

**The Country Turns on its Sons – American Tragedies  
in Philip Roth’s “American Trilogy”**

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Philip Rothin 1990- ja 2000-lukujen taitteessa kirjoittamat kolme romaania *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998) ja *The Human Stain* (2001) luokitellaan useiden kriitikoiden ja tutkijoiden taholta ”amerikkalaiseksi trilogiaksi”. Pro gradu-tutkielmani tarkoitus on tarkastella tätä trilogiaa ja erityisesti romaanien päähenkilöitä ja osoittaa, kuinka jokaisen tarina toisaalta ilmentää amerikkalaisen yhteiskunnan ihanteita ja toisaalta todistaa, kuinka yhteiskunnallinen muutos voi kääntää nämä ihanteet ja arvot pääläelleen.

Tutkielman teoreettinen pohja on uushistorismissa sekä strukturalismissa. Kerronnallisesti käsittelen romaaneja tragedioina, joiden päähenkilön kokemukset heijastelevat yhteiskunnassa tapahtuvaa muutosta. Tätä muutosta ja sen vaikutuksia yksilöön käsittelen Michel Foucaultin valtateorian kautta sekä tukeutuen Richard Rortyn ajatuksiin ihmisen autonomiasta modernissa, klassisen liberalismiin periaatteille rakentuvassa yhteiskunnassa. Lisäksi viitataan muutamii sukupuolen ja etnisyyden tutkimuksen suuntauksiin tutkiessani päähenkilöiden identiteettiä ja heidän sekä romaanien naispuolisten henkilöihahmojen välistä suhdetta.

Tutkielman analyysiosa jakautuu kolmeen kappaleeseen, joista kussakin käsittelen yhtä trilogian romaaneista. Jokaisen romaanin kohdalla tutkin päähenkilön amerikkalaisen identiteetin rakentumista tiettyssä ajassa ja yhteiskunnallisessa tilanteessa sekä yksilön ja yhteiskunnan suhteen muuttumista. Tämä muutos kytkeytyy kussakin romaanissa tiettyyn Yhdysvaltain poliittisen ja yhteiskunnallisen historian vedenjakajahetkeen, jotka muodostuvat käännekohdiksi myös päähenkilöiden yksityiselämässä.

Kuvailtu muutos heijastuu paitsi päähenkilöiden yhteiskunnallisen aseman muutoksessa, myös heitä lähellä olevissa henkilöihahmoissa. Nämä henkilöihahmot, erityisesti naispuoliset, ovat romaaneissa joko kanssakärsijöitä tai osasyllisiä, ja myös heidän merkityksensä tarkasteleminen on olennainen osa tutkielmaani.

Päähenkilöiden identiteetti kehittyy etnisyyden määrittelemästä identiteetistä kansalliseen, amerikkalaiseen identiteettiin. He ymmärtävät amerikkalaisuuden luopumisena niistä tekijöistä, jotka lokeroivat kantajansa ja estävät tätä saavuttamasta yksilön autonomiaa. Tutkielmassani pyrin osoittamaan, kuinka romaanien kuvaama moderni amerikkalainen yhteiskunta ei jatkuvasti muuttuvine valtakursseineen salli yksilölle tämänkaltaista ja – laajuista autonomiaa, ja kuinka yhteiskunta ja sen sisäiset yhteisöt toimivat itseään kontrolloivina rangaistusmekanismeina valtakursssia rikkoneita päähenkilöitä kohtaan.

Avainsanat: Yhdysvallat, yhteiskunta, Philip Roth, identiteetti, valta, autonomia

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# 1 Introduction

The aim of my pro gradu thesis is to examine the novels *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* by the American Jewish author Philip Roth. The focus of my thesis will be on the novels' male protagonists, whose lives become intertwined with crucial moments of change in American cultural and political history. I will look into how the protagonists forge their identities in the American society, how they as individuals are thrown into the midst of a significant change in that society and how "public" and "private" are defined and how they intertwine in the realm of the novels. Aspects of ethnicity, gender, space and location will also be examined, as all of these are powerfully present in the novels and have significant meaning in terms of the focus of my study.

These three novels are often referred to as the "American Trilogy". The novels were all published in a span of five years at the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The idea behind the title "American Trilogy" and the very grouping of the three novels is that these novels are thematically linked, that each novel takes an important moment in American history and examines it through the protagonist, his life and his choices. Roth himself has claimed that "I think of it as a thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in post-war American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation" (McGrath quoted in Abbott 2007, 438-9)<sup>1</sup>. Elaine Safer in her book *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* refers to the trilogy as a "social history trilogy" and indicates that its every novel concentrates on an aspect of the American political scene after the Second World War (2006, 117). The specific aspect of American political scene and the period of American history each of the novels concentrates on will be defined later in the introduction and in the second chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> McGrath, Charles. "Zuckerman's Alter Brain." *New York Review of Books* 7, May 2000.

My interest in the topic has arisen from my interest in American history and culture. I have previously studied the most recent of the novels, *The Human Stain*, in my BA thesis. In that thesis I examined the same themes and issues than in this one, focusing on the one novel and its protagonist. This thesis is located in the field of American studies, with its literary theory largely in the tradition of structuralism and new historicism along with some other currents of postmodern literary theory. I will more closely define my theoretical approach in the second chapter. In this introduction chapter I will take a closer look at the previous scholarship on the American Trilogy and Philip Roth's literary production in general. I will also more closely present the novels that are the object of my study, and formulate the most important research questions and problems.

## **1.1 Background and Previous Scholarship**

Even though there is extensive scholarship on Philip Roth's literary works, there is relatively little scholarly work done on his more recent production, which is of course natural considering that Roth has to this day been an active author continuously publishing new material. It could be argued that to an extent, the "American Trilogy" novels specifically as a trilogy have gone unnoticed by literary scholars. This argument is based on the fact that some scholars<sup>2</sup>, along with Roth himself, recognize the novels as a trilogy, but it is difficult to find articles or other critical work that specifically treat them as one. However, the individual novels in the trilogy have been subject to considerable public as well as critical attention even immediately after they were published in 1997, 1998 and 2001. Royal even goes to say that compared with Roth's previous work, the novels received generous amounts of attention directly after they were published (2005, 187-8). Royal has counted that "in a mere span of

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Royal 2005, Safer 2006 and Shechner 2007.

seven years ... there have been no less than fifteen essays devoted to at least one of the novels in the American Trilogy” (204).

It has to be pointed out that a considerable amount of the scholarship on Roth focuses on him as a Jewish author, and many of the issues tackled by the scholars go into somewhat personal detail. A good example of this, concerning the “American Trilogy” novels, is Mark Shechner’s article, where he treats the novels as “Roth Problem Novels” that tell “more about the man than they do about the nation” (2007, 142). Even though Roth’s own ethnicity is important when looking at the issues of race and ethnicity in the novels, I attempt to avoid looking at the author in too much detail, as I see the novels in quite the opposite way as Shechner, as telling us something important about American history, society and culture as well as about the individual who is a member of that society and culture. I will demonstrate in the theory section of my thesis that the concepts of “society” and “individual” are not separate in the terms of this work.

As I pointed out above, despite the relative newness of my primary sources and the following lack of scholarly work on the trilogy as a whole, there are indeed studies of the three novels relevant to my thesis. Here I will introduce a few examples along with their crucial ideas. One example of these is Philip Abbott’s article where he examines the moments in American history presented in the novels as “populist moments”, establishing the link between the individual protagonist’s and society’s development and the greater political change that has an impact for both of them (2007, 431). Robert Chodat has written about Roth’s treatment of “public” and “private” spheres and an individual’s sense of subjectivity in the American Trilogy novels (see Chodat 2005). In addition, Derek Parker Royal and Elaine Safer have written and edited books on Roth’s more recent material, including essays and articles on the American Trilogy and the individual novels. Many of the articles on the three novels as separate works deal with specific issues, such as race and gender, but there are also

studies<sup>3</sup> that take into account the broader historical, cultural and political context that is relevant to my thesis.

## 1.2 The American Trilogy

In this chapter I will briefly introduce the novels in the trilogy, their protagonists, central themes and plot developments.

In *American Pastoral*, the protagonist is a man named Swede Levov, a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jew who was a star athlete in high school, served in the U.S. Marine Corps and ended up marrying Miss New Jersey. He inherited his father's glove manufacturing business and made a life for himself in the rural, white protestant landscape. His world collapses in 1968 when his daughter, Merry, commits a terrorist act by blowing up their local post office, killing a local doctor. Swede has lived the post-war boom and learned to embrace its values, whereas Merry's actions are a result of the cultural revolution of the 1960's and especially its more radical aspects, perhaps most notably the opposition to the United States' war in Vietnam, which was a starting point for the radicalization of the student movement<sup>4</sup>, a development that also engulfed Merry. In this novel it is in these two characters where the clash of two eras in American cultural and political history is evident. In my view, Swede represents assimilation to the reigning cultural atmosphere, with his attempt to embrace everything being an American is all about. Being American and being successful in White America is all that Swede wants from life, whereas Merry, in the spirit of the 1960's cultural and political radicalism, sees her father's world and ideals as harmful to the rest of the world and as such completely reproachable.

*I Married a Communist* is a story about Ira Ringold, a Newark-based Jewish radio star and celebrity, who is also openly Communist and a supporter of the presidential candidate

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<sup>3</sup> These include among others Chodat 2005, Lyons 2005 and Abbott 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See Levy, Miller.



Henry Wallace. Whereas in *American Pastoral* the protagonist's daughter symbolized the "new" era and a shift in society Swede could not comprehend, in *I Married a Communist* there is no such clear counter-figure, but Ira is being directly punished for his own political beliefs and actions. Ira, who was introduced to communist ideas by a fellow soldier while serving in the U.S. military in World War II, grew up during the Great Recession and the New Deal years of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. After returning from the war, Ira became a political activist and through his powerful presence and charm he also became Iron Rinn, a radio star and a big name in the entertainment business. In *I Married a Communist*, this era of political uniformity and the spirit of FDR's New Deal slowly turns into the atmosphere of the Cold War and senator Joseph McCarthy's persecution of any communist or communist-sympathizing elements in the American society. Ira, as an openly leftist public figure, is suddenly in the middle of this political maelstrom.

*The Human Stain* is a novel about a New England college professor, Coleman Silk, who teaches the Classics in the fictional Athena College. The story begins after Coleman's death, when the Jewish novelist Zuckerman begins the investigations for his book. In the seemingly liberal academic community of Athena College our protagonist, who has carefully constructed a unique life and identity for himself, becomes a victim of a modern-day witch-hunt when he accidentally uses the seemingly racist phrase "spooks" to describe two absent students who by chance happen to be African-American. Coleman Silk has grown up in a time when segregation was still common policy, and even though it was not enforced in the north, there was a clear divide in society between whites and other ethnic groups, most prominently African-Americans. The situation in the novel would not be as complicated were it not for the fact that Coleman Silk himself is originally African-American. That Coleman is being accused of verbally oppressing the same minority he is himself a part of, makes the moral landscape of the novel very interesting. The importance and weight of race and skin

color to the novel is also visible in the very name of the novel. The “stain” that plagues every human being can be seen as something physical, moral, or both, but in the end it is crucial to realize that we all have one.

The structures of the novels bear a significant resemblance, namely the presence of narrator Nathan Zuckerman. I will refer to Zuckerman and his way of treating the protagonists’ lives as narratives occasionally in this thesis, and therefore it is important to briefly introduce his relationship to the characters. In all the novels, Zuckerman comes into contact with either the protagonist or someone close to him, and takes on as his task to delve deeper into the protagonist’s life. In all the cases, Zuckerman also has a personal tie to the protagonist, albeit the relationships are very different. In *I Married a Communist* that relationship is a very close one, with Ira Ringold being one of Nathan’s greatest influences, even an idol, in his youth. This also makes Zuckerman’s narration very self-reflective, the reader seen him grow and develop alongside Ira. In *The Human Stain* Zuckerman also has a close relationship with the protagonist himself, and unlike with Ira Ringold, this time he is very close to protagonist Coleman Silk at the very time his downfall is at hand. They share the bond of being old, (seemingly) Jewish men together, sharing their experiences, problems and fears. In *American Pastoral*, the relationship between Zuckerman and Swede Levov comes mainly through the place they both come from, Newark. Nathan and Swede’s brother Jerry are friends, and Swede comes into brief direct contact with Swede only through his profession as a writer. In *American Pastoral* more than in the other two novels, it seems that Zuckerman’s interest in the protagonist is professional rather than personal on any level. I will return to the question of Zuckerman’s and the protagonists’ connection through Newark in chapter 2.5.

### 1.3 Research Problems and Questions

The main aim of my study is to look at the three novels as a trilogy and to examine how the specific historical and political moment in American history and the life of the protagonist are intertwined. Derek Parker Royal writes that in the American Trilogy “what [Roth] has done is to write the individual subject into the fabric of history, and in doing so he illustrates that identity is not only a product of, but also a hostage to, the many social, political, and cultural forces that surround it” (2005, 186). I am especially interested in why and how the protagonists, who seem to in one moment in history have everything, can lose everything in the next. The men in the novels, all of whom could be described as “self-made men”, have adapted themselves to the American society, its values and ideals, to the best of their ability only to witness those values and ideals vanish amidst a cultural and political change. Even though the protagonists are different individuals and the cultural and political changes the country and the men go through are unique, I will argue that the dynamics of the turmoil that follows are to a great extent similar in all of the novels. What I will aim to prove is that the protagonists in all three novels are searching for autonomy, for freedom from the expectations and demands of the society, but are undone by the fact that the changing society requires the individual to adapt. One cannot survive, let alone thrive by carving out an ideal existence and assuming that the ideals of the society do not change.

I will further argue that structurally each of the novels is a tragedy, where each of the protagonists’ unique “American Dream” becomes outdated and unable to survive in the new cultural and political atmosphere. Bonnie Lyons, in her article “Philip Roth’s American Tragedies”, claims that the trilogy establishes Roth “as our most important author of American tragedies”. She makes this somewhat bold claim along with noting that she does not see the novels structurally as tragedies, but nevertheless containing tragic heroes and tragic versions of the reality of the American society. She also notes that while all

protagonists are very different, they become tragic heroes through similar dynamics, having their fate tangled up with the fate of the America around them (2005, 125). As illustrated by my decision to describe these novels as tragedies, I share Lyons' vision to an extent. I do believe, however, that the novels can be seen as tragedies also structurally, as the dynamics of the "fall from grace" is very powerfully present in all three. Moreover, I do not see the protagonists' differences as relevant or as crucial as Lyons does. They do have different qualities and are of course different persons, but there are also many important similarities, which I will examine throughout this thesis. The most important one is that like Lyons, I believe that the fate of the protagonists is a result of both the society changing around them and the reluctance or ineptitude of the protagonists to change with it (2005, 126). My view is that this is precisely why we need to look at the protagonists as similar to each other, regardless of the seemingly different natures, life situations and historical moments they are in. Another important point to consider when treating the novels as tragedies is that they are not without their comical and ironic elements. Elaine Safer notes in her article "*American Pastoral: The Tragicomic Fall of Newark and the House of Levov*" that in his trilogy Roth "combines laughter and pain, farce and deadly seriousness, as he lampoons the sentimental yearning for the American Dream and people's incapacity to face its collapse" (2006a, 79).

The main focus of my thesis is an analysis of the novels as tragic tales in which the individual's destiny is connected with disappearing values and mores in the changing American society. While concentrating on the broader picture, I must recognize that the novels include many important issues that are minor considering the larger focus, but are nevertheless parts of it. I have to take those issues into account in my analysis as well as in my theoretical framework in order to compile a comprehensive thesis, and here I will briefly introduce them.

As I have presented above, each of the three novels has a different protagonist, but they have something in common: they are American Jewish men who in some way or another have made a place for themselves in the American society which in the novels is, after all, primarily a white protestant society. Of course, in this racial profiling there is a twist: The protagonist Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* is an African-American man who has passed<sup>5</sup> as a Jew all his life. Considering the prominence of the Jewish community and Jewish identity in the novels, Roth's identity and status as a Jewish American author has to be one aspect to consider when studying the issues of race and ethnicity in these novels. Even though my aim is not to concentrate primarily on aspects of race, gender and ethnicity, there are certain factors that make it necessary to comment on the protagonists' ethnic identity, their masculinity and women's role in the novels and in the lives of the protagonists.

Perhaps the most important of these other aspects is the role of the female characters in the trilogy. Regarding this issue, I will analyze the most prominent female characters in all three novels and study their influence in the lives and destinies of the protagonists. I will argue that in all three novels there are two important female characters who have a great impact in the lives of the protagonists. Furthermore, I will argue that these female characters mirror and exemplify the change in the society the main characters are unable to adapt to. Like many other achievements in the lives of the protagonists, their relationships with women seem to transform over the course of the novels. Once so fulfilling and convenient, the relationships turn sour, even poisonous, and eventually contribute to the tragic destinies of the protagonists.

