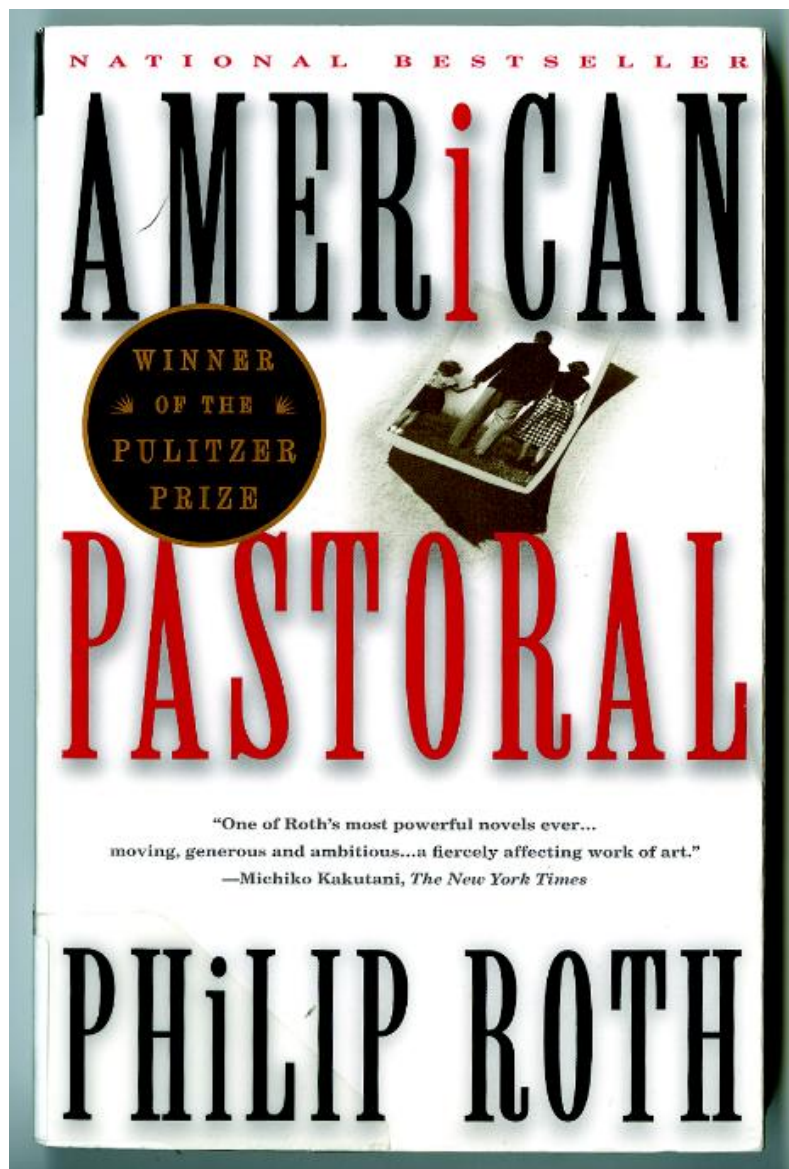


## About the Book...



American Pastoral (1997) is the twenty-second book by Philip Roth, one of the leading twentieth-century American writers. This long novel, which is almost mythic in scope, explores the course of American history from the late 1940s, which Roth's narrator and alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, regards as a golden period, to the social upheavals that marked the 1960s and early 1970s. The focal point of the story is a Jewish character called Swede Levov, an outstanding man in every respect—brilliant athlete, successful businessman, devoted husband and father—whose only goal is to live a tranquil, pastoral life in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey.

But his rebellious sixteen-year-old daughter, Merry, gets caught up in the anti-Vietnam War movement and plants a bomb at the local post office, killing one person. Swede's idyllic life is shattered forever, and for the rest of his life, as the novel zigzags its way back and forth in time, Swede tries without success to understand what went wrong. How could such a thing have happened? In his searching examination of how confident, post-World War II America gave way to the violence and disorder of the 1960s, Roth explores, with depth, understanding, and compassion, issues such as the nature of community and belonging, Jewish assimilation, father-daughter relations, familial loyalty and betrayal, and political fanaticism. ([www.bookrags.com](http://www.bookrags.com))

## About the author... ([www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com))

Philip Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1933. He attended Rutgers University before receiving his B.A. at Bucknell and his M.A. from the University of Chicago. He served in the U.S. Army from 1955 to 1956. He has taught English at a number of universities including, most recently, the University of Pennsylvania where he was writer-in-residence for fifteen years. Philip Roth's first book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*, was published in 1959 and won the

National Book Award for fiction. His last three books have won three major literary awards: *Patrimony* (1991) was the recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Operation Shylock* (1993) of the PEN/Faulkner Award, *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) of the National Book Award. Philip Roth lives in Connecticut; *American Pastoral* is his twentieth book. In 2005, he became the third living American writer to have his work published in a comprehensive, definitive edition by the Library of America. The last of the eight volumes is scheduled for publication in 2013.

## Awards

**Pulitzer Prize for Literature** in 1998

Included in Time's "**All-TIME 100 Greatest Novels**".

