

“THE ECSTASY OF SANCTIMONY”: AMERICAN CULTURE WARS OF THE 1990s IN PHILIP ROTH’S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

Cristina CHEVEREȘAN¹ 

Article history: Received 11 November 2025; Revised 29 January 2026; Accepted 6 February 2026;
Available online 30 March 2026; Available print 30 April 2026.

©2026 Studia UBB Philologia. Published by Babeș-Bolyai University.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

ABSTRACT. *“The Ecstasy of Sanctimony”*: American Culture Wars of the 1990s in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*. Published last in Philip Roth’s notorious and appraised *American Trilogy*, *The Human Stain* (2000) marks the transition to a new century by a critical analysis of the present. After navigating the troubled waters of the Vietnam War-haunted 1960s in *American Pastoral* and diving into the 1940s postwar Red Scare in *I Married a Communist*, Roth turns from the openly violent and traumatic to the complacent, ideologically conflictual, and cliché-ridden atmosphere of his immediate reality. Campus life in 1990s New England is a fierce battleground, particularly when satirically observed against the backdrop of the 1998 Presidential impeachment. The unsettling confrontation of social stereotypes, the vexatious quarrels of identity politics, the intransigence of what the American academia’s sententious rhetoric embraces as ‘political correctness’ are all foregrounded as pillars of private and public, individual and communal self-invention and self-delusion at the turn of the millennium. Coleman Silk’s life, career, and relationships are inextricably linked to and determined by the sociohistorical constraints of the Nation’s old, new, and imagined struggles with itself. This article aims to examine Roth’s provocative

¹ **Cristina CHEVEREȘAN**, Professor Ph.D. Habil., teaches modern and contemporary American Literature and Culture at the West University of Timișoara, Romania. She is the Director of the Faculty of Letters’ American Studies Center and of the English Department’s American Studies M.A. Program, as well as a member of the Philip Roth Society and several other European and American scientific societies and professional associations. Fulbright Senior scholar, Fulbright Ambassador, past recipient of fellowships from the Salzburg Global Seminar, UCD Clinton Institute for American Studies, the Cornell School of Criticism and Theory, she has published eleven books in English and Romanian, as well as numerous articles in national and international journals, collected volumes, and the Romanian cultural press. She has translated and edited a dozen other volumes. Email: cristina.cheveresan@e-uvt.ro

exploration of contemporary consciousness, its underlying moral quandaries and conformities, in a work of fiction that has become a classic of social commentary.

Keywords: *(political) correctness, criticism, identity, ideology, (American) society*

REZUMAT. "Extazul fățărniciei"²: Războaie culturale ale anilor 1990 în Pata Umană de Philip Roth. Ultima publicată în pe cât de notoria, pe atât de apreciată *Trilogie americană* a lui Philip Roth, *Pata umană* (2000) marchează tranziția către un nou secol printr-o analiză critică a prezentului. După navigarea prin apele zbciumate ale unor ani 1960 bântuiți de războiul din Vietnam, în *Pastorala americană*, și scufundarea în Panica Roșie postbelică a anilor 1940, în *M-am măritat cu un comunist*, Roth revine dinspre violența și trauma nedisimulate către atmosfera de autosuficiență, dominată de clișee și conflicte ideologice, a realității sale imediate. Viața de campus din New England în anii 1990 este un câmp de bătaie feroce, mai ales atunci când e observată satiric, pe fundalul suspendării din 1998 a Președintelui. Neliniștitoarea confruntare cu stereotipurile sociale, disputele supărătoare ale politicii identitare, intransigența a ceea ce retorica sentențioasă a mediului academic american îmbrățișează drept 'corectitudine politică' sunt aduse în prim-plan drept piloni ai inventării și iluzionării de sine (privată și publică, individuală și comunitară) la trecerea dintre milenii. Viața, cariera și relațiile lui Coleman Silk sunt inextricabil legate și determinate de constrângerile socio-istorice ale vechilor, noilor și imaginarelor lupte ale Națiunii cu sine însăși. Acest articol își propune să examineze modul provocator în care Roth explorează conștiința contemporană, dilemele și conformismele sale morale intrinseci, într-o ficțiune devenită un clasic al comentariului social.