In comparison to previous scholarship on Roth and his American Trilogy, my thesis will look into all three novels through their protagonists. Many scholars have looked at individual novels and, on a rare occasion, the entire trilogy in studying how public and private

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'passing' refers to a person belonging to one ethnic group pretending to belong to another group. Historically the term goes back to African-American slaves 'passing' as whites to escape and/or avoid captivity. See e.g. Rankine 2005.

or individual and national overlap in Roth's writing. Bonnie Lyons has even offered the point of view about the novels as tragedies.<sup>6</sup> I, however, will focus on the protagonists and aim to point out the similarities in how public and private, individual and collective, overlap in their lives, and how it relates to different discursive practices in American society. In this sense, I hope to give a comprehensive picture of the novels as a trilogy, something that previous scholarship has not done to a similar extent.

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<sup>6</sup> See Chodat 2005, Lyons 2005, Royal 2005.

## **2 Theory and Context**

Roth's writing has been studied from various theoretical angles, and there are several fields of theory in literary criticism that could be relevant in my study as well. Thus it is important to clarify my theoretical starting points and the issues I am going to focus on less or leave out completely. The theory I am going to be using in my thesis is mainly located in the field of structuralism and new historicism, but I will also take into account elements of cultural, ethnic and masculinity studies. In chapter 2.1 I will introduce the basis of my theoretical framework, the analysis of power in American society and analysis on the relationship between the individual's public and private sphere as well as between the society and the individual in terms that are relevant my study. In chapter 2.2 I will go deeper into the historical and political contexts of the novels. In chapters 2.3 and 2.4 I will focus on minor, but nevertheless important aspects in the novels, gender and masculinity along with race and ethnicity. The final chapter, 2.5, will be about the significance of place and location in the novels, focusing on Newark, New Jersey. Newark is a place that connects all of the novels and their protagonists, and the continuity it represents is an important element in my analysis of the novels.

### **2.1 Discourses of Power in the American Trilogy**

The basis of my theoretical framework is the analysis of power in a society, more specifically how the relationship of power between the society and the individual functions in an American society. In my analysis of the novels I will examine how these relationships have manifested themselves in different times and different watershed moments in American history. This theoretical approach will be largely based on the New Historicist idea of reading literary texts and the historical framework without privileging the former (Barry 2002, 174) I see the novels and their historical setting as being in dialogue with one another. I rely heavily

on Michel Foucault's ideas of the "discursive practices" in a society and of the modern society as an advanced disciplinary system, in which power relations are embedded in every interaction between the individuals and the community and the individuals' interaction with each other.<sup>7</sup> American philosopher Richard Rorty has done remarkable research in analyzing the relationship of society and individual, of public and private in his book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

In my thesis I will rely on Rorty's ideas of the society and the self as contingencies, constantly transforming and constantly redefining the principles of the individual's expected behavior in a society and the society's means to control its members. Rorty explains the formation of an individual's self image in a modern society in the following way: "All beliefs which *are* central to a person's self-image are so because their presence or absence serves as a criterion for dividing good people from bad people, the sort of person one wants to be from the sort one does not want to be" (1989, 47). Rorty's description would probably accurately describe most societies throughout the ages as well as the type of society present in the novels my study focuses on. In my view Rorty accurately describes the way the individuals in the American Trilogy adapt themselves to the surrounding community and the beliefs and ideals it shares. The communities embody different values, and individuals in a given community define themselves by the values that are the most prominent, the ones that have become the norm in the community. In the case of the protagonists in the American Trilogy, their effort to live by the values seen as the most respectable in an American society is somewhat out of the ordinary. They epitomize the norms perhaps better than anyone, and in many ways they epitomize the society and the age they live in but eventually they end up being the perfect example of what happens when someone is unable to live through a paradigm shift in society. In their inability to adapt to a changing set of values and norms they make visible the change

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<sup>7</sup> See Foucault 1977



in society, and through its change the society makes visible man's incapability to effect real and profound change in who we actually are or in how we see ourselves.

### 2.1.1 The Panoptic Society

The idea of panopticism is presented by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, and it has its origin in Jeremy Bentham's prison model *Panopticon*. The Panopticon allows one person to observe the inmates without being seen. Because of this, according to Foucault, it is irrelevant who uses the power of surveillance and why (1977, 202). Furthermore, Foucault states that

the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power [and] that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary

(201)

It is argued by Foucault that originally public torture was used in order to show everyone "the truth of the crime" (35) and "the operation of power" (55). As an element of exercising the power over the other, a society dominated by a certain discourse will naturally use some kind of punishment as a manifestation of power if a member of that society violates the code set by the discourse. Moreover, the discourse will work to appropriate and naturalize the punishment. The spectacle of the punishment, whether it be physical or something else, is in Foucault's opinion meant to "prevent the contagion of a crime" (94). People who witness the punishment of someone who does not abide by the rules and the discourse of a society are not likely to repeat the mistakes of that person. Therefore it is also important that the discourse also appropriates the punishment, meaning that people understand that certain actions result in certain punishments. Adapting this to the novels of the American Trilogy is challenging, but I believe there is a connection to be made. All protagonists in the three novels believe that their actions in life lead to a brighter future, and they do everything they can to abide by the

discourse of the society. When the discourse changes, their actions bring about something else, something that is no longer admirable but rather punishable. Either way, the resulting consequence is appropriated by the dominating discourse.

Even though Foucault's analysis of Bentham's Panopticon is a basis for the modern disciplinary system with prisons and other forms of punishment, in the core of Foucault's thinking is the idea that entire civilizations and societies function in the way of the Panopticon. Foucault himself says of the Panopticon:

The Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.

(205)

In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry builds on Michel Foucault's thinking by stating that in a society there are multiple discourses, "mental sets" of certain groups, which enclose all the thinking of a given group. (176). Barry further uses Foucault's ideas by saying that "[t]he panoptic State ... maintains its surveillance not by physical force or intimidation, but by the power of its 'discursive practices' ... which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic" (2002, 176). In each of the novels in the American trilogy, the idea of the panoptic state is powerfully present.

In the novels the protagonists, who have adapted to the society surrounding them and successfully embraced its core values and beliefs despite being outsiders in the sense of belonging to a minority, suddenly become the center of unwanted attention. Their every action and every aspect of their personal life are taken under close scrutiny. This is not necessarily done by any single authority, but the societies and communities themselves. A crucial element in Foucault's theorizing of the panoptic society is the fact that power and channels of power can be distributed to a wide range of institutions and individuals (Foucault 1977, 205 and Rabinow 1984, 206). In other words, in a panoptic state the power relations are

everywhere. A man can exercise power over his neighbor, a schoolchild over another and a worker over a colleague. According to Foucault's view of the public torture as a method of punishment presented above, also in modern society people, or rather the community consisting of the people, can punish each other by means of "torture". The punishment can be delivered by exposing the punished to a form of collective reproach, by making the punished person "the property of society, the object of a collective and useful appropriation" (Foucault 1977, 109)

These types of power relations and forms of punishment are in play in Roth's novels. The treatment of the protagonists includes of course elements of institutional punishment, such as court hearings and suspensions, but the more crucial aspects of the power exercised upon them and the ones who exercise it are to a large extent invisible. The various punishments imposed by the political system or the legal system in the novels are nothing compared with the punishment imposed on the protagonists by the society of which they once, not too long ago for that matter, were prominent and successful members. Furthermore, the punishment is even harder considering that the protagonists consider themselves and are presented to the reader as "self-made men", whose entire existence is based on the fact that they have been the masters of their own destiny. They have made lives for themselves that, considering their backgrounds, are nothing short of remarkable. The punishment they receive is being shut out of and shunned by the community they were once embraced by. This is punishment comparable to the "spectacle of the scaffold", as expressed by Foucault.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.1.2 Public and Private – The Society and the Individual**

In this chapter I will further explore the relationship between the society and the individual and the dichotomy of public and private sphere in the individual's existence and functioning

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<sup>8</sup> "Spectacle of the Scaffold" is the title of chapter 2 in *Discipline and Punish*, referring to forms of public punishment.

as a member of a society. In my thesis, these themes will be in the center of the analysis of the novels, and it is important to define the most relevant research and most crucial ideas that define my treatment of them.

Considering the statement I made in chapter 1.3 about the novels' protagonists as "self-made men" who have tried and succeeded in building their own, ideal lives, the concept of autonomy seems crucial to my analysis. The American philosopher Richard Rorty defines autonomy as follows:

Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which few actually do. The desire to be autonomous is not relevant to the liberal's desire to avoid cruelty and pain ... (1989, 65)

Rorty's definition of how autonomy demonstrates itself in human beings and how autonomy should be understood as a means for an individual to somehow escape the confines society imposes on its members is interesting and also very accurate in terms of the novels I am focusing on. All the protagonists in the novels express the kind of desire for, and also capability of, being autonomous in the sense Rorty describes. The protagonists are capable of the "self-creation" Rorty introduces, but in the end they are still not able to totally escape the values and beliefs of the society. This becomes apparent in what is one of my central arguments in this thesis; that the protagonists are essentially destroyed in their aspirations towards autonomy by the fact that the beliefs and values change in a contingent society.

Rorty connects autonomy with the central idea of classic liberalism, the desire of human beings to avoid the cruelty and pain imposed by the state. Furthermore, Rorty claims that Foucault shared this thought, even though Foucault denied being politically or ideologically a classic liberal. (65) This connection between the desire for autonomy and the classical liberal desire to be free from the state's oppression is relevant here because we can claim that the America the novels' protagonists live in is a society that is very much based on

the values of classic liberalism. The ideas of personal freedom, respect for private property and free market capitalism as a reigning economic model are all something classic liberals were advocating and are deeply embedded in American social and political thought. However, even considering the high value placed on freedom in a liberal society, Rorty claims that individual “autonomy” is still something else. In their search of autonomy, the protagonists in the novels are taking these ideas of freedom further and at the same time outside the confines of what is seen as appropriate in their society.

As I have stated above, a crucial theme in my analysis of the American Trilogy is the individual’s life being part of larger historical and societal developments and an individual’s identity being subject to an identity of a larger body, specifically American national identity. According to Robert Chodat, Roth “has incessantly explored—even in his most metafictional and postmodern work— . . . not just the introspective, ‘private’ individual, and not just the historical environments of ‘public’ events, but the ways in which these domains merge and diverge, overlap and break apart” (2005, 717) Chodat goes on to say that these very issues are under Roth’s scrutiny in the American Trilogy, and his statement perhaps best describes the argument I am making about the novels. In my view, the trilogy does exactly what Chodat promises; it examines the private individual in the historical environment of public events. Moreover, this dichotomy of public and private can be studied very closely with the dichotomy of society and individual presented earlier in chapter 2.1.

The relationship between the society or community and the individual examined in the novels becomes clear in the following statement by Chodat: “Roth implies a particular conception of what it means to be a person, to have a particular identity, and to express or enact this identity as a member of a modern civic community.” (690) This is the same type of relationship I previously referred to when presenting Rorty’s views on how the individual’s self-image is defined by the beliefs and values that are considered “good” or “valuable” in the

time, place and culture one happens to exist in. Regarding one of the novels in my study, *The Human Stain*, Catherine Morley states that “what undoes Coleman [the protagonist] is the fact that he is ‘out of time’, a figure who belongs more to a vanishing past than to a present mired in political correctness” (2011, 81). This description of what essentially is responsible for “undoing” Coleman Silk is in my view applicable to all of the novels in the trilogy and their protagonists. What is required of a man as a successful member of a community varies according to time and place, and in some cases, such as in the ones with our protagonists, this change can be hard and even impossible to adapt to.

## **2.2 The Moments of Change**

Above I have clarified how and why I see the novels demonstrating the individual’s and the society’s power relationship. In the novels this relationship comes into focus in different periods or moments of change in American political and cultural history. In the introduction, where I presented the three novels, I briefly described these moments and the events in American history the novels focus on. Elaine Safer describes these moments as “three historical occurrences that fundamentally damaged American society after the Second World War: the Vietnam War and the rebellions of the ‘60s and ‘70s, McCarthyism in the ‘50s, and the Political Correctness frenzy of the ‘80s and ‘90s” (2006a, 79) In order to understand why the moments are important, one must elaborate on the historical and political context of the respective time period.

Furthermore, Safer’s use of the word “damage” demands some scrutiny. It is bold to claim that the peace movement during the Vietnam War or the demand for greater consideration in public discourse in the form of political correctness would be especially damaging to society in general. However, Safer seems to refer to these moments through the eyes of Roth’s protagonists, who do feel victimized by the changes that occur. The expression

“damaged American society” is laden with emotion and represents a certain point of view. The moments have effected profound and irrevocable change in the society, which has been damaging to some but perhaps liberating and progressive to others. Anthony Hutchinson claims that the trilogy “[traces] the career of American liberalism between the Truman and Clinton presidencies” (2005, 316), which implies that the novels are a more specific political commentary, a study on how the tradition of liberalism has changed its form in the American political scene. In a way this view is correct, since every protagonist in the novels could be viewed as a liberal, at least a proponent of one tradition of liberalism, which is soon to be conflicted not only by forces on the other end of the political spectrum, but also by other forms of “liberalism”.

In the case of *American Pastoral*, the historical context is in the Cultural Revolution and political radicalism of the 1960’s. The decade was a time when the values and ideals of the post-war generation were called into question by the generation who were born immediately after the Second World War. The tumultuous period includes many aspects in which the change was visible, and some of them are more present in the novel than others. One of them is the call for racial equality and the end of segregation, which had of course already happened by the time most of the novel takes place, in the early 1970’s, but is visible in the novel in how Newark is undergoing a radical demographic change and racial turmoil. Another aspect is the rise of New Leftist thought, the idea of participatory democracy and political radicalism, which is referenced in the novel by Merry’s involvement in the Weatherman movement and the overall change in ways of thought expressed even by some of Swede’s contemporaries.<sup>9</sup>

*I Married a Communist* is set in a period of time before the events in *American Pastoral*, the late 1940’s and the 1950’s, when World War II had just been won by the United

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Miller 1987

States and the communist Soviet Union was emerging as the great enemy. The Cold War context lifts to the forefront the persecution of communists and communist sympathizers in the United States, mainly by senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. This persecution of communists and alleged communists focused heavily on celebrities and personalities in media and entertainment.<sup>10</sup> Belonging to those groups of people, the protagonist of *I Married a Communist*, Ira Ringold, is a very appropriate object to reflect the political atmosphere at the time. “McCarthyism”, as the atmosphere of political persecution of the time has come to be called, was a radical change compared to the era before World War II, when the politics of FDR and New Deal were widely accepted and the shades of red were not an abomination in American politics in general.

In the third novel of the trilogy, *The Human Stain*, the specific political and historical context is somewhat more difficult to define than in the other two novels. The novel takes place in the late 1990’s, in the wake of the scandal caused by president Bill Clinton’s affair with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. The change in the novel has to do with the emergence of political correctness as the dominant discourse of American public discussion. Compared to the country’s history, where boldness and daring have always been appreciated in people who operate in the public domain, especially politics and business, the new culture where it is paramount to watch one’s actions and statements in the fear of creating a moral outrage can be understood as quite foreign. This change in thinking is hard on the protagonist Coleman Silk, who has grown up and made his way out of a time when disparaging discourse in reference to race was not the taboo it is made to be in this new age of political correctness. In a sense, in the case of *The Human Stain*, the political and historical change I am referring to is a matter of a longer time span, maybe at least a few decades.

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<sup>10</sup> See Doherty 2003, Johnson 2005



### 2.3 Masculinity and Gender Issues

Gender is an essential aspect in looking at the American Trilogy for two major reasons. One is the fact that every protagonist in the trilogy is male, and their lives and fates are defined by their gender. The way they act, the dreams and goals they have, and the pressures and expectations bestowed upon them by the society are what they are because of the gender of the protagonists. They epitomize one type of masculinity in their era, and all their experiences come their way in part because they are American men.

Another important reason to look at gender issues in the novels is their portrayal of women. In every novel, there are female characters who play a significant role in how the male protagonists' lives turn out. In the case of *American Pastoral*, there are Swede's wife Dawn and daughter Merry. In *I Married a Communist*, there is Ira Ringold's wife Eve Frame and her daughter, Ira's stepdaughter, Sylphid. Finally, in *The Human Stain* there are again two female characters, a professor who is Coleman Silk's colleague Delphine Roux and Silk's lover Faunia Farley. Common to all of these female characters is, in a way, their negative involvement in the fates of the men in the novels. Moreover, although the women in the novels play active roles in the men's lives, they also seem to exist solely for that purpose. As Debra Shostak sees as being typical of Roth's work, all the women in the novels are presented through the point of view of the male protagonist (2007, 112) The female characters are objects of either the men's desire or scorn, and in some cases both.