## Reviews

### *Booklist:*

There is no sex in the new Philip Roth novel, but that is only one shortcoming. *Pastoral*, like Roth's 21 previous works, is well crafted with vivid, crisp prose, but unlike the others, it's empty. There's no there there. Roth resurrects alter ego Nathan Zuckerman to introduce Seymour "Swede" Levov, a Phineas-like character from Roth's childhood at Newark's Wequahic High School. Swede and Nathan meet by chance at a Mets' game years later. Swede, a towheaded, square-jawed, six-foot superathlete, had a knack for transcending the turbulence of wartime America. A marine at the end of World War II, he is spared the South Pacific slaughterhouse and is kept stateside to play baseball for the Parris Island squad. After the war, he marries Dawn, the blond Miss New Jersey, buys a house in the country, and takes over his father's multimillion-dollar glove factory in Newark. And after that, Roth delights in the destruction of his all-American hero, filling page after page with frustration, humiliation, and anxiety: Vietnam radicalizes Swede's daughter, Merry, destroying the family; Dawn's depression and infidelity ruin their marriage; and a jealous, vindictive brother and controlling father each take a toll. *Pastoral* is both sentimental and savage. Roth vents his bitterness with America and himself. Once again, no one escapes the misery that personifies modern America.

### *Library Journal:*

In his latest novel, Roth shows his age. Not that his writing is any less vigorous and supple. But in this autumnal tome, he is definitely in a reflective mood, looking backward. As the book opens, Roth's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, recalls an innocent time when golden boy Seymour "the Swede" Levov was the pride of his Jewish neighborhood. Then, in precise, painful, perfectly rendered detail, he shows how the Swede's life did not turn out as gloriously as expected--how it was, in fact, devastated by a child's violent act. When Merry Levov blew up her quaint little town's post office to protest the Viet Nam war, she didn't just kill passing physician Fred Conlon, she shattered the ties that bound her to her worshipful father. Merry

disappears, then eventually reappears as a stick-thin Jain living in sacred poverty in Newark, having killed three more people for the cause. Roth doesn't tell the whole story blow by blow but gives us the essentials in luminous, overlapping bits. In the end, the book positively resonates with the anguish of a father who has utterly lost his daughter. Highly recommended.

## Literary Criticism

Title: The inscription of terrorism: Philip Roth's American Pastoral

ABSTRACT. Drawing on interviews and essays in which Roth has discussed how he perceives his place in literature and in society, the author argues that *American Pastoral* highlights the affinity between the writer and the terrorist as creative and destructive agents of change. By paying close attention to the book's formal complexities, the author concludes that Zuckerman's seeming identification with Seymour Levov is deceptive, and the narrator is ideologically more understanding of the terrorist daughter than he is of her "depthless" father.

Few essays on American literature have gained more relevance and poignancy with the passing of time than Philip Roth's 1961 *Writing American Fiction*. Before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the war in Vietnam, the first man walked on the moon, and long before 9/11, Roth complained that actuality was "continually outdoing" the writer's talent, making it a struggle "to understand, then describe, and then make credible much of American reality" (*Writing American* 167; emphasis in original). More ambiguous than this bold statement was how Roth believed American writers ought to react to this predicament. He noted that the writer was "apt to lose heart and turn finally to other matters, to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds, and to a celebration of the self" and spoke of "serious" authors who were unable or unwilling to respond to "our cultural predicament" (172, 181). Had Roth himself, then, in his fiction immediately following this observation, taken on the challenge of addressing "some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times" (172)? Much of the evidence seems to suggest not, although it is clear the question of the writer's role in society is one that has preoccupied Roth throughout his long career. In 1969, he exasperated interviewer George Plimpton by giving a Poesque account of the genesis of *Portnoy's Complaint*, stating that the idea came from concerns about style of narration, language, and tone rather than theme or "content" (*On Portnoy's Complaint* 13-14). In 1974, he told Walter Mauro,

"rebellious" or "fighting" against outside forces isn't what I take to be at the heart of my writing. [...] Over the years, whatever serious acts of rebelliousness I may have engaged in as a novelist have been directed far more at my own imagination's system of constraints and habits of expression than at the powers that vie for control in the world. (*Writing and the Powers* 11-12; emphasis in original)

In 1984, he told Hermione Lee, "Writing novels is not the road to power. I don't believe that, in my society, novels effect serious changes in anyone other than the handful of people who are writers [...]. If you ask if I want my fiction to change anything in the culture, the answer is still no" ("Paris Review" 147; emphasis in original). More recently, he told New York Times interviewer Charles McGrath that the trilogy of which *American Pastoral* was the first volume is not "a report card about America but [rather] a work of fiction about America" (par. 18). These statements seem to suggest that Roth does not regard the author as an agent for change in society, nor does he appear to think it is the novelist's responsibility to engage with lived or historical reality in a way that would suggest a political or ideological commitment or vision. Yet with *American Pastoral*, both in its own right and as the first part of a trilogy, the reader is presented with a vision of the writer that seems at odds with Roth's statements over the years.

Published in 1997, *American Pastoral* represents in some ways Roth's attempt to understand, imaginatively re-create, and dramatize "some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times." In telling the story of the rise and fall of Seymour Levov (aka the Swede), the perfectly assimilated Jew who discovers too late that he cannot live outside history, Roth took on the challenge that, covertly, he had set for other writers back in 1961: to create fiction that was not timeless and placeless like Bernard Malamud's and did not represent, as J. D. Salinger's did, a "spurning of life as it is lived in the immediate world" ("*Writing American*" 174). *American Pastoral* has a strong sense of time and place. The habitual setting of Roth's hometown of Newark is evoked in detail, and the changes it goes through serve to mirror changes in American society. Although the narrative is not entirely linear, there are enough dates given to allow the reader to reconstruct the story of the Levov family. There are, of course, the painstaking descriptions of the glove factory and its operations, through which we can infer Roth's interest in the "immediate world": a world of material objects that can be read as signifiers of the material reality that the author can never touch, as well as manifestations of the success and decline of the manufacturing industry in the United States and the social problems it has created.

