



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

## Master's Degree Programme

In European, American and Postcolonial Languages  
and Literature

“Second Cycle (D.M. 270/2004)”

Final Thesis

# Femininity in Philip Roth's American Trilogy

**Supervisor**

Prof. Pia Masiero

**Assistant supervisor**

Prof. Simone Francescato

**Graduand**

Giulia Scordari

Matriculation Number 866056

**Academic Year**

2017 / 2018



## Table of contents

Introduction .....	1
Chapter I.....	5
1. <i>American Pastoral</i> .....	5
1.1. American Chronicle.....	5
1.2. What is wrong with their life? .....	7
1.3. Dawn Dwyer .....	9
1.4. Meredith (Merry) Levov .....	28
Chapter II.....	49
2. <i>I Married a Communist</i> .....	49
2.1. Voices are Indispensable.....	49
2.2. Eve Frame .....	53
2.3. Sylphid Pennington .....	67
Chapter III .....	78
3. <i>The Human Stain</i> .....	78
3.1. Life as Fiction .....	78
3.2. Delphine Roux: nobody knows anything.....	81
3.2.1. Delphine Roux and <i>American Pastoral</i> .....	103
3.2.2. Antithetical Women: Delphine and Marcia Umanoff .....	109
3.3. Faunia Farley .....	111
Conclusion.....	129
Selected Bibliography .....	133

## Introduction

The three novels that constitute the *American Trilogy*—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*—published between 1997 and 2000, concern the life of three formidable men, Seymour Levov, Ira Ringold and Coleman Silk, and each one is set against an important moment in American history. As the name itself says, the trilogy investigates fundamental aspects of both America and the men who are part of it. Each novel is characterized by the presence of the same narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, who crosses the paths of these men and is so much engaged by their lives that he cannot but write about them.

The focus of my thesis will be on the novels' female protagonists. Despite the centrality of masculinity, femininity is an essential aspect of the *American Trilogy*. The protagonists of the three novels, in fact, are males who perfectly embody the type of masculinity typical of their era and their lives, the way they act, they feel, their goals and experiences are defined by their being males, in particular by their being American men, and are interwoven with their women's lives. The representation of male characters is closely linked to that of the women they live with and one must be seen in light of the other. The portraits of these female characters represent a pivotal depiction of femininity, not only because in every novel they play a significant role in defining the male protagonists' lives but also because they forge their identities and their private life inside the American society, as men do. A crucial theme in the trilogy is exactly the life of these women being part of societal and historical changes and as manifestations of American national identity. The objective of this thesis is exactly to see if the female characters are equally rich and independent characters, or if they solely exist to play a secondary—and negative—role in their men's lives.

All the women in the novels are presented through the point of view of the male protagonist, which is typical of Roth's work. The female characters are objects of the men's gaze, objects either of the men's desire or disdain, and

sometimes both. In some cases, their portrayal in the *American Trilogy* has been considered, for this reason, as a proof of Roth's misogyny or as Roth's personal vengeance against some women of his own life. Some reviewers, such as Linda Grant, have argued that his ex-wife Claire Bloom is the model on which Eve Frame has been built as character<sup>1</sup>. This view is shared by many literary scholars, starting from Mary Allen who, in 1976, writes that «in his creation of heroines Roth projects his enormous rage and disappointment with womankind as a man who rails at the world because he has never found in it a woman who is both strong and good»<sup>2</sup>. In addition, Dale Peck's review "Dangerous Girls", published in July 1997 in *The London Review of Books*, defines *American Pastoral* as «anti-woman»<sup>3</sup>. This opinion was echoed in 2006 by the literary scholar Elaine B. Safer who explicitly defines *I Married a Communist* as «clearly a retaliatory act»<sup>4</sup>, and in 2008 by the writer Vivian Gornick who, attacking the author for misogyny in her book *The Men in My Life*, affirms that «for Philip Roth, women are monstrous»<sup>5</sup>.

I do not want to look at the three novels' portrayals of women as the proof of Philip Roth's vengeance or misogyny. However, I do recognize that these women negatively affect the male characters' lives, so I consider it essential to further analyze the six female characters that inhabit the *American trilogy*.

In the first chapter I will focus on *American Pastoral's* main female characters: the Swede's wife, Dawn Dwyer, and their daughter Merry Levov. In the second chapter, which is dedicated to *I Married a Communist*, I will analyze Ira Ringold's wife, Eve Frame, and her daughter Sylphid Pennington. Finally, in the third and final chapter, I will examine *The Human Stain's* main female characters: Coleman Silk's colleague, professor Delphine Roux, and his younger

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Grant, "The Wrath of Roth", *The Guardian*, 1998. <https://bit.ly/2RIIz6c>

<sup>2</sup> M. Allen, *The Necessary Blankness: Women in the Major American Fiction of the Sixties*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1976, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> D. Peck, "Dangerous Girls", in *The London Review of Books*, 3 July 1997. <https://bit.ly/2FglKWn>

<sup>4</sup> E.B. Safer, *Mocking the Age The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, New York, State University of New York, 2006, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> V. Gornick, *The Men in My Life*, London, The MIT Press, 2008, p. 125.

lover, Faunia Farley. I will look into how they shape their existence in society, how they as individuals are thrown into the heart of important changes in that society, how “public” and “private” are defined in the realm of the novels, with an accurate description of everything that pertains to them: from clothes, to speaking habits, to psychical condition, and a comparison between the six women, with regard to the recurring features that connect them.

My method to approach and discuss the female quest for selfhood in Philip Roth’s *American Trilogy* will be a comprehensive one, ranging from close reading of the texts and psychoanalysis—I drew in particular from Lacan’s and Chodorow’s studies on *matrophobia*—to Bataille’s theories on eroticism and literature, and the feminist studies on “Object relations” and on women’s autobiographical texts by Susan Friedman. I also used Rivière’s and Luce Irigaray’s concepts of femininity as constructed through *masquerade*, which is an artificial contrivance, a cultural fabric, a mode of enacting gender norms. The female protagonists perform femininity as an attentively elaborated social mask, or refuse to do so. These theorists illuminate my analyses of the female characters’ system of identity construction.

My objective is also to show how Roth’s portraits of women don’t represent his misogyny, but they are the means to achieve his goal, to give, as Henry James said, a sense of reality. «The protagonist who provides the central standpoint around which the dialogue accrues», so the protagonist through which this goal is achieved, states Debra Shostak in her book *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, «is almost always male, almost always Jewish, and frequently a writer»<sup>6</sup>. Here this writer is Nathan Zuckerman and the protagonists are all males but the narrative choice is merely a medium. «The primary purpose of Roth’s fiction is [...] inquiry into subjectivity, then the way for him to approach the nature of the subject is through its contextualization, in the world, by others»<sup>7</sup>. Women characters condition male ones. Roth challenges their performances as

---

<sup>6</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2004, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

he does with male identities. Identities caught in the web of historical events. The allegation of misogyny does not allow us to go further and see that there is much more behind these characters, and can be considered only according to «the logic that misogyny emerges from a perceived threat to male power»<sup>8</sup>. Roth portrays this threat, through his novels; he does not take part in the complaint.

---

<sup>8</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit. , p. 22.

## Chapter I

### *1. American Pastoral*

#### **1.1. American Chronicle**

The first novel of the *American trilogy*, *American Pastoral*, published in 1997, is the story of Seymour “The Swede” Levov, a Jewish man, a former high school star athlete, veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, who lives in New Jersey with his wife Dawn, his daughter Merry and is a factory owner, after having inherited his father’s glove manufacturing business. Everything changes and his life is definitely destroyed in 1968 when Merry, as a result of the cultural turmoil of the 1960s, commits a terrorist act by blowing up the local post office and kills a man, a doctor. The novel is divided into three sections: “Paradise Remembered”, “The Fall” and “Paradise Lost”. In “Paradise Remembered” the Swede and Zuckerman come into contact with each other, Zuckerman starts to be interested in Seymour’s life and is so much engaged by his story that he cannot but write about him. “The Fall” describes the events at the end of the 1960s, with Merry’s bombing and the actual fall of the entire family. “Paradise Lost” depicts the Swede’s life after this fall and his desperate efforts to cope with what happened. Zuckerman starts as the narrator of the novel and is also a character in many of the first scenes but, finally, the book quickly becomes the story of the Swede and his family, with Nathan disappearing. Zuckerman indeed, at a certain point, withdraws from the scene, into the background, to tell the story of this character who was so important to his own life and who also, with the women who surround him, comes to represent something archetypal about America.

When examining the female characters of *American Pastoral* and their role in the life and destiny of Seymour Levov, I must focus on Dawn, the woman he married, and on his daughter, Meredith. These two women are the most important figures in defining the Swede’s tragic fate.



Andrew Gordon, in his article “The Critique of the Pastoral, Utopia, and the American Dream in *American Pastoral*”, states that the title describes the true nature of this novel, which through the depiction of Levov, Dawn and Merry, is a reflection upon America. By using the title *American Pastoral*, according to Gordon, Roth «intends this work to be not only the chronicle of what seemed a traditional family, but also a meditation on the pastoral, on the American dream, on the essence of American identity, American history»<sup>9</sup>, so also on the essence of American women.

In this novel we assist at the clash of two different eras in the American cultural and political history, which is represented through the depiction of a father, a mother and their daughter. The Swede, the father, represents the attempt to identify with the cultural background, to assimilate the cultural atmosphere, being a successful white American man. His wife Dawn is a key piece of this design. Merry, influenced by the 1960s political radicalism, sees her father’s ideals as dangerous to the rest of the world. Gordon further affirms that «the dissolution of the family and the urban decay mirror the decline of America in that same period»<sup>10</sup>. In fact, «The two themes become integrated: the social and moral decay of cities and the nation paralleling the disintegration of The Swede’s personal life»<sup>11</sup>, explains Ira B. Nadel in the *Critical Companion to Philip Roth*. The national events, the radicalism and the cultural shifts are embodied by his beloved daughter Merry and they maraud the Swede’s private sphere, they invade his home uninvited and, as they come, they destroy everything they find, everything he cares for, everything he has worked through all his life, but especially everything he considers American.

---

<sup>9</sup> G. Andrew, “The Critique of the Pastoral, Utopia, and the American Dream in *American Pastoral*”, in D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, Bloomsbury, USA Academic, 2011, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> I. B. Nadel, *Critical Companion to Philip Roth*, cit., p. 27.

## 1.2. What is wrong with their life?

Mark Shechner describes *American Pastoral* as basically «not a social drama being play on the broad stage of history», but a «family drama»<sup>12</sup>, focused on the dynamics of the relationship between the Swede, Merry and Dawn. The two women are puzzle pieces for the Swede's realization of his American dream of the perfect rural idyll in Old Rimrock but Merry, unfortunately, is a very ill-fitting piece and the first domino in a long series of bad events. The fact that the characters that interfere in the Swede's realization of the American dream are both female is considered crucial, according to some critics, in regards to Roth's own personal history with women. As I have already mentioned, many critics have accused Roth of misogyny and aversion towards women in all his *American Trilogy*, both because the women characters are always seen through the male protagonist's eyes and because they are often actors of pain for the male protagonist. The female characters in the *American Pastoral* certainly fit these definitions but cannot be reduced to them. The structure of a text may indeed contain a gendered lens through which the world is looked. In *American Pastoral* this lens is Roth's double Zuckerman, the man who, as Roth himself said, awakens his mind, his intelligence. Since Seymour dies before Zuckerman can even consider his collaboration, the story of the Swede and his family is Zuckerman's account. Adopting the viewpoint of this male narrator results in seeing women in a particular way. Narrative fiction provides one of the key in which we find a sense of the world and of ourselves. Women in Roth's fiction are treated in light of its concern with the male protagonists. It must be also taken into account, when reading *American Pastoral*, that it is the story of a family, but a family surrounded by a cultural turmoil in which it was possible that people could actually commit some terroristic attacks.

Patrick Hayes says that «the novel indicts the Swede from a feminist standpoint, pointing out that his “major faults are that he accepts the injustices of

---

<sup>12</sup> Marc Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, Madison, 2003, pp. 162-163.

capitalism, that he never genuinely loves women, and that he does not think for himself”»<sup>13</sup>. Debra Shostak argues that «Roth’s work can appear as much a prescient critique of misogynist attitudes as a purveyor of them»<sup>14</sup>. It is my sense that the Swede’s relationships with the women of his life, rather than depicting a dominant masculinity, actually make him further away from it. His action, as we’ll see, are free of misogynist attitudes. I would argue that Roth embeds in the exaggerated portrait of Seymour Levov’s qualities and defects a criticism of his treatment of women, or, more precisely of people, as ready-made puzzle pieces for the realization of the American dream. This criticism is largely embodied within the Swede’s dysfunctional relationship with Dawn Dwyer. Specifically, this relationship exemplifies Seymour’s distorted and flawed attempts to integrate divergent aspects of their relationship into one ideal. His interactions with his wife Dawn demonstrate his impulses to both reject and claim his masculine identity. He loves her and frequently demonstrates it, but he essentially imposes his ideal onto a woman who, it will be revealed, ultimately contributes to his failure as a man. Levov is drawn to Dawn’s beauty, he claims to stay with her despite her, and her, betrayal and despite the apparent lack of respect for what he sees as her weakness, her mental illness, which he often conveys through an attitude of condescension and through his keeping her in the dark. At the same time, however, in spite of this behavior on the Swede’s part, she’s not a victim. His account of her, fully reported into a third person limited representation imagined by the novelist-narrator, is influenced by the perception of her beauty, by the power that she emanates, but she’s not just an idolized object. Dawn, as we’ll see, unsettles the Swede’s distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. He’s subjugated by the authority she doesn’t even know she has. He’s awed by her power. If she truly was just an object she would have no power at all. Objects have no power. The same happens with Merry. The image of masculinity is bound up with the idea of force, but Meredith is stronger than

---

<sup>13</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 10.

her father. She's a force as incontrovertible as gravity in his life, and Seymour, who is the protagonist of this novel, the subject, becomes an object. There's no misogyny in this.

### 1.3. Dawn Dwyer

Mary Dawn Dwyer is the Swede's wife as well as Merry's mother. The woman is a former Miss New Jersey and also a former Miss America contestant. The Swede, with his appeal and his powerful talent as a successful athlete, and Dawn, with her impressive beauty, represent the perfect American couple. Using the words of the Swede's brother Jerry: «he marries the bee-yoo-ti-full Miss Dwyer. You should have seen them. Knockout couple. The two of them all smiles on their outward trip into the USA.»<sup>15</sup> Immediately Dawn is presented as beautiful, an adjective that will return very often when describing her, almost an epithet, a marker over her life. Also Zuckerman, when he tells about when he went to her hometown Elizabeth to find out something more about the woman, describes her by using the adjective “beautiful”, which appears to be her main feature, obvious to all.

I went to Elizabeth, where the Swede's beautiful Dawn was born and raised, and walked around her pleasant neighborhood, the residential Elmora section; I drove by her family's church, St. Genevieve's, and then headed due east to her father's neighborhood, the old port on the Elizabeth River, where the Cuban immigrants and their offspring replaced, back in the sixties, the last of the Irish immigrants and their offspring.<sup>16</sup>

The two are a happy couple in youth. They are in love, they live the perfect American life but only on the surface because, from the very beginning, behind the mask of their seemingly flawless relationship, reality is different. The first obstacle that stands in their way is the difference in their ethnicities. The Swede

---

<sup>15</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, in *The American Trilogy*, New York, The Library of America, 2011, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, p. 72.

is Jewish, Dawn comes from Elizabeth and was raised in a Irish Catholic family, so they are both part of immigrant ethnicities, but not of the same one. Jerry, when he's talking about them, says: «She's post-Catholic, he's post-Jewish, together they're going to go out there to Old Rimrock to raise little post-toasties»<sup>17</sup>. He uses the prefix “post” in front of the two religious terms which suggests that the couple doesn't fall under any clear determination. According to professor Pia Masiero «Jerry's mock definition—“post-toasties”—points to the hollowness of an identity shunning clear-cut definitions. Identity is negotiated along an explicit group-belonging and cannot do away with it»<sup>18</sup>. Even the protagonist's nickname, Swede, suggests that he does not fit in with the Jewish stereotype, moreover he is purposefully trying to achieve an existence that is stereotypically American. Indeed Levov makes a strong effort to pass as Wasps and, most importantly, to hide the difference, the conflict between the two religions, inside his house, thanks to their assimilation project. Despite all of this, religion carries a significant meaning in the novel for both of them. The strong religious mentality present inside Dawn's family is relevant, although Seymour tries not to let it upset their lives, and it shows up in her, through her existence, when she decides to baptize their daughter secretly, and also after Merry's bombing, when her life has already fallen apart, in the shape of a regret.

She remembered how she dreamed of getting married in St. Catherine's, of being a bride there in a white dress, marrying a rich lawyer like her Uncle Ned and living in one of those grand summer houses whose big verandas overlooked the lake and the bridges and the dome of the church while only minutes from the booming Atlantic. She could have done it, too, could have had it just by snapping her fingers. But her choice was to fall in love with and marry Seymour Levov of Newark instead of any one of those dozens and dozens of smitten Catholic boys she'd met through her Mahoney cousins, the smart, rowdy boys from Holy Cross and Boston College, and so her life was not in Spring Lake but down in Deal and up in Old Rimrock with Mr. Levov. “Well, that's the way it happened,” her mother would

---

<sup>17</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit. , p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, Amherst, Cambria Press, 2011, p. 157.

say sadly to whoever would listen. “Could have had a wonderful life there just like Peg’s. Better than Peg’s. St. Catherine’s and St. Margaret’s are there. St. Catherine’s is right by the lake there. Beautiful building. Just beautiful. But Mary Dawn’s the rebel in the family--always was. Always did just what she wanted, and from the time she marched off to be in that contest, fitting in like everybody else is apparently not something she wanted.”<sup>19</sup>

Religion plays an important role in her life not in itself, because she decides to marry a Jewish man, to marry outside the tribe, but in how her husband tries to reject the effect of anything that may interfere with his project of the perfect American life, how he refuses any futile superstitions or useless traditions, any kind of spirituality. Even if she renounced her background she still thinks about the road not taken.

The second problem is that Dawn’s personality shows symptoms of mental illness and low self-esteem, which are present from the very beginning of the novel, but which get really worse after Merry’s act of terrorism. These issues are already present when she is a young Miss New Jersey:

the New Jersey pageant people were sure they had a winner, especially when the photographs of her popped up every morning. “I hate to let them down,” she told him. “You’re not going to. You’re going to win,” he told her. “No, this girl from Texas is going to win. I know it. She’s so pretty. She has a round face. She has a dimple. Not a beauty but very, very cute. And a great figure. I’m scared to death of her. She’s from some tacky little town in Texas and she tap-dances and she’s the one.” “Is she in the papers with you?” “Always. She’s one of the four or five always. I’m there because it’s Atlantic City and I’m Miss New Jersey and the people on the boardwalk see me in my sash and they go nuts, but that happens to Miss New Jersey every year. And she never wins. But Miss Texas is there in those papers, Seymour, because she’s going to win.”<sup>20</sup>

Even if she is objectively beautiful, Dawn seems to be quite concerned with her looks. She is dwarfed by the beauty of another competitor, another girl. She uses the hyperbole “she scares me to death”, exaggerating her reaction, maybe because of her young age or in the hope of being reassured by Seymour, as if the

---

<sup>19</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 184.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 171.

beauty of another woman would diminish her own. These issues come back also in one of the final chapter of *American Pastoral*, when Seymour is thinking about her attitude in front of the rich Ivi League guys: «She didn't seem ever to feel deficient in confidence until she met them and felt the class sting».<sup>21</sup> After she marries Seymour and she becomes older, the problem of her beauty still follows her everywhere as a persecution, not in itself but, again, because of the role played by other women.

People used to stare at Dawn in her bathing suit. [...] They stared at her no matter what style or color suit she wore [...] More disturbing, however, than the staring and the photographs was their suspiciousness of her. “For some strange reason,” she said, “the women always think that because I’m a former whatever I want their husbands.”<sup>22</sup>

Her looks, according to Dawn, makes her hateable to the other wives. She seems to find a truce from this only inside her marriage:

You have to enjoy power, have a certain ruthlessness, to accept the beauty and not mourn the fact that it overshadows everything else. As with any exaggerated trait that sets you apart and makes you exceptional--and enviable, and hateable--to accept your beauty, to accept its effect on others, to play with it, to make the best of it, you're well advised to develop a sense of humor. Dawn was not a stick, she had spirit and she had spunk, and she could be cutting in a very humorous way, but that wasn't quite the inward humor it took to do the job and make her free. Only after she was married and no longer a virgin did she discover the place where it was okay for her to be as beautiful as she was, and that place, to the profit of both husband and wife, was with the Swede, in bed.<sup>23</sup>

Dawn can't accept that her beauty overshadows the other aspects of her personality, she can't even accept the judgment of others. Their sexual relationship is the only place in which her femininity is truly expressed for her, in which she can feel herself, the only place in which she feels powerful:

---

<sup>21</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 282.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 182.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, p. 183.

“It makes me feel so extremely feminine,” she told him, “it makes me feel extremely powerful... it makes me feel both.” When she got out of bed after they made love and she looked wildly disheveled, flushed and with her hair all over the place and her eye makeup smudged and her lips swollen, and she went off into the bathroom to pee, he would follow her there and lift her off the seat after she had wiped herself and look at the two of them together in the bathroom mirror, and she would be taken aback as much as he was, not simply by how beautiful she looked, how beautiful the fucking allowed her to look, but how other she looked. The social face was gone—there was Dawn<sup>24</sup>.

After Seymour and Dawn have sex, she looks at her body and face and she is surprised by her beauty. It almost seems not an act of love, but of detachment. An act of detachment that allows her to rediscover herself. Her marriage allows for an eroticism which is a very important part of their relationship. It is an eroticism which is free to her, not in the sense of an eroticism abstracted from any sentimental and emotional aspect, but an eroticism that, in one way or another, has to do with libido, narcissism, exhibitionism. She repeats twice “extremely” to stress the strength, the energy and the power. When she is with her husband, she rediscovers her femininity, free from any kind of universal judgment, not subjected to any kind of hierarchy or comparison. She rediscovers her true self, without any mask. *American Pastoral* is not a novel that wants to present the figure of a devoted wife, of a wounded mother, or a *femme fatale*, it is a testament to the power of desire, of the fascination—and also the limits—of female power.

He had tremendous stamina and tremendous strength, and her smallness next to his largeness, the way he could lift her up, the bigness of his body in bed with her seemed to excite them both. She said that when he would fall asleep after making love she felt as though she were sleeping with a mountain. It thrilled her sometimes to think she was sleeping beside an enormous rock. When she was lying under him, he would plunge in and out of her very hard but at the same time holding himself at a distance so she would not be crushed, and because of his stamina and strength he could keep this up for a long time without getting tired. With one arm he could pick her up and

---

<sup>24</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 300.



turn her around on her knees or he could sit her on his lap and move easily under the weight of her hundred and three pounds.

Seymour, as a lover, is compared to a mountain, which means that he's able to overpower her but also to protect her. The excitement is given by the contrast between the two roles, between the Swede's masculinity and physical prowess, and Dawn's slimness. Described as angelic because slender, beautiful and delicate, she is in fact manifestly a powerful woman. She embodies the new ideals of an emerging femininity, which no longer undergoes the decadent masculine supremacy, but wants to take on the role of guide.

For months and months following their marriage, she would begin to cry after she had reached her orgasm. She would come and she would cry and he didn't know what to make of it. "What's the matter?" he asked her. "I don't know." "Do I hurt you?" "No. I don't know where it comes from. It's almost as if the sperm, when you shoot it into my body, sets off the tears." "But I don't hurt you." "No." "Does it please you, Dawnie? Do you like it?" "I love it. There's something about it... it just gets to a place that nothing else gets to. And that's the place where the tears are. You reach a part of me that nothing else ever reaches." "Okay. As long as I don't hurt you." "No, no. It's just strange... it's just strange... it's just strange not being alone," she said.<sup>25</sup>

Dawn cries after sex because, as she says, Seymour touches a point that has never been touched before and that is never usually touched, it is like a discovery: the discovery of not being alone in the world. She cries because the sexual act is extremely unifying for her, despite the previous detachment, after the sex with him, of her looking at her naked body at the mirror. The distinctive sexual connotation of the corporeity of man and woman indeed presupposes and requires that a mutual unifying integrative relationality is achieved. The sexually distinct corporeity of man and woman is, for the human being, the preliminary and fundamental condition for living. The inter-relationality that leads each person to find one's identity and full effectiveness in the relationship with the other. The sexual difference establishes the dynamism, makes the correlation,

---

<sup>25</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 300.

creates reciprocity. The sexual union, the culmination of the relationship, is not limited to the juxtaposition of two subjects, but it comes to creating a unity. When this unity is created, Dawn cries. There aren't only poignant passion or absolute tenderness. There is also despair. The vocabulary used comprehends a repetition of the word "hurt" and words like "cry", "tears", "alone". A vocabulary usually connected with death, not with love, or sex. He touches, according to his wife, a point where tears are, just like death. As the Italian scholar Sorrentino says «il significato ultimo dell'erotismo è la fusione, l'oltrepasamento del limite, ma morire e uscire dai limiti sono un'unica cosa; l'erotismo, in quanto esperienza della perdita di sé, della dissoluzione della propria individualità definita, ha dunque il senso della morte»<sup>26</sup>. George Bataille in *L'Anus solaire*, his first novel written in 1927 and published in 1931, wrote:

Ainsi le plomb est la parodie de l'or. L'air est la parodie de l'eau. Le cerveau est la parodie de l'équateur. Le coït est la parodie du crime. L'or, l'eau, l'équateur ou le crime peuvent indifféremment être énoncés comme le principe des choses.<sup>27</sup>

Everything, in a completely tragic way, according to Bataille, is a parody, even literature is parody, and so, like literature, also eroticism and coitus. The latter is only a caricature of death, since eroticism is therefore only an illusory simulacrum and often, this uncontrollable attraction to death experienced by men is reduced to a simple, sad and embarrassed, because unrealizable and impossible, imitation of death itself, a ridiculous and exasperated copy. Their act of having sex is a parody of death, almost a premonition of what is in store for them.

"There's something so touching about you," she whispered to him, "when you get to the point where you're out of control." So touching to her, she told him, this very restrained, good, polite, well-brought-up man, a man always so in charge of his strength, who had mastered his tremendous strength and had no violence in him, when he got past the point of no return, beyond the point of anyone's being embarrassed

---

<sup>26</sup> V. Sorrentino, *Cupio dissolvi: Senso della vita e abbandono, impressioni*, Roma, Armando Editore, 2015, pp. 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> G. Bataille, *L'anus Solaire*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, p. 81.

about anything, when he was beyond the point of being able to judge her or to think that somehow she was a bad girl for wanting it as much as she wanted it from him then, when he just wanted it, those last three or four minutes that would culminate in the screaming orgasm<sup>28</sup>

Dawn is also pleased by the Swede's orgasm to the point that she defines it touching, she perceives the moment of his orgasm almost as an act of domination, of veiled supremacy on a man who's always in charge of his strength, who has always strong discipline and self-control. She's pleased because she sees that he loses control, in a unifying moment, and she's the responsible of that, she's the one in charge, she always is. It's a confirmation of Roth's theory written in *The Dying Animal*, his novel published in 2001, that there's no sexual equality:

in sex there no point of absolute stasis. There is no sexual equality and there can be no sexual equality, certainly not one where the allotments are equal, the male quotient and the female quotient in perfect balance. There's no way to negotiate metrically this wild thing. It's not fifty-fifty like a business transaction. It's the chaos of eros we're talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement.<sup>29</sup>

As Marquis de Sade said: «there would be no sexual pleasure without the demonstration of power»<sup>30</sup>. Dawn, despite her thinness, despite her crying, is the one who demonstrates it.

Jerry, who doesn't appreciate his brother's wife, also describes her as getting rapidly passionate about new enterprises, but as having difficulties in staying focused for a long time and losing interest quickly, with her husband always trying to accommodate her wishes and needs, such as setting her up in the business of a beef cattle ranch. «No house they lived in was right. No amount of money in the bank was enough. He set her up in the cattle business. That didn't work. He set her up in the nursery tree business. That didn't work»<sup>31</sup>. Jerry

---

<sup>28</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 300.

<sup>29</sup> P. Roth, *The Dying Animal*, New York, Vintage Publishing, 2002, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> A. Soble, *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*, Vol.II, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 954.

<sup>31</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 300.

describes her with a repetition of “no” and “that didn’t work” which confers a sort of sarcastic effect to the text and that stresses her negatively. In few lines he gives shape to the common prototype of the dissatisfied, spoiled woman. Despite Dawn’s constant dissatisfaction, there is a positive aspect in her need to find her own place because, as a woman in post-war America, she is not even expected or allowed to have a job, but she wants to work anyway.

Zuckerman finds two pictures of Dawn, in the first she embodies the perfect beauty queen, in the second she symbolize the perfect housewife, two different aspects of what women are expected to be and of what Dawn is.

I was able to get the New Jersey Miss America Pageant office to dig up a glossy photo of Mary Dawn Dwyer, age twenty-two, being crowned Miss New Jersey in May 1949. I found another picture of her—in a 1961 number of a Morris County weekly—standing primly before her fireplace mantel in a blazer, a skirt, and a turtleneck sweater, a picture captioned, “Mrs. Levov, the former Miss New Jersey of 1949, loves living in a 170-year-old home, an environment which she says reflects the values of her family.”<sup>32</sup>

This part of the novel is relevant in its showing that Philip Roth in *American Pastoral* does not reinforces but exposes a misrepresentation of women. He’s not an accomplice, he’s a subtle denouncer. Dawn is a Miss New Jersey and a housewife living in a 170-year-old-home, but not just this.

But Dawn wanted from life something other than to be the slavish mom to half a dozen kids and the nursemaid to a two-hundred-year-old house—she wanted to raise beef cattle. Because of her being introduced, no matter where they went, as “a former Miss New Jersey,” she was sure that even though she had a bachelor’s degree people were always dismissing her as a bathing beauty, a mindless china doll, capable of doing nothing more productive for society than standing around looking pretty.<sup>33</sup>

Dawn wants her husband to fund her business, a beef cattle ranch, as a way of proving, especially to the other women, that she is not just a pageant queen, and

---

<sup>32</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 181.

Seymour supports Dawn in this enterprise because he wants to help his wife to cope with the pain of not having other children besides Merry.

