

PATRYCJA ANTOSZEK

THE PHANTOM IN AMERICAN ARCADIA:
RETHINKING RACE IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

Abstract. The article explores the problem of race and racial ambiguity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). Referring to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and her assumptions concerning "the Africanist presence," the paper discusses how the character's repressed African-American past returns to haunt not only the protagonist but also the reader. As biracial Coleman Silk succeeds in passing for a Jew, his body becomes a signifier whose signified turns out to be problematic. While Roth's narrative argues that the ideal of a self-made man that the protagonist represents is always already haunted by the ghost of racial uncertainty, it also demonstrates that the issue of race functions in contemporary writing primarily as a metaphor, or "a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was." Finally, the paper explores the way in which Roth's novel addresses the long familiar fear that racial boundaries do not exist and the coherent white American self is an illusion.

Key words: African American; biracial; identity; Jewish-American; passing; race; racial boundaries; whiteness.

Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000), a third book in his "American trilogy" including *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998) is, at least on the surface, a story of racial passing. Narrated, as Roth's other novels, by Nathan Zuckerman, the narrative focuses on Coleman Silk, a seventy-one-year-old African American classics professor, who for the last fifty years has passed as a white Jew. As several critics have pointed out, the story may have been inspired by the life of Anatole Broyard, an influential essayist and book reviewer for *The New York Times*, who like Roth's protagonist was a light-skinned black man passing as white. However, to reduce *The Hu-*

PATRYCJA ANTOSZEK, PhD—Department of American Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; address for correspondence: Al. Raławickie 14, PL 20-950 Lublin; E-mail: patbar@kul.pl

man Stain to yet another novel of passing would be to overlook its larger significance as a powerful commentary on the complexities of racial and identity issues in contemporary America. While passing is generally understood as “‘crossing over’ the color line in the United States from the black to the white side,” often involving “imaginative role-playing in [one’s] self-representation” (Sollors 247-8), it is also an act of upward social mobility, a version of America’s cherished myth of a self-made man.¹ Hence, several critical readings of Roth’s novel focus on issues such as the tragedy and farce of performing whiteness, racial prejudice and hypocrisy of the white society, or the complexity and ambiguity of the model of a social upstart, or self-made man.

But there is still another way of approaching the book’s intricate design. The novel’s central irony results from the fact that Roth’s protagonist, Coleman Silk, is accused of racism when, taking attendance in the classroom, he uses the word “spooks” to refer to two absent students who turn out to be black. The word “spooks,” which is “an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks” (*HS* 6) appears to be one of the novel’s central metaphors, suggesting at least two possible points of reference. In keeping with the protagonist’s personal story, it clearly alludes to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and its opening lines: “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—I might even be said to possess a mind” (Ellison 3). Roth makes an even more direct allusion to Ellison when Silk explains: “How could I know they were black students if I had never laid eyes on them . . . what I did know, indisputably, was that they were *invisible* students—and the word for invisible, for a ghost, for a spectre, is the word I used in its primary meaning” (*HS* 85). My reading of *The Human Stain* will revolve around this “primary meaning” of the word “spooks” as indicated by both Roth and Ellison, and will explore how the unsaid and unseen of American culture reveals itself in the novel to complicate the meaning of the narrative. While Roth’s book is clearly not a typical Gothic tale of horror in the style of Stoker’s *Dracula* or Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, its concern with transgressing boundaries as well as the suppressed identity and haunting past of its protagonist allows for this kind of reading.

¹ Interestingly, as Werner Sollors observes, “[i]n the whole portfolio of stories of social transformations that are available, black-white racial passing constitutes an exception in that it is condemned or even *punished* in societies that otherwise idealize, applaud, condone, or at least express amused ambivalence toward, mobility” (259).

