

UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA



TESIS DOCTORAL

The Human Stain in Philip Roth's Fiction

La mancha humana en la obra de Philip Roth

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR

PRESENTADA POR

Lluvia de Segovia de Kraker

Directores

Gustavo Adolfo Sánchez Canales
Fabio Luis Vericat Pérez-Mínguez

Madrid

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We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error,
excrement, semen - there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience.
Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling.
Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark.

-Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation has given me the opportunity to keep studying literature, and for that alone I am extremely grateful. I first became interested in Philip Roth's work when I was an undergraduate student at the UCM, as we studied several of his early short stories, the ones published in *Goodbye, Columbus and Other Stories*. I was interested in the subjects and struck by the qualities of comedy and mystery in them, and so over the summer I gladly read the rest of the stories in that collection, being particularly struck by "Epstein", for the story unfolded itself in front of the reader in such a vivid way. Later, when I finished the Master's in Literary Studies and was wondering what to look into next, I attended a Conference on the translation of the work of Philip Roth into Spanish, and Dr. Gustavo Sánchez Canales and Dr. James W. Flath talked about the work of Roth in such a way that it stirred my interest. Following their advice, I went on to read *The Human Stain*. When I reached the striking passage about the stain that "is there before its mark", I was reminded of the image of impurity in the description of Epstein's rash, that intriguing imprint in all human beings. It seemed to be central in the meaning of the narrative and at first, I was not quite sure of what it meant. As I went on to read the rest of Roth's novels, and talked about them with my supervisors, we set out to explore the representation of the human stain.

I would not have been able to carry out my research without the valuable work of the Philip Roth Society, whose members have published such excellent articles and books. It was a privilege to meet many of them in person in the Roth Remembered Conference which took place in New York City in April 2019. It is my hope that the literary analysis and interpretation put forward in this dissertation will be useful to those interested in contemporary American literature and Philip Roth in particular. I hope it will

inspire others to carry out studies that shed light on how recurring images give shape to a novel and help readers ask themselves about the meaning and the impact of literature as thought provoking as Roth's.

In writing this dissertation I have had the incredibly valuable collaboration and advice from many people. I am extremely thankful for Dr. Gustavo Sánchez Canales and to Dr. James William Flath, for both have taught me so much about the value of literature. To be able to write the dissertation under their guidance is a dream come true. It was because of their lectures that I first glimpsed the vastness of the possibilities of literature. Their passion for the study of literature and the way in which they teach and speak about fiction and life is a permanent inspiration to me. I am glad that they have persevered in encouraging me to keep working even though it was difficult to do so, and they have been very patient and kind. I would like to thank Dr. Fabio Vericat too, for his invaluable help in teaching me how to write a relevant and coherent text, for asking the right questions and giving me many ideas, and for his willingness to be my supervisor when Dr. Flath had to leave.

I feel a special gratitude to Dr. Félix Martín Gutiérrez for his wise and insightful comments, because he helped me to think in new ways about the human stain, and he made me believe it truly is a worthwhile subject to study in depth. Additionally, I am indebted to many friends who have listened to my musings about the human stain, for their interest has spurred me on. I want to thank all those who accompanied me in this journey, encouraging me to go on, and to Rubén, who was at my side and helped me to finish it. Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations appear parenthetically in the text to identify the reference to Roth's work. All other references appear in endnotes.

AP American Pastoral

DA The Dying Animal

GC Goodbye, Columbus

HS The Human Stain

PC Portnoy's Complaint

ST Sabbath's Theater

AL The Anatomy Lesson

RESUMEN

La mancha humana en la obra de Philip Roth

La presente tesis doctoral explora la imagen de la mancha humana en la obra de Philip Roth. Para ello, se analizan cuatro de las novelas escritas por el autor judeo-americano: *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000) y *The Dying Animal* (2001). Además, se rastrea la formación de la mancha humana en una de sus obras más tempranas: "Epstein" (*Goodbye, Columbus and other Stories*, 1959).

La mancha humana aparece en la obra de Roth como una marca en la piel, un derramamiento de fluidos corporales, la presencia no deseada de algo que, aparentemente, no debería estar ahí. En cuanto recurso literario consiste en un conjunto de imágenes: sangre menstrual, semen, heces, barro. Dentro de la trama, la mancha –en cualesquiera de sus formas– es algo con lo que los personajes tropiezan y a lo que deben enfrentarse. Con el objetivo de entender el significado de este recurso literario se lleva a cabo un estudio comparativo de las fuentes anteriormente señaladas, análisis que se estructura en torno a tres ejes principales: la mancha humana como impureza; en segundo lugar, la mancha en cuanto poder de transgresión; finalmente, como expresión humana del sufrimiento, la enfermedad y la muerte. Con el apoyo de la literatura crítica sobre Roth sobre el tema del cuerpo, la transgresión, el deseo y la muerte, esta tesis desea aportar una nueva lectura de su obra al concebir este recurso literario como una lente con la cual se pueden apreciar y comprender los aspectos más controvertidos de su obra. Consciente del escándalo que provocaba su representación de los judíos, las mujeres y las miserias físicas del ser humano en su vulnerabilidad más extrema, Roth utilizó el recurso de la mancha precisamente para reflejar aquello que creía que nos caracteriza más como especie.

El tema de la impureza es desarrollado en el primer capítulo. Un análisis de las influencias del judaísmo en la obra de Roth revela las raíces de la mancha humana. Asimismo, se establece una conexión directa entre esta imagen en “Epstein” y su desarrollo en obras posteriores. Resulta ser una característica esencial del estilo literario del autor, ya que no se restringe a unas imágenes aisladas, sino que refleja los temas centrales y se revela en una serie de síntomas que evidencian su presencia en el texto. La fantasía de la pureza es el espejismo en el que están inmersos los personajes de Roth. Tienen que despertar de su sueño para darse cuenta de su error y ver que sus intentos de lavar su impureza son inútiles. La mancha no se puede borrar, y rompe la imagen ficticia que forman en su anhelo de purificación. La mancha desvela el peligro de querer imponer la pureza en la sociedad --como pretendían los puritanos--. Este anhelo de pureza también se encuentra en el sueño americano e incluso en la revolución sexual, y la mancha actúa como veneno a la par que antídoto de esa ilusión, al mostrar la ironía y el lado oscuro de esa supuesta virtud.

El segundo capítulo se ocupa del tema de la transgresión. Primero, se refleja en el lenguaje obsceno y en la presencia de lo repelente en la representación de la sexualidad. La mancha humana marca lo prohibido, aquello que no debería ser objeto de deseo. De hecho, la búsqueda de la transgresión original se realiza siguiendo las señales que deja la mancha. El tratamiento de la mujer en la obra de Roth y la acusación de misoginia están relacionados con la mancha humana, ya que tanto los personajes masculinos como los femeninos se caracterizan por su naturaleza transgresora. Se ofrece una nueva interpretación de los personajes femeninos de Roth. No son meros objetos de deseo, sino que ejercen su voluntad. La forma en la que se representa su deseo y transgresión sugieren una visión de la mujer que, lejos de despreciarla, muestra su complejidad. Por otra parte, la mancha humana pone de manifiesto el error de aquellos que piensan que no se

equivocan. Al emitir juicios morales, su error radica tanto en su desconocimiento del otro como en su ignorancia de su propio mal, o, en términos de Roth, su mancha, la cual el ser humano tiende a juzgar, aunque es parte de su naturaleza. Esto se percibe también en la historia de los EEUU. Sus personajes se ven atacados por la plaga de América, sorprendidos por el caos de la historia que deshace sus vidas. Demostrando cómo el discurso de América se basa en la fantasía de la inocencia, la mancha humana desvela sus contradicciones.

El tercer capítulo trata del sufrimiento. La mancha humana expresa el dolor de descubrir que la vida decepciona, que las expectativas de infinitud no se cumplen. En la búsqueda del remedio para su dolor, los personajes tratan de borrar toda señal de la mancha, tarea inútil, pues son incapaces de eliminar la fuente de su sufrimiento. Por otro lado, en cuanto enfermedad, la mancha humana toma la forma de un tumor escondido que destruye el cuerpo. Roth refleja las consecuencias de la enfermedad tratando el trauma de la pérdida y los límites de la empatía. Finalmente, la mancha es la marca que indica la realidad de la muerte. Aunque el deseo es la forma en la que los personajes se aferran a la vida para enfrentarse a la muerte, no pueden burlar al último enemigo.

En conclusión, el estudio de la mancha humana en estas novelas aporta un nuevo acercamiento a la obra de Roth que permite conectar su tratamiento del tema de la impureza con la literatura judía. Las raíces de este recurso literario se encuentran en la descripción del pecado como una impureza en el cuerpo en los libros de la Torá. En definitiva, mediante este recurso que recalca una mancha inherente en el ser humano, Roth señala la imposibilidad de la pureza, además de cuestionar la noción de impureza.

Palabras clave: literatura judeo-americana, Philip Roth, impureza, transgresión, sexualidad, sufrimiento, judaísmo, Biblia, imagen.

ABSTRACT

The Human Stain in Philip Roth's Fiction

This doctoral thesis explores the image of the human stain in Philip Roth's fiction. It examines four novels written by the Jewish American author: *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Dying Animal* (2001). In addition, it looks at the shaping of the stain in one of his earliest works: "Epstein" (*Goodbye, Columbus and other Stories*, 1959).

The human stain appears in Roth's work as a mark on the skin, a spilling of bodily fluids, the undesired presence of something that, apparently, should not be there. As a literary resource it consists of a combination of images: menstrual blood, semen, feces, mud. Within the plot, the stain -in any of its shapes-becomes an obstacle for the characters, who have to face its reality. With the objective of understanding the meaning of this literary device, this thesis carries out a comparative analysis of the sources cited above, a study structured around three main points: the human stain as impurity; secondly, the stain as power to transgress; and finally, as the human expression of suffering, illness and death. With the support of Roth scholarship about the subjects of the body, transgression, desire and death, this thesis attempts to offer a new reading of Roth's work, arguing that this resource is a lens through which it is possible to appreciate and understand some of the most controversial aspects of his work. Aware of the scandal that he provoked with his representation of Jews, women and the physical frailty of human beings at their most vulnerable, Roth used the resource of the stain precisely to write about the very feature that he thought most characterizes us as a species.

The subject of impurity is developed in the first chapter. An analysis of the influence of Judaism in Roth's work reveals the roots of the human stain. Also, a direct

link is established between this image in “Epstein” and its development in later works. It turns out to be an essential trait of the author’s literary style, as it is not restricted to a few isolated images; instead, it is connected with the novels’ central themes and it is revealed in a series of symptoms that evidence its presence in the text. The fantasy of purity is the mirage in which the characters are immersed. They must wake up from their dream in order to see their mistake and realize that their attempts to wash away their impurity are useless. The stain cannot be erased, and it breaks the fictional image that they create in their longing for purification. The stain uncovers the dangers of imposing purity in society -as the Puritans intended-. This yearning for purity can also be found in the American dream and even in the Sexual revolution, and the stain acts as a poison as well as an antidote to that illusion, showing the irony and the dark side of that alleged paradise of virtue.

The second chapter deals with the idea of transgression. First, it is found in the obscene language and in the presence of the repellent in the representation of sexuality. The stain marks the forbidden object of desire. In fact, the search for the original transgression leads to the trail left by the stain. The treatment of women in Roth’s work and the accusations of misogyny are connected with the human stain, because both the male and the female characters are characterized by their transgressive nature. Consequently, this thesis offers a new interpretation of Roth’s female characters. They are not mere objects of desire; instead, they have a will of their own. The way in which their desire and transgression are represented suggests a vision of women that, far from being demeaning, shows their complexity. On the other hand, the human stain exposes the error of those who believe that they are right. In their moral judgements, their mistake lays in their lack of knowledge of the other as well as in their ignorance about their own faults -or, to use Roth’s term, their stain-, which people tend to judge despite the fact that

it is in their nature. This can also be seen in American history. Roth's characters are blindsided by the plague in the USA, by the chaos of history that destroys their lives. Laying bare how the imaginary of America is based on the fantasy of innocence, the human stain shows its contradictions.

The third chapter is about suffering. The stain reflects the pain of discovering that life does not keep its promises of endlessness. In their search for a remedy for their pain, the characters try to erase the stain completely, but it is in vain because they are incapable of eliminating the source of their suffering. On the other hand, as an illness, the stain takes the shape of a hidden tumor that destroys the body. Roth writes about the consequences of illness, loss and the limits of empathy. Finally, the stain is the mark that points at the reality of death. Although desire is the way in which the characters cling to life to face death, they cannot overcome the last enemy.

In conclusion, the study of the human stain in these novels offers a new approach to Roth's work that allows to connect his engagement with the theme of impurity with Jewish literature. The roots of this literary resource are found in the description of sin as an impurity on the body in the Torah. Indeed, it is by means of this resource, which highlights an inherent mark on human beings, that Roth points at the impossibility of purity and questions the notion of impurity.

Key Words: Jewish-American Literature, Philip Roth, Human Stain, Impurity, Transgression, Sexuality, Suffering, Judaism, Bible, Image.

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INTRODUCTION

The celebrated American author Philip Roth has been praised for the way in which he represents human experience in depth, but he is also controversial because of the outrageous quality of his fiction, as he is intent on showing what one would rather not see about people. The thesis I would like to propose is about the use of a literary resource, an image that shapes Roth's narrative, which I call "the human stain". The use of this theme is intensified in four of his novels written between 1995 and 2001, but it is also present in one of his early stories, "Epstein". In these texts, there is a stain that the characters bear, and it appears as a sign that tells them that it is a fantasy to try to be pure. In this way, the stain becomes a most powerful and pervasive physical reality, and it characterizes Roth's realism. It is mostly the representation of an experience, so a study of the human stain, rather than analyzing it as a concept, must embrace it as the literary rendering of a human phenomenon. Its obscure nature has both positive and negative connotations, thus escaping an easy definition, but it can be studied in order to throw a new light on some of the central issues in his work.

Even though there are excellent and comprehensive studies that overview the issues of moral transgression and impurity amongst many others in Roth's work, there are no studies that focus solely on the stain as an essential device that is used by Roth in several novels and as it has a complex meaning, it opens up many relevant questions. Some have focused on some aspects, for instance, Alan Cooper's *Philip Roth and the Jews* (1996) considers how decorum becomes an offense for Roth's characters, for they are seeking to be true to themselves, to their nature (Cooper 62).

Debra Shostak's *Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004) analyzes how different voices engage in dialogue with each other in Roth's fiction, and she dedicates a chapter to the link between Jewish American identity and the male body, and it is why she reads the rash in "Epstein" as his Jewish identity. It is with this focus that she reads Roth's work, whilst the reading I propose is an interpretation of the stain as a mark on all human beings that can be found in different images as a symptom of impurity and an instrument of transgression, as well as the stain of pain and the illness that leads to death.

David Brauner has shown interest in the metaphorical meanings of the human stain, but he has not developed his interpretation of the scenes in which the stain appears, and in his study, he does not acknowledge the human stain as a literary device used in different novels. He identifies the theme of purity and impurity in the novels but he does not make a connection between the way these images are represented. He is instead focused on another device: "The thread running through all the different sections of the book is the idea of paradox, both as a rhetorical device of which Roth is particularly fond, and also an organizing intellectual and ideological principle that inflects all of his work" (Brauner 2007:9). However, Brauner's interest in Roth's style encourages a close reading of Roth's texts, which leads to an appreciation of the images and words that the human stain consists of. Ross Posnock's *Philip Roth's Rude Truth* (2008), likewise, offers insight into the detail in the narrative that connotes impurity and the skepticism of purification.

I find the representation of the stain to be more visible in the following novels by Roth: *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Dying Animal* (2001), with the starting point at his early short story titled "Epstein" (*Goodbye, Columbus and other Stories*, 1959). All of these works form the corpus under consideration in this study. As to the methodology, this dissertation offers a close reading of the texts and a critical analysis based on a series of concepts found in Roth scholarship

related to the rhetorical devices and the subjects that can be found in Roth's work. In order to arrive at an understanding of the meaning of the stain, it is necessary to find the instances of these images and place them into the context of the novel as a whole in order to analyze them adequately and interpret them in relation with the main themes. When analyzing the primary sources, I have chosen a comparative approach to the four novels, structuring the thesis in three chapters, each dealing with an aspect of the representation of the human stain. Each chapter consists of three sections, which in turn are divided in more specific aspects. The choice of the themes of impurity, transgression and suffering is due to the importance of these subjects within Roth's oeuvre, as well as the close link between the human stain and these areas in the novels.

Firstly, the issue of the impossibility of purity is explored, with a focus on the images of the stain as an incurable physical blemish which is connected to the larger meaning of an inescapable moral problem. From the Bible's depiction of sin as a stain, a transgression and an incurable illness, to Epstein's rash and Merry's stutter, the images of the stain on the body show the mirage of purity. The key passage in HS is used as a definition that may guide a reading of a blemish that is inescapable and once the characters' eyes are open to its reality, they have to admit that purity is only a fantasy.

The second chapter deals with the question of moral transgression by examining the ambiguousness of the stain regarding desire and sexuality. Firstly, at a personal, at an intimate level, adultery or transgressive sexuality are described with a language that is filled with references to the human stain, even if it is just in the character's imagination or in reality. Secondly, in society and its rules, the fact that people are eager to judge others for their stain and to misjudge is always paradoxically due to their blindness, as something is darkening their sight like a stain. Eventually the text reveals how everyone is stained, and the language and situations are therefore extremely ironic.

The third and last chapter explains how the stain is a mark of pain and illness and it looks at how it is present in the struggle between Eros and Thanatos. Roth's characters suffer and ask the question of why they have to suffer. Their pain is a burden they cannot get rid of and it is represented by means of the stain. When characters are diagnosed with an illness, it appears with language and images reminiscent of the stain, and it is likewise present in the struggle that characters engage in as they hold onto life by means of their love affairs in the face of death.

So far, this study has shown that the literary device of the human stain is not just a recurrent symbol, but that in Roth's work, it functions as a network of images, symptoms and consequences that represent the complex reality of human impurity. More than a symbol with a single and static meaning, the human stain (in all of its forms, including blood, semen, waste, etc.) changes its meaning constantly, playing with the categories and the values of impurity and purity. It is not just an echo of Hawthorne's mark of sin, for the irony with which it is described allows for a constant questioning of moral standards, as in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), for example. The human stain proves to be a lens through which the reader can perceive the conflicts that characterize Roth's fiction in a new light, and it allows for questions about the graphical quality of an invisible reality in the novels.

CHAPTER I. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF PURITY

Over the four novels that I am going to analyze, this thesis explores how Philip Roth presents the only sign striking enough to show that it really is a fantasy to try to be pure: a physical stain, a mark that all human beings bear. This type of literary resource has been used in the Bible and also in Puritan discourse, as well as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's work. This stained reality is something that both his characters and his readers encounter throughout Roth's fiction. It invades their lives, so they are troubled by their transgressive desires, which are signaled by the stain. Roth has described his characters as people who tend toward "mischievous provocation, satiric improvisation, spirited impersonation, farcical abandon, ironic irreverence, immoderate monologue, clamoring corporeality, mock raving, plain mockery, ceaseless craving, and *besmirchment* by the unseemly instincts" (Roth 2017: 371). This word, *besmirchment*, means that his characters are represented as being stained, which is what I intend to analyze in this study.

This powerful and pervasive experience characterizes Roth's realism by shaping its quality of "ruthless intimacy" (Roth 2013: 54). This intimacy refers to the closeness that his narrative strives for, as his characters have to strip down and show everything that is hidden in their lives, which is uncomfortable and painful to witness. In consequence, the representation of the stain is perceived as an intimate feeling precisely because of its concrete rendering as opposed to an abstract, general idea. The complexity of its meaning will be interpreted tracing its use in Roth's work, starting from the short story "Epstein" and consequently, in the four novels that will be discussed in this study.

This thesis relies heavily on the studies carried out previously by Roth scholars, but it also aims for a new take on Roth's work. As one of the most important Roth scholars, Victoria Aarons, says, the discipline of Jewish American studies has changed significantly over the years. In her introduction to *The New Jewish American Literary Studies*, Aarons states that this discipline used to have a "perceived set trajectory to the developing body of literature, a path that roughly corresponded to the shifting cultural place and disposition of Jews in America" (2019: 2). Jewish American studies then held on to the idea of "an evolving, continuous progression, tracing a point-to-point movement of distinct periodicity in the literature of American Jews" (2). This idea of progression and the distinct periods in Jewish American literature is closely connected to issues of identity (See Schreier (2020) for a book-length study of this issue). And Aarons explains how due to the pressures exerted on this literary tradition, the issue of identity had to be grappled with by writers such as Roth, and the question of Jewish-American versus American-Jewish also had to be addressed by him, even though he wanted to reject that hyphenated condition (2). Aarons argues that he and other writers were "opposed to the marginalizing hyphen, but they had to entertain it, to engage it, in order to shed it" (2-3). In "I Have Fallen in Love with American Names" Roth described himself as American (Roth 2017: 331). And this particular American context, identity and language certainly marked his writing.

Now, the new trend in these studies is open to include authors who might have been excluded and to leave behind the emphasis on the past in order to embrace a new sense of the future (Aarons 2019: 8). It is precisely because of these changing perspectives that there are new readings of the work of Roth (14). It is in this context of the new Jewish American Literary studies that this thesis offers a new interpretation focused on the human stain.

It is true that the symbol of the human stain might seem opaque and difficult to interpret, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, because while it resists interpretation, at the same time it *invites* interpreting. This quality is exactly what Roth himself found so fascinating about Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), for example. Examining the way in which the human stain is used will help us understand the meaning of the texts as a whole and the reasoning behind Roth's writing more clearly. Roth stated that "what makes an image revealing or significant is not how much meaning we can assign to it, but the quality of the whole of the fiction it inspires, the liberty it gives the writer to explore his obsessions and talent" (Roth 1975: 70).

I.1. THE STAIN ON THE BODY

"Epstein", one of Roth's first stories, was published in 1959 along with four other stories and a novella in his first book: *Goodbye, Columbus*, which won the National Book Award in 1960 and was praised by Saul Bellow, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler (Roth Pierpont 2013: 13). During his years as a student of English literature at Bucknell University, Pennsylvania, Roth discovered stories about Jews written in a style he had never encountered before. He described these stories from *The Hudson Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Sewanee Review* and *Commentary* as "objective, forthright, descriptive" (Roth Pierpont 29). It was also in those years that he had absorbed the new voice in Saul Bellow's novel *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), which taught him that he "could put everything into a book, including thinking", and he found "the gush of language, the epic sense of life, the outsized characters, the passion for American bigness"

that he admired in Thomas Wolfe also in Bellow's fiction (28). This inspired him to write in a new way about Jews with an awareness of their American identity, in a narrative voice liberated from the traditional Jewish Literary tradition, and as Roth also learned from Bernard Malamud, stories of Jewish experience were valid material for American literature.

Two literary traditions converge in Jewish American Literature, according to Malcolm Bradbury, who argues in *The Modern American Novel* that there is a strong link between the European tradition and the American novel tradition (Bradbury 1992: 168). Roth's work can be analyzed following this double lineage. The Jewish American novel developed into a national and international form, and Bradbury argues that while Malamud represented the more traditional Jewish world, Roth was "an explorer of its extremities and absurdities in the permissive mood of the Sixties and Seventies" (175). The story where the first traces of these extremities and absurdities can be found, "Epstein", was written together with "The Conversion of the Jews" in Roth's year at the army in 1955, when he was only twenty-two years old. He had decided to enlist, but as he suffered a back injury during the training, he was assigned to a desk job at a Hospital in Washington DC and he used the typewriter to write in his spare time.

"Epstein" was inspired by a true story that Roth's father had told at the dinner table in Newark, years ago, about a neighborhood scandal. Briefly told, this story is about a man who cheats on his wife by starting an affair with a neighbor. He is found out because of a rash on his penis, and this causes a great outrage in his family. At the end, he has a heart attack while he is at his lover's house, and when his wife sees him in the ambulance, she asks the doctor if her husband's rash can be cured.

In Roth's short story "Epstein", the human stain is depicted as a physical condition. The reader may ask himself why this is so. One of the consequences of descriptions such as the rash on Epstein's skin is that it becomes evocative, as it will be recognized and remembered, and it has a great impact on the reader, creating a strong emotional response. Images of the body are recurrent in Roth's work and scholars have offered several interpretations, especially focusing on the question of body and mind. To start with, in her book *Countertexts, Counterlives*, Debra Shostak stated that Roth "inherits the ontological difficulties posed by the Cartesian split between body and mind, and frequently his work since the 1970s has traced an effort to understand, if rarely to heal, this split." (Shostak 2004: 21). While Shostak's reading offers a dialogical view of Roth's work, this study seeks to show how the stain is not only a philosophical device, but that it also has an aesthetic sense, a literary framework and a moral dimension, all of which provide a new key to explore Roth's fiction.

In Shostak's view, the rash in "Epstein" stands for the mark of his Jewish identity, circumcision (Shostak 2004: 73). She interprets the story as Epstein's attempt to overcome his alienation (caused, in Shostak's reading, by a crisis of identity and of masculinity) as a character who is trying to prove to himself that he is still a man. Thus, Shostak argues, Epstein's story about how he was brutally deloused with kerosene refers to his Jewish "uncleanness" and it is against this position of weakness that he wants to rebel "by expressing such confident masculinity" in his affair (72, 73). However, the emphasis of this story on the effect of the rash on Epstein, and the references to the story of biblical transgression point towards a deeper experience which is shared by other characters of Roth, as we will see.

Even though I agree with Shostak's view that the rash might have a connection with Jewish identity, I believe it is because the human stain has biblical references, but I

do not see it as only referring to circumcision or masculinity. That is why in this section I intend to argue that there is a connection between this story and Roth's later novels because of the use of the stain. It is not the only thing "Epstein" has in common with the novels, for the peculiar comedy mixed with a serious treatment of pain is what accounts for the paradox Roth puts across in his narrative. As Jacques Berlinerblau notes that "Roth's fiction reminds us that even those who may not believe in, or practice, their own faith, are nevertheless physically and psychically marked by it" (Berlinerblau 2018: 82). Berlinerblau quotes from Amardeep Singh's 2006 study on Literary Secularism, where he writes about the markings on the body that appear at moments in Roth's fiction where his characters realize their religiously inflected embodiment, meaning their Jewish identity. However, I am more interested in the marks on the body in Roth's fiction that are a universal mark on all of humankind.

The human stain is represented in many cases, as I intend to show in this section, as a physical mark, a rash, or a wound in the characters' body. This blemish is represented with "transgressive body humor," as David Gilotta puts it, because Roth's characters are so obsessed with their bodies not because they are the victims of torture, but (and this is the way Roth achieves comedy and also tragedy) because "their bodily predicaments stem from interior struggles." Furthermore, Gilotta argues there are two options: "either their guilt and fear cause them to manifest outlandish and often psychosomatic bodily symptoms, or their bodies behave as they should, but they irrationally view every bodily quirk and stumble as evidence of some symbolic meaning or existential crisis" (Gilotta 2010: 94). The issue of guilt and fear is related to the Jewish notion of having broken the Law and the fear of Divine judgement, both of which characters such as Epstein, as we have seen, experience. As Gilotta points out, it is not easy to figure out the cause for the phenomenon of the experience of the stain, and this is what is explored by Roth: "In most

cases, the line between these two is blurred, and Roth leaves to his characters (and readers) the job of sorting through physical symptoms and psychic baggage” (94).

As seen above in the description of the ambivalent display of shame and innocence when encountering the stain in “Epstein”, Philip Roth is attracted by what is “seemingly unbelievable” to some people, things that, to him, are “quite believable [...] To take what’s thought to be the disgraceful side of men –and by no means to apologize for it [...] But the circus, the circus of being a man –it’s a circus, and the ringleader is the phallus.” (Roth qtd. in Shostak 2004: 21, ellipsis mine). The “disgraceful side of men” appears not only in “Epstein”, but also in the novels selected for this study by means of symptoms and images that can be described as the human stain. As Roth claims, it is expressed unapologetically, and the obscene is openly shown. Sabbath is indeed delighted in flaunting all that is disgraceful in men, and his sexuality is one of the main subjects of his theater. The manifestation of his transgressive appetite marks his story, and this is because, as Debra Shostak claims, in many novels by Roth, “selfhood is inextricable from embodiment” (21). Shostak analyses the role that the body plays in Roth’s novels and this is closely related to the portrayal of the impossibility to be pure, which has also been explored by scholars such as David Brauner (2004; 2007). In his study of Roth’s novels, Brauner does not consider the story of “Epstein”, but he does analyze impurity as it appears in ST, for he finds it interesting to analyze how to Sabbath “bad” means “good” and vice versa. Brauner does give an insight as to how paradoxically morality is represented in novels such as ST, AP and HS, but he does not consider the stain as a device that is used across the different novels in similar ways.

Brauner does recognize that the insistence on the “comic predicament” is what makes Roth’s characters so extreme, and Shostak also argues how the representation of the body is essential: “It is his willingness to touch the body, even the body stripped of

all signs of identity and grotesquely deformed by its own mortality, that provides Roth with one of his most enduring, transgressively comic, and, for some readers, deeply unsettling preoccupations” (Shostak 2004: 20). This can be applied to Roth’s work as a whole but specifically to “Epstein”, DA, HS, AP and ST, so in order to study the symbol of the human stain and moral impurity, it is appropriate to study some aspects of this study on the representations of the body. ST is probably the most blatant or graphic example of a wealth of images and ideas about the human stain in its full exploration of the human being in this bodily plight.

I.1.1. The Stain as the Mark of Sin: The Biblical View

When Roth published “Epstein” along with *Goodbye Columbus and Other Stories*, these were perceived to be particularly about the assimilation of Jews to American culture. However, it was not only Jews who struggled to live a larger, freer life, and Roth saw his work as being about “people in trouble”, as he put it in his 1960 interview for the New York Post. However, it is undeniable that his characters’ troubles have much to do with their Jewish background and the moral rules that come with it, as can be seen in the central image in this particular story. As stated in the Introduction to the section of “Wandering and Return: Literature since 1973” in *Jewish-American Literature. A Norton Anthology*, even though it can be said that at a sociological level Jews were not outsiders anymore, on the contrary, being “deeply embedded in the social structures” of the U.S.A., this also meant it was difficult for them to maintain a religious and cultural distinction while participating in the American culture and society

(Chametzki et al. 2001: 979). In Roth's fiction we see that it is not only difficult to maintain that distinction, it is almost impossible as the Jewish religion permeates the individual's morality in his books and actually remains in the background of the novel's conflict. (Consult Lederhendler's monograph (2017) for an extended analysis of Jewish-American identity from a multiple perspective: historical, demographic, religious, etc.)

As many scholars have acknowledged (among others, see Shostak, 2004), in spite of Roth's reputation as a secular Jew who writes morally provocative fiction, he has repeatedly used and revisited the words and stories in the Torah, proving that it is true that the exposure to the Hebrew school he attended as a boy did indeed leave a mark on him: Roth talked about this when speaking of his 1973 story titled "Looking at Kafka", which can be found in the collection of 2017 Non Fiction collection, *Why Write?*, but was originally also included in *Reading Myself and Others*. When speaking of this story in an interview conducted by Elena Mortara, Roth referred to his personal experience of attending Hebrew School as a child: "I attended the Hebrew School. I hated it, but I'm happy I did. The teachers, some of them, were refugees. Here was when I had the idea because we had these refugees, these poor tormented people. We Jewish kids behaved perfectly at the regular school but were rascals at the Hebrew School" (Interview with *La Stampa*, 2018).

The question still remains of how Judaism informs Philip Roth's work. Jacques Berlinerblau examines how Roth's work fits into the different categories used by scholars when defining the characteristics of "secular Jewish American fiction" (2018). When describing Roth's identity, for example, Alan Cooper speaks about his "secular Jewish childhood" (1996: 8); but what is exactly the meaning and the connotations of the label "secular Jew"? Roth describes himself as "exactly the opposite of religious" (qtd. in Berlinerblau 68); and while some of his characters have forsaken their faith, others respect

it and are curious about it. Berlinerblau finds that the meanings ascribed to secular Jewish literature are the following: Godlessness; Realism; Postmodern Approaches and Embodiment; and finally, Self-Critique (69-76). He surveys Roth's work in order to find how he conforms to those criteria, but even though he offers some examples, he does not offer an in-depth study of the portrayal of faith, God, worship, atheism and the Law in Roth's work. By examining the use of the human stain, I hope to approach some of these subjects more fully in this dissertation.

In his novel *Operation Shylock*, the "real" Philip Roth confesses that Hebrew School had "marked me indelibly" (Roth 1993: 312). Interestingly, this indelible mark led him to create the literary mark that is the human stain in his fiction (In addition, it is interesting to note that Roth often uses the language of marks and stains when he speaks about life and writing). In "Epstein", the perception of the stain is accompanied by feelings of shame, indignation and guilt and it is connected to a "sin", even to Adam's original sin. In order to explore this meaning, it may be helpful to look at the subject of original sin and its representation from the point of view of Theologians and the study of the text from the Bible that inform the narrative that Roth makes reference to. Furthermore, studying these images from the Old and the New Testament may cast a new light upon the stain in Roth's fiction. In Exodus 12:5, the Israelites are told that for the offering, the "lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year" (NKJV) and this sheep or goat had to be perfect, without defect. The Passover lamb, and the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people of Israel as described in the law in Leviticus and in Numbers had to be of a perfect body without blemish, because it signified moral purity.

In his excellent outline of the historical development of Judaism, Isidore Epstein, an eminent Jewish professor, theologian and Rabbi, presents the connection that exists between religious and moral laws. Speaking of the laws of bodily cleanliness, he explains

that while the purpose of the Torah for Israel was to fulfil their call to be “holy unto God” and therefore holiness entailed “negatively a separation from all that is opposed to the will of God, and positively a dedication to His service” (Esptein 1959: 23). This meant a separation from contamination and impurity and a dedication to purity which is reflected in the laws. However, Epstein argues that this did not mean that the human body was essentially impure, which is why it had to be cleaned, to be kept pure: “[...] nor did Judaism ever regard the body as contaminated and the appetites as rooted in evil. [...] To neglect the body and its physical requirements is to offend against God, and to wash daily is a religious duty” (156).

On the other hand, Henri Blochner, a professor of systematic theology in Vaux-sur-Seine, France, published a survey and a philosophical discussion of the biblical evidence for original sin in a study titled *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (1997). As the title suggests, both the reality and the representation of original sin are a riddle: it is natural, but also contrary to human nature, and it involves reconciling the contradictory elements of a shared fallen condition and an individual responsibility. Blochner starts off by warning that original sin cannot really be explained rationally, and his study only means to cast some light upon it, understand its paradoxes and thereby illuminate the human phenomenon, which is equally intriguing.

To start off, the Bible presents sinfulness as “the human problem, which alone causes separation between the Creator and his creatures [...] none escapes the reign of sin and no part of the human person is left untainted” (Blochner 1997: 20; ellipsis mine). This is stated in numerous instances and implied in many texts. One that summarizes it is the following: “Who can say, “I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?”” (Proverbs 20:9). Accordingly, Blochner lists several illustrations used in the Bible and developed by the theologians’ interpretations to convey the meaning of sin. Firstly, sin

appears as a beast crouching at the door, like a snake that seems to lie dead but springs alive with the law. This image signifies the impulse, the desire that may overcome man so he has to try to master it (see Cain's story in Genesis 4:7), and also the fact that it is an inordinate passion, the desire to be free and the impulse that issues in disobedience to God (Blochner 1997: 20).

In Genesis 3:5, when the serpent tells Adam and Eve that, after eating the apple, they will be like God, it can be understood that what is tempting is not so much the idea of disobedience – they actually ignore what that is – but the idea of becoming like their Creator. This stubbornness and desire of Adam and Eve in the Fall can be found in Roth's character Sabbath most explicitly, but it is actually found in most of his characters, as it is a universal stain. As Ihab Hassan wrote in his book *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary Novel* (1961), the Garden of Eden has an important place in American Literature: "It appears that even the Romantic hero in America cannot disentangle himself from the webs of Eden" (Hassan 1961: 55). As we will see with Sabbath's story, there is a tension between freedom and enslavement, and this can also be found in the Bible's description of sinfulness, which means that human beings desire to be free from God's rule, morally autonomous, but on the other hand, God tells his creatures that instead of becoming free, they became slaves to sin (Jesus insisted on this point in John 8:34).

However, in the Bible sin is a reality that often has to be discovered by people or revealed by God, for many do not realize that they are sinners and cannot be rid of it. This happens in Roth's fiction too, when some characters tend to think that defilement resides in physical filth or in others' actions, while that darkness is actually within them. In Matthew 15:17-20, Jesus explains to his disciples that what really defiles people comes from within themselves, not from outside, and that is why when the Pharisees asked why he did not wash his hands before eating, Jesus tells them their tradition is a false doctrine

and betrays that even though they try to show that they seek purity, they do not understand their impurity:

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile. (*New International Version*, Matthew 15:17-20)

In the Bible, “flesh” connotes frailty, transitoriness and vulnerability, and sin also carries a sense of futility, vanity and frustration at the emptiness of life (see the book of Ecclesiastes and Romans 8:20). Job considers sin when he is suffering horribly: “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can” (Job 14:4). Blocher explains how the Psalmist also writes about this in Psalm 51: “as far back as he can go, he sees his life as sinful. Therefore, his radical confession issues in his request for purification in the innermost parts of his person (v.7). Even the ‘man according to God’s heart’ has to acknowledge that he is corrupt and guilty ‘by nature’, like the wicked who are wayward ‘from birth’, ‘from the womb’ (Psalms 58:3)” (Blochner 1997: 28-9).

But as Blochner says, the “master metaphor” is the one that uses illness as a metaphor for sin: Theologians have described it as an infection, “a contagious alteration of human nature”, “an inborn disease”, which seems apt as sin is like a sickness that “once contracted [...] goes on being transmitted; it produces uncleanness and leads to death”. However, Blochner warns against the danger of taking sin to literally be a genetic disease, for sin involves willful intent and responsibility, whereas this is not the case with

illness (Blochner 1997: 110, ellipsis mine). However, it is found as a metaphor in Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 5:6, and Matthew 9:12 ff., and leprosy and blindness often have a symbolic value. Blochner also has a warning against the danger of reading too much into this metaphor for it implies a dualist view of biological vs. spiritual reality, while, as he argues, the Bible puts forward man as a synthesis of biology and spirit (122).

The link between body and spirit is also explored by Roth and one of the biblical aspects that allows him to do so is the issue of the laws: about the concept of “kashrut” – literally “the appropriate thing” and pronounced as “kosher” in Yiddish. This term is applied to what can and cannot be eaten and is explained in Leviticus, which is the basis for Judaism’s dietary norms. In addition, Mary Douglas, the anthropologist and cultural theorist, has also analyzed the Old Testament texts in order to explore the meaning of the division between the profane and the sacred. In her influential book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Douglas argues that every society has their own concepts of what is impure, and she examines how the boundaries between the profane and the sacred are delimited. She classifies these as internal and external limits and some of the most important aspects are dietary norms, bodily fluids, sexuality and death. What is relevant in the light of these studies is that Roth questions the categories of impurity through literature, by showing in his writing that impurity is a symbol and a ritual.

To sum up, this metaphor that Roth draws upon in his work has got a meaning in the Bible that is relevant for this study, related to moral uncleanliness and transgression. Interestingly, Roth is not the only writer who has used this kind of images. For instance, Nathaniel Hawthorne has written several stories in which the image of a physical stain connotes impurity. In order to better understand the function of this symbol as a literary device, we will compare Hawthorne’s use of the stain to Roth’s. The image of the stain

can be found in other works of fiction too, such as in the Spanish Benito Pérez Galdós' *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887), where a boy is jeered at for being born out of wedlock and is covered in a stain. This stain is directly referred to as the stain of sin- of course Galdós is here criticizing the social prejudices of his time, in a way not too far from Roth's use of the stain in HS, for example.

I.1.2. The First Traces of the Stain in “Epstein”

Interestingly, the image of the stain can be identified as early in Roth's work as in his short story “Epstein”. In my view, this story encapsulates the use of the stain as found later in ST, AP, HS and DA and it puts a spotlight on the literary resource of describing a wound as symptomatic of the moral battle that explodes in the plot. In consequence, this use of the stain will illuminate further interpretations and set the foundations for a thorough understanding of the focus that can be found in Roth's work.

The setting at the beginning of the story provides some clues which have a remarkable significance in light of the themes developed by Roth later on. At the Epstein household, two types of candles are lit: The first ones are the *Shabbos* candles, which flicker in the dining room to honor the Jewish *Shabbat*, the day of rest, observed because the Lord asked his people to remember that he created the world and then rested (Genesis 2:1-3), and also to commemorate how he delivered them from slavery:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Additionally, these candles are meant to create domestic peace. Ironically, “Epstein” will reveal that because of what happens, that day will not be a day of true rest, but the very opposite: deep *unrest* will arise in Lou Epstein’s heart. Likewise, we will find that in *ST*, the novel that Roth wrote in 1995, the main character (significantly named Sabbath) is characterized by unrest, unlike his name would suggest. Also, instead of domestic peace, the families of these two characters experience everything but blessing, as marriages are broken and adultery takes place. In fact, both Epstein and Sabbath come to see their family as a trap. To sum up the plot of the novel of *ST* very briefly, it revolves around Mickey Sabbath’s struggle with life. He is an old former puppeteer who has experienced much loss in his life, which the reader discovers as he evokes scenes from the past, while in the present he is looking for a grave for himself because he intends to commit suicide. He has lost a brother, a lover, a wife, a former girlfriend, a friend, etc. But he has not lost his desire to break rules and he delights in his sexual exploits. In fact, the issue of transgressive desire, which is very important in Roth’s work, will be examined in more detail in Chapter II.

Now, to return to “Epstein”, the second candle in the story is the *Jahrzeit* candle, which is lit in memory of the dead. After the Holocaust these lights have also been lit to commemorate the loved ones killed in concentration camps. Even though it was not in

the Holocaust, the Epsteins have lost their son Herbie, and so the reality of death and the pain of loss shadow the life of the main character, as happens in some of Roth's early stories, such as in "The Conversion of the Jews", "Eli, the Fanatic" and in so many of Roth's novels later: *Patrimony*, *ST*, *HS*, *DA*, *Everyman* and *Nemesis*, among others. With regard to that theme, Chapter III will explore the representation of the human stain in relation to suffering and death.

Not only does death plague the life of Epstein, but aging also marks his life, as he notes the decay of his wife's body: Physical reality overrides his attempt to remember the beauty they enjoyed in their youth. With age, the body has lost its appeal, and so Lou Epstein finds himself incapable to feel desire for his wife Goldie, whose golden age is in the past (her name could be read as an ironic reference to this). This painful reality is even more extreme when set in contrast with the young people Epstein sees having sex. It makes him feel even older, and it shows how he is going through a crisis, not only having lost a son, but also disappointed in his daughter. The future looks bleak, and all his effort and work for his business seem to have been fruitless. He is also frustrated because he did not get on well with his brother. In light of all of his troubles, he is in such a vulnerable state, that what he sees on the night the story starts, the naked body of a young girl, may inspire him to try to *change his life*. This is an important Rothian theme, the search for personal freedom and moral autonomy, which I will explore further on in this chapter.

The power that both family and religion exercise upon individuals has been a theme of Roth's, as he himself acknowledges as he describes how characters such as Ozzie from "The Conversion of the Jews" or Portnoy in *Portnoy's Complaint* suffer from an oppressive feeling, an imprisonment (Roth 1975: 20). In "Epstein", there is also a strong presence of this power choking the main character. In *DA*, Kepesh explains how he had to break free from his family because he felt oppressed by it, and in *ST*, Sabbath

seeks to rebel against family and religion. But, as Roth says, what he has developed over time is an affinity for the very practice of putting the influence of those powers to the test. It is the test itself which he cannot get rid of (Roth 1975: 21). The focus of my interpretations is not in Judaism not on Jewish identity in Roth's work, although it is necessary to address the sources from the Torah and aspects relevant to the aspects of the human stain, but not solely about Judaism, which has already been addressed extensively in studies such as Alan Cooper's *Philip Roth and the Jews* (1996).

Epstein is in search for an explanation, like Seymour will be in AP, when he desperately looks back at his life trying to find a reason for disaster, the origin for what has exploded in the present. Thus, Epstein asks: "How far back must you go to discover the beginning of trouble?" (Roth 1959: 192). This question implies how hard it is to find the origin of the human stain. Similarly, in AP, Seymour faces the past with similar despair as he looks at the relationship he had with his daughter, looking for clues. The conclusion he arrives at is that it is impossible to know *why* something happened. Likewise, Epstein feels that everything spirals out of control when he is tempted by the sight of what brings his illicit desire to the surface, the body of a young girl. Searching his feelings, he remembers the fury and the passion he felt when his son got sick and the letdown he experienced when he was wrongly accused by his daughter. Even so, although these moments are on his mind, "maybe to look for a beginning was only to look for an excuse" (Roth 1959: 192).

In Roth's fiction we find other characters that are also immersed in the search for the "beginning" of the stain. To summarize the plot of AP (1997) very briefly, it tells the story of the Swede, a man whose daughter Merry has changed his life by planting a bomb in the post office. The narrator of AP, writer Nathan Zuckerman, is intent on discovering Seymour's doubleness, and he wants to find the origin of his human stain. Nathan, as a

narrator and functioning as a detective, is “working with traces”; traces not only of the story of what really happened, but also of the human stain. So, the Swede’s mysterious story is characterized by traces, and these will lead to his daughter Merry, whom he loved so much and who blew the dream of his life into pieces. Roth’s narrative device allows the reader to see how the story is built by successive conjectures, gradually infiltrating into the Swede’s mind. The Swede, who is loved by everybody, has to face the hatred from the one whom he loved the most- his daughter. In the beginning, he is described by the narrator as strong and brave as “a god” (Roth 1997: 5). It seemed as though he were indifferent to the degree of love he excited in everyone around him. In this initial description, he is portrayed as divine, without a trace of the human stain in him.

The Swede is likened to a god, Zeus, but he is not arrogant or vain -he is modest because he has not known any obstacles or struggles in his life. But that changes dramatically when Merry’s bomb went off, that is the beginning of all the struggles in his life. Zuckerman speculates about the Swede’s apparent purity: He was a stranger to “irrationality”, “wayward temptations”, “guile”, “artifice”, “mischief”, “striving”, “ambivalence”, and “doubleness” (Roth 1997: 20). The very qualities that are proudly embraced by Sabbath in *ST* are rejected here by the Swede. *AP* was written right after *ST*, and Roth said he had grown sick of Sabbath’s cynical and angry personality, so he wanted to write about “a good man”, for a change (Roth Pierpont 2013: 207). However, Zuckerman suspects that the Swede’s perfection is a mask, because “no one gets through unmarked by brooding, grief, confusion and loss” (Roth 1997: 20). This expression, “unmarked”, refers to the mark left by painful experience, but it can also be read as the mark that follows the invisible stain. Zuckerman will unveil both the stain and the mark in the Swede. Zuckerman confesses that when he first met the Swede he was “childishly expecting to be wowed by his godliness, only to be confronted by an utterly ordinary

humanness” (72). He is interested in his story because of “the shocks” that the Swede claims his family have suffered, shocks that reveal the impact of the stain and its mark. As Zuckerman comes to understand, the Swede was referring to his daughter: “she was the shocks” (80).

Gradually, Epstein’s language betrays his sense of guilt, for in the end, his crisis leads him to find refuge in an affair with his neighbor, Ida Kaufman, the mother of the naked girl he saw. The affair is described in humorous terms, both lovers finding satisfaction in each other even though they are both looking for younger lovers. Epstein certainly has some features of the *schlemiel*, the character of the fool in Jewish humor. Even though this character is not usual in Roth, as only Alexander Portnoy behaves like a *schlemiel* in some moments, there’s a long tradition of Yiddish and Jewish(-American) literature in which this figure plays a key role. (See Pinsker (1991) and Wisse (1972), among others, for a detailed study of the Jewish fool in writers such as Sholom Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, just to cite a few.)

While Epstein is thinking about his lover’s daughter, Ida is thinking about his nephew. They find that they look a bit alike to the true object of their desire, and so they settle with the substitute at hand. It helps their desire as it gives them the chance to feel young again. In the midst of the exhilarating affair, Epstein feels unable to tell right from wrong, and tellingly, he gets tickets for speeding and driving through red lights. As he says, he is in no shape to “tell the green lights from the red ones, fast from slow” because he has lost control in the midst of enjoying the thrill of his affair (Roth 1959: 195). He is in no state to make a thoughtful moral decision because he is not even seeing clearly, he is so ecstatic. This aspect of moral blindness and a feeling of childlike innocence is also conveyed in the discourse of ST and DA, as this thesis will outline in Chapter II, because both Sabbath and Kepesh seek this type of relief from responsibility. Furthermore, in his

joy, Epstein loses control and thus disregards all rules, experiencing freedom as he cannot even measure the speed at which he is moving, for he has totally lost track of all limits.

In AP, the narrator believes that the Swede denies the experience of a human stain: “It was as though he had abolished from his world everything that didn’t suit him -not only deceit, violence, mockery, and ruthlessness but anything remotely coarse-grained, any threat of contingency, that dreadful harbinger of helplessness” (Roth 1997:36). It is precisely these aspects of life which the Swede has known first-hand, against his will, unexpectedly, and he has no control over the situation. However, the Swede’s innocent smile betrays no trace of mental disorder, and the narrator creates suspense by formulating the question of who he really is over and over again, in different ways. The image of snow conveys purity: “I could not decide if that blankness of his was like snow covering something or snow covering nothing” (37). One of the sources is Jerry. According to the Swede’s brother, he had a “big, generous nature” which people took advantage of - especially “the monster Merry” (67). In his view, the Swede is just a victim, too good, and Merry is too evil.

But what do father and daughter have in common? The Swede’s tears for his daughter, his letting go in front of his brother when he learns she died, and all of his efforts to be with her prove his love for her. The facts that she is a killer and that she is mad do not erase his bond with her. In a way, Jerry is wrong when he says Merry does not belong to anything the Swede was. Because she did belong to him, he wants to recognize her as his daughter, which is difficult, and that is why there is tension that tortures him. It is as if she were disfigured by the impact of her actions and words and he has to find her under that disfigured face. But even love becomes a stain, for after the bomb, the Swede was unable to “shed completely the frantic possessiveness, the paternal assertiveness, the obsessive love for the lost daughter, shed every trace of that girl and

that past and shake off forever the hysteria of ‘my child’” (Roth 1997: 81). Seymour’s love for Merry despite of her actions is like a big blot on his life, something dark that he cannot get rid of; it has become a part of him, shaping his identity.

However, Epstein’s feeling of freedom comes to an end when the stain makes its appearance, bursting his happy bubble. As he discovers the rash on his penis, he is startled by his wife just when he is “contemplating his blemish with the intensity of a philosopher” (Roth 1959: 195). The scene is portrayed not with a detailed physical description of the stain, but with the characters’ thoughts as he asks himself what he has on his skin and how it is possible he has it. First, he feels like a child as he considers “prickly heat”, and the comedy of the scene starts building up as soon as he trips and falls over when he tries to cover himself in his embarrassment. The shame he feels and his gesture immediately reminds the reader of the theme and the images of the biblical story of Adam and Eve after the Fall:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” (Genesis 3: 6-11)

Roth actually makes several explicit references to this account (nakedness, hiding, transgression, the “fig leaf” with which Epstein covers himself), thus conveying a wider meaning to Epstein’s predicament, while adding a lot of humor to the scene: “So there they were, naked as Adam and Eve, except that Goldie was red all over, and Epstein had prickly heat, or a sand rash, or -and it came to him as a first principle comes to a metaphysician” (Roth 1959: 195-6). This first principle in metaphysics would be the fall, original sin, and the narration hints at this in a playful way.

Thus, Roth purposefully links the rash caused by the adulterous relationship to the experience of shame in recognizing one’s sin. Goldie calls her husband a *pig* and a *liar*, thus characterizing him with the most disgraceful charges she can think of. Her exaggerated threats speak of her desire to purify her husband’s skin, to clean the stain that is the result of his impure deed. On top of that, Goldie threatens to burn the bedsheets, to make him *drink* ammonia... And she seems to be worried about catching the rash, even though he assures her it is not contagious (Roth 1959: 197). Nevertheless, Goldie does not want her husband to touch her, and as they fight hysterically over the bed sheets, tearing them into shreds, she laments about her “nice clean sheets”, adding to the wealth of imagery conveying purity that has been defiled. Goldie’s outrage and her tears may look comical, but they show the emotional upheaval she suffers as the rash signifies that destruction and filth have taken over her life. Unrest has won over domestic peace. Comedy reaches its peak when every single person in the house, guest included, ends up going to the bedroom to see what is going on and they all see the rash, so everybody knows now. The human stain eventually comes to the surface in Roth’s work when the story reaches an emotional climax.

In AP, the stain makes its appearance in a disruptive way and interestingly, the image is invisible in this case, as it is not a stain one can see, but something one can hear.

It is a stain on the voice, an imperfection in speech. Merry's speech impediment, her "wound", could be "the indelible imperfection itself or those who had fostered in her the imperfection", meaning her parents, who wanted to cure her of her stuttering (Roth 1997: 92). The indelible imperfection is the image of the human stain. In his interview with Alain Finkielkraut, Philip Roth points out that Merry's stuttering is the first sign of the entrance of imperfection in the pastoral, as it becomes a problem that proves unavoidable and unsolvable for the family (Roth "Interview" 121). In spite of her parents' love, Merry had become "tainted", inexplicably, "twisted" and "crazed" (Roth 1997: 92). A kiss may seem innocent, and yet, looking for an explanation, its power of destruction is likened to a bomb. This kiss will be analyzed in Chapter II, as an example of an image of transgression. Thus, tainted by the human stain, the mystery of Merry haunts her father's imagination as he seeks for his own original sin: His happiness and his success may have been "the cause of their blight", "his very virtues came to seem vices", the good things became meaningless, and his innocence became evil (93). The Swede's self-examination makes him realize that he falls short of every standard, for nothing was satisfactory, every time he spoke and every time he did not speak. The image he conjures up is terrifying and it resonates with despair:

He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering even than Merry's stuttering: there was no fluency anywhere. It was all stuttering. In bed at night, he pictured the whole of his life as a stuttering mouth and a grimacing face -the whole of his life without cause or sense and completely bungled. He no longer had a conception of order. There was no order. None. He envisioned his life as a stutterer's thought, wildly out of control. (1997: 93)

This image means that the longer the Swede looks at his life, his actions and words, instead of finding clues or answers, the less and less assurance he finds that he did the right thing, as he comes to doubt everything and he is caught between responsibility and accident. Even so, there is an urge to fix the stain, as we see in “Epstein”, when he insists that his rash can be fixed, so he wants a doctor to clean him, and he tells himself he must be clean because his lover has got to be clean too. At this point, he is only referring to the physical rash. But then another question arises: “He was *innocent!* Unless what made him guilty had nothing to do with some dirty bug” (Roth 1959: 200). This is the introduction of the moral significance of the story. So, the character realizes that there are several interpretations to the facts, and Roth’s focus is on how this affects him. Epstein seeks for the origin of his personal fall much like Job in the Bible, who loses everything and is covered in a horrible rash, and asks why this had to happen to him, for he was a good man:

I say to God: Do not declare me guilty,
but tell me what charges you have against me.
Does it please you to oppress me,
to spurn the work of your hands,
while you smile on the plans of the wicked? (Job 10: 2-3)

There is a difference, though, because Epstein knows that he has undergone a transformation and acknowledges that he has indeed sinned. He is not the same anymore, and it is described as the horror, with emphasis: “the change, the change [...] I don’t even know when it began. Me, Lou Epstein, with a rash. I don’t even feel anymore like Lou

Epstein.” (Roth 1959: 200, my ellipsis). In this way, Roth’s characters undergo a deep, unsettling transformation and a questioning of their identity due to the stain.

The representation of the rash is a type of human stain in that it means the character cannot rid himself of the mark of moral defilement. Aside from an identity crisis, Epstein undergoes a confession with his nephew. In this conversation, he does not just address his nephew, he rather feels like he is speaking to society as a whole, or to a Judge. He claims all his life he tried “to do right” (Roth 1959: 201). Then, he proceeds to talk about a traumatic experience from his childhood: being very poor, once he was deloused and cleaned very aggressively with kerosene. The violence of such a purge seems unfair, especially considering a young innocent child. The comparison is clear: Why should a man be judged so harshly for his stain? Epstein says he had something on his mind but could not find the words for it. This unsaid idea is the question that runs through the narrative.

As Epstein reminisces about the transgressive naked pictures he took of Goldie in their youth, he cannot help but asking who is to judge: “I admit it. Maybe to someone else it would seem wrong, a sin or something, but who’s to say [...]” and his nephew replies that “somebody’s got to say. Some things just aren’t right.” (Roth 1959: 202, ellipsis mine). Epstein does not see himself as a sinner and he certainly does not see why some people are so eager to judge others’ actions. That is why he is enraged by his nephew’s judgement, who points his finger at “Uncle Lou the Adulterer”, immediately labelling him as a sinner, a person who bears a stain unlike he does. But Epstein fights back: “Right, Wrong! [...] Who are you, what are you, King Solomon?” (202, ellipsis mine). Again, there is an echo of Job, who questions the judgement of his “friends” who think they have the authority and that they are very wise, and so they do not hesitate in judging him harshly.

But Epstein wants to show that *good* things can come out of wrong things too, paradoxically: His beloved son was probably conceived that time he took those scandalous “dirty” pictures of his wife. Maybe even *because* of that transgression his son was born. *Who knows*, that is the conclusion. The turning point happens when, in response to Michael’s protests, Epstein points at his nephew’s own “rash” in his eye, which is a moment that can be compared with Jesus’ reasoning in his famous warning against judging others, as it is told in the Gospels:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5).

Although it is not clear that Roth would have drawn on the Gospels, given his early education in Judaism, and without making the assumption that Roth read this text from the New Testament, this image is only offered as a comparison with the image of the stain as I believe it works in a similar way. This does not mean that Roth makes a direct reference to Jesus’ words here, of course. That is, I think that the speck and the log function in a similar way to the rash in Epstein in order to point at the error in the judgement of other people’s faults, as the vision of those who think are righteous is faulty. The problem, in Roth’s story, is that Michael is so busy pointing at his uncle’s stain that he does not see his own. Another reality he is blind to is the depression his uncle has been immersed in for a long time. Epstein explains how he felt so deprived that his despair led him to try to take possession of something, inadequately though it may be: “When they

start taking things away from you, you reach out, you *grab* -maybe like a pig even, but you grab. And right, wrong, who knows? With tears in your eyes, who can even see the difference!” And he challenges Michael, for while he committed adultery, his nephew had casual sex before marriage: “For *you* it’s right?” (Roth 1959: 203). Epstein ends up crying, and this is told in a simple way, so that the reader is moved by his honesty. Later on, when considering ST, we will see how Sabbath also breaks down in tears in his despair and helplessness; but Epstein is less scheming than Sabbath, and his crisis is more straightforward.

In fact, Epstein has lost his dignity in his family’s eyes, as is evidenced by the fact that his daughter is not respectful to him, up to the point that she refuses to call him her father. As in Job’s life, he feels everything falls apart as he feels he has lost all he had: No wife, no children, and no home. So impulsively, he runs to his lover when he sees her, because it is the only thing he still has. And tragically, he suffers a heart attack. When Epstein’s wife, Goldie, asks the doctor why this happened and how he can recover, the doctor’s advice is for him to “live a normal life”, implying “normal” for his age means not indulging in excessive sexual activity.

Goldie immediately thinks of solutions meant to purify him like going “to Saratoga, to the mineral baths” (Roth 1959: 211). Will the baths clean his stain, though? Finally, she asks the doctor if he can clean up Epstein’s rash, and the doctor’s words, assuring him he will, are the last words of the story: “So it’ll never come back” (212). What does this end mean? Is the doctor being sarcastic or is he just trying to reassure her? He may cure the rash, but can a doctor fix Epstein’s deeper, moral, original trouble? Is there, after all, a cure for the human stain? These questions are left unanswered, for the reader to wonder, but one thing is certain: Firstly, the blemish signifies moral impurity. Secondly, even though the perpetrator of the moral transgression claims he does not know

what's right and wrong, others judge him because of the stain, and there is a strong desire to clean it and search for purity. Finally, the text shows with irony that this is impossible. This is the aspect that we will focus on in this chapter.

Ironically, in AP, the mark of the human stain, Merry's stutter, is gone when she appears to be pursuing a life of perfection and purity as a Jain but is actually living as the complete embodiment of the human stain. Her flawless speech that was not cured by any therapy was now cured "by going mad", and so her twisted intelligence marked by danger and isolation "was no longer impeded by the blight of stuttering" (Roth 1997: 246). This reality causes a reversal of values and the meaning of the stutter changes. The stain was a false human stain, another mask, a deceitful appearance. The stutter is no longer what Merry needs to get rid of, she is cured, but it is even worse, now she has become a lunatic. Her fluent speech serves a sick mind, she is rid of the blight of the stutter but she is nevertheless completely damaged. The text compares her stutter with a storm, which reveals the calm once the stutter is gone, and the awful surprise is that it is an "insane clarity" (250). That eye of the storm, so light and calm, is the new human stain. It deceives because it seems to connote purity, but madness is a worse imperfection. The dark and the storm may seem the problem, the imperfection, and yet, the absence of perfection would signify life for Merry. In seeking perfection, she will find her death.

When the time has come for the Swede to see his daughter as she really is, he has to look reality in the eye, in a way that he did not dare to when he met Rita. He will be finally face to face with the human stain. In dismay, he laments the loss of sanity in his "sweet, sweet child and girl", sits down on the filthy floor, and tries not to lose control (Roth 1997: 251). There is no light in the room, because she lives in the dark while he lives in the light. But he really lives in the dark too because she is not with him and she was the light of his life. At that moment, he realizes that in his respect and love for her,

in his avoidance of violence, he had been naive. His values, his morality, were good for nothing in that they had enabled him to save his daughter: “The idiocy of the uprightness of the goals he had set” (252). However, the Swede cannot accept the fact that she really is a killer, so he tries to find every possible way to deny it. He tears the veil from her face, and even the way the human stain is covered is filthy in itself, because she puts her mouth up against the most fetid thing. It consists of impurity upon impurity. She refuses to speak, so he opens her mouth, and from her mouth comes the pungent smell of death. It is impossible to endure it, “at last the true smell of her reached him, the lowest human smell there is” (265). This was a “human being”, that which before he did not want to call human, now he has to acknowledge her human condition, and it is foul.

This scene is an extreme example of the image of the human stain, the meaning is built by all the foreshadowing and the previous images. It is what the Swede has been seeking but did not expect to find: “Her foulness had reached him. She is disgusting. His daughter is a human mess stinking of human waste. Her smell is the smell of everything organic breaking down. It is the smell of no coherence. It is the smell of all she’s become. She could do it, and she did do it, and this reverence for life is the final obscenity” (265). As Joshua Lander notes in his essay on AP, “the embodied humanness of Merry’s foulness is what Seymour finds most horrifying” (Lander 2019: 56).

Confronted by the symptoms of the stain, the characters cannot remain clean, they inevitably share in its filth. That is why the Swede’s body reacts by throwing up, against his will, he cannot control himself because his body does not have a mechanism to stop him from “sliding still further into the filth” (Roth 1997: 265); and at the same time, as he makes her face even more filthy, he cries out “Who are you!” (266). But, despite the dark, now he sees. Once he was blind, but now he sees the truth, for the mark that was the stutter has disappeared, and instead of it he sees another mark, an old mark: her eyes,

and “the eyes were his [...] She was all his” (266; ellipsis mine). He identifies himself with her and with her stain. She is the stain and she is imprinted on her family and her house, in the Swede’s eyes. The Swede realizes that Merry hated the stone house “imprinted with her being” as well as her family, who were also imprinted with her being (420). He can never rid himself of her and her stain -that is why he will keep her in his life till the end.

I.1.3. From Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and “The Birthmark” to Roth’s Human Stain

At this point, it is appropriate to consider a story and a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, in relation to Roth’s representation of the human stain, because they feature the image of a mark that can be compared to the stain and develop a surprising meaning. In their book titled *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, published in 1992, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury explore the representation of morality and adultery in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and they offer an interpretation which I think is useful in order to understand Roth’s work too. As Ruland and Bradbury point out, Hawthorne had a Puritan ancestor with a dark history: “William’s son was a judge at the Salem witch trials and was thereby marked with Puritanism’s own sin: the witches’ blood may fairly be said to have left a stain on him. Such guilty stains of human nature are everywhere in Hawthorne’s work” (Ruland and Bradbury 1992: 148).

Now, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is not the first instance of a type of image similar to the human stain, but this novel is important and it will be included later on in this thesis. There is a chapter entitled "Pearl" – Hester Prynne's daughter of sin – where Hawthorne addressed a similar issue as Roth's image of sin, and there are specific allusions, such as the girl's "fiendish" that are relevant to this analysis of the human stain. However, even before that novel, Hawthorne wrote about a similar subject in 1843. The original idea for the story titled "The Birthmark" can be found in his notebooks: "A person to be in possession of something as perfect as mortal man has a right to demand; he tries to make it better and ruins it entirely. For instance, a noble mansion, and in his attempts to improve it, he causes it to fall to the ground" (Hawthorne 1883: 165). To sum up, the search for purity leads to destruction. Hawthorne explores the futile and misleading human attempts to find purity and perfection just like Roth does.

And Hawthorne developed his idea into the following plot: "A person to be the death of his beloved in trying to raise her to more than mortal perfection; yet this should be a comfort to him for having aimed so highly and holily" (Hawthorne qtd. in Zanger 1983: 364-365). This story by Hawthorne is about a woman who has a mark that she considers natural, charming: "a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face" as the narrator puts it, to convey that it is a part of her, foreshadowing how wrong it would be to take it away from her (Hawthorne 1843: 6). To her husband Aylmer, however, the mark is too awfully distinct and it comes to mean something horrible to him. First, aesthetically, the narrator points out how it is conceived as ugly, ruining the woman's beauty, only by those driven by envy. This is dismissed by common sense as the narrator points out that likewise nobody would consider that a sculpture's beauty would be marred by a common blue spot in the marble.

In his essay, Zanger explores the following question: “how do the images, regarded in the light of that theme, flesh it out and extend its illumination of the tale? Why a marriage, why a red birthmark? Such questions of particularity suggest levels of meaning beneath the thematic, meanings that have to do with the images of the story” (Zanger 1983: 365). Zanger finds mentality of submission and traces of vampirism, and although he acknowledges the explicit reference that the narrator makes to the divine signature in the mark of the hand, he chooses to focus his interpretation of the mark as the taboo of menstruation. However, in my opinion, this would reduce its meaning to the area of sexuality, while the text portrays the idea of a moral and aesthetic imperfection that is actually broader: Aylmer tells his wife: “No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection” (5). This “earthly imperfection” is the object of Aylmer’s obsession, who “selecting it as the symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer’s somber imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object” (7).

Because of this horrible feeling, Aylmer is no longer capable of appreciating his wife’s beauty, as the mark becomes his main obsession and he dreams he tries to get rid of it, but it goes so deep he has to dig deeper till he touches her heart and kills her. Even though Aylmer does not utter his harsh thoughts of judgement, his awful staring affects his wife, so she is forced to bring the matter up and she asks him to remove it, for he really believes he can fix the problem with his science. At the beginning of the story, the narrator introduced this idea by stating he was uncertain up to what point Aylmer thought he had the power to control Nature. In the text there’s a reference to the frustration man

experiences when he realizes he cannot change imperfection into perfection, nor create life.

Likewise, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) explored this idea of a man who causes trouble and even pollutes life when he meddles with it, as the story shows the dangers of playing God. In "The Birthmark" the reader finds the theory of alchemy, the belief that it is possible to find gold in the impurity of a stone; in this way, the mark could be turned into something valuable. Hawthorne refers to Paracelsus and others, and explains that even though they were ahead of their times, their philosophical and scientific theories were often wrong. This highlights the fact that human wisdom is limited, just like science -this is what Aylmer's wife learns about him when she reads about his failed experiments in his records. Furthermore, she discovers his fear that his solution may prove to be lethal; but she is nevertheless willing to take this risk, out of love. Eventually she undergoes this sort of purifying ritual out of her own accord.

In conclusion, the use of the mark in Hawthorne's story and of the stain in Roth's work show that earthly imperfection cannot be fixed, for it brings about death. Now, the question is whether this story is implying that the stain is not really bad after all. Only Aylmer interprets the mark as human impurity and he is blinded by his desire to eliminate it. However, as the reader finds out in the epiphany revealed by the narrator at the end, erasing the stain is not liberating, it is rather more like seeing how the *rainbow* fades in the sky, which is a surprising image that points not only at the beauty of the mark, but also at its miraculous nature. So, the mark, instead of being an ugly image, now becomes a beautiful, colorful reality and it is clear it is a mistake to wish it away. It is even considered as a divine sign, speaking of God's goodness. This image of the rainbow used by Hawthorne subverts the meaning of the stain just like Roth does when, for example, Epstein says that good things come out of transgression. Roth goes even further when his

character Faunia in HS wishes she could become the crow, which is a living stain, so to speak. Faunia loves, embraces and feels identified with the crow which is used by Roth to explain the idea of the stain.

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To recapitulate, the human stain appears in Roth's work as an incurable blemish because of various reasons. Firstly, as observed in the seminal story of "Epstein", it shows the lack of innocence in the characters, for it functions as a marker of their transgression, in reference to the imagery in Genesis. The characters try to find the original moment of transgressive desire to have moral autonomy, but they find it difficult to discover the cause and they reveal how wrongly they are judged and how maybe there is something good about the stain. Secondly, it allows Roth to use the body as an image of the invisible stain. While the aspect of the body and its meaning in Roth's work has been explored in depth by scholar Debra Shostak (1999), and on the other hand, the meaning of impurity has been studied by David Brauner (2004; 2007), I find that these two aspects are inextricably connected and that they take shape in the human stain.

Additionally, drawing on David Gilotta's study of the humor raised by the transgressive meaning of the stain (2010), I have pointed at how the stain is presented not only in serious but also in humorous narrative modes. Additionally, Elaine Safer's 2006 book-length study about the use of irony and humor in Roth's work supports my reading of a key passage in ST where tragedy and farce work together to emphasize how the stain functions with irony to highlight the impurity present in what is apparently pure and vice versa. This study, however, considers the human stain as the main rhetorical device used to convey not only the meaning of impossible purity, but also to speak about the contradictory transgressive desires in the narrative, and finally, to understand how this is

connected to the representation of the experience of death. In order to accomplish this task, it is essential to consider the biblical texts as a source for the image of the stain and it is also helpful to establish comparisons with other literary texts such as Hawthorne's. The next section of this chapter will deal with the *graphic* nature of the stain in Roth's fictional style, focusing on the symptoms that can be found in Roth's writing at many levels, especially in ST.

I.2. THE GRAPHIC STAIN

The human stain is not only written on the skin of Philip Roth's characters, it is also written on the skin of the literary text. Its images permeate the text, through the representation of many aspects of human experience, and it infuses Roth's style, which is what I will analyze in this section. Roth's fiction portrays the author's obsession with "hypnotic materiality" (Roth 2017: 393). I intend to show how the human stain has found its dwelling in this materiality. After looking at the meaning of the stain as a blemish on the body, this thesis goes further by proposing that there are a series of symptoms of the human stain that can be found throughout these novels and all of these indicate not only the impossibility of moral purity, but also the fact that it is a sign of an all-encompassing problem and cannot be evaded. When Roth's style is examined, it will show how the stain affects the characters' lives, because they are troubled by the following symptoms of the stain: restlessness, weakness, vulnerability, blindness and lack of control. In this section, it will become evident that this stain is inescapable, as is shown through images of the ineradicable, that all the characters suffer from it, and, finally, that there is no possible

solution to it. They are learning to live with the stain, which is not exactly the same thing as accepting it.

When Roth spoke at the celebration his 80th birthday in 2013, in the speech he gave, he explained why he had stopped writing. Among other reasons, he named the following: “I don’t wish any longer to contemplate in fiction the destructive, the blighted, the bruised, the assailable, the accused, their accusers, or even those who are whole, sane and beautifully intact” (“The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction” 2013: 394). Roth’s choice of words is very appropriate for an analysis of the human stain, as his description sets divisions between people’s experiences and they are marked by blights and bruises and they accuse each other (because of the stain). Overall, the stain is made visible in Roth’s fiction by means of images, but it also spreads throughout the novels’ style. Even though this will be explored in the other novels, it can be seen especially in *ST*, where the text reveals the nature of the stain as in no other of Roth’s novels.

Now, Roth studies tend to focus on his subject matter rather than on his style, which is considered particularly malleable and versatile, as it changes from book to book. Pia Masiero, for example, has focused on Roth’s form, and she has written about his particular “storyworld” in the Zuckerman books (2011). However, it is worthwhile to consider how the author’s ideas are expressed because of his prose style, which cannot simply be labelled as realism. The purpose of this study of the use of the human stain is to define the style and its meaning, because his narrative is experimental as Roth plays games with the question of what the real story actually is, and also plays with the reader’s expectations Roth’s relation to postmodernism has led to the study of his use of metafiction, autofiction, narrative indeterminacy, etc. Debra Shostak has explained how he uses these devices to attack the idea of a stable identity and self (Shostak 2004: 189).

The play between life and fiction is a postmodernist experiment that Roth participated in especially when writing the Zuckerman novels. As Shostak argues, Roth “finds his *subject* (the driving force and central material of his writing) where he finds his *subject* (the complexities and contradictions of indeterminate, shifting, and discursively constructed selfhood)” (Shostak 2004: 9). I would like to add that Roth also finds his subject through the use of the human stain, and that his style resides in the way in which he tells the characters’ story and shows their predicament through the stain and its symptoms. That is why I believe a study of the human stain can throw a new light on his subject.

I.2.1. The Original Stain

If Roth finds his material in the complexities of discursively constructed selfhood, in order to understand the use of the human stain it is necessary to look at a key passage of the stain which is in his novel HS (2000). This novel is about Coleman Silk, a professor who is accused of racism because of the use of his word “spooks” and he is forced to resign. After the death of his wife, which he also sees as a consequence of what happened, he begins a relationship with Faunia, a much younger woman who works at the College as a janitor. Silk contacts Zuckerman to ask him to write his story. Later, Silk and Faunia are killed in a car accident and at Zuckerman meets Coleman’s daughter, who tells him her father’s secret: that he was an African American who has been passing as a Jew. It is in this novel where Roth presents the image of the human stain through Faunia,

introducing the question of the original stain that is present in everybody and at times is visible, while at other times it is invisible.

Likewise, in *ST*, the stain seems to be clearly visible from the very beginning, in Sabbath's affair with Drenka, but it cannot always be seen with the bare eye, as Sabbath suggests when he looks at the dirt on his hands in the scene at the graveyard: "I have to go down in the dirt with more than these fingers if I hope ever to make straight in me all that is crooked" (Roth 1995: 363). In that scene the dirt is the visible stain on his hands, a stain which he paradoxically wants to use to clean himself with, but he acknowledges that the stain -everything that is crooked in him- will not be cleaned. The paradox of the visibility and the invisibility of the human stain is found, first of all, in a central passage in the novel of *HS*, which starts off with Faunia's thoughts about a crow, and this provides the basis for a reflection by the narrator about the nature of human beings.