And then, after Merry started at nursery school, Dawn set out to prove to the world of women, for neither the first time nor the last, that she was impressive for something more than what she looked like. She decided to raise cattle.<sup>34</sup>

She wants to demonstrate that she can make it in the business world because she's so much more than a pretty face. Her beauty, in fact, is still an issue and she does what she can to escape it. Dawn, in her life, is positioned between a mimetic tendency to conform to a generalized perception of womanhood and a subversive impulse to be different. While she is a Miss, she seems gratified when she represents the socially accepted feminine ideal but she later becomes alienated by the objectifying gaze. She feels hurt both when she's young and when she grows up. Her own idea of herself is confused. Dawn also embodies a very uncomfortable duality between her private self and the public one. This ambivalence displays the woman's inner conflict between the desire to respond to individual aspirations and the temptation to give into cultural and masculine scripts of womanhood. However, her business is based only on the Swede's financial help and does not really make profits.

Another demonstration of Seymour's constant desire to satisfy his wife is paying for cosmetic surgery in one of the world's most eminent clinics in Switzerland, when she is only in her forties:

He took her to Switzerland for the world's best face-lift. Not even into her fifties, still in her forties, but that's what the woman wants, so they schlep to Geneva for a face-lift from the guy who did Princess Grace.<sup>35</sup>

The woman decides that she wants to try to carry on with her life, erasing her past. The first step to do that is a face-lift, deleting the pain from her skin. «And then the change occurred. Something made her decide to want to be free of the

---

<sup>34</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 181.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 185.

unexpected, improbable thing. She was not going to be deprived of her life.<sup>36</sup>» Dawn takes this decision when no form of therapy works to cure her grief and depression after her daughter's terroristic attack and disappearance. According to Debra Shostak this face-lift is the «façade beneath which the trauma of Merry's bomb can be obscured»<sup>37</sup>. She achieves the desired result and writes to her doctor:

“Dear Dr. LaPlante: A year has passed since you did my face. I do not feel that when I last saw you I understood what you have given me. That you would spend five hours of your time for my beauty fills me with awe. How can I thank you enough? I feel it's taken me these full twelve months to recover from the surgery. I believe, as you said, that my system was more beaten down than I had realized. Now it is as if I have been given a new life. Both from within and from the outside”<sup>38</sup>

She escaped for so many years her beauty and now she wants it and has it back. She desires and achieves to be beautiful again. She writes “my beauty” as it was an individual. “My beauty” has an alliteration with “my baby”. Her beauty is her new baby to take care of. She seeks to have a “new life” but also to see herself looked at again because beauty is connected with others' gaze. In Simone De Beauvoir's terms, «it is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect, as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her [the woman]; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus to seem to herself to be stabilized, justified in her splendor»<sup>39</sup>. She seems to be unable to transcend the boundaries of objecthood and to construct herself as a subject. But she doesn't do the face-lift only for the others. After many years in which she escaped it, she becomes conscious of the power of the gaze, which gives the male voyeur authority over the female. At the moment of this self-consciousness, with the decision to do a face-lift and to return to be beautiful, Dawn becomes the gazing subject, rather than the passive object of the gaze. She acts as an active subject,

---

<sup>36</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>37</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, New York, Bloomsbury USA Academic, 2011, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 176.

<sup>39</sup> S. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Trans. H. M. Parshley, New York: Knopf, 1953, p. 533.

she appropriates that gaze and turns it towards her inner self, she decides to do something for her.

The surgery is not the only thing she decides to do to change her life. «Almost immediately after the reconstitution of her face to its former pert, heart-shaped pre-explosion perfection, she decided to build a small contemporary house on a ten-acre lot the other side of Rimrock ridge and to sell the big old house»<sup>40</sup>. She sells the only thing left that still connects her to the destroyed past and manages to regain the perfection that characterized her, a perfection that is represented by her beautiful face, ruined and aged because of the pain. A perfection which doesn't really exist, considering her past and her present. There's irony here. Of course, like he has always done, the Swede supports his wife in an effort to make their lives apparently normal again.

He had fulfilled every demand. To disentangle her from her horror, there wasn't anything he had omitted to do. Life had returned to something like its recognizable proportions. Now tear the letter up and throw it away. Pretend it never arrived. Because Dawn had twice been hospitalized in a clinic near Princeton for suicidal depression, he had come to accept that the damage was permanent and that she would be able to function only under the care of psychiatrists and by taking sedatives and an anti-depressant medication—that she would be in and out of psychiatric hospitals and that he would be visiting her in those places for the rest of their lives. He imagined that once or twice a year he would find himself sitting at the side of her bed in a room where there were no locks on the door. There would be flowers he'd sent her in a vase on the writing desk; on a windowsill, the ivy plants he'd brought from her study, thinking it might help her to care for something; on the bedside table framed photographs of himself and Merry and Dawn's parents and brother. At the side of the bed he himself would be holding her hand while she sat propped up against the pillows in her Levi's and a big turtleneck sweater and wept. "I'm frightened, Seymour. I'm frightened all the time." He would sit patiently there beside her whenever she began to tremble and he would tell her to just breathe, slowly breathe in and out and think of the most pleasant place on earth that she knew of, imagine herself in the most wonderfully calming place in the entire world, a tropical beach, a beautiful mountain, a holiday landscape from her childhood... and he would do this even when the trembling was

---

<sup>40</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 176.

brought on by a tirade aimed at him. Sitting up on the bed, with her arms crossed in front of her as though to warm herself, she would hide the whole of her body inside the sweater--turn the sweater into a tent by extending the turtleneck up over her chin, stretching the back under her buttocks, and drawing the front across her bent knees, down over her legs, and beneath her feet. Often she sat tented like that all the time he was there.<sup>41</sup>

Dawn has been suffering of suicidal depression and has been hospitalized in a clinic but once she's healed, Seymour still imagines her there, where we have a very different version of Dawn's. She's also dressed very differently from when she was a Miss.

Dawn wearing her Miss New Jersey sash pinned to her suit and, on her hands, white kid gloves, tremendously expensive gloves, a present to her from Newark Maid, where the Swede was beginning his training to take over the business. All the girls wore the same style of white kid glove, four-button in length, up over the wrist. Dawn alone had got hers for nothing, along with a second pair of gloves--opera length, in black, Newark Maid's formal, sixteen-button kid glove (a small fortune at Saks), the table-cut workmanship as expert as anything from Italy or France--and, in addition, a third pair of gloves, above the elbow, custom made to match her evening gown. The Swede had asked Dawn for a yard of fabric the same as her gown, and a friend of the family's who did fabric gloves made them for Dawn as a courtesy to Newark Maid<sup>42</sup>

In the gloves designed by Seymour, and in her experience as Miss New Jersey, she has forged a chimeric identity, forming herself to match that young woman in her husband's dream.

Joan Rivière, in her famous essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade", published in 1929, coined the term *masquerade* in relation to a woman's gendered identity. The essay argues that «womanliness could be assumed and worn as a mask»<sup>43</sup>. In *American Pastoral*, Shostak affirms that:

Sometimes the mask is literal, as in the veil with which the Jain Merry covers her face; sometimes it is metaphorical, as in the mask that

---

<sup>41</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>43</sup> J. Rivière, "Womanliness as a Masquerade", in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10, 1929, pp. 303-313.



Seymour “learns to live behind” in order to conceal his suffering or the alias—Mary Stoltz—that Merry assumes while on the run; sometimes it is somewhere between the two, as in the “new face” that the plastic surgeon gives Dawn<sup>44</sup>

Pleading to be the beautiful object of contemplation, Dawn Dwyer thus participates in the masquerade of femininity and renounces the status of a subject to become a perfect image of femininity.

The Swede’s keenness to always help his wife, with the gloves when she is a Miss, with her business, and in her struggle against the depression when she’s in the clinic, is motivated by the genuine, authentic love towards the woman he decided to share his life with. This strong attempt to help her, since the very beginning of their relationship, explains something very important about the love he feels for Dawn, and it must be taken into account when examining Dawn’s role inside the novel.

She was so lovely that it made him extraordinarily shy even to glance her way, as though glancing were itself touching or clinging, as though if she knew (and how could she not?) that he was uncontrollably looking her way [...], it took him a full semester to approach Dawn for a date, not only because nakedly confronting her beauty gave him a bad conscience and made him feel shamefully voyeuristic but because once he approached her there’d be no way to prevent her from looking right through him and into his mind and seeing for herself how he pictured her [...] At night he played continuously on his phonograph a song popular that year called “Peg o’ My Heart.” A line in the song went, “It’s your Irish heart I’m after,” and every time he saw Dawn Dwyer on the paths at Upsala, tiny and exquisite, he went around the rest of the day unaware that he was whistling that damn song nonstop. [...] He lived under two skies then—the Dawn Dwyer sky and the natural sky overhead.<sup>45</sup>

The Swede is madly in love with his wife. He’s happy when she’s happy.

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

---

<sup>44</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 178-179.

disappointments it became impossible for him to do nothing about them.<sup>46</sup>

The Swede is depicted here as the typical prototype of a man who defines his fulfillment, as a man and as a husband, not through his own happiness, but through what he is able to provide for his wife and family. Dawn's bliss is definitely the litmus test of his own personal success. If she was disappointed, then the he would have failed as the perfect American man and husband he always wanted to be. The Swede's mindset epitomizes the ideal of a man who, almost excessively, feels responsible for the fortune of his own family. In the end, despite his effort, he fails, he is not able to avoid his family's collapse and Dawn's unhappiness. When in the clinic, she even blames him for her condition.

How have I wound up here? You, that's how! You wouldn't leave me alone! Had to have me! Had to marry me! I just wanted to become a teacher! That's what I wanted. I had the job. I had it waiting. To teach kids music in the Elizabeth system, and to be left alone by boys, and that was it. I never wanted to be Miss America! I never wanted to marry anyone! But you wouldn't let me breathe--you wouldn't let me out of your sight. All I ever wanted was my college education and that job. I should never have left Elizabeth! Never! Do you know what Miss New Jersey did for my life? It ruined it. I only went after the damn scholarship so Danny could go to college and my father wouldn't have to pay. Do you think if my father didn't have the heart attack I would have entered for Miss Union County? No! I just wanted to win the money so Danny could go to college without the burden on my dad! I didn't do it for boys to go traipsing after me everywhere--I was trying to help out at home! But then you arrived. You! Those hands! Those shoulders! Towering over me with your jaw! This huge animal I couldn't get rid of. You wouldn't leave me be! Every time I looked up, there was my boyfriend, gaga because I was a ridiculous beauty queen! You were like some kid! You had to make me into a princess. Well, look where I have wound up! In a madhouse! Your princess is in a madhouse!<sup>47</sup>

In an explosion of anger and resentment we have Dawn talking for the very first time and revealing aspects of her life that we did not know until now, such as her

---

<sup>46</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 188.

<sup>47</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 166-167.

having participated in beauty contests just for the money, which is confirmed by the fact that she always escaped that role, or as her lost dreams of being a music teacher. Then Seymour, her husband, is called “huge animal”. He is a “mountain” when she sleeps beside him, now he is an animal. All her rage is directed against him. Through this passage, of truly frightening power, we’re seduced into her despair and fury, we’re thrown into another perspective. «No small part of the cognitive distress of this passage arouses lies»<sup>48</sup> as Hayes says, in the way the reader not only feels sorry for the Swede, but is also tempted and seduced into a delight in his mockery. We also have a different vision of her experience as a Miss.

All through high school people were telling me, “You should be Miss America.” I thought it was ridiculous. Based on what should I be Miss America? I was a clerk in a dry-goods store after school and in the summer, and people would come up to my cash register and say, “You should be Miss America.” I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand when people said I should do things because of the way that I looked. But when I got a call from the Union County pageant to come to that tea, what could I do? I was a baby. I thought this was a way for me to kick in a little money so my father wouldn’t have to work so hard. [...] I was mortified. [...] I looked around and there was this sea of good-looking girls and they all knew what to do, and I didn’t know anything. [...] And then they were coaching me on how to sit and how to stand, even how to listen--they sent me to a model agency to learn how to walk. They didn’t like the way I walked. I didn’t care how I walked--I walked! [...] Leave me alone! All of you leave me alone! I never wanted this in the first place! Do you see why I married you? Now do you understand? One reason only! I wanted something that seemed normal! So desperately after that year, I wanted something normal! How I wish it had never happened! None of it! They put you up on a pedestal, which I didn’t ask for, and then they rip you off it so damn fast it can blind you! And I did not ask for any of it! I had nothing in common with those other girls. I hated them and they hated me. Those tall girls with their big feet! None of them gifted. All of them so chummy! I was a serious music student! All I wanted was to be left alone and not to have that goddamn crown sparkling like crazy up on top of my head! I never wanted any of it! Never!<sup>49</sup>”

---

<sup>48</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit. , p. 128.

<sup>49</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 167-169.

Having been seduced by Dawn's rich vein of fury, we are now pulled up short and invited to listen to Seymour's version:

It was a great help to him, driving home after one of those visits, to remember her as the girl she had really been back then, who, as he recalled it, was nothing like the girl she portrayed as herself in those tirades. During the week in September of 1949 leading up to the Miss America Pageant, when she called Newark every night from the Dennis Hotel to tell him about what happened to her that day as a Miss America contestant, what radiated from her voice was sheer delight in being herself. He'd never heard her like that before--it was almost frightening, this undisguised exulting in being where she was and who she was and what she was. Suddenly life existed rapturously and for Dawn Dwyer alone. [...] They would talk long distance for as long as an hour at a time-- she was too excited to sleep<sup>50</sup>

And also:

Still, for months afterward the superstimulating adventure refused to die; even while she was being Miss New Jersey and going around snipping ribbons and waving at people and opening department stores and auto showrooms, she wondered aloud if anything so wonderfully unforeseen as that week in Atlantic City would ever happen to her again. She kept beside her bed the 1949 Official Yearbook of the Miss America Pageant, a booklet prepared by the pageant that was sold all week at Atlantic City: individual photos of the girls, four to a page, each with a tiny outline drawing of her state and a capsule biography. Where Miss New Jersey's photoportrait appeared—smiling demurely, Dawn in her evening gown with the matching twelve-button fabric gloves—the corner of the page had been neatly turned back. “Mary Dawn Dwyer, 22 year old Elizabeth, N.J. brunette, carries New Jersey's hopes in this year's Pageant. A graduate of Upsala College, East Orange, N.J., where she majored in music education, Mary Dawn has the ambition of becoming a high school music teacher. She is 5-2V2 and blue-eyed, and her hobbies are swimming, square dancing, and cooking. (Left above)” Reluctant to give up excitement such as she'd never known before, she talked on and on about the fairy tale it had been for a kid from Hillside Road, a plumber's daughter from Hillside Road, to have been up in front of all those people, competing for the title of Miss America. She almost couldn't believe the courage

---

<sup>50</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 169.

she'd shown. "Oh, that ramp, Seymour. That's a long ramp, a long runway, it's a long way to go just smiling...."<sup>51</sup>

Dawn's version doesn't obscure or ignore the Swede's perspective, but it engages it competitively. When Seymour thinks back to the Yearbook, with his wife's picture, that says that her dream is to be a teacher, he does not go deeper. This memory is overshadowed by that of her excitement. He comes up with a single explanation for her ferment, for the fact that she can't sleep. The woman instead, explains that she did it for money and to help her father. Dawn's version is deeper and richer, than her husband's theory, based on his well-domesticated rationalism through which he interprets the world. Dawn takes us backstage, revealing that her experience was made of jealousy, sense of inadequacy, disappointment. She has been knocked off the pedestal they put her on very quickly, replaced by someone more beautiful, taller, younger than her. The repetition "I was a baby" underlines the fact that she was too young to be able to rebel, to fully understand, to decide with judgment. *American Pastoral* is «the perverse provocation of having experience falsified and reinterpreted»<sup>52</sup>. Her anger steals the romantic glow that had encircled the Swede so far.

Dawn's tendency to succumb to the normative constructions of gender and the power of the masculine gaze does not axiomatically exclude possibilities of resistance to these social forces. Indeed, Dwyer conveys, at a certain point, her disgust at the cultural representation thrust upon her by the phallogocentric gaze inside society. The oxymoronic memory they have about her past as a Miss reflects this ambivalence, which makes Dawn Dwyer at once enjoy and resent that representation. She feels a strong resentment against her husband. The fairy tale of romance is actually a nightmare of self-alienation in which Dwyer has to adapt to some roles in order to please men and to conform to Seymour's projected images and desires.

---

<sup>51</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 173-174.

<sup>52</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., p. 128.

Finally, the last straw in the disintegration of their love is betrayal. Dawn, in fact, embarks on a secret relationship with her neighbor, Bill Orcutt. Bill is an architect and her husband's friend. He is the only possible consolation that the woman finds in the middle of the enormous disappointment, the discomfort in her life. She is interested in his art as a painter, she judges his painting as «thought-provoking»<sup>53</sup>. The Swede, who knows his wife, understands the infidelity because of her attitude when she's speaking about him: «Making cracks about his bloodlessness, his breeding, his empty warmth, putting him down like that whenever we are about to get into bed. Sure she talks that way--she has to, she's in love with him.»<sup>54</sup> This affair, to Dawn, bespeaks another possibility of running away from her painful past. When looking at her, in the final pages of the novel, the Swede, who understands he has lost her, thinks:

A gate, some sort of psychological gate, had been installed in her brain, a mighty gate past which nothing harmful could travel. She locked the gate, and that was that. Miraculous, or so he'd thought, until he'd learned that the gate had a name. The William Orcutt III Gate.<sup>55</sup>

She's no more the woman he knew, there is a gate between them. In the final pages «we read the narration of the Swede's guilty, anguished thoughts»<sup>56</sup> about the homicides committed by Merry, «together with Dawn's babbling about Swiss cows and the barns and how it was all “Very clean and very nice”»<sup>57</sup>. Their two different conditions are ironically juxtaposed. The life of the Swede is now completely out of control, it's pure torment, his reality and all his hopes are wrecked, while Dawn's pastoral dreams still goes on. It's the paradise lost. He is the Adam who has lost his Eve.

---

<sup>53</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 301.

<sup>54</sup> *Ivi*, p. 314.

<sup>55</sup> *Ivi*, p. 383.

<sup>56</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 40.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

#### 1.4. Meredith (Merry) Levov

The worst problems between Dawn and Seymour come from one specific source: Meredith Levov. I want to examine Meredith's role in the novel specifically as her parents' daughter, to better understand why her actions are so crucial.

The historical context of *American Pastoral* is the decade of the 1960's, the period of the Cultural Revolution. This turbulent moment is a time in which the generation born after the Second World War starts questioning all the new values and morals of the post-World War generation. One of the aspects of this period is also the rise of the New Leftist thought, and of political radicalism, which is represented in the novel through Meredith's involvement in the Weather Underground. The girl embraces their radicalism. In *American Pastoral* the Swede and his daughter Merry represent the shift in the culture between the values of the old and the new America. In the novel, Seymour's brother Jerry tells the narrator Nathan Zuckerman that:

“The ‘Rimrock Bomber’ was Seymour’s daughter. The high school kid who blew up the post office and killed the doctor. The kid who stopped the war in Vietnam by blowing up somebody out mailing a letter at five a.m. A doctor on his way to the hospital. Charming child,” he said in a voice that was all contempt and still didn’t seem to contain the load of contempt and hatred that he felt. “Brought the war home to Lyndon Johnson by blowing up the post office in the general store”<sup>58</sup>

The difference between father and daughter is quite evident. Jerry says 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»<sup>59</sup>. Seymour is the symbol of Americana but America itself, in that period, is no longer Americana, just like Meredith, Merry who reflects the gestures of a defeated generation. Jerry's quote not only summarizes the transformation in the cultural background, but also Meredith and the Swede's fate. Merry was “out of time” and her father was responsible. Merry

---

<sup>58</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 65.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, p. 66.

is a mirror for America and the love that Levov feels for her is a mirror of the nostalgia for that once ordered country. The division between the old and the new America is played through the division between Meredith and Seymour, between father and daughter.

Always according to Jerry, for the Swede «[she] was the cancellation of everything»<sup>60</sup>, she represents «the brutality of the destruction of this indestructible man»<sup>61</sup>. Seymour had a precise idea of how his life should have been. When dreaming about her, his beloved daughter should have been «the perfected image of himself»,<sup>62</sup> he even wanted to call her Merry «because of the joy she took in the swing he'd built for her»<sup>63</sup> but, on the contrary, she was all but merry:

the angry, rebarbative spitting-out daughter with no interest whatever in being the next successful Levov, flushing him out of hiding as if he were a fugitive—initiating The Swede into the displacement of another America entirely, the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of Utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating The Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral-- into the indigenous American berserk.<sup>64</sup>

His daughter becomes a terrorist. Levov's dream takes the shape of a nightmare embodied by the girl. She is the counterpastoral of Levov and the counterpastoral of *American Pastoral*.

In the novel Meredith is the one who aspires to a different version of American life, she aspires to escape from any predetermined notion of identity and reinvent herself on her own terms. The only solution that she finds is the rebellion from the society and from her father's morals. Levov's family history runs in parallel with the American national history. Merry represents not only the

---

<sup>60</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>61</sup> *Ivi*, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> *Ivi*, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> *Ivi*, p. 179.

<sup>64</sup> *Ivi*, p. 82.



decline of the life of a young girl and her family, but also the decline of America, which has declined from the relative order of the 1940s and 1950s, into the anarchy of the 1960s and 1970s. Merry Levov is a character that Timothy Parrish, in his article “The End of Identity: Philip Roth’s *Jewish American Pastoral*”, considers as:

most similar to Zuckerman. They share as distinguishing character traits a relentless commitment to transformation and the desire to disrupt all pretensions to complacency. Roth has said of his own protagonist “My hero has to be in a state of vivid transformation or radical displacement. ‘I am not what I am—I am, if anything, what I am not’”. By that definition Merry, and not The Swede, should be the hero of the novel<sup>65</sup>.

She is the human proof that her father is reaching for the impossible, for an idealized version of the American man. She’s the other side of the coin because she’s trying to reach for the opposite. The Cultural Revolution drives Levov’s daughter away from home. One of the many reasons for that, is that she does not feel free to choose at home, she is plagued by the sense of cultural deracination present both inside and outside her house. This sense is also due to her father’s assimilation project. Seymour and his family’s fate show how «doomed the ideal of assimilation actually is»<sup>66</sup>. The hardness of this assimilation project, made by the Swede, leads his family to ruin, a ruin that also mirrors the breaking down of the values of post-war America. This breaking down, according to Parrish<sup>67</sup>, manifests itself in the novel through Merry who, from the relative order of a normal life, declines into rebellion and lust for destruction, that leads her to madness. «They raised a child who was neither Catholic nor Jew, who instead was first a stutterer, then a killer, then a Jain»<sup>68</sup> says her uncle Jerry in the novel. The Swede renounces to his ethnic background to reach and welcome a

---

<sup>65</sup> T. L. Parrish, “The End of Identity: Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*”, *Shofar*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2000, p. 91.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>68</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 360.

supposedly perfect American existence but the consequence is Merry's crisis that leads her to a violent reaction, because of her being "out of time".

Merry's violent despair reminds the Swede that to disavow his racial heritage carries costs, but he also encounters the uncanny in the form of the national history that disrupts his cheerfully ahistorical/pastoral life and makes of him history plaything.<sup>69</sup>

While Seymour creates just one identity to follow, just a single version of himself, Merry creates many. «Merry is American Pastoral's secret artist»<sup>70</sup> says Timothy Parrish. Debra Shostak states that «Roth sees us all as fiction-makers and forces us to reconsider the nature of the utopias we all script. He rejects all these as fantasies of innocence, retreats to the womb. The only utopia Roth will allow is that of fiction-making itself: the power of the human mind endlessly to imagine and to reimagine our lives». Merry does that. She multiplies herself in a lot of different versions. She's the fiction-maker of her family's life.

Her grandmother Dwyer took her to pray at St. Genevieve's whenever Merry was visiting down in Elizabeth. Little by little, Catholic trinkets made their way into her room--and as long as he could think of them as trinkets, as long as she wasn't going overboard, everything was okay. First there was the palm frond bent into the shape of the cross that Grandma had given her after Palm Sunday. That was all right. Any kid might want that up on the wall. Then came the candle, in thick glass, about a foot tall, the Eternal Candle; on its label was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a prayer that began, "O Sacred Heart of Jesus who said, 'Ask and you shall receive.'" That wasn't so great, but as she didn't seem to be lighting and burning it, as it just seemed to sit there on her dresser for decoration, there was no sense making a fuss. Then, to hang over the bed, came the picture of Jesus, in profile, praying, which really wasn't all right, though still he said nothing to her, nothing to Dawn, nothing to Grandma Dwyer, told himself, "It's harmless, it's a picture, to her a pretty picture of a nice man. What difference does it make?" What did it was the statue, the plaster statue of the Blessed Mother, a smaller version of the big ones on the breakfront in Grandma Dwyer's dining room and on the

---

<sup>69</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>70</sup> T. L. Parrish, "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*", cit., p. 92.

dressing table in Grandma Dwyer's bedroom. The statue was what led him to sit her down and ask if she would be willing to take the pictures and the palm frond off the wall and put them away in her closet, along with the statue and the Eternal Candle, when Grandma and Grandpa Levov came to visit. Quietly he explained that though her room was her room and she had the right to hang anything there she wanted, Grandma and Grandpa Levov were Jews, and so, of course, was he, and, rightly or wrongly, Jews don't, etc., etc. And because she was a sweet girl who wanted to please people, and to please her daddy most of all, she was careful to be sure that nothing Grandma Dwyer had given her was anywhere to be seen when next the Swede's parents visited Old Rimrock. And then one day everything Catholic came down off the wall and off her dresser for good.<sup>71</sup>

Despite her father's religious heritage, and in response to her mother's one, she goes through a catholic period, during which she decorates her room with a picture of Jesus, a statue of the Blessed Mother and a palm frond. This choice scares her father, who asks her to remove those icons before her Jewish grandparents come to visit the family. After discovering that Dawn has secretly had his baby granddaughter baptized:

the Swede's father couldn't shake the conviction that what lay behind Merry's difficulties all along was the secret baptism: that, and the Christmas tree, and the Easter nonet, enough for that poor kid never to know who she was<sup>72</sup>

Even according to the Swede's father this mixture, this lack of a single defined identity, is the cause of what happened. He thinks that this is the reason for her issues. But Merry does not maintain her interest for the Catholic world for so long:

she stopped wearing the Miraculous Medal, with the impression on it of the Blessed Virgin, which she had sworn to Grandma Dwyer to wear "perpetually" without even taking it off to bathe. She outgrew the saints just as she would have outgrown the Communism. And she would have outgrown it--Merry outgrew everything. It was merely a matter of months. Maybe weeks and the stuff in that drawer would

---

<sup>71</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 89-90.

<sup>72</sup> *Ivi*, p. 389.

have been completely forgotten. All she had to do was wait. If only she could have waited. That was Merry's story in a nutshell. She was impatient. She was always impatient. Maybe it was the stuttering that made her impatient, I don't know. But whatever it was she was passionate about, she was passionate for a year, she did it in a year, and then she got rid of it overnight.<sup>73</sup>

We know indeed that the girl has some features that make her similar to her mother Dawn. She has some difficulties in staying focused, she gets excited very quickly, and very quickly she loses her interest. There is a moment in her youth in which she's fascinated by Audrey Hepburn, a stereotype passion of the typical American girl. As Mark Shechner says, Philip Roth's «job is to bring even banality to life»<sup>74</sup>. Even Edward Alexander has remarked upon how Merry «feeds her six-foot frame on every trendy New Left cliché»<sup>75</sup>. She passes from one interest to another.

Merry's other great love that year, aside from her father, was Audrey Hepburn. Before Audrey Hepburn there had been astronomy and before astronomy, the 4-H Club, and along the way, a bit distressingly to her father, there was even a Catholic phase. [...] Now it was Audrey Hepburn. Every newspaper and magazine she could get hold of she combed for the film star's photograph or name. Even movie timetables—"Breakfast at Tiffany's, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10"—were clipped from the newspaper after dinner and pasted in her Audrey Hepburn scrapbook. For months she went in and out of pretending to be gaminish instead of herself, daintily walking to her room like a wood sprite, smiling with meaningfully coy eyes into every reflecting surface, laughing what they call an "infectious" laugh whenever her father said a word. She bought the soundtrack from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and played it in her bedroom for hours. He could hear her in there singing "Moon River" in the charming way that Audrey Hepburn did, and absolutely fluently—and so, however ostentatious and singularly self-conscious was the shameless playacting, nobody in the house ever indicated that it was tiresome, let alone ludicrous, an improbable dream of purification that had taken possession of her [...] She was a perfectionist who did things passionately, lived intensely in the new interest, and then the passion was suddenly spent and

---

<sup>73</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 150-151.

<sup>74</sup> M. Schechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, cit., p. 158.

<sup>75</sup> E. Alexander, "Philip Roth at Century's End", Middlebury College Publications, 1999, p. 184.

<https://urly.it/3ssg>

everything, including the passion, got thrown into a box and she moved on<sup>76</sup>

Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* says that «in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through»<sup>77</sup>. Merry's self does not have a single identity, as the Swede who is post-Jewish and Dawn, who is post-Catholic. Their daughter is constantly performing: Catholicism, Audrey Hepburn, radicalism, Jainism. She's not defined. She represents the impenetrability of the subjectivity of one person. Her problem is exactly caused by the amount of chances that she has. One of the most important themes of *American Pastoral* is indeed what Zuckerman eventually understands through the Swede's family story, that «even though the self may be of a performative nature, one's ethnic, or rather tribal, identity is not.»<sup>78</sup> It can't be performed. Meredith Levov's identity «lies at the basis of these impersonations as a constant, even though her mother is a Catholic without a church, even though her father is a Jew “without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple”»<sup>79</sup>. The Swede tries to escape his tribal identity through «his immersion into “quaint Americana”»<sup>80</sup>, she tries to escape her absence of identity.

Merry's incapability to find her true identity, and also her incapability to control her rage, are represented by a problem she has: she stutters. Apparently she is the perfect American girl, blonde, physically perfect, very smart, she resembles her perfect parents, if it weren't for this issue which plays, against her will, a crucial role in her life, affecting her stability.

a girl blessed with golden hair and a logical mind and a high IQ and an adultlike sense of humor even about herself, blessed with long,

---

<sup>76</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 89-90.

<sup>77</sup> P. Roth, *The Counterlife*, New York, Vintage Publishing, 1996, p. 324.

<sup>78</sup> S. S. Christiansen, “Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*”, 2006, p. 32.

<https://bit.ly/2SAQJ5J>

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem*.

slender limbs and a wealthy family and her own brand of dogged persistence--with everything except fluency. Security, health, love, every advantage imaginable--missing only was the ability to order a hamburger without humiliating herself.<sup>81</sup>

We have several opinions regarding her problem of stuttering. Jerry, who hates the girl, sees it as a voluntary act of hate and revenge against her father.

