

Novels. Part II /

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Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504
Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

Teaching Contemporary Literature and Culture

Novels

Part II

Edited by
Susanne Peters Klaus Stierstorfer Laurenz Volkmann

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Jens Martin Gurr

Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000)

Philip Roth: literary biography and role in recent American literature

Philip Roth was born into a Jewish American family in Newark, New Jersey, in 1933. His father, after the bankruptcy of the family shoe store, became an insurance salesman and later an insurance executive. Roth received his B.A. from Bucknell University and an M.A. from the University of Chicago, where he also taught academic writing for a number of years. In the mid-1950s, he served in the army for some time. For decades, from the 1950s to the 1990s, Roth intermittently taught literature at several American universities, mostly at the University of Pennsylvania. In the early 1970s until 1976, when he was denied a visa, Roth spent his springs in Prague. Because of his interest in Eastern European writers, with many of whom he became friends, from 1974 to 1989 he edited a Penguin series of Eastern European novels in translation, the "Writers from the Other Europe" series. From 1976 to 1989, Roth spent more than half of each year in London and frequently travelled in Europe and Israel. Apart from two failed marriages (1959-1963 and 1990-1995), his life has been uneventful and he has never been a public figure. As Roth himself phrased it in *Reading Myself and Others*: "Outside of print, I lead virtually no public life at all. [...] Writing in a room by myself is practically my whole life" (Roth 1975: 51).

Having published his first short story as an undergraduate in 1954, his first major publication was *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), a novella with several short stories. Since then, Roth has usually published at a rate of about one novel every other year, sometimes even in more rapid succession.

His early fiction of the 1950s and 1960s with its daring exploration of Jewish identity in America – most prominently *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), an exuberant comic novel about sex and neurosis – made Roth notorious as one of the most explicit writers about sex at the time. His work was especially controversial in the Jewish community and Roth was frequently accused of a lack of sympathy for Jewish concerns, occasionally even of Jewish self-hatred. Furthermore, his irreverent and drastic treatment of sex and a radical refusal to adhere to any aesthetic or moral conventions of representation made him both one of the most celebrated and most controversial American authors.

Roth has repeatedly used the same narrator figures and protagonists over the decades, most frequently the writer Nathan Zuckerman, whom Roth has called his "alter brain" rather than alter ego (McGrath 2000: 8). Zuckerman has been the narrator and sometimes the protagonist in eight of Roth's novels. The first Zuckerman trilogy, *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1984), in the form of a fictional memoir tells the life story of Zuckerman from his own perspective, while in the later Zuckerman books, he is an observer and narrator rather than the protagonist (see below). In three of Roth's novels, the protagonist is David Kepesh, a professor of literature, while in some of his works he has used a protagonist named Philip or even Philip Roth.

Roth's two most recent novels are the counter-factual *The Plot Against America* (2004), a fictional exploration of what might have happened if anti-Semitic and isolationist aviation legend Charles Lindbergh had become president in 1941, had kept America out of the war and had formed an understanding with Hitler, and *Everyman* (2006), a short novel impressively engaging with sickness, frailty and death.

Since *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959, Roth has published 26 books of fiction and autobiography – occasionally impossible to tell apart – as well as two books of criticism. Especially during the past 20 years, he has been astonishingly prolific and successful, with twelve novels and one book of interviews with fellow writers.

With Saul Bellow (1915–2005) and Bernard Malamud (1914–1986), Roth is one of the most important Jewish American writers. He has long moved on from being the hotly debated dirty young man and controversial bogeyman of American literature to a writer often hailed as America's best and most important contemporary novelist (cf. for instance Gray 2001: 48), celebrated for highly intelligent explorations of identity, ingenious plotting, a unique breadth of stylistic variation and for his ability to capture the nuances of authentic speech. Even his thematic and formal spectrum is impressive, ranging from postmodern experimentation with (auto-)biographical writing in the five versions of a life in *The Counterlife*, his most "postmodern" novel, to the broad historical canvas of 20th-century America in the more recent "American Trilogy".

Roth is one of only three living American writers who have their works published in the Library of America and has won every major literary prize in the US: the Pulitzer Prize (1997), the PEN/Faulkner Award (1993, 2000), the National Book Award (1960, 1995) and the National Book Critics Circle Award (1987, 1991). For years now, he has frequently been mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize.

Fictions of authorship and (pseudo-)autobiographical strategies in Roth's fiction

Much of Roth's fiction is based on personal experience, not merely in the insistent return to Newark, New Jersey, where he grew up. Roth has frequently engaged with his family history – particularly with his father – as in the explicitly autobiographical *The Facts* (1988), *Patrimony* (1991) or, in fictionalised form, *The Plot Against America* (2004). Even his two failed marriages are a frequent subtext in a number of Roth's novels, such as *I Married a Communist* (1998). Similarly, a number of his novels engage in literary feuds with disparaging critics, for instance *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). In *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), we learn about the controversial reception of Zuckerman's provocative and sexually explicit novel *Carnovsky*, which clearly invites speculations about parallels with Roth's own *Portnoy's Complaint*, while in *Deception* (1990) and *Operation Shylock* (1993), he even calls his protagonists "Philip" and "Philip Roth". Finally, a number of serious illnesses and medical crises have also – obliquely and never in a straightforward manner – found their way into his fiction, not least in a recurring engagement with sickness, frailty and death in his novels since *The Counterlife* (1986) and especially since the 1990s.

