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IDENTITY, ASSIMILATION, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICAN JUDAISM  
IN PHILIP ROTH'S AMERICAN TRILOGY

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
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*For Max —*

*my partner in the gray area that is  
Jewish-American-German identity*

## ABSTRACT

### IDENTITY, ASSIMILATION, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICAN JUDAISM IN PHILIP ROTH'S AMERICAN TRILOGY

by Tessa Crystal Nath

Roth critics have long acknowledged that the American Trilogy elucidates the life of three men whose identities were formed based on their historical time period (the Vietnam War, the McCarthy era, and the Clinton impeachment). What has not been acknowledged is the extent to which the American Jewish community's identity wars of the 1940s and 50s influenced the men's lives. A history of self-hatred, anti-Semitism, and fear of a Holocaust in America informs the men's lives as much as their contemporary moment. In the American Trilogy, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman writes novels about the lives of three real men after their deaths. In his narration, he reveals that he is actually reexamining his own past through the three men in an attempt to rediscover himself and define his identity. This thesis explores Philip Roth's American Trilogy in order to establish a new definition of American Judaism — one that is predicated on choice rather than on birth or religious practice. Roth is an unusual writer for this goal, since he was long regarded as outside the Jewish literary canon and was popularly accused of penning anti-Semitic texts. Nevertheless, I argue that we are able to realize an inclusive definition of American Jewish identity only by allowing the periphery into the centerfold.

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## Why Him: Using Philip Roth to Answer Questions of Jewish American Identity

When most people think of Philip Roth, they picture a misogynistic, pessimistic man who writes about the worst aspects of Jewish culture. His female characters are frequently defined as flat and subservient to the males, and his depictions of Jewish life are far from flattering. In a 1963 letter to the Anti-Defamation League, an organization whose mission is to fight anti-Semitism in all forms, an American rabbi wrote, “What is being done to silence this man?” (Kissileff), echoing the sentiments of many of his contemporaries. Roth, a third-generation Jewish immigrant from Kiev on his mother’s side and Polish Galicia on his father’s side (Roth 1041), struck a sensitive chord that reverberated through the entire Jewish community. His works launched arguments about what should and should not be written and disclosed to the largely non-Jewish American public. The reasons why Jewish leaders reacted negatively to his work reflect a variety of nuanced preoccupations in the Jewish American community, such as fear of recurring anti-Semitism, a Holocaust in America, and general assimilation anxiety. However, despite his almost immediate ignominy, Roth also garnered much fame. Roth has won the National Book Award twice, the National Book Critics Circle Award twice, and the PEN/Faulkner Award three times, in addition to the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1997, and the Library of Congress National Book Festival Creative Achievement Award in 2012 — to name a few of his distinctions (“Library of Congress”).

Even though Roth hails from a Jewish background, he identifies himself as an American before a Jew. When interviewed for a French documentary series in 1997, Roth said that the “epithet American Jewish writer has no meaning. Jew is just another way of being an American. There’s no separation, not in America, not for me, not for my generation” (Shostak 236). For

Roth, being American takes precedence over being Jewish. In spite of his refusal of the categorization, however, Roth is undoubtedly a Jewish writer — in heritage, as well as in content. In Roth's litany of twenty-eight novels and narratives, and numerous short stories and screenplays, he has only written one distinctly non-Jewish story: *When She Was Good* (Shostak 113). In *When She Was Good*, "Roth writes about the Midwest, about a family of repressed gentiles (non-Jews), and about a woman — a thicket of counterlives so opposed to the concrete details that typically fuel his imaginative life that he doesn't find a toehold" (115). In short, leading Roth critic Debra Shostak argues that Roth is incapable of writing outside of his Jewishness. His gentile characters lack the richness and depth for which he is known, and the novel "does not rise above an earnest artifact of otherness" (115). Roth's experiment depicting the life of the "other" fails, and he returns to writing about Jews, closet Jews, characters passing as Jews, and general Jewish subjects for the rest of his career. Although Roth's narratives frequently antagonize the idyllic pictures of American Judaism and the unparalleled singularity of the Jewish community, he returns to the familiar scenes of his childhood, thereby divulging his preoccupation with the subject and evincing how invested he is in the future of the American Jewish community — although many critics argue that his writing seems to undermine it.

Roth's depiction of Jewish life from a perspective that does not sugarcoat the community's imperfections affords the reader a view of American Jewry that is not often respected or appreciated. Perhaps for this reason, readers and critics who approved of Roth's writing felt inspired to band together, creating such cult groups as the Philip Roth Society. Founded in 2002 by David Parker Royal, the Philip Roth Society publishes a semiannual *Philip Roth Studies* journal, as well as a biannual newsletter (*The Philip Roth Society*). At the very least, Roth succeeded in inspiring scholars to rework his texts with ceaseless energy, thereby placing

himself firmly inside of the Jewish American literary canon. Through his writing, Roth develops an imaginative space in which he plays with identity, grapples with old notions of stagnant identity, and creates fluid examples of American Judaism.

At the end of his career, Roth came full circle as he was honored at the Jewish Theological Seminary's commencement ceremony in 2014. Hailed as the flagship of the Conservative movement, JTS once shunned Roth for his writing, but finally decided to bestow an honorary doctorate on the controversial author (Kissileff). Aimee Pozorski, president of the Philip Roth Society, shared that "Ultimately, for the last 50 years, and despite opinions to the contrary, [Philip Roth and JTS] have fought for the same ideals all along [...] From the very beginning of his career, [Roth] has been deeply invested in representing the lives and fates of Jewish youth" (Kissileff). Seminary chancellor Arnold Eisen agreed with Pozorski's sentiments, and in his address to the graduates said that "We are a community that treasures someone who holds up such a penetrating and insightful mirror to who we are and reveals the dilemmas and contradictions and aspirations of the community [...] We are grateful for the mirror even if not everything you see in it is easy" (Kissileff). Roth is the mirror held up to Jewish American society — and while some readers want to smash it and form their own depiction of American Jewry, Roth's analysis of the American Jewish identity is integral to understanding American Jewry in general. Therefore, while it might seem counterintuitive to base a new definition of American Jewry on an author who does not define himself as a Jewish American, I argue that his divergent depiction is precisely what is needed in order to holistically examine American Jewry.

In this thesis, I will attempt to synthesize a new definition of American Judaism, partially crafted in response to the all but complete destruction of European Jewry following the Holocaust, and their lack of representation in Roth's American Trilogy. Both Philip Roth and



Nathan Zuckerman (the protagonist of most of Roth's novels) were born in the early 1930s and grew up in the predominantly Jewish Weequahic section in Newark, New Jersey. As they came of age in the 1940s and 50s, they experienced one of the greatest periods of shifting Jewish identity: the Holocaust decimated European Jewry, followed shortly by the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel. In the backdrop of these major events, key American Jewish community leaders debated the method of representing Judaism to younger generations, and pondered ways to mitigate feelings of self-hatred and anti-Semitism — which they partially blamed for inciting the massacres in Europe. Some scholars refer to the debate between positive and negative representations of Jewish identity in the 1940s and 50s as the Jewish Cold War (Glenn). Even when Roth purports to be focusing on the late 1990s in his work, as is the case in the American Trilogy, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman betrays nostalgia for his childhood in both pre and post-World War II America.

Most critics read the characters in the American Trilogy as products of their historical moments. As Shostak writes:

Nationalism enters Roth's imagination on the broad canvas of the American Trilogy of the 1990s when he takes Zuckerman out of himself to inquire into the stubbornly mysterious identities of three different men, all marked indelibly by the events of half a century or more of American history. With this common premise in *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, Roth asks what it means to be an American and suggests that subjectivity is inextricably both a historical and a narrative construct.

(Shostak 236)

I agree with Shostak's observation that the American Trilogy examines periods of history through the specific accounts of three men, but I also argue that the main characters of each book

in the trilogy are byproducts of a different historical moment — namely the 1940s and 50s. Therefore, I have chosen to examine the American Trilogy because of its capacity to lend a unique perspective on how history shapes who we are in unexpected ways. The narrator of the American Trilogy is Nathan Zuckerman, who many read to be an alter ego for Philip Roth. Zuckerman, a reclusive writer in his late sixties, narrates the lives and falls of three men who have touched his life. The first book in the series, *American Pastoral*, features Seymour “The Swede” Levov, a muscular blond athlete who appears to have succeeded at assimilating into mainstream white society, but who also harbors a dark secret about a daughter who turned into a political terrorist. As a boy, Zuckerman idolized the Swede, and his recounting of the athlete’s story is filled with nostalgia and awe for the Swede’s resilience to hardship. In *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman listens to his high school English teacher narrate the life of his brother, Ira Ringold, who was friend and mentor to Zuckerman. Ira finds himself at the behest of communist ideology, although, as the husband of silent film star Eve Frame, he indulges in bourgeois pleasures — a contradiction which eventually leads to his demise. Finally, *The Human Stain* tells the story of Coleman Silk, a black classics professor who is passing as a Jew from a neighborhood adjacent to the one in which Zuckerman grew up. When Coleman accidentally spews a racist epithet, he spirals into professional and social ruin, which eventually leads to his death and the exposure of his secret identity. All three books are penned after the men have died, and the men’s stories are therefore left to Zuckerman’s imagination. The American Trilogy is an example of rampant and unchecked identity creation, making it a perfect subject for a discussion of American Jewish identity formed post-World War II.

In addition, since Jewish identity is dependent upon a variety of constantly shifting factors and cannot be essentialized (reduced to a singular definition), I defer to Philip Roth’s

American Trilogy to help answer my questions, since fictional narratives provide a hypothetical space based on the real world in which we can experiment with new ideas. Literature reflects the world around it, but it is also separate, allowing for a unique critique of the outside world.

Moreover, I argue that by examining literary representations of Jewish identity, we participate in exegesis that at once reveals Jewish identity to be fundamentally constructed, and elucidates a tradition of textual interpretation that is at the core of Judaism. By examining the realistic fiction of Philip Roth's American Trilogy, we can use the conversations that come out of it to create a new definition of American Jewishness in the twenty-first century: one predicated on choice rather than familial history.

### **Background: The Jewish Cold War and the Anger that Bubbled Below the Pages**

While looking at the fiction of Philip Roth's American Trilogy, it is important to examine the ideas of Jewish self-hatred and anti-Semitism, as well as the historical context of the Holocaust and post-World War II America, since they fundamentally shaped Roth's generation and the generation about which he wrote. Particularly pertaining to the Holocaust, Roth grew up among a generation of scholars, historians, teachers, and laypeople who believed that Holocaust survivors were silent about their experiences after the war. Since these scholars "produced so much in the way of written texts, they left behind a compendium of documents on which future historians, from the 1980s and beyond, could draw as they began to write the history of post-war America" ("Origins and meanings" 195). The texts defined a counterreality in which Jews were silent about atrocities committed against them — a counterreality that eventually worked its way into the mainstream.

Writing the American Trilogy in the late 1990s, Roth writes after the myth of silence about the Holocaust has firmly taken hold, and participates in its perpetuation. The next few pages will discuss the historical context of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in both Germany and the United States, as well as the cause of the profound hatred directed at Roth and his early writings. Although Roth writes about the end of the century, his characters are tied to their childhoods in the 1940s and 50s, which makes examining this time period and the events leading up to it of extreme importance. Moreover, his texts represent Jewish identity that is not predicated upon, tied to, nor even interested in the larger Jewish world. His texts are histories of the Jewish individual, who is more aligned with events in America than events in the global Jewish community. Roth's characters' disregard for the major Jewish events unfolding in the background (such as the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel) is just as meaningful as if the characters dwelt upon them ad nauseam. Roth willingly breaks from tradition, depicting Jews who are very different from those that the Jewish leaders would prefer to be publicized.

When Philip Roth debuted his short story "Defender of the Faith" in the *New Yorker* in 1959, the Jewish community erupted in outrage. "Defender of the Faith" is about Jewish Sergeant Nathan Marx in the U.S. Army during World War II, who finds himself the instrument of Private Sheldon Grossbart's machinations. By leveraging their Jewish connection, Grossbart tricks Marx into granting him and his two Jewish friends special privileges, all on the pretext that they are observing Shabbat, keeping kosher, or celebrating Passover (which Marx realizes transpired one month previously). While Marx does not hide his Jewishness (and is even nostalgic for gefilte fish and overbearing parents), he resents Grossbart's ceaseless attempts to gain the upper hand over the "goyim" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 172) or non-Jews. When Marx thwarts Grossbart's plan to keep him stateside while his compatriots are shipped off into the

Pacific, Grossbart accuses him of anti-Semitism, marking his descent into absurdity and stripping the word of its meaning, since Grossbart spews it out of contempt. Grossbart, the Jew who tries to stand out and maintain his Jewishness (albeit for purely personal gains), is left to die in the Pacific, while Marx, the Jew who keeps his head down and assimilates, is left with nothing more than a guilty conscience. Although Marx is painted as the hero of the story, he shares his fellow commanding officer's views of the troublesome Jewish trio; Marx describes Larry Fishbein as sporting a "mouthful of bad teeth" (169) and a "long yellow face" (171), and notes that he is always "fighting back tears" (169). Other language used in conjunction with the men includes "cackle" (172), "pushy" (176), "old peddler" (177), and "ugliness of privilege undeserved" (185). Grossbart's primary problem is that he insists on being different and does not keep his head down, as Marx advises on multiple occasions.