That fucking kid! She stuttered, you know. So to pay everybody back for her stuttering, she set off the bomb. He took her to speech therapists. He took her to clinics, to psychiatrists. There wasn't enough he could do for her. And the reward? Boom!<sup>82</sup>

For Dawn that stuttering is exasperating. For the Swede is not a big deal. «She stuttered. So what? What was the big deal?»<sup>83</sup> he says. He's the parent who tries, as much as he can, to make her feel perfect anyway.

He was the parent she could always rely on not to jump all over her every time she opened her mouth. "Cool it," he would tell Dawn, "relax, lay off her," but Dawn could not help herself. Merry began to stutter badly and Dawn's hands were clasped at her waist and her eyes fixed on the child's lips, eyes that said, "I know you can do it!" while saying, "I know that you can't!" Merry's stuttering just killed her mother, and that killed Merry. "I'm not the problem--Mother is!"[...] The exasperation never surfaced: he did not wring his hands like her mother, when she was in trouble he did not watch her lips or mouth her words with her like her mother, he did not turn her, every time she spoke, into the most important person not merely in the room but in the entire world--he did everything he could not to make her stigma into Merry's way of being Einstein. Instead his eyes assured her that he would do all he could to help but that when she was with him she must stutter freely if she needed to.<sup>84</sup>

Merry thinks that her mother is the problem. Also according to her psychiatrist she stutters because of her rage against her family, because of the high standards of her parents, impossible to reach.

---

<sup>81</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 90.

<sup>82</sup> *Ivi*, p. 70.

<sup>83</sup> *Ivi*, p. 253.

<sup>84</sup> *Ivi*, p. 86.

“She has no choice. It’s perfect hell for her when she stutters.” “That isn’t always what she tells me. Last Saturday, I asked her point-blank, ‘Merry, why do you stutter?’ and she told me, ‘It’s just easier to stutter.’” “But you know what she meant by that. It’s obvious what she meant by that. She means she doesn’t have to go through all that she has to go through when she tries not to stutter.” “I happen to think she was telling me something more than that. I think that Merry may even feel that if she doesn’t stutter, then, oh boy, people are really going to find the real problem with her, particularly in a highly pressured perfectionist family where they tend to place an unrealistically high value on her every utterance. ‘If I don’t stutter, then my mother is really going to read me the riot act, then she’s going to find out my real secrets.’”<sup>85</sup>

The doctor says it is a form of manipulation and also a protective shield that she uses because she doesn’t have any others. According to him, she will stop when the stuttering won’t be necessary anymore.

When she sat at the kitchen table after dinner writing the day’s entry in her stuttering diary, that’s when he most wanted to murder the psychiatrist who had finally to inform him--one of the fathers “who can’t accept, who refuse to believe”--that she would stop stuttering only when stuttering was no longer necessary for her, when she wanted to “relate” to the world in a different way--in short, when she found a more valuable replacement for the manipulateness. The stuttering diary was a red three-ring notebook in which, at the suggestion of her speech therapist, Merry kept a record of when she stuttered. Could she have been any more the dedicated enemy of her stuttering than when she sat there scrupulously recalling and recording how the stuttering fluctuated throughout the day, in what context it was least likely to occur, when it was most likely to occur and with whom? And could anything have been more heartbreaking for him than reading that notebook on the Friday evening she rushed off to the movies with her friends and happened to leave it open on the table? “When do I stutter? When somebody asks me something that requires an unexpected, unrehearsed response, that’s when I’m likely to stutter. When people are looking at me. People who know I stutter, particularly when they’re looking at me. Though sometimes it’s worse with people who don’t know me....” On she went, page after page in her strikingly neat handwriting--and all she seemed to be saying was that she stuttered in all situations.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 93-94.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that there are some situations in which she's perfectly capable of not stuttering:

In the quiet, safe cocoon of her speech therapist's office, taken out of her world, she was said to be terrifically at home with herself, to speak flawlessly, make jokes, imitate people, sing. But outside again, she saw it coming, started to go around it, would do anything, anything, to avoid the next word beginning with a b<sup>87</sup>

It's important to note that actually she will stop. When her father meets her for the first time after the terroristic attack, she doesn't stutter anymore, as if detonating that bomb and running away cured her and stopped her rage, her desire to find a form, to find her identity. Most impressive of all, she has already taken another form. She's unstoppable. «[She] is chaos itself»<sup>88</sup>. There's no moment in *American Pastoral* in which she does not transform herself. From the beautiful child that she was, she grows up and changes her appearance:

like some innocent in a fairy story who has been tricked into drinking the noxious potion, the grasshopper child who used to scramble delightedly up and down the furniture and across every available lap in her black leotard all at once shot up, broke out, grew stout-- she thickened across the back and the neck, stopped brushing her teeth and combing her hair; she ate almost nothing she was served at home but at school and out alone ate virtually all the time, cheeseburgers with French fries, pizza, BLTs, fried onion rings, vanilla milk shakes, root beer floats, ice cream with fudge sauce, and cake of any kind, so that almost overnight she became large, a large, loping, slovenly sixteen-year-old, nearly six feet tall, nicknamed by her schoolmates Ho Chi Levov.<sup>89</sup>

Meredith rebels against the maternal figure. She adopts different strategies in order to escape from the maternal threat. As long as femininity is culturally constructed around the beauty of the female body, Meredith uses it as an instrument of revolt against the beautiful mother, over the issue of female

---

<sup>87</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 94.

<sup>88</sup> *Ivi*, p. 216.

<sup>89</sup> *Ivi*, p. 95.



identity. This is why she gets fat. Her look becomes a battlefield between Dawn and Merry. The girl's change of weight can be seen as a sort of rebellion from the traditional standards of beauty, those standards that her mother perfectly represented when she became a Miss. According to the Swede, Merry is «always pretending to be somebody else. What began benignly enough when she was playing at Audrey Hepburn had evolved in only a decade into this outlandish myth of selflessness»<sup>90</sup>. Her rebellion bursts to the surface when she adopts a politicized otherness, which does not correspond with her parents' one. She starts to «ventriloquize the militant speech of the *Black Panthers*»<sup>91</sup>. She shuns one stereotype to endorse another. This feature, again, makes her similar to Dawn. Also Dawn disavows her working class Irish roots and decides to become a Miss and marry a Jew. Furthermore, when her daughter brings violence and homicide into her life, she changes her face, doing a face-lift, and she eventually leaves her husband and marries the architect Bill Orcutt. These two women are both constantly trying to escape what they are and what they have.

Vehemently she renounced the appearance and the allegiances of the good little girl who had tried so hard to be adorable and lovable like all the other good little Rimrock girls--renounced her meaningless manners, her petty social concerns, her family's "bourgeois" values. She had wasted enough time on the cause of herself. "I'm not going to spend my whole life wrestling day and night with a fucking stutter when kids are b-b-b-being b-b-b-b-bu-bu-bu roasted alive by Lyndon B-b-b-baines b-b-b-bu-bu-burn-'em-up Johnson!" All her energy came right to the surface now, unimpeded, the force of resistance that had previously been employed otherwise; and by no longer bothering with the ancient obstruction, she experienced not only her full freedom for the first time in her life but the exhilarating power of total self-certainty. A brand-new Merry had begun, one who'd found, in opposing the "v-v-v-vile" war, a difficulty to fight that was worthy, at last, of her truly stupendous strength. North Vietnam she called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a country she spoke of with such patriotic feeling that, according to Dawn, one would have thought she'd been born not at the Newark Beth Israel but

---

<sup>90</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 226.

<sup>91</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*, cit. p. 57.

at the Beth Israel in Hanoi. “‘The Democratic Republic of Vietnam’-- if I hear that from her one more time, Seymour, I swear, I’ll go out of my mind!” He tried to convince her that perhaps it wasn’t as bad as it sounded. “Merry has a credo, Dawn, Merry has a political position. There may not be much subtlety in it, she may not yet be its best spokesman, but there is some thought behind it, there’s certainly a lot of emotion behind it, there’s a lot of compassion behind it. . . .” But there was now no conversation she had with her daughter that did not drive Dawn, if not out of her mind, out of the house and into the barn. The Swede would overhear Merry fighting with her every time the two of them were alone together for two minutes. “Some people,” Dawn says, “would be perfectly happy to have parents who are contented middle-class people.” “I’m sorry I’m not brainwashed enough to be one of them,” Merry replies. “You’re a sixteen-year-old girl,” Dawn says, “and I can tell you what to do and I will tell you what to do.” “Just because I’m sixteen doesn’t make me a g-g-girl! I do what I w-w-want!” “You’re not antiwar,” Dawn says, “you’re anti everything.” “And what are you, Mom? You’re pro c-c-c-cow!” Night after night now Dawn went to bed in tears. “What is she? What is this?”<sup>92</sup>

In the novel, the Swede disdains the ongoing change in society, but he decides to join a peaceful protest group, the *New Jersey Businessmen Against the War*, only for Meredith. However, the Cultural Revolution is never really significant for him. It’s exactly this indifference that triggers Merry’s anger.

As a sixteen years-old revolutionist in the making, while still living at home, the surly Merry Levov is all teenage bluster and subarticulate resentment. “[President Johnson is] an imperialist dog... There’s no d-d-d- difference between him and Hitler.”[...] The banality of evil gets a new life in *American Pastoral*.<sup>93</sup>

In her view, her father represents the banality, the typical American man, the prototype of those men who created so many injustices, who represent all that she hates in the world. She has a very turbulent relation with her mother Dawn too. To the girl, her mother’s life has no real sense and no real purpose other than being the typical middle woman, she just cares for her cows. She displays a matrophobic attitude, «Blind antagonism and infantile desire to menace—those

---

<sup>92</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 95-96.

<sup>93</sup> M. Schechner, *Up Society’s Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth, Wisconsin*, cit., p. 160.

were her ideals. In search always of something to hate»<sup>94</sup>, says Seymour. Dawn represents a looming figure for Meredith, a ghost constantly haunting Merry's life, who feels confined and caged in Dawn's traditional role as mother and wife. The maternal figure is perceived by the daughter as an impediment in her quest for selfhood. Therefore, she enacts various strategies to avoid becoming her mother's specular double. Meredith dreads repeating the same pattern related to her mother because she considers her powerless. She hates her because Dawn Dwyer embodies simultaneously dominance and powerlessness. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, considers *matrophobia* as «the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother»<sup>95</sup>. In a desperate attempt to know where Dawn ends and daughter begins, because of the comparison with her, but also in a desperate need for her, Merry performs a radical surgery<sup>96</sup>. According to Jacques Lacan, the conflicting, ambivalent aspect of the mother as both omnipotent and not omnipotent is called the «phallic»<sup>97</sup> mother. The “phallic mother” coexists with the so-called «castrated» mother. For instance, when Merry is just eleven years old, she sees the famous image of the Buddhist monk, immolating himself to protest against the Vietnam War and her rage is immediately directed against her parents and her country, a country that is usually considered like a second mother. To Merry, Dawn and the Swede represent American imperialism that made the war begin. When she explodes the bomb, she's fighting against the country but also against her parents, and she's winning against them. She manages to end their normal American life. She blows apart the already fragile unit of the family. However,

---

<sup>94</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>95</sup> A. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York, WW Norton & Co, 1995, p. 235.

<sup>96</sup> *Ivi*, p. 236.

<sup>97</sup> «In studying the Oedipus complex, Jacques Lacan uses the term “castration” to refer to two different operations: on the one hand, at the beginning of the Oedipus complex, the mother is considered as possessing a phallus. She is the phallic mother. The child then feels the threat of being devoured by this phallic mother. On the other hand, Lacan refers to the symbolic castration of the mother at the second stage of the Oedipus complex: the child perceives that the mother desires an imaginary phallus; so, it tries to be the phallus for the mother, but the father intervenes to deprive the mother of her object by promulgating the incest taboo, and thus castrates the mother.» (E.Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 23-24).

Merry's actions reflect the turmoil of that period, they are a consequence of the political radicalism. This was actually happening in the United States and this same situation was happening in many other families. Meredith's actions are not something that can only be seen as a decision for the sake of creating drama and desperation inside her detested family. After the bombing, in fact, she does not come back to see what she has done to her family, but changes again, she chooses to become a Jain.

she had become a Jain. [...] The Jains were a relatively small Indian religious sect--that he could accept as fact. But whether Merry's practices were typical or of her own devising he could not be certain, even if she contended that every last thing she now did was an expression of religious belief. She wore the veil to do no harm to the microscopic organisms that dwell in the air we breathe. She did not bathe because she revered all life, including the vermin. She did not wash, she said, so as "to do no harm to the water." She did not walk about after dark, even in her own room, for fear of crushing some living object beneath her feet. There are souls, she explained, imprisoned in every form of matter; the lower the form of life, the greater is the pain to the soul imprisoned there. The only way ever to become free of matter and to arrive at what she described as "self-sufficient bliss for all eternity" was to become what she reverentially called "a perfected soul." One achieves this perfection only through the rigors of asceticism and self-denial and through the doctrine of ahimsa or nonviolence.<sup>98</sup>

Again, she has completely changed her aspect:

Her eye sockets were huge. Half an inch above the veil, big, big dark eye sockets, and inches above the eye sockets the hair, which no longer streamed down her back but seemed just to have happened onto her head, still blond like his but long and thick no longer because of a haircut that was itself an act of violence. Who'd done it? She or someone else? And with what? She could not, in keeping with her five vows, have renounced any attachment as savagely as she had renounced her once-beautiful hair.<sup>99</sup>

She no longer stutters, as if exploding the bomb and killing a man were the solutions for her problems. According to David Brauner, in his book *Philip Roth*,

---

<sup>98</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 217.

<sup>99</sup> *Ivi*, p. 227.

«ironies abound. Firstly, in her previous incarnation as his precociously bright, loving daughter, Merry had been plagued by a sever stutter; now her speech is fluent but she will not utter a word»<sup>100</sup>. She has renounced to speak.

If she was no longer branded as Merry Levov by her stutter, she was marked unmistakably by the eyes. Within the chiseled-out, oversized eye sockets, the eyes were his. The tallness was his and the eyes were his. She was all his. The tooth she was missing had been pulled or knocked out.<sup>101</sup>

Merry, eventually, has chosen not to have a self at all, she has pushed herself to the edge of the subjectivity, at the point that now she is no longer a subject.

Merry sitting cross-legged on the pallet in her tattered sweatshirt and ill-shapen trousers and black plastic shower clogs, meekly composed behind that nauseating veil? How broad her shoulder bones were. Like his. But hanging off those bones there was nothing. What he saw sitting before him was not a daughter, a woman, or a girl; what he saw, in a scarecrow's clothes, stick-skinny as a scarecrow, was the scantiest farmyard emblem of life, a travestied mock-up of a human being, so meager a likeness to a Levov it could have fooled only a bird.<sup>102</sup>

She has renounced to eat, to physically hurt any other living being, to wash herself, to care at all about herself, she has decided to avoid all those acts that could threaten the existence of any living creature.

But what he smelled now, while pulling open her mouth, was a human being and not a building, a mad human being who grubs about for pleasure in its own shit. Her foulness had reached him. She is disgusting. His daughter is a human mess stinking of human waste. Her smell is the smell of everything organic breaking down. It is the smell of no coherence. It is the smell of all she's become. She could do it, and she did do it, and this reverence for life is the final obscenity.<sup>103</sup>

According to David Brauner, here, the words are carefully chosen by Roth:

---

<sup>100</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 162.

<sup>101</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 248.

<sup>102</sup> *Ivi*, p. 223.

<sup>103</sup> *Ivi*, p. 248.

the phrases 'human mess' and 'human waste' signify fecal excretion but also refer to Merry's psychological state and to the squandering of her potential as human being, and it is this second, metaphorical level of meaning that tragically escapes Seymour [...] what Seymour fails to realize is that the smell of shit that clings to his daughter is not a sign of her decay but rather a sign of impurity, of her failure to achieve a state of perfect purity (which can only mean death) and therefore of her continuing humanity.<sup>104</sup>

This drastic choice can be interpreted as a way of atoning for her gestures. The unrelatedness of Meredith's life and the development of her affair increase the feeling of chaos that is her life and, in general, America itself. As Barthes showed, focusing in detail on the realistic object, without external purposes to its referentiality, is intended to broaden the effect of reality, so the apparent nonsense of Merry's life and the meticulous digressions seem to respond to Roth's need to show the real, or the hyperreal, that is America. «The critic Carol Iannone notes, in a review of *American Pastoral*, "to many a literary imagination, America represented from its inception a New World Eden where the American Adam faced boundless possibility and infinite, open-ended opportunity»<sup>105</sup>. But Eve here is the cause of his failure, the dream is destroyed. It's the fall from paradise. The Swede learned the most important lesson, that «it makes no sense»<sup>106</sup>, that «it is not rational. It is chaos. It is chaos from start to finish»<sup>107</sup>. This chaos is Merry. She is the source of the despair.

In *American Pastoral* Merry has a double, Rita Cohen. Rita in the novel represents a version of Merry, without the problem of stuttering.

A tiny, bone-white girl who looked half Merry's age but claimed to be some six years older, a Miss Rita Cohen, came to the Swede four months after Merry's disappearance. She was dressed like Dr. King's successor, Ralph Abernathy, in freedom-rider overalls and ugly big

---

<sup>104</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., pp. 162-164.

<sup>105</sup> J. L. Halio, B. Siegel, *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2005, p. 153.

<sup>106</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 77.

<sup>107</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 262-263.

shoes, and a bush of wiry hair emphatically framed her bland baby face.<sup>108</sup>

After she goes on the run, Merry sends the fellow militant Rita Cohen to her father to ask him for money and some items from her childhood and, according to Rita, to seduce him. She goes to Seymour as Meredith's emissary and she criticizes the emptiness of his values and morals, she speaks with her identical rage, but she does not stutter. She tells him «you have a shiksa wife, The Swede, but you didn't get a shiksa daughter»<sup>109</sup>. According to Rita, Dawn, is indeed the most relevant cause of Merry's problems. She says: «Don't you know what made Merry Merry, sixteen years of living in a household were she was hated by her mother».<sup>110</sup> According to her, Dawn represents the obsession for a conventional type of American womanhood and she embodies that part, the Catholic heritage, that Meredith couldn't reconcile with her Jewish one. It's Dawn's fault if Merry is out of her time, if she is a woman who doesn't want to belong to her present, who doesn't even feel connected with her past, with the vanishing past of her family. When he encounters Merry's uncanny double, the Swede is also forced to confront his own imperfections as father and also some incestuous feelings. According to Debra Shostak:

There are [...] signs [...] that Merry represents the uncanny “all the wrongness that he had locked away”. Seeking the origins of his daughter's behavior yet again, The Swede happens upon the memory of an act of symbolic incest, a prolonged kiss between father and daughter during a beach vacation.[...] Rita's sexuality is a frightening reminder of both his daughter and his inappropriate desires.<sup>111</sup>

Rita invites him to a hotel room and tries to seduce him, displaying her genitalia, to the imperturbable man. «She's a Kid Mayhem»<sup>112</sup>, he says, just like Meredith. Then Rita Cohen performs a grotesque imitation of Merry's stutter and of

---

<sup>108</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 111.

<sup>109</sup> *Ivi*, p. 128.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>111</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*, cit., pp. 56-57.

<sup>112</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 138.

Meredith's innocent request, when she was a child, to «kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumother»<sup>113</sup>, to which her father at first said «N-n-no»<sup>114</sup>, leaving them both shocked, realizing that his caricature must have hurt her, and he eventually kissed his daughter's «stammering mouth»<sup>115</sup>. Debra Shostak says that *American Pastoral* «functions as an epistemological detective story with multiple levels of sleuthing work put forth to discern the motivation for her collapse and that of the Levov family line»<sup>116</sup>. The Swede, in fact, searches for the motivations for his daughter's terroristic attack. In search of a reason for her tragic act, during the novel, he thinks about the image of the self-immolating Buddhist monk who burned himself alive, but also about the image of that kiss when she was a child. When he is with Rita, and gets an erection, he immediately remembers of that day with a young Merry and a kiss with unconscious sexual overtones. «Rita's sexuality is a frightening reminder of both his daughter and his inappropriate desires» says Debra Shoshtak.<sup>117</sup> The kiss does not seem something serious, but after the act of terrorism, he obsessively searches for a motif, a reason. I do not mean to say that this Oedipal interpretation of their kiss is correct, or close to the heart of the argument here, if such a heart there is. It is Rita who creates this meaning, who interprets it in a perverse way. Furthermore when Seymour finally gets to ask Merry who made her detonate the bomb, she answers Lyndon Johnson. According to J. L. Halio and B. Siegel, in fact, «she is more the product of political than personal history»<sup>118</sup> because «as Aliko Varvogli has argued, Merry is “a symbol for the forces of history”, so that her actions should be understood in allegorical rather than psychological terms»<sup>119</sup>.

When thinking about Meredith's past Levov also remembers that she was very smart when's she was young:

---

<sup>113</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>114</sup> *Ivi*, p. 86.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>116</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>118</sup> J. L. Halio, B. Siegel, *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem*



He remembered then something she had written in the sixth or seventh grade, before she'd gone on to Morristown High. The students in her class at her Montessori school were asked ten questions about their "philosophy," one a week. The first week the teacher asked, "Why are we here?" Instead of writing as the other kids did--here to do good, here to make the world a better place, etc.-- Merry answered with her own question: "Why are apes here?" But the teacher found this an inadequate response and told her to go home and think about the question more seriously—"Expand on this," the teacher said. So Merry went home and did as she was told and the next day handed in an additional sentence: "Why are kangaroos here?" It was at this point that Merry was first informed by a teacher that she had a "stubborn streak." The final question assigned to the class was "What is life?" Merry's answer was something her father and mother chuckled over together that night. According to Merry, while the other students labored busily away with their phony deep thoughts, she—after an hour of thinking at her desk—wrote a single, unplatitudinous declarative sentence: "Life is just a short period of time in which you are alive." "You know," said the Swede, "it's smarter than it sounds. She's a kid—how has she figured out that life is short? She is somethin', our precocious daughter. This girl is going to Harvard." But once again the teacher didn't agree, and she wrote beside Merry's answer, "Is that all?" Yes, the Swede thought now, that is all. Thank God, that is all; even that is unendurable.<sup>120</sup>

Merry tends to speak already in a very adult way and to make reflections that make her different from the other children. There is a mythologization of the figure of Meredith Levov, created by her father's mind, like the mythologization of the Swede himself at the beginning of the novel. «In fact, the novel might be read as a critique of reductive views of history and the human subject»<sup>121</sup>. She's sometimes remembered as a phenomenon, like he was.

I'm lonesome, she used to say to him when she was a tiny girl, and he could never figure out where she had picked up that word. Lonesome. As sad a word as you could hear out of a two-year-old's mouth. But she had learned to say so much so soon, had talked so easily at first, so intelligently--maybe that was what lay behind the stutter, all those words she uncannily knew before other kids could pronounce their

<sup>120</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 231-232.

<sup>121</sup> J. L. Halio, B. Siegel, *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, cit., p. 29.

own names, the emotional overload of a vocabulary that included even  
“I’m lonesome.”<sup>122</sup>

Merry is lonesome through all her story. She’s an uncanny reminder of the Jewishness her father abandoned, of the identity her mother left behind, of the political radicalism of America at the time, of the absence of sense. She’s the one who, in the novel, makes her father generate insights. «The quest for the lost Merry is what propels the plot forward»<sup>123</sup> says I. B. Nadel. She’s the engine of the novel.

You have an influence over me, he shouted, “you are influencing me! You who will not kill a mite are killing me! What you sit there calling ‘coincidence’ is influence--your powerlessness is power over me, goddamn it! Over your mother, over your grandfather, over your grandmother, over everyone who loves you--wearing that veil is bullshit, Merry, complete and absolute bullshit! You are the most powerful person in the world!”<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, some of the book’s most touching sequences are dedicated to her when she was a child:

a body seemingly all finished, a perfected creation in miniature, with all of the miniature’s charm. A body that looks quickly put on after having just been freshly ironed--no folds anywhere. The naive freedom with which she discloses it. The tenderness this evokes. Her bare feet padded like a little animal’s feet. New and unworn, her uncorrupted paws. Her grasping toes. The stalky legs. Utilitarian legs. Firm. The most muscular part of her. Her sorbet-colored underpants. At the great divide, her baby tuchas, the gravity-defying behind, improbably belonging to the upper Merry and not as yet to the lower. No fat. Not an ounce anywhere. The cleft, as though an awl had made it--that beautifully beveled joining that will petal outward, evolving in the cycle of time into a woman’s origami-folded cunt. The implausible belly button. The geometric torso. The anatomical precision of the rib cage. The pliancy of her spine. The bony ridges of her back like keys on a small xylophone. The lovely dormancy of the invisible bosom before the swell begins. All the turbulent wanting-to-become blessedly, blessedly dormant. Yet in the neck somehow is the woman to be, there in that building block of a neck ornamented with down.

---

<sup>122</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 211.

<sup>123</sup> I. B. Nadel, *Critical Companion to Philip Roth*, New York, Facts on File, 2011.

<sup>124</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 237.

The face. That's the glory. The face that she will not carry with her and that is yet the fingerprint of the future. The marker that will disappear and yet be there fifty years later. How little of her story is revealed in his child's face. Its youngness is all he can see. So very new in the cycle. With nothing as yet totally defined, time is so powerfully present in her face. The skull is soft. The flare of the unstructured nose is the whole nose. The color of her eyes. The white, white whiteness. The limpid blue. Eyes unclouded. It's all unclouded, but the eyes particularly, windows, washed windows with nothing yet of the revelation of what's within. The history in her brow of the embryo. The dried apricots that are her ears. Delicious. If once you started eating them you'd never stop. The little ears always older than she is. The ears that were never just four years old and yet hadn't really changed since she was fourteen months. The preternatural fineness of her hair. The health of it. More reddish, more like his mother's than his then, still touched with fire then. The smell of the whole day in her hair. The carefreeness, the abandon of that body in his arms. The catlike abandon to the all-powerful father, the reassuring giant. It is so, it is true--in the abandon of her body to him, she excites an instinct for reassurance that is so abundant that it must be close to what Dawn says she felt when she was lactating. What he feels when his daughter leaves the earth to leap into his arms is the absoluteness of their intimacy. And built into it always is the knowledge that he is not going too far, that he cannot, that it is an enormous freedom and an enormous pleasure, the equivalent of her breast-feeding bond with Dawn. It's true. It's undeniable. He was wonderful at it and so was she. So wonderful. How did all this happen to this wonderful kid? [...] You protect her and protect her--and she is unprotectable. If you don't protect her it's unendurable, if you do protect her it's unendurable. It's all unendurable. The awfulness of her terrible autonomy. The worst of the world had taken his child. If only that beautifully chiseled body had never been born.<sup>125</sup>

From the depths of the life that Levov intended to live, echoes a remote reality, buried by layers of repression, an alienating reality. Merry is the crack of order that shows the true face of reality.

---

<sup>125</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., pp. 252-253.

## Chapter II

### *2. I Married a Communist*

There is nothing superior in being Jewish—and there is nothing inferior or degrading. You are Jewish, and that's it. That's the story.  
*-I Married a Communist*

#### **2.1. Voices are Indispensable**

*I Married a Communist* is the second novel of the trilogy. This novel takes place before *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, during the period of the Red Menace and the McCarthy era. After the end of the Second World War, the United States is struggling for the world's supremacy with the Soviet Union: thus, there are extreme prudence and suspicion against all the leftist activities in the country. The senator Joseph McCarthy becomes the leader of the prosecution, and the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) investigates to prevent any communist threat. In this political situation, in the Newark of his youth, Roth's alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman tells us the story of Ira Ringold, also known as Iron Rinn, a famous radio star and political radical, son of Jewish immigrants, who's blacklisted and ruined when his wife, Eve Frame, publishes a book which gives the title to the novel. Clear echoes of his relationship with the actress Claire Bloom, as confessed in her book, *Leaving the Doll's House*<sup>126</sup>, are present in the novel.

Ira Ringold is a Jewish war veteran who finally becomes a star of the entertainment business, earning his place in society. The protagonist has a belligerent behavior and a big size. He physically resembles Abraham Lincoln. He grows up in a middle class home with a mixed neighborhood where he has to fight for his place among the Italian community. His mother dies when he was young and his father doesn't care very much about his children, so Ira meets a

---

<sup>126</sup> C. Bloom, *Leaving the Doll's House: a Memoir*, New York, Back Bay Books, 1998.

figure, almost paternal, which influences him, in the army, Johnny O'Day, a longshoreman and Communist organizer who starts to educate him. Ironically, it is precisely in the army that Ira witnesses some important experiences of social inequalities, which, combined with Johnny's influence and with his past, contribute to lead him to Communism.

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.<sup>127</sup>

The protagonist does not believe in Communism because he is an enemy of his country. He's described by Zuckerman as deeply American:

I had never before known anyone whose life *was* so intimately circumscribed by so much American history, who was personally familiar with so much American geography, who had confronted, face to face, so much American lowlife<sup>128</sup>

Everything in the novel is deeply American. «Emotions seem grander, passions stronger, actions bigger. It is the American way»<sup>129</sup>, says Nadel. Ira thinks Communism is the only possible solution, the only possible way to realize his ideals as an American citizen.

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.<sup>130</sup>

After the war he starts working for a radio program, “The Free and The Brave”, which makes him a vulnerable target, subject to scrutiny, since McCarthyism blacklists especially TV and radio's personalities.

---

<sup>127</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, in *The American Trilogy*, New York, Library of America, 2011, p. 181.

<sup>128</sup> *Ivi*, p. 574.

<sup>129</sup> I. B. Nadel, *Critical Companion to Philip Roth*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>130</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 192.