'That's what comes of being hand-raised,' said Faunia. 'That's what comes of hanging around all his life with people like us. The human stain,' she said, and without revulsion or contempt or condemnation. Not even with sadness. That's how it is -in her own dry way, that is all Faunia was telling the girl feeding the snake: we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen -there's no other way to be here. (Roth 2000: 242)

This stain, then, is left everywhere by people, the unavoidable mark of a mess that is a consequence of life. The attitude that Faunia has towards this stain is similar to Sabbath's, it is one of acceptance, of coming to terms with it, and seeing it as something natural that ought not to be punished. Interestingly, in this description of the image of the

stain, it seems the stain is actually not the image, not the mark, nor the sign. It is invisible to the bare eye, and rational thoughts or religious concepts fail to grasp it. It is so deep inside of everybody that it is impossible to try to erase it.

Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling, inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It's why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity? All she was saying about the stain was that it's inescapable. (Roth 2000: 242)

The setting of this scene contains many elements and some of the novel's most important themes are present here. Firstly, Faunia states that she has learnt all there is to know about human kind even though she allegedly cannot read (240). She is fascinated by Prince, the crow, who prompts her speech. This animal can be compared with her lover, the protagonist of the novel, Coleman, because he is ashamed of his past and has invented his own language, because he does not recognize his own species, which is called "imprinting" (Roth 2000: 241-243). Similarly, Coleman renounces his African American identity and he pretends to be white. The girl who explains this to Faunia is feeding a snake that lives in a cage. This snake could be a reference to the story of the Fall, with the devil tempting Eve with the body of a serpent.

In a nutshell, this passage introduces not only a definition of the human stain, but it is placed in the middle of a scene that shows the very marks and symptoms that Faunia has presented. She has run away from what she realizes is a fantasy, her relationship with

Coleman (235-237). In these pages, there is a whirlwind description of all the symptoms of the stain: confusion, restlessness, weakness, lack of control, blindness and vulnerability. For instance, after offering her ring to the crow, Faunia recalls the various moments in her life when she fell prey to despair and wanted to die (245).

The fact that Roth chose the phrase of “the human stain” as the title for the novel points to its significance as a concept and an image, but in Roth studies there are different interpretations of this stain. Sam Bluefarb, for example, commenting on the passage that describes the human stain, asks why it could not just be named “original sin” instead of “human stain”, and he argues that this choice of words should be judged by other than literary means (Bluefarb 2010: 226). He thinks “Roth got himself trapped in a web of tortuous weavings built around an archetypal stain that loses itself in a language meant to clarify, but never quite succeeds in doing so” (227). Sánchez Canales, on the other hand, defines the representation of the human stain in this novel as “man’s/woman’s imprint, a reminder of his/her imperfections, something that everybody shares. The actual condition that connects all of us seems to be everybody’s defective nature [...] The human stain, an inherent part in the individual’s nature, makes everybody flawed” (2009: 111, ellipsis mine). Sánchez Canales describes the characters in HS as “irate, over-sexed, self-serving, and vindictive” (111). The paradox being that in trying to get rid of the stain, people actually deepen and darken the mark they are leaving, because the understanding and obedience to moral laws is not something that will help people reach into that inherent human stain. This is why Sánchez Canales interprets the human stain in this passage as the description of the flaw in human beings not because of original sin, but because of the failed attempt of people to clean their impurity: “According to the narrator, evil seems to originate in the human quest for purity. When individuals seek to become pure and holy, they actually become more impure and vicious. Purity, then, would be something to elude,

rather than something to pursue” (116). In my view, if it is true that there is no alternative when living in this world, if all we can do is to live in impurity, then what Roth implies is that it is absurd to believe that purity can be achieved, but he also shows how people continue to attempt to find it.

The complex narrative structure of novels such as HS and AP together with the role of Zuckerman as a narrator have been analyzed in depth by Pia Masiero (2011). She outlines these novels’ structure in the following way: First, Zuckerman learns something about an old friend, and then, he tries to reconstruct what happened during the rest of the novel, and as Masiero discovered, the strength of the novel as a whole lies in the mixture of its different parts (Masiero 2019: 88-89). As Zuckerman sets out to imagine the story, both in AP and in HS, we are introduced to the story as if it were a vision, for the narrator finds himself “inexplicably” seeing his characters in another place (Roth 1997: 85). In my view, this leads Zuckerman in a sort of detective quest to find the human stain. For in his story, Zuckerman learns about the symptoms of the stain, he tracks their traces and sees their consequences in his friends’ lives. As he imagines the stain, he sees it in a visible way and so he creates it through fiction by describing it with words.

I.2.2. The Stain of Depravity: The Attraction of the Forbidden

The stain is linked to the dark aspect of desire that Roth is interested in exploring from early on in his work: craziness, dissoluteness and depravity. Some characters seem to be emblems of this depravity. For instance, in ST, Mick Sabbath; in AP, Merry Levov, and in DA, David Kepesh. In HS, Faunia is the best example and so it makes sense that

she should be the one to introduce the stain in the narrative. As Sánchez Canales writes, Faunia, rather than being a symbol for fertility, signifies on the contrary, barrenness, for she “seems to be a bestower of fruitlessness on the people she loves”, which is why she “serves as an embodiment of disgrace and death” (Sánchez Canales 2009: 115). Interestingly this is another thing she has in common with Sabbath, who feels that everybody hates him and that everyone thinks he has ruined other people’s lives. Sabbath, too, has no children. Other characters such as Epstein, complain about the world’s desire to call them impure, and others, like Marcus Messner, in *Indignation*, are angry as it seems that the world is set on making his life impure.

The characters in AP or in *Indignation* need to believe that they are pure at the beginning of the novel because only then they can fall in the irony trap and discover that they are not pure, they never were; in fact, all of them are bearing the human stain from the beginning. However, Faunia’s identification with the human stain is stated in a different, very straightforward way:

That, naturally, would be Faunia’s take on it: the inevitably stained creatures that we are. Reconciled to the horrible, elemental imperfection. She’s like the Greeks, like Coleman’s Greeks. Like their gods. They’re petty. They quarrel. They fight. They hate. They murder. They fuck. All their Zeus wants to do is fuck [...] There is never enough flesh for the king of the gods or enough perversity. All the craziness desire brings. The dissoluteness. The depravity. The crudest pleasures. (Roth 2000: 242)

Faunia’s belief in the human stain in this passage is linked to an understanding of the worlds and the myths or religions that allow people to make sense of it. The narrator

provides a hypothetical view of Faunia's morality, and as she is characterized by desire and sexuality, and this can be interpreted as a negative or as a positive quality: "Roth seems to have debased Faunia into just a mock figure of desire" (Sánchez Canales 2009: 115). However, more than a mocking portrait, in my view as she has the revelation about the stain, her role is to show she is not the only one to suffer debasement or to appear to be a mock figure, as she knows everyone suffers from the same condition, Coleman too. In fact, there is a redeeming quality in the sexual relationship between Coleman and Faunia, for it seems to provide Coleman with an experience of love that is greater than his grief. Recently, Judie Newman has analyzed how she represents somebody who is in the margins of what is clean and wholesome and therefore she is dangerous and impure. Newman draws on *Purity and Danger*, by Mary Douglas (1966), the anthropological study mentioned at the beginning of the previous section of this chapter. In her book, she defines "dirt as disorder" and points out that "dirt is relative, depending on the place", and looking at the dietary restrictions from Leviticus, it seems that "any blurring of the demarcation lines of a class constitutes pollution, uncleanness" (Newman 2019: 86-87).

Following these ideas, this dissertation seeks to further Newman's argument by examining the ways in which Roth employs the human stain as a literary device to represent transgression in general. While Faunia works as a cleaner and is "the embodiment of a freshening, sweetening country purity" (Roth 2000: 88), this description is undermined by the description of the cow's excrement, a clear image of the human stain which serves to debunk the false ritual of purity. Newman interprets Faunia's sexuality as transgressive because she is described as unclean, which supports my reading of the stain in this novel, and she also sees the irony used by Roth in placing images of false purity with the stain. This will be further looked at in more detail in Chapter II, but it is important to note how throughout the novel, Roth uses a character as a living human

stain, who can be read “as a performance escaping categorization, an impure performance” (Newman 91). Faunia’s transgressive focus on the body leads to an understanding of the meaning of the human stain in Coleman’s life.

I.2.3. Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* and Roth’s Human Stain

The question of how to represent the conflict that takes place in the body can be tackled by comparing his work with Hawthorne’s, as in the previous section. Is the resource of the human stain a symbol? And what does that mean? How does Roth express his meaning through the human stain? And what do readers seek from it? Ruland and Bradbury explain the following about Hawthorne’s novel: “*The Scarlet Letter* can be read as a work of either allegory or symbolism. In a sense, it is a work where allegory is dispersed, freed of fixed moral meanings, and then reconstituted. It is a novel of signs and symbols, concealments and revelations, hidden truths of self and expressed public utterances and confessions; and a book in which the very nature of meaning, of how we express it, what we seek from it, and why we need to do so, is a central concern” (Ruland and Bradbury 1992: 146).

In Roth’s work, the stain serves to show that everyone is debased, in the sense of being corrupted, and Faunia is aware of this. Such a forbidden desire is an experience that is also found in the relationship of Sabbath with Drenka in *ST*, which portrays the joy of an extremely lustful affair. Roth’s characters realize their desire is part of their nature and they cannot be rid of it, just like in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale realizes that his desire for Hester is the same, even after years of trying to silence it. As Ruland

and Bradbury argue, speaking about the mark on Dimmesdale: “the letter that Hester shows, he hides, as he seeks to read himself and not be read by others. But the sign driven inward keeps insistently manifesting itself -on his body in the form of physical stigmata which are seen and interpreted by the vengeful husband, Chillingworth, and outwardly in nature, imprinted on the heavens” (Ruland and Bradbury 146). Consequently, because of these “flawed and stained narrators and protagonists”, Patrick O’Donnell sees a clear link between Roth and Hawthorne in their portrayal of human nature (2019). Moreover, he claims: “No American novelist I know of, with the exception of Hawthorne, understood how deeply riven with contradiction the ‘nature’ of ‘human nature’ can be” (O’Donnell 2019: 111). O’Donnell believes that in spite of Roth’s rendering of the “opacity” of the human (meaning the impossibility to read and understand human nature), Roth tried to see through it by filling in the blanks, so to speak (111).

Considering this literary connection, more scholars have asked themselves about the meaning of pain and marks in Roth’s and Hawthorne’s fiction. While Catherine Morley points at Roth’s reference to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* in *My Life as a Man*, when he suffers migraines and sees them as “standing for something” (Roth 1974: 55), I think the connection can be found in both the form and the meaning of this metaphor. In the previous section, the illustration of Hawthorne’s story “The Birthmark” allowed for a comparison with a narrative that featured an image of the stain with questions about the nature of human imperfection. However, in this novel, the stain is secret and then uncovered, like in Roth’s work. For further discussion of how Dimmesdale’s true nature of his condition is revealed to him, see Stubbs in Gross et al. (1961: 384-392).

But how is the stain made visible in Roth’s style? It is not by means of a letter, a giant “S”, but it is true that the word “stain” is present in many of Roth’s novels. Overall, the clarity of the depiction of depravity is the imprint of Roth’s style and it shows how

universal impurity really is. Likewise, Hawthorne suggested that idea when in *The Scarlet Letter*, which deals with the same theme as Roth's HS, Hester realizes "the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if the truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom" (Hawthorne 1969: 86). Just as Dimmesdale refuses to confess his sin and thereby he adds hypocrisy to his sins, in Roth's novels many characters choose to hide their human stain and pretend to be good, but eventually the stain must be revealed (Baughman in Gross 1961: 207-213). Seeley brilliantly sees how "the letter is itself a stain of sorts: imposed from without, it is but a mirror of the internal, which is why Hester sees it everywhere. Governor Bellingham thinks Hester is not able to be a good mother "because of the stain which the letter indicates" (Hawthorne 1969: 111). The same truth that Hawthorne insinuates is stated by Roth: "The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity?" (Roth 2000: 242). If the ultimate hypocrisy is of those who presume to identify in others the impurity that resides in everyone, Roth points out by the means of the human stain, that we are all "inevitably stained creatures", although this has "[n]othing to do with disobedience", as it "*precedes* disobedience" (242). Here, Roth rejects a religious reading of the stain as disobedience to God as in the Bible's account and instead offers a different view of human beings as originally stained creatures.

In HS, even the president of the nation bears the mark of the stain, and it makes no sense to describe Clinton's "incontinent carnality" as if others were pure, an idea which is ridiculous from the narrator's point of view. Roth, "like Hawthorne uses the word 'stain' as a metonym for the inherent disorder humans create." (Seeley 2011: 105). If being human means bearing the stain of sin, the narrator of Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* has the following advice: "be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (Hawthorne 1850:

260). Because, according to Hawthorne, “he who shows himself in a false light becomes a shadow or, indeed, ceases to exist” (145). In the search of a true light instead of that false light, Roth’s characters try to show their real selves. Coleman and Faunia do so in their intimate encounters in HS, and this can be compared to the representation of the scene between Hester and Dimmesdale. According to Ruland and Bradbury, “Hawthorne creates a conflict of nature and culture. The act of love that sanctifies itself in nature (‘What we did had a consecration of its own’, Hester tells the minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, in the forest) is for this culture an act of sin, requiring guilt, confession and penitence” (1992: 145). Similarly, Coleman and Faunia are judged and punished for their affair.

I.2.4. The Stain of Violence and Destruction

In his book *Radical Innocence*, Ihab Hassan argues that there are various contemporary novelists who concur that “violence and distortion must be the means of projecting a vision to which society is hostile” (Hassan 1961: 4). If the human stain is meant to reveal corruption, how is this represented in Roth’s work? Hassan further argues that “the contemporary world presents a continued affront to man, and that his response must therefore be the response of a rebel or victim, living under the shadow of death” (1961: 5). Roth’s characters, like Epstein, as seen in the first section of this Chapter, will respond in similar ways. Furthermore, they will act like Portnoy in PC, because, as Hassan says: “The contemporary self recoils from the world against itself. It has discovered absurdity” (5). Hassan then agrees with Bradbury that absurdity is a key feature of the

contemporary novel. Interestingly, in my view, this absurdity becomes heightened when linked with the Jewish sense of humor.

In Roth studies, when considering crazed monologues and outbursts of anger and frustration, the first novel that must be discussed is *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). This “somewhat obscene” book features a young man’s struggle with the restrictions of the Jewish law and his sexual urges. Through “self-control, sobriety and sanctions” Jews try to avoid contaminating humanity, but what Portnoy feels is the impulse to break the law (Roth 1969: 79-80). This book was a best-seller, a social phenomenon and also caused a stir in the Jewish community, and it has even led to accusations of anti-Semitism, which have been met by Roth’s own defense and as they are still relevant, they have recently been addressed by scholars such as Sánchez Canales (2021). The question is: What is Roth’s character exactly directing his anger at? When Roth was asked about his satirical approach to Jewish urban life, he replied: “I can’t deny having feelings of anger and censure as a human being and a Jew, although I would say this is not particularly a Jewish problem, but an American problem” (Searles 1992: 2). To Sánchez Canales, this is particularly true in Portnoy’s case, where the biblical references are used to explain everything that was meant to be done to be kept pure, and presented in opposition to Portnoy’s desires (2021).

The human stain carries with it an outpour of indignation, of outraged and outrageous speech. This happens in different degrees in the texts: in “Epstein”, for instance, there is only a veiled reference to the suffering experienced in the past, but in ST, violence makes an appearance in the form of rage. Sabbath becomes furious and quarrels with most of the characters, for different reasons. The representation of violence is also present in the War that took his brother’s life and in the consequences of that loss in his family, which will be analyzed in the last Chapter of this thesis, when looking at

the descriptions of illness and death. In AP, Merry struggles to control her anger at the world around her and the war in Vietnam and the burning of the monk are the epitome of violence and destruction. Merry is the carrier of the stain and she is the one that plants the bomb and introduces violence into the peaceful setting of the story. Merry's mounting feeling of rage is expressed in her silence and in her arguments with her parents, during which she shouts at them.

In HS, Les Farley is a tormented violent Vietnam vet. The stain also can be noted because of the feeling of indignation, even from characters with opposing mindsets. For instance, in HS, Coleman Silk is a man who has undergone a terrible "moral suffering" which makes him age rapidly and grow bitter and angry. This is because of the ordeal he went through due to the false accusation of racism that ruined his career. However, even before his outrage, there is a previous fracture, in his own identity. The stain lies at the core of his secret life. Coleman has the desire to escape his fate and he does so by pretending to have a different identity, but as Sánchez Canales points out, it is a failure because his fate is not in his control (2009: 112). Now, the resource of the stain allows for a vivid portrayal of how Coleman loses control and how his true identity cannot be erased. For example, when he is beaten up because of his race when he is in the navy, when he is badly hurt and bleeding, Coleman hears his father's voice 'speaking back to him –the old admonishing authority rumbling up against the 'tragic, reckless thing that [he's] done' (Roth 2000: 182-3). As Seeley argues, Coleman's "white uniform marred with a real human stain of 'caking blood,' Coleman feels that 'this is what came of failing to fulfil his father's ideals... of deserting his dead father altogether' through renouncing his race and family" (182; Seeley 2011: 103). The description of the "hideous, raucous dive", "the worst, the most abominable" is the setting that is filled with the human stain, which is awful for Coleman, who tries to avoid the "human wreckage" (Roth 2000: 181).

But the fact that he is covered in blood and he cannot wipe it off his white clothes means that he has to face reality, and it is the time for him to decide on the course of his future career.

Ironically, what remains of this episode is also a stain, made of ink, on his body: a tattoo, apparently insignificant, but to him, it reveals how he had to face his real identity. To return to another important literary reference for Roth, close to Hawthorne's, it is timely to look at Herman Melville's tale *White Jacket* (1850), written just a year before *Moby Dick* (1851), features an image of a white jacket that will be covered with a stain of violence and cruelty, and it is precisely about this: the loss of innocence and the impossibility to escape from the world of adults, which is what the Swede has been trying to do, living in his world apart, only to discover, through the stain, that there is no escape from reality.

Similarly, in AP, when Seymour has to face his daughter and discover the stain in himself too, this takes place in an apartment which is also stained with human waste. Merry, too, bears indelible marks of her filth, as she has renounced to basic personal hygiene. This scene is filled with tension and the weight of the knowledge that somebody is responsible for the violent death of various people. And there is a series of images of violence and destruction in HS: The label of the accusation that stains Coleman's reputation is like a tattoo that he cannot erase: "First a racist and now a misogynist" (Roth 2000: 290). That stain is similar to the accusation of adultery in "Epstein" or the charges of indecency that Sabbath has to put up with. In addition, the death of the children of Faunia in a fire, and the wrath and revenge of Les, who has suffered from participating in the violence of the Vietnam War create an "atmosphere of destruction and death" (Sánchez Canales 2009: 116). Now, this destruction is represented by the means of images of darkness and filth.

The nearness of death is most striking when Faunia describes how she cleans a cabin where a man committed suicide: Not even strong-stomached Faunia could bear “the smell of death” and the sight of the man’s remains, and not even the disinfectant and the hot water could not clean it properly (Roth 2000: 340). Coleman feels safe with her because she has seen the worst, and he knows she will not run away if he tells her the truth about his race and what he did. In the ending scene of HS, Seeley points to how Les seems to be calm, “though it is a menacing, threatening calm, which is yet another deception –of nature, of human nature. [...] Moreover, the complicated irony of the last sentence is as chilling as that icy lake: a ‘pure and peaceful’ vision of terror (361; Seeley 2011: 108-9, ellipsis mine). In DA, destruction is present both in the feelings and thoughts of fracture that come with love and also in the effect of cancer on the body. Aristi Trendel addresses this issue, focusing on the dynamics between master and pupil (2007) and Sánchez Canales analyzes this subject too when looking at the literary references and connections between art, erotic desire and death in this novel (2014).

I.2.5. The Stain of Confusion and Blindness

He had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense” (Roth 1997: 81). The stain creates confusion in the mind of Roth’s characters, and this is a very important symptom because it leads them to the realization that what they thought they knew is wrong and nothing makes sense anymore. Such confusion can also be considered the acknowledgement of the extent of their ignorance, meaning the impossibility to know oneself and others. In “Epstein”, confusion appears as a secondary effect of desire, when

the main character cannot tell a red light from a green one, or when he is clueless as to how to behave now that his adultery has been discovered by his family.

In HS a major state of confusion can be found in Delphine, who, despite her intelligence, does not know herself nor Coleman, and to make matters even worse, she makes other people believe lies about him. As Sánchez Canales says, it is interesting to compare her actions to the oracle of Delphi of Greek mythology, with its obscurity and ambiguity, which in the person of Delphine appear alongside to a desire to manipulate and control the people around her and also forge her own life (2009: 117). Mistaking appearance for reality and falsehood from truth is a symptom of the tragic flaw, as Sánchez Canales explains (122).

Truth is revealed in surprising ways, as children, for example, see things for what they really are. Seeley compares Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to HS, noting how "family ties have a crucial place in both novels, for Coleman and Hester are parents of children who, they fear, perceive their secrets. [...] Mark questions his father about his origins; he 'wanted the knowledge of who they were and where they came from,' and he is 'never satisfied' (Roth 2000: 176) with the inventive narrative Coleman provides." (Seeley 103, ellipsis mine). As explained before, when speaking about *The Scarlet Letter* and its use of the stain, Pearl is a character who reveals the stain and also sees it clearly. Pearl also asks about the meaning of the scarlet letter that her mother wears and she tells her that "it is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!" (Hawthorne 1969: 179). That is why Hester "often fancied that Providence had a design of justice and retribution in endowing the child with this marked propensity" for knowing the meaning behind the letter (Hawthorne 1969: 180). Just like Merry in AP or Coleman's children in HS, here Seeley says that "the children's role is to unnerve their parents, to keep conscience afflicted" (Seeley 2011: 103).

But even children can be wrong, as we see in AP, where Merry is the child who apparently sees the reality of injustice in the world in a way that others choose to ignore. As the narrator of HS states, “our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong” (Roth 2000: 22). “We are slightly wrong about our parents, our children, our lovers, and even ourselves –for Roth’s line reads ‘our understanding of people,’ not ‘other people’” (Seeley 2011: 104). There is a similar warning in *The Scarlet Letter*, as “nobody really knows anything about Hester, even though the townspeople believe they do.” (104). Just as in HS, where the section titled “Nobody knows” is filled with irony because people believe they know but they actually do not really know. Self-deception and transgression are inextricably linked through the use of the stain in these narratives. For a further discussion of transgression and the mark of sin in *The Scarlet Letter*, see Foster in Gross (1961: 423-435).

A quality that both novels share is “the inherent messiness of life” (Seeley 2011:104). In Roth’s novel, there is a scene in which Coleman is in “a hideous, raucous dive” and he is beaten in a bathroom which was filled with all the fluids of body waste, described in detail to create a disgusting effect (Roth 2000: 181). It is clear that “blood and excrement and sweat are raceless fluids, simply part of the larger mess of being human” (Seeley 2011: 105). The image of the human stain makes its appearance here in a way that can be compared to ST with the bodily fluids of Sabbath and Drenka. Even those who wish to appear as clean will show their stain eventually. For example, as Seeley points out: “Delphine Roux, in a rare moment of clarity, calls herself ‘a mess of uncertainty’ (Roth 2000: 276). [...] But Delphine is not alone: we all, Roth suggests, are natural-born bunglers of communication and wreckers of situations” (Seeley 2011: 105, ellipsis mine).

The lack of meaning in life appears in ST too, when Sabbath speaks of the only pattern being chaos. In Seeley's interpretation of HS, "There is no future for Roth. And without a future, there can only be 'pointless meaningfulness,' because there is nothing to be learned, not even fragments to be shored up for the future against the ruins of today. [...] The only real choice we have is to live fully now, which Roth acknowledges in the next line that Zuckerman says, "The sensory fullness, the copiousness, the abundant – superabundant- detail of life, which is the rhapsody.' There is nothing more than this. That's why Roth ends that section with the enigmatic lines: 'Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes, either. And nothing passes just because nothing lasts.'" (Roth 2000: 52; Seeley 2011:108, ellipsis mine).

The emphasis of living in the moment and in the body has not only been noted by Newman, as seen before when looking at Faunia's role, but it is also supported by Posnock:

Faunia's illiteracy also heightens her affinity with the 'human stain.' Illiteracy immunizes her from the solicitations of textual representation, in particular written language's rage to order, its tendency to drain the refractory from experience, to, in effect, purify it of human stains. Her body, as in the scene of her dancing, speaks as intensely as her spoken words. But by making her illiteracy feigned, Roth is able to resist the temptation to sanctify the primal as a 'solution' (Posnock 2006:218)

Faunia's role in passing as something she is not is like acting, similar to when Coleman passes for white. She does not want to learn more than what she already knows about the struggle of the human race, a fight between "the ruthless and the defenseless"

(Roth 2000: 240). This emphasis on the meaninglessness of life and the acknowledgement of ignorance can also be seen in Roth's novel *DA*, where there is a transition from a feeling of confidence based on knowledge and the realization that there are no certainties and that knowledge does not explain everything in life. *DA* (2001) tells the story of the relationship between professor David Kepesh and his former student Consuela Castillo. He finds himself consumed by his fear of aging, his desire and jealousy, discovering that he cannot control his feelings, and eventually, they break up. When she returns to tell him that she has breast cancer and she could die, he is finally confronted with her as a whole person.

In *DA*, Kepesh is left clueless when Consuela starts having power over him and when she leaves him. Finally, his confusion reaches its highest peak when she falls ill. In this novel, sexual desire and the jealousy that comes with it are feelings that are characterized by confusion. It does not make sense that Consuela would be the first to die, being so young, and so she experiences meaninglessness to the extreme, facing the prospect of death as they watch TV on New Year's Eve. As Debra Shostak argues, just as in *ST Sabbath* "exposes the false promises art makes to the reality of the decaying body", in *DA*, Kepesh exposes the false promises of sexual desire (Shostak 2004: 61).

The reality of death and how it puts a radical end to human desire and dreams is what creates the most extreme confusion. Does this hopelessness lead to a negation of life in Roth's fiction? Some have taken his skepticism for pessimism and utter cynicism. Though it may seem so in some cases, I would like to argue, as other scholars have, that there is still an affirmation of life in his work. There is hope, after all. The human stain plays an important role in this point. On the one hand, the human stain could be the mark that prompts people to give up, to abandon life, or on the other hand, it can be accepted and lived with. Illustrating the first point is Posnock's interpretation of the human stain

scene with the crow named Prince, as he sees that Faunia, being someone who has suffered so much in her life, having lost her children in a fire, and attempted suicide, is ‘looking for ways to leave the human race’ (Roth 2000: 239). To Posnock, her ‘marriage’ to the crow declares her radical alienation from human hope, what she terms contemptuously ‘the fantasy of forever.’” (Roth 2000: 208; Posnock 2006: 218).

Posnock sees a double meaning to Faunia’s connection to the crow: Firstly, she identifies with him because he is a misfit, which happened as a result of his acting, his imitation. “Prince participates in the unstoppable circulation of mimetic and inferential impressions; his mimicry of mimicry infers and fashions a voice.” (Posnock 2006: 219). This is connected to Zuckerman’s conclusion in *The Counterlife* (1986): “I am a theater and nothing more than a theater” (Roth 1986: 325). As Posnock says, “*The Human Stain* ratifies this abolition of the self as a ‘natural being’ rooted in a solid core of fixed identity” (Posnock 2006: 219). But Posnock adds that “[t]he bond of mimesis means, in effect, that Art lurks in the heart of Nature; and this mingling topples the primordial opposition between them, the opposition that grounds the always lethal ‘fantasy of purity’” (219).

Posnock interprets the fact that it is an animal which elicits an epiphany about the human condition as the idea that “the ‘human stain’ links us to the animal; stains, trails, imprints are common to both species” (2006: 220). In my opinion, this is not an appropriate interpretation of this scene, because it is clear that Roth uses the crow to speak about humans, he is not writing about animals. Unraveling the meaning of the stain is not a straightforward task, as Posnock argues:

The equivocation makes sense when we consider that if the ‘stain’ were understood to function as an absolute, as an essentialist term of immutable difference, it would embody

the very ‘fantasy of purity’ that it is intended to rupture. The phrase, in other words, to enact its slippery ubiquity, rather than marking a limit, must embody transit or transfiguration. [...] In sum: inhabiting the ‘human stain’ is the stain of mimesis, its disruptive energies unraveling Roth’s titular phrase from within. (2006: 220, ellipsis mine)

The evidence Posnock provides as clues that point at this interpretation is about the meaning of Faunia’s name, (Faunus being the Roman god of animals, and the references to Greek gods which lived in a world “where metamorphosis is the only law” (Posnock 2006: 220). However, as Sánchez Canales (2009) has studied in his article on the influence of Greek Tragedy on this novel, these very references actually point to the flaws in the human condition, the hamartia. The references to Greek Tragedy “call to mind ideas of fate, retribution, hubris” (Seeley 2011: 102). Now, the word “hubris,” which is closely connected to the term “hamartia”, is important because its significance is connected with key subjects in all of Roth’s work. Its etymological meaning, from the Greek *hybris*, means “wanton violence, insolence, outrage”, originally “presumption toward the gods”, which in turn brings the nemesis, the vengeance and justice of the gods towards the perpetrator (For an analysis of the concept of *hybris*, see Rodríguez Adrados 2014; 158-159). So if according to the Greek classics, it was a sin committed by human beings when they wanted to be like God, this connects with the interpretation of Adam and Eve’s sin in Gen. 3: 5 as pointed out above, in the first section of this Chapter. Another paradigmatic example from the Bible is when the human beings wanted to build The Tower of Babel and God confused them to stop them. In HS, there is no direct mention of an offense to God or the gods, but it is true that Coleman had an excessive confidence in his ability and power to craft his own life.

To return to my disagreement with Posnock's interpretation of the human stain, it is important to note that Posnock sees destruction as a surprising element in the plot of *HS*, because "Inevitably, death also lives at the heart of this pastoral of entrancing simplicity and purity" (2006: 234). However, death is the logical outcome as a result of hubris.

An important lesson Coleman learns is that his successes are always linked to his failures. His biggest joys are connected to moments of deep sadness. For example, when he tastes freedom he has to renounce to his mother; and later, when his son is born and he is at the peak of his career, he also feels an impulse to go to see his mother, which is impossible by then. And when he is at the Navy, he is mistreated for being black. That night he gets a tattoo which ends up having the following meaning to him: "it was the mark evocative not only of the turbulence of the worst night of his life but of all that underlay the turbulence –it was the sign of all of his history, of the indivisibility of the heroism and the disgrace" (Roth 2000: 184). The stain is like the eye of the storm, signifying the turbulence and everything behind that conflict. It signifies that who he is can never really be erased and it also reminds him of life's unexpectedness, of how dangerous it is to expose oneself or to conceal oneself.

The vulnerability that appears in such a time in Coleman's life can be compared with the weakness experienced by Kepesh in Roth's next novel, *DA*: In the beginning Kepesh refers to the young girls he likes as the "meat" he will eat and he describes Consuela's beauty as most remarkably noted in her breasts, which are described as "powerful, beautiful" and he repeats that she is aware of this power and beauty and still figuring out how to use it (Roth 2001: 3). From the way that she carries herself, merely from her body language, he makes the deduction that she does not really know what to do with her body yet or what she is going to use it for. And the comparison Kepesh uses

(the body as her weapon) introduces the idea that sexuality is a power that can be used to abide by the law or to break it, to look out for your safety or to hurt or threaten others.

So you understand that she's aware of her power but that she isn't sure yet how to use it, what to do with it, how much she even wants it. That body is still new to her, she's still trying it out, thinking it through, a bit like a kid walking through the streets with a loaded gun and deciding whether he's packing it to protect himself or to begin a life of crime. (Roth 2001: 3-4)

The comparison with the loaded gun means her power can be used for good or bad purposes, pointing at the moral implications of sexual behavior. She knew what her body was worth and she knew what she was, but not completely. Kepesh will show that to her, because he acts as if he knew everything about the power of her body, which can be a dangerous thing, but he actually will be surprised by how far it goes. Her body is described by Kepesh as a tool Consuela has, but it also defines her very being because her story will be written on her body. It will experience sex and illness. The erotic power of Consuela's body is very strong, and as it turns out, Kepesh is unable to control it. When noticing the contrast between the description of Consuela's body, treated as an object that can be known, and the mystery that shrouds her personality, how she puzzles the man, it may be helpful to recall how this question is treated in other works by Roth, such as *The Breast* (1972) or *The Professor of Desire* (1977). In the latter, according to Debra Shostak, Kepesh suffers from a "perplexity over the contradiction between woman-as-object and woman-as-subject" and he is "awed by the power of the object, which by all reasoning should possess no power, the dominion of the subject" (Shostak 2004: 25).

Posnock argues that “sexuality in Roth does not have the status, say, of a Lawrentian redemptive wholeness joining man and woman. Neither erotic nor lyrical, but raw and explicit, sexuality in Roth’s portrayal as easily enslaves and isolates as emancipates” (2006: 18). While in *ST* sex emancipates, in *DA* there is an ambiguity as to the effects of sexuality. This starts to be evident from the initial confession that Kepesh makes of not being able to really know her, he feels isolated and enslaved, not really united to her. But Kepesh also locks out this possibility of knowing her with his thinking: “With a self-contained woman of such sexual power, you have no idea and you never will. The tangle that is her character is obscured by her beauty.” And still, what he is moved by is her underwear, her body (Roth 2001: 27). Before, Kepesh declared about the appeal that he found in one of the girls: “Everything’s hidden and nothing’s concealed” (8) but now, with Consuela everything seems to be concealed too. Because of that, he praises what he can see: Her breasts were “round, full, perfect” (28), the description of the beauty of her body is the only thing that is visibly important and meaningful. The paradox is that the stain is hidden under the image of this beautiful body.

Sexuality is complicated as attraction turns into disgust, and just as the cancer will grow in Consuela’s body, the attraction she once felt for Kepesh is contaminated and fades away. There is an echo here of the “Everybody/Nobody knows” theme in Roth’s previous work, *HS*, as mentioned above when speaking about the blindness and confusion generated by the stain. Consuela diagnoses the problem she finds in Kepesh when at the end of their relationship she accuses him of “playing the wise old man who knows everything” (Roth 2001: 96) and she claims he actually did not know her at all, “*Me da asco*. Ordinary idiom meaning “It makes me sick”” (97). However, though he does not know her as a person, she acknowledges that he does know her body, and this is no small thing to her, when she is sick. Clearly this story does not follow a set pattern of an erotic

relationship between a teacher and his pupil, for throughout the novel the reader must ask himself what it really is that is being taught and learnt by the characters. Is Kepesh teaching Consuela anything at all? Does she acquire any knowledge? Aristi Trendel deals with this issue at the study mentioned earlier and claims that “at this point in the master-pupil relationship, which has turned destructive, subversion plays a part. What draws Consuela to her master is precisely what drives her away,” and the letter she sends Kepesh demonstrates “the limits of his mastership” over her (Trendel 2007: 3). And not only is there a movement from attraction to disgust on Consuela’s part, but also on Kepesh’s, as he finds that at the same time that his meaning and knowledge disappears, and he dwindles into insignificance, his sexual appetite also vanishes as he finds himself unable to sleep with Consuela when she comes to him with her illness. Miriam Jaffe-Fogger has seen in her study of the narrativization of illness how this unexpected turn of events shows how body and mind are connected and how the character’s anxieties about aging and illness are connected to their desire and lead them to a new understanding of their value and identity as human beings (2014: 4-5). Even though the subject of dominance and transgression in sexuality will be covered in the next Chapter of this thesis, at this point it is important to acknowledge the way in which Roth introduces the stain in that area of his writing too.

There is no greater, no purer power than sex, according to Kepesh, who wants to portray sexuality as powerful and pure (as opposed to people who think it corrupt and refuse to give it its due importance) but at the same time the story unveils how he finds weakness and dissatisfaction in his sexual experience. As the story develops, both the power of desire and the power of death startle Kepesh, who comes under their influence and cannot flee from them. By exploring the complex paradoxes of attachment and freedom, Roth makes the reader question what these realities actually are. In a similar

way, by portraying scenes that represent actions or behaviors that may be considered moral or immoral in an ambiguous way, he questions our view of purity and impurity. This is done by offering descriptions of the body that become images or metaphors and can be interpreted alternatively as negative or positive, or as disgusting or desirable. Especially the images of cancer in the breast or of drinking menstrual blood are linked to the human stain, a dirty reality or an illness that affects human beings deeply and for which there is no solution. A close reading of the use of these images will help us understand the meaning of the experience of the human stain.

I.2.6. The Filth of the Stain

When displaying a life of impurity, Sabbath is a teacher in the estrangement from the ordinary, so he is seeking that defamiliarization—to use the term coined by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky—which goes hand in hand with exaggeration, grotesque actions and the use of irony. His novels are filled with scatological images, from Portnoy’s masturbating in the liver meant for dinner to the many obscene actions of Sabbath. Besides the image of the girl’s underpants in Sabbath’s pocket, there are other images that have this effect. Considering Roth’s work in general, as David Brauner humorously points out, “there is a lot of shit in Roth’s novels [...] because of what it symbolizes for him: namely, human life in all its visceral, indecorous, noisome messiness” (Brauner 2007: 163, ellipsis mine). In order to gain a better understanding of the role of the description of visceral realities in Roth’s fiction, Brauner and Shostak, among others, have analyzed the scene in *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991) in which Roth

has to clean his sick father's excrement from the bathroom floor. Interestingly, Roth compares this overwhelming task of cleaning with his task of writing: "It's like writing a book [...] I have no idea where to begin" (Roth 1991: 173, ellipsis mine). As Brauner says, the analogy is of course, humorous, and also the emotions aroused by the task (horror and exhilaration) are comparable to writing about the experience of the human stain (2007:163).

There are two meanings of the word "pristine" in English: original, from the biblical Paradise, the Garden of Eden (in reference to Adam and Eve's pristine world, before they sinned); and by extension, something very clean. If, as seen before, once Adam and Eve sinned, sin and corruption entered the world as a consequence, the world cannot longer be pristine. Consequently, there is no way back, which is why the images of the human stain show how ridiculous it is to pretend that impurity can be purified. And the text reveals everything that a human being is ashamed of, which is, paradoxically, the mark that makes him or her human. Sabbath, as was stated at the beginning of this study, cannot find rest, so he is unable to let go, to find repose anywhere, but he chooses to face the troubled mess of his existence as he considers his nature. It is in that sense that one can say that he can "let go", as Posnock puts it, "Sabbath's 'letting the whole creature out' is a performance whose very meaning resides in being immoderate, (relatively) indifferent to economy and selection –elements in the making of factitious order –and immersing himself in the mess of experience as it spills over with glancing meanings, flickering moments of human exchange, abrupt surges, and losses of opportunity" (Posnock 2006: 180). Interestingly, it is through this embracing of the human stain that the character experiences life to the full, like Zuckerman describes in *HS*. Posnock argues that this "overflow and byplay forms the 'rhapsody' of 'sensory fullness' evoked in and through Sabbath's naked receptivity." (181). This interpretation leads to a positive

reading of the human stain as an imperfection that is welcome as it is full of life. However, even though this is partly true, in my view it has to be compared with other important aspects of the meaning of the human stain.

For example, in the beginning of *DA*, as Kepesh introduces himself and his lifestyle, he exhibits his assurance in his ability to attract females because of his status as a professor who appears in the media. At first glance, he is enjoying life to the full while being aware of his human stain. He is self-confident in what makes him attractive and proud of his success, knowledge and experience. His victims, young female students, are impressed by his fame “they are helplessly drawn to celebrity,” so he is shown to be powerful, in control, while the girls are placed in a weaker position (Roth 2001: 1). But, paradoxically, he sees himself as weak too: “Now, I’m very vulnerable to female beauty, as you know. Everybody’s defenseless against something, and that’s it for me. I see it and it blinds me to everything else” (2). That vulnerability, defenselessness and blindness will become more evident when he becomes obsessed with Consuela, as he will no longer feel in control of his life.

On the whole, the human stain is overbearing in *ST* when compared to the other works because of a number of reasons. First of all, as Brauner says, “Sabbath is, finally, an advocate of immorality and mortality, the two essential conditions of humanity” (2007: 145). Sabbath presents his sexual organ “as an unruly, unreliable but undaunted vehicle of pleasure”, in delight, celebration, self-aggrandizing, “but at the same time rueful and self-satirical” like when Sabbath compares it to an old car without much potency (128). “If Sabbath was Roth’s ultimate portrait of a man behaving badly, his next novel, *American Pastoral*, featured a protagonist whose main vice seemed, paradoxically, to be his lack of vices” (146). In *AP*, according to Brauner, Roth is “explaining how an apparent

paragon of virtue might become a monster” (146). Brauner also sees HS as a continuation of Roth’s “analysis of the inherent dangers of moral idealism” (146).

I.2.7. The Stain of Opposition and Opposites

Throughout his work, Roth delights in pursuing oppositions, and these reside not only in the meaning of the human stain but also in the attitude, beliefs, characters and tone of these four novels. In *Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004), Debra Shostak has written in depth about how Roth places a voice in opposition to a countervoice, in a dialogical method that offers a constant source of self-critique (Shostak 2004: 4). The stain participates in this game of opposites by signifying these changes and connections.

The irony that is expressed in ST by the contrast between a shameless phone conversation and a narrative that explores its moral complications and consequences can be explored in terms of the meaning of purity and the questioning of innocence. As Brauner puts it, “it is no coincidence that text one contains so many allusions to lost innocence” (2007: 132). In addition, there is an invocation of the biblical account of the Garden of Eden in Sabbath’s description of his naked revels with Drenka. There is a transition “from the fresh to the stale, the ripe to the rotten, and from the good girl to the bad one”. At the end of *The Facts*, Zuckerman suggests that Roth’s work is “always in transit between the good boy and the bad boy” (Roth 1988: 167). In ST the narrative veers to the extreme of the bad boy, as Sabbath has got a “fight for the lost human cause” (Roth 1995: 235). Brauner claims that Sabbath’s compulsive taboo-breaking is the expression of a credo of antagonism, his immorality an article of (bad) faith” (Brauner 2007: 125).

The will to contradict, to be an antagonist, has been evident in many of Roth's characters and their attitude towards the world.

According to this perspective, as Brauner points out, to Sabbath good means bad and nice means boring, and selflessness is just a threat to purify one's impure humanity. As Brauner says, there is an inversion of terms, from positive to negative (134): "Once again, a word that is customarily a term of appropriation –'perfect'- assumes negative connotations" (134). This can be noted in Sabbath's description of Norman's 'perfect' home. Sabbath is offended by Norman's earnest morality and he responds by being offensive "to flaunt his own immorality" (135). To Sabbath, behaving badly is a way to prove he is more potent than his 'nice' and 'perfect' rival (140). This could be compared to Nietzsche's idea of a wild, beast-like man vs. the docile, domesticated man. Sabbath would definitely opt for the former, as it is filled with life, more human.

Brauner sees how the novel is full of paradoxes with implications about the nature of morally transgressive acts. In this interpretation, Sabbath is both "a comic apologist for his own 'shit-filled life' (where 'shit' signifies authentic degradation) and a comic scourge of the 'genteel shit' (where 'shit' signifies bullshit, hypocritical pretense) on which polite society is built" (145).

But what is the value of that human filth exactly? What is hiding behind the traces of the human stain after all? There is a clue in one of Roth's most straightforward novels: "Once you sidestep disgust and ignore nausea and plunge past those phobias that are fortified like taboos, there's an awful lot to cherish" (Roth 1991: 175). Roth means that it is worthwhile to consider the human stain because in it there is something that is valuable, what makes us human. This is most clearly expressed in AP, but the main character, the Swede, fails to understand this because he lives in a mythical world of his own. However,

his world falls apart overnight as his daughter forces him to consider what it means to be human. As Posnock remarks about Sabbath's words "say what you will about me, it's been a real human life!" (Roth 1995: 247), "As often in Roth, what counts as human being and human life remain open questions, and Sabbath insists on keeping them open, as he does everything else" (Posnock 2006: 164). Posnock also quotes Henry Miller, who shares Sabbath's ideas, and to him being human "seems like a poor, sorry, miserable affair, limited by the senses, restricted by moralities and codes, defined by platitudes and isms" (qtd. in Posnock 2006: 165). Miller too loves "everything that flows [...] rivers, sewers, lava, semen, blood, bile, words, sentences. I love the amniotic fluid when it spills out of the bag... I love the urine that pours out scalding and the clap that runs endlessly" (Miller qtd. in Posnock 2006: 165, ellipsis mine). Posnock sees how Sabbath's flow has its source in the human body, and this mix of fluids of body and art recall Henry Miller.

Roth's father's struggle to clean his mess is described with the verb "cleanse", which, as Brauner observes, "connotes moral or spiritual purity as well as physical hygiene" (163). Brauner does not develop this interpretation, unfortunately. But it is related to the idea of the body as signifying one's whole story and identity, and it identifies human waste as spiritual sin, following a metaphor that can be found in the Bible. As to human waste, such as blood, filth, and also nakedness as a result of sin, see Ezekiel 16, for instance, in which Jerusalem is compared to a baby that has been abandoned and is filthy, covered in blood, despised, and then the Lord cleans and clothes it.

Roth makes various references to *Macbeth* (1606), so it is important to look at how the human stain is described in this play, which also uses imagery from the Bible. Shakespeare's character, Macbeth, is "sick at heart" too, and begs desperately the Doctor to help his wife: "Cure her of that: Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,/Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,/ Raze out the written troubles of the brain,/And with some

sweet oblivious antidote/Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff/ Which weighs upon the heart?"(Act 5, scene III, 41-48). The doctor replies "therein the patient must minister to himself", which enrages Macbeth, but he still asks him to "find her disease, And purge it to a sound and pristine health" (Act 5, scene IV, 40-52). This desire to purge the illness, the foul darkness that ails his wife can be compared to the cry of the wife of Epstein (in Roth's short story "Epstein"), who asks the doctor if her husband will be cleaned from the rash, the human stain, in the sense of a moral problem that is grown deep within people and cannot be cured by doctors. Another image of the stain can be found towards the end of ST, when the "odors that exist only within women" envelop Sabbath:

[...] in the violent misery of everything lost. If irrationality smelled, it would smell like this; if delirium smelled, it would smell like this; if anger, impulse, appetite, antagonism, ego.... Yes, this sublime stink of spoilage was the smell of everything that converges to become the human soul. Whatever the witches were cooking up for Macbeth must have smelled just like this. No wonder Duncan doesn't make it through the night. (Roth 1995: 440, ellipsis mine)

Of course, there must be also a comical turn and it turns out the bad smell came from garbage that had been strewn everywhere out of the can by raccoons: "That explained the smell of spoilage" (1995: 442). Shostak interprets this passage as reinforcing a paradox: "the equivalence between the two apparently opposed desires, eros and thanatos, sex and waste" (2004: 55). By establishing a comparison rather than an opposition between sex and waste, Roth overturns the categories of purity and impurity.

I.2.8. Impossible Cleansing

The impossibility of purity is treated with irony in the eulogies to Coleman and Faunia in the final chapter of HS, titled “The Purifying Ritual”. As Judie Newman notes in her essay on the concepts of impurity in this novel, Faunia is praised for her work as a cleaner and Coleman is also “cleaned up” in order to integrate him in the community, while the reality is very different, as the narrative has shown earlier (Newman 2019: 93). No matter how much people try to clean the human stain, its contamination will prevail, there will still be traces of it on the floor, so to speak. In *Patrimony*, the scene in which Zuckerman has to clean his father’s shit, he realizes it is impossible to clean all of it, there will always be traces left (1991: 176). Shostak explains the character’s realization that “the materiality of the body itself *is* his patrimony,” because:

What Roth cleans up may be only itself -the shit is ‘lived reality’ and not a metaphor, for the Philip Roth in the text -but, once placed in narrative, the act of cleaning as well as the excrement itself are inescapably metaphorical. The thing and the act *represent*, and in this case, they represent not only Roth’s attempts to situate himself as subject in relation to his familial history and the fact of death but also the *quidditas* of fleshly decay, the fact that nature causes each human identity to cross the border into abjection. (Shostak 2004: 47)

As Shostak writes, “In its descent into -and embrace of- the gross materiality of the body and its inevitable decay, *Sabbath’s Theater* plays a riff on this central metaphoric

scene in *Patrimony*” (2004: 47). In this sense, ST has taken the resource of the human stain to the limit, which is why there is such a wealth of images and scenes to be analyzed in this novel, but also comparisons that can be made with the rest of his work.

Now, of course, Roth is not the only writer to have touched upon this subject, as besides Hawthorne, Melville and Shakespeare, W.B. Yeats has also written about the struggle of life and art and the agony of the body. The relationship between literature and life is important to Roth, as can be seen in his references to these writers throughout his work, and in the example of characters such as Kepesh and Sabbath (Consult Sánchez Canales (2010) for an in-depth analysis of the interrelation between literature and life). Roth engages in conversation with the poetry of Yeats in PC, ST and in DA, among other works. As Jack Knowles has argued, Roth invokes Yeats at important moments which are characterized by the recklessness of the style (Knowles 2017: 91). These scenes, which are a reflection of Yeats’ influence on Roth, deal with a similar subject, for, as Knowles points out, they are “marked by the irreducible insistence of the materiality of the human form” (90). Knowles notes that Roth owes much to Yeats for he gives him the language and the way to approach the subject of the “aspiration towards literary transcendence and the anchoring constraints of life” (89). This influence had already been noted by Shostak, who quotes verses by the poet Yeats with images that Roth uses similarly when he writes about “the gross materiality of the body and its inevitable decay”: “Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement.” (qtd. in Shostak 2004: 47). Thus, “Roth revives the modernist image of the proximity of the reproductive organs to the orifices of waste, which, in turn, signify death and bodily corruption” (47).

Shostak also refers to the way in which the ghost of the mother comes out of Drenka’s sexual organs or the fact that Drenka’s cancer grows in her ovaries. As Shostak interprets the account of Sabbath and Drenka urinating on each other, it is referring to the

decay of the body, to death, “an act that may be transgressive largely because it acknowledges the eliminatory function of the genitals. That is, ‘golden showers’ strip away from the sexual organs the cultural meaning of reproduction, replacing it with the signification of pure waste” (57). By visiting Drenka’s grave, Sabbath realizes that just like the people who died, he will also become waste. But as Shostak says, “His urination on Drenka’s grave, however, in its overt reference to their erotic union, represents within Sabbath’s private symbolism a celebration of the very process of living that must inevitably drive toward death, an enactment of the mutually dependent erotic and thanatic impulses” (58). Indeed, here “imagination sheds the burdens of all affectation” in order to “reject the obligations of value”, as Knowles writes about the characteristics that Roth and Yeats have in common in their writing (91).

To sum up, nothing human is alien to Sabbath; he is familiar with the abject, and to him to be human means to freely indulge in his desires. Shostak warns that “Sabbath’s nihilism, however, should not be mistaken for Roth’s. It is, in fact, in Roth’s performance of the transgressive desire *through* Sabbath that he can test the nihilistic vision itself as well as the plausibility and efficacy of the kind of system-disrupting self-invention in which Sabbath engages” (2004: 48). If theater is the main metaphor of ST, as Shostak argues (49), then this theater is also closed down by reality, when he faces deep pain and loss. Sabbath expresses himself through his salacious performance and his promiscuous sexuality but, as Shostak says: “If Sabbath’s theater is his body, however, then time must inevitably ravage his capacity to perform the self, and it is for this reason that Roth’s novel is as obsessed with death as it is with the erotic” (51). The stain is the trail of his life but it also leads to death, which is a subject that will be looked at in more detail in Chapter III of this dissertation, where it will be compared to Kepesh and Consuela’s story of desire and death in DA.

Roth seeks to demystify male sexual power, according to Shostak, “uncovering masculine powerlessness in unprecedented ways, especially when Sabbath discovers that he cannot constitute his subjectivity through the exercise of sexual prowess” (2004: 52). Shostak believes that Sabbath’s flight is from death (52). He lost Nikki, his brother, his mother... When he thinks about his childhood’s memories, when his brother was still alive, he stresses its feeling of “endlessness” (Roth 1995: 31). Shostak points at an irony bomb as “Later in the novel, Roth makes the ironic connection between Sabbath’s nostalgic yearning and his central fear when, conversing with his dead grandmother in the cemetery where she is buried, he says” (2004: 52). “But then, death is endlessness par excellence, is it not?” (Roth 1995: 369). And this is why his mother appears as a ghost and remains close to him from the very beginning of the novel.

Shostak reads Sabbath’s behavior as an attempt to master loss: “Death motivates the way Sabbath’s life takes narrative shape much as it has motivated his choices. Drenka’s death serves as the initiating incident to the novel, just as Morty’s death is at the origin of Mickey’s unstable and transgressive subjectivity, his attempt to defy death by living only for the erotic” (2004: 53). This is why, as we will see in Chapter II, Sabbath holds on to stolen underwear during a funeral, for example.

Sabbath seems to be entranced by how his grandmother ate her corn and cleaned the fish, gutting it with the bare hand. These images, which may be generally considered disgusting, were somehow attractive to him. When Sabbath tries to find hope as he visits his old cousin Fish, he describes his dirty clothes and it seems like this time he does not appreciate its filth, the stains are described in detail and Sabbath expresses his angry thoughts about the cleaner who is not doing her job. The old man is unaware of the filth that surrounds him. Posnock sees this description as a good example of the rhythm of the novel, “the present is stymied by the intrusive past, death deferred by stubborn life [...]

with its detritus of detail spilling out, forming, in this case, the ‘impasto’ texture of Fish’s cardigan” (Posnock 2006: 174). In this passage there is a shocking contrast between purity and impurity, both of which are found in Fish’s attire, for even though his sofa and his cardigan are filthy, his shirt and his breath are clean.

The novel abounds in detailed descriptions that stress the material reality of the world and its importance to people. The detailed account of all of the girl’s underwear, and the vivid scene of the fish Sabbath and his brother caught brings the reader back to that awareness of the materiality and the richness of our existence stained though it may be, as has been explained previously in this study as Shostak notes from Roth’s farewell anniversary speech: “Roth’s renunciation of storytelling took the form of an aesthetic of the real, of the “passion for specificity, for the hypnotic materiality of the world one is in” (“A Celebration”)” (Roth 2013: qtd. in Shostak 2014: 8). The real is the material world and the physical body, just as the human stain and its traces, which are signs that help the human being realize its own condition. Thus, the real human stain works against the mirage of the arcadia, the paradise that does not exist, the purity that is nonexistent in human beings. That is the reason why Roth describes the real in such detail.

Shostak’s conclusion about ST is that “the human comedy exists precisely in that we are desiring subjects who, despite our improvisations on the stage of the body, cannot erase the embarrassing traces of our own transgressive desires [...]. Because these traces are all that exist materially to represent our selves, to embody us and allow us to enact our narratives, Roth finds reason to celebrate them” (2004: 59). If the traces Shostak mentions are the human stain, then it is clear that these traces of our desires are a means of representation, and so the stain is the style at its core. Shostak also sees that the paradoxes in Roth’s themes result from this: “The result is a startling set of paradoxes – the novel argues at once that thanatos is eros, hatred is passionate life-force, the

performative subject is transcendent self-hood, the body is not-self and irreducible self, and masculinism is its own critique” (2004: 59). In my view, with the use of the stain, these paradoxes appear not only in that novel but also in the rest of the novels under the scope of this study. In this regard, Shostak’s reading supports the idea of the importance of the “embarrassing traces” of transgressive desire, which are part of the image of the human stain that cannot be erased and marks us as human.

Roth highlights these traces when Sabbath turns wild in nature, masturbating at the graveyard, and also breaking a window like an angry gorilla. In all of these scenes he expresses grief and rage but it is also a performance, like one of his King Lear acts. Sabbath takes desire to the extreme and everything makes him hungrier. In Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, apart from the reference to the stained hands, there are also examples of this kind of excess. For instance, in *Macbeth*, Malcolm (even though he later claims to be speaking falsely against himself) describes his vices, which are “confineless”: “there’s no bottom, none,/ in my voluptuousness: your wives, your daughters,/ Your matrons, and your maids, could not fill up/ The cistern of my lust; and my desire/All continent impediments would o’erbear/ That did oppose my will” (*Macbeth*, act 4, scene III, 59-65). This character goes on to describe a “stanchless avarice” that can be compared with hunger: “And my more-having would be as a sauce/To make me hunger more” (*Macbeth*, act 4, scene III, 81-82).

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To sum up, in “the graphic stain” there is a transition from skin to text, as there is a movement from the image of the stain to the whole of the style of Roth’s novels. The human stain is more than just a word, and as it represents more than the body, it becomes flesh as “the Word became flesh” (an image used to describe how God became incarnate

in the body of Jesus Christ in John 1:14). Rather than a mysterious, miraculous process, Roth uses the literary resources available to fiction writing to portray how the spiritual reality is linked to the material reality, creating a set of paradoxes in which there is a play between oppositions. While Bluefarb (2010) sees the language of the human stain as confusing, I have argued that it clearly shows the presence of impurity. In addition, Sánchez Canales (2009) interprets the stain in HS as the imprint that reminds human beings of the imperfect and flawed nature, supporting my reading of the stain, which I believe is also present in the other novels. While there are characters who seem to embody the whole of the stain, drawing on interpretations such as Judie Newman's (2019) about the character of Faunia, I find that the symptoms of the stain are revealed through different aspects that imply that all human beings bear this stain.

While Ross Posnock (2006) reads the metaphor of the stain as the connection between human beings and animals, I have argued that it is specifically about a human problem and its consequences. But Roth sees something valuable in what initially seems like a mere image of filth or depravation. Most importantly, Debra Shostak (2004) sees that Roth celebrates the traces of transgressive desire that exist as a representation of our selves, so I conclude that if we read those traces as part of the human stain, this constitutes a means of narrative representation, and therefore, an important characteristic of Roth's style.

In conclusion, the symptoms of the stain that are made visible in the text can be seen in the representation of violence, destruction, blindness, confusion, ignorance and unlimited desire. This analysis stems from the original explanation of the human stain in HS, as seen by Faunia, who makes the stain visible and even embodies the whole stain, as the inevitable imperfection in human beings. Just like Hawthorne's "S" in *The Scarlet Letter* is revealed, and the girl is the one who sees it, Faunia and her embracing of the

human flaws expose the false purity present in society. In the next section, this idea of exposing false purity through the stain will be further explored by looking at how the human stain exposes paradise as an illusion.

I.3. THE MIRAGE OF PURITY

In what is probably one of Roth's first depictions of an earthly paradise or an American pastoral, "Goodbye, Columbus", the promised summertime dream of freedom, love and wealth makes an appearance. However, even though initially Neil Klugman seems to find satisfaction in his affair with Brenda, he finally sees how he does not belong to her world, as she would rather go on without him and so he is left without her at the end of summer. Roth first considered writing this story in 1957, inspired by his experience of living in the house of a girlfriend's family in the upscale Jersey suburbs. This disillusionment would appear with more force later in Roth's career, in AP, where the stain invades the pastoral. Debra Shostak also sees a connection between "Goodbye, Columbus" and AP, regarding the meaning of fruit and food and the Fall. She claims that just as the apple is present in the story of original sin as told in Genesis, the refrigerator filled with fruit in "Goodbye, Columbus" and the scenes with an abundance of food in AP are placed there by Roth with the intention to mark the temptation and the Fall that these characters participate in (Shostak 2004: 117-118). This is not an isolated image, because it works together with many other images in the text.

I.3.1. Images of Paradise

As seen earlier in the first sections of this chapter, the presence of the images of Paradise and the Fall is very important in American Literature, the Bible being its main source for the creation of the American Dream. This is due to the Puritan legacy, as Ruland and Bradbury explain in their *History of American Literature* (1991):

The Puritan imagination, it was acknowledged, was central to the nature of American writing. One reason for this was that it brought to the New World not only a Judaic sense of wonder and millenarian promise -the “American dream” [...] - but a vision of the task and nature of writing itself. Puritan narratives defined a shape for the writing of America, but they also questioned how and whether language could reveal the extraordinary experience. (Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 9, ellipsis mine).

As an American writer who has inherited this legacy, Roth has been interested in this kind of narrative structure until the end of his career, and he too is interested in the use of literature to delve into the hidden revelations of the country. In his last novel, *Nemesis* (2010), there is a paradise of the summer camp in the Poconos, a place which, in the end, is not immune to the polio epidemic and many children fall tragically ill. The polio is the human stain, which act in an invisible and fatal way. The main character, Bucky Cantor, thought he could escape from death, but he finds out that it was precisely because of his escape to paradise that he spreads the illness to the people who thought they were safe in that idyllic place.

Victoria Aarons studies the connection between the representation of a paradise early in Roth's fiction in *Goodbye, Columbus*, and late in Roth's fiction in *Nemesis*, arguing that neither the man-made paradise (the summer haven, a refuge from the city) nor the divine paradise (nature) proves to be a real refuge for Roth's characters (Aarons 2017: 33). As Aarons notes, the characters of both novels, Neil and Bucky, fail in their attempt to step from one life into the other: "For Roth's protagonists, early and late, believing oneself to be autonomous, self-determined, and free from internal combustion is invariably a fall into a psychoanalytically inflected failure" (33). While Aarons interprets characters with a focus on their psychological dimension, I will focus my reading on the aesthetic and moral dimensions through the literary lens of the human stain. Aarons claims that "Roth stages lines of narrative flight that return his characters inescapably to the conditions of their own compulsions" (33). This narrative flight is connected to the discovery of the human stain, in my reading, because as the characters seek authentic freedom, blinded by their self-deceit, the narrative will reveal the human stain in them. Throughout Roth's work, the image of paradise is closely connected to the human stain because the stain exposes the paradise for what it is: just a fantasy, an illusion, a mere dream, something that is eventually lost.

As Jay Halio writes, *AP* is a complex novel that allows for different interpretations and it is not till the second part that the pieces fit together and create an overwhelming effect (Halio 1999: 137). By looking at the role of the stain in these different pieces it will be easier to understand the final effect. It all starts with an image of paradise. In *AP*, the Swede's life in Old Rimrock is portrayed as if it were in an ideal pastoral landscape in a painting, and Roth uses rapturous language, long lists and long-winded paragraphs to convey the character's delight in it. Sánchez Canales addresses the importance of the name "Old Rimrock" in connection with the theme of purity in his essay about the

Classical Greek archetypes in AP, published in a book edited by Velichka Ivanova (2011). When looking at how the Swede crafted a new identity for himself, Sánchez Canales points out that it meant to “efface—his true self, his (Jewish) background, which he regarded as an imperfection or impurity” (2011: 25). But by getting rid of what could be perceived as the stain of Jewishness, he needs to create a new world which, as Sánchez Canales says, ironically looks back at an old one: “trapped between two opposing worlds, the idyllic world inhabited by the Swede and his wife summarized in the name of his house and property—Old Rimrock—and the world inhabited by his daughter Merry symbolized in the names of her cities of residence, New York and Newark” (25). This is the Swede’s paradise, characterized by an amazing abundance, but unexpectedly, what is loved by him will be hated by his daughter. Likewise, the town of Newark, that allowed for the Levov’s progress, is shown to be apocalyptically destroyed.

Regarding a sociopolitical reading of this novel, the focus on the human stain shows that it affects everyone equally regardless of their class, as all sorts of paradises are shown to be false. The Swede’s pastoral life causes much controversy because throughout AP, all the characters will present their different ideas of what life should be like. It is important to bear in mind that the author is not endorsing any of the ideologies described in the novel. AP, just like his other novels, is characterized by counternarratives, different discourses and idealisms, and Roth is interested in what happens to the characters who believe these things than in proving them right or wrong: “I don’t write about my convictions [...] I write about the comic and tragic consequences of holding convictions” (Roth Pierpont 2012: 218, *ellipsis mine*). It is this lack of a direct response, a solution, an answer to the question, that makes his work so strong and unsettling, and it is the reason why this open-ended novel is so thought provoking. It is not only AP that is deeply unsettling, but also ST. The representation of the idea of

paradise and the resource of the stain appear in both novels in different ways and yet, there is a close link between them.

I.3.2. Dreams of Purification

Philip Roth started writing *ST* when he was looking for a place to be buried, as he explains in his *Web of Stories* interview (2011). Claudia Roth Pierpont explains how he had just lost his friend and former lover Janet Hobhouse, who died of ovarian cancer at forty-two (2013: 189). They had been lovers in 1973, when she lived upstairs from him in an apartment building in New York, and she was married. It was Roth's task to arrange her burial in a cemetery in Connecticut near Roth's home, and he had to acquire a stone for her grave too. This is what gave him the idea of finding his own cemetery plot.

Besides this, there were several experiences that had marked Roth and took him to the point of writing this novel. Firstly, he had experienced an extremely difficult marriage to Maggie Martinson, whom he had married in 1959, at the beginning of his career. She embodied the American dream and at that time, when he started teaching at the University of Chicago, he wanted to fully exercise his freedom (Roth Pierpont 2013: 36). Finally, they separated in 1963 and she died in an accident in 1968.

In 1992, Roth started suffering from a recurrent back pain which made life very difficult for him, and as the months went on his mental health also suffered, and in the summer of 1993, he was overcome by a suicidal depression. Fearing that the pain would never go away, he was not able to sleep, and when he called his doctor, he arranged for

him to be sent to a psychiatric hospital, where he stayed for seventeen days, returned home, became ill again and after one more stay came back with medication and medicine, feeling better. He had experienced something terrible, and yet, after he said it was “a merciful affliction”, and he immediately started to write and filed for divorce from Claire Bloom, his second wife. Roth Pierpont says that it was at this point that Roth began ST, thinking about grief, loss, pain and death, while at the same time feeling great relief and freedom (2013: 187-188).

Just as in ST the human stain illustrates the theme of impurity and the exposure of the fantasy of purity, in AP, the images and the plot take up the thread and give it another twist. As mentioned before, the human stain is particularly present in Merry throughout the novel of AP. Merry, the Swede’s daughter, is first portrayed as a happy child, which is connected to the meaning of her name, but ironically, the change she undergoes leads to a bitter turn of events, making her own life and her parents’ miserable.

Firstly, because of her stuttering, which signifies imperfection, she has to find purity. As Merry is passionately immersed in “an improbable dream of purification that had taken possession of her”, her parents let her grow these passions because they think it does her good. However, just as she cannot achieve fluency, just as she cannot achieve purity, not by means of the baptism her mother provides for her (cleansing her of her “original sin”), nor by her adoration of Catholic images or of Audrey Hepburn’s innocent face. Similarly, therapy does not cure her stuttering, and it gives the family a burden of responsibility that foreshadows the Swede’s load of guilt regarding Merry’s crime. Therapy cannot erase the human stain in the same way therapy cannot completely cure Roseanna, Sabbath’s wife, in ST. When a psychiatrist makes Merry feel responsible for her stuttering, to the Swede this seems ludicrous because it is something she obviously cannot control, and he becomes very angry. Not only that, the psychiatrist’s theory is that

the cause for her choice to stigmatize herself is her parents' perfect life. The Swede protests, trying to make the point that she has not "adopted" the stutter, and it is obvious to him that she is not in control of the situation, but the very opposite: the stuttering is what makes her lose control (Roth 1997: 97). These two contrasting ideas reflect on the one hand, Merry's viewpoint, and on the other hand, her father's. Therefore, these ideas present the stain as something that can be willingly adopted as a reaction against purity in order to denounce it; or, in contrast, as something that invades paradise against the victim's will.

The stutter is a representation of the human stain because it is something uncontrollable, and people do not make a conscious choice to have it. Secondly, the stutter, as the human stain, has no cure. Additionally, there is no way of understanding it, as Merry's stuttering diary shows, "she stuttered in all situations" and she is always aware of her condition as a stutterer. Likewise, to the Swede it is ridiculous to ascribe an unconscious meaning to the letters that prompt the stuttering, and frustration grows to its extreme as there is no cure: "Nothing anybody said meant anything or, in the end, made any sense" and nobody was able to really help Merry, who is trapped in the invisible hands of a horrible power, her impediment (Roth 1997: 99). This is also a foreshadowing of her situation as a bomber: she will be trapped in the hands of something evil. Her words can also mirror the existential crisis her father goes through, as everything becomes an unintelligible sound, like "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, act 5, scene V).

I.3.3. The Stain that Shatters the Fictional Self

The ironic implications of Merry's name, mentioned earlier, are a consequence of the stain that she bears. If Merry harbors a considerable frustration because of the stutter, she has an even stronger sense of indignation and a rage that turns her into an altogether different person. This kind of transformation can be seen in other characters: In the same novel, AP, Seymour sees himself change as he becomes prey to irrational thoughts, haunted by obsession, discontent with the life he has created, and disappointed as he can no longer hold on to the certainties that were once his. Sabbath, in ST, is also somebody who takes decisions that are unexpected and he shocks everyone around him with his behavior. Alan Cooper interprets the characters' excess, that drive which pushes against the boundaries of decorum, as the consequence of the fact that "decorum embraced for itself might be an offense to one's personal freedom" (1996: 62). That is why, Cooper reasons, when a character tries to be true to his own nature rather than suppress it, he chooses not to betray himself, so he has to "betray his friends and relatives by refusing to live their fiction of him" (62). For example, Epstein needs to have that affair, indulge in his desire, and show his frustration and despair to his family. This experience is complicated by the fact that the character may have believed in that fictional self, and so, "being his own betrayer, couldn't his struggle to leave the abyss of decorum be almost heroic?" (62). This is clearly Seymour Levov's case, as he struggles to abandon his old patterns of thought, embraces the improbable and chooses to speak with his daughter in spite of her crimes.

I would like to highlight how the experience of "writing and rewriting of ourselves" that Cooper refers to is represented by means of the human stain (1996: 62). In the search for one's identity, the human stain is like the ink on the page, allowing the

text to show how characters write and rewrite their lives. When Cooper refers to “the fiction we are asked to live”, this brings to mind Roth’s description of the clean, pure, successful, perfect life that characters such as Seymour Levov are trying to achieve. There is another turn of the screw when Cooper refers to “the fiction we oppose to the fictions imposed”, because the characters also project fictitious images of themselves (62). The transgressive quality of Roth’s novel is that it reveals how “every fiction is a betrayal of an opposing fiction” (62).

At this point, it is worthwhile to look at the accusations and criticisms that Roth received during his life for the way he conducted himself in his relationships or for his choice of subject or his portrayal of Jews or women. In the second Chapter, this will be looked at in more detail, but taking into consideration the difficulty of tackling the relationship between Life and Work, it is relevant to note that the author provoked people’s anger but he also tried to defend himself and he struggled to control the narrative of his life by choosing his biographers carefully. And yet, the recently published biography by Blake Bailey (2021) offers provocative details and raises scandalous reviews. In some reviews, like the essay written by Joshua Cohen for Harper’s Magazine (2021) we find the question of whether Roth’s life and work also reflect “the fiction we oppose to the fictions imposed” that Cooper referred to, as mentioned earlier.

Is the stain merely a device to show how to overcome what is wrong and do what is right? Quite the opposite. In Roth’s novel *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), there is a passage in which the character has to listen to an analysis of his enemy’s discourse. The opposite of what Roth does in his texts: “You draw stories from your vices, dream up doubles for your demons –he finds criticism a voice for virtue, the pulpit to berate us for our failings. Virtue comes with the franchise. Virtue is the goal. He teaches, he judges, he corrects –rightness is all.” (Roth 1983: 365). In contrast, Roth insists that in his work,

virtue is *not* the goal: “Literature is not a moral beauty contest”, as he said in his interview with Hermione Lee when speaking of the authorial mask (2017: 147).

In his book *The Modern American Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury places Roth in the context of a Jewish American Literature that was concerned with the question of morality. He argues: “If Bernard Malamud is a writer of ‘ethical Jewhood’, the much younger Philip Roth is a writer exploring the world of its collapse; one of his novels is very appropriately titled *Letting Go*” (Bradbury 1992: 177). So if his representation of the collapse of virtue is what distinguishes Roth’s fiction from writers like Malamud, the question remains of how this is accomplished in his writing. Bradbury agrees that *Portnoy’s Complaint* is Roth’s “revolt against the ‘moral seriousness’ of the fiction of the 1950s” as Roth himself also explained in his interviews, as pointed out earlier in this chapter (Bradbury 1992: 178).

In trying to understand this turn from moral seriousness to playfulness in order to represent the collapse of virtue, firstly one must see that in Roth’s work, what initially appears to be right or pure is eventually revealed as false. In fact, decent behavior is used as a mask to hide what is really underneath it. In AL, Zuckerman’s critic, Milton Appel, behaves “mannerly, decently, courteously, decorously, uprightly, civil” and as Zuckerman says to point out his hypocrisy, “oh, what a gorgeous Torah cloth you throw over your meat hooks! How *clean* you are!” (Roth 1983: 369). In AL, after hearing the story of the pornographer’s life, the narrator’s chauffeur tells him she finds him unacceptable not because she is a feminist but because she is a human being: “You don’t just debase women. [...] You debase everything. Your life is filth. On every level. And you make it all the more awful because you won’t even shut up.” (Roth 1983: 419, ellipsis mine). He calls debasement power, though, and justifies it by saying that if the porn actors are well treated and that if people love it, nobody has the right to take away their freedom

to enjoy it. In this way, the human stain of debasement entails individual freedom, the right to relish anything one wants. This ambition to lead one's life independently from others' judgement can also be considered a motivation to create a new fictional self.

For example, in *HS*, it is this ambition that drives Coleman to create his fictional self. In order to do so, he "murders" his mother "on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom," by pretending she is not his mother in order to create his new identity (Roth 2000: 138). Paradoxically, as he tries to pursue more freedom in abandoning his black identity, his own mother tells him he always "thinks like a slave" because he feels so imprisoned by his family. His father would have told him there is no escape from his own prison, "that all your attempts to escape will only lead you back to where you began," but his mother tells him she believes he can successfully pursue his goal of autonomy, even though his life would probably not turn out as he believed it would (140). Coleman eventually reaches the point where he realizes that "freedom is dangerous" indeed (145).

This discovery of Coleman that there is no escape from himself and that there are unavoidable consequences of his search for freedom is closely connected to Roth's treatment of character, according to Victoria Aarons. She explains how Roth's characters Neil and Bucky (in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Nemesis*) "find, through the pursuit of their reckless capers, that they can escape neither themselves nor the inevitable consequences of their precipitous, reactive flight" (Aarons 2017: 33). This, Aarons finds, is because of Roth's interest in the "making and revising of character" and because of their will to create new possible selves, even though they deceive themselves (33). Even though I agree with Aarons on that point, I think that instead of saving themselves, Roth's protagonist do not manage to find a successful salvation or a full pleasure in their self-deception. The human stain shows how ultimately in their failure they experience loss and pain.

I.3.4. The Impurity of Blood

Blood is connected with life on the one hand, because it is what runs through the body to give life, but on the other hand, it is connected with death, as it is shed. This can be found in the Jewish law: “But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat” (Deut. 12: 23). Morally speaking, in the Talmud, blood is also considered impure, as has already been mentioned in the first section of this Chapter, especially if it is menstrual blood. “Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over” (Leviticus 12:4).

