



A Humoristic and Satirical Perspective to Jewish Classes in Goodbye, Columbus By Philip Roth¹

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Abstract

Philip Roth having Jewish ethnicity is a distinguished and famous writer in American literature. In his first novella *Goodbye, Columbus*, containing five other short stories, there are numbers of Jewish characters from all classes. This diversity enables the author make a good humor and flippancy in the lower and upper classes or between each other. Neil Klugman who is both narrator and protagonist of the novella living in working class neighborhood falls in love with Brenda Patimkin, a college student from a wealthy family. Roth from Klugman's point of view satirizes and humors Jews and their relationships between themselves and Gentiles. The author manages to lampoon his society and himself as a Jew of New Jersey. In this study, Roth's first novella written in 1959, *Goodbye, Columbus* will be argued in terms of satirical and humoristic characteristics.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yahudi, Sınıf, Columbus, Hiciv, Neil Klugman, Philip Roth, Nükte

Philip Roth'un Goodbye, Columbus Eserinde Yahudi Sınıflarına Nükteli ve Hicivli Bir Bakış

Öz

Yahudi bir kimliğe sahip olan Philip Roth Amerikan edebiyatında önemli ve saygın bir yazardır. İçinde beş farklı kısa hikâye barındıran ilk kısa romanı *Goodbye, Columbus*'da tüm sınıflardan Yahudi karakterler barınmaktadır. Bu farklılık yazara alt ve üst sınıflarda veya her iki sınıf arasında iyi nükteli ve hicvi mümkün kılar. İşçi sınıfı bir çevrede yaşayan kısa romanın hem anlatıcısı hem de başkahramanı olan Neil Klugman zengin bir aileden gelen üniversite öğrencisi Brenda Patimkin'e âşık olur. Klugman'ın bakış açısından bakan Roth Yahudiler ve Yahudi olmayanlar arasındaki ilişkileri hicivli ve nükteli bir şekilde anlatır. Yazar New Jersey'li bir Yahudi olarak kendini ve yaşadığı toplumu yansıtır. Bu çalışmada 1959 yılında yazılan Roth'un ilk kısa romanın hicivli ve nükteli özellikleri tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Goodbye, Columbus*, Hiciv, Neil Klugman, Philip Roth, Nükte

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1. Introduction:

Philip Roth, having the themes of Judaism, inner psychology and multiculturalism in his novel, is one of the most preeminent Jewish writers in modern American Literature. With *Goodbye, Columbus* he won National Book Award at the age of twenty six. Even the novella's film adaptation is sensational and comic. Erens purports that *Goodbye, Columbus* is "the last major comic work from this very rich two-year period" (1984: 272). The novella and its derivation seems satirical and humoristic according to the reviewers. The critics depict him in a much diversified way: "He has been read as a political radical, an anti-communist, a stand-up (or sit-down) comedian, a misogynist, a liberal apologist, a solipsist, a communitarian, a literary pornographer, a Jewish godfather, and even an anti-Semite. To call him chameleon-like would not be an understatement" (O'Donnell, Madden, and Nieland, 2011: 808). Labeling him such various names necessitates a decent conglomeration. Without a doubt, as an author, Roth has a humoristic and comic perspective while giving the facts in a factitive world. However, Roth's style and narration are slightly different because impoliteness or acrimony figures in almost all novels and nonfictions. Posnock juxtaposing some other very important American writers mentions about what is important for Roth. "What wisteria and alcohol are to Faulkner, and fishing and bullfights to Hemingway, rudeness is to Roth. Rudeness in Roth is a source of stylistic energy, but also a principled (even moral) position, the antidote to the condition of 'anti-humanity that calls itself nice.'" (2006: xi). In fact, no matter how much Roth uses the rudeness in his novels, he can be regarded as a comic and humoristic characteristics, which makes his books more attractive and witty. Roth, admirably observing the deficiencies and dilemmas of individuals, pens pretty detailed characters. Safer believes that Roth uses the black humor while creating a fictive world:

Roth is well known for the caustic humor with which he treats our age, the Jewish community, and himself. Sometimes his criticism takes shape as offensive humor exaggerating the foibles and weaknesses of the Jewish community. It also can be self-lacerating, focusing on Roth's own psychological frailties. Through the comic mode, Roth makes us aware that we live in a bizarre cartoon world where the ludicrous and the calamitous merge, a world in which black humor keeps reappearing and we do not know whether to laugh or cry. (Safer 2006:1)



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Roth's first novella and book published, *Goodbye, Columbus* consisting of five other short stories and written in 1959 deals with librarian protagonist Neil Klugman endeavoring to move up an upper-classman by being in the Patimkins' family. The morality and decency play very important role in Roth's earlier novels. His earlier protagonists are overwhelmed by the contradiction to be more sublime in a corrupted and hypocrite society. When Astruc defines the protagonist aim, he states that it is: "Neil Klugman's goal in the short story *Goodbye, Columbus*, when he flees the Patimkin family and the philistine values of Newark's Jewish bourgeoisie" (2000). Neil's situation is depicted in such a humoristic way that the reader cannot decide whether to laugh or not as Safer states.