In response to the short story, "the Anti-Defamation League publically chastised Roth for betraying 'his' people, for being bad for the Jews, and by 1962 he found himself 'excommunicated' (his word) from the Jewish establishment" (Posnock 41). Even worse, "the preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism and pioneering Zionist Gershom Scholem called it the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying" (41). The key word in Gershom Scholem's vindication of Roth is "anti-Semites," since it encompasses one of the major fears that gripped the American Jewish community of the 1940s and 50s. Historian Susan Glenn explains, "It was not until the 1940s that the term Jewish self-hatred — thought to be the most extreme outcome of the inferiority complex — gained wide theoretical currency in the United States" (98). Jewish self-hatred and anti-Semitism were concepts defined as inextricably connected: in order for a Jew to express self-hatred, he had to have internalized the anti-Semitic slurs heaped on him and his people. For the purposes of this thesis, I define self-hatred the way social psychologist Kurt

Lewin describes it in his 1941 essay, "Self-Hatred Among Jews." Lewin writes, "The self-hatred of a Jew may be directed against the Jews as a group, against a particular fraction of the Jews, against his own family, or against himself. It may be directed against Jewish institutions, Jewish mannerisms, Jewish language, or Jewish ideals" (186-7). In other words, self-hatred is the state of vehemently opposing anything that has to do with an aspect of one's Jewishness. Jewish self-hatred is borne out of feelings of fear and inferiority to the non-Jewish world, and stems from a profound shame of being Jewish. Although the first uses of the term "Jewish self-hatred" appeared in the writing of Anton Kuh (1921) and Theodor Lessing (1930), who believed in the redemptive quality of self-hatred to paradoxically cause the Jews to self-reflect and help move the world past racial categorizations, the majority scholar opinion still associates self-hatred with a negative perception of the self (Reitter).

Therefore, in my thesis, I ascribe to Lewin's definition of self-hatred, as opposed to the redemptive aspects that Reitter notes. Similarly, I define anti-Semitism as a hostility or prejudice toward the Jewish people, in both large and small capacities. As a German Jew who fled Germany during the rise of the Nazi party in 1932, Lewin expressed a strong fear that anti-Semitism and self-hatred in America would help move the United States toward a second Holocaust (Glenn 102). Lewin's fears are most likely derived from the trauma of his experience in Germany, and therefore based on European anti-Semitism instead of comparable anti-Semitism in the United States.

The reality is that American Jews never felt the brunt of anti-Semitism to the same degree that European Jews did. Indeed, by virtue of their light skin pigmentation and the fact that they never "functioned as their nation's most stigmatized group," American Jews enjoyed a level of relative acceptance (Diner 3). I say relative acceptance, for while quota systems limited or barred

Jews from entering specific colleges, universities, hospitals, or law firms in the 1920s, these racist actions never translated into direct political action, as they did in Europe (3). American and European anti-Semitism both hinged on the idea that races are inherently different, although the former was far milder than the latter (214). True to the age-old stereotype, American Jews thrived economically, partially due to their white skin (“no small credential in a segregated society”) and partially due to their unwillingness to work in agriculture, which was hit hardest by the Great Depression in the 1930s (230). Since American Jews “had long shunned heavy industry and farming, and Jewish factory workers tended to be skilled laborers in the needle trades,” this allowed them to thrive in the garment industry, which required very little start-up capital (229-30).<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that the majority of non-Jewish Americans harbored ill will toward the Jews and believed that they controlled the government and caused the depression, Jews managed to achieve relative stability in America (211-12). Compared to the mass murder plotted and carried out against European Jews, American Jews experienced sheer bliss in the 1920s-1940s.

For that reason, many complained about the American Jewish leaders who distorted Jewish life in America and conflated it with the life of Germany’s assimilated Jews before the Holocaust. Jewish writers publically voiced their disapproval that, according to some, assimilation was the cause of European Jewry’s destruction, instead of a direct result of Hitler’s Nazi propaganda (Glenn 102). The prevailing fear, as Lewin suggests, is that assimilation, internalized anti-Semitism, and eventually Jewish self-hatred will lead to another Holocaust — this time in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> In *American Pastoral*, the Levovs are an example of an immigrant Jewish family who earn their fortune by moving up in the glove industry.

Since many Jewish people already lived in America during the Holocaust and as such did not directly experience it, their obsession and paranoia with its recurrence can best be explained by Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory. According to Hirsch, postmemory refers to the relationship that the survivors' progeny have with their friends and family's memories of individual and collective trauma. The descendants experience a connection so profound to the "previous generation's remembrances of the past that they identify that connection as a form of *memory*, and that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transferred to those who were not actually there to live an event" (Hirsch 3). In this way, memories can be transferred so that the resulting postmemory continues even after direct participants and their descendants have perished (33). Although the Jewish people have experienced vastly different events based on their location and mode of belief, they are united in their affiliation with Judaism. Therefore, the Holocaust is a unique instance of shared horrific experience, and of memory belonging to a group and passing over continental barriers (which is also the context in which Hirsch derived her theory). In fact, "The bonds of shared identity influenced American Jews, causing them to wonder about and fret over their own fate in a non-Jewish land" (Diner 6). The trauma experienced in Europe had an immense effect on American Jews, who viewed European Jews as an extension of themselves. Despite the distance, American and European Jewry were frequently connected, and "the moments when anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic rhetoric in America rose to audible levels coincided with the great outbreaks of anti-Semitic rhetoric and action in Europe" (6-7). Therefore, although Jews in the United States enjoyed the protection of a less outwardly anti-Semitic environment, the trauma and imagined memory of the Holocaust was thought by many to be a real, tangible threat in America.



Beginning in the 1960s, historians have mistakenly asserted that Holocaust postmemory in America has followed an atypical course, compared with the memory of other major events throughout history. As historian Peter Novick points out, most historical events are discussed directly following their occurrence, before gradually moving to the “margin of consciousness” (Novick 3). But Novick contends that the Holocaust was “hardly talked about for the first twenty years or so after World War II; then, from the 1970s on, becoming ever more central in American public discourse — particularly, of course, among Jews, but also in the culture at large” (3). Novick is part of the generation of scholars who believed they had unearthed narratives about the Holocaust, and who berated their forefathers for supposedly remaining silent (“Origins and meanings” 195). This myth of silence confirmed a generational narrative which was predicated upon exploiting “the progressively benign environment in America to adopt a more extrovert and expansive Jewish identity and, concurrently, belittled the comparatively restrained expressions that typified their parents’ generation” (Cesarani 10). In other words, Novick’s generation (and, to an extent, Philip Roth’s as well), wanted to use the Holocaust as an example of Jewish particularism, and commemorate the victims of the unique acts of horror perpetrated against the Jews as an ethnic minority.

In reality, Holocaust survivors and historians began publishing material about the Holocaust at the first possible opportunity. The first publications appeared in 1944, and testimonial and documentary literature swelled to an overwhelming mass from 1946-1947 (Cesarani 29). In addition to the immense quantity of content — and a fierce debate about where archives should be housed, in what language they should be studied, and which institution should become the overseer of information — the material itself was daunting. “There were few inhibitions about what could be said: sexual abuse, depravity, prisoner-on-prisoner violence,

cannibalism, graphic descriptions of filth, squalor and human degradation. Reading these memoirs and testimonies it is easy to understand why, by the end of the 1940s, the public turned away” (29). The public’s regression from Holocaust literature was not due to disinterest, but to an overwhelming sense of burden, and the inability to process the raw pain and suffering of its contemporaries. In addition, many survivors wrote about their experience in a way that would appeal to the masses; many survived by hiding their Judaism, and it was counterintuitive to reverse this instinct and write from a uniquely Jewish voice after the war (21). When young Jewish intellectuals of the 1960s “rediscovered” the Holocaust, they asserted the “Jewishness” of events, representing a new form of Holocaust narrative, but certainly not the first.

Although there are mountains of pamphlets, testimonials, memoirs, radio programs, books, et cetera about the Holocaust that directly succeeded the events, purveyors of the myth of silence refuse to recognize the contradiction, and cannot provide an alternative for what all the documents could mean (“Origins and meanings” 200). Diner postulates that the later generation of American Jews feels compelled to celebrate their own patterns of Holocaust remembrance, contrasting them with their parents’ purportedly timid response. Even though there is a prevailing notion of ignorance or silence about the Holocaust, this was not the case; therefore, it seems out of place in Philip Roth’s writing that narratives that fixate upon the 1940s and 50s do not talk about the Holocaust.

In fact, it cannot be argued that American Jews were unaware of the horrors of the Holocaust. “On July 21, 1942, when news of the wholesale slaughter of Jews in eastern Europe reached America, twenty thousand people massed at New York’s Madison Square Garden for a rally [...] thousands more stood outside, overflowing the arena” (Diner 218). The announcement shocked the American public, and “notable Americans — public officials, labor leaders,

representatives of the Christian clergy — participated, while President Roosevelt sent a telegram declaring that all Americans ‘hold the perpetrators of these crimes to strict accountability’” (218). Two days later, on Tisha B’av (or the day of mourning for the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem), Jews in Chicago, Milwaukee, Hartford, and elsewhere across the United States organized a day in memory of the victims already claimed by the Nazis (218). In light of the massive publicity that this news garnered, it is virtually impossible to assert that someone in America (Jew or non-Jew) would remain unaware of the atrocities committed by Nazis and Nazi sympathizers in Europe. The Holocaust is central to the memories of World War II contemporaries in America, whether or not it was openly discussed. For many Jewish Americans, the United States’ entry into World War II after December 7, 1941 allowed the floodgates confining their emotions to be opened; they could blend their American and Jewish identities by fighting in the name of patriotism and in the name of the Jewish people. Indeed, Jewish support for America’s involvement in World War II was so strong that “Jewish men made up 8 percent of those in uniform, about twice their proportion to the population as a whole. A substantial number of Jewish women volunteered for military service. Three hundred and forty thousand of them served as nurses and in a variety of other capacities” (221). The united fight allowed American Jews to achieve their twin aims of “liv[ing] as Jews and [being] accepted as Americans,” or assimilating into mainstream white society while still retaining indicators of a uniquely Jewish ethnic group (207).

The statistics of American Jewish participation in World War II provide evidence for the Holocaust’s prominence in the American Jewish mind. Nevertheless, the Holocaust is never directly mentioned in Philip Roth’s *American Trilogy*, befitting the suppression of memory, as previously discussed. Nathan Zuckerman demonstrates the prevalent trend in contemporary

American Jewry; while they knew about the atrocities of the Holocaust, they did not immediately elaborate upon them. Perhaps the pressure of rebuilding after the destruction of European Jewry was too great of a burden. As Diner writes, “By the war’s end America became the largest, most significant, and most powerful Jewish community in the world. American Jews played a key role in the reconstruction of Jewish life around the globe, attempting to remake it in their image” (6). Since American Jewry was now tasked with essentially recreating the prominent example of Judaism, they faced a difficult decision: relive the trauma, ambiguity, hardship, and duality of forever being an ethnic minority in a foreign land, or present a positive picture of hope for the future generations. For many, the answer was to portray hope and positivity.

The prevalent psychology of hope in the 1940s and 50s is perhaps best exemplified through the endlessly revised editions of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Although today, the diary is seen as a documentation of living under Nazi occupation, when first published, the diary served as an example of hope in the face of impending death. In America, the diary is the most widely read book about the Holocaust, so Anne Frank represents the prevalent perception of events. I use the word “perception” since Anne Frank’s diary has been extensively edited over the years (beginning with her father’s censorship of material he deemed too “sexually suggestive” or “overly personal” [Flanzbaum 2]), and thus the original content of her diary remains contested. Some renditions of Anne Frank’s story, in film, theatre, or otherwise, universalize her experience and abstract the Holocaust altogether so as to appeal to the majority viewership. Therefore, Anne Frank’s story is continually manipulated to reflect the sensibilities of the current audience. The original goal of the Anne Frank Foundation, founded in the 1950s, was to “use the name of Anne Frank as a symbol for hope and to further intergroup understanding in an atmosphere of freedom and hope” (2). Forty years later, the Foundation’s goal was to “educate on World War II,

particularly the Holocaust, and to make known the current prejudice and discrimination affecting Jews today” (2). While the mission in the 1950s was to disregard the particular events in favor of presenting a positive future, the mission of the 1990s reflects the willingness to grapple with difficult memories in order to educate. Hope and optimism were key in the original representation of Anne Frank’s story, to be later followed by concrete facts.