Ira is not the narrator. He doesn't tell us his story. His biography is in fact reconstructed, many years after his death, by Nathan Zuckerman and Murray Ringold. When he's young, Zuckerman is Ira's protégé. They both support the Progressive Henry Wallace running for president after Frankie Delano Roosevelt, while Nathan's Democrat father tries to dissuade the young son. Murray, instead, is Nathan's ex-English professor, and Ira's older brother. He is in his nineties and is attending a course on Shakespeare near Zuckerman's house, in the Berkshire Mountains, where the writer retired because, as he says: «I don't want a story any longer. I've had my story».<sup>131</sup> When they meet the writer thinks: «That's how the past turned up this time, in the shape of a very old man»<sup>132</sup>. From this encounter Nathan learns that his career too was impeded by McCarthyism. These two men are the voices that tell us the story of Ira's downturn. In fact, like Seymour Levov and Coleman Silk, Ira Ringold is ultimately trapped in the historical nets that he tries to fly by and his life is ruined by a woman. A fundamental aspect of his life is exactly the desire to find a woman and create a family. There's nothing more American than the American Dream of having a perfect family, which is also part of Seymour Levov and Coleman Silk's ideal world. Ira falls in love and marries Eve Frame, a silent-movie star. They are very different but «He was dazzled by her. She was dazzling—and dazzlement has a logic all its own.»<sup>133</sup> affirms his brother. With her, his ideal of a family will never be concretized. Ira's life is, as Brauner says:

a project of self-invention and self-determination [...] However, Ira's act of control turns out to be an act not just in the sense of 'deed' but in the sense of 'simulation'; his belief in his mastery of his own fate is brutally exposed as a 'naïve dream'(60). [...] Ironically, his marriage to Eve, which begins as a romantic idyll—the consummation of his journey from street brawler to aristocratic thespian—proves ultimately to be an expression of self-betrayal rather than self-fulfillment.<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 466.

<sup>132</sup> *Ivi*, p. 403.

<sup>133</sup> *Ivi*, p. 451.

<sup>134</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 151.

Ira fails as an American and as a family man, since his dream of a pastoral bliss will never be fulfilled. Eve, in fact, has a daughter from a previous marriage, Sylphid. The daughter hates her and is a very complicated girl who tries in every way to ruin their relationship. Also the protagonists of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, aspire to this same dream and they realize it, even if only for a certain period of time. Ira, instead, will never create a family. This difference is crucial. Ira's destiny involves the complicated biographies of both his wife and his step-daughter. In the narrative reconstruction of the protagonist's life and of his political hopes made by Zuckerman and Murray through a first person narration, we not only find their own history, but also these women's experience of post-war America. *I Married a Communist* thus, is a novel with the voices of two narrators, with multiple biographies, with many different experiences, all interconnected: «Occasionally now, looking back, I think of my life as one long speech that I've been listening to. [...] the book of my life is a book of voices. [...] Everyone perceiving experience as something not to have but to have so as to talk about it.»<sup>135</sup> says Nathan Zuckerman.

Eve and Sylphid represent the world in which the protagonist struggles to find his own place, a world which betrays him. Everything is reported from what Murray and Zuckerman say. We never get into Ira's mind, neither into the female protagonists' ones. They are seen from a distance, so we never know what triggers their mind. Roth's fictional creation Nathan Zuckerman, is telling the reader a story while listening to Murray telling this same story, «as if we were listening to Murray's speaking and participating in Nathan's own recollections»<sup>136</sup>. As Shostak says: «we listen to Zuckerman who listens to Murray who has observed and listened to Ira and Eve»<sup>137</sup>. Murray is a fictional creation too. When reading the novel, the two men' viewpoints are evident and compatible, even if Murray Ringold's narration has a larger space in the narrative. This gives him more authority than the reticent Nathan who, «on the

---

<sup>135</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., pp. 605-606.

<sup>136</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, cit. , p. 167.

<sup>137</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 251.

diegetic level listens to Murray Ringold narrate the story of Ira»<sup>138</sup>, he is silently listening to his professor as an attentive auditor and, on the metadiegetic level of the dialogic narration, is telling us part of his own story. «Nathan as a listener completely obscures Nathan as writer.»<sup>139</sup> says Masiero, which is also what he wants, since he decided to retire, because he already had a story. This time he doesn't even want to be the one who tells the story. Even the title of the book is a title given by someone else. Zuckerman is not the "I" who married a Communist. In fact, the novel, «testing the writer's power of disappearing»<sup>140</sup> as Masiero affirms, is the result of those six nights together, as if we were there with them, listening. Nathan, this once, appears more as a man with his own past, than as a writer.

## 2.2. Eve Frame

Eve Frame is Ira Ringold's wife and a silent-movie star. She is an actress in the Hollywood of the 1950s, when women are not present in the filmmaking process and the treatment of female characters, in regard to storylines, usually put them in a subservient role to male characters, objectified through false and unrealistic representations. Eve Frame, in a certain way, breaks through this male barrier in this novel, with her voice. Furthermore, she's never described in a subservient role to the male protagonist, but only to her daughter, Sylphid.

Eve is described as a fascinating and elegant woman, surrounded by beauty. Her charm and allure are underlined several times, especially by Nathan Zuckerman, who meets her when he is very young. The actress is very different from Ira, she's repeatedly described for her clothes—such as Delphine Roux—

---

<sup>138</sup> S. S. Christiansen, "Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*", 2006, p. 35. <https://bit.ly/2SAQJ5J>

<sup>139</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, cit. , p. 168.

<sup>140</sup> *Ivi*, p. 167.



since «Her taste in clothes was all Dior»<sup>141</sup> and «Nobody in the world [...] looks like that woman in a hat»<sup>142</sup>. Zuckerman tells that when the two married:

Eve Frame had worn a two-piece wool suit of dusty pink, sleeves trimmed with double rings of matching fox fur, and, on her head, the sort of hat that no one in the world wore more charmingly than she did. My mother called it “a veiled come-hither hat”<sup>143</sup>

She always wears elegant clothes, typical of a Hollywood star, but is also depicted as the most fascinating woman: «In one picture she wore [...] a gold embroidered white evening suit with a white ermine muff. I never saw such elegance in my life.»<sup>144</sup> When he knows her, Ira Ringold is dazzled, not only by her grace, but also by her culture:

She calls him ‘mon prince’. She quotes Emily Dickinson. For Ira Ringold, Emily Dickinson. ‘With thee, in the Desert / With thee in the thirst / With thee in the Tamarind wood / Leopard breathes—at last!’. “Well, it feels to Ira like the love of his life. And with the love of your life you don’t think about the particulars.”<sup>145</sup>

She’s a romantic woman, she quotes Dickinson to explain her love for Ira. Eve Frame, in fact, is not only a compelling actress, she’s intelligent and loves literature. Ira’s brother says:

She struck me as too smart for him, too polished for him, certainly too cultivated. I thought, Here is a movie star with a mind. Turned out she’d been reading conscientiously since she was a kid. I don’t think there was a novel on my shelves that she couldn’t talk about with familiarity. It even sounded that night as though her inmost pleasure in life were reading books. She remembered the complicated plots of nineteenth-century novels<sup>146</sup>

All these elements, according to Murray, make the couple too different:

This woman has no contact with politics and especially not with Communism. Knows her way around the complicated plots of the

---

<sup>141</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 450.

<sup>142</sup> *Ivi*, p. 420.

<sup>143</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 417-418.

<sup>144</sup> *Ivi*, p. 420.

<sup>145</sup> *Ivi*, p. 455.

<sup>146</sup> *Ivi*, p. 452.

Victorian novelists, can rattle off the names of the people in Trollope, but completely unknowing about society and the workaday doings of anything. The woman is dressed by Dior. Fabulous clothes. Owns a thousand little hats with little veils. Shoes and handbags made out of reptiles. Spends lots of money on clothes. While Ira is a guy who spends four ninety-nine for a pair of shoes.<sup>147</sup>

The reference to Trollope is ironical, since the English novelist of the Victorian era wrote novels on political and social issues, which she doesn't care about at all. Murray tells she knows the plots and the characters of books but it's only a superficial knowledge. Eve Frame is predetermined by the books she reads, more specifically the classics, both ideologically and linguistically. The woman conforms to a very innocent vision of literature. This vision and her reading aliment her masquerade of self-purification. Literature is not innocent though, as Georges Bataille said, and as also Leo, one of Nathan's mentors, affirms by saying that «politics is the great generalizer»<sup>148</sup> while literature is: «particularizing suffering [...] keeping the particular alive in a simplifying, generalizing world»<sup>149</sup>.

In the essay emblematically titled “La littérature et le Mal”, published in 1957, through the analysis of eight different authors—Emily Brontë, Charles Baudelaire, Jules Michelet, William Blake, Sade, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka and Jean Genet—Bataille gives us a definition of literature, trying to prove the thesis that confirms the existence of an original fault in it, of a literary impulse that feeds on evil, disorder, anguish and trauma, often experienced during childhood. Going against the common thought that exalts goodness, balance, perfection and beauty, the French writer tells us that evil lies precisely in seeking good at all costs: «L'Homme ne peut s'aimer jusqu'au bout s'il ne condamne»<sup>150</sup>. For Bataille, literature is therefore transgression of norms, of common sense, of conventions, it is the search for the intimate, the obscene. Examining the title “La

---

<sup>147</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., pp. 475-476.

<sup>148</sup> *Ivi*, p. 223.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>150</sup> G. Bataille, “La Littérature et le Mal”, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 27.

Littérature et le Mal”, in the interview by the journalist Pierre Dumayet<sup>151</sup> in 1958, Georges Bataille affirms that this evil he talks about is the need for human activities to go well and for human desires to achieve the desired result and, on the other hand, is the need to violate some fundamental taboos, such as the taboo against murder, or against some sexual activities, therefore literature and evil can’t be separated. Literature is the struggle against order, against the will to pursue the defense of the advantageous and useful for the future, it is therefore a childish rejection of the adult world, with its own laws, order, norms, aimed at guaranteeing a future. The result obtained is that of a freedom which is nevertheless dangerous, and which is realized either with absolute evil, destructive and violent, as in Sade, or with a sort of painful impasse, as in Baudelaire. If literature tries to separate itself from evil, if it puts itself at the service of all that set of norms and conventions which guarantee normal coexistence among men, at the service of the good, it becomes immediately boring. Literature has the task of being transgressive, of undermining the traditional world. Literature concerns, moreover, the affirmation of the necessity of erotic pleasure, of sensual joy, of taking possession of one’s body, denied by that traditional morality, which imprisons it, declaring it guilty. Bataille writes:

La littérature est l’essentiel, ou n’est rien. Le Mal—une forme aiguë du Mal—dont elle est l’expression, a pour nous, je le crois, la valeur souveraine. Mais cette conception ne commande pas l’absence de morale, elle exige une “hypermorale”. La littérature est communication. La communication commande la loyauté: la morale rigoureuse est donnée dans cette vue à partir de complicités dans la connaissance du Mal, qui fondent la communication intense. La littérature n’est pas innocente, et, coupable, elle devait à la fin s’avouer telle. L’action seule a les droits.<sup>152</sup>

Literature is therefore the breaking of that limit which has been imposed by social norms, to give life to an aesthetic of evil, which is the reverse of morality. The writer’s affirmation is the affirmation of the violation, «littérature, je l’ai,

---

<sup>151</sup> Georges Bataille *La Littérature et le Mal* (INA 1958)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpFSXAdIEYY>

<sup>152</sup>G. Bataille, “La Littérature et le Mal”, cit., p. 20.

lentement, voulu montrer, c'est enfance enfin retrouvée»<sup>153</sup>, a long-awaited discovery of childhood, a surrealist idea, and the writer, in some ways, is nothing but a criminal who admits his guilt.

Pour Bataille, la littérature ne peut décidément constituer qu'une fuite devant le réel, un reflux devant le danger de l'expérience. Le mot-refuge, la poésie-négation du monde, voilà ce qu'il exècre. Et si, pour sa part, il use du langage, c'est pour le subvertir, s'il use de la poésie, c'est pour y manquer.<sup>154</sup>

However, in *I Married a Communist*, literature has a different meaning, literature affects her life and her way of thinking, transmitting Eve Frame exactly part of the bourgeois culture which entraps her. Her thinking is shaped by her reading. For example, she perfectly epitomizes the Victorian ideal of feminine submission, self-sacrifice and devotion to the daughter. Only «Faunia's bewildering series of connection between rage, death and pleasure (even elation) resonates with Bataille's account.»<sup>155</sup> states Hayes. Eve represents the opposite. References to literature abound in the trilogy. Simon Stow explains that:

Roth's trilogy is a veritable library of references to other authors and other texts: Vogue magazine, The Daily New Star-Ledger, The Stars & Stripes, Citizen Tom Paine, Young Jefferson, Looking Backward, The Red and the Black, Partisan Review, The Communist Manifesto, Machiavelli's The Prince, and Plato's Republic, as well as works by Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, Thoreau, Milan Kundera, and Arthur Miller. Roth's literary work then builds on, and incorporates, the suggestion that literature—the written world—is one of the ways in which we inhabitants of the unwritten world make sense of it and engage with other “flesh people.”<sup>156</sup>

Even Zuckerman, in *American Pastoral*, tells: «I was ten [...] and I had never read anything like it. The cruelty of life. The injustice of it. I could not believe it»<sup>157</sup> talking about the effect that has on him reading the Tunis books. Roth's characters reflect the claim that literature can affect our view of the unwritten

---

<sup>153</sup> G. Bataille, “La Littérature et le Mal”, cit., p. 20.

<sup>154</sup> J. Durançon, *Georges Bataille*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 158.

<sup>155</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., p. 232.

<sup>156</sup> S. Stow, “Written and Unwritten America: Roth on Reading, Politics and Theory”, 2004.

<https://bit.ly/2WpOIYn>

<sup>157</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 9.

world and help us understanding reality. Even if it's hard for the author not to mispresent it: «Writing [...] turns you into somebody who's always wrong.»<sup>158</sup> says Nathan.

Apart from literature, Eve Frame looks for images of a perfect and successful self also in romantic relationships with men, in which she projects herself. Murray, who considers their relationship inappropriate from the beginning and always tries to make Ira end it, depicts in fact them as a mismatched couple. They don't match, not only because of the extreme taste of Eve's clothes, and her refinement, which has nothing to do with Ira, who's not interested in material goods. They are also very different because Eve is a well-educated literature lover, who fascinates the young, uncultivated and lower class Communist, son of working-class immigrants, but she does not even care about politics.

However, the woman perfectly corresponds to Ira's American dream of a family. To him, she, as her biblical name suggests, almost represents the Eve of the Garden of Eden. The perfect woman to marry. The actress though, just as the biblical Eve, as we will see later, betrays him and does not give him a family. Their relationship fails. The story of the Garden of Eden is mentioned by Marcia Umanoff in the final pages of *American Pastoral*, with its moral: «without transgression there isn't very much knowledge»<sup>159</sup>, but there is a price to pay.

There are many examples of betrayal in the trilogy. Seymour Levov and Coleman Silk both betray their fathers. The first one marries Dawn Dwyer and lets the «Jew in him»<sup>160</sup> to be lost. The second one rejects his background. There is a passage in which he thinks: «This was what came of failing to fulfill his father's ideals, of flouting his father's commands, of deserting his dead father altogether»<sup>161</sup> and imagines hearing his father telling him: «What else grandiose are you planning, Coleman Brutus? Whom next are you going to mislead and

---

<sup>158</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 63.

<sup>159</sup> *Ivi*, p. 360.

<sup>160</sup> *Ivi*, p. 20.

<sup>161</sup> *Ivi*, p. 182.

betray?»<sup>162</sup> Eve betrays her husband, her Adam. Adam, however, is not only betrayed. He's a traitor too. He betrays his wife with Sylphid's friend Pamela and, since he has no father to betray, he does the most transgressive act, like Merry Levov: he murders someone<sup>163</sup>. Betrayal is always at the center, is the cause of tragedy in history, literature, poetry and in life, as Murray says:

Othello – betrayed. Hamlet – betrayed. Lear – betrayed. You might even claim that Macbeth is betrayed – by himself – though that's not the same thing. Professionals who've spent their energy teaching masterpieces, the few of us still engrossed by literature's scrutiny of things, have no excuse for finding betrayal anywhere but at the heart of history. History from top to bottom. World history, family history, personal history... Just think of the Bible. What's that book about? The master story situation of the Bible is betrayal. Adam – betrayed. Esau – betrayed. The Shechemites – betrayed. Judah – betrayed. Joseph – betrayed. Moses – betrayed. Samson – betrayed. Samuel – betrayed. David – betrayed. Uriah – betrayed. Job – betrayed. Job betrayed by whom? By none other than God himself. And don't forget the betrayal of God. God betrayed. Betrayed by our ancestors at every turn.<sup>164</sup>

Even Murray himself, at the end of the novel, suggests that he has betrayed someone too. Nathan thinks he betrayed Doris, by refusing to leave the city.

Another fundamental hindrance in the love story of the two protagonists is their ethnicity. They are both Jewish, but with different attitudes toward their background. Ira never hides his ethnicity. He's not ashamed of it. Being part of a minority is not a defining aspect to him. Eve Frame is a Jewish girl who seeks to associate herself with a more expansive notion of cultural belonging. She changes her name from Chava Fromkin, hiding her ethnic background and reinventing herself as a Hollywood actress. However, her ethnicity finds a way back and re-emerges in the form of an anti-Semitic behavior. According to Murray, she is «a pathologically embarrassed Jew. [...] Embarrassed that she looked like a Jew—and the cast of Eve Frame's face was subtly quite Jewish, all

---

<sup>162</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 183.

<sup>163</sup> M. Zhang, "The Motif of Betrayal in Philip Roth's *American Trilog*y", *Advances in Literary Study*, 2016, pp. 41-47. <https://bit.ly/2UYFfwf>

<sup>164</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 185.

the physiognomic nuances Rebecca-like, right out of Scott's *Ivanhoe*»<sup>165</sup>. This anti-Semitism was directed especially against Murray's wife, Doris, and not against all kind of Jews:

Not all Jews, Murray explained—not the accomplished Jews at the top whom she'd met in Hollywood and on Broadway and in the radio business, not, by and large, the directors and the actors and the writers and the musicians she'd worked with [...] Her contempt was for the garden-variety, the standard-issue Jew she saw shopping in the department stores, for run-of-the-mill people with New York accents who worked behind counters or who tended their own little shops in Manhattan, for the Jews who drove taxis, for the Jewish families she saw talking and walking together in Central Park. [...] Elderly Jewish women particularly she could not pass without a groan of disgust. "Look at those faces!" she'd say with a shudder.<sup>166</sup>

Eve is particularly harsh with Jewish women, whose faces she can't stand and which, ironically, are obviously similar to hers. According to her brother in law, «The anti-Semitism was just a part of the role she was playing»<sup>167</sup> and a symbol of «that aversion she had for the Jew who was insufficiently disguised».<sup>168</sup> She assimilates this racist attitude to conform to the environment in which she lives and where she is a star.

Anti-Semitism at the time was indeed typical of many White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Among other things, she assimilates it from her second husband, Carlton Pennington. Carlton is a typical WASP, an actor and, ironically, homosexual:

But Eve's mistake was Pennington, taking him for her model. [...] He was her director. That's where she screwed up but good. To take for your model, for your Gentile mentor, another outsider guarantees that the impersonation will not work. Because Pennington is not just an aristocrat. He's also homosexual. He's also anti-Semitic.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., pp. 539-540.

<sup>166</sup> *Ivi*, p. 449.

<sup>167</sup> *Ivi*, p. 544.

<sup>168</sup> *Ivi*, p. 53.

<sup>169</sup> *Ivi*, p. 545.

They marry only for convenience, to hide his homosexuality, giving to each other exactly what they need to affirm their careers. Even their daughter's conception was programmed. Before him, she marries Mueller, a rough and coarse German-American, who is exactly Pennington's opposite.

Eve is another example of those Jewish characters who find themselves caught in the web of history while trying to escape their marginalized ethnic origin. She, like many other characters, represents the unresolved inner struggle between the external influences and the Jewish background. Eve's life is marked by a search for a replacement of this background. She is like her husband: scarred by the «Early orphaning that freed Ira to connect to whatever he wanted but also left him unmoored [...] ready to begin to be a man, ready, that is, to choose new allegiances and affiliations, the parents of your adulthood»<sup>170</sup>. She finds these parents, these influential figures, as Ira does with O'Day, and Zuckerman with Ira Ringold himself and Leo. These surrogate figures are her husbands. She is inhabited by Carlton's voice when she starts being anti-Semitic. The third one, Freedman, is a Jewish man whom she marries just for lust, after the unhappy experience with Pennington. His ethnicity does not stop her. He's a business man, an estate speculator who convinces her he will take care of her money but wastes most of it, causing severe financial problems to her. Freedman perfectly fits the stereotype of the typical greedy and avid Jew. This, again, does not block her from falling in love with Ira, another Jewish. This shows the superficiality of her anti-Semitism, inherited for work purposes, to be integrated within her environment, and a result even of her past. Furthermore, when she changes her name because she wants to escape from her background, creating a new, immaculate identity, building a new "frame" for herself, she chooses a name with Hebrew origins. Eve simply is the English translation of Chava. This demonstrates that you can't run away from your past because, as we have already seen, a stain of it always remains in your identity. By leaving these traces she shows she doesn't even really want to abandon her past completely, because she

---

<sup>170</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 414.



can't. She never recriminates her husband's Jewish background. She only does it with another member of the family: Doris. She calls her with racist appellations and never hides her loathing. Doris is the one who gives the most appropriate definition of Ira's feelings toward Eve: «Love, says Doris, love is not something that is logical. [...] Each of us in the world has his own vanity, and therefore his own tailor-made blindness. Eve Frame is Ira's.»<sup>171</sup> While Murray Ringold affirms that:

Eve cloaked herself in the mantle of love, the fantasy of love, but was too weak and vulnerable a person not to be filled with resentment. She was too intimidated by everything to provide love that was sensible, and to the point—to provide anything but a caricature of love.<sup>172</sup>

Frame's extreme hatred toward women signifies that she sees a reflection of herself in them, especially in Doris. By throwing this animus on her, she's throwing it on herself. When she sees a Jewish baby and criticizes his ugliness she's doing it with herself and her daughter's appearances because:

She hated what she was and she hated how she looked. Eve Frame, of all people, hated her looks. Her own beauty was her own ugliness, as though that lovely woman had been born with a big purple blotch spread across her face. The indignation at having been born that way, the outrage of it, never left her.<sup>173</sup>

Here she's very similar to Dawn Dwyer. They are different characters who both hate their beauty. She hates it not only because of her background which, in Murray's words is an "outrage" to her, but also because she's irredeemably dissatisfied and insecure:

A woman with a superficial kind of delicacy and gentleness but confused by everything, bitter and poisoned by life, by that daughter, by herself, by her insecurity, by her total insecurity<sup>174</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 476.

<sup>172</sup> *Ivi*, p. 628.

<sup>173</sup> *Ivi*, p. 547.

<sup>174</sup> *Ivi*, p. 548.

As we have already seen, female characters in Philip Roth's novels, experience a dilemma: on the one hand they strive to conform to normative ideals of beauty in order to become socially accepted. On the other hand, they strive to transcend the markers of these gendered identities. However, Eve goes through a crisis because she doesn't even perceive this dilemma. She lacks self-inquiry and self-criticism, necessary to self-knowledge.

As she has been influenced by her husbands, Eve is influenced by the Grants too, since «She made herself slave of just about everyone»<sup>175</sup> says Murray, who thinks she's too weak and impressionable. She publishes an autobiography, *I Married a Communist*, which they wrote, admitting her husband's affiliation to Communism. Murray justifies her by saying: «This nasty thing that Eve Frame did was typical of lots of nasty things people did in those years [...] Eve's behavior fell well within the routine informer practices of the era.»<sup>176</sup>

Georges Gusdorf, the dean of autobiographical studies, compares the autobiographer to a historian and autobiography to a mirror of the author who, «reassembling the scattered elements of his individual life»<sup>177</sup> creates a coherent expression of an individual, since the self is singular. This view of a unique self was challenged by the feminists' idea of the female self as plural. Susan Friedman's essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves" confutes this model of separate and unique selfhood of «inautobiographies» and denounces the «critical bias that leads to the marginalization of autobiographical texts by women»<sup>178</sup>. Autobiography is not the exact imitation of one's life though, but a recreation.<sup>179</sup> The literary theorist Paul de Man affirms that «the author reads him/herself in autobiography, making themselves the subject of their own knowledge. This

---

<sup>175</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 652.

<sup>176</sup> *Ivi*, p. 644.

<sup>177</sup> G. Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 29.

<sup>178</sup> S. Smith, J. Watson, *Women Autobiography Theory: a Reader*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, p. 72.

<sup>179</sup> S. Smith, J. Watson, *Women Autobiography Theory: a Reader*, cit., pp. 70-75.

involves a form of substitution, exchanging the writing “I” for the written “I”»<sup>180</sup>. So an author creates a self as he creates the text.

We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of the medium?<sup>181</sup>

Paul Jean Eakin, in this sense, talks about a «shift from a documentary view of autobiography [...] to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition.»<sup>182</sup> Eve, however, has not written the book. *I Married a Communist* is ghost-written. Ironically, even the photograph on the cover reveals a much younger, and also happier, Sylphid. Through this expedient, Roth shows us that any attempt at definition promotes an illusion. Even the autobiography is an «illusion of self-determination»<sup>183</sup>, as Eakin said. After this episode, again, the woman returns to her husband asking him to forgive her and, says Murray, playing «A favorite role. The Suppliant.»<sup>184</sup> This woman has a plural consciousness because, like all the women of the trilogy, she is wearing a mask. She doesn't have an unique self. Murray, who Schechner defines «the Tiresias who saw it all with the compound eyes of a great fly on the Ringold/Frame wall»<sup>185</sup>, affirms that she has a «perfect equilibrium on stage»<sup>186</sup> but «As a human being she wound up exaggerating everything, and yet as a stage actress she was all moderation and tact, nothing exaggerated.»<sup>187</sup> She is always playing a role and she is quite convincing in each one:

She could do defeated, she could display temper, she could do crying with her hand to her forehead; she could do the funny pratfalls too.

---

<sup>180</sup> M. Mc Quillan, *Paul de Man*, London, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>181</sup> Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, cit., p. 29.

<sup>182</sup> P. J. Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 143.

<sup>183</sup> J.P. Eakin, *How Our Lives Becomes Stories*, London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>184</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 566.

<sup>185</sup> M. Schechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>186</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 453.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibidem*.

When Eve Frame was happy, she would do a run with a little skip in it. Skipping with happiness. Very charming.<sup>188</sup>

That final comment, “very charming”, shows the irony in the words of a person who knows her very well, who knows her power and has learned to know her attitudes, and is not fooled anymore. All the irony is presumably addressed to foolish people like his brother, who was bewildered by her charm and by her duality. An irony also infused with compassion. One of those moments in which she begs the husband to stay with her, is so dramatic that people think she’s playing a movie. Eve, having created a protective shield to avoid the blows of a life that does not match her, is always playing a role: «That of the overstated bourgeois,» explains Schechner, «the sea captain’s daughter, the lady. Eve Frame despises the Chava Fromkin in herself and has thrown up a theatrical disguise to shield herself from the one identity she finds insupportable: the Shayne maydel from Brooklyn.»<sup>189</sup> She is the character with more facets of the *American Trilogy*. She can be the beautiful actress all dressed up, the loving mother who cares for her daughter on the outside, while on the inside she’s the suffering mother subjugated to her will; the charming and loving wife; the acculturated woman and the vindictive Medea by Euripides who destroys her traitor husband’s life. Her identity, however, is forever linked to the identity of Chava Fromkin’s, the “other”, the Jewish who indelibly is, indeed, Eve herself. The clothes she wears, the role she plays and accepts are a replacement of her own. But, for Eve Frame, the replacement of her identity is, of course, far more complicated than is the replacement of clothes, than is her job as actress. Her behavior and short temper are an allegory for the impossibility of embracing the past in any simple way. Eve’s attempt to step into a new identity is not as easy as her job as an actress. The shame she experiences comes in large part, in my opinion, from the recognition that she has given up her history and her background willingly; she has no one to blame but herself. And she punishes

---

<sup>188</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 452.

<sup>189</sup> M. Schechner, *Up Society’s Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, cit., pp. 177-178.

herself. Her masquerade itself is a punishment. For there is a point where Ira realizes that she's not choosing for herself. When she marries Ringold, they are in love and he becomes a new man, but she can't give him the family he wants because he gets caught in the crossfire between the star and her angry daughter, Sylphid. At a certain point, she gets pregnant but is pressed by her daughter to have an abortion, and she accepts, saying she's too old and that her pregnancy would be a problem for her job. However, he understands that:

it wasn't true that Eve felt she was too old to have a child with him [...] that it wasn't true that Eve was worried about the effect of a new baby on her career. He realized that Eve had wanted the baby too [...] This is a woman whose deepest sense is her sense of incapacity, and to experience the incapacity of not being generous enough to do this, of not being big enough to do this, of not being *free* enough to do this— *that* was why she had been crying so hard.<sup>190</sup>

She cries because while «Ira called his utopian dream Communism. Eve called hers Sylphid. The parent's utopia of the perfect child, the actress's utopia of let's pretend, the Jew's utopia of not being a Jewish»<sup>191</sup>.

As revealed in Eve's tragic end, the determined attempts of Roth's characters to recreate themselves out of history ultimately fail because of their unease. In Eve's attempt to reconstruct herself, we find the making of a lot of Roth's protagonists. Her dream is «a dream of personal purification that echoes Ira's dream of political purification through Communism»<sup>192</sup> explains Brauner. They are very similar. Two faces of the same America. Furthermore, Ira changes his name too, he starts selling minerals, hiding, scared of HUAC, «as Eve tries to pass as non-Jewish, so Ira denies his Communist affiliations: both are ultimately exposed.»<sup>193</sup> *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*'s leitmotiv is present also here, «exemplified by Murray Ringold's conviction that 'purity is petrafaction', 'the big lie of righteousness' that deprives human beings of their humanity»<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., pp. 508-509.

<sup>191</sup> *Ivi*, p. 565.

<sup>192</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 152.

<sup>193</sup> *Ivi*, p. 153.

<sup>194</sup> *Ivi*, p. 157.

and represented by Ira's determination to redeem himself, by «Eve Frame's determination 'to empty life of its incongruities, of its meaningless, messy contingencies».<sup>195</sup> The scene in which the actress desperately cries next to her husband, talking about her daughter, expresses her need to leave this world of masks in which she has imprisoned herself. If in Western culture water imagery may stand for the Baptism and washing away the sins, here her cry is a cleansing agent and a symbol of authenticity, even if she will never strip off the suffocating mask which hampers her quest for selfhood. Eve Frame's personality shows that selfhood is cracked, fragmented, divided thus debunks the masculine model of self-unity.

### **2.3. Sylphid Pennington**

Sylphid Pennington is Eve Frame and Carlton Pennington's daughter. She is introduced for the very first time in the first chapter. While her mother is immediately described as an incredibly beautiful woman, we only know that Sylphid is a harpist and a Juilliard graduate.

Despite her name, which is that of the mythological air spirits and which is also used to indicate women who are beautiful and graceful, the young girl does not look like the charming mother at all. The choice of her name is ironical and oxymoronic. Alexander Pope, in *The Rape of the Lock*, a mock-heroic narrative first published in 1712, satirized the alchemical writings and invented another theory about the "sylph", which he considered the condensed humors of irritable, peevish women<sup>196</sup>. This theory definitely suits Sylphid's difficult character and the choice of her name.

