

CULTURE AND IDENTITY: THE ACADEMIC SETTING IN PHILIP ROTH'S THE HUMAN STAIN AND FRANCINE PROSE'S BLUE ANGEL

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## ABSTRACT

The academic novel is a genre that continues to expand in both scholarship and critical review. The Human Stain by Philip Roth and Blue Angel by Francine Prose are examples of the evolution of this genre. Both novels are set on Northern New England college campuses and look at the absurdities and hypocrisies present in contemporary American society.

In the introduction to this study, I look at the history and background of the academic novel and investigate some of the literary characteristics associated with the genre. I go on to give brief background information on novelists Philip Roth and Francine Prose and conclude with a synopsis of The Human Stain and Blue Angel.

The first chapter explores some of the comments and observations about modern American culture articulated by each of these novels. I give particular attention to the issues of sex and sexuality, collegiality, family, racism, feminism, and political correctness. I view each issue in terms of how it affects various characters and discuss the role of the academic setting.

In the second chapter I examine identity and the role of the college campus in identity construction. I specifically focus on Roth's characters Coleman Silk, a professor of Classics and his lover Faunia Farley, a college janitor and on Prose's character Ted Swenson, a professor of fiction writing. In each chapter I draw conclusions as well as form personal opinions resulting from research I have done for this study.

I conclude with my thoughts on where the genre of the academic novel is headed and whether I believe that these two academic novels by Roth and Prose are effective vehicles to provide commentary on contemporary American society.

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Lastly I would like to thank my father. It was through you that all this was possible and I will never be able to thank you enough. You have given me the world and I hope you know that you mean the world to me.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my sister Danielle, the only one who truly knows whose fault it really is! Love you!

## INTRODUCTION

The Human Stain by Philip Roth and Blue Angel by Francine Prose examine contemporary American culture through the lenses of characters living in small college towns in northern New England. In Roth's work the main focus is on Coleman Silk, a tenured professor who quits his job at prestigious Athena College due to accusations that he made racist remarks in one of his classes. Prose's novel focuses on the affair of creative writing professor, Ted Swenson, and his student, Angela Argo, and the subsequent consequences of their actions. I propose, in this thesis, that the setting of the college campus is used in these two novels because it is an appropriate vehicle to satirize and deliver commentary on present-day society.

The Human Stain and Blue Angel make numerous comments and observations about contemporary American society. Issues such as family and sexuality are apparent in the text as well as feminism, political correctness, and occupational relations. In addition, the setting of the college campus propels observations on identity and the ways in which identity construction can be influenced by academia. The academic genre is well equipped to explore social issues because as Carlin Romano observes in his article "The Troves of Academia,"[w]ith the exception of Christian churches, no American institutions provide so much yawning space between appearance and reality for the

novelist of manners to explore' (53). It is interesting that while the college campus is a seemingly ideal genre to explore the reality of our culture, critics have not given it much attention in terms of it being an important literary device.

The academic novel or college fiction as it is sometimes referred is neither extensively researched nor critically examined. It has transformed over the years in scope and continues to evolve as a genre. Two major works introduced the topic. The English University Novel by Mortimer R. Proctor, published in 1957, covers the history and tradition of the college novel in England. The College Novel in America by John Lyons, published in 1962, explores the influences of the English University novel on American academic fiction. In his study, Lyons talks about themes of the college novel and lists over two hundred works that he categorizes as academic fiction, dating from 1828-1962. In a follow up article that appeared in 1974, Lyons adds over ninety works to his list, illustrating the growth of the genre. In terms of relative theme and scope, he notes that many of the college novels he added to his list continue to be written by irritated professors and students who depict campus as a "heartless mill," but now the "administrators, especially the college presidents, are held in even lower esteem"(125). Lyons goes on to discuss the use of the college novel to address social problems. When speaking about the "feminist crusade" he remarks that this issue has not yet "touched the form," but speculates that "no doubt the novels themselves will make the argument in years to come"(125). It is interesting to note the accuracy of this statement made over thirty years ago. As seen in The Human Stain and Blue Angel with the examination of the relationships between older professionally established men and younger less established

women, the issue of feminism has definitely infiltrated the college novel. The feminist issue is just one of the examples of the many features of the academic genre.

Academic novels encapsulate a variety of characteristics. Satire and scrutiny of the established order are often seen, which frequently leads the author (who is usually associated with or was associated with academics) to vent about issues ranging from tenure to parking spots. Distribution and allocation of power are also prevalent themes. Power flows throughout the college campus and is manifested in many ways. For example, professors hold power over their students, though sometimes it is the students who hold the power. Lack of power is also a feature of academic novels. What happens when power is taken away? What are the ramifications when two people on different levels of the power scale intermingle? What occurs when an individual feels powerless? The themes of power and the scrutiny of college campuses appear in numerous academic novels, prompting some critics, such as Adam Begley, author of "The Decline of the Campus Novel," to tire of their tendency to "cover the same turf" (40).

Other critics are equally frustrated with these reoccurring themes that have a tendency to emerge in works of academic fiction. Critic Sanford Pinsker in "Who Cares if Roger Ackroyd Gets Tenure?" indicates that many books classified as academic are not noteworthy and "have slipped down the memory hole." He goes on to say that serious writers who are not fed up professors write the books that do survive (440). Academic fiction produced by those not directly involved with academics is less biased because of the distance between the writer and the campus. Hence, the accomplishments of Philip Roth and Francine Prose as writers not only add clout to the genre, but, make it more likely that scholars and critics will pay attention to future works of academic fiction.



In his article “The Decline of the Campus Novel,” Adam Begley also laments the quality of some academic novels. He feels they have a tendency to focus merely on problems within the college campus. He argues that writers of academic fiction stick with a formulated plot and only alter who is complaining about the problems within the campus and who they affect. As he observes, “The novelist’s perspective shifts, but the place itself remains substantially the same.” He goes on to point out that many recent academic novels are too pleasant and affable, since the majority of those writing them are employed by the university and do not want to “bite the hand that feeds, houses, insures” (40). He seems to believe that light-hearted campus fictions do nothing for the advancement of the academic novel as a scholarly genre and instead debase the genre to that of an easily read romance novel. He stresses that if a campus novel wants to survive the times, it needs to be brutally honest and nasty; for example, Randall Jarrell’s Pictures From an Institution and Mary McCarthy’s Groves of Academe (both written in the 1950s) are about either leaving or swearing off the university (40). Incidentally, like those of Jarrell and McCarthy, Roth and Prose’s works involve swearing off and leaving the world of academe.

While many works of campus fiction involve critiquing the academic establishment, they also give a glimpse into cultural history, shifting in themes and purpose as times change. The academic novel of the 1950s, for example, saw a rise in popularity as more people began attending college and sought outlets for the changes taking place at home and abroad, socially and politically (Bradbury 52). John Lyons, in his article “The College Novel in America,” cites three academic novels written after 1968, when the popular news media portrayed American universities as troubled and on the

verge of a breakdown; Norman Garbo's The Movement, Paul Radar's Professor Wilmess Must Die and Nicholas Von Hoffman's Two Three and Many More examine the issues of leftist professors, radical students, betrayal, and campus uprisings (124). Accordingly, present day culture is reflected in the recent academic novels of Philip Roth and Francine Prose. These academic novels give a pointed and often humorous glimpse of contemporary American society. This range of purpose in academic novels adds to their overall appeal and accessibility for both the reader and writer.

