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《美国牧歌》的新现实主义解读

A Neo-Realistic Reading of *American Pastoral*

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Abstract

This M.A. thesis aims to render a neo-realistic reading of Jewish American writer Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral*. Although since the 1960s postmodernism has been all the vogue on literary stage, throughout the postwar period, many novelists have continued to use the realistic mode of writing. However, their (neo-)realistic works, especially those that emerged after the 1980s, manifest their own distinctive features. While our present time witnesses a gradual decline of postmodernism, realism which has been invisible for a long time becomes visible again, but in the form of neo-realism.

This thesis consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The introduction focuses on Philip Roth's literary career, the characteristics of his works and the novel *American Pastoral*. It also points out that though Roth for an extended period embraced experimental writing, most of his works, especially those written after 1990, of which *American Pastoral* is a representative, are realistic.

The first chapter of this thesis demonstrates why neo-realism rises and the characteristics of neo-realism and neo-realistic fictions. What we call "neo-realism" is neither a simple return to traditional realism, nor a total break from modernism and postmodernism. For one thing, the period after the war, which is characterized by its sense of historical disaster, by the changed global political situation and technological transformation, provides writers with a wide range of possible subjects and themes, which are distinct from those of traditional realists. For another, under the influence of modernism and postmodernism, (neo-)realist writers tend to approach the contemporary society with more effective artistic means fully developed by modernists and postmodernists. Based on my research, I believe that a neo-realistic novel should be one that depicts a contemporary world firmly rooted in a particular place and culture, situates its moral dramas in the *Zeitgeist* (the general spirit or feeling of a period in history, as shown by people's ideas and beliefs at the time) and reveals characters' true-to-life emotions and reactions within their particular situations; and it also should be one that while written within a realistic convention, also takes advantage of modernistic and/or postmodernist artistic means to achieve their own aesthetic effect.

The second chapter examines the neo-realistic themes of the novel *American Pastoral*. Roth uses ethnicity as a framework or context within which to portray contemporary reality. In *American Pastoral*, through the portrayal of the history of a Jewish family, Roth reveals two universal problems: the generation gap and cultural identity.

The third chapter renders a detailed analysis of the characterization and setting of *American Pastoral*. Locating his representative character in the ups and downs of America and offering detailed depictions of the character's disillusionment of his American dream and psychological breakdown, Roth creates a compelling neo-realistic character whose fate is intricately enmeshed in specifically American settings and times.

The fourth chapter explores the neo-realistic artistic features of the novel. The reconstruction of the Biblical fall, which reminds us of the mythological reconstruction frequently employed by modernists, intensifies the tragic sense of the novel. The use of symbolism and montage generates a kind of neo-realistic aesthetic experience. Besides, through the use of stream of consciousness, the protagonist's psychic chaos is presented to us in a more direct and provoking way.

The concluding part of this thesis gives a brief review of the rise of neo-realism. It points out that although it is still hard to give a precise definition of neo-realism, the attempt to discuss certain neo-realistic features is still meaningful, since it could deepen our understanding of those great and gratifying neo-realistic works and allows us to give them their deserved credit. The discussion and analysis in this M.A. thesis demonstrate such an attempt. As will be clear from the thesis, based on a general understanding of neo-realism, a detailed analysis of the themes, characters, setting and artistic features of Roth's *American Pastoral* is meant to enhance our appreciation of the work and could also in turn contribute to a better understanding of neo-realism.

Key words: Neo-Realism; Philip Roth; *American Pastoral*

摘要

本文旨在从新现实主义的角度解读美国犹太作家菲利普·罗斯的《美国牧歌》。后现代主义从二十世纪六十年代开始，活跃了四十多年之后，逐渐式微。从二战后至今，涌现出不少秉承现实主义创作原则的现实主义作家。然而，他们的文学创作在继承现实主义忠于现实传统的同时，又从现代主义和后现代主义创作技巧中汲取了新营养，并且在二十世纪八十年代后比较明显地表现出自身的特色。随着后现代主义的日渐衰落，现实主义在被人忽视如此之久后，开始以新现实主义这一形式回归人们的视野。

本文由引言，四个章节和结语组成。引言部分概括性地介绍了犹太作家菲利普·罗斯的创作生涯以及写作特色，并对将要探讨的小说《美国牧歌》进行了简略介绍。引言还强调尽管罗斯在他的创作生涯中有很长一段时期尝试了实验性写作，创作了一些非现实主义的作品，他的大部分作品，特别是1990年后出版的作品，如《美国牧歌》，是属于现实主义范畴的。