The question is whether blood is clean or if it is a stain. As a symbol in the old Testament, blood could redeem if it is a sacrifice, and its color, red, is considered ambiguous, as it can be either good or bad in some cultures. There are several striking images of blood in Roth’s novels, which turn the image of Paradise upside down. As Aristi Trendel points out, “every Roth novel has in store a most compelling event whose uncanniness could be disquieting to the reader, such as Mickey Sabbath's masturbation over his mistress's tomb in *Sabbath's Theater*. In *The Dying Animal*, Kepesh's licking of Consuela's menstrual blood right at its source ‘like a feeding infant’ (Roth 2001: 72) certainly represents a constellation of the novel's themes in one forceful image” (Trendel 2007: 5). Taking this point even further, I would like to argue that these images of the human stain are the literary device used in order to show the change that takes place in the characters or even to bring about the change in the illusion of paradise.

Firstly, it is important to analyze how Roth describes the image of Consuela menstruating while her lover watches and licks her blood. The first time this description appears, its transgressive nature surprises Kepesh, who is shocked that Consuela has done such a thing, and he feels jealousy, he wants it too. At that point, he uses it as an image of that impurity inherent in all human beings which will rise inevitably even in the most unexpected situations (that story was of Consuela's teenage years in Cuba, in the upper-class traditional society). However, later, as she bleeds while he watches, he feels thrilled, delighted, mesmerized, but mostly he feels "like a boy" (Roth 2001: 71). And this indulging in a transgressive act that he desired out of envy proves an addictive experience for him. Kepesh is getting a taste of the human stain and this means he is surrendering and loving her. In his friend's interpretation, licking Consuela's menstrual blood means that he is worshipping her in an extreme, unhealthy way, putting himself at her mercy:

I had set out to demand the most from her, and when she shamelessly obliged, I wound up again intimidating myself. There seemed nothing to be done- If I wished not to be humbled completely by her exotic matter-of-factness -except to fall to my knees to lick her clean. Which she allowed to happen without comment. Making me into a still smaller boy. One's impossible character. The stupidity of being oneself. The unavoidable comedy of being anyone at all. Each new excess weakening me further -yet what is an insatiable man to do?... I was at her feet. I was on the floor. My own face was pressed to her flesh like a feeding infant's. (Roth 2001: 71-72, ellipsis in original)

Kepesh sees himself as weakening and helpless in this situation, not in control or powerful anymore. Trendel sees this episode as a way in which Kepesh learns something: "Kepesh is a man who has to learn the basics of love. The method of learning is not

through instruction but through osmosis” (Trendel 2007: 5). Through this unconscious assimilation, and not through studying a theory, love is understood not intellectually but physically through the stain. The man becomes a child, and the child feeds helplessly, but this is how he is truly nourished. Kepesh is “denuded of his realism, pragmatism and cynicism” and “helpless as a baby, instinctually directs his mouth to the gateway of life.” As Trendel notes, he is weak and lacking too, because of his old age (98). Miri Jaffe-Fogger has reflected on this issue and she argues that Roth is a writer who writes out of his own wounds: “Someone who gives voice to the body engages in a complex dualistic enterprise. When one gives voice to one’s own body, the use of words requires the mind to reflect on the body, causing a separation” (2020: 1). This will be looked at in more depth in Chapter III, when dealing with the representation of illness.

I.3.5. Bring the War Home

If the image of paradise is characterized by peace, the human stain brings war and opposition to it. The arrival of the element of conflict is shown through the body, so that the rage of war is visible in Merry, who at first seemed a peaceful child. Additionally, Merry’s beauty withers as she purposefully leads an unhealthy lifestyle, and her contentment is gone when she starts unleashing words of anger and hate towards Lyndon Johnson and the War in Vietnam. She stopped caring about how her parents felt about her stuttering, and she became more concerned about what she was saying. This was her freedom, the choice she made to become a new person with a new priority, a new identity and a new appearance. She was no longer a charming good girl, as she turned against her

parents' values and focused her energy on opposing the war. Merry's change and her aggressiveness cause not only the Swede but also Dawn to wonder at their share of responsibility. Dawn is horrified as she does not recognize her own daughter and does not know how to deal with her. The Swede's plan is to hold on to his daughter as long as possible, believing patience and communication will eventually solve the problem, change her again back into a sweet, content girl. Their struggle, day in and day out, seemed hopeless and endless, but the Swede's gentleness only made her angrier and she taunts him speaking of his fears, asking him to think about what is really extreme. Merry embraces the discourse of the repellent, the reality that people would rather not see. Eventually, in his effort to protect her, the Swede actually gives her the idea to plant the bomb in Old Rimrock: "bring the war home to your town", of course he cannot imagine her protest would go to such an extreme. All his patience could not avoid the bombing.

Confronted with Merry's tale, the Swede sees the vanity of his life. Everything he has done is futile in the light of her story. All his work, dedication, values, obedience, and his presence... all of these are useless. He sees he had no influence or power over her. He realizes "we are all in the power of something demented" (Roth 1997: 256). The evidence is in the brutal death that his century had seen, and in the injustice suffered by so many throughout American history. Roth's vision of history has been analyzed by scholars such as Aimee Pozorski (2011) and will be looked into in Chapter II.

Regarding the physical harm on the body, to return to the image of blood, it is important to note that the knowledge that Merry was raped plagues the Swede's imagination. Therefore, he tries to recover her pure, innocent body from the past, from her childhood. But he obsessively keeps thinking of how she was raped. Her body has been violently corrupted. It is a mystery, how could a child so beautifully made become somebody so broken and bad? Her body as a child is a beautiful image of purity:

“perfected creation”, a body “freshly ironed -no folds anywhere”, “naive freedom”, “her uncorrupted paws”, “the anatomical precision”, “eyes unclouded (...) washed windows”, “preternatural fineness”, “the health of it”, “the absoluteness of their intimacy” (Roth 1997: 270-271). This description is so powerful because the reader knows that all this beauty was marred. He looked after her but she ended up not looking after herself: “You protect her and you protect her -and she is unprotectable” because she is free and she used her autonomy in the most awful way. In a discourse of pain that resonates like Job’s, the Swede says “The worst of this world had taken this child. If only that beautifully chiselled body had never been born” (272).

What the Swede comes to understand is that “deviancy prevailed” (Roth 1997: 422). The order of their life did not work and “the breach had been pounded in their fortification, [...] and now that it was opened it would not be closed again” (423, ellipsis mine). Faced with this destruction and condemnation, the final question of the novel resonates, unanswerable, “what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?” (423). This question goes back to the book of Job, but also to characters such as Kafka’s Joseph K., as they are punished without knowing the reason for their suffering; and, like Job, Roth’s Sabbath and the Swede are constantly asking the question of why they have to endure this pain.

I.3.6. From the Ordinary to the Extraordinary

The same question that resonates at the end of AP returns in HS, as the narrator seems to ask the same: What on earth is less reprehensible about the life of Coleman Silk?

In this novel, the stain makes it possible to make the leap from the ordinary to the extraordinary as the material world is filled with meaning. In HS, Faunia is associated with images of purity. Firstly, as to her appearance, she is described as a “clean-cut woman” (Roth 2000: 15). This may initially seem superficial, but the purity of her appearance will become meaningful when we consider her identity and what she means to Coleman. Secondly, she is working as a cleaning woman and the motif of cleaning returns when Coleman and Zuckerman watch her milking the cows, which also connotes purity. Faunia performs her tasks in a “whitewashed room” and there is a detailed description of how she cleans everything: “setting to work with a variety of brushes and with sinkful after sinkful of clear water to scrub every surface of every tube, valve, gasket, plug, plate, liner, cap, disc, and piston until each was spotlessly clean and sanitized” (51). The fact that her spectators are watching fascinated and that nobody uttered a word makes this scene mysteriously significant. Her routine that keeps everything spotless brings the comfort of cleanliness. This cleaning can also be found in other novels of Roth, such as *Patrimony* (1991), where he has to clean his father’s excrement, scrub it off the floor, and also in *Indignation* (2008), where Marcus Messner has to clean the blood and the guts of the chickens in kosher butcher shop that his father runs. In both of these cases, the characters learn that even though the task is extremely revolting, sometimes this has to be done, it marks who they are, and there is no shame in it.

Now, in HS, the way that Zuckerman recalls and interprets this “theatrical performance” stands out in the narration as a moment that reflects the old man’s longing for beauty. The narrator remarks that four months later Coleman and Faunia were both lying in their graves. The shadow of this tragedy looms over a time when a man whose life is coming to an end, “the enamored old man” finds himself shaken by the strength of desire, the force of life (Roth 2000: 51). “a scene of pathos and hypnosis and sexual

subjugation [...] in which a man taken over by a force so long suppressed in him that it had all but been extinguished revealed, before my eyes, the resurgence of its stupefying power” (51, ellipsis mine). The narrator compares this to the main characters in *Death in Venice* (1912) by Thomas Mann, in which Aschenbach watches Tadzio “his sexual longing brought to a boil by the anguishing fact of mortality” (Roth 2000: 51). Precisely in that story the reader learns that there is no innocence, but seduction, in the eyes of the young person who is desired. Sánchez Canales (2014) analyzes this issue of mortality in Mann’s novella and in Roth’s DA pointing out that Kepesh sees the ageing Aschenbach in himself: “when will you begin to rouge your cheeks, Herr von Aschenbach? What do you think you look like? Do you have any idea? All that devotion to the Higher Life” (Roth 2001: 89). Sánchez Canales sees that ultimately in Roth’s perspective the tragedy of death overcomes everyone: “However, there is a significant difference regarding the end: unlike Yeats's poem and Mann's novel, where, as the poet's/novelist's body ages the protagonist becomes a "dying animal" whereas his lover (i.e., muse) stays young, *The Dying Animal* is gloomier in the sense that both the old and the young are doomed to perish” (2014: 8). This theme will be further analyzed in Chapter III of this thesis, in the third section, dealing with death.

It is not by coincidence that in HS, this is the moment that brings along an important revelation about the experience of life, as the rich abundance of all the impressions and sensations make the narrator aware of the will that both animals and human beings have “to live, not merely to endure but to *live*, to go on taking, giving, feeding, milking acknowledging wholeheartedly, as the enigma that it is, the pointless meaningfulness of living” (Roth 2000: 52). The transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary in the eyes of the narrator brings about a sense of awe at the wonder of life: “The sensory fullness, the copiousness, the abundant –superabundant –detail of life,

which is the rhapsody. And Coleman and Faunia, who are now dead, deep in the flow of the unexpected, day by day, minute by minute, themselves details in that superabundance” (52). It is important to note that this celebration of life is done even though there is an end to life. The beauty of life can be appreciated amidst its unexpectedness and its transience. That description of the effect of the superabundant detail of life can be found in ST too, in the description of life at the seaside during the long holidays of Sabbath’s childhood.

I.3.7. The Danger of Imposing Purity: From the Puritans to the American Dream

However, just like Faunia’s features connote purity, her face is also described as bearing the traits of “one of those hardworking goodwives who suffered through New England’s harsh beginnings, stern colonial women locked up within the reigning morality and obedient to it” (Roth 2000: 1). This reference that brings to mind Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), also holds an irony which, at the very beginning, points at the difference between appearances and reality, as this woman who seems to have been imprisoned by a strict moral system is actually free to have a secret adulterous affair.

Faunia is compared to the Greek god Zeus who is, unlike the Hebrew God and the Christian man-god, is contaminated: “entangled in adventure, vividly expressive, capricious, sensual, exuberantly wedded to his own rich existence, anything but alone and anything but hidden. Instead the *divine* stain. A great reality-reflecting religion ... As the hubristic fantasy has it, made in the image of God, all right, but not ours –*theirs*. God

debauched. God corrupted. A god of life if there ever was one. God in the image of *man*.” (Roth 2000: 243).

Some scholars have acknowledged that the stain signifies the reason why purity is unattainable and they comment on the message to take heed from the false purifying rituals, but there is no analysis that goes into depth following the thread of the traces of the stain throughout the novel of HS. According to David Brauner, Ada Savin mentioned that the “generic and metaphoric hybridity” of the human stain “stands as a bulwark against the dangers of imposing purity, in life as in art,” but Savin does not develop this point further (Savin 2002: 184). In my view, the human stain is a hybrid metaphor in that it is indeed composed of different elements: On the one hand, the stain signifies inherent impurity that can be embraced as natural and positive and on the other hand, the negative effect of human actions, which is pitiful. As a bulwark against the danger of imposing purity, the human stain defends the characters from blindness and a state of ignorance by making human nature more visible.

This is relevant to the American Dream because, as Monika Hogan states, “the Zuckerman novels expose the ‘American Dream’ as being reliant on a fantasy notion of bodily purity and wholeness” (Hogan 2004: 3). However, in my view, this exposure of the fantasy of purity is not only found in AP and in HS, but it can be found as one of the major themes too in ST and DA, as well as an underlying idea in many other works by Roth. Consequently, in this section the focus is not on the somatic aspect of the stain in the body, but on the metaphorical significance it has for the ideologies of purity. David Brauner, for instance, is more interested in “tracing the non-somatic, metaphorical meanings of purity” in novels such as AP and HS (Brauner 2007: 181).

I.3.8. The Foolish Illusion of the Purity Binge

“The fantasy of purity is appalling. It’s insane” (Roth 2000: 242). I would like to return to the idea of impurity as that which is liminal, in a transitional state, that which is different because it is neither one thing nor the other. “The fantasy of pastoral not only hides from history but also tends to foment violence because purists tend to preserve their purity by producing difference as degraded, dangerous otherness, a stigmatizing that to scapegoating of sacrificial victims to fortify the boundary of self and other” (Posnock 2006: 153-4).

With completion there is no openness, no possibilities, no freedom to continue the story or to interpret it in different ways. Boddy asks himself why Roth shows the sense of completion as a “foolish illusion” in HS. That fantasy corresponds to the idea of the pastoral. The answer would be that the conclusion of the narrator is that there is not a satisfactory outcome to the actions and the plotting of characters such as Coleman. “In telling Coleman Silk’s story, however, Zuckerman tests the conventions of pastoral in much the same way as he tried out those of tragedy” (Boddy 2010: 45). The pastoral, according to Boddy, is embodied by Faunia, and Roth would test its conventions by showing reality to be the opposite of what it seems on the surface. Boddy suggests that this is a characteristic of an aesthetic form we can find in many of Roth’s works: Thus, if Roth said in his interview with Mervyn Rothstein that he tends “to problematize material... I like when it’s opposed by something else, by another point of view” (Searles 1992: 228), it must be “a fully developed aesthetic – one that rejects the Aristotelian unities in favour of ‘variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty’. This latter

formulation is not Roth's but Lionel Trilling's – proposed at the outset of *The Liberal Imagination*” (Boddy 2010: 48).

The plot of HS is set at a time that Roth considered America was on a “piety binge, a purity binge” when, judging the president's adulterous sexual relations, everyone was moralizing, showing what Hawthorne called “the persecuting spirit” (Roth 2000: 2). Hawthorne is essential to understand where Roth's American novel comes from, as outlined in sections 1 and 2 of this chapter.

From the comparison that can be drawn with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it is obvious that HS comments on the fantasy of purity that still exists in American society so many years later: Arthur Dimmesdale's double life takes its toll as he discovers a second will within him: “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true” (Hawthorne 1850: 215). He feels “incited to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other, with the sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse” (216). Coleman also has a fight within him, just as Seymour, Sabbath and Kepesh do. “Roth finds compelling the aesthetic power and audacity of self-making *and* the spectacle of its unraveling. The latter occurs when the self, caught in the traps that inhere in too adamant an effort at self-invention, abandons its proprietary relation to itself” (Posnock 2006: 279). However strongly a character fashions his will or plans his life, he cannot keep it constant, never changing, he may construe his life but it may be destroyed by the storms of life, as Coleman's story shows.

Gabrielle Seeley and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky have written an article that sheds light on *The Human Stain* by comparing it to *The Scarlet Letter* (see Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky

in Shostak 2011: 93-114). Hawthorne's novel "explores the fundamental belief of self-creation and self-fulfillment as integral to the American promise of freedom, asking the profoundest of questions: Is there some element of identity an individual has no right to relinquish in order to attain individual freedom?" (Seeley & Rubin-Dorsky in Shostak 2011: 93). These scholars ask the same questions of both texts in order to show the connection between them and they find a series of parallels which are helpful to understand Roth's HS. Thus, they see how the question "Why does Hester stay in Salem and endure the torment when she is free to go?" could be asked of The Human Stain's main character too, Coleman. Interestingly, in both stories there are characters who probe the conscience of the guilty characters and Hawthorne uses the word "stain" as well (93). Even though 150 years have passed, the way of thinking Hawthorne wrote about is still present in American society, which is why his and Roth's characters "are often in a struggle for authority over their own lives" (94). Roth wrote about "the problematical nature of moral authority and of social restraint and regulation" (94). "The question of who or what shall have influence and jurisdiction over one's life," he writes, "has been a concern in much of my work", in *Reading Myself and Others* (Roth 1975: 84). The question is who decides what is pure and impure. Dimmesdale tells Hester "thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee" (Hawthorne 1850: 67) and Hester thinks she might "work out another purity than that which she had lost" (80).

The ecstasy of sanctimony resides in the foundations of the fantasy of purity, it is what people repeat to each other in shock, judging someone's actions. As Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky noticed, the chapter in HS titled *What Maniac Conceived it?* recalls Mistress Hibbins whispering to Hester, "what mortal imagination could conceive it?" as she reveals her knowledge of Hester and Dimmesdale clandestine forest meeting" (241), which brings to mind the theme of the limits on human knowledge and their surprise at

scandalous actions (Seeley & Rubin-Dorsky in Shostak 2011: 95). Likewise, in AP, the narrator asks a very similar question when he hears about what happened to Seymour. In DA, Kepesh is also taken by surprise at the news of the illness of Consuela. The narrator in HS calls the tendency to seek other people's faults "America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" (Roth 2000: 2). As Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky note, "this recalls the Puritan elders surrounding Hester on the scaffold as *The Scarlet Letter* opens (Hawthorne 1850: 2) as well as the townspeople's piercing glances and hurled asides when Hester attends Dimmesdale's Election sermon (246)" (Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky in Shostak 2011: 95).

Roth is interested in opposition and it is important to ask why, as Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky do: "if Coleman will not reveal his secret, one must wonder (as with Hester), why not leave the scene with Faunia and let their connection be his salvation? Having positioned himself as an oppressed adversary against the community he despises for its stupidity, he nevertheless remains within that community, allowing himself to suffer its rejection. Why is that opposition so important to him, and why is it so important to Hester?" (2011: 96). To answer this question, it is helpful to compare Coleman's predicament to other characters such as Epstein and Sabbath. In a way, they are all forced to leave the institution or the place where they were as a punishment for their behavior. Epstein has to sleep in another bedroom and his wife threatens with divorce. Sabbath loses his job and leaves the city because of the scandal of engaging in an inappropriate relationship with his student. Likewise, Coleman is forced to leave his job and although he still lives in the same town, he is isolated in his house.

The wound becomes a scar that is the human stain. As Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky put it, "Hester is psychologically wounded, just as Coleman is, by the inflexibility of a strict -a hostile- community. This wound is a genuine "human stain" which causes

Coleman and Hester to defy their communities. The stain rubs both ways, for the community commits a “sin” (intolerance) just as surely as does the protagonist (defiance) in each novel.” (2011: 97).

Coleman, seeking freedom, believes he can experience fewer limitations in his life by creating a new identity for himself, because he would not accept the conditions of his previous identity. As Seeley and Rubin-Dorsky point out (99), Hester has a similar frustration because of her gender. Being a woman, she asks herself: “was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative” (Hawthorne 1850: 165). “Both seek nothing more than what Coleman believes is the ‘basic human right’ of ‘disregarding prescriptive society’s more restrictive demarcations and asserting independently a free personal choice’ (Roth 2000: 155). This is *the* sacred American ideal, encompassing as it does the holy trinity of independence, individuality, and unfettered freedom. Yet, as compelling as this vision of freedom seems, seeking absolute autonomy is costly. Coleman’s and Hester’s insistence upon asserting personal choice while masking their true selves will eventually thwart –and in Coleman’s case, destroy- them.” (Seeley & Rubin-Dorsky 2011: 99). This is so because as Seeley says, “deception and cruelty are correlatives to secrecy in these novels. Coleman’s deceit permeates his entire life” (101).

Deceit and secrecy are important in Roth’s fiction because they define what it is to be human and if they are acknowledged as your own and not rejected or judged as “sick”, then characters find out who they really are. Secrets hold the human stain within them. As Sabbath says, you are as human as your secrets are (Roth 1995: 88), and while their secrets become a source of strength for the characters’ lives, they also cause much pain. Hester regards herself as being connected to Dimmesdale by “the iron link of mutual crime, which neither he nor she could break” (Hawthorne 1850: 160). Their adulterous

relationship, being a secret, can be compared to Sabbath and Drenka's affair. As Sabbath puts it, secrets are not sick, they are as human and as stained as people are.

David Brauner sees Seymour's tragedy as a result from his delusion, his downfall coming from the belief that he is the fulfillment of a mythical role (Brauner 2007: 181). In the first quote that opens AP, the words "dream, dream, dream" point at the illusion that characterizes the Pastoral: The Swede, as an inhabitant of his own utopian dream-like world, needs to be awakened to reality. The novel therefore adopts an anti-utopian mode. Will things prove to be worse than what they seem? Roth unveils what lurks behind the American Dream and it shows reality's grimness. This story confronts the reader with the question: "Why are things the way they are? The question to which there is no answer..." (Roth 1997: 70). Questions of this type fill the novel, shaping its appeal to the reader without giving an answer or a conclusion. Many scholars like David Brauner have also noted how abundant these rhetorical questions are, and the importance of two final unanswerable inquiries.

The second quote that stands out in AP, "the rare occurrence of the expected..." reveals the truth that the unexpected rules our lives. The titles of the sections that divide the novel are revealing and evoke the Old Testament account of the Fall: "Paradise Remembered"; "The Fall", and "Paradise Lost". Velichka Ivanova points this out in her 2010 book-length study: "Les titres bibliques des chapitres évoquent le Pentateuque. Le monde avant la chute est uniforme. Le bien et le mal ne se distinguent pas encore et aucune différence se sépare l'homme de la femme. Or, l'unité constitue l'essence du rêve américain" (2010: 59). In another study of AP, Ivanova wrote: "Le mythe biblique du paradis perdu et le poème épique de Milton inspirent les titres des trois parties du roman: 'Paradise Remembered', 'The Fall', 'Paradise Lost'. Après le titre de la première partie, l'incipit introduit au monde du texte" (2012: 12). Various scholars have studied the

connections between AP and Milton's *Paradise Lost*; however, there is no study of the references of the stain in connection with biblical sin.

Joshua Lander, for example, has studied the "pastoral impulse" in Roth's subversion of the pastoral myth in AP connecting the novel to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (2019). Lander's reading of the novel offers a new interpretation focusing on the importance of the bodies of female characters in AP, which he contends serve to "deconstruct the gendered patriarchal narrative that underlies America's 'pastoral impulse'" (Lander 2019: 45). This connection between the pastoral and the problematic representation of women is relevant in order to transition to the next section of this Chapter, which deals with sexuality and the representation of women in Roth's fiction.

Undoubtedly, the biblical account of the Fall is connected here to the American Dream. But the Swede's story has a structure that not only reminds of a biblical story, it also has references to a religious allegory, or a Greek tragedy, showing the story of an individual as an example for a more universal experience (see Ivanova 2010: 59; 2012: 12). Sánchez Canales has analyzed the Classical Greek Archetypes (2014), but I would like to focus on what role the human stain has in this structure, working through both Greek and Jewish references. The narrator introduces the Swede as "a man whose discontents were barely known to himself, awakening in middle age to the horror of self-reflection" (Roth 1997: 85). The reader will witness "the brutality of the destruction of this indestructible man" (83). The unexpected event of the bombing falls upon the Swede's life, causing him much pain: "But who is set up for the impossible that is going to happen? Who is set up for tragedy and the incomprehensibility of suffering? Nobody. The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy -that is everyman's tragedy" (86).

That is why the narrator of AP introduces the idea of the impossibility of really knowing another man: “that’s the mystery of his mystery [...]” (Roth 1997: 30, ellipsis mine). The reader will soon discover how the Swede tries to cover up “his horrible riddle” by acting as if he were perfectly capable of doing great things, but at the same time, he is falling apart (131). The reason is that his daughter has planted a bomb and abandoned her home. He must discover what is beneath the surface of the world that surrounds him, and under his own skin, for he has no clue of what is underneath the reality that the naked eye can see (137). For that he needs a microscope, or an antidote to the illness of the foolish illusion he suffers from.

I.3.8. The Stain as the Antidote in the Counterpastoral

Paradoxically, the stain which appears as an illness can also act as an antidote. Following Brauner’s thinking, if Seymour suffers from an illness, the idea of a Pastoral he believes and lives by is a dangerous virus, and the human stain would be the saving antidote to that illusion. Accordingly, the description of the disgusting traces of the stain is the only substance that can counteract the harmful poisoning of the lie that humans are stain-free.

One of the ways in which the stain acts as an antidote is when Seymour has to face the fact that his daughter has caused violence and been the victim of violence, as she was raped and has killed people. Before this realization, it is easier for the Swede to think about her daughter as a victim rather than as a murderer (Roth 1997: 267). However, he is plagued by a sense of impotence as he sees there is no justice, no fair retribution on

Earth (268). Justice is connected to the image of Beauty, for both are characterized by perfection and purity. That is why Seymour recalls his daughter's innocent, pure body of a child, still untouched, flawless, perfect, healthy, new, revealing no evil at all (271). But when he hears of her violent actions, the Swede really cannot understand her evil nature, and tries to reason it away, saying "she must have been crazy" (379). However, eventually, Merry showed the reality of evil to her father: "And the instrument of this unblinding is Merry [...]. He had made his fantasy and Merry had unmade it for him" (418, ellipsis mine). She who had an impediment that disabled her (a speech impediment) is now the one who makes her blind father see, figuratively speaking. The physical stain becomes metaphorical here. In this way, she brought the war, her conflict, to her own home, to shatter her father's utopia. Her bomb destroys the false paradise, thereby showing the hidden stain that was lurking in everyone's heart.

The chaos and error that are so obvious to characters such as Sabbath have to be discovered by the Levovs in AP. Eventually, it is not possible to win a "crusade against disorder, against that abiding problem of human error and insufficiency" (Roth 1997: 421). For, "what should be did not exist. Deviancy prevailed. You can't stop it" (422). Roth chooses to end the novel with bitter irony, as Marcia laughs at "the enfeeblement of supposedly robust things" (423). The last lines seem to indicate that what has been destroyed is the "unreprehensible life of the Levovs".

In the introduction to "Wandering and Return: Literature since 1973" in *Jewish-American Literature. A Norton Anthology*, there is a list of the concerns that are particularly reflected in Jewish American Literature as a consequence of the peculiar situation of American Jews. These issues are essential in order to understand Roth's characters. Without forgetting the questions about political questions, the common past, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism, these are the most important problems: "What does it

mean to be Jewish in the final quarter of the American twentieth century? [...] What does it mean to be Jewish when ties to ethnic heritage have loosened? [...] What makes a Jew Jewish if he or she does not practice the rituals of Judaism?" (Chametski et al. 2001: 979, ellipsis mine). I have selected these questions out of the list because I believe they are particularly addressed by Roth in these novels. When looking at the history of American Jews as it is narrated in this introduction, while in the 50s Jews had tried to become more American, in the 70s the opposite trend began. The new objective for them was to find their identity, because especially its religious dimension, which largely conformed their ethnic identity, was lost (2001: 981). And as Jews became more integrated because they studied and worked alongside to non-Jews, and also married non-Jews, the Jewish community was in crisis and changed rapidly (980). Roth's characters struggle between this lost identity and the American Dream which eventually proves to be a trap. This is why Jay Halio speaks of "the tragic element of hubristic pride that, try as he might, the Swede cannot help but be guilty of" (1999: 137). Because of the Swede's self-assurance and his trust in the American Dream, he said "I am who I want to be" (Roth 1997: 315). And he did what he set out to do. However, the Swede succeeded in rejecting his father's will and Judaism, but in the end his life is destroyed anyway and his happiness vanishes in thin air.

In *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) there is a scene where Alex also rejects his parents' Judaism. Sánchez Canales analyzes it in his article about Roth's presumed anti-Semitism (2021). He points out something that is relevant to the subject of the Swede's idea of a new identity and his pride and self-assurance: Alex's refusal to wear different clothes to the synagogue symbolize how he has broken with his parents' faith, in that he wants to look like any other young American, refusing to look different but also ultimately turning his back to the God of his parents (Sánchez Canales 2021: 245). Turning their back to

God and to Paradise, Roth's characters nevertheless discover that Paradise is not found in the house nor in the lifestyle which are so perfect in his eyes. None of these things actually satisfied Dawn nor Merry, they did not really love it. Instead, they would rather love other things, which the Swede considers to be ridiculous and meaningless, such as faraway countries (Vietnam), abstract paintings, a new house and a lover.

The anger at being a mere pawn in History in Lou Levov's speech is accompanied by the irony that the rest of the narrative creates: "get Nixon and all will be well. If we can [...]" (Roth 1997: 299, ellipsis mine). But, in fact, Merry's bombing proves that all is not well. This irony indicates the implication that America is filled with evil, and it cannot be fixed just by getting rid of a president. It cannot be restored.

The daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral -into the indigenous American berserk (Roth 1997: 86).

This passage describes powerfully how shocking it was for the Swede, whose life went perfectly well, and suddenly everything changed. That is why the main character repeatedly asks himself in anguish "Why?" and "how had he become History's plaything?" (Roth 1997: 87).

I.3.9. The Stain That Cannot Be Washed Away

Roth is interested in uncovering the cleansing or purity rituals that are but “foolish illusions”: For instance, in *AP*, when Merry is baptized secretly, her baptism is supposed to wash out her original sin, but her actions prove she has become a murderer and this raises the question of the contradiction of a fight with sin in this world. In the Levov family the role of religion is shown as a limitation and it is used as a tool to interrogate and control, for example when Lou Levov interrogates Dawn about her beliefs in an aggressive manner (Roth 1997: 388-391). To the narrator, religious exclusivity is a burden which his characters need to get rid of in order to attain freedom. Religion is portrayed as inevitably connected to irrational behavior, resulting in grievances, resentment and suspicions of everyone else (402). This same thing happens in other novels by Roth, and in the study mentioned earlier by Sánchez Canales (2021) this is also clear, when he shows how Alex perceives it in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Judaism would seem to consist of a set of rules and what is upsetting to the parents is mostly the lack of faith (as when the father breaks into tears when his son says he does not believe in God) but also the lack of observance of rules that are more about appearances, such as wearing the right clothes to the synagogue.

Those “purifying rituals” are motivated by moralistic impulses, as they are meant to eradicate what contaminates Utopia, in search of a state of purity. But these ideals are questioned harshly throughout Roth’s fiction, and in conclusion, the human stain that cannot be washed by humans is explored and exposed relentlessly.

I.3.10. The Stain Shows There Is No Sexual Healing

Sexuality is dealt with in different ways in Roth's fiction and this subject will be studied more in depth in the next Chapter, dedicated to the idea of transgression; but at this point, it is important to look how the stain transforms its value to show a false ideal of purity, or a false Paradise. The innocence implied in the description of Roth's representation of sex as "candid" and "explicit" can be misleading. There is a number of reasons why Roth's treatment of this subject has been considered so controversial. It has been widely discussed among Roth scholars, for instance, Alan Cooper (1995), Mark Shechner (2005), Debra Shostak (2004), and Ira Nadel (2013), among many others, have written about this subject in connection with the notions of Jewishness, masculinity, desire, eros, etc. On the one hand, sexuality appears in Roth's books as a means of sheer pleasure, release and freedom, but on the other hand, it is a source of frustration as it falls short to keep its promises, and it can be dangerous too. This study would like to ask the following question, looking at the image of the human stain: Is there purity in sex? Firstly, it is clear that the stain allows Roth's narrative to play with the idea of purity and impurity in sexuality.

In DA, when Kepesh licks Consuela's menstrual blood, the adjective "clean" stands out in this passage, thereby introducing the suggestion that this act may be pure and not impure, as one would have thought initially. This episode contains such a shocking image of the stain, marked by taboo and impurity too because it breaks the law as it is a contaminated act according to the law as expressed in Leviticus 12:4, as mentioned earlier, or in Leviticus 18:19, for example: "Also you shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness during her menstrual impurity". "If a man has sexual

relations with her and her monthly flow touches him, he will be unclean for seven days; any bed he lies on will be unclean” (Lev. 15:24).

In this biblical view, menstruation blood makes women unclean (Lev. 12:2); and that is the reason why she would also be guilty if she has relations with a man: “If a man lies with a woman during her monthly period and has sexual relations with her, he has exposed the source of her flow, and she has also uncovered it. Both of them must be cut off from their people.” (Lev. 20:18). As Aristi Trendel notes, “not only is the teacher-student taboo disregarded, but also the Niddah’s laws, forbidding physical exchange and sexual intercourse during menstruation in rabbinic culture, are transgressed too” (Trendel 2007: 5).

This scene in DA is not the first time that the image of menstrual blood appears in Roth’s fiction. As early as in PC (1969), Portnoy is agitated because he remembers when he first saw his mother’s menstrual blood when he was very young. He saw it “shining darkly up at me [...]. Just two red drops [...], but they glow still” (Roth 1969: 42, ellipsis mine). The text connects this image immediately with the vision of “an endless dripping of blood” that “she is draining from the meat so as to make it kosher and fit for consumption” (42). Portnoy acknowledges he might be confusing things, but those drops of blood are still visible in his memory and he links it to his feelings of shame and at the same time, of his “deepest desires” (44). Roth’s character is humorously aware of his obsession with blood: “I sound like a son in the House of Atreus with all this talk of blood” (42-43). In this narrative, Roth is already joining the image of menstrual blood that signifies impurity with the image of making meat kosher in order to highlight the presence of impurity in the process of achieving purity. Later in his work, in *Indignation* (2008), he will return to this juxtaposition of images of blood and flesh in the violence of war and in the kosher butcher shop, which will be analyzed later.

When the stain appears as menstrual blood in DA it is also a cause for alarm as in PC, but it has an important consequence as it is the evidence of the presence of Consuela in her lover's life, thus becoming the symbol of her power over him. For example, there is the image of Consuela's bloody tampon, again from menstrual blood, which appears in the trash basket and is discovered by Kepesh's other lover, Carolyn. This bloody tampon is the evidence of his infidelity so it awakens her fury and he tells her a lie, using her to try to soothe his feeling of powerlessness and dissatisfaction. George warns his friend Kepesh that he will always be powerless with Consuela because something in his relationship with her makes him crazy, which is why he tells him: "If you don't cut the connection for good, in the end that something will destroy you. You're no longer merely answering a natural need with her" (Roth 2001: 98). So, according to this rational discourse, the unknown element that lies hidden in the relationship with Consuela will eventually be the end of Kepesh. She is mysterious and the nature of what makes him dissatisfied also seems to be veiled. George in this speech goes even further and classifies this problem as an illness:

This is the pathology in its purest form. [...] You violated the law of aesthetic distance. You sentimentalized the aesthetic experience with this girl -you personalized it, and you lost the sense of separation essential to your enjoyment. Do you know when that happened? The night she took the tampon out. The necessary aesthetic separation collapsed not while you watched her bleeding [...] but when you couldn't restrain yourself and went down on your knees." (Roth 2001: 99, ellipses mine)

The act of "drinking her blood" means that Kepesh has worshipped "the mystery of the bleeding goddess", thereby crossing the line, as this is forbidden according to

Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Blood means life, and as God is the only one who can give life, blood should be removed and it must not be drunk:

You lick it. You consume it. You digest it. *She* penetrates *you*. What next, David? A glass of her urine? How long before you would have begged for her feces? I'm not against it because it's unhygienic. I'm not against it because it's disgusting. I'm against it because it's falling in love. The only obsession everyone wants: 'love.' People think that in falling in love they make themselves whole? The Platonic union of souls? I think otherwise. (Roth 2001: 99)

George is wary of love because he sees fracture and loss instead of perfection: "I think you're whole before you begin. And the love fractures you. You're whole, and then you're cracked open. She was a foreign body introduced into your wholeness." (Roth 2001: 100). However, the stain shows that even fracture and impurity can be desirable.

As Kepesh gets more intimate with Consuela, the madness of love is what compels him to express this union by sharing in the human stain. By licking her blood and sharing in her impurity, that act brings the two lovers even closer. Experiencing the human stain together can bring the characters together, just as it happened with Sabbath and Drenka in *ST*. But in *DA*, George does not let up, as he considers love, a mutual understanding, as something to be avoided because he fears his friend will suffer a great disappointment when the relationship ends: "attachment is ruinous and your enemy. Joseph Conrad: He who forms a tie is lost. That you should sit there looking like you do is absurd. You tasted it. Isn't that enough? Of what do you ever get more than a taste? That's all we're given in life, that's all we're given *of* life. A taste. There is no more" (2001: 100). The bitterness

and frustration in these words can be compared to Sabbath's realization that "there's nothing that keeps its promise" as the first section of the novel is titled. However, Kepesh cannot help being attached to Consuela, just like Sabbath could not help missing those he loved. Kepesh is not able to detach himself, it is impossible to him and that is why his friend George's admonishing lecture has no effect, he cannot talk him out of it. Kepesh and his experience show that even though the depth of that desire can become his enemy and he will not taste its fruit as much as he wants because the relationship can break or either one of them will die, he will still pursue it.

The brief moment of satisfaction occurs only as Kepesh plays with time in real and fantasy sexual encounters with Consuela; when, immersed in excitement and in his private lesson, during the brief seconds of his orgasm, he is "sick no longer with desire. Isn't that Yeats? 'Consume my heart away; sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal/It knows not what it is.' Yeats. Yes. 'Caught in that sensual music,' and so on." (Roth 2001: 10). However, only briefly does the sickness of desire let up. Because the experience of sex is always contaminated with other things, as Kepesh laments: "No, not even fucking can stay totally pure and protected. And this is where I fail [...]. Of course there is no purity of the kind Kenny dreams of, but there is also no purity of the kind I dream of" (106, ellipsis mine).

This realization is very important, as it implies that there is never just sheer sex, as it is always mixed with many other things that make it impure in Kepesh's eyes. He finds that even among animals there are "these crazy distortions of longing, doting, possessiveness, even of love. This need. This derangement. Will it never stop? I don't even know after a while what I'm desperate for. Her tits? Her soul? Her youth? Her simple mind? Maybe it's worse than that -maybe now that I'm nearing death, I also long secretly not to be free" (106).

Kepesh actually acknowledges to what extent he not only cannot be free, but he also discovers he does not want to be free, as he clings to the hope of the comfort in the attachment that love provides. Sex is not 'pure' in the way he would like it to be as he finds it to be 'contaminated' by love. There is an inversion of connotations of these terms of purity and so the main surprise of the novel is that desire, instead of strengthening, has the effect of weakening Kepesh by enslaving him to the object of his love, Consuela. So even the value of these notions of strength and weakness is inverted in this novel.

I.3.11. The Stain that Goes Over the Limits

In DA, Kepesh chooses to include a historical description of the girls who seek to "rebel against one's condition" in his story (Roth 2001: 50). These women were seeking freedom in sex at a time when people were "law-abiding, members in excellent standing of what Hawthorne called 'the limit-loving class'" (51). The discourse of these women is in favor of going to the limit and over the limit, even advocating for no limits altogether, which would be the best. In addition, after Kepesh praises the rebels who brought about the democratization of the "entitlement to pleasure" of women in America, right after that essay on sexual freedom, he adds another piece of information: "Sidelight. The English trading outpost at Merry Mount that so incensed the Plymouth Puritans." (This place is where Quincy, Massachusetts is today) "Hawthorne based a story on that maypole [...] 'Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire'-that's how Hawthorne understood it" (58-59, ellipsis mine). He explains that Merry Mount was presided by Thomas Morton, who was imprisoned by the Puritans. "He was a source of prurient fascination for the

Puritans. Because if one's piety isn't absolute, it logically leads to a Morton" (59). This thought highlights the impossibility of having a paradise of virtue and purity.

As Aimee Pozorski warns, the narration in this passage is full of irony, and Kepesh's tone and perspective become confusing, but the theme picks up a thread of thought that has featured in many novels by Roth, especially in *ST* (Pozorski 2011: 110). The Puritans, who desired no less than perfection, worried about the younger generation's purity: "Age-old American story: save the young from sex. Yet it's always too late. Too late because they've already been born" (Roth 2001: 60). Roth makes the point that people will always gravitate towards sex, no matter how unlawful it is to the eyes of society. They cannot help it, and it is natural, Roth implies, they do so because they are human.

I.3.12. Freedom from the Illusion of Purity: The Stain of Candor that Opposes Virtue

It seems, as Pozorski says, that the Puritans were worried about the loss of order which helps to "stave off the unexpected"; while, ironically, Kepesh is ambivalent in his account of how he took advantage of the sexual revolution because "he also reveals a kind of nostalgia for order –for a system within freedom, or freedom within a system that would counteract the unexpected effects of history, dying and death" (Pozorski 2011: 111, 113). This comparison between the two opposing mindsets serves to highlight the fact that there is a search for an order which offers real freedom within that order and at the same time protects individuals from "the unexpected". However, Roth shows how it is impossible to escape from that reality of History and Death, it does not depend on the

way which is chosen because both perspectives lack the power to confront these enemies to real freedom. Surprisingly, then, even the sexual revolution is shown as marked by the longing for purity.

The transgressive character mentioned in DA, Thomas Morton, published a book about the Native American society that he discovered and got to know when he lived among them: *The New English Canaan*. Understandably, it was not met with Governor Bradford's approval, according to Kepesh, "because it was also about the Puritans and how they 'make a great show of religion but no humanity.'" Morton is straightforward. Morton doesn't expurgate. You have to wait three hundred years before the voice of Thomas Morton turns up in America again, unexpurgated, as Henry Miller" (Roth 2001: 60-61). This is erased out of History because it is thought to be unsuitable, objectionable. The story of Merry Mount is about the decision not to take the dirt out, to leave things unclean, impure, as they are, making the human stain visible. Interestingly, in Roth's earlier novel, AP, Seymour's daughter is named Merry, sharing the name of the settlement of Merry Mount. Throughout this chapter, the ironical implications of her name have been pointed out several times, and the character is connected with this place as they both contain the human stain. Therefore, it is this character, Merry, who becomes the source of impurity and who shows the human stain most clearly to those around her. It is possible that Roth did not choose this name because of that story, but at any rate it is a meaningful comparison to make as both function as the place or person who chooses freedom and reveals the stain.

The text questions the Puritan judgement when reflecting on "the clash [...] between rule and misrule": "The Puritans were the agents of rule and godly virtue and right reason, and on the other side was misrule. But why is it rule and misrule?" Morton should be recognized as the "founding father of personal freedom" for "in the Puritan

theocracy you were at liberty to do good; in Morton's Merry Mount you were at liberty - that was it" (Roth 2001: 61, ellipsis mine). This is clearly the most valuable thing to Roth, who challenges conventional notions of rule and misrule. Additionally, he suggests that there is only true freedom if one can forget about puritan morality.

Clearly this entails rejecting the Christian morals behind those rules, as Kepesh looks at people "without the ideology of holiness, people who didn't give a damn whether they were elect or not" (Roth 2001: 61). This rebelliousness is shared by many characters throughout Roth's work: Firstly, by Alexander Portnoy, someone who rebels against his Jewish faith (as seen earlier when analyzing Roth's presumed anti-Semitism). Sánchez Canales describes Alex's rebelliousness as his desire to break with that faith which he refers to comically as "that inheritance of terror" that he brings with him out of his "ridiculous past", showing how he wants to be "left alone" and be free (2021: 245). And later, this quality of a refractory character is most notably shared by Sabbath and Drenka in *ST*, and by Coleman and Faunia in *HS*, for example, but this could be studied in virtually all of Roth's characters.

The narrative in *DA* explains that "Merry Mount's been expunged from the official version because it's the story not of a virtuous utopia but of a utopia of candor" (62). However, endorsing that life of freedom has a cost for Kepesh, as his son hates him as a result of him abandoning his marriage and forsaking his family life. In Kepesh's view, marriage is as suffocating as priesthood because of the vow of chastity. He is unwilling to limit the possibilities he has to engage in sexual relationships and that is why he abandons the strictures of marriage. His decision can be compared with Sabbath and Drenka and their defense of their adulterous relationship in *ST*. Interestingly, in describing marriage as a trap in *DA*, the character of George becomes aggressive in his lecturing, and then, the narrator acknowledges the nature of this discourse and justifies

himself: “One either imposes one’s ideas or one is imposed on. Like it or not, that’s the predicament. There are always opposing forces, and so, unless one is inordinately fond of subordination, one is always at war” (112).

This idea of inevitable opposition is shared by Sabbath in *ST*, who is fond of having arguments with everybody around him. Kepesh is aware that he can seem persuasive because of how he puts forward his argument and that is why he creates his discourse to justify his actions. But although he thinks he can win this war of ideas, very much like the war of sex and desire, he might experience a defeat and subordination will take him by surprise, as will be analyzed in Chapter II, when dealing with the theme of transgression.

However, the paradise of freedom and candor crumbles down when after this argument for personal freedom, the narrative shows the cost of an escape from marriage into a life of sexual freedom with strong images. The stain marks Kepesh’s son too, who feels a deep hatred towards his father, because he had to pay for the cost of his freedom. However, Kepesh tries to justify his actions: “I knew it was a difficult escape, and I knew I could take only myself over the wall. If I’d taken him, had that even been possible, it wouldn’t have made any sense because he was eight years old and I couldn’t have lived the way I wanted to. I had to betray him, and for that I am not forgiven and never will be” (Roth 2001: 76). This betrayal has grown into a grief that Roth illustrates as a wound, once again using bodily imagery to express an inner problem: “My deficiencies are at the root of his suffering. Put him anywhere near me and the wound within begins to hemorrhage” (77).

This wound is the stain that grows as a result of the lack of paternal love, literally bleeding. Kepesh’s son weakens in the presence of his father, who has caused him that

pain, and he knows why: “I was absent and entirely too full of meaning. I failed him” (78). But his son comes to him in distress when “something has threatened his idea of himself as a punctiliously upright person” (79). Thereby, the son reveals that within him lies the possibility to be impure like his father. Roth hereby shows how he is interested in the human being in its complexities, for instead of showing a crime of filth disconnected from the person, he reveals how the human stain is within the character and must be understood taking into consideration his circumstances and all the motives and consequences of his actions.

As seen earlier, Roth has shown this intention of showing human beings in all their complexities speaking about his short story “Epstein” in the essay “Writing about the Jews” originally published in 1975 and also included in the Library of Congress collection of Roth’s *Non-Fiction*. Here, he writes about people who experience themselves as “something more” than what others accuse them to be, which is why to him, Literature is “all that is beyond simple moral categorizing” (2017: 51). But the human stain shows the revulsion that this accusation entails. This image of the stain appears when Kepesh’s son has to vomit because of his father’s invitation to spend time in his house:

Yet his vomiting bespoke not just revulsion with me but, even more, revulsion with his revulsion. Why? Because of what he desperately wanted, because even with a father with whom he’s angry and disappointed, the moment together with him is so powerful and the yearning for him is so great. He was still a boy in a helpless predicament (Roth 2001: 80).

In this heartbreaking description, Kepesh's son does the right thing out of fear to disappoint people, he will not leave them so that they will not have reason to call him selfish, to prevent them from thinking he is not admirable. And in Kepesh's interpretation, he believes his son thinks "his life has a significance that mine does not" (Roth 2001: 85). Again, this is shown to be a fallacy, as the human stain is full of significance while obedience to social and religious mores is actually meaningless. In this scene, we find again the joke that the body plays on human beings in a physical way: "all he can do is vomit his heart out" (91). Again, this is in accordance with Roth's representation of "the experience, the confusion and toughness of certain moral problems" when he writes about "people in trouble" as he told Martha McGregor in an interview conducted in 1960 and included in *Conversations with Philip Roth*, edited by George J. Searles (1992: 2).

Vomiting as an image of the human stain not only appears in DA, but it also appears in *Indignation* to show Marcus Messner's disgust with the hypocrisy of the Dean of his college. Fainting renders Marcus weak whilst violently vomiting in the Dean's cup. This stark description of the human stain contrasts with the false pretense of purity that the Dean wants to enforce with the mandatory attendance to chapel. When the Dean subjects Marcus to an unfair interrogation about his private affairs, he gets literally sick with anger, Marcus becomes physically indisposed as well and, in the end, Marcus cannot help but vomit onto the rug, the chair, and one of the photographs that the Dean is so proud of. He did not "have the stomach to battle" and yet he did, in spite of himself (Roth 2008: 111). Finally, vomit also appears in AP when the Swede confronts his daughter's foul stench: "A spasm of gastric secretions and undigested food started up the intestinal piping and, in a bitter, acidic stream, surged sickeningly onto his tongue, and when he cried out, 'Who are you!' it was spewed with his words onto her face" (Roth 1997: 266).

The significance of the morals of Kepesh's son is shown to be ridiculous or ineffective, as even though his family is not destroyed initially, everything is a mess, and so virtue is revealed as being stained. Kepesh tries to have his son accept "the reality" of his need of adultery. He sneers without mercy at his son's need for approval of his own adultery, which he tries to justify and standardize. From this scene, it is clear that the attempts to clean and to purify the stain are ineffectual, as they consist of just more dirt: "My son can fuck only a girl with the right moral credentials. Please, I tell him, it's a perversity, no better or worse than any other. Recognize it for what it is and don't feel so special" (Roth 2001: 88). His son sees things differently and so it is clear that hypocrisy exists on both sides:

Seducing defenseless students, pursuing one's sexual interests at the expense of everyone else -that's so very necessary, is it? No, necessity is staying in a difficult marriage and raising a little child and meeting the responsibilities of an adult. [...] The pain you caused her, and for what? The burden you put on her -the burden you put on *me*, on a child, to be everything in the world to his mother, and for what? So you could be 'free'? (Roth 2001: 90, ellipsis mine)

In this argument it is implied that if freedom from responsibilities means that Kepesh can put the burden on others, forsaking them in order to serve his own goals, this freedom seems to exist at the cost of someone else's oppression. And so the image of the vomit functions as the human stain in order to show moral disgust in a physical way in order to disrupt false myths, as a counterpastoral force.

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In conclusion, a close reading of Roth's novels shows that the images of earthly paradise are described with references to the biblical account in Genesis, and the device of the human stain is used in order to shatter the beliefs of certain characters in what Roth considers a foolish and dangerous illusion, the fantasy of purity. While the stain invades the pastoral in different ways in each novel, in all of them there is a common thread: Even in paradise it is impossible to be immune to the stain.

The characters consistently find themselves trapped between two worlds: the idyllic and pure world and the new one. Unable to escape, Merry is trapped in the invisible hands of her stutter, but even more so in her illusion of purity, which ironically turns out to be really polluted. Roth's characters undergo important changes as they become prey to the stain, possessed by it, even. As in Roth's early story "Eli, the Fanatic" (1959), they seem to become mad as they embrace the stain and nobody can take away the darkness that is within them.

Understanding the mirage of purity is also connected to the subject of creating a new fictional self as the old one is shattered, which runs through all of these four novels. As Aristi Trendel argues, in one single image that represents many of the novel's themes, Roth manages to present an event that is deeply disquieting for the reader. In this section I have argued that these images (for example, Kepesh licking Consuela's blood in *DA*) are the device that Roth uses to bring about a change in his characters, or to reveal the fantasy of paradise.

Finally, this is connected to the American Dream, which relies on the fantasy notion of bodily purity, as Monika Hogan argues, and from the perspective of the human stain, it is shown as a constant theme in Roth's fiction. Ada Savin has written about the "metaphoric hybridity of the stain" and by following the thread of the traces of the stain

through the novels, I have tried to understand its meaning. The fantasy of purity that is found in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is not over, it still lives on in contemporary American culture, as Roth shows that it can still be found in our days, and in his fiction we find the idea of the pastoral as a virus and the human stain as an antidote to it.

CHAPTER II. THE STAIN OF TRANSGRESSION

What is it about Roth's work that makes it so fearless? Even nowadays it still has a powerful effect on the reader, especially if one reads a novel such as *ST*, as Elisa Albert argued on her keynote speech for the *Roth Remembered* Conference in Spring of 2019. She was speaking about why this novel in particular goes against any idea of moralism in art: "The fearlessness, though! That I recalled in my bowels. The base, unacceptable, hideous, fucked up, utterly unafraid, beautiful openness of that book. Unapologetic to its core" (Albert 2020: 8). Where does this fearlessness stem from? Roth's use of the human stain recovers the biblical image of transgression. And in his fiction, surprisingly, through this powerful sign, the profane invades the sacred as the human stain turns the concept of impurity on its head.

In order to examine the power of the stain as a sign of transgression, this Chapter follows the stain as a device that shows what Roth calls the "refractory" quality of his characters. Hereby he means that he shows the human stain by representing a rebellious, incombustible behavior that is difficult to control. This adjective comes from the Latin verb *refractare* which means "to oppose" and it refers to a person's behavior, or to an illness or a virus, which is difficult to treat or to cure (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Such a condition coincides with the vision I have presented of the human stain as a blemish that indicates an inner problem, as seen in Chapter I, section 1. Roth's characters constantly struggle to deal with this condition that they find in themselves or in others. Consequently, their stubbornness is revealed in their desire to transgress and to resist authority, by means of wayward, unruly and turbulent actions. The epitome of such a character is Mickey Sabbath in *ST*, who finds delight in the stain, especially in its sexual manifestation, as he delights in crossing moral boundaries that other characters do not

dare to trespass. Of course, this subject can also be found in HS and before that, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, remarkably. This theme was also present in the work of Hawthorne, as this thesis has outlined in Chapter I, when looking at the role of sin and transgressive desire in *The Scarlet Letter*.

However, it is important to note that Roth sees the refractory quality not as an illness that has to be cured, a sin from which people have to be saved, but as a “human position”, a choice, a way to live. That is how he summarizes the meaning of the refractory, transgressive nature that can be found in the character of Sabbath: He is “the instinctual turbulence of the man beneath the man: the unmanageable man, the unexonerated man -better, the refractory man: refractory meaning ‘resistant to treatment or cure,’ refractory meaning ‘capable of enduring high temperatures.’ Refractory not as a pathology but as a human position. The refractory man being the one who will not join” (Roth 2017: 398).

Particularly, the stain manifests itself in sexuality in an ambiguous way, sometimes positively while other times negatively, because the text is playing with the meaning of purity and impurity, as I started to analyze in section 3 of Chapter I. Transgressive passion defies the rules and expectations people impose on their lives, and Roth's characters struggle as they lose control and are shown their weaknesses precisely when they seek to satisfy their desire. The impossibility of completely understanding who they are, what they want and what they should do is narrated with irony and paradox in order to show how human judgment is always wrong, while there is only one thing that is clear, which is the presence of the human stain.

This stain is not only present in male characters but also in female characters, so I think it is relevant to examine the claim made by some critics and readers about Roth's

misogyny and his portrayal of women. I argue that an interpretation of Roth's work which focuses on the meaning of the human stain may help to analyze the role of women in these novels in a new way, offering insight into this controversial topic. And not only look at women, but also at men. The representation of sexuality in general is an important aspect of Roth's work and it has been analyzed on numerous occasions by scholars such as Biale (1997), Brauner (2007), Greenberg (1997), Hayes (2014), Ivanova (2012); Posnock (2006), Pozorski (2012) and Shostak (1999, 2004), whose contributions will be taken into account as this thesis undertakes a reading of the use of the stain in this subject. Greenberg, particularly, focuses on the issue of transgression.

The theme of transgression as inherent to human nature has been present throughout Roth's fiction, which seeks to prompt the reader into reconsidering the value of transgression, with the claim that "scum" is human and not to be hidden, as can be read in *The Anatomy Lesson*: "It's an unforgiving world we live in, Ricky. Those who transgress are truly hated as scum. Well, that's fine with me. But don't tell me scum has no right to exist along with everybody who's nice. Nobody should tell me that *ever*. Because scum is human too" (Roth 1983: 194). Roth is aware of accusations that his work is offensive from the beginning of his career. He mentions that even when he published "Epstein" in 1958 in *The Paris Review*, people found it offensive "in its intimate sexual revelations" (Roth 2017: 66; see also Parker Royal 2007).

In his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, titled "Roth Literary Influence, and Postmodernism", Derek Parker Royal argues that the subject of transgression in Roth's work, for example in *The Professor of Desire*, is steeped in references to important literary touchstones (Parker Royal 2007: 22). Roth's choice of topic and language, therefore, is not controlled by the mores of the audience but it is chosen for literary reasons, and draws from the literary tradition of James Joyce, Henry

Miller and D.H. Lawrence, as Roth argues (2017: 66). He mentioned this in an interview titled “On Portnoy’s Complaint”, where Roth explains that obscenity is not only a valid language in literature, but also the subject, the issue that *Portnoy Complaint* is about (66-67). Roth always makes a conscious choice of the kind of language he chooses, as he understands the conception of a novel “is really nothing beside the delivery” and the delivery of certain stories requires a “correct presentation” which could mean “dirty words and dirty scenes” (Roth 2017: 65-67).

In his essay titled “In Response to Those Who Have Asked Me: How Did You Come to Write That Book, Anyway?”, Roth explains how he had to find a voice who could speak in behalf of both the “Jewboy” and “the nice Jewish boy”, who are complete opposites. The “Jewboy” is the one who has a forbidden appetite to have sex with *shiksas* (a *shiksa* is Yiddish term for a Gentile -that is a non-Jewish- woman), and “the nice Jewish boy” is the one who has to repress his desire to pursue social respectability and acceptance. Only then could he express the dilemma of the character he wanted to write about rather than just have a text that was “symptomatic” (Roth 2017: 72). This resource of using a double voice or two natures in the same person, a kind of Jewish Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, helps to present the problem just like the human stain does. Roth called that fight the argument between “the Cain and Abel” of his background, making the mythological “locally recognizable” (74-76).

In “Imagining Jews”, Roth addresses the accusations directed at himself and at his novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* (Roth 2017: 78-103). Its publication in 1969 made him famous for “moral remission and its confusions” and on TV Jacqueline Susann said she would like to meet Roth but did not want to shake his hand (79). People confused his novel for a confession, and it was about sexual desire and masturbation, which was especially unseemly, alluring and offensive because the man confessing was a Jew, and

Roth explains that “going wild in public is the last thing in the world that a good Jew is expected to do. [...] He is not expected to make a spectacle of himself, either by shooting off his mouth or by shooting off his semen, and certainly not by shooting off his mouth about shooting off his semen” (84, ellipsis mine). Roth went on to do everything that was not allowed and he hits the nail on the head by pointing out that a good Jew is not supposed to behave badly and that the biggest taboo is the physical evidence of a liberated sexual desire.

Consequently, it is through the use of the device of the human stain in these novels that it is possible to explore the reality of transgression in depth, in three areas: Firstly, in the depiction of sexuality; secondly, in the eyes of the other, when facing society’s judgement; and thirdly, in terms of the historical and political reality of the US as represented in the novels.

II.1. THE STAIN IN SEXUALITY

If in Chapter I the stain is presented as the mark on the body of the characters and on the whole of the text, marking Roth’s style, in this section it will be examined preeminently as a mark that appears pertaining to sexuality. Philip Roth is well known, or rather, infamous, for his representation of sexual desire. It is an ongoing subject, not only in his fiction, but also in his life. Recent biographies have dealt with his contentious divorces and he has been called a misogynist on many occasions, especially after his ex-wife Claire Bloom published her memoir *Leaving a Doll’s House* (1996).

Debra Shostak wrote about Roth's representation of sexuality in her 1999 essay on the meanings of the gendered body and subjectivity, addressing the issue of how Roth's narrative challenges deeply held oppositions about sexuality and that "by representing the very fleshliness of gendering, Roth makes a valuable contribution to thinking about the notions of subjectivity" (Shostak 1999: 317). While Shostak analyzes these notions as represented in Roth's 1972 novella *The Breast*, her conclusions can be used to interpret the use of the stain in images of sexuality.

In addition, David Brauner has studied how Roth portrays his characters' internal struggles between imprisoning inhibitions and liberating impulses (Brauner 2000: 75). I agree with his interpretation, and I think that the stain is the perfect image to show this struggle, as will be shown in this Chapter. In Brauner's analysis, he points out that in *Portnoy's Complaint* there is an identification of the character's relishing in the food that is forbidden for Jews and persistent sexual appetite (77). Portnoy links his disobedience to the Judaic dietary laws that rule which animals must not be eaten with his breaking of taboos regarding sex. Ironically, the kosher laws which, as Alex has learnt, are meant to prevent Jews from "contaminating" their "humanity" (ironically the stain will show humans as already contaminated) have led him to rebel against all restrictions, and so Alex "sucks one night on a lobster's claw and within the hour his cock is out and aimed at a *shikse* on a Public Service bus" (Roth 1969: 79-82). Indeed, this connection goes back to the Law of the Old Testament, and to go further back than the laws that ruled the food that God's people were allowed to eat, in the story of the Garden of Eden we also find an identification of the forbidden fruit with sinful desire and disobedience.

The stain that signifies lawless or transgressive sex goes back to the imagery of the nakedness of Adam and Eve in Genesis and to the bodily fluids that are the proof of forbidden relations, mostly in the form of adultery. The spraying of semen has also been

interpreted as a sin as it appears in the biblical story of Onan (which is where the term “onanism” comes from), as analyzed by Sánchez Canales in his study on these type of images in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (2021). This issue is shown as early as in “Epstein”, and it called for cries of outrage from the community of Jews who did not welcome scandalous stories about adulterous Jews. Roth responded to this criticism and continued writing about transgressive and scandalous realities during the following decades, always defying his critics and defending his work. Roth’s subjects, his characters, as mentioned here in the section titled “The Graphic Stain”, are almost always particularly aware of and plagued by their sexual condition, and this points at Roth’s subject.

II.1.1. The Language of Obscenity and Salvation from Obsessive Desire

With regard to this particular condition, the question is how it is treated in Roth’s fiction. In *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), he explored the comic side of a character who has endless desires and sees that all the unconscious can do is to want, and want, more and more. This desire is expressed in an obscene way in the main character’s monologue because, as Roth explained, “this is a man speaking out of an overwhelming obsession: he is obscene because he wants to be saved” (Roth 2017: 68). This theme of endless desire appears in ST (1995) too, but the question is whether there is a desire to be saved too in Sabbath. What we see in him and in Portnoy, desire taken to its extreme, could be connected to Ihab Hassan’s description of the modern hero in *Radical Innocence*, drawing from Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “when guilt is swollen to an intolerable degree, aggression breaks loose” (Hassan 1961: 17). Freud’s ideas about Life and Death

suggest, according to Hassan, one of the main characteristics of the modern hero, that it is a man in conflict with himself, “the self is not only opposed to the world but also divided in its own house” (18). Roth’s representation of that internal opposition changed over the years and that is why the human stain acquires different meanings in each book.

With *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth’s outlook underwent a switch from Henry James’ strict sense of moral duty as explored in *Letting Go* (1962) and *When She Was Good* (1967), to Kafka’s guilt as a comic idea. As Parker Royal reads these literary references through the postmodern lens of intertextuality and metafiction rather than through the lens of traditional literary influence, it is helpful to the reader to encounter the texts of James and Kafka in order to appreciate the role of moral duty and guilt in Roth’s work (2007: 23). As Parker Royal points out, this influence does not highlight the privilege of a model of literary inheritance, but instead of that, plays with humor around the texts it references: “Here the textual self does not so much build upon previous influences as it does imitate, or even parody, them through performance” (2007: 26). In *ST*, there is a further switch, from guilt as a comic idea to an added tragedy and deeper irony to the irreverence and shamelessness of Sabbath’s impurity.

Just as Roth’s artistic process mirrored Portnoy’s issues, the process of writing *ST* offers insight into Sabbath’s plight. This novel was written with what Roth says was “the freest experience” of his life (Roth Pierpont 2013: 196). Just as Roth portrayed the investigation of Alexander Portnoy’s passion, “and of the combat that it precipitates with his conscience”, Roth undertakes an exploration of Sabbath’s polarities and refractory character (Roth 2017: 68). Both Portnoy and Sabbath experience struggles that have to do with who they are as men, the satisfaction of their desire and the consequences this has on their lives. While both refuse to be bound by taboos, as Roth puts it, Portnoy suffers as he finds no satisfaction in his search for freedom, while Sabbath enjoys living “beyond

the limits of discretion” (398). Roth explains that “Portnoy’s pains arise out of his refusal to be bound any longer by taboos which, rightly or wrongly, *he* experiences as unmanning. The joke on Portnoy is that for him breaking the taboo turns out to be as unmanning in the end as honoring it” (68).

II.1.2. Letting the Repellent Stain In

Philip Roth has demonstrated throughout his work that he does not want difference to be swallowed up or censored. He believes in the power of those who differ and rebel against the norm, so he is unafraid of being conscious of the disagreeable parts of reality. I believe it is this desire to be frank about it that compels him to write about it by means of the human stain. When facing criticism, he has made it clear that his purpose is not to make a balanced portrait, but rather to reveal everything about his characters, including their most scandalous qualities. “Imagining the Jews” and “Jewish Stereotypes” are two paradigmatic studies where Roth has addressed this issue in detail (Roth 2017; 1975).

As Roth’s friend Norman Manea states about what sets Roth apart from other writers: “his obstinate rejection of banality, of the commonplace, of awareness dulled by the quotidian, where complacency, tribal loyalty, pious or prudent complicity, and collective blindness give birth to monsters. ‘I had to squeeze the nice Jewish boy out of me drop by drop’, he once wrote” (Manea 2018). Roth does not shy away from writing scandalous fiction because he has no fear of moral judgement, in fact, he is intent on defying it. Interestingly, the presence of the dirty aspect goes back to the first stories, published in 1959. When an angry reader wrote to Roth to ask him about the issue of

adultery in “Epstein”, about the need for the moral filth in the story, Roth replied in this way, as he tells in his essay “Writing About Jews”:

“Why so much shmutz?” Is he asking, why is there dirt in the world? Why is there disappointment? Why is there hardship, ugliness, evil, death? It would be nice to think these were the questions the gentleman had in mind, when he asks “Why so much shmutz?” But all he is really asking is, “Why so much shmutz in that story?” This, apparently, is what the story adds up to for him. An old man discovers the fires of lust are still burning in him? Shmutz! Disgusting! (Roth 2017: 53).

While the outraged reader blinded by moral rules focuses only on what he perceives as sinful, Roth offers a different perspective of the reality of the human stain. As Roth suggests in his reply, on the one hand, what is striking about the story is not just the act of adultery, but the exploration of the path that leads the main character to this situation. Epstein’s reaction of horror when he discovers the blemish is more meaningful because it is linked to his family’s reaction, to how they judge him, to their lack of understanding of his life in general. Especially his nephew fails to see his own stain. This is the focus of the story, not the act of adultery, but how Epstein came to feel so trapped, and how he feels the need to escape. The description of how he and his family deal with it allows the reader to think about moral judgement.

Commenting on this story, Roth says that the fact that his character’s reaction seems improbable, pathetic and comic does not mean it is insane or inhuman. On the other hand, the depiction of an old man’s lust, which may seem disgusting to some readers, is actually something that the narrative delights in, describing it playfully and showing the

appeal of the transgression. “Epstein” therefore exhibits a mix of comedy and moving sympathy for the main character, whilst the element that imbues the story with life is the brutal blow of reality: at the heart of the story is the ruthless turn of events brought about by cardiac arrest.

In a way, Roth sees the human stain as what we inherit from our progenitors, which is how the Bible explains “original sin”, as all humans have inherited it from our first parents, Adam and Eve. In *Patrimony* (1991), Roth wrote about his father’s illness and there is a scene in which he has to clean his father’s excrements in the bathroom. This can serve to illustrate the physicality of our bodies, as we are unable to control them because of old age and illness. But this is what he realizes will remain of us. It is the human stain that is passed on to the next generation. In *Portnoy’s Complaint* there is also an image of excrement but the narrative includes the question of an added meaning to that physical reality, as David Brauner points out, and this is part of the comic reading of Freud and psychoanalysis, because excrement means something, as it has a morally unclean connotation and Alex feels ashamed of it (Brauner 2000: 80).

This interest in portraying the moral struggle of characters by the means of descriptions of the human stain can be found in Roth’s later fiction too, such as in *Indignation*: That is why a keyword in this book is *disgusting*, which is what the stain is to Marcus, who wants everything to be clean, right, and nice. But this purity is something hard to find at his job in his father’s kosher butcher shop, where he has to eviscerate chickens. The stain, then, is our common heritage and it is shown through images of fluids of the body, which, although they are disgusting to behold, ironically become more obvious when the characters are looking for purity.

The Talmud and the Jewish laws and tradition have been considered an important element in the study of transgression in Roth, as can be seen in the work of Debra Shostak (2004) or Alan Cooper, who for example sees “Epstein” as an ironic account of a man whose affair is especially scandalous because of his Jewish heritage, and he sees this as the reason why the consequences of his actions escape his control (Cooper 1996: 27). However, it ought to be taken into account that Roth’s rebellion is actually against a much broader morality than the Jewish law.

As can be noted in the letter quoted above, the reason why many Jews were outraged, was, as Roth put it, because he revealed their “secret”: “that the perils of human nature afflict the members of our minority” (qtd. in Pierpont 2013: 10). From here, we can understand clearly that the human stain is also on people who are Jewish, and this also implies that the moral complexities that his characters face do not belong exclusively to the Jews, as it affects everyone. It is important to note that anyhow, moral crisis must not be silenced in literature. Therefore, in these novels the human stain will be used to speak out on the reality of human nature as Roth sees it.

II.1.3. The Cleaning of Physical Impurities: the Mikvah

In Roth, there is not grief, but rather a scandalous sense of delight in impurity in the narrative, particularly when it comes to sexuality. The human stain plays a key role in the representation of impurity in sexuality, but firstly, there are also images of the human stain of bodily fluids in an element signifying purity: water. So, swimming and water signify purity, and as Ira Nadel points out, in the Jewish laws, in the Talmud, it

means “the cleansing of the body and the spirit” (Nadel 2018: 38). That is why the same can be said from a Christian point of view, as Jesus used water as a symbol for rebirth, which is why in turn it points to baptism from a Christian perspective. In Matthew’s Gospel, the account of how John the Baptist baptizes Jesus can be found in Chapter III verses 13-17, following the Jewish rite of purification: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water”. The verb “to baptize” in the original Greek has various meanings, that interestingly range from “to clean” or “to wash” to its opposite, “to stain”. Likewise, in Roth’s text, the stain is not only the opposite of purity, but it can also become the means to clean, surprisingly.

If in “Epstein” the stain had to be cleaned, and could not be washed with just water, in ST, water and bodily fluids such as semen connote purity. It is a possible answer to the impurity of the human stain, becoming the other side of the coin or rather, the same thing, as it is in water just as in the stain that human beings find they are in their element. Like babies floating in the amniotic fluid, when Roth’s characters find that protective cushion, it allows them to float freely. Swimming and being in the water are linked to sexuality in ST, when Sabbath meets Drenka by the river, as it appeared in the first part of “Goodbye, Columbus” too, when Neil and Brenda start their relationship in the pool; and in AP, the intoxication of Merry with her father happens at the beach, by the sea. In HS, Coleman Silk finds freedom and purity in his relationship with Faunia, in a rural area: The human stain allows for a play with language of the sacred and the profane. For that reason, Faunia can be described as “anointed” by Coleman’s semen (Roth 2000: 226). In DA, it is blood and not water which acquires importance in the sexual relationship

between Consuela and Kepesh. In this way, the human stain in its images of bodily fluids and water presents a positive image of sexual relationships.

Another example of how sexual desire is represented in other works by Roth, such as in *Indignation*, is when Marcus meets Olivia. He starts what is considered a dirty and immoral relationship by the Dean, but to Marcus, being with Olivia is deeply liberating and enriching: Not only is she the one who initiates their sexual relationship, thereby changing his behavior, thoughts and prospects, but Olivia also represents a reversal of values: She is the one to point out to Marcus that the dirty work at his father's shop actually makes him "clean", giving him integrity. Marcus challenges this view by telling her how he had to clean out the garbage cans in the street and how ashamed he was. But Olivia is interested in the "rancid" details of impurity of his life.

This rendering of physicality has been much discussed in Roth studies, but often have been taken for a mere desire to shock with unlikely depictions of human experiences. Hermione Lee, for instance, describes Roth's novels as being "full of tasting, licking and chewing, vomiting, regurgitating, weeping and excreting, and, conversely, of forbidden foods, constipated fathers, teachers with migraines, and women who prefer not to suck cocks or drink sperm. Roth is, preeminently, the novelist of orifices and blockages, of frustrated gratification." (Lee 1982: 14 qtd. in Cooper 1996: 20). This is part of the experience and the representation of the "thrilling profane", a phrase used by Roth in his 80th anniversary speech (Roth 2014: 57). Characters such as Sabbath seem repellent to many people, because of his joy in defilement, but this is also Roth's intention.

Not only does Sabbath appear immersed in the experience of lust and desire, also Drenka in that same novel, Rita Cohen in AP, Coleman and Faunia in HS, and Kepesh and Consuela in DA. As Roth Pierpont argues about Sabbath, Roth wants to "push us

through these repellent qualities to a wider embrace of the human animal” (2013:198). When asked about the “repellent” quality of ST, Philip Roth replies “I wanted to let the repellent in. [...] Because we try so hard not to see it. [...] We just throw an ugly name on it and look away.” (Roth qtd. in Pierpont 198, ellipsis mine). This is why authors such as Henry Miller are an important influence on Roth in the aspect of the repellent and the “impertinent minutiae of male desire” (198). As Parker Royal argues in his study on the literary references in Roth’s work, which was mentioned earlier in this chapter, names such as Miller’s are not only present in the novels because Roth’s character David Kepesh is a professor of Literature, but “most of these names are the same ones that come up in almost any discussion of those that Roth admires” as the author and his character share the same influences (Parker Royal 2007: 22). Including the body, the sexual, and the repellent aspects of human nature is a decision that Roth took consciously, which means that reading these novels through the lens of the human stain will be useful in order to better understand their overall meaning. The question is how this representation of the repellent can be reconciled with the sensual aspects of the narrative. The novel that shows this contrast or synthesis most strikingly is ST, and it will provide the key images to guide us in the process of interpreting the stain.

The human stain allows Roth to play with the philosophical aesthetic-ethical category, to challenge the notion of the common moral values in order to discover in fiction what lies beyond simple categories (See Valerie Roberge’s essay on these philosophical questions in Roth’s character Zuckerman: Roberge, 2017). As Roth Pierpont notes, only with ST did Roth take up the challenge to let the repellent in fully and in a coherent way: “bringing a rigorous intellect and aching honesty to the subject of the human body -compulsive, smelly, beautiful, ugly, riddled with cancer and love, corruptible only in death” (2013:199). Debra Shostak comments on this in her 1999 essay

on the role of the abject and otherness among other things in *The Breast*, and she also addresses this in her book *Countertexts* (Shostak 1999; 2004). Roth identifies the opposite tendency, the will to get rid of the repellent in order to achieve purity, with the discourse of those who wanted to get rid of the Jews, the rich, or whoever people hate.

