. But when they approach the half mile, Brenda swerves onto the grass to sit. She calls after him to join her, but he pretends he doesn't hear her and does one more lap. She's impressed and suggests that they do this every day: he can run and she'll time him. Neil agrees.

The next day, Brenda and Neil return to the track. Brenda times him with a stopwatch as he runs half a mile, and Neil feels like he's a racehorse in a movie. When he's finished Brenda is waiting for him, and she tells him that she loves him for the first time. Neil runs every morning, and by the end of the week he is running a 7:02 mile.

At night, Neil and Brenda wait for Ron to sleep before Neil sneaks into Brenda's room. Each night, Ron comes in after basketball, calls Harriet, and listens to music—particularly **the Columbus record** over and over. Neil hears this record faintly from his room, and can only make out the words "Goodbye, Columbus" repeated again and again. Then, when Ron's light goes off and he goes to sleep, Neil slips into Brenda's room.

One morning, before sneaking out of Brenda's room and back to his own, Neil wakes up from an unsettling dream. He was on a ship with the boy from the library, anchored in the harbor of an island in the Pacific. When they moved out of the harbor, women threw leis at them and said "goodbye, **Columbus.**" They didn't want to leave, and the boy shouted at Neil that it was his fault and Neil shouted at him for not having a library card. Waking from this, Neil doesn't want to leave Brenda's side, and he almost runs into Ron as he starts his day.

## CHAPTER 6

The morning that Neil almost runs into Ron is supposed to be his last day at the Patimkins'; however, Brenda manages to negotiate for Neil to stay another week, through Labor Day, when Ron will be married. The day after, Brenda will return to school at Radcliffe—a thought that distresses Neil, as he is convinced that this will mean the end of their relationship.

*Brenda sets up another competition, but in this one, Neil gains the upper hand. In contrast to the game in the pool, here he pretends to be indifferent towards her, trying to avoid her ability to simply command him to stop what he's doing and sit with her. Yet, because Brenda immediately sets up another game for them, Neil's attempt proves futile once more.*



*Neil's feeling that he is like a racehorse reinforces his sense that Brenda has power over him in these games and that she treats him as less than equal. Not only does it imply that Brenda is his owner and that she can make him do what she wants, but also that he is working hard for the sake of pleasing her, just as a racehorse does for its owner.*



*This passage foreshadows the importance of the Columbus record to Ron. Because the title of the novel comes from the song's lyrics, readers immediately recognize that it will be significant. Here, Roth simply emphasizes that Ron listens to it repeatedly, and it carries the solemnity and bittersweetness of saying goodbye to something.*



*Neil's dream is thematically rich, and it suggests that he feels that he is losing his fantasy—the relationship that he has with Brenda. It also foreshadows the nostalgia that he will find in his relationship when he looks back on it. "Goodbye, Columbus" represents having to move on from something he loved—particularly the ambivalence of looking back on it fondly but knowing that he will not be able to recapture it, an idea that will recur at the end of the book.*



*Neil's distress over the idea that Brenda and his relationship will end was reflected in his dream from the previous night, as he doesn't want to give up the fantasy of his relationship with Brenda and he desperately clings to it.*



Brenda goes with her family to pick up Harriet from the airport, while Neil calls Aunt Gladys to tell her he's staying another week. She worries over the fact that he doesn't have clean underwear, but he assures her that he's washing it. She worries that by staying too long he will think that he's "too good" for her and Uncle Max. Neil assures her that this isn't true. Aunt Gladys tells him he has a letter from his mother, and he says that he'll read it when he gets home.

Neil greets Carlota on his way out the door. Though she does not return his greeting, he thinks that he feels a kinship with her. Outside, Neil shoots baskets and then drives golf balls for a while, waiting for Brenda to return. With Harriet's impending arrival, Neil starts to think about marriage, wishing he could marry Brenda but feeling worried that they have not talked about it. He wants to propose marriage, but he is worried that she might say no, or might say that she wants to wait.