For many, the only way to reconcile living as Jews and being accepted as Americans was to remain positive. In the mid-1940s, Lewin conducted empirical research for the American Jewish Congress’ Commission on Community Interrelations, which led him to advise Jewish parents and organizations to inculcate pride and loyalty in children. He maintained that the best way to assure that Jewish children were well-adjusted and did not develop self-hatred was to instill “[A]n early buildup of a clear and positive feeling of belongingness to the Jewish group [...] In this way parents can minimize the ambiguity and the tension inherent in the situation of the Jewish minority group, and thus counteract various forms of maladjustment resulting therefrom” (Lewin 183). Lewin strongly advocated for a policy of positively portraying Jewishness in order to “counteract the *feeling of inferiority* and the *feeling of fear*” (198) and resolve the ambiguity of Jewish identity. Roth actively ignored Lewin’s advice to positively represent Judaism, making a name for himself as the elucidator of the Jewish community’s secrets and the confounder of complex identity struggles. Everything that Lewin stood for, Roth stood for the opposite. Still, Lewin’s ideas gave way to the argument that Jewish leaders, educators, and parents should present a positive image of culture in order to engage Jewish youth. Glenn writes, “If Jews were to become fully equal members of American society, Lewin insisted, it was essential that they first establish a sense of Jewish group ‘belongingness’ based on the concept of interdependency” (Glenn 104). Lewin’s ideal was to create an independent

Jewish community within the American whole — a community that was strong and vibrant, but still had a place carved out for itself in the tableau of American immigrants.

Despite Lewin's plan to unite the American Jewish community under a "balanced" approach to Jewish identity, his words had the opposite effect: "Even as it aimed to build a feeling of group 'belongingness,' the campaign for 'positive Jewishness' had the ironic effect of deepening animosities among Jews. Critics of the movement accused Lewin's followers of promoting narrow-minded ethnic chauvinism and ideological intolerance" (Glenn 107). Roth was certainly one of those who strove to problematize Lewin's idealistic enterprise, and who strongly disagreed with Lewin's attempt to resolve or ignore the problems inherent in Jewish society. The criticism of Lewin's "identity indoctrination represented a continuing salvo in the 'Jewish Cold War' — a fierce rhetorical struggle animated by the polemics of 'Jewish self-hatred.' The ideological struggles of this intra-Jewish war of words focused on questions of Jewish loyalty, security, commitment, and survival" (107). According to Glenn, the Jewish Cold War constitutes the period during the 1940s and 50s when Jewish leaders engaged in debate over the portrayal and essence of Jewish identity.

The quest for positive Jewish identity also manifested itself in dialogue over Israel. With the declaration of the Jewish state in 1948, many American Jews felt themselves torn between their comfortable lives in America and loyalty to a Jewish homeland. Instead of uprooting themselves and settling in Israel, many American Jews chose to support Israel as a safe Jewish homeland for *persecuted* Jews (Diner 227). Therefore, Zionist groups in America emphasized "the fostering of positive Jewish identity rather than the need for American Jews to search for another homeland" (227). Following a similar philosophy, Hadassah, or the Woman's Zionist Organization of America, developed as a way to fill a vacuum in American Jewish life. Hadassah

acknowledged that increasing numbers of Jews were seeking to enter mainstream American society, and if they were hampered, they were more likely to blame their Judaism rather than the prevailing American racism. Therefore, Hadassah sought to “provide its members, and by extension other American Jews, with a positive focal point for Jewish life” in the 1920s-40s (228). A positive portrayal of Judaism was perceived as a viable antidote for anti-Semitism and feelings of burgeoning self-hatred, and as a way to strengthen Jewish identity. Naturally, debate ensued over what exactly constituted a positive portrayal of identity. The tension was not easily resolved, since “the mere fact that [American Jews] created a derivative society, made up of immigrants, rendered the construction of American Jewish identity fluid, negotiable, and highly voluntary” (2). There was no singular Jewish identity to portray positively. Although American Jews were faced with almost limitless possibilities of how to craft their Jewish identities, “they also saw a dwindling of numbers and a weakening of group loyalties” (8). In light of these ominous trends, the stakes were high for how to portray American Judaism, and thus shape the conversation about world Jewry.

While American Judaism is engaged in a tug-of-war regarding the positive or negative portrayal of Judaism, enter Philip Roth, a twenty-six-year-old literary can of worms. Roth shocked his Jewish readers with “Defender of the Faith,” but managed to garner approval for his work in literary circles; the story was included in *Best American Short Stories 1960* and *Prize Stories 1960: The O. Henry Awards*, where it took second place (Roth 1044). The key criticism lobbed against Roth stemmed from his depiction of the underbelly of Jewish life — a concept many thought unfit for non-Jewish audiences in light of the Jewish identity war that raged in the background. Roth took a clear stance against the unsaid rule that “Jewish writers ought to concern themselves with what the ‘goyim’ would think, [and] he refused to characterize Jews as

‘a happy, optimistic, endearing people’ or to present them only as ‘innocent victims’ of anti-Semitic hatred” (Glenn 116). Roth refused to conform to expectations, thereby winning him immediate criticism.

Roth’s critics committed the cardinal sin of reading the characters as Philip Roth, instead of expressions of his imagination. Since many of Roth’s characters share biographic similarities with Roth’s own life, critics have been quick to conflate his characters’ identity struggles with his own. Although Roth creates a written Philip Roth and a writer named Peter Tarnopol who in turn invents Nathan Zuckerman (each of whom bear a strong resemblance to Roth himself), Roth is distinctly separate from his creations, as he frequently reminds his audience. Jewish readers were so fixated on the idea of a united Jewish identity that they missed out on the meaning of Roth’s works, namely that they are not about Roth, but about exploring the Jewish psyche. They forgot to leave room for critique, self-reflection, and discussion, which are all quintessentially Jewish ideals. Shostak writes, “much of Roth’s career seems to have developed in response to the way he was read, early on, as insufficiently distinguishing art from life” (Shostak 159). In short, as a result of the backlash to his earliest works, Roth engages in a perpetual cycle of literary jousting with his audience, challenging them to reexamine their preconceived notions about Jewish identity and the role of texts.

One of the most fascinating episodes of Roth’s playful jabbing begins with an article titled “The Uncomplaining Homosexuals,” in which Diana Trilling compares J. R. Ackerley’s *My Father and Myself* to Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, both texts that were published in 1969. Trilling elaborated on the ways in which she finds Roth’s novel lacking, and in response, Roth wrote a letter that he never sent to Trilling, but which reached her all the same, since it was published in Roth’s nonfiction collection *Reading Myself and Others*. One of Roth’s points is



that “True, both ‘Mr. Roth’ and I are Jews, but strong an identifying mark as that is, it is not enough, you will concede, to make us seem one and the same writer, especially as there is a pertinent dissimilarity to consider: the sum of our work, the accumulation of fictions from which the ‘positions’ and ‘views’ we hold might, with caution, be extrapolated” (Mason 3). Although Roth admits his similarity with the written Roth, he deftly enforces the divide between fact and fiction. By responding to Trilling through the lens of his work, however, Roth effectively collapses that same divide, proving that even such a seemingly stable division is a mere construction.

Roth’s message to his readers seems to be that Jewishness and identity are largely performative, and participate in the ongoing process of exegesis. Judaism is not a stable definition of religion, nor is it a marker of distinct cultural traditions. As Lewin writes:

It is rather difficult to describe positively the character of the Jewish group as a whole. A religious group with many atheists? A Jewish race with a great diversity of racial qualities among its members? A nation without a state or a territory of its own containing the majority of its people? A group combined by one culture and tradition but actually having in most respects the different values and ideals of the nations in which it lives? (Lewin 180).

Due to its many shifting, interlocking parts, Jewishness can seem nearly unclassifiable — an arbitrary grouping based on nostalgia and the will to perform or pretend to share a group identity, although a solid one does not exist. Nevertheless, millions of individuals identify themselves as Jews, and millions of individuals throughout history have dedicated themselves to the task of destroying Jews. Some define the Jewish people as white, some as Middle Eastern, and some throw their hands up in defeat.

Since Jewish identity cannot be reduced to its basic, common elements, I now turn to the American Trilogy to help formulate a new definition of American Jewishness. The American trilogy helps us realize that choice, rather than familial history, takes precedence when forming modern Jewish identities. This is seen by examining the three main characters' double lives and the limits of their language, as well as by framing Zuckerman's narration as an autobiography and as an attempt to rediscover his past.

### **The American Trilogy: a Self-Centered Evaluation of Jewish Identity Through Writing**

In the American Trilogy, Roth presents the ultimate feat of storytelling: creating an identity that exists more fully on the page than it does in real life (since the people upon whom the narrative is based are already dead). Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, follows the lives of three different men as he tries to uncover the hidden yet vital part of each of their identities. Nathan narrates the great collapse of the men's lives by relying on the stories of others, his own personal experience, and a large dose of his own imagination. Roth creates a complex network of personal stories within stories, each one narrated by someone else. In this way, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* present the epitome of traditional Jewish textual analysis; Zuckerman uses his writing to reexamine each man's identity formation, the textual or linguistic elements that brought about each man's demise, and role each man played in his life. The narrating, authorial Zuckerman debates with his past self and his misconceptions about each man as he strives to sort out their identities. While retelling the men's lives, Zuckerman depicts three bifurcated identities and the double lives that each man led. The reality, however, is that each double life is just the expression of one life: Nathan Zuckerman's.

The American Trilogy is Nathan Zuckerman's autobiography, disguised as the stories of his three protagonists. Nathan Zuckerman divides his own identity and subjugates it behind the stories of the three men, each of whom expresses a connection to his childhood. By returning to and reexamining the men's stories, Zuckerman is reevaluating his own identity and himself in order to answer the question of who he is as a Jew, and what it means to be an American Jew. Although Zuckerman obsesses over the lives of others, his inability to move past his childhood betrays his obsession with the Jewish identity war of his youth, and his need to resolve them, at least in part.

#### The Trilogy as a Study of Double Lives and Identity Formation

In the American Trilogy, the main characters continually reinvent themselves in order to protest societal norms such as homogeneity in marriage, rigid family structure, and racial segregation. None of the three men passively accepts the identity supposedly relegated to them at birth — they fight against the status quo, just as Roth fights against the standard, positive representation of American Jewry. Throughout the course of each novel, not only does the reader come to question the three men's fundamental identities (in other words, that each man is who he says he is), but the concept of indelible identity disappears by the end of the trilogy as well. Each man leads a double life, which hides a central aspect of his character and allows him to assimilate into his chosen lifestyle, thereby suggesting that identity is performative and infinitely malleable. Although the men chose their own paths, each is born with a physical trait that allows him to circumvent — or even dominate — the circumstances into which he was born, illustrating that identity construction is nevertheless somewhat dependent upon physical characteristics.

In the *American Trilogy*, the “blue-eyed blond” Swede is born with an “insentient Viking mask” which marks him as other (Roth 7). Zuckerman explains that the Swede is “born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov” (7), suggesting that the Swede is the outsider who, by mistake of birth, was born as a Jew with a Jewish name. The Swede does not belong in the “tribe” or the “we” of the Jewish people, suggesting that his actions reflect a gentile heart rather than a Jewish one. The Swede aspires to be purely American, and nothing more. Mimicking the Swede’s voice, Zuckerman writes, “Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me. Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, Wasn’t a Protestant Christian — nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American” (295). The pan-ethnic Johnny Appleseed is the Swede’s fantasy, although Johnny Appleseed had “no brains probably, but didn’t need ’em — a great walker was all Johnny Appleseed needed to be” (295). Johnny Appleseed’s lack of intelligence parallels the Swede’s description as an “insentient Viking,” devoid of mental feeling and utterly inanimate. The addition of “Viking” further emphasizes the Swede’s foreignness, and suggests that Vikings, or traditionally Aryan, northern Germanic people, are of lesser value than the community of Jewish people that surrounds the Swede. Describing the Vikings (who are often associated with brute strength, war, and destruction) as insentient implies that the Jews (with their cultural emphasis on learning and textual study) are supremely sentient by contrast. Traditionally, Jews are stereotyped as a highly intelligent, physically weak people — a heritage that the Swede rejects by way of his natural strength, athletic ability, and his open disregard for “brains.”<sup>2</sup> The Swede is the goyish-Jew by birth, which defines his attempt at assimilation later in life.

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<sup>2</sup> As an aside, I would like to add that although European Jews had been considered physically weak for centuries, they also “created and widely embraced a set of practices, ideals, and institutions for regenerating the individual body of the Jew and the Jewish body politic. In the

Ira Ringold is also born a physically strong, brutish individual, again negating the typified image of the bookish Jew. As Murray tells Zuckerman, “Ira was always bigger than the others his age, and he was strong...he was in fights all the time” (462). Murray remembers that had the Ringolds lived in the Third Ward with the rest of the poor Jews, Ira might have been recruited for the Jewish Mob. But in the First Ward with the poor Italian immigrants, “Ira was always a loudmouth kike outsider to the Italians” (462), and thus made an outcast. Murray comments, “It’s so fickle, isn’t it, who you wind up, how you wind up? It’s only because of a tiny accident of geography that the opportunity to string along” with the Jewish mob “never came Ira’s way” (463). Murray’s statement makes a comment on the larger definition of identity: if the categories that make us who we are today are really so fundamental, why are many of them designated at birth? For example, Ira was born big, brawny, and angry, which shaped the rest of his life. He was also not born into the neighborhood run by the Jewish Mob, but one that was run by Italians. Ira’s Jewish otherness to the Italian mobsters was what eventually sent him away from his family, into the army, and under the influence of fundamentalist communist ideology. When Ira was sixteen years old, an anti-Semitic Italian ditch digger by the name of Strollo

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span of a few decades around the *fin de siècle*, Jews transformed themselves into a muscular, modern people, able to found a nation-state based on and inspired by the European model” (Presner 217). European Jews chose the image to define them and their struggle to establish a Jewish state, thereby fundamentally redefining their identities and shaping the way that the world views Jews, Israel, and their military strength in general. As seen with *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, Philip Roth participates in constructing Jewish men who embody physical virility and strength.

attacked Ira with a shovel while he was walking home from work. Ira wrestled the shovel from the drunk Strollo, and “beat him on the head until he was unconscious [...] but something in him wasn’t finished [...] He’s sixteen and forceful and full of rage, he’s hot and sweaty and worked up and excited — he’s *aroused* — and so he turns around [...] and he beats Strollo over the head until the guy is dead” (673). It was Ira’s status as foreigner and Jew that drew Strollo’s antagonism, and it was Ira’s brute strength and anger — his sheer delight in violence — that eventually killed the man. Although born into his Judaism and his strength by chance, he wields both as a deadly weapon. Furthermore, Ira’s obsession with communism and his attachment to Zuckerman stem from his overpowering sense of guilt for his actions. Murray tells Zuckerman, “You were recruiting *him* [...] That was your job, whether you knew it or not. To help him shield himself against his nature, against all the force in that big body, all the murderous rage [...] it’s the job of lots of people” (675). Ira searched all his life for a civilizing force to combat his natural self, which he partially found in communism and his socialist teacher, Johnny O’Day. In fact, Ira’s entire marriage to the genteel Eve Frame is an attempt to cover up his savage impulses.