Roth thus constantly plays with alter ego fictions of authorship and invites speculation about parallels between his life and views and those of Nathan Zuckerman, Peter Tarnopol, David Kepesh or Alex Portnoy, but a novel like *The Counterlife*, in which he plays through five different lives and destinies for Nathan Zuckerman, should make it very clear that this is part of a literary strategy – and one which renders any biographical speculation both fruitless and largely pointless. Even in his 1988 "autobiography" *The Facts*, intriguing literary ploys force us never naively to take *The Facts* for the facts: the book ends with a 30-page letter from Roth's longstanding alter ego Nathan Zuckerman questioning and undermining everything that came before (for a good discussion of *The Facts* see Shechner 2003: 18–27).

It would be simplistic and entirely misleading to mistake these pseudo-autobiographical strategies for exhibitionism, narcissism or mere laziness – Zuckerman and Roth's other narrators are narrative constructs to explore the limits of fiction and the borderline between fiction and reality, as well as questions of truth, reality, history and identity (for questions of autobiography see Shechner 2003: 18–21 *et passim* and several essays in Halio, Siegel 2005).

The Human Stain: synopsis

Set largely in 1998, the summer of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, and narrated by Nathan Zuckerman, *The Human Stain* is the story of Coleman Silk, an allegedly Jewish Professor of classics at the fictitious Athena College in Massachusetts. At almost 70, he returned to teaching in 1995 after 16 years of being a successful and ambitious dean of the faculty, having alienated many colleagues because of his uncompromising adherence to academic standards. He is forced to retire from the college in 1996, having wrongly, even absurdly been accused of racism after referring to two constantly absent students as "spooks", which his resentful colleagues take as a racist epithet for "blacks". The group of colleagues forcing Coleman out of his job in what is described as a campaign of political correctness running riot is led by young French professor Delphine Roux, whom Coleman had hired during his time as dean. Coleman despises her as a careerist follower of theoretical fads, while she regards him as a rearguard conservative humanist. Nonetheless, their relationship is one of repulsion and attraction. In the witch-hunt atmosphere surrounding his enforced resignation, his wife Iris dies of a stroke. Coleman, outraged at having been wronged and accusing the college of having killed his wife, asks his neighbour, 65-year-old reclusive writer Nathan Zuckerman, to write down his story. Zuckerman initially refuses, but the two become friends. In 1998, Coleman begins an affair with 34-year-old Faunia Farley, an illiterate cleaning woman at his former college with a terrible history of hardship and suffering: she was sexually abused as a child, has lived through poverty, demeaning jobs and a disastrous marriage to a traumatized and violent Vietnam veteran. She is further traumatized by having lost her two children in a house-fire. Haunted by her violent ex-husband Les and by Delphine Roux, who believes Coleman sexually exploits a helpless woman, they begin a profound if unlikely love affair, but are killed in a road accident almost certainly caused deliberately by Les Farley. It is only at Coleman's funeral that narrator Zuckerman learns from Coleman's sister Ernestine that he was a very light-skinned African American who spent his adult life passing as a Jew. In intricately constructed flashbacks, the novel also tells the story of his childhood in Newark, of his time as a student in New York City and his relationship with his great love Steena Palsson, who left him when she found out that his family was black. Determined to break free from the constraints which his ethnic origins imposed upon him in 1950s America, Coleman broke with his family and spent his life leading people to believe he was Jewish. Even his wife Iris and his four children never learned the truth about him.

The Human Stain in context: recent US history in Roth's "American trilogy"

The Human Stain is the concluding novel of a loosely woven "thematic trilogy" (McGrath 2000: 8) of historical novels on three defining moments and phases in American history since World War II – McCarthyism in *I Married a Communist* (1998), the Vietnam war and the anti-Vietnam movement in *American Pastoral* (1997), and finally the Lewinsky affair and the attempted impeachment of Bill Clinton in *The Human Stain* (2000). With its treatment of sexuality, the tension between individual freedom and the demands of a larger community, questions of ethnic identity, and the impact of historical forces on the individual, this novel brings together many of the trilogy's themes and of Roth's work as a whole. In each of the three novels of what has come to be known as the "American Trilogy", fictitious characters find themselves caught up in realistically depicted situations located at a recognizable and clearly delineated moment of post-1945 American history (for readings of *The Human Stain* in the trilogy context see Kimmage 2005 and Kinzel 2006).

The trilogy thus "writes the individual subject into the fabric of history" (Royal 2005: 186). Roth himself has described this as the "joining of the public and the private, seeing the private as a public drama, really, or put another way, so saturated by history, the private drama, that it's determined by history" (Royal 2005: 186f.). Thus, from the very beginning, with the raging indictment of an America indulging in "a piety binge, a purity binge" (2) during the Lewinsky affair, the fictitious story of Coleman Silk is inscribed into the historical context of the puritanical fanaticism and hypocrisy of the hunt for Clinton. Coleman's story thus assumes significance as a fable about the moral and intellectual state of America as a whole.