Brenda returns alone in her car, explaining that Harriet's plane is late. Everyone else, she says, is going to have dinner at the airport. Neil then asks Brenda, hesitantly, if she would get a **diaphragm** from a doctor. She assures him that they're safe and that she doesn't need one. Neil says that if Brenda wanted something from him, she would make him do it immediately. He says he wants her to do it simply because he asked her to do it. Brenda says that Neil isn't being reasonable and stalks away from him. She changes from a dress into shorts and a blouse and starts to hit golf balls.

Neil interrupts Brenda, saying that he doesn't want to fight with her. She agrees, then explains that she just doesn't feel old enough for a **diaphragm**, and that she'd have to lie to the doctor to get one. Neil says that if she went to New York, they wouldn't ask any questions. Brenda is skeptical of Neil knowing so much about it and worried that it is too dishonest and scandalous. Neil says that Brenda is selfish, and he implies that she doesn't want to get a diaphragm because she wants to break up with him. Brenda sarcastically agrees, saying that that's why she asked him to stay another week, or why she continues to sleep with him. She walks away, crying, and Neil doesn't see her for the rest of the afternoon.

*Neil's exchange with Aunt Gladys reinforces the idea that he is becoming assimilated into the Patimkin family—and, at the same time, becoming more distant from his own. The idea that he has become "too good" for her also illustrates how Neil is adjusting to the life of luxury that he is enjoying at the Patimkins, and that it pushes him further away from his family. This is even affirmed by the fact that Neil doesn't want to go back to Newark even briefly to read a letter that his mother sent him.*



*Even after telling Aunt Gladys that she's wrong to worry that Neil will never want to leave the Patimkins, his desire to marry Brenda is borne of a desire to become a permanent part of the fantasy he has been living in. His statement that he feels a kinship with Carlota reminds readers that he still feels of a lower status than the Patimkins, and marrying Brenda will affirm her commitment to him and enable him to feel that he belongs in his fantasy.*



*Neil's request for Brenda to get a diaphragm—a form of birth control that is usually only given to married women—is a symbol of commitment to him and a demonstration that he can make her do something simply because he asked. Yet at the same time, it gives her power over a part of her sexuality. Thus, Neil too plays into the competitions that Brenda sets up, hoping to win out over her own hesitancy.*



*Here, Roth illustrates how these constant power struggles between Brenda and Neil have actively sown discontent between them. Neil's insecurity that Brenda might break up with him can be connected to their game in the pool, which sparked insecurity that she would leave him alone. At the same time, his desire for her to get a diaphragm—which they do not strictly need—has created deep conflict between them that will continue through the rest of the book.*



Harriet arrives at the Patimkin house. Neil notes that Harriet is “all surfaces,” and is thus perfect for Ron and the Patimkins. He also sees that Mrs. Patimkin likes Harriet a lot more than she likes Brenda. All evening, the Patimkins plan where she and Ron should live, what furniture they should buy, and how soon they should have a baby. Brenda is frustrated with Harriet calling Mrs. Patimkin “Mother” during the conversation and heads to bed early. Afterwards, as everyone attends to other things, Neil and Harriet are temporarily left at the table alone together.

Neil and Harriet make inconsequential small talk about his job at the library, until Neil excuses himself and goes into Brenda’s room to talk. Knowing that Brenda is still angry, he says to forget about his suggestion, because it’s not worth it if this is how she feels. Brenda says Neil just doesn’t understand her side of the argument. Neil counters that Brenda is not angry about the **diaphragm**, but is instead angry about him. She dismisses this argument, saying that she can’t win with him. He assures her that she already has won, and he leaves her room.

The next morning, Brenda is in a better mood, and she kisses Neil when he comes downstairs. She tells him that she’s going to New York to go shopping for the wedding with Harriet. When he tells her to get him something, she balks and gets upset, thinking that he means a **diaphragm**. He assures her that he wasn’t even thinking about that.

Neil spends the day trying to avoid Carlota and Mrs. Patimkin, but Mrs. Patimkin sits opposite him in their TV room, checking names off a list. He asks if he can help her, but she politely refuses, saying that it’s for Hadassah, a Jewish women’s volunteer organization. Mrs. Patimkin asks Neil if his mother is in Hadassah. He says in Newark she was, but that his parents are in Arizona now because of their asthma and he isn’t sure.

