

**(INDOCTR)NATION: DUTY, DISRUPTION, DISINTEGRATION IN  
PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL***

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***Abstract:** While readings of *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth's 1997 masterpiece, primarily revolve around the protagonist, "Swede" Levov, and the tragic fall of his *American Dream*, this paper will examine the community values, expectations, pressures, de-/il-lusions behind that process. In the turbulent 1960s, the romantic tradition of American pastoral utopias is shattered by harsh socio-historical realities and the radicalization of public discourse.*

***Keywords:** America; (Jewish) community, history, individual, nation*

## **1. Introduction**

The non-fictional background against which *American Pastoral* unfolds is dominated by the challenging and polarizing reality of the United States' active involvement in the Vietnam War. The ensuing social unrest largely illustrates the inevitable ethical and ontological dilemmas that envelop individual and communal consciousness alike. In Seymour (nicknamed "the Swede") Levov, Roth creates a most impactful protagonist, caught in and disturbed by the powerful conundrums of a tempestuous historical age. He does so by recording and playing back to the reader fictional, yet plausible versions of the convictions, mannerisms, hopes and failures of an entire generation, as well as of a particular (immigrant/ ethnic/ religious/ cultural) community. Levov's destiny is shocking precisely because he is the enviable boy-next-door of Jewish Newark, the luxury product of an entire mythology of successful Americanness, which crumbles with apparently no palpable reason.

The novel sets out to debunk stereotypes and their perniciousness by crawling underneath polished surfaces, into the anxiety, fear, and rage of a nation in distress. As pointed out by reputed Roth scholar and biographer, Ira Nadel, *American Pastoral* scrutinizes the unsettling ways in which middle-class values fall apart, while an affectionate father witnesses in astonishment how his lifetime hopes and achievements are undermined by his extremist daughter's terrorist actions:

Taking the *American Pastoral* ideal and satirizing it (...), Roth shows how urban decay and poverty forces a rewriting of the romance tradition of American literature. (...) Chaos replaces order, disintegration of the self substituting for the structure of a normal life, however one defines it. (Nadel 2011: 25)

This paper will focus on how the novel exposes the fragmentation of unified truths, the dissolution of cardinal values, the moral obscurity, as they all seem to take over the foreground of American life and imagination.

## 2. Manufactured happiness: aspiration and assimilation

Seymour Levov's private and public trajectories evolve in parallel: he is perceived as the embodiment of his community's ideals. They are reconstructed while his story is narrated in retrospect, after Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's fictional alter-ego, attends his 45<sup>th</sup> high-school reunion and reencounters former classmate, Jerry Levov, the Swede's brother. At both individual and collective levels, the nostalgic recollection of the rise and fall of the neighborhood hero begins with romanticizing the impeccably Americanized protagonist:

Through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war. (Roth 1998: 3-4)

As suggested in the passage above, the Jewish community's capacity for self-delusion via an overarching fantasy of perfection (in sports, in this case) is comparable to and assimilated with the WASP majority's propensity for obliterating uncomfortable truths and manufacturing images of an undisturbed pursuit of happiness instead. Thus, from the beginning of this narrative of American Dreams gone astray, one's attention is drawn to the inherent escapism behind the projection of individual and communal accomplishment. The ethnic minority's desire to fit in is doubled by a psychological mechanism that extends to the Gentile majority as well: denial and separation from anything unpleasant, via good practice examples of camaraderie and determination. In such a context, the young Swede becomes an inspiring, mythological, and highly mythologized figure of his native community.

His initial portrayal is revealing and ominous: "His aloofness, his seeming passivity as the desired object of all this asexual lovemaking, made him appear, if not divine, a distinguished cut above the more primordial humanity of just about everybody else at the school. He was fettered to history, an *instrument* of history." (Roth 1998: 5) On the one hand, the reader witnesses the adulation with which this symbolical member is surrounded by the school, family, neighborhood communities. He stands out as a nationalized, deracialized, desexualized model of social integration. On the other hand, he is simultaneously defined and constrained by the historical moments that shape him as a person and as a citizen: he joined the U.S. marines in 1945 after graduating from high-school, and returned in 1947, went to college and ticked all the right boxes of a conventional, (white) middle-class good life, demonstratively marrying Miss America. Then everything began to fall apart.