In some instances the portrayal of the women has been seen as evidence of misogyny from the part of Roth or Roth's revenge on particular women in his own personal life, most notably his ex-wife Claire Bloom, who has been seen by some reviewers as the basis of Eve Frame's character (Grant, 1998). This view is shared by many scholars, including Elaine Safer, who describes *I Married a Communist* as "clearly a retaliatory act", comparing a woman's betrayal to the betrayal of those who disclosed information about alleged

communists to the House Committee on Un-American Activities during the McCarthy era. In addition, Elaine Safer cites Dale Peck's review "Dangerous Girls", published in *The London Review of Books*, as explicitly describing *American Pastoral* as anti-woman. (2006, 181)

I do not intend to look at the novels' portrayal of women as the author's personal vendetta or as evidence of some aspect of the author's personality. However, I do recognize the negative aspects in the portrayals, and therefore it is important to further analyze the female characters. There is a clear dynamic in how the female characters influence the lives of the men. As I stated above, in all the novels there are characters that are important to the men, but their status in relation to the protagonists is slightly different. There are of course the women who are a part of the protagonists' immediate families. Faunia Farley in *The Human Stain* is "Coleman Silk's lover, teacher and femme fatale", as Mark Shechner puts it. (2007, 155) The two remaining women, Sylphid (*I Married a Communist*) and Delphine (*The Human Stain*), come from the outside and have no blood relation or romantic involvement with the men, but end up being influential characters in the protagonists' lives.

The key in analyzing the female characters lies in the fact that they are viewed through the eyes of the protagonists, as I stated above. In the novels there is constant dialogue between the protagonists and the women in their lives. The protagonists are bound to their women, and aspects of the women's behavior become quite dominating in the relationships. The men's incapability to deal with the behavior of women could be attributed to a view of men as rational and women as irrational beings. Catherine A. Lutz describes this outlook in her article "Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power and the Rhetoric of Emotional Control in American Discourse":

As both an analytic and an everyday concept in the West, emotion, like the female, has typically been viewed as something natural rather than cultural, irrational rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered, subjective rather than universal, physical rather than mental or intellectual, unintended and uncontrollable, and hence often dangerous. This network of associations sets emotion in disadvantaged contrast to

more valued personal processes, particularly to cognition or rational thought, and the female in deficient relation to her male other.

(1996, 151)

Lutz presents a collection of binary oppositions that are traditionally attached to men and women in the Western culture. These oppositions are interesting in terms of my study, since they provide a way to look at the relationship the female characters in the trilogy have to the male protagonists. In my analysis of the female characters I will show that many of the qualities that Lutz connects with emotion and with women are applicable to the women in the trilogy. They seem irrational, overly emotional, vindictive and insecure, with all these negative qualities complicating the lives of the men, the protagonists. However, the protagonists in the trilogy do not clearly represent the opposite, since their actions slide down the road of irrationality as well. This requires one to examine whether the men are simply not as rational as Lutz suggests they should be, or is the men's irrationality another result of their incapability to deal with the unfamiliar, do they let themselves be overpowered by the irrational? In examining the women's behavior and their roles in the development of the protagonists' life narratives, I try to answer this question.

## **2.4 Race and Ethnicity**

In the American Trilogy, race and ethnicity are always present and they are a factor in every novel, albeit in different ways. Race seems to carry the most meaning and importance in *The Human Stain*, where the African-American protagonist's passing is an instrumental part of his identity and the plot of the novel. However, race and ethnicity are crucial to the other novels as well, since all of the protagonists are representatives of a minority. Furthermore, race is deeply connected to the understanding of America either as a "melting pot" of all races and ethnicities or a mosaic of different ones.

### **2.4.1 Race and Ethnicity in Roth's America**

To look at race and ethnicity in the American Trilogy means not only examining the racial and ethnic identities of the characters but also the way race and ethnicity were perceived in the American society in which the novels take place. One way to approach this subject is through defining the “norm” and the “other”, as this juxtaposition is powerfully present in all of the novels in the trilogy. Richard Dyer claims in his book *White* that the norm in American (and Western) culture is whiteness, which leads to a situation where white people are “non-raced” and others are representatives of their respective races. Dyer writes that “[t]his assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colors are something else, is endemic to white culture” (1997, 2)

Indeed, in all the novels in the American Trilogy, whiteness is in one way or the other the norm, and the protagonists either try to strive towards it or at least adapt to the world controlled by whiteness to the best of their abilities. Protagonists in the novels are members of other ethnic groups, namely the Jewish and the African-American, but they get caught up in a society that still takes its norms and ideals from the one dominant group, the white population. The norms of the whites are simultaneously also the norms of the American nation, and in the next chapter I will examine the dynamics between the protagonists' ethnic identity and the American national identity.

### **2.4.2 Ethnic Identity vs. National Identity**

In *American Pastoral*, Swede Levov is a Jew with blond hair, blue eyes and a muscular and powerful build. Even the name, Swede, suggests that the protagonist does not exactly fit in with the Jewish stereotype. Moreover, it is made clear in the novel that Swede is purposefully trying to achieve a life and existence that is stereotypically American, that is to say a life that traditionally has belonged to the original settlers, the white American Protestants. In *I*

*Married a Communist*, Ira Ringold is a Jew who becomes very successful in the entertainment industry. When being “Ira Ringold” is not enough, he takes on the identity of Iron Rinn, an American tough guy who is hard and uncompromising but socially and morally conscious. For Derek Royal Parker, Swede’s and Ira’s aspirations carry striking similarities; he argues that while “de-ethnicized emersion [sic] into white-bread America had been the Swede’s pastoral dream, Ira’s becomes a socially just and politically progressive America” (2005, 191). As for Coleman Silk, the protagonist in *The Human Stain*, his way of building an identity takes on the more classical qualities of passing. As a black man with a light complexion, Coleman decides that passing as a Jew will become a part of his quest to escape the confines his African-American heritage has put him in. For Coleman, this escape is not merely escaping racism, but also escaping the expectations of his family and the way that has been prepared for him.

In the case of every protagonist, the element of race and racial transformation is an integral part of the formation of their identity, even though it occurs in different ways. Therefore I would argue that when examining the American Trilogy, the process of passing can be seen as a movement from a racial identity towards an American identity, regardless of the race of the person or the race of the new identity the person assumes. As Mark Maslan writes about the protagonist of *The Human Stain*, “[h]istorical disjunction is typically American. By forsaking his African American past, Coleman embodies the national one” (2005, 366). This movement from the ethnic identity towards national identity described by Maslan is a sign of every protagonist’s desire to be their own man, to be “autonomous” in the sense I referred to earlier in quoting Richard Rorty and his view of the individual’s autonomy.

An interesting view on Coleman deciding to assume a Jewish identity is presented by David Tenenbaum, when he claims that the choice was motivated by hesitation to make a more drastic move and identify himself with the true majority, the whites. Tenenbaum sees

Jews as a minority that is positioned between the blacks and the whites regarding the level of oppression and thus is somehow more accessible for Coleman Silk (2006, 44) The type of reasoning Tenenbaum offers here is fascinating especially because of the view it gives about the position of Jews as a minority. Looking at the protagonists in the novels, Swede Levov and Ira Ringold have the need to make it as Jews in a white society, succeeding in fields that are predominantly white and non-Jewish or otherwise embodying aspects of white Protestant existence. Coleman Silk is a black man in academia, in which in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Jews already were in a relatively strong position. It seems as though every protagonist tries to move towards the centre, towards the American ideal where one's race and ethnicity should not be issues. However, in every novel they very clearly are.

This demonstrates the fact that ethnic identity and national identity in America and also in American literature still are not one and the same. In the novels, all the protagonists believe in one way or another in an America in which race does not matter. These beliefs are presented earlier in this same chapter as something that the protagonists are trying to realize in part by transforming their own ethnicity. However, it is important to note here that in addition to race and ethnicity and their formation being a way to achieve some kind of ideal existence, race and ethnicity are also symbols in which one can see how the American society functions and changes itself over time.

## **2.5 The World of Newark**

Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, is a Jewish novelist from the New Jersey city of Newark. Many scholars, among others Debra Shostak and Tim Parrish, consider Zuckerman Roth's alter ego, an aging Jewish writer with insecurities and various health issues.<sup>11</sup> In every novel,

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<sup>11</sup> Zuckerman, the narrator, shares with the reader many issues of his own life, including a prostate cancer which progresses during the novels and in *The Human Stain* has resulted in Zuckerman becoming impotent. Regardless of whether Roth himself suffers from these same issues, many critics draw parallels between Zuckerman and Roth's own persona. See e.g. Shostak 2005, Parrish 2005a.

Newark seems to be the source of continuity in a world where everything is changing around the protagonists and the narrator. In telling the stories of the protagonists, Zuckerman goes back to his experiences, youth and childhood in Newark. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman has been childhood friends with Swede's brother, Jerry Levov. In *I Married a Communist*, the protagonist's brother Murray Ringold was Zuckerman's English teacher and Ira was also his close friend. Finally, in *The Human Stain*, the protagonist Coleman Silk lived in the black neighborhood of Newark at roughly the same time as the young Zuckerman lived in the Jewish neighborhood, and they share some of the same memories of the town.

The issue of place is very important especially in *American Pastoral*, where the social and cultural erosion of Newark and the "White Flight" phenomenon<sup>12</sup> are being described through the fate of Swede's company, which relocates its manufacturing from Newark to Eastern Europe and the Caribbean due to economic reasons and the decline of social conditions in Newark. The move of the company out of Newark can also be seen as a part of a larger phenomenon that contributes to a change in the American mindset. Barry Smart argues that the shift of power from America to other parts of the world creates among Americans a "growing realization that 'the American way' is being transformed by the growing prominence of constituencies which do not necessarily share the same cultural values, language, traditions, benefits or resources" (1993, 30).

This shift of power is first and foremost economic, but along with that the political power slowly gravitates towards other regions of the world as well. In the novels, this shift of power manifests itself through the protagonists, when the world they grew up in transforms and the power shifts away from their hands and the hands of their likes. Although the theme of Newark's transformation is examined thoroughly only in *American Pastoral*, this realization is something that the protagonists in all three novels have to face. They have

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<sup>12</sup> The development in American big cities, where white inhabitants move to the suburbs and minorities move in to the vacated houses and apartments. "White Flight" usually caused reduction in real estate value, profiteering in rents and deterioration in infrastructure and services in the minority-populated areas. See Woldoff, 2011 p. 3.

become used to a way of thinking, and the realization that their way might not be as universally accepted or as powerful as before is something that for them is very difficult, even impossible to come to terms with.



### 3 American Pastoral

The first novel of the trilogy, *American Pastoral*, is a story about a Jewish factory owner Swede Levov, who lives in the New Jersey countryside with his wife and daughter. I will more closely explain and examine many aspects of the novel further in this chapter, but here I aim to briefly summarize what I think is the core of my reading of the novel. Andrew Gordon states that by giving his novel the title *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth “intends this work to be not only a family chronicle but also a meditation on the pastoral, on utopian dreams, and on the nature of American identity, American history, and the American dream” (2011, 33). Gordon refers specifically to the title of the novel, but he also captures something very relevant about the essence of the novel: it is a meditation about America, manifested through its protagonist.

Gordon goes on to say that the series of events that make Swede’s and his family’s lives crumble into pieces coincide with or “mirror” the events that take place in America at the same time (2011, 33). The national events and cultural shifts invade Swede’s private spheres, they force themselves into his home and basically destroy everything he values, everything he has worked for and everything he has believed to be important, good and essentially American. Both Gordon and Derek Parker Royal use the term “American dream” to describe what Swede is after (Gordon 2011, 33, Royal 2005, 187). The term is well embedded into everyday language, although further analysis of its definition and origins would probably reveal it to be more complicated than we usually think of it. In the way Gordon and Royal use the term, it seems to describe wealth, family, and not having to depend on anyone or anything but oneself both politically and financially. These issues come up many times in my study, and in this sense “American dream” works as a summary of what Swede wants to accomplish in his life.

In the novel, Swede Levov builds himself this American dream, which consists of continuing in his father's footsteps as an owner of the family company, living in a big stone house in the countryside and having a beautiful wife and a daughter. I will essentially argue that this dream crumbles in the 1970s America for it was created 20 years earlier in what was essentially a different country and society. In this new age, the values and ideals Swede based his dream on are dramatically altered, if not vanished altogether and been replaced by new ones. At the very end of the novel it is stated that Swede and people like him were "pillars of a society that ... was going rapidly under" and that a "breach had been pounded in [Swede's] fortification, even out here in secure Old Rimrock, and now that it was opened it would not be closed again. They'll never recover. Everything is against them, everyone and everything that does not like their life. All the voices from without, condemning and rejecting their life!" (AP 423) "They" above refers not only to Swede, but to everyone who lived or had imagined living a life that was perfect by any standards they had ever known. What happens to Swede and this life in *American Pastoral* is evidence of those standards changing. Unyielding to the new dominating discourse, he experiences the punishment of the new society. Foucault describes the criminal, the punished, as being "detached from society", being forced to leave it (1977, 110). The punishment for Swede is just this, being detached from the society that has unfolded in front of him.

The novel is divided into three sections, the names of which are "Paradise Remembered", "The Fall" and "Paradise Lost". "Paradise Remembered" describes how Swede comes into contact with Nathan Zuckerman and how Zuckerman takes an interest in him. "The Fall" recounts the events of the 1970s, Merry's bombing and the actual dynamics of "the fall". "Paradise Lost", which is probably the most interesting and important section, is about Swede's life after "the fall", his reflections about his life and his attempts to cope with what has happened and desperately trying to cling to a life that has already escaped him. This

division very aptly corresponds with my analysis of the novel, and therefore deserves a mention here. It is noteworthy also because my analysis will mostly concern the last two sections of the novel, but some points in my analysis and quotations I include are from the first section, where Nathan Zuckerman and Swede's brother Jerry in a way summarize Swede's life in their conversations.

### **3.1 Bringing the War Home**

The central events of the first novel of the trilogy, *American Pastoral*, take place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the Cultural Revolution in the USA reached its peak and started to level down. The title of this chapter "Bringing the war home"<sup>13</sup>, was the slogan of one of the most radical and extreme phenomena of that age, the Weather Underground, often referred to as "Weathermen". The Weathermen were a group of radical leftist students who embraced the ideas of the anti-Vietnam war movement and took them a step further. They were not satisfied with peaceful protests and tried to help the cause of the Vietnamese people by "bringing the war home", which meant attacks against government institutions in the US. They wanted to recruit the youth of America "to fight on the side of the oppressed peoples of the world" (Levy 1998, 238).

As I have explained in the first chapter, in the novel the protagonist's daughter Merry seemingly becomes a member of the Weather Underground or a similar organization. The organization is not named, and it has to be noted that Merry's actions in the book predate the active period of the Weathermen.<sup>14</sup> Merry plans and carries out a bombing of their local post office, killing two people. After the attack Merry goes into hiding, which at the time was the modus operandi for the Weathermen. They lived under society's radar and carried out their attacks against the system. As I will go into closer analysis of *American Pastoral*, it is

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<sup>13</sup> Also cited in *American Pastoral*, p. 76

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Royal 2005.

important to understand the role of the anti-war movement in 1960s America and the existence of its more radical branches, as they are crucial to the novel and to my study. In the novel there are various references to the Weathermen and other groups and actual events associated with the 1960s and both violent and non-violent opposition to the war in Vietnam, such as the explosion of a Townhouse in Greenwich Village, New York, in which three members of the Weathermen were killed (AP, 149) It also has to be pointed out that the Cultural Revolution was of course more than the anti-war-movement, having its roots in the civil rights movement and bringing forth many other issues in society, such as women's rights and poverty. However, in my study I look at the cultural shift in the 1960s with the focus on the anti-war movement.

In the following chapters I will more closely examine the first novel and the its relationship to the cultural conflict in American society presented above. The character of Swede Levov and his life will be brought into the larger cultural, historical and political context. I will also examine the roles of other characters in the novel and their influence in the transformation of Swede's life. The final thing I will focus on is place, more specifically Newark and New Jersey, which are not only locations of the novel but also carry significant meaning as Swede's life is intertwined with the fate of an American city and American industry.

### **3.2 “Swede” the American**

Seymour “Swede” Levov is the protagonist of *American Pastoral*, a man with strength, fortitude and blond hair that earned him the nickname “Swede”. Levov is Jewish, but the novel leads the reader to understand that throughout his life, he could have very easily passed as a white American protestant because of his Nordic appearance. “Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none

possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov” (AP, 11). As one can see, Roth makes it clear in the very beginning that the Swede was something else even in mere physical appearance. “Born into” the Jewish tribe with a “Viking mask”, Swede was extraordinary from the outset.