Mrs. Patimkin asks if Neil is interested in B’nai Brith, another Jewish service organization, explaining that Ron is going to join when he gets married. Neil jokes that he’ll wait until then, a joke which Mrs. Patimkin doesn’t appreciate. She asks him about his temple and whether he is orthodox or conservative, but Neil is unsure and says he’s “just Jewish.” Neil eventually affirms that he and his temple are both orthodox, even though he doesn’t really know. Mrs. Patimkin says she is orthodox and her husband is conservative, and that Brenda is “nothing.”

*Neil’s noting that Harriet is “all surfaces” provides another peek into the Patimkins’ concern with outward appearances and conforming to the American elite. They seem only to care that Harriet fits the image of what someone in their family should look like and not about her personality or values. This is even further confirmed by their planning Ron and Harriet’s life for them, ensuring that their plans conform to the kind of life that Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin have envisioned for them.*



*Neil frames their sexual relationship—or at least their argument about the diaphragm—as a competition. He affirms that Brenda has “won” because she refuses to get a diaphragm for him. In this way, Neil believes that Brenda has the upper hand when it comes to making decisions about their sexual relationship.*



*Roth continues to demonstrate how this power struggle is creating conflict in their relationship, such that even casual interactions end up in arguments and frustration.*



*Roth again illustrates an important distinction in the Patimkins’ assimilation. Even though they outwardly try to assimilate, they still keep up more private Jewish practices, such as keeping kosher or belonging to service organizations like this one. Thus, their assimilation is more focused on appearance and being able to mix with the wealthy elite.*



*The fact that Neil isn’t very religious (saying he’s “just Jewish” instead of relating to a particular denomination of the religion) illustrates that his Jewishness is largely through his connection to his family, and not through his religion. Thus, by forgoing his family and by trying to assimilate into the Patimkins, he is in many ways making the same journey of assimilation as they did.*



Just then, the phone rings. Mrs. Patimkin gets a message from Mr. Patimkin and says that she is too busy. She asks Neil if he would mind riding down to Newark to pick up some silver patterns from Mr. Patimkin's work. He agrees, and she gives him the keys to her nice new car, which she tells him to use instead of taking his own.

Patimkin Kitchen and Sink, Neil relays, is in the heart of the African American section of Newark, which was once the Jewish section. Neil recounts how the previous generation of Jews had struggled, but their children had prospered in their place and moved to the edges of the city, and some had moved away entirely. Neil notes that now African Americans are making the same migration, and he wonders who might come after them.

Neil pulls into Patimkin Kitchen and Sinks. Inside, he sees an office where Mr. Patimkin is shouting at Ron, who leaves to direct the men working in the warehouse and loading the trucks. Neil imagines asking Mr. Patimkin for permission to marry Brenda, and Mr. Patimkin making him direct the men in the factory or carry a sink. Neil worries about feeling inadequate as a result.

When Neil enters the office, Mr. Patimkin is on the phone and instructs Neil to sit down. Mr. Patimkin is negotiating with someone on the other end, and when he gets what he wants, he hangs up. He looks out to see how Ron is doing, and he observes that even though Ron went to four years of college, he can't unload a truck properly. Neil says he probably couldn't either. Mr. Patimkin comments that Neil could learn and that success comes through hard work. Neil agrees.

*Mrs. Patimkin's sending Neil to run an errand for her continues to show that Neil isn't fully a part of the family, and that in some ways he still feels like a servant. The fact that Mrs. Patimkin makes him take their car rather than his own is yet another indication of how they are more assimilated than he is. Mrs. Patimkin wants to represent their family with luxury cars that are symbolic of American industry and the American dream, rather than Neil's older Plymouth.*



*Neil's thoughts here suggest the broader appeal of focusing on progress rather than nostalgia. Yearning for the past is characteristic of people who do not have hopes for improving their station in the future. But when one is able to remain optimistic about the future, like the older generations of Jews, it enables them to progress and find a better station in life. It is notable, however, that the Jews are able to better assimilate and improve their station because of racial similarity to the wealthy white Americans, whereas African Americans do not have that same avenue for assimilation.*