The narrator, Zuckerman, who ponders Swede's evolution through the lens of his similar experience and aspirations, understands the man's magnetism to his Jewish peers: he leads the way towards the assimilationist experience many craved, particularly after the horrors of World War II. Identification, as well as critical self-analysis, are to be found in the following presentation:

In our idolizing the Swede and his unconscious oneness with America, I suppose there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection. Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews

who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different, resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede who was actually only another of our neighborhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns. (Roth 1998: 19-20)

The conundrums of hyphenation and de-hyphenation, the burden of communal oscillation between submission to mainstream expectations and dissent thereto, self-affirmation and self-negation are the pillars that support the hypnotizing, yet fragile edifice of the Swede's greatness. His physical appearance and his behaviour do not irrevocably distinguish him from any white American of his generation and are, therefore, enviable and admirable for the rest of the Newark immigrant offspring.

The inner contradictions of the Jewish nature, which Roth often dwells upon in his writings, are presented as having a greater influence upon the Swede's actions, reactions, and public image than his agency, replaced by a passivity that is likely to condemn him. Jewish-Americanness as a status quo is problematic because, while making the coveted transition to the privileges of white U.S. citizenship and belonging, the protagonist appears to lose his communal legacy.

Where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that he had eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness [...] What was the Swede's subjectivity? (Roth 1998: 20)

Identity and authenticity come to the fore of the discourse on Seymour, as Zuckerman questions his affiliation to the group mentality and sentiments that have propelled him as an example of upward mobility and cultural adaptation. It seems that an effacement of Jewishness into Americanness, a form of ethnic transformation rather than preservation ultimately dominates his trajectory, which lacks the depth and charisma expected from somebody as firmly rooted in normativity. While recording what is generically perceived as the flawlessness of the Swede's social performance, Roth's alter-ego narrator is bound to also observe, to his surprise, the banality of conformity, the annulment of (self-)questioning, the undeterred obedience to prefabricated expectations. "Something was on top of him that had called a halt to him. Something had turned him into a human platitude. Something had warned him: You must not run counter to anything." (Roth 1998: 23)

What could, perhaps, be taken for the wisdom and flexibility meant to trigger harmonious personal development and cohabitation is equated by the narrator with Seymour's incapability of original views and emotions. His inability to revolt and, hence, his incapacity to understand other people's indignations are crucial for his tragic fate. While seeing and accepting no nuances results in the type of moral resolution that may ensure a much-needed personal balance, negotiating everyday life between irreconcilable opposites proves impossible.

In *American Pastoral*, Roth resorts to his habit of conflating metatextual and (con)textual character development. The following meditation on writing and the role of observation in that process can prophetically apply to decoding the Swede's personal evolution:

You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance [...] You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all 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. (Roth 1998: 35)

This famous passage directly concerns Zuckerman's preoccupation with the accuracy, relevance, and truth-value of collecting, sharing, and understanding life narratives. Storytelling is his trade of choice. Therefore, his ruminations are natural and illuminating in terms of blending and accommodating multiple perspectives. This semi-jocular, nevertheless serious approach to the meanings of art and existence can be seen as anticipating the revelation of the Swede's intimate and repetitive failure to get people - particularly the ones closest to him - right.

### **3. (Dis)Illusionment: the fall from idyllic grace**

As aptly pointed out by Timothy Parrish (2000) in "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*", the Swede's idyllic vision is countered by the reality of ethnic struggle. The ensuing tension pervades both the life story itself and the subsequent narrative thereof.

Zuckerman introduces discord into this Garden of Eden through the presence of Joe Orcutt, the image of WASP gentility and, as the Swede painfully learns, his wife's lover. Under Orcutt's supervision, the Swede receives a tour of Morris County-specifically the site that was George Washington's headquarters and a cemetery that dated back to the American Revolution. Orcutt of course is unaware of Swede's Johnny Appleseed fantasy, but the effect of Orcutt's tour is to remind the Swede that his origins in the Revolution are pure fantasy. Put another way, Orcutt takes the Swede out to show him who really owns America and inhabits its mythology (Parrish 2000: 89-90).