Additionally, Roth emphasizes the changing traditional family structure and the relationships between man and woman. The novella can be considered as a book of satire. Pinsker describes the author as "the hare of Aesop's tortoise-and-hare fable, a young man out of the literary gate before most of his competitors had made it to the track" (2005). The changing roles and systems in American Jewish society reverberate to the Jewish individuals which Roth satirically reflects. The novella argues "for the effects of contraceptive technology on sexual and romantic relationships and the shifting power dynamics between men and women" (Capo, 2003). Unfortunately, his satiric writing cannot be comprehended by some critics and reviewers. Roth's critical perspective sometimes excessively awakens their attention. It is always faulty for those who do not want to be pointed their own fault. Pinsker excellently summarizes the situation:

"Many Jewish Americans were not pleased to see what Roth's satiric eye and deadly accurate ear could dig up about. . . well, them. *Goodbye, Columbus* put their manners and mores on public display, and while they may have denied the accuracy of Roth's observations ('Unfair! Unfair!' they shouted, in what seemed a single voice), they also winced whenever his stories edged too close to the truth" (Pinsker, 2005).

The adaptation or adoption is an important subject Roth discusses in the novel. The immigration from Europe to the US is not enough to be real American. "Jews become Americans by crossing from Newark shtetl to Short Hills mansion, Neil's aspirations towards American success and Patimkinization involve other types of crossings as well" (Rabin, 2005: 13). Roth uses this class antagonism in the novella. Furthermore, before discussion, it must be paid attention to the conflict and differences of social classification in the novella, which we do not deal with these issues but only



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humoristic perspective. While Neil and her Aunt Gladys symbolize the lower-class people, The Patimkins are members of upper-class, which Neil fights for. Also, there is a black teenager, who comes every day to look a specific book representing Neil's alter ego. In this study, only *Goodbye, Columbus* but no other short stories will be argued.

2. Discussion

For Philip Roth, New Jersey and Newark are very important and it also symbolizes the upper and lower classes in the novella. There are a great number of divergences among the critics. While some promotes Roth's idea about the city, New Jersey, others are disappointed with his factitive world in *Goodbye, Columbus*. For instance, astonished by Roth's age while writing the novella at 26, Fiedler congratulates Roth on depiction of relationships of Jewish family and his mythic illustration of Short Hills and Newark. The critic continues on his interpretation by saying "No matter--he has dreamed truly" (1971: 120). Conversely, Horn states that he grows up in Short Hills, New Jersey, which is mentioned in the novella and he turns into very exacerbated after reading it. "I have to say I was frustrated and disappointed with much of the American Jewish literature of the 1960s. Roth and other writers of that generation told stories that had nothing to do with what people my age experience growing up" (qtd. Lewin, 2008). Here in *Goodbye, Columbus* Roth finds his inspiration in his milieu where he grew up. Instead of using comic characteristics, he puts to use the satirical style in the novella. Kimmage refers it as "the pleasant satirical humor of Roth's early stories and of *Goodbye, Columbus*" (2012: 155). Furthermore, Short Hills the upper-class people live is a fascinating and mesmerizing district for the people who are endeavoring to realize the American dream. Neil Klugman "drives up to the hills of the Newark suburbs might bring one 'closer to heaven [Short Hills]'" (Severs, 2007). Of course, the desire for actualization of living a prosperous life in terms of American dream will be very difficult and have the possibility in fantastic world. Kimmage, again, emphasizes both the tragedy and the tragicomedy of people's experience for those who want to move of social ladders:

"Newark in the 1970s and 1980s does not signify American exceptionalism with a comic (suburban) Jewish exceptionalism folded into it. Late twentieth- century Newark is a fine place for tragedy, but not for tragedy without laughter. Memory, story, and joke form a triangle, with which trauma cannot fully



