

PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*, A NARRATIVE OF RHETORIC

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Abstract: Chronologically, The Human Stain is the eighth text to feature the character-narrator Nathan Zuckerman and the third aimed at reconstructing another character's destiny, i.e. Coleman Silk's story of doom. This book is the third in the series which can be labeled, in the words of James Phelan, a 'narrative of rhetoric', as, for the third time, the author Roth is telling the story of Nathan Zuckerman's telling the story of a certain outstanding man. Thus, the authorial audience's interest in an exceptional character's destiny is juxtaposed with issue of narrative construction, which highlights the role of storytelling as a means of rendering coherence to people's experiences by locating them within historical and autobiographical contexts.

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative, Nathan Zuckerman, the framing device, the narrator's (un)reliability

The Human Stain, one of the most critically acclaimed novel of the series and the eighth to feature (if we do not count Roth's 1988 book *The Facts*, where the mimetic functions of Zuckerman are completely omitted) the character of Nathan Zuckerman, is set in 1990s America, the time of political correctness and of the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal. Zuckerman is for the third time mainly the observer-character who reconstructs the story of another man looking backwards.

The story and its themes

The narrator-character of *The Human Stain* is 65-year-old Nathan Zuckerman. At this point in life, Nathan Zuckerman is impotent and incontinent following an operation to remove his prostate (mentioned at the beginning of *American Pastoral*), having to cope with the indignity of wearing diapers. Despite physical impairment, according to Brauner, Nathan Zuckerman is living his Utopian dream of the artist in pastoral isolation dedicated purely to his art, as a self-purification ritual (200).

The action of *The Human Stain* is set in the year of 1998, in rural New England, flashing back to the 1940s and 50s Newark, New Jersey, the protagonist's and narrator's place of birth. Narrator Nathan Zuckerman, a successful writer, living retired and isolated in the Berkshires near the small New England college of Athena, becomes friends with a neighbor named Coleman Silk, apparently another secular Jew. Silk is the former dean and professor of Classics Greek literature at the small Athena College in New England. He resigned after a campus scandal in which he was wrongly accused of racism after a chance and misunderstood remark. Calling the roll in class, Coleman noticed that two students had never attended his class, and asked "Do they exist or are they spooks?"(6), not knowing that the absentees were African American, nor the racial implications of the word "spook", pejorative for a black person. As a result, Silk was accused of racism by the board of the Athena College (made up of professors he had employed and supported in his capacity as the dean of the college), and was soon forced to retire. Here the novel becomes a commentary on the politics that rage in academe, most specifically, on the inquisitorial spirit associated with political correctness.

As a result of his unfair accusations and subsequent resignation, his wife, Iris, died. Apparently, Coleman too had been living his utopian dream, having succeeded to be

assimilated in the mainstream of American nation, but after his wife's death he discovered that living a dream was not actually living (he would only feel alive after having met, fallen in love with and confessed his secret to Faunia). Initially, Coleman resorts to the local writer, 65-year-old Nathan Zuckerman, to get his story told, then, when Zuckerman refuses to write the book, Coleman begins to write it himself. Six months later, Coleman abandons his project due to an affair he is having with an illiterate cleaning woman half his age, Faunia Farley, the ex-wife of an alienated and crazy Vietnam veteran Les Farley, who is stalking them. Faunia makes Coleman want to return to the imperfection of reality - she stands for the transforming power of sex/the erotic; he offers her protection and stability. Not long after their relationship begins, they are both killed in an accident caused by Les Farley. At Coleman's funeral, due to his sister Ernestine's presence, Zuckerman is surprised to discover that Coleman was in fact a light-skinned African-American man that had passed for a Jew for most of his life, disowning his family. Zuckerman finds it ironic that Coleman had lost his wife and job, his entire life due to the racism accusations that became ridiculous in the light of Coleman's true identity, and decides to write a novel called *The Human Stain*, based on Coleman's journey of identity making.

Zuckerman permanently takes us back to Coleman's youth in Newark, New Jersey, through flashbacks, depicting Silk's stages of transgression, explaining his decisions to reinvent himself with a different ethnic identity, as African Americans were gravely discriminated in 1940s and 50s American society. Coleman's decision to forget his past and invent a new future is influenced by his boxing coach, Doc Chizner, who suggests that if he does not tell anyone that he is colored, they will think that he is a Jew. The first time that Coleman tries to pass for a Jew is during a boxing match with another black man, whom he beats up and calls a "nigger", thus betraying his true origins. The first actual step towards becoming white was his signing up for the navy as white, and the final one was renouncing his family by marrying Jewish Iris, after having told her that his parents had died. For Silk, the moment of truth, the incident that changes everything, happens, ironically enough, in Washington, D.C., when he was about to enroll in all-Negro Howard University. He was called the N-word, with its accumulated cultural force of all that is degrading and demeaning. Silk, decided he did not want to have to deal with anything like that anymore and started to reinvent himself, and in the process, became free to be whatever he wanted, free to pursue his aims and achieve his potential of being stupendous.