Academic novels, as pointed out by William Tierney, "have a broad reach" and can be enjoyed by non-academics as well as those involved in academe (161). Sanford Pinsker in "Who Cares if Roger Ackroyd Gets Tenure?" echoes this point, saying, that although often exaggerated, the academic novel may give non-academics a look at academia without being "a dry sociological text." While lay readers would likely miss much of the irony and sarcasm geared toward the university, they would certainly get a view of life inside the coveted ivory tower (450). Sanford Pinsker goes on to articulate that professors often enjoy academic fiction because "they contain just enough to seem familiar, even as their pages move steadily into territory over the top" (451). For those involved in academics, the books provide a realization that things could be worse and perhaps allow them to look at their own college with renewed appreciation. In addition to its accessibility, the academic novel offers ways to reflect upon our lives and society. William Tierney writes that "[a]cademic novels are helpful for academics not merely for the pleasure one may derive in reading fiction, but also for what the text tells us about ourselves" (162). What makes academic novels unique, and what differentiates them from

other genres, is their exaggerated use of satire and allegory in examining contemporary culture, as well as what they reveal about identity and tell us about ourselves.

Philip Roth has been writing for over forty years and in that time has been established as a well-known literary figure. In addition to the many novels he has written, he is known for writing articles and short stories, some of which have been adapted for TV and film. Roth has produced controversial and thought-provoking literature. His novels often leave critics divided and reviews mixed, yet he has won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for American Pastoral.

Roth's narrators are complex; the stories they tell are not chronological, and there is often a twist in plot. In addition, the text often engages in a dialogue with the reader scrutinizing and satirizing American culture. Roth is innovative; constructing, twisting, and playing with literary devices has helped him to produce engaging fiction. Critics, reviewers, and readers alike often claim that Roth's works are autobiographical. Yet he is insistent that, contrary to what people want to believe, they are not (Milbauer 1). Milan Kundera accurately describes one aspect of Roth's writing style:

Roth is infinitely sincere in his desire to tell all, to say everything he has in his heart and to say it openly, "naively," like someone who at confession wants to hold nothing back. Infinitely vulnerable in his sincerity, Roth is infinitely ungraspable in his irony. (Milbauer 164)

Themes in his books, particularly in The Human Stain, range from issues related to sexuality, power, gender roles, the search for identity, the role of family, to the importance of honesty. He takes these themes and produces fiction that does not follow the typical fiction writing formula. As Paul Gray ascertains in his review "[o]ne of his

more intriguing aspects has been his refusal to tailor his work to anyone else's expectations' (49). I believe this refusal not only makes Philip Roth controversial, but also gives him a unique voice for writing about the absurdities of American culture and the tribulations of identity construction. In her review "An American Dream Gone Sour," Rebecca J. Davies asserts that Roth has pioneered the production of a "compelling mix of social commentary and fiction that has afforded a portrayal of a nation corrupted by a moral and political bankruptcy, undone by a spiritualism that smacks of Reaganism at its worst" (644). His most recent novel, The Human Stain, uses the academic setting to deliver commentary on and satirize a time period when the nation is saturated with political correctness and moral questioning.

This novel takes place in a small Northern New England town. The town is home to the prestigious Athena College, and the town and the college share an air of long-standing Puritan New England values. Nathan Zuckerman, a writer who has moved to the outskirts of town to escape mainstream society, narrates the novel. In typical Roth style, the narrative is complicated due to Zuckerman's first person semi-omniscient perspective continuously shifting from the present to the past. The narrative is further complicated by the fact that Coleman Silk, a key character throughout, is already deceased at the onset of the novel, but we do not learn of his passing until much later in the text. Most events of the novel are relayed through the voice of Zuckerman as they were presented to him through conversations with Coleman Silk. However, some of the information in the novel is presented by Zuckerman as he learned it through outsiders such as Coleman's sister Ernestine, or on his own accord such as when he learns of Faunia's illiteracy lie by eavesdropping on a conversation at a local diner.

Nathan Zuckerman and Coleman Silk initially meet when Silk hastily requests Zuckerman's help in writing an account of the absurd charges of racism brought against him. Coleman shows Zuckerman one of the many documents from his case which states one of his students was forced to flunk out of Athena College "because she was too intimidated by the racism emanating from her white professors to work up the courage to go to class" (17). Silk wants to put in writing the events that not only motivated him to leave his position of Classics professor at Athena College, but also, in his estimation, caused his wife's untimely death. It is through the attempt to write this account that a friendship develops and Zuckerman learns much about Coleman Silk's life. Yet, it is not until after Silk's death that Zuckerman learns the full truth about his friend.

The reader learns through Nathan Zuckerman's flashbacks all about Coleman Silk, including the fact that he is not a Jewish man, as people suppose, but a light-skinned African American who, upon leaving college and entering the military, decided that for the rest of his life he would pass as a white man. Subsequently, he also made the decision to cut all ties with his family. The woman he eventually married believed he was a white man, as did his children, acquaintances, and anyone he came into contact with over the next forty years. Through these flashbacks, a dialogue about social values and morals takes place.

The narrator depicts Coleman as a hard worker, who believed in his ability to achieve and prevail, skilled at whatever he chose to put his mind to from boxing to the Classics. He was an intelligent and insightful man, who, upon being appointed Dean of faculty at Athena College, enacted extensive changes throughout the establishment, in order to ensure the credibility and professionalism of Athena faculty. Coleman,

consequently, made both new friends and new enemies with these changes. It becomes evident that Coleman has more enemies than friends within Athena when he is ridiculously charged with racism for calling two absent students, who happen to be Black, “spooks.” Almost all the faculty members, including those he aided by hiring them, do not stand behind him in his time of need. In particular, a French language and literature professor, Delphine Roux, seems to have a personal vendetta against Coleman Silk and is one of the key players in supporting the allegations. The once confident and established Coleman Silk becomes angry and resentful of both the policies and procedures of Athena College and his co-workers.

A change in Coleman’s personality takes place only after he develops a surprising relationship with a woman (after his wife’s death) who works on the custodial staff at the college. While this woman is much younger than Coleman and passes herself off as illiterate, the two connect on a profound personal and physical level. Despite the comments and actions of his ex-co-worker, Delphine Roux, who is jealous and resentful of the relationship and despite the fact that his children have little to do with their father, Coleman begins to see life in a new light. Unfortunately this bliss and resurrection of self are short lived, due to the irrational and crazed actions of his lover’s ex-husband. Faunia’s ex-husband, Les Farley, is a Vietnam vet, who, upon returning from war to the United States felt angry and displaced, and, while he attempts to help himself through therapy, he is never able to let go of the experiences he had abroad. These experiences cause Les to act out in violent and inappropriate ways to Faunia, which causes her to cut all contacts with him. It is brought to the reader’s attention that Les additionally has a plethora of hatred for Faunia, because he is convinced that she is responsible for their children dying

in a fire that destroyed their home. The character development of Les and his subsequent actions depict the troubled plight of America's vets.

