



**ILLUSION AND DISILLUSION IN PHILIP ROTH'S
AMERICAN PASTORAL**

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So far little work has been done to highlight and analyze the illusion and disillusion of American dream with reference to Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. This article shows Roth's exploration of the myth that United States offers its citizens opportunities for wholesale self – reinvention – an explosion that occurs quite literally in the text with the ignition of a bomb. This novel portrays the passionate commitment of many mid-century Jews, often just a generation away from immigration, to the mythic promise in the United States that material prosperity offers a sure avenue to reinvention as “Americans.”

Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of this novel, tells the story of the protagonist, Seymour Swede Levov, a golden boy of the Newark Jewish community, who flourishes according to the terms of American success – good looks, wealth, athletic prowess, a ‘good’ marriage. Swede Levov's innocence supports his success by erasing the traces of history, specifically his difference from some indefinable norm of Gentile life. Roth draws a lovingly detailed portrait of the good-faith striving of his protagonist to be fully “American” – by building a family, a business, and a house – only to show that the critic of this idealized image that emerged in the 1960s rendered Levov's aspirations intellectually and practically impossible. Zuckerman sets himself the task of reconstructing how Levov's world shatters because his innocent pastoral vision is hollow, delusory, and fatal to a coherent sense of self.

By titling this 1997 novel *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth is announcing epic ambitions: he intends his work to be not only a family chronicle but also a meditation on

the pastoral, on utopian dreams, and on the nature of American identity, American history and the American dream. As Bonnie Lyons writes:

The very title of the book ... suggests that a whole period of America history [postwar America from 1945-65] can be seen as a collective pastoral, a beautiful and fragile bubble bound to burst. (126)

The novel moves in concentric circles: at its centre is the disintegration of the family and loss of illusions of Seymour Swede Levov, who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in Weequahic, the Jewish section of Newark, inherited his father's glove factory, married the Irish – Catholic Dawn Dwyer, Miss New Jersey of 1949, and moved in the 1950s to Old Rimrock in rural New Jersey.

In a larger sense, the decline of the Levov goes along with the crumbling of the city of Newark in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with race riots in the inner city and the loss of its industrial base. In the largest sense of all, the dissolution of the family and the urban decay mirror the decline of America in that same period.

The Swede's pastoral illusions about America begin to dissolve in 1968 as a result of his daughter's violent protest against the Vietnam War, and the novel ends with the final nail being driven into the coffin of the Swede's marriage and family five years later, in 1973, during a long dinner party at his home during the Watergate hearings, when presidential corruption and the popular pornographic movie *Deep Throat* have become the topics of middle class dinner table conversation.

In *American Pastoral*, Roth tackles the American dream as the ultimate American utopian fantasy. Carol Iannone notes in a review of *American Pastoral*,

To many a literary imagination, America represented from its inception a New World Eden where the American Adam faced the boundless possibility and infinite, open – ended opportunity. (55)

But against the Emersonian optimism, there has always been a tragic counterstrain in American literature, one represented by such authors as Melville, Hawthorne, Dreiser, or Mailer, Iannone notes further that “in Roth's *American Pastoral*, the grain has darkened still further ... no less than the American dream itself, destroyed even as it comes most fully to fruition, by its own offspring.” (55)

In *American Pastoral*, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman attends in 1995 the forty fifth reunion of his Newark, New Jersey high school class, the Weequahic High class of 1950. Seeing all his aged classmates after so many years and learning there of the death of his childhood hero, the school's most famous athlete, Seymour Swede Levov, of the class

of 1945, puts Zuckerman into a sad and nostalgic state of mind. He ponders post-World War II American history and how it had affected his generation, and he thinks about the loss of Swede, the greatest of his generation of Jewish – American children and grandchildren immigrants:

...the boy we were all going to follow into America, our point man into the next immersion, at home here the way the Wasps were at home here, an American not by sheer striving, not by being a Jew on the Supreme Court, not by being the most brilliant or the most eminent or the best. Instead – by virtue of his isomorphism to the Wasp world – he does it the ordinary way, the natural way, the regular American-guy way. (89)

Swede loses his innocence in the late 1960s through the actions of his daughter Merry. She sets off a bomb in their rural hometown post office / general store to protest the Vietnam War, thereby killing a beloved local physician:

.... the angry, rebarbative spitting – out daughter with no interest whatever in being the next successful Levov, flushing him out of hiding as if he were a fugitive initiating the Swede into the displacement of another America entirely, the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. (86)

Roth likes to leave the tensions in this drama as the novel ends not with a resolution of the two sides – American pastoral versus American berserk or counterpastoral – but with a question.

Finally, the novel invites an allegorical interpretation, as the title of the three books of *American Pastoral – Paradise Remembered, The Fall and Paradise Lost* – allude to yet another version of pastoral: Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* a pastoral, with the Garden of Eden the original pastoral dream world. *American Pastoral* can thus be viewed in one light as a Miltonian allegory in which Swede is the American Adam, living in blissful innocence – or willful denial – in the supposedly unspoiled garden, of rural New Jersey (the Garden State) with his wife Dawn, until the serpent enters the garden and ruins everything.

The central pastoral dream Swede Levov attempts to live out, however, is the immigrant dream of becoming a totally assimilated American by moving to a small town. Many of Roth's novels deal with the dilemma of Jewish – American masculine identity in the late twentieth century – the challenge for a Jewish man to assert his potency according

to the terms of American success, without sacrificing ethical responsibility. The Swede's solution to that dilemma is to attempt to transform himself into an all – American man by marrying Dawn, Miss New Jersey, and becoming a country squire. He imagines that the younger generation in post World War II America, has moved beyond all the prejudices and resentments, so that now people can live in harmony, all sorts of people side by side no matter what's their origin.