In the novel Swede is referred to many times as “Johnny Appleseed”, according to the tale by the same name in the American folklore. The original Johnny Appleseed was a man named John Chapman, who introduces apple trees to large parts of the American Midwest in the 1800s. Chapman, like Swede, was known for his happy nature and generous ways.<sup>15</sup> Swede was seen as Johnny Appleseed and perhaps more importantly, Swede himself wanted badly to be Johnny Appleseed. “Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me”, he says. “Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian – nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American. Big. Ruddy. Happy” (AP 316). Noteworthy in this particular desire is how the Swede mentions religions and which religions he mentions. He is Jewish who lives with an Irish Catholic in a community that is predominantly Christian Protestant. Among all these religions Swede only wants to be “American”. Swede longed for the “quaint Americana” he tried to create for himself and his family through his work in the Newark family business and quiet family life in their old stone castle in Old Rimrock in the New Jersey countryside. Derek Parker Royal has noted this “malleability of identity”, where Seymour Levov takes on the “alternative” self of the Swede and everything that comes with it (2005, 187). Moreover, Parker Royal claims that this malleability is a common denominator to all three American Trilogy novels, and I will come back to the other two later in this work.

For Swede, the experience of being American, not Jewish or a representative of any other ethnicity is something that he has striven for all his life. Regarding race and ethnicity,

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<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Means 2011 and Safer 2006a.

“American” here could be the equivalent of Richard Dyer’s idea of whiteness, functioning to Swede as the norm in the society and as such separate from or above other ethnicities.<sup>16</sup>

Jennifer Glaser (2011, 47) writes that Swede “builds what looks to the outside world like the perfect life, only to have it destroyed by what he has long since repressed”. By what Swede has “repressed”, Glaser refers to his “disavowal of the past”. Glaser claims that in building his American life, Swede has let go of any Jewish or other specific identity he might have possessed and thus also left his family and especially his daughter without anything to identify with in the chaotic world that was the United States in the 1960s. The radical nature of Swede’s assimilation and the source of his eventual destruction are perfectly summarized in the following quote by Glaser:

In *American Pastoral*, the Swede is portrayed as the endpoint of a genealogical line of immigrants who have fully embraced the American project of assimilation and radical individualism. Although the novel details the Swede’s particular struggle to maintain his family in the face of violence and rupture, it also tells the tale of the third-generation American population of immigrants who have erased ties to their racialized Jewish pasts in order to become more fully American.

(2011, 47-8)

If one follows Glaser’s thinking, Swede’s desire for autonomy, to be able to define who he really is without the confines of his racial, ethnic, cultural or religious history, is not something that is uncommon to a third-generation immigrant and is, in fact, a crucial characteristic of Americans from the earliest European settlers.

This desire also connects Swede’s person with the America and the age he was born into and raised in. Swede was an ex-marine, a letterman in more than one sport at his high school, a man in the prime of his life in the post- World War II boom years. Those were the days of the self-made man, when scores of WW II veterans went to colleges across the nation with the help of the GI bill<sup>17</sup> and the American economy received a tremendous boost from the victorious war effort. Suddenly every man was able to enjoy the increased wealth in the

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<sup>16</sup> See chapter 2.4.1.

<sup>17</sup> See Altschuler& Blumin 2009.

American society, even without the help of their fathers' and grandfathers' sacrifices before them. Especially the GI bill, which provided the veterans with a government-subsidized higher education, was a huge step for the American society, advancing the shift into a "knowledge society" and freeing tremendous resources to the job market (Altschuler & Blumin 2009, 3). Of course, Swede inherited the glove factory from his father, but for Swede the company represents first and foremost a business, a way to provide for his family. This in and of itself is very important to Swede, and through this position the company is a large part of his life and identity. Furthermore, Newark Maid connects Swede to a place more than it connects him to his ethnic and cultural heritage. The company is in Newark, a place Swede calls his home and a town he loves. The meaning of the place, a meaning that Swede has created for himself, is more important to him than the memory of the industrious Jewish immigrants who came to the United States and made their fortune out of nothing.

To further illustrate the nature of Swede's assimilation, it has to be clarified that the desire for assimilation to American culture is not just about abandoning one's ethnic heritage, but also about what takes its place. In the novel, it never becomes fully clear what "being American" means to the Swede. One possible conclusion is that "American" is only a surface that has no depth or any contents whatsoever. In the novel, the eventual disruption of Swede's life and American idyll is described as follows:

All that normalcy interrupted by murder. All the small problems any family expects to encounter exaggerated by something so impossible ever to reconcile. The disruption of the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation getting smarter – smarter for knowing the inadequacies and limitations of the generations before – out of each new generation's breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals. (AP 85)

This quote exemplifies the crucial thought behind Swede's attempts for his American existence: to go to the limit. It also seems that this thought falls into line with what Richard Rorty sees as the essence of the creation of an ideal liberal society by its citizens: that the members of that society must arrive to their ideal existence by reform, not revolution. However, according to Rorty this also means that this ideal society must not have any other purpose than freedom (1989, 60). Swede abides exactly by these notions; by reform, not revolution, he wants to go to the limit with the freedom that his American society provides him. In Swede's attempt, the end result, what comes after that limit is reached, is not apparent. Swede is convinced that by reaching this goal everything will fall into place, but the reality is that the society does not recognize Swede's attempt at all. It is as if the society and Swede played by entirely different rules, and from Swede's viewpoint a man who wanted to be reasonable about everything, who wanted to control everything, thought that he would be taking on an adversary who played by the same rules, but instead was faced by one that played by no rules at all. Here we see that Rorty is correct in characterizing his ideal liberal society as "liberal utopia" (1989, 61), for that is what Swede's America is to him.

Above I have presented what I believe are the building blocks of Swede's identity and the things he considers important in life. I believe that these things are also the ones that he considers "American". Providing for one's family, working hard and living a life that fits the surroundings of the peaceful and quaint New Jersey countryside are the things that make the Swede who he is, and anything that disturbs these things disturbs his existence as well. Family is indeed the element in Swede's American existence that becomes the core and catalyst in his downfall. With Swede's desire to assimilate, he faces inability to provide any kind of social and cultural home for himself and his family in a time when one would be needed. This issue of Swede's family and its significance to Swede's fate will be discussed in the following chapter.



### 3.3 The Dangerous Women

When examining the female characters in *American Pastoral* and their role in the life and destiny of Seymour Levov, one must focus on his daughter Meredith but start with the woman Swede married and who mothered the child that was so instrumental in his demise. The fact that these two figures are significant in defining Swede's fate and the fact that they both are female is important in regards to Roth's own personal history with women. As I have pointed out in chapter 2.3, there are many critics and reviewers who see misogyny and antipathy towards women in all of the American Trilogy novels. Firstly, the women characters are seen through the eyes of the male protagonist. Secondly, they are often objects of scorn and/or ridicule or they are actors who deceive or hurt the male protagonist in different ways.

The female characters in the *American Pastoral* certainly fit both definitions. However, I would argue that in their cases the former carries more weight than the latter. It is as though both Merry and Dawn are puzzle pieces for Swede, particles of his perfect American existence. Merry, unfortunately, is a very ill-fitting piece from the start and even with Dawn, there are growing concerns as the novel progresses. As such they both represent at the same time the ideal Swede was trying to accomplish: a perfect rural idyll in Old Rimrock with a loving wife and a beautiful child; and the reality their lives developed into: the child turning against the family and committing an act totally foreign to any value system they could imagine, and both parents suffering from each other's reactions to the child's act. Mark Shechner represents this point of view by categorizing *American Pastoral* as family drama, focusing on the relationships between Swede and the two women in his life. It is a story of a family that is caught in the middle of an age when it actually was plausible that middle-class white Americans could actually go and commit acts of terrorism (2007, 146).

### 3.3.1 Dawn

Dawn Dwyer was a former Miss New Jersey as well as a Miss America contestant. Swede with his athletic prowess and all-American charm and Dawn with her blonde hair and stunning looks made the perfect couple. They had a perfect life on the surface, but from the beginning there were some issues behind the seemingly perfect façade that Dawn and Swede had that made things somewhat complicated. The first was the difference in their ethnic backgrounds, which carries a significant meaning in the novel despite Swede's radical assimilation project described in the previous chapter. Swede was Jewish and Dawn was raised in a devout Irish Catholic family. One could say that they both do a good job in passing as WASPs, considering that they both represent immigrant ethnicities. The conflict of the two ethnicities, and more importantly two religions in the household was not apparent to an onlooker. To describe the situation in the words of Swede's brother Jerry: "[s]he's post-Catholic, he's post-Jewish" (AP 73). Roth's use of the prefix "post" in front of the ethnicities/religions implies their seeming lack of significance to Swede and Dawn. However, we learn that the strong religious mentality present in the Dwyer family is a factor in the Levov household, although Swede tries not to let it affect their lives. The religion plays a role, not necessarily by itself but in how Swede tries to resist the effect of any kind of spirituality, anything that interferes with the construction of the perfect American life, free from any burden of the superstitions or pointless traditions reminiscent of the Old World.

In the novel, Dawn's personality seems to be heavily affected by issues of mental stability, which is present in her personality from the beginning, but which really becomes an issue after the bombing. She is pictured by Swede's brother Jerry as getting easily enthusiastic about new endeavors but having difficulties in staying focused and she also seems to be quite concerned with her looks, perhaps a result of issues in self-esteem (AP 73). These needs arise from Dawn's personality and the fact that as a housewife in post-war America, she is not

expected or even allowed to work. According to Jerry, Dawn's inconsistency took a toll on Swede during their life together, as he made various efforts to accommodate his wife's wishes. These included funding for her business, a beef cattle ranch. Dawn started the ranch as a way of demonstrating that she is not just a pageant queen, that she can make it in the business world as well. However, the business was based solely on Swede's financial help and did not really make a profit on its own (AP, 199). Swede supported Dawn in the endeavor partly because he wanted her to have something of her own, partly because it helped her get over the disappointment of not having more children besides Merry. Another demonstration is Dawn's cosmetic surgery, which was done in one of the world's most distinguished clinics in Switzerland. Dawn's need for cosmetic surgery arose from her devastation after Merry's bombing and disappearance. When no form of therapy worked, Dawn decided that she would try to carry on with her life and make it even better (AP 187). The first step was a face-lift. Of course, Swede supported his wife in an effort to make their lives "normal" again after what had happened with their daughter.

Swede's eagerness to help and aid Dawn in her struggles was motivated by something more serious than an attempt to recapture the life they had had before the bombing. In hindsight, one could say that it was foolish for Swede to imagine that anything could go back to the way it was, but at the time Dawn's situation was so dire that Swede's actions were based on love and sympathy towards the woman he shared his life with, not only on the need to correct his own life situation. There is a genuine concern about Dawn's life by Swede because of the suicidal tendencies she expresses, and this concern cannot be overlooked.

This desire to help, one could say a need to help, also says something important about Swede's personality and his marriage to Dawn: "From the very beginning it had been a far greater strain for him to bear her disappointments than to bear his own; her disappointments seemed to dangerously rob him of himself – once he had absorbed her

disappointments it became impossible for him to do nothing about them.” (AP 201) Dawn’s happiness, or at least life without disappointments, is directly and intimately connected to Swede’s own happiness. One could even say that Swede defines his success as a man and a husband not through his own feelings but through what he has been able to provide for his wife and family and subsequently show to the rest of the community. If Dawn was disappointed, then Swede would have failed. I would argue that Swede’s thinking epitomizes the ideal of a man being responsible for the well-being of his family, in this case to an extent that seems almost ridiculous. This mindset is also one more example of the all-consuming way in which Swede strives to embrace the values of his society. In the end Swede was not able to avoid Dawn being disappointed, he failed as the perfect American man and husband, which was yet another reason that led to his demise.

The final straw in the failure of Swede’s and Dawn’s marriage and life together was Dawn’s infidelity. In the novel, Dawn has an affair with the Levovs’ neighbor and friend, Bill Orcutt. Orcutt is a character of little importance in the novel, his main role is to be the solace Dawn found in the midst of the disappointment in her daughter, husband and marriage. Nevertheless, for Swede the betrayal signifies his family escaping further and further away from him, and in the end he has given up to the extent that he is unwilling to even try and fight to get Dawn back. Eventually Swede recovers to the extent of being remarried and even having a new family with another woman, as evidenced at the beginning of the novel, but what happened with Dawn and Merry plagued him throughout his life, which is why he wanted to reveal his secrets to narrator Nathan Zuckerman in the first place, in a meeting that sets the entire novel in motion (AP 21).

### 3.3.2 Merry

The description of Swede and Dawn's life in the novel gives credibility to Jerry's evaluation that Swede's downfall is due to Dawn making his life unbearable. However, most of the problems in their relationship seem to originally come from one source, their daughter Meredith. I have examined Merry's actions, their reasons and their significance as a starting point for Swede's demise in chapter 3.1, but it is important to look at Merry's role and position specifically as Swede's daughter to understand why just her actions were so important.

The central conflict between the norms and values of the old and the new in *American Pastoral* becomes apparent through the relationship of Swede and his daughter. In the novel, Swede's brother Jerry tells the narrator Nathan Zuckerman that "Seymour was into quaint Americana. But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in" (AP, 68). This quote summarizes the shift in the culture, the transformation that also becomes Swede's doom. He was the epitome of Americana, but like Merry, even America itself was no longer Americana. That this manifested itself through Swede's daughter, his own flesh and blood, was unbearable to him. For a man who considered family and being able to offer his family a life where they would have all they needed, being betrayed by a member of his family was understandably devastating.

The Cultural Revolution takes away Swede's daughter largely because in the American individualism, embedded in her by her father, she is not free to choose but made to choose from a plethora of identities that can tell her who she is and make her belong. The sense of cultural displacement that plagues Merry as much as it plagues the other central characters in the novel is largely due to Swede's treatment of his personal history presented in the previous chapter. Timothy Parrish, in his article "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's Jewish *American Pastoral*" makes the notion that Swede and his family's fate serves as an

example about how “doomed the ideal of assimilation actually is” (2005b, 145). Parrish draws a parallel between the Levov’s family narrative and the American national narrative by claiming that the impossibility of assimilation is exemplified by the breaking down of both the family unit and the hegemonic cultural and community values of post-war America. This breaking down manifests itself in the novel through Merry. Parrish claims that these breakdowns occur because in America cultural transformation is an “inherent social good”, and the society, like Swede’s family, is simply unable to resist this urge to change (2005b, 146). This is an interesting notion, since change and forward-thinking attitude are attributes that are often connected to the American way of thought. Swede’s desire to assimilate can definitely be seen as one of the causes for his demise, but it is not as simple as Parrish suggests. What assimilation and the sense of displacement does to Merry is definitely a key element in how this desire undoes Swede. He has bid farewell to his ethnic heritage to welcome a supposedly perfect existence, but the drastic consequence of it is his daughter’s violent reaction.

As I have mentioned in chapter 3.1, Merry’s actions were a part of something that was actually happening in the United States in the 1970s, and as such not something that could be counted as fantasy or hyperbole for the sake of creating drama in the novel. This was actually happening, and many fathers in real life were in the same place as Swede is in the novel. On many occasions in the novel, Swede lamented the development that was taking place in the society, and that was also a root of many arguments with Merry. He made attempts to accommodate his daughter’s political views for example by joining a peaceful protest group called “New Jersey Businessmen Against the War” (AP 100), but with Swede’s easy-going nature the ongoing change in society and the issue of Cultural Revolution never took on real significance for him, and his indifference to these issues eventually triggered in Merry serious contempt for her father. In Merry’s eyes her father’s life has no substance, no

sense and no purpose other than being the middle guy, the norm, and for her the norm is the worst, the facilitator of all the injustice done in the world. Therefore it could be said that it is when Swede stops changing, abandoning something but not developing it into something else, Merry takes on the role of the bringer of change. When one feels to have arrived to the point where change is not needed, someone else changes the reality on one's behalf. This idea is in the essence of Rorty's idea of a contingent, modern liberal society. In *American Pastoral*, Swede mistakenly thinks that he has arrived at a state where the necessity of historical contingency of a society is no longer an issue, but Merry makes it painstakingly clear that it still applies.

### **3.4 Swede and Newark**

In *American Pastoral*, the significance of place is perhaps greater than in any of the other novels. Swede and Dawn are both New Jersey natives, and they have grown up in white and Jewish working class neighborhoods. The most crucial single place in the novel is the City of Newark, where Swede grew up and the place he had decided he belonged to. For Swede, Newark was to be a place where he and his descendants could build a dynasty, running the glove manufacturing business Newark Maid and living on the idyllic countryside surrounding the thriving industrial town.

