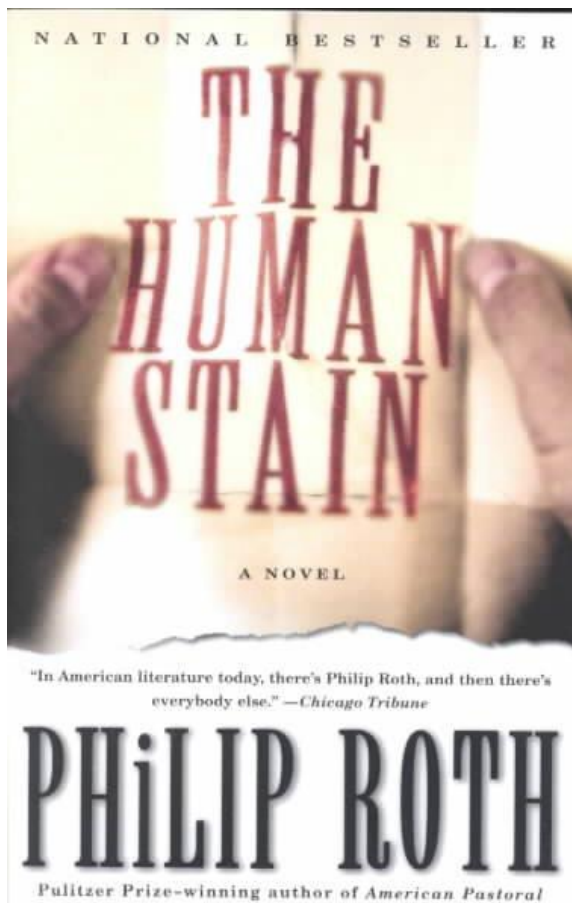


## About the book...



It is 1998, the year in which America is whipped into a frenzy of prurience by the impeachment of a president, and in a small New England town, an aging classics professor, Coleman Silk, is forced to retire when his colleagues decree that he is a racist. The charge is a lie, but the real truth about Silk would have astonished even his most virulent accuser.

Coleman Silk has a secret, one which has been kept for fifty years from his wife, his four children, his colleagues, and his friends, including the writer Nathan Zuckerman. It is Zuckerman who stumbles upon Silk's secret and sets out to reconstruct the unknown biography of this eminent, upright man, esteemed as an educator for nearly all his life, and to understand how this ingeniously contrived life came unraveled. And to understand also how Silk's astonishing private history is, in the words of *The Wall Street Journal*, "magnificently" interwoven with "the larger public history of modern America."

## About the author... (Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2009.)



Philip Roth established himself among leading twentieth-century American authors through his careful scrutiny and biting satire directed at post-World War II America. As *Washington Post Book World* contributor David Lehman noted: "At the top of his game, Philip Roth is our Kafka: a Jewish comic genius able to spin a metaphysical joke to a far point of ingenuity--the point at which artistic paradox becomes moral or religious parable."

In these parables--from *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short Stories*, through *Portnoy's Complaint* and the Nathan Zuckerman novels, to *Sabbath's Theater* and *Operation Shylock: A Confession* --Roth has continued to explore Jewish family life in the city and the conflicted characters that it creates. Neil Klugman, Alexander Portnoy, Zuckerman, Mickey Sabbath, and even Philip Roth are among the memorable characters Roth has created to pursue his themes.

In addition to the acclaim he has received for his writing, Roth has gained a measure of notoriety for his blurring of fact and fiction. The author draws much of his literary material from his personal experiences, but then alters the facts to fit the story he wants to tell. Because of their close ties with their author's life, Roth's books have invited much speculation about what is truth and what is invention. As Lehman stated: "A master illusionist, Roth is adept at fooling the public into thinking that the outlandish fantasies in his fiction must reflect autobiographical fact." But, Tobias Wolff explained in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, this is just what Roth wants: "Roth's purpose in all this is not merely playful or cantankerous; what he means to do, and does, is make the strongest possible case for fiction's autonomy by suggesting and then repudiating its connection with 'the facts.' It's a nervy, sometimes hilarious, now and then exasperating performance; his road of excess doesn't always lead to the palace of wisdom. But it often does."