Cuvinte-cheie: *corectitudine (politică), critică, identitate, ideologie, societate (americană)*

1. Introduction

Narrated by Nathan Zuckerman, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* has probably been one of his most discussed works by critics, the public's equal fascination with the novel making it a bestseller and the inspiration for Robert Benton's 2003 dramatic movie version. It drew impressive accolades in the literary world, among which the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (2001), Prix Médicis Étranger (Meilleur livre de l'année 2002), the National Jewish Book Award (2001), the WH Smith Literary Award (2001) or *The New York Times* Editor's Choice (2000). As part of Roth's larger, unquestionably serious discussion

² See Cornelia Bucur's translation of this phrase, in Roth (2015, 9).

of American (im)morality and its (dis)contents, it illustrates, assesses, and provides a timely warning about the uses and abuses of the categorical rhetoric of righteousness in an inherently flawed media. At the end of the 20th century, United States individuals, families, social and professional communities, the nation itself are placed under the magnifying glass of fiction. By close contextual readings of what I find particularly relevant passages and scenes, I will scrutinize how this judicious approach allows the author to create situations that are meant to function as cautionary tales against extremism and Pharisaism (even when allegedly driven by the best intentions).

The majority of high profile studies, treatises, dissertations on Roth and his work devote ample chapters to *The Human Stain* and its ingenious parallelism between public and private history, the fate of a president on the edge of impeachment (Bill Clinton) and that of a protagonist (Coleman Silk) who is subjected to harsh judgment and retribution in his own university circles, on account of what appear as capital sins to the academic congregation of the principled and virtuous. From among many influential scholarly works which focus primarily on these topics, I have selected a few examples whose carefully chosen titles reflect their systematic consideration of this novel (independently and/or as part of the *American Trilogy*), in terms of its narrative and stylistic strategies, as well as of its almost clinical observation of America's mid-to-late 20th century socio-cultural, historical, and intellectual evolution.

For instance, Elaine B. Safer's 2006 *Mocking the Age. The Later Novels of Philip Roth* highlights "Comic Irony and Lives of Coleman Silk" (Safer 2006, 117-132), while David Gooblar's 2011 *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* looks at "The American Experience: *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*" (Gooblar 2011, 131-152) in connection to each other and the Rothian oeuvre. Michael Kimmage's 2012 *In History's Grip. Philip Roth's Newark Trilogy* deliberately entitles the chapter dedicated to *The Human Stain* "At History's Mercy" (Kimmage 2012, 97-132). Chapter 5 of Brett Ashley Kaplan's 2015 *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* focuses on "Playing It Any Way You Like: *The Human Stain*" (Kaplan 2015, 103-144). Against the background of these broad, penetrating, often cross-disciplinary analyses, my specific claim is that Roth uses the protagonists and circumstances he creates to methodically deconstruct self-serving, indignant – institutional, communal, or individual - discourses, thus taking his examination of human nature to new depths.

In addition to the Roth monographs, guidebooks and companions to the writer's fictional and nonfictional body of work have paid constant attention to *The Human Stain* as well. To quote but a few, Mark Shechner includes an astute reading of "*The American Trilogy*" in the 2007 *Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (Parrish ed. 2007, 142-157), Ira Nadel features a structured presentation

and commentary on *The Human Stain* in his seminal 2011 *Philip Roth. A Literary Reference to His Life and Works* (Nadel 2011, 112-122), and the recent 2024 *Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth* comprises Aimee Pozorski's apt take on "Slipping the Punch': Philip Roth and Racial Passing" (Pozorski 2024, 181-190). My article will draw primarily on *The Human Stain*-related critical articles published in *Philip Roth Studies*, the main Roth scholarship publication venue, as I believe they encapsulate theoretical concerns and standpoints that efficiently inform my proposed investigation of this novel as sagacious social commentary and critique of polarization and ideologization. I will foreground such stimulating contributions in the following subchapters, wherein my main point of observation is Roth's committed stand on the intense and emotional struggle to subject individuality to normativity, and its oftentimes unfortunate side-effects.