In the third chapter she is portrayed by Murray, who doesn't like her, as awkward and overweight. Even Nathan describes her looks by saying:

---

<sup>195</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 157.

<sup>196</sup> B. Latimer, "Alchemies of Satire: a History of the Sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*", Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 684-700. <https://bit.ly/2HrG1ZV>

Sylphid looked to me, while playing the harp—and even despite the classical elegance of her hands moving along the strings—like a wrestler wrestling the harp, one of those Japanese sumo wrestlers.<sup>197</sup>

In this regard she resembles Merry Levov. Like the Swede's daughter, this girl doesn't care about her looks. At her mother's wedding, Murray tells Zuckerman she goes dressed so:

in those clothes of hers. A scarf in her hair. She had kinky hair, so she wears these Greek scarves, rakishly as she thought, and they drive her mother crazy. Wears peasant blouses that make her look enormous. Sheer blouses with Greek embroidery on them. Hoop earrings. Lots of bracelets. When she walks, she clinks. You hear her coming. Embroidered schmattas and lots of jewelry. Wore the Greek sandals that you could buy in Greenwich village. The thongs that tie up to her knees and that dig and leave marks<sup>198</sup>

The terms used to describe her, “enormous”, “kinky”, “lots of”, the sandals that “dig and leave marks” all refer to a bulky presence, eccentric and folkloristic in her Greek accessories. In addition to her thickness, she wears flashy clothes which attract attention. Her choice of clothing and her disinterest in her body are a way of annoying her mother. However, the carelessness is not by any means her worst feature. The girl is disrespectful, rude, angry, spoiled, selfish. «That daughter is a time bomb, Ira.» Murray Ringold tells his brother, with a word, “bomb”, which again clearly reminds us of Merry and her uncle Jerry talking about her at the beginning of the novel. «Resentful, sullen, baleful—a person narrowly focused on exhibiting herself who otherwise is not there. She is a strong-willed person used to getting what she wants»<sup>199</sup>. She disappears without even telling, just to defy Eve. «Constantly she [Eve] gives the daughter the instruments and the power to hurt her»<sup>200</sup> and she does it. She constantly tries to childishly annoy the mother. Even the subject of feminine appearance is a battlefield between Eve and Sylphid, the daughter and her mother. Her

---

<sup>197</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 527.

<sup>198</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 501-502.

<sup>199</sup> *Ivi*, p. 478.

<sup>200</sup> *Ivi*, p. 501.

underground rebellion bursts to the surface when eating: «When she finished each course, Sylphid always cleaned her plate [...] watching Sylphid cleaning up was, as Sylphid well knew, a torment for her mother.»<sup>201</sup> This act of protest irritates Eve. The girl refuses to follow the path of the normative femininity sanctioned by the type of appearances recommended by Eve Frame. Constantly pining for her attention and, at the same time, making her life miserable, she even calls her mother a «Kike bitch»<sup>202</sup>. Sylphid is not anti-Semitic yet. These words are not a protest against Jews. They are an offense against Eve and Ira, but also against herself, since she's Jewish too.

Sylphid's insistence upon ego-justice for Sylphid was so extensive, so exclusive, so automatic, that a grand historical hostility of even the simplest, most undemanding sort, like hating Jews, could never have taken root in her—there was no room in her. Anti-Semitism was too theoretical for her anyway.<sup>203</sup>

The fact that she's not depicted as anti-Semitic is not something positive anyway. The girl is just too selfish: «About Jews, about Negroes, about any group that presents a knotty social problem [...] she does not care one way or the other.»<sup>204</sup> She doesn't care at all about any ethnic minority, according to Murray. She acts that way because she blames her mother for destroying her childhood and taking her away from her father Pennington, whom she loved. In fact, Ira tries to speak with the young musician, to know her, he doesn't give in and she talks to him, while when she's with Eve she calls him «The Beast». They talk about her childhood, she tells him that she never saw her parents' movies because «they were trying to keep her normal»<sup>205</sup>; about «the production that birthday parties were for the movie stars' kids»<sup>206</sup>; about «her mother's clothes, how alarming her mother's clothes were to a little kid like her»<sup>207</sup>; and about her father, «enough

---

<sup>201</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 502.

<sup>202</sup> *Ivi*, p. 504.

<sup>203</sup> *Ivi*, p. 503.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>205</sup> *Ivi*, p. 507.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibidem*.



for Ira to realize how adoring of him she'd been as a child»<sup>208</sup> but she has been taken away from him. This, in a sense, makes her similar to Lisa, Coleman's daughter, because «The consequences of having loved him so fully as a beloved girl-child and of having been estranged from him at the time of his death, would never let this woman be.»<sup>209</sup> Like Lisa, although in a different way, she's a daughter deprived of her father's presence. The problem is that Ira is «the first man in Eve's life who ever treated her decently»<sup>210</sup>, but he «demands respect from Sylphid for her mother [...] that is just the demand that Sylphid cannot forgive.»<sup>211</sup> The problem between them is Eve Frame. The girl is so demanding and so vengeful that when she learns her mother is pregnant, she even says «If you ever, ever try that again, I'll strangle the little idiot in its crib!»<sup>212</sup> The abortion is Sylphid's decision because «all kinds of elemental things percolated from Sylphid»<sup>213</sup>. She's the catalyst of the novel, like Merry was in *American Pastoral*. Like all the women of the *American Trilogy* are. Murray Ringold despises her, as Jerry Levov does with Meredith. However, «Sylphid is the one wielding the whip»<sup>214</sup> he says in the third chapter.

Nothing is clearer than that the daughter bears a rankling grudge against the mother. Nothing is clearer than that the daughter has got it in for the mother for some unpardonable crime. Nothing is clearer than how uncurbed the two of them are with their overwrought emotions. There is certainly no pleasure between those two. There will never be anything resembling a decent, modest state of accord between so frightened a mother and this overweening, unweaned child.<sup>215</sup>

These are the words he tells to Ira. The repetition of “nothing is clearer” stresses the self-confidence of Murray Ringold's statements. This certainty, however, is contradicted by the fact that he starts the speech, through which he is reporting to

---

<sup>208</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 507.

<sup>209</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 303.

<sup>210</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 506.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>212</sup> *Ivi*, p. 509.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>214</sup> *Ivi*, p. 479.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibidem*.

Nathan what he said to his brother, by saying: «Doris and I had been to dinner there already. I had seen the Pennington-Frame family in action, and so I unloaded about that too. I unloaded everything.»<sup>216</sup> As the experiencing-I, despite his being part of the family, Murray is only a spectator of their history, of their lives. The role that usually belongs to Nathan Zuckerman. The role we all have, considered that we only have versions of events. The account of the girl that we have not always corresponds to Murray's direct experience. It's an account made by Ira, who told everything to his brother, who tells it to Zuckerman and to us readers. It's an account filtered and what passes through a filter is always manipulated. «As a narrating-I, Murray is so manipulative as to place the reader in a difficult position to judge his reliability.»<sup>217</sup> We have in fact a different version of the girl made by Zuckerman. During a dinner they meet and talk:

My companion at the dinner table was Sylphid. All the traps laid for me—the eight pieces of cutlery, the four differently shaped drinking glasses, the large appetizer called an artichoke, the serving dishes presented from behind my back and over my shoulder by a solemn black woman in a maid's uniform, the finger bowl, the enigma of the finger bowl—everything that made me feel like a very small boy instead of a large one, Sylphid all but nullified with a sardonic wisecrack, a cynical explanation, even just with a smirk or with a roll of her eyes, helping me gradually to understand that there wasn't as much at stake as all the pomp suggested. I thought she was splendid, in her satire particularly<sup>218</sup>

The writer is fascinated by her personality and by her satire addressed to dinner's members:

She was a reckless, entertaining talker, a great hater with the talent of a chef for filleting, rolling, and roasting a hunk of meat, and I, whose aim was to be radio's bold, un-compromising teller of the truth, was in awe of how she did nothing to rationalize, let alone to hide, her amused contempt. That one is the vainest man of New York... that one's need to be superior... that one's insincerity... that one hasn't the faintest idea... that one got so drunk...that one's talent is so minute,

---

<sup>216</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 478.

<sup>217</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, cit. , p. 171.

<sup>218</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 515.

so infinitesimal...that one is so embittered... that one is so depraved...what's most laughable about that lunatic is her grandiosity...<sup>219</sup>

Sylphid's irony is somewhat similar to that of professor Delphine Roux, who was sending caricatures of her colleagues to her friends. Her irony is almost extreme, so much so that Zuckerman himself gets scared:

“Here,” she said. “Eloise and Abelard.” “My mother read that,” I said. “Your mother's shameless hussy,” Sylphid replied, rendering me weak in the knees until I realized she was joking.<sup>220</sup>

Despite the joke, it is interesting to note that this offense is addressed precisely to a mother figure. For the first time here we face with a different version of Sylphid, stripped of hateful rancor towards the mother, who does not play tricks to annoy, but talks, showing another side of her multifaceted personality. The most significant passage to understand her is the exchange the two have about music:

“What's it like,” I said, “to play at Radio City Music Hall?” “It's a horror. The conductor's a horror. ‘My dear lady, I know it's so difficult to count to four in that bar, but if you wouldn't mind, that would be so nice.’ The more polite he is, the nastier you know he's feeling. If he's really angry he says, ‘My dear dear lady’. The ‘dear’ dripping with venom.<sup>221</sup>

The divergences of the musician with the conductor show once again her character. She does not like rules and having authoritarian figures around. Music, however, is a very important element of the novel, full of references to Debussy, Fauré, Mozart, more than those present in *The Human Stain*, since «art and life and fiction and history do not grow on different grounds but are rooted in the same constitutive element, which is one's perpetual experience. The key to both understanding and knowledge lies in their interaction.»<sup>222</sup> Music is an art form which is interconnected with the character's life, which appeases all the

---

<sup>219</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 521.

<sup>220</sup> *Ivi*, p. 523.

<sup>221</sup> *Ivi*, p. 524.

<sup>222</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, cit. , pp. 164-165.

contradiction present throughout the novel and which, especially, reconciles Sylphid's inner conflicts.

[...] I hate all harps". "Do you really?" [...] "They're impossibly difficult to play. They break down all the time. You breathe on a harp," she said, "and it's out of tune. Trying to have a harp in perfect condition makes me crazy. Moving it around—it's like moving an aircraft carrier." "Then why do you play the harp?" "Because the conductor's right—I am stupid. Oboists are smart. Fiddle play are smart. But not harpists. Harpists are dummies, moronic dummies. How smart can you be to pick an instrument that's going to ruin and run your life the way the harp does? There's no way, had I not been seven years old and too stupid to know better, that I would have begun playing the harp, let alone be playing it still. I don't even have conscious memories of life before harp." "Why did you start so young?" "Most little girls who start the harp start the harp because Mommy thinks it's such a lovely thing for them to do. It looks so pretty and all the music is so damn sweet, and it's played politely in small rooms for polite people who aren't the least bit interested. The column painted in gold leaf [...] And it's monstrously big, you can never put it away. Where are you going to put it? It's always there, sitting there and mocking you. You can never get away from it. Like my mother."<sup>223</sup>

When the girl says she hates the harp, we can easily see in it an allegory of the mother, confirmed by her final words "like my mother". The harp, apparently beautiful, ethereal and romantic, like Eve, is a cumbersome presence, always there, which can't be easily hidden. The girl says she hates it but at the same time she keeps on playing. A contradiction similar to the relationship with Eve. Despite the ruthless hatred, the musician is extremely dependent on the woman and despite the discontent for the instrument, when Nathan Zuckerman sees her playing, he thinks:

The passion of her playing, a concentrated passion that you could see in her eyes—a passion liberated from everything in her that was sardonic and negative—made me wonder what powers might have

---

<sup>223</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., pp. 524-525.

been hers if, in addition to her musicianship, her face were as alluringly angular as her delicate mother's.<sup>224</sup>

Regardless of her words, Nathan sees her passion and sees through her mask:

Not until decades later [...] did I understand that the only way Sylphid could begin to feel at ease in her skin was by hating her mother and playing the harp. Hating her mother's infuriating weakness and producing ethereally enchanting sounds, making with Fauré and Doppler and Debussy all the amorous contact the world would allow.<sup>225</sup>

The ambivalent relationship with music, an integral part of her life, recalls that with Eve Frame. One evening Ira finds «The two of them in bed, under the covers, listening to *Così Fan Tutte*.»<sup>226</sup> like a normal mother with her daughter, except the girl is an adult who still lives with her. Another one, after she discovers that the couple wants to have her transferred, the situation is overturned:

What he saw was Eve on her back screaming and crying, and Sylphid in her pajamas sitting astride her, also screaming, also crying, her strong harpist's hands pinning Eve's shoulders to the bed. There were bits of paper all over the place—the floor plan for the new apartment—and there, on top of his wife, sat Sylphid, screaming, 'Can't you stand up to anyone? Won't you once stand up for your own daughter against him? Won't you be a mother, ever? Ever?''<sup>227</sup>

The scene is awkward and the reader feels almost embarrassed for this girl. She asks Eve if she will ever be a mother, except she's already an adult who should leave and start being independent.

The life Eve has managed to create for herself and her daughter is isolated from history. Sylphid, says Shostak, «is the return of the repressed, an index to the fate-driven self.»<sup>228</sup> As she has separated her from her father and from her ethnic background. The past is pushed away, discarded. Eve has pursued wealth

---

<sup>224</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 527.

<sup>225</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 527-528.

<sup>226</sup> *Ivi*, p. 559.

<sup>227</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 560-561.

<sup>228</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 253.

and comfort but the price she has to pay is the desolation of a mother hated by her daughter. She has lost her history and it is in Sylphid in whom this is most devastatingly reflected; they are an unhappy family, isolated, dissatisfied. This is very typical in Roth's works:

In "The Mistaken" a son writes a long letter of explanation to his mother trying to understand and alleviate the contradictions of childhood. "You told them the truth", he thinks, "and that hurt. You hid the truth, that hurt too [...] In protecting him from "the troubles, the ugliness, all the rotten things" the mother promised a world that doesn't exist; protection became isolation.<sup>229</sup>

The same thing that happens here. Murray says that: «Sylphid made perfectly clear to him that de-utopianizing her mom—giving Mom a dose of life's dung she'd never forget—was her deepest daughterly inclination.»<sup>230</sup> Her projects is to de-utopianize anyone she meets: Zuckerman, during the dinner, offering him caricatures of the people around them; Eve and Ira, destroying the step-father's dream of a family, «she strips him of the family meant, in placing him securely within the American dream, to right his original wrong.»<sup>231</sup> She is the stimulus of the novel, like Merry. When she betrays her mother, roughly asking her to abort, the circle of betrayals starts.

So young and yet so richly antagonistic, so wordly-wise and yet, customized in something long and gaudy as if she were a fortuneteller, so patently oddballish. So happy go-lucky about being repelled by everything. [...] how eager Sylphid was to antagonize, no idea how much freedom there was to enjoy once egoism unleashed itself from the restraint of social fear. There was the fascination: her formidability. I saw that Sylphid was fearless, unafraid to cultivate within herself the threat that she could be to others.<sup>232</sup>

Her personality is split between the public musician Sylphid and the resentful Sylphid, feeling the inner turmoil of discontent.

---

<sup>229</sup> S. Milowitz, *Philip Roth Considered: the Concentrationary Universe of the American Writer*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, p. 95.

<sup>230</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 565.

<sup>231</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 253.

<sup>232</sup> P. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, cit., p. 521.

Disconcerted by Freud's narrative of infant psychosexual evolution, which affirmed that in the Oedipal phase the kid rejects his mother and accepts the law of the father, feminists, through a study named "Object relations", started to examine the nature of this pre-Oedipal phase. It studied the pre-verbal relationships of the mother and the child, discovering the "omnipotent mother", which precedes the "omnipotent father". The theory affirms that mother and child are a unit and the latter will emerge as a distinct self. In the pre-Oedipal phase the child is not able to distinguish between himself and the environment, considering himself and the mother as a unit. Moreover the mother responds for all his needs. When they are not satisfied the child develops a sense of anxiety that something is not right and is lacking in him. She can satisfy or frustrate him, so she can be loved or hated. The child soon becomes aware that the mother is the orchestrator of these sensations<sup>233</sup>. Nancy Chodorow affirms that the child starts oscillating between understanding the mother as separate or not separate, the realization that she can leave and that her love can't be exclusively directed to him. This results in anger and frustration.

This change in its situation is not wholly to the infant's disadvantage. From the point of view of adult life, and from the point of view of that side of the infant that wants independence, total merging and dependence are not so desirable. Merging brings the threat of loss of self or of being devoured as well as the benefit of omnipotence.<sup>234</sup>

Even if the child is able to comprehend this distinction and separation, the memory of the bond and the desire to return to that period of connection, even if repressed, still remain. The child must break with the mother to create a strong self because she's threatening for the formation of the I.<sup>235</sup> Sylphid's quest for selfhood and wholeness starts with playing the harp and developing a hard shell of irony and hatred. This is why the girl perceives her identity as threatened by those figures who impede her search for true selfhood, like her mother, or the conductor, or those who want to control her, like her step-father. She emerges as

---

<sup>233</sup> E. Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>234</sup> N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, California, University of California, 1999, p. 62.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibidem*.

a dissenter. Sylphid doesn't care at all to conform to a generalized perception of womanhood, she has a subversive impulse to be different and authentic. At the same time, she is imprisoned in her own hatred, in the relationship with her mother.

Luce Irigaray, as Rivière, expressed the idea that femininity is a mask for social performances, and that the subject is partially elsewhere<sup>236</sup>. The girl, in fact, embodies a duality between her private and public self, her *persona*<sup>237</sup>. At the dinner she is gratified when she talks to Nathan and when she plays the harp. She speaks with Ira when the mother is not there. When she's at home, instead, she's troubled and miserable, she offends Ira calling him "beast", she's rude, hostile. Furthermore, Eve does not want her daughter to leave the house, but is convinced by Ira. Sylphid's leaving means that she's no longer an extension of herself. This feeling of continuity is described by Nancy Chodorow, who says that mothers may consider their daughters as a narcissistic extension of themselves<sup>238</sup>. This female protagonist's matrophobic attitude towards Eve Frame, is similar to the same complex relationship between mothers and daughters already seen in Roth's trilogy with Delphine and her mother and, more specifically, with Merry and Dawn. However, while this daughter fears becoming Eve Frame, who is perceived as an hindrance in the quest for selfhood, she ends up replicating Eve's life, marrying one of her father's men.

---

<sup>236</sup> L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, New York, New York University Press, 1985.

<sup>237</sup> The *persona* is originally a mask worn by actors in ancient Greece, according to psychoanalyst Carl Jung, refers to the social archetype or the conformity archetype. The *persona* is a social face the individual presents to the world—«a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual.» (C. V. Jung, "Two Essays on Analytical Psychology", London, Pantheon Books, 1953, p. 190.)

<sup>238</sup> N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, cit., p. 62.



## Chapter III

### 3. *The Human Stain*

#### 3.1. Life as Fiction

*The Human Stain*, published in 2000, is the third novel of the *American Trilogy*. The novel is set against another important moment in the American history. Philip Roth situates it in 1998, the year in which President Bill Clinton's sexual affair with his assistant Monica Lewinsky, leads to his impeachment. In a period in which the country is shocked with the president's outrageous behavior, in the small college where he works, and in the little community where he lives, Coleman Silk's relationship with a younger woman and his alleged racial offense against two black students become the objects of the same kind of treatment. «Coleman [is destroyed] by the same Zeitgeist—what Nathan Zuckerman calls the 'persecuting spirit' for a 'morally stupid censorious community—that blighted Bill Clinton's second term as President in the 1990s».<sup>239</sup> One of the themes that Roth tackles here is indeed political correctness. Furthermore, the novel deals with the discourse of public versus private, that is also addressed in the other two novels of the trilogy.

Coleman Silk is a professor who creates a new identity and abandons the old one. He's an African-American who grows up in a mainly white Jewish community in New Jersey and, as a black child, experiences some kind of racism at young age, so he passes as Jewish. With his new identity, he starts a new life and a career in academia, becoming a respected dean of faculty in Athena College. He is driven by the fact that he doesn't want to be judged by the color of his skin. «Coleman Silk passes as white so as to be free [...] Coleman possibly wished to avoid being the object of prejudice»<sup>240</sup> argues Elaine B. Safer. Passing is the only potential escape that he has inside a pre-determined society. By

---

<sup>239</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>240</sup> E.B. Safer, *Mocking the Age The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, cit., p. 119.

passing as white, more specifically as a Jew, he is able to escape the racism that his minority always had to face, to get rid of what he considers a hindrance to his personal success. Furthermore, to Silk, as a modern DuBois, the treatment one gets should depend on the individual, not on the group. He decides to hide his being black because in blackness he can never fully be himself. It's very ironic, finally, that his life is overturned because of the racist word "spooks", used towards two black students who see themselves as being part of a community to defend, and who strongly react when something might offend that community. To these two students there is no difference between personal and racial identity. After addressing the two absent students as "spooks", the professor becomes a pariah in Athena and is forced to resign even if, as he explains:

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.<sup>241</sup>

The abandonment of part of one's identity is a theme that makes *The Human Stain* similar—but also different—to the other novels of the trilogy. In *The Human Stain*, like in *American Pastoral*, the achievements and even the failures of the protagonist are strictly connected with the decision to let his racial identity to be lost. At the same time Coleman's abandonment of his ethnicity can't be compared with the Swede's one and with Iron Rinn's story in *I Married a Communist*. In the case of *The Human Stain*, race is more central because Coleman Silk decides to hide his ethnicity and he masks it with another one. Gabrielle Seeley and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky affirm 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?<sup>242</sup>

---

<sup>241</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, in *The American Trilogy*, New York, The Library of America, 2011, p. 25.

<sup>242</sup> G. Seeley, J. Rubin-Dorsky, "The Pointless Meaningfulness of Living: Illuminating *The Human Stain* through *The Scarlet Letter*", in D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 93.

Coleman Silk is a man who has been able to transform and self-create himself, by changing his own ethnicity, but he has also been caught inside the web of the political correctness. Society always has some power on the individual, very much like in *American Pastoral*, even if the individual tries to escape from it.

In *The Human Stain* there are two very fundamental female characters: Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley. These two characters are relevant in the fate of Coleman Silk and for the development of the plot.

Faunia Farley is the protagonist's lover. In the novel, Faunia's humanity and pragmatism are opposed to the figures of professor Delphine Roux and Les Farley, the misanthropic Vietnam veteran. She embodies the fact that you can't escape or repress human nature, you can't—as Zuckerman did—reject sexuality, carnality, the tension, the furor of being human, because, as Brauner affirms, «Utopian dreams, pastoral ideas of purity, invariably entail a rejection of humanity».<sup>243</sup> Instead of deploring her imperfect, failing life, like Coleman does, she accepts it. Rather than aspiring to an idea of a purified existence, as Dawn Dwyer and Eve Frame do, «She just cannot get enough of the toxins: of all that you're not supposed to be, to show, to say, to think but that you are and show and say and think whether you like it or not»<sup>244</sup>.

Delphine, instead, plays the role of the “villain” in *The Human Stain*. She's a villain in the sense that she interferes in the protagonist's life, she's the architect of his fall. This happens because she pretends to know the truth. The best example is, as we will see, how she sets Coleman reeling with an anonymous note which reads: «Everyone knows»<sup>245</sup>. Zuckerman thinks, at the end of the novel: «Everyone knows... Oh, stupid, stupid, stupid Delphine Roux. One's truth is known to no one and frequently... to oneself least of all»<sup>246</sup>. Delphine, like Coleman, the Swede and Ira, supposes the fiction she created

---

<sup>243</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>244</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 240.

<sup>245</sup> *Ivi*, p. 196.

<sup>246</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 330.

about her life to be true. She thinks that if she believes it hard enough, her life will eventually turn into that fiction, while the only person who can turn life into fiction is Nathan Zuckerman. Nathan, the one who has learned that life does not work that way:

Because we don't know, do we? *Everyone knows...* How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? *Nobody* knows, Professor Roux. "Everyone knows" is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it's the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that's so insufferable. What we know is that, in an unclichéd way, nobody knows anything. You *can't* know anything. The things you *know* you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.<sup>247</sup>

### 3.2. Delphine Roux: nobody knows anything

Delphine Roux is a young and brilliant faculty member. She's French and, like Coleman did, she's trying to find her own identity in America, after leaving her French background behind.

Delphine is the only French character created by Roth. What he develops can be seen as a sort of caricature of a young French intellectual woman. Patrick Harris, in this regard, in the chapter "The Canon" of his book *Philip Roth Fiction And Power*, talks about the decision of choosing this French character:

Some of the higher-volume contributors to the canon debate at times took an explicitly Francophobic tone, as in Harold Bloom's denunciations of "French Shakespeare" and Roth's unflattering portrayal of Delphine would at first glance seem to play into this kind of cultural chauvinism. But Roth has a long-standing interest in using Europeans to relativize American situation.<sup>248</sup>

---

<sup>247</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 208-209.

<sup>248</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., p. 218.

Although accused of a Francophobic tone, this character is crucial to reflect on the relationship between France and America, on the limits of a young expatriate who wants to renounce his roots and, once she is in America, where she does not feel welcomed, the discovery of the impossibility of abandoning them completely.

Delphine Roux is described in the third chapter, “What do you do with the kid who can’t read”, as an intellectual, very precocious for her age, with an upper-class French education and an enviable study curriculum. She graduates at the *École Normale Supérieure* and at Yale University.

Middle child and only daughter Delphine graduated from the Lycée Janson de Sailly, where she studied philosophy and literature, English and German, Latin, French literature: “... read the entire body of French literature in a very canonical way.” After the Lycée Janson, Lycée Henri IV: “... grueling in-depth study of French literature and philosophy, English language and literary history.” At twenty, after the Lycée Henri IV, the école Normale Supérieure de Fontenay: “... with the élite of French intellectual society... only thirty a year selected.”<sup>249</sup>

She’s middle child and member of the élite of young French intellectuals, since she is part of that thirty a year selected.

Privileged 16th arrondissement childhood on the rue de Longchamp. Monsieur Roux an engineer, owner of a firm employing forty; Madame Roux (née de Walincourt) born with an ancient noble name, provincial aristocracy, wife, mother of three, scholar of medieval French literature, master harpsichordist, scholar of harpsichord literature, papal historian, “etc.” And what a telling “etc.” that was!<sup>250</sup>

She also comes from an aristocratic family. The vocabulary used, thus, immediately emphasizes and exaggerates on purpose her uniqueness in the intellectual field. We will find out later in the novel that her parents don’t have respect for the individual, they only care for the ancestry of the entire family and that she feels her family as a load, so she decides to leave. This makes her very

---

<sup>249</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 187-188.

<sup>250</sup> *Ivi*, p. 187.

similar to Coleman Silk. Considering this resemblance, there is a strong irony in the fact that Delphine is the first person who accuses Silk, while he is a real example of American individualism, a man who leaves his family behind, just like her, who's not scared to fight alone all his accusers.

With regard to her name, the choice of "Delphine" is very interesting, like that of the male characters'. The choice of mythologizing names and nicknames is very meaningful for the creation of Philip Roth's characters. As Brauner says, talking about the protagonists of the *American Trilogy*:

Their self-mythologizing nicknames demonstrate a shared conviction that they are masters of their own destinies, with the power to make their lives—and themselves—what they will, but the allegorical elements of their first names suggest, on the contrary, that their fate is predetermined: Coleman can be read as 'coal man', a reference to the racial identity that he tries to efface; Seymour as 'see more', an ironic reference to Levov's lack of insight and foresight; and Ira is the latin for anger which Ringold struggles unsuccessfully to control.<sup>251</sup>

Coleman's name suggests what he truly is, which is exactly the opposite of how he acts, of the fiction he created for himself. What is interesting in *The Human Stain* are also the references made to Greek poetics. Ross Posnock, the professor of English at Columbia University, says:

Roth's dense weave of literary allusion is not to be regarded as ornamental or the occasion for scavenger hunts but functions rather as a vehicle of solicitation, inviting us to pursue clues, hazard guesses, make connections, activities analogous to how Nathan reconstructs Coleman's life.<sup>252</sup>

These references abound when talking about Coleman, but Delphine is the only one who has a name connected to Greek mythology. Her name also corresponds to Coleman's preference, since he is a professor of Latin and Greek Literature. «Coleman's preference [is] for the 'great reality-reflecting religion' of the Greeks rather than the 'exquisite unearthliness' of Christianity, with its 'perfectly

---

<sup>251</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., pp. 149-150.

<sup>252</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 196.

desexualized... man-god and his uncontaminated mother»<sup>253</sup>. Delphine has this evocative name but she does not represent it: she has repressed her sexuality, she hides into her confused dream of purity and perfection. Moreover, as Hayes affirms, her name is connected with the idea of knowing and bringing the truth:

For the Ancient Greeks the Delphic Oracle was a troubling source of both inanities and deep truths, and the same is true of Delphine, for lurking among her manifold trivialities is an entry on her CV that tells us about her doctoral thesis on Georges Bataille. The meaning of this allusion has not so far been explored, but Roth would have been familiar with Bataille's work through his friendship with Philippe Sollers who had promoted Bataille's legacy in the journal *Tel Quel*.<sup>254</sup>

However, as Elaine B. Safer argues, «Delphine is light years removed from the priestess of Delphi from whom great leaders sought prophetic wisdom»<sup>255</sup>. In spite of her prophetic name, she is not an oracle. In fact the woman is the biggest accuser of Coleman's being racist. She misunderstands everything. She pretends to know all the truth but she doesn't know anything. The Delphi oracle predicted threats, Delphine is a threatening figure herself who will come to bruising awareness of the traps and reversals hidden in the art of threatening, and suffer as well.

Coleman Silk hires Delphine Roux when he is the faculty dean. When she's employed, she is new both to America and to the job: «Delphine Roux was twenty-nine years old and virtually without experience outside school, new to the job and relatively new to the college and to the country»<sup>256</sup>. The university is not the place where she expected to go to work and Roth satirizes her and her rhetoric when she says: «I arrived at Yale very Cartesian, and there everything was much more pluralistic and polyphonic».<sup>257</sup>

---

<sup>253</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., 175.

<sup>254</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., p. 218

<sup>255</sup> E.B. Safer, *Mocking the Age The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, cit., p. 120.

<sup>256</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 184.

<sup>257</sup> *Ivi*, p. 188.