## **Awards**

*The New York Times* Editor's Choice Award, 2000

Koret Jewish Book Award, 2000  
*The Chicago Tribune* Editor's Pick, 2000  
WH Smith Literary Award, 2001  
National Jewish Book Award, 2001  
PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, 2001

## Reviews

### *Booklist*

With the help of his alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, Roth continues the inquiry into the state of the American soul during the second half of the twentieth-century. Fueled by the story of his magnetic hero, Coleman Silk, it roars, with heart-revving velocity, through a literary landscape that embraces the politics of race and sex, the Vietnam War, and the absurdity of extreme political correctness, the dumbing down of the academy, and President Clinton's impeachment. Coleman, a classics professor at a small Berkshire college, embodies all the ambition, paradox, anger, and futility of the American dream, and, over the course of his secretive life, he displays all the mettlesome powers of the Greek and Roman gods he helps immortalize. Naturally, a man this fired up makes enemies, and no one defends him when his brilliant career capsizes over a misunderstanding regarding his use of the word *spooks* to refer to students who failed to materialize in the classroom. How was he to know they were black? How was anyone to know that he would be the last professor on earth to make a racist remark? Enraged by the inanity of the ensuing brouhaha, Coleman resigns. Then, when his

wife dies unexpectedly, he becomes involved with a woman who is half his age and illiterate. These unlikely lovers are surely doomed, and Zuckerman seems destined to discover the truth about Coleman, which reveals so many truths about the land he so passionately portrays. As Roth unfurls his hero's galvanizing tale, he protests the tyranny of prejudice and propriety, recognizes the "terrifyingly provisional nature of everything," and shakes his head in sorrow and wonder over the "inevitably stained creatures that we are

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Roth's extraordinary recent productivity (the prizewinning *Sabbath's Theater*, 1995, and *American Pastoral*, 1997) continues apace with this impressively replete and very moving chronicle of an academic scandal and its impact on both the aging professor at its center and his friend—alter ego novelist Nathan Zuckerman.

In the turbulent summer of 1998 (while the country reacts with prurient dismay to the Bill Clinton—Monica Lewinsky mess), Coleman Silk, classics teacher and Dean of Faculty at New England's Athena College, innocently uses the word "spook" (correctly, as it happens) in class, and is immediately accused of racism. His career and reputation are in ruins, his wife dies as a result of the ensuing emotional trauma, and Silk becomes estranged from his several adult children. Then, his "exploitative" ongoing affair with Faunia Farley, a passive cleaning woman less than half his age, is discovered. Zuckerman, in whom Coleman has confided, befriends him, hears him out—then, following the last of the story's several climaxes,

sedulously "reconstructs" his beleaguered friend's history ("I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living"). There's another secret in Coleman's past—and Zuckerman/Roth teases it out and explores its consequences in a back-and-forth narrative filled with surprises that strains plausibility severely, while simultaneously involving us deeply with its vividly imagined characters. In addition to Coleman Silk (whose arrogance and secretiveness in no way lessen our respect for him), Roth creates telling and unusually full characterizations of the semiliterate Faunia (both a pathetic victim of circumstance and a formidably strong woman); her angry ex-husband Les, a Vietnam vet crippled by post-traumatic stress disorder; and even Delphine Roux, Coleman's single-minded feminist colleague, and his most dedicated enemy. And in the long elegiac final scene, Zuckerman contrives a resolution that may confer forgiveness on them all. A marvel of imaginative empathy, generosity, and tact. Roth's late maturity looks more and more like his golden age.

## Literary Criticism

Title: F(r)ictions of identity in *The Human Stain*

Author(s): Francoise Kral

Source: ***Philip Roth Studies***. 2.1 (Spring 2006): p47.

From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

Some critics have noted that in the novels of the American trilogy--*American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist*

(1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000)--there seems to be less emphasis on Jewishness than in earlier novels by Roth. In *The Human Stain*, many important characters such as Coleman Silk, Faunia Farley, and Delphine Roux are non-Jews, which conveys the impression that the question of Jewish identity is less central than it was in earlier novels. Yet if Jewishness seems to be played down in the first chapters, it slowly resurfaces and comes back into focus later in the novel. (1) Interestingly enough, despite the hoax (Coleman passing as white and Jewish), what remains after his death is his endorsed Jewishness: "Buried as a Jew, I thought, and, if I was speculating correctly killed as a Jew. Another of the problems of impersonation" (*Human Stain* 325). This sentence, uttered by Nathan Zuckerman after Coleman's death, sounds like a final statement, a key to an enigma, and yet its remaining opacity sums up rather neatly the way that Jewish identity and identity in general are addressed in *The Human Stain*. In this essay, I argue that Roth does not lose interest in the question of Jewish identity but apprehends its paradigmatic value. (2) By taking account of Coleman's double positioning as an American and a Jew, Roth addresses issues crucial to the understanding of the contemporary psyche, which is probably one of the challenges of the twenty-first century. Theorist Zygmunt Bauman, who has devoted a large part of his work to the question of identity in postmodern society, writes that "the modern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open" (36). I propose to demonstrate that *The Human Stain* invites us to reflect on identity