Roth is not the only one to bring up the topic of urban and industrial decline in specifically New Jersey. To further point out the prominence of the phenomenon in the collective conscience of America, American musician Bruce Springsteen's production can be taken up as an example of how the issue is discussed in popular culture. Roth and Springsteen are both New Jersey natives, and their love for their home state and home towns seems to equal Swede's. They both devote significant parts of their art to discussing this issue, and that is why I want to briefly examine Springsteen "My Hometown" and its view of the

transformation of Freehold Borough, Springsteen's home town, in comparison to the portrayal of Newark in *American Pastoral*. "My Hometown" includes many descriptions of social change in a small industrial town that are very similar to the changes described by Roth. Springsteen describes the racial tensions of the 1960s with the lines "[i]n '65 tension was running high at my high school. There was a lot of fights between the black and white". The racial element is also present in *American Pastoral*, where Swede laments the fact that Newark is being ruled by gangs of black adolescents who do nothing but terrorize the neighborhood by stealing and racing their cars along the streets. Swede's description is slightly ahead of the situation Springsteen is singing about, but the racial tensions began to build up also in Swede's Newark when companies and along with them jobs left Newark and the white flight phenomenon slowly started in the city in the late 1960s. In *American Pastoral*, Swede's father Lou Levov offers a good view on what happened to Newark in the 1960s. He claims that racial tensions were just "the icing on the cake", after businesses and job opportunities had vanished due to high taxes. He claims that the racial tension and hatred was a result of the financial dire straits the town was left in when business was gone. There was no money for public services, and the city was literally left for ruins. He also predicts that "Newark will be the city that never comes back" (AP, 345). That last sentiment rings very true and the sentiment is echoed also by Swede himself at the beginning of the novel, when he is explaining to Nathan Zuckerman the reasons for finally leaving New Jersey. According to Swede, Newark "Used to be the city where they manufactured everything. Now it's the car-theft capital of the world." (AP, 24). Finally, the reality had caught up with Swede.

This industrial and economic decline in the region is another issue that is brought up by both Roth and Springsteen. A state with a traditionally strong industrial production, New Jersey started to suffer when factories were being closed due to economic reasons. Whether the reason was that the goods could be produced cheaper somewhere else or that the factory



went out of business because of harsh economy, the end result for the town and its people was the same. In “My Hometown”, Springsteen describes the situation as follows:

Now Main Street's whitewashed windows and vacant stores.  
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more  
They're closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks  
Foreman says these jobs are going boys  
and they ain't coming back to your hometown

On the first line, Springsteen paints a vivid picture of an American “Main Street”, which has experienced an exodus of businesses. This way the empty street symbolizes the broader economic downfall, which is then explained in a more concrete manner on the third line, where it is mentioned that a textile mill will be closed. It can be assumed that the factory has been quite important to the town, in the way Newark Maid was important to Swede’s Newark, although Newark Maid was just a factory among many in a relatively large industrial town. Its importance to the people whose lives it touched one way or another, however, can be compared to the importance of Springsteen’s textile mill. Lines two and four in the quote touch on the fact that is a direct consequence of businesses leaving a certain region; the people will leave too, for various reasons. Some will remain, and those are usually the ones who do not have the alternative, those who either lack the means to relocate their lives or choose not to do so because they do not believe that it would be any better somewhere else.

Swede, of course, was in a sense partly to blame for the economic decline of Newark, relocating the production of his company first to Czech Republic and later to Puerto Rico. This decision was naturally influenced by financial factors, but in Swede’s case, the decline of Newark is more a reason to move the business away than a consequence from it. Newark Maid was Swede’s lifeblood, a family business that connected him with his heritage and provided him with a strong sense of originality. Like a true American, Swede saw his sense of purpose in his work and family, and both things existed in New Jersey. The disintegration of Swede’s family and the simultaneous economic and social decline of the

environment very dear to him have a very clear connection, and for Swede the decision to relocate Newark Maid to Puerto Rico was as much an emotional decision as it was a financial one. In fact, it was a tremendously difficult decision for Swede, even if all economic realities spoke for the move out of New Jersey. At the end of *American Pastoral*, when a group of friends is having dinner at the Levov house, Swede's father Lou Levov tells the group how he had been trying to get Swede to relocate the company and he still had not. Lou also makes a prediction that there would be no more gloves made in the USA after five years from that moment. As we learn in the novel, that prediction turned out to be quite accurate at least in Newark Maid's case, as Swede had finally moved the operations out of Newark six years after the race riots of 1967 (AP, 24). In retrospect, Swede talks about the move as it was the most natural thing in the world, and his tone in speaking about the state of things in Newark, as illustrated in the paragraphs above, leads one to believe that there was nothing difficult in the move. However, Swede's attachment to place again becomes apparent, this time in his relationship to Newark Maid's new home in Puerto Rico. It is said in the novel that by the time Swede and Zuckerman have their discussion, most of the American textile industry has already moved on from Puerto Rico to Southeast Asia. Swede is again the one to hold on.

The Swede found himself hanging on in P.R., he explained, the way he had hung on in Newark, in large part because he had trained a lot of good people ... who could give him what Newark Maid had demanded in quality going back to his father's days; but also, he had to admit, staying on because his family so much enjoyed the vacation home he'd built some fifteen years ago on the Caribbean coast, not very far from the Ponce plant. (AP, 27-8)

Here Swede again is attached to the accomplishments with his work and his family. He again swims against the current due to reluctance to part with tradition and sense of responsibility.

The same thing that happened with Newark happens with Puerto Rico, and the same thing that happened with Dawn and Merry happens with his new wife and three sons.

## 4 I Married a Communist

The events in the second novel of the trilogy, *I Married a Communist*, take place a couple of decades earlier than those of *American Pastoral*. The historical context in this novel is the late 1940s and the 1950s, American society after the Second World War and FDR, and especially during the time of the Red Scare and McCarthyism.

Joseph McCarthy, the senator from Wisconsin, was the instigator and face for the persecution of Communists and people affiliated with the Communist ideology that raged in the United States during the 1950s. The war in Europe had ended and the United States was in a heated battle of power over Europe with the Soviet Union. This led to extreme caution against all leftist activity in the United States, since in some minds there was an imminent danger of a Communist coup even on American soil. A new government organization, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), was founded to investigate all the suspected Communist affiliations, and Senator McCarthy became the head of the committee.

Of course, the opposition to leftist agenda had as much to do with domestic politics as it had with international politics. According to Haynes Johnson, the political situation in the United States in the 1940s was very much in favor of FDR's Democrats, thanks to the success of their economic policies, especially New Deal. Johnson also notes that during the success of New Deal, the Democrats were able to lure many members of the left-wing Progressive Party into their ranks (2005, 60). This conflict between the two parties to the left of Republicans can be seen in *I Married a Communist*, where Ira Ringold and young Nathan Zuckerman support the Progressive candidate Henry Wallace for president after FDR. Nathan's father, a Democrat, tries to dissuade his son from participating in the Wallace campaign by saying that any vote away from the Democratic candidate Harry Truman is a vote for the Republicans.

The political situation described above is the one the protagonist has to live in with his strong communist worldview. Towards the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, however, there developed a strong backlash against the liberalism associated with the New Deal politics (Johnson 2005, 60). This backlash was most strongly represented by the witch hunts of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and Senator McCarthy. In this chapter I will examine Ira Ringold's role and position in the political atmosphere presented above. I will focus on Ira's role as a political activist and a show business figure, who were among McCarthy's favorite targets at the time. I will also look at the people in Ira's life and their influence on how the protagonist went from an unskilled laborer to a radio star in New York to a publicly disgraced has-been dying alone in a shack in a depleted part of the New Jersey countryside. Compared to *American Pastoral* and the fate of Swede, examining Ira's fate does not require the same attention to place. In the case of *I Married a Communist*, that attention must be paid to Ira's profession and industry, which in a way saw its decline with the coming of television.

## **4.1 Ira Ringold**

In examining the character of Ira Ringold as a representative of a typical and admirable American man, one is immediately faced with difficulties: Ira is Jewish, he is a vocal communist, and there is not even anything significantly American in his appearance, save from his resemblance to Abraham Lincoln, which is indeed relevant considering his career and character. Nevertheless, Ira was a product of New Deal-era America, a war veteran and a star in the entertainment business, which all are reasons to conclude that he had, in fact earned his place as a man worthy of admiration. In the following chapters I will look more closely into the two most important definitions one can give for Ira Ringold and how they contribute to his story.

#### **4.1.1 The Communist**

Ira grew up in a middle class Jewish home in suburban New Jersey. However, the environment was not a safe, homogeneous Jewish neighborhood, but a mixed neighborhood where Ira had to fight for his existence as a Jewish kid among the Italians. Ira is describes as “big and strong and belligerent”, referring to his size and his aggressive demeanor, stemming from his having to fend for himself (IMAC, 66). It is pointed out that there was an Italian mob operating in Ira’s neighborhood, but not being an Italian, Ira was not viewed as a viable candidate for membership. The Jewish mafia ruled another neighborhood, so they were never an influence on Ira either. Instead, Ira met his influence in the army in the form of a longshoreman and a communist organizer Johnny O’Day (IMAC 67).

It is implied in the book that due to Ira’s upbringing in a family where the mother had died when Ira was small and his father was never a close and attentive father figure, Ira sought influences from bigger, stronger and smarter men than himself, and in the army he finally found O’Day. Ira was not educated, and O’Day led him to books and at the same time inserted his own worldview inside Ira’s head. The army during World War II was also the first place where Ira himself witnessed manifestations of greater social inequalities than the ones he had seen growing up in New Jersey. When Ira started to spend time with black soldiers from a segregated unit, he got in trouble with some soldiers from the south, with whom he also tried to have political debates (IMAC 47). Those debates opened Ira’s eyes to how majority of Americans hold deeply-ingrained ideas about race, labor and capital that are in fact contrary to their own interests. The people’s inability to accept Ira’s arguments in turn added to his aggressiveness, and a fight he got himself into over being friends with the black soldiers (IMAC 48) did that as well. I would argue that the experiences Ira had while serving in the army combined with the influence of Johnny O’Day were what finally made him a

communist, which in my view is quite ironic. The American army is not traditionally seen as a place that could convince a person serving there to turn to communism, but for Ira it did just that.

After the war, Ira worked odd jobs not because of the money, but with organizing and communist agitation as his aim. He stayed in touch with O'Day and was told by him where to go and which factories and docks needed an organizer. After Ira had realized that he had a future in the entertainment business, in the radio, for him it was just another way to advance the communist agenda. Ira was deeply involved in the Communist party, perhaps due to his search of leadership and a father figure, which he found in Johnny O'Day. Murray Ringold, Ira's brother, describes Ira's devotion in *I Married a Communist* as follows:

Ira belonged to the Communist party heart and soul. Ira obeyed every one-hundred-eighty-degree shift of policy ... He managed to squelch his doubts and convince himself that his obedience to every last one of the party's twists and turns was helping to build a just and equitable society in America.

(181)

Ira's belief in communism was based on the belief that communism was the ideology that would realize Ira's ideal of America. In that way, he believed that what he was doing was American, and those who were opposed to communism were in fact anti-American. Derek Parker Royal claims that "a socially just and politically progressive America" is Ira's American dream, his ideal of a perfect society (2005, 191). He further states that Ira's life, with all experiences he has gathered during it, actually embodies something truly American:

Ira and his colorful life – his humble beginnings as a ditch digger, his bumming across America during the Great Depression, his plain-spoken impersonation of Abe Lincoln, his uncompromising dedication to the common working man, his unadorned Walden-like retreat – become a stand-in not just for America, but for an idealized America, one that epitomizes serenity and simplicity.

(2005, 192)

In Royal's view, Ira's experiences in life have made him truly American, and the same experiences have made him a communist. In much the same way as Ira finding his communist ideology while in the U.S. Army, his downfall due to being a communist takes on an ironic

and tragicomic note. Ira's Communism was indeed very American, until the Cold War came along and made it literally un-American. Considering the thoughts expressed by Rorty, Communism is for Ira the way to autonomy, not only for him individually but for all American citizens. In the America of this age, Rorty's idea of a contingent society is perhaps most powerfully present, with the New Deal hinting towards another America being possible and the shift to McCarthyism rendering it impossible.

Being a communist, identifying and being identified as one, is obviously a major defining factor in Ira's character, since it is through Ira's political opinions that he is publicly crucified. However, there are two other elements of Ira's personality and identity that are crucial when considering his destiny. I will look at these two elements in the next two chapters.

#### **4.1.2 The Radio Star**

Ira's career in entertainment began with him impersonating Abraham Lincoln and debating on various historical and current issues in Communist Party events. This led to Ira landing a job on a radio show "The Free and the Brave", where he was able to reach a broader audience while continuing to incorporate political content in his show with the help of his stable of writers, who subscribed to the same ideology as he did. Being a star on the radio in the 1940s and early 1950s gave Ira a status that he had never had, which was both a blessing and a curse. It brought him influence and money that he could use to advance his cause, but it also made him a subject of scrutiny and vulnerable to attacks that later proved dangerous and ultimately fatal.

Of course, Ira's life as a star in New York also creates a contradiction between his political beliefs and his lifestyle. Being an adamant communist and simultaneously living in a Townhouse in Manhattan married to a movie star do not, at least at first glance, seem to fit

together particularly well. Ira's reasoning obviously is that it does not matter, since in an ideal state everyone is valued exactly the same, whether they are digging a ditch or making radio shows for millions of listeners. For my study, the contradiction between Ira's lifestyle and his beliefs is not relevant, although I recognize it exists. When it comes to Ira's profession in show business, more relevant is the way it adds to Ira's existence as an ideal American.

Hollywood and Broadway, place names in big American cities, do not represent only the places, but a way of life, something that many people even today strive for and idolize. Even though one could claim that Ira never sought to be in that position, achieving what he achieved in the entertainment business is no small feat, and in the eyes of many Americans, a rags-to-riches-story like Ira's fits the ideal of "making it big". These kinds of stories are expected even today, one needs to only look at TV shows such as American Idol or X-Factor, and they were not unheard of in Ira's time either. There are many reasons why one could easily add "being a famous radio actor" to the list of American traits in Ira's life story, presented above by Derek Parker Royal. Being elevated to the status of a "celebrity" could perceivably bring one closer to the "autonomy" as defined by Rorty. He claims that the "heroes of liberal society are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary" (1989, 60), and an actor, a musician or an entertainer of any field could be considered being the former. Ira arguably hoped to be both, but the publicity along with it also made him an easier and more prominent target to the eventual punishment.

In addition to contributing to Ira's being a poster boy for America, his status as a radio actor is of course meaningful in the sense that it was people in broadcasting – reporters, actors, producers, journalists – who fell victim to McCarthy's persecution. Like his communism, Ira's being a radio actor is an element in his life that also contributed to his downfall in a significant way. As Thomas Doherty explains in *Cold War, Cool Medium*, one of McCarthy's strategies was to "blacklist" radio, television and Hollywood personalities,



since the HUAC believed that Communists were infiltrating the major media outlets across the country (2003, 24-5). Were Ira to go unnoticed as a union organizer and a common worker, he would never had attracted the attention of congressmen and senators, not to mention being in a position where a famous wife would write a desecrating book about him.

#### **4.1.3 The Family Man without a Family**

A third important aspect in Ira's life was his longing for a relationship and a family, which he ultimately found with a former silent movie star Eve Frame. The problem for Ira was that his ideal of a family was never going to be realized with Eve. She had a history of bad marriages, one of which had produced a daughter with whom she had a complicated relationship. Ira's tragedy here was that he fell in love with a woman that could not fulfill his hopes and dreams of a family, which in themselves were right in line with the American ideal.

Ira's desire for family life could indeed be counted as the third element in his American existence. Few things are more profoundly middle-American than finding the right woman, raising a family and providing for them. In Ira's ideal world, a world that also included struggle for greater social justice and work as a popular radio actor, this was as important an accomplishment as any. Unfortunately, this was one accomplishment where Ira failed as an American, and this is also why it is important to point out in my thesis. Family is important in *American Pastoral*, where it is a part of Swede's pastoral bliss. In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk had a seemingly ideal family from which he is estranged following his wife's death. Nevertheless, the two other protagonists possessed this element of the American Dream, and therefore Ira's failed attempt at it is important. It is one of the most crucial differences in the protagonists' life narratives. In *I Married a Communist*, the issue of family revolves around the women in Ira's life, and I will examine it further in the following chapters, where the women in the novel are in focus.

