

An Analysis of Consumerism in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*

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In *Goodbye, Columbus*, the lower-class Neil Krugman falls in love with the upper-class Brenda Patimkin partly driven by wealth, and the lovers' relationship and Brenda's relationship with her family are deeply affected by consumerism. Therefore, this paper tries to elucidate the embodiment of consumerism in *Goodbye, Columbus* and the negative impacts caused by it, aiming to arouse the reflection on the money-oriented consumer society.

Keywords: Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*, consumerism

1. Introduction

Goodbye, Columbus is written by Philip Roth, a preeminent Jewish American writer in the twentieth century. This book was created during the initial stage of Philip Roth's writing career and won a great reputation for Philip Roth.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the supply of commodities supersedes consumer demand and the American society embraces the new era of consumer society. Many works reflect such social changes and Roth's work is no exception, so consumerism came into being. Lawlor claims that consumerism is "the frivolous accumulation of goods for their own sake" (Lawlor, 1988, p. 9). Swagler asserts that "consumerism is being used to mean excessive materialism" (Swagler, 1994, p. 354). The American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to further identify consumerism in a symbolic way. He uses this term to refer to the lavish and ostentatious consumption taken by the wealthy to show off their social status (Veblen, 1994, p. 85). Under consumerism, people purchase and pursue materials, not for their practical function but for manifesting their class superiority, such as the success in their career and the happiness in their life. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth depicts a consumer society in which the heroes attach great importance to extravagant goods and deem consumption and materialism as the only way to happiness.

Many scholars have studied this novel from various perspectives, mostly on the identity of Neil, female characters, and the intertextuality technique. Girgus assumes Neil as "a detached observer" (Girgus, 1981-1989, p. 145); Rudnytsky regards Neil as "a narcissist" (Rudnytsky, 2005, p. 25); Silvey illustrates the process of Neil's identity loss and identity search (Silvey, 2014, p. 60). Barbara Frey Waxman reveals the self-lost Brenda is caught in her affair with Neil and she turns to be "the vulnerable young Jewish woman" who longs for "autonomy

and integrity” (Waxman, 1981-1988, p. 104). Pan declares that the black boy is the externalization of Neil, and their conversation contributes to Neil’s growth (Pan & Bi, 2019, p. 43). But studies from the perspective of consumerism are rare. Thus, this paper focuses on analyzing the heroes’ consuming activities and desires in *Goodbye, Columbus*, revealing the essence of consumerism in this novel and the motivations behind their consumption, which is conducive to a better comprehension of money-oriented consumer society.

2. The Embodiment of Consumerism in *Goodbye, Columbus*

2.1 Excessive Consumption

Excessive consumption is a way of showing off the consumers’ identity as the wealthy upper class. In a consumer society, capital and what a person possesses become the social yardstick for measuring the value of individuals (Pang, 2013, p. 56). People regard money and power of consumption as the only standard of success. They demonstrate their identity as the upper class through excessive consumption.

The Patimkins are keen on displaying their upper-class identity by way of excessive consumption of goods. They purchase more than what they need not only for utility but also for showing off their taste as the upper class. They own “the mirrored bar that was stocked with every kind and size of glass” “as it can be only in the bar of a wealthy man” and “on the shelf back of the bar were two dozen bottles” “of Jack Daniels, each with a little booklet tied to its collared neck informing patrons how patrician of them it was to drink the stuff” (Roth, 1987, p. 36). Plentiful glasses and luxurious wine are used to show that the Patimkins can consume the commodities that the lower class cannot. Besides, there are all kinds of sports equipment under the Patimkins’ oak tree. They use gold dinnerware in daily life. Their refrigerator is filled with various fruits. They consume not only for the basic need of survival but also for the desire of class identification.

The Patimkins show their approval of excessive consumption and present their arrogance toward the impoverished frequently. During Neil’s relationship with Brenda, he is hinted at by Brenda and her family that he has to change his work if he wants to have further development with Brenda because he earns little as a librarian, which cannot support the consumption of Brenda and he will not be accepted by the family. Brenda always exudes satisfaction about being far away from impoverished Newark without any concern with Neil’s feelings. At Ronald’s wedding, the Patimkins invite wealthy people and the only poor one, Leo Patimkin, described as a millionaire, to reflect their conscious avoidance of the underclass. Through excessive consumption, the Patimkins fully demonstrate their superior class status and set themselves apart from the lower class.

2.2 Extravagant Consumption

Extravagant consumption is a kind of unnecessary consumption for the excessive pursuit of enjoyment. As Veblen says: “In order to be reputable it must be wasteful. No merit would accrue from the consumption of the bare necessities of life” (Veblen, 1994, p. 67). In this novel, Brenda consumes extravagantly for the sake of pure pleasure.

Brenda Patimkin improves her appearance through lavish spending. She spends a lot of money on a nose job not for an injury but for perfection in appearance. “‘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’” (Roth, 1987, p. 11). Brenda consumes a large amount of money for the minor improvement of her appearance.