constructions, on the difficult negotiations between the "given" and the "chosen," and between group identity and the freedom of individuals to define their own identity at the crossroads between fixed patterns and personal choices. By doing so, Roth also calls for a redefinition of interpretative patterns and theories of identity, in the sense that existing theories based on monolithic categories fail to explain the complexities of contemporary identity.

To understand the link between the question of Jewish identity and that of identity in general, one has to recontextualize *The Human Stain* not only within the body of Roth's prolific work but also in the context of recent developments in American literature over the past two decades, as well as in the broader context of the status and self-representation of Jews in American society. I will start with the latter. In an interview published in *Reading Philip Roth*, Roth expressed his awareness of the change in the status and image of Jews in American society and commented on the fact that they were now less conspicuous than in the days when he started writing:

American Jews are less intimidated by Gentiles than they were when

I began publishing in [the] 1950s, they are more sophisticated

about anti-Semitism and its causes, and altogether less hedged-in

by suffocating concepts of normalcy. This isn't because they have

been socially blinded by the illusory gains of assimilation, but

because they are not so preoccupied as they once were with the problematical nature of assimilation, and are justifiably less troubled by ethnic disparities in the new American society of the last fifteen years--a society created by a massive influx of over twenty million people far less assimilable than themselves, about eighty-five per cent of them non-Europeans. [...] When everybody sticks out and doesn't seem to mind, perhaps Jews are less likely to worry too much about their sticking out; less likely in fact to stick out. ("Interview" 4)

Interestingly enough, such awareness of the fluctuations of minorities in the hierarchy of the American melting pot is shared by contemporaries from other ethnic backgrounds whose novels testify to the same representation of Jews as a successful and fully integrated minority that now serves as a model for others. In Gish Jen's novel *Mona in the Promised Land*, the Chinese characters see themselves as "the new Jews," on account of their education and success story: "For they're the new Jews after all, a model minority and Great American Success. They belong in the promised land" (1). Yet Jen's novel suggests not only that the Jews offer a positive example as the heroes of an American success story but also that Jewish identity can serve as a paradigm for the negotiation of cultural difference in the



American melting pot. After becoming Jewish, Mona comes to the conclusion that "now that she's Jewish, she feels like more of a Chinese than ever" (66). The use of the Jewish question by novelists and thinkers is quite a controversial subject. The fact that Jewish identity and culture transcend linguistic differences, ethnic diversity, and a multiplicity of historical contexts has made it an interesting paradigm to articulate the complexity of identity formation. Yet, theorists sometimes fall into the trap of reducing the Jewish experience to a list of tropes and strategies, thereby trivializing it. In the realm of postcolonial literature, for example, concepts such as diasporic identities and exiled communities have served as an insightful entry point into the predicament of postcolonial experience. It is a good thing that the "Jewish condition" (3) inspires novelists and theorists, but one has to remain careful not to uproot the concepts from their context. However, I like to think that the observation of current issues related to identity definition from the vantage point of the Jewish experience allows for a refined and in-depth analysis of complex phenomena.

Roth creates characters whose complex identities bring into tension already existing definitions of identity that are monolithic and limitative, which Roth dismisses, using his characters to present an indictment of these definitions. *The Human Stain* spans a broad spectrum of characters who all struggle through an identity crisis. The story of the protagonist, Coleman Silk, takes us back to the days of the color line in a segregated community in America and chronicles the life of a child of African American descent, whose light skin tone allows him to pass as white but