## **4.2 The Treacherous Women**

The issue of family is directly connected to the two women in Ira's life, his wife Eve Frame and Eve's daughter Sylphid. Furthermore, these women represent the world where Ira made a name for himself, where he became Iron Rinn and where he felt he could make the difference, be the great American hero. This is the same world that that also destroyed him, and being from that world, Eve and Sylphid also contributed to Ira's fate. In this chapter I will look at the characters of Eve Frame and Sylphid and examine their relationship with Ira and their role in determining his fate. The name of this chapter, "The Treacherous Women", derives from the notion that Ira was betrayed by these women, not only in the sense that they were not the family he longed for, but in many other ways as well. I will examine this notion of betrayal also in chapter 4.3.

### **4.2.1 Eve Frame**

The relationship of Ira and Eve Frame was an improbable and inappropriate one for many of those closest to Ira from the beginning. A former silent movie star, who was used to the glamorous life in the show business and had been through a string of marriages and a down-to-earth manual laborer who stumbled into his career in radio broadcasting rather than had it as his goal to make it in show business were not seen as a good match for each other.

Especially Ira's brother Murray, with whom Nathan Zuckerman discusses Ira's personal life, tried on many occasions to reason with Ira and make him end the relationship. Elaine Safer claims that the narrators (Zuckerman and Murray Ringold) purposefully stress the differences and "oversimplify the character traits" of Ira and Eve in effort to understand their relationship, which they feel is a case of opposites attracting each other (2006b, 107). In the novel, this difference between the characters is a constant source of conflict, which makes it easier for

the reader to understand the ultimate collapse of Ira's and Eve's marriage and the bitterness they feel towards each other, manifested especially in Eve's memoir, the main culprit in Ira's professional and personal destruction.

An interesting aspect considering Eve's and Ira's relationship has to do with their ethnicity. Both being Jewish, their attitudes towards their own ethnic background are vastly different. Ira was a roughneck worker, for whom growing up as a Jew in an Italian neighborhood in Newark was a major part of his personality. He was proud of being Jewish, and even though it was not a defining element in his life, at least he never shied away from admitting to belonging to a minority. Eve Frame's relationship to her Jewishness was also defined by what her background meant to her and her career, but it took a whole other direction than Ira's. Eve is described by Elaine Safer as "sophisticated, elegant and anti-Semitic" (2006b, 102), all of which could be more or less attributed to any member of the American WASP aristocracy at the time. This is also Eve's tragedy, so powerfully renouncing her working class Jewish background in order to be successful in show business, both on screen and in the social life that ensues. The desire to hide her Jewish background is not entirely Eve's personal decision, but rather a product of a multi-faceted publicity tragedy, that aims to make Eve the star that the whole country could admire. This strategy also brings Eve together with her first husband Carlton Pennington, a homosexual actor otherwise so perfectly WASP that the marriage of convenience was exactly what both of their careers needed. It alleviated concerns about Pennington's sexuality while giving Eve the perfect mate and the perfect setting to be the all-American sweetheart.

Eve's second husband is a Jewish businessman, with whom the marriage is a total opposite to the previous one. Eve and Freedman, as the husband is referred to in the novel, married out of love, if not for pure lust. Freedman turned out to be a real estate speculator, who also persuaded Eve to let him take care of her financial matters, which was not a smart

decision. Freedman spent most of his own and Eve's money, leading her into a financial predicament. This of course fits the stereotype of the money-hungry and ruthless Jew, and gave Eve seemingly another reason to grow resentful towards her own people. However, this resentment did not stop her from marrying Ira, who she considered to be an honest and trustworthy man. The notion of anti-Semitism thus seems somewhat shallow, although Eve's treatment of her own background and her actions towards Ira at the end of their relationship do give it credibility. All in all, I would argue that Eve's actions concerning Ira are, rather than a product of an ideological hatred of Jews, more a product of her personal negative experiences and bitterness stemming not only from their relationship but also from her past.

#### **4.2.2 Sylphid**

Sylphid Pennington is Eve's first and only child, a daughter born out of Eve's marriage to Carlton Pennington. By appearance, Sylphid is portrayed as overweight, awkward and repulsive in just about any way humanly possible. However, the physical unattractiveness is not by any means her worst characteristic. By character, Sylphid is portrayed as rude, loud, selfish, spoiled and manipulative, constantly both pining for her mother's attention and at the same time making both their lives miserable, blaming Eve for destroying her childhood by ending the marriage with Pennington. Sylphid adored her father, and that is one more element that makes Ira's, Eve's and Sylphid's life together extremely difficult and in the end impossible. In *I Married a Communist*, Sylphid is an important catalyst for events that complicate Ira's life with Eve and in the end lead to his demise.

There are numerous instances in the novel, where conflicts between Ira, Eve and Sylphid are described, and almost always the conflicts concern the power relations within the family. Sylphid's need to assert her power and manipulate her mother often clash with Ira's strong will, as he is not under Sylphid's influence the same way as her guilt-stricken mother.

In the end, these conflicts turn towards Sylphid's ultimate victory, and eventually Ira is driven out of the equation. Perhaps the most powerful scene in the novel concentrates on one of these conflicts. In the scene, Ira comes to home to find Eve and Sylphid together on the bed, both screaming and crying, Eve laying on her back and Sylphid straddling her, pinning her mother to the bed (IMAC, 174). The argument was about Sylphid moving out to live in an apartment of her own, a move that Ira and Eve had been planning for a long time. This attempt, like all other attempts to create a life between two adults that did not include Sylphid, was doomed because of Eve's inability to stand up to her daughter and resist the guilt that Sylphid never ceased to bestow upon her. In this case, Sylphid deduced that the idea for her to move out must have originated from Ira, and Eve was to blame for being a bad mother and failing to stand up for her own daughter against the evil stepfather. Of course, Ira was often the one who suggested ways to make their lives revolve a little less around Sylphid and her whimsies.

Sylphid is also the one to bring her friend, Pamela Solomon, into Ira's life.

Tormented in the situation between the two women in her life, Pamela emerges as someone Ira runs to for refuge, and he ends up having an affair with her. Ira's relationship with Pamela can be seen as merely an extramarital affair resulting from an unsatisfying marriage, but it also represents a sophisticated adult relationship in the midst of the farcical performance taking place in the Ringold-Frame household. Moreover, Pamela is portrayed as Sylphid's opposite: she is slender, beautiful, soft-spoken and mild-mannered. To both Ira and Eve, she exemplifies everything Sylphid is not, Eve stating that Pamela should be her daughter instead of Sylphid and Ira seeing her as a breath of fresh air under the suffocating atmosphere of his home. With Ira's and Eve's marriage going downhill and Sylphid always there to act as a point of comparison, it is very easy for Ira to fall for Pamela and begin the affair, which lasts roughly six months, before Pamela breaks it up after Ira asks her to run off with him and have his child.

Ira's desire to have a child with Pamela is further proof that the issue of having children and building a family is crucial to Ira's life narrative. Ira steps into the marriage with Eve imagining that he can also be a father to Sylphid. It soon becomes apparent that that notion is impossible, which leaves Ira wanting to have a child of his own with Eve. Ira does manage to persuade Eve and also get her pregnant, but what follows is one of the more chilling developments of the novel. Sylphid is outraged by the fact that her mother has dared to become pregnant with another child, and goes on a vengeful attempt to make sure that the baby will never be born, again by laying guilt on her mother. This attempt, like all other conflicts, ends with Sylphid's victory, when Eve breaks down and decides to have an abortion, and there is obviously nothing that Ira can do about the matter.

Ira has talked the issue of having a child over and over with Eve, first convincing her that she can take care of the baby even despite her 41 years of age, which was the first argument Eve gave against giving birth to the child. After the age, Eve brought up her career as a reason for not being able to care for a baby. She had had Sylphid at eighteen, when she was an emerging actress in Hollywood, and she had been publicly criticized for being a bad mother, working and leaving her baby to a governess. However, Ira moved over that obstacle by reasoning with Eve that the situation was not the same; the work was not as demanding in the radio and she had Ira there to support her (IMAC, 88). After having these discussions, Ira thought that he succeeded in convincing Eve, but suddenly one night Eve has a change of heart, tells Ira that she cannot go through with having the baby and Ira finally has to resign and realize that there is nothing more he can say or do. But the reality of the situation is yet to reveal itself to Ira. After Eve tells Ira about the decision to have the abortion, he hears Sylphid yelling at Eve and realizes that "the abortion wasn't Eve's decision – it was Sylphid's. That morning he realizes that it wasn't his baby to decide what to do with – it was Sylphid's baby

to decide what to do with. The abortion was Eve evading the wrath of her daughter” (IMAC, 118).

Considering Sylphid’s influence in Eve’s and Ira’s relationship, there is reason to see her as a crucial destructive force regarding Ira’s narrative. Coming from Eve’s previous relationship with Pennington, she comes from a place totally foreign to Ira. She could be viewed as Ira’s antagonist only due to her background, which goes back to the WASP elite circles of silent-movie era Hollywood. Furthermore, the battle of power within Ira’s own family clearly identifies Sylphid as his adversary. This becomes apparent in the way in which Sylphid, first by letting on that Ira will never be a father to her and then destroying Ira’s desire to have a child of his own with Eve, takes away Ira’s chance to be a head of a family. With family being very important to Ira and Sylphid emerging as one of the primary reasons he could never achieve it, one important part of his dream was taken away, and the inability to achieve perfection in his marriage to Eve led to the remainder of it to crumble away as well. This, in turn, leads to the catastrophic falling out between the two spouses.

### **4.3 From New Deal to No Deal**

In accordance with the title of this thesis, the “betrayal” of the protagonists by their country is perhaps most clearly visible in *I Married a Communist*. Nearly every ideal that Ira Ringold had and attempted to realize during his years as a communist, a radio actor and a husband were in a sense betrayed by forces that turned America away from the New Deal era politics towards the Cold War. Anthony Hutchinson says that

[b]etrayal, in fact, is central to the novel’s understanding of ideology and the idea of political commitment as they find expression within the story’s historical context. In this sense ... the personal and the political are interlocked in unprecedented ways in the USA during this period, reflecting, to some extent at least, the condition of totalitarian societies where the distinction between the two is erased

(2005, 318)

Hutchinson here points out two important things: Firstly, that Ira's political commitment and ideology are in fact betrayed by the new way of thought and way of political discourse that started to dominate American politics in the 1950s. Secondly, this political discourse mixed personal and political in order to advance the agenda of one political movement, which is of course somewhat ironic in more than one way. Taking into account what Hutchinson says about the political situation in totalitarian societies such as the Soviet Union and how vehemently McCarthy and other right-wing politicians opposed all things red, it seems hypocritical to persecute American citizens using the methods they did. It is also ironic in retrospect, seeing how strongly the same political movement opposed the left-wing and women's movement idea of "personal is political" in the 1970s.

As I have stated in previous chapters, the overlapping of the personal and the political, public and private, is one of Roth's great themes in the trilogy and also the major subject of my thesis. This is why it is important to pay attention to the various ways these dichotomies create irony in *I Married a Communist*, since they also instrumentally link to bigger issues in the novel: the "betrayal", and how the changing discourse undid Ira both in public and in private. While McCarthy's persecution was directed at all communists and their collaborators, there were other reasons why being subjected to this persecution had such profound effects on Ira in *I Married a Communist*.

The betrayal regarding Ira's status as an entertainer and a family man has more to do with how he is treated by the industry and his own family because of the HUAC hearings than how he is treated directly by the interrogators in those hearings. The book written by Eve, Ira's wife, and Congressman Bryden Grant, Ira's political nemesis, together is an epitome of the betrayal by people Ira considered family. Of course, Ira himself committed adultery and so betrayed Eve, but his dreams of having a family and being truly able to live the life he wanted with Eve were betrayed long before the affair took place, an issue I have discussed in



chapter 4.2. As Mark Shechner points out, in the end Eve and Ira were out to destroy one another, both being betrayed in the process of their relationship (2007, 149). Ira was also betrayed by Sylphid, Eve's daughter, or rather the expectations he had of being a stepfather. Ira's affair with Sylphid's friend Pamela Solomon was in a way a result of this dynamic as well, since it could also be interpreted as revenge towards Sylphid as much as it was betrayal towards Eve. As Murray Ringold says to Nathan Zuckerman in *I Married a Communist*, betrayal was everywhere in American society at the time:

To me it seems likely that more acts of personal betrayal were tellingly perpetrated in America in the decade after the war ... than in any other period in our history. This nasty thing Eve Frame did was typical of lots of nasty things people did in those years, either because they had to or because they felt they had to ... When before had betrayal ever been so destigmatized and rewarded in this country? It was everywhere during those years, the accessible transgression, the *permissible* transgression that any American could commit.

(IMAC, 264)

In this quote, Murray Ringold refers especially to the practice of giving up one's coworkers, relatives or even members of one's family as enemies of state. Eve did not give Ira up to the HUAC, but the way she handled the situation after Ira's hearings fulfills some of the traits in the behavior of many who did. Bitter and resentful but seemingly appalled by her husband's political affiliations, she wrote her book with Ira's political nemesis, Bryden Grant, and essentially serving Ira's head on a platter while helping Grant's political career (IMAC 271). Moreover, there was no going back to show business after the HUAC hearings and the negative publicity started, especially as Ira was in fact a communist, even though he never committed any criminal acts against the United States per se. His co-workers in the industry had leftist sympathies, but those sympathies did not last for long after Ira was labeled a public enemy.

Along with the more intricate aspects of betrayal, it is worth pointing out that Communism in itself betrayed Ira. I have discussed Ira's beliefs and relationship with Communism in chapter 4.1.1, and the element of betrayal is emphasized here. As Mark

Shechner points out in *Up Society's Ass, Copper*, Ira was convinced that Communism was the way to go for the twentieth-century America, and that it was consistent with the democratic ideals of men such as Tom Paine and Lincoln, Ira's two greatest political idols (2003, 176). With this in mind, Ira bought into Communism with all his heart, he did not question the ideology or the Moscow party line even when they did complete turnarounds regarding the leadership of Ira's own party. Of course, the question is not that Ira should not have followed his own thoughts and ideals, but that his own thought and ability for independent decision-making was replaced by naïve trust in the party line. Based on Richard Rorty<sup>18</sup>, I claim that in losing his belief in Communism as an American ideal, a higher and nobler thought than others, and starting to adopt the idea of Communism through a filter and served by an outside agent, Ira also made his quest for autonomy impossible. Communism ceased to be something that was going to elevate the American state and give every citizen their autonomy, but rather became just another thought among others, soon to be completely rejected in the American society. Ira was betrayed not only by his own country's shift from one dominating political discourse to another, but also by the revelation of the true essence of totalitarian one-party Communism. Ira never saw his communism's ideals put to action, he only saw that the American society before, during and after World War II was still unjust and did not provide the common man with the kind of life he deserved. There was great injustice in the American society at the time, and in the end, few people felt it more clearly than Ira Ringold.

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<sup>18</sup> See p. 16 in this thesis.

## 5 The Human Stain

*The Human Stain* is the third novel of the trilogy, and the last novel I will examine in this study. Like the other two novels, *The Human Stain* tackles yet another age in American history through its protagonist. The age in question is the last decade of the previous millennium, and the phenomenon that Roth specifically addresses is the discourse of political correctness. The novel is situated in the year 1998, which was the year when the American public screamed for President Bill Clinton's impeachment due to his sexual encounter with his assistant Monica Lewinsky. As the country is outraged with Clinton's behaviour, Coleman's transgression and racial slur becomes the object of the same kind of treatment in the small college and the surrounding community. Furthermore, the novel deals with the same discourse of public vs. private that is present in the other two works as well. Gabrielle Seeley and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky write that "*The Human Stain* explores the fundamental belief in self-creation and self-fulfillment as integral to the American promise of freedom, asking the profoundest of questions: Is there some element of identity an individual has no right to relinquish in order to attain individual freedom?" (2011, 93)

This question aptly summarizes what connects *The Human Stain* with but also separates it from the two other novels in regards to my study. In *The Human Stain*, the question of relinquishing one part of one's identity, in this case one's race, is more integral than in the other two novels. The construction of Coleman Silk's new identity and abandonment of the old one relies on the African-American Coleman "passing" as Jewish. Noteworthy in this transformation is the fact that Coleman does not abandon race and ethnicity altogether compared with Swede in *American Pastoral* and Iron Rinn in *I Married a Communist*, who both embody an American man who, one could argue, is of no race at all. In *The Human Stain*, the protagonist's identity, achievements and eventually downfall all connect intimately to his decision to abandon one part of his identity and replace it with

another. In this chapter I will examine Coleman Silk's decision and transformation, connecting it with the stories of the protagonists in the other two novels as well as with the larger historical and cultural context provided in the novel.