Roth links the actions of the characters, the setting of the college campus, and the surrounding New England town to present an atmosphere saturated with incongruous ideals and political correctness. It is within this atmosphere that a variety of relationships and issues are examined. These examinations lead to commentary on popular American society and the struggle of identity. In much the same way, Francine Prose's Blue Angel, investigates and comments on American culture and identity through the setting of the college campus.

While not as well known as Philip Roth, Francine Prose is an accomplished writer. She has written over fifteen books, which include novels, children's books, and collections of short stories. Her most recent work The Lives of Muses looks at the wives of some of literature's most famous authors. Prose writes articles for magazines such as Harpers and the New York Times Magazine and has also written a script for a motion picture entitled Janis. Troy L. Thibodeaux writes that Francine Prose is known to have a keen sense of observation of the idiosyncrasies of 'contemporary behavior and for the funny, frequently biting social satire that these observations occasion' (258). He goes on to say that many of Prose's characters are trying to find meaning and direction in their disconnected lives. She is adept at social criticism, and while her themes vary, overall they are centered on '[u]npredictability and the imminent threat of catastrophe' (263). Ted Swenson, a professor, in Blue Angel is a good illustration of her use of characterization and satire to comment on contemporary behavior.

Prose's work resonates with feminist undertones and undoubtedly has feminist qualities, but it is far from straightforward feminism. In the article "A Wasteland of One's Own," Prose attacks the recent influx of women-centered media, such as the television network Oxygen and the web site IVillage.com, claiming that "[t]his new 'women's culture' is more of an embarrassment than an empowerment (Prose 1). She goes on to say the women-centered hot spots are merely playing on already ingrained stereotypes by depicting women as technology illiterate and as feeling that shopping cures all woes. A closer look at what is seemingly feminist on the surface but just the opposite underneath resonates in her book Blue Angel.

Blue Angel addresses feminist issues, but they are not always apparent. For example, we may ask if Ted Swenson's student Angela Argo is a victim of an older man's hopes and desires or if Angela is actually the one who victimizes, using her sexuality to seduce Swenson so as to help her publish her novel. Furthermore, we may ask if Prose is poking fun at Swenson's daughter for taking a class entitled "Batterers and Battered" [that deals with domestic abuse] or is Prose bringing to light an important issue? The duality of her writing, whether it is on feminist issues, the role of family, the absurdities of society, or the struggle for identity deepens and enriches her construction of characters and thematic concerns.

Francine Prose's Blue Angel follows the thoughts and actions of a middle-aged creative writing professor. Ted Swenson has been teaching at Euston College for many years, and in terms of the American dream, he has it all: a nice house, a stable career, and a loving wife. His only setbacks are his strained relationship with his daughter, his lack



of motivation to write his third novel, and the lack of connection he feels with those with whom he works.

Swenson has been facilitating fiction-writing workshops for many years. While he once found it exciting and intriguing, he now struggles with the absurd and mundane process of flushing out reputable fiction from his students. In one of the opening scenes of the novel, Swenson is trying to lead a class that has been writing short stories that deal with bestiality. A job he once found intriguing and uplifting has become a weekly struggle to find “a way to chat” about awkward subjects “so that no one’s feelings get hurt” (5). He is irritated that many of his colleagues think his job is easy because he doesn’t lecture or give tests. This scene illustrates the beginning of Swenson’s feelings of alienation, not only with Euston College, but with his identity as a competent instructor. In what seems to be a search for self, Ted Swenson becomes overly interested in one of his students and consequently further alienates himself from his daughter and his colleagues and faces losing his job, his wife, and life as he knows it. Similar to Coleman Silk in The Human Stain, Swenson realizes amidst these allegations of wrongful conduct that he cannot count on his colleagues for support. It is within the context of these actions and events that take place at Euston College that we see commentary about contemporary American culture.

While the text of Blue Angel is not as complicated and in depth as The Human Stain, both are similar in terms of setting and scope. In addition, both authors use humor, irony, and satire as it relates to political correctness to show the strange marriage of contemporary and traditional values that are prevalent in the current climate of some

college campuses. These literary devices ultimately allow for commentary and reflection on the absurdities of modern American society.

## CHAPTER ONE

Issues of contemporary American society are addressed throughout these two novels. Insightful commentary is given on a range of issues, from sexual relations to society's insistence on political correctness. The presentation of these issues within the context of the college campus gives great depth to this focus on cultural politics.

Sex, sexuality, and America's view on both are central from the beginning of The Human Stain. The novel opens with the chapter "Everyone Knows," which begins with the narrator Nathan Zuckerman talking about Coleman Silk's confession that "he was having an affair with a thirty-four year old cleaning woman who worked down at the college"(1). What makes this confession remarkable is the fact that Silk is a distinguished man more than twice her age and status. Roth, interestingly, couples this confession with commentary on the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky affair. The early pages of this chapter are filled with language depicting offence, wrongful conduct, lack of self-restraint, and smoldering Puritan values.

While much of America is disgusted and in a frenzy about the “youthful middle-aged president and a brash, smitten twenty-one year old employee carrying on in the Oval Office like two teenage kids in a parking lot”(2), a fellow colleague tries to convince Coleman Silk that the University community feels the same about him. Delphine Roux, a professor of Languages and Literature, writes Coleman an anonymous note: “Everyone knows you’re sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age” (38). In truth everyone does not know; however, the note represents what in all likelihood would be the popular consensus about Coleman and Faunia’s relationship. People will view their relationship in terms of differences in occupation and societal status and reason that this younger, less intelligent woman is being exploited. As Nathan Zuckerman accurately affirms to Coleman, it “doesn’t conform to decency’s fantasy blueprint for who should be in bed with a man of your years and your position”(42). Much like the Clinton/Lewinsky situation addressed in this chapter, Faunia and Coleman’s relationship offers commentary on America’s standards about who can sleep with whom and what types of relationships are appropriate and the potential absurdity of the judgment of conventional society.

The Human Stain also takes a humorous look at the newest wonder drug to hit America’s pharmacies, the sexual enhancement drug Viagra. Coleman Silk is in the midst of telling Zuckerman how it has improved his life and goes into an almost poetic ode to the drug on page thirty-two. On the one hand, the text seems to marvel at Viagra’s ability to enrich life well past the sexual prime. On the other hand, it also looks at the problems this increased sex drive causes. For example, it is doubtful if Coleman would be

involved with Faunia if not for the help of the drug, since sex is where the two have the deepest connection.