forces him to relinquish every aspect of his African Americanness and to sever all ties with his family. The other characters who stem from various cultural and economic backgrounds raise other issues linked to identity. Their problem is not always that they do not fit in; it is more that they consider themselves as outsiders, which suggests a disjunction between self-representation and objective markers of integration, or the psychological dimension inherent in identity and the sense of belonging. Among them is Delphine Roux, a French-born academic who comes to realize that, despite her theoretical and practical knowledge of American culture, her mastery of the language, and her academic credentials, she will always remain an outsider, the "poor misunderstood foreigner" (277), unable to relate to people on a personal basis. (4) Another character with an identity problem is Les Farley, the Vietnam War veteran who no longer fits into a post-Vietnam American society and who must come to terms with the fact that he will never be the hero that he was promised to be. Rendered very fragile by traumatic experiences, he is now emotionally unable to return to a normal life with his wife, Faunia, and thus becomes a depressed in-betweener who seems to belong to a forgotten page of history. As for Faunia, she remains a mysterious character until the end of the novel. Not only is she a puzzle to the reader, she is also a puzzle to Coleman, who is far from suspecting that this woman who passes as illiterate is, in fact, educated. In terms of narrative structure, the revelation of the existence of a journal written by Faunia at the end of the novel serves a double purpose: It fuels an already intricate and eventful narrative and invites the reader to reread the text in the

light of this last-minute revelation. But as far as the meaning of the text goes, it invites us to ponder the significance of Faunia's conscious rejection of the written word and what it implies (labels, categories, and taxonomies).

On closer analysis, despite the complexities of the characters' personalities, it seems that they represent a certain definition of identity in the sense that each character has a specific way of defining not only his or her identity but also the way that identity should be established. For example, Mark, Coleman's angry son, who never forgives his father for having an affair with Faunia, voices his need to know where he comes from to understand who he is. In a passage recounting Mark's childhood, the narrator insists on Mark's longing for origins and his need to know the story of his family. The following passage recounts how Mark hassles his father to find out the origins of his family, so much so that Coleman ends up inventing a story:

This was the story he told Iris as well. All of it was invented for

Iris. [...] And the only one never satisfied was Mark.

"Where did

our great-grandparents come from?" Russia. "But what city?" I asked

my father and mother, but they never seemed to know for sure. One

time it was one place, one time another. There was a whole

generation of Jews like that. They never really knew. The old

people didn't talk about it much, and the American children weren't that curious, they were het up on being Americans, and so, in my family as in many families, there was a general Jewish geographical amnesia. All I got when I asked, Coleman told them, was the answer "Russia." But Markie said, "Russia is gigantic, Dad. Where in Russia?" Markie would not be still. (176)

Coleman's fabricated myth of origin points to the importance of geographical roots as a prerequisite to identity. Unlike his father, who has severed all links with the past and whose fake identity has forced him to reject his family and commit matricide, at least symbolically, Mark craves roots. Through this example, Roth posits the first definition of identity as one tethered to a place, which involves a clear topographical mapping of one's origins.

A more problematic definition of identity as complex negotiation between existing definitions and antagonistic definitions is introduced into the novel through the character of Delphine. Although the novel is replete with references to her exotic Frenchness, which seems to set her off as a cultural stereotype, (5) her identity gradually emerges as slightly more complex and brings into tension three different definitions of identity. As these three definitions foreground monolithic identities, they fail to apprehend the complexities of her multilayered identity, which combines her cultural heritage (the "given") and

what I shall refer to as "the chosen." For example, we are told that her mother became for her

the shadow of her accomplishments but, even worse, of her family, the shadow of the Walincourts, named for the place given to them in the thirteenth century by the King Saint Louis and conforming still to the family ideals as they were set in the thirteenth century.

How Delphine hated all those families, the pure and ancient aristocracy of the provinces, all of them thinking the same, looking the same, sharing the same stifling values and the same stifling religious obedience. (274-75; emphasis in original)

Through this reference to Delphine's roots, in both the geographical and genealogical senses of the term, Roth suggests that Delphine's identity combines time and space. It is derived from the land and a sense of territorial belonging, cemented by habitus and elevated to the realm of the sacred through the mediation of the king, who, in the days before the French Revolution, was considered to be the representative of God on earth. At the same time, Delphine is a former student of the Ecole Normale Superieure, which not only sets her off as an elite scholar but also as an heiress to the principles of the French republic, as the Ecole Normale Superieure was founded after the revolution to select the most promising students from any social class and give them the best possible education. In other words, its aim was to break away from what Bourdieu (4) calls the cycle of "social reproduction" with a view to promoting social mobility. Delphine thus embodies the difficult negotiation between two strictly opposed conceptions of identity, a traditional and outdated