In his essay "Writing American Fiction" (1960), Roth had stated that reality frequently outdoes fiction in incredible events and cruel twists of fate, and that the deceit, hypocrisy and outrageous stupidity individuals as well as groups are capable of in reality are frequently beyond anything a novelist could come up with. In his fiction, he engages with just that reality, and it is a curious tribute to his qualities as an uncanny diagnostician of American life that *The Human Stain* not only reads as though it were taken straight from life – though subtle metafictional ploys prevent the careful reader from falling into the realism trap – but that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair to any reader of Roth uncannily felt as though he might have scripted it.

The novel was published to frequently enthusiastic reviews, though the reception has been far from unanimously positive: Both Delphine Roux and Les Farley have been criticized as somewhat unoriginal figures

— she as the caricature of the frustrated feminist, aggressively ambitious and intolerant in her political correctness, he as a clichéd Vietnam veteran. While it is certainly true that Delphine Roux is hardly Roth's most original and rounded character, she serves the purpose of satirizing political correctness in academia. Furthermore, both Delphine Roux and Les Farley have a complex inner life and are not, as some critics have argued, mere "caricatures" (see for instance Safer 2002: 213; for a more balanced reading see Posnock 2006: 231 *et passim*). Similarly, read purely as a campus novel, *The Human Stain* is hardly the best of this kind (see also Parini 2000: B13, Tierney 2002: 166–169). Despite some criticism, *The Human Stain* won Roth his second PEN/Faulkner award, the British W.H. Smith Award for best book of the year and the French Prix Medici for the best foreign book of the year. It quickly established itself as a contemporary classic: There are few texts in recent literature which have received more scholarly attention within only a few years of being published.

Narrative technique – the chronology of revelation

Coleman and Faunia are already dead when the novel begins, and the text is cast as Zuckerman's retrospective attempt to reconstruct Coleman's life and downfall. When he begins the book, Zuckerman already knows about Coleman's past, but he initially lets us share his own and everyone else's original perspective and leads us astray by first telling us that Coleman Silk was Jewish. The complexity of Coleman's identity in the novel is highlighted by the fact that he is thus introduced as a Jew before we learn about his real origins in a flashback after more than one fourth of the novel (85ff.). Furthermore, we learn about Coleman Silk's secret long before we know how Nathan Zuckerman finds out about it.

Even before the revelatory flashback to his childhood and youth, however, there are hints at Coleman's African-American origins, but they only assume significance in retrospect, upon re-reading. These hints are particularly frequent just before the beginning of the flashback (6, 11, 15f., 45, 79, 81, 82, 84). Arguably the most interesting of these hints occurs when Zuckerman describes Coleman's appearance with its "tightly coiled, short-clipped hair" and the "light yellowish skin pigmentation" which gives him "something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white" (15f.).

A further hint, occurring immediately before the flashback, is to be found in Coleman's argument with his lawyer Nelson Primus, who advises him to end his relationship with Faunia. Infuriated, Coleman tells him "I never again want to [...] see your smug fucking lily-white face."

(81), and Primus wonders about this curious expression. This might, in Freudian terms, be called "the return of the repressed", and it is this seemingly pointless insult to his lawyer which reveals, before we even know Coleman is black, that his perception of life and of people's chances in life is shaped by his being African American. One's roots, the past, and history, it seems, are inescapable; and the American ideals of self-realization and constant reinvention of the self come at a high price. The full significance of Coleman's locution, however, only becomes apparent much later. When Coleman tells his mother that he is going to withhold his family history from his wife-to-be Iris and to deny his family, his brother Walter tells him never "to show [his] lily-white face around [the] house again" (145).

The foregrounding of Zuckerman's attempts to reconstruct Coleman's life and his thoughts – as well as those of other key characters, Faunia, Delphine Roux, Les Farley – leads to a fascinating layering of narrative personae, reflecting consciousnesses and focalising instances. In one passage, for instance, the author Philip Roth has his narrator Zuckerman imagine what Coleman might have believed Faunia was thinking about her life and her past (see 164f.).

Zuckerman thus constructs a number of powerful passages of largely free indirect speech in which he gives us insights into Coleman's view of the "spooks" incident, of the parallels between Clinton's case and his own, or of his relationship with Faunia or with his daughter Lisa (151–164). Similarly constructed passages of free indirect speech simulate Les' perceptions of his experience in Vietnam and his rage and frustration in his present life (64–74). Delphine Roux' perspective on the "spooks" affair, on Coleman's relationship with Faunia, on her own desires, experiences with men and her feelings of repulsion as well as attraction for Coleman Silk are similarly rendered in long passages of free indirect speech (259–283, see also 193–201). One of these is the ultimately farcical passage in which she formulates a personal ad for the *New York Review of Books* looking for a partner and ends up accidentally mailing it to her entire department (259–277). The partner she seeks, it becomes clear here, is exactly Coleman Silk. Finally, there are a number of such passages of free indirect speech which reconstruct Faunia's thoughts (165–169, 225–247).