For Coleman Silk, his self-control, coupled with his light skin pigmentation, was the force that allowed him to hide his race and succeed in passing as a white Jew. Coleman passes because it is the easy thing to do and because it enables him to express his individuality apart from the rest of his family, not because he actively plans his new Caucasian existence. With his overbearing father recently deceased and his older brother overseas, Coleman feels himself “free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I” (805). For the first time, Coleman is able to craft his own identity. At first, Coleman does not realize that he can pass as white. As he sits in front of the navy enlistment forms, meticulously filling them out, “It occurred first to his heart, which began banging away like the heart of someone on the brink of

committing his first great crime” (806). Coleman’s body is telling him to pass before his mind has even processed the possibility. It is almost as if Coleman begins to pass on accident, just as the color of his skin and the texture of his hair was an accident of birth. Coleman’s fair complexion and steadfast self-confidence allow him to pass, thereby creating a second self.

Coleman is black and white, Ira is savage and civilized, and the Swede is goy and Jew. Each man battles with two interlocking identities based on the conditions of his birth, and each man fights against his given identity. The Swede embraces his goyish looks as an entrance point into the non-Jewish world, Ira uses his unchecked anger to leave his family and begin fighting for the common man instead of for himself, and Coleman uses his light skin to enter white society — not for any political or personal motive, but just because he can. The three men’s active usurpation of the societies in which they grew up mirrors Roth’s blatant disregard for conforming to the positive Jewish narrative that Lewin persisted in upholding. Roth’s characters stress the fluidity of identity by selecting their own paths in life, and thereby declare that they do not conform to one narrative since they do not hail from one rigid background. This point is stressed most ardently in Coleman’s narrative; when Coleman passes, he invents a childhood for himself befitting his new persona. Just as Coleman’s future becomes open and nebulous, so too does his past. There is no single past or single background narrative to which one must conform.

### The Trilogy as an Example of the Limits of Language

In fact, the past is continually being rewritten by our own minds, as well as the minds of others. Nathan Zuckerman narrates the three men’s stories, making it unclear what actually transpired and what the writer invented for the sake of his plot. Nevertheless, Zuckerman uses

his words to cement a fixed reality for the reader, since we will never know if his version of events is correct or if an alternative exists. Although the men prove that identity is fluid, language is not. One of the central objectives of language is to allow humans to communicate concretely with one another and to prevent misunderstandings that would arise if we attempted to transmit meaning with vague hand signs and indistinct grunts that did not correspond to definite words or ideas. Language, by definition, is intended to limit. Since the language with which the three men define themselves is rigid and unforgiving (although their definitions of themselves are not), it prevents each man from realizing his new identity; misunderstanding, wielding, or misusing language destroys each of the men.

In *American Pastoral*, the Swede's daughter, Merry, is the stain that destroys his life — all because he has chosen to disregard the cultural differences between Jews and Christians and to treat each word as if it were merely a benign adjective (like brown or blond) instead of a fundamental signifier of difference. When the Swede decides to marry Dawn Dwyer, the Catholic beauty from Elizabeth, New Jersey and move to Morristown, his father says: “How are you going to raise a child? As a Catholic? As a Jew? No, you are going to raise a child who won't be one thing or the other — all because you are ‘in love.’” His father was right. That was what happened. They raised a child who was neither Catholic nor Jew, who instead was first a stutterer, then a killer [...]” (360). Lou Levov attributes Merry's confusion to the Swede's marriage to a non-Jew, and his child's incomplete identity. Merry is not “one thing or the other” — she is caught in an unidentifiable nothingness between language. Merry's stutter evinces her imperfect grasp of the language defining her life, since she is unable to coherently express herself and give voice to the precipitous situation in which her parents have placed her. The Swede also does not understand the weight of his words, or the implications that they will have



for his daughter. When Merry goes through her phase of revering Catholicism, the Swede sits her down to “ask if she would be willing to take down the pictures and the palm frond off the wall and put them away in her closet, along with the statue and the Eternal Candle, when Grandma and Grandpa Levov came to visit” (89). The Swede is ashamed of his daughter’s beliefs, and he is afraid that his parents will see how he has failed as a Jew, so he asks her to hide her Catholic paraphernalia. The Swede’s inability to structure Merry’s life with a set religion, and his absurd request for her to navigate the space between the two, forces Merry to assume her own double life — a jarring experience for a young child.

The Swede is caught up in his own fantasy of what it means to practice religion in America, and his fantasy of the great divides that love can conquer. The Swede acts as if ascribing to a religious ideology is a frivolous choice that one can make and change at any time, and that the religion of a future child is of no more consequence than (and as freely subject to change as) the color of that child’s room. In America of the 1800s and 1900s, intermarriage was becoming more and more frequent, although it still maintained its status of being outside the norm. For the Swede’s parents, marriage to a non-Jew was one of the most severe transgressions a person could commit, although the fact that the Swede and Dawn could meet in the first place is a testament to the immense privilege that Jews enjoyed in America (as opposed to their European brethren) and to the openness of American society at large (Diner 39). From the 1920s through the end of World War II, more and more Jews decided to intermarry and leave their Jewishness behind in order to grasp the opportunities that “total integration” would provide (223). Many prominent thinkers believed that assimilation and intermarriage would bring about the end of anti-Semitism, although they did not advocate expressly for these extreme measures. Lewin acknowledged the presence of rampant anti-Semitism, but advertised a positive Jewish

educational experience which would engender Jewish youths with pride and thereby prevent them from intermarrying, assimilating, or otherwise letting themselves become affected by anti-Semitism (229). The Swede, however, remains unmoved by these concerns, much as Roth was. In early manuscripts of *American Pastoral*, Roth acknowledged the Swede to be his alter ego, perhaps explaining both of the men's indifference to the supposed perils of assimilation (Shostak 123).

In short, the Swede rebels against the traditional viewpoint that Jews should marry Jews and Catholics should wed Catholics, thereby simplifying differences in order to build his idea of the everyman Johnny Appleseed, who boasts no specific origin ("Who wrote [the Johnny Appleseed story]? Nobody, as far as he could remember" [295]). The Swede acknowledges that his hero hails from text, but he does not delve into his mysterious naissance. The Swede's flaw is that he treats words, language, and people as if they were devoid of origin, like his fictional Johnny Appleseed who has a real history to which the Swede is oblivious. The Swede is interested in quaint symbolism and illusion, not reality. Referring to the bomb Merry set off when she was sixteen, Jerry Levov tells Zuckerman, "[The Swede] was into quaint Americana. But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in...Good-bye, Americana; hello, real time" (66). Jerry suggests that Merry's bomb was an attempt to make a statement about how she defines the term America. Since Americana refers to an object that has been attributed with historical significance, Merry's bomb forces the Swede out of his imagined past and into the present.

Jerry's analysis of Merry's motives strikes the reader as more genuine than other parts of the novel, because the information comes from Jerry and is not fabricated by Zuckerman's imagination. Jerry was a participant in Merry and the Swede's lives, so his lines hold more

credibility (although they are still filtered through Zuckerman's narrative voice). Shostak agrees with Jerry, and writes that the "Swede's lost Eden is the lie of the melting of differences in the American experiment, a lie exposed by Merry's violent refusals of her father's fantasy of a life for her. Merry's disorder and estrangement suggest that the home the Swede thought he had created was a phantom; there was no home to be lost" (Shostak 244). In his pursuit of the American pastoral, the Swede makes Merry an object of his fantasy, as seen when he imagines her on a swing in his front yard before she is even conceived (Shostak). The Swede's failure — the failure of the all-American athlete who had the physical signs of someone who would be successful assimilating — suggests that the idyllic American life is unattainable. The Swede's American daughter, the product of love that spans two religions and rejects both, is the bomb to destroy his perfect American life. The Swede can combat the status quo and intermarry, but he cannot fight the contradictions that shape his child's life. Had the Swede understood the duplicity of Merry's existence, perhaps he would have paid more attention to the mutually exclusive religious categories that defined her, instead of ignoring their implications for her life, and his life by extension.

The explosive force that destroys Ira Ringold's life is his volatile anger and his inability to express himself, which resulted in him killing a man at the age of sixteen. He rides the rails and enlists in the army, where he meets Johnny O'Day, the radical, plain speaking union organizer who introduces Ira to communism. Once Ira's career as a radio star named Iron Rinn on the liberal airwaves takes off, he is subjected to all sorts of public scrutiny. His marriage to the 1920s silent movie starlet Eve Frame, however, protects him and the rest of his radio station from harm. Nevertheless, Ira's ardent support of communism was not unusual for Jewish Americans in the 1950s. In fact, while "56 percent of all Catholics and 45 percent of all

Protestants considered the anti-Communist tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy acceptable [...] 98 percent of all Jews polled disapproved” (Diner 277). Although most Jews were inclined toward the liberal side of the American political spectrum because they believed “that certain positions would assist both Jews and America as a whole” (281), Ira seems in favor of communism because it gives him an outlet for his anger and allows him to work toward a goal.

Ira is an incomplete communist, and Johnny O’Day frequently berates Ira for his divided morals; while O’Day firmly believes that the private is political, Ira is content living a bourgeois life while campaigning for the equality of all people. Ira hides his original transgression under the double guise of communism and the Upper Eastside elite. When his marriage with Eve falls apart, however, the delicate cord that holds his life together is tugged, sending Ira’s carefully constructed life plummeting down. Eve Frame decides to disguise her marital woes in the larger narrative of heroic Red Scare whistle blowing, outing her husband as an adulterer destroyed by communism. Eve’s tell-all plays with the intersection of literature and reality on two levels. Its title, *I Married a Communist*, mars the line between fact and fiction, since the reader finds himself in a world in which *I Married a Communist* is still being written, albeit with drastically different content. While Eve’s *I Married a Communist* is a fictionalized account of Ira’s life, the *I Married a Communist* that Zuckerman narrates reflects the true story (or so we believe). The second intersection is reflected in Eve’s ability to shape Ira’s reality with her words. Her demonization of Ira results in his radio station being banned from the air, his brother being fired from his teaching position, and Zuckerman being denied his Fulbright scholarship, all because the FBI perceived them as collaborators in Ira’s treason. Ira’s world is destroyed by language, an ironic fate for the high school drop out who rose by diligently studying texts in order to strengthen his vocabulary (Roth 433). In fact, Ira’s own language is his downfall, since it was

“his letters from O’Day and his diary books where he’d recorded the names and serial numbers, the names and home addresses of every Marxist whom he had met in the service” (639) which eventually implicate him.

Ira enacts his revenge on Eve by using the power of the written word to bring about her destruction. Instead of physically murdering his wife, as his untamed self had wanted (“he was going to cut the strings [of Eve’s daughter’s harp] and tie them around their necks and strangle the two of them to death” [680]), he uses words. Ira employs traveling journalists to expose the absurdity of Eve’s story and absolve himself of blame. Murray tells Zuckerman, “They tore Eve to pieces [...] They showed how her whole book was made up. That Ira was never a Communist [...] which did not shake the confidence of Joe McCarthy or Richard Nixon or Bryden Grant, but it could and would destroy Eve in the New York entertainment world” (682). Ira strikes back by destroying Eve’s fame, the pursuit for which she has sacrificed everything. Although Ira begins his marriage with Eve in order to cover up his past mistakes, obtain a family, and gain stability, and Eve marries Ira in order to be protected by a brute, the two ultimately destroy each other through language. Neither can truly hide behind the other, and pulling off their spouse’s mask destroys them both. Ira spends his entire life trying to combat his natural savage instincts and carve out a place for himself in the world — escaping his family at sixteen yet attempting to start an unconventional one while protesting the privilege of rigid family structure. He fights for and against everything he possesses, but he cannot fight against the harsh reality of language, and the impersonal text that finally condemns him to a life of utter loneliness.