*Just as Ron has been taken into the family business because of his impending marriage, Neil starts to incorporate joining Patimkin Kitchen and Sinks into his own dreams about the future. Even though he worries about being inadequate as a husband or son-in-law, Neil views this as a key way to assimilate into their family, although the nagging worry that he will always be a servant to them remains.*



*Like Mrs. Patimkin's earlier assertion that Brenda is lazy, Mr. Patimkin's belief that success comes through hard work complicates the idea of what progress really means. Roth hints that perhaps children who have become used to the success of their parents have actually taken a step backward, because they don't have the same drive to run a business as Mr. Patimkin had.*



Mr. Patimkin leaves the office and tells Ron to let everyone go to lunch, even though Ron had tried to put a plan in place of staggering lunches so someone was always working. Mr. Patimkin says to Neil that Ron has brains, but he's too much of an idealist—that he needs to be a “*gonif*” (thief) to run the business. When he asks if Neil knows what that means, and Neil does, he says that his own children are “*goyim*.” Mr. Patimkin then tells Ron to get the silver patterns for Neil, and he comments that when he got married, he had forks and knives from “the five and ten,” but that his own kid “needs gold to eat off.” Neil notes that he says this with pride.

Later that afternoon, Neil drives to the mountains and watches children feed the deer, despite signs forbidding this. He observes the young white mothers watching the children who are as young as—or even younger than—he is. He thinks that they look immortal, knowing that their hair will always stay the color that they want, that their clothes and homes will always be fashionable. Still, he thinks, only Brenda shines in his mind. He wonders, briefly, if this is because of her money and comfort, but he chooses not to think too much about the source of his desire for her.

When Neil returns to the Patimkin house, Brenda is modeling her new dress for the wedding, and she is more beautiful than he has ever seen her. Harriet comments that Brenda ought to be the bride, and there is an uncomfortable silence. Afterward, Brenda affirms to Neil that she ought to be the bride, and Neil agrees. He kisses her, but she starts crying, and they go outside to talk about what's bothering her.

Brenda tells Neil that she called the Margaret Sanger Clinic when she was in New York to get a **diaphragm**, and they asked if she was married. She said no and then she hung up, upset. Neil says that they can go to a doctor together. She asks if he would come to the office with her, but he says that if he were her husband, he wouldn't come to the office because he'd be working. They argue further until Brenda walks away. When she comes back, he doesn't say anything, and she finally implies that she is willing to go to a doctor in New York City.

*Roth again emphasizes a distinction between Neil and Brenda. Mr. Patimkin's wealth has enabled them to assimilate to the wealthy and largely Protestant community that they live in, and therefore Brenda's generation doesn't know Yiddish words—which is why Mr. Patimkin calls them “goyim,” or the Yiddish word for non-Jews. Yet Mr. Patimkin's pride at the fact that Ron needs gold to eat off at his wedding illustrates that he views this change not with dismay, but with an appreciation of the progress that he and his family have made in attaining a better future.*



*This episode emphasizes how Neil's self-delusion is allowing him to idealize Brenda and maintain their relationship as a fantasy. He sees that for these other mothers, their beauty comes from their ability to maintain it through wealth. But as soon as he tries to understand why he loves Brenda, hinting that it might be for her wealth, he turns away from those thoughts and refuses to truly examine his feelings.*



*The irony of this exchange is that it again displays the harm of Neil and Brenda's power struggles. In this exchange, Neil and Brenda essentially agree that they should get married. Yet it is ruined by her dismay over what Roth immediately reveals is the fact that she called a clinic about a diaphragm.*



*Again, even though marriage is a much more important commitment than getting a diaphragm and Neil and Brenda have just touched on the possibility of getting married, Roth demonstrates how Neil and Brenda have become enveloped in a power struggle. An additional irony lies in the fact that if they were married, they would be able to get a diaphragm, but instead they are mired in a conflict over Neil's desire to take the upper hand in their relationship.*