Comparable to The Human Stain, Blue Angel presents a relationship between an older man and a younger woman. Like Faunia Farley, Angela Argo is of lower status and educational standing than her older love interest, the seemingly well-adjusted and successful Ted Swenson. Swenson is aroused and intrigued by this younger student who partakes in his fiction writing workshop. An unlikely match, Angela is “a skinny, pale redhead with neon-orange and lime green streaks in her hair and a delicate, sharp-featured face pierced in a half-dozen places.”(8). She projects extreme boredom in class but surprises Swenson with her striking ability to write and critique fiction. The presentation of their relationship not only counters what culturally is considered sexy but also pokes fun at the scenario of the middle-aged man cheating on his wife with a younger woman. The situation is further satirized when Swenson and Angela attempt to have sex and Swenson’s tooth shatters, causing the moment to be lost. It is at once a comic and pathetic scene. The presentation of sex in these two novels, as it relates to the college campus, satirizes the rigid Puritan views of sexuality held by some Americans.

In addition to their exploration of sexual relationships, both of these novels explore the issue of relations between colleagues and the influence of power on these relationships. When Coleman Silk is reprimanded for allegedly referring to two black students as *spooks*, he realizes that those he thought were his allies fold under the authority of the College. Understandably, the longtime professors who were severely irritated by the numerous changes Coleman made as Dean of faculty were not on his side. What came as a surprise was the lack of support from those whom Coleman helped out

by hiring them, all those who loved him for giving them a chance when they were newly graduated (9). This fluctuation of power among faculty members (Coleman once being the man in charge, now being charged and persecuted by those who held little power) illustrates the constant shift of influence within the microcosm of academia.

Coleman is shocked by the treatment he receives. He is upset that his colleagues do not support him and angrily laments to Zuckerman: “These shenanigans were so much jockeying for power. To gain a bigger say in how the college is run. They were just exploiting a useful situation” (17). It is this anger at the establishment that fuels his desire to publish a book (with the help of writer Nathan Zuckerman) explaining the unfair treatment. Although the book is never written, Coleman has found a close friend in Zuckerman. The many profound conversations between the two men help Coleman realize it is difficult to find allies in the competitive atmosphere of academics. This realization alleviates some of Coleman’s initial shock and anger over the allegations.

Similarly, in Blue Angel Ted Swenson finds himself amidst allegations, although his are for indecent conduct with a student. Swenson becomes an example for Euston College’s quest to stamp out sexual harassment, and, as a result, colleagues whom he thought were friends do little to defend him. His trial, as pointed out by numerous reviewers, resembles the early Puritan witch-hunts, as everyone from the librarian to former students are called forth to give information that can be used to persecute him. In both instances, Coleman and Swenson are at the mercy of not only the policies and procedures of the academic institutions, but those individuals whom they thought they could trust.

While Ted Swenson's actions with Angela Argo were indeed inappropriate, the lack of support from his fellow colleagues is callous. During Swenson's hearing, fellow faculty member, Dave Sterrer takes the stand. Swenson bitterly wonders what right Sterrer has to testify, considering he had affairs with his own fellow students (274). In addition, Magda Moynahan of the poetry department is on the committee that will decide his fate, a woman, whom he thought was his good friend and confidant. Throughout the inquiry, she does not offer any non-verbal or verbal means of support.

In his article "On Collegiality, College Style" Carlin Romano talks about what leads faculty members to treat each other with a lack of genuineness. Romano discusses a word he believes adequately describes faculty relationships: "colleagueality." Unlike collegiality, colleagueality describes the "backbiting, envy, irresolvable feuds, hidden agendas, contempt, cowardice" present in many faculty departments (B6). He suggests that although they present the facade of a connected group, faculty members are often at odds with each other in their quest for power, recognition, and advancement.

In my opinion, these two instances exemplify how as a society we are often motivated by and act upon personal interest, especially in our occupations. Not only can we be self-serving, but we often cater to those in power to avoid confrontation, even if we do not agree. In addition, like the case of Swenson and Coleman, in times of personal tribulation, we often find ourselves either in the situation of being alone or discovering who are our true friends.

Some issues apparent in The Human Stain are not readily addressed in Blue Angel. For example, the topic of race and racial relations is addressed extensively in Roth's work through the character Coleman Silk. Coleman was born a light-skinned

African American. He realized early in life that passing as a Caucasian would be more beneficial to him in the racist society in which he lived. Encouraged by his boxing coach, Coleman first disregarded his race as a teenager, during a boxing match at West Point. He did so not by actively proclaiming he was white, but by being instructed by his coach, Doc Chizner, "not to mention that he was colored" (98).

Growing up, Coleman had experienced racism from fellow classmates and random individuals. He knew that prejudice against his race could restrict his aspirations. But it wasn't until he was blatantly called a *nigger* at a store in Washington DC that he realized how painful and inhibiting his skin color could be. When he enrolled in military service, he finalized his decision to alter his identity by checking off Caucasian in the section that asked for race.

When Coleman Silk meets and falls in love with a white girl from the Midwest, his ethnic background once again becomes a factor. The two date for over a year and Coleman continues to heed Doc Chizner's advice on the subject of his race: "If nothing comes up, you don't bring it up" (118). When he finally takes her to meet his family, who are unquestionably African American, things go well until the two are on the train headed back to the city. Steena abruptly breaks down and tearfully exclaims, "I can't do it" (125), runs off, and the two never date again. He eventually meets and becomes engaged to a Jewish woman. He realizes that his reason for marrying Iris comes down to the fact that she has kinky hair, which could be used as an explanation if their children are born with African American characteristics. This awareness saddens him, but he reasons that it is just another technicality in his decision to pass as white. He also decides that he needs to cut all ties with his family. Before he marries, he goes to visit with his mother

and announces he will have nothing to do with his family ever again, thus eliminating his mother's right ever to meet her grandchildren.

Coleman realizes that his declaration is excruciating to his mother but reasons he is "murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom!"(138). This idea of freedom, the notion of acquiring all that he can in life, and the desire to be a candidate for every opportunity lead him to turn his back on his race: "Only through this test can he be the man he has chosen to be, unalterable separated from what he was handed at birth, free to struggle at being free like any human being would wish to be free"(139). Silk firmly believes the benefits of his decision outweigh the personal anguish and negative ramifications.

In his article "Climbing Over the Ethnic Fence: Reflections on Stanley Crouch and Philip Roth," Sanford Pinsker discusses Coleman Silk's desire to pass as a white man as his reaction to wanting the American dream, without any restraints, allowing an "emphasis on the Self as opposed to Society"(474). He postulates that Roth's novel "dramatizes the gains as well as the costs of jumping over the ethnic fence"(475).

Coleman's decision grapples with the matter of race in American society. Even after the status of minorities in America was improved through the Civil Rights movement, he never revealed his true race. This raises the question as to why he does not reveal the truth. Is it because he has lived the lie for so long, or is it because he knows that even in the 1990s, there still existed racial prejudice which could inhibit his success? Mr. Silk is consistently depicted as an intelligent, confident, and powerful individual, yet he does not have the power or confidence to deal with racial adversity. He has many strong qualities that would be beneficial to him in achieving success, yet he knows that



society will overlook those and instead look at the color of his skin. Ironically, accusations that he is a white racist lead to the eventual demise of his career.