In Coleman Silk’s life in *The Human Stain*, his carefully cultivated professorship comes to an end when he misuses language and thereby evokes his inner racism. Five weeks into the semester, Coleman sees two names that have consistently failed to elicit responses during roll

call. He asks, “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” (710). The term “spooks” is taken to be racially derogatory for black students — which the missing parties are — however, Coleman insists, “I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: ‘spook’ as a specter or a ghost” (710). Coleman, whose entire life has gone to perfecting language, and who was raised speaking “the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens” (790) commits a racially insensitive blunder that ruins his career and forces him to retire in disgrace. Although Coleman fixates on the stupidity of his colleagues, and frequently lists the dictionary definition of spooks ([“1. *Informal*. A ghost; specter [...] 2. *Disparaging*. A Negro” [783]), he is still vilified. For a man engrossed in language, it is unlikely that the secondary connotation of his diction was completely lost on him. More likely, it is Coleman’s subconscious bigotry against his own race that is coming to the forefront. Coleman’s subverted racism is evinced in the words used to defend himself: “What I did know, indisputably, was that they were *invisible* students — and the word for invisible, for a ghost, for a specter, is the word that I used in its primary meaning: spooks” (783). While spooks can refer to invisible spirits, it also refers to invisible people: the black population of America, which is often forgotten and mistreated. Coleman could have asked if the students were invisible, missing, still enrolled, et cetera, but his choice of the ambiguous word reflects his inner biases.

As further evidence of Coleman’s racism against himself, in times of great distress, Coleman inadvertently spews racially insensitive remarks. When Nelson Primus, Coleman’s lawyer of half his years, berates and mocks Coleman for his affair with the thirty-year-old blond janitor, Coleman loses his composure: “Coleman had silently listened, suppressing his feelings, trying to keep an open mind to and to ignore the too apparent delight Primus took in floridly lecturing on the virtues of prudence a professional man nearly forty years his senior” (779).

Having taken all he can bear, Coleman whispers, “I never again want to hear that self-admiring voice of yours or see your smug fucking lily-white face” (780). Ashamed at his behavior, Primus and his wife mull over Coleman’s words. Primus remarks, “No, I don’t fault him for unloading on me like that. But, honey, the question remains: why *white*?” (780). Why white, indeed. Upon first reading the term, readers might assume that Primus’ skin pigment is of primary importance to Coleman — although they will not find out why for a few more pages. The reader is just as perplexed as Primus is, and the term “lily-white” begins to peel back the layers of Coleman’s passing to reveal a light-skinned black man underneath. Only later do we learn the emotionally charged significance of “lily-white” and its prominent place in Coleman’s guilt-ridden psyche.

When Coleman decided to marry the Ashkenazi Jew, Iris Gittelman, he resolved to completely break ties with his family, so that neither she nor anyone else might discover the truth of his heritage. Utterly heartbroken and destroyed, Coleman’s mother lets him go. Later, Coleman’s older brother, Walt, phones him and says, “Don’t you even *try* to see her. No contact. No calls. Nothing. Never. Hear me? [...] Don’t you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again!” (839). For Coleman, “lily-white” carries the baggage of his self-exile from his race, his family, and the mother in whose eyes he could do no harm. To Walt, Coleman was the contentious white man, leaping at the opportunity to distance himself from the black community. To Coleman, Primus embodies the smug persona characteristic of white men in his youth, and under pressure, Coleman snaps. Moreover, in Coleman’s encounter with Primus, Primus was the one forbidding him from seeing a woman he loves, just as Walt forbade him from seeing his mother all those years ago. Something in Primus’ speech triggers the parallel to Walt, and Coleman uses the opportunity to throw the phrase back into the face of his oppressor. Coleman’s racism goes both ways; he abhors the connotation of his black skin, and he detests anyone who

tries to usurp his control — of any race. Coleman is an angry and determined man who is undone in the heat of the moment by a few ill-chosen words that reflect his entire inner turmoil, and eventually lead to his posthumous discovery.

Coleman decides to pass at the end of the 1940s, just before the rising swell of the civil rights movement. Instead of choosing to fight and to use his superior intellect to show the white masses the mental faculties of a black man, he chose to take the easy way out and pass as a white Jew. Coleman enforced the status quo by conceding that his life would be better as a white man, instead of fighting for racial equality. Ironically, “almost two-thirds of the White volunteers who went to the South for Freedom Summer in 1964” were Jewish, and “three-quarters of the money raised by the civil rights organizations at the height of the movement came from Jewish contributors” (Markowitz 312). Although Coleman forgoes his born race, he chooses to identify with a people who largely support the abolishment of racial segregation in America. Overall, Coleman protests the protestors, struggling against his own race and the change in America that he could help to enact. Coleman’s brand of racial self-segregation is not uncommon; American civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson wrote that “all of us have at some time toyed with the Arabian Nights-like thought of the magical change of race... If the jinny should say, ‘I have come to carry out an inexorable command to change you into a member of another race; make your choice,’ I should answer, probably, ‘Make me a Jew’” (Itzkovitz 44). Since Jews were already associated with race-shifting “at a moment when racial identity was imagined by many to be an immutable fact, Johnson’s addition of magic and Jews to the mix provided an innovative solution to the problem of the color line” (44). Jewish people were seen as having solved their racial difference; they maintained their otherness while passing in mainstream white society. In the early 1900s, numerous novels depicted African Americans as passing as Jews, bespeaking



the prevalence of the trend (45). In *The Human Stain*, Coleman is able to pass by foregrounding his white skin, and by pandering to the stereotype of the liberal Jewish university intellectual (Sicher 7). Coleman upends racial categories limiting the success of African Americans while simultaneously enforcing those against the Jewish people. In the end, despite his careful navigation, Coleman's language betrays his deception and unravels his double life as a white Jew.

In addition to the steadily disintegrating double lives that the Swede, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk lead, their presence in Nathan Zuckerman's books forms a triple life for each of them. Zuckerman's imagination fashions an alternative reality to the lives that each of the protagonists lived and blurs the distinction between what happened and what has been fictionalized. Instead of illuminating the reason for each of the character's chosen new identity, he only succeeds in obscuring them even further behind a cloud of uncertainty. Therefore, the American Trilogy teaches readers that identity is transitory and constructed. In order to decipher the characters' identities, one must interpret the text and language present in their lives (as we have done) and discover them through writing (as Zuckerman does).

### The Trilogy as Zuckerman's Autobiography

Even the identity of Nathan Zuckerman — the man who narrates the trilogy and shapes the main characters — is not stable. The dissolution of expected identity occurs when examining the narrative structure of the trilogy. The constant throughout the three books is Nathan Zuckerman, a writer in his mid-sixties who we learn has exiled himself to a cabin in the Berkshires. As Nathan frequently repeats, "my seclusion is not the story here. It is not a story in

any way. I came here because I don't want a story any longer. I've had my story" (Roth 466).

Although Zuckerman narrates the novels and establishes the frame narratives with which to illuminate the lives of three men (Seymour "the Swede" Levov in *American Pastoral*, Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist*, and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*), he is not the central figure in any of the novels. We learn very little about the storyteller, other than that he was born to middle-class Jewish parents in Newark, New Jersey in the early 1930s.

In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman receives a letter from his childhood hero, Seymour Levov, asking Zuckerman to help him write a tribute to his deceased father. Even fifty years later, the Swede's presence captivates Zuckerman's imagination: "none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov" (7). A gifted athletic star of the predominantly Jewish Weequahic High School, the Swede represents hope for the Jewish people to enter the mainstream American life and to excel in traditionally goyish pastimes, such as sports. Once Zuckerman accepts the unusual task from a man he has not seen in decades, instead of illuminating the father's life, Zuckerman uncovers the hidden destruction of the Swede's outwardly idyllic life. At the time of Zuckerman's discovery, the Swede had passed away from prostate cancer a few days prior. Unable to wrestle enough details on the Swede's life from his brash and unloving brother, Jerry, Zuckerman takes it upon himself to imagine the Swede's life. As Zuckerman concedes, "anything more I wanted to know, I'd have to make up..." (71), thereby casting the majority of *American Pastoral* into speculative uncertainty. While reimagining the Swede's life, Zuckerman melts into the narrative, and the Swede's voice (or, rather, Zuckerman's impression of the Swede's voice) takes control. In fact, "Zuckerman's vanishing act is a structural metaphor for Roth's theme: the unreadable 'reality' of the visible world renders the perceiving subject as

fleeting as his object of perception” (Shostak 182). In other words, Roth writes Zuckerman as a man who has no definite self, and instead Zuckerman foregrounds the imagined story of another man — which is acceptable since there is no fixed reality. In the first book of the trilogy, Zuckerman essentially erases himself from the novel in his eagerness to elucidate the biography of another.

In *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman maintains a more constant role: he listens to his high school English teacher, Murray Ringold, explain the life of his brother and Zuckerman’s mentor, Ira Ringold. Sitting on the porch of Zuckerman’s cabin, Murray and Zuckerman spend six nights reliving the events of Ira’s life; from his escape from the slums of the First Ward to his rise as a stage actor impersonating Abraham Lincoln, then to a radio star, and finally to his exposure as a communist and a threat to America amid McCarthy-era xenophobia. The format of *I Married a Communist* is dialogic (although Murray dominates), with frequent digressions as Zuckerman lapses into contemplation and recalls episodes from his youth when Ira helped inspire and refine his budding written voice (Shostak 250). Although the narrative still centers on Ira (as *American Pastoral* revolves around the Swede), this time, Zuckerman participates in the narration throughout the entire novel.

In *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman actively crafts and researches the life of Coleman Silk once he discovers that his friend and retired classics professor is a black man passing as a white Jew. He attempts to question Coleman’s colleagues, children, and estranged brother and sister in order to reveal the truth of Coleman’s background, thereby taking a more active role in the narration than in either of the previous books. Zuckerman’s determination illustrates his underlying love and appreciation for Coleman, and reveals his desire (whether conscious or not) to rejoin the folds of society and cease to be a hermit.

Although Zuckerman begins as a removed voyeur of the Swede's life, he grows to a participant in Ira's tale, and ends as an active agent in posthumously exposing Coleman's race with the release of his book, *The Human Stain* (Shostak 237-8). The arc of Zuckerman's narrative involvement demonstrates Zuckerman's growth, and his increasing ability to allow people access to *his* private story (which he claims he no longer has). When examining the trilogy as a whole, we see the greatest character development in Zuckerman himself, while the lives of the protagonists in his tales all end in shambles.

Zuckerman endeavors to fulfill two conflicting goals with his narration: he attempts to “unearth the ‘real’ stor[ies]” of the men while simultaneously “cling[ing] to the stories of mythic American identities” (Shostak 237). Shostak's observation reveals that Zuckerman forms himself in response to the “mythic America” of his fantasies. Since there is no one concrete myth or story of how immigrants have created themselves in America, Zuckerman's “mythic America” must be based on personal experiences living in the United States. Perceptions of history are different in every subset of society, and Victoria Aarons observes that modern Jewish storytelling “enacts a deeply ingrained history of bearing witness in Jewish culture” (Aarons 4). Since “bearing witness” is one of the premier phrases used when speaking of Holocaust remembrance, it links Roth's attempt to bear witness to American history through the American Trilogy to the tradition of Holocaust education. As Zuckerman comments on the men's lives, he is also commenting on his own self that was formed in the historical context of the positive identity wars of the 1940s and 50s in America — a time during which Holocaust scholarship erupted. Although Zuckerman narrates the supposedly real stories of different men, he only succeeds in representing his own abstract, shifting self through the lens of historical remembrance. We can surmise that even though the trilogy appears to foreground the Swede, Ira, and Coleman's lives, Zuckerman is

merely using them as an impetus to reflect on his own life — all while allowing him to maintain the disguise of an antisocial hermit. By writing about the men, Zuckerman discovers his narrative voice, as well as his own identity. This claim is supported by the role that each of the protagonists plays in Zuckerman's life.

As mentioned, the Swede is Zuckerman's childhood idol; the entire Weequahic community idealized the Swede, and devised a chant specifically for him: "Swede Levov! It rhymes with... 'The Love'! ... Swede Levov! It rhymes with... 'The Love'! ..." (Roth 8). After meeting the Swede for dinner in 1995 and deciding that he was all surface with no personality to his perfect "Swedean innocence" (7), Zuckerman is shocked to discover the extent to which he misjudged the Swede's façade. In protest of the Vietnam War in 1969, the Swede's daughter, Merry, bombed a post office that killed a man and destroyed the Swede's heretofore-successful foray into American middle-class life. The explosion annihilated the Swede's perfect life, spiraling his wife into a depression that led to her running off with the overtly gentile neighbor, Bill Orcutt. Despite the hardship, the Swede attempts to live his life as normally as possible in order to provide a strong support for his aging parents and their hopes for their favorite grandchild. Merry was supposed to be the fourth generation of Jewish immigrant, the generation "for whom America was to be heaven itself" (116). Amid all the disappointment, the Swede decides to remarry and rebuild his American dream, although it will only ever be a shadow of his former success. Upon learning of the Swede's burden, Zuckerman concedes, "I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life" (40). Zuckerman's shock is the catalyst for his writing of the novel; he attempts to recreate and reimagine the Swede's life with the sparse information that Jerry has provided.