2. The "Purity Binge" vs. The Impure Society

The Human Stain metaphorically captures a world on fire amidst the U.S. culture wars³ of the 1990s. The plot is built on divisiveness, accusation, and aggravation. The former Dean of Athena College, Coleman Silk, resigns after imputations of racism by two ever-absent African American students, whom he has never met in class. Wondering aloud whether the truants might be 'spooks' (in the sense of 'ghosts'), the professor causes an uproar about allegedly employing the term as a racial slur, despite being unaware of the students' color. When he summons neighbor Nathan Zuckerman to professionally write his version of the story, little does either of them seem to realize what other secrets might surface: most prominently, 71-year-old Silk's passing as Jewish to build an academic career, in spite of his African American ancestry, and his affair with Faunia Farley, 34, janitor, believed to be illiterate.

The context in which the story is placed is crucial to understanding its underlying messages. America's constant tensions had long entailed disputes between tradition and modernity, rural and urban environments, conservative and liberal values. The 1990s, however, saw the explosive rise of culture wars, which designated the polarization of culture and politics along ideological lines

³ The term was coined by American sociologist James Davison Hunter in his 1991 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, to refer to what he then identified as the increasing cultural shifts, ideological polarization, and societal division of the United States. At the core of the nation's struggle to redefine its fundamental moral and cultural values lay, among others, identity politics and political correctness (particularly in education and campus life), the ongoing debates affecting both public and private, institutional and personal spheres.

(including, but not limited to race, gender, class, religion, education - all circumscribed, to certain degrees, by the afore-summarized plot). While such analysts as James Davison Hunter (Hunter 1991), Alan Wolfe (Wolfe 1998), Morris P. Fiorina (Fiorina 2005) attempt to observe, explain, and theorize the phenomenon, Andrew Hartman's 2015 *A War for the Soul of America* traces the 1980s and 1990s' constant quarrels back to the 1960s, which he describes as the cradle of a different nation, open to "new, if conflicting, articulations of America itself... In the wake of the sixties the national culture grew more divided than it had been in any period since the Civil War. Americans split over how to think about this new America." (2015, 2).

The major coordinates of this national reconsideration that he identifies are explored in chapters that range from "The Sixties as Liberation", "The Color Line", "The Trouble with Gender", to "God, State, and the Curriculum", "The Battle for the American Mind", or "The Contested American Past". Philip Roth's works participate significantly in the discussion created around these topics. Seeing how, throughout his career, Roth increasingly echoed the often-contentious evolution of U.S. mentalities and actions in his writings, many have asked themselves what might be learnt from the dense Americana of the trilogy in general, and *The Human Stain*, in particular. Among them, Claudia Roth Pierpont, whose 2013 *Roth Unbound. A Writer and His Books* remains an exquisite examination of recurrent themes and opinions in conversations with the author himself.

The following passage is essential to the present exploration:

"The fantasy of purity" ... is appalling. "But that's the great American blessing," Roth tells me when I ask how this phrase applies to the country. "It's a radically impure society." Coleman Silk's genealogical history ... includes runaway slaves, Lenape Indians who married Swedish settlers, and mulatto brothers ... And still, like most of the others, he made himself up. And still he was hounded and murdered for what he was and for what he wasn't. It's an unusually peaceful vision that concludes the trilogy: an arcadian landscape and the word America. And fear and danger and no sign of justice. (Roth 2005, 258)

Besides its overarching irrefutable tone, I argue that this account also offers a proper introduction to the world, expectations, and failures exposed by *The Human Stain*. Speaking about 1998 in New England as "the summer of an enormous piety binge, a purity binge" (Roth 2005, 2), which overflows against the background of Clinton's notorious Oval Office affair⁴, Roth invokes from the

⁴ Bill Clinton, President of the United States, and Monica Lewinsky, a White House intern's 1995-1997 sexual relationship, which triggered the 1998 public exposure and ensuing political scandal, leading to Clinton's impeachment by the House of Representatives.

very first pages the axis around which the entire book will revolve: “America’s oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony” (Roth 2005, 2). Amusement and offence, speculation and exaggeration, shame and envy suddenly inhabit everybody’s imagination. This alternation helps the author use the nuances of the preposterous presidential case to set the ground for a scrutiny of public (dis)illusion(ment) and affectation that goes beyond iconic American exemplariness: “It was the summer when—for the billionth time—the jumble, the mayhem, the mess proved itself more subtle than this one’s ideology and that one’s morality.” (Roth 2005, 3)