## CHAPTER 7

Three days before Ron's wedding, Neil and Brenda drive into New York. Neil waits in Central Park while Brenda goes to the doctor's office. When Brenda goes through the doors, she is almost crying. Neil walks over to the park, but then he decides to turn towards St. Patrick's church to escape the heat. Neil sits in the church and prays to God, thinking that he wants to make the best of things, and he wonders what exactly it is that he loves. He also wonders what God's "prize" is. When Neil leaves the church and walks along Fifth Avenue, he answers his own question, thinking that God's prize is gold dinnerware, nectarines, and "bumpless noses."

Neil goes to the fountain in Central Park, and he sees Brenda coming out of the doctor's building carrying nothing. For a moment, Neil is glad that Brenda might have disobeyed him. But then Brenda tells Neil that she's wearing the **diaphragm**. Neil says that he loves her. That night, they make love very tenderly, nervous about Brenda's new device. Over the weekend, Neil and Brenda barely see each other, as the last-minute wedding preparations become chaotic.

The night before the wedding, Ron invites Neil to listen to music in his room. Ron plays **the Columbus record** for Neil, which he says his college (Ohio State) gives to all the seniors. The song is a marching song, and overlain on it are recordings of key events throughout Ron's senior year, including a recording of basketball game commentary that featured Ron. When they announce his name, the crowd goes wild and Ron is excited to hear his name on the record. At the end of the record, the band plays the Alma Mater, and ends with a voice saying "goodbye, Columbus." As the song finishes, Ron closes his eyes, and Neil sneaks from the room as Ron hums on his bed.

At the wedding, Neil meets many of Brenda's extended family members, including Mr. Patimkin's half-brother Leo. At the reception, the band starts to play. Mr. Patimkin dances with Julie, and Brenda is dancing with Ron's best man, Luther Ferrari. Neil winds up sitting next to Leo. Leo commends Neil on dating Brenda, saying that he has a "deal" if he doesn't mess up their relationship. Leo then says he wishes he hadn't rushed into marriage, and he says that the only good thing that happened to him was getting a cheap deal for his apartment in Queens from his mother-in-law.

*This trip—and Neil's monologue—is a turning point in his own self-examination, as he starts to try to understand the source of his feelings for Brenda. However, because he is addressing God, he is not fully asking these questions of himself, and thus he still continues to idealize his relationship with her. Additionally, Neil concludes that God's "prize" is material goods. Thus, he hints at the idea that his fantasy is borne of Brenda's wealth, even though he does not yet connect these ideas.*



*Neil's attempt at self-examination leads him to understand that he may not actually want Brenda to make the commitment that he has requested of her. But knowing that she has done so gives Neil the feeling of power in the relationship—a feeling that quashes any doubts he had previously held.*



*This is a crucial example of how the characters' nostalgia precludes them from happiness in the present and future. Even on the eve of his wedding, Ron is more focused on what he is losing than what he is looking forward to—particularly because he has had to give up a job he wanted as a gym teacher in order to work for his father's business. The fact that the title of the novella comes from this record also indicates a degree of nostalgia in Neil, as he will look back on his summer romance with Brenda in a similar way.*



*Even Leo recognizes the inherent appeal of Neil marrying Brenda, and how this would improve his socioeconomic standing (implied through his use of the word "deal"). This implies that marrying Brenda is more of a business transaction than a romantic one. Leo also establishes himself as another character who is obsessed with nostalgia. He is focused on his past happiness and regrets the decisions that have led him to his unhappy present.*



Brenda, Ferrari, Mr. Patimkin, and Julie stop dancing, and Neil rushes over to Brenda. Ferrari whisks Julie away, and Mr. Patimkin talks to Brenda and Neil about the wedding, implying that if they want to get married, they would have his blessing and Neil could work for his business. Brenda and Neil then dance and have dinner together. After dinner, the night continues with more eating, drinking, and dancing. By three o'clock in the morning people begin to depart, drunk and sated. Brenda, who has been drinking copious amounts of champagne, heads for the bathroom.