In his assimilationist delusions, Swede even imagines himself as Johnny Appleseed, the legendary sower of the American countryside. Johnny Appleseed, that's the man for me. Wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't Protestant Christian – nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American. No brains probably, but didn't need them. Swede attempts to live out this American legend. But this is pure fantasy; in Old Rimrock, the Jewish Swede is neither ancestor nor inheritor. His wasp neighbour Bill Orcutt is, and Orcutt "Mr. America," will also inherit Dawn, Swede's wife. Swede is not Johnny Appleseed but an American Adam who bites into the apple, has his eyes opened, and is forever exiled from Eden.

Swede's pastoral dream of American assimilation, of raising a family in an old stone house in the country, was first concocted when he was a teenager. Like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, who attempted when he was seventeen to transform himself into a WASP by anglicizing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby, Swede remains true to his adolescent reinvention of himself. And when they are grown men, the puerile dreams to which they cling lead them both to disaster.

Swede's hotheaded brother Jerry is the only one who dares to tell him the truth because Swede swallowed American fantasies whole, he never grew up. Jerry's diagnosis of the Swede recalls Biff Loman's judgement of his father, Willy, in the Requiem to Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) – the iconic story of the American dream.

Perhaps the novel's bitterest critique of the American Dream, or rather of the fantasies that upheld this unsustainable dream, takes place when Swede waits for his outlaw daughter Merry, who, five years after the bombing, is living under an assumed name, in filth and danger, in the Newark slums.

Above and beyond the roofline of her house, he could see the skyline of commercial Newark half a mile and those three familiar, comforting words, the most reassuring words in the English language, cascading down the elegantly ornate that cliff was once the focal point of a buzzing downtown – ten stories high,

white stark letters heralding fiscal confidence and institutional permanence, civic progress and opportunity and pride, indestructible letters that you could read from the seat of your jetliner descending from the north towards the international airport : FIRST FIDELITY BANK.

That's what was left, that lie. First. Last. LAST FIDELITY BANK. From down on the earth where his daughter now lived at the corner of Columbia and Green where his daughter lived even worse than her greenhorn great – grandparents had, fresh from steerage, in their Prince Street tenement – you could see a mammoth signboard designed for concealing the truth. A sign in which only a madman could believe. A sign in a fairy tale. (235-36)

In this novel the dream of assimilation and upward mobility of American immigrants runs in reverse, so that after four generations in Newark, his daughter lived even worse than her greenhorn great-grandparents. As Swede's life is falling apart at the dinner party in 1973, with all the things he has learned that day that he could not possibly talk about in front of his friends and family including the return of his crazy daughter Merry, who has murdered three more people with her bombs and twice been raped; the affair he has just discovered that his wife Dawn is carrying on with their neighbor, the architect Bill Orcutt; and Swede's own brief fling with Sheila, Merry's speech therapist, who, he has just learned, harbored Merry after the bombing – while all this is repeating in Swede's head, Dawn is talking to their guests about a trip to Switzerland. In point counter – point, we read the narration of Swede's guilt, anguished thoughts together with Dawn's babbling about Swiss cows and the barns:

And all the people, all the children, the girls and the women who had been milking all summer would come in beautiful clothes, all dressed in Swiss outfits, and a band, music, a big fiesta down in the square. And then the cows would all go in for winter in the barns and the houses. Very clean and very nice. Oh. That was an occasion, seeing that. Seymour took lots of pictures of all their cows so we could put them on the projector. (414)

The reality of Swede's torment as all his hopes are punctured and his life spins completely out of control is ironically juxtaposed with Dawn's pastoral illusions. Swede has woken up to cruel reality while Dawn retreats into fairy tales, seeking an uncontaminated life while cheating on her husband.

The final utopia that *American Pastoral* deconstructs is utopia of a rational existence. Swede, who lived devoted to order and reason, repeatedly the worst lesson that

life can teach that it makes no sense. Roth laces the narrative with repetitions of Swede's astonished recognition:

Yes, at the age of forty-six, in 1973, almost three – quarters of the way through the century that with no regard for the niceties of burial had strewn the corpses of mutilated children and their mutilated parents everywhere, Swede found out that we are all in the power of something demented. (256)

American Pastoral is structured as a tragedy, a story of decline and fall. Such a narrative trajectory implies that things were once better. According to Roth in the novel, America has declined from the relative, order, reason and progress of the 1940s and 1950s into the anarchy, irrationality, and lust for destruction of the 1960s and the 1970s.

A central idea portrayed in *American Pastoral* is that, starting in the 1960s, a disorder spread like a plague throughout the country, ruining the cities, decaying morality, and finally destroying the American family.

The novel ends with Swede lost and questioning. Swede's tragedy is that, having devoted his life to his dream, once it is revealed as a fantasy, he has nothing with which to replace it. As Posnock suggests, "lacking the capacity to fashion a counter life, he is doomed." (109) For Zuckerman, Swede was as good as dead in 1973, when, bereft and devastated, he lost his dreams. We know that Swede lives over twenty years after this point, but Zuckerman is not interested in narrating those years, which he envisions as a masquerade, with Swede pretending to be the same man but having lost the myth of pastoral innocence which sustained him.

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