Roth places the plight of his protagonist, classicist Coleman Silk, in the context of growing suspiciousness and resentment in the public arena, fed by moralistic, presumably noble convictions about right and wrong in a rather utopian society. While debates over curricula were frequent in end-of-the-millennium U.S., the ivory tower of the academia is depicted as besieged by an agora that succumbs to the radical version of the writer’s object of satire: (political) correctness against all odds. Elaine Safer points out the comparability of Coleman’s home university - rendered judgmental and uncompromising by what many members believe to be the ultimate truth-and-justice system of the late 1990s - to the sermonic American nation, scandalized by the inappropriate White House episode. From the mediatized Clinton-Lewinsky affair to Athena professor’s downfall on account of racial bias, she emphasizes that

there are parallels between the frenetic rush to purify the White House of Clinton and the frantic pressures to get Coleman Silk to resign ... between labeling Clinton a misogynist because of his affair with Lewinsky - who was less than half his age - and using the same allegations against the seventy-one-year-old Coleman Silk because of his relationship with thirty-four-year-old Faunia Farley. (Safer 2013, 241)

The indicated parallelism, which I find indisputable, makes it quite evident that *The Human Stain* revolves around a rather unconventional type of combat. Silk’s trajectory is presented as a dystopian digression from American perfectionism, if measured against the unrealistic standards of the Puritan Dream. Suitability, appropriateness, decorum stand out as misleading key terms of a new authoritarianism, prone to cause strife and struggle in end-of-the-millennium United States, rather than the harmony and tolerance it claims to promote. The protagonist’s conundrum is to accept or, rather, deliberately resist what he perceives as a way of brushing off meritocracy, to the benefit of innocuous mediocrity. “Appropriate. The current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody ‘comfortable’.” (Roth 2005, 152). Roth employs the aggrieved professor’s lens to filter and present

the pitfalls of the “tyranny of propriety” (Roth 2005, 153). It is important to note that the dangers he sees in the inordinate imposition of political correctness on campus and in real life alike do not only lie in the often-specious nature of the presented arguments, but also in the relativization of professional quality or of the intensity and gravity of socio-historical events.

3. I, We, They: The Pronominal Tyranny

It may come as a surprise that the novel foregrounds the issue of passing, since many may associate it with the distant past. Under this impression, the density of the book’s highly relevant critical commentaries might have gone less noticed. Nevertheless, 20th century America, caught in the binary opposition between conservatism and progressivism, never falls out of Roth’s sight or mind: it determines and encompasses its major and minor characters’ decisions and courses of action. My research has shown that quite frequently in his writings, side notes and apparently fleeting remarks contain the essence of individual and communal predicaments. For instance, the following relevant passage captures Coleman’s astonishment at the frailty of human nature and memory, alongside Roth’s own long-standing disbelief:

A century of destruction unlike any other in its extremity befalls and blights the human race—scores of millions of ordinary people condemned to suffer deprivation upon deprivation, atrocity upon atrocity, evil upon evil, half the world or more subjected to pathological sadism as social policy, whole societies organized and fettered by the fear of violent persecution, the degradation of individual life engineered on a scale unknown throughout history, nations broken and enslaved by ideological criminals . . . all the terrible touchstones presented by this century, and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley. (Roth 2005, 153-4)

The irrationality and incoherence of public opinion and the major role they play in the mock Greek tragedy that Roth stages around the classics professor are central to an enlightening article by Jose Carlos del Ama. He realizes that Coleman Silk, the individualist, who is hardly a conformist, yet aware of the normative nature of society and its institutions, is alternately shaped and oppressed by the collective ‘we’ (del Ama 2009, 95). To render that comprehensible, del Ama convincingly discusses the authority of public opinion as a network of unwritten social rules, enacted by tacit agreement rather than by legislative procedures. His article draws on Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s seminal study, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*, which, like much of *The Human Stain*, proves increasingly relevant as time passes and

admonitory tales of bygone ages find renewed expression in the present. Pointing out the researcher's use of the word 'tyranny' to designate the leveling impact of public opinion, del Ama notes that it

is also used by Roth to describe the relentless harassing endured by the hero ... It is a matter of pronominal tyranny ... There is no way to escape ... because any social group, at any cultural or economic level, develops its own formulas of propriety: "... propriety is protean, a dominatrix in a thousand disguises, infiltrating, if need be, as civil responsibility, WASP dignity, women's rights, black pride, ethnic allegiance, or emotion-laden Jewish ethical sensitivity" (153). Submission to any of these sets of rules is the fee charged by the we to accept the individual. (del Ama 2009, 100)