(Re-)constructing a life: the problematic nature of Zuckerman's narrative and the limits of knowledge

Thus, although Zuckerman himself knows about Coleman when he begins to write the book, he attempts to recreate for the reader his own lack of knowledge while hinting at Coleman's secret all along. Even after the

revelation, the novel maintains a double perspective in that Zuckerman recreates and shares with the reader his original perspective of not knowing. This allows for fascinating reflections in passages about times with Coleman when Zuckerman himself did not know yet, while we as readers have already been told about Coleman's secret. A key passage of the novel brings together many of its key themes, concerns and narrative devices:

I sat on the grass, astonished, unable to account for what I was thinking: he has a secret. [...] How do I reach that conclusion? Why a secret? [S]omewhere there's a blank in him too, a blotting out, an excision, though of what I can't begin to guess ... can't even know, really, if I am making sense with this hunch or fancifully registering my ignorance of another human being. Only some three months later, when I learned the secret and began this book [...] did I understand the underpinning of the pact between them: he had told her his whole story. [...] How do I know she knew? I don't. [...] 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 do what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do. (213, see also 63, 208f., 338, 339 *et passim*)

These fundamental limitations on what can be known about another human being in general apply to all characters in the novel and their thoughts about one another. In this vein, Zuckerman also frequently speculates whether Coleman ever told Faunia his secret (326, 337, 340f.), and even his assumption that Les Farley forced them off the road and killed them remains unproven (256f., 350, 354).

Zuckermann thus constantly foregrounds the fact that his narrative is to a large extent based on imagination and that his history of Coleman's life and particularly of his last months is at least as much construction as it is reconstruction. The novel is therefore fundamentally also concerned with what can ever be known about another human being and with the importance of narrative imagination in reconstructing a life (see also Safer 2002: 224 and Royal 2006).

In contrast to critics who have regarded the narrative revelation of Coleman's real past a weakness of the novel (see for instance Kinzel 2006: 190f.), I maintain that the complexity and challenging ambiguity of the novel is due to precisely this intricate narrative structure of first introducing Coleman as a Jew, then slowly and by layers revealing his origins and only finally (316ff.) telling us how Zuckerman at Coleman's funeral comes to find out the truth about his friend.

Similarly, criticism accusing Roth of presumptuously arrogating the right to imagine, as a white writer, the life of a black man passing as white, overlooks the fact that the problematic nature of such an attempt is

made explicit on a metafictional level through the mediating figure of Roth's narrator Nathan Zuckerman and thus becomes a central topic of the novel itself. Indeed, the novel is not least cast as Zuckerman's exploration of the problematic nature of reconstructing an identity, of imagining a life, with frequent meditations on how much will always remain unknown about other people: "What we know is that [...] nobody knows anything" (208f.), "there really is no bottom to what is not known." (315) In this context, it is important to draw attention to the fact that Roth already revealed an acute awareness of the problems inherent in the attempt to narrate a life in his *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, where he had his own literary creation Zuckerman counter Roth's own account with a 30-page concluding discussion of just these problems.

This problematic nature of Zuckerman's reconstruction and the deliberate misleading of the reader for some 85 pages, however, does not justify an assessment of Zuckerman as an unreliable narrator. Like in much recent fiction, conventions which indicate unreliable narration no longer serve the purpose of pointing out that the narrator as such is unreliable and deviates from the truth. Rather, conventions traditionally associated with an unreliable narrator are increasingly to be perceived as a *reliable* and appropriate rendering of the highly problematic status of "truth" and "adequate representation" given the cognitive, epistemological and ontological uncertainties associated with postmodernism (see Zerweck 2000: 136; see also Nünning 1998). Roth's novel in particular poignantly reveals that the limitations of knowledge about another human being are intrinsic and fundamental.

The Human Stain thus also appears as an unobtrusively and yet consistently self-reflexive novel: In addition to the numerous references to the writing of *The Human Stain* by Nathan Zuckerman and his reflections on what one can know about another human being, Roth occasionally uses or alludes to characters from his own previous novels – quite apart from Zuckerman of course – *The Ghost Writer* (5); *Sabbath's Theater* (295). Furthermore, there is a multiplicity of passages concerned with careful reading – Coleman and Nathan reading Delphine's vicious letter (39f.), the reading from *Julius Caesar* at the funeral of Coleman's father (106f.), Coleman's reading of Steena Paulson's love letter (112ff.) and his reading of her farewell letter (126). Finally, the power of words and language also manifests itself in the fact that one word – "spooks" – proves to undo Coleman. The novel thus frequently and self-consciously foregrounds the writing and reading of narratives. The fact that narrative is even an existential activity, that it lends meaning to a life and works against oblivion is highlighted by Zuckerman when he writes about the initial impulse to set down Coleman's story on the evening after his funeral:

[S]tanding in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman's coffin, I was completely seized by his story, by its end and by its beginning, and then and there, I began this book. [...] And that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death. (337f.)

Telling names, symbolic analogies and suggestive contrasts

The title of the novel alone is highly ambiguous: while initially a reference to original sin and humans' inherent moral ambivalence, it surely also indicates the "stain" of different and arbitrary skin pigmentations, which Coleman is trying to escape. Finally, there is also an allusion to the incriminating stain of presidential semen on Monica Lewinsky's notorious blue dress. The phrase itself is directly used by Faunia in a highly symbolic passage when she talks to a crow kept in a cage at the Audubon Society (237-247). The crow is no longer accepted by its fellows in the wilderness and now constantly lives among humans: "That's what comes of being hand-raised [...]. The human stain" (242). In another highly charged passage, the hand-raised and much-fussed-over crow even comes to be symbolically linked to Coleman, when Faunia is told that the bird ripped down newspaper clippings about itself. Amused, she speculates: "He didn't want anyone to know his background" (240).