Delphine is described as a young, very well-educated girl, expert in cinema who struggles against the young Americans' lack of an intellectual side. In their country she isn't satisfied, neither professionally, nor sexually.

Amused by the undergraduates. Where's their intellectual side? Completely shocked by their having fun. Their chaotic, nonideological way of thinking — of living! They've never even seen a Kurosawa film — they don't know *that* much. By the time she was their age, she'd seen all the Kurosawas, all the Tarkovskys, all the Fellinis, all the Antonionis, all the Fassbinders, all the Wertmullers, all the Satyajit Rays, all the René Clairs, all the Wim Wenderses, all the Truffauts, the Godards, the Chabrols, the Resnaises, the Rohmers, the Renoirs, and all these kids have seen is *Star Wars*<sup>258</sup>.

In this list of important movie directors in the history of cinema, a list of Italian, French, German, Indian, Japanese directors, not even one is American. The movie attributed to America, in a derogatory way, is *Star Wars*.

In addition to the load of literary and cinematographic knowledge belonging to her, we also know that she wrote a thesis on Georges Bataille. «Thesis: “Self-Denial in Georges Bataille.” Bataille? Not another one. Every ultra-cool Yale graduate student is working on either Mallarmée or Bataille» thinks Silk. The choice of Bataille is emblematic, not only because Roth persistently returns to the same issue of sex and desire, but because the work of Georges Bataille is a work that deviates from traditional literary canons, as well as his biography, so much so that the official German biographer Mattheus, for this reason, entitled the work he wrote *Georges Bataille, eine thanatographie*. The definition of thanatography, or writing of death, defines the characteristics of the narrative of the French writer, and of his path, given that it is death itself that dominates his life, as a true protagonist, occupying a prominent position also in his stories. Furthermore, on *Histoire de l'œil*<sup>259</sup>, his novel published in 1928, a continual breaking of taboos makes the subjects feel more free. Moments of transgression encompass a renunciation of one's identity by breaking those limits

---

<sup>258</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 188-189.

<sup>259</sup> G. Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil*, Paris, Paris, Pauvert, 1967.



that guarantee the identification of the subject within the social body. We will see later, thus, that even Delphine is a woman who has renounced her identity, who breaks taboos by deceiving those around her, just to protect herself. According to Posnock «Bataille also believed that “history is lived when one does not know how it will come out” and that the drive to construct the future (like the effort to make the self) in “the way an architect oversees a project,” has the effect of arresting time. “The project is the prison,” Bataille remarked»<sup>260</sup>. Delphine’s project to be the author of her own existence is her prison. In America she is blocked, and despite her fancy background, for Coleman Silk the woman represents nothing but a cliché of the young French intellectuals. There is nothing special about her.

In *The Human Stain* the relationship between Coleman and Delphine is immediately presented in these terms:

the young French woman who’d been his department chair when he’d returned to teaching after stepping down from the deanship and who, later, had been among those most eager to have him exposed as a racist and reprimanded for the insult he had leveled at his absent black students.<sup>261</sup>

There is a clear discrepancy between how Delphine sees herself and justifies her own actions and what reality is, how others (Coleman and us readers) see her. «Delphine, moreover, conforms to the Bergsonian description of progressing “from absentmindedness to wild enthusiasm, from wild enthusiasm to various distortions of character and will” becoming more and more absurd in readers’ eyes (Bergson 71)»<sup>262</sup> argues Elaine B. Safer, who also describes her as «a crusader for political correctness».<sup>263</sup> Her strong drive to promote political correctness, however, always clashes clearly with her actions. She is all but correct.

---

<sup>260</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., p. 232.

<sup>261</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>262</sup> E.B. Safer, *Mocking the Age The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibidem*.

Physically Delphine is a beautiful woman and Coleman is aware of it. She does not try to escape her physical aspect, rather, according to Silk, it contributes to make her a bit stuck up, too demanding to remove the veil that separates her from reality, thus:

For nearly an hour Dean Silk listens to her... Narrative structure and temporality. The internal contradictions of the work of art... Narratology. The diegetic. The difference between diegesis and mimesis. The bracketed experience. The proleptic quality of the text. Coleman doesn't have to ask what all this means. He knows, in the original Greek meaning, what all the Yale words mean and what all the École Normale Supérieure words mean. Does she? [...] He thinks: Why does someone so beautiful want to hide from the human dimension of her experience behind these words? Perhaps just because she is so beautiful. He thinks: So carefully self-appraising and so utterly deluded.<sup>264</sup>

In this passage Zuckerman imagines Delphine Roux's job interview and what the man thinks about her. The man assumes that she doesn't know the etymology of her "Yale words". Hence, Coleman thinks that by approaching literature with these terms, the only effect is that of removing it from reality. In the novel, Roux advocates literary theory with a terminology removed from human experience, which is the same thing that she does with her political stance, advocating a morality which is not allowed for real life<sup>265</sup>. Roux in fact is a woman who has a lot of experience on books but few on life and she's conscious of this. She knows she's hiding.

Coleman's perplexities towards Delphine are not much different from the uneasiness she feels about her own intellectual choices, an uneasiness that is tinted of nostalgia for a lost dimension.

Well, obliging as she must be at conferences and in publications to write and speak as the profession requires, the humanist is the very part of her own self that she sometimes feels herself betraying, and so she is attracted to them: because they are what they are and always have been and because she knows they think of her as a traitor.[...] These older men, The Humanists, the old-fashioned traditionalist

---

<sup>264</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 190.

<sup>265</sup> S. S. Christiansen, "Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*", cit., p. 74.

humanists who have read everything, the born-again teachers (as *she* thinks of *them*), make her sometimes feel shallow. [...]in front of them she crumbles. Since she doesn't herself have that much conviction about all the so-called discourse she picked up in Paris and New Haven, inwardly she crumbles.<sup>266</sup>

What she exactly thinks she betrayed, is something which belongs to her past and that took shape in Paris, during Milan Kundera's lessons. The nostalgia she has is in fact for the emotions she felt when attending the lectures given by Roth's friend, Kundera.

Kundera was legitimized for them by being persecuted as a Czech writer, by being someone who had lost out in Czechoslovakia's great historical struggle to be free. Kundera's playfulness did not appear to be frivolous, not at all. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* they loved. There was something trustworthy about him. His Eastern Europeanness. The restless nature of the intellectual. That everything appeared to be difficult for him. Both were won over by Kundera's modesty, the very opposite of superstar demeanor, and both believed in his ethos of thinking and suffering.<sup>267</sup>

Kundera represents for Delphine a moral ideal, a direct approach to literature, an approach that she doesn't have. A direct approach even to life. Something which the career forces her to disavow, but for which she nourishes a big regret. She also occasionally asks him to forgive her. «All that intellectual tribulation — and then there were his looks. Delphine was very taken by the writer's poetically prize-fighterish looks, to her an outward sign of everything colliding within».<sup>268</sup> Delphine is physically attracted by Kundera and by his fighterish looks. Here, again, the irony of her character, since Coleman himself, whom she hates, was a boxer, as a young man.

At moments she even feels herself betraying Milan Kundera, and so, silently, when she is alone, she will picture him in her mind's eye and speak to him and ask his forgiveness. Kundera's intention in his lectures was to free the intelligence from the French sophistication, to talk about the novel as having something to do with human beings and

---

<sup>266</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 266.

<sup>267</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 261-262.

<sup>268</sup> *Ivi*, p. 262.

the *comédie humaine*; his intention was to free his students from the tempting traps of structuralism and formalism and the obsession with modernity, to purge them of the French theory that they had been fed, and listening to him had been an enormous relief, for despite her publications and a growing scholarly reputation, it was always difficult for her to deal with literature through literary theory. There could be such a gigantic gap between what she liked and what she was supposed to admire — between how she was supposed to speak about what she was supposed to admire and how she spoke to herself about the writers she treasured — that her sense of betraying Kundera, though not the most serious problem in her life, would become at times like the shame of betraying a kindly, trusting, absent lover.<sup>269</sup>

Kundera would like the French students, trained to dig in the mechanisms of the texts, to disassemble and reassemble them, to recover the literature as something related to the human dimension, to an immediate fruition of reality, which is precisely what Delphine, according to Coleman Silk, runs from, by taking refuge in her job. This idea is refuted by one of the reasons why she left her country: «She remained amazed and excited by the New York subway. [...] The New York subway was the symbol of why she'd come — her refusal to shrink from reality.»<sup>270</sup> She's does not only think of work. There is a moment in which she goes to see a Pollock show:

The Pollock show emotionally so took possession of her that she felt, as she advanced from one stupendous painting to the next, something of that swelling, clamorous feeling that is the mania of lust. When a woman's cell phone suddenly went off while the whole of the chaos of the painting entitled *Number 1A, 1948* was entering wildly into the space that previously that day — previously that *year*—had been nothing more than her body, she was so furious that she turned and exclaimed, “Madam, I'd like to strangle you!”<sup>271</sup>

The choice of this artist is emblematic. Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) was an American painter and the most important representative of Action painting. In his short life he developed the technique of “dripping” consisting in dripping color

---

<sup>269</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 266-267.

<sup>270</sup> *Ivi*, p. 198.

<sup>271</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 198-199.

onto a horizontal canvas, with ritual and choreographic gestures with reminiscences of the magic-propitiatory rites practiced by the American Indians. The works thus created are a chaotic interweaving of colored lines and spots, with a dramatic charge and the total absence of rational organization. Pollock in fact operated an internal subversion of the work of the painter, in leading the painting itself to its limit. He removed the canvas from the easel, having consequently multiplied the artist's observation and intervention points. In his works there are the typical instances of existentialism, characterized by distrust in man's possibilities to realize his aspirations of harmony with the world<sup>272</sup>, which is also a theme in Roth's novels:

Philip Roth's fiction has always been characterized by the tension between the individual capacity of self-determination and the deterministic forces of history; between the seductive dreams of harmony, idealism and purity and the troubling realities of discord, disillusionment, corruption; between the desire to exert control, impose order, explain, and the impulse to break free from all constraints; to revel in anarchy, chaos and disorder; to celebrate the indeterminate, the unknowable, the inexplicable.<sup>273</sup>

The Pollock's painting which she goes to see acts as a visual signifier of these themes. As a visual double of the author Philip Roth, and of the narrator Nathan Zuckerman, the *Number 1A* focuses our attention on the act of seeing. Like a coded alter ego of Delphine's personality and of the formation of her new identity. Delphine is in fact «destabilized to the point of shame by the discrepancy between how she must deal with literature in order to succeed professionally and why she first came to literature»<sup>274</sup>. She has chosen to follow a path—that she does not believe in—only to succeed in her job. This undermines her. There is a duality between how she feels, the inner distress, like that of a Pollock's painting, and how she wants to appear, always politically and

---

<sup>272</sup> D. Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1987.

<sup>273</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 148.

<sup>274</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 272.

academically correct. She thinks she's neither allowed to show the «sloppier sides of human experience<sup>275</sup>», the human stain.

As already said, Delphine Roux has tried to re-invent herself but, during her new American life, she doesn't receive the attention she expects. This infuses her with a strong sense of intolerance:

She is used to being with people who speak the same intellectual language, and these Americans ... And not everybody finds her that interesting. Expected to come to America and have everyone say, "Oh, my God, she's a *normalienne*." But in America no one appreciates the very special path she was on in France and its enormous prestige. She's not getting the type of recognition she was trained to get as a budding member of the French intellectual elite. She's not even getting the kind of resentment she was trained to get.<sup>276</sup>

Despite her high-level European education makes a good impression on a number of young colleagues, she comes up against the hard core of mistrust and skepticism within the college. She doesn't feel comfortable in America. She doesn't know how to behave, especially with the authoritative figure of Coleman Silk:

For all that she could not bear him, she also couldn't bear that the academic credentials that so impressed other of her Athena colleagues hadn't yet overwhelmed the ex-dean. Despite herself, she could not escape from being intimidated by the man who, five years earlier, had reluctantly hired her fresh from the Yale graduate school and who, afterward, never denied regretting it, especially when the psychological numbskulls in his department settled on so deeply confused a young woman as their chair.<sup>277</sup>

The professor both attracts and intimidates her. She is not able to conquer him or intellectually, since Coleman neither hides the sufficiency towards her and towards what she represents, nor erotically, since he considers her very attractive but emotionally immature, too full of unresolved contradictions.

Afraid of being exposed, dying to be seen—there's a dilemma for you. Something about him made her even secondguess her English, with

---

<sup>275</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 263.

<sup>276</sup> *Ivi*, p. 189.

<sup>277</sup> *Ivi*, p. 185.

which otherwise she felt wholly at ease. Whenever they were face to face, something made her think that he wanted nothing more than to tie her hands behind her back. [...] he looked at her as if she were a schoolgirl, Mr. and Mrs. Inconsequential's little nobody child.<sup>278</sup>

She's described as a dilemma, as a woman who's scared of being exposed but also who wants it. The fact that she thinks that he wants to tie her hands behind her back suggests that she has a sexual interest for the man, confirmed also by her ambiguous attitude:

When, seated across from the dean, she had crossed her legs and the flap of the kilt had fallen open, she had waited a minute or two before pulling it closed—and pulling it closed as perfunctorily as you close a wallet—only because, however young she looked, she wasn't a schoolgirl with a schoolgirl's fears and a schoolgirl's primness, caged in by a schoolgirl's rules. She did not wish to leave that impression any more than to give the opposite impression by allowing the flap to remain open and thereby inviting him to imagine that she meant him to gaze throughout the interview at her slim thighs in the black tights. She had tried as best she could, with the choice of clothing as with her manner, to impress upon him the intricate interplay of all the forces that came together to make her so interesting at twenty-four.<sup>279</sup>

Delphine is very contradictory. On the one hand her clothes' choice tells about her that she does not want to be desexualized, as her other colleagues. In fact she's also trying to be interesting in the eyes of Coleman. On the other hand, she does not want to give that same impression.

All she'd intended, with the kilt as with the black cashmere turtleneck, black tights, and high black boots, was neither to desexualize herself by what she chose to wear (the university women she'd met so far in America seemed all too strenuously to be doing just that) nor to appear to be trying to tantalize him.<sup>280</sup>

Again, there is a clear discrepancy between what Delphine believes Coleman thinks of her, and what he really thinks. This makes the woman almost close to a

---

<sup>278</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 185

<sup>279</sup> *Ivi*, p. 186.

<sup>280</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 185-186.

tragicomic figure but also a metaphor of what our interpretation of others is. What we think is solely a small part of what reality is.

Delphine Roux had misread his gaze by thinking, a bit melodramatically — one of the impediments to her adroitness, this impulse not merely to leap to the melodramatic conclusion but to succumb erotically to the melodramatic spell — that what he wanted was to tie her hands behind her back: what he wanted, for every possible reason, was not to have her around.<sup>281</sup>

We will then discover that Roux had a relationship with an older man, a classicist, like Coleman, which increases the irony inherent in her character and in her choices.

Even her one piece of jewelry, the large ring she'd placed that morning on the middle finger of her left hand, her sole decorative ornament, had been selected for the sidelight it provided on the intellectual she was, one for whom enjoying the aesthetic surface of life openly, nondefensively, with her appetite and connoisseurship undisguised, was nonetheless subsumed by a lifelong devotion to scholarly endeavor. The ring, an eighteenth-century copy of a Roman signet ring, was a man-sized ring formerly worn by a man. On the oval agate, set horizontally—which was what made the ring so masculinely chunky—was a carving of Danaë receiving Zeus as a shower of gold. In Paris, four years earlier, when Delphine was twenty, she had been given the ring as a love token from the professor to whom it belonged—the one professor whom she'd been unable to resist and with whom she'd had an impassioned affair. Coincidentally, he had been a classicist.<sup>282</sup>

The adverb “coincidentally” creates a humorous tone. Her inner insecurity and her unrequited sexual desires are one of the starting points of the personal revenge against the professor. The bond with her profession seems to be a masking device. The desire for Coleman arises from a central lack, that she doesn't really understand. She doesn't even understand her desire as erotic. This erotic impulse will soon turn into a thanatic one.

---

<sup>281</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 190.

<sup>282</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 186-187.



Another starting point of the diatribe between them is Coleman's quarrel with a student, his impatience with a girl's opinion that Euripides' *Hyppolytus and Alcestis* is «degrading to women»<sup>283</sup>. As an academic disciple of French post-structuralist theory, she calls Coleman's approach: the «so-called humanist approach to Greek tragedy»<sup>284</sup>. The woman assumes that his teaching ignores proper attention to a feminist perspective and she thinks he's an example of the oppressor, of the dominant white male. She finds in him the point of attack for her political radicalism. Coleman can't believe the ignorance of such an accuse. Even the exchange between them is almost comic. The accusation of ignoring a feminist perspective, can be seen as a mirror for the need to look for a feminist perspective even within *The Human Stain* itself. The woman defends her student's view asking Coleman to include a feminist perspective in his lessons, while the professor, to defend himself, remarks an opinion already appeared in *The Human Stain*. He believes that Delphine is too tied to books and little to reality:

“Coleman, you've been out of the classroom for a very long time.”

“And you haven't been out of it ever. My dear,” he said, deliberately, and with a deliberately irritating smile, “I've been reading and thinking about these plays all my life.”

“But never from Elena's feminist perspective.”

“Never even from Moses's Jewish perspective. Never even from the fashionable Nietzschean perspective about perspective.”<sup>285</sup>

Using his own words, professor Coleman Silk opposes the «parochial ideological concerns»<sup>286</sup> of what he calls the «prescribed method»<sup>287</sup> of criticism. He is only interested in the lessons of Greek literature, which he considers universal. He is not interested in Delphine's feminist approach to literary criticism so he

---

<sup>283</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 184.

<sup>284</sup> *Ivi*, p. 193.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibidem*.

stigmatizes her tendency to encourage gendered readings, which he sees as «one of the best ways to close down their thinking before it's even had a chance to begin to demolish a single one of their brains». <sup>288</sup> Coleman is indeed very concerned with the cultural decline that is taking place recently because of this assault to the intellectual theories of the humanist scholarship among a generation of students which he describes as follows: «our students are abysmally ignorant. They've been incredibly badly educated. Their lives are intellectually barren. They arrive knowing nothing and most of them leave knowing nothing. Least of all do they know, when they show up in my class, how to read classical drama» <sup>289</sup>. These humanist principles were instilled among Coleman's family by his father. Even Coleman's sister Ernestine <sup>290</sup>, talking with Zuckerman at Coleman's funeral, says that «today the student asserts his incapacity as a privilege... there are no more criteria Mr. Zuckerman, only opinions». <sup>291</sup> The product is a literature deprived of its humanity. This means that there are only discourses for the sake of discourse, which are as valuable as

---

<sup>288</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>290</sup> The encounter with Ernestine is a turning-point. At the end of the book, in fact, we have a reading of bodies during Coleman's funeral. Nathan Zuckerman thinks Ernestine is Herb Keble's wife because her body bespeaks blackness. However, after going up and talking to her, he learns that she is Coleman's sister: «I was wrong» (P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p.316). Ernestine is a proud and sensible woman and Nathan is struck by her, just as he was by Coleman. She is different from the other female characters of the trilogy, not only because she does not affect the protagonist's life negatively, but also because she makes her appearance at the end of the book, and thanks to her Zuckerman arrives at the central intuition of the novel. Throughout their encounter they talk and we're given the precise moment in which Zuckerman is told about Coleman's past. We know everything already. He discovers his friend's past as a passer, he learns that Coleman certainly was not a racist but also that he built his life on a lie and he was a victim of the political correctness of that period. Ernestine is the voice of this revelation. Her revelations about her brother's life run parallel with her telling Zuckerman about the history of blacks, about a black explorer and a black doctor, about her contempt for the division of history into the history of whites and the history of blacks. Nathan needs to make a list in order to tell us that he's not making anything up and the list of items is so long that it takes at least two pages. At the end of the novel, Zuckerman is so overwhelmed with the news provided by Ernestine, that he cannot but return to Coleman's tomb. This is when Nathan explicitly tells us that in that moment he began his book. However, to write, Zuckerman has to admit that there is a gap that must be filled if he wants to come up with an answer or a precise portrait of his subject, and this is why he engages so much with the fact, because he wants this portrait to be rounded, narratively and existentially convincing. To do this he has to invent something.

<sup>291</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 330.

living a life without even getting dirty<sup>292</sup>. This exchange between Coleman and Delphine shows once again the contradictions inherent in the woman. Coleman and her seem to share the same opinion about young Americans. Delphine is siding against someone who thinks exactly like her. Silk also adds that «to read two plays like *Hippolytus and Alcestis*, then to listen to a week of classroom discussion on each, then to have nothing to say about either of them other than that they are ‘degrading to women’, isn’t a ‘perspective,’ for Christ’s sake... it’s just the latest mouthwash».<sup>293</sup> Professor Roux replies: «Coleman Silk, alone on the planet, has no perspective other than the purely disinterested literary perspective».<sup>294</sup> Despite the apparent lack of sympathy for the woman, Philip Roth’s novel discusses Coleman’s conduct, thus: «*The Human Stain* both transports the reader into a sense of delighted awe at Coleman Silk’s highly aggressive self-creation, but also ironizes his exuberant performance by exposing it to the adverse judgement and comic reversal»<sup>295</sup>.

The canonical reading of literary texts is central in Coleman’s life because it defines his behavior and perspective, and also his decision of passing. Faunia is the one who will undermine the fixed view of life that he has learned from his reading of the Greek classical books. Delphine instead, as already said, is the representative of a certain kind of European, and especially French culture, dominant in the second half of the twentieth century, and of its irreconcilability with the American one. Delphine Roux is the field in which this bigger conflict materializes. Coleman Silk will be, in a sense, the collateral victim of the fight.

“Elena’s a student. She’s twenty years old. She’s learning.”

“Sentimentalizing one’s students ill becomes you, my dear. Take them seriously. Elena’s not learning. She’s parroting. Why she ran directly to you is because it’s more than likely you she’s parroting.”

---

<sup>292</sup> A. J. Connolly, “Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition since FDR”, 2012. <https://bit.ly/2Guu70i>

<sup>293</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 192.

<sup>294</sup> *Ivi*, p. 193.

<sup>295</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., p. 24.

“That is not true, though if it pleases you to culturally frame me like that, that is okay too, and entirely predictable. If you feel safely superior putting me in that silly frame, so be it, my dear,” she delighted now in saying with a smile of her own. “Your treatment of Elena was offensive to her. That was why she ran to me. You frightened her. She was upset.”

“Well, I develop irritating personal mannerisms when I am confronting the consequences of my ever having hired someone like you.”

“And,” she replied, “some of our students develop irritating personal mannerisms when they are confronting fossilized pedagogy. If you persist in teaching literature in the tedious way you are used to, if you insist on the so-called humanist approach to Greek tragedy you’ve been taking since the 1950s, conflicts like this are going to arise continually.”<sup>296</sup>

When she talks about the young woman, who is only learning and is frightened by the authoritarian figure of the professor, she seems to be talking about herself. Delphine is unconsciously attracted by Coleman but, since she can’t find a way to sublimate this desire, her feeling quickly turns into hostility for the man<sup>297</sup>. She develops some ambivalent emotions, a sort of immature love-hate feeling. This then leads her to lay on him the scandalous accusation of racism and the charge of sexual exploitation when she discovers he has a sexual relationship with Faunia Farley, the university janitor. Though saying to herself that she only wants to save the unprotected Faunia from Coleman’s claws, she is unconsciously moved by jealousy.

And then Delphine heard about Coleman Silk’s relationship with Faunia Farley, which he was doing everything possible to hide. She couldn’t believe it — two years into retirement, seventy-one years old, and the man was still at it. With no more female students who dared question his bias for him to intimidate, with no more young black girls needing nurturing for him to ridicule, with no more young women professors like herself threatening his hegemony for him to browbeat

---

<sup>296</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 191-193.

<sup>297</sup> G. Neelakantan, “Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth’s Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*”, *International Fiction Review*, 2017, pp. 27-39. <https://bit.ly/2GJnk20>

and insult, he had managed to dredge up, from the college's nethermost reaches, a candidate for subjugation who was the prototype of female helplessness: a full-fledged battered wife. When Delphine stopped by the personnel office to learn what she could about Faunia's background, when she read about the ex-husband and the horrifying death of the two small children — in a mysterious fire set, some suspected, *by* the ex-husband — when she read of the illiteracy that limited Faunia to performing only the most menial of janitorial tasks, she understood that Coleman Silk had managed to unearth no less than a misogynist's heart's desire: in Faunia Farley he had found someone more defenseless even than Elena or Tracy, the perfect woman to crush. For whoever at Athena had ever dared to affront his preposterous sense of prerogative, Faunia Farley would now be made to answer.<sup>298</sup>

Coleman, Faunia and Delphine are all connected by the fact that they all tried, or are trying, to find their place inside society and, in doing this, they all had to transform and to adapt their identities. Therefore it is again controversial that Delphine stands against someone so similar to her, who confronts alone all his accusers and enemies, just like her with her family and colleagues in America. Elaine B. Safer describes her as a «farcical character»<sup>299</sup>. She certainly is a farcical, risible character, not only because her drive to promote political correctness clashes with her own actions, as already mentioned, but also because she misunderstands everything, accusing a man who represents her same ideals.

Faunia Farley was his substitute for her. Through Faunia Farley he was striking back at her. Who else's face and name and form does she suggest to you but mine — the mirror image of me, she could suggest to you no one else's. By luring a woman who is, as I am, employed by Athena College, who is, as I am, less than half your age — yet a woman otherwise my opposite in every way — you at once cleverly masquerade and flagrantly disclose just who it is you wish to destroy. You are not so unshrewd as not to know it, and, from your own august station, you are ruthless enough to enjoy it. But neither am I so stupid as not to recognize that it's me, in effigy, you are out to get.<sup>300</sup>

---

<sup>298</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 194.

<sup>299</sup> E.B. Safer, *Mocking the Age The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>300</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 195.

All the time Delphine thinks she plays a leading role in Coleman's life, playing just a marginal role in reality, a walk-on role.

He settles on this broken woman who cannot possibly fight back. Who cannot begin to compete with him. Who intellectually does not even exist. He settles on a woman who has never defended herself, who *cannot* defend herself, the weakest woman on this earth to take advantage of, drastically inferior to him in every possible way — and settles on her for the most transparent of antithetical motives: because he considers all women inferior and because he's frightened of any woman with a brain. Because I speak up for myself, because I will not be bullied, because I'm successful, because I'm attractive, because I'm independent-minded, because I have a first-rate education, a first-rate degree...<sup>301</sup>

The bold, fearless opening words, «Everyone knows»<sup>302</sup>—which are also the title of the first chapter—of Delphine's anonymous letter to Coleman, have the same power of a «mantra»<sup>303</sup> in the novel. Ironically, «Contrary to her belief that she has figured Coleman out, she is ironically as ignorant as everyone else of his essential racial secret»<sup>304</sup>, and also of his lack of interest for her. «Roth captures the complexities of the historical project in the layered ironies of the phrase which implies not only knowledge of some act but also a moral perspective from which such knowledge is surely damning»<sup>305</sup> explains Debra Shostak. Delphine assumes that everyone knows about his affair with Faunia and that everybody share her values, but she fails to recognize both the truth and the deep contradiction of the supposition: «if everyone knows her threat can hardly have teeth to it».<sup>306</sup> The irony is even created by the fact that Zuckerman himself presented a secret, that of Coleman's racial passing, and Delphine is completely unaware of it. Says Pia Masiero, «A connection is indirectly created at once between what everybody knows about Faunia and Coleman and about this

---

<sup>301</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 198.

<sup>302</sup> *Ivi*, p. 196.

<sup>303</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., p. 227.

<sup>304</sup> G. Neelakantan, "Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth's Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*", cit., pp. 35-36.

<sup>305</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., pp. 238-239.

<sup>306</sup> *Ivi*, p. 249.

latter's ethnic identity. Knowledge and passing are thus subtly presented as interrelated issues that might both be viewed and appraised in terms of reliability»<sup>307</sup>. Similarly to Delphine, even Zuckerman, who has always had faith in the power of narrative to arrange and negotiate the complexity of humanity with all its curves, is overwhelmed in the face of his friend's secret.

Another essential element that contributes to make Delphine Roux a farcical character with tragicomic elements, is the incident that she has when she decides to send a personal advertisement to the *New York Review of Books*. The beautiful professor, in a spontaneous exile in America also from an old love story, is not able to find a man, even if she is, and constructed herself as a desiring object:

She had, by his age, been through so many love affairs and so much thinking and rethinking, so many levels of suffering — at twenty, years younger than him, she had already lived her big love story not once but twice. In part she had come to America in *flight* from her love story (and, also, to make her exit as a bit player in the long-running drama — entitled *Etc.* — that was the almost criminally successful life of her mother). But now she is extremely lonely in her plight to find a man to connect with.<sup>308</sup>

Naturally, it means a man who is fine for her and who is eager to carry out an equal partnership with her:

Others who try to pick her up sometimes say something acceptable enough, sometimes ironic enough or mischievous enough to be charming, but then — because up close she is more beautiful than they had realized and, for one so petite, a little more arrogant than they may have expected — they get shy and back off. The ones who make eye contact with her are automatically the ones she doesn't like. And the ones who are lost in their books, who are charmingly oblivious and charmingly desirable, are... lost in their books. Whom is she looking for? She is looking for the man who is going to recognize *her*. She is looking for the Great Recognizer.<sup>309</sup>

---

<sup>307</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, cit., p. 198.

<sup>308</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 199.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibidem*.

The novel explores the difficulties between psychology and truth-telling. She embodies the lack of self-knowledge, of truth-telling that leads to dishonesty. This is reflected in her relationships with men. While she's trying to write the ad to find a man, Delphine does not know what to write about herself. She does not know which words she should use because she doesn't know how she wants to appear, simply because she does not know herself. It is a moment, in the novel, of continuous negotiation of her own identity.

And since in every ad she'd studied in the *New York Review*, the age given by women exceeded her own by from fifteen to thirty years, how could she go ahead to reveal her correct age — to portray herself correctly altogether — without arousing the suspicion that there was something significant undisclosed by her and wrong with her, a woman claiming to be so young, so attractive, so accomplished who found it necessary to look for a man through a personal ad? If she described herself as “passionate,” this might readily be interpreted by the lascivious-minded to be an intentional provocation, to mean “loose” or worse, and letters would come pouring in to her *NYRB* box from the men she wanted nothing to do with. But if she appeared to be a bluestocking for whom sex was of decidedly less importance than her academic, scholarly, and intellectual pursuits, she would be sure to encourage a response from a type who would be all too maidenly for someone as excitable as she could be with an erotic counterpart she could trust. If she presented herself as “pretty,” she would be associating herself with a vague catchall category of women, and yet if she described herself, straight out, as “beautiful,” if she dared to be truthful enough to evoke the word that had never seemed extravagant to her lovers — who had called her *éblouissante* (as in “*Éblouissante! Tu as un visage de chat*”); dazzling, stunning — or if, for the sake of precision in a text of only thirty or so words, she invoked the resemblance noted by her elders to Leslie Caron who her father always enjoyed making too much of, then anyone other than a megalomaniac might be too intimidated to approach her or refuse to take her seriously as an intellectual.<sup>310</sup>

Furthermore, Delphine is undecided about how to insert in her advertisement that “whites only need apply”.

