

**Naming in Philip Roth's
*Goodbye, Columbus***

William A. Francis

Philip Roth's novella *Goodbye, Columbus* is a story of summer love shared by Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin. The lovers come from very different worlds, and the differences between the lovers contribute considerably to their breaking up at summer's end. Below the surface of the story Philip Roth weaves a subtle and complex series of motifs, the understanding of which affords the reader insights into the private inner world of Neil. Among the motifs is an onomastic one, the primary focus of this paper, but one that must be considered along with motifs of ironic and mock battles on land and on sea, of sharp-pointed weapons, of giants and dwarfs, and of search and of near discovery.

Neil tells his story of summer love in a sarcastic voice, one which is demeaning, arch, and superior. He talks down to Brenda and has little respect for her family and for his co-workers at the Newark Public Library. His smart, biting comments and his superior thoughts underscore his unhappiness, his instability, and his lack of direction. Perhaps Neil's future is with sexy Brenda, whose wealthy father moved the family from Newark to Short Hills, N. J., a world of large air-conditioned houses, country clubs, and private schools. Neil is torn between the security of old Newark, where he was raised, and the artificial world of the Patimkins. He accepts Brenda's invitation to spend his vacation with her in Short Hills, an invitation which makes Mrs. Patimkin furious, for she quickly finds Neil to be an insignificant outlander, something he knew about himself from the beginning of his relationship with Brenda.

In onomastic terms Neil Klugman would seem to be prepared for the challenge of wooing and winning Brenda in her rich and foreign world. The name Neil, from the Gaelic, means "champion." Neil's surname, Klugman, from Yiddish and German, means "wise man," or "clever man," which nicely sums up his opinion of himself. He boasts of his major in philosophy at Newark College of Rutgers University, has an opinion about almost everything, and looks down upon the poorly educated Mr. Patimkin and Brenda's older brother, Ron, a celebrated basketball player at Ohio State whom Neil considers a giant with little sophistication and poor taste in music. Although Neil is a perceptive narrator, the wise, clever man fails to see his own folly and to face his own fears. Though he makes a point of noting Brenda's myopic vision — he met her at the pool and she asked him to hold her glasses — he does not see himself in clear focus. And after breaking up with Brenda he is not much the wiser, for when he looks at his mirror image in the window of Harvard's Lamont Library he says: "I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me. I wished I...could get behind that image and catch whatever it was that looked through those eyes" (135).

In onomastic terms Brenda Patimkin is indeed correctly named. Brenda comes from the German *brand*, meaning "sword," an appropriate name for a young woman who is in constant combat with her mother over who shall do the dishes and how many cashmere sweaters are enough. The battles waged between mother and daughter are likened to those of the Hundred Years' War. Sword-like Brenda poses a symbolic threat to an insecure Neil, who sees sharp objects approaching him again and again. It was on Neil's

knee (a kneel–Neil pun is implied) that Brenda playfully left her teeth marks, just one of the sharp cutting forces that Roth weaves into a subtle motif. Each of the lovers tries to establish supremacy. Brenda challenges Neil to a race on the track at the local high school. He wins, quite impressively, but during the tiring run he says that he feels "A tiny knife" (71) in his side, another moment of suffering for Brenda's exotic love.

Neil's inability to defend himself in Short Hills is evident in a brief scene following his arrival as Brenda's guest. Wishing to impress the Patimkins, Neil invests in an expensive Brooks Brothers shirt, the name on the label an impressive signal of his taste in clothing. In truth, however, he prefers the less expensive and more common Arrow shirt, which he quickly dumps in a drawer. The brand name symbolically says that his arrows in Short Hills are ineffective against the Patimkins.

The motif of sharp threatening objects is also seen in the names of streets in Short Hills, such as Briarpath Hills, and in the "thorny–smelling air" (11) surrounding the tennis courts, where Neil notices that his trouser cuffs are full of burrs. With these burrs in mind Neil imagines that Brenda's tennis partner lives in a manor "No further than the nearest briar patch" (10). Brenda herself is not threatened by sharp objects. In fact it is a kindly sharp object, a surgeon's scalpel, which removes the slight bump on her nose and makes her even prettier. Of course Neil will not have anything to do with knives or scalpels. He no doubt has a little bump on his nose, too, for Brenda observes, "You look like me" (70). But he will not allow the knife to improve him. "I am not one to stick scalpels into myself" (96), he observes, oblivious to the subtle surgery performed on him by Brenda.

In fact, however, Neil is threatened by more sharp cutting edges than those belonging to Brenda. At work in the Newark Public Library he must contend with his boss, a man with a boy's voice disguised as a man's. The boss is named Mr. Scapello, an "Old eunuch" (32), the name almost identical in sound to the word "scalpel." In his overly active and threatened mind Neil sees the library as a place where castration occurs. Another employee, a man who stayed too long on the job, is named Jimmy Boylen, "Our fifty–one–year–old boy" (36). The boy–Boylen pun underscores Neil's fears for his own masculinity and safety. Neil's fears are not entirely without justification, for an employee named Martha Winney falls off a high chair and breaks many bones. It is to this high chair that Neil is promoted before the end of the summer.