Coleman's racial lie questions the ideology of the American Dream and what extent people will go to achieve it. Is this dream, in actuality, molded and built on lies and false manifestations of self? Do qualifications for being able to pursue the American dream require being Caucasian? It is my judgment that the credentials for achieving the American dream are being satirized. Here is a situation where an educated man is trying to be part of a cultural belief by falsifying a factor that is supposed to be irrelevant to that belief.

Another topic examined in Roth and Prose's novels is family relations; each book depicts family relationships that are flawed and atypical. In The Human Stain, Coleman Silk has strained relationships with his children. His youngest son has always resented him, and the other three distance themselves after their mother's passing, blaming Coleman for her untimely death. As previously mentioned, he also has strained relations with his mother and two siblings, resulting from his denial of his ethnic background. The only seemingly healthy relationship in Coleman's life is with Nathan Zuckerman and Faunia Farley.

Faunia Farley is able to make Coleman happy, despite the excessive emotional baggage she has from her dismal family relations. Her stepfather sexually abused her as a child, and her mother refused to accept it, causing Faunia to leave home at an early age. In addition, her own two children died in a fire and her ex-husband is a borderline psychotic. These ill-fated events cause her understandable guilt and uneasiness in interpersonal relationships. She is depicted in the novel, as being pleasant, but lacking

close acquaintances other than Coleman. It appears Faunia is closest to and relates best to a bird, an ostracized black crow that resides at the Audubon society (237). She feels a sense of peace when she visits him, attributing their time together as a way for her "to leave the human race"(239).

Blue Angel also elucidates familial relationships that are broken and unhealthy, such as Ted Swenson's relationships with his wife, daughter and deceased father. His father in a crazed act of suicide burnt himself alive. Swenson rarely speaks with his daughter Ruby, and after over fifteen years of marriage, he betrays his wife and abruptly loses all they had.

The relationship receiving the most attention is between Swenson and his daughter, who attends college in a neighboring town. Ruby's emergence into adolescence caused Swenson to feel "mystified and hurt and embarrassed" (192). It seems he was unable to accept his little girl growing up and felt alienated by changes she was going through. Their relationship becomes further strained when he regrettably breaks up one of her relationships (193). Consequently, Ted feels disillusioned with Ruby and their interaction is often awkward and unnatural. In her book The Wounded Woman, Linda Leonard infers that "when a father is wounded in his own psychological development, he is not able to give his daughter the care and guidance she needs"(back cover). This statement, when related to Swenson's father's suicide, gives merit to Swenson's uneasiness as a parent. Due to this strained father-daughter relationship, Ruby's upcoming visit home for Thanksgiving is an orchestrated event. This stress and apprehensiveness reinforce the sense of uneasiness and disquietude in the family.

Linda Leonard generalizes the father-daughter wound as an inherent part of our contemporary culture, affecting both females and males (25). While her book speaks more to the female side of the issue and how it affects women in their public and personal lives, it is evident from Blue Angel that fathers also struggle and suffer as a result of tension with their children. Swenson adores his daughter, but it is a constant effort for him to connect with her.

The images of family projected by both of these novels lead to an examination of the American family. Some of the relations presented are gross exaggerations and others are more familiar, each showing the conflict and uneasiness present in contemporary families. Paralleling the American Dream is the conception of the perfect American family. This conception has been perpetrated by popular media conveying unrealistic images of family. Suggested by these novels is the reality that there is no such thing as the perfect family.

Also suggested (and satirized) by these two novels is the notion of how political correctness can be taken too far. In addition, both authors relate the issue of political correctness with the feminist issue.

Political correctness is addressed in The Human Stain with an air of irony. Coleman, a tenured professor of the Classics and faithful observer of the English language, is accused of racism after referring to two consistently absent African American students as *spooks*. This word choice causes incredible chaos not only in Professor Coleman's life, but also in the realm of the college campus. What makes these accusations even more ironic is the fact that Coleman, although unknown to anyone at Athena College, is himself an African American.

The administration's desire to be politically correct in handling the accusations overlooks the fact that Coleman was unaware of the students' identity and "was using the word in its customary and primary meaning "spook' as a specter or ghost" because they were absent so much (6). The administration reasons his remarks were racist and thus damaging and hurtful to the two students. Carlin Romano's comparison of the college campus to a courtroom giving "all the attention to detail, sensitivity to rights and violations of the law, but virtually none of its regard for evidence, fairness or due process," resonates in both the case of Coleman Silk and Ted Swenson (*The Troves of Academia* 55).

The interactions and associations between co-worker Delphine Roux, the young French language and literature professor, and Coleman Silk bring forth some of the complexities of the feminist issue. These complexities illustrate some of the problems that arise when political correctness is followed too closely. When one of Coleman's students complains to Ms. Roux that "the Euripides plays in Coleman's Greek tragedy course are 'degrading to women'"(184), Delphine implies to Coleman that perhaps he is teaching the material in a degrading manner. She furthers the inquiry by asserting that he has never read the plays from a "feminist perspective"(191). Coleman counters this by stating a feminist reading would do nothing for the students other than "close down their thinking before it's even had a chance to begin to demolish a single one of their brainless 'likes'"(192). Delphine feels both intimidated and aroused by Coleman. She seems to struggle with her desire to present herself as an intelligent capable woman and her desire to entice him with her femininity and sexuality.

Because of her longstanding battle to stand up to men and “not to be fearful of their presumed authority or their sage pretensions” (197), Delphine feels she has the duty to look after those on campus who have been victims of Coleman Silk’s misogyny, including Faunia Farley. Unknown to her at this time, she is fighting a battle not against Coleman Silk’s supposed masochist attitude towards woman but a battle against her feelings.

Having written an ad for the classified section of the *New York Review of Books*, it becomes evident that Delphine has romantic feelings for the person she has expressed so much disdain for. Brainstorming as to what kind of man she is looking for, she realizes that “the mythical man being summoned” (273) is Coleman Silk. Consequently, one can infer that her actions to expose Faunia and Coleman’s relationship, backed by supposed feminist principles, were in fact motivated by her jealousy.

Prose’s novel seems to use contemporary America’s obsession with political correctness to cogitate upon the feminist movement as well as other contemporary social issues. Using humor and irony, Blue Angel lambasts situations such as Swenson and his wife choosing to drive across campus to a faculty meeting instead of walking, knowing “that it’s an ecological crime to drive across campus...” and Euston College’s obsession with making sure sexual harassment does not happen on their campus (19).