That idea is held by those who think that “if we can just slay the repellent, we will be pure” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 199). Such reasoning refers to the mirage of purity analyzed earlier. The reason why ST in particular reveals the most insatiable and voracious character is because Roth gives a new twist to the theme of the problematic nature of moral authority and social rules that he had treated much earlier in novels such as *When She Was Good* (1967). In most of his work, he explores the danger that arises from the demand of moral authority as characters impose rules on their lives and at the same time feel skeptical about their ability or will to keep them.

If it is Kepesh who crossed the limits of his personal convictions, thereby going into a “moral and psychological unknown”, Sabbath is the character who goes even further than all his predecessors. That is why ST unleashes the repellent unlike any other of Roth’s novels, it had to be a “wicked book”. In a way, Roth had to look for an adequate glass to serve his drink in. It was a strong drink that required a fitting container, so the transgressive reality of the human stain could not be represented in an agreeable form or in aseptic terms.

I will outline the following realities that the images of the human stain convey: Firstly, it shows how lust is inappropriateness in essence. Sexuality appears as a moral transgression first and foremost. However, because of the pleasure and comfort derived from it, characters find joy and hope in life because of it. Secondly, the stain shows how sexuality is used to keep virtue and moral duties at bay. Thirdly, it is used to keep death

itself at bay, and this aspect will further be considered in depth in the third chapter of this dissertation.

II.1.4. The Fall and The Thrilling Profane

The first aspect that the stain reveals is a moral transgression, as we have considered in Chapter I with Epstein's infidelity. Roth explores this theme in a new light much later, in AP with the story of the Swede, taking up a character who is innocent but who finds himself doing something he should not have done. To the Swede, there is only one way of explaining his responsibility in the radical and brutal change that took place in his daughter, and that is that the cause must lie in himself: "the cause for the disaster has for him to be a transgression", either a real or an imagined one, and so he sets out to find this transgression (Roth 1997: 91). The theme of the Fall is connected to the concept of "hubris" used by the Greeks, and it has been analyzed in Roth's work, specifically in HS, by Bakewell (2004), Rankine (2005) and Sánchez-Canales (2009). In contrast, Lander (2019) and Goldberg (2020) study transgression in AP focusing on the representation of women as demonic figures and the connections with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. On the one hand, excessive pride and vanity are the human flaws that lead to the fall and cause the self-deceit characteristic of the tragedy which Roth slowly unveils in his stories. On the other hand, the representation of the stain in the body is crucial in order to debunk the myth of the pastoral.

The Swede's transgression as Zuckerman imagines, lies in the kiss. In Lander's interpretation, the figure of Rita Cohen emerges as the devil who tempts the Swede just

as Merry tempted him (Lander 2019: 51). In the scene where Rita challenges the Swede, she exposes herself to him, tempting him to have sex with her. Here Roth includes an explicit image of her labia at the same time that she mimics Merry's speech impeded voice. Lander points at how Rita metaphorically take the role of Merry, tempting the Swede to enact incest, just as Satan entered the serpent into the mouth, Rita parodies Merry's stutter (51). In this way, the Swede returns to the memory of the kiss, when he himself mimicked his daughter's stutter and when he felt that transgressive incestuous desire. Rita is described as "imp of upheaval" (Roth 1997: 146), which Lander notes is how Satan is described in Milton's work, as an "imp of fraud" (51).

In my view, the role of Rita as someone devilish who deceives and confounds the Swede is rendered more powerful by the use of the human stain. Firstly, it is found in the vivid description of Rita's "membranous tissue veined and mottled and waxy with the moist tulip sheen of flayed flesh" (Roth 1997: 145). Secondly, as Lander notes, "Rita's body is presented as a site of uncultivated chaos" (52). The stain of chaos is rendered in a way that appeals to the senses of the Swede: "Step right up and take a whiff" Rita tells him: "The swamp. It sucks you in. Smell it, Swede" (Roth 1997: 146). By comparing Rita's vagina with the "swamp" with its dangerous ability to suck people in, the text suggests that it smells in a way that is uncontrollable. Lander compares this with Leo Marx's "counterforce", the two opposed narratives that shaped the Elizabethan perceptions of America (qtd. in Lander 52). He notes that the excess of Rita's sexuality represents America as a "savage site" while the Swede had a pastoral dream of America as an "unspoiled garden", which was represented by his image of the pure, innocent body of his daughter when she was a child. The contradictory feelings caused by this clash between desire and disgust cause the Swede to become destabilized and his fantasy is completely disrupted by the effect of Rita's actions and words (Lander 53). While I agree

with Lander that Merry is in fact, Roth's Miltonic serpent, I see that there is a need to address the presence of the stain of transgression. While there is indeed a cataclysm that is caused by Merry's bomb and Dawn also transgresses with her adultery, what is missing from these interpretations is an analysis of the power of the human stain to transgress.

In AP, the word "transgression" is repeated for emphasis throughout the text, in reference to the biblical Fall, the story of original sin in Genesis. In the novel, it is suggested that the Swede's particular moral and fatal transgression has to do with love and sexuality. Sánchez-Canales has written about this transgression in his essay titled "There Is a Bomb Blast in the Most Elegant Greek Revival House: Classical Motifs in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*." Previously, in chapter I, I made reference to the image of purity as analyzed by Sánchez Canales in this novel's representation of the Pastoral. His essay is included in a book entirely about this novel, edited by Velichka Ivanova (2011). In his reading of the Swede's fall as his fate because of the predetermined events that overcome him, Sánchez Canales points at how the Moira, the gods of fate, are the ones who cause the doom of the main character (Sánchez Canales 2011: 207-208).

However, this implication that the Swede was not responsible after all of his transgression leaves the question of why there is such a tortured search for his own part in the transgression, and the fact that he believes he has taken part in it. The text points at the Swede's blame: just as Merry asked herself if nobody had a conscience, her father delves deeper and deeper into his own conscience, in search of his mistake, his faults. When Rita confronts him in the scene at the hotel, the Swede escapes "from something that he could no longer name" (Roth 1997: 147).

I believe that this mysterious thing that tortures him is his own human stain. Sánchez Canales acknowledges that there is one crime that the Swede is indeed guilty of:

passing for what he is not, which is the hamartia that causes his fall (208). Sánchez Canales interprets the stain as the Swede's past, and renouncing to it is what constitutes "passing". I agree that the stain is at the heart of his transgression; but I believe it has a wider meaning, including more than just the Swede's past. On the one hand, it is true that the stain can be his Jewishness, which he tries to efface, as Sánchez Canales points out, but I think it also encompasses the moment when the Swede kisses his daughter, and in my view this action comes from a rebellious, transgressive, dark and evil nature that is deep inside him. Each time the Swede looks back to the kiss, he revisits the reality of his hidden stain: "And in the everyday world, nothing to be done but respectably carry on the huge pretense of living as himself, with all the shame of masquerading as the ideal man" (Roth 1997: 174). It is true that it is the narrator who inquires after this transgression using the Swede as a character, building the fiction of his life, and so he imagines the scene of the kiss, so the reader who is aware of this knows it is a product of his fantasy, but at the same time it is very real to the Swede.

In order to do this, the narrator transports the reader magically into a vision of the Swede as "another assailable man" spending a beautiful summer day at the seaside with his eleven-year-old daughter who adores him. The beauty of this scene will be destroyed by the human stain that creeps into the scene sneakily. In the midst of an atmosphere of light and innocent pleasure, a young Merry asks her father to kiss her the way he kisses her mother: "half innocently, half audaciously, precociously playing the grown-up girl" (Roth 1997: 89). The transgressive kiss has been interpreted by R.L. Goldberg as essential in this novel because with the echoes of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it "imagines father-daughter incest as the locus of destruction, rupture and devastation" (Goldberg 2020: 35). This is the image where Goldberg sees how Roth "uncovers, beneath the suburban surface of the Levov's life, the rot at the center of the all-too-sanguine American ethos" (35). The

rot is the human stain which remains hidden under the surface and it consists of a transgressive desire. The image of their kiss will plague the Swede, who remembers it with “unflagging remorse, even for that kiss when she was eleven and he was thirty-six and the two of them, in their wet bathing suit, were driving home together from the Deal beach” (Roth 1997: 174). The wetness of their bathing suit and the fact that they are driving together back from the beach are details that suggest the moment of transgressive passion appropriately.

It is important to consider the ironic implications that the name “Merry” bears here. This aptronym (which is actually, a malaptronym) points at the girl’s deceiving nature. Her initial cheerfulness and her innocent joy eventually turn into the darkness of her suffering. Her uneasiness and rage at injustice, her stuttering and finally, her crimes, transform her into the opposite of a happy creature. She is a miserable girl. To her request for that incestuous kiss, her father responds by making fun of her stuttering, which is the most painful thing he could do to her, thereby losing the control he always had. And then, “just when he had come to understand that the summer romance required some readjusting all around, he lost his vaunted sense of proportion [...]” and he kissed her passionately (91, ellipsis mine). This action, done without thinking, was utterly transgressive because never “had he given way to anything so alien to the emotional rules by which he was governed [...]” (Roth 1997: 91, ellipsis mine). The Swede remembers this moment as his lapse in responsibility, “the origins of their suffering” (92). His efforts to fix this moment, his distance from her, meant to reassure her that he would not do anything like that again, altered their special relationship and only made her feel worse. He wanted to help her heal the stuttering but with one misstep he may have crushed her. Throughout the second part of the novel, the questions return: Is that ambiguous kiss and

the Swede's mockery of Merry the original "wound"? Are there any more wounds that make Merry get to the point of planting that bomb?

Bearing this burden of guilt, the Swede becomes more and more vulnerable, his transgression being his weakness. On this subject, Roth points out that both Mickey Sabbath in *ST*, and the Swede in *AP* are marked by vulnerability (Roth Pierpont 2013: 213). And some characters, like the Swede's brother or Rita, are his enemies, making him sink further into chaos. Rita, a devilish figure, subjects the Swede to a total humiliation, laughing at his powerlessness, mocking him and trying to lure him into temptation: "A child in terror of being disgraced. Isn't there anything else in there except your famous purity?" (Roth 1997: 143). In order to show him reality, she uses not only verbal violence, but also her sexuality, trying to get him to lose control and yield to her. In this scene, she compels him to hear her words, then look, smell and taste her. Even though she tries to appeal to his "human nature", he resists and does not give in to his impulses. Her depravity is the reality he cannot and will not face, and she takes it to the extreme, imitating Merry. At that point, he flees from her "not from the childlike cruelty and meanness, not even from the vicious provocation, but from something that he could no longer name" (Roth 1997: 147). The scene with Rita refers back to the shameful memory of the kiss that the Swede thought marked the origin of Merry's problematic relationship with him, making him think of his own assailability, the moment when he lost control, and his fall.

The fall appears in scenes like the one with Merry's kiss or with Rita's tempting, but it also appears in the shape of dialogue, by presenting opposing views in a debate for or against morality. The conversation between the characters in the last chapters of *AP* deals, among other things, with moral autonomy as they discuss the fact that a pornographic film, "Deep Throat", had gained a lot of mainstream viewers. The Swede's

father is scandalized by this interest in what he considers to be filth, “degrading things” and he believes it is better to “lock the kids up” so they do not see the film (Roth 1997: 358). He laments the country’s morality, as he considers the movie an “affront to decency and to decent people” (358). The Swede’s family tried to keep that standard of morality and decency, but they choose to ignore the fact that their daughter has become a killer.

The narrative, though, shows how the Swede is aware of this reality and it torments him. Marcia, who wants to be transgressive, points out that the biblical story of the Fall teaches that “without transgression there is no knowledge”, while Levov says that what they taught him is that you obey God or you pay for it, suffer from it (Roth 1997: 360). Marcia makes fun of his belief by asking whether that means that if you obey God, there will not be “terrible things”, no more suffering. But Levov knows that even though they tried to live as best as they could, disgrace befell their family, so his theory about suffering does not stand. This crucial direct reference to the biblical narrative of transgression has been noticed by the scholars who have analyzed this novel. For instance, Sánchez Canales highlights how Marcia focuses on the fact that the Fall brings about knowledge, but she “forgets” to mention that it also has a break as a consequence (2011: 211). This is very important because that break is the reason for the Swede’s suffering.

The dialogue also shows Levov’s foolishness in believing that his indignation could wash away corruption, and that the past was better than the present. To Levov, this corruption consists of “drugs, pornography and violence”, which is shocking because he seems to forget that his own granddaughter is a killer, but that is because the family believes in “Merry’s absolute innocence” (Roth 1997: 364-365). The Swede is even more scandalized by the fact that the man who is having an affair with his wife speaks of “morality” and “transgression” shamelessly, “as though it were not he [...] who had transgressed to the utmost by violating the unity of a family already half destroyed” (Roth

1997: 366, ellipsis mine). The Swede, on the other hand, has also had an affair with somebody who was supposed to help but then he finds out she is the one who hid his daughter, and so kept him from finding her sooner. This is how Roth makes the irony of hypocrisy apparent in multiple ways.

Underneath the conversation lies the real meaning of the discussion, only visible to the Swede: the violence and betrayal that he knows are in his family: “the mockery of human integrity, every ethical obligation destroyed” (Roth 1997: 380). The Swede feels like he is cracking up and sinking under the weight of everything that he cannot understand. He is alone in his search for Merry because Dawn has decided to rid herself of the child who is the embodiment of the human stain: “Rid of the stain of your child, the stain on her credentials, rid of the stain of the destruction of the store, she can begin to resume the uncontaminated life” (385). But no one can rid themselves of the stain, and so Dawn engages in an adulterous relationship with her neighbor, as the Swede will find out.

II.1.5. The Stain as the Link between Subjectivity and Materiality

As Debra Shostak writes, while in earlier novels such as *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), “transgression is played out literally on the field of the body”, ST and DA, are “both paeans and elegies for the dying male body, stressing that the experience of subjectivity is inextricable from materiality” (Shostak 2004: 15; consult also Shostak in Aarons & Sánchez Canales 2014). Further examples can be found in HS, which is also about an aging man and how his identity is linked to his body, Coleman Silk, and in the

early short story “Epstein”, which also shares this feature. But most prominently, Philip Roth created a character who is particularly used to study the selfhood as embodied: Professor David Kepesh. The savage urge of sex, the purity of the sexual drive is what really interests Kepesh, and in DA he will learn new lessons about its power. He speaks confidently about “the delightful imbecility of lust. All this talk! [...] These are the veils of the dance. Don’t confuse it with seduction. What you’re disguising is the thing that got you there, the pure lust. The veils veil the blind drive” (Roth 2001: 15, ellipsis mine). But the blind sexual drive is mysterious; it cannot be understood or explained: “Talking this talk, you have a misguided sense, as does she, that you know what you’re dealing with. [...] You know you want it and you know you’re going to do it and nothing is going to stop you” (15, ellipsis mine). This blindness and invisibility are ironically made visible by the human stain. And the stain becomes the link between the story of the characters, their soul and mind, and their body, and this happens particularly in the battlefield of sex.

It is argued that for most of his career, Roth has focused on the embodiment of the masculine subjectivity, especially in the novels that have David Kepesh as the main character (Shostak 2004: 21). Similarly, Maggie McKinley has written about the fact that Roth’s work does in fact feature a high dose of “testosterone” (2019). The “ugly” scenes in his fiction are indeed “couched in a male character’s fixation on his own masculine power and sexuality” (McKinley 2019: 93). Nevertheless, like Maggie McKinley I am compelled to look closer to these disturbing scenes in order to better understand Roth’s work. However, in this study I intend to show how the anatomy of desire presented by Roth in these four novels by means of the human stain concerns the identity of all the characters, male and female. Therefore, the image of the stain allows an exploration of the embodiment of female subjectivity too.

For instance, *ST* offers a striking portrayal of the sheer power of sexuality, but the story of Sabbath and Drenka is not just about a sexual relationship, it is about a love affair. Pozorski offers a close reading of the language used to characterize Drenka, to show how she represents the force against the Puritan strictures (2011: 156). Roth Pierpont compares *ST* to Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) in that *ST* "is a retrospective account of a transgressive passion" and she considers that having an interesting personality characterized by freedom, "Drenka Balich is undoubtedly a heroine, a worthy descendant of the great adulteresses of European literature" (Roth Pierpont 2013: 194). Both Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) are important literary depictions of adultery and revolve around the will of the individual and the longing to satisfy one's desire (For a detailed bibliography of Roth's works, see Sánchez Canales & Aarons 2014). Roth's heroine Drenka Balich also tries to break free from the expectations of society and the ties of her marriage, like her literary predecessors.

II.1.6. The Representation of Men and Women in Roth's Fiction and the Stain of Misogyny

Even though the scope of this thesis does not include readings related to gender studies, it is necessary to address the issue of the representation of women in Roth's work. In fact, it is unavoidable, firstly because the subject of the relationships between men and women is crucial in Roth's work and for the purpose of this study, the human stain appears in the context of sexuality on many occasions. Moreover, the representation of women is closely connected to the subject of scandal in Roth's work. And secondly, as many

scholars have found, it is important to interpret the texts correctly in order not to read them mistakenly especially in these times. After the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, ST and the Zuckerman books, Roth received attention and criticism due to his portrayal of sex and women and the male perspective. However, I find that even though his female characters are at times depicted in humiliating ways or situations, men also suffer from these shameful scenes and after all, every character, male or female, is described as bearing the human stain equally.

In his novel *Deception* (1990), a book that plays with life and fiction and deals with an adulterous affair, Roth includes a mock trial between himself and his mistress, responding to the charge of sexism and the claim that his female characters are “vicious stereotypes” (Roth 1990: 110). The character, named Philip Roth, claims: “[Y]ou may do your own sex a disservice when you postulate intelligent young women as lacking the courage to be desirable -as having no aggression, no imagination, no daring, no adventurousness, and no perversity” (Roth 1990: 111). Roth’s desirous and aggressive women are also characterized by the human stain of perversity, in my reading of his work. For that reason, I propose rereading the characters of Drenka (ST), Faunia (HS), Consuela (DA), among many others as possessing these qualities and as women who are marked by the literary resource of the human stain. It is necessary to focus, as Maren Scheurer has argued, on “a more complex vision of womanhood often occluded by images of female virtue and demureness” (Scheurer 2017: 14). To sum up, it is important to consider not only what Roth says about women, but also how he says it, in order to assess his contribution to feminism but also to understand more fully the meaning of the human stain.

From early on in his career, Roth has in fact made it a point to delve deeper in two aspects: on the one hand, into the feeling of men that are not only tainted by desire, but

also vulnerable to it. And, on the other hand, he has also represented female vulnerability: “Beginning with *Letting Go*, I began to write about female vulnerability, and to see this vulnerability not only as it determined the lives of the women -who felt it frequently at their core- but the men to whom they looked for love and support” (Roth 2017: 120). The interest in how vulnerability in its different forms shapes relationships lies in how it is imagined through the resource of the human stain. This will be analyzed by looking at the relationship between Sabbath and Drenka, and secondly, to the relationship between Kepesh and Consuela.

According to David Gooblar, as he states in the introduction to the special issue of *Philip Roth Studies* dedicated to the subject of Roth and Women, feminist critics of Roth’s work consider that Roth’s female characters are represented as inferior to his male characters, “mere types, never rising to the complexity or depth of the fully human” (Gooblar 2012: 8). However, as Maren Scheurer notes, by studying the narrative techniques that Roth uses to deconstruct the sexism of some of his characters it becomes clear that the representation of women depends on a male perspective that is shown as flawed by the same narrative: “A close reading shows that one-dimensional or stereotypical portrayals of women, which appear frequently in Roth’s work, can be traced back to a male character’s limited or flawed perspective” (Scheurer 2017: 14). It is exactly for this reason that, as Debra Shostak states in her essay on Roth and Gender in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, “Roth’s work can appear as much a prescient critique of misogynist attitudes as a purveyor of them” (2007: 112).

Roth’s work has been read from a feminist perspective in various ways. Julie Husband notes that Roth’s early novels are both powerful and ambivalent “critiques of patriarchy” (Husband 2005: 25-26). Sam B. Girgus claimed that Roth’s novel *When She Was Good* (1967) “suggests that for Roth becoming a man and achieving true sexual and

personal liberation require a culture of freedom for women as well” (1989: 153). Rachael McLennan has written an essay about this novel too, offering a new reading and rehabilitating the female protagonist Lucy Nelson (McLennan 2020).

In her essay on the psychoanalytic aesthetic and gender politics in Roth’s work, Maren Scheurer has argued in favor of Roth’s feminism, that is, “his critique of rigid gender roles and sexual politics” by looking at how his fiction engages with Freud’s writing and ideas (Scheurer 2017: 14). Similarly, McKinley has written about the center of Roth’s work, which is that “people are not perfect”; “we are set up to get these men wrong”; and that is why a closer examination is necessary to read Roth’s critique of “his own flawed protagonist even as he draws him with affection (McKinley 2019: 94-94). To sum up, McKinley finds Roth’s portrayal of Portnoy’s failures and Peter Tarnopol’s unmaning experiences as a call for empathy (95). This is why she insists on the need of answering to Roth’s call and she urges the reader to reread his work in order to “reassess characters and circumstances, and question assumptions” (96).

As to the accusation of misogyny, the question now is how it is possible to reconcile feminism and an appreciation of Roth’s portrayal of Sabbath, for example. Aimee Pozorski has tackled this issue when writing about the importance of Drenka in *ST* as the force that propels Sabbath and allows for a political reading of the novel too (2011: 30-33). In the part of her book about *DA*, Pozorski also sees Consuela as someone who is extremely powerful, as she is the only one who can unexpectedly teach the protagonist an important lesson (108). By reading these characters in the context of the novel as a whole, it becomes clearer that women are in fact very important in Roth’s work.

Elisa Albert addresses this issue by pointing out that the answer lies in the nature of fiction and its relationship with reality and morality, as it is understood by Roth too.

That is why an author like her can read the work of a radical feminist like Mary Daly while at the same time appreciate the character of Sabbath: “What’s *wrong* with me that his rhapsodies about his extensive international experience with whores don’t raise my feminist dander one little bit? *How* am I not the least bit judgmental of his explicit sexual relationship with his college student? *Did* he murder his first wife? Why don’t I *care*?” (Albert 2020: 9). In each of the scenes that these questions make reference to there are images of the human stain that signify the disorder Roth needs to convey in ST. Albert goes on to explain the reason for her lack of indignation as a feminist:

Because Roth is a masterful, wily, incisive, and perfectly deranged story-teller, of course. Because I’m having so much *fun*. Because Sabbath is fully human *and* fully nonexistent. Because it’s fiction, which is the only place we are allowed to be truly free. In reading (and writing) fiction we get to suspend for a blessed moment the need to be *right*. To be righteous, to uphold what is right. To ‘behave’ ourselves, to speak appropriately, to avoid offense, to toe the line. Fiction is, always was, and ever will be the only place we never have to *lie* (Albert 2020: 9).

Albert actually goes on to make the case that Sabbath “can only be on the side of radical feminists”, and offers ample evidence for this from the novel, which will be looked at later on in this section. First, it is necessary to see where Albert has found this idea about fiction and moralism: It is in Roth’s own explanations, defense and definition of his fiction, which can be found in his interviews and essays as well as in his own fiction.

Firstly, Roth wants his characters to be realistic rather than likeable. Roth has responded to criticism about scenes and characters and the accusation of being misogynistic in different ways. Firstly, in his own fiction (see *Deception*, for example, as mentioned above). Secondly, in his interviews, which have been published in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), for example. When Hermione Lee asked him about the feminist objections against his work, Roth replied: “Don’t elevate that by calling it a ‘feminist’ attack. That’s just stupid reading” (Roth 1976: 130).

Thirdly, he also responded to this criticism in a seminar on his work at Bard University, in 1999. When faced with the complaint that his female characters are not as round or complex as the male characters, or not grounded in sympathy, Roth points at some of his characters such as Amy Bellette in *The Ghost Writer* (1979). He has often hinted at the fact that his characters are not necessarily meant to be “likable”, but he urges readers to overcome their fear or disgust and look at the characters, for “they are meant to be real” (qtd. in Roth Pierpont 2013: 238). Roth also addressed this issue over time in several interviews and articles, where the reader can find his desire to capture reality with precision in his fiction. In “Writing About Jews”, an essay that dates back to speeches from 1962 and 1963, he argues that fiction is not meant to help us affirm common beliefs, but that it frees the reader to experience different realities and expand our moral consciousness as a result (Roth 2017: 51-52).

Later, in an interview from 1969, “On *Portnoy’s Complaint*”, Roth talked about obscenity and sexual taboos as the subject of his supposedly obscene book (Roth 2017: 68). The scandal of Alex Portnoy called for many responses by Roth, where he explains how Portnoy’s erotic relationships are marked by his consciousness of his Jewishness, in interviews and essays such as “How Did You Come To Write That Book?” and “Imagining Jews” (both written in 1974). In that same year, in an interview conducted by

Joyce Carol Oates, “After Eight Books”, Roth speaks about his portrayal of female characters and about the concept of writing as pleasure (Roth 2017: 121). From all of these instances it can be gathered that the concept of fiction is key in order to tackle the interpretations of “obscene” passages.

Although Portnoy has famously been deemed one of Roth’s obscenest characters, and in this novel, it would seem that the female characters are objectified, Brett Ashley Kaplan has tackled the issue of Roth’s representations of women in her essay about PC from a feminist standpoint (2019). She presents how Roth “exposes the trouble with Jewish masculinity as much as he denigrates Portnoy’s various consorts” (Kaplan 2019: 69). While Kaplan appreciates Roth’s problematic portrait of The Monkey in PC, she believes Roth’s fiction cannot be described as feminist because then it would inform its very purpose and structure as a central theme (79). There is a wide range of opinions when it comes to Roth’s representation of women.

If we were to draw a line between the two extremes of these views in Roth criticism, at one end we would find readings such as Elisa Albert’s interpretation of Sabbath as a feminist character. On the other extreme, one would find Kaplan and Shostak’s views, while in the middle, Ivanova believes his fiction exposes rather than endorses misogyny. Tending more toward the extreme of ambivalence, we would find McKinley’s interpretation of Roth’s complex representation of women. Apart from the Special Issue in *Philip Roth Studies* about *Roth and Women* (2012), Debra Shostak has written a chapter on “Roth and Gender” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (2007), and Mike Witcombe has offered a survey of many of these views after Roth’s death (2018).

Furthermore, when it comes to the representation of women, the reception of Roth's texts has to be taken into account, because readers have elicited interesting comments from the author and this exchange of opinions helps to understand the issue better. The writer Norman Manea on a tribute to Roth in 2018 provides an interesting account: There was a meeting between literature students and Roth, in which the accusation of a poor representation of women comes to the surface. On this occasion, several female students accused the author of creating simplistic and vulgar caricatures of women, with what they perceived as "the same old male chauvinism! All the female characters were cardboard cut-outs, lacking in life and complexity!" (Manea 2018). As a response to this, Roth read a quote about human nature by the writer Rabelais and also quotes from the Sinyavsky-Daniel Trial, in which the two Soviet dissidents were convicted:

The prosecutor notes that although the dissident has disguised his intentions, it was obvious to any attentive reader, and still more to an official censor, that the mental hospital in his work of fiction was a crude metaphor for the Soviet people and the communist regime. [...] "I've got the writers' constitution here, I'm a member of the Union, and there's no article that demands that the Soviet writer has to describe only perfect people, immaculate citizens." (Manea 2018, n.p.).

With this story, Roth's intention was to highlight his right to describe imperfect people, the opposite of immaculate, that is, with the human stain, and this is his reply to those who accuse his fiction of being simplistic or sexist. From the first point in this section, which is Roth's intention to write realistic rather than likeable characters, the second point emerges now: Roth is interested in complex, stained human beings, which

might be offensive, as a natural result. And because of this, the writing sometimes includes simplistic views of women, descriptions of abusive behavior or demeaning discourse. As Albert puts it, “Roth’s interested, always, in the complexities of human behavior and emotion, in what drives people to behave like shitheads, to bust up their lives, to die alone, to deny themselves anything so nice and wholesome as healing and closure [...]” (2020: 11). To sum up, Roth’s lack of interest in immaculate characters is due to his interest in stained characters but the fact that his fiction reflects reality with ugliness and unfairness as it appears in the world does not mean he has invented that reality and is responsible for it.

After Roth’s death, and in the context of #MeToo, the perceived misogyny in Roth’s work has become a contentious subject. In an essay written after Roth passed away, writer Zadie Smith wrote that “he had blind spots, prejudices, selves he could imagine only partially, or selves he mistook or mislaid. But, unlike many writers, he did not aspire to perfect vision. He knew that to be an impossibility (See Smith 2018).” This vision of imperfection in the representation of sexuality and relations between men and women has been noticed by many authors. In an interview with *Vulture* following Philip Roth’s death, author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, famous for her advocacy of feminism, was asked a question: “Would Philip Roth fall into that decidedly un-feminist category?” Her reply reveals the tension and difficulty of reading Roth’s work in the #MeToo era. The #MeToo movement, which spread virally in 2017 in social media, speaks against sexual harassment, and also concerns how works of fiction are read and valued.

There was a humanity in Philip Roth’s work that is often overlooked when we talk about his misogyny. I read his women and roll my eyes but there is a truth there, because there are many men like his men. Misogyny is a reality in the world. Maybe there are people

who want Philip Roth's misogynists to die at the end of the novel so that they'll know misogyny is bad. But that would be a little easy, wouldn't it? The world is complex. People are not perfect. (Ngozi Adichie 2018).

Ngozi's comment highlights a crucial ambivalence about Roth's fictional representation of relationships between men and women. How can it feature humanity and misogyny at the same time? The irony is that Roth is praised for his realism, but he is accused for his portrayal of women and men's treatment of women. Yet, in highlighting the humanity in his work, Ngozi is effectively calling for inclusiveness in readings of his novels; that the reader should pay *equal* critical attention to the women as well as the men. Roth's work certainly does not strive to help readers feel comfortable, in general, and this is intentional.

To many feminist readers, in his novels there are uncomfortable scenes in which they interpret the male gaze as being privileged while the characters who are women are represented mainly as the objects of desire. It is true that his work seems to be more focused on the depiction of the male sexual perspective, and some have criticized Roth because they interpret his work as being only about himself. For example, Brenda is considered a "flat character" and Roth therefore would have a "lack of curiosity" by Dara Horn, her strongest accusation being that of narcissism: "Philip Roth's works are only curious about Philip Roth" (Horn). Unfortunately, even though as a feminist it is hard to grapple with some scenes in his work, his work proves to be more nuanced than what might initially appear on the surface. In consequence, taking into consideration that Roth's work is complex, I believe some female characters should be reassessed.

It is important to understand the role of women in his work rather than leave it aside, on the assumption that that is what Roth is doing. Elaine Showalter, a feminist critic, was also asked recently about this issue by Christopher O'Shea: "Did you find all of the maleness, all the focus on male sexuality, limiting, or maybe suffocating — or is that a caricature of what Roth is all about?" Her answer, just like Ngozi's, highlights the fact that there are passages that are offensive but also passages that are flattering to women:

There are certainly passages in some of the novels — not so much about sexuality but about the women who are the objects of sexuality — which I find offensive and find hard to teach. I think that Roth is certainly a writer of male experience primarily, but I don't think that that should stop people from reading the books. I am a feminist critic by conviction. That has been my whole career, and I have loved Roth since the beginning. He is just a great artist, and he is also a very compassionate writer. So despite the fact that there are these passages that I skip over when I'm reading, I don't think that puts Roth beyond the pale in any sense at all. And there are passages of great tenderness and understanding for women throughout the whole range of his novels. James Joyce wasn't perfect either. (Showalter n.p.)

Her answer suggests that although there are scenes which are hard to digest for a feminist reader, this should not cast a shadow over the rest of his work (see "Teaching Literature in Dark Times" in Showalter 2003: 131-140). However, I believe it is important not to skip these passages, but to develop a reading of these scenes within the context of the whole novel in order to explore their meaning. Roth has claimed many times that his intention is not for readers to feel comfortable, but to offer insight into the complex and

dark nature of human beings, which is the imperfection that Ngozi refers to. To read Roth for confirmation of his misogyny may tragically deter us from appreciating the humanity that Ngozi finds at the heart of Roth's novels.

In contrast, Elisa Albert offers a reading of Sabbath as a feminist, using some characteristics from the theory of Mary Daly in *Gyn-Ecology* (1978). Albert argues that Sabbath is “non-linear”, “anti-authoritarian”, “non-rational”, “disrespectful of cultural norms”, “tied immutably to his feelings, his grief, his rage”, “refuses to let go of his grievances” and finally, he is “blasphemous” (Albert 2020: 10). For all these reasons, it can be said he fights against the patriarchy, according to Albert, and so his rebellion is far from being against women, he never uses his desire or sex to hurt women. Most interestingly, as Albert points out, “Sex is how Sabbath asserts himself against death”, for his enemy is death, which is what Chapter III will deal with more extensively, when looking at the issue of Eros and Thanatos (10). Albert's reassessment of Sabbath throws a new light on this topic.

The problem is that much of the criticism of Roth's representation of women stems from a reading that fails to see the depth and complexity of Roth's female characters, and this can be seen particularly in *ST*, one of his best novels. Harold Bloom claims this to be Roth's best novel in his Introduction to his book *Philip Roth* (2003). However, the truth is that *ST* is also one of the most scandalous and offensive books written by Roth. The agency and complexity of the women that feature in this novel are essential aspects to the plot and the themes that run through it. I will also connect the representation of these women with the other novels that are the object of this study.

Moreover, the fact that there are different women struggling with the same issues as the male characters shows Roth's keen interest in writing about women with just as

much precision and exuberance as about men. As the writer Edna O'Brien acknowledges in an interview after Roth's death, in his work women are many things: "They constitute the weepers, the love terrorists, the fault-finders, the avengers and the hotsie-totsies. They are all fluent and fiery. This room is both cradle and battlefield. They represent ecstasy and nemesis" (O'Brien 2018, n.p.). I agree with O'Brien that Roth's female characters are full of meaning and force. Additionally, it is important to analyze the narrator's role and consciousness to understand his gaze on women and the tension between tragedy, humor and irony in the text. In this section, I intend to show the complexity and depth of his female characters as well as how it is possible to appreciate his fiction from a feminist standpoint.

When interviewed with the *New Yorker*, author Lisa Halliday comments that the issue of accusing Roth's writing of misogyny comes from the perception of sexual predation, a confusion of lust with misogyny (Halliday, n.p.). In her view, a voracious sexual appetite is not misogyny, it is an intense desire. People who were close to Philip Roth knew he was in awe with many women and his narrators are in awe of many female characters. As to the criticism of presenting characters who are not perfect, many readers understand how literature is about presenting people as they are.

In fact, the human stain is on the bodies of men and of women, marking the relationships between men and women, and showing the "refractory" quality of the characters: a rebellious, incombustible behavior that is difficult to control which was analyzed in Chapter I of this dissertation. Throughout Roth's fiction there are many female characters who show that rebellious nature in spite of their circumstances. Early on, in *Goodbye Columbus* (1959), Brenda Patimkin is characterized not only by her sexual appeal, but also by her strong will and she is limited by her social status and her family, so she has to struggle with that just as Neil does, and it is the clash between what she

wants and what Neil wants that causes the conflict in their relationship. Ironically, even though she gets a diaphragm because Neil wants it, she still uses the situation in order to break up with him.

In *Letting Go* (1962), both Libby and Martha fight because they do not want to leave their fate to fate, each in their own way, and with their personality and actions they affect Gabe and Paul's lives in a significant way, becoming the center of the novel. Likewise, the plot in *When She Was Good* (1967) revolves around Lucy's passionate actions, because although she suffers because of men's actions, she fights back. Just as Consuela's literally biting back when Kepesh tries to control her, as seen previously. When interpreting passages that describe sexuality, feminists argue the male gaze is privileged while women are represented mainly as the objects of men's desire. According to this interpretation, Roth's work is primarily focused on the depiction of a male sexual perspective. However, it seems to me that female characters and their roles in these scenes should be reassessed.

II.1.6. The Stain and the Anatomy of Desire

When analyzing ST, Roth scholars have written about Sabbath's philosophy, but not so much about the female characters. Debra Shostak is one of the few scholars who has written about the passages in which women appear as sexual objects. She points to the fact that Roth was thinking about "the requirements of desire" and "the anatomy of desire" when he wrote this novel, and she argues that the reason that Sabbath's desire is so extreme is because he feels the need "to project erotic and thanatic desires, to risk

selfhood or its negation” because he is forced to test the limits at the same time that he tries to repress his desires (Shostak 2004: 23). In fact, Roth’s interest in writing about male desire and their actions and motivations spans over his whole career. In one of his last interviews, in January 2018, Philip Roth was asked about his reaction to the stories of sexual harassment that started coming out with the #MeToo movement. Commenting on this, the author puts across the idea that violent and unruly sexual behavior is not surprising to him, as it is something he has written about for a long time.

Men enveloped by sexual temptation [...] Men responsive to the insistent call of sexual pleasure, beset by shameful desires and the undauntedness of obsessive lusts, beguiled even by the lure of the taboo. I have imagined a small coterie of unsettled men possessed by just such inflammatory forces they must negotiate and contend with. I’ve tried to be uncompromising in depicting these men each as he is, each as he behaves, aroused, stimulated, hungry in the grip of carnal fervor and facing the array of psychological and ethical quandaries the exigencies of desire present (Roth 2018, n.p., ellipsis mine).

Roth’s work refuses to be captive to taboos, and it explores the struggle of men, but also of women. That is why in Chapter III I will examine how in *ST*, Drenka represents the power of eros and life struggling against death; just like in *DA* Consuela plays an important and similar role. Just as male characters such as Sabbath are possessed by those “inflammatory forces”, I intend to highlight how female characters such as Dawn in *AP* or Roseanna in *ST* represent the difficulty of finding peace and accepting opposition. Additionally, just as the Swede tries to find purity, in *ST* it is also Sabbath’s young student and lover who represents the impossibility and the irony of purity. Roth is

interested in urges which can be present in male but also in female characters, and that is why he speaks about relevant psychological and social realities:

I haven't shunned the hard facts in these fictions of why and how and when tumescent men do what they do, even when these have not been in harmony with the portrayal that a masculine public-relations campaign — if there were such a thing — might prefer. I've stepped not just inside the male head but into the reality of those urges whose obstinate pressure by its persistence can menace one's rationality, urges sometimes so intense they may even be experienced as a form of lunacy. Consequently, none of the more extreme conduct I have been reading about in the newspapers lately has astonished me (Roth qtd in McGrath 2018, n.p.).

The images of the human stain make the representation of carnality more obviously about the flesh, and characters such as Kepesh are often caught up in a tangle of dilemmas about the sheer force of sexual desire, which they find everywhere and affecting everyone. There is an insanity which can definitely be frightening in many passages of Roth's novels, such as Sabbath's visits to Drenka's grave in *ST*, and Roth's characters take many risks. Sabbath is no saint, he is human, as he insists on showing throughout the text, and Roth writes about his actions, but without a moral superiority, without a judgement. Some characters do judge, but this is what the text does: it questions the reader's moral standards, which is something that will be further analyzed in the next section. In *DA*, the pressure of those reprehensible urges is explored openly: "Sex is all the enchantment required. Do men find women so enchanting once the sex is taken out? Does anyone find anyone of any sex that enchanting unless they have sexual business with them? Who else are you that enchanted by? Nobody." (Roth 2001: 16). Kepesh is

only interested by “the savage urge” that lies beneath what is not sexual seduction, but a social performance:

The comedy of creating a connection that is not the connection -that cannot begin to compete with the connection- created artificially by lust. This is the instant conventionalizing, the giving us something in common on the spot, the trying to transform lust into something socially appropriate. Yet it’s the radical inappropriateness that makes lust *lust*.” (Roth 2001: 16-17)

Ross Posnock argues that “Male lust, in Roth’s work, is the most immediate vehicle for shattering the constraints of balance; but male sexuality operates, ultimately, as much metaphorically as literally, a metaphor for how any of us find ways to keep at bay, however temporarily, the obligations to be appropriate, moderate, agreeable, virtuous” (2006: 18). In ST there is a thorough portrayal of a character who strives to be the contrary of virtuous, and in DA, Kepesh also tries in his way to seek freedom from those obligations. But after experiencing the freedom and life through sex, the characters must always face the grim reality of death in Roth’s works, an issue that has been addressed by several scholars and it will be addressed in the last chapter of this thesis. According to Jay Halio, “Eros successfully defies death in *Sabbath’s Theater*, but it remains still the overwhelming threat in *The Dying Animal*” (Halio in Halio 2005: 205).

If male lust is portrayed as the natural expression of the rebellion against obligations, female lust operates similarly, and the human stain is a device that serves this purpose, especially in ST, a novel which would be inconceivable without the character of Drenka. Debra Shostak has noted that the process of co-narration, added to the connection

and the physical and linguistic transference between Sabbath and Drenka “suggests that they have realized intersubjectivity, each retaining a self as they interpenetrate one another” (2004: 57). Drenka tells the story as much as Sabbath does.

In trying to describe their unique story, Roth Pierpont compares the novel to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* in that it “is a retrospective account of a transgressive passion” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 194). The relationship between Roth’s writing and Nabokov’s has been studied by Luke Maxted (2018), who points out that this American writer is rarely cited as an influence or intertextual companion of Roth, but he sees a clear structural equivalent between passages of both authors. He points out how Roth alludes to Nabokov’s fiction in the final pages of *My Life as a Man* (1974) (Maxted 2018: 35). This connection is worth mentioning as I think there are traces of Nabokov’s influence in Roth’s style and plot in PC, ST, AP and DA.

But in fact, ST is not just about Sabbath’s passion for Drenka, it is also about his passion for Nikki, for Roseanna, for a student, a lover, his friend’s daughter, whores and many other women. It constitutes a countless number of passions, but their voices are not absent from the narrative. In contrast, Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert has a dominant voice in *Lolita* (1955). He is someone who is haunted by the loss of his first love like Sabbath, and that is why he desires nymphets and Lolita, and he tells his story but does not show Lolita’s thoughts and the reader does not hear her voice very often. However, in Roth’s novel, women are more dominant in the narrative, and each one of them has a distinct voice, especially Drenka. Not only does she have a voice, she is also a writer. She wrote everything about how Sabbath deprived her in a journal.

Accordingly, Roth Pierpont sees that “Drenka Balich is undoubtedly a heroine, a worthy descendant of the great adulteresses of European literature” (Roth Pierpont 2013:

194). Drenka has a body that captivates Sabbath and not only is she alluring to him, he is also seized by a tender feeling for her, and the closeness of death and the passing of time only intensify his desire. To him, her body is fruitful, it overflows, it is full of life. She wants Sabbath to desire and love her and does not hesitate to ask for what she wants, so her strong will and her voice spread over the text. When she asks Sabbath to be only with her, because she knows she has cancer and can die, she tells him she wanted him to promise he would be faithful to her without knowing about her illness, as she wanted him to do it on his own. This causes Sabbath's knees to buckle and they see "their whole carnal edifice caving in", her loss being too much for Sabbath to accept, for "there's nothing on earth that keeps its promise" (Roth 1995: 32). In her body, Drenka gives shape to the spiritual tragedy in the novel from the very beginning.

This is significant because, as Shostak argues, "for Drenka, the erotic signifies not just sexual pleasure but transcendence of her own mortal flesh" and as she creates herself, she escapes objectification (Shostak 2004: 56). This is why she is eager to learn about lust and boldly seduces Sabbath and many other men. This is at the core of Roth's fiction, and it is precisely what his works show, if the analysis brushes aside all prejudices and reduces its elements to the simplest idea possible: Eros and Thanatos: The former is an attempt to escape from the latter. Drenka's body is compared to a Venus's, but that is not the only thing the narrative focuses on, as the reader also hears her voice, with her language, and what is more, her stories. These stories, which continue to fascinate Sabbath, are about her life in Croatia and why she came to America, about her aspirations and desires, and also about her husband and her work.

In order to understand Sabbath, the relationship he has with Drenka is the place to start. He depends on her for his "vital need"; she is his only companion, "the only solace he had" as they share "a whole other life to make home endurable", to sum up: She

is his life (Roth 1995: 19-30). Drenka is just as transgressive as Sabbath, and it is clear she is his perfect mate when she says “I love being dirty for you, doing everything for you” (25). She is described as “libertine” and “remorseless”, qualities that are positive to Sabbath, who believes she “could do everything” (29). Ross Posnock describes Drenka as Sabbath’s “sidekick, partner, student, mother, lover, and, above all, ‘total blood brother’ and so their “identities are interchangeable, flowing and porous: Drenka possesses a male carnality and love of pursuit” (Posnock 2006: 167). Posnock uses the term “male” carnality, but really, this shows how women can also possess this quality against social expectations. Sabbath’s public and intimate life is a disgrace, and yet, he does not care for social mores, but Drenka surpasses him with her freedom and recklessness, and that is why he only feels really *new* with Drenka.

Another example of how sexual desire is represented as an opportunity for liberation from moral rules can be found in Roth’s novel *Indignation* (2008). This aspect becomes evident, for example, when Marcus meets Olivia. He starts what is considered a dirty and immoral relationship by the Dean of their School, but to Marcus, being with Olivia is deeply liberating and enriching: Not only is she the one who initiates their sexual relationship, thereby changing his behavior, thoughts and prospects, but Olivia also represents a reversal of values: She is the one to point out to Marcus that the dirty work at his father’s shop actually makes him “clean”, giving him integrity. A similar reversal can be found through the use of the human stain images in ST, when the bodily fluids are like water that cleans the main characters. In addition, in *Indignation*, Marcus challenges Olivia’s view by telling her how he had to clean out the garbage cans in the street and how ashamed he was by having to carry out this task. But Olivia is interested in the “rancid” details of impurity of his life, just as Sabbath is intrigued by Drenka’s detailed

description of her sexual encounters. To sum up, Roth uses the human stain to highlight the liberating aspect of a sexual relationship regarding morality and impurity.

If in ST, desire goes hand in hand with freedom, in DA it seems to go in the opposite direction as a renunciation to freedom seems a requirement for love. DA is the third book with the character David Kepesh, in what Roth considers “a series of dreams, or nightmares, about sex”, and in the case of this short novel, the historical context is “the sexual side of the sixties” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 261). Surprisingly, a book that influenced Roth while writing DA is *The Fall* (1956), by Albert Camus. This novel invokes the Fall of man, portraying the attempt to escape one’s own hypocrisy, and it shows the disenchantment with the lack of justice in the world. The certainty of every man’s guilt and the impossibility of innocence are also presented in this novel, as these are issues that preoccupied Roth. He chooses to explore these subjects especially in the four novels covered in this thesis. Camus’ character has to endure suffering and he becomes a “judge-penitent”. Kepesh will also face suffering and a crisis that brings about a questioning of values and justice in his relationship with Consuela. These themes had been explored earlier in Roth’s work because, as seen above, AP refers to the theme of the Fall and it even structures the novel into its three parts. Roth Pierpont notes another similarity between Camus’ novel and Roth’s DA: one of the moral issues is “a congenital inability to see in love anything but the physical” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 263). This is Kepesh’s experience of love: a very strong sense that sexual desire has nothing to do with a long-term attachment or a commitment such as marriage.

Mike Witcombe is among the critics who has studied Roth’s Kepesh Trilogy in depth, drawing from the work of critics such as Velichka Ivanova and Debra Shostak, who have interpreted DA as “critique of certain kinds of toxic masculinity” (Witcombe 2017: 45). In *Countertexts, Counterlives* Shostak looks at how this trilogy examines “the

consequences for sexuality and self-concept when the gendered perspective of a consciousness shifts position (Shostak 2004: 7).

However, Roth's book does not present Kepesh's philosophy without questioning it, just as he does not give an answer to the questions about sex, love and family. On the contrary, he aims "to position the book so that you can't answer those questions" (263). Roth Pierpont explains how "however thoroughly Kepesh justifies his philosophy, *The Dying Animal* is predicated on the fact that it has come crashing down. For Kepesh has fallen in love" (263). This reading sees Kepesh's helplessness as he is waiting for Consuela to get in touch with him in the midst of his monologue on sexual freedom. He seeks no admiration, but offers reasons for his quest for freedom alongside to evidence of how he needs Consuela, body and soul, to comfort him, ironically.

II.1.7. Irony in the Paradox of Freedom and Enslavement

As Valerie Roberge has argued, in Roth's work irony is used as a resource that helps the character to understand the difference between fiction and reality, while it also allows the narrative form to avoid moral categories (Roberge 2017: 38). At the same time, irony enables the character to finally see something, become aware of it and reach an inner ethic (Roberge 88). Drawing on these ideas, it is possible to study the connection between irony and the human stain in Roth's treatment of the experience of freedom and oppression in sexual desire. The paradox of the "wild thing" that Kepesh and Consuela have in hands soon takes an unexpected turn of events as Kepesh spirals downwards, losing control: In the end, it is not him who is in charge, despite his age and status.

Because in sex there is no point of absolute stasis. There is no sexual equality and there can be no sexual equality, certainly not one where the allotments are equal, the male quotient and the female quotient in perfect balance. There's no way to negotiate metrically this wild thing. It's not fifty-fifty like a business transaction. It's the chaos of eros we're talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement. You're back in the woods with sex. You're back in the bog. What it is is trading dominance, perpetual *imbalance*. You're going to rule out dominance? You're going to rule out yielding? The dominating is the flint, it strikes the spark, it sets it going. Then what? Listen. You'll see. You'll see what dominating leads to. You'll see what yielding leads to. (Roth 2001: 20)

This last part leads to the starting point of an analysis. When the narrator warns the reader to take heed, this signals a serious warning in an ominous tone, just as in *ST* when the narrator says that "something horrible was happening to Sabbath" (Roth 1995: 78). In that instance, Sabbath masturbates on his dead lover's grave, in a gripping image. Similarly, in *DA* at this point there is a disturbing image of the human stain. "The biting back of life" (Roth 2001: 30) is the scene which is so significant because it marks a change. Kepesh performs an "act of domination" on Consuela, having sex as "brutish" as it ought to be according to him. Aristi Trendel analyzes this scene in the context of a reading of this novel with a focus on the master-pupil relations, and she points out that it is not surprising "that the student retaliates and threatens to bite the master by snapping her teeth. Violence breeds violence, destruction entails destruction, and power relations change the course of the master-pupil rapport" (Trendel 2007: 3).

But Consuela looked "ferocious" because "something is finally happening to her. It is no longer so comfortable for her. [...] Uncontrollably she is in motion within" (Roth

2001: 31, ellipsis mine). She shows she could hurt him if she wanted: “At last the forthright, incisive, elemental response from the contained classical beauty. Till then it was all controlled by narcissism, by exhibitionism, and despite the energetic display, despite the audacity, it was strangely inert. [...] that activating bite that freed her from her own surveillance and inaugurated her into the sinister dream” (31, ellipsis mine). The bite means freedom and the rebellion against obligations and oppression, meaning there is a loss of control for Consuela too, just as there was one for Drenka and Sabbath in *ST*. Kepesh has awakened the beast in her, so now she is wild as well. It is a sinister dream and according to his account her loss of control is the cause of his own letting go, as she takes the reins from then on, and he let her do so: “I am the author of her mastery over me” (32). The paradoxes of power and desires are revealed as Kepesh recognizes the irony of what dooms him. “Domination and servitude, possession and deprivation become Kepesh’s lot as he surrenders to the superiority of sex” (Trendel 2007: 3).

Roth has written about “the great and maddening power of desire” and in this novel he writes more specifically about the game of power and submission: Young girls get involved with old men “*for the age*” and “in Consuela’s case, because the vast difference in age gives her permission to submit” according to Kepesh. That “license to surrender” allows that “she gets both the pleasures of submission *and* the pleasures of mastery.” Consuela found the power she wants to have, and this dominance “is being traded continuously. Not so much being traded as being braided. And therein lies the source not only of my obsession with her but of her counterobsession with me” (Roth 2001: 32-33). So, both lovers are weaving the web in which they are both trapped, and the question is whether this submission is represented in a way that is demeaning to women.

In order to better understand how women are represented in this novel, it is interesting to look at Velichka Ivanova's analysis of how Roth actually exposes the misrepresentation of women in DA. If by adopting a male narrative viewpoint, Roth explores how men struggle with their insecurities as they perceive women as a threat, Ivanova also explores how the text "allows Roth to depict women perceived by the male creative consciousness through his explicit spokesperson -the narrator in the text" and as she points out, he is not a model the reader has to sympathise with, as the story shows how that type of sexual politics is "destructive for both genders" (Ivanova 2012: 38). Interestingly, ST does not have a narrator who reduces women to their bodies, quite the opposite, as the text reveals how Drenka and other women possess character, identity and value at many levels. Interestingly, Sabbath treats Drenka as his equal, while in DA, Kepesh tries to master Consuela and fails at it, because although she first appears as man's enemy she reveals herself as his equal (39). Portraying the dynamics of power, Roth shows how woman can also bite back and destabilize man, which is something a misogynistic text would not show (43). Similarly, ST shows the power that women hold over Sabbath's imagination as well as his reality. When Sabbath is overcome by a crippling jealousy after Drenka's death, the text offers her first-hand account of her sexual exploits, narrated with a voice full of energy, in which her pleasure sets the contrast with the torment that Sabbath endures after her death.

In DA there is a striking description of the sexual relationship as utter chaos, destabilization that cannot be negotiated, where no peace nor equality can be reached, as it is defined by dominance and yielding. It is ruled by basic primitive impulses, being anything but easy, peaceful, or fair. This specific relationship is peculiar, because Kepesh thinks he was never able to excite Consuela, for she never told him she desired him sexually, and that is why he says he suffered in many ways: "I never had a moment's

peace [...]. I was all weakness and worry [...]. I could never figure out whether the answer was to see more of her or to see less of her or to see her not at all, to give her up” (Roth 2001: 22-23, ellipsis mine).

Kepesh is full of insecurities, feeling that he is not enough and though he knows such an expression of passion does not fit Consuela’s personality, yet he tortures himself: “Yet that was why the fear of losing her to someone else never left me, why she was continually on my mind, why with her or apart from her I never felt sure of her. The obsessional side of it was awful” (23). He finds no pleasure: “all I did was think -think, worry, and, yes, suffer” (23). His efforts to concentrate on the pleasure, what he lives for, the reason why he values his independence, are utterly fruitless. Also, the moment that Kepesh and Consuela start their relationship and she tells him she could not be his wife, his “terrible jealousy was born. The jealousy. The uncertainty. The fear of losing her, even while on top of her.” He instantaneously and for the first time lost his confidence (26-27).

II.1.8. Wounded Sexuality

In ST there are many meaningful ironic situations which are created by the clash between the sexual desires of the characters and their awareness of the nearness of death or their fear of loss. The fact that sexuality is depicted by Roth as being “wounded” (going back to Kundera’s description) means it is very human and the metaphor is physical (pointing to DA too), this wound is the effect of the human stain on sexuality. Because of the stain, sex never lives up to its expectations, it is limited and it will diminish. A clear

image appears in DA with Consuela's breast, as we have seen in the analysis of that novel. That union of the confessional and the ironical modes in Roth's fiction that Kundera points at is highly remarkable. Roth's representation of human sexuality makes the narrating character vulnerable in his sincerity but also elusive in his irony.

On the one hand, there is a feeling of vulnerability in Part I of ST, titled "There's nothing that keeps its promise," which introduces Sabbath's feeling of disappointment as he loses all that is dear to him –especially Drenka, in whom he has found sexual solace. He has enjoyed an "attachment that had persisted with an amazing licentiousness –and that, no less amazingly, had stayed their secret" (Roth 1995: 3). The circumstances of this affair are described as remarkably "amazing", as the illicit relationship that exists between Drenka and Sabbath is extraordinary. It seems like he prizes it as the most valuable thing in his life. He is approaching the end of his sexual potency and consequently the end of his life, and yet, his lover is asking him to be faithful to her, and he is unable to do this. This problem places the character in a weak position, and his desires and expectations will be crushed by reality.

Besides, the situation of vulnerability gets more complicated when the reader soon learns about the damage that Sabbath's actions may have caused to his wife Roseanna, who seems to have suffered of alcoholic breakdowns following a sexual scandal concerning her husband (Roth 1995: 4). It is not possible to know for sure, because neither cause nor consequence are ever completely clear, and the narrator carefully points out that Roseanna had been "drinking herself to death for her two unchallengeable reasons: because of all that had not happened and because of all that had" (4). This is what she says, and it may be compared to Sabbath's own sense of how unavoidable it is that he should turn out the way he is whatever betrayal he would have experienced. *Everything* is the reason; there is no easy explanation for anything. Later the reader learns more about

what happened to Roseanna (her father's abuse and his suicide). Knowing all this, and probably because of all these things, Sabbath finds comfort in his adulterous relationship with Drenka. From the initial description it can be inferred that both Sabbath and Drenka are escaping their own marriages because they find no delight in them at all, especially no sexual satisfaction.

Sabbath and Drenka have a hideaway where they go to have sex, the Grotto, a secret beautiful natural paradise which replaces their home, where "they retreated to renovate their lives" (Roth 1995: 5). Fittingly, Drenka is praised as a goddess of fertility, endowed with a Venus-like voluptuous body as the figurines that represented who was worshipped as "the great mother of the gods" (5). They seem to be in a pastoral, a paradise of their own, but it is soon blown into pieces as Drenka not only makes an unforeseen request that Sabbath dislikes, but also announces the illness that will lead to her death, and they are observed by the ghost of Sabbath's mother. Sabbath's pleasure is taken away from the very beginning of the story. Now, in AP, the main character also experiences the bliss of a paradise only in order to see how it is lost and proves to be illusory in the end. This parallel that can be established between the Swede's Arcadia-like home and Sabbath's retreat leads to the following conclusion: that there is a dramatic irony that leads the plot of these novels with the purpose of showing how purity is unattainable and that impurity is eventually found everywhere.

The irony in the perception of the lover in ST can be described in aesthetic terms. In an essay titled "On Synthetism" written in 1922, Yevgeny Zamyatin described the spiral of the history of Art as being marked by three different stamps and he calls the last one synthesis:

Today's Adam is already poisoned by the knowledge of the other, once glimpsed Eve, and together with sweetness his kisses leave on the lips of this Eve a bitter touch of irony. Under the glowing flesh, Adam, who has gone through negation, who has grown wiser, knows the skeleton. But this makes his kisses more ecstatic, his love still headier, the colors more vivid, the eye still keener, grasping the most fleeting essence of lines and forms. (Zamyatin 1922: 82)

Applying this description to Roth's portrayal of Sabbath, the third school of art would match his vision, as there is an awareness of Death, for the skeleton which underlies the skin of the lover is constantly being hinted at, figuratively speaking, while Sabbath can still grasp the pleasure of life, fleeting as it is. And thus, sexuality is tainted with irony. And still, as Zamyatin suggests, this makes the senses still keener, for it is not a rejection of life but the very opposite. The wisdom is acquired by the poisoning of knowledge. The tone is of sharp irony, bitter, dark, heavy or scandalous at times, but this must be so because the narrator or the characters are made aware of death and of the unattainable, but nonetheless, perceive the essence of life with intensity. *ST* overflows with ironic contrasts, it never stops. Philip Roth, as well as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, include the use of tragic irony in their work, just as other Jewish writers such as Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer did. At the scene in the graveyard, for example, or Sabbath's visit to the memories of his dead relatives, one grave idea about death or loss is immediately counterpointed with a humorous remark upon it. Thus, the novel becomes a double-edged sword.

The type of irony found at the ending scene, for example, in which Sabbath is expecting to be killed but is just left alone by Matthew, is called contextual irony. There is also linguistic or verbal irony, as well as irony of fate in the development of the plot.

There may also be “irony bombs” which are dropped early on in the novel and explode later as the plot makes progress. For example, in *DA*, the bulk of the irony resides in the fact that it is precisely Consuela’s breast where the cancer must grow because it has been described as extremely beautiful.

But he is still clueless as to what goes on inside her: “I’m unable to make out what she makes of me, what she makes of anything, and my confusion causes me to say things that sound false or exaggerated to my ear, so I hang up full of silent resentment toward her” (Roth 2001: 38). And this is how Kepesh falls in love, falling into a whirlwind of complete instability and confusion, where everything is upsetting: “everything I’m doing leaves me upset” (39). It’s the madness of love, which is unbearably feverish. “I don’t feel the authority with her that’s necessary for my stability, and yet she comes to me because of that authority” (39). This is an ironic paradox, as Kepesh has lost control over his life.

Kepesh cannot stop thinking about Consuela, “The experience of her is too strong. I sit up in bed and in the middle of the night I cry out, ‘Consuela Castillo, leave me alone!’” (Roth 2001: 39). He realizes he is completely infatuated; it is like a curse that will not let him alone. Her presence is always felt, she trickles into his whole life. Like a ghost haunting him. He tries to make himself get rid of her, for it has become a war:

It’s become an endless campaign with her. Where’s the fulfilment and the sense of possession? If you have her, why can’t you have her? You’re not getting what you want even when you’re getting what you want. There is no peace in it and there can’t be, because of our ages and the unavoidable poignancy. Because of our ages, I have the pleasure but I never lose the longing (Roth 2001: 39).

This state of desire will drive Kepesh crazy, as it is unhealthy but it is unavoidable. According to Kepesh, he gave Consuela her influence and control over him by pronouncing her a magical work of art (Roth 2001: 37). Because of this confusion of art with life, “the pornography of jealousy” becomes Kepesh’s punishment. “Ordinary pornography is the aestheticizing of jealousy. It takes the torment out. What? Why ‘aestheticizing’? Why not ‘anesthetizing’?” (Roth 2001: 41). Kepesh’s pornography keeps the torment in, for he identifies himself with the person “losing it, with the person who has lost” (42). He is dreading that loss of his lover, lives in anguish of it. And as he imagines a younger man with her, “It’s the him who was once me but is no longer” (42). Imagination, the thoughts of jealousy, spins out of control. Strangely, Consuela seems untouched by passion, which happened because of the relationship “didn’t appear to be turning her (as it was me) inside out” (44). This complete lack of balance leaves Kepesh in a vulnerable and fragile situation compared to Consuela, and he is unable to escape from his condition because of his body and its desire, which is portrayed with humor.

In addition, in *ST* too, humor is used by means of paradox and contrasts which are often related to the idea of morality and immorality. We find irony in the clash between what one expects and what one actually finds in reality. Roth’s mode of persistent comedy is a note of coherence as it can be found throughout his work, and Debra Shostak summarizes as “a rich comedy of pain, of excess, of satire and self-satire, a comedy at times broadened and leavened by the rhythms of borscht belt humor and at other times raised toward refinements of both social and existential irony by an unlikely pair of influences, Henry James and Franz Kafka. It is a type of comedy which Roth characterized in simple terms in 1974 when he told Joyce Carol Oates: “Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends” (Shostak 2004: 2, 3).

In this way with playfulness and seriousness, Roth reveals the size of the problems that come along with the desire of Kepesh and how it is experienced carnally and psychologically. The main problem is that Kepesh can never be sure of how to interpret things. “No matter how much you know, no matter how much you think, no matter how much you plot and you connive and you plan, you’re not superior to sex. It’s a very risky game. [...] It’s sex that disorders our normally ordered lives. [...] Every last vanity will come back to mock you. Read Byron’s *Don Juan*” (Roth 2001: 33, ellipsis mine). The stain makes that disorder visible and comes back to mock the characters.

Roth took the idea from Kafka that the body is the person’s destiny and it helps to see how arbitrary existence can be, and this is represented in images of the body as in *The Breast* (Shostak 1999). The body is not just an object, as consciousness, the seat of subjectivity, is in the body (1999: 321). This is what David Kepesh learns in *The Breast* (1972) and later in DA too, and really many of Roth’s characters come to this conclusion. When Kepesh grows obsessed with sexual stimulation, he is afraid that his body, that is, he himself, could be reduced to a nipple. Then he fears he would lose his identity and his existence would be “craving flesh”, nothing more. As Shostak argues, “Roth demonstrates through Kepesh the conundrum that sexuality both defines the human and distances us from it. At the extreme, physical desire displaces consciousness, with the corollary that, eventually, no subject remains at the source of desire” (1999: 327). This can be seen in DA, in the sexual relationship between Kepesh and Consuela, as it is both focusing on the body as the person and also the body as an erotic and aesthetic object. Shostak concludes that “Roth insists on taking seriously our relationship to our own bodies. For without acknowledging the body -be it breast, woman or man- we cannot begin to make sense of what the self might be” (330).

II.1.9. Resisting or Giving in: Power and Vulnerability

Far from being an apology for the excess of PC in its portrayal of sexual desire, the later novels of AP and DA explain how after growing up at a time of sexual strictures, as a response to the crumbling of the rules that had governed the actions of a young man like Kepesh, and the forces that had persuaded him to marry young and start a family, he seeks freedom when he is faced with the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. However, as Matthew Shipe notes, DA remains ambivalent because the narrative insists on the costs that sexual freedom entails, as seen with Kepesh's son. In addition, the protagonists of the Sexual Revolution for Kepesh are the "Gutter Girls", and Shipe connects these revolutionary female characters with Rita Cohen in AP, the devilish figure who appears as a challenging young woman who uses her sexuality to make the Swede aware of his transgression (Shipe 2017: 150). The forces of virtue and candor, identified by Kepesh as narratives of "order" and "no-rule" compete indeed in these novels (Roth 2011: 61-61).

If sex brings two-thirds of man's problems, as Kepesh jokes, it is by means of the human stain that his experience of disorder, risks and confusion is represented, as a result of his attachment to Consuela. Apparently, the human stain implies a loss of power for the characters, as they become its victims. For example, just as the main character of "Epstein" as seen in Chapter I of this thesis, Kepesh feels more helpless than ever before, as if he had lost his will. Kepesh reveals his weakness in dealing with his passion for Consuela, which does not make him faithful to her, paradoxically, because he is not to be satiated only with one lover, no, he must take another one too, to help him feel in control.

So, seemingly, desire feeds on more desire, but it has been suggested that Roth's male characters are actually looking for strength in the objects of their desire.

It would be necessary to define strength and weakness first, and in my view, what Roth accomplishes is to show how desire is really full of strength and at the same time, weakness. Energetic in its pursuit of the lover and also fainting in its powerlessness. For instance, I have to disagree when a scholar like Alan Cooper argues that he does not believe that in *ST*, Sabbath is a misogynist because "if he constantly hurts weak women, it is in a continual search for strong ones" (1996: 287). Because I find that as the text of *ST* questions the boundaries of strength and weakness, it is not easy to reduce women to those labels, because the text presents Sabbath and Roseanna's hatred for each other and their grievances and provocations as a mutual issue. In a further twist of irony, Roseanna seeks inner peace and to feel comfortable with life, while Sabbath seeks the opposite, to fight in life, to be uneasy, out of place (Roth 1995: 87). In this way, Roseanna helps the reader see the dimensions and intricacies of Sabbath's struggle more clearly in the way he faces suffering as opposed to how she experiences it. She tries to accept her pain while Sabbath rages at it. To her, secrets are inhuman, while to him they are human. Roseanna also voices accusations against Sabbath that lead them on to the argument that prompts him to leave her.

Another character in *ST* who might be judged as a weak person is Nikki, who might have been plagued by phobias and insecurities, but she was powerful as a talented actress, and moreover, she embodied "everything in the soul that is contradictory and unfathomable, even the monstrousness that paralyzed her with fear" (Roth 1995: 106). Steven Sampson analyzes Nikki from a religious point of view, for there are references to the Old Testament (Genesis) as well as to the New Testament (Matthew), in order to highlight her ethereal and angelical nature through a comparison with Jesus as a carpenter

(Sampson 2011: 127-133). Nikki, who is connected with beauty and purity, is compared with nature and holding her conveys her fragility to Sabbath. It is Nikki's reaction to her mother's death that features in Sabbath's story in order to show the utter grief and horror of death, and however, once again, it might be different if she had told the story, as he imagines her to shout: "It wasn't like that! I wasn't like that! You misunderstand!" (109). Debra Shostak points out how Sabbath's "self-invention requires others to serve as objects for the self's ends. [...] Nikki's disappearance and Roseanna's alcoholism both suggest the damage that Sabbath's objectification of them causes to their grasp of their own subjectivity" (2004: 25, ellipsis mine). Nikki, Sabbath's girlfriend, disappeared without a trace, and yet, her absence never leaves him, and because of his recollections, her presence in the text becomes significant. She is like a ghost from the past who appears to make the main themes of the novel come to life in a personal way, by showing the pain that comes from realizing that the dead cannot be recovered.

The scenes in which Nikki struggles with death are extremely unpleasant because through her character, Roth shows what real suffering looks like, without anaesthetizing feelings or censoring thoughts, to show the struggle with death. In order to represent how death is perceived as unnatural, Roth shows the thoughts and actions of the character of Nikki through Sabbath's eyes, to double the effect, as it is not only her pain that is reported, but also his experience that is echoed in hers. To her, it is impossible to part with the dead body of her mother. "It's unbearable. It's dreadful," Nikki said. "I'm going to stay with her. I'll sleep here. I don't want her to be alone." (Roth 1995: 111). She is in a state of denial that seems childish and unnatural to Sabbath, so he keeps them both company and is disgusted by details such as Nikki blowing her nose with the tissue that they had laid over the dead mother's face: "and that seemed to me altogether crazy" (113). It is impossible to be delicate about death, but ironically, Sabbath treats Nikki "delicately"

and “gently”, like a different character than the rude man we know, being so compassionate and careful not to hurt feelings or indulge in his own desires. Even though Sabbath tried to direct Nikki when she acted, and she followed his directions, “she was still also Nikki” because she was “a real person” (21). Failing to depersonalize her, she ultimately proves she is wholly human because she bears the human stain too.

Similarly, another character in ST, Michelle, who appears to be conventional and happily married, secretly owns a set of erotic self-portraits, and so Sabbath learns she leads a secret double life, very much like Levov learns about his wife’s infidelity in AP. However, Michelle is scandalized by Sabbath’s unruly behavior and degradation. She sees the extent of his excess and is afraid of it but she cannot see her own degradation. Ironically, her daughter Debby, who is only present through her personal objects, her undergarments, her bathtub becomes a sexual consolation for Sabbath, who claims he feels nonsensical like Emma Bovary. This reference to Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary* highlights the theme of rebellion against society’s moral rules and expectations, as seen before. However, she still possesses the flame of desire, as Sabbath observes in her laughter.

Consequently, when Sabbath is accused of degrading himself by defiling his friend’s wife and his daughter, he claims that his actions indicate hope rather than despair. This trait is typically found in Jewish American fiction, as can be seen looking at Bernard Malamud’s stories, for example. Norman ridicules Sabbath’s idea of sex as rebellion, but to Sabbath, “Debby’s bed had become a home away from home” and even though she is absent, he seeks the imaginary presence of her body for comfort (Roth 1995: 349). But women do not only offer Sabbath comfort in the midst of a breakdown, they also provide temptation and provoke conflict in his life, to the same effect as with Kepesh in DA.

The aftermath of the relationship for Kepesh means that everything with Consuela ended up in loss, like a shipwreck: “agitation” is what sums up his state: “The agitation of having Consuela -as opposed to the agitation of not having Consuela [...] Tormented all the while I was with her, a hundred times more tormented for having lost her” (Roth 2001: 92, ellipsis mine). Desire becomes a torture: “The longing never disappeared even while I had her. The primary emotion, as I’ve said, was longing. It’s still longing. There’s no relief from the longing and my sense of myself as a supplicant.” (94-95). Kepesh believes Consuela is his “own White Whale” who can wreck him (125). By referring to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, though it seems like an ironic exaggeration, Kepesh likens his lover to that enormous opponent, a whale full of figurative meaning. Judith Lee Yaross explains that it is actually irony what is behind the lack of a clear conclusion to DA: “Caught between thought and action, going and staying, life and death, love and lust, self and other, the dying body and eternal art, the last volume of the Kepesh trilogy exchanges closure for irony” (2010: 88).

II.1.10. The Outrageousness of a Stained Sexuality

In ST, Sabbath and Drenka are the perfect match because they think alike: Indecency, degeneration, licentiousness, disorder, sanctioning the force that wants more and more, all this to Sabbath means solace and satisfaction, because it is a liberating drive that brings life in abundance to him. The text shows how freedom can be expressed not only in sexuality, but also with words, for Drenka is also free in the way she thinks and speaks, and so her language reveals her unconventionality, which is important to Sabbath,

who seeks the pleasure of words “freed from their daily duty to justify and to conceal” (Roth 1995: 447). After all, Roth describes the experience of writing this novel as “the freest experience” of his life (Roth Pierpont 2013: 196). However, it is not only due to Sabbath’s own freedom, but also due to Drenka.

As Frank Kermode puts it, what sets Roth’s fiction apart is not that it is erotic, “what distinguishes Roth’s is its outrageousness [...]; if nobody feels outraged the whole strategy has failed” (Kermode 1995: u.p., ellipsis mine). Kermode acknowledges how important it is to see that Roth “is hilariously serious about life and death” and that “life can’t win against the last enemy. It can at best put on a scandalously good show. So there is really only one way for him to tell the story—defiantly, facing the outrage of death with outraged phallic energy” (u.p.). I think it is important to add that Drenka too, engages in a shocking portrayal of life in the face of death, and of freedom and joy in the face of boredom. In the same book review, Kermode wrote that in ST, Roth’s “Rabelaisian range and fluency, his deep resources of obscenity, his sense that suffering and dying can be seen as unacceptable though inevitable aberrations from some huge possible happiness, Roth is equipped for his great subject—one that was treated in their own rather different ways by the authors of Genesis and *Paradise Lost*” (u.p.).

Roth challenges the reader’s notions as, in light of the representation of sexuality, the question of the nature of Good and Evil is explored. Characters explore and ask themselves what is straight and what is crooked, as well as that which is life and which is death. There is a scene in ST when Sabbath shows a desire to straighten all that is crooked in him, surprisingly. As he surveys the grave he purchases for himself, preparing all that is necessary for his own burial and also visiting his family’s tombs, Sabbath approaches a pile of wet dirt, which is a striking image of the human stain.

Sabbath, with a tinge of ghoulish pleasure, forced his fingers through the gritty goop until they all disappeared. If I count to ten and then extract them, they'll be the old fingers, the old, provocative fingers with which I pulled their tail. Wrong again. Have to go down in the dirt with more than these fingers if I hope ever to make straight in me all that is crooked. Have to count to ten ten billion times, and he wondered how high Morty had counted by now. And Grandma? And Grandpa? What is the Yiddish word for zillion?
(Roth 1995: 363)

As always, when Sabbath finds pleasure in something, it is a dirty delight. In this case, he is thinking about the physical reality of his own body being buried, about being dead. As he makes his fingers dirty, covering them in dirt, he wonders whether he would regain his youthful, healthy nature and looks. We have seen Sabbath's decline in his arthritic fingers, which render him unable to be a puppeteer anymore. But he learns that there is no way he could straighten out all that has gone crooked in him. Not only fingers which are physically disfigured by an illness, but also his nature, his life. This scene when Sabbath tries to fix his hands by covering them in dirt can be compared to how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth long to clean their hands after the murder they committed, for their guilty conscience tortures them. This text, just as in *ST*, shows how they cannot find rest nor a solution to their problem either.