Such paragraphs and the described circumstances are meant to shatter the characters' and the readers' illusions of equal chances and common aspirations in the America the Levovs inhabit. By openly placing in opposition ideas and ideologies, the pastoral and the catastrophic views on mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, the novel showcases two major conflicting narratives: post-World War II confidence, enthusiasm, development and the grim (hi)story of the Vietnam War, accompanied by exasperation and disbelief at the general level of the American population, and at the specific one, that of minority groups.

At first, the reader is offered minute recapitulations of the national zeal and optimism that flooded, by contagion, Newark's Jewish neighborhoods, with renewed hopes of endless possibilities to overcome, if not forget altogether, the traumatic and insecure past. The narrator vividly recollects the beginning of high school "six months after the unconditional surrender of the Japanese, during the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history" (Roth 1998: 40-41). The key elements of this national emotion are contagious energy, freedom, positivity, which drive Americans towards a new kind of commonly shared and built fate.

By plunging into the specifics of U.S. socio-political change after the Second World War via his narrator's vivid recollections, Roth recreates a panorama of

American moods and mores, which captures the spirit of evolving times. The rise of individualism in the described Newark neighborhood coexists with the feeling of an overarching, unifying trauma. It is this shared sentiment that pushes the first generations of American(ized) Jews who get out of the war to prove themselves and not allow themselves to be defeated, after having escaped horrors to which many European peers had succumbed.

Since Roth's protagonists are of Jewish extraction, their concerns are doubly problematic, as the world and the U.S. undergo and eventually surpass the turmoil of the global conflagration. Their subsequent dedication to hard work, as the safe and correct way to American achievement and integration, is depicted as a strong-willed defiance against anxiety, mistrust of a previously abusive Gentile world, fear of failure and deceit. Thus, "ours was not a neighborhood steeped in darkness. The place was bright with industriousness. There was a big belief in life and we were steered relentlessly in the direction of success: a better existence was going to be ours. The goal was to *have* goals, the aim to *have* aims" (Roth 1998: 41).

Experienced in terms of plot and character construction, Philp Roth senses that, in order for the utopian Swede to be plausible, the novel must outline the socio-historical background of his evolution, alongside the adjacent mentalities. Thus, the Newark community is identified as a unifying "we", meant to emphasize its solidarity and strong beliefs in progression towards commonly shared goals. While trauma breeds resilience, prolonged marginalization and discrimination appear to dissolve into a fresh start after the World War has violently reshuffled (pre)conceptions, allegedly preventing the repetition of fatal historical errors. The palpable outcome is an ineffable sense of unity of goals: "We had new means and new ends, new allegiances and new aims, new innards - a new *ease*, somewhat less agitation in facing down the exclusions the goyim still wished to preserve." (Roth 1998: 44)

#### **4. Detonating lives: the future ahead vs. the point of no return**

The patriarchal immigrant dream of settling down and climbing the social ladder provides enough motivation for Seymour's parents and himself to immerse into the rags-to-riches pattern. The inevitable postwar generation gap, however, brings about a tear in the fabric of illusions: it prompts Merry to break with the established tradition and to denounce her forebears' aspirations as vile and pernicious contributions to human exploitation, rather than dedication, perseverance, and diligence.

As pointed out by Nora Roberts (2000), the progression of events is disturbing, but not necessarily surprising. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish immigration to the Vietnam War, America itself has undergone successive changes. So does the Levov family, turned upon itself by social transformations that trigger revisionist attitudes as the century unfolds. From the European shtetl to the turn-of-the-century American Jewish neighborhood and onto the industry-driven, business-oriented Newark, the Levovs build their glove-making empire in accordance with U.S. commercial practices, contributing, in many activists' views, to the downfall of the equal status utopia and the decline of their adoptive town. While the Swede has little insight into the negative interpretation of his and his family's actions and lifestyle,

Merry, his adored daughter, like so many of her generation, took to the streets to protest. Merry accuses her parents of personal responsibility for what more sophisticated sociologists know was a more or less inexorable economic process. Roth indicates that, here, the idea that the political is personal may be carried too far. [...] Could the Levovs have done differently? Merry doesn't ask this question. She strikes out blindly. (Roberts 2000: 101-102)

Roth's and his narrative alter ego's efforts to make sense of the causes of what seems the outburst of sheer madness shed light upon Seymour Levov's tragic condition as well. Although he is the undoubtable protagonist and fallen angel of *American Pastoral*, it is clear from how his story is construed and delivered that he could not exist without the collective consciousness. The community makes him an exemplary hero, the evolution of the groups he is rooted in determines his own, his agency melts into sociotropy. Earning everybody's approval is an innate desire, as his personal trajectory is inextricable from the national and communal contexts.