Neil's element is old Newark, where he lives with his Aunt Gladys, a comical woman who knows that Short Hills is no place for Neil. Gladys is not comfortable with the new order of life in the 1950s. She is out of synch, so to speak, and makes "Threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews in Palestine" (7). Her name, Gladys, is believed to come from the Latin *claudus*, or "lame." Though she herself is not lame, her household is unsteady, as seen in a piece of bedroom furniture, "The dresser where the leg came off" (4). Practical Gladys levels the dresser with the help of the skinny suburban phone book containing the Patimkin phone number.

In the Patimkin household a serving woman named Carlota, "A Navaho–faced Negro" (21), has become one of the family. Neil sees her as a woman who belongs, who has almost become a Patimkin. Her work never seems to get in the way of her life, for "She

made household chores seem like illustrative gestures of whatever it was she was singing" (77). Carlota lives up to her name, which comes from the German *Karl*, meaning "full-grown." Carlota is not diminished by her status of serving woman or by the color of her skin. Neil, who likens himself to a boy-slave, feels a kinship with Carlota, but when he says hello to her "She did not return the greeting" (77).

Neil's sense of inferiority among the Patimkin giants is in part a sexual one. When he looks at Ron's large athletic supporter hanging to dry in the bathroom, he senses his own inferiority. Yet when Ron chooses to spend his last night as a bachelor with him, Neil observes, "If I was right, then it was the first real attestation he'd given to my masculinity" (102). This "attestation" comes rather late in the summer during which Neil has reflected subliminally upon his shrinking masculinity and Brenda's emerging masculinity acquired at his very personal expense. With the Patimkins, whom he likens to "Brobdingnags" (22), he feels like a castrato among giants. He is pressed into service as a baby sitter for imperious Julie, her name suggesting "Little Caesar," who accuses him of stealing fruit. Overall, Neil is threatened, ordered about, likened to a slave, and, on a particular afternoon when Brenda has another fight with her mother, she seeks revenge by ordering Neil to make love to her on an old dusty sofa stored next to Neil's room. He says, "I obeyed her" (69). The masculine side of Brenda is observed in the nickname "Buck" given her by one of Ron's friends. A more startling indication of Brenda's masculinity is discovered in her angry off-hand remark to a young woman who asked Brenda what she was doing that summer. Brenda responds, "Growing a penis" (110).

In many scenes it is obvious that Neil does not belong. The Patimkin world destroys those who cannot adapt, and to adapt means to surrender to the Patimkin values, to go to work for Mr. Patimkin at his sink factory, to snuggle comfortably under Mother Patimkin's maternal wing, to live a shallow and pretend life. In metaphorical terms Neil does not adapt to the Patimkin element, which is water. Mr. Patimkin, at work, sits in a large glass "Fish bowl" (92) of an office. His son, Ron, is likened to Proteus in the country club pool, where Neil bobs and chokes in the water. His real element is cindery old Newark, where he lives with his Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max, who seek relief from the summer heat by sitting on beach chairs by the back alley, where no beach is within sight. Neil's parents have sought even drier land, in Arizona, to which they have moved for health reasons.

Neil's cousin, Doris Klugman, whose family is quite well-to-do, spends summers by the pool at the country club. She fits in the world Neil is having trouble adjusting to. Whereas Neil cannot swim well, Doris is at home in the water, so much so, in fact, that Neil observes that her skin is fish-like, with "Little scales of translucent flesh" (15). Doris is named for the mother of the sea-nymphs, the Nereids, the fifty daughters of Nereus. It is in the same country club pool that another Greek sea creature emerges in the shape of Proteus. This, of course, is Brenda's brother, Ron.

At the Newark Public Library Neil spends his time playing nonsense games to pass the time until he can visit with Brenda. One of the games he plays is called "Battleship," a name which underscores the combat motif of the story and relates intimately with the sea and water motifs. It is the game that in part provides the scenario of Neil's dream in

which he is a frustrated Christopher Columbus trying to land in the new world of Short Hills. But he cannot. The natives will not permit him to land. The natives in the dream say to Neil, "Goodbye, Columbus" (74). Neil must search for another new world. In this dream Neil-Columbus is denied landing in Short Hills, at the Patimkin port where Mr. Patimkin lives on the profits earned by selling sinks to the military in World War II. Neil observes that after the bombing of Pearl Harbor "Patimkin Kitchen and Bathroom Sinks had gone to war" (43). Not surprisingly, and very appropriately, the name Patimkin is a near echo of Potemkin, the name of the warship made famous in Sergei Eisenstein's silent film *Potemkin* (1925). In the Patimkin-Potemkin onomastic pun Philip Roth blends the various motifs of battle and water, both of which symbolically threaten Neil's security and self image.

Insecure Neil knows that he would have to surrender to the gigantic forces of the larger-than-life Patimkins in order to marry Brenda. He knows that life for him would be one battle after another. And so he returns to the Newark Public Library neither "champion" nor "wise man," to the perilous high chair of Miss Winney. In placing his hero on that chair, Philip Roth suggests that Neil's future will continue to be uncertain, that he will wander long before he ever finds his safe port and his own world, one without Brenda and her loud quarrelsome family of seaborne giants.

Reference

Roth, Philip. *Goodbye, Columbus*. Boston:Houghton Mifflin, 1959.

University of Akron
Akron, Ohio