Yet all of this is not to suggest the novel is one that deals exclusively with the lived world in a specific time and place, because it also asks urgent and unsettling questions about the meaning and importance of authorship. More specifically, through its structural complexity, it suggests the figure of the author is linked with that of the terrorist. Roth directs the reader's sympathies toward the Swede, but on closer scrutiny the author and his narrator are more closely aligned with the terrorist, the ironically named Merry Levov. *American Pastoral* deals with the figure of the terrorist in ways that simultaneously emphasize and decenter the terrorist campaign. Thematically, the novel is built around the question of how Merry could have become a terrorist by rejecting her family's values, but in terms of narrative development, her bombing campaign is short-lived and finished long before the narrative comes to its close. By shifting the emphasis away from Merry and by examining instead the consequences of her actions through the eyes of her uncomprehending family, Roth's narrative strongly suggests the causes are,

paradoxically, both unknowable and all too evident, consequently focusing on the terrorist campaign's aftermath and its immediate consequences for a family that seemingly embodies the American Dream. Crucially, however, there is a certain degree of identification between the narrator and the terrorist character. This is achieved mainly through the narrative's structure rather than conveyed through the words or actions of its characters.

Roth has often taken great pains to stress that a novel's subject matter should not be considered in any way that divorces it from its formal articulation. Speaking of the genesis of *Portnoy's Complaint*, he explained that "the conception is really nothing, you know, beside the delivery. My point is that until my 'ideas' [...] were absorbed by an overall fictional strategy and goal, they were ideas not unlike anybody else's" ("*On Portnoy's Complaint*" 14). In this context, *American Pastoral* can be read as a trap, a novel that deceives those who do not pay close attention to its formal construction. Derek Parker Royal notes that "all the initial major reviews [of *American Pastoral*] focused on the novel's fictional center, Swede Levov, and judged it by that character. What most of these reviews have in common is an unremitting emphasis on the story of the Swede Levov to the exclusion of the novel's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman" ("*Fictional Realms*" 4). Although critics later rectified this exclusion and paid closer attention to Zuckerman's role in the novel, a consensus remains that Zuckerman is allowed to disappear from the narrative so that his alignment with the Swede can be thrown into relief. Most recently, Debra Shostak has written of "Zuckerman's absorption into the Swede's identity" and "Zuckerman's analogy to the Swede," concluding that Zuckerman is soon forgotten because "his voice has become so closely aligned with Seymour's" (246-48). However, this act of ventriloquism should not be taken to mean that Zuckerman's ideology is close to the Swede's. Instead, the novel suggests Zuckerman has no trouble understanding why Merry rebelled against her family's values; his challenge is to try to imagine why the Swede failed to understand her.

Although at first it might appear that the question of authorship is raised only in the novel's opening pages (before Zuckerman fades into the background), the exploration of the authorial role is continued into the main narrative and is dramatized in the Swede's relationship with his terrorist daughter. Zuckerman and Merry belong to different ontological spheres within the novel: the former imagines the latter, and in this relationship of empathy, affinity, and subjugation, Roth's interest in the meaning and importance of authorship is evident. The novel is divided into three sections: "*Paradise Remembered*," "*The Fall*," and "*Paradise Lost*." The structuring and naming of the three sections can be understood in various ways that illuminate the authorship question. With their multilayered references to literature and religion, the section titles speak of the writer's desire to create order within, make sense of, or bestow meaning on the world, both within and outside his own fictions. Evoking Proust, for instance, emphasizes not only the theme of remembering but also, and more important, the role of the narrator and his relation to the author; in making his allusion to Proust, Roth/Zuckerman places the emphasis firmly on the question of authorial identity and its permutations. "*Paradise Lost*" speaks of Milton's epic aspiration, but this is successfully juxtaposed

with Zuckerman's assertion that "getting people right is not what living is all about" (35). Chronologically, the chapters chart America's trajectory from postwar prosperity and happy domesticity in the 1950s to turmoil, struggle, and disillusionment in the 1960s and 1970s. If the book is read as a story of Jewish assimilation, the three section headings also tell a story of immigration, integration, and disintegration. *American Pastoral* engages with postwar American history on the one hand and asks questions about the meaning and the role of the author on the other, yet the two enquiries cannot be addressed separately because, as Royal has noted, they are shown to be intimately bound up in the narrative ("*Fictional Realms*" 13-14).