As evident in retrospect, '68 marked a kind of revolution that proved baffling for most adults, who witnessed in dismay the dissolution of all public inhibitions and authority. The powerlessness of the unknown seemed paralyzing to the Swede's generation, and his tragedy is as much personal as it is communal and, perhaps, unavoidable. While it seems inevitable for teenagers to be self-absorbed to various degrees, "it's one thing to get fat, it's one thing to let your hair grow long, it's one thing to listen to rock-and-roll music too loud, but it's another to jump the line and throw a bomb. [...] His perfect life was over". (Roth 1998: 69)

Juggling with an entire array of perspectives, Roth draws attention to the severity of the phenomena the novel encapsulates in its case studies. Between Seymour (the Swede), the miserable victim of his own conventional existential choices and Merry, the radical dissenter *par excellence*, the reader can discover other opinions. Secondary characters - like the appalled and unforgiving Jerome, Seymour's brother, in this case - tend to take sides, while Zuckerman attempts to preserve narrative balance, to meditate and put the pieces of the puzzle together in retrospect.

Balance, however, is fatally disrupted in the Swede's story. While Merry's accusations against her family largely concern what she perceives as ruthless upstartism, Roth goes deeper with his investigation of personal and communal tragedy. Various characters repeatedly point out that upward mobility for the Jews often triggered exactly the kind of inequality and exploitation they, as members of an immigrant/ ethnic/ religious/ cultural minority, had faced. However, it also becomes evident from the intertwining narratives that this went far beyond mere financial aspects. Timothy Parrish (2000) places these sensitive issues within the larger debate upon the nature of the nuclear American family.

Its abidance by the norms of acquisitionist aspirations is complicated, in the Levovs' case, by the impersonation of a borrowed dream, instead of the cultivation of an authentic one. Merry's radical revolt against any type of authority erases her ethnic belonging and its inherent cultural limitations and/ or expectations, indicating, as Parrish (2000: 98) points out, that

The transformation of identity promised by the American dream is finally a curse rather than a blessing. [...] Zuckerman's Swede sees Merry as the victim of the sixties. Had there not been a bomb to throw symbolically at her family, then she never would have got into so much trouble. Roth, by contrast, portrays the sixties as a bomb set not so much by American imperialism but by the kinds of cross-ethnic

identity conflicts experienced by the Levovs. Merry's critique of her father's unwitting complicity with imperialist and postcolonial American practices is a critique offered from within the family about the (American) family.

It becomes evident that the conflict and contradiction the novel are predicated upon surpass capital(ist) rhetoric and practices. Seymour, the Swede, is symbolically presented as actively engaged in a reenactment of The Settler Myth. The description of his injudiciously followed life and career paths is as close to cliché as possible, bringing together the idea of building a fulfilled existence from scratch with the courage of integration in a new continent altogether. A determination verging on obstinacy drives the Swede in his pursuit of happiness. In his own, rather conformist way, he defies and deconstructs his predecessors' caution and sensibility.

While the previous generations aspired to settle into the comfortable, middle-class, Jewish-American condition, he steps further into full Americanness. He appropriates the symbols and belongings of the white majority, becoming Americanized and different from his kin. Roth uses the very vocabulary of settlement and colonization to describe the process.

The Swede, rather like some frontiersman of old, would not be turned back. What was impractical and ill-advised to his father was an act of bravery to him. Next to marrying Dawn Dwyer, buying that house and the hundred acres and moving out to Old Rimrock was the most daring thing he had ever done. What was Mars to his father was *America* to him—he was settling Revolutionary New Jersey as if for the first time. Out in Old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door. (Roth 1998: 310)

Depicting the Swede's simultaneous adaptation and alienation, Roth addresses the side-effects of inhabiting a collectivist utopia of individual well-being, particularly for the offspring of immigrants. Stepping into the assimilation story turns out decisive: it either validates or denies its protagonists' successful personhood, appurtenance, wholeness. At least that is the Swede's perception for a considerable amount of time. Once he and his young family get immersed into mainstream America, discussions about and confrontations with bias and discrimination do appear.