In Shakespeare's play, first we find the image of the stain in Macbeth's words: "What hands are here! Ha! They pluck out mine eyes. Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather/ The multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red." (II, ii, 59-64). And: "To know my deed 'twere best not know myself." (74-75). Later, Lady Macbeth shows her suffering in her

sleepwalking, as she rubs her hands constantly, trying to clean herself from the bloodstains she imagines, with no avail: “Yet here’s a spot. [...] Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One; two: why, then, ‘tis time to do’t. Hell is murky! [...] will these hands ne’er be clean?” (V, i, 34, 38-39, 47-48, ellipsis mine). “Here’s the smell of the blood, still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!” The Doctor remarks: “What a sigh is there” The heart is sorely charged.” It is interesting that the waiting gentlewoman comments “I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body” (V, i, 55-61). The doctor concludes he cannot help her, for the help she requires is divine. Sabbath will not find someone to clean his hands or straighten his crooked fingers, either.

II.1.11. The Language of Transgression

The presence or absence of the stain in the speech or description of the characters is what indicates transgression in sexuality in these novels. The ambiguous nature of purity and impurity becomes visible especially through women and their relation with Sabbath. For instance, Christa, a young girl with whom Sabbath and Drenka have an affair, is provocative and this is what Sabbath is drawn to, as she appears as “*unbesmirched* by selflessness, a budding beast of prey” who has lost all innocence and whose actions and motivations take Sabbath by surprise (Roth 1995: 54). The reference to the lack of a stain in Christa shows that what Sabbath considers a stain is what others consider morally good and appropriate. She is the chosen one (her name is amusingly appropriate) because of her stain, really. Sabbath chooses her because he sees that she

clearly has the human stain. Christa's name, like Merry's, is an aptonym which is especially relevant because it places the human stain in Christianity itself. While Christ bore the weight of sin upon himself, being God himself he was not marked by the human stain, which is why his sacrifice could atone for human kind's sins. Therefore, Christa, too, participates in Sabbath's inversion of values which consists of loathing the pretense of purity the way others hate impurity.

Sampson analyzes the biblical references in the description of Christa, comparing her with Christ as she comes from poverty, and Sabbath finds her by the side of the road in a kind of miracle that resembles the time when Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus (Sampson 2011: 127). Christa is like the Messiah to Sabbath, who pursues her like "a monk", a Jesuit, someone who worships her because he is devoted to "fucking", "the Evangelist of Fornication" (Roth 1995: 60). This language that parodies a Christian spiritual pursuit clearly shows the opposite of a faith in purity. In the novel, Sabbath accuses university feminists of deceiving and deforming students, and he does this by ironically using the language of the repellent to describe them as people who believe in the mirage of purity.

This is a key Rothian issue which is addressed by Sánchez Canales regarding the role of Delphine Roux in HS (2009). This character, a feminist professor, will be looked at in more depth in the next section of this Chapter. She is full of rage and bitterness and uses her influence on students to lie to them and to encourage them to make accusations against Coleman. The importance of the use of words and how to interpret them also appears when Coleman reminisces about how his father had a great love for the correct use of words, which is ironic in connection with the manipulated use of the word "spooks", as the accusers are not interpreting the word in its correct usage, but out of context.

Just as students should learn to read and to interpret by themselves, readers are not expected to look at Roth's characters for male or female role models. Sabbath, who is accused of corrupting young students, is not a role model, because as Ivanova argues, Roth "does not offer a model of manhood or womanhood. Rather, Roth explores the instability and fissures of gender norms and exposes the misrepresentation women undergo when seen through a masculine lens" (Ivanova 2012: 43). Far from being limited by fixed gender stereotypes, these women show a complex web of meanings and many dimensions to their identity.

This is connected to what Sabbath says to Roseanna in the novel, that he does not "identify" with her ideas because he thinks it is important to see opposition and contradiction in the world, not to ignore the reality of what takes your peace away. Roth responded to some of Bard's students' complaints about his female characters, explaining that the problem is that the characters do not embody the values the students respect, they do not mention characters who do not fit in the pattern and they do not consider the problems with the male characters' values either (Roth Pierpont 2013: 239). When the students said it was difficult to "identify" with characters who are different from them, Roth insisted it is possible, "through literature itself, in which we can identify with anyone and become larger than ourselves" (240).

The depiction of the human stain in sexuality brings the struggle between duty and rage to the limit. Every single paragraph in *ST* captures this tension. As Cooper remarked about the passages in *ST*, it is evident that they are "beautifully composed, so able to fuse idea with apt emotion" (1996: 286). Roth Pierpont also celebrates the beauty of Sabbath's language: "he is clothed in Roth's most gorgeous and expansive language. It gives him stature, humor, color, and charm far beyond his naked self and turns him into a Whitman of negativity, a figure of engulfing if improper vitality" (2013: 200). According to

Brauner, Roth regards the “debasement of language” as “an opportunity for creating new kinds of literary discourse in which debased (that is, popular, clichéd, banal) language is not a threat to, but constitutive of, meaning” (2007: 66). Donald G. Watson wrote that Roth’s fictions “renew and regenerate, bury and revive” (Watson 1988: 108, qtd. in Brauner 2007: 66).

The purpose of the use of transgression has baffled scholars, and Greenberg, for example, notes that Roth creates a literature “formed from baseness, messiness and ‘immaturity,’ a subversive approach to society that seeks to invert conventional theories and shock expectations about the appropriate material, motives, and goals of art” (Greenberg 1997: 490-491). That is certainly the effect of the transgressive quality of Roth’s literature, and it is better understood when observing how it is exactly that his characters are depicted as transgressive. In addition, Ross Posnock sees how both ST and HS portray protagonists who embody Emerson’s “abandonment”- “his belief that ‘the one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety’ (2006: 414), because it is clear that Sabbath has let go of the need to please and to obey moral standards.

That is why Posnock argues that “Sabbath abandoned propriety and any shred of dignity a long time ago, while Coleman Silk’s late-emerging abandonment of control reverses the conviction that has hitherto ruled him –the self is a disciplinary project that maximizes freedom by tabooing impulse. Roth discerns a fatal purism in the very assumption, Cartesian inspired, that the self is a project [...]” (2006: 55, ellipsis mine). Furthermore, Sabbath is ruled by his impulses and feels freedom as a consequence, and has no faith in discipline because he does not believe that his life can be improved. He believes there is more value in remaining as base as he is, in being true to his stain. And

that is exactly what makes Roth's fiction and its portrayal of Sabbath so shocking, in following through with the stain to the utmost.

Roth understands provocation, according to Posnock, "as inseparable from life but also makes provocation a subject in itself, a force that disrupts assurance and control. By midcareer he began calling this force 'counterlife' or 'counterliving,' as a way of understanding the capacity –indeed propensity- of individuals and history for defying the plausible and predictable." (2006: 14). Debra Shostak also understood this force as central in Roth's work as a whole, and she explains that it is particularly in ST that Roth wrote about America, feeling that he had rediscovered it: "While both being a Jew and being an American are of little interest to Mickey Sabbath in his initial self-conception, as the narrative gathers together the sorrows that drive him, his placement in the particularities of history begins to explain who he is" (2004: 235). Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea to reverse the logic of Enlightenment is connected to "the anarchy and spontaneity latent and untapped in Kant's demand to shed reliance on authority and to think for oneself" (Posnock 2006: 11). Sabbath certainly is a character who shapes his own perspective of life and refuses to live by other people's standards and laws.

If the "exhilarating, defiant immaturity" is an outcome of Emersonian self-reliance, Roth's "undoing and remaking of reason and maturity can be regarded as a model for what Emerson means by abstaining from dogmatism so as to recognize 'all the opposite negations.'" (11). In addition, I believe that Sabbath's character is characterized by the ideas from Emerson's famous essay, such as his nonconformist nature, being true only to his own nature, having no sacred laws beside his own constitution. Emerson encourages man to embrace contradiction, and not to fear being misunderstood or judged by society. He refuses to hide his tastes and aversions in spite of all opposition. Roth's main character, Sabbath, is constantly aware of the ambivalent nature of human actions

and motivations. This is so because, as Posnock states, “the self, as if an extension of nature, is split by volatility and ambivalence; and Emerson invites us to stay attuned to this by inhabiting contradiction and perversity” (11). Sabbath’s spirit of contradiction can be read as inherently American, because in the dialectic of American culture, besides the question of innocence, there is a “spirit of contradiction”, according to Hassan (1961: 9).

Those qualities describe Sabbath accurately, and it is with the images of the human stain that this nature is revealed in the text, as we will see. It is because the stain shows the idea that unity or purity in nature is false or impossible, as Derrida or Kierkegaard have written, that it becomes a symbol with an important philosophical meaning. The stain makes such an imbalance visible by presenting characters who are inhabiting contradiction and perversity.

II.1.12. The Irony of the Human Stain

After acknowledging how Roth uses comedy in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) to comment on the reading and treatment of desire by psychoanalysts, as studied by Brauner (2000), it is important to see how irony is also used in the representation of sexuality as a stain. Just as David Brauner situates Roth’s comedy in a theoretical and historical context (2000). Both situational and linguistic irony arise from the human stain. For this reason, it is helpful to consider when the characters’ actions cause the opposite effect than intended or when their words mean the opposite. Even more interesting are the scenes in which the characters cannot endure to look at the stain or when they see it but fail to comprehend its meaning.

Elaine Safer has a book-length study about the use of irony and humor in Roth's late novels (2006). "Sabbath's actions yoke together tragedy and grotesque farce" (65). She sees a good example in Sabbath's scene with Rosa, at the end of the first section of *ST*. There, Rosa ends up becoming Sabbath's comforter, treating him as if he were a helpless child because he is weeping. In my view, this is an important passage because it reveals Sabbath's surprise at his wife's ironic rejection of circumcision as "Jewish barbarism" while she defends a woman who has cut off her husband's penis. The irony resides in the fact that what to some people is heinous, to others is a sacred ritual in the case of circumcision, or a praiseworthy act of heroism, in the case of the revenge of that woman. The description of the blood and the reference to Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* make this image of the human stain the reflection of the problem that is found in *Roseanna* too. After a conversation about *Roseanna's* desire to commit such an evil action against Sabbath himself, he sees this as a warning of her madness, and he decides to flee (Roth 1995: 181). Finally, although Sabbath lies to Rosa, while he is playing a role in his performance, he feels his self pouring out as if his "he were porous", finding that he had come to the surface and could not hide himself (Roth 1995: 184).

Irony and transgression are connected in the use of the human stain: What makes an action sinful or holy? And pure or impure? Cooper suggests a Nietzschean reading of *ST* and its paradoxes: "Sabbath follows his impulses, trusting them, more than formal covenants, to lead him to some spiritual height. His predilection may suggest that Jewish paradox of Sabbatianism [...], the teaching that holiness may emerge from immersion in sin; but Sabbath pursues sexual liaisons not to break the grip of eroticism, but rather to challenge its sinfulness." (Cooper 1996: 282, ellipsis mine). That is why, for example, when Sabbath is accused by Norman of fighting against being a human being, he retorts: "To the contrary [...], To being a human being I've always said, 'Let it come.'" (Roth

1995: 152). And his following actions confirm his principles: as he picks up a tube of vaginal cream that belonged to his friend's daughter, he continues masturbating. Throughout the description of this scene, the word "innocent" is repeated multiple times with a great ironic effect (150-152).

In AP, on the other hand, a seemingly innocent kiss becomes a bleeding wound in the conscience of the Swede. Similarly, as what Sánchez Canales analyzed in DA (2014), the reference to *Death in Venice* could also apply to HS, in my view, when considering the representation of the false myth of the innocence of youth. In HS, Faunia is to Coleman what Tadzio is to Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912). Faunia and Tadzio represent the essence of youth and desirable beauty to their older lovers. In Roth's novel, Faunia is the most important thing for Coleman, who is aware that he is aging and nearing death, because he regards her as his last opportunity to find satisfaction in a relationship. But it is not just any relationship, as she makes "convention unendurable. Upright principles unendurable". Therefore, she embodies the rebelliousness of the human stain. Zuckerman ironically states that when he dances with Coleman he feels "the contaminant of sex, the redeeming corruption that de-idealizes the species and keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are" (Roth 2000: 37). As a further image of the stain, at this point Zuckerman wets himself because he is incontinent after a prostate surgery, and he has a small stain on his pants (36). Sex is the human stain that contaminates but also redeems, paradoxically. Faunia "is the unforeseen" who potentially contaminates Coleman, and his relationship with her is what allows Coleman to be free from "the stupid glory of being right. From the ridiculous quest for significance. From the never-ending campaign for legitimacy" (Roth 2000: 170-171). Coleman sees his affair with Faunia as Sabbath did with Drenka, as his only way to freedom, for he seeks "the freedom to leave a lifetime behind" (Roth 2000: 171), which can also be termed

as “Aschenbachian madness” in reference to *Death in Venice* again. Ironically, Coleman is aware that he feels compelled to live like a tragic character who, while achieving this freedom, is at death’s door.

Robert Greenberg has written about the topic of transgression in Roth’s work, and his study aims to show that Roth uses transgression in order to enter areas from which his characters may feel excluded psychologically and socially due to their Jewish origin (Greenberg 1997: 488). Greenberg has also noted the characteristic irony that Roth uses when writing about the transgressive behavior of his characters, and he calls this narrative mode “antic correction” (492). In his opinion, when Roth laughs at his protagonists, he does it only to come to terms with their “out-of-control behavior”, as if it were an expiation, because his characters are really behaving like fools (492). However, in my view, especially in the case of Sabbath, when we consider the moments of irony, it does not seem as if the narrator was making fun of the protagonist but rather showing how there is comedy even in his tragedy, but not with the intention to subject him to sheer ridicule, because the character is still human, and his human condition is valued, even though it is stained, precisely because it is stained.

Eventually, that is why when Roth responded to some of the Bard’s students’ complaints about his female characters, he explained that he thought the problem was that the characters do not embody the values that the students respect. Additionally, he pointed out the inconsistencies in these criticisms because they do not mention characters who do not fit in the pattern and they do not consider the problems with the male characters’ values either (Roth Pierpont 2013: 239). After all, Roth created individual characters, and it does not seem significant to classify them into types.

Another issue that was raised in that conversation was the perception that it is difficult to “identify” with characters who are different from the reader. In response to this, Roth said it is possible, “through literature itself, in which we can identify with anyone and become larger than ourselves” (240). It is precisely through Roth’s fiction that one can experience life in the skin of many different particular characters, with their nuance, contradictions, chaos and the presence of the human stain.

Roth has also suggested that what bothered readers about female characters such as Lucy in *When She Was Good* (1967) has more to do with the qualities of hatred and fury than with sexuality (Roth 1975: 142). The shame attached to the emotion of rage and the depth of the wound that causes it is what is so uncomfortable to face. Roth refuses to be responsible for human behavior shown by his characters, for it is not him who created people, and he “laments that his male characters do not have the right feelings toward women, or the universal array of feelings about them” (142). In times when a focus on male sexuality is perceived as potentially threatening or limiting women’s subjectivity, we need a reading of Roth’s fiction that focuses on women’s voices, offering a comprehensive portrayal of different women and how they affect a man’s life. Rather than making a judgement based on moral superiority, such a reading would encourage a questioning of the definition of purity, peace, joy, love and respect.

By allowing insight into many different women’s lives, Roth shows how they experience loss and how they passionately drink life to the lees. Most interestingly, the theme of the impossibility of finding a pattern in life and of having a pure life gains force because of the role of the female characters. That is why, in conclusion, women have a significant place in Roth’s work. However, there are questions that remain unsettling: In *ST*, Sabbath accuses university feminists of deceiving and deforming the students, ironically using the language of the repellent to describe them as people who believe in

the mirage of purity: “these filthy, lowlife, rectitudinous cunts who tell your children these terrible lies about men, about the sinister villainy of what is simply the ordinary grubbing about in reality of ordinary people like your dad and me” (Roth 1995: 236). This deception introduces the topic of the role of society and its pressures, which will be addressed in the next chapter. The stain proves to be an image that is powerful to transgress, not only in the personal sphere of sexuality but also in the public eye of society.

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In conclusion, when asking the question of how the human stain is the literary device used by Roth to transgress, first it is important to know where this language comes from in connection with his Jewish literary tradition (Greenberg 1997). In trying to understand Roth’s purpose in using his particular language of obscenity when portraying sexuality, after taking into consideration the reasons he gives, such as a character’s will to be saved (PC) or the freedom it afforded him when writing a novel without any strictures (ST), it seems that when the author said that he wanted to reveal everything he knew about human nature, he had no choice but to let in the repellent. In the “disgusting”, the human stain works to transgress as it allows the narrative to show how different characters react to what they believe is pure or impure in the area of sex. Roth wanted his readers to confront the repellent instead of looking away, so he used the device of the stain in order to show that “the perils of human nature” afflict everyone, even Jews.

Roth’s “thrilling profane” literary device allows him to take the image of water used in ritual cleansing and compare it with bodily fluids such as semen, where his characters can float freely. The stain is at the heart of his characters’ transgression, marking the moment of their temptation and fall, and it is also used to signal lust as an

expression of rebellion against the obligations of virtue. This rebellion does not only appear in men but also in women and it is marked in both by the stain.

Out of an interest in Roth's exploration of the feminine subjectivity, knowing that he has been criticized for focusing on a male perspective, and after considering relevant criticism written by feminists, I have studied a number of scenes in the novels in order to reassess some of his female characters and the problematic elements in these scenes. The characters I focused on were: Drenka, Nikki, Roseanna and Michelle from *ST*; Merry and Dawn from *AP*; Faunia from *HS* and Consuela from *DA*. Put in a nutshell, following Posnock's argument that male lust functions as an expression of rebellion, I argue that female lust operates similarly. But the human stain does more than that, as it enables female characters to express their desire to be free, to challenge preconceived notions and it shows their independence and vulnerability in a shocking way.

Although Roth's fictional representation of women and sexuality has been deemed as obscene and has provoked strong reactions, especially in the #MeToo context, the author repeatedly stated that his intention in writing was not to please, but to delve deeper into an imagined situation in reality, to raise the moral stakes. However, while Roth's work cannot be termed misogynistic, he did represent male sexuality unsparingly in a way that includes elements of misogyny. But reading the novels as a whole, the conclusion is that Roth portrays characters of women who are the opposite of objectified as they are portrayed as human beings and whose limitations and desires are represented with the human stain too.

Roth was realistic about the extent to which literature could influence people, bearing in mind that his task as a writer was to reflect what he learnt about people, an idea he liked to remind himself of as he wrote down what Gustave Flaubert wrote in his letters:

“The task at hand is not to change humanity but to know it” (“Il faut, si l’on veut vivre, renoncer à avoir une idée nette de quoi que ce soit. L’humanité est ainsi, il ne s’agit pas de la changer, mais de la connaître” (Flaubert in Conard 1915: 60). That is why in the next section of this Chapter, the human stain will be interpreted as the element which is the antidote to the character’s blindness to their own faults. The role of moral judgements will be examined in the light of the characters’ reaction to the human stain in others. The question of the laws and standards and transgression as a rebellion will be analyzed by looking at how the images of the stain are used in the novels.

II.2. THE STAIN IN THE EYES OF SOCIETY

Roth has challenged social and cultural norms all his life, primarily through his fiction, although it seems that ironically, even though he courted misunderstanding in his novels, he did not want to be misunderstood in his life, as has been pointed out in recent reviews of Roth’s biographies by Blake Bailey (2021) and Ira Nadel (2021). After studying how the human stain illuminates the representation of sexuality, the question is how the same device also serves Roth to show how characters err as they make moral judgements about one another. Moreover, the human stain enables the readers to become aware of their own judgements and to question them. The subject of wrong judgement is important throughout Roth’s oeuvre and it also extends to his personal life, with his efforts to denounce what he claimed were lies about him (and he tried to publish notes to deny what his ex-wife Claire Bloom memoir said about him, as mentioned in the previous section). Another example that illustrates this interest in writing about judgement is

Roth's novel *HS*, which is based on a real story. As he clarified in an open letter to Wikipedia, was about how Professor Melvin Tumin, who taught at Princeton, was falsely accused of racism (while the first section originally appeared on *The New Yorker* in 2012, later the whole text was published as "Errata" (Roth 2017: 349-363).

The subject of justice and society in Roth's fiction has been studied mostly in relation with Judaism, on the one hand; and on the other hand, with the political context that the novels are set in. The reason is that Roth's early stories clashed heavily with the fears and expectations of the Jewish American community at the time they came out, in the late fifties. It appeared to American Jews that after Hitler's terror they needed good publicity rather than Roth's stories, which exposed unpleasant Jewish traits. But as Saul Bellow argued in his 1963 introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories*, a collection in which he included Roth's story "Epstein" (thus including his work in the canon, alongside to authors such as Isaac Babel, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sholom Aleichem and Bernard Malamud): "in literature we cannot accept a political standard" (Bellow 1963: 14).

In spite of Bellow's defense of Roth, the belief that his work was not good for the Jews was echoed by other critics such as Alfred Kazin, who believed "Conversion of the Jews" was a "simplification" (qtd. in Furman 1981: 1). Apart from the criticism Roth received from rabbis decades ago, Gershom Sholem's words about PC have still been mentioned in Roth's 2018 obituary in the *New York Times*, considering Roth's novel as "more harmful to Jews than *The Protocols of Zion*" (McGrath, n.p.). The accusation that Roth's work is antisemitic has been considered by Roth scholars over the decades, allowing for a close reading of his work in order to analyze how it portrays Jews and what is considered good or bad for the Jews (see Burch and Burch 2020; Sánchez Canales 2021).

Alan Cooper finds that to many readers, Roth's irony "has seemed over-subtle or misapplied, allowing first-person narrators, in defending against the outrageous, to gloss the vicious." (Cooper 1996: 6). Cooper asks if Roth has "shocked a sometimes grudging readership into recognizing their limitations and real possibilities" or whether he has "merely irritated people seeking solace in the human condition." (6). And as to the readers' critical response to the human stain, when Roth's work is judged as obscene, dirty, it is an ironic but logical response, for, as Ruth Wisse has put it, if Roth is a "critic of bourgeois complacency, what sweeter response than his constituency's cry of 'foul,' exposing that very obsession with propriety that he has been ridiculing?" (Wisse 1971: 56 qtd in Cooper 1996: 7).

In the Old Testament, the individual and society must be conscious of any injustice or immorality, that is, aware of their stain, and they also have to remember it, together with God's deliverance. The biblical command to remember is very important in the Jewish literary tradition, and this has to do with the way in which writers make the past present in their work, as can be seen in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* by Yerushalmi Yosef Hayim (1996), which is something that Roth does too through his references to the Holocaust and will be further explored in Chapter III.

However, the problem is that in the sphere of human morality there is room for error as people are eager to judge others for their stain without realizing there is one in them too. This conundrum brings to mind Jesus' words in the Gospel, quoted in Chapter I in order to refer to Epstein's defense against the criticism he received for his actions: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from

your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:3-5). The human stain can be compared both to the speck and to the plank, as it represents the reality that is perceived as something repellent in the other and also what is invisible to those who are sure of their righteousness.

In his essay "Writing About Jews", Roth expressed an interest in a purpose of fiction as allowing us to judge "at a different level of our being, for not only are we judging with the aid of new feelings but without the necessity of having to act upon judgement" (Roth 2017: 52). The writer believed that this new layer of consciousness was valuable to individuals and to society as a whole, and he termed it "an expansion of moral consciousness, an exploration of moral fantasy" (52).

In this section, I intend to show how the human stain is a resource that allows the narrative to weave that tangled web that allows for such an exploration. When understanding the role of the human stain in the representation of the pressure of society's moral judgement on the individual, the tone of the novels is just as important as the themes. Firstly, Roth's is a style of indignation, because his characters cannot stop or help themselves, and it is a style of energy and abundance. The implications of this style and its bearing on the ideas it highlights have been studied by scholars such as Debra Shostak (2004) and Ross Posnock (2006). In the light of their studies, it becomes clear that Roth's text is not just "an angry rant", as his long paragraphs are structured with an objective in mind, an effect to be achieved. In Roth, many voices are talking at each other, but there is also a careful construction in order to create the effect of building up a specific reality in detail.

Secondly, Roth scholars agree that one of his greatest strengths was to find something to push against, not just the Jewish tradition, but also other social and moral rules and pressures. This section proposes how the specific images of the human stain

play an important role in that resistance, by means of the representation of that indignation. Roth writes following the steps of Franz Kafka, fascinated by the sense of entrapment and by the piercing irony, along with the alienation present in his fiction, as can be noted in Roth's 1973 essay "I Always Wanted You to Admire my Fasting", or Looking at Kafka" (Roth 2017: 11; 1975: 247-270). Just as Kafka wrote about the impossibility of escaping judgement, Roth wrote about the insidious presence of that judgement and the tension when his characters try to escape it.

The strength of this impulse and the opposition to moral rules allow for a focused view with a layered and complex plot which has probably led Harold Bloom to consider Roth's work as a historical high point in light of its literary precedents: "In one sense Philip Roth is the culmination of the unsolved riddle of Jewish literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The complex influences of Kafka and Freud and the malaise of American Jewish life produced in Philip a new kind of synthesis" (Bloom 2018, n.p.). As Shostak put it, Roth's transgressive force goes further than making a political statement, as he is more interested in rebelling against the constraints of his own imagination, therefore developing a dialogical method that offers "a constant source of self-critique" (2004: 4). *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) can be seen as a breakthrough in the exploration of a moral fantasy, which is why many considered his work morally brave. And after that novel, Roth's texts continued to be brave and provocative as they tackled taboos not only about the role that the body plays in different aspects of human experience, but also as they questioned moral standards. Furthermore, as Shostak argues, in later novels such as AP, there is a new narrative that shifts the value of ideas expressed in *Portnoy's Complaint*, reversing the meaning of freedom, knowledge and transgression (2004: 5). In this way, the reader is offered multiple opportunities to rethink moral judgements.

II.2.1. The Jews and the Stain of Scandal

When exploring the meaning of the human stain in connection with moral judgement, it might seem obvious to define the stain as the concept of sin that appears in the Bible, that is, as an error, the failure when it comes to hitting the bull's eye. Failing to meet society's standards is not exactly the same as that failure, and this is an idea that will be explored in this section. The question is whether the human stain is merely calling for the readers' empathy or for sheer sympathy for the characters' plight. Alan Cooper, for example, believed that Roth's aim was to write with sympathy for "the most failed human beings, Epstein, for example, so that the reader can derive, not as moral judge but as expanded consciousness, a sense of what that act of failing is like" (Cooper 1996: 37). Admittedly, Roth explained he sought to offer an understanding and humorous view of Epstein, purposefully showing how others judge him and misjudge him for his actions, but the stain does more than that as it shows how the very foundation for that judgement could be wrong. Indeed, Roth has written specifically about moral and personal crisis in the Jewish American context and the stain is particularly accurate for this situation.

This function of the stain brings this study back to the first traces found in Roth's early stories. Jewish identity plays an important role in the subject matter of "Eli the Fanatic" (1959) and it features a clear image of the human stain as there are descriptions of a mysterious darkness that both repels and attracts the main character. This story is about Eli, an attorney who needs to take a message to a small group of Orthodox Jews who act on behalf of the prosperous Jewish community of a suburban American town:

they will be evicted on the grounds that they are breaking the law by having a school in a residential area. The real reason is that they are worried that these strange Jews might jeopardize their position in American society. As he speaks with the yeshiva headmaster, Rabbi Tzoref, Eli defends the law but he finds that the Rabbi confronts him with a different Law, which in turn makes Eli reconsider his opinion.

But most of all, Eli is challenged by the strange darkness, the human stain that is present in the narrative. It appears in the shape of the strange black clothes that are worn by one of the survivors of the death camps. This Jewish man, who is called a “greenie” by Eli’s neighbors, is at first a complete stranger. But gradually Eli realizes that instead of being different to the Orthodox Jews, he has become one of them, and in the act of changing his clothes, he puts on this identity to show it everybody. He walks through the town and all his neighbors watch on at this moment when he finally knows who he is, even though people believe he is having a mental breakdown. As Eli is given an injection to calm him down, they take off the black clothes that are so offensive to them: “In a moment they tore off his jacket -it gave so easily, in one yank. Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul, but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached” (1959: 275). The last lines of the story can be compared with those of “Epstein”, when Epstein’s wife asks the doctor if his rash might be cured, the implication being that the stain cannot really be cured. In the end, it is not just a moral reflection about the significance of the law that brought Eli to that point: it is by the means of the human stain that he has seen a reality that is deep within him. Nevertheless, generally speaking, throughout Roth’s writing career, he wrote about many different types of Jews: Those like Job, those who have no faith, those who do believe, those who act like the stereotype and those who do not (“New Jewish Stereotypes”, “Writing about Jews” and “Imagining

Jews” in Roth 2017; 1975). But most of them are plagued with the same problem of society’s judgements and misunderstandings.

The unsurmountable difficulty that resides in reading people accurately is a theme that is repeated in Roth’s work, and it is especially present in the novels of ST, AP, HS, and DA. I want to show how it is by the means of the human stain that Roth has shown interest in moral fanaticism by delving deep into the experience and consequences of moral ambition. As Roth put it in an interview with Jerry Mangione in 1966, in many of his books, going back to his early stories, characters end up finding “a kind of moral ignorance” in people who try to be good, but have “a deep innocence about the nature of evil” (Searles 1992: 10). Roth refers to the innocence and ignorance that leads people to throw themselves into dangerous situations, driven by moral ambition. What brings characters such as Gabe Wallach in *Letting Go* (1962) or Lucy Nelson in *When She Was Good* (1967) to their destruction is the same moral ignorance that leads characters in Roth’s later novels to accuse others of immorality, and Roth’s attitude towards this experience is that he thinks at the same time that it is absurd and that it is horrible too.

In addition, the very people who believe they could create a pure society by repressing sexual freedom are presented as the authoritative judges who would put characters like David Kepesh, Coleman Silk or Mick Sabbath on trial. Furthermore, this society is close to the characters, it is not just their neighbors or community, it is their closest relatives, their family, who judge them. For example, in DA it is Kepesh’s own friend George and his son, along with Consuela, who judge or lecture him in the end. Similarly, in “Epstein”, it is his family, his wife and daughter who judge him. In ST, Sabbath is judged by his wife Roseanna and in AP, Seymour is judged by his brother and his daughter is judged by Seymour himself.

II.2.2. The Misconstruction of an Individual's Artificial and Inner Life

The human stain shows how it is unavoidable to be wrong about the reality in people's lives because of its double or hidden nature. It does so by either illuminating the opacity of secrets or by darkening the artificial light of dreams. In *AP*, for example, the narrator imagines the Swede's story as "the revelation of the interior life that was unknown and unknowable, the story that is tragic and awful and impossible to ignore [...]" (Roth 1997: 80, ellipsis mine). Through constant questions and the exploration of a variety of possibilities, the novel allows the reader to question the deceiving feeling of certainty that one has when judging other people's lives. Moreover, as Jack Knowles notes, the phrase "I was wrong" is repeated with a specific purpose, as it "recurs throughout *American Pastoral* as an insistent refrain, and it comes to signal the demythologization of national experience and the emergence of history (Knowles 2020: 26). This aspect will be further discussed in the next section, which deals with the representation of the stain in American History.

In his narration, Zuckerman quotes from Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilych* (1886) in order to illustrate how the Swede led a decorous life, approved by society, and he may not regret it, in America, though "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (Roth 1997: 31). Velichka Ivanova argues that Zuckerman's reference to Tolstoy's statement "is in fact both its re-actualization one century later, and its contestation. Not only does it point to the central leitmotiv of *American Pastoral*—the dream of order invariably brings a terrible disorder—it also suggests the dialogic

orientation of Roth's narrative" (Ivanova 2011: 241-241). Ivanova compares this novel with *Ivan Ilych* by pointing at how both Tolstoy's and Roth's characters are fleeing from the unpleasant in their lives only to be caught up with it later in their lives. However, it is not because of an empty inner life that the Swede does not know about imperfection, it is only that he has managed to curb it, he never had to fight it till he is faced with Merry's bomb. This is why Ivanova states that the Levovs are only concerned with order and beauty and that they "live an artificial life", because Zuckerman's initial suspicion is just that they have tried to stay away from the dark, disagreeable aspects of life, they only seek to embrace what is good and beautiful in their view. But Ivanova states that "the Swede is more concerned with external appearance than with inner life" (244-245). Instead, I would like to argue that the Swede is imbued with dreams and does have a rich inner life, it is just that it consists of dreams of purity. This accusation of an artificial life has come from the voices of various characters, and the way the Swede responds is central to the theme of the human stain.

Firstly, the first chapter ends with Zuckerman's verdict, "This guy is the embodiment of nothing", and then, a shocking confession that acts as a cliff-hanger: "I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life" (Roth 1997: 39). And then Zuckerman's narration proceeds to tell what it is that filled the life of the Swede, who is very much alive and proves to know the human stain in his own skin. If by making a parallel with Tolstoy's character, Ivanova echoes the novel's statement that the Levovs "live an artificial life" (2011: 245), I think this is only partly true. It is not so before the bomb, and it is only when they are traumatized by facing the meaninglessness of life that they have to put up a mask to conceal their pain. "Artificial" is actually the adjective used by Zuckerman when he explains what happens to the Swede after he realizes life makes no sense: "And when that happens the happiness is never spontaneous again. It is artificial

and, even then, bought at the price of an obstinate estrangement from oneself and one's history" (Roth 1997: 81). There is no more real and complete joy in life so he has to feign it. It is artificial only superficially, to others' eyes, in that he has to pretend to be happy to hide his suffering: "Stoically he suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin. Swede Levov lives a double life" (81). He cannot recover the innocence or the wholeness he knew before.

This artificiality was Zuckerman's initial suspicion, but it has to be cast away, in light of the narrative that gives insight into the Levovs' lives and thoughts. In the novel, the character Rita Cohen also judges the Swede and Dawn as artificial, claiming they only care about the surface of things and have no idea of what is underneath the skin (Roth 1997: 137). However, as the Swede's thoughts show, he listens to everything Rita has to say precisely because he wants to know the truth, painful though it may be. It is up to the reader to form their own idea of the Swede, but it has to be drawn from the narrator's description and report. The text performs a kind of miracle because Zuckerman has to illuminate "the Swede's opacity" (77). If Zuckerman highlights one idea over and over again, it is this one: It is impossible to avoid being wrong about people. In this way, he is wrong about the Swede in the beginning, and he shows how the Swede was wrong about his daughter. Because just as Zuckerman is losing his patience, bored by the Swede's righteousness, the readers may be tempted to give up, and yet the text teases them into waiting for the revelation of what lies under the veil, or the snow, to use some of the metaphors from the novel.

II.2.3. The Equivocal Stain as an Instrument of Unblinding

Both the characters and the readers have to be unblinded during the reading of Roth's novels, and they do so by lifting the veil with the resource of the human stain. It is not easy for the Swede to maintain an appearance of control when he experiences the chaos of history in his own skin, a terror attack so close to his home. The text shows his fall and "how he must have imagined that it was founded on some failure of his own responsibility", for he makes himself "unnaturally responsible. Keeping under control not just himself but whatever else threatens to be uncontrollable, giving his all to keep his world together" (Roth 1997: 88). The narrator implies throughout the text that these events are really none of the Swede's fault, and yet he feels they must be. Because of the text, the reader realizes that the real mystery is not the Swede, but his daughter. Whilst the narrator speaks with the Swede's voice, Merry's voice is only heard in conversation with other characters, and her thoughts, her inner life, are never revealed. She is like a gap in the narrative. Her voice is heard and yet, the reader is in the same situation as the Swede, being ignorant about her true thoughts, wondering whether she means what she says.

As seen in Chapter I, the human stain can be interpreted as the illness or as the cure, and in AP the Swede sees it as a false cure stemming from good intentions, when he believes his daughter uses filth as a penance. This happens when he questions his daughter about the bombs and the people she has killed. She is guilty and she accepts the full burden of responsibility: "How strongly you still crave the idea of your innocent offspring. [...] I am the abomination. Abhor me" (Roth 1997: 248, ellipsis mine). Finally, the truth is revealed: Without a tempter, she has done it: "everything angry inside her had

broken into the open”, it was her intention to commit murder (249). In the light of her crime, it seems clear to the Swede that she is a Jain because she is punishing herself. He is still holding on to the goodness he believes is in her: “you’re a good girl and so you want to do penance” and so she will die “from filth” (249). The human stain becomes her self-imposed punishment and her death sentence even. There is a deep irony in the double reality of her terrorism and her Jainism. Sánchez Canales talks about this sarcasm in his essay in Ivanova’s book about AP (2011: 214).

This use of the image of the human stain brings back the biblical meaning of original sin which carries with it the penalty of death, as discussed in Chapter I. When the Swede at last sees what is under his daughter’s veil, he realizes that even though he recognizes her as his, she is still “unknowable”: “The veil was off, but behind the veil there was another veil. Isn’t there always?” (266). The Swede’s brother is the first and also the last of the characters to accuse the Swede of leading an “unnatural, artificial” life (277). The problem is that Jerry, like Job’s friend, does not really want to listen to the Swede and so he does not know him: “He hears only himself” (276). And yet, during his final conversation with him, the Swede acknowledges something important: It is true, he may not have been enough to stop his daughter from doing what she did, but now he knows, he did his best, so “what anybody *is* is not enough” (280).

At this point the Swede realizes nobody has the power to stop themselves or others from becoming a monster. As Jerry says, “We are none of us enough! Including the man who does everything right!” (280). These words seem to echo the words of the Book of Psalms: “They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. [...] They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:1-3, ellipsis mine). In Roth’s work there is no divine perspective, however, and it is the human mind that realizes its failings. It is achieved

through irony and the human stain. Valerie Roberge has further explored Roth's use of irony in a paper presented at the Roth Remembered Conference (2019). In "Roth's Lesson in Irony", she presents the effect this irony has on the reader of Roth's fiction and how empathy emerges from the ironic experience. Drawing on Roberge's description of irony, I see how the ironic mode is how the human stain functions in its representation of purity and impurity on the one hand, and transgression and punishment on the other hand. According to Roberge, irony sets the readers free from the world's judgement but also from their own moral consciousness as they explore a new fictional world.

Immersed in the ironic experience, and trapped by Zuckerman's narrative, the reader sees that the Swede had no capacity to "penetrate the interior of people", and so he was fooled by many: "he failed to see into his daughter, failed to see into his wife, failed to see into his one and only mistress -probably had never even begun to see into himself" and nobody really has more idea than he does (Roth 1997: 410). The surprising revelation is that Merry is the one who helps him see how wrong he had been about life:

[...] the instrument of his unblinding is Merry. The daughter has made her father see. [...] She has given him sight, the sight to see clear through that which will never be regularized, to see what you can't see [...]. He had seen that we don't come from one another, that it only appears that we come from one another. [...] He had thought that most of it was order and only a little of it was disorder. He'd had it backwards. He had made his fantasy and Merry had unmade it for him. (Roth 1997: 418, ellipsis mine).

The presence of the unexpected emerges in the text allowing characters to know themselves and to deal with surprises. In "The Conversion of the Jews", one of Roth's

early stories, there is a description of the feeling of surprise at one's own shocking actions. When Ozzie asks himself whether it is him who had insulted the Rabbi and who was prancing about on the roof, it is compared by the narrator to the question a criminal may ask himself before committing a crime or a bridegroom before getting married. After hesitating whether it is them, really, who will do those things, they just do the deed and realize that it is in fact, themselves. They recognize themselves in their actions, as they bear their human stain. This theme will be explored to the extreme and with detail in these novels. In AP, the Swede is surprised as he finds out who his daughter really is, but also his wife etc. In HS, Coleman asks himself what he has done to become who he really is.

Furthermore, the question of whether it is really oneself who will do something decisive is connected to another one: Who is it that judges our actions? Is it possible to know the judge of human beings, or God? Cooper believes that in "The Conversion of the Jews", Rabbi Binder is a hypocrite and Ozzie's response is more of a test in his pursuit of freedom than a question of theological truth (Cooper 1996: 32). Interestingly, if Ozzie's reply to the Rabbi, "You don't know anything about God!" is one of the lessons from the Book of Job, as Cooper points out, then human error about the divine judge might be linked to human error when it comes to judging one's own moral character and one's equals too. This issue is addressed in Sánchez Canales' essay about Roth's presumed anti-Semitism (2021), because there is a passage in which Alex Portnoy has a strong argument with his father because he refused to go to the synagogue. He openly says he is an atheist and that consequently he does not believe in the existence of God. *Portnoy's Complaint* was published one decade later than the stories mentioned above, which shows that Roth's characters had not dramatically changed.

In AP, the human stain helped the Swede see through his daughter because of how her appearance had changed, which highlights the importance of what is visible and

palpable, once again: The body. As seen in the previous section dealing with sexuality, in *DA*, Roth explores how much can be known of a person through his or her body: “The great biological joke on people is that you are intimate before you know anything about the other person. In the initial moment you understand everything. You are drawn to each other’s surface initially, but you also intuit the fullest dimension” (Roth 2001: 15). In expressing how much it is possible to get to know by the body before the mind, the body becomes significant too. Just as meaningful as the mind, in fact, and as people cannot avoid this intimacy, they are bound to know each other. But still, in *DA* that possibility to create an artificial connection by lust that bridges all limitations is contradicted as soon as Kepesh and Consuela have sex and he states he will “have no idea what she is, how clever she is or how stupid she is, how shallow she is, how deep she is, how innocent she is or how guileful she is, how wily, how wise, even how wicked” (Roth 2001: 27). All these things are of interest and would soothe his lack of confidence, for he would feel sure of her only if he felt he really knew her. All of this is getting to know the mind in depth rather than just the body. Consuela is described as someone who is hard to decipher, who does unexpected things, making it impossible for Kepesh to truly know her, so that ironically, maybe the body does not tell the whole story after all.

In the train of thought of the Socratic paradox (“I know one thing; that I know nothing”), the human stain in Roth’s work shows how the characters become aware of their own ignorance and it shows the wisdom of acknowledging that uncertainty. When attempting to describe *ST*’s main character, one is at a loss, for Sabbath’s life seems to rely mostly on waywardness, hence escaping any clear-cut definition. That is why when he is confronted with pain, the history of his losses offers no satisfactory explanation. Reflecting upon his own life, he can only say that everything he knows is wrong. Even though he decides how to act, how to behave, Sabbath believes that the troubles in his life

have no solution. There is no clarity in his aims, nor in the means to accomplish anything, nor is there a clear essence of his identity, nor limits to his person. That is why his actions are never explained without confusion or contradiction: “There was no unsnarling an existence whose waywardness constituted its only authority and provided its primary amusement” (Roth 1995: 108).

That waywardness is why Sabbath does not wholly assign the sense of futility to his personal tragedies, he is just telling the story of what has happened to him, because it is the only thing he can be sure of, and even that certainty is ambiguous: “That’s all you could know, though if what you think happened happens to not ever match up with what somebody else thinks happened, how could you say you know even that? Everybody got everything wrong” (Roth 1995: 109). This acknowledgement of uncertainty can be considered wise. He knows the limits of human knowledge, while at the same time the narration offers a deep insight into human nature. There is, however, something that can be known about it: it bears a stain.

This theme appears too in HS throughout the novel, but especially in the chapter titled “Everybody knows”, as Coleman Silk strives to conceal his true identity but the truth comes to the surface in the end. Similarly, in AP, the Swede is surprised by how much he ignores about his daughter. Matthew Shipe has pointed out how Zuckerman has to realize that he completely misread the Swede and that this argument is present in a large amount of Roth’s later fiction (Shipe 2019: 132). Zuckerman’s realization unleashes his conclusion that it is impossible to be right when trying to understand anyone because we are ill-equipped “to envision one another’s interior workings and invisible aims” which is why he sums up: “The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living [...]” (Roth 2000: 35). Paradoxically, at the same time, in Roth’s work we find the reality that fiction serves as

a vehicle for understanding ourselves” as Shipe argues (2019: 132). The human stain captures the tension of this apparent contradiction as it is a metaphor that shows but also hides its meaning in the text.

Sabbath describes life as a “meaningless mess” (Roth 1995: 111), which will later echo in the second section, in the words written by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/ And then is heard no more; it is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing.” (V, v, 24-28). It seems that Sabbath’s life has come undone and he is left with nothing but a theater. “To a life that had come to nothing, a crude theatrical instinct was lending a garish, pathetic touch of last-minute drama” (Roth 1995: 111). His work as a puppeteer gave him the opportunity to create characters and stories, seducing his audience for the sake of the performance, for art’s sake, which needs no moral justification. Experience remains a mystery even if Sabbath tries to be sensible and make sense out of his life, there is always regret and frustration because of the lack of control he has: “Life is impenetrable” (248). This pervading mess in life can also be found in the experience of Coleman Silk in HS. Gustavo Sánchez Canales writes about the issue of free will vs. determinism in his article on HS (2009: 111-128). As he points out, Coleman does everything he can to prevent any outer force from limiting him (114). Coleman has the strong desire to be in control, but as we see in Greek literature, the *moira*, the forces of destiny, cannot be avoided and so, there is no escape from the true identity of the characters. Precisely in trying to flee, he will fall (119).

II.2.4. The Human Stain Behind Indictment and Beyond Judgement

HS is about a “human secret” that comes out in detail. The secret has implications of Coleman’s personal shame and also the shame of the Athena community that pretends to appear as stainless in the eyes of the others. The political context of the novel is significant because the affair between Coleman and Faunia is compared to the affair of President Clinton with his intern Monica Lewinsky in 1998. But Roth emphasizes not only how people judged it or regarded it as a scandal, he also chooses to narrate the physical details of their story. The human stain serves to tell the story of the mind in the body, once again. The locals think that Faunia is Coleman’s slave while she is actually his liberator, his gateway to freedom. Falsely accused of being a racist, Coleman is also accused of being a misogynist, which is an accusation Roth has also received and an issue he has written about, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. In fact, Coleman’s story was inspired by what happened to a friend of Roth’s, Melvin Tumin, who used the word “spooks” in the same way as it appears in the novel and was accused of racism by the University of Princeton and after a few months he was vindicated of the charges (Roth Pierpont 2013: 254). Probably, the fact that Roth knew that such a witch hunt could indeed happen, just as it happened with the scandal of Clinton’s affair, shows how the novel is rooted in reality.

Not only does the Athena community believe lies about Coleman and judges him harshly, Coleman’s own children also turn against him, and so the question that is constantly on his lips is: “What is my crime?” (Roth 2000: 62). He is seized by indignation, a feeling that many of Roth’s characters share, but in his case, knowing Ancient Greek Literature very well, he is aware that such a rage will destroy him. It is a

furious madness, a despair that comes from believing that he is unjustly wronged. There is irony too in the name of the institution, as Sánchez Canales has pointed out, because Athena makes reference to Pallas Athena, the Greek Goddess of wisdom (2009). The people who falsely accused Coleman in Athena were all professors who lacked wisdom. And Coleman himself gave the best education to his own children, so it seems like it was all a fruitless effort. Because the result is that at a critical time such as this, Coleman's children believe lies about their father without questioning them. Of course, there is an important irony here, which is that, even though it is true that Coleman taught them well, he also lied to them their whole life about his race and his original family. He taught them to believe lies, in a way.

What Coleman most desires now is to *let go*, to ignore people's judgment. Letting go is one of the themes in Roth's fiction, as can be gathered from the title of one of his early novels, *Letting Go* (1962). This phrase means to surrender to the circumstances that the individual tries to fight, to give in to one's desire and forget about moral responsibility, in a way. "It was time to yield, to let this simple craving be *his* guide. Beyond their accusation. Beyond their indictment. Beyond their judgment. Learn, he told himself, before you die, to live beyond the jurisdiction of their enraging, loathsome, stupid blame" (Roth 2000: 64). However, this is a difficult task, taking into account the hypocrisy and vanity of those who are quick to judge Coleman. For example, his attorney Primus, who puts up a tremendous show in order to pretend to be clean of chaos: "no weaknesses of character nor extreme views nor rash compulsions nor even the possibility of inadvertent error, nothing ill or well concealed [...]" (Roth 2000: 78, ellipsis mine). All those characteristics of the frailty of human beings can be found not only in Coleman, but also in other main characters of Roth, such as Sabbath, who actually embrace such things as part not only of their nature, but of humanity in general.

Nonetheless, Primus claims he can “draw the line” and in this way, “no incriminating impurity will be permitted to breach it” (Roth 2000: 79). The question is whether one has the power to do such a thing. Coleman, who has been humiliated, asks himself: “But didn’t I draw the line and draw it no less rigorously? Was I less vigilant in the pursuit of legitimate goals and of an estimable, even-keeled life? Was I any less confident marching in step behind my own impregnable scruples? Was I any less arrogant?” (79). All his caution could not prevent his disgrace: that just because of one word that came out of his lips, his whole life was shattered by people who saw him naked, as it were, who found him lacking in truthfulness. No matter how hard he had tried to build up a respectable life, impurity had caught up with him and he was found guilty. That is why even though he tries to keep the chaos away, it still overcomes him. This is an experience shared with other characters, such as Kepesh in *DA* or The Swede in *AP*.

Primus’ view is that chaos is only present in some people, and that by keeping them away, there is safety and people can remain uncontaminated by their stain. This is a similar way of thinking as that of the community of American Jews that appear in the story mentioned in the introduction, “Eli the Fanatic”. They feel so safe in their modern community, that they believe their status can only be maintained by keeping those who seem strange at bay. Their old black clothes are what make them fanatic, supposedly. The story asks with irony who is more fanatic, really. Intransigence and intolerance are shown to be in those who cannot stand the human stain and try to eradicate it completely. Then, in this line of thinking, for people such as Primus in *HS*, “the world” and its dangers must be avoided at all costs. There is a division in the world, different kinds of worlds. Following this logic, Coleman’s attorney tells him to keep clear of Faunia, because she is “not of his world” (she belongs to a part of society that has suffered too much and thus carries their burdens and dangers with them), and she will no doubt bring disaster to him.

But social status makes no difference, the attorney is wrong, because Coleman's world is really just the same as Faunia's, and everyone, in fact, shares the same chaotic human nature. No one is safe from it, as Sabbath says in ST and as examined in Chapter I.

Just as in ST, the representations of the stain indicate the real, chaotic human quality of Sabbath's life, which is really more than theater, just as in Coleman and Faunia's stain there is more than an empty scandal. This human factor can be found in the physical realities that point at aspects of Sabbath's being which he cannot help or control as if he himself were a puppet. But the opposite position is also marked by the stain. As in AP, where there are two brothers with opposing views, and yet, Jerry also bears the imprint of the stain: "he is king" He reveals everything about himself all the time, "And these two are brothers, [...] one for whom the aggression has been bred out, [...]" (Roth 1997: 277-278, ellipsis mine). The cruelty with which Jerry treats his brother might stem from his outlook on life, as he states that "everything is horrible", and "we are *none* of us *enough*" (278, 280). Jerry thinks that Merry planted the bomb because she hated her father and his lifestyle, but the Swede does not accept this explanation: "it is not rational, it is chaos" (281). Like Coleman in HS, the Swede is aware of the reality of chaos in his life.

The double nature in the characters is revealed drastically by their own discourse. For example, after a passionate and rational description of his trade, the Swede suddenly switches into the speech of a madman as he is asked whether he is happy or not. "Am I? he asked, and felt as though he were going to be dissected, cut into by a knife, opened up, and all his misery revealed" (Roth 1997: 130). Roth's fiction shows this sword that brings conflict into character's lives because it confronts truth with lies, or it holds up a mirror so characters can see the dark reality underneath the surface.

How do people come to change? The human stain appears too as the liquid, the fluid identity inside people, which surprisingly people try to get rid, draining themselves out from it. The Swede realizes “that people were manifold creatures didn’t come as a surprise to the Swede, [...] What was astonishing to him was how people seemed to run out of their own being, run out of whatever the stuff was that made them who they were and, drained of themselves, turn into the sort of people they would have once felt sorry for” (Roth 1997: 329, ellipsis mine). The words “stuff” and “drained” indicate that this liquid is like a character’s fluid and changing identity. Change comes from an escape from one’s own essential identity, and also from a rejection of what they consider impure, unseemly, only to come to miss it and wish they could get back to it: “It was as though while their lives were rich and full they were secretly sick of themselves and couldn’t wait to dispose of their sanity and their health and all sense of proportion so as to get down to that other self, the *true* self” (329). Being “sick” with the human stain, they dispose of their “health”, that is, they discard purity as if it were waste, in order to find themselves.

The stain is hidden away by people only to be looked for again, in search of that “true” self, the human nature. That is why reading a novel like AP brings up the following questions: Why do people have a double nature? How can they hide the stain so effectively? In the Swede’s view, Orcutt, the man who is having an affair with his wife, is “All façade and subterfuge [...] Up top the gentleman, underneath the rat. Drink the devil that lurks in his wife; lust and rivalry the devils lurking in him” (Roth 1997: 382). Orcutt pretends to be civilized and respectable, but in secret he is a beast: “His civilized form of animal behavior” (383). Orcutt’s very name seems to imply a split-up personality.

In conclusion, the Swede fails to really see into the people he thought he knew best -himself included (409-410). He discovers that people in general really fail to know

themselves, and when they say who they are, they are completely wrong: “What was *he*, stripped of all the signs he flashed?” (410). Besides, after the traumatic experience that opens the Swede’s eyes to the reality of his life, the Past loses its innocence. Everything is re-examined: “He saw that everything you say says either more than you wanted it to say or says less than you wanted it to say” (93). Every action has got a reaction that is extreme, exaggerated, does not correspond to the character’s intentions, and so life proves to be a dangerous and cruel stage.

II.2.5. The Question of Morality

In the realm of the human stain the conventional ideas of morality fade, and ethics is left outside when it comes to the representation of this experience. Now, it is confusing because Roth includes the notion of morality in the dialogues to show the judgements that people make, and then these are questioned. The important thing is whether people have a realistic understanding of human nature. A key passage to consider in light of this idea can be found in the part ST titled *To be or not to be*. Sabbath considers that his tapes with the recording of the sexual phone conversation with a girl who was his student constitute a work of art rather than rubbish (Roth 1995: 213). To throw them in the garbage would have been a sin (“like defiling a Picasso”), which warns ironically that what can be considered dirty because of its sexual impurity, can be considered very valuable to Sabbath: “Because there was in the tapes a kind of *art* the way that he was able to unshackle his girls from their habit of innocence” (231). ST has a dual tone, a dual vision. With double passages such as this one, as the reader chooses to read the phone

conversation first, the innocence of the student is mitigated (Cooper 1996: 285). Like in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), these young girls are not more innocent than the adults. With *Lolita* there is the same irony, as Humbert Humbert can only write about his prison, which is his passion for Lolita. The purpose of Roth's narrative is not only to show the impurity that lies hidden beneath a surface of purity, but to show that impurity can be art, or that art can be impure and has to be preserved just like what is considered pure art.

Sabbath analyzes the crooked psychology that fuels such an exchange: The young girls are drawn towards this particular illicit act because "the very repugnance that his aging body inspired in them had to make their adventure with him feel a little like a crime and thereby give free play to their budding perversity and to the confused exhilaration that comes of flirting with disgrace" (Roth 1995: 213). The entrance to the "lurid interstices of life" is appealing precisely because of the human stain. It is important to note how the girls are described as naturally perverse and willing to break the law. These tapes are actually Sabbath's only legacy, which is very meaningful (he planned to leave them to the Library of Congress collection, as he remarks jokingly). This proud attitude of the seducer can be compared to Kepesh in the *DA* and his habit of having affairs with his former students.

The focus of the conversation is on the body and it reflects the girl's experience with "the risks that deviancy entailed" which is awakened by Sabbath's "insidious art of giving license to what was already there" (Roth 1995: 214). This passage is analyzed by David Brauner, who writes about "Sabbath's Nietzschean attempt to recalibrate conventional indices of morality" in this section, conformed by two parallel narratives: On the upper side of the page there is an account of Sabbath's conversation with his student, and on the lower side there is a transcription of the infamous telephone conversation. The conclusion of the conversation features Sabbath's comment: "let them

be unrealistic”, alluding to people who expect others to be pure according to their morality. Sabbath, according to Brauner, uses “the term ‘realistic’ as an antidote to the poisonous idealism of those with rigid notions of morality. To be ‘unrealistic’ about human sexuality in Sabbath’s view, is not simply to exhibit a tenuous grasp of reality, but to create a climate of intemperate morality that is, paradoxically, immoral” (2007: 131-132). I agree with Brauner that Sabbath’s comments and his “impure” words are an antidote to that poisonous idealism.

Mostly, Sabbath’s urge to escape from a moral judgement can be considered to reflect a Nietzschean attempt because this character follows a path that the philosopher illuminated when questioning morals. Many are drawn to literature, Roth said in “Writing About Jews”, to discover “all that is beyond simple moral categorizing” (Roth 2017: 51). When at the end of the passage of the phone conversation, Sabbath has to acknowledge how clueless he is about the girl’s real motivations and about how he should act, he confesses: “So little in life is knowable, Reader-don’t be hard on Sabbath if he gets things wrong. Or on Kathy if *she* gets things wrong. Many farcical, illogical, incomprehensible transactions are subsumed by the manias of lust” (Roth 1995: 232-233). In this direct address to the reader, the narrator makes him an accomplice in a similar way as Humbert Humbert does in Nabokov’s *Lolita*. The question is that there are no grounds of knowing what is right and what is wrong, and because of its nature, lust cannot lead to rational decisions. Posnock has argued that there are important points of comparison between some aspects of Emerson’s thought and Roth’s work, in particular, for their love of agonistic combat and rude truth” and their defense of the defiant immaturity of a soul that “never reasons” (2006: 9-10). In addition, as Emerson wrote in “Circles” included in his *Essays*, “nothing is secure, but life, transition, the energizing spirit”, life is “a series of surprises” (Emerson 1983: 413). This inability to know what will happen is a recurring

theme in HS, AP and DA, which are all novels that represent the idea that “the individual is always mistaken” as Emerson says twice in “Experience” (1983: 484).

Despite all these things that he does not know, Sabbath does have a strong awareness of the human stain, and he also feels drawn to it. The narrative also gradually creates a clear picture of that reality for the reader. So, it is obvious that because of his nature, Sabbath has no choice but to transgress: “if you can still do something, then you must do it! Anything living can figure that out” (Roth 1995: 233). As Nietzsche put it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “‘being conscious’ is not in any decisive sense the opposite of what is instinctive: most of the conscious thinking of a philosopher is secretly guided and forced into certain channels by his instincts” (Nietzsche 1886: 201). Posnock has also compared Nietzsche’s philosophy to Roth’s for a similar enmity of ideology and bourgeois pieties” (2006: 9). Accordingly to Nietzsche’s words, Sabbath’s awareness of reality is often guided by his instincts. He is not only aware of his anxieties about human nature and the nearness of death, he is obsessed by these realities because of his instincts. For an extended analysis of the presence of concepts of the Dionysian and of tragedy and other ideas of Nietzsche in Roth’s work, especially in ST, see Patrick Hayes’ *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (Hayes 2014: 82-87).

In addition, when Ross Posnock speaks about Roth’s references to Dostoevsky, he refers to philosopher and critic Lev Shestov, who was “one of the first to emphasize the Nietzschean side of Dostoevsky”, saying about the Russian author that he “lauds caprice, unconditional, unforeseen, always irrational, and makes mock of all the human virtues” (qtd. in Posnock 2006: 161). Dostoevsky wrote in *Notes from the Underground* (1864) about man’s “sheer perversity”: “Merely to have his own way,” a man will “intentionally desire the most wicked rubbish [...] simply in order to inject his own pernicious, fantastic element into all this positive rationality” (22, ellipsis mine) (qtd in

Posnock 2006: 74). This is a perfect description of Roth's Sabbath. Another Russian writer who was not only influenced by Dostoevsky, but who also influenced writers such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, is Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937). Dostoevsky's idea of writing about a perverse man who has immoral desires in order to inject his element into rationality is very similar to Zamyatin's novel *We* (1924), as the experience of the main character shows how he engages in transgression unwillingly at first, but he actually cannot help doing it because even though his actions constitute a rebellion against the laws of the One State, he feels there is a mysterious beast within him that has to do his own will. Similarly, Sabbath is not deceiving anyone and he is not pretending when he lives the way he does, unapologetically transgressive.

Brauner analyzes the dilemmas posed by the juxtaposition of the two parallel texts mentioned above, that feature very different levels of discourse: "This passage offers both a striking counterpoint to the sexualized language of the conversation that appears beneath it and a justification of it" (2007: 127). Consequently, "the air in text one, though rarefied, is hardly purified. What finally subverts and redeems the pornography of text two, however, is the irreverence and mordant irony in text one" (128). The effect of the combination of humor and thoughts of mortality is indeed striking and complex in text one, and opposed to Brauner's interpretation, it seems that text two cannot be redeemed nor "purified", because that would imply that the contrast of thoughts about mortality with the expression of carnal desire is more valuable than the crude conversation between the teacher and his student. It is meant to be a 'filthy' sexual narrative that needs no justification because of its very nature, and it is precisely what it is, a transgressive recording, included in the narrative with the purpose of showing Sabbath's performance and the way there is no innocence in the girl either. It is true that such passages are disagreeable, and that is because the human stain embodies the unpalatable, as Posnock

states (2006: 2). The conversations end with the girl telling Sabbath he is a “human animal” and saying she is a “bad girl” while she knows that she has to be a good girl, because “it’s what people expect.” The conversation ends with an image of the mess that points at the human stain as Sabbath replies “Well, you be realistic and let them be unrealistic. Jesus. There’s a mess here” (Roth 1995: 234).

Another reason why there is no justification or redemption needed for this passage is that its vulgarity functions as a medicine, a life-giving drive that is essential to fight against the blindness of believing in moral innocence. Posnock writes:

Rudeness in Roth is a source of stylistic energy, but also a principled (even moral) position, the antidote to the condition of ‘anti-humanity that calls itself nice. Nice’ [...] Implied here is that the anti-nice, the rude, is synonymous with a vitality won from socializing forces bent on exacting obedience, restraint, repression –basic constituents of mature adulthood. (Posnock 2006: xi, ellipsis mine)

Roth wants to address the issue of sexuality in a way that deals with what is forbidden by the Jewish faith but also by any other social or religious moral systems. This could be termed a “Nietzschean” focus because it questions why an action is pure or impure according to certain standards. Roth has been doing this throughout his work, starting with *Goodbye Columbus and Other Stories* (1959) as well as *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), his first attempts to deal with his Jewish background in a transgressive way. The Jewish element appears in ST too in the image of the traditional skullcap. In this scene, Sabbath is accused of desecrating his “own people” and his religion because he is urinating on Drenka’s grave while wearing the skullcap of his religion. To Sabbath,

however, the golden shower is a celebration of his love for Drenka, as Pozorski notes in her interpretation of this passage (2011: 36). This is why he is proud of his action instead of ashamed of it. Again, there is an ambiguity in the answer to these questions of morality.

In response to such questions, scholar Ross Posnock argues in his book *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* that ST is the book “that most makes the raunchy, the immature, and the literary virtually synonymous” (Posnock 2006: 156). In his view, Roth has chosen to be impure in his work and it is so because this is how he understands literature. In order to support this, Posnock quotes Zuckerman’s words in *Deception* (1990), which he considers “a hymn to art as outrage and impurity”:

All that timidity, disguised as ‘discretion,’ about a man’s contradictions and pagan urges. The fear of desanctification and the dread of shame. As though it’s purity that’s the heart of a writer’s nature. Heaven help such a writer! As though Joyce hadn’t sniffed filthily at Nora’s underpants. As though in Dostoevsky’s soul, Svidrigailov never whispered. *Caprice* is at the heart of a writer’s nature. Exploration, fixation, isolation, venom, fetishism, austerity, levity, perplexity, childishness... The nose in the seam of the undergarments –*that’s* the writer’s nature. *Impurity*. (Roth 199 96-7, qtd. in Posnock 2006: 156)

However, Sabbath’s misbehaving is confronted by the other characters’ judgement of him. Not only his friend Linc, but also his wife Roseanna and Matthew, Drenka’s son, who condemn him. Sabbath knows Matthew thinks he deprived Drenka. Matthew’s insult summarizes the general opinion about Sabbath: he is “sick” and “filthy” (Roth 1995: 451). In HS, Roth “attacks the ‘tyranny of propriety’ and ‘virtue mongering’ that can be found in all sorts of people, and this problem appears in ST in the judgment

that Sabbath is subjected to. Many are blind to the human stain in them, and are quick in pointing out the stain in others, while they are unable to recognize it in themselves. When accusations ensue, characters like Sabbath cannot help but to be bolder in their defiance against the people who want to impose their moral rules on them. The way Posnock puts it is that “rampant moral didacticism incites resistance –the rudeness and rage that drive HS (and ST)” (Posnock 2006: xvii). That is the reason why Sabbath reacts with such anger against Matthew, Linc and even Roseanna in many scenes. This also happens with Coleman in HS, with Kepesh in DA and with Merry in AP. Posnock claims that this clash between righteous characters and impure characters such as Sabbath is due to the impossibility of purity:

Pastoral will always fail (at least in Roth’s novels) because it pursues purity, and purity is a doomed project, for it is blind to our fallen epistemological condition: that ‘error’ is ‘the heart of the world,’ since ‘everything that lives is in movement’ (Roth 1998: 318). And purity is a lie because it freezes. John Calvin’s American Puritan heirs could not have said it better. The aesthetic correlative of the recognition of impurity is art’s obligation ‘to allow for the chaos, to let it in’ (Posnock 2006: 85).

This is an example of the essence of Sabbath’s chaotic identity: “I am disorder”, “I am disorderly conduct” (Roth 1995: 203,323). That is why he enjoys the freedom of not having to please, inspired by his intense sense of the precarious, as Posnock observes (2006: 157). Sabbath accepts the accusation of rashness: “I’m a rash guy. It’s inexplicable to me, too. It’s displaced virtually everything else in my life. It seems to be the whole aim of my being” (Roth 1995: 449). Patrick Hayes has argued that because Roth’s fiction includes everything that is normally excluded from intellectual discussions of literature,

and mostly, because his fiction insinuates “that our highest aspirations tend to be rather interestingly entangled with the more embarrassing sides of life”, it is unthinkable that Roth could have received the Nobel Prize because of how his work unsettles these institution’s stale propriety (Hayes 2019: 65). Finally, when Sabbath is accused of causing people a lot of pain, he nods, “people continuously telling me that the great thing I was called to do in life was cause pain. The world is just flying along pain-free –happy-go-lucky humanity off on one long fun-filled holiday –and then Sabbath is set down in life, and overnight the place is transformed into a loony bin of tears. Why *is* that?” (450). Roth’s harsh representation of pain is offensive because of the human stain that is used to represent it. Consequently, pain and suffering will be the subject of the third and final Chapter of this dissertation.

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In conclusion, the human stain appears in two different ways when people fail to notice the “plank” in their own eye but are judging others for the “speck” in their eye (as in the text in Matthew mentioned in the introduction of this section). It functions both as the plank and as the stain. After looking at how Roth’s characters (starting with Eli and Epstein in the early stories, and eventually with the main characters in ST, AP, HS and DA) defy society’s expectations by embracing the stain, there are two conclusions in the interpretation of these novels: They might reject the human stain or deny the Law and the laws, but in the end, they have to accept the stain and make it theirs.

To the question of what it is that the human stain that appears in HS has in common with the rash featured in Epstein, the answer lies in the fact that what connects them is that even though one is more universal and the other has a clear Jewish background, these images are both used as a sign to transgress moral rules. In conclusion,

Roth's human stain allows the exploration of moral fantasy in fiction and shows the difficulty that resides in reading people accurately. It does this by illustrating how people are figuratively blinded as the stain illuminates their secrets and darkens their dreams.

The human stain marks the difference between what is artificial and what is real, for example by means of the description of the filth that Merry lives in and the state of her body, that goes from pure to impure. The net of images that is created serves to put across the truth that it is necessary to acknowledge that we will be wrong again and again about people, and that we do not know anything about anyone. Secondly, the stain is also used to describe how the characters try to keep themselves uncontaminated by impurity and how even though they do their best to avoid chaos, the stain invades their existence.

Throughout this section, the desire that appears in the novels is one of the propelling forces of the power of the stain to transgress. As seen in the previous section, the characters defy the rules in sexuality and the stain is the mark of how the profane invades the sacred. As a consequence, society judges this breaking of the law. In Roth's novels, we find that not only the Jews have laws that dictate many aspects of social life, but also in contemporary America society tends to judge the behavior of individuals that goes against their moral rules. In these novels, when society judges, they are looking at the human stain and pointing at it.

To sum up, the device of the stain enables Roth's exploration of moral consciousness, in addition to his narrative style of indignation and rebellious energy. He not only shows the pressure of judgement, but he also uses the human stain as a sword of conflict between the characters and to show the struggle within themselves. The human stain also appears as a mirror that shows a true reflection of humanity. Therefore, the final irony lies in that the stain blinds the eye of those who judge, while it is also an instrument

of unblinding. This is the paradox: the stain is like the plank that blinds but Roth also turns the speck in the eye into the literary device that unblinds.

Also, as will be examined in the third section of this chapter, the stain captures the experience and the effect of the unforeseen of American History. When analyzing the ineluctable force of the unforeseen in Roth's fiction, this thesis arrives at a reading of the human stain's presence in history: "History, so to speak, arrives with the termination of the fantasy of complete knowledge" (Knowles 2020: 21). Because the stain shows the characters that they do not know themselves, it will also reveal our ignorance about what is happening in the world.

II.3. THE STAIN IN AMERICA

In his work, Philip Roth has especially sought to show life as it is experienced in the shape and manner of immediate reality, which is why his writing has to seek proximity to it instead of fleeing far away from it. Instead of using a narrative mode that only allows the reader to observe from a distance, Roth uses the resource of the human stain, which enables the text to get under the skin of individuals, but also of society as a whole. As it is not his intention to cast away the world or to escape from it, his characters have to embrace it fully. This is not something that is easily accomplished. Firstly, there are obstacles because of the sense of discontinuity that individuals have experienced due to the cultural and social events of Roth's times.

As Malcolm Bradbury says speaking of Roth's work amongst other contemporaneous authors: "The sense of discontinuity between society and the individual, between the historical tremors and the individual life, was evident in all the above writers, and it greatly intensified in their work in the Sixties: [...] in Roth's vision of form having to yield to confession and desire, [...]" (Bradbury 1992: 185, ellipsis mine). In Chapter I, this literary form that features confession and desire was analyzed particularly in "Epstein" and PC. Now, for Roth this immediate reality had to be American. As he said, if he was not American, he was nothing. (qtd. in Ozick's review of Blake Bailey's biography of Roth for *The New York Times*, 2021). Rejecting the Jewish American label on his work, he struggled to identify his work as just American but at the same time he continued to engage with Jewish American elements in his fiction. One of these subjects is the Holocaust. Roth has written about it in novels such as *The Ghost Writer* (1979); and he wrote about Israel in *The Counterlife* (1986) and in *Operation Shylock* (1993). However, his interest in America is the reason why the human stain needs to be studied especially in his representation of American reality. As Roth described in an interview with Alain Fienkielkraut for *Le Nouvel Observateur*,

America is the place I know best in the world. [...] My consciousness and my language where shaped by America. I'm an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber or a miner an American miner or a cardiologist an American cardiologist. Rather, what the heart is to the cardiologist, the coal to the miner, the kitchen sink to the plumber, America is to me. ("Interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* 133-34).

Following this analogy, in this section I will explore how Roth diagnoses and treats the human stain in the heart of his patient, America. This will be done by tracing

the images of wounds and punctures in the heart (America) in his fiction. As Matthew Shipe put it, Roth's whole work revolves around the meaning of American identity, because his "sizeable oeuvre reveals a sustained engagement in determining the significance of what it has meant, and continues to mean, to identify oneself as an American" (Shipe 2009: 44). Shipe has dedicated several essays to unravelling the difficult question of how history is understood in Roth's work, and his criticism illuminates the understanding of the stain in America, even though he never identifies the stain as a resource Roth uses, which is what I intend to do in this section.

In his contemporary scene, Roth finds an appropriate stage for his stories, his characters' dilemma being therefore culturally grounded. His works are not just individual stories that function as universal metaphors, his character's plight makes sense because of the history they belong to. As he wrote in the other novel that forms part of what has been termed the "American Trilogy", together with AP and HS, *I Married a Communist* (1998), "you flood into history and history floods into you" (qtd in Pozorski 2011: x). Especially in these three books, Roth makes his own contribution and attempt of "the Great American Novel", grappling with the questions of the American character and identity of the nation. The novels that are the focus of this dissertation are set in these moments of American history: ST is set in the 1960s but Sabbath takes the reader back to World War II; AP is set in the 1960s and it includes the War in Vietnam as well as the Watergate scandal; HS is set in 1998, during the period of President Clinton's impeachment hearings and the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Finally, DA is set on the eve of the new millennium, that is, at the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000.

This interest in the complexities of America and the representation of some points of its history as if it were a cancer links Roth's work to other important writers. For example, it could be said that Norman Mailer's conception of writing is in the same line

of thinking as Roth, taking into consideration what Bradbury points out in *The Modern American Novel*: “Writing was a merging of self-awareness and a report of the psychic and social workings of a cancerous history” (1992: 187). The word “cancerous” is reminiscent of the stain as a cancer in history, which is an image that will be analyzed in this section. Indeed, Roth was particularly concerned with the problem of tackling the representation of American reality. Andy Connolly has claimed that as to Roth, the chaos of American postwar experience supposed a great challenge to the writer’s imagination, and that is why it can be argued that his fiction is “less concerned with directly addressing matters of social identity and political conflict than with the stylistic problems of how to make credible and revealing fictions out of a reality that threatens to outstrip the powers of the literary imagination” (Connolly 2019: 21). The disorder of history and contemporary reality is a test to the writer, who in my view uses the resource of the human stain to convey the source and the consequences of this chaos.

We should also take into account that Roth was not only interested in American history, as he also became aware of the political and social situation in Eastern European countries such as Czechoslovakia. This interest of his led him to take action, which becomes clear in an editorial job he did for the Penguin Publishing House. In the 70s and 80s, Roth had travelled to the then called Czechoslovakia. He met, among others, the writer Milan Kundera, who would become a good friend of his. Roth wanted the American readers to know the until then long ignored literature of the East. He edited a four-volume edition with works translated into English for the first time by Tadeusz Borowski, Danilo Kiš, Milan Kundera and Bruno Schultz.

In her biography of Philip Roth, Roth Pierpont wrote that in 1972, when Roth went to visit Prague because of his interest in Kafka, he found something else that aroused his interest (2013:86). He was introduced to the “real” literary Prague, and then he started

to study Czech culture, literature and history, which reflects his interest, and he made many Czech friends. In Roth's second trip, one year later, he met Ivan Klíma and Milan Kundera, among many others. He felt the responsibility to offer them help and so, when he returned to America, he created a fund and asked other American writers to contribute towards the work of writers in Prague. Finally, Roth edited the series of *Writers from the Other Europe*, published by Penguin (1974-1989). As John Knowles states, "Roth's activities as an agent of cultural transmission throughout the 1970s and 1980s remain neglected in the burgeoning scholarship" (2020: 16). Taking these into account will offer a wider perspective to an understanding of Roth's representation of America.