Much of Roth's exploration of the authorial role is conducted through the linking of the writer/narrator and the terrorist. The relationship between the two figures has, of course, long preoccupied writers, but recent world events have added new urgency to the inquiry. Before the events of 11 September 2001, American public opinion was preoccupied with homegrown rather than imported terrorism, prompted by the cases of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, and Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Unlike post-9/11 perceptions of terrorists as ever-expanding groups of anonymous and perhaps even expendable individuals with no clearly identifiable center of control (other than the elusive Osama Bin Laden), these American terrorists were lone individuals whose terrorist activities ironically reenacted the cultural values most closely associated with the foundations of American identity: nonconformism, self-reliance, and freedom of expression. This can be read as a cultural expression of a corrupted double--the terrorist as Mr. Hyde to the typically American (democratic, individualistic) Dr. Jekyll. No mere rhetorical device, the analogy with Stevenson's archetypal split self is meant to emphasize the idea that the two forces, the creative and the destructive, the benevolent and the murderous, exist in an uneasy symbiosis that American literature has often sought to explore. In probing the links between writing and terrorism in *American Pastoral*, Roth encourages the reader to consider this duality not only in its synchronic parameters (that is, as part of his larger project of offering a cultural critique of postwar America) but also in its diachronic dimensions, as manifested in his preoccupation with the place of the author in American society. More specifically, the debate on the author's role is traced to its origins in nineteenth-century American writing.

*American Pastoral* makes implicit appeals to the spirit and the rhetoric of the American Renaissance. (1) Zuckerman's descriptions of the Levovs' happy life before Merry's bomb emphasize the author's disapproval of unexamined materialism in a way reminiscent of Thoreau's admonitions. The Swede's "oneness with America" evokes Whitman, but only to bring out its opposite: "Only ... what did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede's subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable" (20; emphasis in the original). Roth seeks to define the author's role in contemporary America by tracing a line of descent from the nineteenth century, a time when, as Sacvan Bercovitch has argued, notions of (American) authorship and radicalism were inextricably (and,

one should add, problematically) linked. In *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch argues:

To be American for our classic writers was by definition to be radical--to turn against the past, to defy the status quo and become an agent of change. [...] Whether the writer focused on the individual or on history [...] the radical energies he celebrated served to sustain the culture, because the same ideal that released those energies transformed radicalism itself into a mode of cultural cohesion and continuity. (203-05)

*American Pastoral* takes up Bercovitch's argument, asking what it means to be a radical and what it means to perceive the author as an agent of change at the end of the twentieth century. In so doing, it also extends the inquiry initiated by Don DeLillo in 1991. In *Mao II*, Bill Gray famously says:

There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. In the West we become famous effigies as our books lose the power to shape and influence. Do you ask your writers how they feel about this? Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (41)

As Ryan Simmons has shown, DeLillo's novel attempts to raise the question of whether writing can hold on to its function as "a powerful tool for the powerless" while responding "to a discourse that was already beginning to emerge about the connection between authorship and terrorism, two deeply problematic ways of achieving a voice" (677). Simmons concluded that these two ways of achieving a voice are ultimately incompatible, but with *American Pastoral*, Roth continues the inquiry. The narrator's physical frailty and the terrorist's speech impediment can usefully be thought of within the context of Simmons's notion of "achieving a voice."

In *Plotting Terror*, Margaret Scanlan examines the relationship between writing and terrorism, basing her argument on novels that deal explicitly with the theme of terrorism. She begins by asking "why so many writers have been drawn to terrorists and what affinities they find between literary and terrorist plots, between literature and violence" and then points out that "both writers and terrorists [are] remnants of a romantic belief in the power of marginalized persons to transform history" (2). In Scanlan's view, J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* best demonstrates the failure or disappearance of this romantic belief in contemporary fiction: "[Coetzee's Dostoevsky] is also a powerful image of the failure of a romantic view of literature, a great writer who can finally neither transcend history nor shape it to his liking" (107). *American Pastoral* covers similar territory, although crucially the various roles and functions that Scanlan identifies in Coetzee's novel are reassigned to a range of fictional characters in Roth's novel, thereby allowing the author to shift the terms of the debate while remaining within its broader

parameters. Using Scanlan's terminology, it would be hard to determine whether the "marginalized person" in Roth's novel is Merry, the Swede, or Zuckerman.

In *Crimes of Art + Terror*, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe argue that "since about 1800, the serious artist is the would-be criminal violator of the order of things, and his role remains consistently romantic because the social condition, for all its vast changes since Wordsworth, remains, according to serious artists, in deep structural ways, what it was in Wordsworth's day" (18). As this statement suggests, Lentricchia and McAuliffe (like Scanlan before them) are not concerned with addressing American authorship and its relation to terrorism and criminal intent, although implicit in their argument is the assumption that American hegemony and the progress of globalization make it possible for American concerns to be read as universal. Rather, in a study that moves from Wordsworth to DeLillo and from Thomas Mann to Frederick Douglass, they explore the consequences of the belief that "the intention of the 'serious artist' [...] is consistent: to alter consciousness, shape and influence the 'inner life of the culture,' in DeLillo's words, for the ultimate purpose of shaping and influencing the culture's outer life, the social design itself" (18). It is telling that Lentricchia and McAuliffe use phrases such as order of things and social design, because ordering and creating designs are activities closely related to the role of the writer. DeLillo was already dealing with this issue in *Mao II*. In a passage that may now be read in new, unsettling ways, Bill Gray ponders the design and iconography of the Twin Towers and speaks of their intent to communicate and his inability to read their message: "having two of them is like a comment, it's like dialogue, only I don't know what they're saying" (40). Post-9/11, their meaning has been revealed to Jean Baudrillard, who writes that "allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is--happily--universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments, in their very twinness, of that definitive order" (6). Happily, the definitive order is not the writer's domain, and it is precisely the provisionality of design in fiction that Roth emphasizes through his elaborate and misleading narrative structures. Not only does Zuckerman confess that his assessment of the Swede is wrong but also makes that confession in a narrative that is open to contrasting interpretations depending on how closely a reader pays attention to its formal articulation.