Equally symbolic are the names of the novel's key protagonists. Coleman Silk already alludes to race or skin colour, but also to a certain smoothness and malleability: Coleman, via the homophone "coal-man" can clearly be seen as an oblique if drastic reference to Coleman's black origins (see also Tierney 2002: 166), while Faunia, via "Faun", may well be taken as hinting at her animalistic sexuality. Finally, the figure in many respects cast as her foil and opposite, Delphine Roux, may be taken as an oblique and ironic reference to the oracle at Delphi with its inscription "know thyself" (see Bakewell 2004: 39), for self-knowledge, despite her rigorous academic training and her intellectual credentials, is precisely what she lacks.

Throughout, the novel establishes a large number of symbolic analogies, correspondences and contrasts between these figures: While Coleman and Delphine Roux, for instance, are in many ways the central antagonists of the novel, their relationship is marked by a complex ambivalence of attraction and repulsion. Moreover, there is a profound sense in which they are very much alike and share a fundamental paradox: both seek to escape their families in a radical attempt at self-realization – and both must ultimately come to find the limitations of self-invention (see below). If Coleman and Roux can thus, paradoxically, be seen as

"analogous counter-figures", so can Coleman and Faunia. Despite their contrasting roles in life, both are haunted by their past; for both, a secret lies at the heart of who they are: Coleman's secret is that of his real ethnic origins, Faunia's that she *can* read and write and merely pretends to be illiterate (296f. *et passim*). Similarly, Delphine and Lester Farley are in different ways counter-figures to each other. So, in yet another sense, are Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley, who serve as foils for each other. Both Faunia and Delphine originate from rich, well-educated families, but their lives have taken entirely different turns. Faunia, while poorly educated, in some sense represents the disillusioned wisdom acquired from a lifetime of having to fight misery – "Thirty-four years of savage surprises have given her wisdom" (27) – while Delphine Roux is cast as a highly educated and intellectually brilliant but naïve, hysterical and ignorant fool ill-equipped to deal with the moral complexities of life. These parallels, analogies and oppositions are highlighted by means of intricately constructed symbolic devices, such as symbolically charged rings worn by both Faunia (212, 237, 243f., 247) and Delphine (186).

Finally, even Steena and Faunia are symbolically related: For Coleman, after decades of marriage to a woman who never knew who he was, Faunia represents a *type* of Steena, the woman he could not have when she realized he was black. The experience of having been rejected by Steena was arguably the most important reason for his decision to pass (see 126). Once again, the parallels between Steena and Faunia are highlighted by means of parallel episodes: both Steena and decades later Faunia perform an erotic dance for him to the same piece of music (115f., 225f.) The fact that, as Zuckerman believes, he told Faunia his secret, in a sense makes him come full circle and even releases the tension of a life lived in denial of his origins. Coleman thus can be seen to have died at one with himself and his past (see Parrish 2005: 221).

Intertextuality: Greek drama, the American canon and Coleman as the tragic American hero

The sustained intertextual engagement with classical Greek drama (18, 63, 125, 127, 151, 170, 179, 184, 210 *et passim*) more than suggests that one can read *The Human Stain* as the tragedy of Coleman Silk, who brings about his own downfall because the origins he seeks to repress come back to haunt him (on *The Human Stain* as tragedy see also Kinzel 2006: 173-197, 200-204 *et passim*, Rankine 2005, Bakewell 2004). Bakewell even reads the novel as being inversely modelled on *Oedipus Rex*, a frame of reference already established through the novel's highly apposite motto from this classical tragedy of identity and self-discovery: like Oedipus, Cole-

man attempts to escape his family and his roots, which nonetheless prove inescapable (Bakewell 2004: 30, 32 *et passim*). Coleman, however, is aware of what he is doing, while Oedipus is not. In addition to the motto, the setting "Athena College" invites speculations on classical analogies. Even the function of the chorus as commenting on the action is replicated in the novel: the group of anonymous men Coleman overhears as they drastically comment on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (148-151) is even explicitly called a "chorus" (151). Finally, the division into five chapters, too, may be read as a reference to the tragic genre, if not of classical then of Renaissance tragedy. In addition to Greek tragedy, references to Homer's *Iliad* abound (4f., 63, 232, 335), inviting one to see Coleman's rage upon his enforced resignation and the death of his wife in the light of the rage of Achilles, his favourite literary character. Finally, Zuckerman compares Coleman's forceful and ruthless act of severing all ties to his family with the "savagery of *The Iliad*" (335).