definition of identity as "the given" and the modern definition inherited from the revolution of identity as shaped by the individual with the help of society. This situation is further complicated by her departure for America, the nation of the melting pot, based on the theory of an acceptance of cultural diversity rather than homogeneity, thus opting for a third definition of identity. Francoise Verges reminds us that although these two countries seem to share the same idea of national identity, France is a nation of immigrants that denies this heterogeneous component and foregrounds a principle of sameness and unity hinging on the acceptance of similar principles (32). On the contrary, the American theory of the melting pot does not imply that people should give up their cultural heritage to become integrated into American society; in other words, integration is not synonymous with assimilation. In light of all this, Delphine emerges as more than a one-dimensional character. Her complex identity becomes a paradigm for the complexities of contemporary identity at the crossroads between preexisting definitions. The representation of identities sketched by Roth could be compared to tectonic plates, each one bearing a certain definition of identity. The point where these plates overlap generates a sort of overdetermination of identities, as the individual finds herself caught between different frameworks, while striving to find an interstice where she can freely determine her chosen identity, independent of existing definitions.

A consequence of Roth's emphasis on the complexity of identity definition in *The Human Stain* is the relevance or

lack of relevance of labels when it comes to identity. The novel can be read as an indictment of existing theories of identity, whose limits it repeatedly shows. Each character is defined by society in a fixed, monolithic, and limited way. Yet the personalities of Roth's characters show that none of these definitions, each taken on its own, fully applies to the characters. It is more a case of combining the different definitions and accepting the fact that an individual is the result of a negotiation between different existing definitions, which, in turn, forms a new one and contributes to an infinite spectrum of identities, thus calling for new interpretative patterns that should prove able to take account of the fluidity, the complexity, and the provisionality of identity. Delphine's plot against Coleman is not the consequence of her academic remoteness and inability to engage in relationships. When failing to see through Coleman's hoax, she shows that she is unable to decode complex identity definitions. This episode allows Roth to delineate the limitations of existing theories and analytic frameworks dealing with identity on the grounds that they foreground monolithic categories that prove unable to grasp the complexities of contemporary identity. Likewise, Faunia's pretense of being illiterate can be read as a conscious rejection of the written word and its set categories, which freeze individuals in time and space and fail to account for changes. When Les comes back from the Vietnam War, he is still her husband, and yet he is no longer the man she married.

So what *The Human Stain* tells us is that identity is interstitial; it is found at the point of juncture for different categories of gender, class, and culture. It is not stable but

changing, not one-dimensional but kaleidoscopic. Interestingly, the characters' sense of loss of bearings and in-betweenness is misleading. They feel that they do not belong anywhere, and yet they clearly belong to two worlds. To illustrate this idea, I borrow the concept of in-between identities developed by Homi Bhabha:

The move away from the singularities of "class" or "gender" as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions--of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation--that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood--singular or communal--that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1) In his redefinition of identity, Bhabha dismisses a definition of identity as static and one-dimensional. He shows how categories interact on a vertical axis (gender, class, and so forth). This vertical axis also is subjected to time and potential changes, so much so that identity has to be redefined, not as the sum of "pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet or tradition," but as "social articulation" and "on-going negotiation" (2). A consequence of Bhabha's emphasis on temporal perspective is the necessary "non-coincidence"



and disjunction, categories that may well apply to Delphine herself:

[A]nd now she's exactly nowhere, in the middle, neither there nor here [...] Thinking that under her exotic Frenchness she is to herself who she always was, that all the exotic Frenchness has achieved in America is to make of her the consummate miserable misunderstood foreigner [...] Thinking that she's worse even than in the middle-- that she's in exile. (Roth, *Stain* 277; emphasis in original)