In a humorous dialogue that takes place at Dean Bentham’s home in Prose’s novel, the English faculty exchange stories and concerns about the current sexual harassment buzz. One professor describes a recent meeting with a student who told him that his discussion of homosexuality in Great Expectations “made her feel very unsafe” (103). Another professor uneasily confesses that she feels she has made a mistake in reading a

poem that has offensive language. Swenson, who feels the whole conversation is absurd, proposes that they should take all the students who are so politically correct about sexual harassment and “[l]ock them in a room and shout dirty words at them until they grow up” (107). It is ironic that Swenson eventually becomes a victim of Euston College’s pursuit of being a model politically correct campus.

In Blue Angel, the benefits and ramifications of the feminist movement are coupled with society’s insistence on political correctness to comment on how the feminist movement can be seen as both helpful and destructive to the status of women. Angela Argo, the seemingly shy undergraduate, manipulates her way into Swenson’s life in order to achieve a personal goal. She wants Swenson to show her work Eggs to his agent in hopes that it will get published.

In the end, we see Angela had the whole situation planned and got what she wanted through playing both the seducer and the victim. This victory suggests her actions and accusations make a mockery of the feminist movement. In Blue Angel, Lauren Healy, a well-known feminist and nemesis of Swenson, who teaches classes such as “Text Studies in Gender Warfare,” seizes this opportunity to rally people on campus to fight even harder for women’s rights because another female was violated. Yet, the reader knows that the supposed violation is not that simple in light of Angela’s malicious intent; she knew what she wanted and how to get it.

If, however, the situation is looked at in terms of a woman gaining power through her actions, then Angela does have a positive effect on the women’s movement, that is, she used the power of her sexuality to achieve what she wanted; and the claims of sexual harassment further enabled her to cause someone who supposedly was more powerful

than she to suffer great loss in terms of family and career. Lauren Healy's statement towards the end of Swenson's trial reiterates the duality of the situation. Complimenting Angela on her bravery to come forward and emphasizing the importance of her disclosure, she muses:

Angela, let me say again that we know how tough it was for you to come in and say what you did. But if women are ever going to receive an equal education, these problems have to be addressed and dealt with, so that we can protect ourselves. (306)

Angela, obviously indifferent of what she supposedly did for the feminist movement curtly replies, "Sure. You're welcome. Whatever." The college setting enhances some of the political contradictions about the feminist movement in that the situation between Angela and Swenson is used by Euston College to demonstrate its policy to follow the rules, to be concerned about women's rights, and to not tolerate non-compliance in such important matters.

The social criticism and observations in these two novels are enriched by the setting of the college campus in a variety of ways. Particularly notable is the consideration that colleges attempt to impress upon society that they allow and encourage open-mindedness to inspire individual growth and expression, when in actuality this is not always the case. According to Carlin Romano in his article "The Tresses of Academe," the college campus has never been a safe place to speak your mind (55). I partly agree with his observation: "Speaking your mind" is safe for some of the college populace, such as Angela Argo, a student willing to play unfair, but destructive for others such as Coleman Silk, who has insecurities and secrets to hide. It becomes apparent in these two novels

that successfully speaking one's mind depends upon a variety of factors and can have a variety of consequences.

Jay Parini raises a question that I believe elicits why the setting of the university works so well as a backdrop for discussions and explorations of contemporary sociopolitical issues. In his article "The Fictional Campus: Sex, Power, and Despair" he asks: Does the academic novel "hold a mirror up to our daily lives?" (B12). If one acknowledges that it does, then the academic novel is indeed an ideal vehicle in which to explore and discuss contemporary social issues, values, and ideas. In addition, in these academic novels, individual characters articulate through their actions and dialogue how the microcosm of the college campus cannot but be a place where current and sometimes controversial issues appear and merit exploration. I think these qualities, inherent in an academic setting, enable Blue Angel and The Human Stain to approach contemporary issues with humor and irony, and it is these literary devices that make for a poignant and memorable discussion about modern-day America.



## CHAPTER TWO

Another quality of the academic novel is its potential to explore the nature of identity and identity construction. The setting of the college campus raises the question: Does the campus climate aid in search for self, or is it a restricting climate due to long-standing norms and values within the institution. Many of the characters in The Human Stain and Blue Angel have identity issues that are influenced in some way by the institution in which they work.

Faunia Farley, in The Human Stain, is an example of a character confounded by her identity. In addition to being depicted as simple and of the lower class, Faunia is described as

A thin tall angular woman with graying hair yanked back into a ponytail and the kind of severely sculpted features customarily associated with the church-ruled, hardworking goodwives who suffered through New England's harsh beginnings, stern colonial women locked up within the reigning morality and obedient to it.

(1)

Faunia in fact comes from a wealthy family, but sexual abuse from her stepfather and lack of support from her mother caused her to leave home at an early age. She involves herself in a series of toxic relationships and eventually becomes a divorcee with two deceased children, and works on a custodial staff and at a dairy farm. Passing herself off as illiterate, Faunia leads a simple life, having, as Coleman puts it, “dropped so far down the social ladder from so far up that by now she’s a pretty mixed bag of verbal beans” (28).

Although he originally says that he is “not going to impose my wonderful virtue on her” (35), Coleman ultimately tries to identify with her in the most logical way for him, by continuously trying to teach and educate Faunia as if she were one of his students. He reads to her from the newspaper and quotes lines from the Classics. However, because Faunia is unsure of her identity, she is unsure of what she expects from the relationship. For example, during a conversation where Coleman is watching Faunia dance to a song entitled “The Man I Love” (225), Coleman admiringly asks “Where did I find you, Voluptas?” “How did I find you? Who are you?” (234). Faunia replies, “I am whatever you want.” Yet soon after, when he is reading to her about the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky saga, she abruptly becomes enraged and shouts, “Enough of the seminar! I can’t learn! I don’t learn! I don’t *want* to learn!” (234). She leaves his house and drives to visit with the one creature she feels she can identify with, a black crow named Prince. She feels their connection as being one of “[a] crow who really doesn’t know how to be a crow, a woman who doesn’t really know how to be a woman. (247). At the Audubon Society Faunia immediately appears uplifted and calmed by the presence of the non-human inhabitants:

She was just feeling good being here with the snake and the crow and the stuffed bobcat, none of them intent on teaching her a thing. None of them going to read to her from the *New York Times*. None of them going to try and catch her up on the history of the human race over the last three thousand years. (240)

Although she is unsure of her identity, she knows that she does not want to play the role of the student any longer. She feels connected to the crow Prince in part because he too is unsure of his identity and lives in a state of uncertainty in terms of his relations to others. The bird in many ways symbolizes her. For example, having escaped from his cage one day, Prince heads towards the trees and is taunted by other crows: “He [didn’t] have the right voice. He [didn’t] know the crow language” (242). He consequently adapted and “invented his own language” (243), much like Faunia has adapted her identity by claiming to be illiterate “to spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world” (297). She knew this claim would not influence the already negative judgment accorded by those she came in contact with; they would look at her outwardly and see what they wanted, regardless. Thus this choice to pass as illiterate was an adaptation of her identity that simply “feels right to her” (297).