Baudrillard goes on to argue that "the increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it" (7). These words are, of course, not meant to condone violence or terrorism, and Baudrillard is careful to speak of "the will" to destroy rather than an actual act of destruction. He explains that "no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree" (5; emphasis added). Applied to the perceived link between writer and terrorist, Baudrillard's argument can illuminate another aspect of that relationship: where the terrorist turns the dream into a mass-murdering reality, the writer is, or must be, content with acknowledging the murderous impulse. Acknowledging, in this case, means both accepting rather than denying its existence and recognizing it as a force to be reckoned with in fiction. To suggest the writer is the one who admits our collective but unspoken desire for destruction and to argue that the writer shares with the terrorist the desire to change the order of things can transform the writer into a

radical agent of change. Bercovitch's implicit argument that the radical writer was doomed to become, to use DeLillo's word, "incorporated" has attracted criticism that has perhaps unfairly shifted the emphasis away from his less controversial but crucially important contention that the American writer has simultaneously reflected and created American culture to a far greater extent than the writer of any other nation. In *The Writing of America*, Geoff Ward argues that "America--invented, rather than discovered, and established in a Declaration of Independence--has always been founded on leaps of faith, made real by writing" (213); this is an eloquent and provocative statement that echoes and magnifies Bercovitch's assertion that the classic American writer sustained as well as transformed his culture. "America's striking out as a separate nation," contends Ward, "is founded, in a multiple sense that puns on democracy and description, in a crisis of representation" (16). *American Pastoral* deals with crises of representation in the dual sense that Ward identifies. In its preoccupation with an individual's terrorist mission, it probes questions pertaining to the individual's role in a democracy. In its formal construction and the filtering of the story through a narrator who is a fiction writer, it questions the role of writing as an effective vehicle of representation.

Nathan Zuckerman imaginatively re-creates the story of the Swede and Merry. In the novel's first section, Zuckerman not only traces the genesis of the ensuing narrative through a brief retelling of the main facts of the Swede's life but also engages in an explicit, intense meditation on the resonance of that story for the novelist's imagination. Zuckerman begins by painting a picture of a man who embodies the American Dream in its materialistic and assimilationist glory. The Swede he remembers is not only a successful, happy man but also a successful, happy Jew: a blond, "flawlessly Americanized" sports hero. Zuckerman recalls how all the other boys idolized the Swede at school, not only for his physical perfection but also for his "unconscious oneness with America" (20). On the same page, however, Zuckerman sets up the Swede for a fall by stating that this man who embodies America is also a man with no subjectivity, no "substratum." If he symbolizes America, he symbolizes an America that lacks substance, unmarked by "brooding, grief, confusion, and loss" (20). In other words, the Swede represents not only an untenable position for Zuckerman and the other Jewish boys in the school and neighborhood but also an image of a happy, well-adjusted, and prosperous American who cannot exist without his opposites. Zuckerman's self-confessed aim is to "desimplify" the Swede, and his subsequent narrative does just that by exposing the hidden traumas and tensions lurking beneath the happy surface of the Levov family and beneath the narrative of prosperity and success that is associated with nostalgic recollections of postwar America.

The Swede's idyllic life is blown to pieces when his daughter Merry plants a bomb as a protest against the Vietnam War, and Zuckerman's narrative attempts to trace the causes that led to her gesture as well as its effects on her family. "People think of history in the long term," muses Zuckerman, "but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing" (87). This observation identifies Merry with the forces of history: her gesture happens suddenly and unexpectedly, disrupting the lives of a family who appear to have been living in an almost Edenic version of America--an America

without history. Indeed, one of the novel's central concerns is the brutal disruption of American mythology experienced as real life, and that disruption is seen to be brought about by historical events. The juxtaposition of the terrorist daughter as a symbol for the forces of history, and the Swede as the embodiment of American idealism and mythical timelessness, is emphasized in the novel's two epigraphs. The first is taken from Johnny Mercer's "Dream," a popular song of the 1940s, and contains the lines "things never are as bad as they seem, / so dream, dream, dream." The second one is from William Carlos Williams's "At Kenneth Burke's Place": "the rare occurrence of the expected." Read in tandem, the two epigraphs encapsulate the novel's thematic concerns and indicate the author's ideological position. The first epigraph, with its emphasis on dreaming, optimism, and commitment to the future, sets up the ideological framework against which both Zuckerman and Merry fight (n. pag.). The second epigraph suggests that Merry's behavior may have been unusual for someone in her position, yet at the same time, it was "expected" for reasons that Roth and Zuckerman may already know but for which the innocent Levov family has to search (n. pag.). Jerry, the Swede's brother, also emphasizes the dichotomy announced by the epigraphs: "Seymour was into quaint Americana," he tells Zuckerman. "But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in" (68). Later, in one of the novel's most memorable passages, Jerry shouts to his brother on the phone, "You think you know what this country is? You have no idea what this country is. You have a false image of everything. [...] You longed to belong like everybody else to the United States of America? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter" (276-77; emphasis in original). In many ways, Jerry's words epitomize the novel's central concern: that the desire to transcend or exist outside history is untenable and the realization of its untenability is often precipitated by acts of violence--either real, such as Merry's bombs, or imaginative, such as Zuckerman's (and, of course, ultimately Roth's) narratives.