---

<sup>310</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 260.



The problem confronting her as she sat alone at the computer long after dark, the only person left in Barton Hall, unable to leave her office, unable to face one more night in her apartment without even a cat for company — the problem was how to include in her ad, no matter how subtly coded, something that essentially said, “Whites only need apply.” If it were discovered at Athena that it was she who had specified such an exclusion — no, that would not do for a person ascending so rapidly through the Athena academic hierarchy.<sup>311</sup>

Then, she imagines what the Athena community would think and how her colleagues would react if they found out that the woman who accused Coleman of being a racist and fought to rid the college of him, is a racist too, guilty of the same discrimination. The hypocrisy embedded in her character is evident. In the novel she is the one who’s truly guilty of racial discrimination, but she’s saved because she’s guilty only in her mind. This gives her the right to accuse Coleman Silk. No one in the community of Athena will ever know of Delphine Roux’s racial discrimination and if it’s not public, she can’t, and won’t, be punished. Delphine doesn’t care for this contradiction in her actions. Her ambivalence and hypocrisy are present not only in this situation, but also in the treatment of Coleman’s “spooks affair”. She doesn’t even consider the chance that the man used the term “spooks” referring to the students’ ectoplasmic character, in a sense that has nothing to do with the girls’ race. Delphine assumes that the word “spooks” can only have one unequivocal meaning, so that there is only one possible way to interpret reality, words and the world. Besides, the man she’s looking for gradually takes the shape of a representative of the American humanist culture. Additionally, she realizes her ad describes a man who is exactly identical to professor Coleman Silk:

Mature man with backbone. Unattached. Independent. Witty. Lively. Defiant. Forthright. Well educated. Satirical spirit. Charm. Knowledge and love of great books. Well spoken and straight-speaking. Trimly built. Five eight or nine. Mediterranean complexion. Green eyes preferred. Age unimportant. But must be intellectual. Graying hair acceptable, even desirable... And then, and only then, did the mythical

---

<sup>311</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 262.

man being summoned forth in all earnestness on the screen condense into a portrait of someone she already knew. Abruptly she stopped writing. The exercise had been undertaken only as an experiment, to try loosening the grip of inhibition just a little before she renewed her effort to compose an ad not too diluted by circumspection. Nonetheless, she was astonished by what she'd come up with, by *whom* she'd come up with, in her distress wanting nothing more than to delete those forty-odd useless words as quickly as possible.<sup>312</sup>

As we've already seen, Delphine is intimidated by Coleman. She is trying to make her voice heard, and drawing his attention but, at the same time, by failing to get what she wants, she manifestly opposes him. Eventually she sees in the "spooks affair" the perfect occasion to get rid of this threatening figure, even if she's secretly interested in Coleman, and now, in her advertisement, she is even looking for a man who's just like him. In what can be defined as «a fit of shock at this dark self-knowledge»<sup>313</sup>, after the many moments of self-denial, she sends the e-mail to every computer in the Department of Languages and Literature where she works. To solve the situation the woman decides to lie. She tells that Coleman entered into her office and sent the message to humiliate her. For all her bad conduct, which just makes her «too human»<sup>314</sup>, after hearing the news of Coleman's death, she acts just like his widow: «what would they think if they saw her now, carrying on like the widow herself?»<sup>315</sup>.

### 3.2.1. Delphine Roux and American Pastoral

David Brauner maintains «A number of critics and reviewers have commented on the similarities between the plots of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. Both novels tell the (fictionalized) stories of men endowed with

---

<sup>312</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 273-274.

<sup>313</sup> G. Neelakantan, "Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth's Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*", cit., p. 35.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>315</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 280.

extraordinary talents as schoolboys.»<sup>316</sup> They both are tragic figures, «great men who fall from grace, partly because of their hubris and partly because they are caught up in historical forces beyond their control»<sup>317</sup>. They all attempted to recreate themselves. The same thing can be said of the female protagonists, like Delphine Roux.

On the one hand as heroic feats of liberation, epitomizing the quintessentially American ideal of the self-made man and the immigrant dream of successful assimilation; on the other hand as futile fantasies of escape, illustrating the limitations of American social mobility and the impossibility of transcending historical circumstances.<sup>318</sup>

Delphine is very similar to Coleman and Seymour, she is a very brilliant and talented woman but also a victim of the pastoral dream of a Utopian world, which is at the heart of America's way of thinking. Delphine too embodies the limitations of this dream, of the obstacles that immigrants had to meet once in America, and of the impossibility to abandon part of your own identity and your background. She's very similar to them but, like Merry Levov, she's far more determining than the male characters in the novel's plot, since she ends up being the agent of Coleman's downfall, not only of her own.

Physically Delphine is a «trim, tiny, dark-haired young woman with a small face that was almost entirely eyes and who weighed, clothes and all, barely a hundred pounds»<sup>319</sup>. Except for the dark hair, she physically resembles Dawn Dwyer, with her thinness and fragility. Just like Seymour's wife, she's a beautiful woman who sees her physical aspect as an obstacle but, unlike Dawn, even according to Silk, this contributes to make her feel superior and detached from reality. Also Delphine's relationship with other women is similar to that of the Swede's wife. Both are very beautiful and can't create a contact with other women. In the chapter "What maniac conceived it" we discover that «There is a cabal of three women — a philosophy professor, a sociology professor, and a

---

<sup>316</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>318</sup> *Ivi*, p. 151.

<sup>319</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 185.

history professor — who particularly drive her crazy»<sup>320</sup>. While Dawn tries to escape them, taking refuge in the relationship with her husband and in her job, Delphine would like to be included: «Another of her problems. She does not want to alienate these women».<sup>321</sup> Delphine, with her usual air of pride, justifies this snout, citing envy, and the difference between them, as the reason: «Something about Delphine makes them go green in the face»<sup>322</sup>. In a further description of the professor's clothes, we discover once again that Roth paints the figure of an impeccably dressed intellectual who trivially feels that she is on a higher level: «she wears a vintage Chanel jacket with tight jeans, or a slip dress in summer, and because she likes cashmere and leather, the women are resentful»<sup>323</sup>. Delphine also feels their judgment regarding her relationship with a man older than her:

And yet the women who don't like her are all sure that because he's powerful she has slept with him. It is incomprehensible to them that, bleak and lonely as her life is, she has no interest in becoming Arthur Sussman's little badge of a mistress. It has also gotten back to her that one of them has called her "so passé, such a parody of Simone de Beauvoir." By which she means that it is her judgment that Beauvoir sold out to Sartre — a very intelligent woman but in the end his slave. For these women, who observe her at lunch with Arthur Sussman and get it all wrong, everything is an issue, everything is an ideological stance, everything is a betrayal — everything's a selling out. Beauvoir sold out, Delphine sold out, et cetera, et cetera.<sup>324</sup>

The only woman she does not feel detested by is a colleague. Her move to America is a failure on every level, with enemies on each sides. Enemies that, in a way, she helped to create. Despite this, Delphine moves away from home because she is the perfect example of a person who has developed a sort of rebellion against her family and background, to follow her own ambitions.

---

<sup>320</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 271.

<sup>321</sup> *Ivi*, p. 270.

<sup>322</sup> *Ivi*, p. 269.

<sup>323</sup> *Ivi*, p. 270.

<sup>324</sup> *Ivi*, p. 269.

«Delphine is self-avowedly on exile in America»<sup>325</sup>. Even having left her homeland makes her feel superior:

She just did it as the next step of her ambition, and not a crude ambition either, a dignified ambition, the ambition to be independent, but now she's left with the consequences. Ambition. Adventure. Glamour. The glamour of going to America. The superiority. The superiority of leaving.[...] Left because I wanted to come home one day and have them say — what is it that I wanted them to say? “She did it. She did that. And if she did that, she can do anything. A girl who weighs a hundred and four pounds, barely five foot two, twenty years old, on her own, went there on her own with a name that didn't mean anything to anybody, and she did it. Self-made. Nobody knew her. Made herself.”<sup>326</sup>

In the previous passage she reflects on the motivations that led her to leave. «In many ways similar to Coleman, Delphine exhibits a firm determination to be “the author of [her] own life”»<sup>327</sup>, free from any constraints. However, her motivations are connected to the opinions of others. The uncertainty, the doubt expressed when she does not remember what she wanted them to ask her, emphasizes her motivations' weakness. Her reasons are related to others, more than to her own will. Delphine built a façade. «In a mood of intense self-preoccupation, the young professor meditates thus: “I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family's given, I will fight *against* the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individuality at its best—and she winds up instead in a drama beyond her control”».<sup>328</sup> The French woman wants to be the author of her life, but she loses control.

How Delphine hated all those families, the pure and ancient aristocracy of the provinces, all of them thinking the same, looking the same, sharing the same stifling values and the same stifling religious obedience. However much ambition they have, however much they push their children, they bring their children up to the same litany of charity, selflessness, discipline, faith, and respect — respect not for

---

<sup>325</sup> G. Neelakantan, “Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth's Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*”, cit., p. 35.

<sup>326</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 274.

<sup>327</sup> G. Neelakantan, “Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth's Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*”, p. 35.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibidem*.

the individual (*down* with the individual!) but for the traditions of the family.<sup>329</sup>

Unlike Coleman, Delphine creates her life in an effort to escape from her mother's shadow, with the conviction of her superiority. As Posnock explains «Her abrupt reversal from subject to object [...] is mirrored in the pronoun shift from the active “I” to the subjected “she”»<sup>330</sup>. We have already seen this rebellion, led to extremes, with Merry Levov.

Because I could not make a French success, a real success, not with my mother and her shadow over everything — the shadow of her accomplishments but, even worse, of her family, the shadow of the Walincourts [...] By coming to America, to Yale, to Athena, she had, in fact, *surpassed* her mother, who couldn't herself have dreamed of leaving France — without Delphine's father and his money, Catherine de Walincourt could hardly dream, at twenty-two, of leaving Picardy for Paris.<sup>331</sup>

In this rejection she fails to be the author of her life. Delphine Roux always thinks she's the one who has the truth, even with her family, but this is a mask for her blindness to the effect of an ill-fated self-construction. She can't see that her actions, her self-invention and the life that she carve out for herself have made her into a sort of caricature. Ultimately, she's incapable of distinguishing between good and evil. For all her plotting Delphine can't escape the inevitability of her tragedy. Even her decision to leave her family to go to America is alienating, not liberating. America represents a “counterlife” so different to the life that fueled her imagination, so opposed to reality. «Self-betrayal is finally the key to the novel's treatment of self-invention»<sup>332</sup>. This is also neatly visible in the narrative voice adopted by Roth. Much of the narrative is in indirect discourse, reporting Delphine's consciousness. The effect is the creation of a distance between the reader and the character, that undermines ironically the position that

---

<sup>329</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 275.

<sup>330</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., p. 199.

<sup>331</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 275.

<sup>332</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 155.

she has also in others' lives. «Fleeing the nets cast by her family, her admirers, and her nation to carve out for herself a distinct identity in America, Delphine has unwittingly allowed herself to be ensnared in the nets of alien customs, mores, and habits.»<sup>333</sup> Lacking self-knowledge, she, if anything, harbors the belief and illusion that she has accurately evaluated Coleman and his case but «She is not even fully aware of her tragedy.»<sup>334</sup> Like Merry Levov, she soon learns that she must pay for her disavowals of some part of herself and her life. According to Philip Roth's view which, as we have seen, appears not only in this novel, the subject can't live outside history. The human stain is also the identity created by and through history. Who we are is a product of history and we can't betray it. In support of this thesis, is no accident that Delphine's attempt to create a new identity unfettered by any influences of her successful mother and her French family ends up in a failure. Shostak maintains «As Faulkner suggests in such novels as *Absalom, Absalom!* And *Light in August*, efforts to repudiate one's genealogy inevitably elicit punishment in American society».<sup>335</sup> She's different from Coleman because, like Merry Levov, she starts from a privileged position, which she repudiates, in name of the plurality represented by America. She betrays her family, she betrays Coleman and herself. Her desire to be in control of her life is colored by a sort of romanticism, but soon becomes just an illusion. She sends the e-mail just by accident, she mails the letter to Coleman out in an impulse, she definitely can't control anything. Her heroic struggle to control her life is ill-fated because is an infantile fantasy of self-rebirth, of omnipotence outside space and time. As Nathan thinks toward the end of the novel:

The man who decides to forge a distinct historical destiny, who sets out to spring the historical lock, and who does so, brilliantly succeeds at altering his personal lot, only to be ensnared by the history he hadn't quite counted on: the history that isn't yet history, the history

---

<sup>333</sup> G. Neelakantan, "Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth's Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*", p. 36.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>335</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 155.

that the clock is now ticking off, the history proliferating as I write, accruing a minute at a time and grasped better by the future than it will ever be by us. The we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mind of one's country, the stranglehold of history that is one's own time.<sup>336</sup>

### 3.2.2. Antithetical Women: Delphine and Marcia Umanoff

Delphine Roux is exactly the opposite of Marcia Umanoff. Marcia is a character who appears at the end of another novel of the trilogy, *American Pastoral*, in the chapter "Paradise Lost". Mark Shechner considers her «one of its [American Pastoral] most vivid inventions».<sup>337</sup> Marcia is a friend of the Levov's family who's present at their dinner party. She is a literature professor in New York, like Delphine Roux.

During the famous dinner the woman discusses with Lou Levov, Seymour's father, about the movie *Deep Throat*, its star Linda Lovelace and what the movie's popularity tells about the morality of America. Marcia tells the man that «social conditions may have altered in America since you were taking the kids to eat at the Chinks»<sup>338</sup>. Lou replies: «This is the morality of a country that we're talking about. Well, isn't it? Am I nuts? It is an affront to decency and to decent people»<sup>339</sup>. Marcia answers that it is through real transgression that people obtain knowledge, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: «And what... is so inexhaustibly interesting about decency?»<sup>340</sup> she says. «Well that ain't what they taught me... about the Garden of Eden»<sup>341</sup> replies Lou. For the man, the story of the Garden of Eden means that «when God above tells you not to do something, you damn well don't do it – that's what. Do it and you pay the piper. Do it and

---

<sup>336</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 335.

<sup>337</sup> Marc Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, cit., p. 216.

<sup>338</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 342.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibidem*.



you will suffer from it for the rest of your days.»<sup>342</sup> This conversation is implicitly connected to Meredith because of what, earlier that day, Seymour saw about his daughter's life. The result of transgression is the desolation and the isolation in which Merry lives. Shostak affirms: «Not surprisingly, Roth depicts Marcia Umanoff as a proponent of the film—a mark of the place often reserved for academics in satirical portraits of the New Left»<sup>343</sup>.

The two women are the opposite of each other. They both attract dislikes but, if Delphine Roux is described as an intelligent woman, with a prestigious background, Marcia is defined as «slob»<sup>344</sup>. Dawn Dwyer says to her husband that «A pig has more humanity in her than that woman does! I don't care how many degrees she has – she is callous and she is blind!»<sup>345</sup>

While «Delphine's words are intended to conceal their emptiness through the use of complicated terminology»<sup>346</sup>, while she hides herself behind the use of rhetoric and complicated terms, Marcia is «all talk, always had been: senseless, ostentatious talk, words with the sole purpose of scandalously exhibiting themselves.»<sup>347</sup> She is considered by Seymour Levov as «a militant nonconformist of staggering self-certainty much given to sarcasm and calculatedly apocalyptic pronouncements designed to bring discomfort to the lords of the earth»<sup>348</sup> and a «difficult person»<sup>349</sup>. The narrator calls her the «professor of transgression».<sup>350</sup> Both women hide the emptiness of their lives behind their discourses. While «the emptiness of Marcia's words is concealed through their exposure, through their very scandalousness»<sup>351</sup>, while her words are always scandalous and she's not scared to articulate them, on the contrary, the words of the French professor are always measured, but disconnected from

---

<sup>342</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 342.

<sup>343</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>344</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 340.

<sup>345</sup> *Ivi*, p. 342.

<sup>346</sup> S. S. Christiansen, «Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*», cit., pp. 77-78.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>348</sup> P. Roth, *American Pastoral*, cit., p. 339.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>350</sup> *Ivi*, p. 365.

<sup>351</sup> S. S. Christiansen, «Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*», cit., pp. 77-78.

the experience of real life. They exist solely for themselves and for others, for the response they can produce. As Posnock says:

The prominence of language and of acts of analytical scrutiny in *The Human Stain* alert us to the impact words have, including, as in “spooks”, their incorrigible consequences that take on a life of their own, beyond our control. They alert us as well to the solicitations that artifacts great and small make upon us, demands that are analogous to what brings this novel into being—Nathan feeling “seized” by Coleman’s “story” (327).<sup>352</sup>

### 3.3. Faunia Farley

Coleman’s relationship with the university janitor Faunia Farley is fundamental in the novel. Their relationship is central for the plot because it has a major effect on how Coleman is considered inside the Athena community.

Faunia Farley is introduced for the very first time in the novel, in the first chapter “Everyone Knows”, during the famous scene of the dance between Nathan Zuckerman and Coleman Silk. During this dance Coleman tells Zuckerman an unexpected revelation: he’s having a sexual relationship with a younger woman, named Faunia. This scene, with the dance and the news of the renewed sexual voracity of his friend, sanctions a very important moment for Nathan. A moment he defines as a sort of losing balance and, for this reason, also a moment of rebirth. The rebirth and rediscovery of unconscious impulses hitherto repressed, of a life that he considered arrived to a point of no return. Sex here, as in many other scenes written by Philip Roth, amplifies and renews the understanding of facts, of ourselves and others. According to the character-narrator, sex brings «the falseness, the dissembling, the dual being, the erotic *professionalism*.»<sup>353</sup> The «transgressive audacity»<sup>354</sup> of Coleman’s sexual

---

<sup>352</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., pp. 195-196.

<sup>353</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibidem*.

adventure makes Zuckerman explore how desire is something that «keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are»<sup>355</sup>.

The first thing Silk says about his woman is that she is thirty-four-year-old: «It was when we sat down that Coleman told me about the woman. “I’m having an affair, Nathan. I’m having an affair with a thirty-four-year-old woman. I can’t tell you what it’s done to me.”»<sup>356</sup> The second thing Coleman says about her is that she’s «And ignitable. An ignitable woman. She’s turned sex into a vice again.»<sup>357</sup> and Nathan replies «La Belle Dame sans Merci hath thee in thrall.»<sup>358</sup> He adds that «It’s perfect with somebody seventy-one. He’s set in his ways and he can’t change. You know what he is. No surprises.»<sup>359</sup> Nathan then asks four precise questions to the friend to find out more about her. The first one is «What’s made her so wise?». Coleman answers that Faunia, in her life, had to suffer numerous misfortunes, which he ironically calls surprises:

“Surprises. Thirty-four years of savage surprises have given her wisdom. But it’s a very narrow, antisocial wisdom. It’s savage, too. It’s the wisdom of somebody who expects nothing. That’s her wisdom, and that’s her dignity, but it’s negative wisdom, and that’s not the kind that keeps you on course day to day. This is a woman whose life’s been trying to grind her down almost for as long as she’s had life. Whatever she’s learned comes from that.”<sup>360</sup>

He uses the adjective “savage” twice. As we will see, this is an adjective that properly defines the figure of this woman. The second question is: «Where did you find her?» to which he replies:

“I went to pick up my mail at the end of the day and there she was, mopping the floor. She’s the skinny blonde who sometimes cleans out the post office. She’s on the regular janitorial staff at Athena. She’s a

---

<sup>355</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 37.

<sup>356</sup> *Ivi*, p. 26.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>358</sup> *Ivi*, p. 27.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibidem*.

full-time janitor where I was once dean. The woman has nothing. Faunia Farley. That's her name. Faunia has absolutely nothing."<sup>361</sup>

The third is: «Why has she nothing?»

“She had a husband. He beat her so badly she ended up in a coma. They had a dairy farm. He ran it so badly it went bankrupt. She had two children. A space heater tipped over, caught fire, and both children were asphyxiated. Aside from the ashes of the two children that she keeps in a canister under her bed, she owns nothing of value except an '83 Chevy. The only time I've seen her come close to crying was when she told me, 'I don't know what to do with the ashes.' Rural disaster has squeezed Faunia dry of even her tears. And she began life a rich, privileged kid. Brought up in a big sprawling house south of Boston. Fireplaces in the five bedrooms, the best antiques, heirloom china — everything old and the best, the family included. She can be surprisingly well spoken if she wants to be. But she's dropped so far down the social ladder from so far up that by now she's a pretty mixed bag of verbal beans. Faunia's been exiled from the entitlement that should have been hers. Declasse. There's a real democratization to her suffering.”<sup>362</sup>

The fourth, and last, is «What undid her?» to which Coleman replies:

“A stepfather undid her. Upper-bourgeois evil undid her. There was a divorce when she was five. The prosperous father caught the beautiful mother having an affair. The mother liked money, remarried money, and the rich stepfather wouldn't leave Faunia alone. Fondling her from the day he arrived. Couldn't stay away from her. This blond angelic child, fondling her, fingering her — it's when he tried fucking her that she ran away. She was fourteen. The mother refused to believe her. They took her to a psychiatrist. Faunia told the psychiatrist what happened, and after ten sessions the psychiatrist too sided with the stepfather. 'Takes the side of those who pay him,' Faunia says. 'Just like everyone.' The mother had an affair with the psychiatrist afterward. That is the story, as she reports it, of what launched her into the life of a tough having to make her way on her own. Ran away from home, from high school, went down south, worked there, came back up this way, got whatever work she could, and at twenty married this farmer, older than herself, a dairy farmer, a Vietnam vet, thinking that if they worked hard and raised kids and made the farm work she could have a stable, ordinary life, even if the

---

<sup>361</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 27-28.

<sup>362</sup> *Ivi*, p. 28.

guy was on the dumb side. Especially if he was on the dumb side. She thought she might be better off being the one with the brains. She thought that was her advantage. She was wrong. All they had together was trouble. The farm failed. ‘Jerk-off,’ she tells me, ‘bought one tractor too many.’ And regularly beat her up. Beat her black and blue. You know what she presents as the high point of the marriage? The event she calls ‘the great warm shit fight.’ One evening they are in the barn after the milking arguing about something, and a cow next to her takes a big shit, and Faunia picks up a handful and flings it in Lester’s face. He flings a handful back, and that’s how it started. She said to me, ‘The warm shit fight may have been the best time we had together.’ At the end, they were covered with cow shit and roaring with laughter, and, after washing off with the hose in the barn, they went up to the house to fuck. But that was carrying a good thing too far. That wasn’t one-hundredth of the fun of the fight. Fucking Lester wasn’t ever fun — according to Faunia, he didn’t know how to do it. ‘Too dumb even to fuck right.’<sup>363</sup>

Nathan’s questions are very brief and essential, punctuated almost rhythmically, to go straight to the point. Thanks to them, we come to know that Faunia has a very turbulent past, she was abused by her stepfather, then she went through a violent marriage with the veteran Les Farley and eventually her two children died in a fire. However, Faunia has learned to cope with this troubled history and to react. «For example, Coleman explains to Zuckerman how she has “the laugh of a barmaid who keeps a baseball bat at her feet in case of trouble [...] the coarse, easy laugh of a woman with a past”.»<sup>364</sup> This distressing past has led her to use some protective strategies, such as irony: «the then-boyfriend not only beat her up and trashed her apartment, he stole her vibrator. “That hurt,” Faunia said»<sup>365</sup> and, especially, faking the analphabetism.

The community sees Faunia’s illiteracy as a defect, as a disability. This explains why they consider her a victim of Coleman’s, not the contrary. She’s not seen as the avid *femme fatale* ready to shake some money out of Coleman. Instead, for Faunia, the choice of hiding and denying that she can read means denying her painful past, her background and also protecting herself in the future.

---

<sup>363</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 28-29.

<sup>364</sup> A. J. Connolly, “Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition since FDR”, cit., p. 209.

<sup>365</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 40.

This choice is future oriented as much as it is past oriented. She is the opposite of Delphine Roux, who invents and manipulates words to achieve her goals and who wants to be the author of her life. Farley does not want to be an author at all, she escapes narrative and she also escapes the possible dangerous consequences of language. She protects herself. Furthermore:

For Faunia words are unnecessary because they are inadequate; they can never convey the brutal realities of her life's history. Indeed she recognizes their tendency to aestheticize and thereby alter real, lived experience [...] Faunia resists being subsumed into an overarching narrative and her refusal to read or write is part of this negation of simplistic explanation, her repudiation of the backstory.<sup>366</sup>

And yet, there is only one possible reading for the society, and for professor Delphine Roux. The novel exposes the problem that what matters to people is not what the couple truly is, but how they see and interpret them. They all have prejudices and strongly react against the supposed abuser, who's fired and excluded from the community. What they can't know is that Faunia and Coleman are very similar, since they both feel the same kind of shame towards their background and they both rejected their family, like Delphine Roux did too. They both changed their identities somehow, but in doing so, they also had to lose something. David Tenenbaum, for this reason, affirms that Coleman starts the relationship with the woman because of their similarity:

Coleman Silk hopes to find in Faunia's own sense of degradation a refuge from his drive to overcome the stigma of his race. [...] Roth creates an ethnic prototype, a man whose effort to escape the associations of his ethnicity through the cultural Other ultimately alienates him from the identity that he hopes to realize.<sup>367</sup>

Coleman's wish is to escape his blackness, not to become Jewish, as he became, but just to be an individual, unrestricted by any racial category. With the "spooks affair", he falls into the categorization trap again. The safety net he finds is

---

<sup>366</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, cit., p. 88.

<sup>367</sup> Tenenbaum David, "Race, Class, and Shame in the Fiction of Philip Roth", *Shofar*, vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 34-49. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/42944195?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/42944195?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

Faunia. She's free from the «social ways of thinking»<sup>368</sup>. With her, he's not Jewish, white or black, young or old, he's just a man. He asks her, «Where did I find you, Voluptas? [...] Who are you?»<sup>369</sup>, and she replies, «I am whatever you want».<sup>370</sup> Faunia managed to escape from stereotypes. He sees a refuge in her, not a simple sexual object, nor the grown up Lolita who needs to be taught to write and read by an authoritative figure. Zuckerman eventually discovers she's actually literate, so that they are equals.

Faunia is not only the sexual object through which Coleman is able to exhibit his Viagra-induced physical prowess but the racial Other that illuminates for the protagonist his misdirected energies. Faunia comes from a wealthy background, but her status as part of the white majority gives her the freedom to degrade herself without the stigma that hounds Coleman. Silk is driven towards Faunia out of a passionate admiration for her pursuit of failure that assuages his lifelong guilt but is ultimately a reification of the racial associations that he has sought to escape<sup>371</sup>

According to Hayes:

Faunia not only finds everything in Coleman's earlier life irrelevant, she has little more than contempt for the great drive to achieve equal recognition through literacy that was pioneered by Clarence Silk, and extended by his son Walter, his daughter Ernestine and his granddaughter Lisa. Against their earnest devotion to the social hope that America might be made a less unjust place if linguistic, and symbolic capital were spread about more equally, Faunia actually seeks to abjure language itself, delighting in the caws of the crow, pretending to be illiterate, and coming on dumb in every way but the erotic. "All the social ways of thinking, shut 'em down" (230): that is the far horizon of her philosophy, and there is no doubting that *The Human Stain* does much to seduce its readers into sharing her contempt for the sheer triviality<sup>372</sup>

However, there is a difference between them. Faunia is only hiding a part of her identity: her literacy and her past. In contrast to Coleman's aversion to his social

---

<sup>368</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 229.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>370</sup> *Ivi*, p. 234.

<sup>371</sup> Tenenbaum David, "Race, Class, and Shame in the Fiction of Philip Roth", cit., p. 34-49.

<sup>372</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., pp. 234-235.

status, Faunia willingly embraces her social position as a marginalized. When, after her death, Nathan discovers she was born inside a wealthy family and left a written diary, he describes how she passed «in the opposite direction to Coleman: from a privileged social background to a degraded condition»<sup>373</sup>. This makes her better protected from public view than Coleman, who actually actively invents and develops his identity. This constructed identity is not «well suited to resist inquiry»<sup>374</sup>. Coleman is no longer protected inside society as he would have been if he stayed inside his original position. Now he has to defend himself.

Another device Faunia uses to protect herself is sex: «When I asked, ‘What do you want from me?’ she said, ‘Some companionship. Maybe some knowledge. Sex. Pleasure. Don’t worry. That’s it.’»<sup>375</sup> Silk says. Sex and death are strictly connected in *The Human Stain*. Coleman also recognizes and tells Zuckerman that:

In bed is the only place where Faunia is in any way shrewd, Nathan. A spontaneous physical shrewdness plays the leading role in bed — second lead played by transgressive audacity. In bed nothing escapes Faunia’s attention. Her flesh has eyes. Her flesh sees everything. In bed she is a powerful, coherent, unified being whose pleasure is in overstepping the boundaries. In bed she is a deep phenomenon. Maybe that’s a gift of the molestation. When we go downstairs to the kitchen, when I scramble some eggs and we sit there eating together, she’s a kid. Maybe that’s a gift of the molestation too. I am in the company of a blank-eyed, distracted, incoherent kid. This happens nowhere else. But whenever we eat, there it is: me and my kid. Seems to be all the daughter that’s left in her. She can’t sit up straight in her chair, she can’t string two sentences together having anything to do with each other. All the seeming nonchalance about sex and tragedy, all of that disappears, and I’m sitting there wanting to say to her, ‘Pull yourself up to the table, get the sleeve of my bathrobe out of your plate, try to listen to what I’m saying, and look at me, damn it, when you speak.’»<sup>376</sup>

---

<sup>373</sup> A. J. Connolly, “Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition since FDR”, cit., p. 211.

<sup>374</sup> A. Hiitti, “The Country Turns on its Sons—American Tragedies in Philip Roth’s *American Trilogy*”, 2013. <https://bit.ly/2tnVT61>

<sup>375</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 30.

<sup>376</sup> *Ivi*, p. 31.