In overt or oblique statements concerning the academia or the society at large, *The Human Stain* abounds in passages that faithfully illustrate the 'I' versus 'we' confrontation. Roth demonstrates repeatedly that the hypnotizing power of his writings does not solely reside in plot and character construction. The expressive vocabulary and the punch lines induce laughter as well as anger, frustration, or unease. Moreover, labeling his protagonist "the greatest of the great pioneers of the I" (Roth 2005, 108) and placing him in the tradition of American individualism represented by Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Roth makes Silk a figure of active, even subversive resistance: "Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral we with its insidious *E pluribus unum*" (Roth 2005, 108). Coleman's ideals do not overlap the society's and the nation's. As he evolves from a naïve young man to a minted intellectual, he grows aware of this dissociation. By his almost obstinate passion for singularity and authenticity, he becomes the ultimate self-made man: he chooses his race, his path, his future. The high costs will become apparent late(r) in his life.

Instinctively defying the U.S.' resonant motto of unity in diversity, he quickly realizes that his creed is "neither the they of Woolworth's nor the we of Howard" (Roth 2005, 108). He refuses to identify with the business-oriented ideals of his youth or comply with the racially defined trajectories of targeted education. Since Howard is a historically black university, he feels his options and acknowledgements are limited, no matter how remarkable the accomplishments. He rejects herd mentalities and expectations. It is relevant to note that free indirect speech originally captures his traumatic mental and experiential journey towards personal achievement, which he equates with the inherently American desiderates of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Free to pursue the hugest aim, the confidence right in his bones to be his particular I. Free on a scale unimaginable to his father. As free as his father had been unfree. Free now not only of his father but of all that his father had ever had to endure. The impositions. The humiliations. The obstructions. The wound and the pain and the posturing and the shame - all the inward agonies of failure and defeat. Free instead on the big stage ... Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I. (Roth 2005, 108-9)

This incessant battle of the pronouns circumscribes the tragedy of the loner’s fight against the society that aims to restrain his agency via collective authority and to control his right to self-expression and personal choice. Freedom of the ‘I’ is Coleman’s true American Dream. The latter half of the 20th century and its search for communal atonement for past sins move in the opposite direction. Affiliation, association, group activism, common goals are favored by a society which, in the name of inclusiveness and tolerance, minimizes and marginalizes the once-applauded self-made man. His individualism – academic, racial, familial - triggers a painful downfall. Once more, I feel compelled to emphasize how Roth foregrounds issues of representation. He complicates his argument about the complexity of human nature by the need to transcend clichés and strive for human righteousness, rather than sometimes-debilitating political correctness. Coleman’s is a case study on the effects of moral suffering: his universe is on and under fire, from various sides. On the one hand, Silk consciously opts for the initial advantages of a fabricated racial identity. On the other hand, he ironically ends up subjected to the paradoxical judgment of his peers, suspicious of the very flaw he cannot have: racism.

4. *Beware the Ides of March: Athena versus Classical Education*

The professor’s humiliation by his colleagues, many recruited and promoted by himself, his loss of prestige and his ensuing rage occur, not accidentally, at the sarcastically named Athena College. Roth showcases the controversies of academic prudishness versus ethical behavior against the background of a mythologically-resonant institution, via a literal and symbolical assault against classical education. In the ever-evolving national and international context, I contend that today’s attempts to redefine academic freedom can be discussed in connection with the 1990s radicalization of culture wars, even though Roth’s 2000 novel does not directly address issues that have intensified meanwhile (such as climate change, for instance). My assertion is that the disenfranchisement of the humanities, which had, in fact, always advocated pluralism and critical thinking, lies at the heart of *The Human Stain*’s argument for merit-based inclusiveness, alongside its questioning of ideology as identity.

To initiate solid intellectual rumination upon the dilemmas of social and scholarly equality and populism, as they shapeshift through the ages, the erudite Roth calls upon intertextuality. Coleman's semblance to the heroic, yet vulnerable Achilles is transparent. The author also summons the vengeful Medea and Electra and the altruistic Prometheus, who literally steals the fire from the gods to bestow advancement upon humankind. They are meaningfully present in Silk's meditation on his predicament in the context of revisionist civilization. One of the novel's most telling episodes in terms of crucial disagreements is student Elena Mitnick's complaint against the syllabus' inclusion of two plays by Euripides, which she considers degrading to women.