## 5.1 The Anatomy of Coleman Silk's Passing

Patrice Rankine states in her essay "Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man" (2005, 102) that race is an important foundation for social categorizing in the United States. According to which racial group they belong to, some people are underprivileged in relation to others. The tradition of a passing story in America began already in the times of slavery, when some slaves were able to pass as whites and thus improve their social position. Of course, the most crucial step in improving one's social position at the time was gaining one's freedom. Often the attempt to pass was the only way an African-American could hope to avoid slavery. In Rankine's words, traditionally passing is "the individual's potential escape from what at times amounts to a deterministic, social blight" (101).

Coleman Silk is no exception in that sense, since he grew up as a black child in a mainly white Jewish neighbourhood and experienced forms of racism already at a young age. To point out a few examples, in *The Human Stain* there is a mention of Coleman's childhood where one of his schoolmates had an accident but the friend's family refused to take Coleman's blood because he was black. In another incident, Coleman is refused service at Woolworth's in Washington D.C. while he attends the all-black Howard University in the segregated south. Elaine Safer states that "Coleman Silk passes as white so as to be free" (2006, 119).<sup>19</sup> Safer's description offers a fascinating starting point in studying the process of

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<sup>19</sup> Safer refers to Coleman Silk passing as white, but in the novel (and as I point out multiple times in this thesis) Silk actually passes as a Jew. The essential difference between passing as "white" or as "Jew" will be examined in chapter 5.2.

passing in the novel. The question of “being free” carries a lot of weight since there are multiple ways to look at Coleman’s actions and their motives in the novel. There is definitely more to it than just the aspirations to better one’s financial and social position, which we find in a traditional passing narrative. In the following I will look at Coleman Silk’s process of passing in the modern-day American society, and more importantly I will consider why he chooses such ultimate means to achieve his goals.

### **5.1.1 Escaping racism**

Coleman was surrounded by racist attitudes when he was growing up in New Jersey. Both his father and brother took the race question very seriously, but Coleman never expressed their kind of defiance against all the wrong-doings their family had to encounter. As a youngster, Coleman never saw in these cases the institutional racism that lies behind them. In high school Coleman sensed “an unevenness of endorsement compared to what they lavished on the smart white kids, but never to the degree that the unevenness was able to block his aims” (THS 103). Only the above-mentioned incident in Washington D.C. made him realise that he had lived a very sheltered life under the wings of his father and older brother. By passing as white Coleman is able to escape the institutional racism that minorities encounter, even if he himself does not regard it as an essential problem. Whether this escape is Coleman’s primary motive or not, it will always be at least a “by-product” of his passing.

In addition to escaping institutional racism, passing is a way to get rid of problems regarding one’s relationship with one’s own body and person. In Coleman’s case it seems that his blackness could also be a major hindrance for himself as well as the world around him. David Tenenbaum argues in his article that Coleman’s narcissism leads him to believe that “his cultural identity is the primary impediment to his personal achievement” (2006, 44). This might be a very important aspect regarding Coleman’s decision, since he never fully shared

the black community's view of themselves as being collectively and continuously oppressed. Coleman as an individual does not want to be judged by his ethnicity. Therefore it is somewhat ironic that he is destroyed because of his careless and allegedly racist remark towards two black students who very strongly see their ethnicity as a factor and react very strongly to everything that might offend them and their race, because to them there is no difference between the personal and the racial. Both irritated and amused by this, Coleman makes ironic comments about his own situation. As the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, quotes Silk's words after his resignation "[T]hrown out of a Norfolk warehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for being white" (THS 16). Interestingly enough, Coleman also feels very strongly about one of those two students – the one who filed the complaint about him – and describes her as weak, not talented enough and not belonging to the school. This is actually very much in line with what we learn of Coleman and his attitude to racial grouping: the treatment one gets depends or should depend on the individual, not the group one is confined to.

When we think of passing as escaping racial prejudice, we must take into account the fact that hiding one's racial identity can actually reinforce the existing boundaries. Since race is proven to be an important social factor, Patrice Rankine's words "[p]assing, although an individual choice, reifies the tragic reality of social order" (2005, 101) are very much true in modern American society. Crossing over strengthens the division between "blacks" and "whites", and here we again arrive to the position of whiteness as a norm and others as "others"<sup>20</sup>. Passing is a necessary course of action in order to escape the plight of racial prejudice and oppression, but its necessity is also what upholds the oppressive construction. In order to achieve the state of total individuality, Coleman is forced to escape

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<sup>20</sup> See Dyer 1997.

his blackness. This means that in being black, Coleman can never be an individual. Only privileged white people, who are of no race, have the luxury of individualism.

### **5.1.2 Escaping Family and History**

In her book *Philip Roth*, Hermione Lee points out that Roth himself had to resist Jewish authority figures from the very beginning of his career. This has made these types of figures – such as Coleman Silk’s father, although he was black instead of Jewish – an essential part of Roth’s fiction (1982, 34). These authority figures are present in all three novels of the trilogy, and they are very powerfully present in *The Human Stain*, where Coleman Silk has to battle his entire past and background in order to construct his new identity. Through his passing, Coleman Silk is resisting authority in both his family and on a larger scale in the entire black community.

The death of his father was a turning point in Coleman’s life. After this strong, almost majestic figure was suddenly out of his life, Coleman realized that “he would have to make it [his life story] up himself, and the prospect was terrifying” (THS 107). After this event, he decided to leave Howard University, which his father wanted him to attend and which he hated. This marks the beginning of Coleman Silk’s story as he builds it up for himself. I would argue that in addition to reasons concerning discrimination and institutional racism, Coleman is making up his life narrative to escape his father’s shadow and the entire Silk family history. In Coleman’s view, following family traditions and putting too much weight on what has gone on before is “idolatry” and “ancestor worship”, which can cripple an individual and hinder personal development (THS 144). Coleman might also feel that his father’s attempts to better the social position of the family through excessive learning and correct use of English are inadequate, and he is in need of a greater, more thorough

transformation if he ever wants to be free of prejudice. Coleman's reasoning for his solution is presented in *The Human Stain* as follows:

[Coleman] had chosen to take the future into his own hands rather than to leave it to an unenlightened society to determine his fate—a society in which, more than eighty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, bigots happened to play too large a role to suit him ... All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free

(120)

The university experience in the segregated south represents to Coleman the very opposite view of his racial identity and position than what he wants for himself. There the blacks are close-knit, bound together to face the world outside. “Howard University looked to me like just too many negroes in one place” (THS 134). If they stand up, they stand up not individually, but for the whole community. Individual experience and identity means nothing, the collectiveness and feeling of belonging are everything. To Coleman this is the same view he was exposed to at home by his father and brother, but now it manifests itself on a larger scale. Howard University and the entire concept of historically black colleges are to Coleman a representation of the suffocating racial solidarity, a continuum that begun already in his childhood home. Escaping from Howard and the south as the beginning of Coleman's journey is escaping from the history of collective black suffering that had become overpowering in Coleman's early life.

## **5.2 The “Self-Made Man” in *The Human Stain***

The concept of the “self-made man” is part of American history and identity, an ideal that is so embedded in the nation's collective ethos that it continues to dominate the cultural and political atmosphere of the country to this day. The concept is also crucial to all of the three novels in my study, and with *The Human Stain* and Coleman Silk the concept is taken to a whole new level. In passing, Coleman truly invents and “makes” himself, whereas in the other



two novels the protagonists mostly build on something that already exists, although the idea of “making” oneself is definitely applicable to all three men.

As Patrice Rankine suggests, Coleman Silk’s journey of passing and constructing a new identity is “an act of self-construction, a conscious decision to throw off history” (2005, 104). This argument can be supported not only by the point I presented in the previous chapters about Coleman’s initial desire to break free from his father’s legacy or the attempt to escape the burden of his racial history, but also by the way in which Coleman executes his project of passing. He has to execute various well-planned and sometimes risky manoeuvres in order to create and maintain his unique existence, which give a picture of his passing as an actual construction, something that is put together using elements that have to fit together seamlessly and be kept together by careful maintenance.

Coleman enlists in the army as a white man, which in itself is a very risky move, and it creates one of the few occasions where his façade is in danger of collapsing. Serving in the navy, on a leave in Norfolk, he is thrown out of a brothel because when seeing his naked body, the prostitute identifies him as a black man. In addition to enlisting in the army, Coleman makes many other conscious moves to conceal his black heritage, such as marrying the Jewish Iris Gittelman, completely disowning his family and taking advantage of the fact that he was brought up in a Jewish neighbourhood and, for example, trained by a Jewish boxing coach, Doc Chizner. In the novel, Nathan Zuckerman states that in his youth, “Jews and their kids ... loomed larger than anyone in Coleman’s extracurricular life” (THS 88). This experience Coleman has of Jews and the Jewish community is of course a tremendous help in his project. It is the thing that keeps his construction from falling apart, as it makes him a plausible Jew outside of his physical appearance.

David Tenenbaum claims that Coleman’s decision to assume a Jewish identity was motivated by a desire to “hedge his renunciation of his minority status by aligning his cause

with ... a quasi-oppressed racial group". Tenenbaum sees Jews as "quasi-oppressed", which suggests that Coleman can "soften" his crossing over in passing as Jew rather than a privileged White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (2006, 44). On the other hand, the novel itself gives us the impression that Coleman's decision to pass as a Jew was motivated by the practicality of that choice regarding his appearance and the Jewish influence he was subjected to in his youth. Either way, this reinforces the argument that there is definitely something deeply motivated and calculated in Coleman Silk's identity construction. The above-mentioned "practicality" can also be seen as Roth's way of pointing out that there are links and similarities between the non-WASP groups in the United States. It is "easier" to belong to another minority.

For Coleman Silk, passing as white is escaping racism and history (both personal and collective) and a way to live out his desire to truly be his own man. It has to be acknowledged that by assuming a Jewish identity Coleman automatically climbed many steps on the social ladder especially compared to the fate of his father, who as an educated black man had to work as a waiter in a train (THS 86), but for Coleman rising in society's ranks is not by far the only motive. Patrice Rankine claims that for a long time passing was "a natural choice" for those blacks who were able to do it, since the racial hierarchy in the American society was so strong (2005, 102). Whether we see Coleman Silk's passing this way, as a natural choice dictated by necessity, depends on the way we look at the treatment he got and the hardships he had to encounter in his New Jersey neighbourhood. Do we see them as comparable to those black people experienced after the abolition of slavery or in the segregated south? Regardless of which motives we consider as primary and which we see as secondary, it does not change the intricate way Coleman Silk executes his passing. It is consciously planned and carried out in order to create a new, unique existence.

The process of Coleman's passing can in a larger context be seen as a movement from a racial identity towards an American identity. According to Mark Maslan, quoted in chapter 2.4.2, through his passing Coleman forsakes his racial identity and embodies an American one. Whether Coleman himself sees his new identity as American, is debatable. Unlike Swede and Iron Rinn, Coleman is not as hung up in being a representative of some greater ideal of what "America" should be like. To him the new identity is even more personal, it is something completely new and not subject to any kind of classification, not by him and certainly not by anyone else. Coleman's purification, his getting rid of his racial category, is the beginning of a new freedom from the burden of a past. Coleman's view on this is presented in the novel as follows:

[t]o vanish, as they used to say in the family, 'till all trace of him was lost.' 'Lost himself to all his people' was another way they put it. Ancestor worship – that's how Coleman put it. Honoring the past was one thing – the idolatry that is ancestor worship was something else. The hell with that imprisonment.

(THS 144)

By passing, Coleman Silk abandons his past and starts his life as a new person with a new identity that is wholly his own. This is expressed well by Maslan saying "It is passing, not the past, that defines his identity" (2005, 365-66). Through his choice Coleman becomes the "American individualist *par excellence*" (THS 311). Here is the core of my claim about Coleman falling in line with Swede and Iron Rinn as representatives of American men of their time. Even though Coleman does not find himself being American as in being a part of something that is "American", he ends up epitomizing America nonetheless. In his extreme form of individualism, Coleman captures the essence of the American quest for sovereignty and takes it a big step further.

Thinking about Coleman's decision in terms of leaving or denying one racial group because another, better one has more to offer, it is useful to take into account Timothy Parrish's words: "[s]overeign of his own self, Coleman is not portrayed as denying

his black identity, or its authenticity, so much as making a life choice that renders such questions irrelevant” (2004, 443). Coleman is not crossing over to one group; he is denying the entire idea of groups, and on the larger scale the ideological dominance of prejudice and grouping based on ethnicity, which is present in the American society.

Coleman seems to be an extremist advocate for what America originally was supposed to be all about: to him, all men truly are created equal. Coleman’s extremism applied to the concept of equality seems to mean roughly the same than Rorty’s concept of autonomy.<sup>21</sup> Rorty considers this type of autonomy unachievable, and eventually we realize that also in Coleman’s case it is exactly that. Nevertheless, Coleman believes that he could achieve that autonomy, that the type of world where one could be totally free of the barriers society creates is possible. The problem is that Coleman wants it to be possible only for him. Coleman has what Rorty describes a “demand that our autonomy be embodied in our institutions”<sup>22</sup>, and this demand should, according to Rorty, be limited to the private life of citizen in a liberal society (1989, 65). Through his adaptation of a truly new and unique identity, Coleman makes this bold demand of the society around him. It is the ultimate aim of Coleman’s passing, as well as it is the very thing that will eventually cost him all his life achievements. Like in the case of the other two novels and their protagonists, the society gets the better of Coleman.

### **5.3 The “Spooks”-Incident and the Persecution of Coleman Silk**

In the previous chapter I examined Coleman Silk’s passing narrative and his abandonment of black history and heritage. With his new identity, Coleman makes a very impressive career in academia, and eventually becomes a respected dean of faculty in Athena College. Coleman

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<sup>21</sup> See p. 16 in this thesis.

<sup>22</sup> Quoting Bernard Yack in *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986. p. 385

Silk became an outcast in Athena and was forced to resign when he used the word “spooks” referring to two students who had enrolled to his class but never attended. As Coleman himself says:

I was referring to their possibly ectoplasmic character. Isn't that obvious? ... I had no idea what color these two students might be. I had known perhaps fifty years ago but had wholly forgotten that ‘spooks’ is an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks.

(THS 6)

Regardless of Coleman’s indifferent attitude to race, stemming from his own background, these students were African-American and they, as well as the whole community of Athena, took Coleman’s words as a racist insult because to them Coleman was a white Jewish academic who used an expression traditionally understood as racist at a time when the highest ideal and the most priced value in politics and in society is political correctness. Therefore it is clear that he must be crucified. After all, quoting Michael T. Gilmore, the novel “takes place during its own moment of McCarthyite excess, Kenneth Starr’s Chillingworth-like pursuit of President Clinton as a perjurious adulterer” (2003, 174). This quote not only places the novel in its own historical context, but also connects it with two other “witch-hunts” in American history. It relates the novel with McCarthyism and the persecution of communists, a context crucial to *I Married a Communist*. It also parallels the novel with one written more than a century earlier, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*.

The result of the incident is ultimately a series of unfortunate events. Through the pressure applied on Coleman, he is forced to retire and his wearing battle for fair treatment has resulted in his wife’s illness and eventual death. Roth compares the nature of the process throughout the novel to the Clinton-Lewinsky-scandal, and Elaine Safer and Michael Gilmore both parallel the resulting persecution to *The Scarlet Letter* and Hester Prynne’s experiences in the hands of the puritan crowds (2006, 122). Motives are different at different times, but the treatment of Coleman Silk in the academic community of Athena was nothing less than a

witch-hunt. He was never hung on a scaffold for all Athena to see, but was cast out of the community much like Hester.

#### **5.4 Political Correctness and the “Persecuting Spirit”**

Elaine Safer writes that “Athena College becomes a microcosm for the political correctness fever and what Roth terms ‘calculated frenzy’ that seized the nation in 1998” (2006c, 118). 1998 was the year when the American public screamed for President Bill Clinton’s impeachment due to his sexual encounter with his assistant Monica Lewinsky. Safer further claims that in *The Human Stain*, the judgemental attitudes of Silk’s colleagues in Athena are connected with the moral righteousness of the American public and the Republican congress at that time (2006, 117). The intolerance of the “liberal” community adds an ironic and tragicomic element to the novel. Silk, who during his life has made tremendous efforts to escape the possibility of becoming persecuted because of his race, is now the object of lynch-mob attitudes in the name of political correctness.