In order to obtain all the obvious advantages of the new identity, Coleman Silk, sacrifices his family. Here is how Zuckerman describes Coleman telling his mother that she'll never see his white wife or his children:

He was murdering her. You don't have to murder your father. The world will do that for you. There are plenty of forces out to get your father. The world will take care of him, as it had indeed taken care of Mr. Silk. Who there is to murder is the mother, and that's what he saw he was doing to her, the boy who'd been loved as he'd been loved by this woman. Murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom! It would have been much easier without her. But only through this test can he be the man he has chosen to be, unalterably separated from what he was handed at birth, free to struggle at being free like any human being would wish to be free. To get that from life, the alternate destiny, on one's own terms, he must do what must be done. (250)

Interestingly, when Coleman decides to pass for somebody with a different ethnicity in order to escape the prejudices of the black race, he does not choose to pass for a white man, but takes on a different, (only apparently) less prejudiced ethnicity. What is ironic is that he ends up condemned for being a racist against the race he secretly belongs to, and that his tragic end is caused by another man's racism: Les Farley's motivation to kill him is racism in the form of anti-Semitism - what goes around, comes around!

Another interesting observation is that Coleman's usage of the words "nigger", "spooks" and "lily-white" could be interpreted as a subconscious invitation of retribution upon himself, as if he was craving the revelation of his secret, in order to be restored as "Silky Silk", in order to return to the time when he was himself, before he became slave to his own lies and masquerades. But he cannot truly return.

The story of Coleman's fight against the charges of racism and then charges of immorality for his affair with Faunia Farley are closely paralleled with President Bill Clinton's impeachment following the sexual affair with twenty-one-year-old employee of the Oval Office, Monica Lewinski. The analogy between the protagonist of the story and the U.S. President of the time, makes the story representative for an entire nation. The novel begins with the unraveling of Coleman's secret that he had started an affair with Faunia Farley, and immediately after we are informed of Clinton's impeachment for his affair with Monica Lewinski. There are a number of similarities between the two personalities, such as their nicknames, which have the same sonority and significance, Clinton's nickname was "Slick Willy", and Coleman's is "Silky Silk". They both have adoptive fathers whom follow one way or another, Clinton being the name of the president's adoptive father and Coleman assuming Chizner's Jewishness. They are both struck by scandal at the apex of their careers. Finally, they both had affairs with much younger women, Monica Lewinsky in one case, and Faunia Farley in the other.

The symbolism of the title

According to Rabinowitz's rules of notice (58-65), the title *The Human Stain*, through its generalized reference, serves the writer's aim to remove this book from a specifically parochial context and place it in a larger frame, the focus is clearly neither on plot, nor on character. It is on the thematic level.

The phrase *the human stain* is linked to many aspects of the plot. Brauner explains it refers to the skin pigmentation that influences the ethno-racial identity of human beings, and to the fact that Coleman chooses to pass for a Jew, in order to avoid the metaphorical stain attached to African Americans (209). Parrish examining the actual utterance of these words, made by Faunia in characterizing a hand-raised crow that is rejected by other crows because it has grown estranged from its natural environment, might interpret *the human stain* as a reason for rejection. However, another more widely accepted interpretation is that connected with Zuckerman's words: "We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen – there's no other way to be here" (242), which allude to the human physicality and sexuality, to the stain on his trousers due to his incontinence, closely linked to the stain on Monica Lewinski's dress, as the failure to exercise restraint and to "monitor" oneself, a failure associated with our own mistaken choices or with yielding to instinctual needs. Accordingly, to exist is to make mistakes which leave stains. Coleman

himself was a man marked by the “stain” of giving up his history and his blackness when he chose a different identity for himself. His courageous attempt at liberating himself from the prejudices and drawbacks associated with his race was also a betrayal to his origins. His passing was not complete and stain-free. The stain remained with his destiny and came back to haunt him in the form of his verbal indiscretion.

Technique

This is one of the books which prove great concern with technique. This drives Roth into metafiction, consequently, the subject of how the novel is made becomes once again in the series as important as what is in the book. In fact, the Zuckerman saga in its entirety shows very explicitly how novels are made.