It was Leslie Fiedler who in his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, first pronounced that “the proper subject for the American gothic is the black man, from whose shadow we have not yet emerged” (397). The link between race and the Gothic genre has been demonstrated also by Teresa Goddu, who argues that the curse of slavery and racism “hovers over the American Gothic,” while the genre “remains stubbornly entrenched within a discourse of racial demonization” (64,71). Although it is now an academic commonplace that race is a social construct and, as some cultural critics claim, has no social or historical reality,² Toni Morrison in her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* argues that “[t]he world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion” (46). What is more, Morrison demonstrates that “[e]ven, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation . . . Race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed racisms whose dynamics we are used to deciphering.” (46-47)

It may be worth to investigate how Philip Roth’s quintessentially American novel confirms Morrison’s statement that the Africanist shadow—“a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire” (Morrison 38)—still rests uncomfortably at the bottom of the American identity, and how problematizing racial boundaries may question other inherently American values.

Justin Edwards in his book *Gothic Passages—Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* confirms the genre’s preoccupation with issues of race and states that “cultural criticism on passing has been infected by gothic discourse” (xxix). He points out that “passing in general, repeats the gothic discourse of the double through the split between the performed self and the former identity” (Edwards xxviii), while racially mixed characters express the typically gothic rhetoric of “confinement . . . mixed bloodlines, and unspeakable family secrets” (xxx). Biracial figures function commonly as the gothic Other, and consequently become a source of extreme anxiety. As Elaine Ginsberg explains, “the mulatto can generate ‘cultural anxiety’ by highlighting the closeness of ‘blackness’ to ‘whiteness,’ thus questioning the status and privilege accompanying whiteness” (qtd. in Edwards xxxi). Edwards also quotes Marjorie Garber, who claims that the passing figure “has the effect of ‘a phan-

² Cf. Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Race,” *Writing, and Difference* (1986), Patrice D. Rankine, “Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man,” p. 106.

tom or a ghost' on American culture" (qtd. in Edwards xxix). The critic concludes: "[b]ecause biracial figures resist the polarity of American racial binaries, their physical presence provokes inquiries into, and a justification for, the rigid American parameters of racial difference" (Edwards xxxi).

From the very beginning of the novel, and long before the reader learns about Silk's major secret, the narrative focuses on various forms of transgression. *The Human Stain's* opening motto is a fragment from Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*:

OEDIPUS:

What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?

CREON:

By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood . . .

Quite fittingly, then, the first pages of the book describe the political climate of the summer of 1998 when Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky and all its embarrassing details made the headlines. "It was the summer," the narrator explains, "when a president's penis was on everyone's mind, and life, in all its shameless impurity, once again confounded America" (*HS* 3). The sense of indignation and resentment felt by the righteous towards the excesses of the White House bring to the narrator's mind "the persecuting spirit" described by Nathaniel Hawthorne more than a century earlier. As in the story of Hester Prynne, the need to judge, condemn and purify "revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" (*HS* 2). It is that very summer that Zuckerman learns about the affair that his neighbour, Coleman Silk, has with a thirty-six-year-old illiterate janitor Faunia Farley. While at first, it is the relationship with a lower-class woman half his age, which seems to be Silk's major secret, it soon becomes clear that what draws Zuckerman to his mysterious neighbour is "something *not* there . . . there's a blank in him . . . a blotting out, an excision" (*HS* 213). In this season so ostensibly marked by desire, it is the protagonist's urge to cross the line and transcend his biological race that turns out to be his primary transgression. It is only at Coleman's funeral that the narrator learns about his long repressed identity—about the denial or erasure of his African American self.