A more serious issue underpins the irony directed at Delphine. Through the portrayal of Delphine's misinterpretations, Roth calls for an indictment of theory, not only of structuralism but also of theories based on one-dimensional categories, and, in particular, theories that essentialize human beings and uproot them from a context and potential changes. Delphine's mistake originates not only in her inability to read signs but also in her inability to articulate categories and to situate others at the crossroads between several categories. But Delphine also fails to take into account time and potential changes linked to history: "[S]he was still seething at the thought of the viciousness that could make of this dreadfully disadvantaged woman who had already lost everything a toy, that could capriciously turn a suffering human being like Faunia into a plaything so as to revenge himself on her" (195). Delphine thus allows Roth to evidence the complexity of identity as provisional and multilayered, not as something that can be pinned down, but as a fragile balance. Identity is thus situated at the point of disjuncture. I am borrowing the notion of disjuncture from Arjun Appadurai's analysis in *Modernity at Large*, a book in

which he argues that the postmodern experience is not to be understood in terms of national identity versus "the rest," or center versus periphery, but according to transnational "scapes." Appadurai coins the terms mediascape, financescape, and so forth to show how each individual is not only constructed locally but also internationally or transnationally by the fact that he or she belongs to these networks. The term, whose etymology brings forth the idea of a landscape, allows Appadurai to suggest a certain subjectivity and possibly different perceptions of a certain "reality" by different observers. In the same way that a landscape is perceived differently by various observers who will each focus on specific details, one can see oneself as part of a "scape," and this sense of belonging or unbelonging may differ from someone else's perception of one's own situation. For example, Delphine may feel comfortable in the "scape" of academia, but she is ill-at-ease in other contexts. However, her awareness of not fitting in may differ from the perception of outside observers, who may see in her a perfectly integrated academic on the basis of her successful career in the United States.

The Human Stain also invites us to reflect on the tension between individual identity and group identity, and to a certain extent, the plot hinges on the plight of an individual who not only shapes and fakes his identity but also literally constructs it, independent of society. In other words, the novel invites us to look at identity not only as something determined and imposed by society but also as something that the individual has to find for himself or herself. It is as if identity were the product of a negotiation

between the definition given by a group and that emanating from the individual regardless of society. Coleman provides a concrete illustration of this rather abstract notion. He is a disturbing figure not only because of the hoax but also because he responds to the violence of society with another form of violence. Derrida reminds us that the act of naming, which in itself seems innocuous enough, constitutes a form of violence whereby an individual finds himself or herself tied to a group of people (164). When reading *The Human Stain*, one can be moved by the consequences of Coleman's decision for his family, not only for his mother but also for his children, who may only find out several decades later that they are of African American descent, after giving birth to black children. But one can also be moved by the cry for individual freedom that resonates in every page of the novel. The point is that Coleman's new identity is not only disturbing because of its moral consequences but also because of its rejection of society's claim over individuals. Coleman, who is literally let down by his friends and colleagues, becomes a scapegoat, and ironically, when Mark chants in Kaddish "a Jew is dead," one can read it as a metaphor for Coleman's true identity, not as a Jew, but as a scapegoat.

To a certain extent, the character of Ernestine, who tells Nathan Zuckerman of her family history after Coleman's death, is right when she compares her two brothers and stresses that one is ahead of time and has jumped a stage of history: "Coleman was a part of his time, I tell him [Walter]. Coleman couldn't wait to go through civil rights to get his human rights, and so he skipped a step. 'See him historically,' I say to Walt. 'You're a history teacher--

see him as part of something larger.' [...] Neither of you just submitted to what you were given" (327). It thus seems that there is a lot more to *The Human Stain* than a reflection on identity in relation to authenticity. The novel does not condemn or condone hoaxes and shams; it does not foreground a moral perspective nor a politically correct statement on the evil of usurping an identity, but provides a more complex reflection on the right that one should have to find one's own identity and provide a definition that matches his or her "self" and what he or she has become as a result of his or her personal experience. In a world where one's identity is overdetermined by the fact that one always belongs to several categories such as race, color, family, nationality, and the country of residence, identity has become a complex matter.

Despite its repeated references to the predicament of Jews in the United States, *The Human Stain* embraces broader issues. It is not so much that Roth moves away from the question of Jewish identity and shows less interest in it, but rather that he becomes fully aware of the fact that this "vantage point" offers a most interesting and meaningful insight into the predicament of contemporary identity. This is what makes Roth so meaningful and relevant to a very broad audience and accounts for his popularity. A major difference between Roth's early works and *The Human Stain* lies in his novel's ability to redefine the experience of American Jews as empowering and explore the potential that lies in this *locus standi*. This expression is used by Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* to describe the way the "subaltern" is literally dislocated and marginalized and thus rendered speechless. Roth has gradually moved

away from a more conventional representation of the Jews as a minority to envisage how their double positioning in American society, as Jews and as Americans, generates a double referentiality that provides access to two cultures, a sort of meta-perspective. Roth does not overlook the trauma linked to the experience of minority position, but shows how it can become empowering. Belonging to two cultures provides two sets of interpretative tools that allow the individual to transcend the "given," the exclusivity of a culture, and, as such, to understand the challenges of a new world geography characterized by the collapse of former unions, the rise of new networks, and the compression of time and space, as well as a constant mixing and blending of races and nationalities.