Zuckerman treats the Swede's story as an exercise in writing and creativity, since he concedes that "my Swede was not the primary Swede" (73) and that he will never know the true story of the Swede's life. Zuckerman is unperturbed by the lack of reality in the novel, however, and writes:

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that — well, lucky you. (37)

Zuckerman is suggesting that it is inconsequential whether someone is right or wrong, since it is nearly impossible to determine if one is right, even after extensive study and contemplation. The only way to know someone is to be that person — there is no middle ground. However, since the reader knows Zuckerman has no way of verifying his tale of the Swede, his pontification on the nature of living and right and wrong feels insincere and an evasion of his inability to ever truly know the Swede. Evidently, Zuckerman is aware of this shortcoming, since he ends by admitting that even he cannot take his own advice and disregard what is right and wrong ("But if you can do that — well, lucky you"). Despite this, Zuckerman proceeds with his narration, suggesting that he is more concerned with the exercise of imagining his hero than actually getting him "right." For Zuckerman, the Swede is an opportunity to engage his imagination and place himself in the shoes of the once-great Swede, the burgeoning athlete who Zuckerman watched play football "every day" after school (21). Examining the Swede's life allows Zuckerman to place himself in different situations and imagine how life might have unfolded in a counternarrative to his current reality. The American Trilogy might be named "The Imitation Trilogy," for it reflects

more of Zuckerman's perception and recreation of historical events and people involved in them than the actual events and people.

In *I Married a Communist*, the character of Ira Ringold represents another outlet for Zuckerman to relive his past, this time remembering his own adolescence instead of imagining having lived through someone else's. Zuckerman met Ira when he was fifteen years old, pedaling past the house of his favorite schoolteacher, Murray Ringold. Zuckerman dismounts, introduces himself, and proudly tells Ira, the radio star and Lincoln impersonator, that he was the student who began booing "Stephen A. Douglas when he announced into Lincoln's face, 'I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form...'" (421). The civil-rights-supporting brothers engage Zuckerman in a dialogue about baseball, boxing, politics, and literature — beginning a friendship that swiftly arrests Zuckerman and affords him his first introduction to the world of men. The English teacher and communist radio star then begin to give Zuckerman one of his first impromptu lessons in writing while discussing Howard Fast's novel *Citizen Tom Paine*. By analyzing Paine's diction, Zuckerman is forced to reflect upon the meaning behind words — an important lesson for a young writer.

Throughout Zuckerman's friendship with Ira during the late 1940s, Ira continually encourages Zuckerman to improve himself and his writing. Zuckerman recalls, "I'd begun keeping my journal in imitation of Ira" (434), demonstrating the influence Ira once held over Zuckerman. Therefore, we see that when Zuckerman revisits Ira's life, he does so in deference to his beloved teachers, and in an attempt to remap his growth as a writer. Once again, Zuckerman is using his novels and the stories of others in order to examine himself.

In fact, if it were not for Zuckerman's attachment to Ira, it is unlikely that the writer would have chosen to publish a book about him at all. As Murray says on their last night

remembering the past together: “‘I’ve never told it before and I won’t again. I’d like to tell it right. To the end...I’m the only person still living who knows Ira’s story, you’re the only person still living who cares about it. That’s why: because everyone else is dead...My last task. To file Ira’s story with Nathan Zuckerman’” to which Zuckerman responds: “I don’t know what I can do with it” (645). Essentially, Zuckerman admits here that Ira’s story, while it holds personal significance to him, is unlikely to translate well to others. Perhaps Zuckerman’s unabashedly self-indulgent narration accounts for part of the reason why *I Married a Communist* was not received as well as the other two novels in the trilogy (Kakutani).<sup>3</sup> While each of Zuckerman’s narrations in the American Trilogy relate back to himself, Murray’s reflection that he is “fil[ing] Ira’s story with Nathan Zuckerman” deprives the story of a degree of novelty. It is as if Ira’s story — his life — has no greater purpose than to take up space in Zuckerman’s brain, which clearly does not want the story either. Zuckerman’s use of “can” suggests that Ira’s story is so contrary to what Zuckerman would normally write about, that he does not know if he will be able to produce a decent story. Conversely, his “can” could also point to Zuckerman’s inability to write objectively about someone as emotionally close to him as Ira was. Regardless of which meaning of “can” was intended, both prove that Zuckerman is relaying Ira’s story out of a sense of obligation, either to Murray for burdening him with the story or to himself borne out of a need to remember his mentor in his entirety. Zuckerman’s interpretation of Ira is inspired by his

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<sup>3</sup> While in 1997 *American Pastoral* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and in 2000 *The Human Stain* won the PEN/Faulkner Award in the U.S., the W.H. Smith Award in the U.K., and the Prix Medicis for the best foreign book of the year in France, in 1998, *I Married a Communist* only won the lesser known Ambassador Book Award of the English-Speaking Union (Roth 1050-1051).



personal feelings, and not motivated by thoughts about what would make a compelling narrative. Ira's constant aggressive monologues about the communist party eventually become as tedious for the reader as they do for Zuckerman, and become the force that eventually alienates Zuckerman from Ira. The true main character of *I Married a Communist* is none other than Zuckerman, the puppet master of Ira's life reimagined on the pages of a fiction novel.

Accustomed to living the life of a hermit, Zuckerman is surprised to discover Murray's appetite for life — an appetite made no less insatiable by his proximity to death. Zuckerman writes that “a sense of error settled over me, bordering on shame, for living to myself and keeping everything at such a distance. But then the sense of error vanished. There were no more difficulties I wished to create” (539). In this excerpt, Zuckerman describes his mounting desire to rejoin the world and cease his existence as a hermit in the mountains (in an isolated cabin modeled on that of Ira). He actively suppresses his yearning for human contact by reminding himself of past “difficulties” which he does not wish to rehash. It seems as if Zuckerman is escaping reality by barricading himself within the confines of a log cabin, and by obsessing over the imagined lives of others. Although the narratives are dreamed up in a small cabin, and consequentially removed from history, Zuckerman's constant revival of different historical moments betrays his penchant for the past. Zuckerman also attempts to connect the pieces from someone else's narrative into a cohesive story, suggesting that he is deeply invested in the outcome.

After *I Married a Communist*, a year passes in Zuckerman's fictional life before the reader encounters him again in *The Human Stain*. Zuckerman seems to have become more open to human contact, and begins the novel remembering sharing summer nights with his neighbor, Coleman Silk. About halfway through the novel, however, Coleman withdraws from Zuckerman

for reasons unknown. The Zuckerman following the chronology of 1998 actively tries to stitch together the pieces of Coleman's life in an attempt to discover what drove him to retreat with his mistress, while the later-Zuckerman who narrates serves to build suspense. After constructing an intricate tangle of deception which prevented even Coleman's wife and children from knowing his birth family, Coleman's estranged sister, Ernestine, reveals her brother's secret to Zuckerman while standing together over Coleman's grave. Shocked, Zuckerman tells her, "Look, learning this from you today, there's nothing about Coleman I don't have to rethink. I don't know what to think about anything" (1006). Zuckerman narrates the rest of the novel with a tone of disbelief, vigorously trying to piece together clues that would point to Coleman's hidden racial identity. Therefore, the entire story of the last two years of Coleman's life is painted as Zuckerman's piecemeal attempt to recover the scraps of Coleman's life — the life of one of Zuckerman's only friends. Zuckerman is motivated by a sense of obligation to show Coleman in a positive light, and out of a selfish need to uncover why his friend ceased returning his calls.

Zuckerman's discovery of Coleman's deception bifurcates the narrative voice into the Zuckerman living through Coleman's last days and the later-Zuckerman rediscovering his friend — rendering Zuckerman doubly present in the story. At points throughout the novel, the later-Zuckerman interrupts the chronological storytelling to hint at the truth of Coleman's race. Since both Zuckermans use the first person, the shift is often difficult to notice. Toward the end of the novel, both Zuckermans interact with one another: "Too much truth was still concealed. I meant by this the truth about his death and not the truth that was to come to light a moment or two later. There is truth and then again there is truth...The truth about us is endless. As are the lies. Caught between, I thought" (996). The first sentence of this extract is spoken by the earlier-Zuckerman, as evidenced by the past tense of "meant" in the second sentence. The later-Zuckerman answers

the earlier-Zuckerman by clarifying that there are two truths: the truth of death to which the earlier-Zuckerman refers, and the truth of Coleman's identity, which consumes the later-Zuckerman. In the third sentence and onward, the two I's collapse again into one; either of them could be waxing philosophical on the nature of truth. Both Zuckermans admit that truth is not a stable state of being, nor is there a limited amount of truths about a person. If there are "endless" truths about us, however, this implies that we are either continually growing and producing new truths (which seems plausible, but not endless), or that the truth is expanding. Truth is steadfast, constant, and enduring. The idea of truth expanding is therefore contrary to the indelible nature of truth. If it is not the truth that is expanding, it must therefore be the definition of truth that is expanding. The truth about a person could also encompass all of the lies that people say about them; the lie that Coleman intended to be racist by calling his two missing students "spooks" transforms into the truth of his early retirement, furious shame, unexpected death, and eventual exposure as a black man passing. The two Zuckermans know all of this, which is why they add, "caught between, I thought." The statement is ambiguous. It could either mean that the Zuckermans think that Coleman is "caught between" lies and truth, or it could reveal that the Zuckermans feel "caught between," and are pondering the extent of their inbetweenness. The Zuckermans are caught between knowing Coleman's secret and not yet having discovered it, between knowing the truth behind Coleman's death and being unable to prove its cause, and between being the narrating force of the novel yet never being able to know exactly what goes on in Coleman's mind. Even after penning a novel about the life and death of Coleman Silk, they are only dispersing their projections — lies — which readers take to be true upon reading. The Zuckermans are manufacturing their own truth out of lies in order to make sense of their friend's death, placing themselves eternally "between."

Although Zuckerman is caught in a web of overlapping narratives of his own creation, he manages to escape the cyclical nature of it all by growing as a character, which is one of the greatest narrative arcs of the trilogy. At the end of *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman confronts Les Farley, the paranoid, dangerous Vietnam veteran and ex-husband of Coleman's mistress, who he believes has accidentally killed the two lovers. By confronting Les and promising "not to say anything" about his "secret spot" and "everything," Zuckerman enters into a pact which he cannot keep (1037). His words of "it's safe with me" (1037) ring hollow; by repeating them in his narration, he is not keeping his oath. At the end of *The Human Stain*, and the end of the American Trilogy, Zuckerman backs away from Les and the frozen lake, thinking, "If I even made it, I knew that my five years alone in my house here were over. I knew that if and when I finished the book, I was going to have to go elsewhere to live" (1038). Fearful that Les would attempt to harm him after finding his secrets revealed in *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman closes his trilogy with the promise that he will return to the society he has avoided for over a decade. Although it can be argued that Zuckerman's reentry into society is a reaction to Les' physical threat, since Zuckerman enters the pact knowing he will not keep it, he thereby chooses his own destiny and the accompanying consequences. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman is brought forth from his shell by investing himself in the Swede's story to the point of losing his own distinct voice, in *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman sustains prolonged human contact with Murray over the six nights of Scheherazade-inspired storytelling, and in *The Human Stain*, Zuckerman finally sacrifices his seclusion in order to have a conversation with his friend's killer. The ultimate triumph in the American Trilogy belongs to Zuckerman, and by examining the three stories, we see them continually pointing back to Zuckerman. The American Trilogy is Zuckerman's autobiography, disguised as three different men's posthumous autobiographies.

Moreover, Zuckerman's insufficient representation of anyone other than himself reflects his inability to escape what Shostak calls the "vexing epistemological project of the historian," which is that "one can only know the other by reconstructing his past, and one can only know oneself as a deformation of the other" (Shostak 232). Zuckerman is caught in an endless cycle of remembering and representing, and it is impossible to prove which one came first, or which one is more accurate. Similarly, Zuckerman's past and the conditions of his childhood are muddled as he struggles to remember them how they were, and interpret who he is today.

### The Trilogy as Zuckerman's Attempt to Rediscover His Past

Throughout the trilogy, we see that Nathan Zuckerman is stuck in a conversation about his own identity, which he presents by using others' lives, instead of writing directly about his own. While Zuckerman engages with his own life, he does so from a distance. Nevertheless, each of the three men is from the Jewish quarter of Newark, New Jersey (or at least claim to be, as is the case with Coleman Silk). The Swede, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk are all connected to Zuckerman through their place of origin, a fact which Zuckerman frequently revisits. Based on the American Trilogy, the only personal information that Zuckerman reveals is about his childhood (different information is provided in the other Roth books that Zuckerman narrates). We know that Zuckerman's father was a chiropodist who died in 1969, and his mother was a stay-at-home mom who sometimes helped out in her friend's dress shop on Saturdays (death date unknown). Zuckerman grew up in a house with a "set of glass Passover dishes," with a mother who was a social climber who followed the lives of actresses (Roth 522), and with a conservative father who butted heads with Zuckerman and his burgeoning liberal ideologies. Zuckerman also

has a younger brother named Henry, about whom not much more is known. In his youth, Zuckerman played first baseman for the Daredevil Athletic Club, and his playground nickname was “Skip” because of “two grades [he] skipped in grade school” (19). While Zuckerman occasionally becomes lost in rich flashbacks from his childhood and adolescence, all we know about his present is that he is a bald, impotent man who survived prostate cancer and is currently living alone in a cabin in the Berkshires. Thus, Zuckerman’s short, self-censored autobiography comes to an end — almost the entirety of Zuckerman’s narrative energy is expended on his youth.