Silk's decision to pass was not based solely on a desire to improve his social position by being seen as white. As a young man he experienced racism and segregation, for example when buying a meal he was recognised as black and called a nigger, or when he was thrown out of a white whorehouse

for the same reason. At school, he was a class valedictorian but saw that his very well educated father could work only as a waiter on a train serving white customers. What is more, Coleman's white girlfriend leaves him after he introduces her to his black family, thus rejecting him because of his African American roots. And yet, racial discrimination is not the major factor in his decision to pass—it is the feeling of confinement that he experiences being part of one clearly defined racial category. Silk becomes aware of this need to escape the constraints of racial classifications for the first time when he finds himself part of a Black college community:

At Howard [the university for African Americans] he'd discovered he wasn't just a nigger to Washington, D.C.—as if that shock weren't strong enough, he discovered at Howard that he was a Negro as well. A Howard Negro at that. Overnight the raw I was part of a we with all of the we's overbearing solidity, and he didn't want anything to do with it or with the next oppressive we that came along either. You finally leave home, the Ur of we, and you find another we? Another place that's just like that, the *substitute* for that? . . . He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I. (*HS* 108)

In his celebration of individualism, in the need to invent himself outside of ethnic categories and in spite of racial divisions, Silk enacts the quintessentially American scenario of becoming a self-made man, while his life and career of a respected professor and college dean, paradoxically, is the American success story *par excellence*. Zuckermann realizes it when, brooding upon Coleman's assumed identity, he wonders: "Was he merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness?" (*HS* 334). For Roth's character, then, passing is more a strategy for becoming an individual—autonomous, free, alienated from history, and, ultimately, transcending race: "All he'd ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free" (*HS* 120).³ Indeed, attempting to pass for a Jew, Coleman Silk seems to reject the rigid categories of both blackness and whiteness, and chooses to be identified with a minority that is only "ambiguously white".⁴

³ Interestingly, Coleman's motives clearly echo Ralph Ellison's words: "if you accept the fact that you are neither black nor white, Gentile nor Jew, Rebel-bred nor Yankee-born, you have the freedom to be truly free" (qtd. in Parrish 78).

⁴ In *Abolishing White Masculinity* Stephany Rose comments on "the unclear position of Jews in American socio-political history" and quotes scholars who labelled them as "in-between peo-

By creating a character who re-invents himself, who, like Jay Gatsby, erases his past to follow a dream, Roth challenges the meaning of race and constructions of whiteness like Mark Twain and F.S. Fitzgerald before him. To become a new being, this paradigmatic American act of self-creation is, as Roth's narrator says, "[t]he drama that underlies America's story" (*HS* 342). Historically, as Toni Morrison argues, "the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man" has always been based on the hierarchy of race: American individualism, she believes, relies on the alienation and difference from the black slave as the Other, "the projection of the not-me" (38–9). To put it differently, the African American has been an embodiment of that which the white American does not want to be, and against whom American people have been able to define themselves. In *The Human Stain*, however, by highlighting the fluid identity of Coleman Silk as black, white and Jewish, by deconstructing racial difference and clearly defined ethnic boundaries, Roth seems to be taking the issue of identity on another level. By letting Coleman's lie, as well as his whole life, "be undone by a word" (*HS* 334), Roth attempts to draw the reader's attention to both the power of language and the arbitrariness of signs. If the word *spook* may stand for both a ghost, or specter *and* a black person, the meaning of such labels as *blackness* or *whiteness* also becomes problematic. Making the neither-black-nor-white-nor-Jewish Coleman Silk a signifier of white masculinity, Roth complicates the question about the nature of race and ethnicity: what does it mean to be African American, or white American, or Jewish, if one may choose to perform one or all of these identities? If there is "a blank" in Silk, which the narrator finds so disturbing, it is the inability to label him, to put him into any clearly defined racial categories.

The complex identity of Coleman Silk, the ambiguity of his motives, and the irony of his becoming a victim of racial politics is Roth's attempt to challenge the meaning of blackness and whiteness, as well as the whole bipolar way of reasoning and perceiving reality inherent in American consciousness. While the demonized dark "Other" may indeed be a ghost that continues to haunt contemporary America, it is the inevitable fluidity and ambiguity of racial divisions which becomes the real source of anxiety. As Eugenia DeLamotte observes, "behind the fears of dark, racialised others on which the Gothic construction of whiteness hinges is the unspeakable other

ples" or "not-quite-white" (126). She also observes that the acceptance of Jews as white in the United States after the Second World War "represents a major shift in American race and foreign perspectives" (9).