Dean Delphine Roux, Coleman's mentee turned detractor, challenges him to a discussion. He defends his selection and teaching practices as informed by a disinterested literary perspective, not by the latest theoretical trends. Moreover, he warns his rather inexperienced successor about encouraging classroom ideologization: "Elena's not learning. She's parroting" (Roth 2005, 192). He questions the young woman's feminism and points to the teachers' influence on the minds they shape, hence their moral responsibility. Delphine callously reproaches his "fossilized pedagogy" and "the so-called humanist approach to Greek tragedy you've been taking since the 1950s" (Roth 2005, 193). This reaction encapsulates the essence of the conflict my article identifies: not merely a generation gap, but one in comprehending and relating to cultural products. Looking at Silk's demise and the gloomy future of Athena, Sanchez-Canales competently explains:

The Human Stain raises an awareness of the devastating consequences of politically correct education and denounces the new trends of literary criticism that have helped create and foster this kind of education. The superficial study of the classics and their possible disappearance from the college syllabi will ultimately bring about the denial of a significant part of contemporary humankind's history. The shallow approach to the classics at Athena College is partly responsible for the sad end of Coleman's career and clearly points to the failure of the American education system of the 1990s. (Sanchez-Canales 2009, 112)

One can easily notice Roth's exercise of an applied critical stance vis-à-vis demonization and incipient post-truth in 1990s U.S. university environments. Despite their intention to avoid offense or disadvantage to certain community members or groups, PC policies increasingly gained pejorative connotations in public and media discourses because of their excessiveness and unforeseen side-effects. Presenting a few case studies of characters who are subjected to social bias, peer pressure and discrimination, superficial judgement and othering (among which Silk's stands out as the most prominent), *The Human Stain* proposes

a subtle, nuanced approach to a decisive decade in America’s fierce battles over defining its core values, reshaped and reexamined in polarizing ways, particularly in what family, morality, and Americanness itself were concerned. Roth’s panoramic view in Silk’s convoluted story stirs the audience’s interest via plots twists and suspense, then decisively captures it by anticipating debates still topical nowadays. Consequently, my consolidated belief is that the novel’s core conversation applies beyond its timeframe and (intellectual) niche, potentially shedding light upon contemporary events, their roots and implications as well.

After Coleman Silk resigns from Athena, the emotional impact of the institutional policies he has been subjected to is carefully explored by Zuckerman’s retrospective narrative. His resentment grows towards his colleagues’ obtuseness. Once emboldened by his revered institutional support for a ‘revolution of quality’, they have betrayed him out of weakness, ambition, the desire to follow the times despite any consequences. To him, the attitude of people whom he had believed uncompromising and principled is incongruous: their actions appear guided by the opposite of what had driven them forward. Ira Nadel looks at *The Human Stain* as part of a thematically coherent trilogy, which astutely captures the disorientation of an American nation whose mid-to-late 20th century history has eroded its confidence in and dedication to its democratic foundations:

The ... virtual inquisition of Coleman for his use of the word spooks exposes the moral bankruptcy not only of New England but also the country. Community censorship ... is repugnant and wrong, and just as he did in *I Married a Communist*, with its taint of McCarthyism, or exposed the harmful radicalism that destroyed lives in *American Pastoral*, Roth reveals the weaknesses in the American fabric. For Roth, the rules are not the most important thing ... but the individual. Resistance to coercion is the theme that overrides the fate of sex, academic life, or even personal happiness. (Nadel 2011, 120)

Thus, it becomes apparent that Roth’s writing proves far from merely entertaining or experimental. At the beginning of a challenging new millennium, he offers yet another cautionary tale. This justifies my focus on how he seeks to expose the nation’s and the individuals’ abandonment of the pursuit of happiness based on personal agency, and to present circumstances that emphasize the alienating effect of collective authoritarianism infiltrating public life.