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compete, including the trauma of devastated Newark" (2012
156)

Assuredly, Roth having the same ethnicity concentrates on Jewish culture and people interrelated with each other even though most of the ethnic groups are Afro-Americans and Jewish. However, Neil has an alter ego, a young black boy coming to the library regularly and their destiny meets on the same line. The center of the characterization in *Goodbye, Columbus* is Judaism and their relationships and differences between upper-class and lower-class. Roth satirizes the life, lifestyle and desires of Jewish both classes. Harap commentates how Roth reflects Jewish people's dilemmas and contradictions in their minds and society;

In any event, *Goodbye Columbus* announced the advent of a new, significant talent, Jewish in origin and employing Jewish material, on the literary scene. That talent already exhibited a strong, unsparing satiric bent. The titular story, "*Goodbye, Columbus*," a novella, recounts a frustrated love affair between Brenda Patimkin, daughter of a nouveau riche Jewish man, and Neil Klugman, a poor young Newark librarian, in which the empty, mindless, false values of this new upper class created by World War II, of which the Jewish sector had its special features, are satirized. The satire is serious, acute, and often funny, an early manifestation of Roth's comic vein, which was to be so marked as his work progressed. (1987: 135)

A young librarian Neil Klugman living with his aunt far from his parents is a lower-class man and falls in love with an upper-class girl named Brenda Patimkin encountered in a Country Club. The novella concerns about the relationships between Neil and Aunt Gladys he stays, Brenda, and The Patimkins. The characters in the novella cannot be regarded as comic figures except Aunt Gladys. Haliö purports that Aunt Gladys is a typical Jewish mother and has a very humorist personality (2014: 20). In this sense the novella contains a great numbers of examples. For instance, Aunt Gladys's protectionism like a mother is humorously witnessed in the novella. The dialogue between Neil and Aunt Gladys glorifies:

"Hello?" she said.

"Aunt Gladys," I said, "how are you?"

"You're sick."



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“No, I’m having a fine time. I wanted to call you, I’m going to stay another week.”

“Why?” (*Goodbye, Columbus* 59)

When Neil calls her, the only thing she can think is the idea that he is ill. Her reaction to Neil is very surprising for the readers because she thinks she is totally responsible for young Neil. By the same token, not only is Aunt Gladys engaged with the family members but also saving the family budget is her responsibility. However, instead of using situational comedy, Roth uses the aunt with verbal comedy in the novella. When Neil calls Brenda: “Brenda,” I said. “Yes?” Brenda said. “Brenda?” Aunt Gladys said. “What does she call long distance, I almost had a heart attack” (*Goodbye, Columbus* 98). There are many exemplifications like these in the novella.

However, Aunt Gladys is a typical prototype of lower-class person. Humors and comedy settles in her personality. When Neil informs her aunts about his vocation in Short Hills, it is prominent in order for picturing lower-class people’s point of views to upper-class. Roth again uses metaphors in his novella:

“You’ll leave their telephone number God forbid you should get sick.”

“Okay.”

“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. (*Goodbye, Columbus* 44)

This dialogue discloses the perspective of lower class Jews to East Coast Jews. Charging them with the idea that they are assimilated and abandons all the Jews’ traditions and culture, the lower-class Jews hold at bay with them. Aunt Gladys, the prototype of group, tells in a rhetoric way as Posnock states: “Aunt Gladys’s suspicions about the genuineness of the Patimkins’ ethnic identity testify to the anxiety that assimilation always raises, anxiety expressed in the invidious rhetoric of authenticity” (101).



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Here, Aunt Gladys is portrayed as a traditional Jewish woman who tries to assure her family from social and cultural assimilation. Her most fear is losing one of the members. "What do you mean what? You'll find out. You'll stay there too long you'll be too good for us" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 60). However, her satirical presentation attracts the readers' attention. She is depicted not as a common and classical Jewish relative but as humoristic character. Pinsker implying this character affirms the use of satire in the novella. He states:

To be sure, there had been Jewish satirists before. Mendele the Bookseller exposed the corruption and folly of shtetl life with the savagery of a Swift. And, the Prophets did not hesitate to throw a well-aimed stone at the Establishment when they felt the urge, Divine or otherwise. But *Goodbye, Columbus*, so the argument went, was another story altogether. (1980: 35)

The Jewish characteristics and culture are the source of humorousness in the novella. For instance, both classes ridicule the shape and size of their noses. When Neil begins to flirt with Brenda, he is ashamed of his nose. He tells: "It was not to warn me to clothespin my nose and run in the opposite direction; it was a fact, it apparently didn't bother Brenda, but she wanted it recorded" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 7). The nose, a comic significative feature of Jews according to Roth, is used in the novella.