Sex has a fundamental importance in the life of this woman, both for the harassment suffered as a child, and now, as an adult who sometimes still has childish behavior, as if it were still related to the childhood that she could not have. «Faunia seeks to live outside history, the fantasy of forever, with all its potential for uncontrollable event—a condition she attains only in sex.»<sup>377</sup> explains Shostak. According to Hayes, to Faunia:

the only thing that matters is the “great fucking” that comes with transmuted rage, and Coleman’s stupendous self-creation is just a bridge to that rage. To her Coleman’s life before the moment of their sexual encounter simply amounts to “a load of assholes not liking him—it’s not a big deal” (234) “You really think that this is the important stuff in the world? It’s not that important”, she thinks, “It’s not important at all” (235).<sup>378</sup>

There is a scene in which Zuckerman describes him and Coleman watching the woman doing her job on a dairy farm. In this scene, which the narrator describes as «a theatrical performance in which I had played the part of a walk-on, an extra»<sup>379</sup>, Faunia is milking cows. Her job is enriched with erotic hues in the eyes of her spectators, but also with visceral images.

she was in motion constantly, fixed unwaveringly on each stage of the milking but, in exaggerated contrast to their stubborn docility, moving all the time with a beelike adroitness until the milk was streaming through the clear milk tube into the shining stainless-steel pail, and she at last stood quietly by, watching to make certain that everything was working and that the cow too was standing quietly. Then she was again in motion, massaging the udder to be sure the cow was milked out, removing the teat cups, pouring out the feed portion for the cow she would be milking after undoing the milked cow from the stanchion, getting the grain for the next cow in front of the alternate stanchion, and then, within the confines of that smallish space, grabbing the milked cow by the collar again and maneuvering her great bulk around, backing her up with a push, shoving her with a shoulder, bossily telling her, “Get out, get on out of here, just get—” and leading her back through the mud to the shed.<sup>380</sup>

---

<sup>377</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., p. 261.

<sup>378</sup> P. Hayes, *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*, cit., pp. 234-235.

<sup>379</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>380</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 48-49.

The scene is like a frame taken by the eye of a camera. This camera is on Faunia, while she performs her duty, with the two spectators who are silently watching her. Zuckerman describes how she's dressed: «spattered with dirt, wearing shorts and a T-shirt and rubber boots»<sup>381</sup>. She is always dressed in a very simple way, even later, when Zuckerman meets her for the second time: «She wore faded jeans and a pair of moccasins — as did Coleman — and, with the sleeves rolled up, an old button-down tattersall shirt that I recognized as one of his.»<sup>382</sup> Despite her dresses, she is still charming, as if her grace did not need clothes to be emphasized. Then he illustrates how she physically is:

thin-legged, thin-wristed, thin-armed, with clearly discernible ribs and shoulder blades that protruded, and yet when she tensed you saw that her limbs were hard; when she reached or stretched for something you saw that her breasts were surprisingly substantial; and when, because of the flies and the gnats buzzing the herd on this close summer day, she slapped at her neck or her backside, you saw something of how frisky she could be, despite the otherwise straight-up style. You saw that her body was something more than efficiently lean and severe, that she was a firmly made woman precipitously poised at the moment when she is no longer ripening but not yet deteriorating, a woman in the prime of her prime, whose fistful of white hairs is fundamentally beguiling just because the sharp Yankee contour of her cheeks and her jaw and the long unmistakably female neck haven't yet been subject to the transformations of aging.<sup>383</sup>

Almost physically masculine, Faunia has made of her body a work tool. Even later she is always described by Zuckerman for what she lacks:

I realized then that she was quite lacking in something, and I didn't mean the capacity to attend to small talk. What I meant I would have named if I could. It wasn't intelligence. It wasn't poise. It wasn't decorum or decency — she could pull off that ploy easily enough. It wasn't depth — shallowness wasn't the problem. It wasn't inwardness — one saw that inwardly she was dealing with plenty. It wasn't sanity — she was sane and, in a slightly sheepish way, haughty-seeming as

---

<sup>381</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>382</sup> *Ivi*, p. 211.

<sup>383</sup> *Ivi*, p. 49.

well, superior through the authority of her suffering. Yet a piece of her was decidedly not there.<sup>384</sup>

Thin, «austere. Little, if anything, to be learned from the eyes. Decidedly uneloquent face»<sup>385</sup>, absent sensuality, «Sensuality? Nil. Nowhere to be seen. Outside the milking parlor, everything alluring shut down. She had managed to make herself so that *she* wasn't even here to be seen. The skill of an animal, whether predator or prey»<sup>386</sup>, she does not catch the attention. Also her face lacks something: «Faunia, whose sculpted Yankee features made me think of a narrow room with windows in it but no door.»<sup>387</sup> Even if she's not beautiful in the traditional sense of the term, like characters such as Delphine Roux or Dawn Dwyer, she's still attractive.

In all, Faunia was not the enticing siren who takes your breath away but a clean-cut-looking woman about whom one thinks, As a child she must have been very beautiful. Which she was: according to Coleman, a golden, beautiful child with a rich stepfather who wouldn't leave her alone and a spoiled mother who wouldn't protect her.<sup>388</sup>

Remembering this milking episode, after that the two lovers have been killed by Faunia's crazy husband Les Farley, Zuckerman stresses its importance. The scene is a moment of sexual awakening and craving. A moment of libidinousness for the old Coleman, but also for Nathan, who describes it: «they could distill to an orgasmic essence everything about them that was irreconcilable, the human discrepancies that produced all the power».<sup>389</sup> While Nathan depicts «an enamored old man watching at work the cleaning woman-farmhand who is secretly his paramour»<sup>390</sup>, the pleasure the two men share in watching her, working with the cows, will soon be contrasted by the way in which she will later describe her own job, deprived of every eroticism, as a

---

<sup>384</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., pp. 211-212.

<sup>385</sup> *Ivi*, p. 211.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>387</sup> *Ivi*, p. 207.

<sup>388</sup> *Ivi*, p. 50.

<sup>389</sup> *Ivi*, p. 47.

<sup>390</sup> *Ivi*, p. 51.

struggle and a load that destroys her. As her first name suggests, «Faunia embodies a pastoral ideal of womanhood»<sup>391</sup>, but she's not like that. She affirms that «the dairy farm is a lot of fucking work, to you it sounds great and to you it looks great, Faunia and the cows, but coming on top of everything else it breaks my fucking hump».<sup>392</sup> She brings her lover back to reality. However, sex, as we have seen, is a jump-start for the plot of the novel, as well as a thematic counterpoint to the violence all through Faunia's life. Sexual re-awakening and death are placed in syntactic proximity and this will increase throughout the novel until it will reach the highest climax with the death of the two protagonists. Their relationship has a purpose besides the simple sexual gratification: an intellectual liberation. Both characters, in fact, defend side by side their rights as individuals, and their relation is initially a success. With the benefit of a broader perspective given by sexual liberation, Coleman's life now appears to be less of a failure with no more purposes. The scene is also a moment of suspension of time. The two male protagonists remain in a silent corner while the camera is on Faunia Farley:

Coleman remained outside the stall looking in and let her get on with the job without having to bother to talk to him. Often they said nothing, because saying nothing intensified their pleasure. She knew he was watching her; knowing she knew, he watched all the harder — and that they weren't able to couple down in the dirt didn't make a scrap of difference. It was enough that they should be alone together somewhere *other* than in his bed<sup>393</sup>

And it is also a suspension of aging, a suspension of death, by recalling: «the injunction upon us, [...] not merely to endure but to *live*, to go on taking, giving, feeding, milking, acknowledging wholeheartedly, as the enigma that it is, the pointless meaningfulness of living».<sup>394</sup> After the protagonists are dead, that day is a moment stolen from death, a fragment which stands against the emptiness of

---

<sup>391</sup> D. Brauner, *Philip Roth*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>392</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 227.

<sup>393</sup> *Ivi*, p. 47.

<sup>394</sup> *Ivi*, p. 52.

reality, of existence. The episode is reported with a lot of tiny details: «all was recorded as real by tens of thousands of minute impressions. The sensory fullness, the copiousness, the abundant — superabundant — detail of life, which is the rhapsody»<sup>395</sup>. Even if they died, they can re-emerge in that plethora of impressions: «Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes, either. And nothing passes just because nothing lasts».<sup>396</sup> Coleman and Faunia share a sort of timeless, transcendent moment of eroticism, in which Nathan is included only as spectator. It is a time of pause from the chaotic reality of life. However, as he says, they are now dead and this is a reminder to us that this fragment, crystalized over time, won't pass, even if they are not alive anymore. This scene also serves as an objective correlative of what writing is for Nathan, and for Philip Roth. The effort of the author is to save his literary subjects from death, from the void, but also from the falsehood and incomprehension of the banality of the “everyone knows”, which represents rumors and superficiality, but which speaks for the real concrete meaning of what human existence is: the fact that every claim to truth is an assumption, because nobody really knows. This literary approach characterizes Nathan Zuckerman, whose technique is to imaginatively create lives, haunted by a thanatological threat, starting from a single piece, and then inventing the missing parts of the puzzle, of which he only has a few pieces:

«I can't know. Now that they're dead, nobody can know. For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do.»<sup>397</sup>

This is something which Faunia Farley has already understood. She's a sort of feminine version of Zuckerman too, not only of Coleman's. When Nathan imagines Coleman asking her what's the worst job she has ever done, she tells him about when she has been payed to clean up a cabin where a man had killed himself with a shotgun. She also says that she has been investigating to find a

---

<sup>395</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 52.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>397</sup> *Ivi*, p. 213.

reason for the suicide and that she had concluded he forgot to take his medications. Then Coleman Silk ask her «How do you know this?»<sup>398</sup> and she answers «I'm assuming, I don't know. This is my own story. This is my story»<sup>399</sup>. It's her story. This is the same thing that Nathan does: he assumes.<sup>400</sup> In a room full of death, she enters in competition with death, just as he does. «Both do not shun death but instead contemplate it in order to answer the question concerning the why; [...] Both are also interested in the worst and not the best»<sup>401</sup> affirms Pia Masiero. To do this, Zuckerman ventriloquizes his characters. He «picked up the sassy vibrations of that straight-out talk that was hers».<sup>402</sup> In the chapter “What Do You Do with the Kid Who Can't Read”, Zuckerman imagines Faunia leaving Coleman and going to see a crow at a wildlife reserve. Here Nathan gives voice to her thoughts. Everything is seen through the eyes of the woman, who's fascinated by this kind of bird:

There are men who are locked up in women's bodies and women who are locked up in men's bodies, so why can't I be a crow locked up in this body? Yeah, and where is the doctor who is going to do what they do to let me out? Where do I go to get the surgery that will let me be what I am? Who do I talk to? Where do I go and what do I do and how the fuck do I get out?

I am a crow. I know it. I know it!<sup>403</sup>

This crow, named Prince, has learned his own language by imitating the kids. He has learned to imitate, as humans do. Here the line diving men and beasts is crossed. Prince is another side of Faunia:

Like Nathan, Faunia, and Coleman, Prince participates in the unstoppable circulation of mimetic and inferential impressions; his mimicry of mimicry infers and fashions a voice. [...] Here, in her mimetic receptivity to Prince, Faunia unwittingly underlines the

---

<sup>398</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 339.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>400</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., p. 207.

<sup>401</sup> P. Masiero, *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, cit., p. 189.

<sup>402</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 338.

<sup>403</sup> *Ivi*, p. 169.

novel's animating technique—the impersonations Nathan assembles into a collocation of invented voices.<sup>404</sup>

There, she also imagines that this bird has been alienated from the others crows by hanging around with humans too much. The crow is now dirty of humanity. Then, because of this crow, she explains the concept of the human stain:

we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen — there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity?<sup>405</sup>

She does not believe in the fantasy of purity, she thinks we should all be «reconciled to the horrible, elemental imperfection»<sup>406</sup> because every quest for purity is useless, since humanity is irretrievably not pure. This concept, which underlines the entire trilogy, also gives its title to the novel, *The Human Stain*, and it can be thus summarized: any doctrine that does not comprehend a stain, all the filthier, obscene aspects of life, the inevitability of transgression will soon fail. This view simply represents the most crucial aspect of humanity. Faunia is the one who expresses it. She is a character who's strictly connected with these aspects of existence, and to all that is essential and animalistic, as she represents for Coleman an individualism free from any racial restriction. Farley is so free that she is often associated with the beasts. Coleman's lawyer, Nelson Primus, also defines her «everything that is the antithesis of your own way of life».<sup>407</sup>

Then Zuckerman stops voicing her and starts again talking about her:

She's like the Greeks, like Coleman's Greeks. Like their gods. They're petty. They quarrel. They fight. They hate. They murder.

---

<sup>404</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., p. 219.

<sup>405</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 242.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>407</sup> *Ivi*, p. 157.

They fuck. All their Zeus ever wants to do is to fuck — goddesses, mortals, heifers, she-bears — and not merely in his own form but, even more excitingly, as himself made manifest as beast. To hugely mount a woman as a bull. To enter her bizarrely as a flailing white swan. There is never enough flesh for the king of the gods or enough perversity. All the craziness desire brings. The dissoluteness. The depravity. The crudest pleasures. And the fury from the all-seeing wife.<sup>408</sup>

He compares three different religions and affirms that the Greek Gods are better because they are closer to humans. While the Hebrew God is «infinitely alone, infinitely obscure»<sup>409</sup> and the Christian one is: «the perfectly desexualized Christian man-god and his uncontaminated mother and all the guilt and shame that an exquisite unearthliness inspires»<sup>410</sup>, Zeus is:

entangled in adventure, vividly expressive, capricious, sensual, exuberantly wedded to his own rich existence, anything but alone and anything but hidden. Instead the *divine* stain. A great reality-reflecting religion for Faunia Farley if, through Coleman, she'd known anything about it. As the hubristic fantasy has it, made in the image of God, all right, but not ours—*theirs*. God debauched. God corrupted. A god of life if ever there was one. God in the image of *man*.<sup>411</sup>

The ancient gods are more similar to Faunia, the woman who, by faking her analphabetism, has renounced «the entire western written culture»<sup>412</sup>, which is mostly based on Christianity, and who's at the bottom of society, free from any ideals of purity and perfection, a Dionysian woman.

In the chapter “What Maniac Conceived it?” Faunia is similar to a goddess, performing a dance which has a sort of ritual power. The woman is dancing in front of her naked man. This dance starts as an act wanted by Silk, who asks her to dance *The Man I Love* for him, but it rapidly becomes something more profound. Both are naked and we have a description of her body, covered in «spots where she's been bitten and strung, a hair of his, an ampersand of his hair

---

<sup>408</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 242.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>412</sup> S. S. Christiansen, “Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*”, cit., p. 51.



like a dainty grayish mole adhering to her cheek»<sup>413</sup>, of her skin «scarred in half a dozen places, one kneecap abraded like a child's»<sup>414</sup>, with «threadlike cuts healed on both her arms and legs»<sup>415</sup>, her «graying yellow hair»<sup>416</sup>, her hands «roughened, reddened»<sup>417</sup>. She's showing her "stain" to him and to us readers. According to Debra Shostak:

This amalgam—the scars and scrapes, the hair and fluids—is where the body meets the world, and it is the lived experience of being human. [...] here we see that "stain" is something more like "experience", the messy and mess-making experience of being human. Roth highlights the abject body here—the private and socially shameful aspects of the body that have no socially sanctioned place or language in public life—and in doing so suggests that Coleman and Faunia are in fact dwelling in abjection, literally outcast from the sphere of the social, as Faunia would have it.<sup>418</sup>

While she's moving, at the same time she's also constantly talking, explaining she does not want to give any significance to their relationship except to the sexual one: «I'm dancing in front of you naked with the lights on, and you're naked too, and all the other stuff doesn't matter. It's the simplest thing we've ever done –it's it. Don't fuck it up by thinking it's more than this. [...] It doesn't have to be more than this».<sup>419</sup> The dance captures a moment in which for Faunia the only thing that matters is «this»<sup>420</sup> which represents, that precise erotic moment, what she calls «that slice out of time».<sup>421</sup> She also asks Coleman to repeat it. She wants to explain that «Last night? It happened. It was nice. It was wonderful. I needed it too. But I still have three jobs. It didn't change anything.»<sup>422</sup> She's saying that, with her, he can only afford a temporal pleasure

---

<sup>413</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 226.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>415</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>416</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>417</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>418</sup> D. Shostak, *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, cit., pp. 75-76.

<sup>419</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 228.

<sup>420</sup> *Ivi*, p. 229.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>422</sup> *Ibidem.*

from their problems, from life, from «everything the wonderful society is asking».<sup>423</sup> Despite the erotic euphoria of this romantic moment, she has no illusions about their relationship, about the «indulgence of the fantasy of forever»<sup>424</sup>. She tries to bring him back to reality. At a certain point she even tells him «I see you»,<sup>425</sup> suggesting that she sees him falling in love with her but also:

I see who and what you are, without judgement, and, crucially, without scripted expectations. [...] she spends the rest of the dance demanding that he not fall in love, that he hold onto nothing but this moment of joy and thrill, that he refuses the typical outcomes of love, including a straight relationship, social approval through marriage, and a narrative life. [...] Faunia refuses the social, and in doing so she alone can see Coleman for what he is: not his race or any of his other secrets, but that self that precedes and exceeds the social and public scrutiny that would require secrets in the first place.<sup>426</sup>

By trapping this moment, out of space and time, blocking it, to enjoy it and make it eternal, without thinking about the after, without thinking of a relationship, Faunia exactly tries to do what Nathan Zuckerman wants to do as an author. Zuckerman later also hypothesizes that Coleman told his secret to Faunia. Since no one knows, and he will say it himself, referring to Delphine, since claiming to know is a trivialization of reality, an absurd claim, Nathan imagines that there is someone who actually knows part of the truth, and this someone is Faunia. Faunia who has secrets too, who is a feminine version of Coleman, going in the opposite direction, and of Zuckerman. «Nathan creates for Coleman and Faunia a private experience and a private language, not one that can be translated for the reader»<sup>427</sup> says Shostak. The dance too happens out of space and time, since there are no evidences in the plot about Coleman telling his friend Nathan about it. At the same time «her imperative [is] to “just keep moving”, as if continual motion

---

<sup>423</sup> P. Roth, *The Human Stain*, cit., p. 228.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>426</sup> D. B. Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*, cit., pp. 76-77.

<sup>427</sup> *Ivi*, p. 78.

creates undifferentiated experience that avoids congealing into sentiment, as if her dancing enacts acceptance of time's flow»<sup>428</sup> says Ross Posnock.

---

<sup>428</sup> R. Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth The Art of Immaturity*, cit., p. 216.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis the importance of the female characters in the *American Trilogy* has been demonstrated, not only for the part they play in the lives of male protagonists but as extremely lively characters, and it has been shown how, with their charm and richness, they delegitimize and undo scripts of misogyny attributed to Philip Roth. To do that, I have closely analyzed the six female protagonists in Roth's three novels. I have examined their life narratives with particular attention to the characteristics that make them exceptionally vivid characters, their turns and, eventually, outcomes, their strong impact on the male protagonists' lives and how they get immersed in the changes in the society while searching for their independence, denuded of any ethnic constraints or, in some cases, how they are products and archetypes of a society that has already changed. I have also focused on the similarities between them and with their male counterparts: similarly to them their attempts to move from their ethnic identity, their demands for autonomy, are eventually punished.

Based on the assumption that many critics have accused Roth of misogyny and hostility towards women in his *American Trilogy*, both because these characters are always seen through the male protagonist's eyes and because they are often actors of pain for the male characters, my objective was to show how the women of the trilogy certainly fit these definitions, but cannot be reduced to them. The structure of the three texts indeed contains a gendered lens through which everything is observed. This lens is Roth's double Nathan Zuckerman. Dawn and Merry, Faunia and Delphine, Eve and Sylphid are all constructs of the character-narrator Zuckerman. They are all imagined and reported by him and hence filtered through him, exactly as the Swede, Coleman Silk and Ira Ringold are. Furthermore, the women in his fiction are treated in light of his concern with the male protagonists' lives. I could also notice that many different aspects of the novels result in a strong weakening of that sense of omnipotent masculinity usually associated with Roth's novels: I am referring to the display of an old,

incontinent and impotent Nathan, after prostate surgery, in *The Human Stain*, the presence of characters such as Seymour in *American Pastoral* and Ira in *I Married a Communist*, whose utopian dreams are soon dampened. Moreover, the male protagonists start being described as men full of virtues but then there is the sudden fall: we learn about the Swede's passivity and idealization of the women of his life; we learn that Ira, with all those ideals about equality and justice is indeed a murderer; we discover that Coleman betrayed his family.

In the first chapter, through the analysis of Dawn and Merry, I have demonstrated how the Swede's relationship with them, rather than depicting a dominant masculinity, actually makes him further away from it. Philip Roth embeds in the exaggerated portrait of Seymour's qualities and defects a criticism of his treatment of women—or more specifically people—as ready-made puzzle pieces for the realization of his American dream. This criticism is embodied in the protagonist's relationship with Dawn. Specifically, he loves her and demonstrates it, but he essentially imposes his ideal onto a woman who ultimately contributes to his failure. His interactions with Dawn also demonstrate his impulses to both reject and claim his masculine identity. Dawn unsettles the Swede's distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. She's not just an idolized object and his account of her is influenced by the power and authority she has, by the perception of her beauty. The same happens with Merry. The image of masculinity is bound up with the idea of force, but Meredith is stronger than her father. She's a personification of all his mistakes, the crack of order that shows the true face of reality in his life, she is like gravity for him and for the novel, and he, the subject, becomes an object in her hands.

In the second chapter I have focused on Eve and Sylphid to show how these women created by Roth are men's equals. In *I Married a Communist* they win the battle against the male dominant voices and the male protagonist, destroying his life. These women are similar to their male counterparts in their own destructions too: Eve loses her job and dies, her life is destroyed by her daughter too. While Eve tries to build her own life, brick by brick, creating a new

identity, the American society around her, and the people inside it, change indeed. Even if she's a woman who seizes the historical moment, she makes a misstep, the same the male protagonist does. Some of the trilogy's girls are not able to adapt to the new dynamics around them, they grow in a different direction, while others are exactly the representatives of those changes, for example Sylphid who grows up with two different facets, the public and the private one, wearing a mask.

In the third chapter, through the analysis of Delphine and Faunia, I have shown how Philip Roth, in spite of the narrative choice of having male protagonists and a male narrator, brings us into these women's world. He transports us in Delphine's reality, with the French élite of intellectuals; an overbearing and oppressive mother; the discouragement, solitude and alienation in America; the wit and irony of the funny caricatures of her unpleasant colleagues that she sends to her friends in France; the rage at Coleman and her similarity with the professor. This female character in fact, like many others, is very similar to the male one. Then I have examined Faunia. The novel features a man who changes his identity and never tells anyone about it, except for her, an unlettered woman. They start a relationship outside marriage, a love so full of emotions and so intensively satisfying. Coleman and Faunia are so equals that we even discover that she's really not an analphabet and that he has told her his own story, which he never did before. In the novel's final pages Nathan even learns that Faunia had a diary, as Drenka in *Sabbath's Theater*, which is a sort of reminder to the reader that Roth creates empowered women figures, never inferior. Women in the plot are as powerful as men also thanks to Roth's work of imagination but also of idealization, with the creation of extremely fascinating characters.

Throughout this thesis I wanted to concentrate also on the aspects that link the six women and make them very magnetic characters. I have shown how, in many cases, they are shaped to a great extent by *matrophobia*, that is an identification with and resistance to the Lacanian mother figure: the female

character's self results thus divided and multiple, rather than whole, active and dynamic rather than fixed. They contain multitudes, in Whitman's words, also because they participate in the same masquerade of femininity enunciated by Rivière and Luce Irigaray. Eve is a character with many facets, Sylphid's and Delphine's ego are dual, Dawn is able to reinvent herself, while Merry Levov makes unstoppable transformations. All these female protagonists represent an examination, on the historical level, of certain issues of postwar America and society and of the city of Newark; on the socio-anthropological one, the decline of the American myth, the betrayal of the past, what it means to be human. It could be argued that Philip Roth has written a trilogy on equality, in which Roth himself is aware of the limits of American economy, culture, society, all embodied by the female and male protagonists. The *American Trilogy*, with its unforgettable female characters, who are not content with a passive and secondary role and are the engine of entire action, is a testament to the strength, the fascination—but also the limits—of female power.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by Philip Roth

*Perché scrivere: saggi, conversazioni e altri scritti 1960-2013*. Torino: Einaudi Editore, 2018. Print.

*American Pastoral*, in *The American Trilogy*. New York: The Library of America, 2011. Print.

*I Married a Communist*, in *The American Trilogy*. New York: The Library of America, 2011. Print.

*The Human Stain*, in *The American Trilogy*. New York: The Library of America, 2011. Print.

*Sabbath's Theater*. New York: The Library of America, 2010. Print.

*The Dying Animal*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 2002. Print.

*The Counterlife*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1996. Print.

### Primary Sources

Alexander, Edward. "Philip Roth at Century's End". Middlebury College Publications, 1999. Web 10 Nov 2018. <https://urly.it/3ssg>

Bloom, Claire. *Leaving the Doll's House: a Memoir*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1998. Print.

Brauner, David. *Philip Roth*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. Print.

Christiansen, Stian Stiang. "Nathan Zuckerman's Role in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*", 2006. Web 15 Feb 2019. <https://bit.ly/2SAQJ5J>



- Connolly, Andrew J. "Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition since FDR", 2012. Web 10 Feb 2019. <https://bit.ly/2Guu70i>
- Gentry, Bruce Marshall. "Newark Maid Feminism in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*". *Shofar*, 2005. Web 7 Nov 2018. <https://bit.ly/2Me34pS>
- Gordon, Andrew. "The Critique of the Pastoral, Utopia, and the American Dream in *American Pastoral*". Ed Shostak, Debra. *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*. Bloomsbury: USA Academic, 2011. Print.
- Grant, Linda. "The Wrath of Roth", *The Guardian*, 1998. Web 16 Dec 2018. <https://bit.ly/2RIIz6c>
- Halio, Jay L., Siegel, Ben. *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005. Print.
- Hayes, Philip. *Philip Roth Fiction and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.
- Hiitti, Antti. "The Country Turns on its Sons—American Tragedies in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*", 2013. Web 29 Jan 2019. <https://bit.ly/2tnVT61>
- Masiero, Pia. *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books The Making of a Storyworld*, Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011. Print.
- . "Liminal Narcissus: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*." Ed. Ciani Forza, D. *Quale America? Soglie e culture di un continente*. Venezia: Mazzanti Editori. Vol.2. 231-242. Print.
- Milowitz, Steven. *Philip Roth Considered: the Concentratory Universe of the American Writer*. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. Print.
- Nadel, Ira Bruce. *Critical Companion to Philip Roth*. New York: Facts on File, 2011. Print.

- Neelakantan, Gurumurthy “Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth’s Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*”, *International Fiction Review*, 2017. Web 11 Feb 2019. <https://bit.ly/2GJnk20>
- Parrish, Timothy. *The Cambridge companion to Philip Roth*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2007. Print.
- . “The End of Identity: Philip Roth’s American Pastoral”. *Shofar*, 2000. vol. 19, no.1. 84-99. Web 30 Dec 2018. [www.jstor.org/stable/42943153](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42943153)
- Posnock, Ross. *Philip Roth’s Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Print.
- Safer, Elaine B. *Mocking the Age The Later Novels of Philip Roth*. New York: Stare University of New York, 2006. Print.
- Schechner, Mark. *Up Society’s Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. Print.
- Seeley, Gabriell, Rubin-Dorsky, Jeffrey. “The Pointless Meaningfulness of Living: Illuminating *The Human Stain* through *The Scarlet Letter*”. Ed Shostak, Debra. *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*. Bloomsbury: USA Academic, 2011. Print.
- Shostak, Debra. *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, New York, The Plot Against America*. Bloomsbury: USA Academic, 2011. Print.
- . *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. Print.
- Stow, Simon. “Written and Unwritten America: Roth on Reading, Politics and Theory”, 2004. Web 20 Jan 2019. <https://bit.ly/2WpOIYn>

Tenembaum, David. "Race, Class, and Shame in the Fiction of Philip Roth".  
*Shofar*, vol.24, no.4. 34-49. Web 12 Jan 2019.

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/42944195?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/42944195?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

Varvogli, Alike. "The inscription of terrorism: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*"  
in *Philip Roth's Studies*, 2007. Web 11 Nov 2018. <https://bit.ly/2Hgv7pO>

Zhang, Mingai. "The Motif of Betrayal in Philip Roth's *American Trilogy*",  
*Advances in Literary Study*, 2016. Web 3 Feb 2019. <https://bit.ly/2UYFfWf>

### Secondary Sources

Allen, Mary. *The Necessary Blankness: Women in the Major American Fiction of the Sixties*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976. Print.

Bataille, Georges. "La Littérature et le Mal". Paris: Gallimard, 1990. Print.

---. "L'anus Solaire". *Œuvres complètes*. vol. I (1929). Paris: Gallimard, 1971. Print.

---. *Histoire de l'œil*. Paris: Pauvert, 1967. Print.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering*. California: University of California, 1999. Print.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

Dylan, Evans. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Becomes Stories*. London: Cornell University Press, 1999. Print.

- . *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. Print.
- Ferguson, Frances. *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Print.
- Georges Bataille *La Littérature et le Mal* (INA 1958). Web 29 Jan 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpFSXAdIEYY>
- Gornick, Vivian. *The Men in My Life*, London: The MIT Press, 2008. Print.
- Gusdorf, Georges. “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. Print.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. “Two Essays on Analytical Psychology”. London: Pantheon Books, 1953. Print.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. New York: New York University Press, 1985. Print.
- Latimer, Bonnie. “Alchemies of Satire: a History of the Sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*”. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Web 14 Jan 2019. <https://bit.ly/2HrG1ZV>
- Mc Quillian, Martin. *Paul de Man*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Peck, Dale. “Dangerous Girls.” In *The London Review of Books*. 2006. Web 10 Dec 2018. <https://bit.ly/2FglKWn>
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: WW Norton & Co, 1995. Print.
- Riviere, Joan. “Womanliness as a Masquerade”. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. vol. 10. 1929. Print.

- Smith, Sidonie, Watson, Julia. *Women Autobiography Theory: a Reader*.  
Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Print.
- Soble, Alan. *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*. Vol.II.  
Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005. Print.
- Solomon, Deborah. *Jackson Pollock: A Biography*. New York: Simon &  
Schuster, 1987. Print.
- Sorrentino, Vincenzo. *Cupio dissolvi: Senso della vita e abbandono, impressioni*.  
Roma: Armando Editore, 2015. Print.
- Vicari, Justin. *Mad Muses and the Early Surrealists*. Jefferson: Mc Farland &  
Company, 2012. Print.