An aspect of Faunia’s identity that seems to be concrete is her sexual identity. Coleman is aware of this and knows the one place where Faunia comes alive is in the bedroom. He tells Nathan: “In bed she is a powerful, coherent, unified being whose pleasure is in overstepping the boundaries” (31). Faunia finds confidence in sexual intimacy, so much so that she brings Coleman “sexual intoxication” (32). It is ironic that the aspect of her identity that she feels so comfortable with could be considered her major character flaw. For instance, when her children were killed in a fire, it was speculated

that she was pleasuring a random man and didn't realize her house was on fire.

Additionally, when she and Coleman are eventually killed in a car accident, she was found in a position that suggested she was giving him oral sex.

These characteristics of Faunia question the role of the college culture in shaping her identity. In the realm of Athena College, she is identified by the title of her job, as illustrated by Professor Delphine Roux's inclination to save this woman who is "from the college's nethermost reaches, a candidate for subjugation who was the prototype of female helplessness?" (194) such a perception parallels that of "the old-timers who found it unendurable to think of a man of his [Coleman's] intellectual stature sliding so precipitously into the scandalous death of an alienated, bizarre outsider" (284). Faunia is confounded not only by personal identity conflict, but also by the college's insistence on defining her. In the minds of the college faculty and the surrounding town, distinguished professors do not mix with those who clean the floors. It is interesting to imagine how differently Coleman's affair would have been perceived if it had been with a faculty member instead of a custodian. I believe this subplot satirizes people's inability to accept the mingling of social strata and comments on how perceived identities are fallible.

In contrast to Faunia's identity, Coleman Silk grew up in a loving working-class family, became a Classics professor, married, and raised a family. Coleman grew up in a literary environment consisting of numerous drills on the "power of naming precisely" and other devices of the English language. His father never blatantly yelled at his children; instead, he used the power of speech to reprimand (92). He was strongly influenced by his father's devotion to language; he knew that words could impact and hurt a person just

as much as one of his boxing punches. Coleman's knowledge of the authority of words and language is illustrated in his surprised and impetuous reaction to the "spooks" incident.

It was his father's "powers of speech [that] had inadvertently taught Coleman to want to be stupendous" (107). It can be inferred that this component of Coleman's identity drives him to react profoundly to an experience he had at an eatery in downtown Washington DC while attending Howard University. Attempting to buy a hotdog, Coleman was refused service and called "a nigger" (102). In all aspects it was a demeaning incident, but particularly demeaning to one who understands the implications and powers of the lexicon. He was painfully clear of the sociological reasons he was referred to in such a derogatory way and realized that in the face of this word, what defined him as a person became unimportant. People didn't see him as Coleman Silk the accomplished boxer, well-educated student, and master of Greek and Latin, but simply as Coleman Silk the Negro. Coleman "saw the fate that was awaiting him, and he wasn't having it" (108). He did not want to be a part of the oppressed *we*, but his own *I*: "Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns *we*, *they*, and *I*" (109), and so determined not to be victimized by his race, he became Coleman Silk, a white man. He continues as a young adult "not to mention that he was colored" (98), but shows obvious signs of strife with his new identity. When Steena, a white girlfriend, writes him a poem admiring his body and persona, he mistakenly reads a line about muscles on the back of his neck as "the *back of his negro*" (112).

Constructing his identity to coincide with the pursuit of the American dream, Coleman, as stated by Rebecca Davies, in her review "An American Dream Gone Sour," shows "all that is rotten at the heart of the great American dream: the triumph of

individualism over the collective”(645). The pursuit of this dream causes Coleman to lose touch with his true identity. It is when he meets Faunia that we see him begin to free himself from the constraints that have defined him for so long. The relationship enables him to “strip away the facades of convention and denial, to confront whatever” he has “long tried to deny” (Michels 2066), primarily his choice to be known as Caucasian to achieve his version of the American dream.

Coleman has also lost part of his identity through years of working at Athena College and Nathan Zuckerman inherently knows this, as illustrated in a scene where Coleman is reading Zuckerman a letter from an old girlfriend and Coleman unexpectedly asks his friend to dance. Zuckerman marvels at this free spirited man, the man who not long ago was “estranged from life and maddened by it” (25). Watching Coleman and hearing the letter Zuckerman understands

[w]hat Coleman Silk had once been like. Before becoming a serious classics professor---and not long before becoming Athena’s pariah---he had been not only a studious boy but a charming and seductive boy as well. Excited. Mischievous. A bit demonic even, a snub-nosed, goat-footed Pan. Once upon a time, before the serious things took over completely. (25)

His relationship with Faunia paired with his detachment from Athena College--in my opinion, enables a seventy-one year old Coleman Silk to reconstruct his identity. He appears less anxious and happy and has found a true friend in Nathan Zuckerman.

Initially, Coleman’s identity is defined by his choice to discount his race and pass as Caucasian. Eventually, the microcosm of Athena College plays an important role in his identity construction. He is defined by the college in terms of being known as “a

formidable figure on campus, both respected and feared' (Allen 31), and at the same time he is oppressed by it. There was never any loyalty between him and his colleagues, and values and ideas he thought he shared with this establishment were nullified when he was accused of being a racist. I believe the search for himself was complicated by the false guise of Athena College, one that promotes the appearance of tolerance and rectitude. He became alienated and distraught upon the realization that his identity, as defined by the college, did not coincide with his true self, much like how many years earlier, his identity as defined by the person who refused to sell him a hotdog did not match who he truly was.

Similar to Faunia Farley and Coleman Silk, Ted Swenson in Blue Angel has a confused sense of his identity. While on the surface, he appears content in his job and marriage, it is revealed through his actions and inner dialogue that he is confused and unhappy with his identity as a father, a husband, and a professor.

He is unsure of his identity as a father and relates to his daughter Ruby with a sense of obligation and confusion. These mixed feelings are illustrated in a scene when Ruby comes home for Thanksgiving. Upon hearing her arrival in the driveway, Swenson debates whether to remain where he is and act like 'the classic, dignified dad? Or should he run outside and throw his arms around her in an effusive papa-bear hug? Why can't he remember what he used to do?'(206).

In another scene when he is taking her to buy a new computer, he becomes easily agitated with the hassles that arise, causing him to want 'Ruby to understand what a giant inconvenience this is. Let her feel guilty for once' (233). The next moment he laments how 'he wants to take her in his arms and swear that everything will be fine, that he and

Sherrie [his wife] love her and will always love her'(233). It can be assumed that Ted's identity construction in terms of his role as a father was impeded and confused as a result of exposure to his father's suicide through both television and newspaper coverage. Witnessing such a tragic event in the shadow of the media surely was difficult for him. Interestingly, the suicide and Swenson's thoughts and feelings about it are not given much attention in the novel other than in brief passages. For example, early in the novel there is a passage 'he hadn't realized how painful his childhood was until his novel about it was published' (4). As the novel advances, it becomes apparent that Swenson and his daughter Ruby realize that the suicide has had effects on their family. During a telephone call, Ruby tells her father that she has been researching 'hereditary patterns of illness' and knows that her grandfather 'was not exactly healthy' (192). Her declaration gives Swenson a sense of relief and he realizes it is important for him 'to really talk to her about her grandfather--with more compassion and at greater depth even than in his novel' (193). It could be speculated that this moment could have been a turning point in their relationship, if the guilt and consequences of his recent actions with Angela Argo were not looming.