Furthermore, the nose is one of the determiners about a person's Jewishness and it must be operated in the upper-class society in *Goodbye, Columbus*. All the Patimkins including Brenda's father's operation on nose is comically narrated. The dialogue given below is prominent about the idea of getting rid of shapeless nose:

"Why?"

"My nose."

"What?"

"I'm afraid of my nose. I had it bobbed."

"What?"

"I had my nose fixed."

"What was the matter with it?"

"It was bumpy."

"A lot?" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 11)



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Literally, the reasons of why they would like to have operations can be discussed here. Yet, the most relevant thing is exactly truth “Not for nothing does Brenda's nose job become a target of Neil's *incessant razzing*” (my emphasis, Rudnytsky 2005). While Neil, member of lower-class, has no problem with his nose, all Patimkin family thinks that it is an insignia for their Jewishness but it must be eliminated. The Jewish characteristics are hidden in order to be a real American.

Brenda is a product of capitalist system which upper-class people lead to. As aforementioned, the satirization of Jewish life in 60's is Roth's priority in the novella. While get-rich-quick scheme becomes a motto for Neil Klugman, the possibility of having everything one desires is the only aim among the Patimkins' girls. Brenda is depicted as a girl leading Klugman wherever she wants. Buying everything she likes or letting her win every game, Brenda's father's attitudes make her abnormal and lead her have unhealthy personality and mentality. The critics using a slang word states: ““This impersonality was far removed from the display of temperament that animated ‘*Goodbye, Columbus*’ as the life of the bitchy heroine, Lucy Nelson, so meager and so arduous, is from that of the bitchy Brenda Patimkin” (Solotaroff, 1986: 45). Solotaroff is absolutely right that Brenda's impersonality. For instance, at the beginning of novella, Brenda asks him to hold her glasses so that she is able to take a swim without looking at him. Brenda does not care about Neil's appearance or inner world. As the critic states, “Brenda has journeyed so far into America that she never quite sees Neil from Newark” (Kimmage 2012: 67). In this sense, Roth illustrating the behaviors of upper-class young of 1960s like Brenda Patimkin indicates the upper-class people's point of view to the others.

Brenda “who appeared in countless jokes” (Diner, 2001: 139) is depicted as a comically humorist in the novella. When she is together with Neil, her wittiness rises. The conversations with the protagonist prove that idea. On the one hand, the puns and ambiguities play very important role in her verbal world. For instance, Neil says: “I had come a long way since that day she'd said to me on the phone, “Fancy-shmancy” (*Goodbye, Columbus* 43). The phrase she uses is fancy-shmancy intending to mean “an extraordinarily fancy thing, event, or person that your jealousy causes you to play down” however, urbandictionary describes it as “beyond your social class and/or tax bracket” in fact; there is also reference to Neil and her social status. On the other hand, Brenda's another characterization is her iteration of a



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controversial word in a context in order for emphasizing. To make an exemplification, it is interesting for her to use the adjective of 'cruddy' for jumping Neil's blood.

"Wouldn't you have?"

"No."

"Make love to me, Neil. Right now."

"Where?"

"Do it! Here. On this cruddy cruddy cruddy sofa."

And I obeyed her. (*Goodbye, Columbus* 53)

The use of satire is one of the main characteristics in the novella. The reason why Roth criticized so harshly is that the novel depicts Jewish culture and people under the controversial conditions according to the critics. For instance, for the upper class people, the subject of paternity and maternity is contravened with Jewish customs because Brenda's mother is depicted as irrelevant, unconcerned, and stiff one unlike a traditional Jewish mother. She regards Neil Klugman as a functional boyfriend of Brenda's. Her indifference, like Brenda, makes Neil feel like the maid in the house. From the moment Mrs. Patimkin encounters with him, she overlooks him. For instance, when Neil sits on the Patimkin's table for the first time, the dialogue between Brenda is interesting for encapsulation of situation:

MRS. P.: Where do you live, Bill?

BRENDA: Neil.

MRS. P.: Didn't I say Neil?