The inherent frictions of multiculturalism become apparent, proving that the deep structure of America is still dominated by the WASP prototype, regardless of appearances or attitudes. Swede Levov and Dawn, his wife, are surrounded by prejudices, whether the community expresses them openly or not. In order to fit in, they must face their own suspiciousness and reservations: "The Protestants are just another denomination. Maybe they were rare where she grew up - they were rare where he grew up too - but they happen not to be rare in America. Let's face it, they *are* America. (Roth 1998: 311)

The American society's inherent stratification presents itself as an insurmountable mental construct, wherein open-mindedness, tolerance, and respect for the alterity function within fluid limits: often unpredictable, rarely inexistent.

## **5. Mutual denunciations: no common denominator**

*American Pastoral* provides a detailed, sometimes intentionally exaggerated case study on the impact of indoctrination upon individuals and communities alike.

Embracing prefabricated ideas about the nation and their predetermined or earned place in it, the protagonists end up bitter and disillusioned: the borrowed dreams never match the encountered realities. Moreover, just as the depicted communities are biased, conflicted, and essentially non-inclusive, so are the individuals they comprise and nurture.

As pointed out by Ira Nadel (2011), quest and loneliness are the novel's red threads: Swede desperately attempts to comprehend his daughter's violent estrangement and somehow undo the wrong and mend the family relations. However, when he finally finds Merry again and is confronted with the circumstances of her present, chosen life, he realizes that she has been indoctrinated to believe that any form of material comfort is an act of destruction against nature. The Swede, torn between fatherly love for his daughter and a desire for her to return, is equally incensed at her blind failure to understand how society functions.

One can easily see in Roth's illustration of the father's and daughter's extreme, conflicting choices, the tragedy of misunderstanding and the extent to which lack of nuances and failure to negotiate values may result in catastrophe. Not only does Merry practically resort to terrorist acts. Roth's focus is primarily on the ways in which radical behaviour impacts everybody on a deep psychological level. It destroys lives from within, leaving essential ontological questions unanswered and offering no solutions towards finding common denominators and means of constructive dialogue.

In the world that the novel presents as increasingly predicated on belligerent rhetoric, any kind of disagreement is exploitable by people with an agenda. Regardless of the political side, the characters' confrontations with ideological manipulators are meant to illustrate the overall perversity and carelessness of indoctrination. Roth succeeds in capturing the swirl of emotions surrounding the Levovs' family drama. When Seymour finally explodes, the intensity of feelings overflows in an accusatory discourse, dominated by the negativity of irreconcilable differences. Frustration, resentment, the shock of betrayed expectations echo in the Swede's unforgiving analysis of the estrangement and radicalization of his daughter, which he throws at her corrupter.

You hate us because we haven't failed. Because we've worked hard and honestly to become the best in the business and because of that we have prospered, so you envy us and you hate us and want to destroy us. And so you used her. A sixteen-year-old kid with a stutter. No, nothing small about you people. Made her into a "revolutionary" full of great thoughts and high-minded ideals. Sons of bitches. You *enjoy* the spectacle of our devastation. (Roth 1998: 214)

Most relevant in this powerful passage are the communal spirit, the unified consciousness and tradition that Seymour cannot seem to tear himself apart from. *You vs. We*: Roth invests each of his major characters with the rage of personal vexation and disappointment. Embodying opposite types of extreme idealism, the Swede and Merry subsume an American nation of immigrants, suffocated, irritated, and scandalized by its own inherent inconsistencies. The Vietnam War tears its long-standing wounds open and intensifies the pain, the despair, the abyss between utopia and everyday struggle. Roth's major achievement lies in capturing each outcry of discord with equal energy, vividness, and unrestrained pathos, to eventually expose and warn against the dangers and damages of immoderation.



According to Remi Astruc (2000), *American Pastoral* mercilessly derides idealism and exposes the magnitude of human pretense.