Swenson is additionally confused about his relationship identity with his co-workers, often questioning why he works among so many people so different from himself. One critic, Elizabeth Powers, notes that 'ensconced in a literature department beset with academic acrimony, [Swenson] goes through the motions of teaching creative writing' (73). Ted wonders how he became part of an establishment surrounded by so many people he cannot identify with. He dreads going to a faculty dinner at the Dean's home, referring to it as a 'protracted peep into the abyss. Deadly conversations, banal



beyond belief (93). This lack of connection with his colleagues is, in my opinion, one of the reasons he slips further into a state of a mid-life crisis. The deficiency of friendships gives him no one to converse with about his problems and frustrations. Unlike Coleman, who could vent his anger and confide in Zuckerman, Swenson has no one, which I believe, in part, causes him to have an affair with his student, Angela Argo.

Angela is a young opportunist, who uses the powers of sexuality and praise to get what she wants. She compliments Swenson profusely on his novel Phoenix Rising, claiming it saved her life, and gushes that she not only loves his fiction writing workshop, but it is the only class she goes to. In light of the fact that he has not published his third novel, nor been inspired to do so, he finds comfort in reading Angela's work Eggs and in interacting with her about literature. He soon becomes attracted to this gothic punk-looking girl. As Elizabeth Powers states in her review, "Angela's writing is so good that Swenson finds himself obsessed with her, an attraction that is more literary than sexual" (74).

I feel Swenson takes comfort in knowing that even though he is not making progress on his novel a young and intelligent student, someone he is teaching and guiding, is producing engaging and well-written material. It is as if he sees her as a manifestation of himself. Men in our society have identity crises and affairs with younger woman regularly; however, within the setting of the college campus this common occurrence becomes complicated and more problematic. Swenson knows that pursuing a relationship is not only morally wrong but also against school policy, and yet his desire for a strong sense of self is so urgent that he is easily led astray, albeit knowing his actions counter the college's definition of a respectable professor.

Ted Swenson's resistance to Euston College defining him makes him realize that he was never meant to be there. He knew this all along, but it took many years to fully realize it. In his essay "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus" William Tierney contends Blue Angel is a novel "where we learn how much the academic doesn't understand about himself" (171). I believe that it's not that Swenson doesn't understand himself, but he doesn't know himself. He understands that he is a forty-seven year old professor teaching at a rural New England college, surrounded by people preoccupied with political correctness. He realizes he has a tepid relationship with his daughter and mixed feelings about his wife. He knows that his relationship with Angela is wrong and he knows the ramifications of his actions; however, in spite of all he knows, he doesn't know his true identity, especially within the culture of the college.

Tierney acknowledges that "Blue Angel comes full circle and returns us to wondering what it means to be human and academic" (172). I agree with this statement and feel Swenson is also struggling with and wondering what it means. It is the combination of the two that brings him alienation and disillusionment with himself and also greatly affects his conception and structuring of his identity. In one of the final scenes of the novel, Swenson laments about how he is "sorrer than he can ever begin to say" that he wrecked his career and marriage, "but as it happens, he is not particularly sorry for having broken the rules of Euston College" (308). He goes on to say that he is "extremely sorry for having spent twenty years of his one and only life, twenty years he will never get back, among people he cannot even talk to, men and woman he can't even tell the simple truth" (308). This confession reveals that Swenson may perhaps know what it means to be an academic. He knows that being defined in the terms of an academic for

so many years has taken him away from knowing what it means to be in touch with himself.

## CONCLUSION

My research and writing of this thesis raised some interesting questions about the genre of the academic novel. For instance, why do the majority of college novels take place within a New England setting? Are authors such as Roth and Prose not only making fun of the social climate of modern America but also the climate of the college campus? Do the themes of these novels set within a college campus in any way benefit higher education or satirize it to the point of demeaning it?

Through the study of these novels, I have been led to the conclusion that the genre of the academic novel is an important vehicle for commentary on the many absurdities of contemporary society, particularly those relevant to the middle class. Furthermore it is an important vehicle because it is not only accessible to both academics and non-academics, but I would generalize that these novels are enjoyable to read due to the use of humor, sarcasm, and irony within the text. In many ways the academic novel is not only poking

fun at contemporary society but also the absurdity of the actions and events on college campuses. Additionally the academic novel is effective because it allows the writer to explore these absurdities within the context of how they affect identity and identity construction.

Writing this thesis has led me to believe that identity formation is definitely influenced by the culture of the college campus. The deep-seated morals and values inherent in an academic institution can only influence those who are a part of it. There are often people adhering to these morals and values so closely, such as the pesky language and literature professor Delphine Roux in The Human Stain, and the politically correct Dean Bentham in Blue Angel, that others are unwillingly affected. It is my belief that these novels suggest that the college campus challenges and in some ways inhibits sound identity construction and conception of self.

The agendas of these two authors seem to be to make their audience aware of the complications of culture and self. It is interesting to note that despite the gap in age, gender, and accomplishments, Philip Roth and Francine Prose produced novels within the same genre, which share an abundance of similarities in terms of setting and dialogue. Each novel satirizes the occurrences and events of northern New England colleges, which in turn offers commentary on contemporary American culture. The two novels, published within a year of each other, reveal the effectiveness of using the academic genre for social satire. Both couple the absurdities of the academic culture with the absurdities of society, such as the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky saga that takes place within the setting of The Human Stain.

The two authors mock many other aspects of contemporary American society. They do so with a variety of literary devices and a variety of themes. It is with the development of these themes and hence the development of the characters that social commentary is given. This commentary allows readers to form opinions and draw conclusions about their beliefs concerning the issues presented. In addition, the authors' treatment of identity allows each reader to question his or her identity and factors that influence identity construction. The genre of the academic novel, especially as Roth and Prose use it, is an important medium in presenting and exploring contemporary issues affecting individual Americans and society.

The choice for accomplished writers Philip Roth and Francine Prose to use the setting of the college campus is beneficial to the academic genre not only because it may inspire other novelists to apply it to their works, but also encourage critics to regard the academic novel as worthy of scholarship. The ability for this genre to deliver commentary on contemporary events and issues causes me to foresee an augmentation in its use, in light of our heightened awareness of terrorism and the current political climate. I believe the academic genre will continue to evolve, concentrating less on the problems within the academic establishment and more about the greater problems of society that affect the campus environment. Scholarship on the academic novel is difficult to come across partly because of numerous poorly written academic novels considered not noteworthy. It is my hope that well-written academic novels such as The Human Stain and Blue Angel will continue to appear on the literary market. This, in my opinion, will encourage scholars and critics to recognize the potential of the academic novel to give insightful commentary on ourselves and our culture.

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