第一章探讨新现实主义兴起的原因以及新现实主义和新现实主义小说的特点。“新现实主义”既不是对传统现实主义的简单回归，也不是同现代主义和后现代主义的完全决裂。一方面二战以后，历史灾难感，新的国际政治格局，科技的发展等等因素所促成的特殊时期，给作家们提供了大量不同于传统现实主义的创作主题。另一方面，现代主义和后现代主义的文学理念和较为完善的写作技巧也丰富了新现实主义的创作手法。经过查证，本文指出新现实主义小说应该是这样一种能够真实反映当下特定的社会状况和特定的文化环境，关注生活在其中的人们的心理状态，体现道德和人文关怀的现实主义文学创作。并且由于受到现代主义和后现代主义文学创作的影响，新现实主义在其艺术特征上表现为现实主义原则和现代、后现代主义手法的有机融合。

第二章探讨《美国牧歌》所反映出的新现实主义的创作主题。罗斯用民族作为框架或者背景来描绘当代现实。在《美国牧歌》中，罗斯通过讲述一个犹太家族的发展史来揭示人类普遍存在的代沟和文化身份问题。

第三章从人物形象刻画和故事背景入手，分析《美国牧歌》中体现的新现实主义小说中的典型人物形象和典型场景。将典型人物置于美国社会动荡起伏的

大背景下，通过对人物美国梦的破灭及精神崩溃的描述，罗斯向读者展示了一个与美国特定时期历史和现实命运相连的新现实主义人物形象。

第四章主要探讨《美国牧歌》的艺术特征。对圣经中亚当被逐出乐园的神话重塑，让人联想到了现代主义常用的神话重塑创作技巧，此技巧的运用加剧了《美国牧歌》的悲剧感。对象征主义和蒙太奇手法的运用更是创造出了新现实主义独特的审美体验。同时，通过意识流这一手法的运用，主人公内心世界的混乱被以一种更为直接和更具感染力的方式呈现出来。

结论部分指出，就目前而言美国文学界对新现实主义的界定仍不清晰，但尝试探讨新现实主义的基本特征依然颇具意义，因为它可以加深我们对那些具有现实倾向的优秀文学作品的理解并且使它们得到公允的评价。对菲利普·罗斯的《美国牧歌》的新现实主义解读就是这样一种尝试。从新现实主义角度阅读分析小说的主题，人物形象和场景及其艺术特征可以帮助我们对此小说的研究，与此同时深化对新现实主义的理解。

关键词：新现实主义；菲利普·罗斯；《美国牧歌》

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Introduction

Philip Roth is an important American Jewish writer who is still active on the American literary arena. Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Norman Mailer, and Bernard Malamud are called “The Five Great Jewish Writers”.

Unlike many prolific novelists, whose productive qualities may tend to wane over time, Roth has demonstrated a unique ability not only to sustain his literary output, but even surpass the scope and talent inherent in his previous writings. His later fiction is arguably his best work, as is demonstrated by the succession of awards he received in the 1990s.

Ever since his first stories were collected in 1959 in a volume called *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth has been attacked by certain pulpits and periodicals. His stories were condemned for “ignoring the accomplishments of Jewish life”, for creating a “distorted image of the basic values of Orthodox Judaism”, and even for denying the non-Jewish world the opportunity of appreciating the “overwhelming contribution which Orthodox Jews are making in every avenue of modern endeavor” (Roth, 1975: 149). He was accused of being anti-Semitic and self-hating and his criticism of Jews was charged with being taken by anti-Semites as justification of their attitudes, as “fuel” for their fires. However, Roth has repeatedly asserted that he views himself as neither a spokesperson nor an apologist for American Jews, but as an artist. Roth pointed out in *Reading Myself and Others* that some readers just looked at fiction “in terms of ‘approval’ and ‘disapproval’ of Jews, ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attitudes toward Jewish life” and they were “likely not to see what it is that the story is really about” (Roth, 1975: 150). In response to those continual accusations and criticism, Roth declared that “what draws most readers and writers to literature is this ‘something more’ — all that is beyond simple moral categorizing. Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee the appropriateness of our feelings” (Roth, 1975: 151). It was not

his purpose in writing a story of an adulterous man to make clear whatever disapproval he may feel for adulterous men. Instead, he claimed that “I write a story of a man who is adulterous to reveal the condition of such a man. If the adulterous man is a Jew, then I am revealing the condition of an adulterous man who is a Jew” (Roth, 1975: 152).