The Swede's identification with Johnny Appleseed, who "[w]asn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian--nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American. Big. Ruddy. Happy" (316), further reinforces the idea of American pastoral as an idyllic, dehistoricized existence. As a folk hero who lives in perfect harmony with nature, Johnny Appleseed represents the optimism and idealism of American pastoralism, while the Swede's emphasis on Johnny Appleseed's lack of religious or ethnic background also emphasizes the Swede's own desire to exist outside history. (2) At the same time, by choosing a quintessentially American hero, the Swede can be seen as subscribing to the idea of a mythical American Adam, and the novel shows that his ambition to live out that dream, or myth, is doomed to failure. It should be noted that the Swede's fantasies are undermined not only by the very existence of his terrorist daughter but also by the book's narrative structure. The Swede's secret yearning to emulate Johnny Appleseed is disclosed late in the novel, but it is significant that this is Zuckerman's imaginative reconstruction of a man he hardly knew, a fact the narrative takes great pains to disguise. By this stage, Zuckerman has effectively disappeared from his story, and the narrative ends without a return to the opening frame. In addition, although the Swede thought of Johnny Appleseed when his family life was good, the fact is

recalled after the full horror of ensuing events has been revealed and almost obsessively examined. This anachronistic telling of events and sketching of character ought to be a sufficient reminder of the distance between the Swede and the narrator, and accounting for this distance calls for a reappraisal of Zuckerman's ideological position in the narrative. The Johnny Appleseed passage is, in fact, a strong indication of the ways in which the narrative structure aligns Zuckerman with Merry and not with the Swede.

It is as easy as it is misleading to assume that the novel asks its readers to identify with the Swede. Because most of the novel's events are focused through him, the identification is encouraged in technical rather than thematic ways, so that even those readers suspicious of the Swede's ideology and the values he represents feel a certain degree of sympathy and share his incomprehension. The main narrative seems to be concerned with the quest for answers and explanations, as the Swede tries and repeatedly fails to understand how his seemingly well-adjusted daughter has become a murdering terrorist. However, reading that same section of the book through the narrative frame of the first half of "Paradise Remembered" produces a different interpretation. The narrative is not concerned with trying to understand the terrorist's mindset; rather, Zuckerman is attempting to understand what it feels like to be the Swede. Sitting across the table during the first meeting that stirred his imagination, Zuckerman observes, "The man within the man was scarcely perceptible to me. I could not make sense of him. I couldn't imagine him at all" (30). Later, the Swede's brother describes him as "completely banal and conventional. An absence of negative values and nothing more. [...] That ordinary decent life that they all want to live, and that's it" (65). In "Paradise Remembered," Zuckerman describes the writing of the subsequent narrative as an attempt to "inhabit this person least like myself [and to] try to take the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity" (74). The transition from Zuckerman's opening observations about the Swede's lack of depth to the main narrative that imagines this man as a complex character is seamless and accomplished in the space of one sentence in the middle of a paragraph, where Zuckerman fades out of the narrative frame. One minute he is dancing at his high school reunion, the next, "to the honeysweet strains of 'Dream,' I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed ... I dreamed a realistic chronicle" (89). (3)

By placing so much emphasis on his main character's unknowability and by repeating the fact that his protagonist is a man totally unlike him, Zuckerman implicitly admits the Swede's daughter, Merry, is far more knowable and comprehensible. Father and daughter represent conflicting American discourses. If he is Johnny Appleseed and represents an edenic vision of America, then his daughter is the serpent in the garden, and the novel suggests that, for an author writing at the end of the twentieth century, it is hard to imagine, let alone sustain, a discourse that imagines America as a prelapsarian Garden of Eden. This point is driven home by Jerry, who tells the Swede, "You think you know what a daughter is? You have no idea what a daughter is. [...] All you know is what a fucking glove is. This country is frightening. [...] You wanted Miss America? Well, you've got her,

with a vengeance--she's your daughter!" (276-77; emphasis in original). Here, Jerry is suggesting that Merry's behavior is culturally and historically coherent, whereas his brother's innocent optimism is incomprehensible and unjustifiable. However, this does not necessarily suggest any kind of implicit approval of Merry's actions. Rather, by emphasizing the affinity between the author-narrator and the terrorist, the novel asks to be read not only as a book about a specific time and place in (Jewish) American history but also as a book concerned with the question of authorship.

The affinity between Zuckerman and Merry is never articulated; her character and her actions are presented indirectly through her father's words and reactions, which are Zuckerman's imaginative constructs. Yet despite the fact the relationship between the terrorist and the writer is always mediated, an affinity emerges in their physical portrayal. Merry has a stutter that is seen as a major contributing force to her character development. The stutter represents the inability to articulate her rage against her country, an inability that leads her to plant bombs because words have failed her. Whereas the writer uses language in his attempt to be an agent of change, the inarticulate Merry resorts to bombing. However, a further twist is added by the fact that the aging Zuckerman is now impotent and incontinent. The idea of powerlessness, expressed as bodily malfunction in both narrator and Merry, brings to the fore questions pertaining to the individual's role in a democratic society, as it further worries the boundaries between writer and terrorist as agents of change. To a certain degree, both Zuckerman and Merry are shown as powerless, a fact metaphorically expressed through the ways in which their bodies fail them. However, the book does not ultimately suggest that the similarities between the two are greater than their differences.