The daughter's insanity destroys the Levovs' ideal household when she smashes to pieces the local post office in an act of protest against the Vietnam war: *And then the loss of the daughter [...] who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral - into the indigenous American berserk.* (Astruc 2000: 113-114)

Such critical opinions and the prose they reference place several elements at the heart of *American Pastoral*: delusion, denial, dystopia. On the one hand, the Swede stands out as almost conservatively connected to the idea of upward mobility embraced by his predecessors. On the other hand, to the financial emancipation thereby entailed he adds group emancipation, crossing over from minority to majority status. He projects the myth of equal chances and harmonious cohabitation upon his own life with his *shiksa* wife. His excursion into mythomania, much like the nation's penchant for utopian designs, becomes for a while a comfortable, though self-delusional way of relying on the rather naïve belief in a unidirectional string of cause-and-effect events.

The very notion of truth is deconstructed, in a highly postmodernist manner, throughout the novel. For the Swede, his alleged desiderates of kindness, positivity, achievement are erased and turned into their opposites by discourses of resentment and radical revolution coming from his own daughter. Although he clearly identifies the roots of the transformation in the ideological brainwashing she has been subjected to, he is baffled by the lack of logic and coherence left in his blown-up universe. Having relied on clear-cut actions and objectives all his life, he is deprived of his major motivation and practical support: (self)-control.

He sees himself primarily as innocence betrayed. Yet, he is consumed by doubts and guilt, and he replays events in his head, trying to identify the flaw in the design and his own tragic fault. Having always counted on his calm, organized, kindhearted nature, he is crushed by the thought of a potential responsibility and he resorts to obsessive (self)-examination, in the hope of identifying an accidental and repairable cause for the family drama that envelops everybody. He is, inevitably, disappointed, as he gradually discovers that "there was no fluency anywhere. It was *all* stuttering. [...] He no longer had any conception of order. There was no order. None. He envisioned his life as a stutterer's thought, wildly out of his control." (Roth 1998: 93)

Disorder and paradox take over, as the author wastes no opportunity to explore the limitations of the characters' personalized versions of the American Dream and their inherent, apparently inevitable failures. The utopian image of America falls apart as each of the extreme, or even moderate aspirations is brought to ruin. Roth formulates an overarching observation and critique of the rhetoric of the American Dream, as an inevitably non-inclusive fantasy, which projects unrealistic expectations, resulting in dissatisfaction and disaster instead of the instant gratification it has long promised.

## 6. Conclusion

There is more to *American Pastoral* than meets the eye. Meditating upon "Race in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*", Hwang references a Roth interview for

*Le Figaro*. Questioned about the loss of American innocence after 9/11, the writer expressed his disbelief in the very notion, given a national history marked by slavery and segregation. Thus, Hwang (2018: 161-63) points out that Roth is

criticizing Americans for their innocence—their ignorance and lack of historical awareness—and their perpetuation of an idealized vision of the nation [...] What Roth says about America is not limited to the sixties. Setting *American Pastoral* in Newark, he carefully interweaves the city’s history from the 1940s to the 1990s, including the racial and class divisions between the city and suburbs, the 1967 Newark riots, and their continuing, ruinous effects on the city. He contrasts the protagonist’s idealized vision of America as a wealthy WASP suburb with a poor city that functions as “a black colony”.

The major idea that surfaces from a reading focused on the protagonist as a product and exponent of a community, rather than an individual in search of his authentic happiness, is all the more surprising, as Seymour Levov is one of Roth’s strongest protagonists. Under the guise of an immigrant’s (self)-destructive quest for integration, assimilation, and prosperity, doomed to failure by its consequences (symbolized by his own offspring), the true protagonist of *American Pastoral* is the American Nation. Its confusion, downfall, radical changes of values and multiplicity of discourses, driven by socio-historical trends and transformations, parallel, mirror, and determine the protagonist’s.

What endures is the clairvoyant X-ray of the nation of immigrants’ hopes and disillusionments, its radicalizations and hypocrisies, its inherent vices and indubitable virtues. Roth prefigures the new Millennium’s fall into terrorism and violence, the dissolution of dialogue, the polarization of opinions, the irreconcilable differences between competing discourses, the flaws of the major parties, and he does so in his brilliant, poignant, uncompromising style.

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