The whole of the narrative is presented through the technique of metafiction as a false document, *The Human Stain* novel which Zuckerman is supposed to have written, making the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader. At the end of the novel, the narrator makes sure that his narrative audience become aware of reading the very book mentioned in the conversation between Nathan and Less Farley, while within a different layer, the authorial audience with its awareness of the synthetic and the artificial world, understand that they are reading a book written by an implied author about a writer having written a book on some events which happened. Zuckerman's writing his books parallels Roth's writing the series. Thus, Roth's novel acquires rhetorical dimensions: he “is telling a particular story to a particular audience in particular situation for a particular purpose” (Phelan 4). The particular story that Roth is telling is the Zuckerman's telling of another man's story. By viewing Zuckerman's telling and Roth's telling as parallel rhetorical acts, we can recognize a crucial element of the novel construction that may not initially jump out during a first reading: the novel is a narrative with at least three interrelated levels. These are (1) **the inner level**, the events narrated by the *writer* Zuckerman: the story of Coleman Silk – *the Silk story*; (2) **the middle level**, narrated by Zuckerman himself in the first person which discloses his act of writing about somebody else; this level is the report of his own telling the protagonist's story to the narrative audience; this is Zuckerman's story framing the Silk's story, i.e. framing the inner level; this can be called *the framing story*; (3) **the outer level**, constructed and designed by Roth as implied author: the largely covert communication from Roth to his audiences (implied and real) of the author telling the Zuckerman's story of the protagonist story; this is *Roth's story* or Roth's rhetoric. There are important consequences arising from this.

The homodiegetic narration that Roth chose to use in this novel (in fact in the entire series) has direct consequences over what constitutes mimesis in the book. In *The Human Stain*, it is characterized by *paralepsis* - the narrator telling more than he knows, hence the necessity to understand Roth's rhetorical reasons for the *paralepsis* and discuss the narrator's reliability and unreliability. Zuckerman the narrator of Coleman Silk's misadventures, tells us that he obtained his information from Silk's manuscript and from conversations with him, but it becomes clear to the reader that some of the episodes – most notably the death of Coleman Silk- cannot have been based on these sources and must be the product of the narrator's imaginative recreation of what might have happened. In the same way – by means of his imagination- Zuckerman tries to unravel the secrets and lies of the various other characters' lives – including the young French feminist professor who primarily made Coleman lose his

job. This spells unreliability, but there are two reasons why Zuckerman's unreliability as a narrator is acceptable:

1. Nathan Zuckerman, as a homodiegetic narrator has a fluctuating relationship between his narratorial and his character functions in the course of every novel. The shift in American trilogy to narrator functions is also a shift from the focus on mimetic to the one on thematic functions and even synthetic. Thus, in *The Human Stain* (like in the whole American trilogy) the narrator is set to depict a spectacular story of doom. His agenda is to use literature in order to make sense of unfair and inexplicable circumstances bending an exceptional person. This person both wants and deserves Zuckerman to write his biography (even if it is to a great extent fictionalized) to set the record straight. The end justifies the means.

2. Behind Zuckerman the narrator stands Zuckerman the implied writer who allows his fictionalized narrator-character to be as unreliable as it is necessary in order to be compelling and efficient in his writing.

One of the devices Roth uses most successfully to create the rhetorical effects is the point of view/focalization/perspective. The narrative presents the point of view of Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator-character, who closely observes the main character, Coleman Silk. Repeatedly the text suddenly changes its vantage point from Zuckerman's perspective to the limited perspective of one of the characters—that is, when readers start seeing what one of the other characters sees, which means that the words read represent what the character is saying or thinking. Alternatively, sometimes the vision of a scene is too large for a character to have; it is a vision of events that is beyond that available to the characters, therefore it can be assumed that the accompanying words are those of Zuckerman the narrator (but never of the implied author).

Unlike the *American Pastoral* in which Zuckerman apparently disappears in the first half of the novel, in *The Human Stain* Zuckerman's voice follows the story (despite a constant flickering of point of view) and provides the conclusion of the novel. According to Schur, Roth seemingly resolves the problem of distinct narrative viewpoints by allowing Zuckerman the last words regarding Silk. The novel opening from Zuckerman's point of view, readers can reasonably expect that it will be dominated by that point of view or will at least close with it. The author fulfills that expectation to create a sense of closure.

What is important is that there are no disruptions in terms of author-narrator relationship. Roth (the implied author) does not use a "dual focalization" in depicting Zuckerman narrating Silk's story. Zuckerman (the narrator), on the other hand, uses it when he lives voyeuristically through the characters he depicts. In this way he signals the difference between his own perception of things, his own vision and values, and the perceptions, vision and values of the people he describes in his narration. This indicates that many times there are ethical conflicts between Zuckerman's perception and ethical values and his subjects'.

Another technique used is temporal distortion, and fragmentation of the narrative through flashbacks, or, more specifically, external analepsis (flashback to before the narrative started) which take us from the present time of the narration, the year of 1998, to the 1940s and 50s, to the protagonist's youth, in order to create suspense in the story, and also help develop the character of Coleman Silk.

Conclusion

The Human Stain is a narrative of rhetoric which delights its readers with its exceptional protagonist's destiny. It is a story which transcends parochial concerns appealing to a whole nation who has witnessed the political correctness policies of the 1980s and 1990s. Roth knows in order to make the narrative compelling, story is only half of his task, the other is narrative technique. As a result, he adopts a number of rhetorical devices which highlight the role of storytelling as a means of rendering coherence to people's experiences and drives the book close to metafiction.

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