of that construction: the fear that there is no such thing as whiteness, or even race" (17). Indeed, the most uncanny aspect of passing is questioning and dissolution of racial boundaries—the threat that the carefully organized and coherent white American self “may dissolve into some nebulous white mist of undefinition” (DeLamotte 27). While in Gothic literature, and in Roth’s novel, transgressing boundaries is one of central preoccupations, to contest the color line is probably the most threatening of all. If racial boundaries do not exist, there is in fact no “Other” against which to construct one’s superior, coherent sense of self, and the long-celebrated hegemony of whiteness becomes a myth. And finally, if Coleman Silk is not who we thought he was, what in fact lies behind the mask of American white, male, middle-class self?⁵ As Coleman’s “Jewish” children, who are not aware of their African American ancestry, may one day have a dark-skinned off-spring, Roth seems to be saying, can anyone in America be sure their blood is one hundred percent pure white? Indeed, the ideal of a self-made man that Roth’s protagonist represents is always already haunted by the ghost of racial uncertainty.

Not incidentally, in *The Human Stain* rethinking whiteness and racial politics takes place against the backdrop of the sexual scandal around Clinton-Lewinsky affair. The real phantom that haunts America, the novel seems to imply, is that which has long been buried at the bottom of the individual and collective unconscious—the fear of impurity in racial, sexual, religious or moral terms. While purity requires clearly defined boundaries, that which does not respect borders, “[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4), or *the abject*, has to be excluded from everyday reality, only to return and be confronted like anything that has been repressed. As a biracial figure, Coleman Silk represents the “in-betweenness” associated with abjection, which “complicates the distinctions between self and other, subject and object” (Edwards 114). As Edwards points out, “[f]or Kristeva, the abject is the gothic identity that highlights the permeability of borders and that permits the passage from one category to another” (49). If a passing figure functions as a ghost in American culture, it is because it embodies the collapse of the binary systems of representation as well as the subject’s inherently unstable position at the brink of dissolution. To use Elizabeth Grosz’s words, “even at times of its strongest cohesion and integration the subject tee-

⁵ Discussing the influence of Ellison on Roth’s novel, Parish remarks that “Roth’s portrayal of Coleman challenges racial classifications and does so along the lines explored by Ellison in *Invisible Man* and in his essays” (46).

ters on the brink of a gaping abyss . . . [which] is the locus for the subject's generation and the place of its potential obliteration" (qtd. in Edwards 49).

The illicit sexuality of President Clinton, the alleged racism of Athena College professor, as well as his sexual affair with a young, lower-class, uneducated woman also work to destabilize the clear cut boundaries of purity and propriety. "It was the summer in America when the nausea returned" (*HS* 3), Zuckerman observes, and when the president's sexual and moral transgressions bring back the nation's own repressed desires and fears. The initial impeachment of Bill Clinton as well as the banishment of Coleman Silk for his dubiously racial comment are performed by the seekers of purity similar to those surrounding Hester Prynne on the scaffold. Delphine Roux, Silk's colleague who most forcefully accuses him of racism, does it only to conceal her own racial prejudices—composing a personal ad for *The New York Review of Books* she adds a note: "Whites only need apply" (*HS* 262). Roth's narrator seems to voice the concern of the author, when he says: "It was strange to think . . . that people so well educated and professionally civil should have fallen so willingly for the venerable human dream of a situation in which one man can embody evil. Yet there is this need, and it is undying and it is profound" (*HS* 306-7).

