



## Unveiling the Essence of the American Dream: A Modern Perspective via Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*

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**Abstract.** The concept of *The American Dream* has captivated the attention of scores of people, within and outside of the U.S., generation after generation, for this *American Dream* is a reality that provides the comfort of a self-sufficient and self-reliant life amongst the highly educated, cultured and like-minded class of people, in one of the highly civilized parts of the world. This ideal and mesmerizing lifestyle has not only encouraged the major white population in the U.S. to strive towards it, but has also earned the attention of the non-white, immigrant communities, many of whom migrate to the U.S. with the hope of making lives better for themselves. The novel *The Human Stain* by Jewish American author Philip Roth depicts the lives of some such non-white and immigrant characters. While some of them are successful in navigating through a maze of hurdles to experience and relish the reality of the American Dream, there are some who either subject themselves to or are subjected to struggles, challenges and humiliations in the face of their attempt in realizing this dream, with a white supremacist and oft-changing American political scene in the background. This paper attempts to explore and expose the reality of the feasibilities and difficulties behind realizing the American Dream, through the lens of Roth's *The Human Stain*.

CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	<b>Keywords:</b> American Dream, class struggle, immigration, ambition, hurdles, endurance.
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## 1 Introduction

There's a popular saying that one becomes what one believes in. This kind of approach to life seems simple, optimistic and assuring, and evidently implies that a person's life is shaped by their beliefs, and the actions based on these beliefs. Theoretically, this seems to be the simplest method to achieve constructive progress in one's life. When interpreted for the values one's ideologies and beliefs can hold in shaping their life, it appears accurate and convincing. However, when the progress of the actual scheme of things is analyzed, one can see that the intricate elements of social standards, societal ethics and multiplicity of opinions influence some core aspects of one's life, either directly or indirectly. "...what looks like the outside world becomes the inside of an individual" (Beck et al., 1995, p. 40). Practically, it is not just one's beliefs that shape one's life; it is also the beliefs of the other, that is, the society, that exerts a significant influence on the way one is raised, lives and dies. While it cannot be denied that some of these societal norms, which mostly aim to restrain and draw a moral code of conduct, do help citizens in a good way, it is also undeniable that these norms influence their lives in ways they do not want it to.

Set during the summer of 1998, with Bill Clinton's impeachment looming in the background, *The Human Stain* tells the story of Coleman Silk, a respected classics professor at Athena College in New England. A controversial remark about absent students leads to a false accusation of racism against Silk, triggering a bitter conflict that unravels his life. Following his wife's death, which he blames on the harassment they endured, Silk resigns, cuts ties with the college, and embarks on an affair with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old janitor. This affair becomes a public scandal when Delphine Roux, a Yale-educated literary theorist leading the attack against Silk, exposes it. However, Silk harbors an even more astonishing secret—one he has concealed for five decades, surpassing anything his adversaries could have imagined. The novel's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, delves into Silk's true identity and hidden history, unveiling a life both uniquely captivating and emblematic of a fundamental American impulse.

The narrative is told through the perspective of Nathan Zuckerman, a recurring character in Roth's works and a neighbor of Silk's.

Through his writings, Philip Roth comments on, and gives his observations about the American society of the late 20th century, trying to project the virtue and the vice of the American society in its raw form, by articulating the issues of sex and sexuality, collegiality, family, racism, feminism, morality, identity crisis and political correctness in his writings.

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

Roth is widely appreciated and recognized for his effort to lay bare the complexities and the sad realities in the lives of people, who in their attempts at greatness and prosperity face hurdles, pitfalls and discouragement, including in the novel *The Human Stain*.

## 2 The Reality behind Realizing the *American Dream*

When the readers of the novel *The Human Stain* travel with the narrator Nathan Zuckerman, to trace the turn of events in the life of three key characters, Coleman Silk, Faunia Farley and Lester Farley, they are exposed to the stark revelation that none of these characters ever manage to live the American Dream, may be with the possible exception of Coleman Silk who manages to experience a slice of it, yet only for a while, before being pushed down by circumstances unforeseen.

The American Dream has been defined as “one of the motivating forces of American civilization” (Carpenter 5). For the characters in Roth’s novels, this non-accomplished feat of living the Dream, which by the standards of the American society are ideal, purposeful and vivacious, is also part of the reason for the many frustrations exhibited by them even in the simplest of situations. The tantrum thrown by Coleman when a casual reference is made to the sexual relations between Coleman and Faunia, who is half his age, as untoward and damaging to Coleman’s reputation, is because he feels the society is constantly judgmental in their views about others’ private lives, despite their insufficient knowledge about the bond the parties involved actually share. The narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, himself accurately summarizes the prevailing opinions to Coleman that it “doesn’t conform to decency’s fantasy blueprint for who should be in bed with a man of your years and your position...” (Roth, 42).