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### **Discussion questions**

1. Why does Roth begin the novel by establishing the parallel story of the public scandal over Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky--a scandal that "revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" [p. 2]? How are Clinton's and Silk's stories similar? In what ways does this context extend the novel's

scope beyond one man's experience to a larger critique of late twentieth-century American culture?

2. Coleman Silk's downfall is caused, ostensibly, by the spurious charge of racism that results from his question about two absent black students. But as we learn more of Silk's past--a past of which his colleagues at Athena have no knowledge--his disgrace takes on different meanings. What ironies are involved in Silk being charged with racism when he himself is black? By denying his own racial identity has he turned it into a kind of ghost? Is Coleman in any way responsible for his own destruction?

3. Delphine Roux appears to act on behalf of the aggrieved students, but what other motives does she have for orchestrating the attack on Coleman Silk? Is she aware of her motivation? What discrepancies are revealed between her public position and her emotional struggles?

4. Why do Silk's colleagues fail to defend him? Why would highly educated academics--people trained to weigh evidence carefully and to be aware of the complex subtleties of any object of study--so readily believe the absurd stories concocted to disgrace Coleman Silk? Why does Ernestine describe Athena College as "a hotbed of ignorance" [p. 328]?

5. Coleman and Faunia are an unlikely couple--a seventy-one-year-old classics professor and a thirty-four-year-old janitor. What draws them together? What do they offer each other? How is their relationship--the relationship about which "everyone knows"[as Delphine Roux claims in

her anonymous letter]--different from what others imagine it to be? Why is Coleman able to reveal his secret to her?

6. Throughout the novel, characters are portrayed as caricatures through a set of preexisting and clichéd stories--Coleman is the racist professor and lecherous old man who takes advantage of a woman half his age; Faunia Farley is the naïve and helpless victim; Les Farley is the crazed, abusive husband. How does the real story of each of these characters defy or complicate these simplifications?

7. In what ways are each of the major characters in the novel--Coleman, Faunia, and Les--controlled by the past?

8. After the funeral, when Ernestine reveals that Coleman was black, Nathan reflects, "I couldn't imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing" [p. 333]. What is Roth saying about the limits of our ability really to know one another? At what other points in the novel does this problem arise?

9. Late in the novel, Nathan discovers that Faunia had kept a diary and that "the illiteracy had been an act, something she decided her situation demanded" [p. 297]. Why did Faunia feign illiteracy? Was there any reason why she chose this flaw in lieu of others? What are the implications of her secret?

10. In the overheard conversation that begins Chapter 3, one of the characters complains of his students, "They fix

on the conventionalized narrative, with its beginning, middle, and end--every experience, no matter how ambiguous, no matter how knotty or mysterious, must lend itself to this normalizing, conventionalizing, anchorman cliché?. Any kid who says 'closure' I flunk. They want closure, there's their closure" [p. 147]. In what ways does *The Human Stain* resist this "conventionalizing" need for closure? How does it alter the classical unities of beginning, middle, and end?

11. The Vietnam vet Les Farley is a menacing, violently angry character, whose stream-of-consciousness rants reflect some of the most powerful writing in the book. What kind of mental and emotional damage has the war done to him? How has it changed who he is? What are the implications of Les's being the instrument of Coleman's destruction?

12. After an argument with Coleman, Faunia drives to the Audubon Society to visit Prince, a crow who was raised by people and achieved notoriety for acting like a "big shot" and stealing girls' barrettes. When Faunia learns that Prince has ripped down the newspaper clippings about him, she says, "He didn't want anybody to know his background! Ashamed of his own background! Prince! . . . Oh, you good boy. You're a good crow" [p. 240]. And when she's told that Prince can't live among other crows, she says, "That's what comes of hanging around all his life with people like us. The Human Stain" [p. 242]. In what ways can this episode be read as a parable of Coleman Silk's own experience? How does this passage help to explain the novel's title?