When Brenda departs for the bathroom, Leo—who is also very drunk—returns to sit next to Neil. Leo, who is a lightbulb salesman, starts to ramble about the quality of the fluorescent lights in the room. He laments that he isn't as successful as Mr. Patimkin, that he can't even buy a car and wears out all of his shoes. He says that he could mass produce something of less quality and make a lot of money, but it's better to keep up a good reputation. He also notes that he often has to take long train trips for his work, and that his wife complains when he comes home smelling like alcohol instead of coming home early and playing with his daughter.

Leo asks Neil how much he thinks Leo makes in a week. Neil doesn't know, and Leo says that a cab driver makes more than him. Leo continues to drunkenly ramble, describing the second good thing that happened to him: before he was married, he visited San Francisco and spent the night with a girl named Hannah Schreiber, who took him back to her room and gave him oral sex. He says that he can count the good things that have happened to him on his fingers. He then wonders why Mr. Patimkin has so much success, while he has nothing, and he concludes it's because Mr. Patimkin was "born lucky." He then goes silent, seeming to be about to cry.

Neil suggests to Leo that he go home. Leo agrees, and he says goodbye to Neil, saying he'll go far. He says that next time he sees Neil, it'll be Neil's wedding. Neil then finds Brenda asleep in the hotel lobby. As he watches her sleeping, Neil thinks that he doesn't really know her. He wakes her and they drive back to the Patimkins' house. Neil thinks about how, in a few hours, Leo will be on a train, trying to find some luck in business. He thinks that the world is open to Leo if he wants, but he won't pursue it for fear of new discomfort and sorrow. The next day, Neil drives Brenda to the train at noon, and she returns to school.

*Mr. Patimkin's offer for Neil to join the business if he marries Brenda emphasizes how Neil's exposure to Brenda's family and their wealth—and the possibility of joining their family—gives him a greater ability to achieve the classic American dream. This is also one of the reasons that Neil perpetuates the idea of marrying Brenda as a fantasy in his mind. As she said previously, marrying her would mean an end to Neil's concerns about the future and would allow him to achieve great wealth.*



*Here Roth contrasts Leo with Mr. Patimkin. While Mr. Patimkin has been able to achieve wealth and progress for his family, Leo has not been able to find the same success. He has some of the same markers of the class divide as Neil does. While the Patimkins have many nice cars (symbols of the American dream), Leo is unable to afford a car for himself and must take long train rides. It is clear he finds this demoralizing, because it often leads him to drink. This contributes to his lack of optimism about the present and the future, and it fuels his nostalgia for prior times in which he had found true happiness.*



*Leo continues to illustrate how his nostalgia for the past is impeding his happiness in the present. He is so fixated on fleeting happy memories from the past that he even makes himself more upset, illustrating how nostalgia can be counterproductive. Additionally, his focus on the fact that Mr. Patimkin was simply "born lucky" again illustrates a fixation on the past rather than any attempt to make progress in the future.*



*Neil again starts to approach more serious self-reflection, in realizing that he doesn't really know Brenda and instead has been fixated on what she represents rather than who she actually is. Additionally, Roth puts a final point on the idea that Leo's focus on the happiness in his past and the sorrow that he has experienced since those happy times prevents him from pursuing greater opportunity in the present and future.*



## CHAPTER 8

After Brenda's return to school, she and Neil have a difficult time figuring out the best way to communicate on the phone or through letters. When Neil returns to the library, he is scolded by Mr. Scapello for his treatment of the older gentleman, but Neil manages to wriggle out of punishment by offering a confused story, managing to make it so that Mr. Scapello apologizes to Neil. Neil thinks that perhaps he learned the technique from Mr. Patimkin when he was on the phone that day in his office. He thinks that perhaps he could be a businessman.

Days pass; **the Gauguin book** is checked out, and so Neil no longer sees the little boy in the library. Neil wonders whether the boy was very upset. Neil thinks that it's better for him not to dream of Tahiti if he can't afford to get there. As Neil goes about his days, he faces a sense of emptiness without Brenda there.