Faunia Farley’s character is a representation of the modern society’s failure to protect women against abusive partners, to provide for the welfare of children separated from their parents and to lend a helping hand to a fellow citizen deprived of their rightful legal inheritance. The frustration Faunia takes out on Coleman in varied circumstances is mostly because of the fact, in Faunia’s own words, that she never got anywhere in life, despite being born into a rich family, which later fell apart. Even Coleman comments that Faunia, “...dropped so far down the social ladder from so far up that by now she’s a pretty mixed bag of verbal beans” (Roth, 28). Her frustration is a result of the many failures that take a lead in her life.

Lester Farley, the ex-husband of Faunia Farley, seems to spin out of control throughout the novel, evidently from an unstable emotional pattern and the havoc inflicted and being inflicted on him by PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder), which resulted from his time in the Vietnam war. Lester Farley is a symbol of the scars of the Vietnam War, a war that benefits the capitalists, but haunts the commoners on a social and, even, personal level. He is “America’s bad conscience coming back to haunt it” (Higgin, 2000). He is angry and abusive, and feels displaced. He makes life harder for himself and for those around him. While his own inner conscience has been violated, it is also evident that he constantly violates Faunia’s prerogatives, by abusing her, even after their separation. He is a typical example of an abusive male who obstructs woman’s rights.

Extrinsically, the reasons for the breakdown and frustrations of these characters, in these kinds of situations, appear to result from the actions, choices and beliefs they hold. Yet, when analyzed intrinsically, it becomes apparent that the society, the people in it, and their ideologies have played a role along the way, in shaping the many turns their lives take. Even though not all their actions can be justified, including that

of Les Farley's, who becomes a peace-breaker in the lives of others around him, the ill effects of some of the external societal influence in their lives cannot be ignored. While it would not be reasonable to shift the entire blame on the society for all the things that go wrong in one's life, it should also be acknowledged that some blame does lie with the society, for the way it influences, directs, restricts and judges individuals' lives.

The fact that Coleman Silk had always strived towards achieving the American Dream is quite clear from many of his actions starting from his very young age. Being an intelligent and insightful boy, he grew up in a middle-class family. His father, being an educated man, encouraged Coleman to enter Harvard and encouraged his children with words, and set them an example about the power of words. Hence, Coleman basically grew up in a literary environment consisting of numerous drills on the "power of naming precisely" and other devices of the English language. According to the narrator, his father never blatantly yelled at his children; instead, he used the power of speech to reprimand.

Coleman gets married, raises a family, earns a good name through his work as Dean of faculty at Athena college, a position he holds for over forty-years. He passes off as a Jew and manages to hide his true racial identity from his family his entire life, before Nathan Zuckerman learns the truth at his funeral.

A young Coleman, while deciding to join the Navy, deliberately chooses to fake his racial identity, which is a result of the pounding impact on his emotions, when the ugly truth, that the girl he dated and decided to marry left him after learning that he was not white, unravels on him. When he wanted to marry, he even goes to the extent of determining to disconnect and unbind himself from his ancestral roots, at the cost of his racial identity and at the expense of his family, deliberately choosing to sever all ties with them forever. "As he and his wife begin their family, Coleman prays that his children's bodies not betray his betrayal of his own family" (Moland, 192). Throughout his adult life he witnesses racial discrimination against the non-white community. Coleman shows Zuckerman a document where he has a record of a black student dropping out of Athena "...because she was too intimidated by the racism emanating from her white professors to work up the courage to go to class" (Roth, 17).

Many years later, when he himself is accused of racial discrimination against the black students, for using the word 'spooks', which he used absolutely unintentionally, and in a completely different context, referring only to the black students' continued absence for the classes, one can see the paradox of life dawn upon him.

Coleman remained credible and professional throughout his career as professor at Athena. While he earned good friends, there were a number of enemies as well, and when they found an opportunity to plot against him, they seized it. The way the entire sequence of events develops, starting from Coleman using the word 'spooks' to him ending up dead in the car crash, obviously plotted by Les Farley, shows how even the slightest of ill-intended intervention by the envious ones can potentially alter the path people's lives take. It demonstrates how an accusation of political correctness can strangle an individual and individualism. "America, in its quest to root out and repair historical inequalities of all sorts, has lost sight of individualism in favor of groups, of the herd mentality" (Blake, 415).

