Shame and Identity in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*

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Our study aims to demonstrate that shame in literature does not function only as a theme with an imagined psychological ground, but also as an extended framework (philosophical, moral and sociological). The literary representation of shame involves an insight and deep cultural analytical skills for both the author and the reader. The literary cases propose, in fact, versions of identity, which are not just literary types. Some of the most renowned authors illustrate a specific paradigm of shame: for example, Philip Roth (*The Human Stain*) imagines a cultural and social context for the protagonist’s shame, a context related with the specific American historical and racist, “politically correct” paradigm. The research is intended to argue that a literary theme – shame – is intertwined with plural dimensions (determinations) of the human being, seen as a social and historical product. Briefly, shame is not just a literary theme, it is a human phenomenon connected with the social and psychological construction of identity and the literary discourse has specific, contextualized messages, sometimes connected with various agendas.

*Keywords: identity; shame; Philip Roth; Jewishness; racism; desire; postmodernism.shame, hybrid identity.*


Identity plays a central role in Roth’s fiction, with multiple determinations: racial, ethnical, sexual. Roth’s fiction significantly imposes special and essentialistic notions of self, race and class identity. He imagines and explores a fluid and protean notion of identity. Also, we must observe that the *shame* in *The Human Stain* (and the other two novels) is deeply connected with *desire*. Roth gives a “fictional definition”, realizing a literary development, to the notion of *desire*, understood as a “conscious impulse toward something that promises enjoyment or satisfaction in its attainment”. Another central theme of the novel is the quest for freedom, viewed from the point of view of his characters – as they are self-inventing themselves and misreading situations and stories.

As many critics observed, *The Human Stain* focuses on the constitution of identity and difference by negotiating the definition of the self.

Underlining the originality of Roth’s novel, we must observe that when his narrator creates the complex identities of his characters by assigning motivations to their actions, it seems a non-objective practice, as their images are products of his own imagination. Besides: “Although Zuckermann believes that he is telling Coleman’s story [...] he repeatedly indicates that his own imaginings are the focus of attention” (Safer, 2003: 255). This is a postmodern discursive practice. And a narrative strategy approaching identity which is often discussed in the context of the post-
modern American novel, represented by the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, John Barth, John Updike, Saul Bellow; or in a Jewish context, as Dean Franco – in his volume Race, Rights, and Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969 (2012) – places Roth in the vicinity of Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, Allegra Goodman or less familiar names, such as Lore Segal, Gary Shteyngart, Tony Kushner, and Harriet Rochlin. For example, it is observed that identity in Updike's novel is permanently negotiated through the persona's sexual and religious experiences, or – as Bellow portrays in his novels – a fragmented identity of intimacy. Sharing a thematic affinity with these two authors, Roth depicts a human self which is socially constructed, not just reflected in a culture's social discourses and signifying practices. The notion of the self – in Roth's trilogy – is never an empty form to be filled or invented. An observation, yet: each of the novels of the American trilogy employs “a kind of Proustian technique, whereby Zuckermann's present is absorbed by his memories of the past so that his current identity is but a consequence of the events – and other lives – he recalls” (Parrish, 2005: 209). By contrast with Proust, whose identities absorbed historical events, Roth makes identity a result of history. Roth's formal strategy is based on an elaborated response “to the contradictory identities Roth has experienced as a Jew who is also an American” (Parrish, 2005: 210).

Nathan Zuckermann – Roth's narrator – has a very deep and intuitive understanding of the fragmented identity of Coleman Silk, the main character of The Human Stain. The racist charges of the academic community from where Coleman was expelled are to be clarified in the context of political correctness. “The spooks” invoked by Coleman Silk actually have a single meaning and not a racist one: the image is related to the absence of the students from the classroom, his students who have never attended his class being compared with entities having a ghostly nature. Of course, it is possible to state that David Kepesh (Dying Animal) and Nathan Zuckermann (American Trilogy) are alter egos of Roth. He is disguised in his novels in the narrator invented, and who does not invent the story; he is a story-teller. Amy Hungerford gives an illustrative example: “When, in The Human Stain, Roth has Coleman Silk say, ‘All of Western literature began with a quarrel, the wrath of Achilles’, in a certain way he is describing his own origin as a writer” (Hungerford, 2008).

The implicit and complex discourse on identity in The Human Stain is, in fact, a discourse of an identity that refuses to be socially constructed and it stresses out the complex given identity, denying the secrecy and the self-invention. In the same way the other American postmodern novels do, Roth's novel shows an interest on the idea that subjectivity is central in defining a personal identity.

In The Human Stain, Tim Parrish identifies some degree of superiority:

“What makes The Human Stain so remarkable and so controversial is that Roth's ostensibly Jewish protagonist, Coleman Silk, is actually born African American. Thus, in the guise of telling a Jewish story, Roth also tells an African American one. As such, The Human Stain is the logical outgrowth of Roth's lifelong aesthetic commitment to the fluidity of the American (or ethnic) self” (Parrish, 2005: 211).