This international scope of Roth's fiction is connected to the works that Roth's fiction alludes to, as can be seen in Ross Posnock's description of Roth's "cosmopolitanism", which involves "a refusal to revere local or national authority and a desire to uphold multiple affiliations" (Posnock 2006: 6). This is the reason why Posnock believes it is easier to understand Roth's work in an international context, and so his book *Philip Roth's Rude Truth* builds "overlapping frames of reference, using them as a resource for literary criticism of the fiction, and making vivid Roth's creative engagement with a rich lineage of intellectual history" (3). Among other scholars who have looked at Roth from this point of view, Valerie Roberge takes up Posnock's idea that Roth's cosmopolitanism allows Roth to escape fixed identities and explores Roth's aesthetic bounds by looking at his "conversation" with Kierkegaard in his work (Roberge 2017: 76). Roth's representation of the characters' delusion and his use of irony are highlighted when taking into account the connections with other authors.

However, Roth did not stop portraying American life during those decades, but he returned to it constantly and continued doing it until his last works, which feature a keen interest in historical and social questions that are particular to America. One of these

novels is *Indignation*, published in 2008, which as Matthew Shipe argues, “foregrounds the violence and reality of the Korean War” (2018: 3). Gerard O’Donoghue also explores the representation of American political and historical reality in AP and *Indignation* in order to find where Roth’s “seriousness” lies when dealing with this subject and why it is so difficult to adapt to the screen (2020). O’Donoghue studies the meaning of images of flesh and blood in these stories, and these images are embedded in the narrative and reflect the ambiguity of the position of the characters’ values and aspirations. As these images are instances of the human stain, they will be analyzed in this section.

In her book *Roth and Trauma*, Aimee Pozorski offers a reading of Roth’s late works focusing on how American history is represented, interpreting the texts in the light of trauma theory in order to see how the USA has experienced “turbulence and unpredictability” rather than the promised freedom and stability of the unfulfilled American Dream (Pozorski 2011: x). She has argued how Roth’s work puts forward the idea that there is no innocence nor purity, no pastoral after all in America. Supported by Pozorski’s detailed reading of Roth’s texts, I will look for the images of the human stain. In this section, the stain will be read as the evidence of the unravelling of the American Dream and also as the reflection of a deep sense of fracture in postwar America. In addition, Pozorski has also pointed out that HS “is as much about surviving Vietnam as it is about Bill Clinton’s White House affair”, as in HS there is a book that contains the story of Vietnam and also its traumatic effects on the people who took part in the war, as shown in the Vietnam vet Les Farley (Pozorski 2017: 105). Roth’s novel connects the Clinton scandal with Vietnam, as Pozorski has argued, in the final scene at the lake in HS, where Zuckerman has to decide whether he will stay to listen to Les Farley or not. Here, the readers witness how American politics, embodied in the figure of Bill Clinton, “becomes inextricably bound up with the past of Vietnam and post-traumatic stress in

order to become precisely the moment when Zuckerman realizes why he must stay” (114). As Les Farley denounces the injustice that the president “gets off everything” while he thinks of “the guys who didn’t get off nothing” because they had to go to Vietnam and now they carry a secret of horror (Roth 2000: 351).

According to Roth, regarding its political and military actions, the US is not innocent, has never really been, in fact. The image of the stain offers a new side to exploring the ways in which American society is damaged, as in contrast to the beauty of the pastoral, the human stain is hidden in the pond of history and politics, violence and terrorism, covered by ice, as in the last scene of *HS*, hidden but still there. In this section, Roth’s representation of America will be illuminated by the human stain, as in these novels, the country, which was the new Garden of Eden for the Puritans, eventually became stained by the very human stain which they also bore with them.

Roth understands the spirit of liberation but also the forces that go against it, as mentioned by Max Rudin, the President of *Library of America* in an interview radio released in PBS news hour to honor Roth after his death (Rudin 2018). As Rudin points out:

Philip was on kind of two sides at the same time. He was on the side of vitality, you know, of libido and liberation. And it’s a ’60s theme, you know, the era where his work really, really begins. And yet he was also a ruthlessly honest observer of the historical forces arrayed against that liberation and vitality. And I think, as the work goes on, I mean, that darker side gets explored more and more, you know, the forces of political violence and the war in Vietnam in *American Pastoral*, the McCarthy era in *I Married a Communist*, and the way a certain era of political correctness could be used as a bludgeon in *The Human Stain*. He’s one of the great ironists in our literature, because he was at once in

sympathy with the impulses of liberation, and yet understands deeply the forces, as I say, that block that liberation, the forces of fate and history.” (Rudin 2018, n.p.)

Roth was interested in getting as close to reality as possible in these three novels, and as Rudin says, he does so with the use of irony, which is a device that has been analyzed as an important element throughout this chapter, and this section too will look at its importance. I believe that the sheer energy in this contrast that Rudin describes also takes shape in Roth’s descriptions, particularly those that are considered shocking and excessive. I believe that these are part of the human stain, which allows for the anger at the pretense of purity to be represented in striking images that show the violent excess of indignation, transgression and the ambiguity of impurity.

America is no mere background of the story in Roth’s fiction. However, Roth was interested in portraying “the density of surface” like in Jackson Pollock’s paintings, which are completely covered with paint, and painted with energy. In the same way, in these novels, as Roth himself put it in his interview with David Remnick, he “tried to cover every square inch with real stuff” (Remnick 2003, n.p.). Roth’s long sentences and paragraphs lead the reader into surprising discoveries and shocking trains of thought, because, as he describes them: “It’s like taking a ride on the subway, you get on at one place and get off at another” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 276). Therefore, the descriptions of American life are intricately connected to the purpose of the narrative, in order to show the reality of the characters’ predicament.

The reason of Roth’s interest in America is because, as Victoria Aarons argues, “America is seared behind the lenses of his characters’ visions of themselves, their making, their stories, and their place in history” (Aarons 2019: 30). In Roth’s fiction,

America becomes one more character whose fate is entwined with the other characters, Aarons concludes (30).

The first question is whether it is possible to locate the “original sin” in American history. Roth’s work seems to suggest that it is impossible. However, the human stain can be found as a mark to testify to this corruption and its effect on individuals. And as Shipe has argued, Roth’s fiction not only suggests the original sin in America cannot be rectified but it also portrays how “the chaos of history is always on the verge of consuming the individual” (Shipe 2019: 15). Secondly, what is Roth’s assessment or opinion about the transformation that his nation has undergone during the postwar era? As Shipe notes, Roth conveys the astonishing measure of that change but he does not seem to comment on “the meaning, or the value, of that change. History, for Roth, whether it is the life of an individual or a nation, is neither progress nor regress -it is simply ‘astonishing’” (Shipe 18). I believe that in spite of this resistance to interpretation, it is worthwhile studying the signs of this collapse, which are marked by the stain in Roth’s novels.

II.3.1. Blindsided by History

Roth’s depiction of American history in particular and his writing in general were both undoubtedly influenced by Postmodernism in the 60s. Bradbury argues that Postmodernism was characterized by a sense of absurdity and specifically a feeling of the absurdity of American history, and he quotes from Roth’s 1961 essay “Writing American Fiction” in order to state that Roth’s fiction, “like that of others, began exploring the unreliable borders between the outward world of history and the imaginary life of fiction”

(Bradbury 1992: 199). This will be looked at in detail in this section, in connection with the device of the human stain, which is what makes such a literary exploration possible.

According to Bradbury, while most American writers played with history “with a parodic and disruptive spirit” (201), Roth included it in the subject of his novels showing how it floods into the lives of individuals. Many novels grew self-conscious and reflexive, says Bradbury, treating fiction’s subject as fictionality itself (203). In accordance with this view, Matthew Shipe applies the concept of “metafiction” as defined by Linda Hutcheon to Roth’s depiction of history: “metafiction” being a narrative form that shows a “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). This awareness of history and fiction as a construct is central to the use of the human stain in its depiction of the constructs of purity and impurity in history.

This subject has been dealt with in depth by Roth scholars. For instance, in his analysis of Roth’s depiction of history by means of the anti-pastoral narrative mode, David Brauner has argued that Roth’s protagonists Zuckerman and Coleman (in *HS*), and Seymour Levov (in *AP*) as well as Ira Ringold (*I Married a Communist*) are all “victims of what might be seen as different manifestations of American Puritanism, [...] different versions of the pastoral dream of a Utopian world that has always been at the heart of America’s mythology of itself” (Brauner 2007: 150, ellipsis mine). American Puritanism is important to understand not only the literary origin of the image of the human stain and its religious significance, as seen in Chapter I, but it is also the social context of the morality that Roth sees as a blight on America. Brauner identifies this moralistic impulse as the “purifying rituals” Roth exposes, as movements that try to eradicate what they see as contamination as they look for a pure, ideal State (2007: 150) (For a discussion of *AP* in the American literary tradition of the pastoral, see McDonald 2004: 27-40). However, as Brauner sees it, Roth presents ambivalence in the characters’ idealism, for on the one

hand, there is a certain liberation but on the other, a sense of futile escape (2007: 151). This ambivalence will be therefore be reflected in the stain.

As Samuel Cohen writes about AP's demythologizing impulse as embraced by Merry and Rita: "it is not a value-free activity; that is, it works from its own ideals, its own vision of perfection, and it can tear down more than it intends" (Cohen 2009: 89). And Cohen explains that AP reveals that the "idea of tearing things down and starting over itself partakes of the myth that such a thing is possible, that a new, innocent work can be made" (89). In essence, both the American Dream and the rebellion that runs counter to it are constructed on the same myth, which is why the characters who embody the two discourses bear the human stain and suffer from it.

II.3.2. The Plague: The Destruction of the American Dream

If the previous section presented the stain as the vehicle for the representation of the problem of truly knowing and judging other people, now it will be transformed into the device that depicts the issue of how to understand history. As Matthew Shipe writes, Roth's work, instead of just looking back at the past, "illuminates the various myths that shape out historical narratives and exposes how we are vulnerable to the circumstances of history" (Shipe 2019: 133). One of these myths is the American Dream, and one of the ways Roth represents its illusion as well as its destruction is through the body of the characters.

Nemesis (2010) shows a character who has to become aware that all assurances are provisional. It is informed by Roth's darkening and pessimistic tone: "Any biography

is chance, and, beginning at conception, chance -the tyranny of contingency- is everything” (2010: 242-243). In *Nemesis*, the polio epidemic attacks the individual body of the children who suffer from it, but the illness also assaults the nation, so there is a connection between the representation of the body and America. Ann Basu reflects on this link in her 2019 essay about Jewish American identity in HS, but her point supports my reading of America as bearing a stain just like the characters’ bodies, who suffer from physical ordeals: “In the American trilogy and other later novels, from *Operation Shylock* to *Nemesis*, Roth associates these bodily trials with tests of national identity generated by historical and political processes. The body of an individual who is at the center of the narrative then becomes important for its resemblance to the figurative body of the American nation” (Basu 2019: 37). In her reading, Basu claims that HS portrays the unravelling of the American Dream and strips the nation of its innocence by testing “the mythology of national unity” (38).

The second of the novels that conform the American Trilogy, *I Married a Communist* (1998), describes McCarthyism in the 50’s (Safer 2006: 3). But Aimee Pozorski sees that there is a deeper vision in this novel of how the US democracy appears “as inherently and irredeemably flawed” (Pozorski 2011: 62). The destruction of the American dream is also represented as a painful experience in AP. In this novel, written in 1997, Roth portrays the life of three generations that are supposed to have achieved more freedom, more safety, more education and a better life. But the novel narrates how their dream does not come true, for there is still violence and chaos in the 60s and 70s. In fact, the novel is set during the summer of the Watergate hearings (1973). This chaos is not only visible in the lives of the grandfather or in the father, but mainly in the daughter: Merry. Instead of being “the perfected image” of her parents, she becomes a distorted image of them, bringing about the Fall in this Paradise. The “counterpastoral” is

introduced by Merry: “the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede’s castle and there infecting everyone” (Roth 1997: 86). The phrase “the plague America” is striking as it suggests that America itself is an image of the stain, a virus that infects everybody. In Chapter III this will be further discussed in order to see how America is one of the images of the stain as an illness.

Merry shatters her father’s view of America as a safe and secure place. She mocks his idea of the “secure and peaceful lives” that they lead in America, in contrast with the families in Vietnam. Her stuttering makes her speech even stronger, putting her point across in a violent way as the words “B-b-blown to b-b-b-b-bits” are a foreshadowing of the bomb that will blow up the post office in Old Rimrock (Roth 1997: 108). As Goldberg argues, the Swede is “congenitally unable to see the world for what it is: profoundly unequal, oppressive and loath to protect the most socially marginalized” (Goldberg 2020: 45). The Swede’s ignorance can only be blown to pieces by a violent act of transgression, in Goldberg’s reading. This is why Marcia Umanoff says at the end that transgression is necessary to achieve knowledge, which is an argument that at the end is about “seeing” (48). She sees the limitations of the Swede’s perspective and also of his father’s perspective about morality and decay, and in this ironic moment, when Orcutt almost blinds Lou Levov, it is a moment of vision (Roth 1997: 423). In this scene of final laughter in AP, Marcia laughs at the “frailty” of “supposedly robust things”, emphasizing, according to Matthew Shipe, that Roth shows how “easily the façade of American progress and infallibility crumbled at this time” (Shipe 2017: 146). To sum up, Merry unmade her father’s fantasy about America by introducing transgression into his life by means of the bomb and the kiss, thus bringing about the Fall from Eden.

Roth's portrayal of the Fall in his particular character's Eden can be read in its context within the American literary tradition. We find references to Eden in most of the scholarship written about AP. Ihab Hassan writes about the Garden of Eden as an image that can be found throughout American Literature in order to express the loss and conflict that keep making a return: "But there is also the Eden we lost and which we persistently attempt to recapture by transforming the substance of our failure, our passion, into values for the conduct of life [...] a running debate between Utopia and Eden" (1961: 36, ellipsis mine). In contemporary American fiction, Hassan finds "a persistent escape toward freedom" (36). An escape toward freedom is precisely what Epstein, Portnoy, Sabbath, Merry, Coleman and Kepesh are looking for in the works analyzed in this thesis. As Hassan wrote, it consists in an escape from the present, from the ravaging of time and death (38). The escape from death will be looked at in more detail in Chapter III. However, this escape toward freedom that emerges as a result from this fight between a utopia and Eden has been read by Roth scholars as a conflict that is full of irony.

Consequently, Brauner points at the irony in AP, as "all the utopias so relentlessly pursued by Seymour Levov -the most beautiful woman, the perfect child, the successful factory, and the perfect assimilation into WASP America- lead to a completely opposite result (2007: 168). The most important irony of the novel, as Brauner writes, is that "the serpents in Seymour's Eden" are also victims of their "particular dreams of Utopia" (171). Rita, for example, is set on her own ideology and she is convinced hers is the right way. Speaking about the serpent in Eden, The Swede refers on several occasions to the tempters who must have deceived his daughter, lured her into committing those crimes. However, his discovery is that there really was no tempter as Merry did it all by her own convictions. The serpent, however, would also be the one who tricks man into believing something

that is a lie. In that sense, Seymour was the serpent to his own Eden all along. He believed in the power of goodness and order.

There are also external forces that put the Swede's world in danger, as Jack Knowles has acknowledged in his essay about AP and Roth's relationship with writers from Czechoslovakia (2020). Amongst these dangers are the changes that are happening in the world as a whole, which place this story in a much larger historic and global context: "the growing momentum of globalization is at least one of the material forces threatening the Swede's Edenic dreamworld" (Knowles 2020: 15). Merry's conscience starts developing the moment she is affected and horrified by the injustice she sees in the world, and this is most evident in the image of the burning monk that she sees on TV. When the Swede thinks about the possible reasons the idea of the bomb started to take shape in her mind, he looks back at this moment in the early sixties. The shocking image of this Buddhist monk's self-immolation in Vietnam was deceiving because at first it seemed like an innocent circus performance, but its reality was brutal: "No screaming, no writhing, just his calmness at the heart of the flames -no pain registering on anyone on camera, only on Merry and the Swede and Dawn, horrified together in their living room" (Roth 1997: 153). The stain travels to the other side of the world through the images on their TV, from Vietnam to their living room: "into their home on Arcady Hill Road the charred and blackened corpse on its back in that empty street" (154). The blackness of this dead body is an image of the human stain that leaves a strong imprint on the characters' imagination and Merry becomes obsessed with it, traumatized by it and connects these images with the corruption she sees in her country.

I would say it is one of the external forces that break the Swede's world, but what really destroys his dream is his daughter and his vision of America is a symptom of the stain that he discovers because of her criticism of capitalism. It is through Merry that the

Swede is confronted with “the something that is demented [...] American history! [...] Welcome to the fucked-over-by-America human race!” (Roth 1997: 257). It is precisely with the excuse of doing business in Czechoslovakia that the Swede is able to speak with Rita and learn the harrowing truth about his daughter. Knowles believes that “Roth’s turn to American history itself, and, more specifically, the literary strategies that he employs in order to generate his own kinds of fictional purchase on the historical, owe much to the inventive material published in “Writers from the Other Europe” and to the dynamics of the project itself” (17). I agree that Roth looks at his experience and his personal confrontation with defining moments of History, not only in America but also in other countries. And he does this especially in his writing in the 90s, to ask himself about the purpose, nature and meaning of history, as Debra Shostak notes (2004: 230). AP, together with other fiction published around the same time, explored the social tumult of the 1960s. Even though the novel was published in the 90s, Roth began writing a draft of the novel earlier, in 1972, which included the most important events of the final version: the kiss and the bomb. These are the scenes of the images of the Fall.

The Vietnam war (1961-1975), a conflict that marked American history, appears not only in AP, but also in HS, through the character of Les Farley, a Vietnam vet who suffers from PTSD and is portrayed as the one who probably caused Coleman and Faunia’s accident. In AP, it is especially ironic that the Swede was a symbol of hope during World War II, only to be dragged by Merry into an abyss of terror, violence and lack of hope. Her bomb and her protest against the Vietnam war ultimately turn her into the symbol of rage and despair in the face of war. “Terror starts at home”: Merry brings violence and chaos into the Swede’s life at the same time that the text describes vividly the riots in Newark and the violence in the streets, and the worst is that it is all totally irrational: “They’ll kill anyone” (Roth 1997: 26). In AP the story of one family becomes

representative of a wider reality. The Swede suffers from the pressure to “escape insignificance”, to make something of yourself, just like all Americans of his generation, just after the war. When writing this novel, Roth was inspired by the detail that flooded over him, that he was immersed in as a child, when he came to know all the details about everybody and he noticed how they make each family uniquely shaped in its own complex set of circumstances.

The final scene of HS with Les Farley, the Vietnam vet, prompts the second key passage of the novel to understand the meaning of the human stain. If in Faunia’s conversation with the crow the stain is presented as the human imprint that precedes everything and leaves its trace everywhere, here it is ironically shown as the human figure itself, the body of a man becoming a mark like a signature of a person who cannot write: “the icy white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all off nature, like X of an illiterate’s signature of a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture” (Roth 2000: 111). The human marker, embodied by Les Farley, who looks deceptively innocent and “pure” in the “peaceful” “arcadian mountain in America” is the human being in the golden utopian past. The human stain cannot tell the complete story but it can show the whole image. Patrick O’Donnell points out Roth’s ironic “acceptance of the unreadability -the sheer opacity- of the human and the impossibility of ever relating ‘the whole story’” (O’Donnell 2019: 111).

Ivanova explains how the situational irony which we find in passages such as this one, and which is also used in Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus Rex* for example, can also be found in AP (2014: 117). This type of irony is understood as when an action leads to the opposite consequence than intended. In my view, it seems that Levov’s situational irony arises from the presence of the human stain, which in all instances is represented through this irony. Ivanova presents her interpretation based on the premise that irony creates a

dialectic text which allows for a reading of different meanings and perspectives in the same text (119). Irony makes it possible to read a novel by taking into account many ironic connections between different assertions in the text, as Kundera proposes (qtd. in Ivanova 120). “The lack of wit or irony in the Swede constitutes an important difference between the two voices the reader hears in the book: the voice of the deluded Seymour Levov and the voice of the narrator” (120).

II.3.3. An Inheritance of Filth

The bathroom scene in *Patrimony* has frequently been revisited by critics when studying Roth’s engagement with American history. As seen earlier, in this scene Roth interprets “the shit” as the patrimony he inherits from his father (Roth 1996: 175-176). But as he finds out, in spite of cleaning, there will always remain some residue. In AP there is a powerful scene with filth that develops this image and takes it further into the narrative. First, the text presents an image of purity, only to shock the readers into the discovery of an enormous amount of filth, which is hiding behind a veil.

When Merry sees her father again, after all those years, she immediately recognizes him, runs to her father like “the carefree child” of his dreams, and the scene seems beautiful, only shadowed by the mysterious presence of the veil she is wearing over her face. The chapter ends with that hug and the tears of the father “whose center is the source of all order [...] and the daughter who is chaos itself” (Roth 1997: 231, ellipsis mine). But the next chapter reveals the meaning of the veil that she wore: she had become a Jain, and because of this religious belief, the veil kept her from harming microscopic

organisms in the air; she did not bathe nor did she wash, for the same reason, out of reverence for all life: “The only way ever to become free of matter and to arrive at what she described as ‘self-sufficient bliss for all eternity’ was to become what she reverentially called ‘a perfected soul’” (232). This perfection could only be achieved through self-denial and nonviolence. As pointed out above, there is great irony in Merry: she is a terrorist but practices Jainism, which is a non-violent religion.

Merry’s body looked different because she was so close to starvation, to her father’s horror. Her room is even smaller than the prison cell the Swede had dreaded she would be. Her life is even worse than he imagined in his nightmares. In order to get to the building, they had to go through an underpass filled with garbage, characterized by a degree of filth that horrifies the Swede: “The place hadn’t been cleaned in ten years. Maybe it had never been cleaned” (Roth 1997: 233). The filth is described in detail to give a clear picture of the degradation of the place but also because of the association of Merry with this filth. She has let the human stain grow all over her, she has chosen to live in the human stain itself, and he has even become the embodiment of the human stain. In this scenario, the only thing that keeps the Swede from breaking down is the thought that it is their life that is at stake and he cannot let her go. He holds on to his daughter’s hand telling himself that regardless of what surrounds her, she is still Merry. The lament for the decay of the city of Newark, where even the streets are stolen, functions as a parallel narrative of the destruction of the hopes from the past. The dream was broken down, just as Merry was not what he hoped she would become. “She would have lived better than this, far better, if she were one of Dawn’s cattle, in the shed [...] if only she had become an animal” (237-8, ellipsis mine). She loses her dignity as a human being, becoming “a travestied mock-up of a human being, so meager a likeness to a Levov it would have

fooled only a bird” (239). The smell, the sight, and the words of Merry’s new life, characterized by death rather than life, would have killed her mother.

DA has been difficult to tackle by critics because of its complex and uncomfortable descriptions of sex, it is blunt and explicit in its representation of desire, some would say it is “filthy”. However, there is another kind of filth that is explored in this novel in its depiction of history. As it evokes World War II and the Cold War at the moment of the global celebration of the new millennium, exactly at the moment when fireworks are broadcast on TV, these are portrayed as dark instead of bright (Roth 2001: 144). To Kepesh, they light these fireworks “to welcome the shit and the kitsch of the new millennium” (Shipe 2017: 144-146). As Matthew Shipe argues, Roth’s “sense of dissolution” was shared by Roth’s contemporary writers, and he names, for example, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and John Updike (Shipe 2017: 145). However, in my view, what distinguishes Roth’s work from the rest is that the disgusting, the human stain, forces itself into the national consciousness. And what was previously assumed to be sacred became the target of blasphemy. What was imagined to be “impermeable” eventually “yields” to the human stain, to use some of the words the author himself employed when describing the effect of “the demythologizing decade” of the 1960s.

Following Gerard O’Donoghue’s interpretation of the images of cleaning shit and blood in Roth’s fiction, I agree with him when he reaches the conclusion that “historical subjects inheriting their patrimony can marshal all the energy they want but will never be able to keep the place kosher” (O’Donoghue 2020: 63). In other words, no matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to deny the close relationship between filth and the dream of purity in America, and Roth accomplishes this by making visible the link between violence, pollution and the “clean” image of American life.

II.3.4. Flesh and Blood: The Human Stain in America

The human stain as flesh and blood appears as human or animal flesh and blood, but it ultimately refers to the reality of the human body. These images of flesh and blood are used by Roth in rendering “the unwritten as written without denying the primacy of the unwritten or the derivativeness of the written, to use O’Donoghue’s phrase (2020: 62). In some instances, such as in *AP*, blood is half-hidden in the narrative but it is a powerful instance of the human stain as it informs the characters’ imagination.

As the Swede reads Merry’s vows, consisting in life renunciation in order to paradoxically, respect life, he is astounded. And all of it “for purity”, so he asks himself why she needs this purity: to wash away the blood on her hands, or because she needed it even if she had never hurt anyone? He thinks again at that moment of transgression, the kiss. But it does not make sense to him. If respect and affection could ruin her life, what was the value of his own morality? Should he have been violent with her? Ironically, when he finally talks with Merry and would have the opportunity to solve the mystery and find an answer to the questions he has, she says she had no motives, there is no logic to her actions. She claims to “relinquish all influence”, which is ridiculous to the Swede because she has influence over him, and as he says, her powerlessness means that she has power over him.

As Ivanova describes, the text shows the contrast between the Swede’s moral awareness of the crimes committed by his daughter and Dawn’s denial and self-centeredness (2014: 126). She seems immersed in her daydreams of beautiful Switzerland

pastures and milkmaids, her personal pastoral, unwilling to let go of it and face the painful truth. But as the ending of the novel states, even in their refuge, the Levovs cannot hide from the world's chaos. Their rock has been breached and it is broken, past mending. The novel ends with the following questions: "And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" (Roth 1997: 423). Jack Knowles argues that the purpose of these questions is to "amplify the confusion of an era and trace the legacy of the fractures, only further to emphasize the unhealed ruptures with the open angles of the interrogative" (2020: 22). The Levovs' sense of confusion is shared by the narrator, the writer and the readers' incomprehension of history. In Shipe's view, Roth intends to show that "the disorder of the 1960s is not so much an anomaly within the United States history as it is our natural condition, always on the verge of puncturing our sense of progress and order" (Shipe 146). This reference to a natural condition points at the presence of a human stain that is embedded in the fractious trauma that Aimee Pozorski sees as present from the very beginnings of the country's history in Roth's fiction (2011).

The Swede's innocence and naiveté, which led him to believe in a false myth, can be compared to Marcus Messner's in Roth's later work *Indignation*, set in the 1950s, characterized by the social and sexual repression. As Matthew Shipe has argued, Marcus' sexual naiveté would never encounter the Sexual Revolution because he dies in Korea: "Roth wants us to hear all that is absent from his voice. That is, Marcus's innocence can only exist because he is ignorant of how history turned out" (Shipe 2019: 19). This ignorance is felt by the readers, who are immersed in the experience of the incomprehension of history in Roth's fiction.

Indignation is relevant here because of its use of the human stain, which can be compared to the novels that this dissertation focuses on. In *Indignation*, violence is

portrayed with blunt imagery, and as Shipe points out, speaking about the main character, “Marcus’s narration defamiliarizes the past -stripping it of any of the nostalgia that other Roth narrators might have had for the 1950s” (Shipe 2018: 4). Marcus’s parents wear aprons that are covered in blood, and although he grew up with blood, he never got used to it:

I envisioned my father’s knives and cleavers whenever I read about the bayonet combat against the Chinese in Korea. I knew how murderously sharp sharp could be. And I knew what blood looked like, encrusted around the necks of the chickens where they had been ritually slaughtered, dripping out of the beef onto my hands when I was cutting a rib steak along the bone, seeping through the brown paper bags despite the wax paper wrappings within (Roth 2008: 35).

In my view, the choice of blood as a recurrent image is no coincidence, and in linking the blood of war in Korea to the blood of impurity that has to be cleaned in the kosher shop, Roth uses the same image of the human stain in order to establish a connection. As Gerard O’Donoghue writes, Marcus has grown up with blood because of the kosher butcher shop and he has never liked it, but in spite of this, “it is the inestimable value of his particular flesh and blood that motivates Marcus’s devalorization of flesh and blood in general substances (O’Donoghue 2020: 61). Because of the brutal death of his cousins in World War II, the family has lived “steeped in their blood” (Roth 2008: 37). In order to avoid being butchered in Korea, he needs to enroll in college at all costs. Ironically, at college he will only encounter more blood and be covered with the stain, foreshadowing his final death, in fact, as he will be steeped in blood in Korea too.

That is why Marcus' obsession with purity is ironic, because even though he is doing his duty, he is accused of being vile. The war in Korea is foreshadowed by the details of the butcher shop when Marcus says he knows how sharp knives are and what blood looks like. In addition, the human stain is present in the book in the portrayal of bloody punches, pain, and the dashing of a record against the wall. Marcus reacts to all this with utter disgust, unlike characters such as Sabbath in Roth's *ST*, who embraces the nastiness of the human stain. Horrified by these bodily fluids, Marcus is more similar to Seymour in *AP*, because they both reject the human stain and do not recognize it as their own.

II.3.5. The Chaos of History

When considering the historical context of a novel such as *DA*, it is important to realize the weight of the feeling of a "sense of an ending" at the end of the 20th Century. The shadow of the Holocaust and various global disasters gave substance to a nightmare in people's imagination. This is the setting of a novel that is fittingly obsessed with death and so it shows that the old system has disappeared and it has been replaced by fear. *DA*, in fact, was published only months before the deadly 9/11 attacks in 2001. In consequence, in an excellent chapter published in *A Political Companion to Philip Roth*, Matthew Shipe rightly considers this novel "a portrait of this liminal moment in American history" (Shipe 2017: 136). In my view, this novel is connected to how Roth treats the subject of history in *ST*, *AP* and *HS*, as an unpredictable force of chaos that reveals its dark stain in the narrative. In fact, Shipe explores how *DA* challenges the myth of progress

“a faith in infinite advancement that has continually informed, to various degrees, America’s understanding of itself” (136). The myth of progress is destroyed through the use of the stain just like the American Dream, as seen earlier.

Shipe claims that the motion of progress is central to Roth’s novels of his late period because as he represents the reality of aging and struggling with physical change, his novels at the same time critique the idea of progress. Once again, the human body functions to reflect the reality of American ideas. However, it not only American ideas, but also American actions are represented by the images of the human stain. In her essay “Philip Roth’s Fictions of Intimacy and the Aging of America” (2009), Georgiana Banita argues how in Roth’s work the theme of aging is connected with his other subjects, such as the struggle between the forces of desire and restraint, and that in works such as *HS* and *DA* the body reflects the political body of the nation (Banita 2009: 91).

In this transition that goes from “a private to a national allegory”, Banita looks at how Roth writes about the process of aging and she focuses on its feature of self-consciousness (92). Politically, the struggle of Roth’s protagonist when aging would correspond to a post-Cold War America that is divided between an ethical yearning and the temptation of pleasure (92-93). Because of Consuela’s Cuban-American identity, Banita interprets the forceful sexual act of fellatio that Kepesh has with Consuela as a moment that represents not only Kepesh’s illusion of control in their relationship, but also as part of a political metaphor, as America’s attempt to control Cuba (2009: 98). And Banita continues to analyze how the manner in which Consuela defends herself with her challenging bite, her snapping is a defiance of Kepesh’s dynamics and also represents Cuba’s response to America with the references to Fidel Castro (98). This throws a different light on an important aspect of *DA* and it demonstrates how the characters’ struggle reflects the nation’s own problems.

Because of the tension between the forces of puritanism and liberation, there is a language of debate and struggle in Roth's characters. Elaine Safer's book *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* (2006) is important when analyzing the use of irony in the inner contradiction in the characters. They desire one thing and do another, or they know they should do something, but cannot help doing the opposite. In *Operation Shylock* (1993), the character Philip is struggling with two aspects of his own being rather than with his double, his false self. As Safer suggests, this interpretation would fit with the reference to the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord in the Bible, which Roth uses as one of the epigraphs for the novel ("so Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak", Gen. 32:24). As Safer points out, it can be interpreted as an inner struggle which would coincide with Kierkegaard's sentence which is the second epigraph: "The whole content of my being shrieks in contradiction against itself... Existence is surely a debate" (Safer 2010: 172, ellipsis in original). This struggle can be seen in DA and ST and the awareness of this contradiction is what unblinds the characters and characterizes the tension that is felt in their American experience.

Damon Barta explores how AP challenges the narrative of postwar lost innocence by means of two opposing registers: The Swede's, who espouses American innocence, and Zuckerman's, who lays bare its contradictions in his narrative (Barta 2018: 25). Merry's register represents the sixties' counterculture. Barta proposes that instead of emphasizing Roth's identification with one character or another, it is more important to see how he uses the characters "to target a master narrative of postwar American historiography that emerged in the nineties to re-establish an imperiled American *nostos*" (27). The double perspective of the narrative creates a double central question in the novel, for as the Swede asks himself how it is possible that his daughter would destroy his world, Zuckerman asks "why Merry's act is so incomprehensible to the Swede" (29).

This is the pattern that Shostak identifies as a counterlife, and Barta illustrates how in AP, Merry and her father “represent seemingly antithetical positions that illustrate a paradox [...], contrapuntal roles that are fundamental to the same teleological historical narrative, a narrative that begins with postwar optimism and ends with the Cold War” (29, ellipsis mine). Both characters hold views that are generalized poles, the “pastoral” and the “counterpastoral”, and it is the narrator, Zuckerman, who reveals how both actually rely on fantasies of innocence, and that is why we find so many “dramatized arguments about innocence that illustrate its importance to the consensus-counterculture narrative” (31).

I would like to add how the images of the human stain in the discourse of both characters shows that purity is a mere fantasy in both stories, and how this resource uncovers the reality behind both arguments, how innocence falls short. Both the claims of innocence and knowledge are shown in a new light by means of the resource of the human stain. When Merry and her father are arguing, they accuse each other of childlike ignorance and also of addressing each other as if they were children. However, the adults choose to remain in a childlike state of ignorance and immaturity, turning a blind eye to the world’s reality when they choose to believe a false narrative. This is the story of “Merry’s absolute innocence” that becomes an anchor for the characters not to lose grip on what they hold on to (Roth 1997: 365). Without it they would be lost, not knowing how to accept evil and transformation within their own lives.

According to Barta, Roth’s portrayal of the culture war is linked to the fantasy of innocence embodied by America:

[...] illuminates an ongoing reliance on the trope of lost innocence to justify decidedly non-rhetorical wars. The sixties that *American Pastoral* sets against postwar American cohesion

is a grotesque figuration that stands in, at what was arguably the height of the culture war, for the menacing Other that had recently been the “evil empire” of the Cold War and would soon become the omnipresent “evildoers” of the War on Terror. (Barta 2018: 33)

Furthermore, not only does Roth narrative show the effects of being blind to reality, it shows the dangers of maintaining a myth founded on counter realities, because as Barta says, “the Swede’s notion of violent, uncritical radicalism as the central fact of the sixties is one such counterreality that Laura Tannenbaum argues “has obscured the context of the extreme violence of the Vietnam War itself” and the “repressive state response to dissent” that ensued (qtd. in Barta 2018: 34). To conclude, Roth presents anti-utopian narratives by means of the human stain, as the text shows how Merry’s dream of purity is false just like her father’s. Posnock describes utopian thinking, and then its contrary, dystopian, which is really the other side of the coin, the same reasoning, for, and he quotes Havel, “a trace of the heroic dreamer, something mad and unrealistic, is hidden in the very genesis of the dissident perspective. In the very nature of things, the dissident is something of a Don Quixote” (Havel 192 qtd. in Posnock 2006: 187). Posnock notes “the dissident is not immune to utopian imagination; indeed within him is ‘the germ of utopianism’ (192,175). Posnock continues arguing: “But this ‘germ’ contains a ‘devilish temptation’ that if left unchecked can end up ‘degenerating’ and enslaving one to an abstraction –a ‘project for a better world.’ Often, megalomania ensues, followed by zealous indoctrination of the masses” (187).

As with the analysis of irony, when looking at Roth’s use of humor, Safer’s 2006 monograph is essential. Remnick also wrote about this humor placing it in the tradition and context of Jewish American Literature: “At his best, Roth internalizes the metaphysical drive of Bellow’s comedy, as well as the moral dilemmas and the uneasy

sense of being adrift characteristic of Malamud's comedy." What makes Roth's different is that he locates "the comic perspective as integral to the moment of crisis itself. This is possibly what takes the reader, notes Remnick, to "laughing loudest just at the moment when the abyss widens" (2000: 78). So "Roth, in his entire work and particularly in *Sabbath's Theater*, lets his comic imagination unabashedly engage the human comedy of the protagonist's 'low-life existence [...] and his yearning for higher illumination'" (Weber qtd. in Neelakantan 197-198, ellipsis mine).

II.3.6. The Fluidity of the Modern

In HS, Coleman Silk is a character who represents the possibility of changing your life and forging your own identity in America. This is described in the narrator's voice and Coleman's actions, both of which bear the imprint of the human stain and its fluid meaning. This image has already been presented in the previous section, but here it takes on a new meaning in relation with America. As Ira Nadel points out, "the fluidity of the modern becomes the very nature of Roth's America" (Nadel 2018: 39). As the narrator of HS puts it, "To become a new being. To bifurcate. The drama that is America's story" (Roth 2000: 342). Ira Nadel argues that it is possible to interpret the representation of swimming and water in Roth's texts as the concept of "liquid modernity" of Zygmunt Bauman. This phrase refers to the constant change that characterizes the state of "becoming", "avoiding completion, as we see in the unstable, variable heroes of Roth's fiction and his own chameleon-like persona" (38). Roth engages with this issue of "fluctuating self-identity" in his narrative experiments which convey mobility and

change. The American tries to carve a statue of himself, sculpting it in hard rock, but the stone will crumble and break into pieces.

Not only is the American individual unstable, but America itself is unstable in Roth's fiction. Both the internal and the external world are fluctuating. Andy Connolly writes about how in Roth's fiction, "history is thus not a stable context"; rather, "history, in all its messy unevenness, reveals a dispersive and fluctuating external world that presents both an opportunity and a challenge to the creative energies of a writer (Connolly 2019: 17). The words "messy" and "unevenness" suggest the presence of the stain in history. Therefore, the stain in America is revealed as Roth's novels explore America's foundation, because according to Michael Kimmage's explanation they dramatize the impossibility of creating history in a coherent way, which is why we cannot be the authors of history, instead history shapes our life (Kimmage qtd. in Connolly 17).

Not only is it impossible to see national history in a coherent way, but it is also impossible for Roth's characters to forge their own lives in a coherent way. Far from erasing contradiction, Roth shows it is at the core of human beings: "Until he meets Faunia and 'lets the whole creature out' unfurled, Coleman regards his life as an artifact, sculpted by decisions and acts produced by his executive will. That his understanding is at once brave and deeply inadequate is part of the perplexing irreconcilability that Silk will grapple with" (Posnock 2006: 186). Coleman is forced to flow along with history. Roth, as Posnock notices, "is skeptical, to put it mildly, of purification. It breeds deadly violence, and attracts those allergic to 'everything that flows'" (86). Opposed to rigid stone, the stain appears as water in order to represent a desirable fluidity. This is most evident in the final scene of HS with Zuckerman's conversation with Les Farley at the frozen lake. It is a pristine place that connotes the natural purity of the American pastoral, described as "unviolated", "unspoiled" "a clean place", and it is because it has not been

contaminated by human beings, as Farley argues: “That’s why it’s clean” (Roth 2000: 347). However, as Farley’s story of the aftermath of violence in Vietnam will show, under the lake there is a hidden stain.

II.3.7. Impurity and Transgression expressed with Irony and Paradox

When writing about the failures of the American Dream, literary critics have to take into account that America is founded on promises but also on paradox. As Ihab Hassan argues about its origin: “Men as different as Calvin and Rousseau shaped its conscience” (1961: 35). And Hassan also writes in the same line of thought mentioned above, when speaking about Roth’s acknowledgement about the country’s lack of innocence: “America, we see, was not born blameless” (36). This has informed Roth scholars’ views of history in his fiction, such as Pozorski’s (2011) and Shipe’s (2017).

This is perfectly represented in ST’s memorable image of Sabbath wrapping himself up in the American flag, as Aimee Pozorski notes (2011: 28). As Roth stated in his interview with McGrath, out of Sabbath came the American trilogy (McGrath 2000). Sabbath is the American voice to Roth, and seeing him enveloping himself in the very symbol of national identity at the same time that he mourns his brother’s death presents a stark image of the toll that a nation takes on an individual. Aimee Pozorski has analyzed this scene in the context of the novel, focusing on the details of the appearance of the American flag in different passages of ST (2011). First, the flag in the house of Sabbath’s cousin, Fish, is not only “washed out” but also completely dirty: “If this cleaning lady were interested in cleaning, she would have torn it up for rags years ago” (Roth 1995:

28). Secondly, Sabbath wraps himself with the flag of his dead brother, and finally, he is accused of desecrating the American flag (446). The stain on the dirty flag means that America is not innocent.

Harold Bloom remarked that *ST* “has earned [Roth] a permanent place in American Literature by a comic genius that need never be doubted again” and praised its “perfect marriage of form and content” (Bloom 2003: 6). In order to appreciate that union, the use of humor and the ideas that are entangled with it have to be analyzed. These are shaped in the novel by the action of irony modes and paradoxes. By focusing on the ideas and images of impurity and transgression, it is possible to see how the concept of the human stain keeps evolving. This is especially evident in the area of sexuality. From the very beginning, there is a sense of disillusion that is progressively revealed, as even though Sabbath seeks sexual satisfaction, there is no cure for his pain in the end. He delights in his illicit relations and comes undone when he witnesses how these come to an end. And that is how there is another adding to his losses, Death being the ruler over it all, and therefore the line between comedy and tragedy becomes blurred in this novel. In Roth’s earlier works, there is comedy in what he called his protagonists’ ‘superseriousness’, “their comic predicament result[ing] from the repeated attempt to escape [their] comic predicament” as the author himself put it (Roth 2001 a: 159). In *ST*, however, the main character seems to accept his comic predicament, while he fights against his tragic predicament.

As Roth opposes seriousness with a counterforce of irony, the result is that everything that is held serious is challenged in his work, as Gerard O’Donoghue argues:

The seriousness of piety and duty are contested as forms of vanity and submission. Commitment to absolute moral ideas is challenged as arrogance or a neurotic obsession with purity. The seriousness of diligent husbandry is challenged as culturally valorized greed. The seriousness of a life of the mind is contested as derivative of the body and powerless before the compelling force of bodily appetites. (O'Donoghue 2020: 62).

The ironic mode, used by Philip Roth as a resource in order to achieve several effects, has been studied by several scholars. It is worthwhile to analyze what makes Roth's irony so special, as it has been considered a valuable trait of his narrative. Firstly, it is a sharp, hard irony, because it challenges moral grounds to the extreme, and it is difficult to tell how ironic it is. In some passages it may be a lighter irony than in others. Roth's fellow writer Saul Bellow has given a name to this peculiar ambivalence: "One literary manifestation of Roth's acute feel for the unsettled has been what Saul Bellow once called the 'sliding' focus of his irony: 'You don't know when he means to take you seriously. When you think you've got him connected to a position, you find he's gotten away from you' (qtd. Shostak 2004: 269, qtd in Posnock 2006: xiv). This is why it is clear that in order to interpret Roth's novels adequately, it is important to read his ironies correctly and be aware of the possibility that he may be serious when one thinks he is being funny or both at the same time. This quality makes his fiction very valuable, and this, among other characteristics, would probably have motivated Saul Bellow when he sent a note to the Swedish Academy in 2000 to support Roth's candidacy for the Nobel Prize. The note goes like this: "I wish to nominate the American novelist Philip Roth for the Nobel Prize. His books have been so widely examined and praised that it would be superfluous for me to describe, or praise, his gifts" (Taylor 2010: 546).

As mentioned before, one of the aspects that are treated with this sliding focus of irony is the issue of sex. This is relevant here because to Drenka, her lover represents America. This is why she says to Sabbath: “you are America, yes you are my wicked boy” (Roth 1995: 419). Sabbath is a “dirty” adulterer but at the same time he gives her a new understanding and knowledge of America. It is interesting to note in what light sexuality is put because in *ST*, the description of sexuality appears as something ambiguous, which has an enormous power but also as something wounded, has been noted by several scholars. Speaking about the union of confession and irony in Roth’s depiction of a wounded sexuality, Milan Kundera has found a very particular type of literary eroticism in his work. As mentioned above, Roth’s friendship with Kundera was fruitful, but this was not only due to the books that were published with Penguin, but also because both authors shared an interest and an appreciation for specific modes and themes in fiction. In Roth’s book *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (2001), Kundera is interviewed by Roth, among other writers such as Primo Levi and Aharon Appelfeld. In this interview, carried out in 1980, Kundera tells Roth about the importance of humor and the different attitudes that laughter can convey. “Human life is bounded by two chasms: fanaticism on one side, absolute skepticism on the other” (Roth 2001b: 95). As Kundera lived in a state that suffered the oppression of a Totalitarian regime, he also reflects about the irony in the utopian fiction present in that particular ideology: “Totalitarianism is not only hell but also the dream of paradise” (Roth 2001b: 95). Once the dream becomes reality, everything changes. When delving into this matter, Kundera reveals something that we also find in Roth’s fiction as an ironic paradox: “People like to say: Revolution is beautiful; it is only the terror arising from it that is evil. But this is not true. The evil is already present in the beautiful, hell is already contained in the dream of

paradise, and if we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of the paradise from which it originated” (96).

As stated earlier, one of the most important elements to understand Roth’s fiction is the use of opposites, as seen with the nice Jewish boy and the rebellious one. Regarding this issue, Alan Berger and Gloria Cronin edited a book titled *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World* in 2004. In the chapter titled “Philip Roth and Jewish American Literature at the Millenium”, Bonnie Lyons argues that Roth’s work can be interpreted through structuring ideas and through sets of opposites, such as purity and impurity. She explains that this happens throughout Roth’s fiction: “From his earliest book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, with its assimilated Jew versus alienated Jew, thinking and fictionalizing through oppositions has been a predominant strategy in Roth’s fiction” (Lyons 2004: 177). Furthermore, Lyons points out that “*American Pastoral* has the Rothian pattern of two antithetical brothers. The Swede and Merry are also dialectical antagonists in their diametrically opposed responses to America and in their opposite temperaments— the father seeks moderation and conciliation, the daughter demands extremes and violent responses. But the most interesting opposition of all is external to the novel: the Swede as a counterpoint to Mickey Sabbath” (177).

The presentation of antithetical discourse in the same novel characterizes Roth’s complex and layered work. This is, along with his emphasis on human contradiction, makes it especially difficult to adapt his work in order to use it politically. Gerard O’Donoghue has written about Roth’s literature and its adaptation to film in order to “question the expectation that Roth’s fiction might possess a political instrumentality” (O’Donoghue 2020: 55). In the same line as Andy Connolly, who believes it is not possible to read Roth’s fiction as a salve to the current political context, O’Donoghue argues for a focus on the potency of the embracing of contradiction in Roth’s fiction that

goes beyond the softening generic constraints of the Hollywood industry (55-56). In my view, Roth's double perspective can be compared to the anti-utopian vision that was portrayed by the Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin in the 1920s, in his essays and in his fiction. Zamyatin adopted a narrative mode that sought to question the very articles of faith in the possibility of a utopian hope, and that is why instead of writing dystopian stories in which there is a hopeful alternative which is the opposite to the nightmarish reality, in his work, the characters are puzzled as they discover the complexities of the changing meaning of good and evil within them and the world that surrounds them. For example, in his novel *We* (which served as a model for *1984* (1949) by Orwell and for *Brave New World* (1932) by Huxley), the main character discovers how everything he thought about freedom and slavery is wrong. John Huntington gave a theoretical framework to this narrative mode by proposing a term, *anti-utopia*, which refers to a "skeptical imagining that is opposed to the consistencies of utopia-dystopia" (Huntington 1982: 123). While this term refers to science fiction, it can be extrapolated to Roth's text as it shares the use of these skeptical literary mechanisms for very similar purposes and with the same effects on the characters and the readers.

According to this theory, the utopia or dystopia builds a narrative structure that offers a solution to a dilemma, whilst an anti-utopia poses questions, reveals problems and creates doubts in the reader. Similarly, Roth's novels never offer a clear solution to the problems it perceives, it rather raises questions and problems and shows how complicated or troubled some aspects of life can be. For example, as O'Donoghue explains, there are two sides when reading a novel like *AP*: On the one hand, Merry might be read as a radical, a fanatic who identifies with people's suffering while her father sees how his life is destroyed by her thinking. On the other hand, Merry's conviction to bring

the Vietnam war home makes her father's pastoral seem delusional (O'Donoghue 2020: 60).

Furthermore, anti-utopia "is not simply satiric; it is a mode of relentless inquisition, of restless skeptical exploration of the very articles of faith on which utopias themselves are built" (Huntington 1982: 123). In the same way, Roth is not merely satirizing the human urge to find purity, but he is causing the reader to doubt the fact that cleaning the human stain may be possible. This is why Roth's fiction is not "serviceable" as other dystopian fiction might be, and it offers no final moral or "happy ending" with the convenient death of evil characters in novels such as *The Plot Against America* (2004), as pointed out by Andy Connolly in his assessment of historicist criticism of Roth's fiction (2019: 13).

Consequently, anti-utopia has an interest in understanding the conflicting relationship between human desires, expectations, and their clash with reality. That is why "anti-utopia questions utopian solutions even as it proposes them. It enjoys the construction of imaginary community, but does not succumb to the satisfactions of solutions" (Huntington 1982: 124). For instance, when Sabbath finds some degree of consolation in his transgression or in his relationship with Drenka, one may think that this is the utopian solution that is being championed, but such a reading would have to ignore all the signs of the novel that make the disappointments and frustrations of Sabbath's attempts to find rest visible.

And finally, Sabbath's speech and the ambivalent nature of the narrative fits perfectly into the description of anti-utopia that focuses on being mindful of conflict:

At the core of the anti-utopia is not simply an ideal or a nightmare, but an awareness of conflict, of deeply opposed values that pure utopia and dystopia tend to override. If utopia seeks imaginative solutions, anti-utopia goes beyond to return to the powerful and disturbing ambivalences that come from perceiving simultaneous yet conflicting goods. (Huntington 1982: 123-124).

Therefore, I believe it would be interesting to draw a comparison between Zamyatin's and Roth's treatment of purity and immorality, because even though these authors write in different genres, the mode is the same, as their treatment of paradox and irony shapes their representation of knowledge of death, the moral questions, the experience of sexuality and the effect of sin in similar ways in both of their works. This quality of questioning beliefs has a strong effect in their literary work, for it functions like dynamite, blowing up reader's ideas. It is problematic because it shows the contradictions, the chaos in reality and adjusts human thinking to it. Both Zamyatin and Roth can be read in the light of Nietzsche's philosophy, which challenged the way people thought about the origin of moral judgments, as can be read in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886):

How *could* anything originate out of its opposite? For example, truth out of error? Or the will to truth out of the will to deception? Or selfless deeds out of selfishness? Or the pure and sunlike gaze of the sage out of lust? Such origins are impossible; whoever dreams of them is a fool, indeed worse; the things of the highest value must have another, *peculiar* origin –they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from the turmoil of delusion and lust. (Nietzsche 1886: 199-200).

Likewise, Sabbath is considered a fool for the acceptance of delusion and lust that are in him, but it is exactly through the knowledge of these things that he finds truth shows the essence of human life. To the Swede, in AP, the opposite happens as he is first ignorant or blind to this reality, and so when his daughter plants the bomb, and evil and filth come out of perfection, he is faced with this idea. That is why he asks himself the question of how imperfection can originate out of the perfection he created.

The provisional nature of all assurances in American history is connected to the provisional perspectives of moral values. Andy Connolly has pointed out how texts such as AP and HS “examine how inherited notions of causality and logical momentum in human affairs are deeply distressed by life’s proclivity for sudden moments of fluctuation and haphazardness” (Connolly 2019: 17). There is no neat scheme of lineal progress (17). This is what Roth calls “the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything” (Roth 2000: 336). In addition, as seen earlier, Roth’s novels challenge the idea of judging people’s actions as good or bad as they show how these actions can be perceived positively or negatively. “For one may doubt, first, whether there are any opposites at all, and secondly whether these popular valuations and opposite values on which the metaphysicians put their seal, are not perhaps merely foreground estimates, only provisional perspectives” (Nietzsche 1886: 200). There is an urge to doubt people’s judgements and even one’s own perception of reality, that is where wisdom lies, because it is so hard to really know anything or anyone at all.

Roth’s sense of crisis is evident when he insists that life in America is as precarious as anywhere else: “all the assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-democracy” (“The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*”). The individuals in his novels are therefore “ambushed” by unpredictable events, and as Shipe has argued, in novels like *Indignation* there are allusions to an early trauma that is not named, because

to Roth, the Korean War is “symptomatic of a history that has always been corrupt” (Shipe 2019: 15). The symptoms of the corruption of the stain affect the characters in violent ways.

In the celebration of Roth’s work that took place in 2013, Philip Roth is reported to have spoken of ST, stating that “Facing the “infinite capriciousness of existence”, Sabbath takes “a savage journey into his raw wound”, but, Roth noted, he does so with “great sadness about the deaths of others and great gaiety about his own”. In the writer’s passion for the hypnotic materiality of the world, of course, nothing looks so real as the grave. But ultimately, Roth averred of Sabbath, “in his mischief, he finds his truth”—the truth of “ungovernable laughter.” (Shostak 2014: 8-9).

As pointed out in the first chapter of this thesis, Cooper sees “Epstein” as an ironic account of a man whose affair is scandalous because of his Jewish heritage, and that’s why its consequences escape his control (Cooper 1996: 27). Cooper believes Roth’s aim is to write with sympathy for “the most failed human beings, Epstein, for example, so that the reader can derive, not as moral judge but as expanded consciousness, a sense of what that act of failing is like” (37).

Matthew Shipe has argued that in Roth’s late fiction, starting with *Indignation* (2008), there is an important shift in how Roth approached history (2018). By looking back at the repression of the 1950s (both in the sexual and political areas of life), Roth revisits the era that he represented in his early work. But Shipe argues that this is not merely another story of a “‘good’ Jewish boy’s desire to break free from the constraints of home” (Shipe 2018: 1). Instead, this is a rewriting of Roth’s past fiction (2). In recovering the violence of the Korean War (1950-53), Roth presents a story that shows

how brutally history disrupts an individual's life, as Marcus' sense of indignation eventually leads him to his death.

In conclusion, Roth's work helps the reader to examine his own life as a citizen in America, as Franziska Brühwiler and Lee Trepanier write in their introduction to *A Political Companion to Philip Roth*: "Without his critical scrutiny, perhaps even provocation, from Roth's works, American democracy would not be able to pull itself back from the brink of political madness to which it has from time to time succumbed" (2017: 8).

After Roth's passing, Andy Connolly has reflected about the dangers of misinterpreting Roth's fiction when approaching it from a historicist point of view (2019). After examining a wide range of commentaries that tend to read Roth's fiction in light of the contemporary political moments, Connolly warns against readings that see Roth's novels "as a kind of salve" against the troubling political times of the present (2019: 12). Connolly insists that Roth's fiction cannot be understood as a "literary palliative for present ailments" (12). Nor only do I agree with him, but I also think it would be particularly ironic if Roth's fiction, which is marked by the awareness of the pervasiveness of the human stain, would be taken as a medicine against the ailment that is its consequence in America.

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Roth's profound and life-long interest in the United States of America as a subject for his fiction has led him to seek to write in immediate proximity to it, and as shown in this section, this is accomplished in a particular way through the human stain. The images of the stain present America as diagnosed with a cancer; exposing its raw flesh; stained with filth and blood; and finally, suffering from a plague. Images such as the black corpse

of the burning monk haunt the characters' imagination and awaken their conscience and the consciousness of the stain in the corruption and injustice of America. The country is not innocent nor clean and Roth's fiction reveals this trauma, as Pozorski has argued (2011). Even though Roth's characters may not recognize this blight as their own, in the descriptions of the stain there is a connection between violence, war and impurity in a personal sphere.

The moralistic impulse as seen at a smaller scale in the previous section is shown now at a larger scale throughout history from its Puritan beginnings and it is denounced as the blight on America. The American Dream and the myth of progress that fuels it participate in the utopian fantasy that is associated with this impulse. Firstly, with the stain, Roth presents purity as the renunciation of life. While Roth's use of irony has been studied by Safer (2006), Ivanova (2014) and Remnick (2000), among others, I have explored how this irony works along with the stain in particular. Secondly, the human stain describes the struggle between two opposing forces in America: these two discourses are the pastoral and the counterpastoral, but through the stain it is clear that in the end they both rely in fantasies of innocence. As Posnock (2006) has argued, in the "germ of utopianism" there can be a temptation that can degenerate and enslave people to yet another project of purity, which is why I have compared Roth's narrative with the anti-utopian mode. Consequently, as argued in Matthew Shipe's reading of Roth's depiction of history, instead of assigning one single meaning to American history, Roth's novels expose myths and beliefs that have given shape to the narrative of American postwar experience, as argued by Shipe (2017). To sum up, Roth's fiction reveals our limitations to comprehend history or to imagine what is in store for us (Shipe 2017: 157).

Finally, Roth saw how the subject of American history crept into his work constantly after writing *ST*, and he thought that the historical perspective that he had

acquired was a result of his aging. Chapter III will present the consequences of the transgression of the human stain. This consists in the experience of suffering, the presence of illness (which has already been foreshadowed by the image of the rash in Epstein's skin in Chapter I, or the epidemic in America in this Chapter) and last but not least, the final enemy: death.

CHAPTER III. THE STAIN OF SUFFERING

Philip Roth wrote extensively about the experience of suffering, and not only are his books preoccupied with the representation of trauma, but they also put forward important questions about the role of fiction in the midst of pain. See Aimee Pozorski's *Roth and Trauma* (2011) for a complete study about how the description of the characters' grief brings to mind the memory of an earlier trauma in their personal or national history. This is a characteristic trait in Jewish American Literature, where the memory of the Holocaust looms large, next to the problem of forgetting, that is, the loss of identity. However, while many Jews asked themselves the question of how they could attach themselves to the identity of their ancestors, and to the lost memory of the old world they came from (Chametzki et al. 2001: 984), Philip Roth dealt with the representation of loss in a different way. The trauma of the Holocaust is present in early stories such as in "Eli the Fanatic" (1959) and in the figure of Amy Bellette, who pretends to be Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer* (1979). In his exploration of the subject, Roth uses the image of dark clothes to represent their strangeness in America and his text appeals to the character's struggle to deal with suffering. As Debra Shostak argues, in books such as *ST*, Roth poses questions such as: How do you live with the dead? Who are you? And how do you "invent a self in the face of desire and death"? (Shostak 2004: 48).

But Roth was not only interested in the collective tragedies that happened in his lifetime. He was certainly no stranger to pain, illness, and death throughout his own life. As Claudia Roth Pierpont tells in her biography of the author, Roth was grieved by the loss of many close friends and family members. Among them was Primo Levi's death, in 1987. Roth had visited Levi, the author of *If This is a Man* (1947), in Turin, Italy, and

maintained a correspondence with him afterwards, and he was shocked by his death, which had a staggering effect on him, and he even compared it to the blow of the assassinations of the sixties (Pierpont 2013: 165).

According to Pierpont, when Roth's father died in October 1989, three months after Roth had undergone emergency bypass surgery, he had suffered but at least he had been able to care for his father, unlike what had happened when he lost his mother. It had been extremely difficult for Roth to be there for his sick father while he had to recover from his heart surgery and he also kept it secret from him (Pierpont 2013: 171). Roth has written extensively about his personal experience with loss, illness and death; in fact, he had been writing *Patrimony*, which is about his father, when he learnt about the tumor in his father's brain.

During Roth's basic training at Fort Dix, in 1955, when he was twenty-two, he acquired his first and lasting back injury (Pierpont 2013: 29). It was exactly at this time, when he experienced an acute pain for the first time, that he began to write. As he was granted an honorable discharge and given a desk job at a hospital, he was able to use the typewriter that came with the job for his stories, because he was allowed to use it in his free time. In this sense, one could say that writing and pain have been connected in Roth's life from the very beginning. He even wrote a story about his injury later: "Novotny's Pain", which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1962. This back injury led to many years of pain, surgeries and painkillers, which drove him over the edge. But in the story inspired by this pain, as well as in other novels, such as *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth explores questions related to the meaning of pain and the self. As Debra Shostak argues, it is by this focus on physical pain that Roth "reminds us that identity is incomplete without one's consciousness of one's body" (2004: 41). I agree, and I intend to argue that

it is precisely through pain that Epstein, Sabbath, The Swede, Coleman and Kepesh gain a revelation about their identity, and that the text reveals a stain on their bodies.

Shostak further notes that “pain is the exquisite consciousness of our embodiment. To confront the breakdown of the body-in a sense, its coming to consciousness, its assault on the subject/object distinction- is in a sense to face reality” (2004: 41). This will be most evident in DA. Caught in a Kafkaesque predicament; Roth’s characters confront the irrational nature of their pain (For an in-depth analysis of this influence, see, among others, Andrzejczak, 1991; Green, 1987; Kimmage, 2013; Medin, 2007; and Sánchez Canales 2011c). In Roth’s story “Novotny’s Pain”, as Shostak concludes, pain has no identifiable source or meaning, and so, “the assumption that one’s psyche is inevitably written upon one’s body, rather than the reverse, grows doubtful” (2004: 42).

Roth did not only experience physical pain; he also struggled with psychological pain. His marriage with Margaret Martinson Williams (Maggie) had brought about a conflict in his life that he was unable to deal with and caused him to feel much resentment and rage. He had married her in 1959 but he separated from her three years later, although the legal separation did not happen until 1963 and it was very difficult. For this reason, he turned to psychoanalysis for help in 1962, which helped him and also inspired him to write “A Jewish Patient Begins His Analysis” in 1967. He was particularly haunted by the image of Maggie’s deception, a trick she played on him when she bought a pregnant woman’s urine and so made him believe she was pregnant and manipulated him so he would marry her. This scheme and its impact on the author were included in *My Life as a Man* (1974) and in Roth’s autobiographical novel *The Facts* (1988).

Roth also suffered from heart disease, and this struggle is what took him closest to the reality of death. He was told in 1982 that he only had a fraction of normal cardiac

function, and so he became aware that he could only take a day at a time, as he had no certainty that he could return to his work the following day. In her book *Countertexts, Counterlives*, Debra Shostak writes, “Death is, of course, what makes us most aware of our corporeality, the literalness of our bodies” (2004: 44). Many of Roth’s characters suffer from a disease that can cause their death and forces them to confront the reality that their lives can end at any time. The famous graveyard scenes, spread all over Roth’s work, speak of this ongoing concern.

As Shostak says, speaking of the symbolic weight of one of such scenes in *The Anatomy Lesson*, “Nathan’s crisis occurs in the place of death, where the unavoidable reminder of bodily existence consists in the iconography of loss -the gravestones that mark the places where bodies have crumbled to dust” (Shostak 2004: 45). The graveyard bears a universal warning sign: Remember that you will die too. Interestingly, Shostak says that the gravestones *mark* the place where the dead turn to dust (45). To my mind, this word, “mark”, is like the stain in Roth’s novels, which marks the reality of the consequence of sin, which is death. In addition, in her article “Roth’s Graveyards, Narrative Desire, and ‘Professional Competition with Death’”, Shostak analyzes the motifs and textual strategies that appear when Roth’s characters become aware of death in the cemetery scenes of different novels, like *ST* (2014). Her reading of these scenes will be referred to in the last section of this Chapter in order to understand the key issues of death and desire in the light of the motif of the stain.

In Chapter I, the stain signifies moral impurity; in Chapter II a transgressive drive, and in this Chapter, it appears as a wound from the past, a sign of the trauma caused by the pain of losing beloved people. As seen in Chapter I, the human stain appears as a wound that can be physical, as it appears as a real illness, a lethal wound, and it is described in detail. But the worst enemy is the death that awaits the characters. Indeed,

Roth has been interested in the nearness of death and its effect on life from his beginnings, in his early stories, such as “Epstein”, where the main character’s life is overshadowed by the threat of the end of life. Similarly, in *Letting Go* (1962) and in *When She Was Good* (1967), death is portrayed as a shocking retribution for the characters.

Death is ever lingering in Roth’s characters’ minds and they try to seek comfort, life and hope in sexual relationships. Eros-Thanatos is a major theme in Roth’s fiction: Eros is the only way the Rothian protagonist has to try to escape from death (Thanatos). I will address this idea in more detail throughout this Chapter, to show how the characters find themselves utterly crushed under the power of death. Especially in HS and DA, Roth’s narrator Nathan Zuckerman has entered a “competition with death” and DA, written in 2001, represents a new stage in Roth’s fiction, in what is termed as “late Roth”, comprising his work from that novel to the last novellas, which Roth termed “tragedies”. DA is the novel that most clearly shows how the metaphor of the human stain comes to signify everything that has been lost, and the cost of suffering and the weight of impending death on the characters.

Gradually, death becomes the main subject in the “late Roth” period, gaining significance throughout the following novellas: First, *Everyman* (2007), which is named after a late fifteenth century morality play, an allegory about death. Then, after writing *Exit Ghost* (2007) which is about time, age and ghosts, in *Indignation* (2008), he explored the terrible fate that awaits a young man who in trying to escape being drafted, cannot avoid death in the end. *The Humbling* (2009) features an aging depressed actor who contemplates suicide; and finally, *Nemesis* (2010) is a tale of a devastating polio epidemic. Scholars such as Victoria Aarons (2007, 2013), Aimee Pozorski (2004, 2011, 2015), Derek Parker Royal (2009) and Elaine B. Safer (2006, 2011), among others, have devoted research specifically to these novels of the late Roth period. At the time he wrote

these novels, Roth had suffered the loss of a number of his friends (including Janet Hobhouse, Melvin Tumin, Veronica Geng, George Plimpton and Saul Bellow). Particularly his fellow writer's death, Bellow's, sent Roth into despair, according to his biographer Pierpont (2013: 284). And at this time, in 2005, he also had undergone surgery on different occasions and he spent more time at his house in the country (282).

This is also reflected on his writing, as the subject of death is especially present from the start to the end of *HS*, written in 2000. Its narrator, Nathan, takes the time to reflect on it particularly during the scene of the concert rehearsal, when he pictures everybody's death, imagining how their illnesses are growing invisibly, and he thinks about "the ceaseless perishing. What an idea! What maniac conceived it?" (Roth 2000: 209). The stain of death, lying invisible and deep contrasts with the surface of a clear, harmless and pretty day on earth. How can all that destruction go on under the surface of life? The invisible threat that is pending over everybody seems horrifying in this novel.

The Old Testament book of Job will be an important biblical and literary reference in this Chapter because its subject is precisely the question of suffering. It asks fundamental questions about the reasons for pain, illness and death and it represents the devastating consequences of these experiences to an extreme degree, because it is not the story of an individual but a representation for all humans. Job is also remarkably a book that goes against dualism, as it shows how body and spirit are one and how life on this earth does matter. As in the Book of Job, Roth steers away from a diagnosis of the ailment that the main characters suffer from, leaving it to other characters, who are always proved wrong. Just as in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), there is no easy explanation for a physical ailment or for psychological distress in these novels. For example, in *AP*, several people try to explain the reason for the Swede's tragedy. But the text shows that not knowing why something is painful is just as bad as knowing the reason. The writer never gives a

definitive answer, a single cause, for his intention is to describe the experience of pain as it unfolds and the speculation in the mind of the character, detailing the constant questions and doubts.

III.1. THE STAIN IN PAIN

“Why are things the way they are?” is the question that is echoed throughout Roth’s fiction and particularly in these four novels. When considering the disillusion and frustration, the tragedies and impending death that mark everybody’s life, to Roth, the first question to consider is where this pain comes from. In considering the origin of the state that human beings are in, it is necessary to look back to the story of the Fall that is analyzed in Chapter I. But this question leads to the problem of how pain is represented in Roth’s work. In this section, we will look at the stain of loss and the loss of the stain. In this reading of the text, erasing the stain can be compared to how people are erased out of life.

As Bernard Malamud, an important Jewish American literary predecessor of Roth, said: “Every man is a Jew though he may not know it”, and to him, this notion meant “the primal knowledge that life is tragic, no matter how sweet or apparently full” (qtd. in Chametzki et al. 718). Malamud saw the American Jew as someone who is particularly conscious of the struggle of life, and in his work, suffering and pain were inextricably linked to the experience of being a Jew. Roth’s writing is also characterized by an awareness of the experience of pain.

In seeking to understand what she terms Roth's "Anatomies of Desire", Debra Shostak has written about the reasons why ST is not only obsessed with the erotic but also with death: Time ravages Sabbath's body, and with it, his ability to perform the self (Shostak 2004: 51). But in Shostak's analysis of DA, she focuses more on subjectivity and the abject and the representation of sexuality than on the aspect of pain (59-65). Of course, the former is essential to understand the latter, which is why this Chapter must come after the second one that deals with sexuality and desire. As mentioned earlier, Shostak specifically addressed Roth's literary techniques when writing about death in her 2014 essay on the graveyard scenes in several novels. Interestingly, she also comes to the conclusion that the representation of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos often ends in closing ambiguities through the questions of the narrative (2014: 9).

Victoria Aarons, on the other hand, has written about the ironies of body and spirit in Roth's *Everyman* and the failure of the main character to accept his mortality (2007). Aimee Pozorski has focused on trauma and therefore offers an interpretation of DA centered on the experience of suffering (2004). Similarly, she argues that the child who is the victim of history is an important focus of his work, from "Eli, the Fanatic" to *Nemesis* (Pozorski 2019: 126). Most of the Roth scholars who have written about the issue of tragedy and pain in Roth are interested in his obsession with death and trauma, but I would like to focus on how the meaning of the human stain changes from novel to novel in connection to pain.

Therefore, the themes that will be explored in this Chapter revolve around the following questions: Firstly, how does the human stain represent pain, loss, illness and death? And, if the past lives on in the present, is there any sense in concealing the stain, the wounds and scars of traumatic loss? Finally, how is the search for a remedy represented through the image of the stain? In a recent call for papers for a Special Issue

of the *Philip Roth Studies Journal*, the editors invite essays on Roth's response to Judaism and the impact of the Torah and the Talmud on Roth's work. There is clearly a need to expand our understanding of this issue in Roth studies. Even though there are scholars such as the editor of this Special Issue, Timothy Parrish, who also edited *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* in 2007, who has written about the role of Jewishness in Roth's work, I also believe that there is a need for a closer reading of Roth's work in the light of biblical texts that are an important reference in these texts, such as the Book of Job, especially when illuminating the role of the human stain to represent the experience of pain.

III.1.1. "The Cruelty of Life": Images of Injustice from the Book of Job in Roth's Fiction

Aimee Pozorski's work focuses on pain, and therefore her analysis of Roth's novels, starting with *ST* and ending with *Nemesis*, focuses on passages such as Sabbath grieving his dead brother (2011: 28); or on characters who are plagued by the experience of intense pain, such as Les Farley in *HS*, who suffers from PTSD (2017: 105). Pozorski finds a common element in the trauma experienced by Roth's characters, and it is the impact of American history on their lives (see her book length study on Roth and Trauma, 2011). However, her analysis of Roth's texts also reveals the importance of Roth's choice of words and the images he uses to represent their pain. It is on this aspect that I want to focus in this section. Once again, in order to look at Roth's words, first it is necessary to understand the source of his references. One of the most important figures that embody

the reality of pain in the Jewish literary imagination is Job. Ihab Hassan comments on Northrop Frye's characterization of the ironic hero in American fiction by emphasizing the figure of the biblical character of Job: "a would-be rebel whose failure, unlike that of Prometheus, is more bitter or absurd than tragic. He is, in his self-taught irony, who represents better than Adam or Christ the existential man" (1961: 121). But there is another aspect that Job shares with Roth's characters.

Firstly, the injustice of life is one of the main aspects of suffering that is represented by the human stain. At first, in AP, seeing himself as Johnny Appleseed, the Swede thinks that the Lord (or life, as he's not religious) is good to him because he gives him all the good things he needs. However, when ill befalls him, he experiences excruciating pain and cries out that it is unfair, like the biblical character of Job. Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator, (who has also had his share of pain, loss and illness in his life) recalls a book, *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, whose hero he compares to the Swede. It is "the boys' Book of Job" and it presents "the cruelty of life. The Injustice of it" (Roth 1997: 9). The hero, a good kid, suffers from an unexpected tragedy that cuts his life short. The realization that this can indeed happen makes Zuckerman wonder if the Swede was aware that this too could be his fate. The absence of a tragic flaw does not keep the "thundering heavens" from destroying the hero (9). Now, as mentioned in the introduction of this section, the Book of Job reflects on pain and loss philosophically and presents different voices and an evolution in Job's thinking. Job poses the question of the judgement of the innocent, the question of God's justice and power, as well as Job's constant question:

Why did this happen to me?

“If I have sinned, what have I done to you,

you who see everything we do?

Why have you made me your target?

Have I become a burden to you? (Job 7:20)

And God’s answer to Job consists of questions too, as he asks him: Do you know how to take care of the world’s creatures? Or who is in control of nature? (Job 38-42). Job finally has to recognize God’s power over everything and his own need for a mediator. In the same way as Job, the Swede, who is a successful man in every aspect of his life, will suffer a complete loss: he will lose his children, his wife, his health, his status, his sanity and his hope. This feeling is destroyed by Merry’s bomb, which seems to be directed at him, in Jerry’s interpretation:

The violence done to his life was awful. Horrible. Never in his life had occasion to ask himself, ‘Why are things the way they are?’ Why should he bother, when the way they were was always perfect? Why are things the way they are? The question to which there is no answer, and up till then he was so blessed he didn’t even know the question existed. (Roth 1997: 70)

The burden of pain, as shown in Roth’s novels, is overwhelmingly terrible and it has no redeeming quality at all. The aim of the narrative is to represent its physical reality and to address several questions: what does it mean, what is the cause, and what is the result of pain in life? As Roth puts it in *The Anatomy Lesson*, speaking about physical pain: “It’s impossible just to suffer the pain, you have to suffer its meaning. But it’s not

interesting and it has no meaning –it’s just plain stupid pain, it’s the *opposite* of interesting, and nothing, *nothing* made it worth it unless you were mad to begin with.” (Roth 1983: 391). In Roth’s fiction, pain does not bring about anything good. The main character, Zuckerman, knows he did not deserve this pain and that it could not possibly be caused as a relief of guilt feelings, because he was sure he did not have any. “It wasn’t punishment or guilt that he was expiating. [...] He hadn’t been writing for twenty years, writing principally *about* irrational guilt, to wind up irrationally guilty” (391, ellipsis mine). Pain comes to devour life, taking up everything:

What prevents my recovery, what I do or what I don’t do? What does this illness want with me anyway? Or is it I who want something from it? The interrogation had no useful purpose, yet the sole motif of his existence was this hourly search for the missing meaning. Had he kept a pain diary, the only entry would have been one word: Myself. (Roth 1983: 411)

As a result, pain brings the human being back to himself. However, Roth does not offer an answer to the question that pain raises in the individual. That is why, in his analysis of *AL*, David Gilotta sees how “Roth does not allow his narrative to end with an easy vision of recovery” because the main character must “come to terms with his body and his pain” (2010: 112). In a similar way, Sabbath’s narrative is open-ended but the stain on his body is the means of confronting pain in this text.