By narrating the story of Coleman's unexpected and humiliating fall, Roth highlights that any individual's belief that one holds responsibility for shaping one's life goes against the very idea of individualism. Individualism fails to thrive when it is at odds with the opinions, biases and beliefs of the society. According to Lawrence Samuel, "the American Dream was a unifying vision that set the nation apart and became America's only influence on world civilization" (Samuel, 14). Yet, this ex-

ceptional dream has failed many of its own citizens. Roth has expressed this on several occasions, including in an interview, where he opined that political correctness has turned into opportunism.

### **3 The Irony that Shadows the *American Dream*:**

Much of the criticism surrounding *The Human Stain* revolves around Coleman's racial transition, overshadowing his pursuit of personal autonomy even at the cost of disconnecting from his cultural history. Roth skillfully prompts readers to reflect on their own reactions to Coleman's background revelation, provoking discomfort. Zuckerman's discovery of Coleman's race highlights the fallacy of Political Correctness and contemporary ideas on Race and Identity, emphasizing the absurdities within these constructs.

The joy people derive from meddling in and criticizing others' lives might be one of the faults symbolized by the term 'human stain' in the title. However, it encompasses more than this and, besides the explicit reference to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, signifies the broader idea that humans inevitably leave a mark, regardless of their efforts to erase it. "...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."

Roth's exceptional prose delves into these themes, with Nathan Zuckerman's role as a narrator adding an intriguing dimension. Zuckerman appears to lean towards Coleman's perspective while maintaining a reasonable level of reliability. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that Zuckerman's narrative includes information beyond what he could have known, such as events he wasn't present for and the inner thoughts of characters not documented elsewhere. This highlights how authors embellish and shape stories. Does this significantly alter how we should interpret *The Human Stain*? It's debatable, but it's essential to recognize that in a narrative that explores controlling one's own story, appreciating the unknowable, language precision, and the fallibility of interpretation, the narrator wields ultimate control over what's known and may not always provide an entirely accurate portrayal.

*The Human Stain* is a rich, satisfying book that effectively encapsulates a specific era in American history. It skillfully satirizes small-town college life, political correctness, race, identity, and the male psyche, among other significant themes. While it pays homage to the classical world, it remains deeply rooted in its contemporary context, solidifying its place among Roth's most notable works. It is a timeless piece that will continue to be recognized as a symbol of late twentieth-century America, offering valuable insights into the use and misuse of language during that time.

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, along with the other two novels in the trilogy, *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, is replete with imagery and themes relevant to the multicultural America of the late twentieth century. It ambitiously disentangles the intricacies of human identity while also outlining the evolution of American national identity, reflecting a narrative of transformation and redefinition.

### **4 Conclusion**

Once a person becomes free from the clutches of their parents, after graduating from school, and starts leading their life independently, based on their choices, they will

naturally be hopeful and positive that their life is going to be prosperous. Because the new found freedom would give them the impetus to proceed progressively, with every new year dawning upon them with hope!

But, to the question if the citizens in the American society have the advantage of an equal privilege and opportunity to prosper and live the American Dream, the answer is not always affirmative.

None of the characters depicted by Roth in *The Human Stain* ever manage to become self-reliant and self-sufficient, partly as a result of some of their choices, and partly because of the conspiracies, intended as well as unintended, of the society. They lack the ability to take care of themselves at all times, to be able to stand on their own and support the people around them whenever possible.

The fact that Coleman and Faunia's dreams are being obstructed by internal and external hurdles, intentional and unintentional counterplots, restrains from within and outside the family, rules and obligations that are binding and non-binding, restraint placed on one's physical movements as well mental process, and emotional and ideological manipulation angers, frustrates and disappoints them. Some of their frustrations are justifiable to some extent, because the greatest gift expected out of education is the ability to become self-sufficient and self-reliant, one of the core tenets of the American Dream. But even the educated do not really get to enjoy this privilege. Their dreams are symbolically crushed. They become victims of absurdity of judgment of the society, some deliberately and some inadvertently. They reach a point where they feel they lack enough self-awareness and experience a dwindling confidence in their abilities and in themselves, thereby evidently substantiating the fact that the American Dream becomes a reality only for a privileged few.

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