So, The Human Stain – a narrative of change and redefinition – unravels the complexities of human identity in a context of American national identity – of the multicultural America of the late 20th century (American Pastoral does the same). As we have shown, subjectivity is present and influences the attitude, the curiosity of Nathan Zuckermann towards Coleman Silk, the two of them having in common a similar ethnic and cultural education. Then, in the end, Zuckermann considers that the adequate presentation of Coleman's secret (disguise) is his problem to solve. Zuckermann has a special status, with a special significance: his role as narrator and novelist is authentic and persuasive only when he accepts the true humanity and the stain of Coleman's past. Coleman Silk is a perfect example of secrecy and self-invention. What we find here, then, is personal shame, but also collective shame, that of the community that pretends to appear in the eyes
of the others as perfect, stainless. For Coleman Silk, it is not the shame of being black, but the 
shame of having lied and invented a new identity for the social advantages it brought with it. It 
is the shame derived from the fear of being discovered. Lying and self-deceiving hypocrisy are 
“stains” on the biographies of all the five major characters, but in the case of Coleman, we could 
easily say that he is not as guilty of racism or the exploitation of women as he is of deconstructing 
and reinventing his own past (Safer, 2006: 128).

His lifelong denial of family history is compared by Safer (2006: 123) with Oedipus the King, 
a guided comparison due to Roth’s epigraph from Sophocles, talking about purification and exile 
of man. The reference is to a professor of classics whose apparent transgression caused his ban-
ishment from Athena academic community, a dominant contrariety of the novel, as it is called 
by Elaine Safer:

“(…) the human stain and people’s idealistic desire for perfection; crime and purification. (...) Coleman feels 
that his color stains him in a society where being the Other, an Afro-American, makes one the object of prejudice. 
His desire for purification – and thus for freedom – convinces him to pass as white. Just as Oedipus believes that 
he has escaped the destiny of marrying his mother and killing his father, so does Coleman assume that he has 
avoided the fate of a black man by passing as white” (2006: 124).

Born in a lower middle-class family with cultural aspirations, Coleman’s ability of self-inven-
tion is catalyzed by the socio-cultural and political ethos of the first-half of 20th century America. 
His early interest in boxing points out his “shadowy” secrecy and his desire for self-invention 
that will later define his whole identity. It is also highly significant that Coleman’s whiteness and 
Jewishness are defined by the effacement of his blackness.

As we have mentioned before, Coleman’s process of self-transformation is deeply connected 
with desire (Steena Palsson, Ellie Maggie are women that give him the opportunity and “the pleas-
ure” of being “conventional unconventionally”). Antonio Monda observed that Roth’s male pro-
tagonsists (in The Human Stain, American Pastoral, Goodbye Columbus) develop lust for women, as a 
second desire; their first desire is to get fully integrated into society (or the racial or ethnic group). 
The desire for women is characterized by passion and a strong wish to possess, lacking profound 
love. Roth’s desire is compared with the feeling of the end and of death. Confronted with the in-
nate physical degradation, Roth’s man feels the absence of love, the absence of meaning in his 
existence. This lack of meaning is underlined by the narrator Nathan Zuckermann in American 
Pastoral, who sees his character’s story as the most relentless lesson that life can teach: that it 
makes no sense. Amy Hungerford defines desire as that “permanent looking towards the other 
thing, the thing that you are not, the thing that you do not have, the thing that is absent from you 
(…). You can’t have desire if you already have the thing. Desire is that force that’s always reaching 
toward something that is separate from you” (Hungerford, 2008).

The sense of failure of Coleman Silk is, in fact, shame. Patrick Colm Hogan is ruthless: “In 
the case of a changeable propensity, it would seem that shame may be overcome by reform, by 
changing one’s habits, or whatever. In the case of an identity category, however, there may be no 
opportunity for avoiding the disgust, other than death” (Hogan, 2011: 218). On the other hand, 
The Human Stain seems to be more provocative, as it explores the psyche of its protagonist and 
of his mistress, Faunia Farley. Coleman’s depression, caused by his disgrace in the academic com-
munity of Athena, is doubled by Faunia’s depression generated by her past: she was forced to 
leave home at the age of 14, as she was troubled and molested by her father.

Secrecy is at the very heart of what identity means in this novel. We think this secrecy is 
related with shame in a specific way: shame of not being discovered, but also it is the shame of 
not being authentic. We know that because there is a “private consciousness” (Amy Hungerford) 
that decides to decide. This kind of consciousness gives the power to self-present, to make an 
identity. Amy Hungerford emphasizes that the problem of “identity plot” is the problem of “I” 
and of “We”. It is a constant process of definition of “I” through “We” – family, ethnic group,
society, nation, but first of all, race: “He could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose” (The Human Stain: 109).

The very nature of the narrator (and of the author’s consciousness, also), Nathan Zuckermann, is that of a “writer who is Jew, not a Jewish writer” (as Roth describes himself). Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky writes: “Jews in America have the opportunity to create themselves as Jews, first by acknowledging the presence of Jews in history (...), and then by expressing their freedom through the reinvention or reconfiguration of Jewishness” (Rubin-Dorsky, 2003: 227). At the same time, transformation is an integral part of the Jewish identity and, despite being irreverent and ironic, Roth remains loyal to his Jewishness, as Operation Shylock showed us before the American Trilogy. Moreover, it is important to remark that Roth makes his novels speak about the relation between reality and life, between writing and life, between the writer and what he writes, the writer and his work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