If one had to choose one character who speaks especially about the subject of pain, it would be Mickey Sabbath in *ST*. And so, if one had to draw a portrait of Sabbath, in this picture it would be visible that Sabbath’s life is a life that speaks of pain; he has a

calling against his will to cause pain, so it becomes a curse for him. While his drive is purely about persevering in his desire, indulging in any impure impulse he may have, and in grieving death and considering the disappointments he had in life. He is filled with loss. The “beast in the jungle” (as in Henry James’ story) is not hidden for Sabbath, for to him there is no need to keep a secret or to wait for the beast without taking action. Sabbath *must* fight back, clinging to life by means of his affair with Drenka. He does suffer, and experiences much emotion, for he is very much active and has several breakdowns. He knows the value of the days of his life, as he approaches the degradation of his body and sees how his powers fail him. All of this leads him to mistrust life while at the same time, cling to it.

Not only is old age the cause of pain in ST, it is also violent death in war that which kills Sabbath’s brother Morty, or a deadly cancer that kills Drenka. Roth decidedly focuses on grief in this novel, as he imagines the impact of loss on a man, on a whole family. “How would the bereft creature who was oneself ever again be a child? I wondered what it would be like never again to know delight. [...] when I came to write *Sabbath’s Theater*, I found out for myself by imagining the anguish of the grieving Sabbaths of Bradley Beach, New Jersey” (Roth 2014: 53, ellipsis mine). The author remembers the shock of hearing about the tragedy of the grief people experienced when they lost their children in the war and through this narrative that grief is represented strikingly. The “maddeningly improbable” and the “unforeseen” keeps surprising Roth’s characters (Roth 1995: 3). They cannot plan their lives, there is nothing they can count on.

Instead of seeing the stain in the Swede’s life, at the beginning, Zuckerman only sees an “incognito” wrapped in “good nature” and praise for his family (Roth 1997: 23). Everything is an interrogation mark, until looking back to the past reveals how it is

undetoned, holding within the dynamite that is ready to explode later. But the Swede's own stories betray his secret, so the text gives the readers a clue, a foreshadowing of the disaster that the Swede does not want to speak of. This clue resides in the only topic that the Swede speaks of with sadness and rage: the fate of his beloved city of Newark. The place where his factory was is now a dump, and the downfall, the change of this city goes parallel to the Swede's own downfall, to his disappointment in the destruction of his dream, even though he does not admit it at this point.

As Zuckerman hears about all the suffering, death and chaos that befell one of his old classmates, he is amazed at his ignorance: He did not know of all that in the past, when he was enjoying life. Encapsulating this moment of revelation, of the journey from innocence to knowledge, Zuckerman dances to the song with the words that are quoted at the beginning of the novel, "Dream... when you're feelin' blue, ... dream... that's the thing to do" (Roth 1997: 84, ellipsis in original). The sound of the song that brings back memories from the past and the knowledge of all the painful events crushes Zuckerman, who, under the weight of "unruly emotion" thinks of the Swede, who awakens to the horror and the truth of evil and suffering in the world and it is such a hard blow. He awakens "to the horror of self-reflection", and to "normalcy interrupted by murder" (85).

III.1.2. The Metaphor of Sickness and the Masks that Hide the Scars

The destruction of the American dream is also painful: generations that are supposed to have more freedom, more safety, more education and a better life see how their dream does not come true, for there is still violence and chaos. Merry, instead of

being “the perfected image” of her parents, becomes a distorted image of them. Equally, the “counterpastoral” is introduced by Merry: “the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede’s castle and there infecting everyone” (Roth 1997: 86). Identifying the whole country with an epidemic is a powerful image to show the relationship between the individual and the society he lives in, and the plague is the human stain by definition, having both a positive and a negative effect. The representation of illness will be studied more in depth in the second section of this Chapter.

In the same manner that Job asks about the reason for his suffering, in AP there is a similar universal question, applicable to everybody: “Who is set up for tragedy and the incomprehensibility of suffering? Nobody. The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy, that is every man’s tragedy” (Roth 1997: 86). In the second section of the novel, the reader is given an insight into the Swede’s cracks, for he puts up a facade indicating everything is normal, but by rendering his thoughts, the narrator shows the interior monologue that betrays his permanent sense of loss, his madness even. He starts calling Rita “honey” the way he would call his daughter and he was not able to stop himself. Rita’s reference to his apparent happiness rips through his crack: “‘Am I?’ he asked, and felt as though he were going to be dissected, cut into by a knife, opened up and all his misery revealed” (130). The utter despair growing under his mask of calm is revealed gradually, as the narrator explains the effort he has to make to keep from losing control: “having managed momentarily to quash everything that was shadowing him and menacing him [...]” (130, ellipsis mine). He lives prey to his fears and his grief, described like beasts that are waiting to devour him. His inner monologue runs more intense and it is represented with hyphenated sentences that convey the obsessive nature of his thoughts about madness, mourning, death and even Hell. He also feels alone, plagued by the presence of “this

horrible riddle” (131). He is in a desperate situation, unable to be cured from his grief: “He clutched at his own effusiveness the way a sick person clutches at any sign of health, no matter how minute” (132). The Swede’s inner life is nightmarish, gruesome, lonely, ridden with “self-castigation” and “unflagging remorse”, even for that innocent kiss long ago (173). Finally, the text points at the Swede’s feeling of shame, he is not proud to be living a double life, of “masquerading as the ideal man” (174).

Merry suffers not only from her stuttering, that stands for her own imperfection, but also from witnessing the pain of innocent people. A striking image of this pain is the scene in which she watches the Buddhist monk going up in flames on TV, analyzed earlier in connection with the subject of America. That image caused her to empathize with “these gentle people” and to ask whether anybody cared for them or had a conscience (Roth 1997: 154). Her father’s explanations did not satisfy her, and for her the horror was reduced to the fact that only few people had a conscience. But Merry is not the only one to ask this question in the novel. Later, the question is repeated in the context of the riots at Newark (165). The question could be repeated over and over again, endlessly: Where is everybody’s conscience?

Watching the news about the war in Vietnam on the television set held Merry captive, and her father, as he recollects this memory after the bomb, wonders what it was that she was thinking as she watched. Is that enough to make somebody a bomber? Terrorism acquires an existentialist aspect in this novel. To the Swede it is important to understand the process that his daughter has gone through. Nowadays, the debate still goes on. Does religion come first and then a radicalization? Or is it first an extreme ideology and then religion that comes into play in the mind of a terrorist? Merry’s case is an example of somebody who goes through periods of obsession and beliefs in different systems or ideologies. It is a set of values that she acquires and then exchanges for the

next one. She chooses to follow an idol, upholds something as the origin of good, and something else as evil, and also a goal, the end towards she lives. It is in this way that we can read the Swede's wanderings through the different phases of her life, her articles of faith at each time. From images of Jesus and the Virgin to the Communist manifesto, as well as Audrey Hepburn: "Merry outgrew everything. And then she would have found something new to hate and new to love [...]" (Roth 1997: 160, ellipsis mine). The detailed description of everything she believed in, from the political ideology to the apparition of the Virgin, causes the reader to think about the value of what one puts one's faith in.

Merry ironically goes from being oppressed by madness to becoming mad herself: "Why must she always be enslaving herself to the handiest empty-headed idea?" (Roth 1997: 241). She is "tyrannized" by "the thinking of crackpots", and she subjects to their ideology in spite of her intelligence and education. As the Swede recalls his arguments with her, it is evident that there is no use in trying to reason with her, she just fiercely denies every argument and accuses her father of being a conformist and of not thinking (242). There is no way of making her see the incongruity of her reverence for life which is causing her death, because she has no real desire to live anymore, her goal is to die: "self-starvation. The price paid for perfection" (244). In view of this, is it better to be self-seeking or to be selfless? Merry has fallen into the trap of "the lying, inhuman horror of all this selflessness", and her "flawless speech" linked to her "monstrous altruism" is awful (242). The Swede asks her: "For whom? For what?" and she says she believes in "the sanctity of life, not in the sovereignty of God, and that is why she sacrifices her life. Paradoxically, the Swede notices her monotonous explanation lacks the "sound of life" (245). It is realizing that his daughter is mad what causes the Swede a pain worse than he had imagined. His efforts were in vain, "being reasonable with her was his madness. Sitting there trying to act as though he were respectful of her religion when her religion

consisted of an absolute failure to understand what life is and is not” (247). His daughter is completely isolated, her situation is terrifying.

While some characters, such as Merry, not only confront the stains and even make it part of their appearance, other characters, such as Dawn, try to erase the stain from their body and their life. Dawn has been hospitalized twice for suicidal depression, she is sick with fear, and no dream of beauty can distract her from her pain. She blames her husband for luring her into his life and is full of regrets that lead her to “the relentless crying about her shame, her mortification, the futility of her life [...]” (Roth 1997: 187, *ellipsis mine*). And the remedy she seeks is a face-lift, which is like a mask, a superficial cure, which the Swede knows will not heal the real problem within. This truth is revealed right after the surgery, as instead of renewal, there is only a sense of the death of the old Dawn, as if in removing the scar of her trauma, everything is cast away -even the very existence of her daughter. This can be read as a metaphor of Dawn’s attempt to remove a stain, as she tries to start anew. However, instead of seeing beauty, the Swede sees mutilation, and when he looks after her, her bandages make him think of the “burial of her corpse” (188). The old identity of his wife has died with the changes in her body. In *ST*, Drenka experiences suffering as an eraser, in Sabbath’s view: “He’d seen her suffer and this was what it looked like. The blurriness broadened out from the middle of her face rather like an eraser crossing a blackboard and leaving in its wake a wide streak of negated meaning” (Roth 1995: 18). Suffering here appears as a stain that paradoxically “erases” the visible identity and characteristic traits of a person’s face, leaving the effect of a stupefied blur.

Not only does Dawn need a change of face to start a new life, she also wants a new house. She wants to sell the big old stone house that represents the Swede’s dream of a perfect life. Her hate for the house means hate for her husband and his dream of their life together. And a house that was characterized by regularity and order is now cast away,

the indestructible house is destructed, the daughter is lost, and the past is cast away, buried. Nothing is left of the old pastoral. The daughter named Merry, who brought them joy, has now brought them utter desolation, which is sadly ironic when thinking of her name, as mentioned earlier in the previous chapters of this thesis. All of this makes the Swede realize that he did not know his wife either, just as people misjudged her when they believed she had no more aspirations in life only because she was Miss New Jersey. And then, on top of that, the Swede eventually learns that Dawn is having an affair with their neighbor.

In AP, the human stain appears in the image of rape as imagined by the Swede. He visualizes how his daughter was raped repeatedly (Roth 1997: 266). Throughout the novel of AP, it becomes clear that there is no real safety anywhere. Danger, violence and rape are to be found in the places where one would least expect it to happen. Early in the novel, Merry tries to tell her father that there is no way of knowing where evil comes from, their conversation thus foreshadowing what will happen to her later. Even more tellingly, she says that he, as a father, is not only not able to save her from danger, and she says even fathers are capable of doing evil: “Sometimes daddies do the raping” (Roth 1997: 111). This is a blow to the Swede because he perceives himself as innocent. The unthinkable to him is that he would be considered guilty of anything, and that is why being considered a criminal, an exploiter, in the eyes of Rita Cohen, Merry and the Weathermen is so upsetting to him. Nevertheless, the real blow comes later in the novel, when he is forced to confront the reality that his daughter has in fact been raped several times during the time she went underground after the bombing. As the Swede imagines the rape, all the other details are “blocked out”, the faces of the perpetrators are “out of sight” and they disappear along with their “blameless innocence” because the stain erases

it, showing only a dark blot in a clear image of the human stain: “The rape obscured everything else” (Roth 1997: 267).

III.1.3. The Hurt that Comes from Being Human

Another attempt of erasing the human stain can be found in the cleansing of water. Just as Dawn’s face-lift in *AP*, bathing in water is an image laden with the meaning of the search of purification. The connotations of water as cleansing have been mentioned earlier and have been considered by scholars such as Ira Nadel (2018). However, these interpretations fail to acknowledge the ambivalent way in which water is present in Roth’s text. Water actually subverts the meaning of purity in these novels because of the human stain. In *ST*, Sabbath runs a bath when he is at his friend’s house and he is trying to indulge in his desire but at the same time he is confronted with his limitations and the frustration of his sense of loss (Roth 1995: 337). His dirty clothes reflect his stained state, his attempt to masturbate and his rummaging through his friend’s wife and daughter’s personal belongings further reinforce this image of filth (330). Sabbath experiences a gradual descent into hell. There is a question posed by Sabbath that invites the reader to think about it during the whole novel: “flight from what?” (Roth 1995: 125). It may be death, or it may be the human stain, that condition of which he cannot rid himself, which is sometimes portrayed positively and other times negatively. In any case, it produces pain. The subject of Sabbath’s pain is further explored as the events unfold. Towards the end of the novel, he recites a long list of grievances, the blows that life has dealt him:

Wifeless, mistressless, penniless, vocationless, homeless... and now, to top things off, on the run. If he weren't too old to go back to sea, if his fingers weren't crippled, if Morty had lived and Nikki hadn't been insane, or he hadn't been –if there weren't war, lunacy, perversity, sickness, imbecility, suicide, and death, chances were he'd be in a lot better shape. (Roth 1995: 142-143)

Not only has he suffered these things, he also adds to the list sufferings that are particular to his artist's vocation: "isolation, poverty, despair, mental and physical obstruction" (143). The reason why Sabbath is in a miserable shape is the burden of his particular sufferings and what the ghost of his mother sees as "human life. There is a great hurt that everyone has to endure" (Roth 1995: 143). It is in these simple words that Sabbath sees truth. That is why, to him, "empathy" or "sensible" words are nothing but lies (144). He is utterly broken, which is why he does not believe in therapy (145). In contrast, Gurumurthy Neelakantan, who offers a reading of ST with a focus on its ethical aspect, has argued that in this novel, therapy is redefined as an "empowering philosophy of life" (2017: 93). Instead, I think what is redefined in this novel is actually the experience of human pain. Drawing on the benefits of psychoanalysis, Neelakantan emphasizes how Sabbath might learn to live "virtuously" in a "salubrious" way, and that the novel's ending with its memories, which are "redemptive", allows Sabbath to overcome trauma (100). Far from being able to "heal the wounds" and achieving "peace" (101), I instead argue that Sabbath finds that he is utterly incapable of doing so. Remembering does not heal his wounds, it opens them instead. At the devastating scene where he opens the box that contains his dead brother's objects, the memories only bring pain. I totally disagree with Neelakantan when he interprets that they "rejuvenate his conscience" (102).

Because Sabbath's psychological and emotional wounds are due to more than the loss of his brother Morty, Nikki, and also to the frustration of not being able to continue his career as a puppeteer. The conclusion that Sabbath reaches is related to the idea mentioned previously, the fact that nobody really knows anything about each other, even though they think they do, which Sabbath experiences as the frustrating fact that people who pretend to help and understand don't really know anything at all (146). This issue also appears in *HS*, when Coleman is subjected to everybody's mistaken judgement. In *ST*, Roth chooses to reveal this feeling of helplessness with a description of an emotional crisis through crying and tears: Sabbath breaks down and cries three times at this climactic moment, and while the first times he seems to make the reader believe he could be putting on an act, the last time his tears are definitely genuine, and he confesses he cannot stop himself (147, 149). *ST* features more tears, in the description of his wife Roseanna's wail of desperation: "This sound accompanied Sabbath [...]" and no matter how loud he played music, he could not "cancel it out", for it was "a truly record-breaking wail" that made Sabbath decline sex later, because he was so haunted by this expression of pain (Roth 1995: 240).

Sabbath's vulnerability is shown when he breaks down, facing the prospect of loss and death, when Rosa is comforting him as if he were a baby (Roth 1995: 184). This description of human frailty can also be found in *AP*, in several striking descriptions that reveal Levov as a vulnerable person who finds out the myth on which his happiness is based crumbles down as it is no more than a mere illusion. Likewise, in *DA* there is a description of Kepesh as well as Consuela's horror when confronting her illness, death and the loss of her beauty. All of the main characters in these novels go through traumatic experiences and a feeling of impotence when facing a harsh reality. And this is on their minds when they try to explain the way they live. Greenberg, too, sees Sabbath's pain in

relation to his transgressive nature: “A powerful undertow of emotional pain and a desperado philosophy with roots in the existential Absurd have built up in his life [...]” as a consequence of the greatest losses and failures he has experienced (Greenberg 1997: 503, ellipsis mine). This sense of an increasing passion actually grows throughout the novel as the reader follows Sabbath’s steps. Paradoxically, though, it seems like he may try to move away from his transgressive lifestyle as he gets closer to death (by visiting the cemetery where his dead relatives are buried). Roth explained that “to meet the dead, to be reunited with them, is never far from Sabbath’s mind. The closer he gets to the dead -to *his* dead -the stronger the geyser of tormented feeling and the further he moves from the wild and antagonistic performance that is his life. The book is a savage journey with the dead into his own raw wound” (Roth 2014: 58-59).

Sabbath’s wound is revealed by means of the narrative, the strong imagery and his powerful words. He is trying to discover the nature of his wound too, and he needs to think about death and be close to the dead in order to do so. He needs to speak to them, to question them as well as himself. The reader consequently travels this same distance with him in a wild journey. Many questions are raised as it is hard to understand some aspects, not only the reason for transgressive behavior, but also the reason for unexpected feelings of happiness, relief or even joy in Sabbath. The circumstances are not typical for such feelings, so where do they come from? Roth has remarked that he is aware of the irony in the narrative: “there is Sabbath’s great grief about the death of others and a great gaiety about his own. There is leaping with delight, there is also leaping with despair” (Roth 2014: 59). As discussed earlier, in Chapter II when looking at the use of irony, this constant switch of tones or perspectives gradually creates a double view of the complex reality of life, and death in this case. (For a detailed analysis of irony in Roth’s works, see

Safer's 2006 book-length study). But there is also a description of joy in the sense of peace, of Sabbath really finding something he is looking for, as we will see.

III.1.4. "A Symphonic Portrayal of Human Frailty and Filth"

Ihab Hassan defines the figure of the new hero in American fiction as flawed but also endowed with a desire that affirms life: "flawed in his sainthood and grotesque in his criminality, he finally appears as an expression of man's quenchless desire to affirm, despite the voids and vicissitudes of our age, the human sense of *life!*" (Hassan 1961: 6). He calls this quality "radical innocence", *radical* because it is "extreme, impulsive, anarchic, troubled with vision [...] It is the innocence of a Self that refuses to accept the immitigable rule of reality, including death, an aboriginal Self the radical imperatives of whose freedom cannot be stifled" (6). Roth's Sabbath fits perfectly into this description.

It is certainly puzzling to consider how Roth's most outrageous character, Sabbath, finds joy in the midst of life and of death too, and this is the effect that the novel has had on many readers. The novelist Elisa Albert has also expressed this surprising experience describing ST as "a symphonic portrayal of human frailty and filth [...] the writing had blazed off the page, left me slack-jawed, riveted, amazed, appalled, in stitches. The things you could get away with in fiction! The grotesque and beautiful honesty you could get away with, if you could tell a decent story!" (Albert 2020: 8, ellipsis mine). Albert here summarizes the qualities that lend Roth its force in order to portray the experience of "frailty" and of "filth" together in a way that escapes moralistic judgement and literary rules, finding freedom in its unique form of expression.

At this point, the question is how the suffering from this frailty is connected with the filth encountered through the human stain, and also how it is interlinked with the opposite emotion of joy. Because, surprisingly, Sabbath seems to find joy even at the time when he should be crushed by despair. The description of weakness comes along with the ironic consolation that his life is really *human* precisely because of the pain that he experiences. When Sabbath tries to explain why he feels great, he says maybe it is his freedom (as he frees himself from his wife and refuses to be bound by society's moral rules): and that is why he comes to the conclusion that he has lived "a real human life":

Or maybe it was knowing that he'd never had to please and wasn't starting now. Yes, yes, yes, he felt uncontrollable tenderness for his own shit-filled life. And a laughable hunger for more. More defeat! More disappointment! More deceit! More loneliness! More arthritis! More missionaries! God willing, more cunt! More disastrous entanglement in everything. For a pure sense of being tumultuously alive, you can't beat the nasty side of existence. (Roth 1995: 247)

Consequently, the mess, the stain in his life, provides him with a renewed desire to keep living. At the pivotal chapter in which Sabbath seeks the graveyard where his family was buried, there are a series of revelations and the narrative becomes increasingly intense, carrying the play between humor and seriousness to the extreme. When he finds the grave he is looking for, he experiences a strong feeling of homecoming. He has found what he is looking for, and he feels a primary power: "He felt himself at last inside his life, like someone who, after a long illness, steps back into his shoes for the first time" (Roth 1995: 357). Does this suggest that Sabbath is cured from his stain, his illness? Does he truly feel he has a new life, that he is different now? Interestingly, it is here, at this

point, when there is a reference to the possibility of the existence of a soul that may live in the character's body: "walls of embitterment were crashing down; the surface of something long unexposed –Sabbath's soul? The film of his soul? –was illuminated by happiness. As close as a substanceless substance can come to being physically caressed" (357). It is interesting that even when describing the soul Philip Roth uses the image of the physical body and a caress, therefore showing again the union between the physical reality we know and everything that is supposedly not material. Maybe at this moment he feels like he has finally come home, and found what he was looking for. There is no more need for a quest, nothing left to pursue. Where does this mysterious feeling of happiness come from? As we have seen, the stain he has experienced in life helps him to feel alive but he also wants to be liberated from it.

The images of water prove to be a suitable setting for Sabbath's grief. Roth uses his memories of holidays at the Jersey shore when he chooses Bradley Beach as the setting for the moving scene in which Sabbath mourns his brother's death. It is a significant place because this is where Roth, in his teenage years, experienced a sharp sense of being alive and free in the Ocean. It is a place that encourages feeling and emotion for characters like Sabbath because it is sublime but also frightening. Water, however, cannot wash away Sabbath's grief completely. When he goes to his friend's funeral and he meets his old friend Norman, and he is overcome by pain, he goes to the bathroom: "Sabbath has washed his hands, face, and beard in the bathroom, and still, he realized, he unnerved Norman no less than if he had been a tramp [...]" (Roth 1995: 140). Sabbath cannot wash away the marks of his imperfection which stand out against the "perfect" image of Norman's house.

The grave is Sabbath's home because it is the place where his body may find rest. But we soon learn his mind is still very much alive and so he is not ready for this rest;

and yet he keeps thinking about it. It seems a never-ending conflict. The opening quote of the novel is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611): "Every third thought shall be my grave." Roth explains that this means that to Prospero, "the irksome law of cessation has come to permeate his brain" (Roth 2014: 58). Because Sabbath's death is constantly on his mind, he knows it will be his end and seems to be willing to be playful as well as serious about it, but he is aware of the fact that what he really wants is to live.

However, there is something that man cannot conquer, and that is death, and so in most of his novels, Roth treats the problem of his main character and the human predicament in this world in general as a process of humbling, by being defeated by the final enemy. The experience of being humbled was especially explored by Roth in his homonymous novel of 2009. *The Humbling* actually addresses this very issue. The role the stain plays in the encounter with the final enemy, death, will be analyzed in the last point of this Chapter, but first this study will consider how the stain is present in the representation of illness and the loss of the strength and beauty of the body.

III.1.5. The Dark Shadow of the Past

"The past is never dead; it's not even past", as William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951). The ghosts from the past that live on in the present are explored throughout Roth's work, and in some of his works it is the central theme, like in *Exit, Ghost* (2007). Chapter I presented the idea of how the ghost of sins of the past hovers over the present lives like a stain of darkness, and similarly now the past also becomes a dream that never abandons the characters. It can come in the form of a nostalgic vision of

cherished memories, but always with a painful edge, because the past is lost forever. This is a reality that is acutely experienced by Roth's characters, as they remember the days of splendor in their childhood, days of happiness in which they knew no pain; but also, as they recall everything that they did end up losing eventually. That is why, for example, in *ST*, the shadow of Sabbath's past walks with him and never leaves him, constantly reminding him of all those he has lost. He converses with his mother's ghost, and the trauma of the losses of Nikki and of his brother Morty is constantly present in his mind.

The ghost of Sabbath's mother is also marked by the human stain of filth, as can be seen in this description where she is compared with debris that keeps coming back: "All he could talk about with his mother, who was gliding about inside the car, drifting and plunging like debris in the tide" (Roth 1995: 105). Therefore, the reality of the disappearance and death of beloved ones and the emotional loss it entails is experienced as traumatic, and it is anything but concealed. Similarly, in *AP*, The Swede and Dawn suffer when their child Merry disappears, just like Coleman laments the loss of his mother, whom he rejected, and likewise Faunia has to live with the trauma of having lost her children, in *HS*. The anxiety that plagues many of Roth's characters results in an increase of the fear of the disappearance of more people. This can be found in *DA*, as Kepesh reflects upon his frailty and Consuela faces her illness and death.

Anton Chekhov's theater play *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) is an important literary reference in *ST*, and it is key to understand the subject of suffering in the novel. And Sabbath speaks of one of the characters, explaining that even though she flees from disorder she carries it within her, very much like the human stain: "Yet she carries the disorder within her -she is the disorder! But I was the disorder. I am disorder" (Roth 1995: 203). Likewise, Chekhov's humor turns bitter as it addresses how "time flies" for the characters, who reminisce about their youth. They have a great nostalgia about the orchard

that lends the play its title. This place is like Bradley Beach in Roth's ST, or like the Garden of Eden, and this property which will be lost in Chekhov's play. It will disappear unlike the characters' memories of the past, for they are also haunted by the past, like Sabbath: "If I could cast off the burden that weighs on my heart, if I could forget the past!" (20). Charlotta is a character who also experiences what Roth's characters have to learn in these novels, especially in HS, as seen earlier: "I know nothing at all" (29). In *The Cherry Orchard* the past must be discarded in favor of the new life, as in AP, when the Swede builds his house in Old Rimrock. And it is similar to Sabbath's feelings of despair when Lyubov cries "Oh my Orchard! My life, my youth, my happiness, goodbye!" (77).

As well, the past is put on the spotlight by Roth when one is nearing death, in a painful way: The feeling that life is over, but at the same time not over yet, is what plagues Kepesh. Sabbath too, deals with a similar feeling. This is how Kepesh experiences it in DA: "To those not yet old, being old means *you've been*. But being old also means that despite, in addition to, and in excess of your beenness, you still are. Your beenness is very much alive. You still are, and one is as haunted by the still-being and its fullness as by the having-already-been, by the pastness" (Roth 2001: 36). In this case, the past becomes a burden too. It seems like Roth's characters try to look back to the past for answers, but the past, beautiful and painful at the same time, only has the effect of illuminating the stain in their lives.

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To sum up, there are several images of the human stain that represent pain in Roth's fiction and paradoxically their meaning lies in the erasure of the mark of the stain itself. There is a consensus among Roth scholars that Roth's descriptions of graveyards

are the setting for his exploration of the confrontation of the self with mortality, as Shostak (2004; 2014) and Aarons (2007) argue. However, there are not many studies about how the reality of pain is represented in Roth's work and how it relates to the themes of purity and impurity. But Pozorski (2004; 2019) has focused on the subject of suffering in some of Roth's novels, such as *DA* and *Nemesis*, so I have followed her close reading of some key passages and used her concept of Roth's focus on the vulnerability of individuals in the face of trauma in order to tackle the issue of pain in these four novels in a broader way.

Starting with the references to the biblical figure of Job, Roth's characters tend to embody the reality of pain. Sabbath, Drenka and Roseanna go through painful experiences in *ST*; the Swede, Dawn and Merry also experience great suffering in *AP*; Coleman, Faunia and Les Farley each hurt in their own way; and finally in *DA*, Consuela and Kepesh ache because of their particular situations. Overall, I have found that the attempt to erase the stain is the way in which characters respond to their pain. For example, in "Epstein", Goldie expresses her pain at her husband's adultery by asking if his rash can be removed. Pain is made visible physically through the characters' emotions, for example, through the characters' tears, such as Sabbath's. These tears, just like water, wash his face and point at the rite of purification. The pain caused by visualizing images of physical violence, such as the rape in the Swede's imagination in *AP*, also causes an erasure of the physical details of the scene. In *HS*, Coleman's tattoo represents the erasure of his real identity as an African American.

There are also attempts to erase or remove the mark of the stain on the body, as can be seen in Dawn's face-lift and in the image of cleaning with water in the bathing in *ST*. Unlike Neelakantan argues (2017), I believe that as the novel as a whole does not reflect a faith in the effectiveness of therapy, these images fail to offer real redemption.

Rather, they point at the opposite reality, as the stain pervades the images of water and rain with the muddy representation of impurity and filth. These failed attempts to seek purity do portray the characters' search for a remedy for their psychological and physical pain, but there is no final relief in sight. Finally, there are also more invisible images of the stain, whose presence hovers over the narrative, such as the ghosts of the past, like Sabbath's mother who is like debris that floats with the tide, constantly returning and reflecting the pain of loss.

III.2. THE STAIN IN ILLNESS

As mentioned in Chapter II, America is compared to a patient who suffers from an illness and Roth is like the cardiologist who examines its state. But as Victoria Aarons claims, Roth's characters and his readers also are the patients, characterized by their limitations and mistakes (Aarons 2019: 30). But which is the illness that ails these patients? Roth's work is intent on exploring the nature, origin, meaning and mere reality of illness in the human experience.

The presence of illness in Roth's work is treated especially in *Portnoy's Complaint*, which is completely dedicated to Portnoy's peculiar illness or disorder, as it states at the beginning, where Roth humorously defines this imaginary complaint: "A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature" (Roth 1969: i). As Alex's doctor Spielvogel explains, the patient's various sexual acts (a consequence of his "morality") derive in shame and dread of retribution instead of issuing in gratification.

Debra Shostak has written in depth about how the decay of the body caused by illness is related to desire and subjectivity, and she focuses on the loss of selfhood experienced by Roth's protagonists (2004). In addition, she has explored this issue further in her 2014 essay included in a special issue about Roth's fiction edited by Victoria Aarons and Gustavo Sánchez Canales. In this essay she reflects on how both portrays the ambivalence of being caught between those who have left and the sweetness of life, that is, the choice between leaving and staying Shostak 2014: 7-9). Similarly, Victoria Aarons sees the depiction of the nearness of death in Roth's work as the most important fear to the characters of Roth's late fiction, as it means the loss of one's own life (2006). In the same line, Arísti Trendel looks at the sense of mortality present in DA (2007). Sánchez Canales, too, has written about how the biological clock is reversed because of illness in DA (2014) and also about the meaning of sickness in the Bible (2021). Both Roth's narrativization of illness and the issue of how illness affects women in particular in his work have been analyzed by Miriam Jaffe Foger (2012; 2014; 2020). Aimee Pozorski is also interested in this issue, as is evident in her studies of cancer as the predator in DA (2015) and in her previous book about Roth and Trauma (2011).

In this section, I intend to show how the human stain represents illness and how its meaning is revealed differently in each of the four novels that this dissertation focuses on. After asking whether it is possible to conceal this stain of illness, I will look at how there is also a search for a remedy in the very stain that causes the fatal disease.

III.2.1. The Metaphor of Sickness in the Bible

In the first section of this Chapter, when looking at the experience of pain, we have found out how Roth has used the image of the symptom of an illness throughout his work and I would like to propose how the human stain throws light on its meaning. As explained in Chapter I, the image of the human stain draws from the texts in the Old Testament that describe physical stains on the body as signifying moral impurity. Sánchez Canales pointed out, as seen earlier, that these images are used by Roth as early as in *Portnoy's Complaint* to explore questions of Jewish identity and rebellion but not with an anti-Semite meaning (2021: 245).

Firstly, the blemish of wickedness stands for everything that is opposed to the Lord's purity and perfect justice: "They have corrupted themselves; They are not his children, because of their blemish: a perverse and crooked generation" (Deuteronomy 32: 5). The next step is to look at how the stain can be analyzed in Roth's fiction when it is represented as an illness, as it appeared in the Law referring to the rituals of the cleansing of leprosy. Here, lepers suffer from an illness that has to be diagnosed because of its symptoms, the marks on the skin, but the biblical text points at what happens underneath the skin. If the spots of leprosy go "deeper than the skin", the sick person is deemed "unclean" (Leviticus 13: 38). The law does not only dictate how to tell what the symptoms mean, but also that the ones who are found unclean must be isolated and if their spots disappear and they are healed, how they should be cleaned in a ritual of purification, and also how in the temple there should be a sin and a trespass offering of blood "to make atonement for him who is to be cleaned of his uncleanness" (Leviticus 14:14).

Just as the leprosy sores once covered the whole body of the sick person, in this ritual of symbolic cleansing that happens after the actual physical healing, the priest is to put blood and oil from the offering on different parts of the body of him who is to be cleansed (14). This text illuminates the Jewish concept of sin as covering the whole of human experience, making all aspects of human life sinful, just as no part of the body remains untouched or clean because of leprosy, making the whole person contaminated. Because sin, just like leprosy, sets the unclean apart from what is clean, showing that everything is sinful, not just one part of the body, and after it is cleaned miraculously, and that there should be an offering of blood and trespass speaks of the moral significance of this illness.

While in Roth's fiction there are no biblical lepers nor atonement sacrifices, there are rebellious characters who are condemned for their transgressions and there are also scapegoats, such as in *ST* and *HS*. In the light of recent reactions to Roth's fiction, it is worthwhile reconsidering the relationship between sexuality and illness in the representation of the body through the human stain. Following this line of thought, I would like to propose a new reading of *DA* focusing on the representation of illness through the literary device of the human stain. While Roth's representation of the body has been considered highly obscene and upsetting, it can be argued that Roth's fiction can actually foster empathy, not only for men but also for women, which is why Miriam Jaffe-Fogger not only sees humanity in novels such as *DA*, but also argues strongly against the misinterpretation of Roth's representation of women as misogynist (Jaffe-Fogger in Aarons & Sánchez Canales 2014). There is a temptation to see a novel like *DA* as an obscene, pornographic story, where women are portrayed in a demeaning way.

Likewise, the novel that brought Roth to the heights of fame back in 1969, *Portnoy's Complaint*, became an international phenomenon as critics and reviewers

debated whether this was literature or if it was pornography, too offensive to be taken seriously. I believe a focus on the stain can solve some of these problematic issues. Of course, in Roth playfulness and seriousness are always interlinked and questioned. However, readings such as Jaffe-Fogger's (2012; 2014; 2020) and Aimee Pozorski's (2004, 2015), as well as Peter Mathews' (2007) offer a new interpretation of DA. In addition, recently, younger authors such as Elisa Albert (2009; 2015) have written about the experience of illness and pain, influenced by Roth's style and subject (Jaffe-Fogger & Pozorski 2017: 14).

As studied in the previous section of this Chapter, the experience of loss is represented with images of the human stain in these novels. As Alan Cooper has stated, for the characters there is no comfort in sight: "Roth's characters do not rest in loss of the world or feel redeemed at having wrested from that loss some single personal fulfillment. More than any other response to their own experience is the loss itself: seeing some illusion shattered without having it replaced by anything comforting" (Cooper 1996: 6). Roth's brutal realism and this lack of peace as a symptom of the stain has already been discussed in Chapter I, when describing the consequences of the physical blemish which is the image of the stain. In the face of death, this unrest seems to be at its most unbearable. As Sabbath cannot find rest in the loss of the world, he can only feel his loss more strongly and the narrative makes the reader aware of how poignant that loss is.

The overwhelming nature of loss and the ensuing lack of personal fulfillment when somebody is under such circumstances can mostly be observed in DA, when Kepesh misses Consuela, and also when she faces the prospect of the loss of her breast, her own life and her future. And finally, the loss of one's own life, not only of that of others, is the most painful. Victoria Aarons wrote this about *Everyman* (2006) but it can be extrapolated to other narratives by Roth: "The body's decay becomes a metonymy for

failures of character and its subsequent losses, specifically the failure of the protagonist to come to terms with his mortality, to recognize that he is no match for death” (Aarons 2007: 117). In Roth’s novels, life is particularly painful because there is an awareness of the enormity of all the physical and psychological limitations and the characters’ helplessness. The latter makes its appearance especially with old age, which is when the characters are frail even when they think their lives are still in their control, when they think they are in no need for help. As seen above, the belief in an unlimited human willpower leads to tragedy in Roth. “the delusion of self-determination -always a mistake for Roth’s characters” (119). Just like there is no way to overcome impurity, people cannot overcome death. The stain which once signified impurity now has come to describe the darkness of illness, death and pain. This theme is also explored in Shostak’s essay about the issue of the competition with death as represented in Roth’s most significant graveyard scenes, as mentioned earlier (2014).

III.2.2. The Invisible Cancer

The trace of the human stain is like a cancer that is the hidden reality under the surface. In AP, the Swede hides the fact that he has cancer from Nathan when he meets him. Cancer is one of the images of the stain as represented in ST, in HS and in DA too. But in AP, the stain that is Merry herself is connected with the cancer suffered by her father. Jerry refers to Merry as a monster, and when she dies, Jerry links this fact to the Swede’s cancer and to his death. At one point, Zuckerman believes that the trouble in the Swede’s life must have stemmed from the experience of illness, his “belated discovery of

what it means to be not healthy but sick, to be not strong but weak; what it means to not look great -what physical shame is, what humiliation is, what the gruesome is, what extinction is, what it is like to ask ‘Why?’” (Roth 1997: 29). In other words, his discovery of the stain is directly linked to his experience of illness. He who once had an impressively strong body is now aware of his frailty, Zuckerman imagines. But he is wrong, as it is not the reality of the Swede’s own death that has “burst into the dream of his life”, it is something else. This is why illness is represented by the stain, because there is a moral, spiritual meaning of the stain. The question asked by Job (“Why?”) is not because of illness and death only, it is because he feels he has received an unfair punishment and his view of life is shattered, broken into pieces and he has to try to understand life in a new way. The text keeps suggesting different stains in the narrative and the reader must discover and decide which ones are the real stain. In fact, the Swede’s brother suggests that his stubborn love for his daughter is actually like an illness, something rotten inside of him which eventually caused his death (Roth 1997: 72). So, is love, unconditional, irrational love, the real human stain, rather than hatred and violence?

To Jerry, the absence of violence and rage is a symptom of sickness, it is lethal. However, in Zuckerman’s narration the Swede does experience anger and loses control, and yet, even this rage does not save him from being destroyed. Jerry believes hatred is strengthening, but this is not the case for the Swede. Jerry sees his brother’s life in terms of conflict: his wife was against him, and his daughter was against him. To Jerry, the Swede was driven by responsibility towards his loved ones and they paid him back with violence and abuse. Eventually, however, Jerry asks the same questions that Zuckerman does: How did the catastrophe happen? What was the cause? He thinks the cause of the Swede’s feeling of displacement is that he was not able to “bury” what had happened, and it became his “poison” (Roth 1997: 74). This poison of generous love would be the

stain, according to Jerry. Consequently, the Swede's "horror", the stain, has to be kept submerged like an iceberg, but it "comes back distilled" in spite of his efforts (82). It comes back just at the time when he is dying of cancer, "back worse than ever", and the horror is his daughter, "the first child who was the cancellation of everything" (82). She looms over his life like a shadow, putting his physical, mental and spiritual health in danger. If the stain of his poisoned love is like an iceberg, it will be the cause of his shipwreck.

Similarly, in DA, Kepesh's love for Consuela becomes a dangerous iceberg, as hidden under the sea are his deep desires of possession and the jealousy that come with his love. Against his expectations, he will be wrecked against this rock. Miriam Jaffe-Foger has written about Roth's representation of illness and the empathy fostered by the narrative in DA: "To avoid falling into the chasm between body and mind, Roth creates fictional selves and characters that reflect off of each other to create a shared language" (Jaffe 2020: 4). This reading offers a new way of looking at illness in Roth, focusing on the meaning of body language as a signifier of the human response to pain (Jaffe 2012; 2014 are strongly recommended in case the reader is interested in an in-depth analysis of this issue). That is why the characterization of Kepesh and Consuela creates the possibility of telling different stories. Jaffe comments on the scene in DA where Consuela asked her lover to take pictures of her body, which could be interpreted as objectification:

The objectification is not, in this case, meant to be totally or only sexual; there is something beyond that limit, a deeper connection, the kind of attachment that Kepesh fears most: the duty of love and, by extension, care, in his act of witness. Kepesh is surprisingly adept at being a witness, a listener, when it comes to managing Consuela's emotional response to physical decline, [...]. (Jaffe 2020: 5, *ellipsis mine*)

And when Kepesh kisses Consuela's head, her body is shown to be her whole self, not a mere sexual object, but a person, as Jaffe sees: "the head is an all-encompassing thing, both mind and body. The line continues, 'There it was. All the horror of it in that head. Consuela's head. I kissed it and kissed it. What else was there for me to do?' (Roth 2001: 155). In this moment where there are no words, only these kisses and kisses fill in where no words can be found" (Jaffe 2020: 7). Unlike Jaffe, I do not think these kisses signify an acceptance of illness; rather, these kisses are an expression of love and a manifestation of rebellion against the illness. Although it is true that Kepesh seems to absorb the shock when he hears the news of her illness, when he realizes that she is no longer the person he always knew but somebody who is about to die, who is actually dying and leaving him and life, then he is devastated. So, in my view, eventually Kepesh finds it impossible to grasp the facts of the illness, which is why when Consuela says that the illness puts everything in perspective, Kepesh thinks the opposite: "No, nothing puts anything in perspective" (Roth 2001: 129). The fact that Kepesh asks Consuela why he cannot touch the tumor when he holds her breasts also represents the force of the invisible human stain that is there, present nevertheless.

III.2.3. The Invisible Dying

Foreshadowing death, the representation of aging in Roth is marked by an observation of the darkness of the decay of the body. As addressed in Chapter I, "Epstein", the story that Roth wrote when he was in his twenties, is a sympathetic

portrayal of a man who is frustrated with the direction his life has taken and he seeks freedom and fulfilment by having an affair. He is marked by aging as he sees how young people still enjoy life and he envies them. This type of character with its mixture of comedy and tragedy is something Roth takes up again and uses as the center of *ST*. As *ST* was written many years later, it carries the weight of experience and loss in the writer's own life, as well as his childhood memories and his vision of American history, sharpened by his move back to America (Roth Pierpont 2013: 203-204). But most importantly, the image of the human stain makes an appearance again, just like the rash in "Epstein", in order to show the evidence of aging in the character's own skin. Sabbath is sixty-four, he has a white beard and he suffers osteoarthritis in both hands, which is mentioned many times throughout the novel to highlight how his hands are marked by pain and his fingers are crooked (Roth 1995: 171).

In Roth's fiction, as seen in "Epstein", suffering is enhanced by old age and illness: "What do you do if you're sixty-two and the urge to take whatever is still takable couldn't be stronger?" (Roth 2001: 33-34). The process of aging haunts Kepesh, for whom impotence means insignificance. He mourns himself and the decay of his body. To return to an idea which is at the core of Roth's fiction, as seen in Chapter II, where this issue has been analyzed in order to understand transgression in Eros. In *DA*, Thanatos (death) is fought with the help of Eros (erotic and romantic love), but the fact is that going out with a young girl only makes Kepesh feel worse: "Far from feeling youthful, you feel the poignancy of her limitless future as opposed to your own limited one, you feel even more than you ordinarily do the poignancy of every last grace that's been lost" (Roth 2001: 34). Everything will eventually disappear.

Consuela's beauty will disappear too, even though he does not suspect it, how could he expect such a thing to happen? But Roth's characters learn that everyone is

mortal. As nobody wants to face old age before they must, the human stain becomes the sign that announces the inevitable. Especially young people do not want to face their own illness, loss of beauty and death when it is before their time. Yet this is what happens to Consuela, as she is forced to consider her death. To Kepesh, “Observing one’s decay all the while [...] one has, by virtue of one’s continuing vitality, considerable distance from one’s decay” (Roth 2001: 35, ellipsis mine). But he will not be able to escape its reality when he sees it in the person he loves.

Aging is the invisible reality that is made visible by the human stain. Kepesh calls aging “Invisible dying” because one does not really realize how everyday one is closer to death. And yet, he does realize some aspects of his physical decay and he cares about what others may think. Ironically, it turns out that it is precisely due to his trying to avoid being the object of ridicule because of his old age that he fails to show up at Consuela’s party, and so disappoints her and brings about the end of their relationship. It is a pathetic ending to their relationship and it is because of the awareness of his old age. However, in an unexpected turn of events, it is the sight of the human stain in the form of the cancer in Consuela’s breast what makes death more palpable.

This image that brings together the object of desire and the nearness of death points again at the issue considered in Chapter II, the question of transgression and rebellion. As it is obvious that just like Sabbath, Kepesh is old but that does not mean that he has no sexual desires: “*nothing* is put to rest, however old a man may be” (Roth 2001: 37). There is no satisfaction to be found in life in this perspective; instead, it is always restlessness which plagues humans till the very end, as seen above when considering Sabbath’s plight. And, as always in Roth’s fiction, everything comes in abundance, death and suffering are not an exception. For instance, his friend’s George’s death proves to be another significant loss to Kepesh. The painstaking, agonizingly realistic description of

the decay and death of this secondary character is so striking because of the narration of the physical details. His body is crumbling to pieces and the rest are just witnessing it caving in. And, most surprisingly, even though this man is dying, he can still feel a strong desire, and he can kiss his friend, hold his wife and his children. The human stain makes an appearance in this scene, which can be interpreted as obscene, funny or offensive in its portrayal of a blind sexual drive at the very gates of death, or as a tender moment. In a surprising description of this man's last actions, the narrator shows how, weak though he is, George tries to undress his wife, in one last move of the dying animal of desire.

III.2.4. The Carnal Edifice Caves In

At the beginning of ST, there is perhaps the most memorable scene in which there is a connection between desire and death. This happens when Drenka reveals that she is dying of cancer, which is narrated in a way that is both shocking and very moving. When she announces this bad news, it hits both her and her lover Mickey very strongly. It is a scene rich with meaning especially when bearing in mind that she had been asking of him to be faithful, and that he refuses to do it, even though it was not even necessary because his other affairs were just a lie. The effect of this conflict is dramatic, pathetic and also humorous. As Drenka embraces her lover, the helicopter is flying over them, and he thinks it is his mother's ghost. It is a surreal situation, with the extraordinary element of the supernatural making an appearance in the midst of reality. The reader gets insight into the complex play of logic and the roles that Sabbath plays, while at the same time seeing evidence of his and his lover's feelings.

Drenka's cry for help ("Oh, my God") can be compared to Consuela's words in DA, when she looks for support in Kepesh, her former lover, and how she articulates her disbelief at the premature arrival of death: Drenka cries "I can't believe it! I *don't!* I can die!" (Roth 1995: 32). It is just like when Consuela says: "This is my body! It can't go away! This can't be real! This can't be happening! How can it go away? I don't want to die!" (Roth 2001: 150). Sánchez Canales wrote about the influence of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and W.B. Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" on this novel (2014). Both these literary works emphasize the feeling of growing old as the character and the poetic persona look at young people (Sánchez Canales 2014: 7). Likewise, the scenes describing the wound of life and the implacability of time in DA echo a cry of unbelief and pain that is increased because, in Sánchez Canales' words, "the biological clock is reversed" as the young and beautiful will die and sees her beauty suddenly wane before her time, while the older man watches on (2014: 8).

Furthermore, in my view, for Kepesh and Consuela it is not only that the biological clock is reversed, it seems like the whole of life and its promises are reversed in the face of illness. In the History of Literature, the theme of illness is connected with the representation of a deeper sense of human alienation and with existentialism. Texts such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) indicate the condition of self-degradation and protest that is shared by these characters who appear as victims in literature. Individuals are judged and found guilty, according to Ihab Hassan, because man in general is "victim of an unappeasable power" (1961: 25). In the view of Thomas Mann, according to Hassan, "disease and even death become an ultimate response to life" (26). This is an idea which informs *Death in Venice*, but in Roth's DA, illness and death become an opportunity to value life and actually find true life. Hassan also raises the question of freedom and fatality, and "acting only in

despite of that fatality” (29). Likewise, Consuela and Kepesh face that fatality in their lives and they have to act despite it.

Hassan also writes about the importance of Albert Camus’ emphasis on rebellion in the face of fatality and illness (30-31). This topic is discussed in Camus’ *The Plague* (1947), a novel in which the characters face the destruction caused by an epidemic and try to fight against the spread of the illness. As mentioned earlier in this Chapter, Roth also wrote about an epidemic in his last novel *Nemesis* (2010), which is about the polio outbreak that took place in New Jersey in 1944. As we are currently experiencing with the global Covid-19 pandemic, the fear of how the virus may spread, the safety measures and social distancing can be understood in terms of the stain of contagion. In Roth’s *Nemesis*, although the main characters escapes from the city to the mountains in order to find a natural paradise, there is a bleak reminder that the virus may travel invisibly to the places where people feel the safest, with terrible consequences. In consequence, in this novel there is an even stronger emphasis on force of the unexpected and an outcry at the cruelty and injustice of a God who would allow this illness and death.

Just as the references of Thomas Mann and W.B. Yeats offer context to interpret DA as shown by Sánchez Canales, Geoffrey Bakewell (2004) and Patrick D. Rankine (2010) are two scholars who address similar literary and classical references in HS. The weight of classical tragedy is overbearing in ST too, unsurprisingly. One of the reasons why the opening scene in ST achieves such a dramatic effect is because of the reference to classical tragedy, as it deals with the inability of man to fight against his doomed destiny. That is why Drenka clings to Mickey, whose knees buckle not only because of her full weight, but also because he feels as weak as she does. They are both impotent as they face death and he immediately thinks about all the beloved people he has already lost to death: “Mother, he thought, this can’t be so. First Morty, then you, then Nikki, now

Drenka. There's nothing on earth that keeps its promise" (Roth 1995: 32). The lesson is that everyone whom you love will leave eventually, everything is a letdown, and all good things come to an end. This is the main source of disappointment for Roth's characters: Nothing good lasts, that is the truth that keeps hitting Sabbath, and how can one come to terms with that?

'Oh, I wanted, oh,' cried Drenka as the helicopter's energy roared above them, a dynamic force to magnify the monstrous loneliness, a wall of noise tumbling down on them, their whole carnal edifice caving in. 'I wanted you to say it without *knowing*, I wanted you to do it on your own,' and here she wailed the wail that authenticates the final act of a classical tragedy. 'I can die! If they can't stop it, darling, I will be dead in a year!'

Mercifully she was dead in six months, killed by a pulmonary embolus before there was time for the cancer, which had spread omnivorously from her ovaries throughout her system, to torture Drenka beyond even the tough capacity of her own ruthless strength. (Roth 1995: 33)

The human stain of cancer is endowed with a personality, an evil and playful will of its own, by Roth: Sabbath describes how appalled he is by the "sardonic and satiric cancer turning to carrion the female body." The hellish cancer that has spread through Drenka's whole body is stronger than her own strength, and it has the power to make her suffer terribly. In Roth's fiction, doctors are almost always unable to help much in fighting against illness, this is the case in *Patrimony*, *DA* and *ST*. The same happens with Merry's stammering in *AP*, and I believe there is a reason for this, connected to the meaning of the human stain. Just as with Epstein's rash, which has to be cleaned and cured, these characters struggle to find a way to heal their illness but medicine has no

cure for this physical and figurative stain, which frustrates them, as they are unable to restore their bodies or to explain their ailments.

Eventually, everything is falling apart for the characters from the very beginning of *ST*, because Sabbath and Drenka's "carnal edifice" is the union of their bodies, and the life they built, their paradise, and it all caves in. Cancer appears as an aggressive form of the human stain, a dark devilish force that ends life. As Pozorski notes, "Here, cancer is personified as having agency over the lives of its victims: the embolus emerged before the cancer "spread omnivorously," and before it could "torture" her -two associations with a vulture or other predator" (2015: 111). The human stain becomes an enemy, the animal that will end human life, leading to the final enemy, as Roth used to say when he referred to death.

The trauma of loss appears as an overwhelming force in these novels, as it is clear from the examples above that there is an abundance of loss and suffering, and it is depicted to its extreme in *ST*. Even though Sabbath speaks with a touch of bitter irony when he refers to Nikki's sudden disappearance, by his words one can notice the pain he still feels because of it. Sabbath ought to have been warned by Nikki's "pervasive sense of crisis" but he is still traumatized by his failure to understand her unexpected disappearance: "until a day came when the crisis of being herself simply swept Nikki away" (Roth 1995: 21). Nikki's loss is communicated differently than Roseanna's situation (who is as good as absent after her traumas, depression, breakdown, alcoholism, and the way she clings to Alcoholics Anonymous), which Sabbath describes so coldly and with such sarcasm that there is almost no warmth left for her, neither in his words nor in his gestures, but from his complaint it is evident that he harbors a lot of anger and is aware of the sad circumstances of his wife.

Sabbath seems incapable to do anything to change the situation, just as he could not remedy the loss of Nikki in the past. Sabbath knows that people are not puppets he can control, because they have a life of their own, they can disappear, as he states: “no one had to worry that a puppet would disappear, as Nikki had, right off the face of the earth” (21). During Sabbath’s relationship with Nikki he did try to control her but eventually she exited his stage, leaving him. Drenka is also taken away from him by death, illustrating the difference between a lifeless object and a human being, and the fact that the people Sabbath loves are not mere puppets entails the possibility of losing them.

In the same way, Sabbath’s brother was taken from life and from him. The memory of the “endlessness” of boyhood is described in detail in a beautiful passage, as the two brothers had a wealth of months of the year that never seemed to stop during their boyhood. However, endlessness ended. The happy memories from the past in which Sabbath enjoyed his brother’s company cannot be lived again, and this is a constant source of sadness. Sabbath speaks hypothetically, wondering whether he would have turned out to be a different person if that tragedy had not happened, (“If Monty had come home alive, if the endlessness had ended naturally”) but his conclusion is that it would not have made any difference: “Take your pick. Get betrayed by the fantasy of endlessness or by the fact of finitude.” (Roth 1995: 31). Sabbath’s painful perception of life’s short span echoes what the Bible describes in the Old Testament like a “dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (Psalm 90:5-6). Similarly, in the New Testament human life is described as a “vapor” or a “mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:34).

To Sabbath, the outcome of the betrayal that breaks him would certainly have been a disillusion, because death is the traitor that turns people’s weight into mere grass

or a vapor. And Sabbath has no other option but to beg for more life, more transgressive sex, as he only wants to be bound by his unstoppable desire and to keep saying offensive things to please himself. He feels betrayed and he could not have become somebody different, because in either case he would have been betrayed anyway, so this experience shapes Sabbath's transgressive behavior in life. Paradoxically, what Drenka is asking of him in this scene at the Grotto is for him to be different, to betray his nature, as he puts it, by being faithful to her, and the reason, as she is about to reveal, is precisely because she is going to die. This time, the betrayal of death will bring about an appeal and an attempt of a reversal in his behavior.

Posnock has written that "grief is deemed to be experience saturated with meaning, a crucible that forges strength, wisdom, maturity. In sum, grief is assumed to be a supreme teacher" (2006: 191). However, Sabbath shows how one learns nothing from grief, instead. This is why, as seen in the previous section, instead of being laden with meaning, pain is paradoxically represented as the erasure of the mark of the stain. That is why Emerson said 'I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature' (473, qtd. in Posnock 2006:191).

Instead of providing anchorage, grief reveals the quicksand of nonmeaning normally hidden by the merciful quotidian routines of the midworld. [...] We project these meanings *into* experience, as if desperate to populate the vacancy of its stark, casual indifference. [...] Grieving Sabbath at the shore discovers nothing but how 'immoderate' is grief; 'staring into the sea and up at the sky and seeing nothing and everything and nothing.' He reaches no sharp peaks and edges of epiphanic illumination. (Posnock 2006: 191, ellipsis mine).

Just as Sabbath reaches no illumination, the human stain permeates the experience of life darkly, under the shadow of death.

III.2.5. The Fear and the Trauma

The fear of dying puts the human being in chains like no other fear does. It imprisons people and makes slaves of them. Not only do human beings experience the fear of death; they also suffer from the shame of being human, and consequently of bearing the human stain. This shame is precisely what Roth's characters have to deal with, especially in *ST*. However, Sabbath seems shameless, searching into his stain and his humanity and not hesitating to show it to the world. It is the fear of death what he has to fight the most. This is connected with the fact that the obsession with death is a typically Jewish theme. In Job 3:25, the biblical character who embodies suffering, Job, cries out: «What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me».

That is why it is important to consider how Roth portrays human beings as they become vulnerable and weak. In *DA*, illness is represented as the center of trauma: “And I was thinking, She is dying before my eyes, she too is now dying” (Roth 2001: 128). The fact that Consuela can be touched by cancer and die indicates that this story is not about a deity, it is about a human being, who is flawed and mortal. Her body is a “dying animal” too. She not only loses her beauty (literally losing the breasts that made her so desirable), but also her identity becomes marked by her illness and her life is threatened and cut short by death. The female breast appeared earlier in Roth's fiction, and it is significant, as Shostak argues, because “*The Breast* foregrounds the body as both a site of signification

and a signifier in its own right” (Shostak 1999: 322). The breast was already chosen in *The Breast* as especially meaningful because it has “a tradition as the object of looking, burdened with the complex of meanings associated with the feminine as a maternal and sexual being” (Shostak 1999: 323).

In DA, however, it becomes obvious that sex is not only unable to stave off death; it is ruined by illness and the prospect of death. For a further exploration of the themes of illness, desire and death in this novel in particular, see Mark Shechner’s *Up Society’s Ass, Copper* (2003: 197-206), and Elaine Safer’s *Mocking the Age* (2006: 133-46). In this analysis, I will focus on the images of the stain and how these represent illness.

As Aimee Pozorski states in her book *Roth and Trauma*, “Roth interrogates in this novel the connection between sex and death” (Pozorski 2011: 105). She argues that Kepesh has to come to terms with the fact that in spite of all his knowledge, “his body, too, will some day fail him” (105). In my view, this interrogation consists in questioning the idea that sex really is a revenge on death. The characters may delight and take comfort and strength from sex, but eventually death rules over life, for it takes away every single lover.

This is an idea which can also be found in ST, as Drenka is described similarly as a beautiful, almost divine, mighty Venus-like figure, but she shocks her lover Sabbath revealing the fact that she has got cancer, therefore losing her vitality and strength and eventually she dies. Sex loses when confronted to death, the ultimate and cruel ruler. For example, in ST there is a description of how Michelle suffers from the hot flashes of menopause and there is a vivid description of how death will leap on Michelle, mocking her desire. Just as happened with Drenka, as she is aging, there is a repetition of the word “sick” as Michelle is “sick of everything” (Roth 1995: 306-307). Her husband, Linc, us

“marked” by reasonableness [...] the way others are scarred by insanity or illness” (306, ellipsis mine). The scar of the stain can be present both in illness and in what is socially accepted as health. Finally, what is represented most dramatically is the scar of aging, as the text depicts dusk as descending on Michelle and sexual pleasure racing away at a tremendous speed: “Death on top of us [...], over us, ruling us” (307, ellipsis mine). Bodily decay, to sum up, mocks desire although Sabbath still fools around with Michelle, trying to touch her, still reaching for satisfaction in spite of everything.

In contrast, witnessing the approach of Consuela’s death is a traumatic experience for Kepesh and he cannot help but to relate it to the recent death of his friend and to his own mortality. The account is moving and appalling because it spares no painful physical and emotional details, and it is also compassionate because at least Kepesh tries to keep Consuela company and offer her some comfort in her hour of need.

I said ‘Are you afraid right now?’ And she said, ‘Very. Very much afraid. I’m all right for two minutes, I’m thinking of something else, and then the bottom falls out of my stomach and I can’t believe what’s happening. It’s a roller coaster, and it doesn’t stop. It can’t stop unless the *cancer* stops. (Roth 2001: 129)

Cancer will very likely lead to death and there is very little possibility to get rid of it, so there is reason to fear it. There is no consolation, no hopeful frame of mind, and no reason that enlightens life in the face of this threat: “No, nothing puts anything in perspective” (Roth 2001: 129). This is similar to Sabbath’s acceptance of the “meaningless mess” of life, in which the memory of the death of the people he loved, their loss and their suffering does not really give a new explanation to life. (See Roth

1995: 90-91, for example, in which Sabbath explains how there is no pattern, just chaos.) The only request Consuela has for her former lover is about her body: “And she said ‘I even want more of you. Because I know you love my breasts.’ I said, ‘What do you want?’ ‘I want you to feel my cancer” (Roth 2001: 130). She wants him to take pictures of her breasts before they are ruined in order to take the cancer out, and she had gone to him because he had really loved her body and seen her at her most glorious. He is not aroused anymore. He feels the cancer, analyzing it coldly but also with tenderness. “I couldn’t have slept with her, and yet I kept thinking about it. Because they’re so beautiful, her breasts. [...] It was so mean, so degrading, these breasts, her breasts -I just thought, They can’t be destroyed!” (135, ellipsis mine).

That is Kepesh’s first reaction, to ask whether this must happen precisely to this woman, who has got such gorgeous breasts. He is infuriated because cancer will destroy her most precious trait. Shostak believes it is meaningful because “The breast is the object of comfort and nourishment, the promise of endlessness, the signifier of wholeness, and its withdrawal –by the mother, by erotic failure, by aging –is merely the proof that the subject, too, will disappear” (2004: 65). Trendel states that “the breast caught between Eros and Thanatos is the heart of the question of pedagogy” (2007: 5). If we compare Kepesh’s mourning over Consuela’s body to Sabbath’s over Drenka’s, in ST there is also a strong sense of rage because the character loses what gave him such pleasure, what he considered most valuable, and this loss of what gave his life meaning is his greatest grief.

Here the body becomes the means by which the aesthetic, the visual becomes inextricably linked to love, affection, the invisible and the spiritual. “After you, I never had a boyfriend or a lover who loved my body as much as you loved it” (Roth 2001: 130). Debra Shostak notes how “this is an important shift, because Consuela, diagnosed with breast cancer, no longer has the luxury of defining her subjectivity as distinct from her

body” because she “redefines David’s objectification of her body *as* love, collapsing George’s opposition of the aesthetic and the sentimental” (Shostak 2004: 63). Shostak speaks of this as an important contribution to the idea of the “embodiment of selfhood”: “When I want to be loved ‘for myself’, is it politically necessary to exclude from that desire a need to be loved ‘for my body’? Does David’s love for Consuela’s body preclude a love of her ‘self’, or is it the entrance to and sign of that love?” (63). This is illuminating because it shows how the judgement of those who consider carnal passion, sexual desire, something impure, can be turned around if it is seen as a trigger or a symptom, something inseparable from a “pure love” for the whole person.

As Shostak says about the issues of subjectivity and the value and recognition of the self in DA: “[d]ecay and death make these questions urgent,” and Consuela wishes to retain evidence of the self that is threatened with mutilation and death, a self that she experiences as inseparable from her body. [...] Consuela adopts the position of the sexual object in order to install and record her own subjectivity, to enable her body to become ‘self-aware by way of the other’ before some of that selfhood is lost to cancer treatment” (2004: 63-4, ellipsis mine). Consuela’s expression of horror at the dissociation she will feel from her body highlights how linked the body is to her identity: “Because this is my body and that won’t be my body. That won’t be anything” (Roth 2001: 132). Pain and illness bring about an awareness of how the human being is joined to his or her body. In AL, Zuckerman comments on the invisibility of the nearness of death: “It stays unseen, out of sight, and you come to it. Illness is a message from the grave. Greetings: You and your body are one.” (Roth 1983: 660). In the end, selfhood is inextricable from the body.

Finally, in Roth the fear of death describes the utter loneliness and the panic of the individual who is confronted with the end of life: “How did I feel? The greatest pain I felt

that night was over her being alone and panicking in her bed. Panicking about death” (Roth 2001: 138).

III.2.6. The Stain that Ruins Desire

In *Countertexts, Counterlives*, Debra Shostak explains how aging and sickness prevents Roth’s characters from fulfilling their desires, and this is especially visible in ST: “If Sabbath’s theater is his body, however, then time must inevitably ravage his capacity to perform the self, and it is for this reason that Roth’s novel is as obsessed with death as it is with the erotic” (Shostak 2004: 51). In consequence, little signs become looming markers of Sabbath’s inability to perform. For example, Shostak sees that Kathy’s “failure of manipulation is figured metaphorically as well as in the crippling, disfiguring arthritis that has caused Sabbath to suffer chronic pain and to renounce his vocation as puppeteer” and she comes to the conclusion that “for Sabbath death *means* impotence and viceversa” (Shostak 2004: 51). In dying there will be nothing more to desire, then. It is important to note the pivoting point between the novels of ST and DA when it comes to this subject. As Shostak has noted, in these novels Roth “once again explores the way the subject teeters between ‘fucking’ and ‘dying’” (Shostak 2004: 59).

In her essay titled “Roth’s Graveyards, Narrative Desire, and ‘Professional Competition with Death’”, Shostak develops this idea further by arguing that in the “primal scene” of the graveyard, Roth confronts the reality of death in various ways through his narrative strategies (2014: 2). Shostak lists different ways of confronting death in these scenes, analyzing different novels. One possibility is to express erotic

desire; another one is to talk to the dead; and yet another one is to gaze upon death refusing any comfort about its meaning (2). Shostak also points out that the characters are unable to control the narrative of their own life when faced with “the inescapable materiality of loss” (3). However, in my view, the materiality of loss is not only hinted at by means of the description of a box or the grave, but it is done mostly by means of the human stain. This can be seen in scenes such as Sabbath holding the dirt in his crooked fingers at the graveyard in ST, which has been mentioned earlier in this Chapter. When looking closely at this scene, the reader will notice that Sabbath looks at various marks of the human stain in his body and in his memories of the dead. Here, he reflects on attachments that are stronger than the erotic ones.

Even at the beginning of the scene, when Sabbath looks for the cemetery but all he finds is a place where people dump garbage, we find the first signs of the stain in the description of broken household remains. The narration is ironically aware of the search for meaning in this picture: “Mist and drizzling rain to ensure the picture’s permanent place in the North American wing of his memory’s museum of earthly blight” (Roth 1995: 353). The “earthly blight” that spoils and damages everything, the human stain, is present in this picture, but Sabbath jokes, complaining about the effect of the rain (which paradoxically signals destruction instead of renewal, as the other descriptions of water in the book): “The rain bestowed more meaning than was necessary. That was realism for you. More meaning than was necessary was in the nature of things” (353). The wet ground and the mud soil the characters’ boots (360), added to the description of his memory of cleaning the fish with his brother (365), and finally, his own hands in the mud, bring him to a confrontation with the fact that he can gain no wisdom when reflecting upon death, only a yearning for more life.

While in DA, Kepesh's own body is marked by the signs of old age, there is also an emphasis on marks that seem to mar women's beauty. Here, another image of the abject stain and its devastating effect on the body and the subject appears in the narrative: Kepesh tells the record of the women he encountered who bore marks of some kind, in order to explain why he doubts he would be able to sleep with Consuela and the cancer in her breast. "In all my years, I've never slept with a woman who has been mutilated in this manner" (Roth 2001: 138). He was unable to do so once, and he tells the story: "I once slept with a woman who had a dark brownish wine stain -between her breasts and partly over her breasts, a huge birthmark" (139). Here, the stain is like the outward form of a cancer, significantly covering the breasts, the objects of beauty and desire. Though Kepesh tried to hide it, he was shocked by the stain:

And I started overdoing things. Kissing the birthmark. Touching it. Playing with it. Being polite. Making her feel happy with it. Saying I loved it. Such things aren't easy to take in stride. But you're supposed to be able to take charge, to act unhysterically, to deal with such things with grace. Not to recoil from anything that a body must abide. That wine stain. It was tragic for her. Six foot five. Men drawn to her, as I was, by this amazing height. And with every man, the same story: 'There's something wrong with me.' (Roth 2001: 140)

Although Kepesh tries to be graceful about the stain, he cannot brush it away. It taints beauty and there is no solution, no way around it. Kepesh cannot have sex with Consuela and makes a reference to the image of the stain which is so central in the novel: "not even I who licked the blood from her", implying that having sex with her while knowing that she has cancer would have been even more impure than to lick her

menstruation blood. As Shostak explains, Kepesh recognizes revulsion as he anticipates the dead body and this ruins his desire, which, in addition to his inability to perform sex, leads to the conclusion that “to be a subject is to be placed irreversibly in abjection” (2004: 64). This is the beginning of the disappointment that Kepesh experiences as he sees his coping mechanisms failing and he is forced to know the pain of real loss, as Stephanie Cherolis has written in her essay on the role of the “pornography of destruction” in *DA* (Cherolis 2006: 146). In my view this change is most powerfully conveyed by the means of images of the stain, in the form of two paintings of nudes.

It is at this point, when there is no hope for comfort in sex when facing illness and death and bearing in mind the human stain that cannot be cured, that Roth includes a description of Stanley Spencer’s painting, a double nude portrait: Aged bodies that have lost their appeal, next to two pieces of raw meat. In contrast to the second painting, Modigliani’s nude, which signifies beauty at its prime, this is a contrasting image, a description of an entirely different painting that is marked by the human stain.

Every time I think about Consuela, I envision that raw leg of lamb shaped like a primitive club beside the blatantly exhibited bodies of this husband and wife. Its being there, so close to their mattress, becomes less and less incongruous the longer you look. There’s melancholy resignation in the somewhat stunned expression of the wife, and there is that butchered hunk of meat having nothing in common with a living lamb, and, for three weeks now, ever since Consuela’s visit, I can get neither image out of my mind. (Roth 2001: 143-144)

The body, when it ages or becomes ill, is as different from its beauty when it was young and strong, as a living lamb and a piece of dead meat. It is horrifying and shocking,

because this is not only what Kepesh remembers Consuela by, he also appears in the picture. As Trendel sees, “the ‘bull’s meat,’ so appetizing at the beginning of the novel, has become repulsive” (2007: 6). It seems out of place in the world of the living, the opposite of life, as if it does not belong in this world.

In DA, illness is portrayed with a very particular setting that makes the nearness of death relevant at a global scale. As Kepesh and Consuela are watching the millennial New Year’s Eve celebration, the somber irony at this scene highlights the fact that there is nothing to celebrate for these characters who are facing death, the end of everything, while people celebrate that the end of the world has not come. “Maybe that’s what everyone was celebrating -that it hadn’t come, never came, that the disaster of the end will now never arrive.” This provides for a stark contrast, as instead of destruction there will be prosperity in the world:

No bombs go off, no blood is shed -the next bang you hear will be the boom of prosperity and the explosion of markets. The slightest lucidity about the misery made ordinary by our era sedated by the grandiose stimulation of the grandest illusion. Watching this hyped-up production of staged pandemonium, I have a sense of the monied world eagerly entering the prosperous dark ages. (Roth 2001: 145)

Any enlightened grasping of misery is thus stifled by an illusion that stimulates and sedates society at the same time. This blindness affects everybody, but Kepesh and Consuela’s blind has fallen off their eyes because of the shaking reality of death. This makes them aware of misery and so they see this celebration as a terrible state of illusion which prevents people from looking at the grim truth straight in the eye. As Aimee

Pozorski states in her study about Roth's Late Novels, this passage emphasizes a "counterintuitive longing for Armageddon" and it serves as an illustration of the human desire for events in life "to be significant in some way, only to turn out woefully inadequate in the end" (Pozorski 2011: 103). The mark of the passage of time that precedes the end of our lives is an image of the human stain, described as "the swim" where people sink in and finally drown in, because it is impossible to escape from it.

[...] why should anyone care, about something that gives us a sense that we're understanding something that we're not understanding? The passage of time. We're in the swim, sinking in time, until finally we drown and go. This nonevent made into a great event while Consuela is here suffering the biggest event in her life. The Big Ending, though no one knows what, if anything, is ending and certainly no one knows what is beginning. (Roth 2011: 147-148, ellipsis mine)

Death changes everything, for it does not seem natural at all to Roth's characters when they know the "wound of age" in their own flesh (Roth 2011: 148).

Getting old is unimaginable to anyone but the aging, but that is no longer so for Consuela. She no longer measures time like the young, marking backward to when you started. Time for the young is always made up of what is past, but for Consuela time is now how much future she has left, and she doesn't believe there is any. Now she measures time counting forward, counting time by the closeness of death. The illusion has been broken, the metronomic illusion, the comforting thought that, tick tock, everything happens in its proper time. Her sense of time is now the same as mine, speeded up and more forlorn even than mine. She, in fact, has overtaken me. (Roth 2011: 148)

The mark of illness acts as an antidote to yet another illusion, just as the stain worked to expose the false pastoral, as seen earlier. When Sabbath goes to his friend's funeral in *ST*, he is also haunted by the memories of his first wife, Nikki. Going to New York and thinking about her is "the perennial time bomb" (Roth 1995: 159). Even though Sabbath claims he has murdered Nikki, the text reveals his thoughts and his questions about her mysterious death. He asks himself whether she used a razor to kill herself. Nikki is like a mark on his memory, and even though her body has disappeared she has left an "indelible" stain on him: "Nikki [...] whose mark on him was indelible" (138). In this image of the human, embodied by Nikki, Roth portrays the importance of how her selfhood is linked to her body: "it was the body of his first wife that he could never stop thinking about, *her* body, alive" (139, emphasis in original).

Because of what her illness has shown her about the false illusion of time, Consuela holds a deep knowledge now, Kepesh realizes: "But Consuela has not been lucky, and so beside me she sits, under the sentence of death [...]" and he listens to her because "[...] she began to speak about herself as she never had before, never had cause to before, as, perhaps, she'd not even known herself before" (Roth 2001: 149, ellipsis mine). Thus, the nearness of death seems to help one to figure out the reality of one's life like never before, and see through the veil of mystery that usually hangs over the characters during their lives. And this is what Consuela reveals, what she finds in herself: "Terrible longing" for the lost homeland, the beloved family members left behind, who are missed so much. She experiences great sadness at the loss, so her loss is doubled, as the imminent loss of her life is linked to a feeling of fear and permanent exile, not belonging to the place where she lives, and so she feels lost. That is why Consuela thinks about what could have been and will never be, and about hanging out at the Malecón, in

Cuba. “The road that might have been [...] *Should* have been” (152, ellipsis mine). She feels grief “for everything she feared she was about to leave” (153). According to Pozorski, trauma studies is an appropriate discipline to read this novel in order to show “the way that time becomes skewed for those living with cancer; as Roth’s fiction ultimately shows, the traumatic impact of the diagnosis is not simply related to the horror of the disease, but also to one’s alienated and alienating sense of the passage of time” (2011: 108-109). Indeed, in Roth’s fiction, the body reflects the fear of the mind.

The longing that Consuela feels is a wish for her body not to disappear: “Terrible, terrible longing. But it’s for myself. It’s for my life. I feel myself, I feel my body with my hands, I think, This is my body! It can’t go away! This can’t be real! This can’t be happening! How can it go away? I don’t want to die! David, I’m afraid to die!” (Roth 2001: 150). Other characters in Roth’s work also feel they would like to go back in time to a beautiful past where everything was fine and everlasting, like Sabbath. In *ST*, there is a detailed description of the life Sabbath enjoyed with Morty during the holidays and the sheer pleasure they had in life, and the water of the sea represents the vastness of this life (Roth 1995: 30-31). In *Everyman* (2006) too, Aarons notes how the main character “wants to return to an innocent, Edenic existence before the fall; he wants to retain that state of unawareness of death” (2007:121). This desire to return to Eden is at the center of *AP*, so that there is a connection between *ST*, *Everyman* and *AP* because the protagonists of these novels have a deep longing for the idea of “Eden”, which embodies a pristine (i.e., pure, that is utopian, non-existent) place.