13. Nathan interprets Coleman's choosing to reject his past and create a new identity for himself as "the drama that underlies America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving--and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands," whereas Walter thinks of his brother as a "calculating liar," a "heartless son," and a "traitor to his race" [p. 342]. Which of these views seems closer to the truth? Are they both legitimate? What is Ernestine's position?

14. Coleman Silk is a professor of ancient Greek and Roman literature, and the novel abounds in classical references. The college is named Athena, Coleman thinks Viagra should be called Zeus, the author of the anonymous e-mail message that slanders Coleman calls herself Clytemnestra, the three young professors whom Coleman overhears commenting on the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal are referred to as a chorus, and so on. What do these allusions add to the novel? How are elements of Greek tragedy such as hubris, the hero's fall, retribution, and ritual cleansing relevant to the action of the novel?

15. *The Human Stain* ends with Zuckerman finding Les Farley ice fishing in the middle of a secluded lake. Les says, "And now you know my secret spot. . . . You know everything. . . . But you won't tell nobody, will you? It's nice to have a secret spot. You don't tell anybody about 'em. You learn not to say anything" [p. 361]. In what sense is the entire novel about revealing and concealing secrets?

16. *The Human Stain* is a novel of sweeping ambition that tells the stories not just of individual lives but of the moral ethos of America at the end of the twentieth century. How would that ethos be described? What does the novel reveal about the complexity of issues such as race, sex, identity, and privacy?

## **Multimedia**

Author interview available through National Public Radio  
"Pulitzer Prize-Winning Novelist Philip Roth"

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4080230>

## **Read-alikes** (*NoveList*)

*Blue Angel: A Novel* by Francine Prose

Creative writing professor Ted Swenson spends his time teaching mediocre students who write bland stories at expensive Euston College in Vermont. Ted has had literary success--just not enough of it. Any attempt to repeat this success merely ends in confusion, drinking, and another academic year at Euston. Ted is therefore surprised to find Angela Argo, a very talented writer, in his newest seminar. Angela's story of a girl's crush on her teacher becomes the catalyst for Ted's rediscovery of writing. When Ted begins to blur the lines between writer and story, though, sparks fly on his politically correct campus, and the tables are turned on the (reasonably) innocent.

*Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee

When middle-aged university professor of communications David Lurie is fired from his job for having an affair with one of his students, he moves to his daughter Lucy's small piece of land in the remote area of Salem, South Africa. Lucy is content with the new South Africa, but David is still wary of the changed political system. He tries to escape his troubled past and enjoy some rest and relaxation. However, a violent incident shatters his peace and shows that forgetting the past is not always possible--particularly in South Africa, which cannot escape its own violent and troubled past. Coetzee focuses on the ties that bind David and Lucy and what happens when David fails to protect his daughter. The Booker Prize Winner for 1999.

*Cotton* by Christopher Wilson

African-American albino Lee Cotton struggles with his identity as a black person capable of gaining entry into white society, experiencing a romance with a Klansman's daughter, a freight train attack, and the women's liberation movement.

### **Watch-alikes:**

*The Heart of Me*

In Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *The Heart of Me*, Madeleine (Olivia Williams) and Dinah (Helena Bonham Carter) are sisters with little in common except for their bloodlines and the man that they both love. Madeleine and her husband Rickie (Paul Bettany) appear to be the perfect couple: they have an exquisite home, a loving son, and are obviously well bred and well off. When Madeleine's bohemian sister,

Dinah, returns to pre-World War II London for their father's funeral, she finds herself drawn to her brother-in-law. The attraction is mutual, and while Madeleine tries to marry her sister off to a fine gentleman, Dinah and Rickie begin a torrid love affair with heartbreaking consequences.

*Faithless* (jinni.com)

Actress Marianne Vogler (Lena Endre) and her husband, Markus (Thomas Hanzon) have a 9-year-old daughter, Isabelle (Michelle Gylemo). Markus, an orchestra conductor, is often away, and casually, almost without thought, Marianne starts an affair with theater director David (Krister Henriksson). Thus starts another of Ingmar Bergman's relentless examinations of love and sex and pain in the affairs of women and men. For FAITHLESS, Bergman is the scriptwriter--not the director. He writes from the point of view of a solitary old man, also called Bergman (Erland Josephson), who lives on a remote island. He remembers an affair he had long ago. From time to time, Marianne interrupts him to correct his version of their story.



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