5. The Humanities between Reinterpretation and Indoctrination

Coleman Silk is living proof that identity cannot be prescriptively circumscribed: an example of racial in-betweenness and a multiple-self freedom fighter who will not relent to external pressures, at the eventual cost of his own life. In academic terms, Athena College embodies the 1990s' purity fever. Coleman's only option is to resist perilous transformations in the humanistic nature of education. Sanchez Canales offers an in-depth analysis of how the political correctness that had already started permeating American education sabotaged the curriculum by restructured programs and restrictive speech codes, meant to increase multiculturalism, but progressively resulting in indoctrination. The researcher points out that attempts to transform the U.S. society into a more egalitarian one breed "cultural relativism in the students' minds. With the rise of political correctness, the two pillars that have sustained the liberal arts—academic freedom and freedom of speech—are bound to collapse. Without the possibility of writing and speaking freely, academic rigor cannot be maintained." (Sanchez Canales 2009, 120) This instils Coleman's indignation, as he can hardly be suspected of bigotry or reactionary tendencies. In addition to his subjective, distressed view, Roth resorts to the authority of characters who know exactly the plight of discrimination and marginalization, to explain the absurdity of extreme PC behavior. Ernestine is Silk's African American sister, whom he has left behind - along with his entire family - to build a suitable career for himself. Theoretically, she could resent him, yet she is baffled by the injustice done to her brother.

As a woman of color, she ranks among the main beneficiaries of the amendments proposed by PC activism, yet she wonders: "One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses? What ever happened to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America?" (Roth 2005, 329) Ernestine indirectly invokes the freedom of speech and manifests her impatience with hyperbolic reparations such as Black History Month, which she perceives as disingenuous: "Youngsters were coming to me the year I retired, telling me that for Black History Month they would only read a biography of a black by a black. What difference, I would ask them, if it's a black author or it's a white author?" (Roth 2005, 329) Handling matters of appropriation with care, Roth employs an openly African American voice (unlike her brother's) to comment upon the disbalance that may be created by magnifying, instead of smoothening difference (in gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality a.o.)

As she stands outside the education system, but has experienced it from within, she can voice her discontent without being suspected of *parti pris*. This is a recurrent practice throughout the Rothian oeuvre: although she is a minor character by comparison with the narrator and the protagonist(s), Ernestine's voice fully denounces the collapse of quality, professionalism, or objective fact

checking, clear predecessors of today's quasi-generalized post-truth assault. Pondering the unpleasant situation that has harmed her brother, she delivers a disheartening analysis:

What happened to Coleman with that word 'spooks' is all a part of the same enormous failure. In my parents' day and well into yours and mine, it used to be the person who fell short. Now it's the discipline. Reading the classics is too difficult, therefore it's the classics that are to blame. Today the student asserts his incapacity as a privilege. I can't learn it, so there is something wrong with it. And there is something especially wrong with the bad teacher who wants to teach it. There are no more criteria, Mr. Zuckerman, only opinions. (Roth 2005, 330-31)

Thus, in Roth's emblematic 2000 novel, Ernestine candidly anticipates Third Millennium debates on the general confusion created by unregulated social media, for instance. Evidence-based argumentation is replaced by a multitude of subjective, oftentimes malicious opinions and self-serving, even conspiracist theories. Entitlement in the name of group values displaces personal merit, lack of accomplishment is not critically assessed, but justified by the denunciation of evaluation tools. Consequently, vulnerability, frustration, and inequities grow, rather than diminish, and radical divisions follow. All these burning issues are easily recognizable 25 years later. In Roth's rather dark prophecy, Coleman Silk's professional reputation is restored only after his physical expiration. At his funeral, Herbert Keble, senior African American chairman of the Political Science Department, admits his mistake: he did not support his friend and mentor when everyone failed him. Deeming what had ousted Silk an incident, a misunderstanding, he belatedly calls out "the grievous, the contemptible wrong, that was done to him by Athena College." (Roth 2005, 309)

The irony of the entire case is Keble's and the community's ignorance of Silk's actual identity, as he had long chosen to cross the color line and artificially affiliate with the Jewish community. As Miriam Jaffe-Foger notes, while apologizing, Keble still believes that he defends a Jew. It is unclear whether, had he known that Silk was an African American who passed and engaged in dubious relationships, he would have been as compassionate. "It is precisely the cross-ethnic justification of the other's position that makes it so powerful. If Keble had been a Jew defending a fellow Jew, it would have seemed like a self-defense. By extension, if Roth had defended himself against charges that he was a "self-hating Jew" using a Jewish double, it would have seemed too obviously a self-defense" (Jaffe-Foger 2008, 51-52). The critic, thus, appreciates the writer's ingeniousness in projecting fictional alter-egos that are both perceptive and plausible to the reader.