Besides, she also persists in splashing out on designer clothes from high-end shops instead of discount stores. It can be noted from Brenda's complaints. She complains that Mrs. Patimkin asks her to buy clothes from one of the cheap stores like Ohrbach's, which "has the strongest fabrics" (Roth, 1987, p. 22), but she never follows her suggestions but insists on purchasing from high-grade department stores like "Bonwit's" (Roth, 1987, p. 22). Neil also remarks that "Bergdorf Goodman's" (Roth, 1987, p. 85), the luxury store, "was a perfect place for Brenda to add to her wardrobe" (Roth, 1987, p. 85). Obviously, Brenda never cares whether the spending is necessary or not but her own pleasure counts the most.

2.3 Advanced Consumption

People equate the happiness of life with material wealth through advanced consumption. In the consumer society, the consumption of goods creates and maintains certain social relations, which represent the consumers' needs to be accepted by the target group by means of the imitation of the target image in society (Wang, 2011, p. 164).

Neil Klugman regards the lifestyle of the Patimkins as his target and believes the sumptuous visions of consumer society are the ultimate goal and happiness in life through advanced consumption. Thanks to his girlfriend, Brenda, he experiences the upper-class lifestyle and consumptive behaviors in advance.

Neil struggles to ingratiate himself with the Patimkins. He imitates Brenda's fashion of garments to please Brenda and integrates into the upper class. He wears the same sports suit as Brenda. Neil shows off his designer clothes because he has a desire to demonstrate his consumption level. "Then he sat down on my bed and watched me as I finished unpacking. I have one shirt with Brooks Brothers label and I let it linger on the bed a while; the Arrows I heaped in the drawer" (Roth, 1987, p. 55). "Brooks Brothers" is the label that Ronald Patimkin wears. Confronted with Ronald Patimkin, Neil is self-abased. Therefore, Neil attempts to prove that he is able to consume commodities like the upper class in order to strengthen his confidence even if it is incompatible with his income.

3. The Negative Influence from Consumerism on Human Nature

3.1 Benefits First

Under the influence of consumerism, people can easily sacrifice others' for their own benefit. Neil is an example.

Neil's feelings for Brenda were not rooted in love but in Brenda's promise of wealth. In the early stage of their date, Neil says he doesn't love Brenda when Brenda asks him. However, he changes his answer right away after Brenda makes her promise that "when you love me, there'll be nothing to worry about" (Roth, 1987, p. 44). Therefore, although Brenda shows "obtuseness", he betrays his true feelings and pretends to love Brenda (Roth, 1987, p. 44), for he realizes that he has the chance to enter the upper class through Brenda which makes him no longer worry about his future. In Neil's view, bonding himself with Brenda urgently through the diaphragm without considering Brenda's feelings is the shortcut for him to acquire the wealth thus before marriage, Neil asks Brenda to wear a diaphragm, which is hard to accept for Brenda. She feels Neil is "selfish" (Roth, 1987, p. 69) and she is not "old enough for all that equipment" which is normally used by the married couple. However, he ignores Brenda's feelings and forces her to accept his ideas and tells Brenda, "I'm bothering just because I want you to go to a doctor and get a diaphragm. That's all. No explanation. Just do it. Do it because I asked you to"

(Roth, 1987, p. 70). He believes "the doctor is about to wed Brenda to me" and he will obtain the material he aspires to (Roth, 1987, p. 86). "Which prize do you think, schmuck? Gold dinnerware, sporting-goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, bumpless noses, Patimkin Sink, Bonwit Teller -" (Roth, 1987, p. 87). In Neil's eyes, his needs come first, and he can sacrifice anyone, including his so-called lover, for his own benefit.

3.2 Indifference between People

Affected by consumerism, the connection between people is evaluated through material consumption. People attach great importance to money and neglect the construction of emotional links.

Brenda evaluates the relationship between her parents and herself through consumption. She shows a positive attitude toward her father who approves of her extravagant consumption and supports her money. She is unsatisfied with her mother since her mother advocates thriftiness and opposes Brenda's spending on unnecessary commodities. Her mother believes "money is a waste" and "doesn't even know how to enjoy it" (Roth, 1987, p. 22). So Brenda always shows no respect for her mother and quarrels with her mother frequently over clothes purchases. Each time after quarreling with her mother, she would come to Neil for comfort, who is not the person she loves but a kind of sex tool to release her anger. From the examples, it can be seen that as a daughter, Brenda doesn't care about her mother's feeling at all; as a girlfriend, she is indifferent to Neil's emotion, which shows material consumption and benefits exceed the real feelings between people and also shows the indifference between people in materialistic society.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of consumerism in this novel, it could be found that people highlight their class through excessive consumption, search for pure pleasure through extravagant consumption, and integrate into the rich through advanced consumption. During this process, people place money and personal benefits in the first place and ignore the real feelings with others, which would definitely bring great negative influence to the development of the society. Now we are living in the society with abundant material, it is very important to set up the correct consumption concept. Hopefully, this paper can provide some useful reference.

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