JULIE: You said "Where do you live, Bill?" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 20)

This conversation establishes the discrimination between Neil and the Patimkins. In fact, nobody worries about Neil's psychology or make him feel at home. Beside, Brenda's father mocks him by saying that 'he eats like a bird'. "The banality of the conversation has to stand on its own, and we are immersed among a family of strangers making jokes that we don't altogether understand" (Raban 1986: 23). Throughout the novella, this point of view is regarded. When Brenda's parents realize Brenda and Neil's intimacy, both father and mother writes letters to their daughter to indicate their feelings. Even though her father insists that she should not care her mother and he repeats to say that he certainly buys the coat she wants, her mother reflects a satiric pens to refer her feelings. In her letter, she writes; "About your friend



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I have no words. He is his parents' responsibility and I cannot imagine what kind of home life he had that he could act that way. Certainly that was a fine way to repay us for the hospitality" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 105). In fact, the parents' approximation is a bit bizarre to show as a parent. Roth uses satire to depict his society and milieu in his Newark. His preference of anti-representation in Jewish family structure is harshly criticized by especially Jewish reviewers. However, "American Jews' use of comedy to mitigate ambivalences surrounding assimilation, as well as gender and generational tensions within Jewish communities and individual families" (Materson, 2009). Actually, the then man is perception of woman is one of important matter of facts Roth indicates on the character of Mrs. Patimkin. She is characterized as a devout Jews in a world where Jewish men promote the Gentiles. Moreover, her negative attitudes detract from the readers' attention and sympathy. The critic states this issue: "Since many of these men perceive women as embodying a devout Judaism that excludes them, their inability to achieve some level of heterosexual romantic fulfillment raises questions about religious identity" (Fahy, 2000).

The use of humor in Roth's upper-class people is a bit different from Neil and Aunt Gladys. The vituperation or the words related to the sexuality are very popular in the Jewish upper-class, which causes harsh criticism and blaming Roth for anti-Semitism. The novella teems with the examples: For instance, the dialogue between Neil and one of the attendants to the wedding encapsulates: "Well our little Radcliffe smarty, what have you been doing all summer?" "Growing a penis" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 89). There are many examples like that. For instance, Neil grumbles himself by thinking what Brenda means: "I believe in oral love. I don't know what the hell she means. I figure she was one of those Christian Scientists or some cult or something" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 92).

On the other hand, Neil meets older Patimkin's relatives in Brenda's brother's wedding. This time, the jokes and humors are more gracious and far from sexuality between the elders and Neil. The space varies from the person who pretends to forget everything he says to the person who does not care anything in her milieu. Brenda's uncle is a nice example for the former person:

"I'll tell you something, one good thing happened to me in my whole life. Two maybe. Before I came back from overseas I got a letter from my wife—she wasn't my wife then. My mother-in-



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law found an apartment for us in Queens. Sixty-two fifty a month it cost That's the last good thing that happened."

"What was the first?"

"What first?"

"You said two things," I said.

"I don't remember. I say two because my wife tells me I'm sarcastic and a cynic. That way maybe she won't think I'm such a wise guy." (*Goodbye, Columbus* 85)

As aforementioned, the upper class Jews' humor is very different from the lower class ones. While Aunt Gladys is more faithful and conservative, The Patimkins are liberated and emancipated. The upper class Jews are depicted to have humoristic soul as well. However, after Posnock juxtaposes the classes in the novella, she gives the details of upper class Jews:

"The above contexts suggest ample reason for enlarging the usual categories that confine Roth (especially his early work) to ethnic regionalism, to comedies of manners about a particular group - second-generation East Coast Jews - joining the postwar upper-class American mainstream. This sketches the terms in which *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) was received" (Posnock 98)

III. Conclusion

As a matter of fact, Roth indicates the features of all Jewish classes living in the 60s. Neil and Aunt Gladys, two representatives of their classes, are drawn as traditional Jews as told in Jews jokes. Yet, the upper class Jews have more tendency to sexuality and sarcasm to their culture. They seem more assimilated and eager to be consumer society, which makes Roth harshly criticized and blamed for anti-Semitism. No matter how he is severely criticized Roth pens and spotlights the comic and witty ways of both classes. Budik summarizes the novella as we tend to:

"'Goodbye, Columbus' is a comic satire "of upper-class Jewish American life. Nonetheless, like 'Defender of the Faith,' it preserves behind the humor the serious question that Jewish assimilation raises: does assimilation signal the end of Jewish identity as such, or is the Jewish American, as embodied by Nathan Marx or Neil Klugman, the beginning of a new form of Jewish identity characterized by a secularizing Americanization



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of Judaism's commitment to ethics and communal activism?"
(Budik 488-9)

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