Soon, Brenda writes that she will be coming in for the Jewish holidays, which are a week away. Neil is elated, but two days later, Brenda calls Neil, apologizing because she realizes that she can't come back for the holidays: she has a test and a paper due soon, and she needs to be at school. She asks if Neil can come up to Boston, suggesting he use the holidays as an excuse to take off. Neil says he can't, because Aunt Gladys is having the family for dinner and his parents are coming in.

Brenda ignores Neil's protests, saying that she got a hotel room for them. Neil then considers this, saying that he could take a train Wednesday night and then would have to be back to work on Saturday. Aunt Gladys shouts from another room, telling him not to be on the phone long distance for too long. Neil angrily tells Brenda that he'll come. She tells him not to be upset, saying that he should be able to take off for the holidays. Neil says goodnight, and he tells Brenda he loves her.

When Neil tells Aunt Gladys he's going away for Rosh Hashana, she cries. Aunt Gladys argues that Brenda would come home to see her family if she loved them. Neil says that Aunt Gladys doesn't understand, to which she replies that she'll understand when she's 23 years old. The next morning, Neil manages to get Mr. Scapello to agree to let him leave.

*The fact that Neil thinks that he could have the makings of a businessman emphasizes both the amount that he has assimilated to the culture of Brenda's family—picking up on habits from Mr. Patimkin—and his continued aspiration to be included in it. He hopes that by proving himself a worthy businessman (and thus attaining wealth), he can be accepted by the family.*



*Neil now recognizes that the boy's fantasies have been unrealistic and unproductive—and that by recognizing reality, one can build more realistic dreams and thoughts about the future. Yet even though Neil recognizes this in the boy's situation, he doesn't fully recognize this in himself yet.*



*Brenda's request that Neil miss spending the Jewish new year with his parents is another example of Neil's conflict between assimilation into Brenda's life and honoring his own family's Jewishness. The further he moves towards her, the further away he moves from his own family and culture.*



*This is yet another struggle for power that Brenda wins. By renting a hotel for the two of them, Brenda uses the promise of sex to manipulate Neil into coming up to Boston, rather than offering to come to see him or respecting his obligation to be with family.*



*Aunt Gladys continues to recognize that the more Neil assimilates to the Patimkins, the more he moves away from their family. Additionally, she notes that Brenda doesn't seem to care about her own Jewish heritage, because she isn't coming home to spend time with her family during the holidays. In this way, Roth reinforces the fact that Brenda's wealth has moved her away from her heritage, and that Neil is following the same path.*



Neil arrives in Boston on Wednesday night, and Brenda meets him at the station. He's excited to see her, although for the first minute he barely recognizes her. They take a cab to the hotel, where he signs the register as Mr. and Mrs. Neil Klugman. When they get inside the room, Neil notices that her heart is pounding. Neil asks Brenda if there's something wrong. She turns away from him, and he comes up behind her and embraces her, realizing in the moment that the real reason that he came up to Boston is because he wants to ask Brenda to marry him.

Brenda then reveals that Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin found out about her and Neil sleeping together over the summer, because her mother found her **diaphragm** at home. Both Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin had sent her letters, which she shows to Neil. Her father had told her that he doesn't want to shut her out from the family, but that he wants her to move on from this mistake. Mrs. Patimkin's letter is more distraught, saying that she doesn't know why Brenda would treat the family in this way and that she doesn't know what kind of home life Neil has for him to betray their hospitality towards him.

After reading both letters, Neil asks Brenda why she left the **diaphragm** at home. Brenda says that she didn't plan on using it at school and thought she'd go home to see Neil before he came up to see her. Neil says that doesn't make any sense and starts to get angry, saying that she should have expected someone to find it. Brenda is taken aback, saying that his questions make it sound like she wanted her mother to find it. They argue further until Neil admits that he thinks Brenda left it for her mother to find. Brenda is furious and starts crying.

Neil rereads Mr. Patimkin's letter, and notes that he suggests that Brenda bring home her roommate Linda for their Thanksgiving dinner. Neil asks who Brenda will bring home. Brenda wonders whether she could bring Neil home to her family again. Neil says that if she can imagine it, he can imagine it. She says that she can't disobey her parents after they've given her so much in life.