While attending a forty-fifth high school reunion, Zuckerman encounters a classmate whose conversation demonstrates the importance and sanctity of childhood memory. The classmate reveals the profound influence Zuckerman’s father had on him, while Zuckerman does not remember ever having been friends with this man. Zuckerman reflects:

It was one of those things that get torn out of you and thrust into oblivion just because they didn’t matter enough. And yet what I had missed completely took root in Ira [Posners] and changed his life. So you don’t have to look much further than Ira and me to see why we go through life with a generalized sense that everybody is wrong except us...because each of us remembers and forgets in a pattern whose labyrinthine windings are an identification mark no less distinctive than a fingerprint — it’s no wonder that the shards of reality one person will cherish as biography can seem to someone else who, say, happened to have eaten some ten thousand dinners at the very same kitchen table, to be a willful excursion into mythomania. (54)

Zuckerman reviews the incident from Ira Posners’ perspective, and acknowledges the transformative impact that it had on Ira’s life while realizing that the moment was insignificant

to him. Zuckerman concedes that people are caught up in their own lives to the point that they are unable to see life from someone else's perspective. Each person remembers different moments, and weaves them together into a personal sense of "reality" that is completely unharmonious with anyone else's chosen reality. Zuckerman's quote reveals both the choice of memory and the performance of identity; we pick and choose the things that we will remember and what lessons we will learn, thereby selecting the experiences that will shape us. Consequently, what we remember is a revealing indication of what is important to us, and what we thought was worth cataloguing away in the recesses of our minds.

After the reunion, Zuckerman lies awake in bed, composing the speech that he wished he had given for his former classmates. Zuckerman insists to himself, "Something powerful united us [...] not merely in where we came from but in where we were going and how we would get there" (44). Trying to pinpoint the unbreakable bond that still unites him with his classmates, Zuckerman is left with only questions: "[...] out of what context did these transformations arise — out of what historical drama, acted unsuspectingly by its little protagonists, played out in classrooms and kitchens looking nothing at all like the great theater of life? Just what collided with what to produce the spark in us?" (44). During his ruminations, Zuckerman compares his peers and himself to actors upon a stage, performing a life that was given to them. The protagonists are "unsuspecting," however, suggesting that whatever larger force controlled the play, Zuckerman and his friends felt aligned with its mission. They were not forced into their roles, but they were unaware why they acted the way that they did. Zuckerman hints that the "context" and "historical drama" produced the class of 1950, implying that their identities were shaped by the debates of the Jewish Cold War of the 1940s and 50s. More specifically, the

success of the children was a symbol of hope for the older generations, especially against the backdrop of the Holocaust and World War II.

During Zuckerman's childhood, the Swede is a testament to the physical strength of the Jewish people. Zuckerman explains that "With the Swede indomitable on the playing field, the meaningless surface of life provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedean innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again" (7). Traumatized by the present reality of war and mass murder, the Swede allowed the American Jews to put aside their troubles and focus on the present moment — their present success, no matter how small. Interestingly, part of the immigrants' trauma undoubtedly results from the knowledge of the Holocaust eradicating their fellow Jews (or even family members), although this line of reasoning is not made explicit. Instead, Zuckerman's narration emphasizes that the residents of the Jewish quarter of Newark are concerned with the American side of fighting the war, and the characters do not exhibit any special Jewish empathy. Knowing the context of Zuckerman's adolescence, one can surmise that Zuckerman purposefully omits this crucial historical context in order to foreground his community's Americanness, and deemphasize a period in history — an incongruity that only serves to highlight it more. Zuckerman's choice illustrates the ability to dictate which portions of our background we treasure, reinforce, and share with the outside world. Simply by reframing the community's reaction to the war, we see Zuckerman's attempt to redefine his past, and thereby himself.

In Zuckerman's retelling of his childhood, all of his community members are stoutly American, with hopes of assimilating themselves and their offspring into the mainstream white culture. The immigrant community entrusted its hope for success to its offspring: "A whole



community perpetually imploring us not to be immoderate and screw up, imploring us to grasp opportunity, exploit our advantages, remember *what matters*” (42). Ostensibly, what “matters” to this generation of Jews would be their roots — Judaism — although Zuckerman, again, does not make this hint of Jewish community explicit. Zuckerman and his contemporaries carried all the weight of their forefathers’ expectation, which unites them and makes “the neighborhood a cohesive place” (42) in which to grow. Despite the pressure, Zuckerman contends, “living as well-born children in Renaissance Florence could not have held a candle to growing up within aromatic range of Tabacknik’s pickle barrels” (43). One would usually describe pickles as sour and pungent — not quite befitting a nostalgic recollection — however, Zuckerman’s loving depiction of the odor demonstrates his fondness for the minutia of his adolescence. He imagines asking his classmates, “Has anywhere since so engrossed you in its ocean of details? The *detail*, the immensity of the detail, the force of the detail, the weight of the detail — the rich endlessness of detail surrounding you in your young life like the six feet of dirt that’ll be packed on your grave when you’re dead” (43). Zuckerman’s description of the details of his childhood is at once enlivening and suffocating. The metaphor of details as the ocean evokes his feelings of endless potential and adventure, while the image of details as dirt on top of a grave demonstrates Zuckerman’s inability to escape his childhood, and its weight on his body for all of eternity. Although Zuckerman has an ambivalent relationship to his upbringing, he nevertheless admits that it has fundamentally shaped him. For a writer gathering details about other people’s lives, it is a surprise that his own childhood would enchant him more than the fantastic stories he narrates, and partially invents.

It is almost as if Zuckerman returns to his childhood subconsciously, unable to distance himself from his formative experiences. When Zuckerman comes across things, events, places,

or people that remind him of his childhood, he is instantly transported back to the Jewish quarter of Newark in the 1940s and 50s. As he drives home from the reunion, Zuckerman unpacks a commemorative mug with “half a dozen little *rugelach*” and starts ravenously devouring each Ashkenazic Jewish pastry (46). He says, “the *rugelach*, as fresh as any I’d ever snacked on at home after school — back then baked by the recipe broker of her mahjongg club, my mother — were a gift from one of our class members, a Teaneck baker” (46). Zuckerman begins his sentence by comparing the *rugelach* to the ones of his childhood, but interrupts himself with an even more specific memory (that of his mother playing mahjongg and baking) before returning to the present. The em dashes reflect the intrusion of Zuckerman’s new line of thought; as he remembers the *rugelach*, he cannot help but be transported to the past.

Nevertheless, Zuckerman’s recollection is not as organic and instantaneous as Marcel Proust’s famous passage about the madeleine in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (“In Search of Lost Time”). While Proust tastes his madeleine and is involuntarily transported to his childhood, Zuckerman actively seeks memories of his childhood. Zuckerman admits that he hoped by tasting mouthful after mouthful of the *rugelach*, he would “find vanishing from Nathan what, according to Proust, vanished from Marcel the instant he recognized ‘the savour of the little *madeleine*’: the apprehensiveness of death. ‘A mere taste,’ Proust writes, and ‘the word ‘death’ ... [has] ... no meaning for him” (Roth 46-7). Zuckerman wants to regain some magic from his past — he wants the invincibility that the French novelist has promised him. At the beginning of his sixties, Zuckerman wants the perceived reassurance that death lies in the distant future — and what better way to do that than by remembering and reliving his childhood? Zuckerman returns to his upbringing by examining the lives of men who grew out of the same (or similar)

surroundings as him. He wants to discover how the Swede, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk are products of his world, how they are “united” in the “historical drama” of their time.

Although Zuckerman, the Swede, Ira, and Coleman would not pick “Jewish” as their primary identifier, the reality is that each was born out of a Jewish background (or, as in the case of Coleman, his persona was crafted in the image of a Jew). Their youths were formed in response to their Jewish upbringings (or the Jewish upbringings of their peers), which in turn engendered their adolescences and adulthoods. Judaism has had a profound impact on the life of each man, although they were not practicing Jews during their lifetimes or even stressed their relationship to the Jewish people.

### **Tying the Ends: Assimilation, Self-Hatred, and Texts in Jewish Discussion**

The question then becomes, how do these men, Jewish but not embodying stereotypical Jewishness, define American Jewishness — in this thesis, and in the larger world they reflect? In short, each of the primary characters (the Swede, Ira, and Coleman) represents something different about modern American Judaism.

In *American Pastoral*, the Swede struggles with a deep yearning to assimilate, although he is fundamentally unsuccessful. The Swede’s assimilation narrative demonstrates two incontrovertible realities: it is possible to disappear into mainstream, white American society if one possesses the proper genetic make-up, but one must also marry within the tribe. If one does not, it will potentially pose an identity crisis for the resulting offspring, as is the case with Merry Levov. As aforementioned, the Swede agrees with his father’s assessment that Merry’s trouble is rooted in the religious diversity of her parents. Merry is a constant reminder of the Swede’s

partially realized victory: she is the fourth generation “for whom America was to be heaven itself” (Roth 116), but she is also perpetually the other. She is Jewish and Catholic, but subscribes to both incompletely.

Nevertheless, assimilation is presented as a necessary evil. In fact, it would only be possible for America to open itself up to the fourth generation of Levovs if they assimilated enough to enable them to take advantage of the opportunities afforded to white Americans. Indeed, when Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe, they were faced with a choice of where to align themselves in America — a society which often reduced individuals into either the reigning white class or the secondary class that included all other races. Due to their skin pigmentation, “[Jewish immigrants] could take advantage of whatever educational and economic opportunities society offered” (Diner 230) despite the fact that elite life in America persisted to shut “the doors” in “their faces” (210). In *American Pastoral*, irrespective of the sadness that Lou Levov feels in regards to his granddaughter’s lack of Judaism, assimilation is still set up as an inevitable necessity, and should thus be embraced. In Zuckerman’s imagined speech to his high school classmates, he says, “The shift was not slight between the generations and there was plenty to argue about: the ideas of the world they wouldn’t give up; the rules they worshipped, for us rendered all but toothless by the passage of just a couple of decades of American time; those uncertainties that were theirs and not ours” (Roth 42). The “they” in Zuckerman’s mind is the older generation of Jews in Newark, who have extreme stakes in their children’s lives in order to make up for the lack of opportunity they possessed while growing up. Zuckerman elucidates the tension between the old world ways his parents enforced and the utter lack of interest that his friends and he exhibited. More importantly, “American time” is presented as a unit outside of the standard passage of time, which corrupts the children of immigrants and makes them alien to

their parents. If time passes differently in America, then it also represents a loss of control, since the immigrant generations have no way to relate to the changes befalling their offspring. In this way, American time is an affliction that grips the younger generation, to which the immigrant generation remains immune. Nevertheless, there is no remedy for American time — short of travelling to a new home and dealing with their standards of time instead. American time will continue to elapse until it is no longer distinct — time in America will be the only time that Jews will know. And, as the Swede's attitude seems to suggest, so be it. We cannot control what happens to our children, just as the Swede could not hinder his daughter's self-destruction. Assimilation is unavoidable, although, as Lou Levov contends, marrying someone with a similar background can mitigate the effects. Thus, *American Pastoral* teaches readers about the inevitability of assimilation, and the larger inability to foresee what life will hold.

In *I Married a Communist*, Ira Ringold escapes his past transgressions, but also ends up leaving his Jewish past behind as well. He marries Eve Frame, née Chava Fromkin, who has also forgone her Jewish self in order to manufacture a brand new identity as a Hollywood icon. Two marriages before Ira, she wed a closeted gay man named Carlton Pennington, who taught her how to be anti-Semitic and to perform the role of an “American Gentile aristocrat” (546). Venting to Murray, Ira says, “You don't want anybody to know you were born Jewish, you want to disguise your passage into the world? You want to drop the problem and pretend you're somebody else? Fine. You've come to the right country. But you don't have to hate Jews in the bargain. You don't have to punch your way out of something by punching somebody else in the face” (545). Unfortunately for Eve, the only way she knew how to perform her role of gentile aristocrat was to impersonate Pennington's anti-Semitism, and so she spurns all that reminds her of Judaism — eventually bringing about her downfall. In retaliation for Eve's fraudulent

depiction of his life, Ira enlists his traveling journalist friends to expose the lie at the heart of Eve's performance: her Jewishness. When she storms into the *Nation's* office, Eve insists that the article is full of lies, and the "the most vicious lie" is that the writer "identified her as a closet Jew," born in Brownsville, Brooklyn to a family of Polish immigrants who only spoke Yiddish at home (683-4). Rather than succumb to her wishes, the writer inserts her hysteric breakdown into the piece, solidifying her demise. As a result, Eve begins to lose her friends, her acquaintances grow tired of her story, and, eventually, "there's no more work for her" (685), thereby ending her Hollywood career — the basis of her fabricated existence. Despite her steadfast rejection of all things Jewish, Eve Frame is fundamentally unable to escape her heritage. She will always be marked as a Jew.