Because of the great changes of society and times and the enrichment of his own life experiences, Roth’s works experience changes and innovations in terms of themes and artistic means. Like Saul Bellow and a number of others, Philip Roth himself is essentially a social realist, a novelist of manners. “Although his career has encompassed some experimental ventures, in his best and most representative works he has created striking vivid impressions of American society today” (Searles, 1985: 2). According to the different characteristics of different periods, Roth’s creation can be roughly divided into three phases. Roth’s works of the first phase concentrate on the Jewish community life with which he is quite familiar and reveal the anxieties, the dilemmas and struggles into which the descendants of American Jewish immigrants fall. On the one hand, they desire to break away from the traditional constraints and join the mainstream; on the other hand, they ironically fail to free themselves from the traditional American dream. Generally speaking, most works of this period are realistic. In the second phase, Roth expands his vision and produces works that are diversified both in theme and subject matter. During this period, Roth still puts Jewish intellectuals at the writing centre, but the problems discussed are quite beyond the Jewish ghetto. His works serve to be rather a monologue of an American who seeks himself and explore the existence of life in a dissimilatory modern western society than a story of a Jewish intellectual who looks for identity and culture identification in a foreign culture. As for style, Roth embraced experimentalism during this period, producing a whole series of unconventional works. As John N. McDaniel has pointed out, they reveal a movement in Roth’s fiction toward the vernacular and the satirical, while emphasizing “the most prominent features of Roth’s sensibility: his increasing pessimism over the possibilities for selfhood, his attention to the social landscape... and his continuing

concern with moral and psychological crises experienced in and perpetuated by American life” (Searles, 1985: 142). In addition, Roth seems to imply that in a sense, unreality is the norm in a world gone mad (Searles, 1985: 143). During the third phase, Roth retrospects both his own creation and the national and social history, and once more projects his vision on the broad national fate and social reality. Moreover, he returns to neo-realism and creates a lot of works that reflect the American reality and “dreams and heart beating of the nation” (Versluys, 1992: 8).

American Pastoral (1997) is the first of Roth’s American Trilogy in his third phase. *American Pastoral* explores the course of American history from the late 1940s, which Roth’s narrator and alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, regards as a golden period, to the social upheavals that marked the 1960s and early 1970s. The focal point of the story is a Jewish character called Seymour Levov, an outstanding man in every respect—brilliant athlete, successful businessman, devoted husband and father—whose only goal is to live a tranquil, pastoral life in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey. But his rebellious sixteen-year-old daughter, Merry, gets caught up in the anti-Vietnam War movement and plants a bomb at the local post office, killing one person. Seymour’s idyllic life is shattered forever, and for the rest of his life, as the novel zigzags its way back and forth in time, Seymour tries without success to understand what went wrong. How could such a thing have happened? In his searching examination of how confident, post-World War II America gave way to the violence and disorder of the 1960s, Roth explores, with depth, understanding, and compassion, issues such as the nature of community and belonging, Jewish assimilation, father-daughter relations, familial loyalty and betrayal, and political fanaticism.

On the surface, it is a story of the making and unmaking of a Jewish family. However, in essence, *American Pastoral* shows how individual identity embodies national identity and how the forces of history—American history, specifically—threaten to overtake personal freedom and individual agency. The novel presents a Jew’s attempts to assimilate into the melting pot of WASPish society (WASP: White Anglo Saxon Protestant), and how his daughter’s

involvement with radical anti-Vietnam politics destroyed his pursuit of the “American dream.” Roth’s concern about cultural identity and the generation gap, the mythic framework of this novel, as well as the use of symbolism, stream of consciousness, and montage, makes *American Pastoral* a novel with realistic themes and modernistic/postmodern artistic features. As will be clear in the following chapters, a neo-realistic reading of *American Pastoral* will further enhance our understanding of this wonderful book.

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Chapter One The Rise of Neo-Realism and Neo-Realistic Fictions

1.1 The Rise and Development of Neo-Realism

1.1.1 The Decline of Postmodernism

After the two world wars, postmodern literature gradually came into being, with different genres such as magic realism, black humor and the novel of absurdity, etc. In the 1960s a belief that the novel is dead became popular. This meant, for some, that the traditional functions of the novel should be abandoned, namely, the belief that the novel should represent social reality, should represent how the psychological experience is related to the social experience, and should address those cultural terms governing our “lived” reality. Literary postmodernists then favored “fiction” (the word “novel” is dropped) and turned against “reality”.

Since the 1960s, postmodernism—and certainly not neorealism—had been all the vogue in academic circles. The war in Vietnam, recurrent race riots and a general climate of rebelliousness against repressive post-war conformism induced an urge to explode all conventions, including the narrative ones. A world presumed chaotic was reflected in the (dis)organization of the narrative material itself. “Ludic or reality-distorting elements came to constitute the building blocks of the state-of-the-art meta-fictional, auto-reflexive novel” (Versluys, 1992: 10). The new generation of authors has proved their newness and competence by a wide range of experimentation that would have dazzled even their brilliantly original predecessors like Faulkner and Hemingway.

However, as critic and novelist Malcolm Bradbury observes, “the way of things that experiment, after a time, begins to generate its own conventions and conventionality, and becomes not adversary of the tradition, but the tradition” (Bradbury, 1992: 14). The postmodern practice of questioning all conventions and

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