Even beyond its engagement with classical drama, *The Human Stain* is fraught with intertextual references and allusions to the Bible (61), the story of Eloisa and Abelard (2f.) Chaucer (92), Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (92, 107, 140) and *Othello* (151), Swift (19), Keats (27, 32, 212, 354), Dickens (92), Balzac and Stendhal (42), Hawthorne (2, 44, 310 *et passim*), Melville and Thoreau (310), Mark Twain (128), Dos Passos (148), Sinclair Lewis (153), James Baldwin (154), American cultural critics such as Mencken (153), political theorists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin (128), literary theorists Kristeva and Sollers (200), or Czech writer Milan Kundera (200, 261) (for intertextuality see also Leonard 2000). Silk's late-in-life love for Faunia is repeatedly linked to Aschenbach's infatuation with Tadzio in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (51, 64, 171).

A further strong presence is Ralph Ellison. In one sense, *The Human Stain* can even be read as a rewriting of Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Ellison being one of Roth's frequently acknowledged intellectual and creative role models as an ethnic writer. The spooks incident so central to the novel, the incident which triggers Coleman's tragic downfall, appears to allude to the celebrated opening of *The Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those that haunted Edgar Allan Poe [...]. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). I am also, the implication goes, a "spook" in the sense of "African American" (see Parrish 2005: 215). The different implications of the term "spooks" and of invisibility in this passage are explored in Roth's novel and are frequently invoked in individual passages (6, 84f., 158 *et passim*). Coleman, thus, in a sense becomes another "invisible" man, passing as white in a predominantly white society where to be black would always

have meant being visibly "different" (for Roth's indebtedness to Ellison see also Parrish 2004, Kinzel 2006: 186ff.).

Finally, the novel can also be read as an engagement with the canon of American literature and some of its classic themes. Especially Nathaniel Hawthorne is a strong presence in *The Human Stain*. Already on the second page of the novel, writing about the hysteria around the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, Zuckerman chastises "America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" (2). Explicitly linking these two outbreaks of narrow-minded intolerance, he here quotes Hawthorne's description of the "persecuting spirit" of early Puritanism from the "Custom House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne 1971: 15). Hawthorne and Melville and their friendship in the 1850s are associated with the Berkshires as the setting of this novel, and Zuckerman draws attention to the fact that "Hawthorne [...] in the 1860s, lived not many miles from my door" (2). At Coleman's funeral, Herb Keble associates Coleman's individualism and his "resistance to the coercions of a censorious community" with the tradition of "Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau" (310). In the crucial "The Minister in a Maze" chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator remarks: "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true" (Hawthorne 1971: 260). This, it seems, is also true of Coleman Silk. Shechner even refers to *The Human Stain* as a "moral romance, a *Scarlet Letter* about race" (2003: 188; for Hawthorne's presence in *The Human Stain* see also Posnock 2001: 87, 99 *et passim*).

Most tellingly, perhaps, *The Scarlet Letter* is invoked in the context of the accusations against Coleman: "Only a label is required. The label is the motive. The label is the evidence. [...] First a racist and now a misogynist. It is too late in the century to call him a Communist, though that is the way it used to be done" (290). Just as Hawthorne's Hester Prynne with her scarlet letter "A" comes to stand not just for "adultery", "angel", or "able", but also for "America" itself, the continuity here, established from the inquisitorial spirit at the heart of *The Scarlet Letter* via the anti-Communist witch-hunt of the 1950s to the narrow minded intolerance that persecuted Clinton and Coleman, once again makes clear how closely the text links the private and the political, how Coleman's fate virtually comes to stand for America.

As Posnock (2006: 234) has shown, even the tableau of the final eight lines of the novel – Les Farley seated on his bucket, fishing through the ice on an isolated lake – alludes to, at least, Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and Melville's *Moby Dick*,

some of the central texts in the canon of American literature. This telling intertextual collage and the novel as a whole significantly end with the symbolically fraught word "America". These generalizing implications are underscored by the large number of highly symbolic locations and sites of memory in the novel – traditional New England with all its historical associations generally, the Berkshires and their link with Hawthorne more specifically, "magic, mythical West Point" (101), the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or Greenwich Village in New York City and its associations of an intellectually open melting-pot America. One might even want to extend the analogy to imply that, just like Coleman, America is living a lie by denying and betraying its origins. Individual identity and national identity are frequently associated throughout the novel and thus virtually become inseparable.

Passing, identity and the American ideal of self-realization

Roth's central theme in much of his fiction is the tension between the self-realization of an individual and the competing claims of the family or a larger community (see also Parrish 2007), a tension that frequently yields enlightening reflections on central American themes such as self-reliance, individuality and personal freedom. In most of Roth's novels, the individual struggles to break away from the Jewish community; here it is the struggle between the black community and the individual Coleman Silk, though to call him "black" only raises the question of the absurdity of such racial ascriptions. What, the novel asks, ultimately defines identity? Is it nature or nurture? Is it a matter of choice or of origins? Is it self-constructed or imposed by others? What would be the more courageous decision – to live as a black man in an openly racist society or to deny one's roots and to cut off all family ties to pass as white?

It is important to note here, however, that passing as Jewish in 1946 was still not to be equated with passing as generally "white", because there were still restrictions on the number of Jewish students at many colleges (86f.) and anti-Semitism was still fairly current in the US.

There is a further irony in the fact that Coleman as an African-American passes as a Jew – Zuckerman refers to Coleman's adopted identity as an "amalgam of the most unlike of America's historic undesirables" (132) and thus also ironically comments on the "supposed strife between African-Americans and Jews ... [an] animosity that developed between blacks and Jews in America after the civil rights movement" (Kaplan 2005: 184).