It is evident from the narrative in *ST*, for example, that such a state was not real, it was a lie, only a paradise on the surface, because the child is unaware and inexperienced and that is why he is happy. Nevertheless, that does not make the feeling of horror at the experience of pain and the nearness of death less real, and Roth treats these complex

emotions with realism and sympathy in his stories by showing the frustration of failing to control time. This is made worse by the false hopes raised by the momentary fulfilment of desire. One could argue that this is a similar experience to the one Seymour feels when confronting impurity and violence in his daughter in AP, because he also thinks he can hold on to the happiness of the past but this does not comfort him in his present grief. Likewise, Coleman faces accusation and judgement by trying to lose himself in the relationship with Faunia. Sabbath, too, in ST, relies on sexual pleasure in order to alleviate his tough circumstances. While Patrick Hayes argues that pleasure is a principle in Roth's fiction, influenced by a Nietzschean orientation, I have to disagree with him when he writes about the intuition that "grief can be a state of strength rather than vulnerability" (Hayes 2019: 64). Rather, in Roth's writing grief breaks the characters' strength.

Faith in the return to a paradise in the past reveals the need for eternity, a paradise where there is no death nor pain, even though the characters reject the Jewish or Christian vision. *Everyman's* main character laments: "death is so unjust... Once one has tasted life, death does not even seem natural. I had thought -secretly I was certain -that life goes on and on" (qtd. in Aarons 2007: 126). This is why Aarons argues that the character of *Everyman* actually has his own set of beliefs: "Smugly believing himself immune to the evasions of religion, the protagonist insists that the fulfilment of desire can replace the necessity to believe in something beyond oneself" (123). Aarons claims that this belief relies on the personal link with the past generations, but maybe this proves to be a meager hope when one compares it with the experience of Coleman, for example, who feels far away from the people he comes from, and with Seymour, who also feels alone in his predicament.

Sabbath, too, can only recall some memories from his grandmother but when he visits his old cousin, who is the living link to the past, instead of being a comforting

moment, it only throws light upon the miserable state of an aging, lonely person who has even lost his own memories. His cousin, named Fish, lives in a house that is filled with images of the human stain and the detailed description of this filth and Sabbath's preoccupation with the lack of cleaning are very important in this passage. Even though Fish claims he does not feel any pain, his mind is not right and his memory is failing, so he is really unaware of the state he is in: "A lucky man you are, Fish, not to have pain" (Roth 1995: 388). Unable to get the answer he is looking for, Sabbath sees a mark of the stain in his cousin, who is struggling, a "blot": "There is a big blot there, obscuring the answer" (388). Sabbath insists on the importance of cleanliness: "Who cleans for you?" and he is astonished by the amount of "the filth, the dirt" everywhere in the house. The furniture is broken, the floor is covered in debris and dust. However, Fish does not see it, he is blind to its reality and this is part of his illness.

Sabbath is in a position where he sees the nearness of his cousin to death through the state of filth he is in, and in spite of his old age, it comes as a shock. The "knowledge that you are born to live and you die instead" that plagues the character in *Everyman* becomes the source of the deepest pain because the human being feels betrayed in its expectations from life (Roth qtd. in Aarons 2007: 123). Sabbath voiced his complaint at this false promise of life too in *ST*, just like Kepesh when he speaks about Consuela in *DA*: "The transition from thinking of someone in the way you've always thought of that person -as just as alive as you are-to whatever signifies to you, as her fuzzy hairlessness did to me, that the person is close to death, is dying, I experienced at that moment not only as a shock but as a betrayal" (Roth 2001: 154).

Consuela wants Kepesh to tell her about "the beauty of her body" (Roth 2001: 155). The breast will be removed because the cancer is too serious, and he is going to stay with her. He must go with her, he knows she needs him because she is in terror. He will

run the risk of being finished. (156). But it is not certain what Kepesh will learn about death in the end: As Trendel explains, “the novel leaves this lesson suspended. Will Kepesh respond to Consuela’s call? Will he leap, in fear and trembling, into his calling? What sense will he make of mortality?” (2007: 6). In my view, the novel’s ending presents cancer again as a stain that will be removed from the body. The repetition of the words “her body” and “removed” places emphasis on the materiality of the fact that Consuela’s breast will probably be removed with surgery. Kepesh is fully aware now of her need for company and care, and he knows that once he goes to be with her, there will be no turning back.

III.2.7. Lessons in Empathy

Shostak has analyzed the embodied self in her book *Countertexts, Counterlives*, looking at how Roth in ST and DA “composes both paeans to and elegies for the dying male body, stressing that the experience of subjectivity is inextricable from materiality” (2004: 15). This description of the effect of the stain on the character who sees how his body gets old and sick and will eventually die, can be observed in ST, DA and also in HS. Pozorski acknowledges “the tumor as the ultimate symbol for death” in *Exit Ghost*, and highlights, as the majority of the scholars do, that death is an extremely important topic in Roth’s fiction (2011: 119).

But in DA it is not only about the dying male body, but also about the dying female body, and therein lies the blow of the story. The shocking reality that the first to go will be the younger one, as it is Consuela, the healthy young girl who will fall very ill with

cancer and faces the prospect of an early death. Thus, there seems to be an inversion: Kepesh, an old man who is the one who should die, is actually faced with the fact that the one who will die, unexpectedly, is Consuela, so young and beautiful. In “Confronting the ‘C’ Word: Cancer and Death in Philip Roth’s fiction”, Aimee Pozorski addresses the issue of cancer in female characters in order to highlight an interpretation of Roth’s work as revealing a specific sensitivity towards this reality.

An artistic understanding of women that is more ethical than objectifying, more humane than sexually predatory. Such a reading, I hope, not only defends Roth against the charge of misogyny, but also casts him in a fully ethical light: by shifting our focus from one ‘c-word’ to another—from ‘cunt’, so often the focus in reading Roth’s fiction, to ‘cancer’ -we can see more about Roth’s approach to women and indeed, humanity, in general. (Pozorski 2015: 106)

Pozorski has also argued how Roth’s work shows an “appreciation for parenthood and for the delicate figure of the child -one who is confronted with violence on almost every corner of the world stage while simultaneously brought to believe in the tenets of freedom and democracy” (Pozorski 2011: x). This is especially in reference to Merry and her parents in AP, and it can be compared to the vulnerable position of Consuela, who is confronted to the violence of cancer and the meaninglessness of life in her youth.

The research on the representation of illness in female Roth characters was relatively new one decade ago, according to Pozorski: “Such recent dissertations as those written by Kristen M. Hetrick, Michael Rolland Sunga, and April Nicole Patrick reveal that the intersection of women and cancer is an emergent trend in literary scholarship”

(2011: 109). This topic is still being studied, but I believe that taking into account the resource of the human stain sheds light on this topic. In addition, considering the claim that Roth's work fosters empathy in its portrayal of sickness, it is necessary to look at how this is achieved. Pozorski argues that these scenes revolve about a moral dilemma: "In this fiction depicting women and cancer, Roth seems to take on the biggest ethical conundrum: How do I relate to someone other than me? In what ways does radical otherness entailed by living with or dying from a terminal disease test the boundaries of our relationship?" (Pozorski 2011: 121). By looking at key scenes in these novels, I intend to show how the stain makes such an approach possible.

If we consider the representation of women and cancer, and, in addition, how the female body and the female sexual organs particularly are the ones which are precisely chosen in the narrative as the place where cancer grows, it is so for an important reason and with a strong effect. Precisely what gives pleasure is where destruction begins, and it has a striking, thought-provoking result. How is it possible that what made someone so powerful can make him or her so miserable? In *ST*, Drenka's cancer starts in her ovaries, and in *DA*, Consuela suffers from cancer in her breast. I would even claim it is not that different from cancer in the brain, as in *Patrimony* (1991) in the account of Roth's father's illness, or in Amy Bellette's brain in *Exit Ghost* (2007).

Amy Bellette first appeared as a character in Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979), and she is a mysterious character whom Zuckerman imagines as Anne Frank, alive and living incognito in the United States. In this instance, Roth explores a story of suffering and develops a character who invents another character in order to survive, and in turn this is revealed as a fiction made up in order to seduce Zuckerman. When she appears again, in Roth's 2007 novel, she is older, sick and she tells her own Holocaust story. It is the same type of loss of life, the corruption of the body and of the parts of the

body which are their identity. However, most importantly, as Aimee Pozorski explains in her book *Roth and Trauma*, what connects Consuela with Drenka from ST is that she is a woman who is “able to teach the otherwise unchanging, unchangeable protagonist a lesson through her illness and suffering” (Pozorski 2011: 108). I would like to add that this lesson is made possible in the narrative through the human stain. Only through the connecting web of images of the stain that revolve around the presence, illness and absence of their lovers do the protagonists change their mind or their way of thinking and feeling. This change of heart is possible in Sabbath when he sees that Drenka’s omnivorous cancer is too strong even for her: “The tumor pressing on the aorta, [...]. Cancer too widespread for surgery” (Roth 1995: 416, ellipsis mine). The physical details he observes when visiting her in hospital are described vividly to show her fragility and how he needs to get used to this change in “Drenka’s flesh” (417).

As they recall the wetness and the fluids that made her so alive and desirable, they regret the loss of “*all of it*”, meaning not only her body but also everything that she is as a person (424). The dryness that she suffers now, the loss of the fluids that represent her life, are the opposite of a very special moment they recall, when Sabbath pissed on Drenka and it was something forbidden but it made her feel no shame, instead of that, it was not only lustful but also a “feeling of giving”, an “innocent” act and a “rite of passage” (426-429). This moment where the images of the stain abound, represents the union and the freedom these two characters have found and as they are drenched in their tears, they acknowledge how they gave their selves in their relationship.

Similarly, in the case of Kepesh and Consuela in DA, when she is sick and comes to his house to ask him to take pictures of her naked body, he understands it was “as far as you could get from pornography” (Roth 2011: 140). To her this was a natural, intuitive idea, with no reason behind it; but it comes at a time that “the erotic power of Consuela’s

body was over” (142). In the scene where they are both watching TV as she talks about her fear of dying, of leaving, there are also tears as in ST (52). Externalizing the fear “of her body”, she reveals a “second person” that was hidden inside her; and she does this in two ways: Firstly, by revealing her stories from the past, her hopes and regrets, and secondly, by showing him her head with its “fuzzy hairlessness” (154). Only then does Kepesh experience the change in how he perceives Consuela, because he knows she will die.

In both ST and DA, the description of the sickness in women leads to an imminent sense of death that deeply affects the male characters especially because of the sexual connection they enjoyed with them. Pozorski also points at the idea of that connection between sex and illness: “As Roth seems to convey throughout his career, the unexpected reality of the body turning against itself is the other side of that experience: the body gives us pleasure; the body gives us pain. And the body gives us life as naturally as it takes it away” (2011: 108). I agree with everything but that last remark, because I believe that the nearness of death is described as traumatic and horrifying, anything but natural. It is a “betrayal”, “traumatic”, “all the horror of it” visible in the dying body in Kepesh’s words (Roth 2001: 155). Similarly, in ST, Drenka leaves this world suddenly, because of a blood clot and so life is brutally taken away.

Even though Kepesh tries to comfort Consuela by listening to her and he also tries to come to terms with her illness by learning all the medical details of her cancer, there is an unknown factor that troubles him. As Pozorski states,

In saying there’s ‘something about her case I’m failing to understand,’ Kepesh acknowledges a limit-point to his ability to help as well as the absolute fear that something

will slip through the cracks and go unnoticed, unchecked, untreated. Beyond Kepesh's ultimately reinforcing belief that if he catches everything, he can solve it, Roth also quietly signals the cancerous body's resistance to being caught up in any general narrative. (Pozorski 2011: 115)

At the end of the novel, according to Pozorski, "Kepesh is going out in search of death. What will 'finish' him is an encounter not with Consuela's sexuality, but with her illness and mortality" (2011: 117). Ultimately, the human stain confronts him not only with his awareness of her as a person, but also with the reality of his own mortality.

To sum up, the images of cancer in the body function in the novels to challenge the characters as they have to face the reality of death and its impact not only on the body but also on the mind. Pozorski remarks how "questions of the body, of its beauty, are inextricably bound up with conversations about cancer itself." This is how Roth treats this experience, "the absolute terror of confronting cancer in another –in these cases, a woman his protagonist desperately loves –and, in so doing, confronting one's own mortality as well. Kepesh's story goes a step further still, showing us that this confrontation is, horrifically, a final betrayal of the one we loved, as we turn from her plight to our own" (2011: 121). The presence of the human stain is visible in the sick person but it reveals the invisible, hidden reality of the stain in the healthy person who sees that eventually he too will die.

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After considering the biblical references for the human stain in the aspect of illness it is clear that just as the health of the body is used as the measure of purity and justice in the Old Testament (see Leviticus 21: 16-20), in Roth's work, illness signals the

problematic presence of impurity and injustice. The body's decay, through illness or aging, figures in Roth's fiction as a metonymy for failure to come to terms with mortality, as Aarons (2007) has argued. Cancer is the most important image of the human stain in this area because it is like a tumor that is hidden, but destroys the whole body eventually. According to Pozorski (2011), it is the ultimate symbol of death. By taking these readings of the significance of illness to all four of the novels, I look at how cancer is depicted in Drenka (ST), Consuela (DA) and other characters. In AP, the Swede also suffers from cancer but Merry's stuttering is the most important image of the stain in this novel. I have explored the questions of the different meanings or concepts of illness, and looked at the various opinions about which are the real symptoms of the characters' sickness.

Paradoxically, the organs that are meant to give life, which signify endlessness (Drenka's ovaries and Consuela's breasts) are suffering from a cancer that will lead to death, highlighting the particular experience of women who suffer cancer, as studied by Pozorski (2011) and Jaffe-Foger (2012; 2014; 2020). While Jaffe-Foger interprets bodily language as an empathetic response in order to show love to the person who experiences suffering in the midst of an illness (2014), I disagree with her reading of these passages because I believe that the human stain has a stronger impact in that it reveals the disgust and the horror felt by those who confront the reality of illness. In the end, even though it seems that there is no final epiphany in Roth's work and that pain does not teach the characters anything, the human stain's presence does make some important changes in the narrative. It reveals the devastating reality of illness in the body and its effect as it renders people helpless and fragile. At the same time, it confronts the rest to their own mortality and it helps to reflect on the meaning of the whole life of the person and on the nature of their relationships.

In conclusion, the reality of death comes back again and again as the “first and most important theme” as Saul Bellow wrote in *Humboldt’s Gift* (1975: 36), and this is because, as the German philosopher Heidegger said, living is getting ready to die. Concerning this subject, there is an interview of Bellow with Jane Howard included in *Conversations with Saul Bellow* (1994) edited by Gloria Cronin and Ben Siegel. Bellow shares his thoughts about death at the end of this interview, saying that “the real problem is the problem of death. If people don’t know how to come to terms with it, and souls have no preparation, then the only thing is to be externally young and in pursuit of pleasure, and further sexual and hedonistic horizons” (1994: 82-83). Roth definitely understood the pressing need to come to terms with death, as Bellow did, but he also saw it in relation to the urge to retain one’s youth and beauty and the desire and the pursuit of pleasure which stays with people even in the face of death.

III.3. EROS AND THANATOS

“There’s Nothing on Earth that Keeps Its Promise”

Death is considered one of the most important themes in Jewish American Literature. But why? Nicole Krauss, a Jewish American author who has been much influenced by Roth’s writing, and has written about love and loss, the disappearance of people in novels such as *The History of Love* (2005), writes about the presence of death in her book *Great House* (2010). She explains that in Judaism, there is no assurance or knowledge of what will happen after death. Therefore, the Jew needs to get used to living

with Death, get to terms with it. And as he has no answers, he is always thinking about it, living in its nearness, even building his home under its shadow, and never questioning it (Krauss 2010: 211). Roth's fiction certainly presents people who live under its shadow.

In his introduction to *Great Jewish Short Stories*, Saul Bellow outlines the recurrent themes in these Jewish stories. One of them is death, and he recalls what his father used to tell him: "So you see, when it comes to dying [...], nobody is really ready" (Bellow 1963: 11). This topic, however, is characterized in Jewish literature, according to Bellow, by a peculiar narrative mode that uses two seemingly opposed tones. That is why when "laughter and trembling" are so mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations between the two, this is a characteristically Jewish trait in a story (12). This trait can definitely be found in Roth's fiction, along with the idea that nobody is ready for death.

In many of Roth's novels, the story of the life of the characters is shown to be driven both by desire and by death, as the narrator of AP says: "Let's speak further of death and of desire—understandably in the aging a Desperate desire—to forestall death, to resist it, to resort to whatever means are necessary to see death with anything, anything, anything but clarity" (Roth 1997: 47). This quality of desire holds the hope of resisting death. By examining the human stain in relation to death the question will be how effective this resistance really is.

Just as desire has been the main subject of Roth scholarship, death is the other topic that has to be written about if one is to understand Roth's oeuvre. It has been present in his work from the very beginning until the last books. These two forces which I have partly analyzed before, Eros and Thanatos, motivate the action in stories like that of *Everyman* (2006), as Victoria Aarons has argued (2007). As mentioned above, Debra

Shostak has written about the “competition with Death” that Roth’s characters engage in, looking at key graveyard scenes in various novels (2004; 2014). In Chapter II of this thesis, the power of desire is shown to give Roth’s characters comfort in their lives, especially when death is near, while it is ironically also a source for frustration. Death is always near, too close, actually, and it is often the starting point of Roth’s stories: “Thus the ‘end’ is an appropriate place for Roth to begin” as Aarons put it, referring to *Everyman* particularly (2007: 116). In DA, especially, it is important to consider the shadow of death that hovers over the characters. But it is not only in Roth’s late work that this subject is found. Death always comes as a surprise, like in Roth’s early work, with Epstein, whose life seems to be in danger at the end of the story when he suffers from a heart attack. Or later, in HS with Coleman and Faunia, whose lives end in a fatal accident. Death always arrives unexpectedly and it is a surprise to the reader just like it is to the character, for “what is given as certain is artfully taken away” in the narration, as Aarons says (2007: 117).

Roth tried to control the narrative of his own life and joked that he hoped death would arrive before his biography was published: “Biography gives a new dimension of terror to dying” (qtd. in Kellman, n.p.). Death was especially present in the author’s life when he wrote the four novels that this dissertation focuses on. Firstly, Roth began writing ST because he was looking for a plot to be buried in. He realized he had to take care of that because he was getting old and because Janet Hobhouse, his friend and former lover, had died of cancer, and he was in charge of burying her. This visit he made to the New Jersey cemetery where his parents are buried was the inspiration for the core of the novel of ST. The humor of the cemetery warden and the situation inspired him: “It began to dawn on me [...] that someone who’s looking for a grave to be buried in might be interesting -especially if he’s going to commit suicide” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 189-190,

ellipsis mine). Later, Roth also visited his friend's grave at night, seeking inspiration for his novel (197). These experiences helped him to create key scenes where the images of the human stain abound.

Roth chose to speak about ST, out of all of his work, in his 80th anniversary speech. He joked that he should have titled the novel *Death and the Art of Dying*, for in it, breakdown, suicide, hatred, lust, disobedience and death are out of control (Roth 2014: 58). In ST there is a quick turn from the power of life to the power of death, so there is a constant struggle or dance between both realities. Sabbath is immersed in the pain of figuring out the meaning of his life as he faces death. Kafka, who inspired Roth so much, wrote “the meaning of life is that it stops” (qtd. in Roth 2014: 58). From Sabbath to *Kepeš* there is a change in how Roth wrote about the nearness of death. Eventually, DA introduces the short form that Roth would use during his late work at the same time that it introduces the theme of the toll that age takes on the body.

Among the Roth scholars, Debra Shostak has written extensively about the topic of death, analyzing the role of the grave in his work: “It may seem as if all Roth's roads lead to the grave” (Shostak in Sánchez Canales & Aarons 2014: 3). Shostak identifies several forms in which this concern is represented in the narrative: Firstly, a cyclical structure in which the character remembers the trauma of death and tells it. Secondly, the tone switches “between oppositions—such as love and hate, transcendence and materiality, tragedy and irony” (3). Thirdly, the awareness of the presence of his mother plagues Sabbath, and finally, there is a tension, a fight between Eros and Thanatos. Consequently, it is relevant to observe how Sabbath tries to make Drenka come back to life when he visits her grave. Additionally, as I see it, this structure works together with the images of the stain to illustrate the themes and work towards the events of the plot of the novels.

In *Patrimony* (1991), the novella in which Roth faces the loss of his father, the main character also tries to engage with the dead as if they could still live. Shostak describes this as a realistic representation of the paradox human beings experience when facing death: “Mixing eros and thanatos with infantile wishes, highlights the lengths to which the human imagination may go in cloaking the fundamental reality of death. In the unmasked narrative voice of *Patrimony*, Roth makes such paradoxical gestures plain” (4). The fact that human imagination “cloaks” the reality of death is shown by the use of the human stain, which as seen earlier, has the power to unveil, that is to take the cloak off certain unavoidable realities that are difficult to confront. Death is the final reality that is unmasked by the human stain. In addition to those literary resources highlighted by the scholars, I would like to propose that it is the human stain which allows the narrative to lead the reader to the grave, figuratively speaking. In this section I will explore the images of death (Thanatos) and of desire (Eros) in the face of death.

III.3.1. The Human Stain: The Mark on the Grave

Death is represented in the physical body with a description of its materiality through the human stain in Roth’s writing. It can be found in the descriptions of the dead body, bodily fluids, urine, blood and semen. A combination of all of these images can be found in the graveyard scenes in *ST*, shockingly. Firstly, *ST* is haunted by death, and the images of death can be found not only in Sabbath, who wants to commit suicide; but also in his wife Roseanna, who is an alcoholic, suffers from depression and has a nervous breakdown. Secondly, the novel not only includes descriptions of Sabbath’s friend’s

funeral and of Drenka's death and the visits to her grave, but also descriptions of deaths from the past, such as Nikki's mother and Sabbath's brother.

According to Shostak, in *ST* the narrative revolves around Eros and Thanatos and moves from past to present in a cycle because it enacts Freud's idea of a repetition compulsion as described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as the psyche's attempt to control loss (2004: 53). While Shostak sees Sabbath's performance as a "masking device", his desire as coming from "a central lack" (53), I think that even though he does put on a performance and despite his use of a mask, this does not hide, but rather shows the desperate thirst for life he has. In my view, the human stain makes this desire visible and it can be interpreted as a knowledge and an experience that Sabbath gains through this performance, although the gap that has to be filled (the loss of the people who have died) can never be filled, truly. It is true that death initiates action in *ST*'s narrative, as Shostak argues (53), and this origin in Morty's death and in Nikki's death, as well as in Drenka's death, is what Sabbath has to live with and confront. The idea that the meaning of life is that it stops is most evident in a scene in which while he drives, Sabbath has a conversation with the ghost of his mother and the account of his life leads to an epiphany. He seems to realize he is on the road to perdition, to the end of life, as he's driving, as if he were on his way to the gates of Death:

The drive was interminable. Had he missed a turn or was this itself the next abode: a coffin that you endlessly steer through the placeless darkness, recounting and recounting the uncontrollable events that induced you to become someone unforeseen. And so fast! So quickly! Everything runs away, beginning with who you are, and at some indefinable point you come to half understand that the ruthless antagonist is yourself. (Roth 1995: 111)

From this speech it cannot simply be understood that Sabbath is saying that loss and death have shaped his identity, but the impact of these realities on him certainly offers an explanation for the mess he is in. The inability to do anything to avoid the losses that are experienced so suddenly in life does not prevent Sabbath from considering how he has lost not only the presence of the people he loved, but also his own being, in a way. The person he used to be is not there any longer, he has changed, has ran away from himself too. He is his own “ruthless enemy” because he tends to be self-destructive, or rather, he discovers that it is mostly because of his own nature, actions and decisions that he has suffered so much. Sabbath finds out that the worst war is actually fought within himself. Facing these troubles, Sabbath exhibits an appetite for life that indulges in his illicit affair with Drenka. This is portrayed with a bitter irony and a dark humor by Roth.

Granted, the transgression Sabbath indulges in is “for fun,” his obscene and indecent acts are his way to exercise his free will, for pleasure, but he only started doing this after his brother’s death. Roth Pierpont also points this out in her biography: If Sabbath is free of constraints, “it is because he has already lost so much [...] Sabbath can do whatever he wants, at whatever risk, because nothing more can be taken from him” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 192, *ellipsis mine*). Moreover, after Nikki’s disappearance (his former partner), his life took another turn and he began to live with the dead, as it were. Not only that, but also, as David Brauner writes, “If Sabbath’s libido is limitless, however, his body is all too painfully circumscribed by its mortality” (2007: 129). In every attempt to pursue his goals, he finds his attempt frustrated by the failings of his body or the nearness of death. This can be interpreted, as Howard Jacobson has done, as the result of the resources of comedy, in which “the phallus [functions] as [a] site of comic forgetfulness, irresponsibility, freedom, but for Sabbath in this passage and in the novel

as a whole, phallic clowning does not banish, but rather *evokes* tormenting memories: of lost loved ones, of forsaken responsibilities, of the cost of taking liberties” (Jacobson 1997 qtd. in Brauner 2007: 129). It is about that loss and death that the reader has to think in order to better understand the source of Sabbath’s transgression, and the reader is introduced to his traumatic memories by means of images of the human stain in the body.

Sabbath’s profanity consists in invading the sacred space of the dead by communing with them. Narrated with grotesque details and switching between serious and comical speech at short intervals, the visits Sabbath pays to Drenka’s grave at night, in secret, are very important. Sabbath outs his grief throwing himself to the grave, having this imaginary sexual encounter with Drenka “sobbing as he could not sob at the funeral” (Roth 1995: 64). He is drawn to this place so he can pay his respects to his dead lover, whom he misses so much. Only the ghost of his mother is a witness to this, and it is her presence which makes him doubt whether he is going crazy: “These visitations had been going on too regularly to be a mental aberration [...] Unless he was mentally aberrant and the unreality was going to worsen as life became even more unendurable. Without Drenka it *was* unendurable –he didn’t have a life, except at the cemetery” (Roth 1995: 51, ellipsis mine). As Roth Pierpont points out, this novel elevates “the familiar theme of sex as freedom into sex as a protest against the grave itself” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 193). Thus, Sabbath lives in communion with the dead, as he explains after the account of Nikki’s struggle to part with her mother’s body.

The unexpected events following Drenka’s relationship with Sabbath are very significant when analyzing how grief is portrayed. Pozorski claims about ST that “the grief at the heart of the story is expressed for Drenka Balich, Sabbath’s married Croatian mistress in whom he has met his match” (2015: 109-110). To support this reading of the focus of the novel, Pozorski shows how “Significantly, Drenka’s early death haunts the

entire text, much like Morty's. In fact, *Sabbath's Theater* can be read as a novel structured around grave scenes, with frequent visits to Drenka's grave in particular punctuating the narrative" (111). It could be said that Drenka's death (in addition to Morty's and Nikki's disappearance) haunts ST as much as the question of why Merry became a terrorist haunts AP, or as the secrets of Coleman's past haunt HS.

In addition, the representation of the experience of suffering derived from death is accompanied by a constant philosophical reflection on death. Sabbath has got his "death books" to read, and in one of them he reads about different attitudes towards death, one of them being the resignation to a collective fate, and the second one being the worry about one's own death, and then there is the preoccupation with the death of the other person (Roth 1995: 88-89). Sabbath is a philosopher, in a way, especially if one understands philosophy as a meditation on death, as Socrates wrote in the *Phaedo*. In Sabbath's own personal experience, he feels as if he himself died when his brother died, so his anxiety is mostly about the death of the people he loved which remind him of his own pending death. The identification with his brother is so strong, that when he writes his will, first he writes that year, 1944 instead of 1994, by mistake. He wants to be buried naked, "unclothed", and surrounded by the things that belonged to his brother. The description of the pain that Sabbath suffers when he finds the objects that belonged to his brother shows the reality that grief breaks the human being as it reveals the emptiness of our being. The scene at the beach is truly moving, and it follows a detailed description of Sabbath going through his dead brother's objects. Sabbath holds on to his dead brother's things as his only valuable possession, and discovering them is a very emotional experience. It is very moving to read Morty's letters and think about the loss the family suffered. Morty's things seem to face Sabbath with a blankness, as they "transformed nothing, abated nothing, neither merged him with what was gone nor separated him from

what was here” (423). The physical objects make no change, as there is no way of bringing the living closer to the dead, nor, on the other hand, can he leave this world, this life. Sabbath may be a reckless man, but he is wise in that he does not scorn death, he fears it and considers its reality constantly, aware of the limits and barriers between himself and the dead.

This awareness of death is also present in Roth’s next novel, *AP*, although in a different way. In the novel’s opening, during the scene of the high school reunion, “the Angel of Time” is as present as the band. Driven by his desire to “forestall death”, Zuckerman tries to fight against the thought of impending Death by holding on to memories and seeking a Proust-like revelation unsuccessfully (Roth 1997: 47). It is ironic because the more Zuckerman tries to obscure death, the clearer it becomes, and so underneath bright memories of his youth, the shadow of a dark fate emerges. Furthermore, what initially could be comprehended by reason becomes meaningless and what was first chaotic is now clear: “Death had become perfectly understandable while everything unenigmatic [...] had become inexplicable” (53, *ellipsis mine*). This reversal permeates the novel and illustrates the narrator’s helplessness and the lack of clues to interpret reality.

Memories from the past arise with irony as life leaves its mark on the characters’ bodies. As seen in Chapters I and II, the body is full with meaning in Roth’s texts, and characters realize with time that the spell they cast on each other, physical attraction, the interest in another person and his or her body is “as serious a thing as there is in life. The body, from which one cannot strip oneself however one tries, from which one is not to be freed this side of death” (Roth 1997: 79). In this scene, Zuckerman is thinking about “the Swede and the tyranny that his body held over him” (79). The Swede and his wife have both been endowed with strong, beautiful bodies, but they will not conform to what is

expected of them. Ironically, as the narrator puts it, “The Swede wanted what he took to be a higher calling, and his bad luck was to have found one” (79). Being a hero carried a weight of responsibility that turned out to be heavier than he thought. The Swede, who is supposed to lead people away from the reality of death, from the war, as a savior who has to beat evil, brings into the world a seed of evil: A killer, bringing destruction to the indestructible. The human stain in the Swede’s story brings him to his death, as the narrator gives the story a dramatic tone, comparing the events to President John F. Kennedy’s assassination: “who could have imagined that his life would come apart in this horrible way?” (83). As Roth wrote in *Patrimony*, the account of his father’s illness and death, the attempt of the living to feel close to the dead can only end in disappointment:

‘If there’s no one in the cemetery to observe you, you can do some pretty crazy things to make the dead seem something other than dead.’ He shrugs, ‘Oh, you can try talking to the dead if you feel that’ll help [...] but it’s hard not to know [...] that you might as well be conversing with the column of vertebrae hanging in the osteopath’s office’ [...] Even if you succeed and get yourself worked up enough to feel their presence, you still walk away without them. What cemeteries prove [...] is not that the dead are present but that they are gone. They are gone and, as yet, we aren’t. (Roth 1991: 21, ellipsis mine)

Sabbath learns that endlessness ends and yet, he does not want to leave the graveyard. The pain that comes from realizing that the dead cannot be recovered, that they are really gone, is represented fully in this novel, in an unpleasant way, because Roth seeks to have his characters live real human lives, which means real suffering, without anaesthetizing their feelings or thoughts. The human being struggles with death because it does not seem natural that life can just stop like that. This idea can be compared to the

thoughts of the character in *Everyman*: “Death does not even seem natural. I had thought—secretly I was certain—that life goes on and on” (Roth 2006: 169). Sabbath suffers from anxiety as he has to face the reality of loss, and as Posnock points out, his speech is always referring to the past: “Even the most sustained present-tense swatch of narrative [...] is rife with holes that expose the ever present past” (Posnock 173, ellipsis mine). This quality is also present, although in a less evident way, in AP and HS. But in these novels, it is different because the past does not reveal the wound caused by death.

In order to represent how death is perceived as unnatural, in ST Roth shows the thoughts and actions of the character of Nikki through Sabbath’s eyes. To her, it is impossible to part with the dead body of her mother. “It’s unbearable. It’s dreadful,” Nikki said. ‘I’m going to stay with her. I’ll sleep here. I don’t want her to be alone’” (Roth 1995: 111). She is in a state of denial that seems childish and unnatural to Sabbath. That is why he keeps them company and is disgusted by details such as Nikki blowing her nose with the tissue that they had laid over the dead mother’s face: “and that seemed to me altogether crazy” (113). There is a lot of black humor in this account, and as the funeral director says when speaking about death: “At the risk of being indelicate”, it is impossible to be delicate about death. This truth is what Sabbath’s story communicates through the human stain, the impossibility of purity when it comes to death. And paradoxically enough, Sabbath mentions in several occasions how he treated Nikki “delicately” and “gently”. It seems like a different character than the rude man we know. He seems compassionate and careful not to hurt her feelings or indulge in his own desires at this time of grief.

When Sabbath helps the embalmer to remove the jewelry off the dead body of Nikki’s mother, he notes “She is so dead, I thought –and this is becoming insufferable” (Roth 1995: 115). He cannot really bear the feel of the dead, it disgusts and horrifies him. And yet, he has crazy thoughts about communion with the dead and the living, as when

he holds her head and notes this “was by far the most intimate we had been” and when he thinks “the unthinkable” about the embalmer having sexual contact with the corpse. This grotesque thought of his imagination that is sparked by a comment about being seen is another indication of the unsettling unnaturalness of death. When the embalmer is finished and says everything is as it was and that there were flowers beside her, he is bothered by the “tableau”, the theater that is arranged for the dead (116). As he thinks later, “We are dealing here with death, fuck the flowers!” (120). Those flowers enrage Sabbath so much that he feels an impulse to throw them into the wastebasket, because he feels the ugly reality of the dead is being hidden, as the corpse is disguised as if she were a statue. The “fluid self”, that natural liquid that represents life, is gone.

All her fluid self is gone, I thought, suctioned into those black cases and then –what? Down the toilet bowl at the back of the shop? I could just see that giant in his black suit tossing about the naked body once it was the two of them alone in the room with the curtains drawn and there was no longer any need to be as dainty as he’d been with the jewelry. Evacuating the bowels, emptying the bladder, draining the blood, injecting the formaldehyde, if formaldehyde was what I smelled. (Roth 1995: 118)

To Sabbath, it feels wrong to get rid of that which makes a person human, throwing it away like waste, garbage, down the toilet. In order to leave the house clean, Sabbath has to pour out the milk so that it does not go bad and starts smelling, and he takes the garbage out with the same purpose. But with a person it ought to be different. The feeling of distress gets worse when Sabbath considers the loss of the human stain. When only the body is left, the traces of the stain are removed, out of sight, hidden. They disappear with the person. (Roth 1995: 118).

The profane invades the sacred also in the area of death. And yet, Sabbath is disgusted by how Nikki keeps touching the dead body of her mother, and he knows she needs help. In Judaism the Law says it is forbidden to touch a dead body. In fact, in the Law it is the highest degree of uncleanness and people would defile anything they touch after being in contact with a corpse (see Numbers 19: 11-22). Even though he is not thinking about the Jewish Law, it is important that in this scene there is a reference to impurity, although the rage that Sabbath feels is due to the pretense that the dead are like the living; that death should be kept nice and natural, while really, it is not. That is why he delivers this speech to try to make Nikki come to her senses: “You are not living with the dead, you are living with the living. It’s as simple as that [...]” (Roth 1995: 121, ellipsis mine). The separation between life and death must be respected. However, the truth is, as Nikki’s own traumatized behavior and Sabbath’s own conversations with his mother and his visits to Drenka show that it is not that simple at all. Roth crosses the boundaries of this separation in an unsettling way by connecting life and death through these images.

III.3.2. How to Keep Death at Bay

The human stain can also appear in images of urine and semen in order to show how Roth’s characters fight against death. Earlier, in Chapter II, this study looked at how Sabbath is more of a feminist than a misogynist in Elisa Albert’s view. Along the lines of that interpretation, sex is this character’s way of asserting himself against death. The sheer energy of Sabbath in his fight against death is inspiring, and as Albert says, the writing is

brimming with feeling, which is what makes it possible: “Oh, the offensive, gluttonous, hurtful, obtuse, obsessive sweep of this one little human being’s feelings. It’s a reminder: remember what it was like to have an inner life?” (Albert 2020: 10).

Death is represented with physical images of the body because it cannot be understood or explained into rational stages, nor played or acted on the stage: “There are no stages. She is dead. That is the only stage. Do you hear me? That is the only stage, and you are not *on* the stage. This is no act. This is all becoming very offensive” (Roth 1995: 121). It is shocking to hear from Sabbath’s mouth the judgment that something is very offensive to him. It is unexpected to read this because from the beginning of the novel the reader has witnessed how Sabbath has no qualms in doing crazy things of all sorts and delighting in transgression, counting any offense as a blessing. He recognizes this: “And that’s when I took on the job and began a life with the dead that has, by now, put those antics of Nikki’s to shame. To think how repelled I was by her –as though it were Nikki and not Death who had overstepped the limits” (121). As Death (depicted as a character in literature, always as a cunning figure and winning the game) oversteps the limits, why not go along with it? This seems to be Sabbath’s response. He has grown to make his own that mad behavior because what is repelling is death, not the people who are shocked by it. “Sabbath’s immoderate grief is a source for his disdain for any form of the moderate, the cardinal bourgeois virtue that, for him, bespeaks a desperate effort at control, an effort to escape being blindsided by experience” (Posnock 2006: 176). Because of his awareness of the immoderate action of death, he is also immoderate in his grief as a result of it and he knows the experience of death is impossible to control.

Not only is death impossible to control, it is also impossible to interpret. In *ST*, there is an insistence upon the fact that human beings are made of flesh and blood, and so there can be no artificial reading of a pattern on their bodies. In dealing with death, Roth’s

narration describes the contradictions that we deal with when confronting death of the other and also of oneself. Part II of this novel is titled “To be or not to be” alluding both at the thought of suicide and, in the context of Hamlet’s speech, to the general state of hesitation of a person who has a task at hand and fears to do it, doubts whether to go on with it or to take his life. This is not only Sabbath’s case. To live or to die is also Roseanna’s struggle, and many other characters’ fight in life. Finally, Sabbath himself contemplates his own will to die. Sabbath must attend the funeral old colleague who has committed suicide. It is introduced as a horrible thing he has to witness. He embarks on a journey to visit old friends, searching for ghosts from the past (Nikki), goes to visit the graves of his parents and his brother, and also pays a visit to his aged uncle. It is very much like a few days’ journey toward death.

In treating his idea of suicide as an act, a show, Sabbath even points out the comedy in it. This is enhanced especially with his being a puppeteer, as he plans to take his own life: “A man who wants to die. A living being choosing death. That’s entertainment” (Roth 1995: 443). But in this comedy, there can also be seriousness, as Sabbath warns at the beginning of the novel: “Luxurious unseriousness was what the outsmarter often felt the greater the seriousness with which he conversed. Detailed, scrupulous, loquacious rationality was generally to be suspected when Morris Sabbath was the speaker. Though not even he could always be certain whether the nonsense so articulated was wholly nonsensical” (21). This follows the playful logic of Philip Roth’s famous saying: “Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends” (Roth 2017: 120; see also Oates in Searles 1992: 89-99). So, the reader has to be on his guard, for in this novel there is a constant ambivalence of tones. Often the text is serious and playful at the same time, and there is a double meaning to everything. Finally, Sabbath decides not to write a suicide note because “notes are a sham” (Roth 1995: 443) for words

are not necessary, just the act will speak for itself. But eventually he realizes he could not kill himself, exit life, because as he states at the end: “Everything he hated was here” (451).

In one of the most extreme images of the human stain, and in accordance with the logic of Eros and Thanatos, Sabbath, in masturbating at Drenka’s grave, is trying to bring his dead lover back to life by conjuring up the very physical substance of her. That is why he imagines her being excited as if she were alive and he also urinates on her. The text presents these actions first through Sabbath witnessing another character’s attempt to commune with the dead. The image of the human stain in the form of semen is presented in an intriguing way at this point as Sabbath wonders about the nature of the sticky, wet substance on the flowers at the grave: “His hands were covered with it” and the flowers were “drenched” with it (Roth 1995: 73). This scene emphasizes the extraordinary and eerie quality of what to Sabbath is an “abomination”, even though he is also impure, as marked by his “dirty” jacket (72-73). In contrast, the setting of the scene is wet because it is raining that night. Seeing this image of another man masturbating at Drenka’s grave makes him remember how Drenka told him stories about how she was “awash with the sperm of other men” (74). Again, the human stain takes on an ambiguous meaning by turning what is considered impure into something pure, similar to water.

As Pozorski notes, “the novel ends with Mickey at Drenka’s grave, in a swamp of springtime images suggesting new life” (Pozorski 2015: 112) as Sabbath is “ankle-deep in the pudding of the springtime mud, blindly engulfed by the alien, inland woods, by the rainmaking trees and the rainwashed boulders -and with no one to kill him except himself. And he couldn’t do it” (Roth 1995: 451). Pozorski reads this as him being “challenged to live, despite himself -a reclamation of life on Roth’s part in a novel written in the wake of deaths in his own life” (Pozorski 2015: 113). However, when Sabbath tries to make

Drenka come back to life, he is reminded that this is impossible. He is surprised he forgot this, he who reminded himself so often of it. “There is nothing on earth more firmly established, it’s all that you can know for sure –and no one wants to know it” (Roth 1995: 445). So those images may suggest new life, but in the end, it is a false hope. Not even his “clean come” can revive her, the human stain does not give life, to remind the reader that “Nobody beloved gets out alive” (364).

Additionally, the human stain also appears in the form of urine when Sabbath is trying to urinate on Drenka’s grave, his intention is “to anoint this sacred ground”:

Could what was impending the urine flow be that wall of conscience that deprives a person of what is most himself? What had happened to his entire conception of life? It had cost him dearly to clear a space where he could exist in the world as antagonistically as he liked. Where was the contempt with which he had overridden their hatred; where were the laws, the code of conduct, by which he had labored to be free from their stupidly harmonious expectations? Yes, the strictures that had inspired his buffoonery were taking their vengeance at last. All the taboos that seek to abate our monstrosity had shut his water down. (Roth 1995: 444)

It seems like in Sabbath’s view, conscience is the enemy of humanity. That moral awareness or rule is against the human stain, which is what makes or describes us as human. Sabbath understands that we cannot expect harmony from human actions, only chaos. He describes the show, the acting that is his life, as a reaction to those limiting laws. Interestingly, he has devised his own contempt, his own laws and code of conduct to counteract “theirs”. These other people are stupid and unrealistic in his view.

The act of urinating on Drenka's grave is charged with meaning. It goes back to Drenka's act of courage as she did something considered forbidden, and Sabbath admired her for that. But it is also as if he were crying tears of grief. Furthermore, he tries to show his adoration to her as an extraordinary *human* creature. Roth is careful not to turn her into a goddess, repeating the words human and describing her physical secretions. He invokes her in a style of praise: "Drenched Drenka, bubbling spring, mother of moisture and overflow, surging, streaming Drenka, drinker of the juices of the human vine – sweetheart, rise up before you turn to dust, come back and be revived, oozing all your secretions. But even by watering all spring and summer the plot that all her men had seeded, he could not bring her back, either Drenka or anyone else" (Roth 1995: 445). The word "drenched", along with all the words that refer to liquid and wetness, are an image of the stain signifying the life she exuded when she was alive. But indeed, even the urine and semen that are intended to "water" her seed cannot make her grow back to life as if she were a plant.

This is what is done by masturbating at her grave, these former lovers are spreading their seed, trying to make her come back to life in a way. But it is a frustrated attempt, as there is no way to do this. The dead do not live again. Maybe it is the realization of this truth what brings him to the final decision. When he decides he will not live any longer it is because "It was played out, that thing which allowed him to improvise endlessly and which had kept him alive. The nutty tawdriness is over" (Roth 1995: 446). This refers to Sabbath's sexual decay and also to his loss of Drenka. Furthermore, it refers to every human being's encounter with death, which causes such anxiety. This is something ineluctable and, as such, tragic. Gustavo Sánchez Canales has written about the comedy vs. tragedy dichotomy: tragedy represents the human being's fate as inevitable, while comedy shows the attempt to escape it and this brings about a funny

situation which show the innate human inability to keep things under control (Sánchez Canales in Durán et al. 2018). The reader can inquire about Sabbath whether he lost sight of the purpose of his existence, or if he just lost the will to live in the end. What is certain is that Sabbath could not have come to the conclusion that it is meaningless to continue provoking the law, because he goes on challenging the law till the very end of the novel.

As seen in Chapter II in the discussion about representation of transgressive sexual acts, semen is an image that is loaded with meaning because of its cultural and religious significance, as can be seen in the Old Testament, in the case of the Jewish context. In his essay about Roth's presumed anti-Semitism, Sánchez Canales points out how there is a biblical episode that refers to Onan, to be precise (2021). On the other hand, Cooper has pointed out that in ST, semen can be interpreted as a metaphor for the energy it suggests (Cooper 1996: 281). So, depending on the rite of passage or the laws, the representation of semen may refer to the symbolical seed of life it spreads or to the rules that are broken. The description of semen at this point, that is, this image of the human stain, can be connected with Roth's homonymous novel. As seen earlier in the analysis of HS, the image of semen is a reference to the Clinton-Lewinski affair and, to use Othello's famous phrase, "the ocular proof." This visible sign refers to the invisible stain.

But the characters enter the cemetery, which represents the nearness of the realm of death, as blind people would, trying to interpret what they touch and hear with their other senses. As in Shakespeare's plays, the use of light and blackness is important to understand the meaning of the scenes: The night Sabbath goes to the cemetery to get ready to die, the light of his flashlight grows thin and "Outside the car the blackness was immense, shocking, a night as challenging to the mind as any he had known at sea" (Roth 1995: 442). This is the main character's dark night of the soul: Sabbath dislikes this blindness he is subjected to: "Unlike suicide, seeing nothing was not amusing" and he

feels very old, stepping “into the black granite world of the blind” (443). He is completely helpless now. He is like King Lear or blind Gloucester, at his worst time. He stumbles and falls in the mud, covered in dirt, amidst the graves. But Roth suffuses this scene with a lot of humor, of course. When Sabbath expects to be killed, instead he finds himself left alone, abandoned, on his own, ankle-deep in the mud, blind in the darkness of the woods.

Pozorski points out that Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (1611) just like Roth’s novel, is full of “language of water, rain, cleanliness, and renewal” which contrasts with the dark reality of the grave which is also present in the novel (Pozorski 2015: 113). Regarding the references to water which could be interpreted as purity and stand in opposition to the images of the stain, as seen previously. At this final scene, because “the ground was drenched with the day’s heavy rain” (Roth 1995: 443), Sabbath eventually is not washed by the water, but instead of that, when he falls on the ground, he is covered in mud: “leaving Sabbath ankle-deep in the pudding of the springtime mud, blindly engulfed by the alien, inland woods” (451). To my mind, this would be the opposite of the catharsis or purification that are suggested by the watery images initially, which in the Christian imagination is a metaphor that signifies purity in literature. In conclusion, at the end even the rain and the water cannot wash away the human stain and Sabbath feels compelled to remain in this world.

III.3.3. The Desire to Keep Desiring, to Continue Living

As seen before, it is clear that Sabbath does not in the end want to die, for, in spite of his attempts to die, “there’s a divine spark propelling him toward light, toward action,

toward revolt, toward being alive” as Elisa Albert puts it (2020: 10). Desire, then, carries people back to life. Shostak states that DA insists that “abjection typifies human subjectivity because it is inevitably constituted by the body” and yet, in DA, as in “Epstein” and ST, desire, which mocks the aging person by suggesting satisfaction and renewal just when these will not be possible for much longer, instead of ceasing to be, continues very much alive (Shostak 2004: 60-1). In contrast, in HS Coleman does find this satisfaction in his relationship with Faunia. But in general, the desire to desire more is nonetheless startling when it spins out of control; it is not something that the characters seek intentionally, as the characters find themselves unable to avoid that desire, and others are shocked by it.

Unlike other scholars (see Neelakantan 2017), I believe Sabbath does not really find the will to live in the memories of the past nor in the voice of the ghosts that appear in the novel. For instance, Mellard interprets the presence of Besse’s ghost in Sabbath’s life as having the purpose to restore him to life rather than lead him to death (Mellard 2000: 121). He argues that his mother’s ghost has a similar function to Hamlet’s in that it brings Sabbath “to the symbolization of the grief that has driven his outrageously transgressive life” (2000: 121-122). However, I think that when Sabbath finds his brother’s things and he feels the blow of suffering, instead of realizing that he has to keep living because he needs to look after his brother’s memories, he is further driven towards utter desperation.

Rather than finding the will to live in the memories of the past, Sabbath definitely finds it in his feelings of hate and desire. The hate he feels towards those who pretend to live a pure life in a world that has let him down in innumerable ways. In “Eros and Death in Roth’s Later Fiction”, Jay Halio has argued that Kepesh and Sabbath embody contradictory approaches to the relation between Eros and Thanatos, as their lovers die

because of cancer, because Sabbath's eroticism resists death while Kepesh's vanishes in the clash with death (Halo 2005: 205). Indeed, Sabbath still experiences the force of desire in spite of Drenka's death, while Kepesh arguably loses all desire for Consuela when he sees her approaching death. *DA*, written a few years later than the previous novels, absolutely has a different perception of desire in the face of death.

The theme of desire and death is explored in depth by Judith Yaross Lee's "Affairs of the Breast" (2010). However, Yaross claims that it is not necessarily true that Kepesh has no desire for Consuela, because "you don't have to believe that *le petit morte* of orgasm cheats death and avenges life's disappointments to accept the tenet that we are our bodies, that our selves are in the body." (Yaross 2010: 84). Yaross further claims that when Consuela states that Kepesh loved her body (Roth 2001: 130), the implication is that "great passion honors the beloved through her body" (Yaross 2010: 84). Truly, Kepesh is even ready to risk his own death because of the love he feels for Consuela at the end of *DA*. And, as Yaross points out, Kepesh learns that he was mistaken, firstly when he thinks "that the critic creates the work of art from his gaze and appreciation, that "she had only to be there, on view, and the understanding of her importance flowed from me" (Roth 2001: 37), then again in mistaking the transitory beauty of a life being for the enduring beauty of art" (Yaross 2010: 77).

However, Consuela's beautiful body is revealed as something different than art, as it is a life, a human being. While initially love means loss and lust is a gain to Roth's protagonist, here these principles are inverted. According to Yaross, the novel shows that "love can replace lust when lost. Without rejecting his earlier premise that sexual desires define us and enact through the body the spirit of great art, Roth concludes the Kepesh trilogy with a new mathematics: in love we lose part of ourselves, but lust gains us part of the lover, a gain that is to the good." (Yaross 2010: 77). However, this formula is not

so clear in the use of the human stain in DA. The body of Consuela is stained by cancer and she is completely separated from health, and yet, she needs the human touch, contact and company of a comforter.

The subject of the loneliness of the individual when facing death is found in Sabbath in ST, the Swede in AP, in Coleman in HS and finally also in Kepesh in DA: “What changes Kepesh is his awareness of loneliness” (Yaross 2010: 83). This lesson comes at the end of life and also in Roth’s late fiction, especially. Trendel observes that “the question of what the teacher learns becomes more important than the issue of the student’s education. Roth’s novella, which features a master in the process of learning, can certainly be read as a bildungsroman, but one whose main character is an aging man, not a hopeful youth” (Trendel 2007: 4). The Modigliani painting reproduced in the postcard Consuela sends to Kepesh leads him to think about his sexual desire for her but also about death: “A nude represented with her eyes closed, defended, like Consuela, by nothing other than her erotic power, at once, like Consuela, elemental and elegant. A golden-skinned nude inexplicably asleep over a velvety black abyss that, in my mood, I associated with the grave. One long, undulating line, she lies there awaiting you, still as death” (Roth 2001: 98). She is enveloped by the light of Eros but she lies in the darkness of Thanatos.

Later, when Consuela is afraid of dying, she will tell Kepesh she knew he loved her body very much, more than all her other lovers, and that seemed to give her comfort. The body tells the story, the question is how this is done. The narrative that can be found in Consuela’s breast, for example, as seen in the previous section, is about beauty marred by illness, but also about the biological clock being reversed. In a definition based on images of cleanliness and corruption, and on the “flesh”, using the human stain, Kepesh says that sex is irreplaceable in life, arguing it is a basic need of human beings:

(It) is based in your physical being, in the flesh that is born and the flesh that dies. Because only when you fuck is everything that you dislike in life and everything by which you are defeated in life purely, if momentarily, revenged. Only then are you most cleanly alive and most cleanly yourself. It's not the sex that's the corruption -it's the rest. Sex isn't just friction and shallow fun. Sex is also the revenge on death. Don't forget death. Don't ever forget it. Yes, sex too is limited in its power. I know very well how limited. But tell me, what power is greater?" (Roth 2001: 69)

In this important passage, sex is described as challenging the power of death. Sex is "clean" and connected to life and to the person's self, to his or her identity. That is why it is not impure, it is not "the corruption", instead it is the pure force that allows people to live, to battle against death, even though it has a limited power. It is the theme of Eros and Thanatos, As in *ST*, the main character clings to sexuality as what makes him feel most alive and as the most valuable and worthwhile thing, the only thing that gives him strength or comfort in the little life he has left. However, it proves to be ineffectual when facing the intense pain of loss and the characters are abandoned to their confusion.

In *Countertexts, Counterlives*, Shostak wrote in depth about the revelation of the disappointment of the hope suggested by Eros and Thanatos in Roth's work: "Desire seems to mock the consciousness of an aging subject, since it suggests the possibility of satisfaction, continuance, and renewal –as if desire could thwart the fate that the body so forthrightly predicts" (Shostak 2004: 60). Shostak quotes from "Sailing to Byzantium", the poem by W.B: Yeats alluded to in the title of the novel, (that flesh is "sick with desire/And fastened to a dying animal/ It knows not what it is") in order to explain how "Yeats suggests that the yoking of the two human conditions –desire and mortal

embodiment –deprives the subject of identity [...]” (Shostak 2004: 61, ellipsis mine). The flesh is sick with desire and while the text shows how desire is clean, because the human being is fastened to a dying animal, at the same time it suffers from this impending corruption and it struggles to know itself.

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In Jewish American literature, suffering and illness have been widely studied as important themes, but one of the most characteristic subjects it deals with is the reality of death. Roth’s work treats this theme starting from his early work but most intensely in his late work, and especially in the four novels that I turn to in this dissertation. It has been pointed out how Roth’s work reveals that the human imagination tends to cloak the reality of death, and I have looked at the device that Roth uses to take this cloak off the reality of death, figuratively speaking. This is carried out by the resource of the human stain, and it is present in various images: The pervasive darkness of the graveyard; the dead body itself, rid of the liquids that represent its life; the dryness that contrasts with being “drenched” in the liquids of the stain; and finally, the semen and urine that are used to try to make the dead come back to life in an attempt to commune with the death. This last function of the stain reveals an important Rothian theme that Debra Shostak has written about in depth (2014).

Desire, which was at the heart of the power of the human stain to transgress, has led to the subject of this Chapter. As desire becomes the will to live in its struggle against Death (Eros and Thanatos), the realities of suffering, illness and death have been shown as the consequence of the disorder marked by the human stain. Through this resource, it will be shown how death casts its shadow over the narrative and although the protagonists fight against it with their desire, eventually as it is the final enemy, it will win. For

instance, the darkness of death is described as a black background in the Modigliani painting in DA, enveloping the human figure, enclosing it despite the power of its desire.

Finally there is no reprieve, as death reminds human beings that they are “one with their body”, thereby changing the protagonists’ mindset, as argued by Yaross (2010) and Trendel (2007). And this is shown through the images of the stain that reveal how in spite of all efforts to make death invisible, the marks of the stain will reveal its presence and its devastating darkness.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Still relevant today, in novels such as HS, Roth captures “the antinomies of our growing intolerance of our own deep imperfection, paired with our growing lassitude in the face of human corruption and violence” (O’Donnell 2019: 112). He carries out this protest against reductionism by revealing how guilt and innocence and purity and impurity are separated and how these concepts articulate contemporary American reality.

The marks of imperfection appear in the works of many American novelists and it is especially present in Jewish American Literature particularly, as pointed at by Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence* (1961). But the human stain appears as a symbol of the impossibility of purity most clearly when it is used consistently, when form expresses content in a way that spreads throughout the novels. The work of Philip Roth provides an interesting example of the complexity and the possibilities of this literary resource. In this dissertation, I have focused on four of his major novels to show how he worked out some of his major themes by using the images of the human stain, with the intention to point out new readings of his work by looking at it through the lens of the stain. This thesis has interpreted the stain in *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Dying Animal* (2001), with reference to the first traces in Roth’s early short story titled “Epstein” (*Goodbye, Columbus and other stories*, 1959).

In American literature, from the beginning, there seems to be a search for purity and a struggle with the fact that it is always marred by imperfection in the end. The curious thing is that this can be portrayed in fiction by means of a realist narrative mode that employs certain images or symbols. Dealing with reality in an age when the individual subject’s very existence is put into question is very difficult. Indeed, it is almost impossible. Describing the nature of reality is of the utmost importance to everybody, but

it is more so to the writer, and Roth captured the dilemma he faced when he remarked back in 1960, in “Writing American Fiction” that “the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality” (Roth 2017: 27). How can fiction make sense of a world that is seemingly senseless, that outdoes the imagination?

When I began writing this dissertation, I thought that studying the stain had no connection at all with Roth’s Jewish American identity, even though at first, I chose to ignore these themes during my analysis of the human stain, I kept finding that elements of Judaism appeared and that his background and interest in the Jewish laws and rituals was relevant after all to the study of the human stain. Not only that, the texts where the stain is most evident have literary traits that can be traced back to biblical texts and these are connected with questions and issues related to Jewish themes. So I could not ignore it any longer -the Jewish origin of the human stain is at the heart of the thesis after all, in spite of my initial misgivings.

This thesis has been organized into different chapters as follows: Chapter I, titled “The Impossibility of Purity”, points out how Roth integrated elements from his Jewish religious, moral and literary background as the human stain is an image that in part comes from the biblical story of original sin and other images of blemishes on the body from the Old Testament. I point out that from his early work on, Roth was concerned with portraying how individuals discover that they bear a human stain. Especially throughout the novels chosen for this study, the stain is used to reveal the characters’ impurity.

In the first section, “The Stain on the Body”, I have undertaken an exploration of the biblical roots of the images of a physical blemish on the skin that function as a mark of transgression. In the Bible, sin is characterized as physical impurity. The illness of

leprosy with its stains serves as a metaphor for human sinfulness. Secondly, the bodily fluids, such as blood, menstruation blood, semen, etc. render the body impure so they have to be washed and there are rituals for this. The lamb with no blemish would represent the opposite, purity. The way in which sin enters the world and attacks humans is through the figure of the serpent, and it is also described as a crouching beast. This source has definitely inspired Roth in his use of images of the stain by using them in literature, he challenges the notions of purity and impurity. The first traces of the stain are analyzed in “Epstein” in order to show the origin of the image of transgression that will later be developed in the other novels. By comparing Roth’s use of the human stain and the significance the stain has in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birth Mark”, it will be clear how in both texts the ambivalent meanings of purity and imperfection are put across through this device. My analysis of the use of the stain establishes the connection in Roth’s work between the representation of the body and the issue of impurity.

In the second section, “The Graphic Stain”, I have presented the stain as more than a single image, consisting in much more than a mark on the skin of the characters, as it actually appears as a web of images that permeates the whole text. I set out to discover how it characterizes Roth’s style in a unique way, considering the author’s obsession with materiality and the complex structure of his novels, where the sum of their parts and the role of the narrators work together with the link between the vivid descriptions and the main themes. The first text I have considered is a key passage in HS that contains both a definition and a meeting point of the marks and symptoms of the human stain: “we leave a trail, an imprint” consisting of “Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen”, and finally, the assertion that “there is no other way to be here” (Roth 2000: 242). This leads to the question of how the invisible stain becomes visible in Roth’s fiction.

HS and AP feature a similar structure found in all of the Zuckerman novels, in which the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, learns something shocking about the life of one of his friends and then, as he imagines their lives, he searches for the origin of the human stain as he embarks on a quest to track its traces and he shows the symptoms of the stain in his friend's life. From this point on, there emerges a pattern of the discovery of the stain. First, Roth's characters believe that they are pure, and then, they discern that they are impure. But this only happens with some characters, because there are others who know they are impure, such as Faunia or Sabbath, and others who never accept that they are in fact impure.

The objective in this section is to identify the symptoms of the human stain and to ask how they are portrayed in the novels. I have found that through the description of restlessness, weakness, vulnerability, blindness and the lack of control, the characters find that the human stain is inescapable. Indeed, Roth's fiction contemplates the predicament of the blighted, the bruised and the assailable in particular through these symptoms of the stain. If, as Debra Shostak (2004) has argued, Roth finds his subject where he finds his subject, my claim is that Roth finds his driving force and his exploration of selfhood through the use of the stain, by leaving its marks and revealing its symptoms in the novels. As I set out to tackle the question of how Roth expresses meaning through the human stain, by comparing it to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, I have analyzed how Roth describes depravity in detail in order to show how human disorder is everywhere. For instance, while Faunia embodies country purity because of her job as a cleaner and working at the farm, instead of expressing life and fertility as her name suggests, her story is marked by the mess of her experience of pain and desire.

In the third section, "The Mirage of Purity", by looking at how Roth writes about the illusion of purity, I have chosen the images of Paradise and the Fall as one of the most

important and recurrent motifs where the human stain works together with the main themes in these novels. Roth exposes the dangers of upholding a fantasy of achieving purity in various ways, and while the scholars have studied the references to Milton's *Paradise Lost* in AP, for example, I have looked at the account in Genesis in order to go back to the original biblical source of the images of temptation and sin.

It has been acknowledged that the presence of images of Paradise and the Fall in American literature is connected to the Puritan legacy of the American Dream, and the idea I put forward is that the device of the human stain works in such a way that it presents the act of temptation in order to finally reveal the reality of impurity to the characters and open their eyes to the stain that is within their idea of Paradise. For example, Merry's stutter in AP and Kepesh licking Consuela's blood in DA are images that bring about this knowledge. In this way, the stain that appears as something impure or ill actually acts as an antidote to the poisonous fantasy of purity. As a consequence, the conclusion is that in an earthly paradise people cannot be immune to the stain and their highest aspirations to purity are revealed as being eventually polluted, for example in the Swede's life in Old Rimrock and his daughter's Jainism in AP. But it is precisely in that moment of discovery of the stain, that the father is able to see that his dream was just a mirage, a delusion. This effect of the stain as an antidote to false pastorals is still relevant nowadays, as the fantasy of purity still exists.

In Chapter II, titled "The Stain of Transgression", I have attempted to show that the refractory quality of Roth's characters, that is, their position in how they oppose moral standards with their rebellion, resides in the power of the human stain to transgress in the narrative. If their refractory condition is like a virus that is difficult to cure, an illness that they suffer from and compels them to transgress, it also allows them to delight in their transgression, like Sabbath in ST. This has been present in Roth's work since the

publication of PC, and it is connected to how Roth writes about the struggle generated by the imperative to be a good Jew and the individual's desire to be free.

In the first section, "The Stain in Sexuality", drawing on studies by scholars such as Debra Shostak (1999; 2004) and David Brauner (2004; 2007), I analyze the references to the Judaic laws related to food and sexuality, as in Roth, the descriptions of forbidden food are linked to transgressive desire as well as bodily fluids that are the proof of forbidden sexual actions or relations. In this sense, one may claim that in Roth's fiction the presence of the disgusting works as an opposing force to what is falsely perceived as clean. By presenting the repellent as a common human heritage, Roth highlights its reality because in his novels these images become more obvious especially when there is a search for purity. However, the human stain acts with ambivalence as the water, which may signify ritual cleansing, is compared to semen, for example, to convey the freedom inherent in the experience of transgression.

Evidently, the issue of Roth's representation of women and the charges of misogyny cannot be ignored when studying his work in our current times. To my mind, just as the human stain allows male characters to transgress in Roth's fiction, it works in a similar way with the female characters. Considering the charges of obscenity and of misogyny that Roth's fiction has received, the human stain is important to study Roth's texts. In order to address the relevance of the issue of how women are represented in his fiction, I have reassessed some of the most important female characters of the four novels, along with the most problematic scenes. I have come to the conclusion that in Roth's fiction, lust, both in men and in women, appears as an expression of rebellion and of the desire to be free from moral strictures. There is an eternal Eros/Thanatos struggle, because lust is a way to cleave to life, or to try to escape from the unavoidable reality of death.

The human stain allows the characters to challenge preconceived notions about independence and vulnerability as it questions the concepts of purity.

In the second section, “The Stain in the Eyes of Society”, the human stain allows for an exploration of how Roth presents his moral fantasies in fiction. In order to understand how the stain shows how wrong people’s judgement of each other is, I set out to examine different instances of the images of the stain in this terrain. Roth’s fiction does more than just calling for the readers’ sympathy for the characters’ errors and failures. In making visible the difficulty in reading people accurately, the stain represents the blindness of those who think see correctly. The human stain works in two directions: On the one hand, when people fail to notice the mistakes and the chaos in their own lives; and on the other hand, when they misjudge others for the stain in their lives.

In order to outline this particular function of the stain I have analyzed how Roth’s characters defy society’s expectations and rules by embracing the stain. The stain acts not only as a mirror, but also as the sword that shows people’s double nature by revealing lies and bringing conflict in the narrative. As David Brauner argues, Roth’s realism is an antidote to the poisonous idealism of rigid notions of morality. By tracing the influence of ideas and writings by Nietzsche, Emerson and Dostoevsky on Roth’s fiction, it becomes clear that the human stain is an appropriate way to represent the characters’ struggles. Appearing as the physical bodily fluid that signifies liquid or changing identity, it also represents the irrational element which characterizes the main characters. Finally, the constant presence of Jewish references in the human stain shows that there is a strong link after all between the stain as it appears in HS and the stain in “Epstein”.

Eventually, in the process of going from an initial rejection of the stain to an acceptance of it, it becomes an instrument of unblinding for Roth’s characters, and the

horror of self-reflection is performed by means of the mirror of the human stain. This looking-glass forces people to look at themselves, as it interrupts the normalcy of their lives: It is the extraordinary breaking into the ordinary, entering their reality and opening their eyes to it.

In the third section, “The Stain in America”, not only the individual, but the whole nation is marked by the stain. In this case, it is blighted by corruption, compared to a plague. The individual is blindsided by history, taken by surprise by the forces that destroy their lives and shed chaos everywhere. The depiction of World War II, the Wars of Korea and Vietnam, the protest movements, the Watergate and the Clinton scandals, the American Dream and the Sexual Revolution, as well as the celebration of the new millennium are all characterized by the role of descriptions of filth, illness and violence. Roth exposes the beliefs that have given shape to the narrative of postwar America by the means of images of the human stain.

In Chapter III, titled “The Stain of Suffering” addresses the question of how the human stain represents pain, loss, illness and death in Roth’s fiction. While the experience of suffering is a prominent theme in American Jewish literature, Roth has not only written about it regarding the Holocaust, but when writing about pain, aging and the nearness of death as felt in the physical body. While scholars such as Debra Shostak have looked at the question of how to invent a self in the face of desire and death, I have turned to the issue of how this experience is marked by the human stain in Roth’s fiction. Looking back at the biblical sources for the representation of the stain, it is in the description of suffering that we find the mark of the consequences of the transgression seen in the second Chapter. The impossibility to conceal the stain means that the wounds and scars from the suffering of the past are still felt in the character’s present.

In the first section, “The Stain in Pain”, the images of the stain serve to make tangible the invisible reality of pain. But not only that, these images also represent the characters’ desperate search for a remedy for the suffering that they have experienced. In this attempt to erase the marks of the stain, they try to remove its traces from their face, as Dawn does in *AP*, for example. Or with their tears, their features are blurred and, just like with a rite of purification with water, they try to wash away their filth in a bath, like Sabbath does in *ST*. Finally, by reading Roth in the light of passages of the biblical book of Job, the connection between the Jewish images of utter despair and the questions that are linked to this experience of loss and Roth’s own portrayal of the permanent mark of pain.

In the second section, “The Stain in Illness”, just as health signals purity and justice in the Old Testament, in Roth’s fiction, the descriptions of illness are connected with the realities of impurity and injustice. Cancer, with its hidden tumors that cause destruction, is the ultimate symbol of death and therefore it is also a clear image of the human stain. While Roth’s subject is compared to a patient, figuratively speaking, in this case, his subjects are also actual patients. The reality of illness comes to the surface in his fiction as that which is impossible to conceal, and through the descriptions of the human stain, the characters are allowed to come to terms with it. In *AP*, Merry suffers from her stutter but she herself is described as an illness, as if she were the cancer that the Swede really suffers from. His love for his daughter is also compared to an illness. In *ST*, Drenka suffers from ovaries cancer and in *DA*, Consuela suffers from cancer in her breast. In these novels, cancer appears as if it were endowed with a personality and an evil will of its own. The impact of the body’s decay on the mind of the person who suffers the illness also has consequences for the people who love the one who is ill. The protagonists see how life vanishes and this new sense of death brings about a change of heart in them.

In the third section, “Eros and Thanatos”, the subject of death emerges as a central theme from the Jewish literary tradition that undergoes a transformation in Roth’s fiction because of the human stain. As in the Jewish imagination there is no assurance of what will happen after death, when the individual faces his or her mortality, they are doomed to live under its shadow with no certainties. As Saul Bellow wrote, nobody is ever ready for death and this is represented in Jewish American literature in particular with “laughter and trembling” (1963). Furthermore, Roth wrote about death with a focus on the devastating and the visible, concrete, repellent aspect of mortality.

The variety of Roth’s work on death has led scholars such as Victoria Aarons (2007) focus on novels such as *Everyman*, because they deal solely with an individual’s death, and she studies Roth’s concrete rendering of the opposing forces of Eros and Thanatos, which I have brought to my analysis of these four novels. While Shostak (2004; 2014) has focused on the graveyard scenes in novels such as *Patrimony*, there are many other instances of how Roth writes about the materiality of death. The physical reality of death is surprisingly found in more ethereal or imaginary representations of death, such as in the ghosts of dead people, but it is more often revealed in the physical reality of the dead body, devoid of the bodily fluids that stand for the human quality of life. In the Judaic law, the dead body and these fluids symbolize uncleanness, and Roth takes up this notion of impurity in his fiction. In contrast, the flow of urine, blood and semen work in the text in ambivalent ways, showing the unshakably human qualities of life. Finally, the human stain serves to render the impossibility of the wish to bring the dead back to life.

Just as the human stain is no salve to our troubled times, Roth’s work does not offer an answer to the reality of suffering. Although his characters, as in the book of Job, ask themselves what they have done to deserve their misery, in Roth in the end there is no answer from above.

FUTURE RESEARCH LINES

As mentioned earlier in Chapter III, recently there has been a surge of interest in the topic of Roth's response to Judaism and the impact of the Torah and the Talmud on Roth's work, as reflected in the Special Issue on Judaism for the *Journal of Philip Roth Studies*. Clearly, there is a need to expand our understanding of this issue in Roth studies, and I believe that it would be helpful to look particularly at the texts in the light of the biblical references, which is what I have tried to do throughout this dissertation.

Many writers have raised the public's interest because of their connection with Philip Roth. Recently, Lisa Halliday's *Asymmetry* (2018) has received wide critical acclaim. In her novel, a much younger author who writes a fictional account based on her real relationship with Philip Roth feels the "anxiety of influence" to use Harold Bloom's well-known term. She writes about a unique relationship and introduces a new counter voice to Roth's narratives. She quotes Roth's famous response, when he said that whenever he wrote fiction, they said it was autobiographical and whenever he wrote autobiography, they said it was fiction. His answer to this criticism was: why bother? Let them decide what it is. In her work, Lisa Halliday seeks to ask questions, not answer them. In this, she shares Roth's outlook. The asymmetries that are present in her novel take up three sections, with different points of view, different characters, and the relationship between youth and old age, justice and injustice, and other juxtapositions that can be found in life.

However, I am more interested in Roth's legacy on a new, younger generation of Jewish American writers. I find Elisa Albert's work particularly reflects the influence of Roth's style and subject. She pursues the freedom to write about taboos and explores feelings of uneasiness with the Jewish tradition. One thing that Albert and Roth have in

common is that they both wrote a collection of short stories that is entirely about the topic of Jews, and these were published as their first books: *Goodbye, Columbus and Other Stories* (1959) was Roth's, and Albert published *How This Night is Different* in 2006. She takes up the question of what it means to be Jewish in America in the present, and tackles the problem of not being able or not wanting to conform to the rules, but the difference is that she has chosen to speak from the women perspective and experience. After reading her work, I find that she and Roth share more than a label, a subject and a style: they both use the motif of the human stain. Albert seems to be left out of the Jewish American canon because she is a woman or for her uncanny representation of female sexuality and motherhood. This characteristic is evident in her novel *After Birth* (2015), for example. The use of the literary resource of the human stain in the representation of illness is also present in *The Book of Dahlia* (2008). Her emphasis on the connection between soul and body is very important, as this quote from her novel *After Birth* demonstrates: "Feminism without a focus on the body, the soul, and the relationship between the two, is of no interest to me" (Albert 2015: 136).

In fact, Albert's work is deeply connected to Roth's voice and subject, but it also offers a new, fresh perspective, as has already been explored by Aimee Pozorski and Miriam Jaffe (2017). As stated in the introduction and the first Chapter of this thesis, Roth told his readers to avoid a reductive ethnic categorization of his work as Jewish-American literature. But as Pozorski and Jaffe point out in their essay, Albert argues that she needed to produce "[a] Great Jewish-American Novel" as if it were a biological imperative (Albert, 2006: 179). As Pozorski and Jaffe note: "Although Malamud and Roth thought that the Jewish label might affect their relevance, Albert claims the Jewish label with a prideful appreciation of those who were labeled against their will. In this way, she takes

up Roth's freedom to be contrary to tradition while simultaneously—and paradoxically—seeking to become a part of that tradition herself" (2017).

From my perspective, it is clear that Elisa Albert writes about the lack of innocence in America in a way that is relevant nowadays, and she does this using the legacy of Roth's resource of the human stain, which is spilt everywhere in Albert's fiction. In her speech at the Roth Society, during the Roth Remembered Conference (held in 2019), she presented a new reading of her own fictional letter addressed to Roth, but she also gave a new interpretation of Mickey Sabbath, which I refer to in Chapter II of this thesis. To sum up, there is much to be written about this promising Jewish American writer, Elisa Albert. In addition, there are many other Jewish American authors whose work is certainly worth studying, especially considering the transmission of trauma and memory through the generations, as Victoria Aarons explains in the book she edited about third-generation writers, *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction* (2016).

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