In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk builds his life around the lie of him being a white, Jewish man. At the end of his life, Coleman is buried as a Jew and mourners recite Kaddish over his grave, but his sister, Ernestine, reveals his deception to Zuckerman mere minutes later. With the release of Zuckerman's book, Coleman's secret will be revealed to the entire world, undoing his former, unadulterated success. Coleman's passing elucidates some of the blurry distinctions between races, particularly those between black and Jewish — two minorities discriminated against in Protestant, white America. While Jews of European descent have passed as white, "American Jews have understood themselves as a separate race (although they may not use that language) without being a separate color" (Greenberg 46). Jews were sometimes referred to as a "chameleonic race," which paradoxically insinuated "*both* the fluid instability of Jewish identity *and* the embodied stability of Jewish racial distinctiveness" (Itzkovitz 42). Therefore, since African Americans frequently passed as Jews, it exposed the ambiguity of the Jews' race and color in America (Sicher 6). The ambiguity and shifting racial distinctions fuse together in the

“melting pot” that is America. The term, coined by Israel Zangwill (an Anglo-Jewish playwright who composed a play of the same title in 1908), was intended to evoke the sentiment that “native-born White Americans [should] stop insisting that immigrants give up on their own identities to become, in the term of the day, ‘100 percent Americans.’ Rather, he suggested, each new group made its own unique contributions to the national culture” (Greenberg 38). In short, America embodies the ideal that cultures can come together in a national landscape devoid of a single nationality. More importantly, Jews participate in constituting the shifting, indefinable landscape that comprises twenty-first century America — they are both Jewish and fully American.

While characters in the American Trilogy attempt to dismiss their Jewish identities, they discover that they are fundamentally unable to sever themselves from their heritages. Instead, they ascertain a more nuanced definition of American Jewry that does not hinge upon unconditional worship of God and frequent religious practice. They are indelibly Jewish — whether it is rooted in their parentage, latent (or overt) anti-Semitism in themselves (or others), or a conscious decision. While it seems as if Roth, Zuckerman, and the rest of the cast of fictional characters are chasing absolute assimilation, they are unable to complete the transformation. Roth creates a space in the American Trilogy in which to experiment with fictitious identities and combat the standard portrayals of American Judaism. Roth’s exposition shows readers that American Jews are Jewish because they say they are — to a degree, no matter how small, they identify with the Jewish people.

In some senses, what it means to be Jewish has always been about fighting for the autonomy to define oneself; the Jewish people have spent most of their legacy in exile, characterized both by the places in which they resided, but also by their separation (mental and

physical) from the non-Jewish host population. As aforementioned, the concept of Jewish self-hatred developed to account for the internalized feelings of anti-Semitism that assimilated Jews felt in Germany. But today, “as Arab-Israeli relations have worsened over the past decade, the term ‘Jewish self-hatred’ has been thrust back into prominence” (Reitter 12), and is most commonly used to refer to a Jew who does not support the state of Israel. In the American Trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman does not explicitly speak about Israel (apart from mentioning as an aside that one of Ira’s journalist friends is a strong critic of Israel [Roth 684]), yet his silence is equally as powerful. While Zuckerman appears to uphold the model that individuals define their own Jewish identity, he does not express any outright support for the idea that the Jewish people have a right to self-determination, or the right to determine selfhood and peoplehood in a homeland. Zuckerman depicts Israel’s formation as tangential to the historical events he narrates, suggesting either that he is not a supporter of the Jewish state, or that he is not overly concerned with questions of Judaism abroad, since he and his characters are staunchly American.

In fact, Zuckerman’s entire trilogy would be unable to function if it were placed in Israel, instead of the United States. The particular concerns of each protagonist would be fundamentally different, since assimilation was not as prevalent, there was no red scare witch hunt, and race relations were not based on hundreds of years of slavery and oppression. Moreover, there is less room for ambiguity in Israel, where the soil of the country is tied to specific biblical passages and is thus more difficult to divorce from religious Judaism. In America, the Jewish people are immigrants who bring their culture and religion with them, mixing it with the new American culture in unexpected ways. The Jewish identity that Zuckerman examines can only flourish in America — where contradictions and double lives abound, as exemplified by the American Trilogy. For that reason, Zuckerman’s omission of Israel draws a careful line between



determining the self and using a common group ideology (such as Zionism, or the nationalist movement to form a Jewish state in the historic land of Israel) to define the self. Zuckerman is an American Jew, but he seems to prefer to function separate from the mainstream Jewish group identity that glorifies Israel. He is part of American Jewishness, but also outside of it — belonging to the group while performing the role of a foreigner.

Zuckerman exercises his individuality by refusing to discuss one of the major topics of concern in the Jewish community. On the other end of the spectrum are those Jews — commonly defined as “self-hating” — who ceaselessly criticize Israel. Nevertheless, even though some Jews vilify the practices — or very existence — of the Jewish state, they are still engaging in dialogue about it, evincing a connection to Israel in spite of heavy criticism. Talking and discussing a topic over and over again demonstrates a relationship with Israel (and Judaism, by association) despite efforts to sever ties. Similarly, Zuckerman’s conspicuous silence on the matter only serves to reinforce his connection.

To a certain extent, the inability to escape Judaism mirrors Roth’s career; although Roth does not define himself as an American Jewish writer, he chooses to be one through his almost exclusive narration of Jewish life in America. As literary critic Derek Parker Royal argues, we come to know what “Jewish” is by writing about Jews — identity is constantly under construction.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when analyzing the Swede’s path of assimilation into mainstream American culture, Zuckerman is really looking at himself and his own American Jewish identity. Debra Shostak takes this idea one step further, arguing that not only do Roth’s characters write to understand themselves, but also that Roth invents self-reflective characters in order to examine

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<sup>4</sup> In “Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,”

D. J. Franco also argues that we come to know identity through writing.

his own identity under different circumstances. Shostak's argument is rooted in the more than 100 pages of draft written in 1972 that would later turn into *American Pastoral*. At the head of the first chapter, a handwritten line reads: "This [illegible] Roth who I am not but might have been." This scribble reveals that the Swede (originally named Milton) is an analogy to the writer himself, the imagined self that could have been if perhaps Roth had been born with different physical attributes (Shostak 123, 157).

Moreover, although Roth does not build blatantly Jewish characters, the idea that text, writing, and dialogue participate in identity construction *is* fundamental to Jewish tradition — which relies upon the written Torah (Tanakh) and oral Torah (Talmud) to make up the Torah, or the defining body of Jewish teachings.<sup>5</sup> Roth makes this assertion undeniable, "The Jewish quality of books like mine doesn't really reside in their subject matter. Talking about Jewishness hardly interests me at all. It's a kind of sensibility: ...the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting — above all, the *talking*" (Shostak 11). Roth's characters are linked to Judaism and its tradition through their rich dialogues and constant cycle of writing and interpreting texts, despite their lack of religious observance. The American Trilogy is the ultimate dialogic space, where Roth experiments with invented Jewish personas and his characters discuss issues of identity — a combination that helps broaden the category of American Jewry.

By writing about Jewish identity in his texts, Roth creates a fictionalized identity in his characters that is reflected back upon the reader. According to Roland Barthes' concept of the

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<sup>5</sup> George Steiner argues that the Jew is at home in exile, citing that an "extreme commitment to abstraction, to word and text" — in reference specifically to Torah and Talmud — allows them to find a home *in* the text: 'each commentary a return'" (Shostak 110).

writerly text, the readers of a text participate in the production of its meaning (Barthes). Roth's American Trilogy produces Jewish identity that becomes manifest in the real world; it has been read and internalized by readers, and it has inspired a discussion about the roles of Jews in America (as it has done in this thesis). Furthermore, Jewish identity is not simply a literary construct, but an identity shared by millions of individuals worldwide. As such, representations of Jewish identity are exceedingly personal.

Ethnographer Fran Markowitz attempted to resolve the question of Jewish identity and prove that “although united from without and within through metaphors of blood and race and treated as one all-embracing social category excluded in the Western imaginary from grace or soul, the Jews [...] and Jewishness [...] are startlingly varied” (Markowitz 264). When she conducted research, she chose not to rest as a mere “chronicler” of culture, but elected to be a “contributor,” participating in the spaces and interacting with individuals in order to elicit their own definitions of Jewish identity (264). She dialogically participated in the social experience, using a process called full-bodied ethnography, so termed by Karla Poewe (263). In other words, as she conducted research, she also examined her own body interacting with others. As a result, Markowitz explains how the Jewish people are “dialectically interacting with — and not just representing or emanating from — religious, literary, and legal texts” (264). Just as Markowitz interacted with her subjects in order to exhibit their shared Jewish identity, readers and writers of Jewish texts are responding to generations of Jewish textuality.

Instead of reacting to rabbinic literature, the characters in Philip Roth's American Trilogy react to the secular literature, thereby illustrating their participation in the global community while still maintaining signifiers of Judaism. The characters are formed through the texts they read (the Swede with his baseball autobiographies, Ira with his communist doctrines, and

Coleman with his classic texts), and their identities change as a result of these influences (the Swede becomes an all-American athlete, Ira becomes a communist, and Coleman becomes a classics professor). True, the Jewish people are often referred to as the people of the book — but the category of which books their identities are based on and which books the Jewish people have conversations with (or about) is expanding. It is no longer just rabbinic literature — it is all literature. By flourishing in the pages of a supposedly self-hating, anti-Semitic author, Roth's characters are expanding the definition of Jewishness and Jewish identity. Through Zuckerman, the past in America is being reshaped and reimagined, and by the nature of the trilogy's warm reception and subsequent impact on readers, so is the future. By creating fictional identities in literature, Roth is also carving out a space for experimentation; fiction allows Zuckerman (and Roth) to investigate different identities, to test the experiences that define them, and to discover out of which circumstances they arise.

Even though Zuckerman uses the process of writing the American Trilogy to better understand himself, his larger goal is to gain insight on a portion of his past, and the collective consciousness of post-Holocaust Jews in America. During Zuckerman's narrations of the three men's lives, he constantly returns to his own experience growing up in Newark in the 1940s and 50s, which illustrates his preoccupation with the period. The debate in those days centered on self-hatred and anti-Semitism in the wake of the Holocaust and the declaration of the state of Israel, essentially trying to answer the question of how Jews should present themselves to the outside world. In the American Trilogy, Zuckerman writes in the late 1990s, looking back and seeing how history has unfolded. As he discovers the lives of the three men, he attempts to discern how history has lead up to the present moment. Although Zuckerman sees the men as a product of their time period (the Vietnam War, the McCarthy era, and the Clinton impeachment),

in the back of his mind, the prevalent tensions of the 1940s and 50s influence the men's futures, since each possesses a significant connection to Zuckerman's childhood in the Jewish quarter of Newark. In short, the Jewish past in America (with Jews being fearful of a second Holocaust, and the prevalence of self-hatred and assimilation) informs our present. Today, Jewish Americans have an abundance of options for how to define their Jewishness, and modern Jews are not hampered by accusations of self-hatred (and even if they are, there will be another Jewish organization to welcome them). Therefore, assimilation will always be a source of vexation, but only if our definition of Judaism is Orthodoxy.

If we allow for a myriad of different definitions of Judaism, then we accept the inevitable expansion and increasing diversity of the Jewish community. Only by opening up Judaism can we hope to maintain it — a paradox embodied by the reality of the lives of many American Jews. Just as Roth is a Jewish writer and is not a Jewish writer, just as Nathan Zuckerman is Roth and is not Roth, each of the characters of the American Trilogy is Jewish and is not Jewish. Jewishness flourishes in paradoxes, arguments, and texts — it has done so throughout history, on the written page, and in American society.

### **Why Him Still: A Postscript**

As stressed in my thesis, the American Trilogy reflects the representational anxieties of American Jewish society in the 1940s and 50s. About 70 years later, one might wonder why this topic is a valuable one befitting fresh analysis. I believe that Roth's message that American Judaism is indefinable, predicated on personal choice, and constantly being reexamined through text is one that holds true to this day. From Jews who belong to an Orthodox shul (synagogue),

teach their children Hebrew, and converse only in Yiddish to Jews who claim only one Jewish grandfather on their mothers' side, go on Birthright, and support the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel, the fold of American Jewry will welcome them — in one establishment or another.

America is a nation of choices. No other Jewish community would welcome as much divergence in political and religious opinion, and America is frequently seen as the site of assimilation. In light of the Charlie Hebdo terror attacks, Jews around the world have lamented the state of Diaspora Judaism; either the Jewish people face anti-Semitism in Europe or they battle the temptation of assimilation in the United States (Heilman). If American Judaism is just a choice, and is frequently seen as the gateway to assimilation and complete loss of Judaism, is this a positive model to uphold? I think that Roth demonstrates for readers that multifaceted, contradictory personal identities can exist in America — and that the analysis of them makes for captivating novels. Roth's witty, fast-paced language brings characters to life and allows readers to converse with hyperbolized depictions of American Jewishness. Especially for those weary of assimilation — or a broadened definition of American Judaism not rooted in religion — Roth's American Trilogy is a safe space in which to interact with “self-hating,” unaffiliated Jews. Although their lives are a bit messy, the protagonists are part of the interlocking canvas of American life that spans from World War II to the present day — whether we like it or not. And for that reason, Roth's writing lives on more than half a century after the decades that he emphatically returns to in his controversial, self-reflective, and metafictional prose.

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