The motif of "passing" is by no means unique to Roth's novel but is frequent in American literature and was a particularly common theme of

the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. As classic examples of the theme one might cite James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's, *Passing* (1929), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) or Claude McKay's story "Near-White" (1931). More recently, Ralph Ellison's posthumously published *Juneteenth* (1999) is also concerned with passing and has been seen as a potential influence (for parallels see also Parrish 2004: 440, Rankine 2005: 105f., Kinzel 2006: 162f.).

Since the earliest reviews (Kakutani 2000, Leonard 2000, Moore 2000, Taylor 2000), it has been suggested that the immediate model for Coleman Silk was probably Anatole Broyard, leading essayist, literary critic and long-standing book reviewer for the *New York Times*, who passed as white for much of his adult life and who was revealed to have been African American by origin only after his death in 1990 (for an enlightening discussion see Gates 1997). Despite many differences, there appear to be a number of close parallels between Broyard and Coleman Silk, for instance in their radical dissociation from a black family in order to be able to pass as white or in anxieties about the skin pigmentation of their children, interestingly also in their curious combination of hiding and yet semi-consciously revealing their secret, in occasionally downright racist attitudes sprung from a need to dissociate themselves from their origins. Most telling, perhaps, is the fact that a number of Broyard's friends and acquaintances became aware of his ethnic origins when they met his less light-skinned sister at his funeral (Gates 1997: 213; for parallels cf. also Safer 2002: 224). Though Roth himself does not mention Broyard in an interview about his sources (McGrath 2000: 8), he was clearly aware of him, and the parallels particularly with Gates's portrayal of Broyard appear to indicate Roth's familiarity with Gates's essay, which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Coleman's repudiation of his past and his invention of a self – "To become a new being. [...] The drama that underlies America's story" (342) – explicitly links Coleman to the classic American theme of self-invention and self-realization:

He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I. [...] Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*. [...] Instead the raw *I* with all its agility. [...] The passionate struggle for singularity. (108)

Without, ironically, knowing his real story, Herb Keble in his funeral apology refers to Coleman as an "American individualist par excellence" (311, see also 334). In one sense, this antagonism against the "we" (108)

justifies Coleman's behaviour as a heroic act of self-reliance in the great American tradition, and if Coleman found it necessary to pass in 1946, that may say at least as much about the society in which he lives as it does about himself. As one reviewer appropriately asked, "Would a Black Coleman Silk have ever been hired to teach Classics at Athena College in the 1950s?" (Tierney 2002: 168).

The attempt to escape one's family and a powerful desire for self-realization, beyond their ambivalent relationship of attraction and repulsion, strongly connects Coleman Silk and Delphine Roux. Her following reflection on the desire to "construct [her]self outside the orthodoxy of [her] family's given" with hardly any changes also applies to Coleman:

I will go to America and be the author of my life, she says; I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family's given. I will fight *against* the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individualism at its best – and she winds up instead in a drama beyond her control. She winds up as the author of nothing. There is the drive to master things, and the thing that is mastered is oneself. (273)

The Human Stain, thus, is on one level the classic American story of self-realization and transcendence of the limitations of one's origin – "the pursuit of happiness" – but it is also the story of how, through "the return of the repressed", one's own history ultimately proves inescapable.

The politics of *The Human Stain*

Here lies a central irony of the novel: Coleman Silk, who passes for white to escape the racist stereotypes of a society in which he would never have been hired as a black classics professor in the 1950s, is forced from his job by fanatical adherents to political correctness who spuriously and for base motives accuse him of racism. Clinton's peccadilloes of "incontinent carnality" (3) in the White House form the backdrop to Coleman's affair with Faunia, and the political correctness ritual of pseudo-purification that costs Coleman his job is the same that nearly cost Clinton his with the inquisitorial Puritanism of Kenneth Starr.

Though serious in consequence, those passages concerned with political correctness are in themselves rather drastic and farcical, especially a number of the passages on the Lewinsky affair (2f., 146-151) or Delphine Roux' disastrous error in sending her personal ad with the carefully coded message "Whites only need apply" (262, 273) to her entire department. The title of Kinzel's monograph of Roth's American trilogy – *Tragödie und Komödie des amerikanischen Lebens* – is quite appropriate and nicely captures the mixed tone of the novel (see also Safer 2002).