Coleman Silk finds himself unable to finish his autobiographical book entitled *Spooks*, but Roth's narrator—the writer Nathan Zuckerman—does it for him. While Silk cannot come to grips with the ghosts of his racially marked past, with his own indeterminacy and invisibility, Zuckerman locates Silk's dilemma in a larger context and renames the book *The Human Stain*. In a scene, in which Silk's lover, Faunia, talks to a crow in a wildlife habitat, the reader begins to grasp Zuckerman's/Roth's central idea:

The human stain . . . Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. . . . It's why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity? (*HS* 242)

In a fashion similar to F.S. Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, Roth questions the myth of America as innocent and pure, and reveals the fallacy of such assumptions. All his characters, including biracial Coleman Silk, illiterate and abused Faunia, traumatized Vietnam veteran Les Farley, and the

promiscuous president Clinton, bear the stain of “impurity”—they challenge our neatly constructed social, racial or moral boundaries to reveal their artificiality and fragility. It is true then, as Toni Morrison suggests, that the issue of race functions in contemporary writing, and therefore also in Roth’s novel, primarily as a metaphor, or “a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was” (63).

The Human Stain ends with a fishing scene, in which Lester Farley, most probably the murderer of his former wife Faunia and her lover Coleman Silk, stands alone surrounded by the impeccable purity and whiteness of the scenery: “the icy white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate’s signature on a sheet of paper. There it was, if not the whole story, the whole picture. Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that’s constantly turning over its water atop an arca-dian mountain in America.” (HS 361)

The ending of the novel brings to mind other images of white, limitless spaces in American literary works: the “great, high, and unbelievably white” mountain top in Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” or the white frozen land in Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King* (Morrison 58-9). As Morrison explains, “images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say” (59). In Roth’s novel, the final scene illustrates perfectly the anxiety that lies at the heart of *The Human Stain*: this is an image of the “elemental imperfection,” or the contradictions inherent in the vision of America: the dark figure of the violent Vietnam veteran like a blot on the otherwise perfect landscape, like the infamous stain on Monika Lewinsky’s dress, and like one drop of black blood in the white man. But the closing image is complicated further by the fact that the dark figure, which *stains* the impeccable whiteness of the frozen lake, is in fact the white man yet containing in himself the evil, fear and weakness of every human being. If Roth’s novel may be seen as a sequel to *Invisible Man* and a tribute to Ralph Ellison, it also, like Ellison’s writing, manages to make the readers realize that “whatever else the white American is, he or she is essentially black” (Parrish 73).

WORKS CITED

- DeLamotte, Eugenia. "White Terror, Black Dreams: Gothic Constructions of Race in the Nineteenth Century." *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard. Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004. 17-31. Print.
- Edwards, Justin D. *Gothic Passages—Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: The Modern Library, 1994. Print.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 1966. Dalkey Archive Press, 2008. Print.
- Goddu, Teresa. "American Gothic." *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*. Eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. 63-72. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. London: Picador, 1993. Print.
- Parrish, Timothy. *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. Print.
- Rose, Stephany. *Abolishing White Masculinity from Mark Twain to Hip-hop: Crises in Whiteness*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014. Print.
- Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*. London: Vintage, 2001. Print.
- Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

ROZWAŻANIA NA TEMAT RASY
W POWIEŚCI PHILIPA ROTH A *LUDZKA SKAZA*

Streszczenie

Tematem artykułu jest problem przynależności rasowej i związanych z nią niejednoznaczności w powieści Philipa Roth a pt. *Ludzka skaza*. Bohaterem książki jest czarnoskóry Coleman Silk, którego jasna karnacja pozwala mu na podawanie się za białego człowieka. Odwołując się do książki Toni Morrison pt. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, autorka pokazuje w jaki sposób wyparta przez bohatera przynależność rasowa powraca jako trudne do udźwignięcia brzemie, oraz w jaki sposób problem rasy staje się metaforą społecznych i ekonomicznych podziałów w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Artykuł dowodzi także, że jednym z głównych tematów powieści Roth a jest niepokój związany z faktem, że granice rasowe w istocie nie istnieją, a hegemonia białego człowieka zawsze oparta była na iluzji.

Streszcila Patrycja Antoszek

Słowa kluczowe: Afroamerykanie; dwurasowość; granice rasowe; rasa; tożsamość.