*Despite all of Neil's prior hesitations about not fully knowing Brenda, and his and Brenda's arguments, he continues to idealize their relationship in his desire to marry her. This would represent an easy end to their conflict and an easy path to success in his life, but it also represents a misunderstanding of reality. Any time he tries to evaluate his love for Brenda, he realizes that he might not actually love her as a person, but he pushes those thoughts away in favor of deluding himself.*



*Mr. and Mrs. Patimkin's letters both imply that for her to remain connected to their family, Brenda must cut ties with Neil. Thus, after all of the power struggles between Neil and Brenda, ultimately that competition comes to an end through her parents. Mrs. Patimkin in particular returns to the attitude that Neil's behavior is an extension of his class and upbringing, reasserting the socioeconomic barrier between Neil and Brenda.*



*Here Neil and Brenda finally face the fallout of their power struggles—particularly Neil's desire to control Brenda's commitment and sexuality. Even though Neil gained the upper hand by asking her to get the diaphragm, it has led to a deep and ultimately irreparable rift in their relationship.*



*Brenda's response here illustrates another difference between them: that while Neil would gladly choose her over his family, Brenda would not make the same choice. This choice illustrates how Neil is able to assimilate because of Brenda's wealth, whereas Brenda does not want to choose Neil over her family because she would lose the wealth that has enabled her current life.*



Neil again returns to accusing Brenda of leaving the **diaphragm** for Mrs. Patimkin to find, implying that Brenda wanted to ruin their relationship. She says that he's the one who has been creating conflict in their relationship, asking her why she doesn't get more of herself "fixed," as though it is her fault that she has the money to have her nose fixed. She says that he kept acting as if she were going to run away from him any minute. He says he loved her, so he cared about her. She replies that she loved him, and that's why she got the diaphragm in the first place.

Neil packs up his bag and leaves Brenda in the room crying. Instead of grabbing a cab, he walks along Harvard Yard. He stands in front of Lamont Library, seeing his dark reflection in the glass in the front of the building. He has an urge to pick up a rock and throw it through his glass reflection. He wonders what had turned "pursuit and clutching into love" and why their relationship had been so plagued by winning and losing.

Neil knows that he loved Brenda, but he also knows that he can't keep loving her. He wonders if he will be able to find such passion with anybody else. He wishes that she had been slightly different, but then he wonders if he would have loved her the same way if she hadn't been Brenda. He looks at the image of himself in the glass, and then through it, to the books in the library. Then he leaves and boards a train that gets him into Newark as the sun is rising on the first day of the Jewish New Year. He is back in time for work.

*Brenda finally confronts Neil about the fact that he both idealized Brenda's life and also resented it. His insecurity in their relationship might not have come from any ambivalence on Brenda's end; it seems like it came only from his own lack of confidence and the fact that he might not fully fit into the kind of life that she lived. In not confronting his own feelings about why he loved her, he enabled this insecurity to poison their feelings toward each other through an attempt to make her commit to him. Thus, both their competitions and the unrealistic nature of Neil's fantasy undermined their relationship.*



*Here, Neil finally comes to the self-reflection that he needed to understand his relationship with Brenda. He realizes how it has been ruined by competitions, and how he conflated the pursuit of her idealized life and the sense that he truly loved her as a person.*



*Neil is wondering whether he could love anyone else in the same way, but he doesn't answer this question, even though he is narrating from a future time. In this way, Roth leaves open the question of whether Neil is looking back on this story only with nostalgia, or whether Neil is appreciating the progress he has made in the interim. Additionally, the fact that he is literally looking at his face in the glass as he comes to these realizations makes literal the fact that he is finally moving past delusions and taking a hard look at what he really wants and who he really is. He understands that his true desire is to end his relationship with Brenda. In then returning to work on the Jewish New Year, Roth concludes Neil's story with a symbolic return to his heritage and his socioeconomic status by turning away from Brenda's wealth.*







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