Political correctness as an ideal epitomizes the tendency of treating people as part of a social group. This is important to note as it directly connects the novel with Richard Rorty’s ideas about a person’s self-image reflecting the values and norms of the community of which they are members. Following also Rorty’s ideas about individual’s autonomy<sup>23</sup>, one could say that an individual’s desire to free oneself from the confines of political correctness can be understood as an effort to achieve autonomy. The fact that Coleman Silk is able to transform his entire person, starting from his ethnicity, but is not able to escape the norm of political correctness, speaks volumes of the power of the community against the individual. The fact that this effort is doomed to fail and that it has consequences that could be characterised as a punishment, also connect political correctness to Foucault’s idea of a dominating discourse in

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<sup>23</sup> See ch. 2.1.2.

a society.<sup>24</sup> The discourse of political correctness dictates the appropriate punishment for Coleman's actions. The use of a racial slur by a person in a position of power against one in a subordinate position is an act that results in a punishment that has to be public in order to make it clear to everyone that the act will not be tolerated and also make sure that the punished will not be able to repeat the act. Coleman's punishment meets both criteria, as he becomes the object of scorn in the entire community and he is forced to resign his position of power.

The way we commonly understand the term "political correctness" is as a way of keeping oneself from insulting a certain group or entity in one's speech and action. An American political theorist and critic of the political correctness ideal, Paul Gottfried, states in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt : Toward a Secular Theocracy* the following:

American administrative democracy ... has moved into socializing 'citizens' through publicly controlled education and wars against discrimination. Such reconstructionist initiatives have been taken in response to what the state, the media, and 'victim' groups designate as a crisis, a surging outburst of prejudice that supposedly must be contained and whose representatives need to be re-educated.

(2002, 1)

According to Gottfried's thinking, the state as an authority has the power to control people's attitudes towards certain ideas, which results in collective thinking and actions. At the time of the "spooks"-incident, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, one important element in this collective ethos was political correctness. Coleman Silk belongs to the dominant group of white males, and the two students he directs his comment to are members of the oppressed group of African-American females. Following Gottfried's thinking, the students belong to a "victim" group, and Coleman is a representative of the prejudice they have to face. Therefore, Coleman needs to feel the consequences of such attitude. This mentality of teaching a lesson has its roots already in Hawthorne's "persecuting spirit" (Safer 2006c, 2) and is voiced by the narrator

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<sup>24</sup> See p. 13 in this thesis.

Nathan Zuckerman as “America’s oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony” (THS 2).

There are characters in the novel who either embrace the ideal of political correctness or reject it through their own actions. These patterns of behaviour can expand to measures beyond sanity. This is ultimately why Coleman Silk is treated the way he is. As Patrice Rankine puts it: “Silk’s heroic individualism ultimately fails because he is part of a society that at times is disorderly. He cannot escape the madness of others ... Society negates the self-made man” (2005, 108). This raises another important aspect concerning the discourse of power between the society and the individual: The sheer force with which the society’s norms overpower the individual is not the only reason for the ultimate failure of the individual’s quest for autonomy. One factor in this struggle is also the individual’s inability to predict the ways the society works. In many ways Coleman Silk, as well as Swede and Iron Rinn, fall victim to the latter more than to the former.

The novel seems to suggest that the self-made man cannot be a part of a society, although he is something that the American society has been thought to idolize. It could be that in Coleman Silk’s case, his breaking of racial boundaries causes an even bigger problem than for example merely climbing the social ladder within a racial group, and race is the issue that comes to haunt him. In a society that is very conscious of race and its importance in the contemporary political environment, leading Coleman’s life is simply impossible. At one point even Coleman, the individualist, tries to find a way out by blaming his treatment on anti-Semitism. He claims that he was “[t]hrown out of Athena ... for being a white Jew of the sort those ignorant bastards call the enemy” (THS 16). By “ignorant bastards” Silk refers to blacks, who according to Coleman think the Jews are “the major source of black suffering on this planet” (THS 16).



Timothy Parrish views this strategy of blaming one's treatment on another ethnic group's prejudice as impossible because until that day ethnicity has not stopped Coleman from becoming who he is (2004, 435). Blaming anti-Semitism for his treatment can be judged as both ironic in itself and hypocritical of Coleman, as it is an effort to play by society's rules after many years of ignoring them. The irony and hypocrisy lie in the fact that the group Coleman lays the blame on is the same that he originally came from and abandoned. Coleman has lived and experienced the prejudice aimed at blacks in America, but he is still capable of blaming them for reacting to it. In addition, Coleman's view of himself as qualified to make this type of accusation is questionable, since he for so long has denied any allegiance to an ethnic group. Jewishness for him has been little more than a façade, a mask that has protected him from unpleasant questions about his background and allowed him to function as a member of a society that is so keen on racial profiling. When Coleman at the moment of his own demise deems appropriate to use this make-believe ethnicity as a shield against the punishment bestowed upon him, it is difficult to determine whether it is justified or not. On one hand it can be seen as Coleman yet again hiding behind the mask of Jewishness, using his ethnicity in the way he has done throughout his entire life and career. On the other hand, if Coleman's reaction is read as true outrage about his situation and his allegation towards blacks as sincere, the claim of hypocrisy is justified.

## **5.5 Coleman and Two Women of Athena**

Very much like the other two novels, *The Human Stain* also includes female characters that are worthy of attention in my study. These female characters are instrumental in the development of the story and in the fate of the protagonist. In this chapter I will present and examine the crucial female characters in *The Human Stain*.

Delphine Roux is a young faculty member who much like the young Coleman struggles with her French background trying to find her American identity. Roux is “a crusader for political correctness” (Safer 2006c, 120) and the most fierce accuser of Coleman during his trial. Safer also describes Roux as a farcical character (119), and in the cases where her drive to promote political correctness clashes with the nature of her own actions she certainly has elements of farce. Faunia Farley is a university janitor, with whom Coleman is having a sexual relationship. Coleman and Faunia are also connected through an effort to transform their identities and in that way find and secure their places in society.

### **5.5.1 Coleman and Delphine Roux**

Coleman Silk hired Delphine Roux, a Yale graduate, when he was the dean faculty at Athena College. As new to the country as to the university, Delphine did not know how she should act around the intimidating and strict authority figure. Her insecurity later became the driving force behind her personal vendetta towards Coleman. She is an example of what Gottfried calls “social control” or “behavioural modification” by the American managerial state (2002, 71).

Roux comes from an upper-class French background, and through her education in the liberal environments of École Normale Supérieure and Yale University has developed a sort of rebellion against her heritage. She feels the expectations and heritage of her aristocratic French family as a burden, as they have “respect not for the individual (*down* with the individual!) but for the tradition of the family” (THS 275). This resembles the way Coleman feels about his black ancestry and the way his family embraced it. Considering the similarities in the two characters’ backgrounds, it is somewhat ironic that Roux finds encouragement and purpose in taking a stand against Coleman as his most fierce prosecutor and an advocate for

political correctness, whereas Coleman is the real American individualist who stands alone against the accusers.

To further point out the farcical element in Delphine Roux's character, I want to mention the incident where Roux intends to send a personal ad to the *New York Review of Books*, but instead the e-mail finds its way to every computer in the Department of Languages and Literature. What is more, the ad describes a man who shares all his qualities with Coleman Silk. Ashamed and panicking, Delphine decides to make up a story of Coleman breaking into her computer and sending the message. In the novel Delphine is portrayed as a young Yale graduate who is intimidated by Coleman. She saw the "spooks"-incident as a way to get rid of that threatening authority figure, and now she is seeking a relationship with a man who is just like him. Furthermore, Delphine is puzzled with how she could include in her ad the idea "whites only need apply" (THS 262). Imagine how the community of Athena would react if they found out that the woman who would rid the college of the old racist Jew, could be guilty of such discrimination. The hypocrisy embedded in the witch-hunt discourse and dating back to as far as Hawthorne is painfully evident here. The fact that Delphine herself is guilty of racial discrimination could put the justification of her actions towards Coleman under heavy scrutiny, but Delphine is guilty only in her thoughts, and that is the crucial difference. No one in the Athena community will ever catch Delphine in the act of racial discrimination, and that gives her the right to act as Coleman's accuser. After all, if a transgression is not public, there is no way for the society to hand out a punishment.

As a post-structuralist literary theorist, Delphine Roux should be well aware of the contradiction in her actions. The contradictive behaviour is visible not only in the transgression she made regarding the personal ad, but also of her treatment of Coleman's case. Refusing to see the possibility that Coleman used the term "spooks" in a sense that had nothing to do with the students' race, Delphine assumes that there is only one way to interpret

the word, that there is only one possible relation between the word ‘spooks’ and reality. Moreover, as a poststructuralist, Delphine should not be so quick to accept the label of being “politically correct”. Richard Feldstein and Teresa Brennan claim, albeit their view is directly related to the discourse of left and right in American politics, that by accepting the label of “political correctness” poststructuralist academics among others “oblige right-wing critics by assuming their assigned narrative role in a binary network of fantasy” (1997, 185). This view is very credible, since Paul Gottfried, whom I have quoted above, represents this right-wing criticism in the factual world, whereas Coleman and Delphine act out this situation in fiction. Coleman accuses Delphine of destroying his career in the name of political correctness, and Delphine does nothing to claim that this is not the case. By having her forsake her assumed intellectual position in this matter, Roth makes Delphine Roux become both morally and intellectually suspect.

### **5.5.2 Coleman and Faunia Farley**

Coleman’s relationship with the school janitor Faunia Farley is one of the major developments in the novel. I want to examine this complicated relationship briefly here at the end of my study, as the power relations in the relationship have a major effect on how Coleman is ultimately viewed in the Athena community.

Faunia Farley is a 34-year-old woman, who probably has had more misfortune in her life than an average person would be able to handle. She has had an abusive stepfather, a violent marriage and she has lost her two children in a fire. Faunia’s past has led to her using some escape strategies, much like Coleman. In the case of Faunia, the most important one is denying that she can read. For Faunia, faking her illiteracy is a means of denying her prestigious upper-class background and dropping the burden, but for all the others it is a disability, which to them implies that her relationship with Coleman is based on abuse and

control. The sexual relationship between these two characters has an effect on how the society around Coleman reacts to his person. In addition to being a racist, he is seen as misogynistic and abusive. This “knowledge” gives more power for the faculty in its battle to deprive Coleman of his position.

David Tenenbaum claims that Coleman seeks refuge in Faunia, since she feels the same kind of shame towards her background as he feels towards his determination and drive to abandon his race (2006, 36). After we learn that Faunia can in fact read, and she systematically resists all the occasions where Coleman is trying to teach her or act in any way as an authority figure, we realise that this view of the relationship is perhaps more accurate. They are equals, two people who find solace in the arms of another human being who shares the burden of secular existence. They both have made their personalities and identities, but in doing so, they have also deprived themselves of the chance of finding true companionship from anywhere else than each other. However, regarding the ultimate fates of these two characters, the way they feel about and understand each other has little importance. What matters is what the community outside the couple perceives and how they interpret it. Society has prejudices against them both, for Faunia especially as illiterate divorcee and a potential “fallen woman”, but it is still possible for it to be concerned about Faunia’s fate in the hands of bad people like Coleman Silk. In the eyes of the society, Faunia is yet another victim that unfortunately could not be rescued.

This way, Faunia is better suited to face the expectations of a society. She is protected by its rules, whereas Coleman Silk is not. This is not entirely because of gender and Faunia’s position as a victim, but also because Faunia’s constructed identity and transformation is better suited to withstand scrutiny. Faunia is merely hiding something, keeping her literacy and bad experiences away from public view, while Coleman relies on actively creating and developing his identity. By doing this, Coleman has lost the protection

he would have received from the society had he remained in his original social position. Now, in the face of adversity, he must cling to his invented identity, actively defending himself.

## 6 Conclusion

In this thesis I have closely examined the three novels in Philip Roth's American Trilogy and their protagonists. I have looked at the protagonists' life narratives and examined their turns and eventually, outcomes. The first and foremost matter that must be stated is that every novel and every protagonist's story meets the qualifications set for a tragedy in the research aims, meaning that they are all narratives of a individual's rise and fall in a society. Furthermore, there are various issues that contribute to both those rises and falls, as well as there are many similarities between those issues in each novel.

The most important similarity is every novel's relationship to the actual events in the American society at the time the novel takes place. Roth constructs his protagonists and their story to mirror the developments that take place outside the confines of the pages and covers of the book. From the New Deal solidarity to the red-baiting of the McCarthy era in *I Married a Communist*, from the prosperous and steady post-war years to the cultural revolution of the 1960s in *American Pastoral* and from the clear rules of the old, openly racist society to the new and muddled world of political correctness in *The Human Stain*, the protagonists get stampeded by the development in the society. This was the primary baseline for my study and one that many scholars have pointed out as well. However, it has to be noted that the protagonists are not mere passive victims of a development they have no possibility of stopping, but they rather lose their means of adapting to the change at a crucial moment. Many of the very same choices the protagonists have made in their lives to improve their position are also the ones that eventually become their undoing. Every protagonist's life is proof of the fact that they are not passive bystanders in a society. On the contrary, their entire lives are built by their abilities to make, to invent their own destinies. They have seemingly achieved autonomy, a concept I defined for this thesis according to the theories of Richard Rorty. Autonomy to the protagonists denotes freedom from the confines of the society and its

rules, both written and unwritten. The most interesting question regarding my thesis is whether that kind of autonomy is ever actually achievable. For the protagonists, it is not.

A crucial element in the protagonists' search for autonomy in all three novels is their attempt to find an identity devoid of any racial or ethnic constraints. I have characterized this attempt as a move from an ethnic identity towards a "national identity", in this case specifically American identity. Their idea of freedom includes the ability to live a quintessentially "American" life, which all of them at some point feel to have discovered and achieved. Swede, Ira and Coleman are exceptional individuals in their embodiment of what it is to be American, and they have all worked hard to achieve that. I have described this rise in the case of every protagonist and I parallel this attempt and achievement with Rorty's ideas of individual's search of autonomy. However, in the destinies of the protagonists it becomes evident that this kind of breach from the demands of society is not possible. Rorty's contingent society changes its values and norms and re-invents itself, but it always requires its members to abide by its rules. This revelation in itself is not surprising, in fact it may be self-evident, but the crucial claim is that I have been able to show how American society and the communities around the protagonists specifically function as contingent communities and networks of power, and how the protagonists themselves are unaware of this. When the values and norms in the society change the protagonists, who have by their own standards achieved autonomy, are forced to realize that their autonomy does not extend to the institutions of the society or in any larger sense to the communities around them. As men whose demand for autonomy is greater than the society would grant them, they are doomed to be punished.

While the protagonists almost literally built their lives piece by piece, creating their existence, their identity, their character, the world and most specifically the American society around them changed. With that society, many aspects in and around their lives, including people, changed as well. I argue that the dynamics of the change the protagonists were not



able to adapt to is well exemplified in the other characters in the novels, and that there are two types of other characters represented: those that “grow” with the protagonists, albeit in a different direction, and exemplify the change and those who come into their lives at a later stage and are products and representatives of the society that has already transformed. This division is complicated and not fully applicable to all supporting characters, but the main notion here is that the ways in which characters around the protagonists deal with the changes in the society differ from each other and those of the protagonists. This shows that the failure of the protagonists’ quest for autonomy does not manifest itself only in the changing of society’s values and mores and the subsequent collapse of their social status, but it is also illuminated in their inability to make themselves independent on the personal relationships they share with other individuals. Especially clear this is in the protagonists’ relationships with women, which emerged as a crucial theme in my thesis. Apart from the female characters in the novels representing the new values and norms of the society, they had an important role in the protagonists’ stories as individuals. This thesis leaves open the question whether one role, as an individual or as a manifestation of the change in society, is more important than the other, but they both can nevertheless be seen as major contributors to the protagonists’ life narratives.

One issue that presented a challenge to my research was that *I Married a Communist* proved to be somewhat difficult to examine with the same research questions as *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. The crucial issue of the protagonist’s search for autonomy is significantly less recognizable in *I Married a Communist*, since Ira does not actively try to transform his own existence and cut ties to his heritage to the same extent as Swede and Coleman Silk do. Nevertheless, I decided to include the novel in my study and point out that even if Ira does not take any drastic actions in terms of transforming himself, there are significant parallels to the protagonists’ life narratives in all three novels. In the case of *I*

*Married a Communist* the narrative is mainly created by factors outside the protagonist's self, the society making him what he is rather than him creating his own story. Of course, the issue of society's influence on all the protagonists' stories is the very focus of my story and this same question is important in all the cases, but it seems that the label of "self-made man" does not fit Ira as well as it does Swede and Coleman.

To conclude, I would say that this thesis has answered some questions and awakened more of them. The similarities in the structure of the novels and the dynamics of the protagonists' tragic destinies have become clearer, and there are plenty of valid arguments to recognize the novel as a trilogy that examines how the American society can, in fact, turn on itself and its most faithful members by changing its values and mores. This has become clear in examining both the protagonists' narratives and the characters around them, especially the female characters. Their relevance in the novels has in fact been one of the most important revelations during the process of this research.

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