6. Conclusion

The Human Stain conflates ethical issues concerning the private and the public spheres and presents Coleman Silk as a problematic nature, a rebel vis-à-vis social, institutional, and ideological norms, which he questions or simply decides to flaunt. Thus, Roth appears to create a new sort of personal duplicate, different from his various narrators, who observe, analyze, comment, and take part in his plots. On the one hand, the insightful toying with racial bias in the novel has already been amply considered in the existing readings of the novel. My article, on the other hand, proposes a reexamination of the fictionally illustrated roots of ideological quarrels and unbridgeable gaps in contemporary American social performance and representation. In the present post-truth era, dominated by national and international conflict and crisis, I believe that such a rereading was necessary, as it may contribute to illuminating turbulent exchanges, disquieting interactions and notions that appear to have not yet been entirely grasped.

Elaine Safer pinpoints the essence of the author and his (anti)hero's struggle for (self)-representation in a world of concentric, often concentrationary circles.

Coleman is in a society of shallow people who are prejudiced against the "Other" and yet advocate political correctness . . . The politically correct academicians at Athena College may have assembled to call Coleman Silk a racist so as to cover up their own unacknowledged racial prejudice; their inclination to see African Americans as the Other; their desire to see Jews ... or people of lower economic status ... as the Other... The underlying message is that the zealots of the left and of the right are tainted by exactly the same disease: incurable smugness and self-righteousness. (Safer 2013, 245)

Roth's disappointment with the equal flaws of the major competing trends of the 20th century American mind has fueled this article's primary concern with the author's illustration of 1990s culture wars in the U.S. academia, rather than with Coleman's much-discussed struggle with the alleged moral obligation towards the collective 'we' of his racial community. However, I consider it important to mention that his resistance against a system that he watched grow unjust is also informed by his choice of belonging to a group that provides him with the advantages of having a successful career path and a resonant voice. The length of a journal article implicitly limits the complexity of this exploration. More could be added regarding the novel's treatment of tragic flaws and pragmatic innocence, mass hysteria, or the ineffaceability of Americanness as a multifarious, burdensome

identity. However, Roth’s sagacity, his rhetorical, analytical, and evocative skills, alongside the relevance of his discerning novel published at the turn of a new millennium of deplorable divisiveness, extremism, indoctrination, ineptitude, perplexity have been eloquently exemplified. My analytical rereading could, therefore, serve as a starting point for further research along the aforementioned lines.

WORKS CITED

- Del Ama, Jose Carlos. 2009. “Everyone Knows: Public Opinion in Philip Roth’s Contemporary Tragedy *The Human Stain*”. *Philip Roth Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring): 93-110.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 2005. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. London: Longman
- Gooblar, Davis. 2011. *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Hartman, Andrew. 2015. *A War for the Soul of America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York: Basic Books.
- Jaffe-Foger, Miriam. 2008. “Black-Jewish Doubling in *The Tenants* and *The Human Stain*”. *Philip Roth Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring): 47-56.
- Kaplan, Brett-Ashley. 2015. *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Kimmage, Michael. 2012. *In History’s Grip. Philip Roth’s Newark Trilogy*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Nadel, Ira. 2011. *Philip Roth. A Literary Reference to His Life and Works*, New York: Facts on File Inc.
- Parrish, Timothy ed. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pozorski, Aimee, and Maren Schaurer eds. 2024. *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth*. New York, London and Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Roth Pierpont, Claudia. 2013. *Roth Unbound. A Writer and His Books*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Roth, Philip. 2005. *The Human Stain*. London: Vintage Books.
- Roth, Philip. 2015. *Pata umană*. Translated into Romanian by Cornelia Bucur. Iași: Polirom.
- Wolfe, Alan. 1998. *One Nation, After All*. New York: Viking Adult.
- Safer, Elaine B. 2013. “Tragedy and Farce in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*”. In *Philip Roth (Bloom’s Modern Critical Views)*, edited by Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publisher: 239-258.
- Safer, Elaine B. 2006. *Mocking the Age. The Later Novels of Philip Roth*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sanchez Canales, Gustavo. 2009. “The Classical World and Modern Academia in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*”. *Philip Roth Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring): 111-128.