Throughout the narrative, Zuckerman shows that books and television greatly influence Merry. A factor that shapes her early development is the televised broadcast of the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk who is protesting the war in Vietnam. Later, her father learns that she spent much of her time in hiding from the FBI in libraries, reading Marx, Marcuse, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon. Although the novel does not show the direct impact this reading had on Merry, she admits defeat by realizing "that there could never be a revolution in America to uproot the forces of racism and reaction and greed. Urban guerrilla warfare was futile against a thermonuclear superstate that would stop at nothing to defend the profit principle" (260). Merry then decides to move to Cuba, thinking that if she cannot start a revolution, she can at least join one in progress. However, her attempt to emigrate is thwarted in Florida, and instead of traveling to Cuba, she finds herself teaching English in Miami to refugees from the Dominican Republic. It is during this period in her life that Merry also decides to denounce the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it is her library reading that leads her to become a Jain. The image of the terrorist seeking refuge in a library highlights the novel's emphasis on the power of discourse, and also brings to mind the two most famous recent instances of terrorists shaped by reading. Andrew Macdonald's *The Turner Diaries* profoundly influenced McVeigh; a right-wing organization takes over the United States and cleans up the country, ridding it of "undesirable" ethnic minorities and tolerant

liberals alike. Kaczynski was revealed as an avid Joseph Conrad reader, and it was claimed that *The Secret Agent* had as great an effect on him as *The Turner Diaries* did on McVeigh. The two books neatly suggest the different ways in which the written word gains power through (mis)appropriation. Whereas *The Turner Diaries* is a genuinely deplorable book that, as Scanlan argues, could "feed every revenge fantasy an ill-educated young white man, drifting around the margins of his prosperous society, might invent" (158), *The Secret Agent* could only have the same result (direct terrorist action) if it were misread. Scanlan claims that Kaczynski's interest in Conrad's novel stemmed from a misreading of it, one that missed the ironies, subtleties, and "interpretive difficulties" associated with a great work of fiction (161).

In addition to highlighting the relationship between writing and terrorism, these two examples, as well as Merry's apprenticeship in the library, also serve as reminders that the novelist paradoxically loses authority the moment he becomes a published author. "A book is a mysterious object," says Peter Aaron, narrator of Paul Auster's *Leviathan*, "and once it floats out into the world, anything can happen. All kinds of mischief can be caused, and there's not a damned thing you can do about it. For better or worse, it's completely out of your control" (4). This point echoes Roth's own observation that novels "do influence action, shape opinion, alter conduct [...] but that's because of a choice made by the reader to use the fiction for purposes of his own (purposes that might appal the novelist)" ("Zuckerman" 155; emphasis in original). Ultimately, it is this fear of appalling misappropriation that informs Roth's interest in the authorial role in *American Pastoral*. Roth has said he reads and writes fiction to be liberated from his own "suffocatingly narrow" way of viewing the world ("*Nouvel Observateur*" 103). The novelist may not aspire to change the world in tangible or measurable ways, or by violent tactics, but in showing what it is like to be someone else, he underscores the similarity and the difference between the author and the terrorist. They both want to effect change by realizing their vision, but one of them accomplishes it through a totalizing belief in a single vision, and the other accomplishes it by achieving what only fiction can do so well: imagining what it is like to be someone else. *American Pastoral* criticizes postwar America, and highlights the triumphs and perils of Jewish assimilation, but it is also about the power of the author. Zuckerman, weak, incontinent and impotent though he is, has the moral imagination and the vision to conjure up the man least like him. Although he protests that living is about getting people wrong, his own narrative suggests that fiction, unlike life, is about getting them right.

Varvogli, Alik

Source: Varvogli, Alik. "The inscription of terrorism: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*." *Philip Roth Studies* 3.2 (2007): 101+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 18 May 2011.

## Discussion questions

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/pastoral/>)

1. What is the effect of being told the story through Zuckerman? Are we led to believe aspects of the story are a projection of Zuckerman's fantasies about a character who caught his imagination?
2. Zuckerman sees the Swede's life as an illustration of the Jewish "desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals" [p. 85]. How does Roth illustrate this thought? The Swede tries very hard to form himself as this ideal person. Does the story imply that such a life, such a reinvention of the self, is ultimately impossible?
3. There could hardly be two more different personality types than the Swede and his brother, Jerry. What do Jerry's positive traits tell us about the Swede's negative ones? Why have the two of them chosen such different paths?
4. Does Lou Levov appear to be a benign or a negative influence on his sons' lives? How, if at all, has he contributed in making the Swede what he is?
5. The passionate kiss that the Swede gave Merry when she was eleven was a once-in-a-lifetime transgression. "Never in his entire life, not as a son, a husband, a father, even as an employer, had he given way to anything so alien to the emotional rules by which he was governed" [p. 91]. Later the Swede fears that this moment precipitated the infinite anger of her teenage years. Is this conclusion erroneous? What does it reveal?
6. The Swede believes that the political radicalism professed by Merry and Rita Cohen is nothing but "angry, infantile egoism thinly disguised as identification with the oppressed" [p. 134]. Is the answer as simple as that? How genuine is Merry's identification with the oppressed? Are her political arguments convincing?
7. What effect did the experience of watching, as a child, the self-immolation of the Buddhist monks have upon Merry? Does her reaction seem unusual to you? Did it affect what happened to her later?
8. What effect do all the details about the glove trade have upon the narrative? How do they illuminate the story?