Seen in connection with the other novels of the trilogy, *The Human Stain* uncomfortably hints at disturbing continuities – from the liberating spirit of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which escalated into terrorist violence in the wake of some anti-Vietnam protests, to political correctness running riot in the 1990s. While *I Married a Communist* engaged with the right-wing radicalism and intolerance of the McCarthy era and *American Pastoral* with left-wing radicalism and its occasionally murderous consequences during the Vietnam war, *The Human Stain* brings together both forms of blind and hypocritical intolerance (Taylor 2000: n.p., Safer 2002: 211f.) and reveals that the right-wing attacks against Clinton and the left-wing form of rampant political correctness that undoes Coleman Silk both spring from the same source, namely the impulse Hawthorne – quoted in the novel – called "the persecuting spirit" in its most self-righteous form. *Les extrêmes se touchent*. The parallels between Coleman and Clinton, implicit throughout the novel, are made explicit when Coleman muses: "Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk!" (154) What contributes to the political even-handedness of the novel is an ambivalence in the portrayal of Coleman: While he sometimes appears as a rather likeable common-sense humanist against the modish careerism of Delphine Roux, he elsewhere appears as the unpleasant mouthpiece of cultural conservatism in the vein of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* when he speaks of contemporary students as "incredibly badly educated" and "far and away the dumbest generation in American history" (191f.; for parallels cf. Kinzel 2006: 164-167). With its drastic attack on intolerant radicalism of *any* persuasion, Roth's novel thus shies away from simplistic sermonizing on behalf of either side.

Teaching *The Human Stain*

Because of a large number of provocative themes, the novel lends itself to class discussions, though surely more at university than at school level. Depending on the seminar context, questions of identity, racism, political correctness, the interplay of the personal and the political are all potentially fruitful topics for a more thematically oriented discussion. In all of these areas, a screening of selected scenes from the 2003 film version starring Anthony Hopkins as Coleman Silk and Nicole Kidman as Faunia Farley might be helpful as a starting point. But the film in its entirety also lends itself to a comparison with the novel. Dramatically reducing the Delphine Roux story and cutting short most of what the novel shows us about Lester Farley, the film focuses on Coleman's past and his relation-

ship with Faunia, cleverly cutting back and forth between the 1950s and the 1990s time frames. Particularly the scene in which Coleman breaks with his family is movingly rendered and could even function as a point of departure for a discussion of the novel. Though the use of voice-over narration in parts of the film attempts to simulate some of the effects of the narrative situation in the novel, the film unquestioningly proceeds in the manner of "showing" and entirely glosses over the problematic nature of Zuckerman's imaginative reconstruction. Les Farley, for instance, is unambiguously seen to force Coleman and Faunia off the road.

In a more analytical vein, one might productively discuss functions of intertextuality, the use of symbols, telling names and suggestive constellations of figures or the potential of a novel to function as a "contemporary tragedy". More theoretical inquiries might consider questions of narrative identity or the function of narrative in making sense of human experience. The specific way in which the novel inscribes fictitious characters and events into a recognizable recent context, virtually making *The Human Stain* a historical novel about the very recent past, lends itself to a discussion of the relationship between narrative and historiography. Selected passages from Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* or from Hayden White's essays in *Tropics of Discourse* might suitably provide a framework for such an analysis.

Finally, *The Human Stain* can also be used to explore the function of literature in cultural diagnosis. Arguably, the novel's engagement with the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (especially 2f.) is more enlightening than many more sustained scholarly discussions could ever be (148). One of the anonymous men overheard by Coleman attributes a diagnostic function to the Lewinsky affair: "[T]his girl has revealed more about America than anybody since Dos Passos. She stuck a thermometer up the country's ass. Monica's U.S.A." (148, italics original). Similarly, Roth's trilogy as a vast narrative attempt at cultural diagnosis has itself been compared to Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy. Without having to be too apologetic about the uses of literature and of literary scholarship, anyone trying to highlight the crucial function of literature in cultural self-reflection will find a compelling example in *The Human Stain*.

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Laurenz Volkmann

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Global bestseller – glocal activist

Born in 1961 to a Keralite Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father, Arundhati Roy originally studied architecture in New Delhi, where she still lives. Her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, published in the fiftieth year of India's independence, 1997, won the prestigious Man Booker Prize and became an enormous international success (see Lane 2006: 197, Peters 2006: 61, Banerjee, Stadler 2008: 21). It has been translated into more than forty languages, selling well over six million copies so far. Allegedly raking in a one million dollar advance payment, the author's only novel to date immediately generated tremendous media attention. There is also a robust academic literature debating the reasons behind this international bestseller by an Indian debut author (see bibliography). Evidently, the novel fits well into a Western "cosmopolitan" concept of writing, specifically catering to the international audience's penchant for lush exotic settings and narratives with a touch of magic realism – all dished up here by a photogenic female author. Similarly, it incorporates many concerns cherished by literary critics in the field of postcolonial literature – issues of dislocated, alienated and displaced identities, intercultural homelessness, cultural hybridity and persistent discrimination and racism (see Volkmann 1999, 2007, Patel 2008: 227). Likewise, the novel's unique and creative lyrical style has contributed to its success and fame, a style that is often interpreted as undermining the dominance of accepted norms of English grammar with its linguistic acrobatics, thus contributing to the novel's harsh exposure of the persevering influence of colonialism, of Western-style globalization and reactionary, fundamentalist and patriarchal structures in a postcolonial context.

However, the novel has also drawn severe criticism from Western and non-Western areas. Both react to the fact that *The God of Small Things* is deliberately catering to Western markets, which are frequently seen as caring little about indigenous cares and concerns (Lane 2006: 98). Thus, on one side, critical voices from the West lament Roy's ostentatious appeal to Western tastes and accuse her of exotizing India in a story gesturing towards "universal" – i.e., actually Western – values and norms at best, of being caught in a double bind of both deriding Western influences and "selling out" to them at worst. On the other side, non-