9. Do you believe Merry when she says that she doesn't know Rita Cohen? If she is telling the truth, who might Rita Cohen be? What is her function within the story?
10. The Swede planned his life to be picture perfect, and he lived that life until it turned dark and violent. Was his life the essential American Dream, or was it a nightmare rather than a pastoral? What comment does the novel's title make upon the story it tells?
11. What are Merry's feelings for America? What are her feelings for her parents? How are the two connected?
12. Merry's stuttering began to disappear when she worked with dynamite. What emotional purpose did Merry's stuttering serve, and why was she able to leave the handicap behind her when she left home?
13. When the Swede calls Jerry to ask for his advice, he is treated to a diatribe. "What's the matter with you?" Jerry asks. "You're acceding to her the way you acceded to your father, the way you have acceded to everything in your life" [p. 273]. Is Jerry right? Should the Swede force Merry to come home? Why does the Swede refuse Jerry's offer to come get Merry himself?
14. Why does Merry, when she becomes a Jain, choose to settle in the neighborhood of her father's factory in Newark?
15. Does Dawn, in reinventing herself after Merry's disappearance, seem ruthless to you, or do you sympathize with her struggle for personal survival? When she tells Bill Orcutt that she always hated the Old Rimrock house, is she telling the truth? And is she telling the truth when she claims she is glad that she didn't become Miss America?
16. Describing his brother, Jerry says, "In one way he could be conceived as completely banal and conventional. An absence of negative values and nothing more. Bred to be dumb, built for convention, and so on" [p. 65]. Is this how you see Swede Levov by the end of the novel? Does he depart from banality and convention?
17. "His great looks, his larger-than-lifeness, his glory, our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role--that all these manly properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story...of Kennedy" [p. 83]. In what ways do **American Pastoral's** political metaphors reflect the story of mid-century America? Why might they be presented through a Kennedy-like figure?
18. The Swede "had learned the worst lesson that life can teach--that it makes no sense." What leads him to this conclusion? Did his life in fact make no sense?

## Multimedia

### A Rare Look at Author Phillip Roth (Online Content)

Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Vz7oUhgTQk>

Phillip Roth has been called "America's greatest living novelist" many times over. Roth rarely does interviews, but he invited Sunday Morning into his home. And that's where Rita Braver sat down with him to talk about his work, his life, and his legacy.

A feature length movie based on the book is currently in production:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0376479/>

## Further Reading

*Our War: What We Did In Vietnam and What It Did To Us* by David Harris

(Call Number: 959.704 Ha)

David Harris was the most famous draft resister of the Vietnam War. A former student body president of Stanford University, he refused to accept induction and be sent to Vietnam. He spent nearly two years in a federal prison as a consequence. With his marriage to Joan Baez, he emerged as the leading moral voice of his generation. For the past two decades, he has largely remained silent as the antiwar movement he led stood accused by critics and pundits of everything from cowardice to frivolity. Now, in *Our War*, he speaks out in defense of a generation torn by the most divisive war in America's history. Neither a history nor a memoir, though containing aspects of both, *Our War* is a compelling, even fevered account of stalking the war's moral shadow through the decades since its ignominious end. This is a one-of-a-kind look at who we were, what we did, why we did it, and what those actions made us, seen through the eyes of a unique and significant American figure and one of our most gifted writers.

*The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* by Tom Wells

(Call Number: 959.704 We)

The Vietnam war left a gash in the heart of America that can still be felt today. *The War Within* is the definitive history of America's internal battle over that war, and it chronicles, as no other book has done, the full story of how a powerful grassroots force--the antiwar movement--changed the course of American history. Tom Wells spent over ten years painstakingly researching government and antiwar-movement documents and interviewing virtually every key player from the Vietnam era--from Dean Rusk, William Westmoreland, and John Ehrlichman to Dave Dellinger, Philip Berrigan, and Daniel Ellsberg. Wells moves from protests at the White House gates to antiwar meeting halls, recreating the activities of the student factions, religious organizations, political splinter groups, and other organizations that waged campaigns of mass protest, draft resistance, civil disobedience, and sometimes political violence. Here, too, are the behind-the-scenes planning sessions of

Democratic and Republican administrations as they sought to discredit and subvert the antiwar movement's efforts. Wells demonstrates that Washington took the antiwar movement seriously at every stage of the war and that the movement was instrumental in the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia. He also reveals how the movement's growing influence prompted the Watergate fiasco. And he graphically conveys the internecine conflicts that plagued the antiwar movement and its leaders. In these pages the human drama of the antiwar era unfolds through the words of its participants, both the famous and the forgotten. Wells not only captures the spirit of these tumultuous times but also shows how the events of twenty-five years ago shaped the America of today.

The Roth Society's Official Website: <http://rothsociety.org/>

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

**Read alike** (www.Amazon.com)

Don DeLillo, *Underworld: a novel* (1997)

Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (1995)

Mark Helprin, *Winter's Tale* (1983)

Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (2003)

**Activity**

Dress in "hippy" style clothing for the reading group's meeting. This may seem to go against the seriousness of the book's material but Phillip Roth himself was quoted as saying "Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends." Embrace this.

